

## The Mexican Stage in the Fall of 1971

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No single event on the order of the "Festival nacional de teatro universitario" of the previous season can be reported for the fall of 1971.<sup>1</sup> However, in spite of individual voices of doom of the legitimate stage, customarily heard all over the world, Mexican theatre appeared very much alive to this observer during the past October/November. The daily *cartelera teatral* hardly ever showed less than twenty items and even seeing plays nightly, all over town, one could hardly see the entire changing repertoire.

Already at first sight the Mexican stage appears much less commercial than, for instance, the Argentine. The non-commercial sector carries much weight and has strong links with the commercial theatre. The former is experimental, didactic, and amateur theatre, often of a very high level. It enjoys substantial public support and serves to varied audiences, in the capital and beyond, at low cost, a fare both national and cosmopolitan.

The three main arms of the non-commercial theatre are the University (UNAM), Bellas Artes (INBA), as may be expected, and the Seguro Social (IMSS). The latter's clinical and social services are manifest, but its cultural impact is not sufficiently known abroad. In addition to these three, other lesser entities, such as schools, the Acción Cultural y Social of the Federal District, and others show a lively interest in the theatrical arts.

The Universidad Nacional Autónoma has a theatre on Chapultepec Avenue; it also uses the Casa del Lago, in the Park, and the Foro Isabelino, on Sullivan Street. There, the continued success of *Juegos de masacre*, by Ionesco, well staged by Hector Azar, delayed considerably Lorca's *Mariana Pineda*, projected to follow the same fall.<sup>2</sup> Weekend performances of *Cartas de amor de una monja portuguesa* and *Escorial*, by Ghelderode, in the Casa del Lago, seemed less successful. As a matter of fact, this was the only poorly attended performance of my stay. A number of student groups were active at UNAM, one of them pro-

ducing Arrabal's *Fando y Lis*. Besides, the theatre is an academic discipline; the dramatist and critic, Carlos Solórzano, offers courses and seminars.

The Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes has a long tradition of fostering the theatre and sponsoring dramatic events, under the leadership of Mexico's best stage writers. Performances are both in the old but still striking Palacio de Bellas Artes, by the Alameda, and two units in the Bosque de Chapultepec, behind the Auditorium. Of the INBA-related fall '71 repertoire, there should be mentioned, among others, a series of Spanish zarzuelas, the traditional November fare of Zorrilla's *Don Juan*, in three versions—one of them in a third location, and perhaps the season's most interesting *estreno*, Vicente Leñero's *El juicio*. Based on the stenographic record of the trial of President Obregón's assassin, it is a fine example of this upcoming writer's epic theatre, which merits a special study. Directed by Ignacio Retes, it was well received by capacity audiences at the Teatro Orientación. Likewise under INBA auspices was Rafael Solana's reading of his own works, including the little-known playlet *Tres desenlaces*.

The national social security system, Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social, owns forty theatres in twenty states and the Federal District; among them eight are outdoors. These theatres seat three to eight hundred persons each—altogether 18,000 throughout the country. Eight theatres, with over 5,000 seats, are in Mexico City itself, from Teatro Hidalgo and Teatro Reforma, on the city's axis, through Teatro Xola in a middle-class residential sector, to those in outlying proletarian areas. These facilities are available both to professional companies and amateur groups. The latter are encouraged to participate in regional and national contests.<sup>3</sup> Successful groups and plays pass on to other IMSS theatres, a system which provides both variety and long runs. Weekend performances are usually free and well attended, but so are the weekday ones in the regular price range.<sup>4</sup> Teatro Xola is sold out at times, as I had to find out. Not included in the preceding enumeration are small outdoor facilities, which I saw at numerous IMSS centers in adjacent towns. Next to clinics, libraries, pools and ball fields, one usually sees open air theatres which obviously are more commonly used for movies and meetings than for the legitimate stage. But they are there and offer great promise of cultural diffusion.

The repertoire of the Seguro Social theatres, presented by both professional and amateur companies in the fall of 1971, was indeed varied. Historically, it ranged from the anonymous authors of early Hispanic farces to Wilberto Cantón, of México's present middle generation of dramatic writers, and geographically from Russia to South America.

The aficionado group of the Hidalgo Center imbued their performance of *Farsas por la justicia* (*Farsa y justicia del señor Corregidor* and *Farsa de Maese Pedro Pathelin*) with the spirit of the pre-Lope theater, in the setting of IMSS mid-twentieth century or even more recent structures. I was fortunate in seeing Fernando Calderón's *A ninguna de las tres* at the Santa Fe center, a working class development at the southwestern limit of the Federal District, overlooking the city. There, on a Sunday afternoon the Tepeyac ensemble presented the transitional comedy by the early Mexican romanticist, laid in the period of 1830. The large, predominantly young audience obviously enjoyed this take-off on

Bretón de los Herreros with its "anti-extranjerizante" slant. Theatre-going seemed to be a very natural part of the weekend life for the youthful and middle-age couples, as well as adolescents there. ("Viernes y sábados 19:00 hrs. Domingos 17:00. Entrada libre.")

Likewise amateurs were the performers of *La visión de los vencidos*, by M. L. Portillo and P. Salinas, a very modern attempt at choral dramatics reflecting, in excellent taste, the Aztec concept of the conquest. At the Tepeyac center, it seemed to impress the descendants of victors and vanquished. Of a very different type was *Y la mujer hizo al hombre* and also its audience. Playing nightly for over six months at Teatro Hidalgo, the work of Alejandro Galindo—successful director of films—drew an elegant public, but although echoing a Revolutionary anecdote and the Beauty and Beast theme in the civilizing of a rude warlord, it had an unmistakable soap opera flavor. I was unable to see Wilberto Cantón's *Los malditos*, out of reach then at an Estado de México center, and the premiere of Salvador Novo's new set of *Diálogos* was postponed beyond my departure. To judge from earlier series, these sophisticated confrontations were to delight the intellectuals gravitating to the Xola Theater.

*Las monjas*, by Eduardo Manet, a Cuban living in France, ran into difficulties at Teatro Reforma but was given another chance in being offered gratis by the four professionals under the direction of Hector Mendoza. The casting of three would-be nuns with male actors—apparently not done in Europe—made this allegory on violence and abuse of intellect too way-out for the sparse audience, which, however, was quite willing to discuss the play with the actors after the curtain fell. Not an unhealthy phenomenon, to be sure!

An excellent team presented the British *Hogar*, by David Storey, which was universally acclaimed and ran at the Xola and elsewhere. The veteran Carlos Ancira headed the professionals portraying the wacky English characters of this play. The same actor, single-handed, was responsible for the triumph of *Diario de un loco*. The staging of the Gogol narrative (with allusions to early nineteenth-century Spain) as a full-length monologue performance was a veritable tour de force. It was directed by Alexandro Jodorowsky, originally of Chile, now of the world, who was responsible for a number of other Mexican ventures of the year, including a Strindberg adaptation. Ancira, as Gogol's madman, captivated the audience to the very end. Interestingly enough, *The Inspector*, by the Russian novelist and dramatist, also made the rounds in the IMSS theaters in the fall of 1971.

At the Teatro Santo Domingo, adjacent to the church of the same name, on Mexico City's most purely colonial Plaza Santo Domingo, a group sponsored by the Federal District government offered Rafael's Solana's charming *Debiera haber obispas*. This tongue-in-cheek view of small-town gossip, centered on the rectory, drew a large heterogeneous audience, from babes in arm to the aged. I was one of many standing up.

The commercial theatre showed its usual complement of musicals and reviews, some quite successful. Also some "adult" shows, twice nightly, and a couple of light comedies. Three earnest attempts to offer good theatre commercially deserve special mention: Teatro V. Fabregas presented Guilherme Figue-

reido's *Un dios durmió en mi casa*. The Brazilian author's new version of the Amphitryon theme, laid in old Greece, was clever and attractively staged but the acting not convincing enough to draw the crowds necessary to fill the large theatre. At the smaller Teatro Principal, *Flor de huevo* maintained itself for some time, in spite of the difficult subject of the British play, known elsewhere under the title *Joe Egg*. Peter Nichols dramatized the problem of a couple with a spastic child. Very well acted, with Pilar Pellicer as the mother, the work also provoked a lively discussion between the actors and the audience afterwards. Of a different nature was the success of Ricardo Talesnik's *La fiaca*, brought in from Argentina by Carlos Gorostiza. Successful everywhere, it made the people roar with laughter at the 1300th performance, which I witnessed. Afterwards it merely moved from the Teatro Sullivan to another location. While labeled "obra grotesca tragicómica," it is only outwardly a farce and the spectators may not be consciously aware of the protagonist's revolt against the nine-to-five rat-race, a comical rebellion which is catching.

Other events, off-stage, worth mention were: The awarding of the "Magda Donato Prize" of 25,000 pesos to Luisa Josefina Hernández, noted practitioner and exegete of the theatre. Also, the return of Rodolfo Usigli from Oslo. After a successful diplomatic career, representing Mexico in the Near East and Scandinavia, the man considered the creator of the modern Mexican theatre has retired from public service and has come back home. On October 28, he lectured at the Seminario de Cultura Mexicana on "Imagen y prisma de México." He was also one of the candidates for the Premio Nacional de Literatura for 1971. The prize, never awarded a dramatist, went to a historian. Usigli, after nearly fifty plays—not to speak of translations, adaptations and criticism—seems full of plans. A fragment of a new play he read to me appears most promising. It is quite disturbing, therefore, that his two latest works, though published, have not yet been staged—*Los viejos* and *El gran circo del mundo*.<sup>5</sup> One may wonder whether the latter, probably inspired by the Oppenheimer case and confronting Scientist and President, might be considered offensive to the country's Big Neighbor. It is a powerful play.

In conclusion, a number of general observations appear pertinent. One of them is the lack of compartmentalization of the arts in Mexico. Theatre people and subjects are not exclusively of the theatre. We noted Vicente Leñero turning from the narrative to the stage; José Agustín, successful in other genres, launched a good film *Sé quien eres*. . . . The festival celebrating forty years of Mexican sound movies, in the fall of 1971, also revealed links between stage and screen. Of course, there are strong ties between higher education and the theatre, as well as between publishing at all levels and the stage. Carballido and Solórzano, for instance, teach, as did Usigli and Hernández in the past, and all publish outside their specialty. Another subject of interest is price structure and theatre attendance. Tickets to theatrical performances sell at prices ranging from ten to twenty-five pesos, occasionally for less, especially to students, rarely for more. In other words, even if one does not wish to wait for a free show, at one to two dollars a seat, good theatre is within reach of a considerable segment of Mexico's urban population, given the country's wage-price structure. Obviously, this

accounts for the attendance at theatrical events by people from all walks of life, in spite of the low-cost competition from films. (Movie prices have been artificially pegged by the government at four *pesos*—32 cents—with some permitted exceptions. However, even four *pesos* are probably too much for the vast number of rural poor.) Finally, turning to publishing, it is still difficult to obtain printed versions of dramatic works, as it is in other countries. If published, they often appear before staging and, if successful, soon become unavailable. Nevertheless, it should be noted that recently several Mexican publishers have been daring enough to edit more theatre. Novarro, Finisterre, and Mortiz must be commended for it. Of course, the continuation, in 1970, of *Teatro mexicano del siglo XX*, by Fondo de Cultura Económica, to a fourth and fifth volume afforded a convenient and readily available anthology of the Mexican stage in the fifties and sixties, with all the positive and negative aspects of selective compilations.<sup>6</sup>

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## Notes

1. Listed by John Sarnacki in *Latin American Theatre Review*, 4/2 (Spring 1971), 76-77.
2. These were not the only Ionesco and Lorca items of the season.
3. See *Latin American Theatre Review*, 4/2 (Spring 1971), 74-75 (Sarnacki).
4. Information furnished by Alfredo Robledo, Secretary General of the Unión Nacional de Autores Mexicanos.
5. *Cuadernos Americanos*, 1969 and Finisterre, 1971 (Colección de teatro hispanoamericano), Mexico.
6. Nos. 98 and 99 of the series "Letras mexicanas," Selección, prólogo y notas de Antonio Magaña Esquivel. The first three volumes were Nos. 25, 26, and 27 of the Series.