Mexican "History" in and as Theatre in the Classroom and Beyond

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Extraña escritura, la historia de México.
—Enrique Krauze

Theatre is history by other means.
—Henry Bial

History books routinely describe past events in dramatic terms such as tragedy, conflict, climax, protagonist, and antagonist. In the case of Mexico, history is represented both *as* theatre and *through* the theatre. Since Rodolfo Usigli's *El gesticulador* (1938), the theatres of Mexico City and elsewhere have served as a staging ground for the re-thinking and re-presentation of past episodes of Mexican history. In *El gesticulador* and his three anti-historical *Coronas*, Usigli relied on the inherently theatrical nature of history to unmask the hypocrisy and deceitfulness endemic to Mexico's political system. Unfortunately, his statement that "[l]a verdad de México es una larga obra de las mentiras mexicanas" ("Las máscaras" 131) rings as true today as it did in the 1930s. Following in Usigli's footsteps, Mexico's playwrights have uncovered case after case of "mentiras mexicanas" as they have re-opened chapters of "official" history, both recent and remote, such as the Conquest, the assassination of President Alvaro Obregón, and the femicides of Ciudad Juárez. Enrique Krauze concludes his book *La presidencia imperial* with a particularly relevant chapter titled "El teatro de la historia," in which he describes Mexico's recent political history as "la obra de Usigli [vuelto] libreto político nacional" (448), a long-running national farce composed of lousy actors, stock characters, flimsy masks, a repetitive plot, and a dwindling audience no longer able to suspend disbelief.

There is no lack of history in Mexico, where museums, statues, memorials, and street signs remit us to the past at every turn. History is so ingrained in the Mexican consciousness that it would be utterly pretentious for one to claim an understanding of contemporary Mexican theatre without some understanding of Mexico's past. Historically inspired theatre has been especially prevalent during the last half-century, throughout which tumultuous events such as the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre, the 1994 assassination of presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio, and the Ciudad Juárez femicides have led to a widespread demand for the truth. While the Mexican government has traditionally preferred secrecy over transparency, the country's playwrights have found that uncomfortable, unsavory, and unknown truths regarding the past play well on stage. For example, Flavio González Mello's *1822, año que fuimos felice*s (2000), which focuses on the brief reign of Emperor Agustín Iturbide, played 400 times to a full house in the UNAM (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México). Nonetheless, while the staging of bizarre and/or buried "truths" clearly has marketing as well as entertainment value, theatre also serves, in the words of Henry Bial, as "an ideal venue for critical reflexivity with regard to the remembrance and re-telling of past experience" (6).

Mexico lies both literally and figuratively on top of ruins, which in turn rest on ground that is as porous and unstable as the country's history. According to Michael Lazzaro and Vicky Unruh, the ruins of places like Rome "invite backward-looking nostalgia," while those of Mexico provoke "a politically and ethically motivated 'reflective excavation' that can lead to historical revision and the creation of alternative futures" (3). Nonetheless, not even Usigli could foresee the historical "ruins" yet to be buried in Mexico, particularly those that the government attempted to hide in the pre-Columbian Plaza de Tlatelolco following the October 2, 1968, massacre of students, residents, and innocent bystanders just days before the opening of the Olympic Games in Mexico City.[1] The government's steadfast refusal to accept responsibility and to release credible numbers of the dead, wounded, and imprisoned spurred a deep, lasting public distrust of all political authority and of all "official" history. Subsequent governments, particularly those led by the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional), have been as zealous about keeping the events of 1968 buried as they have been about keeping Mexico's heroes and martyrs firmly attached to their pedestals. During the presidency of Carlos Salinas, for example, his Secretary of Education, future President Ernesto Zedillo, was forced to recall and shred 10 million revised grade school history texts that mentioned the Mexican armed forces' role in

the Tlatelolco massacre.[2] It has fallen, therefore, to Mexico's dramatists and other intellectuals to engage in the "reflective excavation" of what Krauze calls "la Sagrada Escritura," digging up buried archives and questioning and revising the "official" history of not only Mexico 1968, but also other events, ranging from the Conquest to recent presidential elections.

Over the years, I have developed a course titled "Contemporary Mexican Theatre: Staging the Past," in which graduate students and advanced undergraduates read and discuss plays that revive certain historical entities and episodes as part of this creative re-opening and critical inquiry into the past. The objective of the class is threefold: to instill an appreciation for theatre as a means of revis(it)ing history; to convey the important role that history has played in the formation of contemporary Mexican consciousness and what Enrique Florescano calls "un nuevo pasado mexicano"; and to familiarize students with theoretical approaches that range from Hayden White's concept of metahistory to Hans-Thies Lehmann's "postdramatic" theatre. The overall objective is to create an awareness of the complexity of Mexican history, of the power of the written word, and of the power of theatre in particular as a means of setting the story straight, giving voice to the vanquished as well as the vanished, demanding the truth and an end to impunity, and ultimately avoiding the repetition of past errors.

In addition to selected dramatic texts, students read Daniel Cosío Villegas's succinct *Historia mínima de México* essays by: leading cultural historians such as Krauze, Carlos Fuentes, and Octavio Paz; critical studies of the plays; and theory related to historiography, postmodernism, memory, performance, and narraturgy.[3] By studying these plays within the historical, cultural, and political context in which they were written and performed, students learn not only about key moments in Mexican history, but also about Mexico's political culture.[4] Indeed, at times more interesting than the plays themselves is the knee-jerk reaction that they have provoked in the governmental agencies whose job is purportedly that of promoting culture.

We begin the semester with a pairing of Usigli's *Corona de sombra* (1943) and theories proposed in the 1970s by White and Herbert Lindenberger. White focuses on the ways in which history is written, using the concept of "metahistory" to posit that all written history not only follows narrative models, but also invariably contains fictitious as well as ideological elements. In his words, "all historical narratives contain an irreducible and inexpungeable element of interpretation" (51). Interestingly, White wrote these words about the same time that Paz declared that "[l]a historia que vivimos es una escritura [...] Esa

lectura es un desciframiento, la traducción de una traducción: jamás leeremos el original. [...] Cada traducción es una creación: un texto nuevo" (115). Both White and Paz view written history as a form of constructive imagination in which the historiographer configures the "facts" and fills in the gaps. This in turn relates to Usigli's description of written history as a "bola de nieve que rueda sin fin [...], enriqueciéndose y engrosando con todo lo nuevo" (*Corona* 62). In *Corona de sombra*, he re-writes the short reign of Maximiliano and Carlota by creating a fictitious encounter between the senile Carlota and a modern-day historian desperate to uncover a "better" story. The latter leads both the dying Carlota and the audience to an understanding of the crucial role that the ill-fated emperor played in ensuring a democratic future for his lost empire, a role entirely missing from Mexican history books. In short, *Corona de sombra* exemplifies White's concept of the historical imagination, which Usigli proclaimed as being far more important than the actual events on which historical dramas are based.

Lindenberger focuses on drama and the different forms that historical drama in particular has taken at different moments in time and in response to changing audiences. He underscores the relationship that exists between historical drama and political power, a concept that helps to explain the proliferation of historically based plays during the last half-century, throughout which a single party, the PRI, controlled not only the political life of the country but also its history. Like White, Lindenberger believes that the important question is not what episodes of history are presented, but rather *how* they are presented (155). This emphasis on the *how* is particularly relevant to the understanding of plays like Vicente Leñero's *Martirio de Morelos* (1982) and Sabina Berman's *Rompecabezas* (1981) and *Águila o sol* (1985), all of which offer the reader/spectator a surprisingly different perspective of what are considered well-known histories. Theorist John Ernest terms this kind of history-telling "liberation historiography," which involves "artful *untellings* that function always in the context of oppression, containment, and misrepresentations" (37).

With regard to theatre, a common form of "artful retelling" is documentary theatre, which establishes historical authority through the insertion of confessions, recorded interviews, courtroom transcripts, and other such documents. During the 70s and 80s, many of Mexico's dramatists jumped on the documentary bandwagon, using techniques characteristic of Brechtian theatre—narration, structural fragmentation, music, plays within plays, music—to create the distance needed for the audience to respond critically to the

historical events and personages being presented on stage. Vicente Leñero is without a doubt the most renowned and prolific of those who adapted the precepts of Bertolt Brecht and other docudramatists to the Mexican stage. While nearly all of his plays question the notion of historical truth, the most documentary of them do so through the recreation of legal trials: *Pueblo rechazado* (1968), *El juicio* (1972), and *Martirio de Morelos* (1982). As Leñero explains, trials are "teatro de hecho: piezas conformadas con los más esenciales ingredientes de la lucha dramática: Acusación y Defensa peleando a muerte dentro de un escenario único" (*Ruta* 13). Accordingly, the experience of the spectator or reader is much like that of a jury member in a retrial, as Leñero brings to light dusty documents that could change the audience's understanding of history.

While *Pueblo rechazado* and *El juicio* were scandalous enough in their respective recreations of the trials of a Freudian priest and the presumed assassin of President Obregón, *Martirio de Morelos* hit a particularly tender spot when José María Morelos, rebel priest and leader in the fight for independence from Spain, was put on the stage and back on the stand.[5] In lieu of the martyr who nobly sacrificed himself in the name of independence, Leñero presents a cowardly snitch who denounces his fellow rebels in a final effort to save his soul and perhaps even his life. While Leñero was accused of denigrating a national hero, his intention was neither to refute history nor to persuade his audience that one version is truer than the other and even less to topple Morelos from his pedestal. The issue of martyrdom is actually secondary to that of the power of those *in* power to compel public belief in institutionalized fictions. Leñero subverts the authority of what he calls "la Sagrada Historia" by playing little-known courtroom transcripts and signed documents against quoted passages from leading historians, all of whom extol Morelos for his unswerving loyalty to the cause. The basic conflict between official and unofficial history is personified on stage through conversations between Morelos and a fictitious, modern-day character, significantly named El Lector, who reads aloud passages pertaining to Morelos's trial. The book from which he reads is not only enormous, but referred to as "el libro," meaning *the* book, the *only* book, a sort of sacred bible of Mexican history. The discrepancy between the book's account of Morelos's martyrdom and the evidence of betrayal as presented in the quoted documents ultimately puts on the stand not just the myth of Morelos but also the inherent authority of all written history. Leñero provides no resolution, but rather ends the play by having El Lector reluctantly read a detailed retraction that may or may not have been

written and signed by Morelos, who may or may not have been a martyr. While *Martirio de Morelos*—and for that matter, documentary theatre in general—can be somewhat tedious to read, it offers one of the most blatant dramatic representations of the power of "official" history to dictate our understanding of the past and to control the cultural production of the present.[6]

From docudrama we move on to postmodern theatre, which also concerns the telling and retelling of history, but with a playfully subversive emphasis on the inherently and inevitably ideological nature of all forms of representation. I rely heavily on the theory of Linda Hutcheon, who uses the term "historiographic metafiction" to describe work that "keeps distinct its formal auto-representation and its historical context, and in so doing problematizes the very possibility of historical knowledge, because there is no reconciliation [...] just unresolved contradiction" (106). We begin with *Yo también hablo de la rosa* (1967) by Emilio Carballido, who makes a mockery of historical interpretation by including various parodic explications (Freudian, Marxist, metaphorical, and popular) of a train accident, an incident that Carballido read about in the newspaper. The repeated on-stage recreation of the derailment provoked by two kids from the wrong side of the tracks serves not only as a play on the interpretation of "facts" and the multifaceted nature of what we regard as "history," but also as a postmodern metaphor of the derailment of all master narratives, a phenomenon that would occur with greater frequency and even greater cynicism in the aftermath of the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre.

Other postmodern works like Leñero's *La noche de Hernán Cortés* (1992), Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda's *La Malinche* (1998), and Berman's *Herejía* (1983) take a playful approach to the "history" of such events as the Conquest and the three centuries of colonial rule that followed, relying on parody in particular to undermine and desecrate the narratives on which Mexico was founded. These playwrights share not only an attitude of blatant skepticism toward official history, but also a refusal to provide clear and final resolutions. An outstanding example is Berman's *Águila o sol* (1985), which was originally commissioned for didactic purposes by the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes. Rather than a play that would teach the usual, institutionalized version of the Conquest of Mexico to rural secondary-level students, Berman delivered a work that irreverently dismantles the very foundation of Mexico's official history, according to which Cortés conquered all of Mexico with some horses and a few hundred men. The text is short, simple, and easily appreciated by US students, whose knowledge of Mexican history is likely to be limited to the same master narrative as the one presented to Mexican

students. Through a fragmented structure and what she herself calls a "vista desquiciada," Berman defamiliarizes the Conquest with a pastiche of narrators, *corridos, mariachis*, and quotes from Miguel León-Portillas's *Visión de los vencidos*, which tells the story of the Conquest from the viewpoint of the conquered. Following the pictographic structure of pre-Hispanic historiography and León-Portilla's book, Berman reduces the conquest to 14 *cuadros* and just six actors, half of whom represent the Church, the Aztecs, and the Spanish troops. The dialogue is an anachronistic potpourri of tongues, ranging from Mexican street slang to utter nonsense. Malinche, as always, serves as interpreter, but in this case her words do not correspond in the least to those of Cortés, who speaks nothing but gibberish. This lack of correlation between utterance and translation not only makes a mockery of Cortés but also implies a lack of correspondence between what was actually said and done during that encounter and how it has been "translated" and represented in history books over the course of 500 years.

The play ends by casting doubt on one aspect of the master narrative that has rarely been questioned: the death of Moctezuma at the hands of his former subjects. After one of the characters repeats the well-known story of how "La pedrada de un mexicano lo tumbó de la vida," another suggests, "O fue que Cortés le hundió la espada por el culo," whereupon Cortés thrusts his sword between Moctezuma's legs (264). Rather than resolve this contradiction, Berman brings Moctezuma back to life to close the play with the familiar line, "ellos eran trescientos y nosotros millones" (265). After Berman's brutal parody of Mexico's most fundamental fiction, these words seem as arbitrary as the popular coin toss for which the play is named, hovering in the air, as does the "true" history of the Conquest. In this play and others such as *Herejía* and *Rompecabezas*, Berman portrays history not as an absolute truth, but rather as a fragmented narrative that has been repeated and modified to fit the ideological desires and needs of the powerful and the moment.

The postmodern obsession with marginal and suppressed histories leads us to performance theory and to the intersections of staged performance, historical archive, and cultural memory, the last of which is, according to Andreas Huyssen, "always transitory, notoriously unreliable, and haunted by forgetting" (28). Diana Taylor, Freddie Roken, Jeanette Malkin, Joseph Roach, and Marvin Carlson are among those who focus on the performance of history, particularly the alternate *histories* of marginalized groups, as a means of preserving cultural memory in a world that is increasingly global and homogenous. In her key study *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Taylor

emphasizes the relationship between written documents and personal memory as well as the role of performance in preserving the latter. In a similar vein, Malkin develops the concept of "memory theatre," whose intent is to "evoke erased memories of national pasts, to recontextualize, reopen canonized memory-'narratives,' rethink taboo discourses, intervene in the politics of memory and repression, and to engage (and occasionally enrage) the memoried consciousness of its audience" (3).

One of those most obsessed with repressed memories was Rascón Banda, who wrote at least 15 plays directly concerned with past events, many of which took place in the mountainous, isolated, and violence-pocked region of Chihuahua where he was born. These are, however, not the historical events narrated in school textbooks, but rather the unwritten and unrecorded memories of the marginalized, powerless, and invisible. Rascón Banda was particularly fascinated by the untold histories of Mexico, which include a group of children who arrive from war-torn Spain in *Los niños de Morelia* (2007) and the demise of a group of Mexican soldiers stranded and forgotten during the Revolution on the Pacific island of Clipperton in *La Isla de la Pasión* (2000). Other plays by Rascón Banda are doubly historical. In *Voces en el umbral* (1982), *Contrabando* (1991), and *Desazón/Sazón de mujer* (1999), for example, memories are retold by women from the northern Sierra, marginalized within their own country and within a world increasingly driven and shrunken by technology. *Desazón* consists simply of three women from the remote highlands of Uruachi who each deliver a monologue, through which they share with the reader/spectator traumatic episodes of their past. Rascón Banda enhances their sense of isolation and helplessness by having each woman appear by herself on a bare stage, alone with her memories and the spectators. Mennonite María tells of how she was ostracized and forced to leave her small community after her husband went to the North in search of work. Amanda, a former *guerrillera*, now lives in isolation and terror with the Tarahumara who once saved her from the military forces that sought to eradicate the rebels. Rural schoolteacher Consuelo lives in fear that her husband, an imprisoned *narco*, will escape and fulfill his threat to kill her. Despite the silence and emptiness on which *Desazón* ends, the women's memories ultimately end up right where the dramatist intended them to be, in the collective memory of the reader/spectator. *Desazón*, *La mujer que cayó del cielo* (1999), and other plays mentioned above serve as both archive and repertoire of the memories of many such women who, while strong and resistant, have been marginalized and silenced by gender, geography, and ethnicity.

Other contemporary Mexican playwrights focus on specific historical events and personages more familiar to the audience. Flavio González Mello, for example, has staged three particular moments of history in *1822 año que fuimos felices* (2000), *Lascuráin o la brevedad del poder* (2005), and *Olimpia 68* (2008). The first two works do not so much question institutionalized history as they recreate and satirize bizarre episodes, namely the short, chaotic reign of Emperor Agustín Iturbide and the 1913 presidency of Pedro Lascuráin, which lasted for less than one hour. The third play, *Olimpia 68*, written in 2008 to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the Tlatelolco massacre, is a brilliant, brutal farce in which the bloody events of October 1968 are presented in conjunction with the 1968 Olympics and *as* Olympic sports.

Unlike most of the plays that tackle the topic of Mexico 1968, *Olimpia 68* does not combine past and present, the youthful idealism of the moment and the bitter cynicism that followed, but rather the two faces of Mexico 1968: the massacre of October 2 and the Olympic Games that opened just ten days later. González Mello merges the two events from the title on, which refers not only to the games and to their original site in ancient Greece, but also to the Olympia Battalion, an undercover paramilitary force that was formed by President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz to maintain order before and during the Olympics. The dramatist makes no effort to disguise his use of sports as a metaphor for the political tug-of-war that was waged in Mexico during the summer of 1968. Indeed, the opening scene, "Hit eliminatorio," blatantly sets the stage for what will soon become a running metaphor. The Olympic official initiates the usual "On your mark. Get set," routine, only to diverge from the final "Go" by pointing the pistol not in the air, but at the athlete, shooting him point-blank in the back of the head, at once ending the race and his life. This first scene, while shocking, establishes the link between sports and political struggle, athletes and student activists, the Aztec stadium and the Plaza de Tlatelolco, corrupt Olympic officials and corrupt governmental officials. Likewise, the stage, designed to serve as the stadium, is full of balloons, which become equated with the massacred students when a parade of men wearing the white glove that distinguished members of the Olympia Battalion from civilians on October 2 pop them, leaving behind a trail of latex cadavers.

While most of the dialogue and action concern sporting events and the relationships that form among athletes oblivious to Mexico's political violence, the shadow of Tlatelolco is omnipresent. The cover-ups committed by athletes, coaches, and officials reflect similar cover-ups taking place in

Mexico, where the phrase "aquí no pasa nada" served as the official, stock response to external questions regarding the government's brutal response to student protests. The theory of suicide provided by the Olympic judge when a human hand emerges from the long jump sand pit is no more absurd than the reasons the government offered to parents for the disappearance of their sons and daughters: "[...] la posición de la mano parecería indicar que estuvo echándose arena hasta el final, hasta cubrirse por completo; con excepción de la mano, que no pudo enterrarse a sí misma" (62). Of all the plays that have been written on the events of 1968, *Olimpia 68* is the most effective in conveying not only the brutality, but also the absurdity of the massacre. In the last scene, activist Julio, beaten into a state of amnesia, sits in the empty stadium, unable to recall why he is there. A little girl at his side remarks, "ya se acabó," a simple statement that relates not only to the play but also to the Olympic Games and to the student movement. Now, almost five decades later, Julio's "amnesia" reflects the government's ceaseless efforts to erase memory, just as it erased the blood that covered the plaza on the dawn of October 3, 1968.

It is important to note that, as time goes by, the histories performed on the stages of Mexico seem to be shifting in focus from the remote past to recent history, from archival digs to living memories, from "readerly" texts to postdramatic performance, and from institutionalized fictions to socio-political realities such as drug-related violence, corruption, and impunity. Some plays do this in a more creative and effective way than others. Hugo Salcedo's *El viaje de los cantores*, for example, combines features common to Brechtian theatre with poetry and classical tragedy, thereby locking history in an eternal present that transcends the specificity of one historical event, the death by asphyxiation of 18 border crossers in a locked boxcar. Indeed, no one could have predicted when the play was first written and staged in 1988 how relevant it would continue to be today, 28 years later, when the death of those crossing the border is compounded by that of the thousands who have been sequestered, executed, and buried in mass graves before they even reached the border. Yet it is not the historical event itself, which Salcedo, like Carballido, found in a newspaper, but rather the simple and lyrical style with which Salcedo recreates it that makes this play so appealing and appropriate for the classroom.

Most of the "action" occurs in a three-sided boxcar, while the remainder takes place in various unnamed towns in northern Mexico. With echoes of Brecht, Federico García Lorca, and the Greeks, Salcedo delivers a heartrend-

ing portrait of the thousands who have died trying to cross into the US as well as the mothers, wives, and children they left behind. The uniquely Mexican merges with the universal in language, characters, and time. Most of the men in the boxcar have specific names, while the women, identified only by number, lament their loss as an anonymous chorus. The journalistic description of the dry facts clashes not only with the colloquial language used by the trapped men, but also with the jokes, poetry, and songs they share as they sweat in the darkness. Salcedo makes time irrelevant by fragmenting the play into ten very short scenes, which can be re-ordered and reconfigured, much like historical facts. Ultimately, time does not matter, as fatal attempts to reach and cross the border have happened many times before and will continue to happen as long as Mexicans and those from countless other countries find themselves forced to flee lives of poverty, injustice, and violence.

We end the semester with plays by younger dramatists who have followed in Salcedo's footsteps, commingling facts and poetry, the personal and the political, the voices of the dead and the clamor for justice from those who survived. Alejandro Román, for example, recreates in verse-like prose recent historical atrocities that no one wants or needs to see re-presented physically on stage. Such is the case in plays like *Aullido de mariposas* (2009), *Ánima sola* (2010), and *Perlas a los cerdos* (2011), all of which deal with violence, specifically that directed at women. Without avoiding the facts, Román retells the story of the victims with a poetic style that allows him to metaphorize human brutality and thereby transcend the geographic and temporal boundaries of historical fact.

Humberto Robles, on the other hand, favors oral testimony over poetry, relying heavily on the voices of those who have lived to tell the story of such atrocities as the burning of the ABC daycare in Hermosillo on June 5, 2009, in which 49 children perished in a fire suspected to have been set by *narcos*. *Nosotros somos los culpables* (2011) consists primarily of isolated voices and personal texts such as letters and diaries, which serve to relate and denounce such acts of violence, again without having to re-enact them on the stage. Similar plays by Robles include *Mujeres de arena* (2002) and *Mujeres sin miedo: Todas somos Atenco* (2006), which likewise recreate in a narrative, documentary style the femicides of Ciudad Juárez and the brutal sexual assault committed against female street protesters in San Salvador Atenco.

Yet another recent shift in the dramatic treatment of history can be observed in the theatre of younger playwrights such as Alejandro Ricaño, Luis Enrique Gutiérrez Ortiz Monasterios (LEGOM), Édgar Chías, Enrique Olmos,

and other self-proclaimed *narraturgos*. This term is used to describe those who write plays in which the main ingredients are the following: a small cast, a bare stage from which the actors directly address the audience, a lack of stage directions, a reliance on the spoken word, an ironic focus on the most mediocre and skeptical members of society, and the absolute elimination of the fourth wall.[7] Rather than concern themselves with the larger questions of History and historical representation, these minimalist plays tell what appear to be simple stories about the "little man" and his daily trials and tribulations.

The most prolific and frequently staged of these *narraturgos* are Ricaño and LEGOM, who share the use of crude, vulgar, and unmistakably Mexican Spanish as well as a predilection for protagonists inspired by members of the lower, "invisible" echelons of Mexican society. LEGOM's *Demetrius o la caducidad del ser* (2009) presents the sad yet amusing story of a ridiculous yet endearing character of little means, little motivation, and even less intelligence. The tale, narrated primarily by Demetrius himself, is personal and unique, yet at the same time an allegory of the anonymous masses that likewise lack the education and resources to escape their own mediocrity. With a similar focus on the common man, Ricaño weaves parallel, intersecting stories that ultimately lead the audience to see themselves as part of a much larger history. As Ricaño explains, "Para hablar de la condición humana no hace falta hablar sobre el mundo sino atender a nuestros pequeños universos" (López García). While the stories narrated by Ricaño's characters are relatively uncomplicated, the structural fragmentation of the text and the constant shifts between narration and dialogue and between past and present oblige the spectator to connect the dots among the different characters and their histories. In *Idiotas contemplando la nieve* (2009), for example, he uses two narrators to tell the funny, overlapping, and interlocking stories of several memorable characters who share the pathetic belief that their happiness depends on the acquisition of one particular item, which ranges from a deluxe coffee machine to a pet *axolotl*. Ricaño's meteoric success with this play and others such as *Más pequeños que el Guggenheim* (2008) and *El amor de las luciérnagas* (2011) owes to his appreciation of the anecdotal and its entertainment value, his ability to mix the metaphorical with the vulgar, and his creation of common, yet endearing, characters.

Overall these young narraturgs share the postdramatic belief that the best way to detonate the public's imagination and emotions is not through fancy stagecraft, but rather through words fired directly at the audience from a bare stage. They have lost faith in the effectiveness of dialogue, not only in the

theatre, but also between those invested with power and those who have never had it. As Enrique Olmos de Ita explains, "Con el fracaso del 'gobierno del cambio', la sociedad mexicana aceptó que la historia estaba plagada de diálogos incompletos o falsos y volvió a contarse, a relatarse el *cuento* histórico desde una perspectiva propia. [...] ¿No será que la narraturgia es la respuesta de la más joven generación de dramaturgos por explicar(se) la historia contemporánea mexicana [...]?" While the stories of LEGOM and Ricaño may well focus on an anonymous member of the masses, that same anti-hero and his story are clearly a microcosm of Mexico's daily history at large.

The reasons for this recent shift from histories of the past to anecdotes of everyday reality are unclear. One could posit that, thanks to the internet, Mexicans don't need to go to the theater to experience alternative histories; with just one "click," the computer screen offers an infinite number of them, all purportedly "true." Or perhaps today's society is too concerned with present-day happenings such as kidnappings, killings, and disappearances to preoccupy itself with the remote past and how it is being taught to children. Or maybe Mexicans have simply and skeptically given up on the idea of ever knowing "la verdad de la verdad." As the 50th commemoration of the Tlatelolco massacre looms, Krauze's concept of the "theatre of history" sadly remains as valid now as it was when he coined the metaphor. As far as the past is concerned, Mexico remains obsessed with its history.The heroes and martyrs of the last five centuries remain firmly attached to their pedestals. And while many of Mexico's playwrights seek to offer a different version of these age-old "truths," Mexico's political stage continues to be hogged by pathetic and patently ridiculous performances of truth, transparency, and justice. The disappearance and presumed murder of 43 rural students in Ayotzinapa on September 26, 2014, is simply one more repetition of a historical cycle that began in the Plaza de Tlatelolco in 1968, if not as far back as the Conquest. It would seem that as long as this vicious circle of violence, repression, and historiograhic manipulation continues, there will be ample historical fodder for Mexico's dramatists as well as a continuous supply of dramatic material through which our students can learn to appreciate the institutionalized fictions, along with the as yet untold truths that have led Mexico to where it is today. Future dramatists will discover new forms through which to re-stage Mexico's history, while we teaching scholars continue to seek a deeper understanding of Mexico's "past present" as and through its theatre.

Virginia Tech

Notes

[1] In several previous publications, I examine in greater detail the theatrical and artistic production that followed the 1968 massacre. See, in particular, "Re-membering the Past: Memory-Theatre and Tlatelolco" and "Mexico 1968 and the Art(s) of Memory."

[2] Students may enjoy reading fragments of Luis González de Alba's book *Las mentiras de mis maestras*, in which he pokes fun at the way in which Mexican schoolchildren are "inoculated" early on against any *un*official version of their country's history.

[3] While our lack of proximity to the theaters of Mexico forces us to concentrate mainly on the dramatic text, full-length recordings or at the very least video clips of the performance of these plays can be found on the internet. Virtual spectatorship offers images that no text can truly convey, such as the huge book from which Morelos quotes in *Martirio de Morelos*, the incorporation of Aztec drawings of the Conquest in *Águila o sol*, the asphyxiating setting of *Viaje de los cantores*, and the emptiness that surrounds the three marginalized women of *Desazón*. At the same time, every attempt should be made to encourage students to read each text with the eye of the hypothetical director and to imagine such things as physical space, movement, tone, and their potential impact on the audience.

[4] Another popular way of re-presenting Mexican history, particularly very recent history, is through cabaret theatre. I do not include this form in my class due to the lack, in most cases, of a text. Those interested in Jesusa Rodríguez, Astrid Hadad, and others who regularly make a mockery of both historical figures and contemporary political figures should consult the work of Gastón Alzate.

[5] See Bixler, "Historical (Dis)Authority," for a more thorough discussion of *Martirio de Morelos*. As this has been the focus of my scholarship for the past 25 years, I include in the bibliography all previous publications that relate to the use and abuse of history in Mexican theatre.

[6] Students should be encouraged to read fragments of *La ruta crítica de Martirio de Morelos*, in which Leñero describes the censorship, accusations, and other difficulties that he encountered in the staging of the play.

[7] José Sanchis Sinisterra and Hans-Thies Lehmann offer theories on narraturgy and postdramatic theatre through which students can appreciate, respectively, the objectives and relevance of narraturgy and the postdramatic emphasis on performance over text.

Suggested plays

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Gutiérrez Ortiz Monasterio, Luis Enrique. *Demetrius o la caducidad del ser*. Pasodegato, 2009.

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Rascón Banda, Víctor Hugo. *Sazón de mujer. Table Dance*. CAEN Editores, 1999. Later re-titled *Desazón*.

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