The Art of Production: Staging Latin(o) American Plays

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In his celebrated book *The Empty Space*, Peter Brook writes that "[a] man walks across [an] empty space while someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged" (7). While many of us teach Latin American or US Latino theatre at the university level as literature or with a literary perspective, it is through the praxis of theatre production that our students begin to grasp the value of how to apply theory to their understanding of the plays and their visualization of the body on stage. In today's university climate, literature has often been pushed to the margins, and cultural and performance studies have become a more central focus. Teaching a hybrid class, where theatre is seen both as dramatic literature as well as a staged production, can bring together the different ways of analyzing and understanding a play, mitigating the need to act.[1]

In this essay, I explore a pedagogical model for a hybrid class that combines the reading of drama as literature with a fully staged production as the final project. In detailed description of different aspects of the class, this essay focuses on the benefits of moving from analyzing dramatic pieces to embodying them on stage. As students shift from theoretical analyses of theatre to learning about the intricacies of production, they immerse themselves in a more inclusive expression of the performing arts by learning how to apply theory to practice. The course was originally developed to raise awareness of how staging a play teaches students to value the nuances of theatre. It shows them to pay close attention to how, for instance, a scene can change depending on the lights, costumes, or sounds added, or how an audience can be affected differently through silences, movement, or music. As the selected play is performed in Spanish in front of a live audience, our goal is also to be able to learn how to apply language to a live event, emphasizing the application of regional dialect, intonation, and accent while developing

students' overall linguistic, social, and cultural competence. As a successful class, with nearly nine years of production history, it has created a sense of community on campus and a need for collective creation that goes beyond the text of the play.

Studies have consistently shown the advantages of teaching a staged production in a foreign language as a successful pedagogical tool for improving language and cultural awareness.[2] As scholar Kerry Kingsbury Brunetto, a former student and actress in two of my theatre classes, states, "L2 theatre performance can offer a valuable complement to the curriculum's existing literary/linguistic focus: it privileges speaking and engages participants in repeated, ever-deepening encounters with a single text" (16).[3] Besides providing students with a more hands-on, communicative experience through the production process, which includes auditions, casting, rehearsals, costume and set design, and dramatic analysis, it offers them a wealth of opportunities to understand the intricacies of idioms, culture, and traditions. A project such as this one also foments collective participation and negotiation that builds a sense of community both in the class and in the university's Spanish Department.[4] While producing a full play in a foreign language can be daunting—after all, there are costs involved, extra hours for rehearsals, negotiation with the Theatre Department or the university theater for space, and students with little or no theatrical training—this project involves, as Ira Shor suggests, a "risk-taking 'praxis'" (2). This risk-taking strategy pays off, because it provides students with the power to be in charge, to think critically about their choices of how and why a character should act a certain way, and to use language in a fluid and immersed setting. This open space for creativity and learning goes beyond a regular classroom; it creates a community of learners and practitioners who are willing to embody the many possibilities theatre has to offer. Shor explains that "[t]esting the limits by practicing theory and by theorizing practice in a real context is harder and riskier than theorizing theory without a context" (3). This risk is certainly part of the journey of creating a collective play in which every student has an active role and a voice to decide on aesthetic and thematic choices.

While the class offers students many advantages, such as intercultural learning, hands-on experience, total immersion in a practical setting, empowerment, and so on, it also presents some challenges for both instructors and students.[5] These demands include: how to balance academic work (papers, exams, homework) while adding extra hours for rehearsal time; how to promote an equal-opportunity platform for everybody to be involved; and how

to grade everyone fairly for participation in both aspects of the class, literary/theoretical analysis and stage production. In my view, the advantages that students gain by immersing themselves and engaging in several weeks of work on a collective project and speaking Spanish with their peers, graduate students, and instructors offer a productive outcome that surpasses any other approach to studying language through the dramatic arts. Theatre-based language learning is a collective effort that creates a wealth of opportunities and benefits to a department.[6] I have been fortunate that my own department has a long and cherished tradition of theatrical involvement and production and has set funds aside to help cover the cost of theatre expenses, but both cost and space can be a deterrent when formalizing this type of class.[7]

During my first years as an assistant professor, I designed this course as a hybrid class for undergraduate and graduate students so that everyone would be exposed to the two sides of theatre: literary analysis and dramatic staging. The class was originally created to attract higher-level undergraduates and graduate students and to foster a sense of community and of guidance and encouragement. From its conception, I have always invited an advanced graduate student interested in theatre arts to be the assistant director. This became an invaluable contribution to the whole production, as it allowed the graduate student to become an active member of the cast, bridging a gap that often forms between instructors and students. It also fosters an inviting setting in which all students feel comfortable and willing to share their thoughts.[8]

I have taught this course three times, with three different full productions, and so far the structure has not changed. The class has two phases: the first seven weeks focus on the reading and analysis of six plays with a combination of theatre theory, both for dramatic analysis and staged productions, as well as an understanding of Latin American theatre history. The remaining weeks are dedicated to different stages of production. A syllabus for this class usually provides theoretical readings to enhance literary analysis of dramatic texts. Examples vary, but there is normally a combination of works by Patrice Pavis, Tadeusz Kowzan, Anne Ubersfeld, Richard Hornby, Marvin Carlson, Richard Schechner, Victor Turner, and Diana Taylor, among others, that help delve into the underpinnings of dramatic and performance studies. In order to achieve more in-depth production expression, the class reads Eugenio Barba, Augusto Boal, Constantin Stanislavski, Bertolt Brecht, Jerzy Grotowski, Miguel Rubio, Guillermo Gómez Peña, and Hans-Thies Lehmann. After a midterm exam, the last half of the semester is dedicated to auditions, casting, rehearsals, lights, costumes design, and the actual production. The goal is for

the class to collectively arrive at a decision for staging one of the six plays read in the first half of the class. I believe that part of the success of this class has been in choosing to stage the most appropriate play for the group we have become. However, there are some basic elements that contribute to the play selection, such as having enough characters so that students can act, props that are few in number or cost-effective, and short dialogues or monologues so that there is less demand on actors' bodies and memories. After all, the majority of students in a foreign language do not have an extensive acting background, thus they are not used to heavy memorization, especially not in their second language. Choosing the right play to stage is one of the most difficult and important aspects of this class. Which play spoke to us? Which play do we think we can stage given our talents and resources? What type of play do we want our audience to see? Should we think, as Patrice Pavis suggests, that our "respect for cultural diversity, for difference, for communities and minorities, should not destroy the values of humanism and enlightenment on which the theatre, at least the classical western theatre, is based" (83)? Or should we work more emphatically as an amateur group that is eager to learn and explore Latin American theatre in front of an audience that belongs, for the most part, to a university community?

In the specific case of Latino and Latin American theatre, the plays on the syllabus explore social, political, and even traumatic situations of history. Some previous plays studied, but not staged, included *La señora Macbeth* (2004) by Griselda Gambaro, *Ana en el trópico* (2003) by Nilo Cruz, *Indocumentados… el otro merengue* (1991) by José Luis Ramos Escobar, *El viaje de los cantores* (1990) by Hugo Salcedo, and *Volvió una noche* (1992) by Eduardo Rovner. Many times, the reasons for choosing not to stage some of these plays were their large amounts of dialogue, the weight they put on one or two actors to remember most of the lines, and their physical and mental demand on the actors. For instance, *La señora Macbeth*, usually a favorite in the class, becomes a highly difficult play for one actress, who has to play a deeply affected protagonist haunted by her own demons. *Indocumentados,* also a favorite in the class, requires students to speak different Caribbean dialects so that the audience is aware if they are Puerto Ricans or Dominicans.[9] Thus, students are less inclined to choose these plays and more interested in thinking about more technically complicated plays that might demand less work on one or two characters and a more collective type of work. In contrast, the final productions showed not only excellent written texts, but also demanded less on the actors' bodies and less reliance on memorizing long lines.

All of the productions required a deep understanding of historical events and cultural nuances. For instance, our first staged play, *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* (1993) by Mexican playwright Sabina Berman, prompted students to dig deeper into their understanding of the Mexican Revolution. Specifically, they had to learn about the many facets of Pancho Villa, his role in the Revolution, his adversaries, and his tactics. The play, which deals with events of the Mexican Revolution and its aftermath in contemporary neoliberal Mexican society, entreats students to understand metatheatre, fiction and reality, illusion and imagination, and Pancho Villa's numerous love affairs and many kidnappings, while also exploring the nuances of colloquial Mexican speech. In order to grasp Villa's character, the student playing him studied speech inflections, tone, and accent through films of the Mexican Golden Age that featured Villa. Even though the play is infused with humor—Villa is a ghostly character who does not fit the present time and does not understand how society has changed since the Revolution—, students needed to truly explore the play's historical manifestations and the multiple ways in which Villa is invoked as symbol in the play and in Mexican society. Berman's portrayal "attacks the always politicized myth of Villa in two areas: the official myth […] as part of the Revolutionary government; and the popular myth of Villa, which celebrates his sexual escapades as much as his political commitment to the poor" (Day 37). Villa's ambiguous figure becomes a strong undercurrent that provides the spectator with a variety of visual and linguistic codes that students working closely with a textual play "can appropriate the target language forms and structures through which the particular situations of a given play are created, negotiated and resolved" (Kingsbury Brunetto 19). The advantages of choosing this play were many; it had a variety of characters, manageable props, excellent stage directions, and very well written dialogues infused with humor and irony. As stated before, the student playing Villa had to learn the specific dialect and accent that he used in order for the character to be more realistic and to not fall into a buffoon-like portrayal. Thus, the student, a female I might add, also worked closely with a Mexican graduate student to learn the dialect, tone, and specific accent.

When students explore theatre through theoretical and critical analyses, they usually lack understanding of the process of creating a mise-en-scène and, thus, there is a lack of conceptualizing performance semiotics (acting, sound, lights, tone, movement, use of space, etc.). As Lef Essif states, not only is it meaningful for students to transfer textual information into stage action, it is also productive to think of the relationships that the student-actor

creates as an "active spectator of her own and the other actors' efforts toward creative communication" (123). Antonin Artaud asserted that it was essential to focus on the "physical language" of theatre, which "consists of everything that occupies the stage, everything that can be manifested and expressed materially on a stage and that is addressed first of all to the senses instead of being addressed primarily to the mind as is the language of words" (38). In my experience, conceiving physical language on stage is one of the most difficult aspects of theatre for non-actors. Students are more comfortable using their words than their bodies. They are usually very self-aware of how others perceive their movements on stage. Therefore, the process of letting go, of making their bodies do the speaking and not just their words, is the first of many steps we take in class. Trust-building exercises are key, as are the more physical exercises that make their bodies express themselves. As non-production experts, we approach this process by allowing students with more expertise to take the lead. Other times we use basic "acting" books to guide our training. For example, students are pushed to be more rebellious by following the work of Guillermo Gómez Peña and Roberto Sifuentes in *Exercises for Rebel Artists: Radical Performance Pedagogy* and to express themselves in ways they did not think of before. For instance, some of their objectives —"to reconnect with your bodies, to operate in 'performance mode,' to explore various strategies for collaboration"— illustrate the basis for our group (37). Specific exercises, such as walking blind folded, immersing ourselves in high-energy electronic music, and concentrating on our breathing were key to begin trusting our bodies, scoping the place, and understanding how to, in their own words, "reterritorialize" ourselves so that our bodies can also speak for us (41).

Rehearsals provide students with ample opportunities to explore their bodies and movements, but we found that by watching others move and try new postures, everybody learns and becomes a critical voice in shaping a character. In a sense, students' work is doubled. Not only do they learn how to act and move, but they also recognize the need to watch others do the same and to contribute their thoughts. Augusto Boal understood the significance of the doubling of an actor during rehearsals, a term he coined "spect-actor."[10] And while this exercise takes time for students to grasp, the spect-actor approach is a very useful tool in building trust and a sense of a collective work—everybody is on the same level, making mistakes, trying new sounds and movements, and exposing themselves to failure and success. In our class, the distance between textual understanding of the play and the embodiment of

characters exposes students to "acquiring a sense of performance semiotics" (Essif 123) that is necessary to a successful production. Being spect-actors makes them aware of the needs of others, of imagined props and space, and of the many possibilities of what their bodies can actually accomplish and how their relationship to the stage changes as props, costumes, blocking, and lights get underway. One very successful exercise that we continually use is to divide our scenes with different "directors" for the day. Each small group simultaneously practices its lines and movements with comments from other students who help it explore more possibilities. While blocking is reserved for later on when lines are better memorized, this small scene approach has been an excellent way to use all of our potential. By having students act and take charge of the possible construction of a character, this exercise provides all students with an empowering experience wherein their ideas and creativity create a trusting environment. It is also important to note that Spanish becomes less of a foreign language to wrestle with and more of communicating tool to act. As Dominica Radulescu states, that "[c]ommunicating in a foreign language is a performative act" where there is a constant negotiation between grammatical structures and improvisation and mimicking (36). Therefore, the platform for acting in a foreign language class is already set; a theatre-based language-learning class explores these expressions. After all, "we do not speak a language, we inhabit a language" (Radulescu 35).

At times, the plays produced would not have been my personal choice. Even though I am the one designing the syllabus, and thus the one who decides which plays could actually end up at the theater, students are more inclined to take risks on stage. This was the case, for instance, when a class (mostly graduate students in this instance) decided to stage Sabina Berman's *Águila o sol* (1984). Berman was commissioned by the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (INBA) to create a didactic piece about Mexican history. However, due to her "distortion" of retelling Mexican history through the eyes of those who "lost," the play was controversial, and the INBA refused to promote it.[11]

Based on León Portilla's book on the Conquest of Mexico, *Visión de los vencidos* (1959), the play is peppered with farcical humor and includes a mixture of costumes, music, street theatre, and dance from different regions and indigenous groups. Berman's decision to base her play on Portilla's book pushes forward the issue of the incongruities and misinformation about the conquest. Portilla describes Aztec life before and during the Spanish conquest of Mexico, calling attention to the role of eyewitness accounts and translators from the Nahuatls' perspective. With an exquisite amount of historical re-

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search, he unveils the many misunderstandings of how Mexico was conquered, making a perfect foundation for a play that questions the many vicissitudes of how Tenochitlan was lost. According to Priscilla Meléndez, "the fact that Berman turns to a disparaged genre such as farce and other forms of popular theater—to street theatre and the circus tent—becomes a way of questioning traditional, institutional, and even ideological theater" (32).

Thus, the Aztecs and other indigenous groups become the central point of view, as the play delves into their culture, language, struggles, and fascination with Hernán Cortés and his conquistadors. Jacqueline Bixler correctly describes this play as a pastiche in which "Berman combines mariachis, chorus, narrators, *corridos*, indigenous dances, and various languages" (45). She adds that Berman "postmodernizes history to foreground its representation and to remind her audience that events from the past acquire not their existence, but their *meaning* thanks to their representation" (45).

However, from a production standpoint, the lack of stage directions regarding costume design, music, dance, and rituals made the students more aware of their possibilities and of their need to study semiotic signs that would help with the visuals of the play. For instance, costume design was a key factor, as the play explores the different inner wars and cultural tensions between indigenous groups of the time. Thus, the student in charge of cos-

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tumes made sure to find out which colors, signs, and rituals would most likely resemble those of the indigenous groups that confronted the Aztec empire. Other key elements of the production were the ritual dances and music, the decision as to which instruments to use and how to pay tribute to the dances without falling into merely slapstick moves. The assistant director, Laissa Rodríguez Moreno, a graduate student who is also a dance practitioner, researched different types of possible choreographies to create *la danza de la serpiente*, a popular indigenous dance that imbued the different vignettes with a sense of unity.

Águila o sol called for costumes that would immerse actors in the world of the Mexican Conquest. Moctezuma's feathered head piece and La Llorona's soft, see-through, ghost-like fabric made students more aware of how they embodied the characters and incorporated gestures. Based on research done on how students learn a second language through theatre, student actor/scholar Kingsbury Brunetto found that "the wearing of a particular garment has been shown to have a demonstrable effect upon the wearer's psychological state," an effect called enclothed cognition, and it made an impact on students' acting in this class. As the student who played La Llorona explained in her interview, "I think that my *Llorona* costume helped a lot…when we were just rehearsing I didn't know how to move…but once I put that whole thing on…it was

better for me…I think once you add costumes everyone gets a little more into it" (168). Even though the play promotes a sarcastic and at times humorous and absurdist point of view of the Conquest, attention to costuming was key. While space, props, and even lights were scarce and truly secondary objects, costuming became part of the embodiment of these characters, and for the students it became a touchstone. As a student cogently put it, once she saw Moctezuma wearing his big head piece and heard him lament the loss of the Aztec empire to the Spanish conquistadors, everything fell into place:

> When [Moctezuma] said that last line, I…choked up. Even though I'd heard that line so many times—the first time we did it, when the spotlight was just on him, and he was, like, shaking, and he had his costume on,…I was sad, I was sad…and that's amazing that theatre can do that. Something I saw so many times, something I read so many times, when all the components are put together, how amazing it can be, how powerful it can be. (Kingsbury Brunetto 166)

Berman created this play both as a sarcastic look at history and as a political confrontation with how history usually gets retold. Thus, her humorous angle calls for sometimes-absurd acting and artificial settings. In order to be able to keep the humor and the farce but simultaneously explore the intricacies of costuming, the class took many risks and found themselves in a trial and error setting. As Kingsbury Brunetto states:

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> Participants derived many benefits from finding useful props, costumes, gestures, interpretations, inflections for their lines, and the like, but part of this process involved trying and discarding many options that proved to be ill-suited or incorrect. However, even though these mistakes, errors, and possible-but-rejected options were not a part of the final production, they were an integral part of the overall experience of target-language theatre. (234)

As any theatre practitioner knows, all rehearsals are full of failures that take us into finding our ways to the final production. "Failure works," as Sara Jane Bailes states (2). For her, the "poetics of failure" helps theatre practitioners explore other options and corroborates that "a failed objective establishes an aperture, an opening onto several (and often many) other ways of doing that counter the authority of a singular or 'correct' outcome" (2). Empowering students with choices, making them aware that theatre demands trial and error and dedication to keep trying until we get it right makes theatre an invaluable practice. Making mistakes is not easy, and making mistakes in front of others is even harder, but since this class is a democratic, collective community of theatre practitioners, all members become more and more trusting of their voices, their language skills, the levels of embodied practices, and what they can offer to the whole group. Students constantly remarked how this type of class was a team-playing learning experience for everyone, that "no matter how little your contribution may be, it is adding to a greater whole" and that everyone had a role, no matter how small or big that was. They were all part of the same team (Brunetto 158).

Our most recent play was Hugo Salcedo's *Música de balas* (2011). Not often do we find a play that can speak to us, to all of us in the class and in the audience. But this play about the dire effects of the *narcos* and the drug cartels that have heavily and tragically changed contemporary Mexican society did just that. Written in a fragmented, non-linear, non-narrative fashion, with no main protagonists, almost no stage directions, and thirteen short scenes, this play serves as an excellent example of how students take risks, go beyond classroom learning, and are integrated in a collective endeavor. During class discussion, students had the opportunity to interview Salcedo in order to understand some of the nuances of the play's action. While this work is not documentary in technique, it does provide some excerpts from a real speech made by ex-President Felipe Calderón (2006-2012), who supported a war on drugs. As a scholar and a theatre practitioner, Salcedo likes to introduce documentation into his plays. For *Música de balas*, he added information

about the amount of violence and number of deaths at the hands of the drug traffickers, amounting to 45,000 by April 2011. Students understood that even though the play presents a poetic and at times even humorous point of view, what is central to the play is the tragic, factual situation that plagues Mexico and its citizens. This play allows students to explore the ramifications of violence on all walks of society, from *narcos* to police to children to families and to any civilian who might be caught in the line of fire.

Música de balas spoke directly to students from the beginning of class discussion. The current political chaos in Mexico and the explosive violence due to drug trafficking prompted students to express their interest in the need to stage this highly technical play. And while this play expects actors and spectators to engage in a political, Brechtian fashion and be, in a sense, changed by what they do and see, this play resonates more closely with what Hans-Thies Lehmann has explored as post-Brechtian theatre, or what he has coined as "post-dramatic theatre." He states that post-dramatic theatre "situates itself in a space opened up by the Brechtian inquiries into the presence and consciousness of the process of representation within the represented and the inquiry into a new 'art of spectating'" (33). In a sense, this new art of seeing complements Janelle Reinelt's assertion that "audiences have become familiar with a postmodern dramaturgy in which fragmented narratives, decentered subjects, instable signifiers, and lack of closure keep definition of meaning, let alone any political argument, at bay" (40). For students, the fragmented aspect of the play did not seem to be a deterrent. On the contrary, something about the vignettes attracted almost all of them from the beginning. Even though Salcedo wrote a script and there is a story to be told, the work in itself is post-dramatic because it postulates a restructuring of how we understand the theatrical event, shifting both the way the play is staged as well as its reception. The lack of stage directions or of any insinuation as to where, when, or how actors should act forces students to embody the political underpinnings of this type of theatre. And while they read Brecht, Artaud, and Lehmann, it is in the doing and acting in the play that students connect the dots between theatre and politics. The playwright called his characters "entes," which could be roughly translated as "bodies" or "entities," but in Spanish it carries a ghostly connotation of human beings resembling zombies. These "entes" on stage became part of the "art of spectating," making language less of a central player and turning, instead, to seeing how these bodies could represent the agony of violence in contemporary Mexico.

In the spring of 2015, we began rehearsals for this play. The backdrop story of the 43 students from Ayotzinapa (a rural school for future teachers) who disappeared in September 2014 became a constant grounding narrative and image in the students' ideas and perceptions of this violent world.[12] As the thirteen scenes started to unfold, all of the actors were eager to learn and to understand the links between drug trafficking, the Mexican government, and society at large. While during our analytical discussion of this play the idea of the "ente" was particularly difficult to grasp, once we moved into rehearsals, they used their bodies to explore ways to carry the weight and to visually demonstrate to themselves and others how they conceived the embodiment of an "ente." Warm-up exercises became the basis in every class for students to learn how to use their bodies instead of just their words to convey meaning. In many of our warm-up practices we imagined carrying heavy objects, walking blindfolded to exercise our bodies in new ways on the stage. We were constantly reminded of the idea of the "ente" and what it meant to us as a group, which became more evident when we begun thinking about blocking. Since the stage was basically bare, graduate student Megan Bailon, the co-director of this play, imagined a box resembling a casket as the main, and many times, only prop on stage. The idea of moving the box

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to a different part of the stage for each scene made all of us very aware of its weight and what it represented. When the hand-made box was introduced onto the stage, about two weeks before opening night, students' movements became heavier, sturdier, and slower. While the box was codified as many other props —sometimes a table, a bench, a bathtub or even a bridge— it was always conspicuously present.

Death, violence, corruption, and impotence were the constant images we had to represent, together with understanding how Salcedo's humor and poetry were also part of this story. In contrast to *Águila o sol*, where costumes were central to the story, actors wore an all-black ensemble to emphasize the more political side of this play. As a group, we decided that all members would have a small red piece to add to their all black attire to remind the audience that all of these vignettes, and all of their members, were touched, in one way or another, by violence. When the students decided to stage this play, all of them expressed an interest in acting, something I had not experienced before since there are usually students who would rather work behind the scenes. Once casting was done, my co-director and I decided to explore a documentary angle to the play. Because Salcedo relied on current political data, as well as the music and culture of recent *narcocorridos* by Chalino Sánchez, we decided that adding documentary material would allow both the

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actors and audience a more complete analysis of this play.[13] This addition, which included some ghostly images of Sánchez, a radio broadcast about Ayotzinapa and the 43 disappeared students, and footage of social protests in reaction to this event, became crucial to the play, making a point about political theatre, both to actors and audience members.

The escape of notorious drug cartel leader Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán in July 2015 made it clear that drug trafficking is very alive and organized in Mexico.[14] El "Chapo" Guzmán, a character mentioned in the play, reminds us that *Música de balas* is a necessary work that brings to the forefront issues of human rights awareness in the politically corrupted world of drug cartels. The disappearance of 43 students from Ayotzinapa was a present reminder of this political violence, especially because it connected to Salcedo's understanding of how the Mexican government knowingly disregards the lives of its own citizens. Since the finale was a very open-ended flow of words about violence, drugs, prostitution, and disappearances, we decided to show how this play invokes the political ramifications of violence on a broader, more universal scale. Relying on an overhead projector and a large screen, we filled in the empty black screen with white words of despair. Meanwhile, actors ambulated on stage as the "entes" they had been throughout, but this time with a political purpose of denunciation and anger.

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During the two months of rehearsals, students learned to appreciate the theory of political theatre by reading Brecht, Boal, and Grotowski. However, it was not until our dress rehearsal that everything finally came together and students began to grasp the meaning, and even be emotionally affected, when they participated in a tribute to the 43 students from Ayotzinapa. That same day, we joined forces with a local, student-run grassroots group, Axolote. This group is dedicated to bringing awareness to the disappearances and the consecutive silence regarding Ayotzinapa. Two of their founders came and gave the group more information about how we could make a call to action. So, with their direction, we added a last segment in which actors formed a triangle, while on the screen we projected the faces and names of the missing, and then in a chorus the student actors began counting to 43, a tradition that has been taken up in many theatres in Mexico City.[15]

To teach this class is a privilege, and even though it requires a huge amount of dedication, risk taking, and a different approach to teaching, I have never experienced anything like the sense of community, achievement, and ownership I have felt with this class. Students always say that this class pushed them to do their best or to do things they never thought they could. And while the vast majority of undergraduate students expressed an improvement in their language skills, sometimes even comparing their experience to that of studying

abroad, it is equally important to acknowledge that theatre builds a collective group.[16] This also became evident after graduate students who participated in the performance of *Águila o sol* decided to continue to pursue their interests in theatre by forming a troupe. Their group, Teatro Décimo Piso was born in August 2012, and it now enjoys a life full of undergraduate and graduate students who stage a different production every year. As a Latin American theatre scholar, teacher, and sometimes practitioner, I am happy to say that there is nothing like doing, acting, and performing in Spanish in front of an audience to truly appreciate all of the inflections theatre can have in all of us.

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Notes

[1] For a more in-depth look at the role of literature in today's multi-media reality, please see Bettina Matthias "Acting…is the Recovery…"

[2] See Collen Ryan and Nicoletta Marini-Maio's *Dramatic Interactions* (2011), Domnica Radulescu and Maria Stadter Fox's *The Theater of Teaching and the Lessons of Theatre* (2005), and Isa Shor's *When Students Have Power* (1996).

[3] I should note that I rely heavily on the data that Kelly Kingsbury Brunetto collected while she was a student and actress in two different productions: *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* and *Aguila o sol.* Her study is now published and I refer to her book throughout this essay.

[4] Colleen Ryan-Scheutz and Laura M. Colangelo provide a substantial pedagogical study on the advantages of theatre production and foreign language learning. They explore how staging a "full-scale foreign language theater production promotes all five Cs (communication, culture, connections, comparisons, and communities)" (375).

[5] According to Ryan-Scheutz and Colangelo, offering a staged production as part of a foreign language class showed "broad but consistent tendencies toward improvement in a variety of skill areas […] a comparison of pre-and postproduction tests showed general trend of improvement in oral proficiency, reading comprehension, knowledge of language structures and idioms, and writing proficiency" (380).

[6] As Matthias states, a theatre-based language learning class can help "foreign language departments gain greater public visibility, thus supporting their recruitment and retention efforts" (64).

[7] The Department of Spanish and Portuguese at the University of Wisconsin-Madison has had a tradition of producing plays, which were first promoted and directed by Emeritus Professor Roberto Sánchez. His endowment and the ongoing support of the department to stage plays have made this class possible.

[8] I would like to take this opportunity to thank the graduate students who were part of these productions. Bretton White (*Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda*, 2009); Laissa Rodríguez Moreno (*Águila o sol*, 2011); Megan Bailon (*Música de balas*, 2015); Christina Baker (*Música de balas*, 2015). I should note that due to *Música de bala's* arduous documentary and media requirements, Bailon became a co-director of this play. Without their help and dedication, these productions would not have been possible.

[9] By metatheatrical techniques on acting, I am referring to the many changes a character sometimes goes through, making the actor understand more than one or even two different sets of acting within the same character. This technique is difficult for non-actors to acquire.

[10] In his work with Forum Theatre, Augusto Boal coins the term "spect-actor" to emphasize the important role both actors and spectators have and to give the spectator the tools to become an active participant in the theatrical event. However, I am focusing on the term "spect-actor" as part of a rehearsal exercise, where "the spectator (meaning other actors too) is encouraged to intervene in the action, abandoning his condition of object and assuming fully the role of the subject" (132).

[11] This information is provided by Laurietz Seda in her doctoral dissertation and quoted here by Jacqueline Bixler.

[12] On Sept. 24, 2014, 43 students from Ayotzinapa, a rural teacher's college, went missing in Iguala, Mexico. Details of what happened are not clear, but the Mexican government quickly claimed that a criminal gang had been involved. As recently as September 2015 experts from the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights rejected the Mexican government's official account that the students were "executed by a drug gang that then burned the bodies to ashes in a garbage dump" (Villegas n/p).

[13] Hugo Salcedo provides some footnotes with documentary information about the play, and he makes reference to a presidential speech given by Felipe Calderón on Nov. 28, 2010, as well as the number of drug-war related deaths that are devastating Mexico, which by the time he wrote this play in April 2011 had amounted to 45,000. According to a study by the Congressional Research Service done in July 2015, drug-war-related deaths were up to 80,000.

[14] On July 11, 2015, the world-famous Sinaloa drug lord Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán made an escape from his Mexican maximum-security prison. While there are stories of his escape through tunnels, there is no concrete information as to how he escaped, exposing Mexican's corruption at high levels (Ahmed and Cave n/p).

[15] A highly artistic group, Axolote grounds its work on bringing awareness to Ayotzinapa. During the performance, it participated with a table outside the theater, showing its Pensaré Cartoneras books with covers that stated "Never Again" and "Ayotzinapa Forced Disappearances." As I write this article, Axolote has built an exhibit at the UW Memorial Union titled "We Will Not Wither," a combination of Cartoneras books, pamphlets, puppets, and photography that relate to the search for the 43 students.

[16] As a student in Á*guila o sol* proclaimed, "I almost felt like when we were in the theatre, we were studying abroad" (Kingsbury Brunetto 184).

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