## Mexico City's Spring 2013 Theatre Season (Plus a Note on a Play Staged in Xalapa)

**Timothy G. Compton**

Several new theatre spaces have enriched Mexico City's vibrant theatrical landscape since 2012. The city has many large-scale, well-equipped theatres, but some of its finest offerings occur in smaller venues, sometimes in spaces not originally built for public performances. Carretera 45 Teatro A.C. draws its name and origins from the Chihuahua/U.S. border region. Its directors (Antonio Zúñiga and Rodolfo Guerrero) hail from Chihuahua but have well-established theatrical reputations in Mexico City and beyond. Removed from sections of Mexico City typically associated with theatre, Colonia Obrera houses Carretera 45 in what appears to have been a common house originally. Although much of the programming deals with issues from Chihuahua, some does not, such as *El Grillo*, by Suzanne Lebeau, which played during the season, and the play *m³*, performed by a group from Spain in January. The theatre itself features an experimental space with precious little seating—a capacity for perhaps 50 people. It is a modest but welcome addition to Mexican theatre.

*Mendoza* provides an example of the type of theatre Carretera 45 produces. Based on *Macbeth*, Zúñiga and Juan Carillo wrote and Carillo directed it. Sadly, the Mexican Revolution provided easy fodder for an adaptation of the Bard's play, which the authors exploited brilliantly. Character names switched to Spanish, northern Mexico provided the setting, and the famous witches became a *bruja*, accompanied by a live chicken. The staging was noteworthy, to say the least. Folding chairs located around the stage's perimeter provided seating for most of the spectators (with overflow bench seating in the usual spectator area). When audience members entered, many of the actors were already seated on the folding chairs, and as the play progressed they joined the action and returned to their seats intermittently.

Actually, in several scenes, they took their chairs to the middle of the stage and used them as props. At times they would act right from their chairs at stage perimeter, often making eye contact with spectators as if in intimate conversation with them. In a noteworthy dinner scene, actors positioned a long tablecloth along one wall, just above the laps of actors and spectators, who wore masks for the scene. Several times actors had spectators join the action in simple ways, and at play's end all spectators were offered a drink as if to acknowledge their complicity in the play's performance. Marco Vidal performed the title role beautifully, transforming from a dutiful soldier to a power-hungry, scheming murderer. The rest of the cast, made up of the Los Colochos theatre group, acted most effectively as well. If Carreterra 45 can continue to produce well-attended, quality plays like this one, it will be an important addition to Mexico City's theatre scene.[1]

*El Culebra* joined *Mendoza* this season as evidence that the Mexican Revolution still resonates as a source of Mexican identity. Martín López Brie wrote and directed the play in a production by the Teatro de Quimeras company (www.teatrodequimeras.wix.com/teatro). It featured three memorable characters living toward the end of the Revolution. The first, the title character, was a soldier of Villa's División del Norte who fancied himself

*Mendoza*. Photo: Deniel Compton.

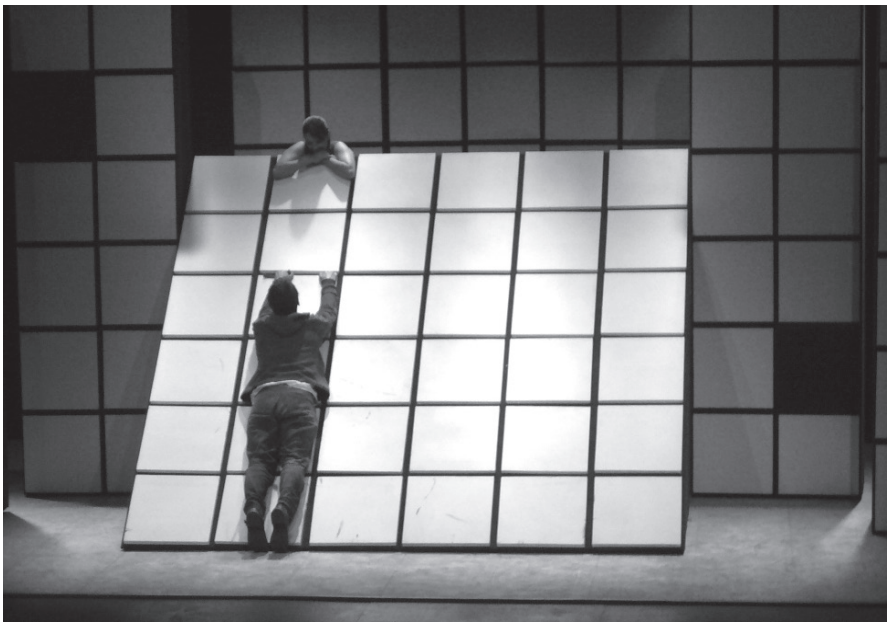
a great hero, but seemed more of a Mexican Willie Lomax—a big-talking, illiterate drunk whose exploits and standing merit no great place in history. He took himself very seriously, but proved to be more clown than hero. His *mujer*, Ausencia, had lost her patience for the Revolution and had tired of El Culebra's lifestyle and bluster. Clearly intelligent, she feigned ignorance and seemed trapped in the habit of playing the submissive partner. An American journalist, Mr. Brice, naturally evoked the image of Ambrose Bierce. He went to Mexico in search of heroes and utopia, but had become disillusioned. It didn't help that El Culebra tied him up and demanded that Brice cast him as a revolutionary hero. The situation oozed with irony as El Culebra sang his own praises, Ausencia passive-aggressively discredited him, and the protagonist couldn't even read whatever it might have been that Brice typed at gunpoint. Spectators roared at El Culebra's flights of autobiographical fancy, but the overall image featured a pathetic soldier in a chaotic revolution, and a chasm between reality and his flights of fancy. Alejandro Morales played El Culebra's role brilliantly, as did Oscar Serrano Cotán as Mr. Brice. A layer of dried white corn kernels covered the stage (ironically, in the El Granero theatre), which made for wonderful sounds as the actors walked on it, suggested the arid and abandoned north, and kept present one of Mexico's most enduring symbols. The actors used five rustic boxes in multiple ways—as chairs, desks, look-out points, a cliff, and the interior and the exterior of a train. A scene in which the characters used the crates as props to suggest that they were descending a cliff was pure magic. The paucity of the set allowed the characters to jump instantly from locale to locale with the help of audience imagination. I was happy to learn that the company has performed *El Culebra* beyond just Mexico City—as far away as Buenos Aires—, as it not only speaks volumes about Mexico, but also about its outstanding theatre.

The Foro el Bicho, located in Colonia Roma, is another new, intimate theatre, with a seating capacity of just 45 spectators. It housed *Montserrat*, a play written, directed and performed by Gabino Rodríguez of the group Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol. *Montserrat* fit perfectly a statement about El Bicho: "Un espacio para revalorar nuestra identidad." This play focused on Rodríguez's quest to learn the identity of his mother, Montserrat, who disappeared from his life when he was six. It was a mystery of sorts, as he first told and showed what he knew about his mother and then told and showed what he did to learn of her. In the process, he used a computer, projecting its contents onto a large screen at the back of the stage—it showed family pho-

*El Culebra.* Photo: Deniel Compton.

tos, images of important places in his mother's life and his own life, and images of where he went to research her. He read family letters about her and from her, read her death certificate (which turned out to be falsified), told of hiring a detective to find her, and finally told of traveling to Costa Rica to find her. Although narration was the primary mode, accompanied by images on the screen, the play was punctuated by musical interludes, during which Rodríguez would do different things, in many of the scenes wearing different masks. During one such break he danced, during others he hung the various documents of his search on a clothesline, and in one scene (which was beautiful and evocative, although I do not understand the significance of it) he arranged potted plants on the stage. While the staging and imagery were compelling, the play worked primarily because Rodríguez spun a fascinating yarn. At the end, when he flashed a list of works cited, including Borges, I realized spectators would never know what had been fact and what had been fiction. *Montserrat* left me thinking for a very long time about the thorny issues related to memory, history, history's limitations, research, and family ties. Gabino Rodríguez once again created outstanding theatre in an exceptionally non-traditional way.

The Julio Jiménez Rueda theatre, in contrast to El Bicho, is an old, established venue that seats nearly 500 spectators. I went to the final performance of *El Caso Romeo y Julieta*'s run and was very fortunate to enter. Every seat was full, people were standing in the aisles, and hundreds of disappointed people were turned away. Written by Berta Hiriart, Sandra Félix, and Ángeles Hernández, and with an excellent cast from the Compañía Nacional de Teatro directed by Félix, it presented a clever approach to Shakespeare's tragedy: law enforcement officers in the town of Verona, Mexico, investigated the deaths of the love-struck pair referenced in the title. Flashbacks to the events of the "case" regularly interrupted their investigation, portraying the basics of the famous story, but adapted to small-town Mexico, and with abundant humor. The set, designed by Philippe Amand, brilliantly transformed itself to accommodate myriad instantaneous changes in time and space. Seven light-colored columns, which looked like a wall when they stood side by side, would break up, some going forward and others retreating to create the various spaces. Lighting of various colors, minimal furniture, and props were added to complete the effects from scene to scene. For the brilliant balcony scene, the central columns tilted back-



*El Caso Romeo y Julieta.* Photo: Deniel Compton.

ward and Julieta appeared at the top. Two spaces occasionally existed simultaneously. The bumbling, corrupt investigators with their heavy *norteño* accents provided comic relief throughout the play (and performed the all-important wedding), but humor flowed from Romeo's fawning entourage, from mexicanization and modernization of various elements (for example, the presence of photographers at the crime scene and yellow "Do not cross" tape around it), and from the delicious mixture of Golden Age speech and Mexican slang. The handbill stated that this belonged to the fourth round of "Teatro para jóvenes/Dramaturgia nacional," so the play's humor drew young people to messages of the harsh consequences of hatred, violence, and uncontrolled passions.

Another excellent play targeted for young audiences was *La Máquina de Esquilo*, by Luis Eduardo Gutiérrez Ortiz Monasterio (LEGOM) and directed by Alberto Lomnitz. A cast of seven performed it on a plaza between several of the venerable theatres of the Bellas Artes complex in Chapultepec park as part of a series for middle school audiences. In a delightful flow between narration and representation, the cast told the story of the origins of theatre, illustrating their teaching with snippets of three plays by Aeschylus (*Seven Against Thebes, The Suppliants,* and *Prometheus Bound*). The highly

*La Máquina de Esquilo.* Photo: Deniel Compton.

energetic cast established excellent contact with the young audience, had marvelous precise timing as a group, displayed rich variety in their speaking and singing and an equal panorama of delightful facial and corporal expression. Ricardo Rodríguez was particularly cheeky with spectators, to which they responded enthusiastically. Olivia Lagunas also deserves note for her outstanding performance, punctuated by a surreal goat bellow! Costumes often matched the hilarity of the acting, such as with sumo-wrestler-type costumes for the sisters in the snippets from *The Suppliants*, and the men as sirens with their tails in constant motion in *Prometheus Bound*. The use of popular Mexican expression and humor mixed with Greek tragedy was extremely funny (but more sexual at times than standards in the U.S. would allow for similar school audiences). *La Máquina* taught, entertained, and paid homage to Aeschylus and to theatre in general.

The group Género Menor, which, as its name suggests, specializes in a style of old-fashioned cabaret, produced another extremely funny play, the funniest of the season for my taste. *Los Intachables*, by Gustavo Proal and Roam León and directed by León, tapped into and parodied the conventions of the American TV series *The Untouchables*, set during the Prohibition Era. In the case of *Los Intachables*, a crack team led by Elías Ness set out to eradicate from society not alcohol but that menace to Mexican obesity in 1929, the *tortilla*. The cabaret portion of the play consisted of exceptionally well-performed high energy dancing and singing scenes with excellent choreography. I found the level of talent of the entire cast and musicians stratospheric, but give particular kudos to Hazael Rivera for simultaneously playing the keyboard and serving as narrator and to Roam León in his role as Ness's assistant, Frankie Buen Rostro, whose deadpanned lines, histrionic facial expressions, and dumb-as-an-ox personality combined to make a thoroughly unforgettable character. In the most hysterical scene of the play (and season?), Buen Rostro turned a hardened mobster with secrets the *Intachables* needed into a gelatinous confessing fool by virtue of his spectacularly horrendous singing. Other deadpanned gags and plot twists (like the hero's girlfriend turning out to be public enemy number one, Al Chapino) kept the audience in stitches. *Los Intachables* showcased outstanding singing, dancing, acting, and parodying, but it also showed how foolish government can become in its laws and its reach, with negative consequences for the masses. Unfortunately, real-life government seems to mirror the absurdity seen in this play—during this season Mexico City's Health Secretary pushed to have salt shakers removed from tables at Mexican restaurants!

*Los Intachables.* Photo: Deniel Compton.

I saw just a rehearsal of another very funny play, *Chucho, el Chueco*, written and directed by Fernando Bonilla. The story featured a *pícaro* victimizer who feigned sainthood. Actors toggled between characters wearing expressive masks and others who did not. Much of the acting technique depended on exact timing between actors looking at each other or at common points in unison for a moment, then turning away. The actors' showed corporal virtuosity and delighted spectators by completely transforming themselves from one character to another upon donning or removing their masks. Rhyming verse made up the text but utilized popular rather than formal Spanish. Leonardo Soqui played live, upbeat, original accordion music. *Chucho* had numerous wonderful traits, and best of all it was scheduled to be performed in street settings in numerous parts of Mexico City.

Universal or Disney classics such as *Peter Pan*, *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Little Mermaid* always inhabit the stages of Mexico City's children's theatre, but this year's offerings featured many more plays by Mexicans. Two such outstanding plays were Jaime Chabaud's *Lágrimas de agua dulce* and Berta Hiriart's *El viaje de Tina*. Both provided visual delights,

used exquisite costumes, masks, sets and props, and had excellent acting. Mauricio Pimentel directed a fine group of graduates of La Casa del Teatro in *Lágrimas*. They made the villains of the town drip with evil appropriate to children's theatre, just as Diana Becerril made Sofía sweet.[2]

Alicia Martínez Álvarez directed *El viaje de Tina*, which tackled the issue of identity and immigration, showing how people can go to another culture and still maintain their cultural roots. Beautiful scenes dealing with the migratory journey included a variety of sets, colors and elements. Without mentioning the United States, it contrasted Halloween with Day of the Dead. This beautiful play's thematics hold great importance for contemporary Mexico.

As always, outstanding offerings from foreign playwrights, living and dead, found their way to Mexico City's stages this season. Three of Mexico's finest directors directed three such plays. *Un charco inútil*, by Spaniard David Desola and directed by Carlos Corona, had the greatest impact on me as a spectator of any play this season. Desola based its premise on an incident he saw on the news in Spain. A middle school teacher was physically battered by one of his students and the other students in the class did nothing to stop the aggressor. The teacher suffered further humiliation because one of the students recorded the event on a smart phone and then sold the footage to television stations for national consumption. *Un charco* explored the fallout of dealing with such trauma. In the play, the traumatized teacher would meet his mentor in the park for weekly therapy sessions. He built up the courage to respond to an ad to tutor a young student, but was shocked to find that the student actually died in the 3/11 train bombings in Madrid, and that the mother had kept him alive in her fantasy world. The teacher complied, pretending to tutor the boy. When he finally confronted the mother, she turned the tables and confronted him, and the audience learned that the protagonist was living in his own dream world. The line between reality and fantasy disappeared, and spectators had to wonder whether anyone can be truly sane. The play also looked at crucial societal issues such as violence and its effects, the media, and education. Tomás Rojas and Miguel Flores played the teacher and his mentor masterfully. Blackboard material made up the mother's house, with most of the furnishings in chalk outlines—a brilliant set designed by Jesús Hernández which reinforced the theme of reality's shifty nature. And at play's end the following message appeared on the wall of the house: "La libertad de la fantasía no es ninguna

huida de la realidad—es creación y osadía." Every detail of this play worked for me. I count it as one of finest plays I have ever seen.

Sandra Félix directed the remarkable monologue *Rose* by American Martin Sherman and performed impeccably by Amanda Schmelz. Several factors made it noteworthy. First, Schmelz performed it in the living room of a family residence in Coyoacán to an audience of about 25 people under the billing "Teatro a domicilio." Second, Schmelz delivered an astonishing performance, a monologue that lasted nearly three hours without even standing up from a bench (save for an intermission), and kept the audience spellbound with a compelling story, amazing storytelling, excellent facial expression and spot-on gestures. Schmelz rose to the challenge of a very demanding text.

Luis de Tavira currently serves as the artistic director of the Compañía Nacional de Teatro, and as such directed the company in a lush version of Bertolt Brecht's *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis*, which he translated with Eduardo Weiss. Entitled *El círculo de cal*, it had twenty excellent actors play upwards of 100 roles with an amazing set designed by Philippe Amand, original, live music, remarkable esperpentic costuming by Jerildy Bosch, and fascinatingly grotesque masks designed by José Pineda in a nearly four-hour performance. Érika de la Llave played the lead role marvelously, and the entire cast played with brilliant Brechtian largess. A stairway dominated the set, the stairs of which were enormous near the audience, but retreated toward a vanishing point at the back of the stage. As the play progressed, the set represented some 15 locales, sometimes starting as an exterior of a building, then becoming its interior, with sections of the set disappearing or appearing according to the locale. In one of the most memorable scenes I have ever seen, the set transformed into a raging, flooding river that the characters had to cross—enormous swathes of blue fabric whipped about the actors. As with most de Tavira productions, excess marked *El círculo de cal* (I felt it didn't need all four hours, especially given the lamentably uncomfortable seats of the small theatre of the Compañía Nacional), but it made for memorable theatre.

I promised a note regarding theatre in Xalapa. Mexican theatre boasts fine productions all over the country, and I saw one by the Universidad Veracruzana's venerable Compañía Titular de Teatro. Ana Lucía Ramírez and Luis Enrique Gutiérrez Ortiz Monasterio (LEGOM) wrote *El origen de las especies*, while Alberto Lomnitz directed it and designed the set. It focused on the phenomenon of *paracaidistas*, urban squatters who take over

vacant lots. This play focused on the type of society that develops in such settings, a harsh pecking order that rewards the clever and the ruthless and preys upon immigrants, latecomers, and the mentally ill. Raúl Santamaría nailed the role of "Rudy," the lazy *pícaro* who lived off other residents and reigned over the squalid kingdom. Eventually, its society seemed to provide a dark, impoverished microcosm of Mexican society at large, with winners and losers, victimizers and victims. The narrative mode dominated, complete in this case with chapters announced by the characters. As with many of LEGOM's plays, actors used coarse language and depicted a depressing world. Although it had dark imagery and implications, it featured abundant humor and excellent acting, and spectators occupied every seat at the new Foro Miguel Herrera de la Casa de los Lagos with its seating capacity of about 250. Indeed, excellent theatre occurs well beyond Mexico City.

The plays of this report testify to the continuing creative genius encompassed in Mexico's theatre world. They represent the tip of the country's theatrical iceberg, but give an idea of its vitality. New theatres, texts, actors and production concepts combine with established locales, classic texts, seasoned actors, and proven techniques, resulting in a constantly renewing, infinitely complex, culturally important, and artistically rich theatre scene.

*Northern Michigan University*

**Notes**

[1] I also saw *Juárez-Jerusalem* at Carreterra 45, a play written by Zúñiga and directed by Roberto Ríos "Raki," although I did not find it as compelling as *Mendoza*. It focused on the difficulty of a young woman in violence-ridden Cd. Juárez. The main character met a young man on a bus who listened to her and told her stories about difficulties in Palestine. The actors took on various roles and went back and forth between narrative and performance mode, but the stories became confusing and the Palestinian threads did not resonate with me.

[2] For a brief description of the plot and a very different staging of *Lágrimas de agua dulce*, see page 184 of my "Mexico City's Spring 2009 Theatre Season," in the Spring 2010 issue of *Latin American Theatre Review*.