

The Contemporary Spanish and Mexican Stages: Is There a Cultural Exchange?

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The present study was inspired by two chance conversations: the first in San Diego in April 1984, and the second in Barcelona the following month. In California I was attending a symposium on Spanish and Mexican theatre. The Mexican playwright Guillermo Schmidhuber de la Mora, one of the symposium participants, was very eager to chat with the specialists in contemporary Spanish drama. He explained that he is a great admirer of Antonio Buero Vallejo and seldom finds anyone in Mexico knowledgeable about Spain's foremost living playwright. In the second of my dialogues, I mentioned to the Spanish playwright Jaime Salom that Emilio Carballido would be present at the Southeast Conference on Foreign Languages and Literatures which I planned to attend at Rollins College in late February 1985. Salom responded that had I mentioned Carballido, Mexico's foremost playwright, to almost anyone else in Spain, I would have received a shrug of the shoulders as a response. The Barcelona dramatist hastened to add that he knew Carballido's works and had met Carballido in Mexico but that in Spain his knowledge was exceptional.

One realizes, of course, that among Hispanists there is little communication between Latin Americanists and specialists in Peninsular literature. But the suggestion that there might also be a cultural gap between theatre people, working in the same language, came to me as a surprise. Was it really possible that Buero Vallejo, whose works have been widely staged in Sweden, Finland, Iceland, Norway, the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, the East German Democratic Republic, Poland and Romania was even less known in Mexico than in the United States? Considering the famous "boom" of the Latin American novel in Spain, was it really possible that Mexican theatre—and perhaps most of Latin American theatre—was largely unstaged in Spain? The answer to both of these questions appears to be yes.¹

Let me hasten to limit the above generalization. My research to date has been primarily limited to mainstream theatre activity in the capital cities of Mexico and Spain, and my emphasis has been on contemporary works staged

in the past decade. The cultural ties between theatre in Argentina and Spain are doubtless quite different from the Mexican-Spanish connection. Before, during, and after the Spanish Civil War—indeed, up to the present—many Spanish playwrights, directors, and actors have journeyed to Buenos Aires in their roles as theatre professionals. While no exiled Spanish playwright achieved any real prominence in the Mexican theatre—even the prolific Max Aub was never staged professionally there²—Alejandro Casona, as a Spaniard writing in Argentina, acquired a place in international repertory.³ In more recent years, Argentinian theatre professionals have sought refuge in Spain and have found acceptance. In 1976 Guillermo Gentile's *Hablemos a calzón quitado*, in a production he directed and acted in himself, ran for more than 600 performances in Madrid and was awarded the *Espectador y la crítica* prize for the best company performing that year.⁴ In 1978 another Argentinian, Carlos Cytrynowsky, was awarded the *Espectador y la crítica* prize as the best stage designer.

Although the cultural exchange between Spain and Argentina has been more constant and significant than that between Spain and Mexico,⁵ it was Mexico that welcomed the largest number of Spanish refugees at the end of the Civil War. Among the more than half million Spaniards who emigrated to Mexico were a number of theatre people, several of whom, like Cipriano Rivas Cherif and Alvaro Custodio, established their own playhouses or theatre companies and specialized in staging Spanish dramas. It was Rivas Cherif who directed Casona's *Los árboles mueren de pie* in Mexico in July 1949, only three months after its premiere in Buenos Aires. Similarly, Buero's *Historia de una escalera*, which made stage history in Madrid in October 1949, was available to Mexico City theatregoers less than a half year later. At this point in the postwar period, major works by the most important Spanish playwrights quickly reached the Mexican stage.

By the 1960s, the staging of Spanish plays in the Mexican capital had begun to assume a somewhat different pattern, which apparently still holds. Anyone wishing to see productions of Golden Age theatre would be better advised to visit Mexico City than Madrid. Anyone wishing to see the latest light comedies from Spain can find them almost as readily south of the Rio Grande as in their country of origin. But most of the serious contemporary Spanish dramas *brillan por su ausencia*. In 1960, for example, nine contemporary Spanish plays were staged in Mexico City: three by Miguel Mihura, three by Alfonso Paso, one comedy each by Tono and José María Pemán, and Buero's *Madrugada*—a 1954 drama that is far from being one of his major works.⁶

The emphasis on comedy—indeed the emergence of several commercial theatres that initially presented one Mihura or Paso comedy after another and more recently have added Alonso Millán, Julio Mathías, and Santiago Moncada to their repertory of eminently forgettable scripts—does not mean that Spain's major twentieth-century dramatists were being totally ignored in Mexico. Innovative Mexican productions of works by Valle-Inclán and García Lorca, in fact, anticipated the revival of interest in Spain itself of these two towering figures from before the Civil War. In 1964 a Mexican university troupe took first prize in international competition in Nancy, France, for its

staging of *Divinas palabras* and, in the opinion of Carlos Solórzano, the most important production of 1969 in Mexico City was *Así que pasen cinco años*.

Nevertheless, in the 1970s, it was Spanish comedy that continued to find an audience throughout Mexico. Indeed, the dominance of the prolific Alfonso Paso was not much different on the Mexican boards than in Spain. According to the records of the Sociedad General de Autores de España, in 1970 alone nine of Paso's comedies were staged in Mexico. Of the other eleven Spanish plays presented in the country that year, only three might be considered of interest to theatre specialists: Lorca's *La casa de Bernarda Alba*, Calvo-Sotelo's moralistic drama of 1954, *La muralla*, and the ingenious Enrique Llovet modernization of Molière's *Tartuffe*. This last work, a clever satire of the Opus Dei, reached Mexico within a year of its Madrid premiere.

El Tartufo's quick trip to Mexico was repeated by only three other major Spanish dramas in the next dozen years. Ana Diosdado's 1970 *Olvida los tambores* ran for two months in Mexico in 1971—under the direction of Alvaro Custodio. Antonio Gala's *Anillos para una dama*, his prize-winning 1973 demythification of the Jimena/Cid story, was staged in Mexico in 1974-1975. And Jaime Salom's controversial drama of Nicolás Franco, Francisco's father, which ran in Madrid in 1980-1981, was presented successfully in Mexico in January 1982 by a Spanish company.⁷

And what about Buero Vallejo, whose Mexican admirer prompted this study? For the period 1970-1983—years when Buero had seven Spanish premieres—I have found notice of only one of his plays being staged anywhere in Mexico: *El concierto de San Ovidio*, a work dating from 1962, was produced in Mexico in 1981.⁸

Back in Spain, during the same period, Mexican theatre was hardly being staged at all. In Madrid there were only three productions of plays by Mexican playwrights: Carballido's *Te juro, Juana, que tengo ganas* in 1974, Rodolfo Usigli's *El gesticulador* in 1981, and Luis G. Basurto's *Cada quien su vida* in 1983. The latter two were performed by Mexican touring companies. The Carballido play, which enjoyed a modest run of some 75 performances, was staged in the Pequeño Teatro Magallanes, a now defunct playhouse that then represented Madrid's equivalent to off-off-Broadway. Although critical reaction was favorable, Francisco Alvaro in his theatre annual emphasized the fact that the author was unknown to the city's playgoers, who therefore absented themselves from the theatre. "El problema de siempre: ¿Quién es Carballido?"⁹

The lack of cultural exchange between Madrid and Mexico City stands in vivid contrast to what is happening in the theatre of London and New York.¹⁰ English-language plays cross the Atlantic with ease and generally are preferred to translations. In Spain, certainly from the viewpoint of Spanish playwrights, foreign works have actually dominated the stage—but those works are much more likely to be translations than Spanish-language texts. At the moment, the foreign playwright most in vogue in Spain is an Italian who until recently was virtually unknown in the United States: Dario Fo.¹¹

Of course, it is quite possible that the situation suggested to me initially by Guillermo Schmidhuber de la Mora and Jaime Salom and largely substantiated by my research is on the verge of change. Although the real impact on the

theatre world in Spain is doubtless much less than the extensive coverage in José Monleón's journal *Primer Acto* would indicate, recent Latin American/Spanish theatre festivals have opened lines of cultural communication among Spanish-speaking theatre professionals of various countries.¹² (Schmidhuber himself reported in the pages of the *Latin American Theatre Review* on the II Encuentro Teatral América Latina—España, held in Caracas in July 1981.¹³ With specific reference to Mexico, the *ciclo teatro* that formed part of the two-month exhibition in Madrid on *El exilio español en México* (15 December 1983-15 February 1984) must have had a consciousness-raising effect on Madrid theatregoers about the Mexican stage in general, not just the Spanish presence there.¹⁴ With continuing initiatives like these, in the not too distant future it may be possible to eliminate that "problema de siempre: ¿Quién es Carballido?"

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Notes

1. For information on Spanish plays staged in Mexico in the postwar period my primary sources, cited in chronological order, were as follows:

Olivarria y Ferraro, Enrique de. *Reseña histórica del teatro en México. 1538-1911*. Prólogo de Salvador Novo. 3^a ed. ilustrada y puesta al día de 1911 a 1961. Tomo V. México: Editorial Porrúa, 1961. (Lists plays opening in Mexico City, month by month.)

Solórzano, Carlos. "Resúmenes anuales de 1963 a 1969" in his *Testimonios teatrales de México*. México DF: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1973. (Selection of major productions.)

Magaña-Esquivel, Antonio, ed. *Teatro mexicano, 1971*. México: Aguilar, 1974. *Teatro mexicano, 1972*. México: Aguilar, 1975. (Includes list of foreign plays staged in Mexico City, month by month.)

Alvaro, Francisco, ed. *El espectador y la crítica (El teatro en España)*. Theatre annual, beginning with 1958, variously published in Valladolid by the author or in Madrid, Editorial Prensa Española. (Generally includes list of Spanish plays staged abroad, country by country. List omitted in volumes for 1971 and 1972. Volumes consulted included 1970, 1973-1983.)

The principal source of information on Latin American plays staged in Spain is Francisco Alvaro, *El espectador y la crítica*. Volumes consulted were for 1970-1983. (Volumes include excerpts of play reviews for major productions in Madrid, data on productions in Barcelona, lists of plays done in the provinces, and a chart of plays by the length of their runs in Madrid theatres.)

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2. Margarita Mendoza-López, "Exiliados españoles en el teatro mexicano," *Primer Acto* 201 (Nov.-Dec. 1983): 22. This issue of *Primer Acto* has several articles related to *El exilio español en México*. Because Maruxa Vilalta was very young when she arrived in Mexico, she is not considered among the exiled Spanish playwrights but did participate in the cultural programs on the subject mentioned later in the present study. Also of interest on the question of Spanish intellectuals in Latin America is Luis Marañón, *Cultura española y América hispana* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe. Selecciones Austral, 1984).

3. Judging from Francisco Alvaro's listings of Spanish plays staged abroad, it appears that Casona is now as widely produced in Europe and Latin America as is Lorca.

4. The script performed before a Spanish audience was modified from the original through an "adaptación de lenguaje" prepared by Alfredo Mañas.

5. An exploration of the political causes for the difference in cultural relations between Spain and these two Latin American nations lies beyond the scope of the present study but could be illuminating.

6. Eleanore Maxwell Dial's study of stagings of Buero in Mexico was limited to *Historia de una escalera* and *Madrugada*. (See "Critical Reaction to Buero Vallejo and Casona in Mexico," *Hispania* 54:3 (1971): 553-58.)

7. At the Southeast Conference, Gary E. Bigelow informed me that Fermín Cabal's prize-winning *Esta noche gran velada* was scheduled for production in Mexico in 1984 or 1985.

8. As indicated in note 1, I did not have access to complete and identical data for every year. It is possible that in 1971 or 1972, the years for which I relied on Magaña-Esquivel's report rather than Alvaro's, some play of Buero was produced outside the capital city. It is, of course, also possible that there were productions for which royalties were not paid to the Sociedad General de Autores de España, the basis of Alvaro's information.

At the time of this writing, I also do not have complete information for the 1984 and 1985 seasons in either country. I have learned that Buero's 1970 *El sueño de la razón* opened in Mexico City in 1985 to favorable reviews. This same play was well received in Marion Holt's English translation at Centre Stage in Baltimore the preceding winter.

9. Alvaro, *El espectador y la crítica: El teatro en España en 1974* (Madrid: Prensa Española, 1975) 144. According to Carballido, who graciously consented to discuss my study with me at the Southeast Conference, there were also productions of his plays in Bilbao and Barcelona in the 1960s and 1970s.

10. An Associated Press release on 11 July 1984 indicated that by the end of that month 14 of the 33 offerings of the West End would be imports from the United States. British hits have dominated Broadway during a number of recent seasons.

11. Fo, previously excluded because of his political beliefs, was finally granted a visa to enter the United States in 1984. His *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* played at the Belasco Theatre in New York City that fall.

12. See, for example, the indicated issues of *Primer Acto* for articles on theatre festivals related to Latin America: "Encuentro España-América Latina," 185 (Aug.-Sept. 1980) and 186 (Oct.-Nov. 1980); "2ª muestra de cultura latinoamericana" and "Los 'hispanos' de Nueva York," 188 (Feb.-Jun. 1981); "II Encuentro de teatro América latina-España," 189 (Jul.-Oct. 1981); "Caracas," 190/191 (Nov.-Dec. 1981); "El diálogo entre América y España," 195 (Sep.-Oct. 1982). The interest reflected in these issues of *Primer Acto* has not been noted at La Avispa, the theatre bookstore, where I was told in May 1984 that there is almost no demand for Latin American plays.

13. Schmidhuber de la Mora, "Jornadas para el estudio de la dramaturgia," *Latin American Theatre Review* 15/2 (Spring 1982): 55-57.

14. In addition to the special issue of *Primer Acto*, cited above, see Juan Carlos Arce, "El exilio en el retrovisor," *El Público* 4 (Jan. 1984): 19.