
A Practical Approach to Teaching Mexican Political Cabaret

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With its penchant for dissecting and criticizing imperialism, authoritarianism, consumerism, and patriarchal structures, contemporary Mexican political cabaret (MPC) has captured the attention of progressive scholars and performers in the US. This is not surprising as, from its start in the late 1970s, MPC has aimed to connect Mexican concerns to larger political issues using a multifaceted approach that combines academic theatre techniques and popular culture, as well as the personal and the political. The visibility of MPC as an art movement that may take place both on stage and in the streets, and its enormous potential to bridge the gap between social classes and groups by appealing to diverse audiences, makes it a rare phenomenon even within openly anti-establishment art movements.

This characteristic alone should be enough to make MPC worthy of examination in US classrooms, even before considering our significant national interest in Mexican life and culture. Whether in theatre and performance courses, gender studies, Latin American studies, or Spanish language courses, the intrinsic connections between Mexican political cabaret and pressing global issues offers fruitful ground for research and practice. In this article, we propose two pedagogical approaches that introduce MPC to students in the US. Our goal is not to theorize this genre of theatre but to offer practical guidelines to teach Latin American theatre in the US, using MPC as a starting point.

One of the positive effects of MPC's popularity, mainly among formally trained actors, has been that in the last decades several MPC practitioners have started offering workshops, which vary in scope and approach. To provide an overview of actor training in MPC that may be inspiring for theatre instructors in the US, we will start with a brief history of this trend, followed by the specifics of such training. The second part of the essay addresses sociopolitical issues in contemporary Mexican political cabaret.

Mexican Cabaret: A Brief Background

Particularly since the 90s, veterans such as Jesusa Rodríguez and Tito Vasconcelos have been offering cabaret workshops aimed at actors who want to explore theatre in a new and independent style that allows them to become actor, director, and playwright all at the same time. Rodríguez and her spouse—the Argentinian musician Liliana Felipe—founded bar-theater El Hábito (The Habit) in 1990 and performed there regularly until 2005. El Hábito was located in the former house of Salvador Novo (1904-1974), a major figure of Mexican literature who was known as the chronicler of Mexico City. The building still has a formal theater stage, La Capilla (The Chapel). Both La Capilla and El Hábito are iconic places where significant alternative theatre and political cabaret shows took place in the 1990s. In this setting, Rodríguez and Felipe performed over 300 political cabaret shows and came to be known as the political consciousness of the country. Even prominent politicians such as former Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo and his wife attended just to see how they were mocked and criticized on stage.

Vasconcelos has also directed and performed in over 300 cabaret shows. In addition, he has great prestige as a movie actor and theatre instructor. Along with businessman David Rangel, over the past 30 years he has established a series of nightclubs in Mexico City aimed mainly at providing cultural and entertainment spaces for the gay community.

It is important to state that for both Rodríguez and Vasconcelos, political cabaret is directly intertwined with activism, particularly those movements in favor of LGBT rights. For example, Rodríguez and Felipe decided to undertake “massive cabaret” after the 2006 presidential election. They, along with many Mexicans, were convinced that Felipe Calderón Hinojosa had defeated Andrés Manuel López Obrador only because of a fraudulent vote count; the margin between the candidates was 0.56%. To make things worse, the National Electoral Institute refused to do a recount. Manifestations of social unrest included permanent sit-down demonstrations in Mexico City’s main public square (El Zócalo) and mass protests for around six months.

Rodríguez and Felipe were some of the main organizers of the so-called Pacific Civil Resistance Movement that congregated and organized supporters of López Obrador, whom they saw as the legitimate president. As a part of their involvement in this movement they began performing “massive cabaret,” which uses public urban space as a stage for political protest by involving regular citizens in the performances. Rodríguez and Felipe fostered public participation using strategies taken from political cabaret theatre and agit-prop

(i.e. impersonating politicians or changing the lyrics of well-known songs for political satire). Quite often Rodríguez impersonated former President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, who still has great leverage in Mexican politics, even more so after the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) came back to power in 2012. President of Mexico from 1988 to 1994, Salinas is a well-known symbol of governmental corruption and impunity, unpopular to the point that regular citizens almost attacked Rodríguez when she was impersonating him in mass demonstrations. Even after Salinas finished his term, Rodríguez never stopped protesting against him in her shows and public interventions.

The other major figure of MPC, Vasconcelos, has focused mainly on LGBT rights. For almost eight years he conducted a show on the topic of sexual diversity for Radio Educación (1989-1996), which was a watershed in terms of recognizing LGBT rights in Mexico City. In addition, along with Enoé Uranga Muñoz, he was an important advocate of the domestic partnership law approved in 2006.¹

Besides their advocacy and artistic work, Rodríguez, Felipe, and Vasconcelos have offered political cabaret workshops in marginalized communities in Mexico City and in rural areas. In collaboration with professional psychologists, Rodríguez and Felipe used cabaret theatre as a tool to empower indigenous women. They offered 25 theatre workshops in 17 Mexican states over a period of six years during Vicente Fox's presidency (2000-2006). These were intended to support the efforts of around 25,000 health workers (mainly nurses, doctors, and psychologists) who worked with approximately 11 million of Mexico's poorest. The idea was to use theatre to improve communication and to encourage indigenous women in particular to discuss their most pressing problems. For example, farce—a mainstay of political cabaret—provides a more open and less formal forum for the discussion of sexual health issues. As one may imagine, there are serious obstacles for indigenous women in terms of healthcare access, including cultural and class barriers. Rodríguez and Felipe were charged by the Mexican Social Security Office with the task of identifying rural, indigenous, female leaders who could both provide continuity to the project and foster community involvement. Rodríguez describes the empowerment that resulted from discussion and reflection with indigenous women in these workshops as a “silent revolution.”

As seen above, activism and artistry have been two sides of the same coin in Mexican political cabaret. Rodríguez and Vasconcelos are well-versed in theatre traditions from both Mexico and abroad (e.g., *commedia dell'arte*, Greek tragedy, opera), which were the basis for the workshops they offered to

actors interested in the genre. Both also emphasized the collaborative nature of political cabaret, in which actors are responsible for writing and improvising most of their roles, as well as the need for extensive and conscientious research on the topic(s) of each show. Fellow artist Astrid Hadad for a time offered workshops on the creation of political cabaret, drawing from German cabaret and Mexican *rumbera* films, among other sources. Her cabaret shows, still popular in Mexico, combine traditional music with rock'n roll, *bolero*, *mambo*, *fado*, flamenco, and jazz. Music and acting, as well as kitsch and camp visual aesthetics—particularly seen in Hadad's elaborate and whimsical dresses—enrich her satirical comments on current politics, traditional gender roles, and Mexican history. Hadad's shows consist of a series of songs interspersed with commentaries, while her acting consists mainly of performing the songs in a humorous and ironic way that dissects a dominant discourse (e.g., branding herself like a cow while singing about a woman abandoned by her lover). Hadad has represented Mexico several times at the International Cultural Festival and has performed in venues such as Royce Hall (UCLA), the Australian International Music Market, and New York's Central Park.

Nowadays, Hadad and Vasconcelos rarely offer cabaret workshops, while Rodríguez stopped doing so a few years ago. In the 2000s, Las Reinas Chulas, a troupe whose members had taken workshops with Rodríguez and Vasconcelos, started offering regular workshops, not only at its cabaret-theater space, El Vicio, but also in other Mexican cities. In 2006, Las Reinas Chulas decided to change the name of the bar-theater El Hábito, originally founded by Rodríguez and Felipe, to El Vicio. Under Las Reinas Chulas' management, El Vicio has served as the main location of a well-known yearly international cabaret theatre festival since 2003. Most current cabaret practitioners have taken workshops with either Las Reinas Chulas or Vasconcelos. Over the past 10 years, some of these actors have begun offering their own workshops, starting from similar principles but with their own personal stamp and artistic concerns.

In Mexico, most actors attend theatre schools at universities or governmental cultural institutions. While the majority of political cabaret artists we have talked with feel that they received appropriate training, many regret the lack of actors' participation in the creative process while working with theatre directors and playwrights in and out of the academic setting. Many see in cabaret theatre a less restrictive territory in which to explore issues that are important to them while also developing their creative potential. There are, however, cabaret artists who graduated as actors and then went on to become

directors and playwrights. This has been the case for Paola Izquierdo and Elfye Bautista, who have also developed their own method to train political cabaret actors based on what they learned from Las Reinas Chulas and Vasconcelos, respectively. Another example is singer and actress Adriana Jiménez-Moles. Two years ago she founded an artistic academy named Zirka in the trendy Condesa neighborhood of Mexico City. Zirka offers training in political cabaret, clowning, and filmmaking. Jiménez-Moles is currently making a concerted effort to develop clown techniques and include clown sketches within cabaret. Her space, initially sponsored by one of the former producers for the filmmaker Luis Buñuel, even offers a few scholarships for students who are unable to pay for the workshops. Unfortunately, other tenants didn't appreciate encountering young people who were not properly dressed (according to them) in the building's common areas, and the actress ended up having to find another space for her school. She decided to use a motor home in which instructors would take turns teaching itinerant cabaret and circus courses. As of August 2016, she has also been able to use a public building in her neighborhood in the town of Tlalpan, south of Mexico City, to offer cabaret and film courses.

Other cabaret artists who regularly work in academic theatre simultaneously offer cabaret workshops and/or are involved in cabaret directing and acting. Besides Izquierdo from *Género Menor* and Bautista, a former member of *Las Hijas de Safo*, they include Leticia Pedrajo of *La Cabaretera Solitaria* and Andrés Carreño, the director of *Cabaret Misterio*, who has also worked in "boylesque" shows with Tigger-James Ferguson. While all of these cabaret artists have had formal theatre training, a particular characteristic of their workshops is that they are aimed not only at professional actors, but also at complete amateurs.

Mexican Political Cabaret: Basic Training

While it is not possible to establish a clearly defined training method in Mexican political cabaret—each cabaret artist has his/her own ideas of what cabaret should or shouldn't be—there are some basic principles common to most artists. We will draw upon a 2015 workshop offered by Nora Huerta and Ceci Sotres of *Las Reinas Chulas* at Mexico City's National Center for the Arts.²

About half of the participants were either actors or theatre students. Other attendees aimed at doing cabaret in the future, even if they had never studied theatre. These were mostly university students; the rest had seen cabaret

shows and wanted to participate in a creative activity. This heterogeneous group included a philosophy professor, a journalist, and a medical student.

The workshop began with physical warm-up exercises, which were progressively combined with verbal exercises related to memory, coordination, and timing, some in couples and others involving the whole group. The training also included individual improv exercises, e.g. improvising a phone conversation with an imaginary being, speaking from the perspective of an inanimate object. Ensuing exercises combined keeping a beat and telling a story. For example, a person would add to a story and throw a ball to someone who would continue the story. The main rule governing this storytelling exercise consisted of continuing the story without contradicting or questioning what previous storytellers had said. The workshop continued with an exercise based on current events. Participants were divided in groups and given a newspaper, from which they had to choose a piece of news. Members of the group had to discuss and justify their selection, clearly stating why it was of interest to them. This was followed by a brief overview of dramatic genres according to Mexican playwright Luisa Josefina Hernández, with a focus on the history of comedy and farce. Sotres and Huerta underscored that these genres are often used to ridicule devious characters, a goal shared with political cabaret. Melodrama was then discussed as a genre that has become characteristically Latin American through films and soap operas, which opens the door to a common imaginary with wide audiences that may also be quite fruitful for cabaret.

Sotres and Huerta then touched upon naturalist theatre, with the goal of highlighting Bertold Brecht's revolutionary view of theatre and its importance for political cabaret. MPC intends to be an instrument for creating political awareness. Thus, connections between Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect) and Marxism were discussed, as well as epic theatre's focus on denouncing and unveiling mechanisms of oppression. The main example Sotres and Huerta provided of the alienation effect was the incorporation of songs in cabaret shows to break the theatrical illusion. In MPC, videos and TV commercials are similarly used to interrupt dramatic action. The commercials are usually dubbed and parodied by the artists to further emphasize the absurd character of real life politics and consumerism. Another feature common to both MPC and Brecht's epic theatre is the creation of a hero who does not follow the tragic model, but rather "critically analyzes and takes issue with his environment" (Osborne 105). This helps to prevent the spectator from identifying emotionally with the hero, thus contributing to the alienation ef-

fect. In MPC, these heroes are usually awkward or self-contradictory rather than models of behavior.

As stated by Klaus Pemsel, “What cabaret artists look for is a spectator positioned as critical observer so that s/he can discover the facts conditioning social reality behind the appearances of daily life” (authors’ translation, qtd in Hengst and Álvarez Osorio 51). To the contrary, naturalist theatre intended to perfect the illusion of reality, so that what was on stage was seen by the spectator as a microcosm that reflected his or her social reality. While this type of theatre may have involved exposing or analyzing social evils, how “reality” was constructed and how “daily life” was normalized were not put into question. Thus, Sotres and Huerta underscored the importance of active spectators in MPC as opposed to passive spectators in naturalist theatre.

As mentioned above, farce was at the heart of this theoretical segment of the workshop. Huerta and Sotres skillfully traced the history of this genre, from Aristophanes to Brecht and Jarry. They also emphasized how cabaret theatre actors-creators must start by focusing on the body as the main site where the state exerts control. Political cabaret thereby offers a space to be oneself and to explore the complexity of human nature by breaking away from social restrictions.

After this theoretical section, Huerta and Sotres instructed the participants to write a basic outline for a political cabaret show, starting from the piece of news that they had previously chosen. This outline consisted of:

- 1) Topic (What will I be talking about?)
- 2) Sub-topic (What do I want to say about it?)
- 3) Being delirious (How will I say it?)

Each group had to discuss why the specific piece of news was relevant to them. Then the trainers explained that the basis for this exercise was the practice of *canovaccio* (a general plot outline) from *commedia dell’arte* and thus needed to include the following sequence or scenes³:

- 1) An informative scene
- 2) A descriptive scene
- 3) A suspense scene
- 4) Conflict
- 5) Conflict resolution
- 6) Grand finale (usually involving all characters, as well as singing and/or dancing)

In preparation for writing their show, participants also had to draft a humorous, one-page press release. It was expected to include what the story was about, what was unique or special about it, who the artists were, and why it was important that they came together in this play. Huerta and Sotres explained that due to the changing nature of daily events, it was not rare for cabaret artists to have only a general idea of the final product when announcing future shows. In MPC, shows have to change and adapt to new circumstances every time they are performed and as political events unfold.

Additional exercises consisted of creating a parody of a popular song by changing the lyrics so that they related to the topic of the show. The trainers emphasized the importance of language and discussed techniques for fostering humor. For example, contrasts within the characters may result in humor (e.g. a naïf or victimized character who seems stupid but ends up being smarter than others). Huerta and Sotres also commented on different types of humor, from taking things literally to shattering audience expectations and resorting to folk sayings. They also underscored that having a general plot outline helps actors keep their focus when improvising or writing their roles. They also highlighted how essential it is to thoroughly research the topic of the show and thereby find out as many perspectives as possible about it. However, Huerta and Sotres also stated that such importance cannot be only abstract or rational. The choice of a topic should respond to something personal so that the actor-creator can empathize with the audience. Thus, actors must ask themselves: Why does this topic affect me? What about it is hurting me?

To the extent that cabaret theatre implies breaking the fourth wall between players and public, the specificities of the audience are of the essence. On the one hand, the audience will let the actor know if things are working out, if timing is right, or if changes must be made. On the other hand, cabaret artists must always analyze who their audiences will be and adapt the play according to their age group(s), the social context, and the particular performance space. In addition, cabaret is deeply related to dreaming, that is, imagining an alternative reality. Thus, it has great potential to open communication channels with audiences based on humor. In cabaret, people must have fun, but also think. Thus, actors must also be thoughtful about their choices. While using easy humor that perpetuates discrimination may make people laugh (e.g., misogynist jokes), this will defeat the inquisitive purpose of political cabaret. While this acting workshop dealt with many other aspects of political cabaret, both the concepts and specific exercises outlined above are enough to offer an overview of what basic cabaret training entails. Theatre practitioners

may analyze shows with their students by considering these principles, or they may develop their own political cabaret training by adapting these ideas.

Mexico, the US, and Their Relationship in MPC

A possible approach to introducing this theatre movement to students in the US is to begin by focusing on shows that deal with the political and cultural influence of the US in Latin America. Instructors could use this as a jumping-off point for later discussion of issues related to Mexican politics and daily life as well as the essentials of cabaret as performance. Due to the critical and satirical nature of the genre, it is not surprising that the pervasiveness of the mass media and US pop culture in Latin America have become a staple topic in MPC. On the one hand, most cabaret artists aim at revising Mexican history from a non-official perspective (often a feminist or openly queer view), which is often quite critical of neoliberalism. On the other hand, references to US popular culture allow for Mexican cabaret artists to play with common references shared with audiences across social classes and thus use humor to question dominant perspectives, such as the subordination of Mexican culture and economy to those of the US.

Nowadays, an instructor planning to introduce MPC in theatre and/or culture courses has access to several studies published in the US, both in Spanish and English. Most of these publications tackle either directly or indirectly the way Mexican history has been performed and revised in cabaret shows. It should be noted that cabaret may appeal to audiences unfamiliar with Mexican politics because of the inclusion of music numbers and the highly visual nature of shows, such as those of Astrid Hadad, Regina Orozco, Jesusa Rodríguez, and Las Reinas Chulas. Instructors will have to translate some fragments if teaching a class for non-Spanish speaking students, but even these pupils could enjoy and understand the basics of the Mexican political cabaret phenomenon if provided with enough contextual information. In addition, the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics based at New York University offers free online access to an ample database that includes Mexican political cabaret videos, interviews, and related information. The journal *KARPA* is another free-access online platform that contains a great deal of teaching resources, mostly in Spanish.

US Hegemony According to MPC

In this section we will provide a few examples of MPC shows, making reference to the cultural, political, and/or economic influence of the US in

Mexico. Singer Astrid Hadad is famous for her feminist parodies of traditional and regional music, as well as the striking visuals of her ornate costumes. Her shows often involve a critique of the imbalanced relationship between Mexico and the US. A good example is her version of The Lord's Prayer, which she recited in her show *Pecadora*:

Uncle Sam who is up North
 Holy is your new order
 Your dollars come
 Your will be done in the U.S. as it is in the whole world
 Give us this day our daily McDonalds
 And forgive Cubans as we forgive the DEA
 And lead us not into nationalism
 And deliver us from Japanese businessmen
 (and also from Harvard)
 In God We Trust. Shalom. Amen. (Our translation)

In this parodical prayer, Hadad satirizes the self-righteousness that characterizes US hegemony by mixing the most mundane aspects and symbols of US capitalism with Christianity. At the same time, she offers a critique of how religion is intertwined with political and economic ideologies.

Another significant example from Hadad is *Pasión sin puñales*. She opened this show with a costume change on stage, which has become a trademark of hers; her dresses often include several layers and incorporate moving parts and props such as blinking lights. The opening line for this show—"What you are seeing are special effects, Mexican style: Madonna would be jealous"—mocks both the American singer and the idea of Mexico as an undeveloped country. Later on, as described by Alzate:

[S]he went on with a formulaic phrase of courtesy from her country, 'My home is your home,' and linked it to a satire of both the Spanish colonization of Mexico—which in Spain is usually portrayed as much more benign than in Northern Europe—and also to those Mexicans who, against historical evidence, pretend that theirs is a country heading toward progress: 'The Spaniards arrived and penetrated us from the front and behind, and we said thank you, thank you, come in, make yourself at home. Then the U.S. took half of our territory and we were like thank you, thank you, just come in, make yourself at home. Then the drug dealers came and took charge, and the same, thank you, thank you, please come in, make yourself at

home. So tonight, not to give you the wrong impression, I will also give thanks.’ (48)

Hadad satirizes colonialism and imperialism, but also offers an interesting critique of Mexicans regarding their responsibility vis-a-vis the crises that their country has gone through, including US expansionism and contemporary drug trafficking.

Another of the “founding mothers” of MPC, Tito Vasconcelos, emphatically states that the best way to reveal the inner conflicts of Mexican culture and society lies at the intersection of pop culture and political issues. Among his many plays that make reference to US pop culture is *Martita*, a parody of the famous *Evita* Broadway musical. The central character—played by Vasconcelos himself—is Marta Sahagún, the ambitious wife of former Mexican President Vicente Fox. He also wrote and directed a parody of *The Powerpuff Girls* cartoon, *Las chicas superpudorosas*. In this show, former Mexican State Secretary Carlos Abascal—from the ultra-conservative PAN (Partido de Acción Nacional)—has three daughters whose names are the same as those of the Powerpuff Girls. Abascal is deeply worried about the dubious morals of some female Mexican political figures, so he convinces his daughters to try to find out the truth about them. In this play, the contrast between such an unsympathetic and straight-minded individual as Abascal and the cartoon-like characters and situations provides a chance for highly entertaining political satire. While very active in the defense of human rights and sexual diversity, it is worth mentioning that Vasconcelos does not pledge allegiance to any political party and thus criticizes both the Mexican right and the left in his shows. For example, in his version of *The Powerpuff Girls*, the work of politicians from both the right (like Abascal) and the left (like Andrés Manuel López Obrador) is portrayed as sheer fraud.

Jesusa Rodríguez, who has always identified with the left, is probably the most well-known figure of Mexican political cabaret outside Mexico. A telling example of her critique of US hegemony in Mexican politics, culture, and economy, is her sketch on la Malinche.⁴ In this sketch, as in many others—she presented over 300 during the fifteen years at her former theater-bar alone—the actress relies on hilarious linguistic misunderstandings. Rodríguez transforms Malintzin into a witty interpreter for the far-from-witty Emperor Zedillitzin—meant to represent former Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo—and US Marines, who go to Mexico because they have decided they should be in charge of drug dealing. Rodríguez’s Malintzin purposely mistranslates messages between the Marines and the “emperor,” particularly when they

may negatively affect the Mexican people. However, the Marines still end up causing the demise of the Aztec Empire (contemporary Mexico). Rodríguez's verbal wit allows her to give a completely different version of Malinche from that offered by official history, which portrays her as a traitor to her people. In fact, Rodríguez's Malinche is much more aware of what the Mexican people need than Emperor Zedillitzin. As recycling sketches and characters is common in cabaret, years later a new version of this character was presented in Rodríguez's show *El maíz* (2006–11). The examples above may offer rich starting points for class discussions, such as the reasons why Mexican cabaret artists make constant reference to the US in their shows, how this country's hegemony is presented on stage, and the strategies (both visual and verbal) artists use in order to subvert such hegemony, among many possible topics.

In spite of the rise of cultural and postcolonial studies in American academia over the past 30 years and their influence on Euro-American theatre and performance studies, in the US the inclusion of African, Asian, and Latin American contemporary theatre in graduate and undergraduate courses beyond area and language programs remains scarce. Thus, we hope this article will be useful to our colleagues who wish to incorporate contemporary MPC in their curricula, either as a door to discuss Mexican culture or as inspiration for implementing their own political cabaret practice in US classrooms.

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Notes

¹ This law offers legal recognition to homes formed by two adults, regardless of their way of life. This partnership doesn't change their marital status, so rather than a marriage it legalizes a civil union. However, the law acquired notoriety because the Mexican mass media talked about it as legislation aimed at equating gay relations with marriage. In Spanish it is called Ley de Sociedades de Convivencia.

² Sotres already released her book centered on defining cabaret and providing acting guidelines for it, titled *Introducción al cabaret—con albur* (Ediciones Paso de Gato, 2016). During the first half of 2016, Huerta has also been writing a book on dramaturgy for political cabaret, which she will publish in the near future.

³ A good example of *canovaccio* as applied to political cabaret is *Las chicas superpudorosas* by Tito Vasconcelos (*Revista Karpa*).

⁴ Malintzin, her Nahuatl name, was an indigenous woman enslaved by the Mayas. She served the Spaniards as an interpreter between the Mayan and Nahuatl languages and also had children with the conqueror Hernán Cortés. Historically, she has therefore been blamed for selling out her people to the conquerors.

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