

Spring 2012 Theatre Season in Mexico City

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Although Mexico City's spring 2012 theatre season lacked blockbuster, large-scale masterpieces, it had a number of excellent, noteworthy plays among its prolific, multi-faceted productions. As in seasons past, it once again boasted in excess of 150 plays during any given week (except *Semana Santa*). A number of plays lingered from past years, particularly in commercial venues (such as Susan Hill and Stephen Mallatrat's thriller *La dama de negro* and Rob Becker's *Defendiendo al cavernícola*), but the vast majority of plays had short runs. Even a commercial success such as *La vuelta al mundo en ochenta días* had an initial run of only nine performances. Although Mexico was inundated with political propaganda in advance of its July elections, politics did not spill overtly into plays more than other years, and I didn't find any that addressed the current campaign in a significant way. In May, Carlos Fuentes' death caught the attention of the literary world, but Paul McCartney's free concert in the Zócalo seemed to affect theatre more—getting past police blockades to arrive at theatres within 5-6 blocks of the concert was challenging! All in all, the season had many excellent offerings, some of the most noteworthy of which this essay highlights.

Most of the season's finest plays had a decidedly negative societal outlook, despite light moments. For me, the season's most noteworthy play was *Siglo XX... que estás en los cielos* in a brilliantly Mexicanized version. The original was written by David Desola, a playwright from Cataluña, Spain. In the original, the main characters were a victim of the Spanish Civil War and a victim of drug abuse in Spain from the 1970s. A third character remained off stage, but spoke with the two. In the version I saw, adapted to Mexico by Fernando Bonilla, who also designed the set and directed, the main characters were a victim of the 1968 student massacre at



Siglo XX... que estás en los cielos. Foto: Gabriel Zapata Z.

Tlatelolco and a victim of the Ciudad Juárez femicide. It was staged eight times at the Orientación theatre as part of a Bellas Artes trio of plays under the banner of “JóvenesAlTeatro: Ciclo de Teatro para Jóvenes.” The voice in this version belonged to Mexico’s “Niño Dios,” and rather than being a disembodied voice from offstage, puppeteers Valentina Sierra and Carmin Flores rolled a puppet version of the infant deity onto the stage on a globe of the world and Sierra provided his voice. In addition, Bonilla added to the cast an eternally grinning but mute Mexican conception of death. The play represented an odd state of limbo, one in which the victims waited for reincarnation until no one remaining on Earth remembered them. The set consisted of a somewhat dismal row of connecting seats in the middle of the stage, reminiscent of a small town waiting room at a bus station. Death appeared on the stage prior to each scene, each time dressed in different bright clothing and often as a circus performer, juggling balls or riding a unicycle or dancing, always in celebration, always panning to the audience with his eternal smile. The “Niño Dios” had a wonderfully quirky personality—a spoiled brat of a child, full of tantrums and insults when he didn’t get his way. He delighted in tormenting the other two characters by telling them that if they didn’t perform for him the last persons alive who remembered

them would die. He would then demand that they perform in ways that were either extremely uncomfortable or impossible for them, and would follow up by mocking their efforts. The characters themselves exchanged extensive dialogue, learning about each other, wondering about their current circumstances, and comparing notes about Mexico from their different eras. Eventually they bonded in their desolation, and arranged a deal to return to earth together as twins. Moments after they left the stage, a radio announcement noted the birth of twins who immediately became orphans on account of drug trafficking violence in the state of Tamaulipas. The only member of the deserving cast who appeared for bows was Death, of course, because according to Bonilla, “La muerte es lo único real.” Death was so real that he came out for applause nine times! This play was not only a visual and acoustic delight, with excellent acting, outstanding puppet work, a variety of music, and the eye-popping antics and costumes of death between every scene. It also created memorable characters, featured excellent dialogue, and had plenty of humor. Furthermore, it included abundant thought-provoking content relative to contemporary Mexico: the unhealed wounds of 1968, the horrors of Cd. Juárez, drug violence, politics, Catholicism, and the inexorable presence of death. *Siglo XX*'s run at Orientación was very short, but it had previously enjoyed a run elsewhere, and will hopefully be picked up for many more performances.

Several plays this season focused on the plight of children in a hostile world. I saw an outstanding version of Javier Malpica's *Papá está en la Atlántida* in the Casa de la Compañía Nacional de Teatro performed by the El Rinoceronte Enamorado group from San Luis Potosí. Jesús Coronado directed Enrique Ballesté and Eduardo López in what the actors informed me was their 103rd performance of the play. The beautiful script provides dialogue for a pair of boys whose mother has died and whose father has gone to the United States to find work, leaving them first with a grandmother who dies while they are with her, then with an aunt and uncle who show them little concern. Eventually they set out to cross over to the United States to seek their father on their own. The most obvious twist to this performance was that both actors were far from youngsters. López played the naïve younger brother, full of energy and joy, but also vulnerable, neurotic, and jumpy. Ballesté projected well the feeling of a wiser older brother, a protector, but one who enjoys being in control. The interactions between the two ranged from tender conversations about their deceased mother to hilarious discussions about English, playing baseball, trying to get some sleep, and



Papá está en la Atlántida, El Rinoceronte Enamorado. Foto: Sergio Carreón Ireta.

worrying about their family. To a great extent, the play was about siblings, capturing the innocence, wonder, magic, worries, and joys of discovering the world together. But it was also about the hardships that people face, often at ages far too tender. The stark set contributed beautifully to this theme. At the back of the stage were barren tree trunks. In the middle of the stage, a bench served, in different scenes, as a bed, a seat on a bus, a seat in a car, and a bench. Around it was a ring of rocks that the characters were arranging as the audience entered. The play started when the ring closed, to me symbolizing their closed-in situation, including the border separating them from their father in the United States. At play's end, they broke through the barrier, piling up rocks near the tree trunks, but when they became exhausted and fell asleep near the rocks in the desert, the rocks symbolized a gravestone. The play had ten scenes, each separated by music, including beautiful accordion music played by López. Every aspect of this performance was outstanding, from the dialogue to the acting to the set to the music, taking spectators through a rich range of emotions and aesthetics.

Although I felt that its aesthetics did not rise to the level of *Papá, De sueños rotos* shared striking similarity in its thematics. Written by Paco Reyes and directed by Juan Carlos Saavedra, its plot also revolved around a pair of siblings searching for the father who had left them as orphans years prior. This was more of a feel-good play, as the older brother vigilantly

cared for his younger sister and their grandmother helped them both out in dream sequences. They encountered a pair of poetic characters who ended up falling in love with each other, and although the siblings never found their father, they came to grips with the situation and found a way to move forward in life. The costumes, acting, set, and music all had a poetic feel. It was a lovely play, with several noteworthy aspects beyond the themes. First of all, the cast included actors with hearing and visual disabilities, and included a character in a wheelchair. Second, the performance included simultaneous interpretation into Mexican Sign Language. Third, the audience included many people with a variety of disabilities. Thus, *De sueños rotos* reached out to a different audience than the average Mexican play.

El rostro de Abaddón indicted modern society for its lack of values and the resulting alienation and bitterness people experience. Written by Naolli Eguarte and Emmanuel Varela and directed by Varela, it portrayed characters in a variety of intertwined situations, which highlighted the absurdity of the contemporary human condition. The play's protagonist provided the glue that held the scenes together. At the play's beginning, he lamented the emptiness of his world and determined to write a play to produce hope. Yet as he confronted society, his despair and frustration deepened and he never managed to come up with a play or solutions. Several of the scenes were simply depressing. In one of them, a young executive spoke of his great business success and wealth, yet he could not relate on a positive emotional level with people, especially of the opposite sex. Other scenes were hilarious while maintaining pessimism, such as a telephone conversation dealing with a potential real estate transaction. An angry but rich man full of road rage called the real estate office as he was driving and spoke with an employee who had been trained to keep her cool under any and all conditions. So the disconnect in tone between the employee's sweetness and the mania of the customer as he swore at other drivers and fired insults like bullets was rich, even as it indicated a dysfunctional society. This play portrayed a world lacking in love, communication, values, or any human warmth, a world filled with chaos, technology, insincerity, bitterness, frustration, injustice, and unhappiness. The acting was first-rate and the characters were extremely well drawn and developed. The set, designed by Gabriel Pascal, allowed the play to move instantly from scene to scene. This was an outstanding, although disconcerting play.

El filósofo declara showed a different, more subtle side to a society void of values. In this play by Juan Villoro and directed by Antonio Castro,

the main character was an intellectual whose sole aspiration was to prove himself more brilliant than anyone else. He set up an encounter with a rival philosopher who was more recognized by society than he, hoping to show his preeminence once and for all. Yet in the end the protagonist was a sham. His wife had actually written the books he had published and his means to establishing preeminence consisted of insulting and tearing down those around him, even his wife. His fraud even included cultivating a public persona consisting of being physically confined to a wheelchair to contrast with his intellectual brilliance. Nevertheless, by play's end the truth came to light and he was exposed as a cynical, bitter, alienated deception. *El filósofo declara* illustrated brilliantly the concept of "máscaras mexicanas," about which Octavio Paz wrote in *El laberinto de la soledad*. The protagonist's wife and their driver wore masks of their own, since the former enabled the entire charade. The play's dialogue was one of its finest features, with rich, brilliant, dense, rapid-fire language and ideas. Many of the finest moments had to do with subtle intellectual put-downs, which were often hilarious, yet revealed clearly unhealthy human interaction. Arturo Ríos played the protagonist most convincingly—clever yet despicable. High-pitched squeaky sound effects between scenes underscored the lack of harmony between characters, and the set (designed by Mónica Raya), consisting of an upscale apartment, contributed to the success of the play. Yet the essence of the play was intellectualism gone bad, personified by the protagonist, with an outstanding supporting cast portraying people willingly caught up in the same web. Like *El rostro de Abbadón*, this play showed people devoid of values or human compassion, not to mention happiness.

El camino del insecto, written by David Gaitán and directed by David Jiménez Sánchez, linked two prominent areas of Mexican society not typically intertwined—presidential politics and soccer. However, the play ultimately centered on corruption and conspiracy. The two actors, Gaitán and Raúl Villegas, alternated between narrative and representational modes to illustrate how Mexico has had a number of key moments in its history when politics and soccer have crossed paths. They then projected that at some point in the future the country could be thrown into chaos at the convergence of the World Cup competition and Presidential elections, if saboteurs should attack both at the same time. This play's timing was impeccable, premiering the spring before Mexico's presidential elections, and gave flight to possibilities of political conspiracy, which most Mexicans accept as doctrine anyway. Beyond its pertinent subject matter and the flow between

narration and representation, it was unusual in its staging in the Trolebús Escénico, a former trolley bus parked alongside a city square and now used for cultural events. Seating limitations allowed for just twelve spectators, all packed into the rear of the bus. A large hanging mirror constituted the principal feature of the set. Initially spectators saw reflections of themselves in it, but the actors moved it to different positions with different angles during the play, creating a wide variety of effects. For example, during one scene an actor lay down on the ground, while the mirror was tilted such that his reflection was looking directly at the audience. The mirror, to me, suggested that public images in society may be manipulations or illusions. Occasionally the action took place outside of the trolley bus, which must have caused passers-by to wonder what was going on. The actors showed remarkable poise even as they acted at noteworthy proximity to the audience. This was a dense, rapid-moving, thought-provoking play in a most unusual setting.

Another play performed in an unusual setting was *El mural: ¿Qué (des)cubrió Diego en los muros del Palacio Nacional?*, a carnivalesque romp through Mexican history and mythology written by Ernesto Anaya Ottone and directed by José Antonio Cordero. Performed in an upper great room of the Casino metropolitano, a building that testifies to past glory, the set consisted of large ramps to the sides of the audience leading to scaffolding and projection screens at the front. What made the “theatre” even more unusual on the night I saw the play is that Paul McCartney performed a free concert a few blocks away in the Zócalo (to 200,000+ people), so security in the surrounding areas was tight, shutting down traffic and forcing theatre-goers to have to talk their way through police barricades to get to the theatre. The listing of characters in the play included Diego Rivera and numerous people whom he painted in his famous mural just a few blocks from the theatre. The actors portraying these Mexican icons sang, danced, wore masks, and donned makeup and exaggerated costumes. The dialogue often sparkled, as did the imagery, but I felt a lack of plot—instead the play featured a series of esperpentic scenes and images, presenting Mexican history as a funhouse. *El mural* certainly entertained, but I did not find a deeper meaning to it.

A children’s play drew on Mexican mythology more concisely than *El mural*, but its strong point was an exceptionally creative approach to puppets. *El pájaro Dziú* was written and directed by Marcela Castillo, who based it on a Mayan legend in which the Dziú heroically sacrificed his life to rescue grains of corn from a raging fire. What made this play unusual and

particularly beautiful was that all the characters existed in the form of “puppets” created from run-of-the-mill objects found in Mexican kitchens. At the front of the stage was a rustic kitchen, and as the play began an actress representing a grandmother told the story of the Dziú to her granddaughter, but as she told the story the actors transformed items from the kitchen into the characters they described. One bird was formed by having the puppeteer hold a wooden spoon, the handle of which represented the bird’s beak, while the puppeteer’s forearm represented the neck and the hand and “basin” of the spoon made up the head. From behind another actor/puppeteer spread a cloth bunched just above the puppeteer’s elbow with two hands to represent the bird’s wings. Wooden spoons with a bit of cloth for clothing represented humans. An enormous shallow basket, at a 90-degree angle to the ground, with round implements attached to represent eyes and mouth, and the actor/puppeteer from behind waving hot pads at her extremities constituted an angry god. In all cases the creation of “puppets” was exceptionally clever and the puppeteers did an outstanding job of bringing them to life. The website www.pajarodziu.blogspot.com includes snippets of a performance. Live music and singing and basic but effective lighting contributed to this beautiful, creative play for children.



La vuelta al mundo en 80 días, Señá y verbo. Foto: José Luis Santacruz.

A number of outstanding plays featured content with clear universal implications. The first was yet another powerhouse staged by Mexico's deaf theatre company, *Seña y verbo*. Alberto Lomnitz directed *La vuelta al mundo en 80 días* in an Haydeé Boetto adaptation of Jules Verne's classic book. Four deaf actors and one hearing/speaking actor provided 88 minutes of visually and acoustically brilliant theatre that spanned the globe in its imagery. Montserrat Marañón played the part of Jules Verne, who told the story of his book, and while (s)he did, the deaf actors frenetically acted out the narration, instantly and almost magically changing costumes, roles, and demeanor scores of times. Marañón delivered a vocal tour-de-force, taking on numerous voices, accents, and rhythms as she led the cast from country to country. As if that weren't enough, she provided myriad sound effects using a variety of gadgets. Her role required non-stop energy and attention to detail, with an eye for exact timing in confluence with the deaf actors. The deaf actors (Roberto de Loera, Eduardo Domínguez, Jofrán Méndez, and Lucila Olalde) delivered performances in the tour-de-force range of their own, changing roles, posture, costumes, and facial expressions with astonishing variety, but also creating all sorts of surprising props or "puppets" with their own bodies. With their hands and forearms alone, they created several types of clocks (pendulum, hands on a clock), trains, chests-of-drawers, fish, ships, flames, dolls, and more. Their actions had to be exact, with no time for mistakes, as the action barreled around the world in fewer than 90 minutes. The set was composed almost entirely of a "story-telling machine," a two-dimensional prop perhaps 8 feet tall and 25 feet from side to side. The actors could appear around either side of it, through a variety of trap doors in it, or do scenes peering over the top of it. It made for instant transitions from locale to locale dozens of times, with delightful variety. This masterpiece was a testament to the human capacity for creative, comedic expression, with a feel-good message about the buoyancy of the human spirit to accomplish great things.

Carlos Corona directed Mexico's National Theatre Company in his adaptation of Juan Ruiz de Alarcón's *La prueba de las promesas*. The accomplished cast acted exquisitely in this play in which the protagonist magically created a virtual reality to test the promises of a love interest. The set allowed for multiple slips through which characters could either enter the action or observe without being seen (while being seen by the audience, naturally). The play's strengths included elegant 17th-century period costumes, beautiful and beautifully spoken language, lovely singing, and live



La paz, Carro de las Comedias. Foto: Daniel Compton.

accordion and flute music. Upon the conclusion of its run in Mexico City, this play travelled to Spain at the invitation of a festival there.

UNAM's Carro de las Comedias hosted another highly successful play this year in the form of *La paz*, a "versión libre" of Aristophanes' classic adapted and directed by Juan Carlos Vives. The play followed the plot of the classic, complete with a dung beetle flight, but with a number of Mexicanized/modernized elements, such as rich gringo weapons peddlers and references to Quetzalcoatl. The noteworthy costuming included an extravagant oracle dressed like a Bedouin, but with a video camera on his head recording everything, and a voluminous politician in the mode of Fernando Botero's art (speaking of which, many of his paintings and sculptures were in a wonderful exhibition at the Palacio de Bellas Artes during the season). The play's language delighted the young audience, but what stole the show was the brilliant dung beetle. Three actors danced onto the stage holding parts of the beetle, but the parts did not look like anything recognizable until they put them together, enclosing themselves beneath it. From below, they controlled the wings and face of the bug while it sang a side-splitting origi-

nal song in a ridiculous voice and flew to the place of the gods. I saw the 27th performance of this version of *La paz*, which was scheduled to have nearly 100 performances across Mexico, including the states of Taxco, Michoacán, Estado de México, Veracruz, and Durango.

Finally, Flavio González Mello adapted and directed Shakespeare's *The Tempest* under the title of *Temporal*. I did not care for the adapted language, which often lowered Shakespeare's beautiful language into the lowest of Mexican expression, but the performance deserves strong kudos in other areas. It featured brilliant staging and lighting designed by Jorge Kuri and based on numerous stacks of books that had a variety of functions but testified constantly to the power of the written word. The entire cast acted with great professionalism, with standout performances by Alejandro Calvo as Próspero and Olivia Lagunas as Ariel. Curiously, its program listed all the actors, but only as a list, with no indication of the characters they played; this practice may promote egalitarianism, but it makes identification of actors difficult (a practice used by many plays this season).

The Spring 2012 theatre season in Mexico City said plenty about Mexico, most of it indicating abundant room for societal improvement, but it also featured outstanding artistic and creative accomplishment. Such aesthetic achievement in Mexico City's theatre continues to take my breath away, at the same time that I have come to expect nothing less.

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