

Rehearsal Problems in Bilingual Theatre

JOE ROSENBERG

In 1972 La Compañía de Teatro Bilingüe was formed as part of the theatre department at Texas A&I University.¹ Its purposes were to provide an opportunity for South Texans to experience theatre in Spanish as well as in English, and to train students to perpetuate such programs.

In the five years since, La Compañía de Teatro Bilingüe has performed a great number of times in both languages in the United States and in Mexico. In the past academic year alone it gave over eighty performances in theatres ranging from Mexico City to San Diego, California to Washington, D.C. in one or both languages.

When an actor accepts a role with La Compañía de Teatro Bilingüe he commits himself to perform in both languages—whether he speaks those languages or not. Hence a number of problems have arisen concerning rehearsal technique, language training and language usage. This paper describes the problems and my way, as director of La Compañía de Teatro Bilingüe, of dealing with them.

Our first problem concerned forming a public. A primarily English-speaking public was already available, but we wished to add to it a new and heretofore alienated group, the primarily Spanish-speaking members of the community. Our decision to present a play in only Spanish meant that the play would have to be of the sort that relies heavily on non-verbal techniques of expression for intelligibility. Most of our actors had not been trained, and of those who had been trained none had been schooled in the use of non-verbal techniques. All were line memorizers.

The procedure of learning a role by underlining speeches and committing them to memory, ordinarily considered standard by many actors, came immediately under fire, for it was contradictory to the non-verbal approach we required. My argument was not with the memorization approach itself, although I must admit that I do not care for the technique, but rather with its limitations relative to bilingual theatre. In order to assess the problem a cursory evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of the memorization approach must be considered.

Television and stock actors use it because it is quick. They have relatively little time to rehearse and have found that if they develop ways to memorize rapidly they can then provide an overlay of passion onto the words and thus achieve quick characterization. Some use this procedure relatively well—relatively, for it would be interesting to conjecture what they might produce with a more organic approach.²

Often, however, the memorizer leaves the public with the impression of canned speeches fancily dressed. Memorizers arrive at words for no better reason than that the script calls for them, and then hope that they can supply non-verbal activity to make the words fit. Hence they often tend to settle for prosaic non-verbal imagery. Memorizers who transcend this limitation are rare. It can be charged that many method actors, if not most, are also makers of prosaic imagery. However, if the actor works at creating words out of a non-verbal process it is easier for the director to insist on and get exciting non-verbal imagery.

The most severe problem posed by the memorizer, even if he is adroit at his technique, is to the other actors. Until he has memorized to the point where the words can be produced “trippingly on the tongue” he has not assimilated the words into characterization. Therefore his earlier agonies with the lines produce interesting memory lapses which occur, more often than might be supposed, at crucial points in the dialogue. The following example is less extreme than might be imagined:

ACTOR: (To Prompter) Line!

PROMPTER: I love you, Irene.

ACTOR: (With the emotion of strong conviction) I love you, Irene.

ACTRESS: Please remember me once in a while.

ACTOR: (To Prompter) Dammit!—don't tell me!! It's—oh, I know it, I know it! . . . Line!

PROMPTER: How could I ever forget you?

ACTOR: Right! I knew it was . . . (to Actress) How could I ever forget you, Irene?

It is futile for the actress to hope for interaction for quite some time, hopefully not for too long.

While such problems teach the monolingual director patience, they leave the director of bilingual theatre no choice but to insist on a more organic approach to acting. Questions arise in bilingual theatre. Put in their most extreme form these questions end up like this: How can the memorizer who speaks no Spanish act effectively in Spanish? The words mean nothing to him, the phrases and idiomatic expressions even less. Intonations escape him. He is at a total loss. Being a memorizer, he may look for English language equivalents of Spanish words, translate them in his mind, and try to remember them. He may hope that if he repeats the words long enough (a year or so?) he may learn them so well that he will not have to translate them during the action and he may achieve a small degree of spontaneity—provided that he is not fed the wrong cues. And what does he do about feedback from the public if he does not understand the language? He cannot ignore the public. Acting is always partly a dialogue with the public.



La pancarta by Jorge Díaz

Worse, he has no way of interpreting silence. Spanish silence is not the same as English silence. If he does not know what can lead from silence, he cannot assess silence and make it meaningful. Obviously this means another way must be found, a way that makes it possible for the actor to use the Spanish language effectively. He must from the start undertake to feel, think, utter in Spanish. He must rehearse in Spanish—totally. And if he does not know a word, he must do as the Spaniard does—use non-verbal communication, grunts, groans, everything to make meaning. Then he will learn the word.

But how?

Usually our problem was in a less severe form, but at one point we did meet it successfully in just that severe a form. All the actors in our first play were Mexican Americans. Some spoke Spanish well, but some spoke it with limited vocabularies and were further impeded by never or rarely having read in Spanish. It was obvious from our first read-through of the script, which consumed six hours, that several of the actors would struggle with Spanish and perhaps never learn the meanings of some of the words if they were not helped. All were line memorizers. On the credit side, even those who had trouble with Spanish were intimately acquainted with Mexican ways, pronunciation, idiomatic meanings and social patterns. It was obvious that we would have to accent their positive characteristics in dealing with the language problem. A plan in several stages was created to effect organic rehearsal.

Stage One: We began our rehearsals with games calculated to help the actor develop the character within the social context of the play.³ The words of the playwright were for the time set aside. We used the premise of the script, a

simple statement describing the core idea,⁴ and we used a guiding metaphor or core game in common with the script.⁵ By means of these games relating to the premise and the guiding metaphor the actors invented situations and circumstances parallel to those in the script and acted them out non-verbally. Non-verbal expression gave way to grunts, and grunts to language. When the actor did not know the word in Spanish he grunted his way through communication until the word could be supplied.

If we had enough time to do so we would have waited until all the gibberish were replaced by words. As it was, I was content that the process of establishing language as a meaningful extension of the physiological process of communication had begun. We moved on, encouraged with the hope that more rehearsal would bring the actors closer towards connecting the spoken word with the non-verbal. And so, after ten days of intensive rehearsal we moved on to the next stage of our program.

Stage Two: Transporting the actors from the environment of their make-believe to the actual environment of the playscript turned out to be more of a problem than I had expected. Unsure of their language the actors reverted to memorization, committing to rote not merely the words but the movements as well. As a result we became involved in seemingly endless rehearsal in an attempt to create pantomimic fidelity.⁶ For example, the leading man repeated the opening pantomime close to seventy times, each time repeating a memorized gesture or pattern of gestures. Of course the movement seemed superficial. When he was told his action was implausible, he would retreat into replying that he was only doing what I had told him to do. As caustically as possible I would tell him not to quote authorities to me and that playgoers would not accept footnotes. Sheer perseverance moved him. Finally his movements came from motivation rather than memorization, and soon he brought a heretofore dormant, but lively imagination to his work.

The immediate result for this actor was that his movements varied from rehearsal to rehearsal. Accustomed as he had been to predictability, he was at first concerned. He was encouraged with the assurance that it was preferable to become predictable after the imagination had been opened up. He began to experiment, at first hesitantly and then whole-heartedly, with his pantomimes and with his involvements with other actors. It was as if he had for the first time been given his artistic driver's license. The result was a tightly knit ensemble company in which each actor contributed characterizations which had been worked out in considerable depth. And in time the patterns became more and more predictable. Insistence upon pantomimic fidelity did not stop actors from memorizing lines, but it did establish the use to which lines had to be put. All of them measured up to performance with spontaneity.

Stage Three: While pantomimic fidelity was necessary, it was insufficient; for the actor's purpose should be to present action not merely accurately but interestingly. Hence the final stage, of creating imagery exciting to the public,⁷ took up the final two weeks of rehearsal time. We worked with the concept of "arrivals." The concept of "arrivals" is an extension of the stanislavskian idea of "justification." By "justification" is meant that the actor must establish motivation for what he does at any point in the play. "I do this because. . ."

Justification is the test of pantomimic fidelity. In the case of good method acting the justified activity is also interesting. Often, however, method actors are people with prosaic imaginations, supplying mere plausibility where talent is called for. The concept of "arrivals" insists on the use of talent—hopefully the actors'. It does this by raising the question of whether an image is sufficient for the communication it needs to make. The actor is said to "arrive" at dialogue that is in the playscript when he has managed to fill it up with meaning. Until then he is not entitled to use it.

How does the actor know when he has "arrived" at a line of dialogue? At first by how he understands its meaning. Then by how the other actors receive what he is doing. Then by how it strikes the director. Finally by feedback from the public. The director who uses "arrivals" will insist on at least optimal meaning for himself. Actually the process of "arriving" never stops, for the actor never really stops rehearsing. In this case interesting imagery was insisted on. Very little of it had to be supplied by the director. I found my function was mostly to raise questions for the actors to consider in developing characterization. This play remained in our repertory for two years. We never stopped "arriving."

Analysis: The measures taken were considered successful. We achieved pantomimic fidelity all of the time and interesting imagery most of the time. A yardstick of our success was provided by our performance in Monterrey at the Universidad de Nuevo León where a difficult public praised the actors enthusiastically for their presentation of imagery and forgave their occasional mispronunciations of words.

Our next play was in both languages. It raised the question of in which language to rehearse first. In the interest of pantomimic fidelity it seemed appropriate to create the conditions of involvement with the most difficult language first. Therefore we began in Spanish and continued in that language up to the point of dress rehearsal readiness before moving into English. Again, the actors were all of Mexican American background. Most spoke Spanish relatively well. Some spoke it poorly. Of those who had been in the first play and had spoken the language poorly it could be seen that considerable improvement in word use had resulted.

Actually this play raised no new problems as to rehearsal technique, but it brought about new realizations. The reexamination of the script in the more familiar language after the actor had achieved proficiency in the least familiar one provided him with fresh insights into his work in both languages, for he set up comparisons. The result was that each actor performed better in both languages than he might have in a situation involving him only monolingually.

We had wondered if we would encounter slippage from one language into the other, substitutions of words, translations, or linguistic confusions. We found that when the actor rehearsed organically from the start he was more apt to supply gibberish for a meaning than to translate into the other language. It can be said now, after some six hundred performances, that hardly ever has an actor lapsed from one linguistic process into the other. We attribute this to the involvement of the actor in the total environment of the play, of which the linguistic environment is a part.

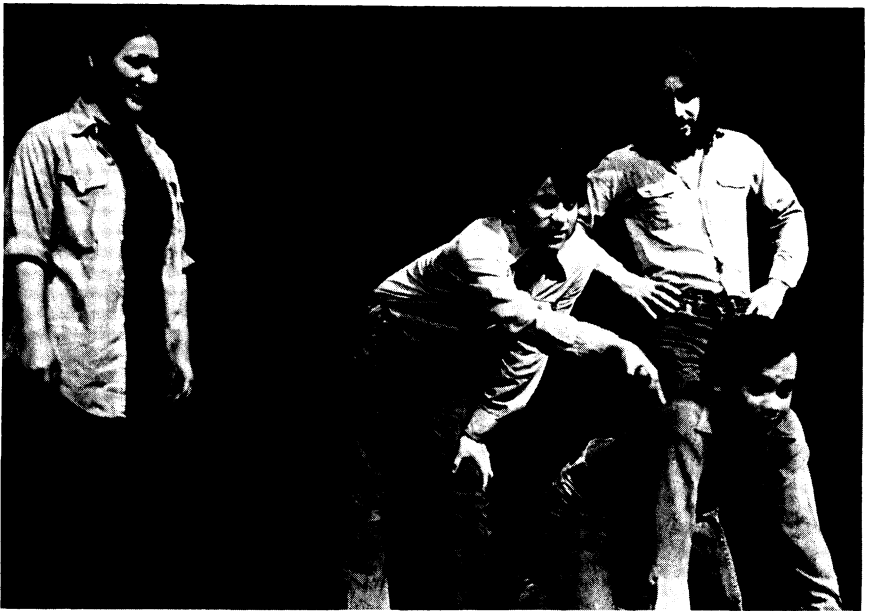
We found out too that rehearsal in the second language required very little

time. We rehearsed four weeks in Spanish, two in English, and then a week in both languages. We discovered that we could condense down to four in the first language, one in the second and a week in both, thus saving a week.

We discovered, though not immediately, that each language requires a different character assessment. When this became apparent, after well over a year of performance of one of the plays, *Historias para ser contadas*, by Osvaldo Dragún, we tended towards somewhat different action patterns in Spanish than in English. We made this shift because we realized that Spanish-speaking audiences tend to relate to information from different social frames of reference than English-speaking audiences do. The cultural gap between the audiences required adaptation.

Finally, we discovered that successful performance in both languages increased the self-esteem of the actors and contributed greatly to their confidence on stage and off. While our actors were still aware of their status as members of an oppressed minority, they suddenly responded to the realization that they were better equipped for their profession, and as a result more in demand, than their monolingual colleagues.

Our next production put the procedures we had established to a crucial test. This time the role of the leading lady in *A Hatful of Rain/ Un sombrero lleno de lluvia* was performed by a *mexicana* who spoke little English. She had studied English in Mexico and could read it fairly well. That is to say she was familiar with a good many words in the script, but far from all of them. However, as a student at Texas A&I she had managed thus far to get by with infrequent use of English. Her ear did not assimilate English language sounds very well.



Dragún's *Historias para ser contadas*
Mexico Cast: Escobar, García, Araiza, Moreno

She was further impeded by an attitude. Spanish-speaking people tend to be amused by those who mispronounce or misuse their language. A great respect for "correctness" can be found in all strata of Mexican society. Therefore our actress feared being laughed out of the theatre by English-speaking audiences. She did not realize that in the United States "foreign" patterns of speech are so commonplace that listeners tend simply to adjust where they can. She felt that her pronunciation had to be as un-Mexican as that of an English-speaking Texan trying to imitate Italian New York City speech.

We began in English. Our actress memorized all the words, had the lines down in a week. That is to say, she could utter the words at their appropriate places, in sequence, if we began at the beginning and continued without going back to previously rehearsed sections. But she could not perform with spontaneity because she thought and felt in Spanish and translated as she went along. She always stopped in the same places to ask for a word, for its pronunciation, for its meaning. The actress agreed in principle that her approach was dangerous. She had been exposed slightly, in class, to the concept of pantomimic fidelity and understood it well intellectually. She had used it a little in acting in scenes in class. But she was so fearsome of her shortcomings in English that she took refuge in memorization and translation and would not come out of it.

When it came time to rehearse in Spanish the exceptionally competent cast had not been able to reach the point of interaction whereby characterization is given depth. Discussion with the actress concerning this problem created by her reliance upon memorization proved unfruitful: she kept on assuring me that she already knew the words and that it was a matter of a short time before she would feel free to use them spontaneously. When we moved into Spanish the actress displayed similar problems. The fact that she ran into problems created by memorization in her own tongue turned out to be a stroke of good fortune for us. Her reliance upon memorization in Spanish was not caused by a feeling of inadequacy, but by habit. In Spanish she belonged to that school of performers who memorize well enough to be able to spit words out machine-gun fashion, that is to say, promiscuously from a general mood. In Spanish she had never worked with pantomimic fidelity and did not now. She threw the other actors into confusion—because she spoke too rapidly for them to assimilate her words, because she left out many important non-verbal steps leading to the creation of words, because she gave only generalized interaction where the others required specific non-verbal statements to work off. The script was frankly melodramatic: her approach made it so unmotivated that it became unbearably melodramatic. Interestingly, the action always bogged down at the same places—different places than in English, but just as consistent, and for the same reason. It bogged down in those places because at those points it made no sense.

Despite further showdowns, the actress persisted in her approach. A few days before opening night she for the first time expressed reservation and admitted that a more organic approach would have served her better. However she felt that the time was too short for her to adapt to the organic approach sufficiently to perform in English. I was forced into a difficult decision, one which I devoutly hoped I would not have to repent. I told her that if she did not have a word in English when she performed before the public she should use gibberish, for moti-

vated gibberish would be accepted by the public for just what it was—meaningful grunts; whereas memorized, correctly pronounced and meaningless words would merely turn the public against her. She wondered just how much gibberish she could get away with, but the fact that the use of gibberish was a permissible option encouraged her.

The immediate effect of her recognition of this option was to release her from her anxiety. She discovered in the next two rehearsals that she had to resort to gibberish in only a few places, and realized that she knew her role much better than she had permitted herself to accept. By opening night she had found acceptable verbal substitutions for gibberish and felt secure with her use of language. As soon as she had freed herself from memorization she began to put meaning into movement and into words that helped her interact with the other cast members. They created an absorbing performance.⁸

The play after *Un sombrero lleno de lluvia* was *Réquiem por un girasol/ Requiem for a Sunflower* by Jorge Díaz. Here an actor who spoke no Spanish at all, but who had well-organized rehearsal technique, took on the role of the flower vendor, a rather colloquial character. In an orderly way he juxtaposed the Spanish words alongside the English ones, did the same for phrases and for idiomatic expressions, inquired about intonations and potential means of expressivity. He then taped a cast member from Mexico reading the role. By the time we entered into rehearsal, this time in Spanish first, our flower vendor was behaving in Spanish. He subsequently performed the role so convincingly that he was accepted in Mexico City for Spanish-speaking.

We have had many experiences with actors who know only one language but need to perform in two. Usually we have had to come to grips from the start with the actor's tendency to retreat into reliance on the combination of memorization with translation. We have in a few instances not been able to resolve the problem, with the result that the performers settled for less than their capability when acting in Spanish. In summation it can be said that the technique of creating an organic approach to language as an aspect of the social environment of the play has been successful. When actors begin rehearsal by feeling, thinking and uttering in Spanish or the gibberish equivalent thereof, they develop in the language well. The problem of getting the insecure actor to shed his inhibitions sufficiently to try this technique when he knows nothing or little of Spanish still requires more exploration.

Texas A&I University

Notes

1. Dr. Randall J. Buchanan, head of the Department of Speech and Drama at Texas A&I University, initiated the idea. He was the first theatre department chairman in the United States, to the best of my knowledge, to commit his department to a bilingual program. I was appointed to work on this experiment. My qualifications were a history of experimentation, indifferent use of Spanish that has since been developed to the point where I do not offend the ear, a bilingual and bicultural family life, and a strong identification with the problems of oppressed minorities.

2. By an organic approach to characterization and word use as an aspect of characterization is meant the involvement of the actor's entire organism in the action. The words of dialogue indicated in a script should be looked upon as cues indicating ends and means. As ends they

should be formed by the actor from motivation rather than from memorization. As means they should be recognized for their potential to create stimulac.

Many theories exist as to how an organic approach can be accomplished. Stanislavski favored a process of internalization that would lead to dialogue. He felt that the actor could accomplish this internalization only through experiences such as the character had had. Boleslavski felt substitution was possible. If the actor did not have experiences like the character's, he could compare it with similar ones and work on the "as if" principle. Benedetti builds a convincing case for externalization, claims that by putting the psycho-physical characteristics of the character on, or wearing the characteristics, the actor can work up a pattern of development similar to what results from internalization. He favors the use of both internalization and externalization. As to where memorization fits into these theories, there are also various views. Stanislavski prefers the words to come from the functions of the body. Benedetti allows for the use of memorization, but actually he sets up exercises that make it possible for the actor to assimilate the words without memorization.

3. Any of a number of games can be used. The director using this approach should consider which games would best serve the purposes of the play, and if need be, invent them. In our play I felt that it was propitious to ask the actors to invent animals with characteristics like the characters' and then to take only one or two of these characteristics and use them—for example, the restlessness of a caged monkey. These characteristics were then used in various games in which situations similar to those of the play were used. We also used energy transfer warmups before each rehearsal, to open up the body to the physical demands of involvement, to make a cohesive unit of the cast, and to share imaginations.

4. A premise, according to Lajos Egri in his book, *The Art of Dramatic Writing* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1946), is a simple sentence of large scope which controls the action of the play. For example, the premise of *Romeo and Juliet* by Shakespeare would be "True love defies even death." The key to the premise is the active verb. Consider that a vastly different premise would be supplied by changing the verb "defy" to "conquer." "True love conquers even death" would give the actors different things to do than "true love defies even death." Consider too that a passive verb would leave the actors with nothing to do. "True love is greater even than death" might be a fit core statement for a descriptive essay, but it can offer nothing to a play.

5. Guiding metaphor is my own term, and it comes from my book entitled *Playscript Analysis*, which is being published by the Instituto Politécnico Nacional de México under the title *Análisis del texto dramático*. The guiding metaphor may be a word or two which describes the way of the action; its image potential, its dance relationships, its color, rhythms, qualities. For example, the guiding metaphor of *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams might be "bull-fight." Each scene can be treated as similar to a contest between torero and toro.

6. "Pantomimic fidelity" also comes from my book, *Playscript Analysis*, and it means that the actor must create the process which made the character say the lines of dialogue. Hence the actor must recreate the dialogue from faithfulness to the subtext.

7. Of course the process of creating imagery exciting to the public begins with imagery exciting to the other actors, but it sometimes extends past involvement with other actors. For example, any of Shakespeare's monologues should be treated as if the character were speaking privately in public. He does not address the other actors. He addresses himself, and does so by facing out to the public. Also, even in the most psychologically lifelike acting the actor is always concerned with a triangle. He works with another actor or other actors or objects or forces and relates his impressions and comments out to the public. The comment will be either prosaic or interesting depending on how the actor has synthesized his experiences and managed to express them.

For example, if the actor playing Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet* by Shakespeare cannot bring exciting understanding to such a line as "O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright! It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night Like a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear—Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear!" he has no right to use the line.

8. The actress' story has a fairy tale ending. She performed so well in English that her peers awarded her a prize as best actress of the year.

LA COMPAÑÍA DE TEATRO BILINGÜE, 1976-77

Highlights:

The highlights of the 1976-77 season were: ventures into two new fields, musicals and Golden Age drama; entry into the American College Theatre Festival competition and selection to represent the Southwest Theatre region at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. where we performed twice at the Eisenhower

Theatre and twice at the Chatauqua Tent Theatre; opening the ACTF IX in Washington with a work in Spanish and English, *Historias para ser contadas/ Stories for the Theatre* by Osvaldo Dragún*; entry into the Siglo de Oro International Festival at the Chamizal National Monument; bringing the Argentine playwright, Osvaldo Dragún, to our campus and being instrumental in arranging his tour of the United States.

Awards:

1. Amoco Awards of Excellence: to La Compañía de Teatro Bilingüe for being selected to perform at the ACTF IX, to Joe Rosenberg as director, to Ruby Nelda Pérez, José Treviño, Luis Muñoz, J. Ed. Araiza, performers.

2. Texas House of Representatives Certificate of Citation—for performance of *Historias para ser contadas* at the ACTF IX at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington.

3. Siglo de Oro International Festival at Chamizal International Monument awards for presentation of *Los habladores/ The Chatterboxes* and *El viejo celoso/ The Jealous Old Husband*—Cervantes—Best director award to Joe Rosenberg, best leading actress award to Ruby Nelda Pérez, best leading actor award to J. Ed. Araiza.

4. Quixote Award of the Hispania Society, Alamo Chapter for 1976—To Joe Rosenberg for the work of La Compañía de Teatro Bilingüe in promoting Spanish Language drama.

5. Alpha Psi Omega awards—To Joe Rosenberg, director, and to Ruby Nelda Pérez, José Treviño, Luis Muñoz and J. Ed. Araiza for performances at ACTF IX. To Luis Muñoz, best actor award for performances in Spanish and in English of *Requiem por la lluvia*—José Martínez Quirolo.

Repertory:

1. *Historias para ser contadas/ Stories for the Theatre*—Osvaldo Dragún. (Spanish, English)

2. *La pancarta*—Jorge Díaz. Music by Rusty Wolfe and choreography by Jay Jennings. (Spanish, English)

3. *Guernica*—Fernando Arrabal. (Spanish, English)

4. *Picnic en la campana/ Picnic on the Battlefield*—Fernando Arrabal. (Spanish, English)

5. *Réquiem por la lluvia*—José Martínez Quirolo. (Spanish, English)

6. *Los habladores/ The Chatterboxes*—Miguel de Cervantes. (Spanish, English)

7. *El viejo celoso/ The Jealous Old Husband*—Miguel de Cervantes. (Spanish, English)

8. *El gato sin amigos/ The Cat Who Had No Friends*—Translated and adapted for theatre in simultaneous bilingual production by Joe Rosenberg. From a story by Teresita Gómez Vallejo.

9. *La rana Juana/ Jeanie the Frog*—Translated and adapted for theatre in simultaneous bilingual production by Joe Rosenberg. From a Mexican story.

Texas A&I University

* To the best of our knowledge this was the first time a work in Spanish was presented at an American College Theatre Festival at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.