

The Spring 2011 Theatre Season in Mexico City

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Mexico City's Spring 2011 theatre season featured some truly outstanding plays, several festivals, an abundance of offerings, an astonishing variety, and even a play performed by inmates from a local penitentiary. With roughly 150 plays advertised during any given week (except Holy Week, when most theatres close), spectators could choose from a wide variety of offerings of varying quality, methods, and topics.

Two of the season's finest plays were directed by Alberto Lomnitz. Daniel Serrano wrote *Roma al final de la vía* and Julieta Ortiz and Norma Angélica performed it at Teatro Casa de la Paz. The pair of actresses delivered an acting tour de force, starting the play as a pair of seven-year olds and morphing five times in age, ending the play as 80-year olds. Ortiz and Angélica portrayed each age distinctly and beautifully, never leaving the stage, which was occupied only by a pair of cubes, a rectangular "bench," and two coat trees with props to aid in the transformations. Watching them between scenes was like watching them age, as they changed key elements of their clothing, their hair from pigtails to ponytails to buns, their postures, and the pace at which they did things. At the start of each of the first five scenes the two got up onto the "bench," walked across it, and then followed a meandering route on the stage eventually leading through the pair of cubes, at which point "railroad tracks" would appear (through illumination) at the front of the stage. These opening sequences for each scene were brilliant theatre, drawing the audience into the characters' world without ever revealing where they were, except near train tracks. In powerful images those initial moments spoke volumes about changes in the women: as a very young child and then young woman, vibrant, hyperactive Emilia (played by Ortiz) jumped up onto the "bench" (which was only really a bench in the final scene, but was whatever the audience supposed it was—in my case I

imagined it to be a log over a small stream), then helped her overweight, awkward friend across and then off after jumping high into the air. By age 60, the characters were still a contrast to each other, but ironically, Evangelina was now the stronger of the two, as Emilia was bent by time, used a cane, had a hard time moving and required considerable help. At each stage of their lives the train entered into their thinking and conversation, as they fantasized about getting onto it and travelling to Rome, symbol of a glamorous distant place. Brilliant lighting represented the train, with moving, alternating rectangles of light projected onto the actresses, to which they reacted with great enthusiasm. Emilia in particular yearned to leave, and in fact got on the train at the end of the fourth scene, at about age 40. Even though the audience later learned that the train crashed within half an hour, thwarting Emilia's goofy plans, the moment of getting on provided one of the play's most memorable moments, as Evangelina excitedly cheered her friend's accomplishment, then sat down and wept as she realized that her friend had gone. Each of the six moments allowed the characters to talk about changes in their lives; as they aged Emilia became decrepit not only physically but psychologically, developing bitterness over her family life and circumstances, while Evangelina seemed well-adjusted to her life and the town in which they lived. Eventually, at age 80, they sat on the bench and conversed, completely covered except their faces, and the play ended with what I took to be Emilia's death, as she stood up from her aged body and danced like a butterfly across the stage. This play explored beautifully issues of friendship, dreams, frustrations, aging, and women's roles. It took spectators through a broad range of emotions, with moments of laughter, moments of joy, moments of sadness, and moments of tenderness. I noticed many audience members moved to tears at the performance I witnessed. The actresses have formed a group called Escape Girls which has a presence on Facebook, on which many spectators have given testimonials to the play's impact on them. The actresses have performed this play a number of times in Tijuana, where Serrano resides, and were arranging for it to have a run in Los Angeles (where Ortiz lives) after its final performance in Mexico City at the end of May.

Alberto Lomnitz also wrote the other play he directed this season, *El funcionario bueno*, a comic masterpiece and a stark contrast to the emotion-laden *Roma al final de la vía*. Performed in the Sala Villaurrutia, it focused on the bureaucratic nightmares faced by the "subcoordinador nacional de teatro" for the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (INBA) as he tries to ar-

range for good theatre. The nightmares and frustrations for the protagonist, Joel Bueno, played flawlessly by Silverio Palacios, were deliciously incongruous situations and dialogue for the audience. As spectators entered the theatre, they found a roughly worked notice on the stage stating: "ATENTO AVISO: ESTA ES UNA OBRA DE FICCIÓN. CUALQUIER PARECIDO PERSONAL YA SEA CON FUNCIONARIOS DEL GOBIERNO O BIEN CON HUMANOS DE VERDAD ES MERA CASUALIDAD." In addition, stagehands were still putting finishing touches on the set. As if that were not enough to establish a tone of irony, the character Meche, played hilariously by Pilar Boliver, came onto the stage to ask the audience's forbearance for the embarrassing situation of the set not being quite ready. She blamed it on ongoing problems in INBA as well as the indecision of the playwright/director who she claimed kept changing the play. After shoohing the stagehands and notice from the stage, she got the play going as its narrator of sorts, continuing to talk directly to the audience, introducing characters, the place (Joel Bueno's office), and even the time of day. In this role she introduced each new scene, but once each scene started rolling she played the consummately professional but controlling secretary for Joel Bueno. The plot involved Bueno trying to negotiate a project with a director/playwright, Andrés Zacarías, asking for textual changes in one of his plays. Zacarías took offense, then splashed half truths about the situation into the public media, causing Bueno's superiors to overreact. To calm Zacarías, they directed Bueno to shut down a major project he had been working on and to direct the money to a new project of Zacarías' choosing. Zacarías embarked on writing a play called *El funcionario bueno*, a scathing exposé of the absurdities of the INBA bureaucracy, featuring Joel Bueno, Meche, and others from the play in his play within the play. The final touch was to throw in a lovely girl over whom both Bueno and Zacarías fawned. Although it was hilarious, *El funcionario bueno* was also tremendously serious, showing the dark side of INBA, or any out-of-control bureaucracy, and the difficulties in trying to do anything of significance within that bureaucracy. It really was a scathing exposé. This was all doubly rich because it took place in an INBA theatre. A crowning comic touch came after the end of the play. Almost from the play's beginning Bueno waged a principled battle against renting INBA theatres to a company that wanted to stage *Toy Story* for school children. A recording of "You've Got a Friend in Me" in Spanish accompanied spectators to the exits after the play ended: one last message about individual helplessness within the labyrinths of bureaucracy. One could only admire

INBA for housing and producing this play, or take it as sure evidence that INBA had lost any shred of sanity. Whatever the case, this was outstanding comic theatre featuring excellent acting, rich dialogue and situations, and realistic, insightful themes.

El Yeitotol was the most outstanding piece of children's theatre I saw this season. Written by Verónica Maldonado, directed by Mauricio Pimentel, and performed as part of a 3-play tour produced by Teatro Rocinante, *teatro trashumante para llevar el teatro a los que no lo han tenido*, and Teatro Rucio, I saw a performance of it in La casa del teatro. The group's leaders explained to me that Teatro Rocinante/Teatro Rucio is based out of Michoacán and generally performs its plays in remote locations, using a semi trailer which converts into a stage. This was the 79th time the play had been performed by this group. In the play, a bird vendor carrying numerous cages told the story of the mythical *yeitotol* bird, and as she told the story it came to life beside her on the stage. At one point, however, as she was elaborating to excess during the story, the characters begged her to cut it short as they were getting exhausted. Besides the vendor and a brief appearance of a panther, all the other characters were birds. Asur Zágada and Bárbara Pohlenz played a duck, a hummingbird, a dove, a heron, and a macaw. The actresses performed the birds both as observing puppets (bird heads) on sticks as well as using the puppets as masks and providing them voices. The other three characters were an instrument-playing, constantly singing nightingale, a heroic eagle, and an intellectual owl. The puppets/masks were lovely (designed by Quy Lan Lachino, the actress who played the bird vendor/narrator), and the costumes of the three were very clever—the nightingale was dressed like a singing minstrel, the eagle had elegant grey and black clothes topped by a cowboy hat and a large cape, and the owl looked like a hobo. All three character-actors were highly entertaining, but Rafael Covarrubias deserves special commendation for his vivacious representation of the owl. In the story, the birds found a *yeitotol* feather, but only the nightingale, eagle, and owl were brave and determined enough to want to return it to the distant mountain home of its owner. After overcoming many obstacles by working together, they became a *yeitotol*, which means "three birds." One of the play's finest theatrical features was its use of three large, round tin basins, which the actors used for many things. Several characters made their entrance onto the stage in them, getting rolled in as if in a large tire; they served as small stages for characters to stand on; they became a pyramid for the characters to climb; they became nests to spend the night in;

they were used as chairs, tables, drums, and hats; they became transportation into which all three amigos crowded; in short, the young audience was treated to an expert demonstration of how imagination works with props. Other visual delights included a shadow screen at the back of the stage onto which images were cast; use of a rope net on which the three floundered during a “storm;” surprising slits through which props were passed to actors, bird puppets performed, and characters emerged; and use of a large swing which allowed the three to turn into the *yeitotol* at the play’s climax. Quy Lan Lachino’s narration was excellent, in part because she improvised extremely well, particularly as she interacted with children in the audience. This play was a visual delight with a lovely story about courage, determination, and teamwork. As with all outstanding children’s theatre, children and adults alike thoroughly enjoyed *El Yeitotol*.

Richard Viqueira wrote, directed, and was the sole actor in *Careo*, an utterly unique play, which is exactly what one would expect from the creator of *Vencer al Sensei* and *El evangelio según Clark*.¹ Advertising and the program for the play featured the back of a head covered by a wrestling mask, and the issue of masks was at the heart of the play. Viqueira performed the entire play without ever showing his face, which led the program to proclaim the event as an “unipersonal anónimo.” That alone would have made *Careo* memorable, but what made it unlike any other play I have ever seen was the set. In the Centro Cultural Helénico’s experimental black box theatre, La gruta, with spectators on all sides, Viqueira performed on a platform roughly 3 feet off the ground, with 12 holes through which, at the beginning of the performance, Viqueira popped in and out with stunning speed and accuracy, almost like a cartoon character. Then pre-chosen audience members seated on stools next to the platform were told to sit with their heads protruding from the holes. And so for the rest of the play Viqueira performed with the heads of eleven audience members right on the stage, making up part of the set. The 12th hole was left to a stagehand, whose head occasionally appeared on the stage, but at other times ducked down to provide different masks and props to Viqueira. Although much of the action could have taken place without the onstage spectators, many other times the protagonist interacted with them. He placed masks of despised Mexican presidents (Salinas de Gortari, Fox, Calderón) on several and engaged in political banter with them (recordings of presidential speeches provided voice, but the masked spectators provided head movements), and at one point placed Vicente Fox’s head in a headlock and Felipe Calderón’s

in a leglock. In one sequence, Viqueira played an aspiring soccer star who chased a ball (made up of lights) around the stage, occasionally pretending to let loose on a spectator's head. Twice he fired up a chainsaw and swung it around, followed by news reports over the loudspeaker of the discovery of 11 decapitated heads. And once he linked two spectators together so they couldn't duck into their holes, then placed a tarantula on the link, letting it choose to go toward one. In short, this play was an unforgettable spectacle, with amazing physical feats of strength and acrobatics by Viqueira, combined with precise choreography, and with numerous eye-catching lighting effects. But this play went beyond spectacle, as it focused on issues related to what Octavio Paz famously referred to as "máscaras mexicanas," with questions of identity and authenticity in Mexican life. The play examined the heroism and hero worship heaped on all-star wrestlers, and it also dealt with the problem of violence in Mexican society. The play did what its title suggested, in that it made spectators come face to face with very Mexican issues, yet it did so in a highly entertaining, unforgettably creative way.

Carlos Corona directed a "Carro de Comedias" version of Molière's *Tartufo*.² Actually, the program stated that Corona adapted a Roberto Cossa version of the play. This version made do with 9 characters played by 6 actors, dispensing with 5 characters from the original. More importantly, it was set in Mexico in the 1940's, during the presidency of Ávila Camacho. Many aspects of Carpa tradition were used in the performance, including live music and stylized period costumes and acting. The two calls announcing the play featured music within the traditions of old time radio, complete with radio announcer, and then during the play several times a radio was "turned on" and continued with the same traditions. In addition to black-and-white period costumes, which sometimes included buttons featuring the familiar three-colored symbol of the PRI, all the characters had fanciful, multi-layered fabric wigs except, ironically, the pretender, as Tartufo simply wore his own hair extremely short. The set was sparse, but its centerpiece, a red sofa, was used extensively as characters stood on it, sat on it, reclined on it, hid behind and to the side of it, and even used it as the wall of a bedroom. Benjamín Palafox delivered an outstanding performance as Tartufo, and he was particularly funny in the scene in which he declared himself the lowest of all sinners, writhing on the ground, broadcasting his guilt, and literally foaming at the mouth. Palafox also played a very funny Sra. Pernelle. Elena Manzo was equally skilled and hilarious in her role as Dorina, with remarkably expressive facial expressions to go with her clever character and lines.

The buildup to the entrance of heroic Valerio was exploded beautifully by Ángel T. Román, as he played the part as exceptionally wimpy. A crowd I calculated at well over 300 spectators enjoyed the highly entertaining performance I witnessed. Ironically, it addressed some of the same issues as *Careo*, exploring topics of identity and “mascaras” within society, but with an entirely different tone and approach.

Antonio Zúñiga wrote and Juan Carillo directed *El enigma del Serengueti* as part of the “seventh stage” of the Salas de urgencia project, which has been underway since 2007. This project, supported by Mexico City’s government, aims to cultivate new audiences for theatre. In the case of *El enigma*, the play premiered (along with the premiere performance of an original musical composition) at the Sergio Magaña Theatre on May 27. But the build-up to the premiere was nontraditional to say the least. During the first several weeks in May, Zúñiga, Carillo, and the cast held rehearsals in different homes in the neighborhood of the theatre. In each home the host invited friends and neighbors to attend and then give feedback on what they had seen. Based on spectator reactions and comments, they altered the script, the staging, and the acting. The project’s assumption was that following this model, people who do not regularly go to plays become invested in them and go see them in their entirety. I saw a rehearsal of the third part of the play in the living room of an apartment about three blocks from the theatre. The play is based on an unusual crime which occurred at the Balderas subway station in Mexico City in 2010, in which a man shot several people. Part three focused primarily on the police officer who stopped the assassin, subsequently interrogated him, and was then interrogated by his superiors. It featured a rich mixture of narration and representation, included a pair of very interesting characters, and framed a number of issues important to Mexicans—violence, crime, relations with law enforcement officials, and the psychological impact of these issues. In the rehearsal, Carillo first had the actors, Marco Vidal as the officer and Leonardo Zamudio as the assassin, perform the scene in a manner that highlighted the officer. The actors improvised their interactions, choreography, and movements. In this mode, Vidal’s performance was highly dynamic and humorous, particularly as his character was interrogated by the superior, given that he played both roles. He used a balero he found on the shelf of the home as his pistol and an extension cord as a trail of blood. After spectator feedback, Carillo gave the actors a different set of attitudes and inserted an audience member as a corpse on the floor and another as the superior. In this version Zamudio had

much more opportunity to shine, as he faced the audience and dealt with his head being dunked in water during interrogations, while Vidal's role was toned down. This method of preparing a play is an extremely ingenious, as well as challenging way to do so; more importantly, it is a significant attempt to introduce new audiences to theatre.

Escurrimiento y anticoagulantes tackled the same issues of crime, violence, and law enforcement, but based on Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and including a strong element of psychology and philosophy. David Gaitán wrote and directed the play, and played the smiling police officer, Porfiri, as well. Gaitán stated that his interest in adapting the novel to theatre came precisely from constant reports in Mexico of violence and the psychological issues which accompany it. Like the novel, the play followed the inner journey of Raskolnikov as he first justified himself in killing an old woman and then dealt with feelings of guilt while weighing issues of what makes people ordinary or extra-ordinary, eventually turning himself in to authorities. Unlike *Tartufo*, this play was not adapted to Mexican society, except for a quick mention of Quetzalcoatl as one of the characters read a newspaper. Audience members had to reach across cultures to make those connections, and judging from the reaction of the packed audience at the La capilla theatre, they did. Impressively, they filled the theatre on a Tuesday night, the night least associated with theatre in Mexico City. The play featured a highly effective theatrical depiction of the inner voices of the protagonist. When he was on the stage, one to four faceless figures typically accompanied him and expressed his inner voices. The play's other actors alternated between their characters and acting as an inner voice of the protagonist by placing a black hood/stretch fabric over their heads. Often they would express thoughts to other characters (which the characters could not hear), but they would also carry on conversations with the protagonist and with the other inner voices. On several occasions they engaged in precise choreography, doing almost a dance together with perfect timing. At the beginning of the second act they formed a musical group which started well, but ended terribly out of tune and rhythm, symbolizing the inner chaos of the protagonist. Gaitán adapted the novel to theatre very effectively, and the actors delivered an excellent performance. And as icing on the cake, in serendipitous theatre magic, at the end of the first act of the performance I attended, the characters set fire to a figure which I took as representative of the protagonist's inner turmoil. The contained but dramatic fire on stage provided the only light in the house. The audience watched it burn brightly then

turn to darkness. As the last light extinguished, with an impeccable sense of timing, thunder rolled over the neighborhood to signal the end of the act.

The independent community theatre group Tadeco has fulfilled its dream of moving from Colonia Granjas, a part of the city distant from theatre and art centers, to culture-rich Coyoacán, where it now holds workshops and performs plays in its center they have named “El albergue del arte.” It housed *Romanza cruel*, a monologue written by Efraín Franco, directed by Miguel Angel Flores, and performed by Luis Germán Martínez. Care was taken to clearly announce that once the performance started no one would be allowed to enter or exit. Usually such arrangements have to do with practical matters of door placement in relation to the stage, but in this case it was a highly successful strategy to immerse spectators into the world represented. As they entered, the actor was already in the small performance space, wandering around, seeming a little off-balance. Such was indeed the case, as the setting was an insane asylum, and the grist of the play was to join the protagonist in his enclosed agony, having access to his thoughts, his delusions, his paranoias, and his tortured relationship with a supposed beloved and the world. Germán Martínez performed the role convincingly, but also made it good theatre by varying his tone, his pace, his posture, his facial expression, and by exploiting the few props at his disposal. The isolation and discomfort of the situation translated effectively to the audience. In a brief discussion with spectators after the play, Flores and Germán Martínez made a plea to reform the treatment of the mentally ill in Mexico. This play did not have the flash of a big stage production, but it took on important issues in an artistic, moving way.

Vladimir Bojórquez and Alejandro Benítez teamed up to create a unique theatrical experience called “Teatro en miniatura” in the Trolebús el foro (a disabled trolleybus now used for cultural events at the edge of a square in Colonia Roma). Each performed a short puppet play with tiny sets and unusual “puppets.” In both cases, in contrast to puppet theatre conventions in the United States, the performers looked the audience in the eye and hovered over their creations as they provided voice and movement. Bojórquez’ play, *Jinete en el cubo*, was based on Kafka’s “The Bucket Rider.” His set was a mountain scene with a factory in a box with two sides cut out, and the main puppet was a bucket, which represented the bucket rider. Benítez has performed his play, *Troka*, in a number of puppet festivals in the United States and elsewhere. He dramatized a number of poems, starting with several from the estridentismo movement which focused on urbaniza-

tion and “progress.” His “puppets” were wheels, buildings, words, face cut-outs, and miniature people. Benítez manipulated the “puppets” in numerous ways, lowering them into the tiny “set,” introducing them from below, pulling them across the “set” with threads, using them outside of the “set,” spinning them, and having them detach and then reattach to the “set.” These plays proved that beauty in Mexico City’s theatre has many different modes.

Speaking of different modes, the Foro Shakespeare theatre hosted a unique offering of *Richard III*. Inmates from the Penitenciaría del Distrito Federal en Santa Martha Acatitla formed the cast. Although I did not see a performance, I saw a news report on the project, which focuses on helping inmates gain self-respect through theatre. The actual performances happened only after extensive theatre training, competitive casting, and professional rehearsals. The inmates involved reported a liberating sense of discipline and capacity.

The sheer number of plays during the season allows me to focus on very few, but I would quickly note that a number of plays continue on from past seasons, often in new theatres, such as *Amarillo*, *Los sueños de Paco* and *Curva peligrosa*; that Juan Carlos Vives wrote and directed five plays that were performed during the season; that a festival in honor of Antonio González Caballero was held; and that INBA organized a series of plays produced at state universities from around Mexico—a different play every week. I continue to scratch my head at numerous discrepancies between published starting times and actual starting times, and at the difficulty of finding good information about plays (an irony, since more and more companies and plays have websites, blogs or Facebook pages). Yet despite the challenges in communication and transportation and production, as well as the presence of some plays genuinely lacking in artistic merit, this season testifies that Mexico City continues to produce theatre of the highest quality and creativity, many of which focus on issues of great importance to Mexican society, with the best of its offerings shining as brightly as plays anywhere in the world.

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Notes

¹ See my analyses of these plays in *Latin American Theatre Review* 40/1 (Fall 2006): 157-158, and *LATR* 43/2 (Spring 2010): 185.

² See *Latin American Theatre Review* 43/2 (Spring 2010): 187-188, for a brief explanation of the concept behind the “Carro de las comedias.”