

## Usigli Honored at Miami University

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Born in 1905 in Mexico City, five years before the revolution, he was the youngest of four children of European immigrants, of a father who was born in Alexandria, Egypt by Italian parents and of a mother who was Austro-Hungarian, born in Poland. He started working at an early age due to the death of his father, leaving elementary school after the fifth-grade. Although he later attended night-school to finish his formal education, his greatest teachers were the books of the public library. In one of the country's great ironies, although he was one of the most prolific and creative intellectuals of Mexico, the man who established Mexican cultural identity on the Mexican stage, Rodolfo Usigli was neither of Mexican descent nor university-educated.

As part of the year-long Latin American Celebration at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, a week of activities celebrating the life and work of the "Apostle of Mexican Drama," Rodolfo Usigli, culminated in the dedication of his personal archives in the University Libraries' Special Collections on Saturday, November 16, 1996. Alejandro Usigli, the playwright's son and literary executor, attended the celebration and presentation of the collection. He attributed the realization of the dream of sharing the artistic and intellectual legacy of his father to 14 years of persistence on the part of Ramón Layera, professor of Spanish at Miami University. As a scholar of Usigli's work, Layera developed a friendship with Alejandro Usigli many years ago. Upon coming to Miami University from the University of Texas-Austin, Layera sought support from the University and Miami alumni for the purchase of the collection. His persistent requests, described by Associate Dean of Arts and Sciences Reed Anderson as impossible to deny, resulted in a generous endowment from Miami alumni Mr. and Mrs. Phelps Woods, a donation which finally brought the Usigli collection to Oxford, Ohio.

The collection is, according to the library, "the definitive research collection relating to Usigli's life and career." The archive contains handwritten and typed drafts of original plays by Usigli and his translations

of works by other authors, photographs, books, playbills and posters of his plays, awards, newspaper and magazine articles, memorabilia, and correspondence, including letters to and from playwright George Bernard Shaw. Much of the material has never before been published or investigated by scholars.

The dedication also included a keynote address by Dr. Frank Dauster, professor emeritus of Spanish at Rutgers University and noted scholar of Latin American theatre. The address, entitled "The Construction of Mexico's Cultural Identity Through the Dramatic Arts," described Mexico and Mexican theatre at a crossroads in the early 20th century. At this critical moment in Mexican history, Rodolfo Usigli, daring to say what no one else would, created a counter cultural identity against the "official history" of Mexico as established in 1917 by the victors of the Mexican Revolution. He created a theatre that represented a Mexico with national characteristics, a critical theatre that would assault institutionalism in Mexico head-on in an effort to understand Mexico more profoundly by revealing the myths of history in Mexican society. As a result of his three *Corona* plays dealing with crucial moments in Mexican history, his "impolitical" comedies which were actually savage attacks on the establishment, and many other works, Rodolfo Usigli redefined the concept of cultural identity in Mexico. His legacy is seen even now as new playwrights continue to take on the themes of ethnic identity, pre-hispanic history, and the relationship of Mexico with the United States in terms of borders.

In addition to the dedication of the Usigli Collection in Miami University's King Library Special Collections, a large crowd of faculty and students attended an International Symposium entitled "Understanding Mexico's Cultural Identity Through the Dramatic Arts" on Friday, November 15. The speakers included Peter Beardsell of the Department of Spanish at the University of Hull in England, Kirsten F. Nigro of the Department of Spanish at the University of Cincinnati and Altman Distinguished Teaching Professor in the Humanities at Miami University, Sandra M. Cypess of the University of Maryland, and Alejandro Usigli of Mexico City. The moderator was Frank Dauster of Rutgers University.

Nigro opened the symposium with a discussion in which she addressed the idea of cultural identity and its link to history. According to Nigro, the Revolution of 1910 had everything to do with who Mexicans are now. It had as one of its official tasks to define Mexicans and Mexican society in the arts and education. Through the Revolution, Mexico rebuilt its cultural identity and its history. This idea of creating a cultural identity and nation-building is closely tied to the dramatic arts. According to Nigro, theatre

is not so much as a history lesson as a lesson in meanings and interpretations. As a playwright, Rodolfo Usigli was obsessed with history, wanting to understand Mexico's present through its past and wanting to make history by establishing a theatrical tradition in Mexico that reflected what it is to be Mexican. His success in both endeavors is seen in one of his most famous plays *The Impostor*, a play passionately concerned with Mexican history and its consequences.

Peter Beardsell, author of *A Theatre for Cannibals: Rodolfo Usigli and the Mexican Stage*, addressed the important question of whether Mexican dramatists should explore the essence of their national identity by focusing on indigenous traits and by excluding cultural influences from the United States and Europe or whether national playwrights should be open to foreign influences in order to represent more faithfully the hybrid culture of Mexico. Generally the self-identity is dependent on one's relations with others, and Usigli introduced his country's relationship with the United States through the contrast of the American professor Oliver Bolton with Mexican professor César Rubio in the play *The Impostor*. According to Beardsell, one of Bolton's main functions in the work is to show how events in the US have repercussions in Mexican society and its political system. Beardsell also discussed Usigli's legacy through such new playwrights as Juan Tovar and Hugo Salcedo in whose works the mix of myths and reality from the indigenous past impinges on the present, including on the border relationship that Mexico has with the US, resulting in the discovery of identity on both the individual and national level.

Sandra Cypess' address regarding ethnicity, gender, and nationalism concerned "las voces acalladas" of Mexican theatre. She credits Usigli for opening up the realm of theatre to those who had not previously been heard, particularly women and the indigenous population. In *Corona de fuego*, for example, which concerns the conquest of Mexico by the Spanish, Cuauhtémoc and la Malinche are credited as being the father and mother of the Mexican people. This portrayal and inclusion of the indigenous and women, particularly "la chingada" and her role in the creation of a mestizo Mexican race, was unprecedented at the time. Usigli led the way in including women and the indigenous people in Mexican history and in Mexican theatre, a path later followed by Rosario Castellanos, Sabina Berman, and others.

Alejandro Usigli reiterated his father's determination to rebuild Mexico by demystifying its history. Rodolfo Usigli did this in part in his trilogy of *Coronas* and in part by painting the first mural of Mexican politics by daring to say what no other playwright had said at the time about Mexico's politics, society, history, and cultural identity. The week of activities

celebrating Usigli's work also included a panel discussion "Directing a Latin American Play." Speaking to a crowd of approximately 65 faculty and students, the participants – Donald Rosenberg from the Miami University Theatre Department, Frank Dauster and Alejandro Usigli – discussed the difficulties of producing a foreign play on-stage and making it speak to a foreign audience. Latin American theatre is full of political and regional influences that often create difficulties in the interpretation of a playwright's "regional flavor," as Dauster called it, in another context. The regional flavor of Mexico is exactly what Usigli tried to portray in his work. He was trying to represent what Mexico *was*, and at issue in the discussion was how to understand the universal parallels that would allow a foreign audience to understand and enjoy the play. As a result of an ever-changing political scene in Latin America and the lack of stage directions and character descriptions provided by the playwright, a director must have a knowledge of the historical background in which the play was written as well as of the playwright's regional flavor. The discussion coincided with the opening night of the Miami University Theatre Department's two week long mainstage production of one of Usigli's most noted works, *El gesticulador* or *The Impostor*, making the topic particularly significant.

Alejandro Usigli also addressed two other groups later in the week, the Friends of the Library and a group of area high school students who attended a theatre lab with scenes from *The Impostor*. During his presentation to the library supporters, Usigli read from his father's diaries, revealing the man behind the work. The younger Usigli spoke of his memories of his father, his father's strong work ethic, his humanism and generosity, his intellectual curiosity, his dream of creating a national theatre, and his later career as a diplomat. Rodolfo Usigli was truly one of Mexico's great minds, and his memory and intellectual legacy are now honored with the Usigli Collection of his archives at Miami University.

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