The Lark Theatre's US-México Word Exchange

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The Lark Theatre's Word Exchange (El Trueque de Palabras) is a "10 day residency which of theatrical dialogue between Mexican playwrights, directors, actors and the Lark community," directed by playwright Andrea Thome, and produced by John Eisner (US-México Playwright Exchange). The program is co-sponsored by the Lark and FONCA / Conaculta, making it a transnational private-public arts collaboration. The main focus of the residency is the translation of four new Mexican works into American English for American audiences, for whom they are presented at the end of the residency. The program officially began in October 2006, however the Lark has been collaborating with Mexican playwrights since 2000, when the company commissioned a translation of Sabina Berman's *Happy New Century, Doktor Freud* by Kristin Nigro. Caridad Svich's translation of Silvia Peláez's *Fever at 107 Degrees* was also completed before the official commencement of the program.

In 2006, the program translated five plays — four from Spanish to English — and one from English to Spanish. The plays translated into English were *Adela y Juana* by Verónica Musalem Moreno, translated by Caridad Svich; *H* by Richard Viqueira translated by Andrea Thome; *Papá está en Atlántida* by Javier Malpica, translated by Jorge Cortñias; and *Acontecimientos con aparteds de la vida* by Alberto Villareal, translated by Andy Bragen. In addition, *Pleasure and Pain* by Chantal Bilodeau was translated into Spanish by Silvia Paleaz. In 2007, four plays were translated into Spanish — *La tristeza de los citricos* by Verónica Brujiero, translated by Andy Bragen; *Van Gogh en Nueva York* by Jorge Celaya, translated by Migdalia Cruz; *Desiertos* by Hugo Alfredo Hinojosa Díaz, translated by Caridad Svich; and *De príncipes, princesas y otro bichos* by Paola Izquierdo, translated by Susana Cook.

The translation process is extensive. The residency begins with a rough translation all four plays completed before each text receives ten days of attention from directors, actors, writers and translators. As most of the production team is in the room during each rehearsal, the work is collaborative and the process is open to discovery. While the translators are fully bilingual, the playwrights, directors and actors have varying levels of language facility in their non-native languages, which leads to a multilingual rehearsal room conducive to questioning and honing cultural translations. The Lark's translators are playwrights themselves, many of whom are Latino/a, and write bilingually and/or biculturally, making them especially apt intermediaries for the Mexican playwrights' work.

The November 2008 Word Exchange included four plays: *The Camels (Los Camellos)* by Luis Ayhllón, translated by Maria Alexandria Beech; *Decomposition (Descomposición)* by José Alfonso Cárcamo, translated by Mariana Carreño King; *Maids of Honor (Las Meninas)* by Ernesto Anaya, translated by Migdalia Cruz; and *Yamaha 300* by Cutberto López Reyes, translated by Mando Alvarado. While the subject matter and styles of the plays were diverse, each one translated well into U.S. cultural frames. The relevance of these pieces denies the usual claim that Mexican plays that deal with social and political issues particular to Mexico do not make sense in a US reality.

Los Camellos is a play that centers on a middle class family that plays itself on a stage four days a week. Surrounded by barbed wire, the family must choose whether to "talk to each other or try to escape" (US-México Playwright Exchange). *Los Camellos* resonated with the reality T.V. culture so prevalent in the US in the contemporary era. While the playwright did not intend this analogy — and in fact the play's exploration of the inability of the family to communicate due to their alienation from each other could in fact be said to be "universal" — the metatheatrical elements of the piece seemed designed for audiences used to the conventions of reality T.V., making this Mexican play quite accessible for a US audience.

Decomposition also resonated despite the disparity in class politics in the US and Mexico. *Decomposition* tells the story of two friends from their teen years to middle adulthood — one working class, the other quite wealthy. The less wealthy friend falls in love with the wealthy young man's sister, and deals are cut to keep that relationship from flourishing. Ultimately, there is inevitable double crossing and the decomposition of each man's soul. Although the vagaries of their careers are framed by political corruption

particular to Mexico, the play's exploration of cross-class male friendships is accessible in part because of the boom of movies that have traveled to the US from Mexico City, such as *Amores perro*s and *Y tu mamá también*, of which *Decomposition* seems like kin. (In fact, playwright Carcamo also works as a film actor who has worked with Carlos Cuaron, co-author of *Y tu mamá también*'s screenplay). Yet I was interested in one potential mistranslation. When an accusation of incest was revealed in the play, more than one audience member gasped. This scene seemed like the moment in which many spectators were most invested in the play. However, I felt this information was a peripheral aspect of the plot of *Decomposition*, whose exploration of the more subtle emotional violence between friends did not emphasize the violations within the blood family. Instead it chronicled the decomposition of souls when the forms of economic mobility available ultimately lead to sure corruption.

Las Meninas, on the surface, would seem the most difficult of the plays to translate, because of its subject matter. Anaya's work is an exploration of the life of Diego Velázquez, as told through the composition of his painting *Las Meninas.* The characters in this famous painting are alive and well throughout the play. Their interactions with Velázquez open up questions about art, patronage and mortality. The baroque style of the piece is quite distanced from U.S. reality as is the temporal play between past and present often featured in Mexican drama. The humor of the anachronism comes at particular moments, such as when the Infanta makes a claim about the devaluation of being a princess after some witty banter about her great knowledge of economics. When she used this term, and referred to a crisis it did not evoke the general puzzlement that sometimes comes with terms specific to Mexico's troubled economic history. Our own economic crises, alongside Cruz's deft translation, made the joke painfully prescient. In other places in the script the rather layered textures of the Baroque found themselves translated in stage directions and musical cues, where she inserted a mash up of Prince's "Sexy Motherfucker" and other pop songs. The mix of the religious and the erotic captured the mood of *Las Meninas* perfectly, so much so that Anaya mentioned that he wanted to revise the Spanish text.

Yamaha 300, a "dark comedy that exposes the violent life of Narco fisherman who swarm the coasts of Sinaloa," (US-México Playwright Exchange) seemed to close for comfort at times. Lopez's work would perhaps, at the current moment, be too painful to stage in Mexico; in fact, it was intimated that staging it in Sinaloa at the moment would not be without its potential

dangers. Given publicity about the recent spike of narcotraffic inspired killings in Northern Mexico, US audiences are more familiar with the play's cultural world than they would have been a few years ago. The almost filmic nature of the *Yamaha 300*'s short scenes, and its urgent action sequences, risked desensitizing the audiences to the violence they were seeing. Ultimately, however, the emotional reflection of its characters, leads it elsewhere. The undercurrent of violence and disappointment that seeped through *Yamaha 300* and *Decomposition* seemed to reflect the tense mood in Mexico, where public outcry about violence has led to public demonstrations in cities throughout the nation. As always, displaying this violence is a risk. As playwright Alberto Villareal said at a No Passport Conference in 2006: "Mexico is good at selling two things to the world: violence and the folkloric" (Svich 39). Many of the collaborators in 2008 seemed aware of the stakes of their representations and took pains to avoid reifying stereotypes or exploiting the idea of Mexico for a U.S. audience such that said audiences could abstract themselves from the Mexican conditions (including the very profitable illicit activity created by demands for illegal drugs in the US) created in part by economic disparities and opportunities between neighboring countries.

In previous years both Hugo Alfredo Hinojosa's play *Deserts* and Malpica's *My Father is in Atlantis*, took this issue on by making the border its overt subject. Watching the plays this year made me think that we may be at a moment when talking about the border has been deemphasized by playwrights who wish to expose the everyday violence of the hemisphere. Perhaps because of the US own compromised position at the moment, the mood of dispossession and absurdity so common in Mexican drama seemed real to the US audiences who saw their economy crash around the time of the festival. It does not seem odd to me that *Decomposition* premiered in an equity showcase February 26-28, 2009. Press for the play suggests that its "brilliance is compounded by its pervasive humor, moments of grace, and a fascinating structure that allows actors to go in and out of character, inviting the audience to share the universality of friendship and survival" (Lark Theatre Website). While I agree that the play is brilliant, I do not see the "universality of friendship" as theme as the reason for its success with US audiences. Instead, I believe that at this moment this *very Mexican* friendship refracts our own modes of the human cost of achieving success when the odds are stacked against you. The difficulties of class mobility in Mexico are perhaps more of a reality in the US today than anyone wants to admit. It is for this

reason that I shy away from singing the praises of these plays predicated on their universality although I agree with Caridad Svich and many others that Mexican (and by extension Latin American) drama has been overlooked because it is wrongly assumed that it is not as universal as European drama.[1] Instead I praise them for their bold and brave specificity in pointing out the difficult road ahead for citizens living under a hemispheric neoliberalism that privileges free trade and privatization for profit over human rights and welfare.

Yet the plays' successes with their audiences was a hopeful aspect of the residency and festival, as was the cultural exchange between US born Latino and Latin American artists who collaborated on the productions. The Lark Theatre's commitment to these playwrights (and to many of the other international playwrights they work with in Romania and the Netherlands) is based on a "strong conviction that continuity and reciprocity are essential components of productive international collaborations and their long-term success; therefore, with each country, our goal is to establish a stable infrastructure for developing creative relationships over time in reasonable ways" (Lark Theatre Website). Perhaps what is most exciting is the commitment to a long-term process, facilitated by the public-private collaboration between the Lark and FONCA / Conaculta because it undoes the logic of exchange in which these international artists' works are mere commodities to be exchanged quickly for maximum profit. In addition, as artists in both the US and in Mexico are in the midst of debates about cultural democracy and the role of the artist in their respective societies as state funding for the arts diminishes and privatization of culture looms large, the exchange gives them to time to think about the practical modes of art making today as well as sharing their art.

Hopefully, the Word Exchange will continue not only to foster the translation and production of the writers they work with, but make a case for the possibilities of translating other Mexican plays. For example, many political comedies of the 1980s and 90s by Mexico's finest playwrights such as *La grieta* by Sabina Berman, which deals with the corruption of the PRI, and *La Malinche* by Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda, which replays the conquest in relation to neoliberalism, have not been translated, perhaps because of fear of lack of relevance to a US public. However, given our present financial crisis, our recognition of our place in a globalized economy, and the reality of the human costs of deregulated market economies, Mexican dramas that deal with the contradictory everyday dilemmas related to these conditions will

seem closer rather than farther away. The 2008 US Mexico Word Exchange suggests that it certainly possible, if not imminent.

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Note

[1] See *Theatre Journal*'s October 2004 issue's "A Forum on the State of Latin American Theatre and Performance Studies in the United States Today," pp.445-77, for a discussion of this issue by US.academics who research on Latin American drama and performance.

Works Cited

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