

Fourth Siglo de Oro Drama Festival (Chamizal)

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To read Cervantes, Lope de Vega, Tirso de Molina, Calderón de la Barca and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz in manuscript or a well-edited edition is one thing but to visualize their art come alive on stage is quite another. Whether or not a play in its written form without its actualization before an audience can be considered theatre constitutes one of the major debates of literary criticism, a question as ancient as the art itself.

Until recently, I was among those who had dedicated a great part of academic life to the study of the *comedia* but who never had a chance to see more than a handful of live productions. A phone call from Walker Reid, Cultural Affairs Director, on behalf of Frank Smith, Superintendent of the Chamizal National Memorial in El Paso, Texas, gave me an opportunity to experience first-hand the performance of several classics. They invited me to participate as one of three judges in the Fourth Siglo de Oro Drama Festival. The other two members of the *jurado* were Héctor Azar, director, playwright, and founder of CADAC (Centro de Arte Dramático Acción Civil) in Mexico City and author of the weekly column "Zoon Theatrykon" in *El Universal*; and Carlos Miguel Suárez Radillo, dramatist, critic, and lecturer from Madrid.

The Festival was scheduled to run for two consecutive weeks from March 9-24. Actually, the festivities ended on Friday the 23rd, as the theatrical group from Venezuela—Teatro de Repertorio del Ateneo de Caracas—failed to live up to its commitment and make an appearance the following evening. The Cardinale Alliance of Masquers and Artists from Los Angeles also cancelled during the second week of the festival due to a misfortune that befell one of its leading actors two days before their scheduled performance. The remaining twelve theatrical groups representing Mexico, Puerto Rico, and the United States performed as planned.

It became obvious to the judges early that the two categories, academic and

repertory, which were originally designated as divisions for the competition, did not adequately reflect the quality of a given theatrical group nor the degree to which it was capable of performing. Some groups, initially placed in the student category, were actually able to perform at a level approximating professional or semi-professional. By the same token, some theatrical troupes who called themselves "repertory" were, in reality, by structure and design, more student oriented. The judges, in an attempt to arrive at a more equitable distribution of the awards decided to regroup the performers into two divisions with the simple designation of "A" and "B", the former considered the top or class division.

The Festival began with Lope's *La dama boba* by the Promethean Players of Miami-Dade Community College, Miami, Florida. The play was wisely selected for opening night not only because of its light-hearted tone, a sure bet to enliven any audience, but also because its presenters were well-known to the Chamizal for their prize-winning performances during two previous years. María Teresa Rojas, who for this year's performance shared the best director award, illustrated her creative touches when, in a prelude to the play, she had actors dressed in blue-jeans and loose-fitting tops scrambling about preparing a contemporary set of eight large boxes decorated as wrapped presents and children's blocks. A photographer ran around flashing pictures and Finea sat in the audience as the play began. Meanwhile, someone sat at a player piano located in the back of the stage and initiated and ended each act with music. The whole production was supported by convincing performances from José Amaya as Laurencio (best actor) and Elizabeth Longo as the comic Clara (best supporting actress).

In contrast to the frivolity and levity of the opening performance, the following night's dramatization of Sor Juana's poetry by the Universidad Autónoma de Chihuahua was a solemn and religious experience. The selection of poems and their theatrical adaptation by Mario Huberto Chávez was recognized by the *jurado*. However, Chávez was working with difficult material and the evening resulted more in a series of dramatic readings than theatre. The initial scene, which attempted to establish a play within a play but which never was effectively realized because the characters failed to appear on stage again, depicted *un anciano* and *un niño* discussing Sor Juana and her significance to Mexican history and culture. The scene changed, as if in a flash-back, and the audience witnessed ten courtly women dressed in flowing gowns of the epoch who spent the next half-hour reciting love sonnets. After intermission, the set was transformed from the court to the convent. The audience was dazzled by the flickering of some two-to-three hundred candles mounted on the facade of a baroque altar in the Convent's chapel. The same ten women, this time in religious garb, passed another half-hour reciting Sor Juana's mystic poetry. Suddenly, the nuns exit and within minutes the women reenter clothed in loosely draped white tunics. Pointing accusing fingers at the men in the audience they cry out Sor Juana's most famous *redondilla*, "Hombres necios. . ." The full theatrical impact of the two juxtaposed scenes of the reposeful pious nuns and the screaming frustrated women seemed to have escaped most in the audience, perhaps because Chávez himself did not consciously conceive of its presence.

At eight o'clock on Sunday evening, people from both sides of the Rio Grande again filled the large auditorium at the Chamizal as they had done ten

out of the twelve nights of the Festival. Those who did not arrive early enough to secure one of the 503 comfortable *butacas* watched via closed circuit t.v. from seats on folding chairs in the lobby. The Compañía Titular del Colegio de Bachilleres from Mexico City delighted the público with a theatrical version of *Doña Endrina* taken from Juan Ruiz's *El libro de buen amor* and one of Cervantes more hilarious *entremeses*, *Los mirones*. Although the productions were simply staged in the classical mode, they were intelligently directed by Juan Ignacio Orozco who claimed the best over-all production award in Division B for *Doña Endrina*. Pedro Aguayo gave a better-than-average performance for his role as Don Melón (best actor) and María Antonietta Martínez did equally well for her performance as Trotaconventos (best supporting actress). The judges also paid special tribute to Victor Guzmán for his costuming and staging and to all the actors for their clarity of diction and fidelity to the Spanish language in their presentation of *Doña Endrina*.

The Compañía de Teatro de Albuquerque of the University of Albuquerque which staged one of the most controversial productions had the public buzzing at intermission and after the performance with its rendition of Lope's *Fuenteovejuna*. Remembering the very fine traditional staging of *Doña Endrina* and *Los mirones* the night before, all entered the auditorium expecting another classical version of Lope's popular comedy. Instead, what we witnessed was a daring but creative adaptation of Lope's 16th-century Spain to the 19th-century American Southwest. In *loa* fashion, a guitarist set the scene with a Mexican *corrido*. The staging was uncomplicated but unmistakably that of the desert Southwest and the actors wore the dress of the *campesino* or *chicano* of the field. Instead of the Comendador, the villain was a U.S. cavalry general. Throughout the entire play, whenever the General spoke to Flores and Ortuño, the officers recited in carefully selected English translations of Lope's text. On the other hand, Laurencia, Frondoso, and the other villagers of Fuenteovejuna dialogued in 17th-century Lopean Spanish. It was always the villagers who attempted to speak the General's language whenever communication was necessary between the two camps. José Rodríguez, the play's director, effectively used the linguistic difficulties to heighten the dramatic intensity of the play and to portray, even more than in Lope's original, the cultural and social conflict between the two opposing protagonists. Curiously, after the General's death by "Fuenteovejuna," the new officer who takes charge of the cavalry and the village is able to speak Spanish, much to the delight of all the *campesinos* who see this as a sign of better times. Although many disagreed and reacted negatively to Rodríguez's modifications, his creation did succeed in capturing Lope's spirit of rebellion, his love for democracy, and his appreciation for the individual worth of the *gente chica*.

On March 13-15, the Festival continued with three performances from Division "B": Sor Juana's *El divino Narciso* by the Hispanic Repertoire Theater from Our Lady of the Lake University in San Antonio; Lope's *La hermosa fea* by the Compañía de Teatro de la Universidad de Guadalajara; and another Lopean work, *El mejor alcalde, el rey*, presented by the Department of Drama and Speech of the University of Texas at El Paso. Of the three, the best performance was given by the group from Guadalajara, primarily because of outstanding individual efforts by Rosanna Uribe as Duquesa Estella (best actress)

and Rubén Navarro as Julio (best supporting actor). The entire Guadalajara production was enlivened by the colorful and elaborate costuming design of Pita Yepiz.

The weekend of March 16-18 was undoubtedly the highlight of the entire Festival with two excellent, but entirely contrasting, productions by groups from Division A and a guest performance by the Compañía de Teatro Repertorio Español de Nueva York of *Romeo y Julieta* in translation by Pablo Neruda. It all began Friday evening when Los Teatristas of the Casa Cultura de Aguascalientes staged before a packed house Director Jorge Galván's adaptation of Cervantes' *El cerco de Numancia*. With a host of twenty-nine actors, Galván, who shared the honors for best direction, effectively conveyed the epic nature of the Cervantine tragedy with a surrealist creation of mood through costume, lighting, and music. A black curtain was torn down and left draped across the back of the stage. The Roman army, wearing black leather jackets and sunglasses, strutted about in Neo-Nazi fashion. The Numantines wore levis or simple dresses. An especially effective use of lighting was deployed to depict the epic sacrifice of the Numantines, as men, women, and children threw themselves into the human conflagration. An intense red light beamed from above onto members of the cast who were slowly circling about in the center of the stage. Their hands were extended straight-up, high above their heads as they slowly moved in a patterned circle, impressionistically conveying a sense of flames from a fire that grew huger as the circle enlarged when more citizens of the besieged city offered themselves as victims. Alfredo Baez and Iban Carrillo received the judges' plaudits for their lighting effects as did Ladislao Juárez Ponce for his music.

In contrast, Saturday's performance by the University of Puerto Rico at Río Piedras was a classic presentation of Tirso's *Don Gil de las calzas verdes*. Considered unanimously by the judges to be the best over-all production of the entire Festival, the play swept five of the top awards. Besides the award for best over-all production to Dean Zayas, Codelia González was deemed the best actress for her demanding role as Dona Juana; Carmelo Santana kept the audience in stitches for his supporting role as the *gracioso*, Caramanchel. The actors donned traditional 16th and 17th-century costumes expertly done by Gloria Sáenz. What pleased the audience most, however, was a flexible set created by "Nina" of about eight pieces of styrofoam with imbedded magnets which were artistically rearranged to represent palace interiors, garden fountains, and street balconies in full view of an applauding public.

The entire weekend was brought to a crescendo with an excellent adaption of Shakespeare's immortal classic, *Romeo and Juliet* by the Spanish Theater Repertory Company of New York under the direction of René Buch. The actors from New York, who appeared in two previous competitions at the Chamizal in 1976 and 1977, this year made a guest appearance.

As it turned out, during the final week, there were only two more presentations, both in the Division B category, both by theatrical performers from Ciudad de Juárez. On Thursday, March 23, the Taller de Teatro de la Universidad Autónoma rendered a very traditional but interesting version of Calderón's sacramental play, *El gran teatro del mundo*. Particularly noteworthy was the

interpretation of *El Mundo* by Oscar Siqueiros whose mimicry and facial expressions lent an added dynamism to the play. Far superior was the theatrical fare offered the following evening by the Teatro Experimental. Their traditional but very lively rendition of three *entremeses* by Cervantes, *La guarda cuidadosa*, *El retablo de las maravillas* and *La cueva de Salamanca* brought praises for their fine director, Roberto Salas Herrera, and special honors for the acting of Onésimo Ramos.

Those associated with the Siglo de Oro Drama Festival since its inception claim that this year's 1979 Festival was the best ever both in terms of the number of presentations and quality of production. At a time when Shakespeare's plays are being televised to millions thanks to the British Broadcasting System and P.B.S., it is gratifying to know that the dramas of his Spanish contemporaries also have some opportunity where their theatrical expression before the public is welcomed and realized. If you wish to be among those who, like myself, have traversed the bridge from book to stage, the dates of next year's Fifth Siglo de Oro Drama Festival at the Chamizal are March 7-22.

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