

## Mexico City's Spring 2009 Theatre Season

### Timothy G. Compton

The same phenomenon which dominated Mexico City's spring also dominated its spring theatre season: H1N1. Government decree closed all theaters for several weeks, along with restaurants, museums, schools, and other gathering places. Although debates rage over whether the government overreacted, reacted too late, did too much or too little, etc., we do know that the crisis indisputably dealt a serious blow to theatre as a result of lost performances and light attendance for weeks afterward, since spectators had to overcome their fears and inertia before returning to public places. A full month after they once again opened, many theaters still offered hand sanitizer to every spectator, instructions on proper hand-washing were posted in most restrooms, and some theaters advertised that they disinfected their facilities after every performance. The word "irregular" describes post-crisis programming in a number of theatres, due, I assume, to not knowing when the government would rescind its ban. Swine flu notwithstanding, Mexico City's theatre rose as the phoenix, and the spring season featured some excellent offerings.

The Centro Cultural Helénico wasted no time out of the gate, immediately offering over ten plays a week in its pair of theaters. Year in and year out, Helénico's La gruta is one of the most important experimental venues in Mexico City, and this year was no exception, with a different play almost every night, plus children's plays on weekends. It housed one of the season's finest plays, a modest piece performed by Grupo Historias, a group from Puebla which evidently does specialize in historias, as they announced this as historia number 23. Written and directed by Aída Andrade Varas, *La historia del Señor Sommer* sparkled in several ways. First of all, the storytelling consisted of brilliant and abundant flow back and forth between narration and representation. Although one character told the story, two actors embodied

him, so during flashbacks to the character's childhood the actors alternated playing a younger version of the narrator, and the other would take on the identity of other characters in the narrator's past. In the performance I saw, Mauricio Montes and Eric Rodas played the pair flawlessly, switching roles often, seamlessly, and effectively (the names of three actors appeared in the program, but only two acted in each performance). They had remarkable range of expression, sometimes comic and sometimes moving, sometimes frantic and sometimes relaxed, sometimes bombastic and other times intimate. And they played off each other with perfect timing. The minimalist set included a just a few props used with exceeding effectiveness — a walking stick, a fishing hat, and a small box containing various items. The stick and hat, which symbolized Señor Sommer, never left the stage. They often stood alone at the back of the stage, but sometimes actors used them to embody Señor Sommer. The protagonist's (protagonists'?) story captured the wonder and quirkiness and nostalgia of childhood, as he (they?) described/acted out humorous episodes from early in his (their?) life, but each episode related somehow to the mysterious Señor Sommer, a man who wandered the town with no apparent destination and never spoke to anybody. The episodes included watching eccentric parents in power struggles, becoming aware of girls and a first attempt at wooing one, climbing a tree and imagining the sadness of family and acquaintances if he should jump to his death, and a hysterically funny scene of a piano lesson presided over by a thoroughly intimidating teacher who sneezed a bit of mucus onto a crucial piano key, thoroughly traumatizing the cowering child. In another dazzling scene the actors staged a hailstorm by throwing a torrent of superballs on the floor, causing sound effects remarkably similar to those of an actual hailstorm. But focus always turned back to Señor Sommer, and both the childhood and adult versions of the protagonist speculated on the mysteries of who he was and what might have made him be the way he was. Eventually, the child witnessed the suicide of the old man, so suddenly the play transformed from a nostalgic look back at childhood into a profound reflection on mental illness, human relations, guilt, and memory. It was a shame that *La historia del Señor Sommer* was only scheduled for performances once a week in April and May, and worse that several of those performances fell victim to H1N1.

Three other excellent plays also featured attractive mixtures of narrating and acting: *Delirium tremens*, *Lágrimas de agua dulce*, and *Uga*. Antonio Crestani adapted the first from Ignacio Solares' book by the same name. In fact, this was the third adaptation to theatre of Solares' haunting testimonial



*Delirium Tremens*. Photo: Roberto Blenda

book about the alcohol-related phenomenon of delirium tremens. In this adaptation, which Crestani also directed, he reordered selected portions of the book's text, ending up with the stories of five different people (as opposed to the eleven in the book). Nevertheless, like in the book, conversation between a young Solares and Gabriel made up the play's main connecting thread. Jorge Avalos embodied Gabriel beautifully, capturing the bizarre personality of a man who has suffered extensively but has created for himself a unique and tenuous place of recovery. His interactions with Solares clearly helped the writer make sense of the phenomenon he was studying — Avalos convincingly projected in Gabriel the image of a wise fool. During the dialogues between Gabriel and Solares they would occasionally freeze and allow the latter to comment directly to the audience on the situation. Four other characters told their stories, with an excellent mix of showing/acting their stories rather than just narrating them. During several monologues the actors lived the horrors that they described — angels turning into devils, destructive voices in their heads, trying to escape from a grotesque dwarf (a case narrated by a man in the book, but by a woman in the play), all accompanied by haunting sound effects and changes in lighting. The five cases had varying rhythms, tones, and even colors. Like the book, which has played a positive role in alcohol recovery programs in Mexico for 30 years, this play has reportedly also had a positive social impact among recovering alcoholics, but it was also gripping theatre.

Children's theatre claimed the other two plays which used narration as a springboard to representation. Although Jaime Chabaud wrote 11 characters into his play *Lágrimas de agua dulce*, in this performance, directed by Perla Szuchmacher, a cast of one performed it — Ana Zavala, who embodied the narrator-grandmother, but also played the other ten parts through clever puppets of varying types and sizes designed by Haydeé Boetto. The set, designed by Edyta Rzewuska, consisted of a desk on one part of the stage, and a large “arpillera” on another. The arpillera represented the town in which the abuela lived, and Zavala made changes to the scenery as she told the story of a drought and its effects on the village. Not only did she change verdant trees and sheep to skeletons, but she placed small puppets on the board to represent the various characters. She also managed hand puppets, puppets she would hang on parts of her own clothing, and larger puppets as well, so many of the characters had multiple manifestations of themselves. The quirky and amusing cast of characters included the town's incompetent mayor, an overweight priest, gossipy nuns, the narrator's granddaughter and her friends. Zavala had a different voice for each and also provided numerous sound effects throughout the play. *Lágrimas...* was children's theatre, complete with colorful and cute visual imagery and endearing interaction between Zavala and young spectators, but the play's thematics were stark, especially by the standards of children's theatre: drought, child abuse, corruption and greed (town authorities paddled the abuela's granddaughter six hours a day to produce enough fresh water through her tears to keep the town prosperous despite the drought). Given its delights, combined with its social dimensions, it was not surprising to learn that *Lágrimas de agua dulce* had won an award in the state of Michoacán for best play of any type (not just children's theatre).

Haydeé Boetto was even more involved in *Uga*, as she not only designed the puppets but conceived of the play's idea, directed it, designed the set with José Agüero, and took the lead in writing the script with the actors. Unlike *Lágrimas...*, happiness unabashedly reigned in *Uga* — a girl told the story of how she met three deaf people and became friends with them. Performed by Mexico's deaf theatre group, *Seña y verbo*, and in accordance with children's theatre, the play appealed visually to audiences of all ages, with charming puppets and costumes of a different color for each actor. The main puppet, Uga, emerged from an egg a cutesy blue thing with a face, but the real magic happened when the actors played a game with gunny sacks, making myriad animals out of them. Jacobo Lieberman composed original music for the play, which he performed live. He also created multiple sound

effects, and on occasion interacted with the characters in humorous ways. As the main character became friends with the deaf characters, she learned bits and pieces of Mexican sign language, which she shared with audience members as well. This was a very sweet, educational, visually beautiful play.

*El evangelio según Clark* was undoubtedly the most distinctive play of the season. Writing and directing it alone did not satisfy Richard Viqueira, as he also designed the set and played one of the four parts. *El evangelio* actually premiered in 2008 but has enjoyed a long run, and during this spring season was being performed once a week on the main stage of the Helénico complex. The plot (Clark Kent went back in time to undo events leading to Lois Lane's tragic death but overshot and ended up in the time of Christ; hijinks ensued) lacked substance, as the characters themselves admitted late in the play when they couldn't find a way to finish. Nevertheless, the play's strengths abundantly compensated for its weaknesses. The set consisted of a swing set, which, in the play's initial scene, descended to the stage and actors bolted it down. The four actors then engaged in an unforgettable performance of unbelievably demanding and exacting physical work, part gymnastics and part circus. As they played their roles as Superman (Mauricio E. Galaz), Jesus Christ (Waldo Facco in the performance I saw), Clark Kent, Lois Lane, Mary Magdalene (Carlos Valencia), Lex Luthor and Judas Iscariot (Richard Viqueira), the actors used every inch of the swing set in numerous ways, swinging on it (usually without the swings), mounting it, traversing it, and using the swings as beds, rocks, planes, puppet stages, doors, windows, tables, a boxing ring, a press box, a typewriter, and a time machine. The incredibly imaginative use of the swing set made extreme demands of the actors, but produced marvelous unique images for spectators. The choreography was exact, the timing impeccable, and the characters hilarious, although irreverent. The characters of Jesus and Superman were particularly unique, at times projecting an image and tone of superhero or savior, but other times slipping into the mode of a Mexican picaro, complete with Mexican lingo, accent, humor, and attitude, as they engaged in an entertaining rivalry to be the greatest superhero ever. The characters also occasionally broke with their roles, talking directly with the audience in Brechtian asides. Although its topic didn't completely jell for me, *El evangelio según Clark* was a unique, joyful, spectacular performance unlike anything I have ever seen.

*Amarillo* also excelled in its memorable imagery. It was a *creación colectiva* performed in the El Milagro theater by a cast of six, directed by Jorge A. Vargas. The title refers not to the color, but to the city in Texas to

which the play's protagonist tried to go. Three long rows of spectators sat lengthwise along the long, enormous performance space, which was dominated by a long cement wall at the back, and had shelves to the sides. An avalanche of symbols filled the austere space during the entire play. Visually, in addition to the actors and props, several projectors produced images on the large back wall and to the stage. Often the projections were pre-recorded (for example, footage of immigrants to the US in their struggles, or a disgusting video game which rewarded the player for shooting wetbacks) and often they were live shots of the play taken from a variety of cameras. One such camera took shots from directly above the cavernous space, and several times the images projected on the back wall communicated the illusion of the actors climbing a wall, when actually they were moving on the stage in a horizontal position. Sounds also filled the space in abundance, with Pedro Páramo-like murmurs much of the time, but dominated by the haunting "singing" of Jesús Cuevas, whose amplified voice had the tone of a didgeridoo. Dressed entirely in black, donning a large black Texas cowboy hat and a white beard, and wandering the stage like a detached sage, he wistfully and penetratingly sang to and about the journeyers. And the dialogue itself delivered by the actors was overwhelming, with numerous repetitions, almost ritualistic monologues on how crossing the border leads to identity loss, and technical lectures on things like how dehydration works. The props and illumination also contributed to make the play memorable. Actors moved bottles of water from the shelves to the stage to help the traveler on his way. Lights of various sizes illuminated them, creating otherworldly effects. Steam rising from a smoldering box communicated most effectively the heat the protagonist had to endure. And toward the end of the play actors punctured scores of bags full of sand which lowered from the ceiling, then set them into motion like pendulums, which filled the stage with falling sand, once again placing the characters and spectators in the desert. Raúl Mendoza played the protagonist and deserves praise for his physical prowess alone, as he ran, climbed, jumped, wore many layers of clothing, and worked hard during the entire play. He must have been exhausted by play's end. Along with the four women who played various parts, his choreography was exacting and beautiful. The numerous strands of the plot did not entirely come together for me, but the central image of a man suffering in an unforgiving desert against all odds came through with great power.

Cuauhtémoc Duque and Jorge Domínguez acted in a high energy, hilarious play which shared the concern of crossing the border with *Ama-*



*El mojado*. Photo: Timothy Compton

*rillo*, but with a very different tone. Domínguez adapted *El mojado* from José Ruiz Mercado's *Mojado James*. The actors performed it *Carpa*-style, complete with abundant singing, slapstick, role playing, and direct contact with the audience. Both actors took on multiple roles, and both played the main character at different points, a Mexican who went to the United States, endured the humiliations of life as an undocumented alien, eventually made good money, albeit in shady ways, returned to Mexico as a big shot, but ended up murdered just the same. Despite its humor, sadness permeated *El mojado* in the form of leaving one's homeland, feeling like a "ciudadano en la tierra de nadie," and never really being able to return home. Like a good picaresque novel, a picaro dominated, but the play served up a rich gallery of Mexican types. I was pleasantly surprised to find such a fine little gem in a tiny theater off the beaten theatre path (at the Círculo teatral), especially since it offered only one performance a week.

A number of plays this season had non-traditional performance histories, starting with a street theatre performance of Emilio Carballido's *¡Silencio pollos pelones, ya les van a echar su maíz!*, directed by Alberto Lomnitz. UNAM's "Carro de Comedias" program produced *Silencio*. . . and Dario Fo's *Muerte accidental de un anarquista* from its small trailer, which houses all the costumes, props, and even the set used for the plays. The actors not only perform the play, but engage in the significant physical labor of transforming the trailer into the set prior to the play, and then taking it



*¡Silencio, pollos pelones, ya les van a echar su maíz!* Photo: Ashton Jensen

down afterwards. Although the group often performs the plays on UNAM's campus in the cultural zone, they travel extensively. By mid-year 2009 they had already performed in the states of Chiapas, Durango, Guanajuato, Puebla, Querétaro and Zacatecas. I caught a performance in the pedestrian walkway in the middle of elegant and frenetic Reforma Boulevard as part of a festival highlighting cultures of numerous countries from around the world. People packed the walkway and the swirling traffic never stopped. In the midst of the chaos, spectators stood for 65 minutes of excellent, free theatre. With the help of high-powered microphones, the play's six actors demanded the attention of passers-by and even office workers prior to the play: "¡Gente bonita de Reforma, dejen sus oficinas y vengan!" The actors sang, danced, and changed roles and typical garb from Veracruz often during the play. The picaresque nature of their characters came through beautifully. Olivia Lagunas deserves particular commendation for her hysterical embodiment first of a gringa and then of a social worker, but the performances of her colleagues also merit kudos. By swinging doors, using trap doors, or descending from the stage into the crowd, they created a variety of spaces, including a raging river with the help of audience members. In short, Lomnitz and company did justice to Carballido's outstanding farce, pummeling multiple levels of Mexican society and many of its players.

Several other plays performed in Mexico City had legs which carried them to other parts of the country. *San Goyo*, written by Felipe Galván



and directed by Raúl Péretz, was performed in one of the old Seguro Social theaters (Teatro Morelos, to be exact) in northern Mexico City, distant from traditional theatre venues.<sup>1</sup> At the time I saw it, the group had performed this play in Puebla, Morelos, Tlaxcala, and Chiapas. Much of the play focused on traditions and ceremonies from the region of the famous volcano Popocatepetl, and on “tiemperos,” people called upon to communicate with the volcano. It showed how one *tiempero* passed traditions from the 16<sup>th</sup> century on to the next generation in an act of resistance to the relentless march of change in our modern world. Galván reported particularly warm reception of the play in volcanic regions.

A pair of plays by Anton Chekhov, *The Proposal* and *The Bear*, were performed under somewhat unusual circumstances under the direction of Antonio Zúñiga, Abraham Jurado, and Matías Álvarez by the Grupo Puerta al Teatro of Michoacán as part of a project called “Teatro en la maleta.” The idea, as I understood it from Zúñiga, was to take high quality, traditional theatre into the actual homes of people in the state of Michoacán. So the group, made up of quite a number of actors, has fanned out in various casts and performed this exceptionally comic duo of plays in the intimacy of numerous living rooms throughout Michoacán. I caught a performance of the plays in a tiny room billed as “Espacio urgente 2” in the Foro Shakespeare in Mexico City, a space roughly the size of a living room, big enough for about 30 tightly packed, but fortunate spectators.

Several plays from other parts of Latin America made their way to the stages of Mexico City, including several by Argentine playwright Daniel Veronese and several plays presented as part of a mini-festival of Colombian and Ecuadorian theatre. To my taste, the best of this category was *El silencio*, written and directed by Diego Fernando Montoya, and performed by a group from Cali, Colombia. Metatheatre formed the essence of *El silencio*, as the play’s main action consisted of rehearsing another play. The inner play focused on the violence gripping the city, and it gradually became clear both to the actors and to the audience that the reality portrayed within the inner play coincided absolutely with the outer reality. It was very cleverly written, well acted, and focused on the need to act and speak despite the violent realities people face.

Finally, Jesusa Rodríguez performed several plays outside of her usual cabaret setting. She performed *Primero sueño*, appropriately enough, in the Foro Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz at UNAM. She also wrote and performed *Diálogos entre Darwin y Dios* in a new theatre space, the atrium of

the Universum museum at UNAM. In classic Jesusa style, she took on the role of Darwin and had a lot of fun with it. He (she?) said he chose to visit Mexico to give a lecture with the ulterior motive of researching why Mexico has defied his theory of evolution, and to challenge the country's belief in God. It was political and cultural satire, and Jesusa's wicked wit spared no one, from current politicians and cultural figures to historical icons, including even spectators of the play itself for their responses to a survey they took about their beliefs in God prior to the play. Spectators will not soon forget this Darwin, which came bundled with a Mexican picaro's personality, nerve, and sense of humor.

Unfortunately, this report can focus on only a few of the most outstanding and noteworthy plays of Mexico City's spring 2009 season; happily, the season included hundreds of plays, coming in abundant varieties for all types of audiences. Mexico City continues to be one of Latin America's most important centers of theatre activity, and its best offerings figure among the most creative of any in the world.

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## **Note**

<sup>1</sup> About 40 years ago, the director of the Seguro Social hospital system in Mexico City loved theatre. He had a fair number of venues built next to hospitals all over town. Over time many have gone into disrepair. This year they have been made available to groups on a temporary basis, giving many of them new life.