

Postscript

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To echo Sharon Magnarelli, it is difficult to make generalizations about the state of Mexican theatre in performance when one has had only a brief glimpse of it. My impressions are based on a short stint of theatregoing last fall, which hardly began to cover the wide range of theatrical fare available. And given that theatre in performance has its ups and downs (witness Broadway in 1984!) what was playing then may not have been a representative selection. Nonetheless, a month of following the Mexico City theatre scene (on stage and in the press) has given me, I think, a good enough sense of what is going on to let me venture some opinions and conclusions.

The first thing that is immediately noticeable is the amount of theatre activity. For example, in one week, as advertised in *Tiempo Libre* (Mexico City's equivalent to London's *Time Out*, which lists all cultural events), there were nearly 50 plays from which to choose. These included professional and commercial theatre, opera, children's theatre and many amateur productions by university and secondary school students. The beginning and end of my stay were marked by two important theatre events: the Primer Festival Internacional de Teatro Amateur, which brought together groups from seven countries (including the U.S., Germany and Belgium) and played to packed houses at the Teatro Hidalgo of the Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social; and the Segundo Congreso Nacional de Teatro para Niños y Jóvenes, organized by Socorro Merlín of the Centro de Investigación e Información Teatral Rodolfo Usigli, with the co-sponsorship of the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, the Centro Mexicano de la Asociación Internacional de Teatro para Niños y Jóvenes, the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional and the Escuela Nacional de Maestros. Guests from as far away as Sweden attended, and on opening day the event was drawing a good crowd of scholars, theatre practitioners and students. Other theatre activities while I was in Mexico City were numerous "mesas redondas" and the much-publicized publication by Editores Mexicanos Unidos of the winning playtexts in the Primer Concurso de Teatro Salvador Novo.

As Sharon Magnarelli has noted already, Mexico City's major newspapers provide relatively good coverage of this theatre activity, in the form of reviews

(which unfortunately do not always come out soon enough after an opening night), interviews with theatre people and short articles about special events. One concern that runs throughout many of these newspaper items is the underappreciation of Mexico's native theatre talent. There are, however, signs that just maybe this is beginning to change, for, as noted in the Radio UNAM's program included here, nearly 20 Mexican plays were represented in the 1984 theatre season. A good number of them (e.g., Carballido's *Te juro Juana*, Antonio González Caballero's *El medio pelo* and *Señoritas a disgusto*, and Hugo Argüelles' *Los cuervos están de luto*) were part of the IMSS's Ciclo de Teatro Mexicano Contemporáneo. Another event that singled out Mexican playwrights for special attention was the four-week program sponsored by the UAM and the INBA, Dramaturgos Nacionales y sus Obras Premiadas por Bellas Artes; those honored were Sabina Berman, Guillermo Schmidhuber, Felipe Santander and Wilberto Cantón.

Even with this attention, Mexican plays unfortunately still account for a very small percentage of what is performed, and those that I saw were usually poorly attended. But then, attendance was sparse at most productions, regardless of the playwright's nationality. This may have been a reflection of how long a play had been in performance, of the accessibility of the theatre (which sometimes can be a real obstacle to theatregoing in Mexico City), or perhaps of the kinds of plays I attended. Nonetheless, I did manage to take in a cross section (with the regrettable exception of UNAM productions), and only on three occasions was there a full house: for Feydeau's *Los infieles*, and I suspect that the big attraction there was María Félix's son, Enrique Álvarez Félix, in the lead role; for a rock version of *Hamlet*, starring teenage heart-throb Jaime Garza; and for Víctor Hugo Rascón's *Voces en el umbral* on the night it premièred (for a very short run) to an audience largely of invited guests.

Despite the inroads that Mexican playwrights are making, the paying public seems to still prefer foreign to domestic fare, with U.S. and British imports being the most popular; for example *El vestidor* (*The Dresser*), *Amadeus*, *Buenas noches, mamá* (*'Night, Mother*), *La visita de la bestia* (*Extremities*). Many of these are produced by Manolo Fábregas, the dominant force in Mexico City's commercial equivalent to our Broadway. Judging by *Buenas noches, mamá*, which is the only one of these plays I saw, the quality can be high. It withstood comparison with its New York version, excepting the stage set, which was too much like an advertisement for a *Better Homes and Gardens*' kitchen. I thought the acting was very fine, although Carmen Montejo's Thelma was a trifle too melodramatic. However, Susana Alexander's unsentimental portrayal of Jessie, the awkward but determined daughter, was for me both convincing and quite moving.

Spanish or other Latin American playwrights were not well represented in Mexico's commercial theatre. The Spaniard Torcuato Luca de Tena had a success with *Hay una luz sobre la cama*, a relatively sound production of a quite predictable piece about the conflict between a corrupt father and his too rigid, self-righteous son. José Ignacio Cabrujas' *El día que me quieras* played to a practically empty house the night I saw it, which for me was especially disappointing, as the play is one of my favorites. With Chekhovian-like

humor, Cabrujas shows the effects on ordinary people of extraordinary events, like the 1935 visit of tango idol Carlos Gardel to a Caracas family, the dictatorship of Juan Vicente Gómez and the new Stalinist Russia. Directed by the Chilean Marcelo Pomo (who also starred as an impressively sartorial Gardel), the play was an effective period piece, with costumes by Cecilia Molinero that were beautifully evocative of the 1930s. The acting here was the best ensemble work I saw, although Silvia Mariscal sometimes got carried away with her role as the young and impressionable Matilde. Maybe the negligible publicity given to *El día que me quieras* accounts for the low attendance; whatever the reason, this production deserved far more critical and public attention.

Musicals in Mexico City are not plentiful and luckily so, if the rock *Hamlet* I saw was at all representative. This was a perfectly dreadful affair, a butchering of Shakespeare's text with (taped and mimed!) rock songs and dance routines interspersed for no discernible reason other than that it seemed a trendy (and I suspect money-making) thing to do. The music, singing, choreography and dancing were embarrassing, and this in a play that had the highest ticket price of anything I saw, including opera. Of course, mine may well be a minority voice, for this *Hamlet* had all the earmarks of being a great popular success, due in large part, I think, to its perceived "uniqueness" and to the notable amount of printed and televised publicity it was getting. I should add that a different kind of musical, smaller in scale and based on Mexican music hall, is gaining in popularity and from all reports is high-quality theatre and entertainment.



Barbara Gil and Javier Ruan in Antonio González Caballero's *El medio pelo*.

Of the Mexican plays in performance, I saw the two by Antonio González Caballero. *Señoritas a disgusto* is a modern *costumbrista* piece about two sisters (played by Kitty de Hoyos and Magda Guzmán) unhappy with their repressed provincial life and the scarcity of desirable suitors. Facing spinsterhood, they both fall in love with and compete for the attention of their handsome young lodger (Roberto D'Amico), who flirts with them but marries his boss's daughter. The play is a light piece with some good moments for the two actresses. Magda Guzmán was especially effective as the older, more cynical of the sisters. González Caballero's *El medio pelo* is again a bit of contemporary *costumbrismo* about a rancher in Apaseo, Guanajuato, who courts a lady not of his rank; or better said, a lady who thinks she is too good for him. Paz García Vda. de Pérez (played by Barbara Gil) wants her man to be of "terciopelo" and not the "medio pelo" of which Guadalupe Marcial, with his charro gear and colorful jorongo, is cut. When she finally does decide to accept him, it is too late and she is left to suffer the loneliness of life in the provinces. The play is very charming and Javier Ruan as the rejected but persistent rancher, with his malapropisms and bumbling social manners, was thoroughly delightful. *El medio pelo* is full of clever dialogue and is peopled with a wonderful cross-section of popular types (like the charlatan doctor and the bothersome but loveable uncle obsessed with astrology).

The big event in national theatre during my stay was the premiere of Emilio Carballido's *Chucho el Roto*, directed by Marta Luna, with a cast of thousands, or so it seemed in this marathon production of over four hours. One could choose to see each "tanda" on a different night, but I decided to do it all in one sitting, which proved to be no hardship at all! Jacqueline Bixler and Jorge Ruffinelli's comments here on *Chucho el Roto* give a very good sense of what the play is about; what perhaps cannot be captured in any description of this Carballido extravaganza (conceived rather in the manner of the Royal Shakespeare's *Nicholas Nickleby*) is the way it holds audience attention with its fast-paced action and soap operatic plot. As someone said to me, *Chucho el Roto* is a very sophisticated *telenovela*. It is a mixed bag of genres—melodrama, farce, romance, the grotesque—that makes for a very entertaining theatrical occasion, with many subplots, much movement on stage, numerous costume and set changes, punctuated by music and dance routines. Although *Chucho el Roto* was not well received by all critics, I thoroughly enjoyed it. This is not to say that it was without its problems when I saw it, soon after it opened in November. Perhaps some of these were later ironed out, but the major one then was that the play is so big in scope and has so many things going on at once that stage entrances and exits, set changes and the grouping of crowds were not always effective or smoothly executed. Sometimes the stage seemed cluttered and the actors off beat. The director added what to me were some seemingly gratuitous details—e.g., Chucho's total nudity when he is first brought on stage by his executioners. However, Marta Luna was brilliant in her orchestration of a difficult scene like "Chez Frau Schiller," an "escena enmiendada," (to use Jorge Ruffinelli's apt phrase) that works like a parody of Buñuel's parody of the Last Supper in *Viridiana*.

Marta Luna also directed another impressive play I saw: Víctor Hugo Rascón's *Voces en el umbral*, which deals with events surrounding a miner's

strike in Chihuahua during the Porfiriato. These events are really the backdrop for the play's central action, which concentrates on the daughter of the German entrepreneur who owns the mines, and her relationship with a Tarahumara servant. This relationship is emblematic of the entire servant-master, rich-poor, indian-white conflicts of Mexican society at that time. In its textual form, *Voces en el umbral* reads like realistic playwriting, but in Marta Luna's version it became highly stylized, with synthesizer music, an abstract set and a slow-motion, nearly expressionistic acting style. This seems to be something of a trademark in Luna's directorial work, as many of these same touches were present in *Chucho el roto*. In *Voces en el umbral* she took some risks with her largely amateur cast and stage crew (from the Universidad Autónoma de Chihuahua); the risks paid off handsomely some, but not all of the time. Often what should have been stylized was made awkward, stiff and painfully melodramatic by the actors' inexperience. Luna has a keen eye for detail, however, and the use of a purple-lavender color scheme for the costumes and set was stunning, as well as being expressive of the atmosphere of death and mourning that permeated the production. The play is very somber indeed, and one scene—that of the daughter's self-induced abortion—was shocking and horrible, yet extremely effective on stage. Marta Luna also has directed Víctor Hugo Rascón's *El baile de los montañeses*, and based on what I have seen, this collaboration between one of Mexico's leading young directors and one of her finest upcoming playwrights promises to be a most creative and productive one.

Guillermo Schmidhuber has commented on the absence of a strong tradition of urban theatre that deals directly with the problems of big city life. Only one of the Mexican plays I saw dealt with this theme, Otto Minera's *Siete pecados en la capital*, which won the Premio Casa de la Américas in 1983. In all fairness to Minera, I must distinguish between what he wrote, which has the potential of being good theatre, and the production it was given, which was very bad, to say the least. The play is a rewriting of Brecht's *The Seven Deadly Sins*, placed in a Mexico City context. The play's story is unfortunately all too familiar by now: two girls from the provinces come to the capital to escape poverty and make a decent living. Instead, they are defeated by corruption, crime, violence, exploitation and all the other forces that beat down peasant immigrants to D.F. I was struck with how absent this whole problematic seems to be on the Mexico City stage, as opposed to its popularity among contemporary short story writers and novelists. Some dramatists are writing about it, to be sure (for example, Víctor Hugo Rascón's *La razón de Elvira*), but the topic is certainly not being given much space on the so-called legitimate stage (whereas Donald Frischmann's essay makes clear that it is being given considerable attention in Mexico's popular theatre). This makes the failure of Minera's play in performance all the more regrettable, which is not to say forgivable, for the acting, singing and dancing were so bad that most audience members did not return after the intermission, and I was loath to see the production through to its end.

During my limited Mexico City theatregoing I saw many good productions, some poor ones and none that quite managed that inexplicable magic that can make the theatre such a memorable experience. Of course, such

magical moments are rare in the theatre anywhere. One can see a great many plays without experiencing anything like magic, and I only attended a dozen or so while there. Nonetheless, Mexico City has some very fine theatre to offer, although one may occasionally have to work hard to see it; for unlike many cities, Mexico has no geographically bounded theatre district. Rather, it is spread throughout this urban octopus; for example, some of the Seguro Social's playhouses are in working-class suburbs that are sometimes up to an hour's car drive from more central districts. The UNAM's theatres in the Centro Cultural Universitario are distant and not on any direct bus or metro route. For visitors to the city who have no car this can be problematic, especially since cabs are not that easy to hail during rush hour or outside the city center. This may sound like a petty complaint, but I think it not, for these transport difficulties can make going to the theatre too much of a chore, and doubtless are a contributing factor to the small public the theatre in Mexico City seems to have. But as always, we theatre enthusiasts will make the effort to get there no matter what; and in my case, the effort was certainly well worth it. I now anxiously await my next theatregoing adventure in Mexico, D.F.!

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