

Mexico City's Spring 2008 Theatre Season

Timothy G. Compton

The best of Mexico City's spring 2008 theatre season featured some old and some new. The new included a slick new theatre space, Teatro El Milagro, on the second floor of the building associated with the El Milagro publishing house which has published numerous important anthologies of contemporary Mexican theatre. New leaders occupy a number of key positions in Mexico City's theatre world as a result of the inevitable shuffle in the wake of naming a new rector at UNAM (Enrique Singer has replaced Mónica Raya as UNAM's Director de Teatro, Mario Espinoza has replaced Antonio Crestani as Director of UNAM's Centro Universitario de Teatro acting school, and Crestani has replaced Luis Mario Moncada as director of the Centro Cultural Helénico). Fine new plays by young playwrights premiered, but plays by some of Mexico's most venerable playwrights had excellent performances as well. Consider this lineup of classic Mexican playwrights: Rodolfo Usigli, Elena Garro, Luisa Josefina Hernández, and Emilio Carbalido. Mexico City once again had plenty to choose from this season, with 102 plays for adults (of which about 70 were by Mexicans) and 23 for children (about 15 by Mexicans!) advertised in the May 8-14 issue of *Tiempo libre* alone. Others happened without advertising in *Tiempo libre*, or happened during other weeks of the season. As always, one of the biggest challenges for theatre spectators in Mexico City is having to miss some of the plays they really want to see due to the sheer abundance of plays.

For me, the most memorable play of the season was *Derviche*, written by Ximena Escalante and directed by Carlos Corona with an unforgettable set designed by Jorge Ballina. Spectators were prepared to be transported to the Middle East by the play's subtitle, *Cuentos sufis para incomodar a los convencionales*, Middle Eastern music, and geometrical motifs on the handbill and the floor of the stage. The stage floor was composed of a 4 x 7 grid of



Derviche. Photo: Christopher Wells

interlocking, alternating designs – one a sixteen-sided star with eight points and the other a sort of blocked X. Each of the 28 sections was outlined with a light-toned wood, while inside the outline, in darker wood, the designs were repeated with geometrical precision, each one smaller than the previous. They made for a beautiful stage. Above it hung 40 light bulbs in metallic holders, arranged in a 5 x 8 grid so that each hung exactly over a corner of one of the stage floor sections. *Derviche* included numerous elements which were outstanding, but the theatrical effects achieved by lowering different combinations of those forty lights to varying heights was sensational, and unlike any play I have ever seen. Lowering four lights to the floor, to cite the simplest of examples, created an elevator or a jail cell. Other sites created by lowering lights to various levels included vendor shops, a rickshaw, a palace, a garden, a press briefing room, and a ship. In some cases the lights were fastened to the floor or each other, on high sea the lights swayed just above the floor to suggest waves, and in the case of a press room, the actors used some of the lights as microphones. The ropes controlling the height of the lights were visible at the sides of the stage, and at times the configurations were so complex that the actors helped to create the various spaces. The magic of those forty lights with their cables in instantly transporting actors



Derviche. Photo: Christopher Wells

and spectators alike to myriad exotic locales was recognized at the end of the play, as the two technicians took bows along with the five actors, each one, appropriately, within one of the seven lanes created by lowered lights. The plot itself was a set of four framed tales. In the outer frame, a girl in Mexico City, where everyone wore drab, dark clothes, was in the middle of a family break up. She escaped to a more appealing reality by reading a book of tales called *Derviche*, narrated by a character of the same name. The adventures of her readings burst to life in vivid colors contrasting to the drab of her own life, with exotic dress, magical relationships, frightful dangers, heroic success, and even fairytale romance with a prince. Just as there were several stories and many locales, the actors took on many roles, with the exception of Miguel Flores, who delivered a marvelous performance as the derviche, the audience's formal guide through the various stories. His precision, control, timing and expression were flawless. Talía Marcela, Erika de la Llave, Héctor Holten, and Miguel Conde played their multiple roles beautifully, with perfect timing, and instant changes between clearly drawn characters of their creation. This was nothing short of brilliant, magical theatre.

Mauricio Jiménez directed one of Rodolfo Usigli's lesser-known "Comedias impolíticas," *Estado de secreto*, and with great success. It ran



Estado de secreto. Photo: Christopher Wells

from mid-April to mid-May and was the first part of a project billed as “Mural: Teatro Mexicano,” which was to continue in late-May to mid-June with Jorge Ibarguengoitia’s *Susana y los jóvenes*, then in July with Edgar Chias’s *Crack...o de las cosas sin nombre*. *Estado de secreto* is a farce in which an ambitious, self-serving, self-aggrandizing politician is particularly in control of every situation, by the standards of any country which knows corruption. The central character, Poncho, was played to perfection by Roberto Soto. In a slick green suit and with a smirk on his face he made other politicians quake in their boots, commanded an array of well-paying illegal activities, sweet-talked lovers, and threatened, intimidated, and demagogued his way to the brink of the presidency. At times he would make use of a microphone to magnify his demagoguery, and other times to indulge himself in singing to a mistress. This play’s choreography sparkled, as various groups eagerly responded to Poncho’s presence. His inner circle of right-hand men was particularly in sync, sometimes breaking spontaneously into song to accompany their dances in honor of their leader. Another beautifully choreographed scene showed a professor of declamation, very full of himself and his craft, hilariously teaching a group to chant anti-Poncho slogans with great artistry (until Poncho showed up and turned them into pro-Poncho chants). Poncho’s

blonde and brunette lovers were fabulous contrasts, with the blonde slight, sly, scantily clad, and entirely clumsy, while the brunette was Amazonic in her dimensions, wore a massive white tunic and an Aztec headdress, and carried a spear. The dialogue of the first scene of the third act is dazzling in and of itself, as it calls for senators and deputies to plot a coup against Poncho in grand, blustery terms, all of which melts sheepishly when Poncho shows up. In this *puesta* the scene was hilariously set in a Turkish bath, with all the dialogue being exchanged by towel-wearing goofballs standing on chairs (or lying on the ground, in the case of one very drunk politician, who showed signs of life only when someone would mention “el jefe,” at which point he, along with everyone on stage, would beat their chest once then extend their arms in a fist). When Poncho showed up their towels dropped ever so momentarily to the floor, but their bluster dropped forever. This farce managed to be exceptionally amusing without being inane. Overall the set was well done, the singing was excellent, the acting was superb, and even though the text was written in 1935 (and was the first Usigli play ever performed, from the research I have done), the dialogue was still very funny, and the political and social situation, although exaggerated, seemed contemporary.

En el mismo barco was a *creación colectiva* written, directed, and performed by the group *Lagartijas tiradas al sol*, a group comprised of actors in their twenties. Gabino Rodríguez and Luisa Pardo have acted alone in prior plays I have seen by this group, but in this case they were joined on the set by three other actors. The grit of this play dealt with the lives and concerns and aspirations and shortcomings of the generation born in the 1980s. Surrounded by technology, videogames, toys, and cheap furniture, the play’s five characters expressed their dissatisfaction with the world as they had received and perceived it, made plans to change it (an assassination attempt, for starters), and then failed miserably in a tantrum of self-destruction. They finished the play soaked after inflating a ridiculously small raft and then taking it to the sea (this part of the scene was shown as a video), where waves overwhelmed them in a final failure. The play showed vividly the contrast between the characters’ capacity to grasp and communicate high-minded ideals such as justice, peace, and environmentalism, with their incapacity to act constructively on those ideals. They alternated between scenes in which they voiced their theories, and scenes in which they lived their lives in trivial ways disconnected from that theory, culminating in a strong scene of utter chaos in which they senselessly beat up on each other verbally and physically. Several theatrical techniques were noteworthy. One was that all lighting was

controlled by the actors right on the stage. Above them was a large grid densely populated by light bulbs of many shapes and sizes arranged in a way that was anything but neat. It seemed to reflect the do-it-yourself/we'll-do-it-our-way attitude characters portrayed during the play. Another memorable technique had to do with outdoor scenes portrayed in a black box theatre. To achieve the effect, the actors created a mountain scene with masking tape on one of the walls, complete with mountains, valleys, trees, and birds. They then put up a tent and went on a camping trip. During one of the camping scenes, the only light on the stage was a flashlight inside the tent. The actors played their parts very effectively, powerfully communicating the frustrations and the foibles of their generation. This was an extremely creative play in a very intimate setting with profound insights into a rising generation.



Autopsia a un copo de nieve. Photo: Christopher Wells

Autopsia a un copo de nieve, written by Luis Santillán and co-directed by Richard Viqueira and José Alberto Gallardo, was a visually stunning play with a horrifyingly grim emotional impact stemming from an intriguing and tragic subject: child suicide. It portrayed a highly dysfunctional, very wealthy family comprised of a mother and her two daughters roughly 10 and 20 years old. The mother and the older daughter withheld love from the younger daughter and eventually she drowned herself in the tub, ironically, since they had a fetish for cleanliness. Their fetishes did not stop at cleanliness, though, and included very blonde hair (wigs), being extremely trim, wearing white, and being in control. The mother was clearly mentally ill, and the older daughter was clearly well on the path, bulimic, anxious to wash and disinfect everything, detached, and reluctant to touch other people. And the little girl just wanted love and to play, but was denied. The set, designed by Mónica Raya,



Pequeñas certezas. Photo: Christopher Wells

had black walls and floor, which brought out the whiteness of the costumes. A silver-colored tub was located center stage, a white toilet was stage right (for the bulimia scenes), and there were several randomly sized elegant glass containers on several points of the stage. Water was important in the play from the very beginning, as the adults poured water into the containers to start the play, washed with it, pretended to bathe with it, and finally Nicoleta took her life with it. Lighting enhanced many of the scenes, often through the use of black lights, which emphasized the germ-free but stifling environment, but more often through the lack of light, which communicated the tenuous, shadowy existence of the characters. Dissonant sound effects added to the effect. The dialogue was painful, with the older women emphasizing their lack of time and abundance of disdain for Nicoleta. “Quisiera ser gorda para que alguien me viera y notara,” was the unanswered plea of the girl. All three actors placed their roles beautifully. I did find it ironic that while this was a world of women, it was men who wrote and directed this very disturbing play.

Bárbara Colio wrote *Pequeñas certezas* and Claudia Ríos directed it on the main stage of the Helénico theatre complex. This play combined a complex plot and some profound philosophical musings with some quirky

characters in unusual, sometimes slapstick circumstances. The plot involved the disappearance of a man in Tijuana, Colio's hometown, and the efforts of his family and lover to find him and make sense of the situation. The philosophical part had to do with the nature of existence, since people started to wonder whether the character who disappeared had even existed, as they could not even locate a photograph of him. The comic relief was related to the lover's mother, who accompanied her in her search, and was superbly played by Angelina Peláez. Peláez's character was a very dignified, matronly sort, with a penchant for wanting to smooth over tensions, often to the point of the absurd, combined with a profound enjoyment of mourning the dead. Her family, keenly aware of her quirks, was aware of her history of inventing stories just to participate in a good wake. Circumstances combined to have authorities ask her to identify the remains of a dead man as those of her daughter's lover, whom she had never met and whose picture she had never seen. She obliged, naturally, and a serious wake ensued, even though several people realized that the deceased probably was not who he was thought to be. The set was minimal, but allowed for numerous and instantaneous changes of time and locale, just by moving a sofa, lowering a gate, or creating a fence folded upward from the stage. One scene was ambiguous to at least one spectator – the image of the disappeared man appeared to his lover in the dark. Was that his ghost? Or was it her memory conjuring up an image? This was a delightful play in which the forte was the creation of memorable characters.

Eli o la recámara mal usada was reportedly one of the final plays written by Emilio Carballido, and was performed under the direction of Raquel Seoane by the Contigo América group. Further, Carballido reportedly wrote this play for Contigo América. *Eli o la recámara mal usada* took place in the home of a family whose father had gone into hiding during Mexico City's 1968 tensions. When the family learned that their relative Eli would visit them for an extended period of time, they went into a panic. And rightly so, because when she arrived with her children (one played by a doll), she wreaked havoc on the family, dislodging them from one of the few bedrooms, invading their small living areas, eating their meager food, and acting like she owned the place. Played vivaciously by María Antonieta Martínez, Eli's very presence was imposing – a larger woman wearing a flamboyant dress, hair wrapped in vibrant red, a large necklace around her neck, far too much make up on her face – and she arrived full of energy and demands. The fun was to see the chaos she imposed on the household, and how they figured

out a way to get rid of her by mentioning the politics of the absent father. This was a pleasant play, but I predict it will not be remembered as one of Carballido's greatest.

Unfortunately, the same can be said for *Equinoccio*, written by Luisa Josefina Hernández and directed by Fernando Martínez Monroy. A play with too many story lines that didn't seem to tie together, in it several sets of people looked in frustration for love. Others looked for enough money to survive. Despite the shortcomings in the plot, it did have a number of merits, including the intriguing presence of a character by the name of Señora Degris. Gracefully played by Paola Izquierdo, she donned an elegant grey dress and a veil over her face. She glided in and out of the lives of the characters, eventually delivering an envelope to one of them, a symbol of his death. High-pitched violin music always accompanied her presence on the stage. Izquierdo also played a very different character, a vivacious pícaro who worked for a tailor but had to scramble for every *pesito* he could get. Just as Izquierdo expertly played two extremely different roles, so did Pilar Villanueva, who played a chic ex-Olympian divorcee as well as an overweight, nagging, infirmed, homebound, two-timing wife. I found the men characters to be cartoonish in their exaggeration. I was fortunate to attend the premiere of this *puesta*, which the playwright herself attended along with a packed house of people with extensive ties to the world of theatre. The performance was followed by the presentation of a lovely homenaje to Hernández by several people and the *Agrupación de Críticos Teatrales*.

Sandra Félix directed *Los perros* by Elena Garro as part of a series for middle school students. I wondered whether the content was too strong for the target audience, but surely showing young people that abuse and violence causes suffering is a worthy goal. *Los perros* focused on the relationship between a mother and her daughter in a humble hut in a rural setting. On the eve of a festival the mother told her daughter how, on the eve of that festival years prior, she was kidnapped, used sexually, then abandoned, all part of an expected cycle. At the end of the play several men arrived and whisked the daughter away, thus continuing the cycle, as the mother and a cousin stood by, torn by the events but incapable of intervening. Even the dogs referred to in the title were accomplices, as their barking fell silent at the moment of the crime. The set, designed by Philippe Amand, contributed beautifully to establishing a bleak tone – the hut was a mere roof angled so the audience could only see the inside, and a floor of sand, while the walls were left to the imagination of the audience. On the floor was an actual fire over which the



Siberia. Photo: Christopher Wells

mother made tortillas as she talked to her daughter. Pilar Villanueva played the mother beautifully, fully communicating her anguish over her past and her daughter's future. This was an unsettling look at the results of violence against women with an effective implied call to break the cycle.

David Olguín wrote and directed *Siberia*, the first play performed in El Milagro's new theatre. Theatre insiders were abuzz because during the premiere one of the actors (Rodrigo Espinosa, judging from his bandaged arm at the performance I saw) was injured and a number of performances had to be cancelled. This play contained echoes of *Crime and Punishment*, as it showed what seemed to be a gratuitous murder of a prostitute, then the torment the perpetrator endured not at the hands of a criminal justice system, but from a character billed as "Laura, el demonio interior." Played by Laura Almela, this character had several manifestations, but in her most flamboyant role she dressed as a Siberian in winter, complete with a big fur coat with what appeared to be blood stains. It was as though the assassin had been exiled to one of the most inhospitable places on the earth, and his companion was a sarcastic, contemptuous, unpredictable mental and emotional torturer. In another manifestation, Almela donned a more chic costume, highlighted by a pink, alligator print jacket, and in this manifestation she was even more

frenetic and in the assassin's face. Almela played her role beautifully, and was definitely one of the highlights of the play. A drunk, the prostitute and the assassin, by the way, all seemed as tormented as any Rulfo character. The set, designed by Gabriel Pascal, was based on large white rectangles, the white suggesting Siberian winters. An enormous rectangle the length of the stage was raised or lowered, opening other spaces. Several trap doors in the stage and unseen openings in the rectangles allowed characters to suddenly burst onto the stage. The lack of realism in the set allowed for the action to take place in both Mexico City and Siberia, and in real places as well as imaginary. Music intensified the suspense and edge of the play, often working itself into a frenetic mode mirroring the moods of the characters. Typical of Olguín, this play featured rapid-fire, dense, and intense dialogue. I finished *Siberia* wishing I could see it again, but suspecting that I would miss a lot even after seeing it several times.

Mujer on the Border was a monologue performed by Marta Aura based on A/J Malpica's *El llanto del verdugo*. Directed by María Muro, Muro and Aura collaborated on the adaptation to theatre. In this play a woman recounted how her son had gone to the United States, was arrested, and was eventually executed. She reflected on her loneliness, on the US legal system, on the American dream, and on her agony as she was powerless to help her son. Aura's character was a traditional Mexican woman from a rural area, and wore a traditional dress with a shawl. As she told the story she decorated a piñata, which she now did to scratch out a meager living. The most noteworthy theatrical technique was the use of video showing footage, in a projection many times the size of the actor, of her in poignant rural settings. Audio snippets of the final words between her son and the men who administered the death penalty were also powerful. This was a terribly moving play focusing on the ever present topic of immigration to the United States and how it affects Mexicans.

Finally, it should be noted that one of this season's finest plays was *¿Quién te entiende?!*, written and directed by Alberto Lomnitz and performed by Señal y Verbo, Mexico's deaf theatre company. The basics of this play are included in the report in this issue of *Latin American Theatre Review* on the VII Conference/Festival Latin American Theatre Today (129). In its Mexico City setting, the stage was indeed very close to spectators, making the play very intimate, like a visit to the home of some friends. It was also 16 minutes shorter than the performance in Virginia. Part-way through the season Haydeé Boetto had to leave the cast, and her role was then played by Ricardo

Esquerra, who reportedly did a excellent job in the role. Upon finishing its run in the Villaurrutia theatre, *¿Quién te entiende?!* was slated to go on the road to various places in Mexico, and then form part of the lineup for school theatre in 2009.

Mexico City's theatre scene continues to feature enormously creative theatrics, outstanding acting, and timely topics. The best of its theatre is marvelously entertaining, but serious at the same time, taking on issues of great importance. Mexico City is still extremely fertile ground for excellent theatre.

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