

Mexico City's Spring 2015 Theatre Season

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Mexico City's theatre world churns on, producing abundant theatre, much of it of the highest quality. For me, the event of the season was a tribute to Emilio Carballido's short theatre focusing on Mexico's capital city. After discussing it, I highlight, in alphabetical order, thirteen more of the season's most outstanding plays.

Several years ago, Microteatro México opened in the Santa María la Ribera neighborhood, not traditionally a hotbed of theatre activity. Formerly a massive, venerable house, its central patio now houses a ticket counter and snack bar, and actors perform plays in thirteen rooms of various sizes (all of them small) spread throughout the structure's two levels. "Historias de la Ciudad de México" was actually the 14th set of plays performed in the locale, with a new set of plays roughly every other month. The 13 plays of this event played 6 times a day from Thursday through Sunday over a period of four weeks, so at this theatre alone, during that month, over a thousand performances occurred. This doesn't even take into account weekend micro-matinees for children. Billed as plays no longer than 15 minutes for audiences of no more than 15 spectators, that was not exactly true in the nine plays I saw, with the longest 21 minutes and biggest crowd 23 extremely cramped spectators. Among the 13 directors were any number of great renown, as well as actors with distinguished stage, television, and movie careers. Not all the plays were brilliant, but many were. It all combined to make a highly energized, very popular event. Both nights that I attended, spectators stood in line for about an hour just to buy tickets. Different showings would sell out and the schedule for each play was unique, which made things exceptionally complicated in the box office. And yet, standing in line was an event unto itself, with actors flying in and out of rooms for their plays, sound effects and lights blaring, and enthusiastic audience members laughing and

talking between plays. Given the unusual circumstances, it was an enjoyable novelty to see actors between plays, rather than sequestered backstage. One cast chatted with me as I waited for a play and as they were between performances, saying that they love watching spectators emerge from plays as enthused as if they had just ridden a roller coaster.

And as I mentioned, many of the plays themselves were excellent. Several were comic masterpieces. *Paso de madrugada*, directed by Mauricio Jiménez, could not have been funnier, with stellar comic performances by Ángel Lara and Mauricio Pimentel as bumbling police officers and Odett Méndez as a woman in labor. This play included sirens and lights out on the street, enlivening the neighborhood. Mario Espinoza's version of *¿Quién anda ahí?* highlighted perfectly the abyss between Mexico's lower and upper classes. *El censo*, directed by Martín Acosta, was hilariously performed in a closet. And *Cuento de navidad*, directed by David Olguín, included a rich Santa Claus and a contrasting poor Santa trying to edge into the former's territory. Carballido's gift for portraying the picaresque element and ingenuity in Mexican culture sparkled in all four of these plays, but social statements came through as well. Other plays offered more subdued content and overt focus on Mexico's troubles, such as *La miseria*, directed by Enrique Pineda, which dealt with the homeless and the way privileged classes ignore them. Incidentally, this play was performed in the smallest performance space I can ever remember experiencing—I estimated that it was about 6 x 8 feet, with 17 spectators and 3 actors sharing that space. Ana Karina Guevara, Mauricio Bonet and Carilú Navarro's performances were all the more impressive given that tiny space and the incredible proximity to spectators. José Alberto Gallardo directed a powerful version of *La pesadilla*, in which innocents living next to Tlatelolco square suffered in the moments following the 1968 massacre. Surreal elements, I assume added by set designer Alain Kerriú, such as screws in a doll's head and army boots at the top and bottom of a pole, added to the play's stark nature. *Delicioso domingo*, directed by Francisco Franco, showed the sadness and emptiness behind the lives of prostitutes and their clients in what would have appeared to be a fun day in Chapultepec park. And *El espejo 2*, directed by Sandra Félix, was a snapshot of the scourge of infidelity and hypocrisy in marriage as a wife, played by Pilar Villanueva, two-timed her husband but tried to talk her way out of it. Each play was a little gem, but the overall festival was a major, joyful celebration of Emilio Carballido and theatre itself.



El censo by Emilio Carballido. Director: Martín Acosta. Photo: Nicholas Sheets

El amor de las luciérnagas

Alejandro Ricaño wrote and directed this extremely popular, brilliant play, which has had successful runs in past seasons and opened this season to packed houses at the Xola-Julio Prieto theater (capacity of roughly 400). Spectators roundly enjoyed Ricaño's delicious brand of quirky humor, outstanding acting from Sonia Franco and Sara Pinet, and others in less prominent roles, ingenious plot twists bordering on magical realism (in which the protagonist wrote a double of herself into existence, then she had to struggle to get a new passport and airline ticket home as her double already used the originals, and she had to fight just to be someone), and a feel-good ending suggesting true love was on its way. For me, its most outstanding trait mirrored exactly the theatrical technique Ricaño used in his *Un hombre ajeno*: three different actors played the protagonist simultaneously. Thus, rather than monologue, the triple tag-team told the protagonist's story, toggling from narration into representation and back, and often one or more of the Marías would take on a different role. Thus, theatrical time and space were exceptionally fluid, keeping spectators moving and engaged, almost

miraculously, during what was mostly a monologue. For me, this play was far superior to *Un hombre ajeno* because it included more than the three protagonist characters, the characters were more likeable, and the plot was more entertaining and substantial.

Desvenar: Mole escénico

Richard Viqueira wrote, directed and starred in this play, which billed itself as an exploration of Mexico through the chile pepper. On the surface, *Desvenar* consisted of a six-part treatise: 1. The chile in Mexican culture; 2. The chile in Mexican history; 3. The chile in Mexican music; 4. The chile and language in Mexico; 5. The chile in social settings; and 6. The chile and love. However, as with any Viqueira play, this was far from an intellectual lecture, although plenty of intelligence was evident. By play's end, Viqueira's shirt was drenched in sweat, as he had sung, danced, rapped, spit fire (literally), held lit firecrackers in his mouth, and eaten whole chiles. To say that his performance was high energy does not do it justice—he was intensity personified, delivering a delightful spectacle in which he and his co-actors, Valentina Garibay and Ángel Luna, gave their all. Luna played the guitar and sang gorgeously, sometimes alone and sometimes with the others in music composed for the play. Ultimately, the play really did offer a profound interpretation of Mexican life and history as intertwined with the chile and what it means to be Mexican. I left wishing for a script because of the rapid-fire delivery of idea after idea, many of which I would have liked to ponder at length. A few ideas: in Mexico, eating chiles is a way to show manhood; the chile is the only vegetable that, like humans, has veins; mole is the blood of Mexican cuisine and culture; chile is the drug of the masses; in Mexico eating isn't just a delight but a challenge; love in Mexico draws abundantly on language related to chiles. By play's end, and having pondered it since, I was convinced that speaking of Mexico's essence without taking into account the chile would be folly. And what an amazing, delightful way to have packaged that message.

Dicen que me parezco a Santa Anna... ¡y ni guitarra tengo!

Although the program proclaimed that Isaac Pérez Calzada and Paola Izquierdo both wrote this play, Izquierdo insisted that her role was minimal. She did direct it, and whatever the collaboration, the result was a spectacular monologue—one of the finest I have seen. Far from a history lesson, this was a musical delight, a strong political commentary, a comedic romp, and

an acting showcase. The music alone would have been worth the price of admission, with well-known classical pianist Juan Ramón Sandoval Prado performing live at a grand piano. He played several pieces from Mexico's 19th century that he has uncovered in his own research. He also provided sound effects and vaudevillian background music during the play—all flawlessly and in tails. Pérez Calzada himself played the two roles of this monologue—that of a magician who would channel Mexico's historical figures, and the channeled Santa Anna, who attempted to clear his name during the performance. Pérez Calzada had the audience eating out of his hand between the memorized dialogue and the brilliantly improvised portions of the play. The audience seemed to thrive on the improvisations, in which it participated. For example, spectators were asked to write Santa Anna's biggest treachery prior to the play, and at one point in the play Santa Anna addressed these accusations in Cantinflas-esque style, talking fast, turning things upside-down, and maintaining a straight face while making completely outrageous statements. He sang and danced beautifully, showed a range of emotions and attitudes, switched constantly from comic to serious and back, and from present to past and back. It was a masterful performance. Ultimately, in addition to being highly entertaining, it had great substance, positing that Mexico's real "padre de la patria" is Santa Anna, since modern politicians follow in his footsteps in self-interest, corruption, and linguistic manipulation. I was only sorry that the venue (Foro A Poco No) was tiny, although it was packed. Izquierdo and Pérez Calzada informed me that they have plans to take this performance on the road all over Mexico—bravo!

Exilios

This performance included four short plays by different authors on the subject of living away from one's homeland. Directed by Sandra Félix and performed by nine actors in sets designed by Philippe Amand, these were tremendously moving plays. *Frontera*, by Spaniard Laila Ripoll, brilliantly portrayed the struggle the protagonist faced as he approached, under cloak of darkness, the border to leave his country. He dialogued with his grandfather, whom he carried on his back and who begged him to not abandon his past. His struggle between the desire to honor his grandfather's desires and his desire to improve economically was excruciating. It turned out the grandfather was only a memory, but a heavy one. Although written by a Spaniard, the image resonated perfectly in Mexico for obvious reasons. *El buen vecino* by Spaniard Juan Mayorga was also highly charged. A man

sidled up to another in a cafeteria, told him he had been watching him over time, knew he was undocumented, cited new laws about immigration, and threatened to turn him in if the man didn't do his bidding. The immigrant's fear and lack of resources was palpable, as was the evil in the supposed good neighbor. *Un día de lluvia* by Mexican Alicia Zárate portrayed a pair of people who took refuge in a doorway during a downpour and as they waited discovered they were both foreigners from different countries. They exchanged tender memories and seemed to overcome some of their aloneness in the conversation. The yearning for solidarity and companionship in a strange land came through loud and clear. Incidentally, Zárate herself played one of the roles beautifully. The fourth play, *El ganso de Djurgarden* by Argentine Lucía Laragione did the least for me. It took place in Sweden and featured an encounter of three exiles from South American dictatorships. But the situation (secretly stealing and killing a swan for no good reason) seemed contrived, although the sense of confused identity resulting from torture and exile did shine through. The variants on a single charged theme in these plays created a sum of the parts which were even more moving as they showed its depth and complexity.



El buen vecino by Juan Mayorga. Director: Sandra Félix. Photo: Nicholas Sheets

Humboldt: México para los mexicanos

This powerful play also dealt with foreignness, featuring six characters living in Mexico and desperately trying to become Mexican, to no avail. In addition to following their plights, the play gave profound insights into Mexican culture and society. The program credited Ernesto Anaya Ottone with the play's "dramaturgia," but director and actor David Psalmon told me that much of the play was generated in a form of "creación colectiva," wherein actors were cast and then contributed to the creation of the text. Each member of the cast, as well as the playwright and the director, were from different countries but are long term residents of Mexico, so much of the play echoed their own experience. One aspect of Mexican culture the play explored was that of fatherhood—who is the "padre de la patria?" In the play's initial image all the actors sat and read *Pedro Páramo*, suggesting the title character as the answer to the question, with all the troubled baggage for Mexico that implies. The other suggestion was Alexander von Humboldt, the 19th-century, world-renowned scientist and explorer who helped develop some of Mexico's early maps, and the first foreigner to be granted Mexican citizenship. But Humboldt's adoption as father figure turned out to be problematic, as his work facilitated the loss of considerable Mexican territory and his life was far from ideal. These issues and representations from Humboldt's life intertwined with scenes from the lives of current residents of Mexico trying to become Mexican. They each told their story of frustration and illustrated it brilliantly through scenes in which the process of seeking citizenship was cast in the form of a game show, but a game show in which the candidates were destined to lose. Ana Patricia Yáñez' set included a massive backdrop onto which images were projected and changed constantly. The result was an incredibly powerful testimony of the terrible dilemmas faced by foreigners seeking citizenship in Mexico and a number of the equally terrible dilemmas encompassed in Mexican culture.

La llegada

For me, this was the season's most unique and aesthetically stunning play. Based on Shaun Tan's graphic novel *The Arrival*, Sandra Félix adapted it to theatre and directed. Like the novel, this play used no words, yet the storyline was communicated beautifully. The program credited Philippe Amand with the set and lighting design and also for the use of multimedia. The front of the set was a huge frame perhaps 25 feet high and 50 feet wide, framing a space perhaps 15 by 35. Venetian blinds raised and lowered,

and when they were down, the entire front of the set served as a projection screen. When raised, the sides continued to be screens for projections, and the back of the stage, behind the acting space, often was a projection screen as well. Amand took the whimsical, creative, evocative art from Tan's novel and bathed the play in it, sometimes animating portions, sometimes focusing on bits and enlarging them or reducing them or moving them around. The audience for the performance I saw consisted of over 100 middle school students. I have seen plays ruined by the antics of such audiences, but this audience (which was spirited and rambunctious moments prior to the play) sat entranced, as did I, for the entire play, from the moment animated figures came onto the scene and set the stage to the end. Seven actors beautifully portrayed 48 characters in the moving story of a man who left his family and homeland, had to adapt to a new place, language and culture, and eventually welcomed his family to the new land. Antonio Zúñiga's performance in the lead role was impeccable, but all seven actors worked beautifully together, with perfect timing and controlled, graceful movements. Jerildy Bosch designed wonderfully evocative costumes matching the images from the book, which enhanced the play greatly, as did original music by El Gabinete. In short, this was an aesthetic feast, the kind of play one can only dream middle school students will see to whet their appetites for excellent theatre. Incidentally, those middle school students from an average school truly did enjoy privilege—I spoke to a spectator who twice went to the (newly created) theater at the Biblioteca de México to see the one public performance of the play per week and was turned away both times because it had sold out.

Masiosare: Un extraño enemigo

Fernando Bonilla wrote, directed and starred in this wildly irreverent romp that kept the audience in stitches from start to finish. It pilloried several notable figures from Mexican consciousness, starting with Father Hidalgo, angels, the military, the poor, television talk shows, and the Virgin of Guadalupe. On the surface, it portrayed the life of a pathetic character by the name of Masiosare, the product of an angel raping his mother, who went on to join the army, where he was manipulated by his superior (played by Bonilla), was made out to be a hero, then was discredited and blamed for a murder before being murdered himself. A downer for sure, it was either about the futility of life for many Mexicans or the way a few manipulate and use the masses for their own purposes. And yet this was an absolute delight, with exceptionally memorable characters (the clueless title character, played

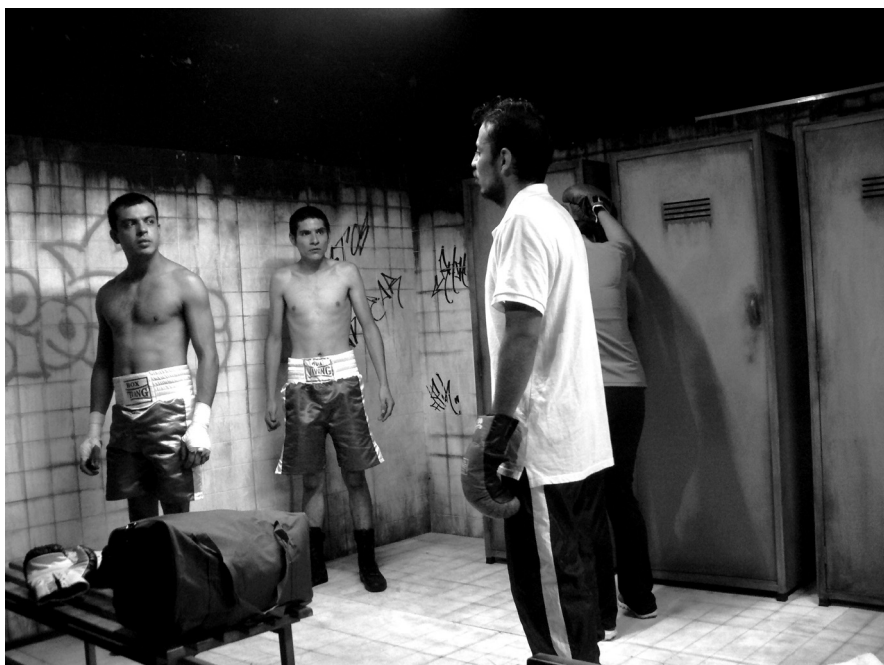


La llegada, based on the graphic novel *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan.
Directed and adapted by Sandra Félix. Photo: Nicholas Sheets

by Malcolm Méndez, the imposing and manipulative picaro commandant who constantly imposed his will through language, the sweet and semi-deaf mother, played with delicious improvisations by Valentina Sierra, a drunk, cross-dressed announcer played by Juan Carlos Medellín, who also played the bumbling assistant to the commandant), outstanding acting, incredible rhetoric, faces painted like clowns, and a number of incredibly memorable scenes. Several of the latter include the birth of Masiosare, who emerged from under a table with crazed, long black hair, fully adult, the scene in which the commandant delivers the horrible news, in euphemisms, of Masiosare's death to his mother, who misunderstood everything with big smiles until the commandant got ruthlessly graphic, a tour de force in an accusation read by the commandant's virtually illiterate assistant, Brechtian asides to criticize the play, the performance of the "Corrido de Masiosare," with lyrics written and sung by Bonilla and accompanied by Leonardo Soqui, who also composed the music, the commandant's rapid-fire denunciation of Masiosare, accusing him of breaking dozens of laws, an insipid (yet strangely realistic) talk show, a scene in which the Virgin of Guadalupe (in puppet form) condemned a prostitute, then distributed tomatoes to audience members to throw at the condemned, and finally a trial in which the audience got to vote on Masiosare's guilt or innocence (he was found overwhelmingly guilty). This brilliant play was the classic case of non-stop laughing in the moment, but upon later reflection, spectators recognized they had seen reflections of a society in deep trouble.

Mi papá no es santo ni enmascarado de plata

Carretera 45 continues strong despite its location far from the usual theatre centers of Mexico City. In the case of this play, the theater's neighborhood provided the story as well. Antonio Zúñiga said he wrote it based on the life of a teenager who lives nearby. Directed by Sixto Castro Santillán, it was a stark play, set primarily in a beat up locker room of a boxing venue. It concerned the way the teenager's father would beat him up verbally and physically after losing boxing matches, or during practice. And when it looked like he actually found a friend after boxing was over, it turned out that his new friend was also a boxer, the son of his father's former girlfriend. Eventually the two friends faced each other in the ring, having to fight a type of surrogate grudge match between their parents. The acting was so well done that it was hard for me to watch. It was a painful incursion into a very difficult world, full of single parents, poverty, abuse, bullying, and terribly slim hopes.



Mi papá no es santo ni enmascarado de plata by Antonio Zúñiga.

Director: Sixto Castro Santillán. Photo: Nicholas Sheets

La paloma mágica

This beautiful children's play, written and directed by Nurydia Briseño, was based on a Mixteca legend. The storyline was lovely, about how a man saw a magic dove turn into a human, fell in love with her, arranged to keep her human, lost her, then gained her back by passing a series of tests, including letting her have freedom. It had rich visual appeal, including lovely costumes designed by Alicia Lara. Most were based on indigenous dress, but others offered personifications of the sun, moon, birds, wind and storm, enhanced by head gear and bright colors. The set, although sparse, was also lovely, with a flowing stream of blue fabric. Puppets also enhanced the play, some fully developed and others shadows. Original music performed live by a pair of musicians also added to the play's magic. And several times the actors invited children onto the stage to help take the story forward. Every detail combined to make this a delightful experience for children and adults alike.

Posada es el nombre del juego

UNAM's mobile Carro de las Comedias once again teamed up with Carlos Corona for another highly entertaining play for audiences of all ages. In this one Corona adapted texts by Hugo Hiriart and directed, and his actors performed admirably, showcasing singing, dancing, vocal range, ability to play various parts, exercising strong corporal control, and delivering with precise timing. Characters from the Porfiriato populated the stage, all wearing exquisite masks, designed and created by Alberto and Alejandra Lomnitz, masks that reflected José Guadalupe Posada's art. Costumes evoking Posada's era were lovely. Most of the characters were absurd fools dressed as scientific or upper class Mexicans. Set, ironically, on "the train of national progress," several characters sought love in insane ways, while a scientist turned a woman into a dog. Clearly, national progress was in grave danger thanks to these people, and the inference that Mexico is now passing through a similar era did not speak well of Mexico's current progress. Performed outside, this play did not offer deep insights into Mexico or life, but it certainly delighted the audience of about 300 people.

Pulmones

Duncan MacMillan, from England, wrote this play, Roberto Cavazos translated it into Spanish, and then played one of the two roles in it, along with Ana González Bello. Alberto Lomnitz directed it. The two played a



Posada es el nombre del juego by Hugo Hiriart.

Director: Carlos Corona. Photo: Nicholas Sheets

couple that had been in a relationship for years and as the play started were beginning to think about having children. Their extensive considerations (including environmental, hence the title) led to pregnancy, a miscarriage, depression, a separation, then a reunion, followed by a baby and eventual maturity in their relationship. What made this play phenomenal was its emotional intimacy and the vast range of emotions the actors communicated. For nearly two hours the two remained on the stage, with audience members on all four sides (in a relatively new, very well equipped space, the Foro Lucerna), with no set beyond a pair of stools. The timing and chemistry between the two could not have been better; they were locked fully into their roles despite proximity to the audience. Not only did they take spectators on a wild ride through euphoria and depression, restiveness and resolve, but myriad places and decades of life. The text never had to indicate that time had passed; audience members simply observed the choreography, changes in tone and body language, and could perceive that time and place had changed, often instantly. This was one of the finest, most poignant, most realistic, most

beautiful portraits of the psychology, the challenges and joys of a couple's relationship that I have seen, in theatre or any genre. It was also theatre at its finest.

Valentina y la sombra del diablo

When I heard that this play for children had to do with sexual abuse of children, I shuddered, knowing what trauma such a topic could cause in children. Nevertheless, out of my respect for the play's writer and director, Verónica Maldonado, and the fact that this is one of her most performed plays, I attended and came away with even greater respect for her and for the power of theatre. The actual abuse in the play took place only in the minds of spectators, as a symbol (in this case a triangle shape) was given by the perpetrator to Valentina as the lights dimmed, and the details had to be imagined in accordance with the life experiences of individual spectators. The verbal manipulations and threats that enabled the perpetrator to abuse the child were diabolical and haunting, while the kindly grandfather's aid in helping his granddaughter bravely confront and overcome were tender and realistic. Tsayamhall Esquivel played Valentina beautifully, and Luis Mauricio Vásquez did a marvelous job embodying both the evil perpetrator and the tender grandfather. The play managed to deal with a most sensitive subject in a very healthy way. Maldonado told me that this run was the 23rd staging of the play and that she has been told of many children who have acted on the message of the play to get out of abusive situations and prosecute perpetrators. This play was aesthetically beautiful, but it showed theatre's empowering capacity.

21 historias de baúl

This play used 21 of the 44 mini-texts from Spaniard Javier Tomeo's book *Historias mínimas* to create a whimsical montage of sets, characters, ideas, and surprises. Directed by Amanda Farah, the play's actors essentially created 21 short plays, as if by magic, extracting them from a large trunk in the middle of the stage. Actors opened and transformed the trunk in many different ways, creating a ship, a restaurant, the inside of a house, an insane asylum, a train, a bar, a barber shop, a bull ring, and even a whale. The list of peculiar characters that the actors created is considerably longer, but equally as magical—they include a father/Don Quixote figure and his son/Sancho Panza, an elephant, a camel, a whale, a seal, various simians, human skeletons (one of whom played his femur like a flute), a man who could fly,

insane asylum residents, etc. This was a tour de force in the use of props, as they enhanced the creation of spaces and characters. And the plots to the stories were as quirky as the characters, such as a customer in a restaurant who wanted the waiter to choose his food, people in a remote town who resisted change to the point of prohibiting the arrival of a doctor, a bullfighter who asked the bull to only partially kill her. The actors (Llever Aíza, Joanna Larequi, Pablo Marín, and Emilio Savani) were phenomenal, transforming space, donning new outfits and props, changing roles, supplying their own sound effects, creating surprise after surprise for the audience. This was 75 minutes of delight and marvel.

Well over a hundred plays were performed every week of this theatre season, so this report clearly only scratches the surface of its breadth, depth, and variety. Not all its plays were as accomplished as the ones highlighted here, but many others were equally good, and sheer numbers allow a critic to see limited numbers of shows and to comment on even more limited numbers. Nevertheless, this report gives an indication of the continued vitality and creativity of Mexico City's theatre world. Few cities in the world can come close to matching it.

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