

Mexico City's (Almost) Invisible Family Theatre: Puppets at Work

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For any given weekend in Mexico City, the publication *Tiempo Libre* lists dozens of plays of almost all shapes and sizes in its theatre section. "Almost all," because near the back, in the section devoted to Niños, in the Títeres sub-section, is a short list of puppet theatre, which most people automatically interpret as "teatro infantil." A better name, though, would be "teatro familiar," because while those who do professional, adult drama many times have to content themselves with a half-full theatre, "kid's" plays can fill the seats, with children, along with the parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles who accompany, and many times even use the "infantes" as an excuse to see family entertainment. Still, the vast majority of the public either does not know about puppet theatre or considers it to be unimportant, a lesser art form, probably because children make up its primary intended audience. Given that, the relative invisibility of puppet theatre surprises less than the fact that it manages to exist at all. Yet it does; one can still find puppets at work, and some puppet theatre groups have managed to stay in existence for more than 20 years.

On the one hand, then, an art form that previously enjoyed widespread popularity with both adults and children has almost disappeared from general, public view. On the other hand, a select few groups have enjoyed a long existence, which suggests that puppet theatre remains a viable form of entertainment (and more specifically, of *family* entertainment). This apparently contradictory circumstance leads one to wonder, in the face of reduced popularity, how have some groups managed to survive? Moreover, if puppet theatre does, in fact, have substantial entertainment and educational value, what can puppeteers do to raise their profile and bring their art and their contribution back to a wider audience? A look at two of the most established

and long-lasting Mexican puppet theatre groups provides an example of how to keep puppets at work, and perhaps make them a bit more visible.

The selection of two groups obviously requires the elimination of many of the puppet theatre groups that exist throughout Mexico. Unfortunately, though, one characteristic that too many of them have in common is the tendency to come and go. Many groups simply do not last, and for a variety of reasons. The idea that puppets are for kids limits available venues and potential audience, so some groups disappear for economic reasons. Others dissolve because of internal problems, some because they are not in the right place at the right time, and some do not offer quality productions. In the latter case puppet theatre's image sometimes becomes self-defeating because it can justify laziness and less than excellent presentations, which then has the unfortunate result of further tarnishing puppetry's reputation.¹ Since the purpose here is to consider how to avoid precisely these kinds of difficulties, groups that have sidestepped the pitfalls and managed to function as successful, stable organizations over a period of several years would serve best as examples. Two such groups exist in Mexico City: Marionetas de la Esquina, celebrating their thirtieth anniversary in 2004, and La Troupe, who have been entertaining family audiences since 1980.² To have survived for so long, they must be doing something right, something that all the groups that come and go have missed. In that sense, Marionetas de la Esquina and La Troupe provide examples of how to do it right. They both serve as models because, although Marionetas de la Esquina and La Troupe have very different styles, they also have elements in common, and the balance between these similar characteristics and their individuality provides a lesson in how to present puppet theatre successfully, and perhaps an example of what other groups need to consider if puppetry is to change its reputation and regain the positive image and the visibility it had in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In the early 1900s, the popularity that puppet theatre in Mexico had enjoyed to that point began to decline. Sonia Iglesias Cabrera and Guillermo Murray Prisant, in *Piel de papel, manos de palo: Historia de los títeres en México*, lay at least partial blame at the feet of movies, a new attraction that began to occupy the theatres previously available to puppets. As puppeteers looked for ways to maintain a place in the public eye, they eventually made two significant changes to the way they worked. They slowly abandoned marionettes (string puppets) and turned more and more to the "guiñol" or "muñeco de guante," hand puppets on the order of Punch and

Judy. They also began to write more didactic plays. Lola and Germán Cueto, Germán List Arzubide, Roberto Lago, Angelina Beloff and others managed to attract the attention of Bellas Artes and the directors of Mexico's Educación Pública, who saw the educational possibilities inherent in puppets. The relative ease of transporting and performing with them (compared to theatre companies with live actors and full scenery), and the natural attraction of children to puppets soon resulted in governmental backing for groups to travel from school to school and town to town, especially to outlying areas, with a combination of traditional and educational plays. The "Brigadas Nacionales de Alfabetización" (193) along with other groups and individuals promoted reading and safe health practices, for example.

These activities saved puppet theatre, but only temporarily. By the end of the 1940s, government support for the literacy campaigns waned, and the struggle to survive renewed. While the pressures in the first half of the century had forced new directions for puppet theatre and helped it to reinvent itself, in retrospect its salvation turned out to be a two-edged sword. The puppets left behind their previous, adult audience, and dedicated themselves to children, and the resulting perception – puppets are for kids – continues today. It certainly brings with it benefits, but it also limits both its audience and what it is expected to do, limitations that make puppeteering such a struggle. So the pervading image of "teatro infantil" continues, despite the efforts of artists like Mireya Cueto to play to a more adult level. For that reason, a general change in perspective and tactics would seem to be in order. For example, children do not go to the theatre alone; some adult has to accompany them, and it is the wise group that understands that playing to the adults along with the children has the potential to create long-term benefits. That mentality may have contributed to the success and longevity of *Marionetas de la Esquina* and *La Troupe*, and may signal one of the paths back to more widespread puppet popularity.³

At any given moment Mexico has dozens of groups, and Mexico City serves as the home base for 20 or 30 of them, but very few have stood the test of time as stable, on-going organizations.⁴ The success of those few holds lessons for the long-term survival and the possible re-emergence of puppet theatre, and two that have survived the longest as a unified body are *Marionetas de la Esquina* and *La Troupe*, two groups that have followed different creative paths. *Marionetas de la Esquina*, even as they constantly innovate, maintain a much more traditional flavor, while *La Troupe* has developed a new and distinctive style and direction.

The identity or personality of a group depends on its members, on what they do, and on how they do it. Unity and cohesiveness characterize both *Marionetas de la Esquina* and *La Troupe*'s personnel, strengths that come through family in the first case, and in the second through an unselfish identification with the group rather than with individual, egotistical desires. The presentations of both groups grow from the good sense they have to use what puppet theatre can do more effectively than can theatre with live actors. Peter D. Arnott explains that, ". . . the true values of the puppet only appear when one accepts it for what it is, and does not try to make it into what it is not, a human being in miniature" (29). As a result, the presentations of *Marionetas de la Esquina* and *La Troupe* spring from dreams, a disregard for linear time, and from a magical world where imagination, day dreams, fantasies and everyday objects come to life. The necessary suspension of disbelief is easier for an audience that has already agreed to accept puppets as animated and even living beings. Arnott again: "[Spectators] accept from the beginning that puppets are unreal, and may therefore reasonably be expected to behave in an unrealistic way" (142). Both *Marionetas* and *La Troupe* aim the resulting liberty of expression at both children and adults, *Marionetas de la Esquina* generally through stories, and *La Troupe* through a series of skits and sketches tied together by a central theme. Neither group does the equivalent of kids' birthday parties in the theatre; they give children credit for having a degree of intelligence and for being able to discern the well done from the not so well done. They include moments for children and moments for adults, but in the main they have discovered a middle ground that manages to entertain and inform both groups simultaneously. That is how they do what they do, the point at which true talent begins to make a difference. Much of their success, then, comes from their unity and its concomitant experience, from their attitude toward their audience, and from sheer talent. Therein lies a certain common ground, but once past that, each group has followed its own direction.

Marionetas de la Esquina originated with Lucio Espíndola in Argentina in 1973. Their first official performance came in 1974 (thus the thirty-year anniversary in 2004); the next year, the group won a national arts prize, but because of the political situation, Espíndola, with one play and his puppets, moved to Mexico, associated with the University of Jalisco, and began performing in parks and other open spaces. While in Guadalajara he teamed up with Lourdes Pérez Gay, and they have worked together ever since. Early on they both did some of everything – it is a fact of puppet theatre that

everybody does everything – with Espíndola focusing more on writing, making puppets, and manipulating, and Pérez Gay on directing and puppeteering. In 1997, their daughter, Amaranta Leyva, took over the writing chores, thus allowing Espíndola to dedicate more time to puppet creation and construction. Although Marionetas de la Esquina involves twelve people, the core is really family, with Lucio making puppets and stage settings, Lourdes directing, Amaranta writing, and Emiliano Leyva (a nephew of Lourdes) taking care of the technical aspects. Mexico has had something of a tradition of families doing puppet theatre, from the Rosete Aranda family in the 1800s, through the Cuetos from the 1900s to today, with Germán and Lola, their daughter Mireya, and her son Pablo. In a somewhat less direct fashion, Marionetas de la Esquina follows that tradition.

What Marionetas de la Esquina does has traditional touches as well (they have a puppet circus, for example) but mostly their original plays tell stories that involve a lesson, so that at the same time they entertain their audiences, they also teach them, about the importance of conserving water, the effects of pollution, the value of the past, the difference between being lonely and having companions, the ability to achieve success through working together (a sub-theme of almost all their plays), and more recently, children of divorce. Marionetas entertains, but they also know that children are perceptive enough to take away knowledge and understanding, and by directing the 11 plays in their repertoire to adults as well as children, Marionetas de la Esquina assumes that the audience will have more to think and perhaps talk about than which puppet they liked best. The plays are original, meaningful, contemporary and always innovative, while at the same time reflective of a personal style in the design of the puppets and in the visual and conceptual presentation, that is, in how they create their puppet world.

The group uses traditional string marionettes in the reduced area of a puppet theatre with the puppeteer hidden, one of the few groups in Mexico City that still works with string puppets. They do not limit themselves, though. In fact, Marionetas de la Esquina is one of Mexico's most wide-ranging groups in kinds of puppets used. Aside from marionettes, they use glove puppets, rod puppets, table puppets and over half a dozen other kinds, both in small, puppet theatres as well as across a whole theatre stage. That versatility allows them to choose the most appropriate form for each play, from the sheer entertainment of *El circo* to the exploration of contemporary problems, like the effects of divorce on children, in *Dibújame una vaca*. The latter play clearly reaches into areas that go beyond simple "teatro infantil," although

the primary vehicle remains entertainment. In the play, a boy's drawing of a cow comes to life and becomes a companion who helps him in his struggle to understand the anger, fear, worry, and confusion of having to leave his home and his father and start a new life. Because the action comes from the boy's perspective, children in his situation can see that they are not the only ones who must cope with the effects of divorce, and parents can better comprehend their child's point of view. What *Marionetas de la Esquina* does in this case stretches beyond tradition, but how they do it comes back to a foundation of entertainment appropriate for and popular with the whole family, one of the secrets that could help *Marionetas de la Esquina* lead puppet theatre back to the level of popular acceptance that it once enjoyed.

La Troupe also works at the forefront of that charge. Their beginnings came with the graduation of Mauro Mendoza and Sylvia Guevara from the Bellas Artes drama school in 1980. The next year they teamed up with Carmen Luna, and the group began doing free shows, physical, visual shows without dialogue. Their first important break came in 1983 when they got a job performing at Reino Aventura (now Six Flags), an amusement park in Mexico City. The next year they moved on to the Teatro Jiménez Rueda for their first extended run. Today some ten people make up the group, but the central organizers continue to be Guevara, who tends to administrative matters, Luna who works as the group's agent, procurer of materials, and public relations person, and Mendoza who creates and develops the puppets and the ideas that the group then works into final form. In addition Marco A. Serna writes all the original music for their productions, and everyone contributes to puppet construction, manipulation, and all of the other details. While *La Troupe* does not have a family base like *Marionetas de la Esquina*, they still form a family of sorts. In conversations with any number of the group's participants, their comments clearly reflect their dedication to the group rather than to their own individuality and ego, certainly a significant factor in *La Troupe's* long existence.

The heart of *La Troupe* is entertainment, not based so much on a plot or story line as on a series of sketches linked by a style and an underlying thread that generally informs. The information ranges from the basic concepts of shapes, colors, letters, and numbers all the way to the importance and the benefits of reading, exposure to different types and styles of music, the history of the theatre, and the background of the historical center of Mexico City. All of their plays (fourteen and growing) overflow with humor, some verbal for parents and other adults, some visual for children (and for parents and

other adults, also), and some almost vaudevillian slapstick which appeals to all ages. In the case of La Troupe, what they do has such flexibility partly because they tie it so closely to how they do it.

They definitely do not do traditional puppet theatre. They use puppets, but not the kind that one normally imagines. Instead, they employ large, flexible “things” – animals, books, trees, letters, furniture, musical instruments – on a grand scale in front of black light, so the puppeteers remain hidden while the puppets’ colors glow, move, float, fly and transform. The ability to use such flexible images produces an animated quality and an amazing degree of freedom from the confines of reality. Into that world of illusion enter clowns, although not stereotypical clowns. Rather, the four or five of them (including Mendoza, Guevara, Luna, Serna, and others in their alter-egos) transform themselves into something like human cartoons with only a touch of makeup, a red nose, a silly hat, and/or colorful clothes that serve to identify and personalize them. While the puppets change from show to show, the clowns remain constant, the characters that an in-the-know audience expects to see, because in their free-form presentations, the members of La Troupe appear both with and without puppets, doing skits whose antics at times recall what one might see in a Marx Brothers or a Laurel and Hardy film.⁵

Obviously humor lies at the heart of La Troupe’s performances, but other characteristic qualities complete the group’s personality: the large, colorful puppets, the use of black light, the “clowns,” interaction which brings the characters into the audience, the audience’s expectation of participation, and music, original music by Serna. So many, varied pieces could easily lead to chaos, but part of La Troupe’s success stems from their ability to unify all the diverse elements, so that their shows flow rather than jumping from one fragment to another. In *Troupeando* for example (most of their shows play with the group’s name), Lady Lucas (Sylvia Guevara) intends to learn to play the saxophone, but she gets frustrated, falls asleep and dreams. The dream is the play, in which she wanders through a forest that talks, musical instruments that come to life, animals that sing, a pair of strange doctors, and even moments of semi-sleep, when a mouse sneaks into her bed. Beneath the fun and laughs, though, lurks the idea that music and learning to play an instrument are entertaining and valuable endeavors. Like *Marionetas de la Esquina*, La Troupe provides an hour-plus of humorous, clean, refreshing, family entertainment that at the same time manages to communicate an important, worthwhile lesson.

Marionetas de la Esquina and La Troupe consistently set the standard for what Mexican puppet theatre can be. Despite their different styles, they share plenty of common ground that may well serve as a blueprint for helping to revive the image and the general popularity of puppet theatre in Mexico. Both groups have managed to bring together a number of creative people with the talent, the ingenuity, the imagination, and the intelligence to use puppets in a logical, effective way. They have the originality to know how to create their own, identifiable world that speaks to contemporary concerns. They care about and respect children and understand that “for children” does not mean infantile. As a result they do not offer typical fairy tales for kids; they direct intelligent and even sophisticated entertainment to adults as well as to children. They insist on excellence; playing for children and families does not mean taking the easy road. They respect their audience. Finally, both groups share a sense of family, literally in the case of Marionetas de la Esquina, and with a feeling and atmosphere in La Troupe, a sense that creates unity and mutual respect, both of which show through clearly in their productions.

Marionetas de la Esquina and La Troupe have enjoyed success, but it is success limited by the confines of the public perception of puppets. Most of the general public either consider puppet theatre a minor and relatively unimportant art form, or simply do not know that it still exists, and they almost certainly do not know what these two groups do. The challenge for puppeteers, then, and especially for groups who have not found the level of acceptance of Marionetas and La Troupe, is to move puppet theatre beyond the confines of simple shows for kids.

If there is a formula or a path that could lead to a revival of puppet theatre, Marionetas de la Esquina and La Troupe may offer the best example for other groups to follow. Their cumulative fifty-three years of success far exceed what is typical for contemporary puppet theatre groups, and they have built it on a sense of family, respect for their audiences, for their work, and for themselves, by continually progressing while still maintaining their identity, and by always remembering that their obligation is to entertain first and foremost. Audiences can go to a Marionetas de la Esquina or a La Troupe performance with certain expectations that they know will be fulfilled, and that kind of individualized identity sustains and maintains both groups. A generation of children who enjoyed the groups’ performances before now take their own children, knowing that they can expect excellence. If enough other groups come to provide the same level of excellence, the audience could grow, slowly but surely, from the relatively small base that now exists.

Puppet theatre as a broad-based entertainment form has been down for so long that it will not recover quickly or easily, but the existence of groups like Marionetas de la Esquina and La Troupe proves that it is not futile to hope and to try. Their very existence for so long in the face of so many obstacles shows that puppet theatre in Mexico is viable. They have apparently found a key that makes working puppets a little more visible and that provides a valuable, comfortable, and sorely needed place for the whole family to go and enjoy themselves.

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Notes

¹ Over and over in my conversations with puppeteers, they express concern over groups that do poor quality shows, which makes it more difficult for others to gain respect for their own work.

² As with professional theatre (for adults), Mexico City seems to be the ultimate proving ground. It offers more opportunities, but at the same time more competition, both from other groups and from other forms of entertainment. Survival in that atmosphere lends a measure of validity to the methods employed by groups who base themselves primarily in the capital.

³ Success, of course, is relative. While Marionetas de la Esquina and La Troupe enjoy great success in the world of puppet theatre, they do not command the same respect and recognition as do established practitioners ("stars") of professional, adult theatre.

⁴ Since Mexican puppet theatre has received scant critical attention, there is much work to be done that extends beyond the scope of this article. The purpose here is to provide an initial glance at the subject by looking at a pair of groups who have had success in a difficult field.

⁵ The notion is well founded; Mendoza has covered his office walls with posters and pictures of Disney characters, of Laurel and Hardy, and of the Marx Brothers. Their influence shows in La Troupe's performances.

Works Cited

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