

The Spring 1983 Theatre Season in Mexico

Sharon Magnarelli

This season's theatrical offerings in Mexico were varied, impressive, and far too multiple for us to do more than just touch on the highlights. In addition to a wide assortment of university groups and theatrical workshops, professional theatre alone offered Spanish classics such as *La Celestina* (at the Julio Prieto) and *Fuenteovejuna* (at the Claustro de Sor Juana) as well as a number of plays which have been successful in other languages, including Tennessee Williams' *Un tranvía llamado deseo*, Pinter's *Traición*, Dostoievski's *Crimen y castigo*, and *Eurídice*. Even more exciting for this critic, however, were the number of contemporary plays by Spanish-American authors which were being staged. The productions in a two-month period included Usigli's *El gesticulador* (which followed *Crimen y castigo* at the Jiménez Rueda), Ibargüengoitia and Urreta's *Los buenos manejos* (at the Teatro del Bosque), Magaña's *Moctezuma II* (which preceded *Los buenos manejos* at the Bosque), Vargas Llosa's *La señorita de Tacna* (at the Hidalgo), Puig's *El beso de la mujer araña* (at the Polyforum Cultural Siqueiros), and Carballido's *Orinoco* (at the Reforma, which unfortunately closed before we were able to see it). Significantly, the majority of the works we mention were supported by either the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes or the Instituto Mexicano de Seguridad Social. Thanks to these two organizations theatre is indeed alive and well in Mexico.

EL BESO DE LA MUJER ARAÑA

Of the contemporary plays we had the opportunity to attend, there can be little doubt that by far the most successful was Puig's *El beso de la mujer araña*. Based on the novel of the same name, the script of *El beso* was written by Puig himself, who, according to the theatre program, is also the author of three other dramatic works: *Amor del bueno* (comedia musical), *Muy señor mío* (comedia musical), and *Bajo un manto de estrellas*. The latter, along with *El beso*, was published by Seix Barral in April 1983. Clearly, *El beso* as a play artistically surpasses the novel. The latter is written principally in dialogue, a fact which facilitates conversion to the dramatic form, and the work benefits greatly both from reduction and from the subtleties of visual and auditory

signs and gestures. Although the text of *El beso* deserves an in-depth study itself, we shall focus only on the presentation of the work.

Directed by Arturo Ripstein, with setting by Juan José Urbini, the work was produced in the round, on a very small stage, decorated completely in gray. The choice of this color was particularly appropriate as a highlight to the thematic concerns of the play and the metaphoric “gray areas” in which both protagonists found themselves. Because of its spatial and visual impact, the setting of the jail cell becomes even more significant in the theatre as a reflection of imprisonment, limitation, and restriction of the lives and worlds of the characters. Although each one does “break out” of his own world to some extent in order to enter the other’s, there can be little doubt that the crossing of barriers merely signals the passage from one metaphoric jail cell to another. And, judging by what the characters tell us, even their lives outside of prison are severely restricted and limited by the role each has assumed. In this sense, the protagonists are every bit as entrapped by their positions and roles as was/is *la mujer pantera* who forms the basis of their early verbal exchange.

The play opens in a darkened cell with the voices of Molina, a homosexual jailed for corruption of minors, and Valentín, a political dissident, excellently performed by Hector Gómez and Gonzalo Vega, respectively. The use of voices alone, bodiless discourse, at the opening of the play is particularly effective in producing the alienation, a sense of otherness, which is one of the goals of the play, as well as in emphasizing language and reiteration as principal themes. Not only are Molina and Valentín completely estranged from each other as their conversation centers not on themselves but rather on the re-narration of a movie Molina has seen (a Puig technique used as early as *La traición de Rita Hayworth*), but the audience too immediately becomes distanced from the characters. We see nothing; we only hear voices talking about what appears to be nonsense, but which, of course, as Susan Stewart has shown, is nonsense only if we fail to use the proper code.¹ This does not mean to suggest that the audience does not come to identify with the protagonists during the course of the play; quite the contrary. However, our process of *acercamiento*, identification, directly parallels that of the characters themselves within the work. It is an *acercamiento* produced by and based on words, discourse, and more specifically on reading between the lines and on interpreting the signs, symbols, and implied connotations. That is, our comprehension of the play is, at least in part, dependent upon our re-writing (or re-reading) ourselves into the play and its characters. Along these same lines, it is relevant that for all practical purposes the only action in this dramatic work is verbal—the re-telling of the story of the *mujer pantera*. Paradoxically, this narration serves to disguise or divert attention away from the more important issue—the development of this interpersonal relationship between Molina and Valentín—while at the same time it underlines on two different levels the process of assimilation, absorption, as Molina and Valentín in some sense intermingle to become one, and we merge and find ourselves psychologically one with the characters. Again, we are reminded of the techniques so frequently used by Puig in his novels beginning with *Rita Hayworth*.

The use of voices without bodies is also employed successfully elsewhere in the play. The setting of the jail cell never changes—again particularly effective for impressing upon the audience a sense of relentless confinement—and Molina's meetings with the prison officials are broadcast over a loudspeaker system while we observe Valentín unsuspectingly continue his routine in the cell. Thus, we learn of Molina's potential betrayal via incorporeal voices.² Similarly, but unlike the novel, the play concludes with Molina's release from the prison, and once again we learn of the events which postdate this moment—Molina's eventual contact with the dissident group, his death at their hands, Valentín's torture and dreams of Marta—via voices. As Molina packs his belongings in preparation for his departure, the voices of Molina and Valentín are projected on the loudspeaker system, but the characters on the stage merely continue packing and do not speak. The voice of Molina asks, "¿Qué pasó conmigo, Valentín, al salir de aquí?" The voice of the latter responds, "La policia te vigiló . . ." and asks in turn, "Y a mi, Molina, ¿qué me pasó?"³ Revealingly, Puig has chosen to use the *tú* in the past tense to tell what *will happen* to each of the characters, and the future lives of the characters are reduced to the same level (linguistically, at least) as the adventures of the *mujer pantera*, an imaginary movie character. Thus, the work ends as it began, with bodiless voices telling, re-telling a story, converting actions, events into words, as the past, present, future of the characters are reduced to discourse. Ultimately, reality and fantasy merge and intermingle as by necessity they must since both are merely linguistic creations. Thus, the movie is as real as the lives of the characters, the play, the future of the characters or perhaps even our own futures—all are reduced to discourse.

In this respect there can be little doubt that the work itself (and in turn language in general) is the *mujer araña* "que atrapa a los hombres en su tela" (p. 137), for we along with the rest of the audience were thoroughly enthralled with the work, which in addition to being well written was superbly performed and directed. Many of the Argentine expressions in the piece had been converted into Mexicanisms, affording the work added charm for the Mexican audience (e.g. *pinche película*), and in spite of its serious thematic concerns, the work was very humorous at moments and taught us, among other things, to laugh at ourselves. *El beso de la mujer araña* was definitely the highlight of the Mexican theatre season.

LA SEÑORITA DE TACNA

Equally promising as a text, but far less successful in its execution, was Mario Vargas Llosa's *La señorita de Tacna*. Although the Peruvian work centers on many of the same thematic concerns as the Argentine play—language, the division (or lack thereof) between fantasy and reality, repetition, the conversion of events into language or art—the results were quite different. Unquestionably, *La señorita de Tacna* functions much better as a written text than it does on stage, and the audience's reaction to it surely emphasized this point. Played to a half-filled theatre, the work never fully captured the audience's attention or empathy. Although Silvia Pinal was brilliant as Mamaé—to watch her change from the ancient Mamaé to the youthful Elvira by simply lowering

her shawl was an experience not to be missed—the majority of the audience (presumably those who had not been afforded the opportunity to read the text beforehand) appeared not to understand the play nor even what was occurring on the stage. Unlike the 1981 Peruvian audience as reported by Wolfgang Luchting, the Mexican audience was clearly uncomfortable and confused.⁴ The abrupt changes of time and place, although essential to the message of the work, are nearly impossible to follow on stage without the visual clues of the written text and/or without some indication that such has occurred. Without this, the resultant performance *appears* to be a surrealistic hodgepodge with little rhyme or reason. Of course, the conclusion of the play explains and justifies the procedure, but the evening I attended much of the audience departed, frustrated, at the end of the first act. Surely, the problem could have been eliminated by the inclusion of some type of explanatory note in the program—perhaps “Las mentiras verdaderas” which introduces the text published by Seix Barral (Barcelona, 1981). Although I very much enjoyed both the text and its performance, my reaction to the production was to a large degree predicated on my previous knowledge of the text, for there can be little doubt that the staging asked far too much of an audience.

In spite of these operative staging problems, the dramatic piece is an excellent study of the process of writing, creation, fictionalization, and mythification. The young writer, Belisario, played by Sergio Klainer, bore some physical resemblance to Vargas Llosa and thus emphasized his position as the dramatist’s youthful alter ego, much like Marito of *La tía Julia y el escribidor*. The work centers on the would-be author’s efforts to write as he sorts through his memories of Mamaé’s stories, selecting, substituting, and inventing as he attempts to comprehend what “really” happened and in turn read and write “una historia de amor.”⁵ Belisario, of course, is hindered in his activity by the fact that his story is based on fragments of yet another story. Nevertheless, he never seems to grasp the incongruity of writing a love story about someone whose concept of love was already based on literature. Indeed, one of Joaquín’s complaints about Elvira/Mamaé was that she was “una boba que cree que el amor consiste en leer los versos de un bobo.”⁶ Thus, as in *El beso*, the principal action of *La señorita de Tacna* is that of narrating, and the play ultimately posits that perhaps the only reality available to us is that of telling stories.

LOS BUENOS MANEJOS

A pleasant, amusing evening of entertainment was to be found with Jorge Ibargüengoitia and Alicia Urreta’s *Los buenos manejos*, a musical comedy directed by Marta Luna, which delighted the audience (a full house) the night I was there. Like Usigli’s *El gesticulador*, *Los buenos manejos* opened late in the season (mid-June) after the closing of another play at the theatre. Set at the end of the eighteenth century, the comedy examines life in a Mexican town by using the format (as announced in the program) of the Italian *ópera buffa*. The program’s description of the function and goal of the *ópera buffa* certainly aided the audience and guided them in their approach to the work. One wonders why the producers of this play would have chosen to offer a note for such a

relatively simple concept while those of *La señorita de Tacna* offered no assistance for a much more difficult work. One wonders, too, to what extent the success and the audience's acceptance and enjoyment of the work were predicated on the note or lack thereof in the case of *La señorita*.

Los buenos manejos opens in a typical colonial town with its predictably stratified society. Colonial life and the townspeople's roles are delineated so rigidly that many of the characters even lack names: *dos sobrinas cursis, la borracha, una tía*, etc. The story line is simple, typical of seventeenth and eighteenth-century drama, and almost cliché (but intentionally so). Three prostitutes arrive in the town to discover that this is just the town and life they have been looking for, so they decide to set up business here. At the same time the local priest, motivated by the prospect of easy riches, resolves to convert the town into a resting place for religious pilgrims. From the beginning our sympathies are with the prostitutes who are merely trying "to earn a living" and against the priest and the rest of the colonial hierarchy who are profiteering by exploiting the less fortunate. The town fathers vote to clean up the town and rid it of its undesirable element, but the prostitutes opt to stay and fight for their profession and for the right to work, as they call it. Thus, we are presented with something of an ironic social revolution with the "idealistic" worker class represented by the prostitutes. Meanwhile, of course, in the style of the eighteenth-century comedy of manners, the town gallant, who in reality is penniless, devises a variety of complicated schemes to replace his long lost fortune and relieve others of theirs.

In the end, in an *almost* baroque reversal of values, the dandy remains penniless, and the prostitutes are not only allowed to stay but are exalted by the town. We say *almost* baroque reversal of values because ultimately and in spite of the program's announcement that the work is a "sátira musical de malas costumbres," there can be little doubt that good still prevails, not evil. It is merely a question of recognizing that the "good" does not necessarily rest in the upper social classes as it did in the seventeenth and eighteenth-century dramas. The prostitutes are never presented as truly bad women but rather as fun-loving, spirited women who are merely trying to make a living and who see to it that the abusive, stuffy town fathers receive their due. The use of prostitutes as representatives of the less fortunate social classes gives the work a subtle feminist flavor as was particularly highlighted in a charming song about all the things a *mujer decente* ought not to do—which is just about everything.

We found the second act far superior to the first since it was here that the satire clearly surfaced. The first act left one a little uncomfortable, wondering if the authors could possibly be serious about presenting such an out-dated form with such archaic values. In the second act it finally became apparent that the work was satirizing not only life in the Mexican colonial town but the entire body of theatrical works which exalted and perpetuated that way of life. Unlike the traditional dramatic work which concludes with order restored and things returned to what they were before the start of the play, *Los buenos manejos* ends with the social strata turned topsy-turvy and the prostitutes at the top of that hierarchy—an interesting thought.

MOCTEZUMA II

The major production of the season, in terms of cast, size, costumes, and flourish, was Sergio Magaña's *Moctezuma II*, which preceded *Los buenos manejos* at the Bosque. Directed by José Solé, the production included more than fifty characters, exotic costumes and settings. Heralded as a "tragedia en dos actos y un prólogo," the work used much of the classic Greek machinery such as the chorus, omens from the gods portending the final downfall, etc. The play is a re-examination of the character of Moctezuma and his psychology and succeeds in presenting the Aztec leader in very human terms. He is frightened by the old women (the chorus) who foretell his tragedy and is clearly perplexed as to which attitude to assume with the Spaniards. Particularly highlighted in the play are the internal plots and intrigues which surrounded him and contributed as much to his defeat as the Spanish presence. As the playwright himself has noted in regard to his study of Moctezuma, "Sin embargo, jamás intenté revivirlo y hacerlo de cartoncillo. Me interesaba mostrar su aspecto más humano y comprender por qué reaccionó de determinada manera ante las circunstancias. El es uno de los monarcas más brillantes que ha tenido México desde hace 500 años y así lo digo en mi obra."⁷

Presumably *Moctezuma II* was more than moderately successful with the Mexican audiences since it ran for more than two hundred performances. The night we saw it, however, (one of the last performances) the theatre was nearly empty, and there were as many if not more people on stage than in the audience. For us, the work was flawed by the unwieldy length of the prologue and first act—more than an hour and a half—indeed an excessively long period to maintain audience interest. One wonders too how successful the production would have been outside of Mexico before an audience with less familiarity with the more obscure Indian leaders and the details of the Conquest. The production, however, was lively and colorful.

In summary, the Mexican professional stage this season offered something for nearly every taste—from the classics to the latest innovations in theme and technique. This variety is doubtlessly a credit to the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (INBA) and the Instituto Mexicano de Seguridad Social (IMSS) since, if we are to judge by the sparseness of the audiences we observed, the public itself was definitely not supporting many of the works. Hopefully, the spectators were more abundant during the earlier part of the season.

Interestingly, the common trait demonstrated by a number of the presentations was a self-consciousness within the work of the theatre's role as theatre. If we are to draw a conclusion based on this rather small selection, it would appear that theatre no longer strives to present itself as life but rather recognizes itself as art, literature, repetition, mask. Whether this common denominator is characteristic of contemporary theatre in general or merely a reflection of the taste of those in control of the INBA and the IMSS would be a provocative point of departure for a future study.

Notes

1. Susan Stewart, *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1978).
2. We use the word potential because clearly there is no betrayal on Molina's part.
3. Quotations are taken from Manuel Puig, *Bajo un manto de estrellas y El beso de la mujer araña* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1983), p. 139.
4. See "The Usual and Some Better Shows: Peruvian Theater in 1981," *Latin American Theatre Review*, 15/2 (Spring 1982), 59-63.
5. See C. Lucía Garavito, "La señorita de Tacna o la escritura de una lectura," *Latin American Theatre Review*, 16/1 (Fall 1982), 3-14, which focuses on the work as a process of reading.
6. Mario Vargas Llosa, *La señorita de Tacna* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1981), p. 76.
7. Quoted in the *Excelsior*, martes, el 24 de mayo de 1983.