

Mexico City's October 2017 Theatre Season, with a Bonus Performance in Querétaro

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For more than 25 consecutive years, I have travelled each year to Mexico City to study its theatre. Because of my school-year obligations at Northern Michigan University, I have always gone in the spring or summer. For the first time, in October of 2017, I experienced Mexican theatre at a different time of year. Although the primary purpose of my trip was not related to theatre, I managed to see nine absolutely first-rate plays in Mexico City and an astonishing performance in Querétaro.

La espera, written and directed by Conchi León, had the biggest impact on me. I had heard of “teatro penitenciario,” but this was my first experience with it. The Foro Shakespeare works with the Teatro Penitenciario theatre company, which started in the Santa Marta Acatitla prison. The company performs both at the prison and at the Foro. I saw *La espera* in the Foro's Espacio Urgente 2, with a cast of four actors whose training as actors began while they were inmates at Santa Marta. In the play, they told of/represented key moments of their own lives: their crimes, their arrests, their jail time, and their post-release experiences. They described and performed events and scenes that were at times violent and at other times humiliating, but with touches of humor, reflection, and hope. León deserves praise for interviewing the four actors, culling their testimonies, organizing and intertwining them, and giving them a dramatic frame. I admired her work as a director equally. She achieved a beautiful combination of narration and representation, giving the actors the power to communicate in little more than an hour enormous insights into their lives, but also making the audience a witness to many of the most dramatic and influential moments of the actors' lives. They represented themselves most of the time, but occasionally played other key people in their own lives or in the lives of their companions, whether family

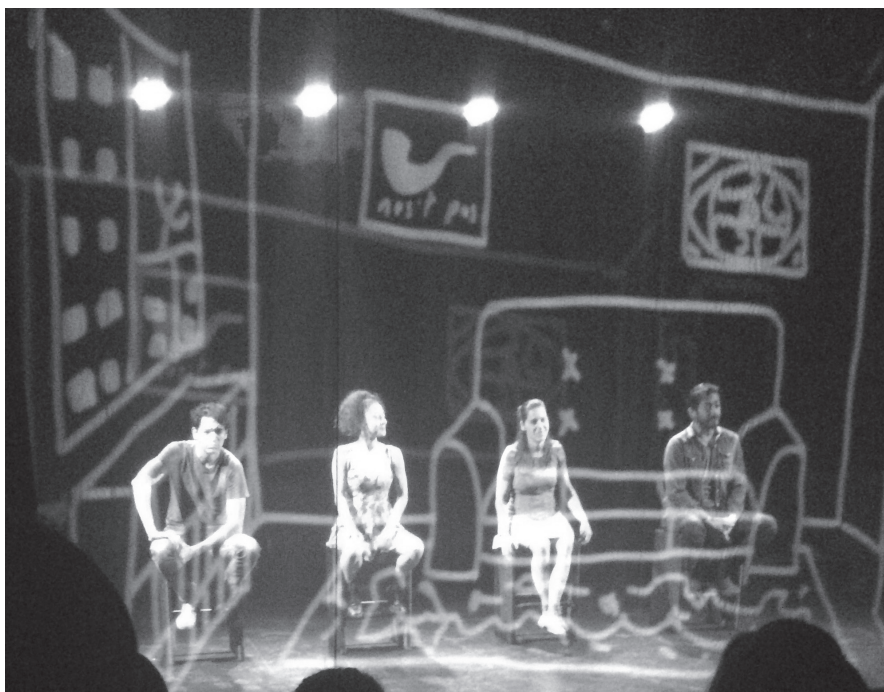
members, police officers, prison guards, fellow inmates, or victims of their crimes. The play used a variety of theatrical elements to present harsh topics and scenes without traumatizing audience members. For example, the actors attacked a chalk outline on the wall to illustrate the abuses endured at prison and used toy cars to show how one of them had stolen cars. On the other hand, they also used real props, such as knives. The guns they used were not real, but their sounds were loud and realistic, and they pointed them several times at some spectators. In fact, they came very close to the spectators on the first row and would occasionally dissolve the fourth wall to talk with them. The intimate space of the small *foro* suited the intimate subject matter perfectly. The organizing frame León created to introduce the play seemed exceptionally clever to me: each actor introduced himself and launched a Mexican top. As the tops spun, the actors compared our lives to theirs in the way they spin, sometimes high and sometimes low (they picked up the tops as they spun, to mirror the words). After each actor-character told his story, he placed his top on the stage next to a sign indicating his crime and the number of years he served in prison, which cleverly signaled the transitions from one story to the next. The autobiographical testimonies of *La espera* were compelling and of considerable sociological, psychological and historical value, but Conchi León turned them into art.

Javier Cruz, Ismael Corona, Feliciano Mares, and Héctor Maldonado also deserve praise for their acting. With other actors the play would have been memorable, but it reached a new dimension knowing that the actors were telling and showing their own stories. I continue to process what it means for human beings to have lived through the experiences of losing their freedom, of being abused and humiliated, of recognizing and lamenting the damage they did to society and fellow human beings (both direct victims as well as indirect ones such as spouses and children), of trying to return to society, and finally to relive and represent these experiences through theatre. I think this would require extreme emotional control. One could say that the actors are now different people than the ones they were, but the relationship between them and what they narrated and acted, especially given the intense subject matter, is much closer than the norm in theatre. I trust that while their acting is surely challenging, it is also therapeutic, showing that they have come a long way in life, and that they are now contributing to society despite their troubled pasts. Spectators filled all the seats, and the play continues to enjoy its run months after the premiere.



La espera. Fotógrafo: Manuel Rangel.

Five plays featured experimental structures and acting, two of them directed by Ricardo Rodríguez. He also wrote the text of *El niño que se comió la servilleta de su sándwich*, a title that surely deserves an award of some sort. The four brilliant actors of the play—Teté Espinoza, Verónica Bravo,



El niño que se comió la servilleta de su sándwich. Fotógrafo: Manuel Rangel.

Hamlet Ramírez, and Luis Eduardo Yee—entered the stage at the play’s start, sat on stools, and remained the entire play, rarely leaving the stools. A transparent fabric separated them from the audience and served as a screen upon which drawings were projected, which suggested the settings of the play’s various scenes. The actors told and acted out the whimsical yet serious story of Rodrigo, a 6th grader who struggled in his transition to a new school. To me, the tone was reminiscent of *Calvin and Hobbes*, capturing the creativity of a child’s insights on the world, such as casting the class bully Anselmo in Rodrigo’s imagination as his archenemy, “Doctor No.” A different adjective preceded each reference to Doctor No, among them “terrible, insaciable, aborrecible, temido, maléfico, horripilante, espeluznante, intempestivo, destructivo,” and my favorite, “el cuatrocientas veces repudiado Doctor No.” At one point, Rodrigo stood up to Anselmo, the bully wet his pants, and the adjectives turned to “hediondo, pútrido, pestilente, y orinado.” The story was both fun and instructive, but the absolute joy of this performance was the way the actors told the story, with great chemistry

and timing. At times, they all talked about Rodrigo, at times they all embodied Rodrigo, at times they embodied different characters in the story. At times they took the story forward at breakneck speed, requiring pinpoint accuracy in their timing. Occasionally, rather than take the story forward, an actor would pause and question “¿en serio?” or some such. Humor accompanied the play throughout. The actors altered their voices, intonations, and rhythms to fit the various characters. All four actors excelled. Billed for audiences aged 7 and higher, the performance I saw at the La Gruta theater kept children and adults alike mesmerized, transported into a quirky, nostalgic childhood world.

Gibrán Portela, best known for his screenplays, wrote the other play directed by Rodríguez. *Adiós marineros, adiós monstruos del mar* featured two of the same actors as *El niño*: Teté Espinoza and Verónica Bravo. It intertwined two storylines; in one, a sea captain who had vowed never to walk on soil again fearlessly fought sea monsters, while in the other a bumbling detective searched for a missing husband. The actors, joined by Rebeca Trejo, portrayed ten characters and moved spectacularly from role to role, scene to scene, land to sea. Using the tone of a detective mystery, and



Adiós marineros, adiós monstruos del mar. Fotógrafo: Manuel Rangel.

enhanced by low lighting, all three actors both narrated and portrayed in rapid-fire style, imparting abundant information, varying voice tone, volume, and implication, and also providing rich facial and corporal interpretation. The set, designed by Auda Caraza and Atenea Chávez, included three sets of steep risers on wheels and a wooden desk. The risers, in their various configurations, represented a ship, the walls of the detective's office, the walls of a bar, underwater, and the undulating open sea. Just as spectators had to create in their minds the scenes from the non-representative set, they had to do the same with props, which the actors mimed. The two storylines eventually intertwined in surprising ways; for example, the captain turned out to be the detective's father (or stepfather, depending on interpretation). The storylines also featured quirky, frequent references to a mysterious Mr. Baldor who wore a turban, excelled at math, and whose memory tormented multiple characters. It turned out this had reference to a math exercise book used extensively in Mexican schools. References to the sea, dry ground, monsters, and fog clearly symbolized the challenges of life. This moving play combined thematic profundity, beautiful visual imagery, superb acting, and the expectation of a deep-thinking audience.

Mauricio Jiménez Quinto and Luis Felipe Losada wrote *Elefante: Ópera en espacio mínimo*, directed by Sofia Sanz and Jorge Reza and produced by the group Ópera Irreverente. The set consisted of two mats, the larger one 6 by 4 feet, and the other considerably smaller. The six actor/singers never left those tiny spaces. Accompanied live by pianist James Pullés, the six represented five scenarios and four stories. The framing scenario was an old folk's home, in which the residents told each other stories. One by one, an actor would step from the large mat to the small one and tell/sing a story while the others stayed on the big mat and brought the story to life. The stories themselves (five blind men describing an elephant and a warrior confronting a dragon and other foes) mattered much less than the incredible way they brought the stories to life. They sang the stories in pitch-perfect operatic form. And using just their bodies, they created doors, tables, birds, chairs, caves, columns, trees, fire, cupboards, closets, wall clocks, castles, moats, dungeons, portraits, buildings, subway stations and cars, dragons, the presidential balcony, and on and on. It was a visual tour-de-force in the breakneck way the actors created so much with no props beyond their own bodies. The choreography, precision, and imagination were stunning. Dressed in monotone, grey, loose-fitting clothes, Virginia Álvarez, Jairo Calderón, Mauricio Jiménez, Kevin Arnoldo, Ángel Luna, and Galo Balca-



Elefante: ópera en espacio mínimo. Fotógrafo: Manuel Rangel.

zar sang beautifully and created five different magical worlds full of adventure. This play was a testament to the transformative power of storytelling, imagination, and music.

From October 11th to the 18th, the state of Querétaro hosted the Festival Internacional de Artes Escénicas in the city of Querétaro, during which spectators could attend for free a remarkable 60 different performances, among them 35 plays, 21 dances, and 2 operas. Performing groups were mostly based in Querétaro, but others came from other parts of Mexico, and a few came from abroad, notably Argentina, Spain, France, and Canada. The festival also included four artistic workshops. I stumbled quite by chance into the final day of this extraordinary whirlwind of cultural activity, and therefore witnessed only one performance, but it was a performance unlike anything I've ever experienced. The Colectivo TeatroSinParedes, based in Mexico City, performed *Después de Babel, reconstruyendo comunidad*, in the Museo de la Ciudad, formerly a convent. This "play," directed by David Psalmon, had premiered just days earlier in the Festival Cervantino in Guanajuato. As they entered, spectators received play programs, which, it turned out, had codes to create six different groups of spectators. An open-



Después de Babel: Reconstruyendo comunidad. Fotógrafo: Manuel Rangel.

ing ceremony in the building's main courtyard posited the groundwork for the rest of the evening. Each group, led by a guide, was to witness six different performances, each 12 minutes long and in a different part of the complex. Spectators would see six scenarios associated with a transition away from civilization, each with a different theme. My group of 16 spectators started with "Cámara de refrigeración," by Sara Pinedo, on the topic of "El auto-reconocimiento." In this monologue, the actor spoke to a video camera about the significance of words, of being an individual, and gave advice for what seemed a post-apocalyptic age. He wore an army boot on one foot and a high heel on the other, suggesting an end to gender as we know it. At the

end of the 12-minute performance, the actor ran to his next assignment. As our group travelled to the next performance, we passed the other spectator groups as well as actors hurrying to beat the spectators to the next play. In our case, the next one was “El encuentro de dos cuerpos,” by Guillermo León. It took place on a ramp lined with lights. Two actors spoke to a tripod and then eventually to each other, thus overcoming the distance between them. They also flooded the floor with different colored balls, the mixture of which symbolized for me their encounter. The next act, “¿Funciona el amor?,” by Luisa Pardo, featured two actors sitting on a platform. A recording described their less-than-perfect relationship. Then audience members were asked questions about love through a live microphone. Act four, “Las palabras de la diosa,” by Sergio López Viguera, took place around a small open fire surrounded by a circle of rocks, where the actors spoke poetically about the power of language. Act five, “Paraíso perdido 1.0,” by Diego Álvarez Robledo, took place in a room full of plants, water, humidity, projections of verdure, and even a few live animals. Biblical language came over a loudspeaker, while an actor tended to the garden. The language started descriptively, then turned pleading, and eventually lamented humankind’s failure to care properly for nature. The final short play, “Babel por Philip Knight,” by Ángel Hernández, featured an enormous cube onto which myriad images were projected, but inside of which the audience could see an actor playing the role of Philip Knight. The cube symbolized the womb, and as an actor narrated Philip’s development, we could see the inner actor’s growth and development, which culminated with great athletic efforts and failures on his part. Finally, all six groups of spectators returned to the main courtyard, as did all the actors, who staged a funeral procession for the world as we know it and then opened a rather lengthy discussion, led by David Psalmon, with audience members on the topic of how we should build a new world. This play’s structure was unique, as was the use of a magnificent colonial building. The variety of themes, sets, costumes, and tones, along with the movement of the actors as they scurried to get to the right places, was exhilarating. The experience of each spectator group was unique, as the actors configured differently for each iteration of the mini-plays. *Después de Babel* was quite the spectacle, but it also aspired to a higher calling, that of awakening spectators to the critical state of the world and to the need to create something better.

David Olguín was listed as the *dramaturgista* and director of *Malpaís*, a play similarly focused on the horrific state of society and the need to do

something different, but focusing specifically on Mexico. According to the program, Olguín stitched together texts of his own, those of sixteen other Mexican writers, news reports, and interviews. The result was a carnival-like collage of scenes, characters, and situations that highlighted many of Mexico's problems, ranging from the disappeared to resistance fighters to immigrants to abusers of women to drug lords to the insane to artist wannabes to the ultra-rich to the ultra-poor to dysfunctional families to professional assassins to the devil himself. All members of the cast of fourteen played multiple roles and donned multiple costumes. Despite the negative subject matter, the play never felt depressing, perhaps because of the sheer variety of characters, costumes, scenarios, and tones, not to mention occasional singing and the projection of original movies. Another surprise was that after the intermission spectators could not return to their seats, but for roughly 15 minutes shared the stage with the actors, who occasionally entered into verbal and physical contact with them. Several times during the play actors turned to the audience and exclaimed, "¿Qué país es éste?" As with *Después de Babel*, *Malpaís* concluded with thoughts of starting over and creating a more humane country. Excellent acting, highly imaginative imagery, wonderful variety and tone, together with deadly serious subject matter all made *Malpaís* a significant play, and it played to a full house at the El Milagro theater.

While the final three plays of this report featured more traditional dramatic structures and conventions, all were excellent and shared a deep concern for Mexico and its problems. Antonio Zúñiga wrote *Los niños caballero*, based on the story and situation of a family in remote Guerrero, interwoven with legends from the same state. José Uriel García Solís, who hails from Guerrero, directed the small cast comprised of actors from Guerrero. When death and disease struck an impoverished family, the father left his remaining sons for a stretch to find help. In his absence, the older brother became very ill, whereupon the younger brother selflessly carried him on a mountain odyssey to get treatment. The brother eventually died, but the night of his death a shooting star signaled the death, according to Guerrero legend, of a *caballero*. The story was heart-breaking and the text beautifully written. The set was evocative of humble mountain dwellings, with lovely props representing heavenly lights. The actors performed beautifully, using puppets of various sizes and in various configurations in one of the performance's most original and compelling elements. Puppets dressed like the characters occasionally supplanted the actual actors, creating an occasional



Malpaís. Fotógrafo: Manuel Rangel.

eagle's view effect on the story. As with the best of children's theatre, although this play was theoretically for children, it resonated with spectators of all ages. Carretera 45 continues to produce significant theatre, in this case a play that combined societal issues with hope and beauty.

Todos Santos, by Mónica Perea, directed by Sixto Castro Santillán and beautifully acted by Mayra Sérbulo, also highlighted the plight of the poor in rural Mexico, in this case Oaxaca. It focused on an indigenous woman caught in the drug-trafficking vortex. Traffickers killed her husband, raped her, and kidnapped her son to use him in the drug trade. The son eventually met his death as well, leaving her without family. She felt the only way to survive was to leave her beloved rural Oaxaca and go to a city. In that city she yearned for her hometown, her family, the customs and food of her region, and her former identity. She acted several of the customs associated with Day of the Dead, which heightened her yearning for the land she loved and life as it once was. As the protagonist told her story, she would go back in time and represent key moments of her past, a very effective theatrical technique. This play showed the chilling fallout of the drug trade



Todos santos. Fotógrafo: Manuel Rangel.

on common people and identity in rural Mexico. It also showed government inaction and corruption. Despite the darkness of the topic, the play's beauty kept spectators from falling into depression. It featured gorgeous live guitar music composed and performed by Ariel Torres, a lovely, colorful set designed by Natalia Sedano, richly colored traditional dresses, and a resilient protagonist, able to survive despite it all. This moving play shed light on rural, indigenous customs, problems and also food; after the play the audience

got to sample food from rural Oaxaca. This play's timing was both good and bad, good because it was performed in the weeks leading up to Day of the Dead, and bad because its run was interrupted by the September 19th earthquake and no provision was made to recover the lost performances.¹

Finally, what could be more traditional in Mexican theatre than a performance of Rodolfo Usigli's *El gesticulador*? I've seen hundreds of plays in Mexico since 1992, but during my stays I have only seen notice of performances of two plays by the playwright most recognize as the father of modern Mexican theatre. This performance of *El gesticulador* was the best I've seen. Armando Hernán directed it in the Casa de Cultura Jesús Reyes Heróles, in a *foro* that was clearly a former residence. The house conformed nicely to Usigli's description of the set in its stage directions. Sergio Márquez embodied César Rubio admirably, and the rest of the cast also performed very well. To me, even though Usigli wrote it nearly 80 years earlier, and it premiered 70 years prior, in this performance it still had zip, the issues it raised continue to be important in Mexico, and the audience was deeply appreciative. The scene in which various levels of government



El gesticulador. Fotógrafo: Manuel Rangel.

officials descended upon the Rubio home to ascertain César's identity, to me one of the richest in the text, was equally rich in this performance; the timing and chemistry between actors was spot on, as was their self-importance and bumbling stupidity. The cost of hypocrisy, insincerity, selfishness, and corruption to Mexican society came through loud and clear. My only disappointment was that the ending was altered—in this performance, Navarro killed Guzmán, who had killed Rubio, which takes away some of the subtlety of the original text. Audience capacity was limited, but every seat was, happily, occupied for this excellent play and performance.

While this report has focused on just a few plays, they exemplify the brilliance of Mexican theatre. From highly experimental and innovative to traditional, the quality was uniformly high. To me, Usigli was the first major Mexican playwright to combine strong theatre technique with subject matter of importance to Mexico. I believe this set of plays clearly shows that Usigli's legacy lives. At the end of at least half of these plays, I felt they had transported me to a sort of sacred ground, a convergence of beauty, ingenuity, ideas, and in many cases calls for social justice. I found that despite having a day job, Mexican theatre was accessible, even if it took some sacrifice to access it, and it was very much worth the sacrifice.

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Note

¹ The earthquake shut down theatre in Mexico City for several weeks, just as it shut down so much of the city. The reports I heard indicated very little damage to theaters, except for El Círculo Teatral, which was heavily damaged.