
International Hispanic Theatre Festival of Miami XXV July 7-August 1, 2010

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This 25th annual festival carried as a subtitle “A Tribute to Mexico,” but the activities were truly international. The performance of sixteen different plays constituted the strong suit of the festival, only seven of which came from Mexico. But of those seven, a transplant from Argentina wrote one, two were staged readings, theatre groups from the United States performed three of them, and one was set in Colombia. Groups from Mexico, Spain, Brazil, Uruguay, Puerto Rico, Chile, Argentina, and the United States all performed plays, although not all brought plays written by their fellow citizens — a group from Spain performed a play by an Argentine/Ecuadorian playwright, and a group from Uruguay performed a Lope de Vega classic from Spain. Groups performed their plays up to five times each, but most provided just two or three performances. And beyond the *plato fuerte*, the festival featured a vibrant “Educational Program,” the presentation of several significant awards, an exhibit featuring photos taken by Asela Torres of Mexican plays performed at prior iterations of this festival, and a pair of theatre workshops held on International Children’s Day. As if all of the foregoing did not illustrate the enormous international dimensions of this festival, I would add that I have never seen a more extensive and varied listing of sponsors for a like event, which included 45 sponsors from four countries, ranging from governments to foundations to radio stations to banks to restaurants to airlines. The festival vividly reflected the vitality and internationalism of Miami itself.

Before moving to some of the festival’s theatrical highlights, I will dwell for a moment on the “Educational Program” organized and directed by Beatriz Rizk on the Wolfson campus of Miami Dade College, and sponsored by the College’s Prometeo Theatre, Mexico’s National Center for Theatre Research (CITRU), and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. This

was a two-day scholarly conference on Hispanic theatre with presenters from all over the Spanish-speaking world. Many of the presentations focused on Mexican theatre, given the theme of the festival in general, but Jorge Dubatti of the Universidad de Buenos Aires delivered the keynote address on the study and philosophy of theatre as an “acontecimiento,” arguing that researchers need to be close to and study actual performances, an argument which participants immediately put into practice at the festival. Other highlights included the presentation by Rodolfo Obregón, director of CITRU, of a video montage of numerous Mexican plays, and the presentation of the International Hispanic Theatre Festival of Miami 2010 Life Achievement Award to Mexican director José Solé. Solé then spoke of his experience in Mexican theatre, which started at a very young age with small puppets, after which he formed a theatre group when he was 12 or 13, and has now included directing, in abundance, avant-guard as well as commercial theatre, including a stint directing Mexico’s Compañía Nacional de Teatro. Many scholars and researchers also presented ponencias and entered into a dialogue on a variety of Hispanic theatre subjects, and undoubtedly many of these ponencias will appear in an even more polished format in the pages of scholarly journals and books in the months and years ahead. Another fruitful session introduced recent publications in the world of Hispanic theatre, including traditional journals such as *Tramoya*, *Gestos*, *Latin American Theatre Review*, and *Artez*, as well as the cyber-journal *Karpa*, books ranging from the latest publications of CITRU and AINCRIT, and books celebrating festivals such as this one. In fact, Beatriz Rizk presented the first of a two-volume set of books paying homage to the 25 years of the International Hispanic Theatre Festival of Miami.

As if it had not been enough for Rizk to organize the scholarly portion of this festival and prepare the aforementioned book, she directed not one but two staged readings of plays by Emilio Carballido, *Orinoco* and *Rosa de dos aromas*. Here follows a list of the other plays performed at the festival during the month of July: *Amarillo*, a creación colectiva from Mexico directed by Jorge A. Vargas and performed by Teatro Línea de Sombra of Mexico City; *Más pequeños que el Guggenheim*, written and directed by Alejandro Ricaño and performed by Los Guggenheim of Xalapa, Mexico; *Filo al fuego*, written by Oliver Mayer and directed by Joann María Yarrow and performed by Teatro Prometeo of Miami; *Divinas palabras* by Ramón María del Valle-Inclán in a version adapted and directed by Ricardo Iniesta and performed by Atalaya Teatro of Seville, Spain; *Os sonhos de Segismundo* by Luis Alberto Alonso and Tiago Chaves Martínez, directed by Luis Alberto Alonso and

performed by Oco Teatro Laboratório of Salvador, Brazil; *Gracias por todo* by Julio César Castro, directed by Carlos Aguilera and performed by Nidia Telles Co. of Montevideo, Uruguay; *Flores arrancadas a la niebla* by Aristedes Vargas, directed by Pepe Bablé and performed by Albanta of Cádiz, Spain; *El rey que no oía, pero escuchaba* by Perla Szychmacher, directed by Adrian Blue and Alberto Lomnitz and performed by Seña y Verbo Teatro de Sordos of Mexico City; *Versado, el andarín cuentero: de cómo la princesa Oma acabó con la Guerra* written and directed by Carola García López and performed by Consejo artístico de Puerto Rico, Inc.; *Gatomaquia* by Lope de Vega, adapted and directed by Héctor Manuel Vidal and performed by La Cuarta of Montevideo, Uruguay; *Los niños perdidos* by Francisco Hinojosa, directed by Esteban Castellanos and performed by El fénix producciones of Mexico City; *Pedro de Valdivia, la gesta inconclusa* by Francisco Sánchez and Tryo Teatro Banda, directed by Sebastián Vila and performed by Tryo Teatro Banda of Santiago, Chile; *Tercer cuerpo — la historia de un intento absurdo*, written and directed by Claudio Tolcachir and performed by Timbre 4 of Buenos Aires, Argentina; and *Por las tierras de Colón* by Guillermo Schmidhuber, adapted and directed by Mario Ernesto Sánchez and performed by Teatro Avante of Miami.

Since the plays were performed throughout the month, I managed to see just a cross-section of them, and will highlight just two in this report, one from Mexico to reflect the festival's tribute to Mexican theatre, and one based out of Miami to reflect the locale and international nature of the entire festival. As I noted above, Alejandro Ricaño wrote and directed *Más pequeños que el Guggenheim*, and the Los Guggenheim group from Xalapa, Veracruz, México, performed it. Ricaño received a Mexican playwriting award for the play in 2008. For me, the play's greatest accomplishment was its creation of four exceptionally interesting characters: Sunday, played by Adrián Vásquez, was the quintessential Mexican macho on the outside, with a thick moustache, sunglasses, tight jeans, U.S. flag on his belt buckle, leather jacket, loud voice, foul language, and a demeanor much like that of Bugs Bunny's antagonist Yosemite Sam. And yet deep down Sunday was actually repressing his homo-sexuality in a hostile culture. Jam, played by Hamlet Ramírez, like the actor who played him, was named for Shakespeare's famous character, but the character's parents obviously didn't know how it was spelled in English. He was a clueless follower in his unbuttoned tropical shirt, revealing a t-shirt as non-descript as his intellect. Al, played by Rodrigo Hernández, was a cross-eyed albino with a speech impediment, dressed like a nerd with



Más pequeños que el Guggenheim. Photo: Timothy G. Compton

a sweater vest over a plaid, long-sleeved shirt, green pants, thick-rimmed glasses, and blonde hair under his winter cap. He was quiet and unassuming, but thirsted for acceptance with his peers. Finally, Gorka, played by Austin Morgan, was a very tall diabetic aspiring playwright who could never figure out how to end his plays. He wore slacks, a button-down shirt, and sports jacket, perhaps hinting at his more normalized relationship with society than his peers had. His daughter had died young, introducing a touch of tragedy to his past. All were losers, really, but colorful, interesting, loveable losers, and the play represented their efforts to become otherwise. The plot of the play can be summarized succinctly: a pair of friends, after traveling to Spain and ending their time there penniless, decides to create a play about their experience, and when they hire two amateurs to put on the play with them, it flops terribly, but inspires another play. Nevertheless, the plot did not take a straight path, because it flowed back and forth numerous times and often without clear transition between narrative and representational modes. The action volleyed between hilarious slapstick and poignant reflection, between Spain and Mexico, between metatheatrical and reality. The nonsensical absurdity of the trip to Spain (which included a visit to the Guggenheim museum in Bilbao, which led to the play's title), as well as the rich metatheatrical scenes

of the disastrous play (the day of their grand performance they didn't have an ending for their play), and their crazy schemes to make enough money to stay afloat (for example, by stealing Gorka's Volkswagen and encouraging his wife to collect insurance on it) all made the play exceptionally entertaining. The actors had supreme timing, brought their unusual characters to life, but also inspired compassion for them. In the end, the play highlighted the redeeming power of both friendship and theatre. In a tender scene, void of metatheatre, Al expressed to Gorka his desire to act, but pointed out the obvious problem that most plays can't really use a dorky cross-eyed albino. Gorka immediately came up with a solution, writing a dorky cross-eyed albino into his play. In short, this intimate, complex play, with a minimal set to allow shifting times and places, featured a satisfying mixture of humor and seriousness, of brilliant acting, of shifting realities, and a testimony of the human spirit, willing to keep going despite an oppressive past and present. This play represented well the vitality of Mexican theatre in this festival.

For me, *Filo al fuego* similarly represented the international nature of this festival. Written by Oliver Mayer and directed by Joann María Yarrow, it was performed by the remarkably international students of the Prometeo theatre school housed at the Miami Dade College. As I understand it, this is



Filo al fuego. Photo: Timothy G. Compton

the only theatre school in the United States which trains actors completely in Spanish. The cast of nearly 20 included actors born in Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Honduras, Nicaragua, Puerto Rico, Uruguay, and the United States. This was a large production with a large and complex stage, and the play's action even expanded at times into the audience. The stage's main feature was a boxing ring practically in the laps of spectators, and behind and to the sides of the ring were areas which served as multiple spaces — dressing rooms, training areas, bars, bedrooms, and seats for “spectators.” Much of the play successfully highlighted the drama of boxing, with its bombastic announcers, anticipatory hype, choreographed entries of the combatants, the ring as a stage itself, the glossy robes and gloves and shorts and shoes of the boxers, and heightened storylines leading up to a big fight. Many of the play's finest moments came in the fight scenes, which featured outstanding choreography combined with obvious physical training which must have taken many months. These scenes received artistic attention by altering the speed of the actual match, alternating fast and slow motion, and featuring a variety of lighting techniques to draw out the variety and beauty and drama of the sport. Many of the characters were highly memorable, including Hispanic boxers of various backgrounds, their trophy women, hard-nosed trainers, and ambitious reporters. The play's plot included numerous threads related to title fights, the drama and psychology surrounding them, the behind-the-scenes power struggles at various levels, but the most prominent one exposed the unthinkable in its Miami 1962 setting — that the paragon of machismo, a Hispanic boxing champion, turned out to be gay. Many of the spectators with whom I talked found inconsistencies in the plot or some of the characters, but the show itself, which included live music stage right, was absolutely spectacular, and was a fine representative of the international nature of this festival.

With an outstanding 25-year track record, Miami's International Hispanic Theatre Festival continues to be one of the best of its kind, and promises to be so for many years to come.

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