

Mexico City's Spring 2014 Theatre Season

Timothy G. Compton

Mexico City offered a wide array of theatre offerings during its Spring 2014 season, ranging from an extremely expensive version of *Wicked* to street theatre financed by local government, from well-equipped, large theatres to adapted, tiny venues, from world and Spanish Golden Age classics to new plays written by very young Mexican playwrights, from plays featuring universal settings and themes to others focused on specific Mexican locales and issues, from plays intended for mature audiences to others accessible to audiences of all ages and backgrounds. The theatre world of Mexico City marches forward with vibrance despite several earthquakes and the usual snarl of transportation and big city issues.

In my opinion, the season's finest play reached out to spectators of all demographics despite its designation as children's theatre. Written by Bertha Hiriart and directed by a visiting Polish director, Ewa Piotrowska, *Si no lo cuentas tú, ¿quién lo sabrá?: Historia de los niños de Santa Rosa* had a distinctively Polish flavor. It focused on the riveting story of how a group of refugee children fled their Polish homeland during World War II, spent time working in virtual slavery in Siberia, then went on to live first in Persia, then India, and eventually in the Santa Rosa Hacienda in Mexico's state of Jalisco. Many made Mexico their permanent home, while others joined the large Polish community in Chicago. Hiriart based the play on interviews with the children and grandchildren of a number of the refugees. She personalized it by focusing on a brother and sister who survived harrowing journeys and conditions to settle in Mexico and the U.S., respectively. In this compelling story of danger, survival, and adventure, spectators could easily identify with and care deeply about the pair of protagonists in their innocence and goodness. Their separation from homeland and family was wrenching, their pluck inspiring. But the beauty of the play extended well beyond the story-

line. Edyta Rzewuska, an immigrant of Poland to Mexico herself, designed numerous stunning visual elements. A large metallic square, perhaps ten feet tall, dominated the Orientación theater's generous stage. With an open circle perhaps five feet across its middle, it looked like an enormous square nut (from a mechanical nut and bolt set). Behind it stood another slab. Photo and video projections onto these slabs transformed the play's setting. At times actual newspaper clippings were projected onto the slabs. Other times maps illustrated the route of the characters' journey. The actors usually acted in front of the slabs, but often entered into the circular opening, allowing the actors to "be" in a variety of indoor locales. Video projections of a train, together with the repetitive movements of the actors and effective sound effects, created spectacular illusions of rail travel, for example. Toward the end of the play, photographs of the actual historical children from Santa Rosa appeared poignantly on the structures. Puppets of several sizes of the children themselves, clothing matched to that of the actors, enabled the entire illusion to suddenly exist in miniature, as also happened with a toy train, a small ship, and a minute village. Other elements of the set contributed to the play's beauty and playfulness: a trunk containing dolls and a dollhouse, which showed up in Mexico in the play's final scene to the delight and nostalgia of the now-grown sister; wheelbarrows containing numerous dolls representing the cadavers of children who did not survive the rigors of Siberia; metal tins that represented bathtubs in which the children were harshly disinfected in Persia; and a three-foot long boat representing the vessel that took the children across the Atlantic to Mexico, perched on top of the captain's head, dipping this way and that as he narrated the travails of the voyage. Music from the various parts of the world enhanced the settings. Some of the dialogue was either in Polish or mimicked Polish, with just enough Spanish thrown in to clarify the situation. Snippets of other languages helped establish settings and illustrated the linguistic challenges the refugees faced. All four actors (Rodolfo Guerrero, Pablo Marín, Tania Olhovich, and Sofía Sylwin) played multiple roles, ending with short, moving monologues from characters that represent the sister's husband, grandchildren, and finally the sister herself as an old woman, telling of the importance of remembering and how she carries, as do her descendants, a bit of Poland deep within. This play was beautiful from start to finish. Plans were underway to take it to a festival in Poland, then to Chicago.

After an absence of nearly a decade from active participation in theatre, Sabina Berman has returned with an outstanding play that she wrote



Si no lo cuentas tú, ¿quién lo sabrá?: Historia de los niños de Santa Rosa. Photo: Joseph T. Compton

and directed, *Testosterona*. Reminiscent of her *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* in its focus on gender and power in relationships, it modernized the topic from the moment spectators stepped into the theatre. The slick set designed by Philippe Amand represented a professional office high in a skyscraper overlooking Mexico City. As the play progressed, spectacular images/video of the backdrop changed subtly, at first with mere cloud movement, but eventually transitioning from day to night, and then showing various amounts of precipitation. The office belonged to the top dog of a major newspaper, who called in one of his two most powerful underlings to inform her that he would have to leave the business immediately due to medical problems, and that she would either become the new director or the position would go to her alpha-male rival and she would be fired. While she almost fell prey to her rival's underhanded, bullying tactics, she ultimately proved herself his superior in getting the position. Every element of this play worked, but its forte rested in the relationship between the pair of characters and dazzling dialogue. Without realizing it, the newspaper director used demeaning, condescending and manipulative language to establish himself as dominant. In the second act, in a particularly delicious scene, the

sub-director reviewed the previous act's conversation, pointed out to the director his horrible *macho* techniques, then brilliantly turned the tables to put herself in control. César Évora and Verónica Merchant played the roles impeccably. The beautiful new theatre of the Centro Cultural Chapultepec housed the play. Most of Mexico City's "commercial" theatre receives deserved criticism for depending too heavily on television stars and international musicals, but this version of *Testosterona* proved the existence of excellent commercial theatre in Mexico City with significant reflection about and for Mexico.

Several exceptionally young playwright/directors have created outstanding theatre in recent seasons, and this season saw multiple such plays from David Gaitán and Fernando Bonilla. Although Bonilla was not yet even 30 years of age at the time of this season, he had founded the theatre company Puño de Tierra and written and directed an ever-growing number of quality plays. He has also acted in a fair number of plays. Throughout 2014 Puño de Tierra has performances lined up at the Foro Shakespeare, which this season I felt had the strongest array of theatre offerings in the city. Bonilla has developed a healthy relationship with Catalán playwright David Desola, resulting in a number of excellent performances of Desola's plays directed by Bonilla and produced by Puño de Tierra. Mexico City's spring season featured two such plays. *Almacenados* featured a Bonilla family cast, headlined by Fernando's famous father Héctor, with the two-person cast rounded out by Fernando's brother, Sergio. This play with this same cast premiered several years ago, but with only once-a-week performances, and this season saw it bloom to Friday through Sunday performances in the Foro Shakespeare's largest space. The play depended entirely on dialogue and acting talent, as the set consisted of bare black walls, a ratty old desk, a water cooler, and a time clock. The setting portrayed a lonely warehouse in which the older man had worked for 29 years and was starting his final week before retiring. The play focused on his efforts to train a new worker to take over for him the following week. The play's beauty centered on how the older worker had a system for everything and determined to have the younger man follow those systems in excruciating detail, while the younger worker questioned everything and pointed out the ridiculousness of the systems, resulting in rich confrontations. Further absurdity derived from the fact that the elder worker's dire warnings to be ready for truckloads of product never materialized, resulting in a situation not unlike *Waiting for Godot*. Both Bonillas played their roles superbly, turning a conversation that was



Almacenados. Photo: Joseph T. Compton

not funny to the characters into hilarity for the audience. Despite the Spanish author, the actors used abundant Mexican slang. The themes of conformity and revolution and work and routine all had universal resonance. This was a masterful performance.

Puño de Tierra, under Fernando Bonilla's direction, also performed *La nieta del dictador*, also by David Desola, also at the Foro Shakespeare, with performances by Valentina Sierra and Valerio Vázquez. In this play, the granddaughter of a dictator visited him once a week for an hour. Her vivacity and loquaciousness contrasted perfectly with him, as he never left his bed, never said a word, and medical life support alone kept him alive (a mannequin played him). The granddaughter reminisced about her relationship with him when she was a child, admired the oversized portrait of him in his heyday with full military regalia, voiced her admiration for his service to their unnamed country, complained about the women protesting him outside of the building, spouted her political philosophies (such as a theory that good dictators sport small moustaches, while bad ones wear large ones), and read to him from his favorite book—a Western featuring a sheriff who brought order to his town in the Old West. As the play progressed, she learned of the atrocities committed under her grandfather's regime and

ended up unplugging his life support. Staccato farcical appearances from a variety of characters, all played by Vázquez, whose face was painted white like a clown's, interrupted the granddaughter's monologues from time to time. These characters included a nurse, the dictator, a limping general, the sherriff, a woman from high society, an executive assistant to the dictator, and even the granddaughter herself. Vázquez's hysterical, high-energy interventions represented fantasies and flashbacks. Perhaps the content was so strong that comic relief made it palatable. Or perhaps these interventions showed how dictators become cartoonish. It definitely made for exciting theatre, as audience members never knew what Vázquez would wear, what role he would have, or even where he would appear. Images and video footage occasionally accompanied the play on a small television and projected onto the dictator's bed, which started with farcical snippets of the sherriff story and footage of the Vázquez characters or the dictator, but eventually transitioned into sobering images of actual recent dictators from the Spanish-speaking world, as well as victims of their atrocities. This excellent play had deadly serious content that reflected all-too-real realities from Spain and Latin America.



La nieta del dictador. Photo: Joseph T. Compton

Fernando Bonilla wrote and directed a third play, *Don Juan Chilorio* (actually, I arrived a week too late to see a fourth he wrote and directed this season, *Los ingravidos*). *Chilorio*'s cast included the pair from *La nieta*, but added Malcolm Méndez and Mario Monroy. The physical setting for the play contrasted starkly with the Foro Shakespeare; this was part of an initiative called "Teatro en las Colonias," which was brought about by a pair of politicians from the PRD party, Polimnia Romana and Fernando Zárate. They aim to take quality theatre to disadvantaged areas in Mexico City, where citizens face overwhelming transportation and financial challenges that make their attendance at typical theatres impossible. They contracted Puño de Tierra to perform a series of plays, four different locations per weekend, over a series of months. This play was the fourth such play, and the performances we saw took place on blocked-off streets in the Palmas Axotitla and Ampliación Ave Real neighborhoods. Actors, costumes, set, sound system, and all props had to be transported from place to place. During the performances, actors had to ignore barking dogs, nearby cars, trucks and motorcycles, and even children nonchalantly walking and riding bikes past the performance area. The play itself portrayed a trio of picaro nobodies in trouble with the law who claimed to be actors and improvised a hilarious version of *Don Juan Tenorio*. Valentina Sierra played her role flawlessly as narrator and director of the metaplay, even nabbing a few people from the audience and coaching them throughout. The play's success pivoted on her excellent performance, which was even more impressive because of how different this role was from that of the granddaughter in *La nieta*. Vázquez and Méndez played don Juan and don Luis and could not have been funnier. Their humor required perfect timing and chemistry, as well as considerable physical conditioning for all-star wrestling and clowning sequences. One highlight came when Méndez toggled between playing doña Inés and don Luis. The characters fit the mold of the classic popular Mexican picaro, as did the vocabulary they used, which contrasted beautifully with the occasional lines in Castillian from Zorrilla's play. *Chilorio* did not explore topics of deep import for Mexico, but it did provide excellent theatre and entertainment. And Romana and Zárate provided healthy snacks and a pep talk to the audience at the play's end.

David Gaitán wrote and directed two plays this season. The first, *Ricardo III 0.1: Shakespeare & Ska*, shared similarities in story line with *Chilorio*. A group of young actors started performing parts of *Richard III* when they unexpectedly found themselves before an audience, but unprepared to



Don Juan Chilorio. Photo: Joseph T. Compton

do the whole play. The metaperformances actually encompassed less time than the cast's discussions about them, the ideas in the play, and their applications to Mexico. It showed a generation unhappy with power structures and increasing violence in Mexico, and aspiring to accomplishment and greatness, but not knowing what to pursue or how to achieve it. The cast performed beautifully, creating, along with the set and costumes, numerous memorable and eye-catching images. They all sang and performed a number of instruments, hence the reference to ska in the play's subtitle. Adrián Alarcón, a contortionist champion in Mexico City, played King Richard. In one particularly memorable image, he played the role of the physically defective king by cradling his legs behind his head for extended periods of time. Some of the dense text and complex images went over my head, but what should one expect from a dense, serious play?

Gaitán's other play of the season, *Simulacro de idilio*, explored the hypocritical world of a public school in Mexico. The principal abused his power with the female staff, which seemed far too happy to oblige to get ahead, thus showing a world that should be pure and idyllic, but certainly

was not in this play. The protagonist seemed to fall into the same mold in an obsession with one of his students, while his semi-estranged wife had relationships with his boss and attorney. By the end of the play, the protagonist proved to be the cleanest of the group, but struggled to get above the dirt of the environment. *Simulacro* created remarkable imagery, starting with the fact that much of the action took place on tables in the middle of the set, tables on which stood chairs, and in one case a chair connected to another which connected to another in a Dalí-esque stairway. Occasionally, projections of characters' thoughts or fantasies appeared in words or animated sequences on the sides of the tables or on the table tops. All but one actor stayed on the stage the entire time, retreating to the back of the stage to witness the events of the play, and in one case to act like poorly behaved school children, throwing hundreds of paper airplanes into the play's action and into the audience. Using sophisticated lighting techniques and taking advantage of superb acting, this play showed a society in grave need of reform.

Another young director/playwright of increasing prominence in Mexico, Alejandro Ricaño, who hails from Xalapa, wrote and directed *Un hombre ajeno* in Mexico City this season. This play also tended toward "commercial theatre," as its three actors were well known from television and movies. As the title hints, this play focused on a character who ex-



Simulacro de idilio. Photo: Joseph T. Compton

plained factors and incidents in his life that had led him to feel alienated from others and even himself. All three actors embodied the protagonist, usually simultaneously, and took turns telling his story, revealing his quirky and troubled personality and sense of humor, as well as introducing dysfunctional family members and love interests. Their narration would seamlessly transition into representation, with one or two of the actors toggling to different characters, then transitioning back into the 1-in-3 narrative mode. The characters made selfish choices that led to their alienation, but did so with good humor.

Jacinto y Nicolasa took spectators into a rare region—it introduced them into the world of Tarahumara Indians and the challenges they face in a rapidly changing and increasingly hostile world. Alberto Lomnitz directed the play, but he also intertwined the pair of monologues about the characters in the title, written by Camila Villegas. Jacinto told his story of having killed a man and seeking to satisfy the demands of justice. The Tarahumara community absolved him of any guilt, taking into account the circumstances of the incident, and eventually allowed him to become a leader in the community. At the same time, he sought justice in the Mexican legal system at no little sacrifice, walking tremendous distances to the court on a weekly basis, and weekly being told to come back a week later...until years later, when the powers that be did NOT take into account circumstances and senselessly jailed him. Nicolasa's story, which she related using a heavy Native American accent, detailed how her son disappeared. Years later, he returned to her town, but drug traffickers had since kidnapped and brainwashed him and he was now a hardened assassin at age 13, breaking his mother's heart. Beautifully acted by Olivia Lagunas and Bernardo Velasco, with a phenomenal background soundtrack from Tarahumara contexts, this play revealed a people in crisis, misunderstood and encroached upon in their way of life.

Camila Villegas also adapted Lope de Vega's *La dama boba* to a setting in Veracruz in *Finea en el Papaloapan*, which Ignacio Escárcega directed in a delightful version of this *drama de enredos*. The transculturalization worked very well, especially because *jarocho* music (from Veracruz) composed by Marcial Salinas for this play served as the heart of this performance. Before the play even started, the eight actors greeted incoming spectators with song and dance, some playing a variety of instruments. The live music alone would have been well worth the price of admission, but the wild plot and characters and costumes and script were also highly entertaining. Villegas could not have written two more different plays this season.



Jacinto y Nicolasa. Photo: Joseph T. Compton

The Compañía Nacional de Teatro undertook a massive project under the title of *Los grandes muertos de Luisa Josefina Hernández*, in which they put on six plays written by Hernández, all of which were set in a town near the Gulf of Mexico (which many critics see as the town in which her family lived in Campeche) and had many characters in common from one play to the next. The first, *El galán de ultramar*, was set in 1862, *La amante* in 1882, *Fermento y sueño* in 1886, *Tres perros y un gato* in 1890, *La sota* in 1894, and *Los médicos* in 1902. José Caballero directed all six plays, with an adjunct director for each. All six plays used the same versatile and lovely set designed by Jorge Kuri Neumann. The plays ran two per night Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays, and three a day Saturdays and Sundays. Each play had a large cast, sumptuously costumed for the time period (costumes designed by Jerildy Bosch). The cast of the company, made up of numerous outstanding actors, delivered outstanding performances. Laura Padilla deserves particular kudos for her role as the narrator throughout the six plays—an incredibly demanding feat. These plays portrayed a society suffering from racism, classism, injustice, infidelity, psychoses, and self-centeredness. Despite their many merits, as well as the merits of the overall

project, the dark content made them hard to watch, especially one after another after another.

Speaking of content that was hard to watch, *Ateo Dios*, written by Enrique Olmos de Ita and directed by Hugo Arias, took the prize for the most depressing play of the season. It focused on the hypocrisy of the press and the church, as a reporter sought to report on the case of a priest in California accused of sexually abusing children. The reporter turned out to be as vile as the priest. Several factors made this play intriguing. First, a pair of actresses, Amaranta Getino and Carmín Flores, played all the roles, thereby creating fascinating gender implications. Occasionally, both actresses would play the same character simultaneously. Second, the actresses narrated perhaps 70% of the time and toggled into representational mode for the remainder. Fortunately, the depraved acts of which the priest was accused, and in which the reporter participated, existed only in the narrative mode (which was painful enough!). Third, the play took place in a new venue called *Así Que Pasen Cinco Años*, in the tiny front room of a home belonging to teatrista Blanca Peña. A packed house would have consisted of roughly 20 people, so the setting was intimate. Despite the dark content, this was a fine performance in a unique setting, made even more unique by the fact that aftershocks from the earthquake that hit Mexico City on May 8 disabled the sound system in the performance I saw, so we missed out on recordings we would have otherwise heard.

Finally, in recent years Mexican director Hugo Arrivillaga has directed several plays by Moroccan-Canadian playwright Wajdi Mouawad. This season he directed *Litoral*. In this coming of age play, the protagonist grew up as a result of his father's death. The son embarked on a quest to bury his father properly, in his homeland. In the process, he learned of his father and mother's lives and discovered his roots and identity. The set, designed by Auda Caraza and Atenea Chávez, consisted of stacks of pallets, which the actors reconfigured from scene to scene to create the suggestion of different locales. Another noteworthy feature was that the ghost of the deceased father accompanied his son throughout his quest. Just as present was a character who existed only in the mind of the protagonist, a fantasy knight that the immature young man used to right his wrongs. A poetic moment occurred towards play's end when he informed the knight that he would not be needing him any longer. He encountered a number of poignant characters from his ancestral homeland during his quest, survivors of civil war, torture, and family dysfunction. The rescuing of stories and recognizing them

as fundamental to our development and identity played out poetically and movingly.

This report includes information on and comments regarding a scant few of the season's numerous outstanding/noteworthy performances. As much as any season I can remember, I think this season would have made Rodolfo Usigli happy with regard to his oft-quoted quip that "un pueblo sin teatro es un pueblo sin verdad." Mexicans could find abundant truth in addition to plentiful beauty in numerous high quality plays focusing on identity, telling and representing compelling stories, and reflecting crucial and varied elements of Mexican society.

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