

## Performance Reviews

### *Roosters* by Milcha Sanchez-Scott

The setting is the American southwest, where the First World clashes with the Third World, Spanish mixes with English, and myth meets reality. Sand dunes undulate amidst fingers of cactus. A conch shell blows, sounds of flutes and drums. Enter a lithe dancer clad in loincloth with antlers on his head who does a passionate rendition of the Yaqui deer dance. The Los Angeles premiere of Milcha Sanchez-Scott's *Roosters* is about to commence.

The story revolves around Gallo (Rooster) who has just returned from seven years in prison for stabbing a man to death. All his women--his wife Juana, daughter Angela and sister Chata--have spent the years in limbo waiting for him. His son Hector has been minding the family business, raising roosters for cockfighting, out of a sense of obligation. But now that the father is home, the son wants to leave and a conflict between the two ensues.

In playwright Sanchez-Scott we see the brown face of a mestiza: a mixture of Indonesian, Colombian and Mexican. This writer draws bold images of magical realism: men who crow and cackle like roosters; women who appear as madonnas or whores; a girl-child who levitates at the end of Act II like an angel. Sanchez-Scott's voice is poetic, characters spout airy soliloquies that give day to day dialogue another dimension.

The Los Angeles Theatre Center's Latino Theatre Lab production of *Roosters* is the third piece that Jose Luis Valenzuela has directed for the prestigious company located in downtown L. A. Valenzuela, who starred for ten years as an actor and director with El Teatro de la Esperanza, has also produced *La víctima* and *The Promise*. With this production Valenzuela proves he is one of the most effective Latino directors on both coasts. His handling of *Roosters* was infinitely better than the ineffectual INTAR production I witnessed the year before in New York City.

The director has some of the best actors on the west coast to work with. Lupe Ontiveros was especially memorable as the succulent Chata whose body has serviced thousands of migrant workers. E. J. Castillo gave the minor character of Adan a sense of dignity that made him equal to the principals. Evelina Fernandez, who turned in a sterling performance as the suffering wife and mother, elicited spontaneous applause from the audience on numerous occasions.

Pepe Serna acted out the role of the macho Gallo with credibility, although he too often stayed on one level of intensity. If there were any problems with the casting, it was the role of Hector played by Fausto Bara. He was too mature to play the part of the son opposite a youthful Fernandez.

The setting and lights by Timian Alsaker and Douglas D. Smith helped to evoke the stifling feeling of the arid, windblown southwest, as did the costumes by Tina Navarro. The choreography by Wade Collings was also authentic.

It all came together as the best production I saw that year. Milcha Sanchez-Scott is a lyrical voice in the Mexican American Southwest, and Valenzuela and his cast are professional interpreters of that unique music.

Carlos Morton

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*Los enemigos* by Sergio Magaña

An example of Mexican national theatre at its best is the production by the Compañía Nacional de Teatro of Sergio Magaña's play *Los enemigos* (Teatro Julio Castillo, January 26th and 28th). Magaña dramatizes the recuperation and translation of the original Amerindian play, the *Rabinal Achí* of Mayan tradition, by the French priest and ethnologist, Brasseur de Bourbourg. Borrowing from oriental dramatic convention, European fantastic visions of the New World, Catholic liturgical practice, nineteenth century French mores of behavior and Amerindian ritual, Lorena Maza (director), Tolita Figueroa (staging and costumes), and Lidya Romero (choreographer) invent a gestural poetry adequate to the drama of sacrifice as seen through the eyes of the European.

Several spaces of representation are marked off within the play. On the one hand, even before the play begins (between the second and last curtain call) two actors in character, Brasseur and his scribe/translator Colach López (performed respectively by Farnesio de Bernal and Edgar Alexen) step out on the stage and begin acting. On the other hand, once the curtain rises, the stage is not limited to the representation of these two characters. On the contrary, the stage becomes the setting for at least two plays occurring simultaneously: the drama of Brasseur who wishes to transcribe the Amerindian play and the re-enactment he arranges to witness and use as his model for the text. The space portrayed is that of a church with vaulted ceilings and massive columns and corridors. Shadows, grays and blacks dominate the stage. Within these limits, Pilmama (performed by Joana Brito) consecrates a rectangular space in the center of the church by placing candles at each corner. This then becomes the space exclusively reserved for the play-within-the-play or the altar for the Amerindian ritual.

However, the play continually suggests the transgression of such lines of demarcation, for it delves into the syncretism of New World culture and the impossibility of defending or successfully obliterating the lines of distinction between cultures and peoples. It becomes obvious through the staging of Magaña's version of the *Rabinal Achí* that the only way Brasseur (and hence the audience) can perceive the play is to translate its images into something hybrid. The re-enactment, as faithful as it pretends to be to the original, is performed through the media and props of a mestizo culture, within the confines of the Catholic church, and becomes conflated with the sacraments of Indian and Catholic faiths.

Brasseur imagines the *Rabinal Achí* complete with courtly love, sword play and gallantry. In the design of the costumes for the re-enactment, Tolita Figueroa evokes European depictions of the noble savage of the New World found in engravings from the XVI through the XIX centuries. In such engravings, the inhabitants of the New World pose in European attire slightly modified to suggest their "otherness." They are strange and other, but not authentic. And this is the point: Brasseur is seeking authenticity. However the *Rabinal Achí* has not been performed for centuries and the actors who re-enact it are no longer the Queché and Rabinal, but members of a mestizo nation. The cultural text that would both require and understand the *Rabinal Achí* is replaced by a new cultural text--a Christian, mestizo culture. However, the present does not successfully eradicate, contain or control the past.

Lidya Romero has invented a stylized dance of the warriors to evoke the rivalry between the two tribes--the people of Queché and the people of Rabinal. The warriors, dressed in varying shades of gray and black, stand out as silhouettes against the background, metonymically dancing the battle scene. "El Varón de Queché" however enters as a flash of color, dressed with plumes and costume fashioned according to a European imagination. The use of lighting, the pantomime, the stylized gestures of the two warriors who vie for honor and the love of the same woman (Yamanic played by Rosaro Zúñiga), the poses struck to suggest rank within the hierarchy of the Amerindian tribe, all demand that we appreciate the re-enactment as symbol, as ritual, as alien to the world in which Brasseur functions.

The breaks with the illusion of the play-within-the-play confirm the representational nature of the *Rabinal Achí* and bring into question the problematics of representation and of the analysis or transcription of a play. The audience identifies with Brasseur as spectator of the re-enactment, a stance that is ironically achieved by the slippage of illusion between the *Rabinal Achí* and the level of reality portrayed within the church. Bartolomé (Guillermo Gil), the Amerindian who has agreed to arrange the re-enactment, stands to the side and directs the "actors" who have come to perform the ritual. Hence we are quite aware that the "varón de Queché" and "varón de Rabinal" (Daniel Giménez Cacho and Eduardo Palomo respectively) are characters, but we are asked to suspend disbelief and accept the nameless actors who play

them as "real" in the same way we accept the illusion of Brasseur. When the "varón de Queché" faints in one scene, we are momentarily confused as to the nature of this action. Did the character or the actor faint? This ambiguity is essential to the climax of the play where ritual and representation collide.

Magaña's play *Los enemigos* recalls points of conflict, not assimilation. Originally the play evokes the internecine wars of Amerindian cultures and tribes. However, all times converge in Magaña's play as Pilmama predicts the already past event of the arrival of the conquistadors. And finally, Brasseur's presence also alludes to the French invasion of Mexico by Maximilian and Carlota. Once we take into consideration these conflicts--emphasized by the title itself--we understand the metaphor of sacrifice and cultural identity that Lorena Maza's production so beautifully captures.

Becky Boling  
*Carlton College*

*Lunes rojo* by Adam Guevara

*Lunes rojo* falls somewhere between the traditional play authored by an individual (Adam Guevara) and a collective creation (Teatro Estable). As Bruno Bert defines it, it is a "trabajo de sintetización que él [Guevara] realiza de las aportaciones colectivas de su elenco" (*Tiempo Libre* 22-28 de febrero 1990 p. 39). As in most independent theatre groups the objectives of the theatrical project are at least twofold: to present theatre that is provocative and experimental in form and polemical in content. *Lunes rojo* meets both of these criteria.

Teatro Estable's production in the Teatro Santa Catarina, March 14, 1990, creates a symbolic space, replete with objects such as rocking chairs and crates suspended from the ceiling. Anna Irene Meneses' staging evokes a Salvador Dalí dream scenario for the Pirandelian inspired script. Indeed the setting is quite appropriate to the surreal drama that unfolds on the stage given that the main character, Norma (performed by Silvia Mariscal), two hours before her death is forced to "act out" moments of her life in a theatre which happens to coincide spatially and temporally with the small Santa Catarina Theatre. The stage metaphorically comes to represent the limits between birth and death and suggests the atemporal, oneiric world of dream, imagination and fiction. One of the actors' entrances (stage left) is an oval, cavernous tunnel that is the thorax of a large, painted papier-maché representation of *La Belle-Dame*. Both Madonna and death, the hooded female figure looms over the stage extending her sleeved arms toward either side of the curved, arched entrance, alternately "giving birth" and receiving the various actors who pass through her embrace. Stage right a red curtain first acts as a backdrop to a room and second is pulled aside to reveal a rope trellis upon which are hung a variety of

costumes. Given the appearance of what suggests a backstage, the stage reveals itself as a theatre for the purposes of representation. With the exception of Norma's hospital bed, the stage is bare. Aside from a few props (a radio, guitar and notebook), the representation is created and dominated by the presence of the actors, their costumes and their gestures.

The play centers on the familiar conceit of "All the world's a stage." Actors go through several role changes, signaled by their wardrobe changes, changes in discursive style indicating class, and physical signatures hinting at individualized personalities or identities. For example, Andrés (Carlos Guízar), who is consistently a coward, periodically takes a drink from a flask always in his possession. The actor in and director of Norma's story (performed by Miguel Flores) at one point identifies himself as "el hombre que fuma," thus underscoring his gestural signature in the play. The boss of the company is the business suit which the actor wears and discards at the end in contempt for the role he has been assigned in Norma's re-enactment.

The play connects vignettes of Norma's life to issues of gender spanning from the 1920s to the present. "Lunes rojo" is the name of a 1922 socialist women's group which fought for universal suffrage and woman's right to own property and to control her own body. In addition, it recalls an adage that warns against marrying the woman who menstruates on Mondays for it is a sign that she will give birth only to female children. Norma's growing feminist consciousness leads her through various scenarios: as a pregnant single woman --grateful to the child's father who marries her out of manly obligation--, as a suffering daughter-in-law who can only give her husband a daughter, as a singer paraded before her husband's lecherous associates as object and pawn, and finally as a woman who now believes the feminist songs she sings and works in solidarity with the women workers of the company. It is due to this last stage of political engagement that Norma is raped and beaten to the point of death. The question then becomes why is there so much hatred of women by men that men can perform such violence against them.

The play-within-the-play is an appropriate metaphor for a discussion of a woman's place in society since it underscores two aspects about society and gender. First, it suggests that we are assigned roles by society's script. Along with the role, masculine or feminine, are assigned a gamut of props and characteristics and a number of activities. Thus, these roles are shown to be learned, not "natural," and we assume these roles through rehearsal and representation.

Second, in spite of the strong presence of author/director Adam Guevara, the very nature of Teatro Estable draws upon the collaborative creation of the actors in the group, working as an ensemble. The actors in *Lunes rojo* fulfill several different roles. And indeed, the play-within-the-play (the re-creation or re-enactment of Norma's life) is a work in process, a psychoanalysis performed through role-playing. And this is the hope for Norma and for society that the play offers. We create and re-create our roles. We can also

change them. In the course of the play, Norma realizes her own power to change the script directed by "el hombre que fuma." She simply puts off her death for another performance. A general rebellion takes place on stage. The actors who rape Norma no longer want to play the heavies and walk off stage. The actor who plays the boss who ordered the rape in order to give her a scare takes off his corporate coat and disdainfully throws it to the ground and exits. Roles can be altered. Hence through its modes of production and its own formal construction of theatre, Teatro Estable also comments on gender and power.

Becky Boling  
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*El suplicio del placer: "Dos"* by Sabina Berman

In addition to theatres like Teatro Julio Castillo devoted to major productions, Mexico City supports a large number of smaller theatres, a fact which allows the production of experimental, sometimes small-scale, drama. One such play space, Foro Ghandi, is located over a bookstore. On January 27th, a group of no more than six people in the Foro Ghandi put on several extremely short one act plays by Sabina Berman: "Dos" and "Tres" of the three part text of *El suplicio del placer* (1978) and a slapstick sketch called "Los dientes" by the same dramatist. Berman's *El suplicio del placer* are three pieces built around the same theme--gender relations in contemporary life. The characters are in each case Él and Ella and are at varying stages of either marriage or an affair. The common theme throughout however is the subtle combat that goes on beneath the surface.

"Dos" was played very effectively by the two actors (Aline Barón and Sergio Perera) as humorous and absurd. The mistress, who is almost always facing her mirror, has few lines of dialogue. The man, ostentatious and resentful, occupies the stage, gesticulating, berating the mistress and admiring himself. Berman gives only the slightest instruction in stage directions in the published version of the plays, leaving it to the actors and director (Gonzalo Blanco in this case) to follow the embedded directions and to invent around the stereotypes of the mistress and her sugar daddy. Indeed in this case, a distinctly '50s *ambience*, fed heavily by media imagery from the U. S., informs the *mise-en-scene*. The mistress, once in full costume, is in a platinum blonde wig, wearing a white 1950s style dress that cannot help but evoke the United States' sex kitten Marilyn Monroe. Such a connection was prepared by the music played before the scene, "Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend."

Although Berman definitely seeks an ironic resolution when she indicates that the finished product, his mistress, leaves Él completely "embobado"; that is, seduced by her shameless appearance, his discourse contradicts this. He

berates her continually, even ripping her dress and laying her down "bruscamente" as if it were a rape scene. Due to the possible ironic edge to Berman's script, this scene could be played several different ways, adopting one of several possible tones--from humorous to horrific. But this performance chose to play up the comic aspects, undercutting the discourse, which is not reliable anyway, and mitigating the suggested violence of the last scene. Actually the actress playing Ella never loses her composure and, although Él demands that she respond appropriately with pain when he insults her, laughter when he makes jokes, and wide-eyed amazement when he warns her, she follows his instructions "por labios afuera" so well that he looks like the idiot he is. Although Ella has fewer lines than Él, she seems either to be oblivious to him or to have complete control over him. He is in the end completely enthralled by her and unable to resist his temptations, at the same time that he abhors them.

I imagine that the point of producing these three sketches was the range of acting they allowed: from caricature, to dark absurdism, to slapstick comedy, the two actors showcased obviously different talents in each of the three skits. Thus, the experience was more an exercise in form than in content. However, the play does directly pertain to social mores of middle class Mexican families.

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### *La última diana* by Sergio Magaña

Concerned with a theatre rooted in the national culture and history, director Germán Castillo presented Sergio Magaña's play *La última diana* (with Angelina Peláez, Salvador Garcini, Alfredo Escolar and Juan Sahagún) in the Foro Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, in the Centro Cultural Universitario. In the program the director summarizes the pertinence of the play for the young theatre public of Latin America: "Aquí estamos, pues, latinoamericanos colgados del hambre y de la sangre, hijos de Sergio, tratando de alcanzar la mama portentosa de la vida." The performance I attended (February 24th) revolved around the hallucinations of a starved, abused prisoner just hours before his execution. Condemned to death by his own regiment, the lieutenant experiences episodes from his past and from his imagination. His crime as presented in the surreal play is not having fulfilled his oath as soldier, which is to obey and protect the recognized government and to enforce its law. The offenses, whether it be insurgency or theft, merit the same punishment--death. Since the lieutenant sees his own mother steal a leg of ham from the General's table and does not shoot her on the spot, he is charged with treason. Obviously the exaggeration of the case is to underscore the

fratricidal/matricidal/patricidal nature of civil war in Latin America, whether it be the National Guard in Nicaragua or the military during the "guerra sucia" in Argentina. Magaña's play suggests that at the base of such internal dissension and violence are hunger and greed.

Grotesquely the drama plays off the images of hunger. In the first moments of the play we find the prisoner alone trying to distract himself from the likelihood of his execution and perhaps suffering fantasies from his hunger. In addition, the soldier Fernando brings him his last supper, but threatens to eat it all. At this point others enter the cell--his mother, his sister with several officers, the General--all entering through an entrance stage left against a back wall recessed only enough to allow entrances and exits on either side as if it were one side of a corridor. The light changes, and the actors use slow motion in these transitional moments, unnatural movements that suggest they are only externalized images of the prisoner's mind. For this reason it is likely that the rest of the play is to be taken as fantasy. The prisoner, condemned because of his mother's hunger, sits and eats his last meal in front of her, not leaving her a crumb. Later, however, when the mother is imprisoned with her son and a starving priest, not only is she no longer hungry, but she pulls out "taquitos," especially prepared for her son and gives them to the priest. The theme of hunger becomes a *leit* motif in the production. The most significant revelation is that these "taquitos," which are "almost" pork, are actually made from the buttocks of the General which the prisoner's mother had cut off during a parade and then taken to her neighborhood and cooked. This road from hunger to cannibalism parallels the trajectory the son follows from duty to his mother or his regiment to matricide.

The mother is a broad comic character associated alternately and simultaneously with the prisoner's mother, his past, his origins among the humble, the "pueblo," the "chusma," hunger, and life. She is linked to the consequences of hunger: as "alcahueta" she sells her daughter and robs her son's dead body. Although the "taquitos" are not her son's flesh, her son is condemned for her acts. She is a completely floating sign in the play. She transgresses the illusion of the fourth wall and addresses the audience. As her son says, she has been executed hundreds of times but never dies, she is always present, she is "madre patria," she is life. And, as such, she is forced into many acts to survive.

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*Orinoco!* by Emilio Carballido

The Miami University Second Stage Theatre presented four performances of Emilio Carballido's two-act play *Orinoco!* in the Zimmerman experimental theatre December 7-10, 1989. All performances were in the English translation by Margaret Sayers Peden.

*Orinoco!* takes place on the Stella Maris river boat on the Orinoco River in Venezuela. The time period is the present. It is the story of two second-rate show girls on their way to an oil camp: Fifi is an optimist and Mina, a pessimist. Fifi is small, young and pretty. Mina is showing signs of aging and is overweight. The two women find themselves alone on the river boat except for one drunk deckhand who has thrown everyone else overboard, including the captain, in an effort to save Mina and Fifi from a rape attempt. The two women make an effort to steer the boat themselves, but to no avail. The play ends ambiguously; the boat is drifting. Mina is convinced that they are going nowhere, but Fifi concludes the play with a line from her favorite story ". . . the best is still to come."

Marni Gail Jones, a theatre graduate student, played Mina and Fifi was portrayed by Alice Shikina, a first-year student studying theatre and mass communications. They complemented each other well and each portrayed her character enthusiastically. Mina and Fifi were funny and likeable. The play was directed by Genevieve deVeer, a master's student in theatre. All three women attend Miami University of Ohio.

The river boat set, designed by Bear Barker, was convincingly constructed. Tracy Janis, head of costuming, selected superb costumes for Mina and Fifi's musical-rehearsal routine. They appeared in leotards with an abundance of brightly-colored feathers, projecting a bittersweet image that was particularly fitting for showing the contrasting characteristics of the optimist and pessimist. The singing and dancing were especially entertaining. The musical script included Venezuelan and Caribbean songs and music. The entire crew and actresses worked well together, giving an extremely successful performance of *Orinoco!*.

Thanks to a joint effort by the Department of Spanish and Portuguese, and the Department of Theatre, those people fortunate enough to attend the performance on Sunday, December 10 had the pleasant opportunity of meeting the playwright himself. He entertained questions, in English, from the audience and complimented and invited the two actresses to share the stage with him. Mr. Carballido spent three days in Oxford where he gave a taped, television interview and visited with faculty and graduate students in Spanish and in theatre.

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*Orinoco*, Emilio Carballido. Miami University Second Stage Theatre.