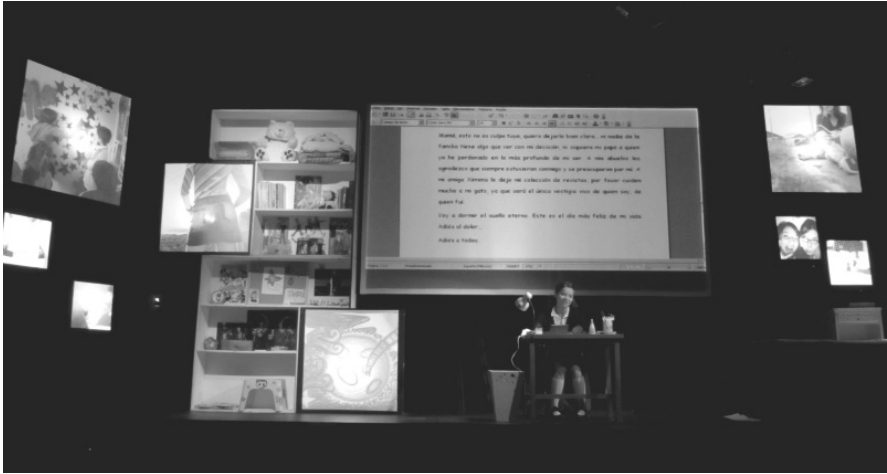


Spring 2010 Theatre Season in Mexico City

Timothy G. Compton

Mexico has been abuzz with history in 2010, celebrating the 200th anniversary of its movement for Independence and the 100th anniversary of the start of the Revolution. Not surprisingly, Mexico City's theatre this year features more plays than usual with topics from national history, and some of these plays were among the finest of the season. But Mexico City's theatre scene produced much more than historical theatre. UNAM's theaters housed several of the plays that made the season's biggest theatrical splashes, but other traditional theater spaces as well as smaller venues also produced fine theatre. Total production approximated that of seasons from prior years, and with a similar mix of adult and children's theatre, as well as plays written by Mexicans and those written elsewhere. In short, Mexico City's theatre scene continues to thrive in number, variety, and quality.

Two of the season's most outstanding plays were conceived for younger audiences. *Inmolación*, written by Enrique Olmos and directed by Alberto Lomnitz, had the greatest pure impact on me as a spectator. It had a run in the Julio Jiménez Rueda theater from November 2009 to April 2010 for public school students as part of Mexico's "Teatro Escolar" program, and then in May started a commercial run in the Galeón theater. It tackled an exceptionally sensitive subject, adolescent suicide. One of its finest elements was that it immersed the audience into the conflicted, overloaded world of adolescents. Spectators on stools in the middle of a 6-sided set had to swivel from side to side to try to take in the worlds of the play's two young characters. Most of the "action" occurred on opposite sides of the set, which I will call sides one and four. Side one represented the personal living space of Jorge Luis, brilliantly played by Fernando Bonilla, a 14-year old growing up in Spain after his family immigrated there from South America. It included his computer desk, bed, and shelves containing some of his personal items. Side



Inmolación. Photo: Zachary Bartel

four contained a similar space for Nora, a 13-year old from Puebla played very well by Paulina Treviño. Side two had a bathtub, side three represented a medical facility, with a stand for intravenous treatment, side five had a park bench, and side six a large screen. That screen was just one of 42 that I counted, with the other 41 disbursed among the other five sides of the set, which was designed by Elizabeth Álvarez. The screens projected myriad images which no audience member could entirely process, a reflection of the bewildering world adolescents face, especially given the cyber world which this play expertly included. Screens behind the characters' computers primarily reflected what the characters themselves were seeing and creating on their computer screens, while the others had images from their lives. Jorge Luis took refuge in a blog he had created about dinosaurs, since as an overweight, nerdy immigrant from a broken home, and a victim of bullying at school, his real life was far from satisfying to him. Eventually the satisfaction of his cyber world wore off, and after a wrenching, devastating monologue in which he spewed how much he hated every aspect of his existence, he decided to take his life. Nora sought attention through live online broadcasts of her attempts at suicide to try to reach her single mother and self-centered "friends." Bizarre conversations between the two characters happened in an online chat format as they sat at their computers, but on their screens they were represented by freakish avatars. Clearly, they found little comfort or meaning in "real" life, but their "cyber" existences further muddied the waters, and the play ended

with the pair making preparations to commit suicide. Lomnitz reported that he consulted with several psychologists before staging *Inmolación* because he did not want it to seem like an invitation to suicide. As a result he added the myriad screens with mostly positive images of life. In addition, he and the actors brainstormed about possible endings after the ambiguous ending of the Olmos text. During performances the actors announced that the formal text had ended, and then they presented a dozen possible outcomes to show young people that they have many choices beyond suicide. After performances in the teatro escolar setting the actors would converse with audience members about the play and its thematics, although that practice did not continue in the commercial run. *Inmolación* managed to address multiple topics, focusing not just on the tragedy of suicide, but on family deterioration, the need for real friendships, the way technology cannot substitute for human relationships, the problems of immigration, and the confounding modern world young people face. Even better, its aesthetics matched its urgent thematic in its outstanding acting, set design, and complex technical requirements which were carried out to perfection. All these elements combined to create an exceptionally powerful play for young people and more mature spectators alike.

Like *Inmolación*, *Los sueños de Paco* was billed for one age group, in this case children, but was outstanding theatre for spectators of all ages. Written and directed by Carlos Corona, its content dealt with the impact marital breakdown has on children. The most obvious as well as felicitous theatrical feature of this play was that a puppet played the protagonist's role, while human actors played all other characters. This allowed Paco to go on hilarious yet significant flights of fancy in his dreams and daydreams as responses to his parents' relationship. In each such episode, Paco became a superhero of sorts. In the first episode, as his parents fought in the front seat of their car during a trip, he fell asleep and dreamed that he was Captain Apolo 5 Estrellas of a spaceship on an important intergalactic mission meant to save a princess (played by his mother) and the galaxy from his arch-enemy, K-Lamar Negro (played by his father). Two puppeteers, Daniela Arroio and Kenia Lara, dressed in muted red (to match the dominant color scheme of the set) except their faces and hands, guided Paco through his heroic adventures in zero gravity. The pair made Paco come hilariously alive in his actions, and Arroio's vocal performance captured perfectly the attitude of a child imagining himself a hero, as did Paco's lines. Seven times spectators saw Paco's dreams, the second time as all-star wrestler "La Trusa," the third as the magnificent magician Pacótikus, the fourth as knight extraordinaire Sir



Los sueños de Paco. Photo: Roberto Blenda

Francis Corazón de Pollo, the fifth as soldier F-9 casi 10, the sixth as the great explorer Cocodrilo Frank, and finally as himself in a dream which helped him to cope with his family situation. In each case Paco's reality slipped over into his dreams in the form of clever use of props. For example, in his foray as "La Trusa," he wore his underpants on his head as his wrestling mask, he battled a monster made up of his blanket with a table lamp which formed an eye like a cyclops, and his victory came when he threw urine on his nemesis. Moments later the father awakened Paco, removed the underpants from his head, and scolded him for wetting the bed. *Los sueños de Paco* was simply excellent theatre — all elements combined to create a theatrical masterpiece, with an excellent text and main concept, wonderful props and technical elements, and masterful acting/puppet work by Arroio and Lara.

Corona also directed two of the season's finest historical pieces, both farces which formed part of UNAM's Carro de las Comedias program, which year in and year out takes a pair of performances all over Mexico, as actors travel in a van which pulls a small trailer containing everything they need for their performances, and which opens up almost magically (but requiring intense physical labor from the cast) into a set. By May, the states of Michoa-



Los cabecillas. Photo: Zachary Bartel

cán, Campeche, Guerrero, and Durango had already enjoyed visits from the program's six actors as they performed the pair of plays. This year, the program presented a very recently written play, *Los cabecillas*, by Hiram Molina, and a classic, *El atentado*, by Jorge Ibargüengoitia. Molina's play focused on the heroes of Mexico's Independence movement, showing Hidalgo working with Allende and Aldama to start the movement, but depicting even the Father of the Republic as flawed: personally ambitious, selfish, hypocritical, and stupid. Further, it poked fun at Independence for not helping Mexico's masses. The actors gave brilliant performances, making the entire play into a spectacle, starting with a hilarious military parade. Mireya González and Cristhian Alvarado deserve special commendation for their particularly side-splitting performances, the first mostly for playing the ambitious, arrogant, feminist daughter of Father Hidalgo, and the second primarily for his role as Pipila, who did the thankless dirty work of burning down the door of Guanajuato's Alhóndiga while the supposed heroes of Independence acted like imbeciles behind closed doors. With the exception of the actor who played Hidalgo, all actors played multiple roles, and González was also brilliant as the head



El atentado. Photo: Zachary Bartel

of an idiot viceroy in a character that was part puppet. Alvarado also played a hilarious “voceador” whose hawking of newspapers filled in plot details for the play. The play’s ludic tone was clearly evident when he announced news that had to do with *El atentado*, the other play of El Carro de las Comedias’ season. Much of the humor was very physical, for example when insurgent Allende and Spaniard Calleja clashed in an outrageous match of all-star wrestling. Other times the language itself was rich, for example when Hidalgo’s daughter, who up to that moment had looked like a backward idiot, delivered a speech 150 years ahead of its time urging women to unite and be strong. For the performance I witnessed, a large crowd, which I estimated at around 300 people, enjoyed *Los cabecillas* on the plaza outside UNAM’s main theater complex, many of them enduring a relentless sun.

El atentado, with the same brilliant cast, was the equal of *Los cabecillas* in its acting, its hilarity, and its ability to skewer historical figures. In some ways it was an even more accomplished play theatrically, as it featured scenes from many more settings, but moved instantly and seamlessly from one setting to another in multiple clever ways, such as having nothing more

than a steering wheel in the hands of a driver represent a scene which took place in a car. The minimalist set and props required excellent performances from the actors, and they delivered. In the car scene, for example, the actors delivered the illusion of making turns and hitting bumps in absolute unison. Another example involved a section of a movable railing, which represented multiple locales in different scenes: the wall of a train, a confessionary, a bathroom, and a witness box. The actors also played a variety of musical instruments and sang. Leonardo Soqui composed an original song for the play, while Carlos Corona penned the lyrics. Much of the acting required exacting choreography and superb timing. The half dozen actors ably created 24 characters, switching from character to character instantly in more than just costume changes. Like *Los Cabecillas*, this play captured audience attention from the very beginning, with a straight-faced ironic announcement that the play's contents absolutely, definitively, and unquestionably had NOTHING to do with ANYTHING from Mexico's history, and that audience members should NOT find ANY similarities between the play and the time period and events dealing with Obregón's administration and his assassination. Trap doors, puppets, role-changing, masks, huge props, rapid scene changes, marvelously overblown political speech, and merciless depictions of hypocrisy, incompetence, corruption, and fanaticism all combined to make outstanding theatre.

I saw two other plays dealing with Mexican history, although I found them less accomplished than the prior two plays. Señá y verbo, Mexico's deaf theatre company, performed *La inaudible Historia de México*, written by Hiram Molina, Jorge Alejandro Suárez Rangel, and Boris Schoemann, and directed by Schoemann. As with other plays I have seen by Señá y verbo, the acting was outstanding. The actors took turns with "monologues" featuring various scenes in Mexico's history, starting with the founding of Mexico City and the incident of the eagle with a snake in its mouth resting on a cactus, and running through scenes of Aztec sacrifices, the appearance of the Virgin of Guadalupe, scenes of the Revolution, a depiction of Popocatepetl spewing ash and smoke, and a news show depicting current-day events. The only words in Spanish, 8 of them, showed up on signs the actors held up. Otherwise, all communication happened solely through joyful, expressive pantomime, with instantaneous jumps in time, space, and perspective. This was visually spectacular theatre, but the lack of spoken language, for this spectator, made *La inaudible* a less powerful play than other plays by the same group he has seen. The other play associated with Mexican history, *Conspiración Tepeyac*,

by Alfonso Castañeda and directed by Elfye Bautista, hinged on the premise that the Virgin of Guadalupe fled the Basilica and Juan Ciego (not Diego) looked for a new image to replace her. A goofy contest ensued, and eventually Guadalupe returned, taking back her rightful place after scolding Mexico for its lack of faith and abundance of corruption and greed. Unfortunately, this play sometimes simply turned inane as it skewered symbols of Mexico.

The Compañía nacional de teatro staged a huge production of the chicano classic *Zoot Suit*, by Luis Valdez. This run was the world premiere of the play in Spanish, translated by Valdez himself, and directed by him as well. UNAM's largest theater stage, the Juan Ruiz de Alarcón, made an excellent space for the oversized choreography and glitz of the play, and every seat of the large auditorium was filled for the performance I saw. The cast of more than 30 was outstanding, but particular kudos go to Enrique Arreola, who delivered a knockout performance as El Pachuco, the spirit of chicanismo, who guided the action of the play like a magician. He wore his zoot suit with impeccable flair, demanded and got attention, sang and danced flawlessly, and was the key to the way the play brilliantly moved back and forth between comedy and gravity. The choreography and 1940s music of the musical scenes was dazzling, the period costumes of both the men and women alluring, and the lighting spectacular. The pachuco vocabulary and accents transported the audience to mid-20th century East Los Angeles. All the technical and aesthetic merits of this play, in their abundance, took on increased value because its content, more than 30 years after it first appeared in English in the United States, is still compelling and urgent. *Zoot Suit* still resonated, given its focus on prejudice, racism, corruption, and flawed systems of justice. In fact, the crowd cheered enthusiastically when one of the characters, after spending years in a California penitentiary for a crime he did not commit due to racial profiling, declared that he wanted to get away from the problems of being Mexican-American and being judged by the color of his skin, so he was moving to Arizona. This line, penned in the 1970s, seemed written for the Arizona immigration controversy of 2010. This grand production even had a three day academic symposium focusing on it toward the end of its run: "¡Esos pachucos, esos chicanos, esos pocos! The theater of Luis Valdez and his struggle for a Mexican 'American' identity." The symposium was held on the UNAM campus, was sponsored by UNAM and the National Theatre Company in Mexico, and Pomona College and the University of California Santa Barbara north of the border. This seemed to

be the year of Luis Valdez in Mexico City, as his *El venado momificado* was also performed, although I was unable to see it.

Another noteworthy play was performed across the lobby from *Zoot Suit*, in the Foro Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, UNAM's large black box theatre. *9 días de Guerra en Facebook*, written by Luis Mario Moncada and directed by Martín Acosta, was a clever theatrical representation of the world of Facebook. At the play's start, Moncada announced that the texts from the play derive from actual postings on the internet, then he assumed the role of "moderador" by "setting up" a public internet page on the topic of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from the end of 2008 and the beginning of 2009. He monitored the responses which deluged the site from all over the Spanish-speaking world. In the first half of the play, the other 16 actors performed an intricately choreographed scene in which they represented participants in the open forum. Although they were all on the same stage, often within inches of each other, theatrically they were in 16 different homes from Chile to Mexico City and points north. They took care of their individual needs, mostly hurriedly getting ready to leave their homes, but pausing every so often to post a message, which they did vocally. It made for a bizarre, chaotic scene, with characters buzzing around the stage never looking at each other, but making grand pronouncements about peace and tolerance. One of the many ironies of the play was that they argued vehemently for peace with a war of words. Another was that a medium designed to help people communicate actually isolated them from each other. Often several people spoke at the same time and at times the physical actions became frenetic, showing the chaotic world behind Facebook. Characters occasionally wrote messages on an enormous whiteboard at the back of the stage, and advertisements would pop up from time to time. In the second scene the actors took on the role of military liberators of Palestine, and performed exacting military choreography as the virtual exchanges continued. At one point, perhaps to illustrate how the internet provides an entirely open forum, audience members were allowed to publicly voice their opinions on the Middle East. Eventually other internet sites were created, multiplying the chaos and banality. Some participants undermined the entire process. The moderator finally erased his original site. *9 días* was an exceptionally creative transposition of the cyber world to theatre, made possible by an extremely able young cast which performed flawlessly.

Laura Almeda and Daniel Giménez Cacho teamed to write, direct and perform *Trabajando un día particular* in the El milagro theater. The plot centered on the meeting of neighbors in an apartment building and their sub-

sequent friendship/conversation throughout the day. She was in an unhappy marriage and he was frustrated in his homosexuality, and they consoled each other. More importantly, the play's technique was noteworthy. Both actors hobnobbed with audience members in the lobby before the show, and walked to the performing area with them, chatting as they made last-minute preparations until the play began. Beyond a few props, they "created" most of the set by making chalk drawings on the bare black walls of the stage—windows, a telephone, a birdcage, a mirror, and so forth. Audience members had to help create the set in their imaginations. Both actors delivered convincing performances, with keen psychological portrayals of troubled people. And at the end of the play they didn't even pause for bows, they just picked up the conversations with audience members where they had left off before the play.

An even more unique theatrical situation occurred in the Trolebús la Otra Nave Condesa "theater," which is actually an old trolley sitting at the edge of a plaza in Colonia Condesa. Antonio Zúñiga wrote and Rodolfo Guerrero directed this play, called *Historias comunes de anónimos viajantes*. Seated on the trolley, spectators chatted as they waited for the play to begin, and eventually it became clear that one of the spectators was actually an actor. After telling his story another spectator turned actor and interacted with the first. The ticket taker got involved, as did two other actors, each one telling and acting out his or her own fantasy. Their props were in the overhead racks, and as can be expected, the interactions with the real audience members were very close and often included improvisation with them. Ironically, the calls for the play to start did not culminate until the end of the play, and as spectators left the trolley they surrendered their tickets, suggesting that the real spectacle was life itself.

The brief run of another unique play started after my departure, although I was able to see the set and get a feel for the project. *Autoconstrucción* was performed in the Kurimanzutto gallery as a multidisciplinary performance combining theatre, music, and the plastic arts. Billed as a "proyecto de Antonio Castro, Abraham Cruzvillegas and Antonio Fernández Ros," it was to focus on issues of lower classes and squatters in particular within the context of modern Mexico. Reports were that the play was visually rich and filled with creation of various types of art. After the six performances, the set stayed in the gallery as an exhibit.

Felipe Galván used yet another unique space to perform his *Autor anónimo*, a play he has performed in numerous settings. In the play he told

the story of a character responsible for extensive atrocities against Mexicans, including Tlatelolco. Corruption, police abuse, and the travails of Mexicans were the grist of this play, during which Galván flowed back and forth from telling the story to representing it. The setting of this play was Tacuba 53, the former home of doña Josefa Ortiz de Domínguez, better known in Mexican history as “La corregidora,” and don José Joaquín Fernández de Lizarde, author of several of Mexico’s first novels. The occasion was a tertulia, and after the play several dozen spectators discussed the play and the state of Mexico. Theatre performances happen in many settings in Mexico City.

Finally, a word about a marvelous little play in translation by Romanian playwright Saviana Stanescu, *Inmigrantes con habilidades extraordinarias*. Translated by Alberto Lomnitz and the actors, and directed by Lomnitz, this was a play about the challenges immigrants face in the United States in general and New York City in particular. The love scene at the end of the play was one of the most tender I have seen, which included wearing ridiculous hamburger and soft drink costumes to make ends meet and delivering the line: “¿Podrías imaginar a una hamburguesa besar a una Diet Coke?” The characters were believable and sympathetic, the acting convincing, and the thematic compelling for Mexicans, since so many countrymen have gone to the United States and face difficulties there.

Limitations of space allow me to examine only a tiny fraction of Mexico City’s Spring 2010 theatre season. This short survey of some of the season’s most noteworthy offerings merely gives a glimpse of the rich creativity and vigor of theatre in Mexico’s capital city.

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