



From left to right: Héctor Martínez, Monica Miguel, Irma Lozano, Héctor Salinas and Antonio Medellín in Hugo Argüelles' *Los cuervos están de luto*.

Mexican Theatre in Performance: 1983 and 1984

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Theatre in performance in Mexico is best characterized by its eclecticism. It would seem that there is something for every age group, taste, and philosophical bias. Having spent several weeks attending theatre in Mexico City during the last two years, I offer the reader my observations on Mexican theatre in performance.

Let me begin by noting that the Mexican stage tends to be dominated by non-Mexican works—particularly non-Hispanic works. For example, professional theatre in Mexico City during the period from June 11, 1984 through June 27, 1984 offered the theatregoer the following foreign and domestic fare: James Kirkwood, *P.D. Tu gato ha muerto*; Lillian Hellman, *La loba*; Robert Thomas, *Trampa para un hombre solo*; *Jesucristo superestrella*; David Antone, *José el soñador*; Peter Shaffer, *Amadeus*; *Vaselina*; Robert Harwood, *El vestidor*; Beth Henley, *Crímenes del corazón*; Henrik Ibsen, *Hedda Gabler*; Michael Frayn, *No hagan ruido*; Jean Racine, *Andromaca*; Emile Zolá, *Bestias humanas*; Brothers Grimm, *Hansel y Gretel*; *La Cencienta* (musical comedy); Euripides, *Electra*; Olga Harmony, *La ley de Creón*; Emilio Carballido, *Te juro Juana que tengo ganas*; Olivia de Montelongo, *Canto verde*; Rafael Degar (one of those who last year created *Euridice*), *Antídoto* (advertised as “teatro de movimiento con más caras”—“ciencia-ficción”); *Kuman*; *Chao*; Gabriel Araut, *Si todos los hombres del mundo*; *Celomaniacos*; Héctor Mendoza, *Noche decisiva en la vida sentimental de Eva Iriarte*; *Boeing Boeing*; Federico S. Inclán, *Don Quijote murió del corazón*; José Antonio Závala y Hugo Macías, *Las modelos de Chachita*; A. Oceransky, *Acto de amor*; *Tovarich*; Alfonso Paso, *La loca locura de amar*; Alejandro Jodorosky, *El juego que todos jugamos*; Felipe Santander, *El extensionista*; Malu Huacuja, *Historia de amor en síntesis*; *Dos tandas por un boleto* (from cerca 1927); José González Dávila, *Los niños prohibidos*; Ricardo Talesnik, *La faca*; and Manuel Puig, *El beso de la mujer araña*.

In addition, a number of plays were produced at and sponsored by the universities. In this group one found the following: Odon von Horvath, *La presa*; Oscar Liera, *Repaso de indulgencias*; Boris Vian, *Los forjadores de imperio*; Jean Genet, *Las criadas*; Dario Fo, *Muerte accidental de un anarquista*; Juan Tovar, *Manuscrito encontrado en Zaragoza*; *El juicio final* (“expresión sintética de la obra de José de Jesús Martínez”); *Novedad de la patria* (“espectáculo mínimo en épica sordina basado en *La suave patria* de Ramón López Velarde”); J. M. Tebelak and S. Schwartz, *Godspell*; and Mario Benedetti, *Ida y vuelta*.

In the above lists, I have omitted the obviously burlesque theatre which

seems to be plentiful in Mexico. Indeed, in an interview with Roberto Ramírez S., actor Sergio Bustamente bemoans the popularity of such theatre and believes actors should fight against “el teatro que está acaparado por el mal gusto, o sea por el llamado vodevil u obras picarescas que resultan tan obscenas.” Further, he suggests that “hay que utilizar bien el intelecto para presentar situaciones cómicas con sutileza, con cierta picardía, pero sin ofender al público” (“Debe hacerse”)—something which apparently is not happening on the Mexican stage as often as he would like. Similarly, Ethel Krauze applauds *Noche decisiva en la vida sentimental de Eva Triarte* for being a change from “el teatro que se ha venido haciendo en México—desde el vodevil, a la comedia lépera, a las malas traducciones de malos autores extranjeros.”

Nevertheless, what is apparent is the lack of continuity and longevity of plays in performance. *El beso de la mujer araña* is the only work which was produced during both years, although even this performance was not uninterrupted since it was on tour in the interim. When one considers the extended performances of Broadway plays, the life of a play in Mexico would seem particularly ephemeral. Indeed, much is made of works which have had 100 or more performances, although in 1984 only the following plays were billed according to duration: *Las modelos de Chachita* (250 performances), *Electra* (100 performances), *El beso de la mujer araña* (“más de un año de éxito”), *Boeing, Boeing* (100 performances), *Crímenes del corazón* (100 performances), *El extensionista* (more than 1,900 performances), *Canto verde* (200 performances).

What does seem evident, however, is that there is considerable interest in the theatre in Mexico. The majority of the works listed were not sponsored by either the INBA or the IMSS (although this critic would venture to say that many of the better works were). The number of plays which managed to survive for some period of time certainly suggests that the public is attending theatre (or that the Mexican stage is blessed with very generous patrons), although surely the theatres and actors cannot survive easily when tickets are priced at an average of \$2 U.S. By the same token, however, this very low price makes theatre accessible to people in Mexico in a way it seldom is in the United States (consider the price of a Broadway ticket). At the same time and probably significantly, this critic noticed a particularly keen interest in the theatre on the part of the press. During the time I was in Mexico, the *Excelsior* carried at least one article (review or interview) on theatre nearly every day. Nevertheless, and paradoxically, the plays I saw were generally poorly attended when I was there (usually week nights rather than weekends, which may account for the lack of audience).

The outstanding play of the 1984 season, as in 1983, was definitely Manuel Puig's *El beso de la mujer araña*. All that I said about it last year is equally valid this year: it is well written, well performed, and well received by the Mexican audience (69-71). Of the other works staged, apparently the box office success of 1984 was also Argentine—Ricardo Talesnik's *La fiaca*, at the Teatro Lírico. The work was so successful in fact that I was unable to get tickets in April. When I did attend in May, seats were sold out, and the audience appeared to love every minute of it. This is particularly relevant since the work survived (economically) without the support of the INBA, SEP,

or IMSS (institutions which provide the financial backing for many of the plays staged in Mexico).

In Mexico City, the lead of *La fiaca* was played by Sergio Corona, who was most competent, as were all the actors. In a style reminiscent of Chaplin, Corona's Néstor was an appealing social misfit who invites audience identification because of his awkward candor. Corona is to be particularly commended for his timing, so important in comedy, and here impeccable. The play centers on a man who has *fiaca*, a desire to avoid work and the tedium of the everyday work life. Like much Spanish-American theatre being written and performed today, the main theme of *La fiaca* is language itself. The title word, *fiaca*, is the label given to the main character's "illness," a disease even the other characters do not understand. Nevertheless, as testimony to the influence of art over life, and as a validation of the popularity of the work, *la fiaca* has become a common expression in Mexico as well as in Argentina.

La fiaca posits that language can create realities, as evidenced by the fact that the use of the word results in the creation/recognition of a psychological state, one which has no doubt always existed but one for which we had no name and thus tended to deny—the lack of desire to work and continue in our everyday, contemporary drudgery. Once the word is coined, the Talesnik work obliquely suggests, we can begin to understand the emotional state. Significantly, however, only the audience comprehends this, for the characters (with perhaps minor exceptions) never do quite understand Néstor's problem. In this respect the play adeptly creates a *dédoublement* in the spectator, for we understand Néstor's plight (thus identifying with his role), but at the same time we also see ourselves in the other characters on stage who do not comprehend his *fiaca*.

Furthermore, *La fiaca* shows us that all communication is not verbal. The play opens without words, but communication takes place via gestures and routine, everyday actions. Language here would be superfluous. We already understand what is happening; actions do "speak" louder than words in this case. And, these actions are humorous because of what Henri Bergson would label the rigidity of the characters who go through their daily actions with no thought, no awareness of what they do (again, not unlike us all). The amusement the characters evoke, however, is equally aimed towards ourselves. Similarly, this humor, a product of rigidity, is further linked to language at the beginning of the second act, when Jauregui spurts out an entire speech, completely memorized, with no pauses, and with no significance. The character has learned his lines, but the words are meaningless to him because they are automatic, rigid sounds. When interrupted, he must begin again in order to regurgitate the whole. Thus, *La fiaca* demonstrates that we are locked into rigidity in both our language and our actions, as it provides a forum for laughter, but laughter in the style suggested by Bergson—a socially redeeming laughter.

Doubtlessly, the play was enjoyed even more by the Mexican audience due to the fact that the Argentine references were converted to allusions to Mexican language, customs, history. For example, we heard "pinche," a list of Mexican foods and Mexican sights, "te estoy hablando chihuahua," etc.

One even wondered, in fact, how many of the audience were aware that *La fiaca* is not a Mexican play.

The most technically innovative play I saw during the two seasons was *Noche decisiva en la vida sentimental de Eva Iriarte* by Héctor Mendoza, performed at the Teatro del Bosque by the Compañía Nacional de Teatro of the INBA. Unfortunately, like so many other works, *Noche* also played to a mostly empty auditorium the night I attended. As indicated in the program, the play is an attempt to discover the psychological impulses that motivate us to reach the decisions we reach. The play is framed by an excursion to celebrate Eva's birthday. She and her husband return to the woods where they first made love eight years ago. While he virtually rapes her, we follow the meandering of her mind as she relives yet another scene at the home of her friend, Alicia, a scene which suggests a more metaphoric, intellectual "rape" of the mind.

Technically, the staging is inventive as it combines film with theatre. The play opens with a film projected onto a scrim (the same transparent screen which will later mark the scenes which occur in Eva's mind). The film visually and dramatically "takes us into" the play. It begins with the image of a car as it is being driven down a country road; we are on the outside looking in. Then, via the film, we are taken inside the car and ride with the passengers (Eva and her husband). And, finally, again via the film, we are placed in Eva's position; we see things from inside the car as if we were the character. Then, the film ends, the curtain rises, the car drives onto the stage, and what had been "art" becomes "reality" (theatrical presence, at least), and we begin the same process of *acercamiento* all over again: first outside as spectator, but gradually moving into Eva's mind as the action of the play moves behind the scrim curtain to represent the images of her mind. But, even this fictional world still alternates with cinematographic projections onto the scrim screen—projections which presumably represent yet another facet of reality/fantasy. The performance ends as it began, with a cinematic presentation which takes us "out of" Eva's mind and returns us to our position of distanced spectator as the car drives away. Throughout, Eva has insisted that she feels split in two, an emotional state visually dramatized via the staging technique, for we surely experience this same division (inside/outside, dream/reality).

In many ways the staging of *Noche* accomplishes what the staging of Vargas Llosa's *La señorita de Tacna* attempted in 1983.¹ Both plays set the theatre within the mind (a concept which surely deserves an entire study), and both try to show how this affects and in some sense creates the "theatre" of our daily lives, our "reality." The staging of the Vargas Llosa work failed precisely because the blending of reality and fantasy was too complete. Although the written text does separate the two levels so that the reader knows where one ends and the other begins, the two merged too completely on the stage, leaving the spectator perplexed and bewildered. We know reality and fantasy mingle at some indistinguishable point; theoretically theatre should demonstrate this for us but not lose us in its attempts to make that point. The staging of *Noche* dramatized the merging of fantasy and reality, but it separated them just enough for us to understand that they were two, just enough for the audience to be able to understand where one began and the other ended (or perhaps where they meet). Not all critics agree with me,

however. In fact, Ethel Krauze's review of the play states unequivocally, "Esa fantasmagoría de Eva . . . debe ser legible para el espectador, y no lo es. . . . El caos debe pertenecer al personaje, no al espectador, que necesita tener los hilos en la mano para viajar en la emotividad de Eva sin perderse en su propio caos." At the same time she finds the first and last scenes the best, "cuando estamos en el terreno de los sucesos reales."

I would be inclined, however, to agree with Krauze's evaluation of the acting of the play: "La actuación lleva un mismo tono semiamanerado, semiexagerado entre burla y melodrama que llega a irritar por momentos." I would add only that perhaps the tendency towards melodrama is justifiable in view of the fact that the action takes place in the mind.

Thematically, *Noche* focuses on the psychological processes which cause us to alter our external reality. At the same time, however, its subthemes center again on language and theatre (the theatre of the mind and the metaphoric theatre—play acting—of our everyday lives). The curtain rises to darkness and voices; like Eva we cannot "see" very well. Much of the dialogue emphasizes the triteness of our linguistic attempts at communication or even our inherent inability to communicate anything significant via language. In the end, Eva's husband never does understand why she has decided to leave him, and the audience is left to wonder if she really will divorce him or if this declaration is just more empty language.

The play was definitely one of the highlights of the season. As Krauze has observed, "La idea es excelente, tremendamente ambiciosa, y ponerla en escena significa un arduo reto." I would agree wholeheartedly.

Far less successful for this critic was Federico S. Inclán's *Don Quijote murió*



Sonia Furio and Alberto Celarie in Emilio Carballido's *Te juro Juana que tengo ganas*.

del corazón, produced at the Teatro Ciudadela by the dramatist's son, Federico Schroeder. The leading role was played by Sergio Klainer. The night I attended the public was nearly nonexistent (some 20 to 30 people), but according to *Excelsior* the theatre had been full just a few nights before (''La Academia''). Significantly, too, the ticket price here was almost double that of other plays in Mexico (500 pesos rather than the usual 200 or 300).

The idea on which the play is based is a good one: a present day Alonso Quijano has read and believed in *Don Quijote*. He wishes to live as his hero did and as a result, is committed to a mental institution. There he eventually convinces the doctor he is Sancho Panza, and the nurses and workers learn to love him and eventually mourn his death. The play begins at the end, when Alonso is dying, and the workers and doctors grieve. The play then goes back chronologically to tell his story. The idea behind the play has promise; many of the monologues were philosophical and profound. Unfortunately, dramatic tension worthy of a climax was established right from the opening lines of the play and could not be sustained. The performance demanded far too much emotion from the audience too early. Had the performance progressed more slowly (in emotional terms) towards a climax and given the audience more of an opportunity to identify with Alonso rather than demanding such an intense emotional reaction right from the beginning, the play would have been far more successful. Because the roles were overacted, the entire performance exuded an aura of melodrama.

My other disappointment with the performance is related to the gratuitous eroticism. The play opened with the institutional workers (all female) mopping the floor and splashing each other in an erotically suggestive manner. Later, approximately half way through the first act, one of the female workers bared her breasts as she placed herself upon a cross at the head of Alonso's bed. In neither case did the eroticism seem thematic, purposeful, or necessary, but rather, gratuitous at best, degrading at worst.

Finally, I also had the opportunity to attend Emilio Carballido's *Te juro Juana que tengo ganas* at the Teatro Tepeyac, which formed part of the Ciclo de Teatro Mexicano Contemporáneo sponsored by IMSS and INBA, and which played to a half-full house the night I attended. The play is an amusing comedy and generally well known, having been performed for the first time as early as 1966. The role of Inesita was particularly well performed by Estela Serret, as was the role of Serafina by Socorro Avelar. The plot involves an almost renaissance style restoration of order to the chaos which love and sensuality have already created before the start of the action. Once again, one of the themes is language and rhetoric as the play continually returns to the problem of the conjugation of *abolir* and whether or not it is an irregular verb.

This particular staging of the play was enhanced by the addition of the *albañiles* who are not part of the original text as I know it.² Like so many of the plays currently staged in Mexico, *Te juro Juana* used no curtain; the set was in place and visible as the audience entered the theatre. After the first call, the *albañiles* entered on stage and began dressing for their roles. They worked and cavorted until the play actually began and remained on stage or nearby throughout the performance. In many ways they provided a mirror reflection of the audience itself, since we watched them watching the action of the play,

and presumably they showed us what our reactions should be. Indeed, a clever addition to the play.

Since in both years I have been able to attend only a small portion of all the plays being staged in Mexico City, I am somewhat hesitant to draw any general conclusions. However, based on what I have seen and what is being offered, there can be little doubt that there is an appreciation of theatre in Mexico even if that interest is not always apparent in the number of spectators in the auditorium. As I have noted, two of the dominant themes of the plays I saw seem to be language and theatre itself. Sets are being simplified—*El beso* used only two beds, chairs, and a box or two, *Te juro Juana* used merely the bare outlines, almost a sketch, of a set, and *La señorita*'s set included little more than a few tables and chairs. Casts are generally small (with the notable exception of last year's *Moctezuma II* by Magaña). Both of these facts may be due to economic necessity,³ but they may equally well reflect thematic concerns—playwrights and producers seem to favor the impressionistic approach and the use of synecdoche. At the same time significant innovation is being added to staging: new media are being used (e.g. film), and techniques are less predictable (*Don Quijote* cleverly increased the lighting when the action was intended to be seen as real rather than imagined); *Beso* used the public address system to evoke the ubiquitous presence of the prison officials). Actors seem to be working harder on stage as evidenced in *La señorita* when the old, decrepit Mamaé transformed into the young Elvira before our very eyes. Perhaps even more importantly, theatre in Mexico is not limited to the capital; works which are successful in Mexico City are generally taken on tour, sooner or later, through the provinces. Nevertheless, there would still seem to be at least some domination of the theatrical world by foreign works, due perhaps to the public's attitude that foreign must be better. As actor Salvador Sánchez has noted, "Existe una buena parte del público que soslaya las obras mexicanas, y lo mismo le hace al teatro se lo repiten al cine, prefieren la producción del exterior" (Ayala).

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Notes

1. For my review of *La señorita de Tacna* see "The Spring 1983 Theatre Season in Mexico."

2. See for example the Editores Mexicanos Unidos edition of 1983 (5th edition) and/or the version published in *La Palabra y el Hombre*, both of which also have three acts rather than the two produced at the Teatro Tepeyac.

3. Rafael Banquells notes, "Hacer teatro en México, con obras de calidad, actualmente requiere un gran esfuerzo y mucha inversión. Los tiempos han cambiado desde los años cincuenta . . . entonces, con poco dinero se montaba una obra, y ahora escenificar la pieza 'Todo se vale,' nos costará catorce millones de pesos" (Ramírez S., "Hacer buen teatro").

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Gonzalo Vega and Héctor Gómez in *El beso de la mujer araña* by Manuel Puig.