

## XXX Festival Iberoamericano de Teatro, Cádiz: Family and the Representation of Latin American Masculinities

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The thirtieth Festival Iberoamericano de Teatro took place in Cádiz, October 16-24, 2015. One of the highlights of this festival has been the accompanying Encuentro de Mujeres, which celebrated its nineteenth gathering this year. Keeping in mind the significance given by the festival to gender with this annual conference, I will look at the representation of men and their masculinities in the plays brought this year to Cádiz. In line with theorists of men's studies, I would like to focus on men as *gendered* beings.

The term *machismo* is quite often discussed in relation to Latin American men almost as a synonym of sexism in patriarchal societies. Conversely, applying gender theory and terminology such as hegemonic, supportive, or marginal masculinities to the representation of men in Latin American theatre must also take the question of power into consideration. Feminist and gay movements have, in one way or another, affected gender relations and the traditional values that determine the distribution of power in contemporary societies. The frequency with which these changes are addressed as a masculinity crisis is seen with reservations by feminist theorists. A crisis in the parameters of masculinity could imply that things were at some time "stable" and men imposed their power almost "naturally." Although I agree with these reservations, most of the male characters considered here prove to be either very far away from or in clear conflict with the hegemonic masculinity ideals of their time.

The three plays to be discussed are not all that new: the most recent one is *No daré hijos, daré versos*, from 2013. *El sistema solar* is a year older, and *El loco y la camisa* is a collaborative creation first staged in 2008. One of the possible reasons why they still circulate in international festivals might be the fact that they are family plays, that is to say, their main conflict takes



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place within a family setting. Audiences can easily relate to the problems of family and couples even if they take place in a different time and culture. The microcosm of the family can also represent a whole society and the apparently personal issues can be translated into major moral, political, or social matters.

Written by Nelson Valente in collaboration with the Banfield Teatro Ensemble, *El loco y la camisa* was one of three plays representing Argentina in the festival. Gender roles in the Argentinian family represented here are quite traditional; the father José is the one who works outside the house while the mother Matilde is a housewife. He constantly complains about how his wife does not make his *mate* right, but it never occurs to him that he could just make it himself. On the other hand, he is very proud of his abilities as a repairman in the house. During the opening scene, Matilde irons while her husband reads the newspaper. She finds a lipstick stain on one of José's shirts and the latter invents a story that, despite its absurdity, she insists on believing. At some point, José acts abusively towards both his wife and son. The play takes place the day that the daughter María brings her fiancé Mariano to the house for the first time. During their conversation with him, it becomes clear that the future planned for María is very similar to her mother's life. Mariano's social class and economic status implicate a different set of values

that do not allow him, for instance, to appreciate José's pride in the repairs that he made to their modest house. But when it comes to María, her fiancé can only imagine her as completely dedicated to him. Notwithstanding Matilde's fear of losing her daughter and José's discomfort for not completely understanding Mariano's world, the only one who really says something about the situation of both women is Beto, the "crazy" son. The marginality of his mental condition prevents Beto's masculinity from being taken as a point of reference. However, it is from this marginal position that he can make others confront the lies sustaining their world. These lies guarantee the subordination of women and their full support of the hegemonic masculinities with which José and Mariano align themselves. Like gender performance, those lies must be recreated all the time to maintain the family's "happiness." Equally important is the negotiation between both men of the power that they must share momentarily, but that will be solved once Mariano and María live in their own house. Mariano acts respectful and José supports his soon-to-be son-in-law's decisions. The subordination of the women is key throughout this negotiation.

The female characters of the next two plays are much less traditional than those of *El loco y la camisa*. It cannot be overlooked that their playwrights and directors are women. In the case of Mariana de Althaus' *El sistema solar*, the whole family is quite unconventional or, it might be more correct to say, a product of our time. Divorce is present in the two generations. The daughter Edurne, despite her economic and personal instability, decides to get artificially inseminated and become a single mother, while the household consists of a child who lives with his father and aunt. This Peruvian play takes place on Christmas night. Siblings Pavel and Edurne have not seen their father Leonardo in a long time. He left their mother for another woman, Paula, who is also Pavel's ex-wife. This fact and the authoritative personality of Leonardo situate the father in a clear hegemonic position towards the son, whose weakness is also revealed in his somatic asthma and the need to take over his son Puli's sessions with the psychologist. As a matter of fact, Pavel projects many of his problems and insecurities onto his son. For instance, it is not Puli, as the father affirms, but he who thinks that their grandfather is incarnated in their pet, a turtle. On the other hand, Leonardo's present health prevents him from embodying the hegemonic masculinity that he once conformed to. In his children's eyes the ideology behind his gender performance cannot be sustained anymore. Even worse, the ideal man that their grandfather represented to them since they were kids is exposed by Leonardo as someone



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totally different and, worse than that, as characterized by all those things that Edurne and Pavel despise in their father. Like in *El loco y la camisa*, it is through the character with a marginal masculinity, Puli—as he is not yet a man—that we gain access to a deeper reality. In this case, it is not so much about the difference between lies and truth, but rather the complexities that a different sensibility can show.

The contemporaneity of the two plays discussed above is clear despite the lack of specific time references. As a matter of fact, their representation at the Sala Central Lechera invited the spectators to feel almost as if they were inside these families' living rooms, sharing their conflicts and experiences. In contrast, Marianella Morena's *No daré hijos, daré versos* takes place at the beginning of the last century and its staging in the Teatro La Tía Norica created a very different effect. Inspired by the life of the Uruguayan poetess Delmira Agustini, the more traditional stage, located higher up than the audience, might have kept us somehow distanced from the acts narrated. However, in at least two of the three scenes, the actors address the audience, thereby breaking the fourth wall and prompting a reflection on the recreation



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of past events. The second scene is particularly relevant here as it confronts how to represent Delmira's family, taking as a point of departure a picture and some facts regarding the ideology of the time and specific social class to which Delmira belonged. The nuisances suffered by the actors (or the characters?) while being directed by one of them express Delmira's conflict as a woman who did not belong to her time; her passion and understanding of sexual desire went against the restrictive conventions of her society. Although Delmira is the main focus of the play, gender conventions are represented as also affecting the men at the turn of the last century. As a member of an upper-class family, Delmira's father censures his son for not conforming to the masculinity that is expected of him. Without serving as an apology for his murderous act, Enrique's way of thinking and the weight of the era's ideas are also put on display. A man of his time, Enrique could not understand his wife and might have felt his masculinity questioned by his wife's behavior and way of thinking. The play does not aspire to reconstruct exactly what happened the night of the murder or to give an interpretation of the reasons that led Enrique to stab his ex-wife. Focused on that night, the first scene

emphasizes the multiplicity of interpretations not just as part of a narrative, but through the physicality of the actors themselves. All six members of the group play the two lead roles in a fluid and constant rhythm, but also dependent on each other, like gender performance itself. The plasticity of the scene represents Enrique's masculinity; it is multiple, constantly enacted and physically determined. It responds not just to the pre-established parameters of its time, but also to Delmira's performances of her own gender identity.

The three plays reviewed here might not add much to the contemporary theatrical scene in terms of themes or innovative techniques. However, they manifest the way in which we finally seem to understand gender. Characters constantly perform their gender identity in response to an "other" that can be either a woman or another man. My focus on men and their masculinity does not partake in the portrayal of a masculinity crisis with a lamenting or nostalgic tone for an ideal past. Each of us is responsible for the maintenance or disruption of gender parameters. Even when this responsibility is masqueraded by an invented reality, a marginal character like "el loco" can denounce its true injustice and inequalities. Finally, there is also a call for a different sensibility that can avoid the insecurities haunting both non-hegemonic and hegemonic masculinities, like those of Pavel or Enrique. It is not the role of theatre to offer a different masculinity model to which Latin American societies can aspire. But the performatic quality of gender can make good use of the space made available by plays like *El loco y la camisa*, *El sistema solar* and *No daré hijos, daré versos*, where gender roles are re-examined and put into consideration.

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