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**“Hazme un Guagüis”: The politics of *Relajo*, Humor, Gender, and Sexuality in *Teatro de Revista*, *Teatro de Carpa*, and *Cabaret Político* in Mexico City**

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Sexuality in *Teatro de Revista*, *Teatro de Carpa*, and *Cabaret Político* in  
Mexico City**

by

**Sandra Edith Sotelo-Miller B.A.; M.A.**

**Dissertation**

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## **Dedication**

*A mi papá, Gilberto Sotelo Ávila.*

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**‘Hazme un Guagüis’: The Politics of *Relajo*, Humor, Gender and Sexuality in *Teatro de Revista*, *Teatro de Carpa* and *Cabaret Político* in Mexico**

Sandra Edith Sotelo-Miller, Ph.D.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2016

Supervisor: Héctor Domínguez-Ruvalcaba

This dissertation focuses on how *teatro de revista*, *teatro de carpa*, and later *cabaret político* provide an outlet where humor and the politics of class, gender, and sexuality intersect, creating powerful, cultural sites of resistance in past and present day Mexico. More specifically, this study argues that *teatro de revista* and *teatro de carpa*, two theater genres developed in the first three decades of the twentieth century in Mexico City, created the foundation and tools for political and social criticism which were later appropriated and redefined by political cabaret theater artists in the 1980s and 1990s. Through close-readings and analysis of various performances and the work of Tito Vasconcelos and Jesusa Rodriguez, this study explores a festive dissidence that emerged in Mexico City where the stage became a space in which collective spheres of irreverence and criticism were and continue to be created.

By exploring the performance styles and tools developed in these theatrical genres a window is opened into the critical nature of frivolous theater that has also opened avenues for resistance and defiance through irreverence. In a country where political criticism has often been violently punished, especially during periods of political and



social crisis, critical sites like those created in *teatro de revista*, *teatro de carpa*, and political cabaret theater play a key role in building collective spaces of dissidence.

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## INTRODUCTION

### **“TOCAR CON EL DEDITO EL AGUA FRÍA:” ART AND RESISTANCE IN SAN CRISTÓBAL DE LAS CASAS**

On the morning of August 14, 2013, St. Louis based biotech corporation Monsanto Company released a statement celebrating the Mexican government’s approval to commercially grow Monsanto’s patented, genetically modified corn seeds in Mexico. According to the press release, this news came after months of debates with the government and with the approval of the Secretaría de Agricultura, Ganadería, Desarrollo Rural, Pesca y Alimentación (SAGARPA). Acknowledging concerns raised by the introduction of genetically modified corn into Mexican agriculture, Monsanto proposed a new cultural and scientific initiative designed to safeguard 246 native, Mexican corn strains. This National Seed Vault (Bóveda Nacional de Semillas, BNS) promised to not only preserve the variety of corn native to Mexico, but to also include a Varieties Tasting Center (Centro de Degustación de Variedades de Maíz), where visitors could sample Mexico’s native corn and thirty varieties of Monsanto’s genetically modified corn. Additionally, Monsanto said the Bóveda Nacional de Semillas would be open to student groups and anyone interested in the history and preservation of endemic corn varieties.

The company also proudly announced it would finance and build a “Códice Digital de Costumbres Mexicanas,” a digital repository documenting the history of Mexican culture. By using “Códice,” Monsanto hoped to pay homage to the Mayan manuscripts irretrievably lost during the Spanish Conquest of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The message also contained a short description of plans to build a physical museum with an aim to preserve Mexican culture for centuries to come.

The announcement ended quoting the president and director of Monsanto Latinoamérica Norte, Manuel Bravo Pereyra, proudly affirming this agreement as a perfect way to celebrate and begin a “revolutionary new era in the 4,500-year history of Mexican corn,” just one day after the traditional Mexican celebration of Día del Maíz.<sup>1</sup>

Hours after the press release and after several reporters called Monsanto and SAGARPA to confirm the story, Monsanto made an announcement via their Twitter feed and blog, revealing the release as fraudulent. The company denounced this hoax press release as an ‘intentional misrepresentation’ of the company and condemned the group responsible for spreading this information: a collective known as Sin Maíz No Hay Vida, comprised of activists and students.<sup>2</sup> At the same time that Monsanto denounced the press release as a hoax, Sin Maíz No Hay Vida, staged a festive Carnaval del Maíz in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas to generate debate surrounding Monsanto’s “not-so-secret” efforts to penetrate Mexican agriculture. Though the company already had permits to sell its seed to Mexican farmers since 2004, it still did not have permission to commercially grow corn in the country, instead the genetically modified seed had to be imported.<sup>3</sup>

Led by Jesusa Rodríguez, a Mexican political *cabaretera* and founder of Resistencia Creativa movement, the collective Sin Maíz No Hay Vida created a festive parade style performance that went from the Centro Hemisférico de Performance y

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the fake press-release created in a joint effort between the New York based, activist Yes-Lab and Sin Maíz No Hay Vida see : <http://monsantoglobal.com.yeslab.org/mexico-grants-mexico-approval-to.html>

<sup>2</sup> For Monsanto’s press release, please read <http://monsantoblog.com/2013/08/14/website-hoax/>

<sup>3</sup> The first law that favored transnational companies selling genetically modified agricultural products in Mexico with little to no monitoring is La Ley de Bioseguridad y Organismos Genéticamente Modificados (LBOGM) or more popularly known as La Ley Monsanto. For information on the effects of this law in Mexico since 2004 read Chema Gómez’s “La semilla roja: así funciona Monsanto en México” in *Vice*. [http://www.vice.com/es\\_mx/read/la-semilla-roja-asi-funciona-monsanto-en-mexico](http://www.vice.com/es_mx/read/la-semilla-roja-asi-funciona-monsanto-en-mexico)

Política to the city's main plaza.<sup>4</sup> In preparation and as a source of inspiration the group studied the *Popol Vuh* (ca. 1000-1550), the sacred book of creation of the Quiché Mayan people. This religious book blends myth, legend, and history that beginning with the creation of the universe by the sea and sky gods and then tells the epic tales of the hero twins Hunahpú and Xbalanqué and their battles against the Lords of Death in Xibalbá, the underworld. The book was significant to the performance because it highlighted the importance of corn in the history and culture of the place the group was in geographically and it helped members contextualize its contemporary significance as a main source of sustenance not only in Chiapas but Mexico as a whole.

With two weeks preparation time and inspired by the symbolic and literal battle that took place between the twin brothers and the Lords of Death, Sin Maíz No Hay Vida reinterpreted the Mayan Ballgame that took place in the story and divided in two groups. Led by a grotesquely costumed couple representing the Mexican government and Monsanto, one group represented the Lords of Death. A pig-masked character wearing a top-hat, a large white t-shirt, a black tailcoat, and black boxer briefs embodied Monsanto. By his side, an obnoxiously loud, nationalistic eagle character, laughed and flirted with the Monsanto pig. The eagle donned a green, white, and red beaked mask, 6-inch, white platforms, and a piece of fabric covered with images of the Mexican flag that barely wrapped around her body. Surrounding them a group of guardians painted and dressed in all black acted as their bodyguards and army. A goddess of corn wearing a long brown dress, a crown made of corn tassels, and carrying a basket full of corn cobs, led the second group. Protecting her were the guardians of corn. Each of these guardians was

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<sup>4</sup> This academic and performance research center was developed by the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics in conjunction with the Fortaleza de la Mujer Maya, a woman's theater group in San Cristóbal de las Casas. It was open for 5 years. For more information on the history of the center see: <https://centrohemisferico.wordpress.com/historia/>

painted head to toe in bright red, yellow or brown body paint. They also wielded corn stalks as spears to defend the goddess of corn when under attack by the lords of death army. Finally, trailing behind the two groups, two dancers painted in sky blue and wearing red shorts and bras represented the hero twin brothers: Hunahpú and Xbalanqué.<sup>5</sup>

As the procession walked through the streets of San Cristóbal they chanted anti-Monsanto slogans, pretend battled against each other to the beat of drums, and stopped along the way to speak to onlookers and pass out leaflets with information on Monsanto's plan and names and websites of various organizations working against giving the biotech company more permits. The parade ended in the Plaza de la Resistencia, the city's main plaza, located in front of the cathedral.<sup>6</sup> Here, the blue twins performed a dance surrounded by the guardians of corn, the Monsanto/Mexican army, and several onlookers who formed a circle around them. After the dance onlookers were invited to play a game of dodge ball where they joined the forces of the guardians of corn against the Monsanto/Mexican government army. This game paid homage to the *juego de pelota* played between the hero twins against the Lords of Death in the *Popol Vuh* and, at the same time, the game symbolically represented a battle between the economic interests of Monsanto versus the social and agricultural welfare of the Mexican people and her farmers.

The Internet hoax and subsequent public performance perpetrated by Sin Maíz No Hay Vida had unexpected consequences. The same day the fraudulent press release was published, Bravo Pereyra sent a letter to Mexico's Secretary of SAGARPA, Enrique Martínez y Martínez. This letter alerted him to the false information disseminated online

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<sup>5</sup> For a visual archive of the *acción* in San Cristóbal see:  
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/hemiresistance/sets/72157635136296557/>

<sup>6</sup> By *acción* I mean intentional and direct artistic political actions artists and activists in Latin America use on to intervene in public discourses.



and condemning these actions as effectively creating an adverse business environment for Monsanto to continue productive conversations surrounding the authorization to commercially sell their product in Mexico.<sup>7</sup>

Believing these political actions were tied to a course taught by the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics in Chiapas, Monsanto representatives contacted New York University's administration, which facilitated the course, to formally complain about the damage these actions had caused to the relationship between Mexico and Monsanto. The company asked the university and institute for a formal apology. They furthermore asked for a full-scale investigation into what the company saw as a 'conflict of interest' between the academic activities of the course taught and the participation of professors, students, scholars, and artists in public actions that were critical of Monsanto.<sup>8</sup>

The swift reaction by Monsanto to the seemingly innocuous work of Sin Maíz No Hay Vida shows the power voices of everyday people have within a greater cultural and political conversation when they address serious issues through humor and performance. Through a combination of an Internet hoax and a carnivalesque performance, Sin Maíz No Hay Vida was able to inform the public about Monsanto's plans to commercially grow genetically modified corn in México, something that before had been prevented by law. Until then, Monsanto had only been able to sell its product to farmers in Mexico but could not grow it in country. In 2004 and 2005 several environmental and activist groups protested Monsanto's incursion into the Mexican market, including Jesusa Rodríguez who performed *El Maíz* at the 2005 Hemispheric Encuentro in Belo Horizonte, Brazil as an act of protest against the La Ley de Bioseguridad y Organismos Genéticamente

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<sup>7</sup> For a copy of the letter please see: <http://files.yeslab.org/EnriqueMartinezyMartinez.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed account of the action and subsequent consequences see David Brooks' article in *La Jornada* titled "Monsanto intenta acallar las críticas a su negocio de semillas transgénicas."

Modificados. This law had been approved by Mexico's congress after intense lobbying by Monsanto.<sup>9</sup> Ten years after this performance, Rodríguez led the Sin Maíz No Hay Vida collective in continuing to protest Monsanto's attempt to commercially grow one of the most important crops and cultural symbols in Mexico: corn. In addition to this, the group helped facilitate public discourse around Monsanto's plans to grow their product at all costs regardless of the consequences to local communities or indigenous corn varieties. While Monsanto may feel the group's actions were a 'conflict of interest,' they were immune to the idea that their own interests were likely conflicting with those of the local communities and farmers.

Sin Maíz No Hay Vida's humorous and mocking digital impersonation of Monsanto as a new defender of Mexican corn and culture garnered national and international attention, especially when it was revealed to be a hoax. Through their work, the group brought awareness to Monsanto's renewed negotiations with SAGARPA to obtain the permits necessary to grow their genetically modified product on Mexican land. Significantly, the articles written about the *acción* and Monsanto's petulant response provided an online forum for people to share their opinions at a time when these negotiations were happening in secrecy. The action provided the space to reignite the debate surrounding Monsanto's presence in Mexico.

As a member of Sin Maíz No Hay Vida and participant in the virtual and performance *acción*, the lasting effect of this experience was seeing firsthand the power of performance and its ability to get those who normally would not listen, to listen. Individually, none of those involved would have been able to influence the conversation around Monsanto and their plans in Mexico. Collectively, however, we not only got

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<sup>9</sup> For an analysis of this performance see "Coda Transtortilleras: Political Cabaret in the Twenty-first Century" (167-187) in Gutiérrez's *Performing Mexicanidad*.

Monsanto's attention, but we also garnered national and international attention by bringing backroom politics into the public sphere. For many of us, this was the first time we engaged and witnessed the power of engaging in performance as political practice.

As I mentioned before Rodríguez led this *acción*, which came about as a result of the practical part of a course offered by the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics through New York University. "Art and Resistance" was an intensive three-week class also taught by Diana Taylor, Lorie Novak, and Jacques Servin. Through it we explored and discussed the many ways in which artists and activists used performance, graffiti, music, photography, art, and writing to make social interventions. We studied theories that helped us consider the interconnections between these interventions and their relationship with themes of resistance and social action, which were central to the course. The other aim of "Art and Resistance," was to explore the link between politics and performance through both academic research as well as an embodied participation. By teaching the practical part of the course, Rodríguez along with Jacques Servin, a founding member of the The Yes Men, wanted us to understand this voluntary, political *acción* as a way for us to "tocar con el dedo el agua fría." In other words, they wanted us to feel what it was like to leave academic discussions and essays aside, and instead risk using our physical and online bodies as text to creatively respond to a situation that affected us all. Monsanto is not just affecting the way we eat but our very culture. To me, it was an opportunity to put into practice what I had read, seen, and discussed, as a way to actively take a stand.

As Rodríguez explained it, any time you decide to use your body for public, political or social statements, you must ask yourself, "What are you willing to risk?" For each person involved, this meant something different. For foreigners, it meant the possibility of being deported for participating in a political protest, something illegal for

them to do in Mexico. Others risked offending and angering the onlookers by wearing the Mexican flag as a provocative dress and frivolously laughing and flirting with a grotesque pig character, implying that the Mexican government was in bed with Monsanto and willing to sell-out regardless of the effects this would have on Mexican farmers and Mexican agriculture. While these risks were tangible to all of us involved, Rodríguez's real message was the importance of action and the negative consequences of silence. Silence to her represented a type of complicity and acceptance of the status quo. By expressing our concerns, we broke our own silence and joined in the public debate around Monsanto's role in our world, agricultural future, and genetically modified foods.

Through our online hoax and our carnivalesque parade, we humorously and festively interrupted the media and government's silence around the negotiations taking place. Furthermore, but in both the main plaza of San Cristóbal and online we invited others to join in and participate in this interruption of backdoor politics to redirect conversations around what various individuals' thoughts were surrounding Monsanto's presence in Mexico. We participated and became what this investigation denominates the dissident *relajiento*. This concept will be further described in the next section, and, in summary, involves actively choosing to use humor and performance to mockingly interrupt political and social discourses and at the same time convince others to join in the irreverent mockery.

My experience taking the "Art and Resistance" course and choosing to be part of Sin Maíz No Hay Vida elucidated the powerful way in which social justice, performance practice, and academia coalesce to create positive and provocative spaces for critical discourse. This experience in the summer of 2013 shaped the trajectory of my own academic work and brought to light the power of humor and the body within performance in creating new ways of exploring and using knowledge around issues we care about.

Another key experience was learning about and creating a performance with Jesusa Rodríguez, an artist that captured my attention and imagination in 2009 when I wrote an article on two of her shows *La Malinche en Dios T.V.* (1991) and *Sor Juana en Almoloya: Pastorela virtual* (1995). In that article I focused on her use of body as text to challenge official historical narratives surrounding women, while also making poignant political and social critiques of what was going on in Mexico at the time. It was then that I discovered that many scholars described her work as a mixture of different theatrical genres, including two theater genres developed in Mexico City at the beginning of the twentieth-century: *teatro de revista* and *teatro de carpa*.

Not knowing much about these theater genres, I embarked on a second investigation, completing archival research with primary sources. While I was unable to find any complete scripts of *revistas* or *carpas*, I did come across countless theater reviews in two prominent magazines of the time: *Revista de Revistas* and *El Universal Ilustrado*. I also found various books that included snippets of acts, descriptions of theater spaces, and testimonies from fans, comedians, and theater critics who had lived through the *revista* and *carpa* Golden Age. The more I read about these theater genres the more I realized the deep imprint these had in the work of Jesusa Rodríguez and other political cabaret theater artists. More importantly I started to see a long history in Mexico City, of using frivolous theater genres as a forum where a festive type of *relajo* was being practiced as a way to interrupt official political discourses and conservative social norms.

All of these experiences helped inform my decision to study *teatro de carpa*, *teatro de revista*, and *cabaret político* to provide a lens through which to study performance as oral and embodied narratives that help individuals and communities construct and negotiate identities and values. While each genre is unique and singular,

collectively, they created the foundation to further explore the dissident type of *relajo* created there.

**‘VAMOS A HACER RELAJO’: THE DISSIDENT *RELAJIENTOS* IN *TEATRO DE REVISTA*, *TEATRO DE CARPA*, AND *CABARET POLÍTICO***

This dissertation focuses on how *teatro de revista*, *teatro de carpa*, and later *cabaret político* provide an outlet where humor and the politics of class, gender, and sexuality intersect, creating powerful, cultural sites of resistance in past and present day Mexico. More specifically, this study argues that *teatro de revista* and *teatro de carpa*, two theater genres developed in the first three decades of the twentieth-century in Mexico City, created the foundation and the tools for political and social criticism which were later appropriated and redefined by political cabaret theater artists in the 1980s and 1990s. Through close-readings and analysis of various performances, this study explores a festive dissidence that emerged in Mexico City where the stage became a space in which collective spheres of irreverence and criticism were and continue to be created. Moreover, the *relajiento* dissident voices that emerged from these sites constructed collective spaces from which to envision a much more dynamic, fragmented, fluid, and complex Mexican identity.

In this sense, I add to the growing corpus of work that reformulates Benedict Anderson’s conception of “imagined communities,” a tool he used to understand how national identity was constructed in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>10</sup> In his research, he describes the nation as a socially constructed community, imagined by people who perceive themselves as part of that group. According to Anderson the creation of these imagined communities became possible because of the rise of the printed word and media. William H. Beezley

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<sup>10</sup> Anderson, Benedict R. O’G. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1991. Print.

then took this concept a step further by analyzing festivals, theatrical performances, and bullfighting in Mexico in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to better understand Mexican identity through cultural objects that came into closer contact with common people.<sup>11</sup> Beezley understood that to examine nation building in Latin America, historians and critics could not solely rely on the printed word because of the low literacy rates and also the rich history of oral tradition that exists in the region.

In this sense, my dissertation is an incursion into studying oral narratives based on various performance practices, where these imagined and re-imagined communities can be created and negotiated. It contributes to the fields of cultural studies, performance and theater studies, and gender and sexuality studies in an effort to bring to light the spaces of irreverence and dissent these writers and artists created through their work. These are spaces where a markedly Mexican urban, *relajiento* identity was constructed and reimagined.

In order to understand the concept of *relajo* and the effect the dissident *relajientos* studied in this investigation had, Jorge Portilla's description of the effect a *relajiento* causes when he enters a public space is a helpful introduction:

Su pura presencia es un presagio de la disolución de toda seriedad posible. Su sola aparición, desata una ligera brisa de sonrisas y la atmósfera se convierte en una condescendiente expectativa de la lluvia de chistes que disolverá la seriedad de todos los temas, reduciéndolos, literalmente, a nada. El lenguaje popular de la ciudad de México designa a este tipo de hombre con una palabra horrible pero adecuada: este hombre es un relajiento (“Fenomenología del relajo” 39).

Though Portilla negatively describes the effect of the *relajiento* as a subject who obnoxiously calls attention to him or herself, and through mockery and jokes dissolves any possibility of seriousness at an event, he further defines him as “un hombre sin

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<sup>11</sup> Beezley, William H. *Mexican National Identity: Memory, Innuendo, and Popular Culture*. Tucson: University of Arizona, 2008. Print.

porvenir” because, in his estimation, this subject only seeks to interrupt and does not propose anything of value (40). In the dissertation, however, I propose that the artists who participated in *teatro de carpa*, *teatro de revista* and eventually in political cabaret theater are *relajientos* that use this dissident voice to point to the contradictions and fissures that exist in Mexican political and social discourses and in doing so offer a much more complex and fragmented national identity.

In this sense *relajo* should be read as a type of behavior that seeks to suspend or interrupt the tendency to respond seriously to people, events, and institutions that hold themselves in value. As Portilla points out, the point of participating or creating *relajo* is precisely to frustrate ones own and others natural tendency to adhere to proposed values that are displayed in seriousness and solemnity (18). Instead, when *relajientos* act they noticeably call attention to themselves, position themselves in disolidarity with the proposed value, and finally invite or incite others to participate in that disolidarity with them. In this way the conduct expected by the person, event, or institution proposing the value is at that moment substituted by chaos and disorder, and ‘what matters’ at that time is no longer feasible.

In other words, *relajo* is a suspension of seriousness, a displacement of attention, an invocation to others (to members of a group), a disruption, and a provocation. Portilla, however, does not see *relajo* as an act of resistance or an act that leads to freedom; he reads it more as a phenomenological weak spot in the Mexican composition, a short-coming, a lack of seriousness, a fault. In his view, *relajo* is a self-destructive behavior that prevents the *relajiento* from becoming part of a community because this subject does not commit to anything.

By studying the type of *relajo* used and created in *teatro de revista*, *teatro de carpa* and political cabaret theater; however, this investigation proposes that these artists



embody a festive type of *relajiento* performance style as a strategy of self-fashioning, helping a dispossessed subject enact the self through a critique of normative culture. In this sense, by enacting a type of *relajo* that closely adheres to hilarity and costumes itself in frivolity, the spectacles here analyzed create spaces of resistance. In using *relajo*, these artists affirm their own subjectivity by not subscribing to value and seriousness imposed by the State. They are instead *relajiento* dissidents critical of Mexico's modernizing project. This investigation studies how these artists incorporate various strategies to create *relajo* as acts of resistance or defiance. By not becoming seduced by the solemnity and seriousness with which official discourses of power push their modernizing project and image of national identity, these theater genres create a palpable space in which artists and audience members can construct their subjectivities reaffirming their humanity and validating their own festive and ambiguous processes of self-fashioning.

***TEATRO DE REVISTA, TEATRO DE CARPA, AND CABARET POLÍTICO: A BRIEF GENEALOGY OF COMEDY IN FRIVOLOUS THEATER IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY MEXICO CITY***

In order to understand the imprint *teatro de revista* and *teatro de carpa* had on political cabaret theater, the following paragraphs briefly describe their most salient characteristics as these will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 1. *Teatro de revista* emerged just prior to the outset of the Mexican Revolution. Pablo Dueñas and Socorro Merlín describe *revistas* predominantly as a combination of the Spanish *zarzuela* genre and the French revue. From *zarzuelas*, *revistas* appropriated the focus on *costumbrista* or local color scenes to reflect the realities of the Mexican capital. It also borrowed the use of musical interludes as a way to further the main theme or argument of the piece through songs that often included vulgar language and sexual connotations. In a similar fashion, *revistas* appropriated the spectacular sets and dance numbers along with the practice of satirizing contemporary political and social figures from French revue. Though *revistas*

didn't necessarily follow a traditionally constructed plot, each *cuadro* or act built upon a general theme that glued the acts together.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, *teatro de revista* was the first theater genre where popular street language filled with mockery and sexual connotations was used. It was also here where the popular classes saw themselves reflected on stage for the first time in the *peladitos*, *borrachitos*, and *mariguanos* that populated the stage. More significantly, as Chapter 1 argues, *revistas* began the tradition of political criticism in Mexican popular theater.

Alternatively, *teatro de carpa* emerged in the 1930s in the poor neighborhoods of Mexico City. Similar to the circuses that began traveling around the country in the nineteenth century, these small, itinerant theaters set up their performance spaces on empty lots around the city. *Carpas* were influenced by the nomadic nature of the circus as well as the variety of acts performed. During a *carpa* performance, the audience might encounter magicians, contortionists, dancers, singers, and the quintessential comedian. Contrasting with *teatro de revista*, the acts performed in *carpas* were not connected. Part of the reason they were so popular is that the audience was able to see a variety of acts and artists in one place. This dissertation focuses on the comedic sketches, which typically came at the end of each *tanda* or act, because it is here where the critical voices first emerging in *revistas* evolved to create a strong tradition of improvisation and irreverence within *carpas*. More specifically I argue that these spaces were the first to stage sketches where a comedic character and a serious character would engage in an encounter that would inevitably end with the serious character becoming the butt of the joke and the comedic character getting away with it. In this sense, *carpas* were spaces to actively practice an irreverent type of *relajo* that mocked not only authority but also the

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<sup>12</sup> This study will develop these descriptions in more detail in Chapter 1.

general seriousness and solemnity with which the post-revolutionary government was leading the country.

Through an analysis of selected acts, I first describe the tools developed in *teatro de revista* and *teatro de carpa* to set up the foundation for the type of political and social criticism that was later given new meaning in political cabaret theater. Gastón Alzate maintains that political cabaret theater in Mexico City appeared as a cultural response to the mechanisms of marginalization that arose from the neoliberal policies Mexico was engaging in during Miguel de la Madrid's presidency in the early 1980s (Alzate 63). In other words, political cabaret theater came about as a resistance network of people responding to a strong desire to feel part of a collectivity, *vis-à-vis* the mechanisms of marginalization arising from the government's policies. I further this argument in saying that through the dissident type of *relajo* proposed on the political cabaret stage, these performances sought to disrupt these mechanisms of marginalization through a type of mockery and irreverence that incited others, namely the audience, to participate with them and in doing so show disolidarity with political and social elites.

Before giving a brief description of political cabaret theater, it is important to contextualize its development within Mexico's LGBT movement, which made its first public incursion in 1978 when a large contingent of LGBT activists participated in a protest commemorating the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1968 student massacre in Tlatelolco. In this sense the movement emerged embedded in a socialist agenda that along with the student activist groups and workers unions were pushing for a democracy with a socialist background.<sup>13</sup> This environment provided a fertile ground for the appearance of significant political groups like the Frente Homosexual de Acción Revolucionaria

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<sup>13</sup> For a more detailed analysis of this movement in comparison to the LGBT movement in the United States see: "From Fags to Gays: Political Adaptations and Cultural Transformations in the Mexican Gay Liberation Movement."

(FAHR) and Grupo Lambda de Liberación Homosexual, alongside strong cultural responses through art and theater. Yet, in a same way indigenous activists and student leaders were violently repressed by the government at the time, LGBT leaders were also attacked and many times murdered. The difference in the oppression suffered specifically by the LGBT community can also be explained because homosexuality in Mexico has been considered a threat to national identity since the beginning of the twentieth-century.<sup>14</sup> Because of the oppression and also inner fighting within the LGBT political groups, these quickly disintegrated in the 1980s. The movement however awakened and politicized the LGBT community and plastic artists and performers began constructing spaces of resistance and community through art and performance. By the mid-1980s the neomexicanist art movement emerged which is broadly characterized by the use of themes, signs, symbols, and iconography that directly alluded to Mexico's national culture. Though artists used various mediums to express themselves including collage, installations, and sculptures, many rescue elements from Mexico's popular culture and retool them to not only question previous aesthetics but also bring to the forefront questions of class, gender, and sexuality in Mexican society.<sup>15</sup> There is an interesting parallel between the neomexicanist art movement in Mexico and the emergence of political cabaret theater during the same time, because both subversively used elements of Mexican popular culture to create criticism. Within the first generation of political cabaret artists we could include people like Astrid Hadad, Jesusa Rodríguez, Liliana Felipe, Francis, and Tito Vasconcelos.

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<sup>14</sup> This will be further discussed in Chapter 2.

<sup>15</sup> For a more detailed description read *Rooted Visions: Mexican Art Today* (1988). It is in this book that art critic Teresa del Conde coins the term Neomexicanism to describe this art movement.

To date, there is no one way to perform political cabaret theater in Mexico; each artist or performer has his or her own unique style. There are, however, key aspects that characterize and thread themselves through many of these performances as themes or constants. One of these characteristics is that these spectacles predominantly take place at night in bars or small independent theaters, allowing for close interaction with the audience. Moreover, this type of theater entails writing, producing, acting, and directing all at the same time. In this sense, the power of the script to dictate the story that takes place along with the power the director has in deciding how to interpret the text and decide the way in which the action will take place is displaced. Instead, in political cabaret theater the artists along with audience are responsible for the outcome of the piece. Scripts are minimal or non-existent and most of the time it is the political cabaret artists who design and what happens on stage. In addition, the structure of these performances is often fragmented. In other words, though the acts might be thematically related, they don't necessarily follow a traditional, linear plot line. Finally, many of the artists that engage in this type of theater challenge predominant conceptions of gender and sexuality through their work. Further, I argue that the principal elements common to the work of many of these artists can be traced back to the stages of *teatro de revista* and *teatro de carpa*. What these artists did was evolve the traditions and tools developed in *carpas* and *revistas* to create a queer cultural space of resistance through performance.

Taking cues from *revistas* and *carpas*, political cabaret theater uses the political satire, vulgar street language, double-entendres, and sexually tinted jokes developed in *revistas* and *carpas* to highlight a queer perspective. Like *revistas* and *carpas* did in the past, political cabaret theater uses humor and laughter as tools for political and social criticism, but more profoundly they use them as tools to create a dissident type of *relajo* that is used as a scalpel to open up conversations about the contradictions, and multiple

manifestations of exclusions especially regarding the LGTB community in Mexico. Similar to *teatro de carpa*, political cabaret relies heavily on improvisation which allows for the incorporation of daily local, national, and international events as well as a playful interaction with the audience. In this sense, each performance is unique, changing daily depending on what happens in the political and social arena as well as how the audience reacts to what is happening on stage. Finally, political cabaret theater evolves the sexualization of humor and the stage that first began in *teatro de revista* and *teatro de carpa* to highlight sexualities and genders that deviate from the norm.

The significance *revistas* and *carpas* had in establishing a rich heritage from which political cabaret artists of the 1980s and 1990s drew inspiration cannot be overstated. As will be further explored in the last two chapters, *cabaret político* takes well-known tropes, themes, and tools developed in *carpas* and *revistas* and repurposes them to create a space from which queer identities use *relajo* to interrupt and ultimately challenge hegemonic, national culture.

In an effort to trace the styles and tools developed in *revistas* and *carpas* namely the emphasis on improvisation, the use of humor for criticism, and the evolution of the sexualization of the stage, I focused on the work of two seminal artists, both of whom have adopted these aspects into their own work molding them to fit their style of performance. To this end, I analyze the work of Tito Vasconcelos, a primary figure in the political cabaret scene, who has not received the kind of attention I believe he deserves. By exploring his work in depth, this chapter widens the scope of themes and issues contemporary political cabaret artists tackle, while emphasizing the deep imprint *revistas* and *carpas* have had in his work. Alternatively, I also examine the work of Jesusa Rodríguez who found in the type of humor and laughter that emerged in *carpas* and *revistas*, a tool to create lines of communication to engage the audience in interrupting

and degrading traditional discourses of knowledge. I explore her use of improvisation to incite the audience to participate in the outcome of her shows as well as her carnivalesque impersonations of historical and political figures to immerse her spectators in multi-temporal and multi-spacial worlds, questioning seemingly static representations of history as characters and events frozen in time.

While there are other artists like Astrid Hadad, Regina Orozco, and César Enríquez, Las Reinas Chulas, engaging in *cabaret político*, the work of Rodríguez and Vasconcelos provides rich examples of the continuation and evolution of a dissident type of *relajo* in Mexican frivolous theater. Their work also shows a clear progression of the styles and comedic tools developed in *revistas* and *carpas* that helped construct queer, cultural spaces of resistance within Mexican theater.

#### **METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The primary methodological approach in this dissertation is close reading. I examine particular performances where I believe *revista*, *carpa* and political cabaret artists are using a humorous type of dissident *relajo* to create spaces of resistance for themselves and their audience. In this sense the following chapters isolate and focus on the comedic history of popular theater in Mexico and the preceding evolution of comedy and performance as a tool to help create queer spaces of resistance. Globally I also present socio-political historical information directly related to the performances I analyze to highlight the principal importance of the artists' environment in their work. I ground my arguments in the scholarship of theater studies, performance studies, queer studies, and Mexican cultural studies experts.

To understand the importance of performance in the creation of festive and collective spaces of resistance, it is first vital to explain performance as a way to create

and embody knowledge. To this end, the work of Diana Taylor is significant. In *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (2003) Taylor describes embodied behavior and performance as a way to produce knowledge and the *repertoire* as a non-archival and therefore non-canonical system to preserve and transmit it (xviii). In her attempt to rethink and refocus our systems of learning, storing, and transmitting knowledge, Taylor explores the tensions between the archive which includes enduring materials such as texts, documents, literary texts, buildings, archeological remains, films, and videos, and the “so-called ephemeral repertoire of embodied practice and knowledge,” which includes spoken language, dance, sports, rituals, gestures, and movements (19). In *The Archive and Repertoire* Taylor describes performance as “a process, a praxis, an episteme, a mode of transmission, an accomplishment, and a means of intervening in the world” (15). This dissertation contributes to the fields of Performance and Theater Studies, Cultural Studies, Gender and Sexuality Studies by studying *teatro de revista*, *teatro de carpa* and the work of Vasconcelos and Rodríguez as examples of performances that fulfill these functions as “vital act(s) of transfer” of knowledge, cultural memory, and identity in Mexico (2). More profoundly, the work of the artists discussed in this study is interpreted as subversive acts that interrupt and incite others to disrupt normative discourses through humor and laughter in what this study denominates dissident *relajo*.

To establish a historical genealogy of comedy used as criticism I make use of theater reviews, testimonies, scripts, and photographs found in various sources, which have focused on *teatro de carpa* and *teatro de revista* of the beginning of the twentieth-century in Mexico. I use videotaped performances available online as well as performances I attended of Tito Vasconcelos and Jesusa Rodríguez to flesh out their uses of humorous characters to queer and evolve the dissident *relajiento* entities that first



began to appear in *revistas* and *carpas*. These oral and visual texts also allow me to analyze the interaction the artists have with the audience in order to elucidate the spectator's participation in the *relajo* created on stage. Finally, I use interviews with Vasconcelos and Rodríguez, to clarify how they see their art, the connections between activism and their work, and finally their thoughts on how they view their identity.

Finally, this dissertation also analyzes the style and aesthetics proposed in the work of Rodríguez and Vasconcelos as a way to present strong, dissident, queer voices that magnify the deep fissures that exist in Mexican society. In this sense, the work of Vasconcelos and Rodríguez can be read as queer acts that disrupt cultural categories, representations, desires, and identities. More specifically, Vasconcelos and Rodríguez challenge what Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner define as heteronormativity in their essay "Sex in Public." The authors describe this concept as:

"more than an ideology, or prejudice, or phobia against gays and lesbians; it is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life: nationality, the state, and the law; commerce; medicine; education; plus the conventions and affects of narrativity, romance, and other protected spaces of culture" (*The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* 2605-2606).

This dissertation therefore argues that through a theatrical aesthetic that uses humor to create dissident *relajo*, Vasconcelos's and Rodríguez's performances rattle, display the instability, and open roads to redefine what is considered normal and at the same time allow for the importance Judith Butler sees in the politics of fantasy in *Undoing Gender* (2004): "The critical promise of fantasy, when and where it exists, is to challenge the contingent limits of what will and will not be called reality. Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings elsewhere home (29).

## CHAPTERS

Divided into three chapters, this dissertation first addresses the historical framework necessary to analyze the work of both Rodríguez and Vasconcelos. Chapter 1 looks at the rich history and traditions of popular Mexican theater genres that continue to weave their influence into today's artists. Specifically, Chapter 1 focuses on the history of *teatro de revista* and *teatro de carpa*. Within these genres, artists developed a characteristically Mexican type of humor where irreverence towards the government was cultivated through the voice of popular urban types and parody. By analyzing examples of humorous *cuadros* from *revistas* written in the 1920s, the chapter shows the cutting edge and risqué political criticism developed on these stages, something later re-tooled and seen in the work of Rodríguez and Vasconcelos. Through the use of *choteo* and irony, forms of humor that can be used as tools to create *relajo*, artists were able to mock political leaders, while revealing their corruption and criminal activities.

The chapter further analyzes the development of black humor in *teatro de carpa* as a mechanism to reflect upon difficult subject matter without falling into feelings of self-pity. It explores the irreverence championed in the creation of the *relajiento* vs. *apretado* relationship, where the comedic character, often representing the popular classes, was celebrated for his/her ability to mock the serious character on stage. In addition, this chapter discusses the sexualization of *revistas* through female singers, dancers, and comedians. The appearance of scantily clad women on stage significantly increased the popularity of these shows and surprisingly pushed the boundaries of traditional understandings of female gender and sexuality. *Teatro de revista* and *teatro de carpa* established a rich history of theater as a critical performance space within a traditionally conservative Mexico.

This framework was critical in the evolution of the work of Tito Vasconcelos's work, the performance artist studied in Chapter 2. Though Vasconcelos is considered a primary figure in the development of political cabaret theater in Mexico, limited research has been done on his work there. Building on the humor developed in *revistas* and *carpas*, Vasconcelos uses the language, structure, and style developed by these genres, but questions the misogyny and homophobia embedded within them.

As an openly gay artist in a religiously conservative and patriarchal society, Vasconcelos pushes the boundaries of what it means to be Mexican and also attempts to redefine who is creating this narrative. He challenges the status quo and pushes his audience to do the same. By developing characters that go beyond the typical drag queen lip-sync show, Vasconcelos creates a space where his "feminine characters" are politically critical voices challenging the system. This political criticism and challenging of gender and sexual identities builds upon the traditions established by *revista* and *carpa*.

Chapter 2 analyzes three separate performances by Tito Vasconcelos. Each performance builds upon the acceptable political criticism found in *revistas* and *carpas*, eventually leading Vasconcelos to challenge what many believe to be the moral compass of Mexico: the Catholic Church. He is critical of a church that marginalizes his way of life and those of other LGBT people, a church that was and continues to be complicit in the cover up of sexual predation of minors by the country's clergy.

As a performance artist and entrepreneur Vasconcelos also created safe spaces for members of the LGBT community to take respite from the larger destructive cultural narrative. This chapter explores the evolution of his work through several performances, showing the significant impact he has played in the continued development of a dynamic and often critical contemporary Mexican theater.

Chapter 3 delves into the work of Jesusa Rodríguez, one of the most renowned and internationally recognized political cabaret artists of her time. As one of the first artists to recreate a theater space that was critical of the political situation of Mexico during the 1980s and 1990s, she repurposes the foundational principles of *teatro de revista* and *teatro de carpa*, making them her own. This type of open political criticism had disappeared, and she was at the forefront of revitalizing a by-gone genre and of using performance as a method to openly and actively criticize the political structures of Mexico.

In creating this performance space, Rodríguez reignited a public conversation about politics requiring the participation of the audience in attendance. This space allowed for in-depth discussions about things often seen as taboo subjects. It was in these spaces that the average Mexican citizen could openly criticize members of the ruling elite, who might also be in attendance. The importance of this collaboration is key to understanding Rodríguez's commitment to political cabaret theater. She believes this type of theater is a tool to resist oppressive structures of power and help people best understand who they are. As a by-product of her work, she has been a vocal participant in shaping the way Mexicans talk about politics, gender, and sexuality. She is unapologetic and unafraid, redefining the boundaries that attempt to keep her in her "place," at all times.

By exploring Rodríguez's work, this chapter highlights her influences as an artist and the importance she has played in creating a space where you can challenge the mainstream Mexican narrative around politics, gender, and sexuality. This space gives rise to a voice for those whose voice is often silenced. By using historical figures of the past to criticize political figures of the present, she draws parallels between the

oppressive regimes of Mexico's history and encourages the audience to speak out in defiance to the current corrupt cycle of Mexican politics.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study uses and evolves the concept of *relajo* that Jorge Portilla describes as an act that displaces attention, situates the subject in disolidarity with the value being proposed, and finally invites others to join in that disolidarity. Though Portilla reads *relajo* and *relajientos* as acts and subjects that only lead to a negative type freedom, this study proposes that the artists who participated in *teatro de carpa*, *teatro de revista* and eventually political cabaret theater are dissident *relajientos* who use this non-conforming voice to point to the contradictions and fissures that exist in normative political and social discourses and also to envision a more dynamic, fragmented, fluid, and complex Mexican identity. Additionally this investigation traces a genealogy of the development of humor for political and social criticism in Mexican popular theater, unearthing specific examples that help bring these criticisms alive.

By exploring the performance styles and tools developed in these theatrical genres a window is opened into the critical nature of frivolous theater that has also opened avenues for resistance and defiance through irreverence. In a country where political criticism has often been violently punished, especially during periods of political and social crisis, critical sites like those created in *teatro de revista*, *teatro de carpa*, and political cabaret theater play a key role in building collective spaces of dissidence. These sites provide a necessary alternative form of entertainment where active participation is fomented. Here, the politics of gender, sexuality, and class become effective points of departure from which to challenge hegemonic constructions of identity, and more

importantly sites in which to imagine and construct ambiguous and alternative paths of self-identity and understanding of what it means to be Mexican in Mexico.

## CHAPTER 1

### Humor and the Sexualization of the Stage in *Teatro de Revista* and *Teatro de Carpa*

#### INTRODUCTION

El pueblo mexicano tiene un refinado gusto y un sentido del humor verdaderamente extraordinario que casi adivina lo que el actor va a decir. Solo que necesita para su regocijo que lo hagan entrar en dos rutas: el chiste político o la picardía. El primero es una válvula de escape. Cuando el pueblo no tiene la oportunidad de decir su descontento y oye que alguien habla a voz alta por él, produce un desbordamiento de alegría. Cuando en lo administrativo o en lo social no está conforme con sus gobernantes, el chiste político viene a ser un desahogo, una satisfacción, un alivio muy grande (María y Campos 437).

*Teatro de revista* and *teatro de carpa* are two popular theater genres developed at the beginning of the twentieth century in Mexico. Though influenced by various European and American genres, by tailoring the acts to reflect local-color scenes, featuring popular Mexican types as main characters, and using vulgar, urban language, these genres became markedly Mexican. The impact both of these have had in Mexico's performance and entertainment industries can be seen not only within the birth of Mexican radio shows in the 1920s and 1930s, but the film industry as well. Many singers, comedians, and actors that began their careers on the stages of *revistas* and *carpas* later transitioned to the radio, film, and television industry. Mario Moreno "Cantinflas" is one of the more prominent examples of this trajectory. More significantly however, and the focus of this chapter is the role *teatro de revista* and *teatro de carpa* have had in the formation of a tradition of criticism within popular theater in México. More than sites for entertainment or information, *revistas* and *carpas* provided spaces in which to challenge oppressive social structures and rectify information through political and social satire.

The following sections will elucidate the most significant characteristics and tools developed on these stages, which created a fertile arena from which the popular classes critically engaged with social and political elites. Moreover, to fully understand and

appreciate the style and techniques used by Jesusa Rodríguez and Tito Vasconcelos, who will be studied in Chapters 2 and 3, it is imperative to explore the influences shaping their work. To this effect, this chapter initially explores the historical development and evolution of *teatro de revista* and *teatro de carpa*, while also providing definitions to key aspects of each theater genre. Subsequently this chapter explores the development of humoristic tools founded in *revistas* and *carpas* which not only characterize what has been identified as a Mexican type of humor, but as we will later see are retooled in the work of Rodríguez and Vasconcelos. Finally, though the sexualization of the *revista* stage in the mid-1920s was acridly criticized these stages became sites in which normative definitions of gender and sexuality were experimented with, explored, and ultimately challenged by the female artists. In turn the subsequent chapters will show how these tools have served as a successful foundation for the continuation of this critical type of theater in the work of Rodríguez and Vasconcelos. While they are important figures in the foundation of political cabaret theater they have a style specific to them, which pulls greatly from the rich history and traditions of *teatro de revista* and *teatro de carpa*.

Shaped by Mexico, her traditions, and her people, *teatro de revista* is characteristically and uniquely Mexican. According to scholars Socorro Merlín and Armando María y Campos, *revista* were born at the beginning of the twentieth century in Mexico City. They developed as a smorgasbord of various theater genres including French revue, Spanish *zarzuela*, burlesque, and characteristics of the American minstrel show.<sup>16</sup> Of these western genres, however, Merlín observed that the most salient characteristics came from *zarzuelas* and revue. On one hand, *revistas* borrowed from French revue both the visually and ornate spectacles displayed in the dance and music

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<sup>16</sup> For a more detailed description please see “De dónde vienen las carpas” in Socorro Merlín’s *Vida y Milagros de las carpas*.



scenes as well as the practice of satirizing contemporary political and social figures. On the other hand, similar to the *zarzuela*, *revistas* depicted humorous, *costumbrista* scenes incorporating musical numbers into the argument of the work. These musical interludes often included sexual themes, double-entendres, and vulgar language, while making social criticism. Though *revista* writers borrowed ideas and tools from their European counterparts, what makes this genre unique is that the content was inspired by Mexican popular types and by the daily political and social happenings of the city and the country. Beyond being a collage of various genres, *revista* writers appropriated and molded the theatrical tools and structures they found useful to construct a uniquely Mexican performance.

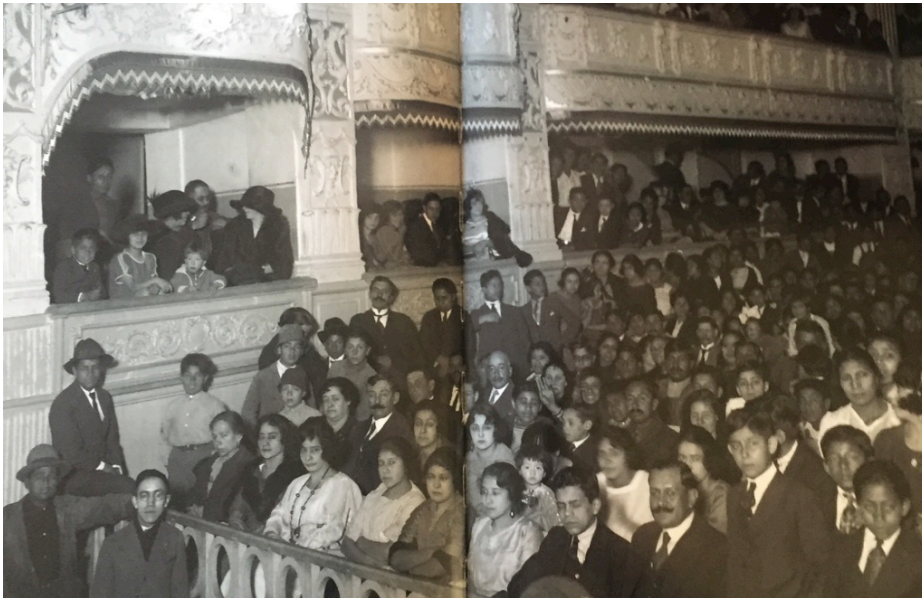


Illustration 1: Audience in a theater, Casasola (1920) (García 302)

Another similarity to the *zarzuela* and more traditional forms of theater was the use of scripts in *revistas*. Each script was divided into several *cuadros* or scenes that were glued together through musical interludes and a general theme. Authors were primarily

newspaper reporters or cartoonists who wrote *revistas* on the side and utilized the stage to say what they were unable to in their newspaper articles.<sup>17</sup> Once born, the genre quickly overtook *zarzuelas*, as the audience thirsted to see themselves and their realities, language, and humor represented on stage.

By the same token, by incorporating common, every-day language, the actors, comedians, and singers showed that the every-day man and not the political or social elite inspired these performances. Actors like Delia Magaña and Amelia Wilhelmy recall going out on excursions to study factory workers, market vendors, drunkards, and beggars populating Mexico City's streets for inspiration.<sup>18</sup> Their observations became the popular types Wilhelmy and Magaña became famous for on stage, including Juan Marihuano, *la borrachita*, *la peladita*, and *la indita*. Comedians would mimic accents and mannerisms of the common person to create the country's first reflections of Mexican, popular, urban types. These types represented not only the audience's reality and everyday drama but also an evolving vision of the effects of urbanization, industrialization, and modernization in the city.

Not surprisingly, theater critics repudiated the type of humor reflected and developed in *revistas*, as in this 1921 opinion piece published in *El Universal Ilustrado* shows:

¿Hay un humorismo netamente mexicano?...México presenta ya el esbozo de un humor propio que se transparenta en los dichos populares, en las anécdotas

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<sup>17</sup> In an interview with María y Campos, renowned *revista* writer Guzmán Águila explains: Deseo confesar al público, que es al que únicamente debo explicaciones, por qué hago obras políticas. Y eso es muy sencillo. En México, la mitad de la gente vive de la política, y la otra mitad de lo que medra con la otra mitad; de manera que en resumidas cuentas, aquí todo lo llena la política y todos nos hacemos política constante. Tengo, pues, que acomodarme al medio actual y hacer política, como en la prensa no he de hacerla, primero porque no quiero y segundo porque no me parece, la hago en el teatro, y el público que también está deseoso de hacer política y no puede hacerla, encuentra en el teatro una forma de lograr sus deseos adhiriéndose anónimamente con sus aplausos a mis sátiras (260).

<sup>18</sup> See M.A. Morales' chapters on Amelia Wilhelmy and Delia Magaña in *Cómicos de México*.

políticas y en las frases de algunos de sus escritores. El pueblo mexicano tiene una válvula de escape en sus chistes y sabe mofarse de sus malos gobiernos...El que nosotros denominamos ‘teatro de barrio,’ con más propiedad, es un humor rastrero y con groserías de mal gusto, que en vez de orgullo debería provocarnos vergüenza (García 277).

While using words like “despicable” and “of bad-taste” to describe this type of humor, the critic also points out how the humor and laughter experienced in these theaters was a kind of escape valve for the audience. Armando María y Campos, a renowned critic of this time asserts, that the reliance by Mexican comedians on political and sexual jokes marked the decadence of “el chiste teatral.” However, he also affirms that through this type of political humor, the audience demonstrated a form of civic participation that escaped the control of the dominant culture of the time.<sup>19</sup> Although elites and theater critics frowned upon it, the type of humor represented in *teatro de revista* made these entertainment spaces wildly popular. It was here where “...el espectador se sentía a sus anchas para expresar sin temor ni cortapisas sus ideas sobre política y políticos” (María y Campos 247). Comedians used humor to entertain, make fun of politicians, and to become a microphone for what the audience wanted to say but couldn’t in other public spaces.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> In *El teatro de género chico en la revolución mexicana*, María y Campos explains the use of political jokes in the following way: “Yo me lo explico de esta manera. Para el público mexicano el chiste político es la única forma de demostrar su civismo, desgraciadamente, renegando de todo lo que sea gobierno. Y como el público es el que manda porque es quien paga y exige, pues por eso veo como una decadencia del chiste teatral” (438).

<sup>20</sup> In an interview with María y Campos, famous comedian Roberto Soto describes the humor developed in *revistas* the following way: “El pueblo mexicano tiene un refinado gusto y un sentido del humor verdaderamente extraordinario, que casi adivina lo que el actor va a decir. Solo que necesita para su regocijo que lo hagan entrar en dos rutas: el chiste político o la picardía. El primero es una válvula de escape. Cuando el pueblo no tienen la oportunidad de decir su descontento y oye que alguien habla a voz alta por el, produce un desbordamiento de alegría. Cuando en lo administrativo o en lo social no está conforme con sus gobernantes, el chiste político viene a ser un desahogo, una satisfacción, un alivio muy grande. Yo en lo personal, tuve la oportunidad de pulsar el gran efecto que tenía sobre el pueblo, hacer comicidad a base de aludir a la CROM en 1929” (437).

Though *teatro de revista* only lasted through the first half of the twentieth century, its effects can still be felt today and within the works of Rodríguez and Vasconcelos, among others identified as *teatro cabaret* performers like Astrid Hadad, César Enrique Cabaret, and Las Reinas Chulas. The focus on representations of Mexico City's urban types as well as the mocking portrayal of political and social figures continues to be present in contemporary political cabaret theater, as we will see in Chapters 2 and 3.

*Teatro de carpa's* roots can be traced back to the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the first circuses toured Mexico (García 192). María y Campos furthermore maintains that *carpas* as we now know them, begin to appear in Mexico City during the 1930s (María y Campos 363). These portable theaters also referred to as *jacalones* found their way into the poor neighborhoods in the center of the city and set up shop on empty lots. From various photographs and descriptions, one can deduce that the performance space was constructed with easily transportable and cheap materials: wooden boards for the walls and seats, packed dirt for the floors, and a foldable tarp roof. After set up, *carpas* would stay for two to three weeks presenting shows on a daily basis and then move somewhere else within the city limits.<sup>21</sup>

*Carpas* were influenced by the nomadic nature and variety of acts of the circus and by the political and social satire born within *teatro de revista*. One of the main differences between these genres was the lack of continuity in theme within the performances of *carpas*. Essentially, these performances were connected only by the fact that they occurred on the same stage on any given day. One *tanda* or act might include magicians, contortionists, singers, dancers, and comedians. At the end of each *tanda*,

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<sup>21</sup> For more a more detailed description see the testimony of Gloria Alicia and Miguel Inclán in Socorro Merlín's *Vida y milagros* (129).

comedians performed an improvised comedic sketch that was rarely rehearsed or scripted. It was an act that relied on the audience and their responses to what was taking place. It was during these sketches where *albures*, jokes with sexual connotations, were celebrated and popularized.<sup>22</sup> Though *carpas* were considered to be harmless entertainment, the festive nature of the space allowed for an irreverent type of humor to be born. Along with *revistas*, *carpas* continued the construction of a post-revolutionary, politically critical type of popular theater.



Illustration 2: Entrance to Carpa Bombay, Nacho López (1952) (García 308)

Unique to *carpas* was the fact that audiences attending them were active participants in the outcome of the sketch. They attended these makeshift theaters to be part of the performance rather than just passive observers. “(E)l público increpaba a los

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<sup>22</sup> An *albur* is a play on words that has double-entendre and is for the most part sexually inflected.

actores, pedía reprises de personajes o de equivocaciones de los actores, gozaba con sus apuros para salir del paso desde arriba lo que tenían a la mano o lo que previamente llevaban consigo, desde papeles, sombreros, cáscaras de fruta, hasta escupitajos y otros líquidos” (Merlín 17). This intimate interaction with the audience required deftness by comedians to ensure the success of any given sketch. Guadalupe Márquez, better known as “Caralimpia,” describes this relationship as a tricky one. “Los artistas y el público se hablan de tú, es una relación que necesita de psicología, porque hay que saber cuándo y cómo se contesta al público” (Merlín 100). While it is likely that early sketches were based on scenes from *teatro de revista*, comedians soon began acting out commonly known jokes or basing their sketches on political comic strips.

This type of audience and actor interaction required a heavy reliance on improvisation, which is another key difference between *carpas* and *revistas*. This practice is also one of the most notable contributions *teatro de carpa* made to contemporary political cabaret theater in Mexico, as we will see later in the works of Rodríguez and Vasconcelos. During an interview with Merlín, Enrique Hernández “Kike,” a well-known *carpa* comedian, describes how as soon as a joke hit the stage it became part of a collective type of knowledge.

No te preocupes, tú sabes que todos los “sketchistas” se fusilan hasta los chistes y todo eso...A mí nunca me dio por registrar los sketches. Yo nada más los ponía y les decía a mis compañeros: tú vas a esto, me contestas esto, yo te digo aquello, sales corriendo, tú te tropiezas, en fin. Es como se explican los sketches. Es imposible que salgan idénticos a lo que uno explica (149).

Whereas artists in *revistas* rehearsed and learned scripted dialogues, from this description it is easy to see that *carpa* comedians had to have well honed improvisational skills, intimate knowledge of various character archetypes, current events, and be able to shift as needed because of the lack of permanency within *carpas*. They had to have

intimate knowledge of their characters to be able to jump into any sketch act at a moment's notice. Because *carpas* moved around and actors and comedians were fired and hired on a night's notice, strong improvisational skills were key to a successful career as a comedian. Though *revistas* in many ways inspired the type of humor that arose in *carpas*, these makeshift stages and master comedians morphed and changed their style of humor to fit the space and audience.

With a clear foundation and understanding of the evolution and differences between *revistas* and *carpas*, one can now begin to explore the use of humor in these uniquely Mexican theater genres. In *El teatro de género chico en la revolución mexicana* María y Campos affirms that audiences in Mexico were not satisfied with slapstick humor or what he describes as *chiste natural*. To make them laugh, jokes needed to have either political content or have sexual undertones.<sup>23</sup> This type of humor paints a sense of freedom not felt elsewhere. As Carlos Monsiváis states in *Escenas de pudor y liviandad*: “La índole del teatro frívolo – entreverar y fundir las dos excitaciones – la del espectador divertido por la humanización despiadada de sus dirigentes y la del espectador contrariado por la lejanía física de sus ídolos femeninos” (41). In other words, the sites constructed by *revistas* and *carpas* provided a space where the artists and audience were educated in a critical irreverence towards the political and social elite.

The following section discusses the use of humor and laughter in these two genres. During these representations, what was “prohibited” in other public spaces was

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<sup>23</sup> See interview with Antonio Cortés “Bobito” in Merlín’s “Testimonios”: Yo recuerdo haber visto a un cómico americano, me lo encontré en varias ferias, el sketch que nosotros hacemos aquí con los calcetines, él lo hacía con algo que se escondía, el sketch se trata de que el cómico se sube a un camión y empieza a despedir un olor desagradable y la gente empezaba a preguntar por qué olía así y el cómico, sacando el bulto, dice debe ser esto. A la gente le hacía gracia. Son un poco insípidos los norteamericanos (Merlín 127).

considered and discussed with more ease. As Merlín argues, it is a playful tool used by popular culture as a way to resist the penetration of dominant cultures (Merlin 47).

**ESTABLISHING CRITICAL IRREVERENCE THROUGH POLITICAL CRITICISM AND BLACK HUMOR IN MEXICAN *TEATRO DE REVISTA* AND *TEATRO DE CARPA***

¿Mi hermanita? Pos también está pelona.  
Y no se asombre, comadre, que ora todos andamos ansina.  
Ya vesté el gobierno: nos tiene pelones y con peinetas.  
"La Tierra de las Pelonas", 1924

Theoretical works by Henri Bergson and Jorge Portilla can facilitate a better understanding of the importance of humor and laughter in *revistas*. In his seminal essay *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1901) Bergson asserts that one of humor's basic functions is that it is a human form of social communication. Laughter is a phenomenon that tends to happen more often than not when other people accompany us. As Bergson puts it, it is not a mere intellectual activity; it is a human activity that has social meaning. "You could hardly appreciate the comic if you felt yourself isolated from others. Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo...Our laughter is always the laughter of a group" (11). Because we are more likely to laugh in the company of others, laughter can create a sense of community among those present.

Portilla, alternatively, explores laughter as a pleasurable emotion that happens when a degradation of values takes place. In his essay "Fenomenología del relajo," he describes laughter as "...una forma de conciencia que, ante la degradación del valor y justamente por esta degradación, trataría de asegurarse a sí misma su libertad..." (47). Keeping this in mind, humor and laughter are forms of rebellion against powers attempting to impose a value system on a group of people. Laughter, Portilla affirms, results in a positive liberation for those laughing.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> In his essay, Portilla credits his analysis of humor and laughter as a combination of Alfred Stern's *Philosophie du Rire et des Pleurs* (1949) and Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790).



Taking these theories into account this section will analyze the development of political humor in *teatro de revista* as a collective form of liberation. In looking at the *cuadro* entitled "Vacilando espero el triunfo del primer plan" from the *revista La Huerta de Don Adolfo* (1921) by Guz Águila and J.A. Palacios, the use of *choteo* or mockery was used to make fun of political leaders of the time and turn the power dynamics upside down.

Portilla describes *choteo* in the following way, "si bien el choteo es menos cáustico que el sarcasmo, más juguetón y menos tenso...El individuo que 'chotea' a otro se erige a sí mismo en valor; en el fondo existe en él una voluntad de mostrar su 'superioridad' frente al otro, en un juego de ingenio que es esencial a esta forma de acción de burla" (29). To put it differently, *choteo* is a playful way to undervalue a person or situation through mockery. Cuban essayist Jorge Mañach further observed *choteo* as a form of mockery and joking that systematically undermined authority and perpetuated chaos and confusion.<sup>25</sup> In this sense, *choteo* is a subversive tool to strip authority of its power.

In *El teatro de género chico* María y Campos describes the importance of *revista* titles in luring audiences to attend with promises of political *choteo* of the latest political and social turmoil.<sup>26</sup> The title, *La Huerta de Don Adolfo*, insinuates that the *revista* will mock Adolfo de la Huerta and his quest for power.

"Vacilando espero el triunfo del primer plan," the *cuadro* analyzed within this *revista* has two characters described as "dos pelados vaciladores." In his essay

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<sup>25</sup> Mañach, Jorge. *Indignación del choteo*. Miami: Mnemosyne Publishing, 1969, pg. 18.

<sup>26</sup> In his book María y Campos relates that while in exile in El Paso, Texas, Guz Águila, a popular author and playwright, produced a play titled *La Mula de Don Plutarco*. The author gave it this title because he knew it would attract the attention of the audience given the political turmoil at the time. However, it was only the title that was allusive to the presidency. The play itself was of Cuban origin and did not overtly criticize the Mexican government. See pages 247-248.

“Instituciones: Cantinflas - Allí estuvo el detalle,” Monsiváis uses Samuel Ramos’ definition of *el pelado* describing the character as:

(el) despojado de todo, el ser apresado en la falta de vestimenta del cargador...Es un marginado de la distribución del ingreso...es la sombra acechante de la miseria sobre la ciudad que crece, es la amenaza sin nombre y casi sin ropa, es la figura del motín, el robo o el asalto, es el bulto inerte sobre las banquetas” (*Escenas de pudor y liviandad* 88).

In other words, Pascual and Homóbono, the two *pelados*, represent the dangerous, popular, urban types who began populating the streets of the capital as a result of the mass migration of people from the country to the city.

Adding another layer to these *pelados*, María y Campos asserts that the verb *vacilar* means, “to smoke marihuana.”<sup>27</sup> So essentially, the *cuadro* begins with two pot smoking *pelados* entering the stage in the middle of a conversation about their future, a situation the audience clearly would have found both shocking and hilarious. In their ensuing dialogue Pascual describes how he will become the "Ministro de Hacienda" by establishing an institution that regulates bean prices in Yucatán and then using that money to rise to power. Equally absurd, Homóbono shares how he will become a “General” by raising a small army, running off to the mountains, and creating his very own government. On the surface, this *cuadro* is a witty conversation between two young men playfully dreaming of their rise to powerful positions. On further analysis, however, these characters use *choteo* to mock Adolfo de la Huerta and Alvaro Obregón.

The following section of text, chock full of common street language and pronunciations, comes after both characters have staked their claims as 'Ministro de Hacienda' and 'General':

HOMÓBONO: Ya estará, fiebre amarilla ¿Y qué harás para ese güeso?

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<sup>27</sup> See a description María y Campos gives of the *revista El vacilón* in the early years of the Revolution (130).

PASCUAL: Pos la cosa es re-sencilla  
 HOMÓBONO: Viene.  
 PASCUAL: Pos en Yucatán  
 En menos de media hora  
 Onque sea de frijoles  
 Pondré una Riguladora.  
 Manejaré muchas lanas  
 Los frijoles regulando  
 Y mandaré a New Yor, lo  
 que se me vaya pegando,  
 Y como en la de Henequén,  
 Veré que existen bemoles  
 En la Comisión Riguladora de los frijoles.  
 Y sin poderla arreglar  
 Me largaré a...Nicaragua...  
 HOMÓBONO: Bueno ¿y a los frijoleros?  
 PASCUAL: Pos los dejaré echando agua  
 HOMÓFONO: ¿Y luego?  
 PASCUAL: A los pocos días  
 Con hazaña tan tremenda  
 Ya me verás cómo me nombran  
 El Menistro de la Hacienda  
 (*El país de las tandas*, 48).

Pascual represents a comical version of Adolfo de la Huerta and his rise to power.<sup>28</sup> He mentions the creation of the ‘Riguladora de frijoles’ an institution to ‘manejar muchas lanas’, which is a reference to the money De la Huerta made in his position as Official Mayor during Carranza's presidency when the Comisión Reguladora de Henequén was created in Yucatán. The commission’s sole function was to raise money for the government by taxing the production of *henequén* (agave), which is similar to what Pascual believes would happen with his ‘Riguladora’. Pascual continues mocking

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<sup>28</sup> De la Huerta was the first of three presidents to rise to power in the 1920s and began the decade of what historian Jean Meyer calls the Sonoran hegemony. His presidency came about as the result of a rebellion against President Venustiano Carranza after he chose Ignacio Bonillas and not Obregón as the next presidential candidate. Under the Plan de Agua Prieta (1920), Obregón along with De La Huerta deny Carranza's government and join in an armed rebellion against him. After his assassination, De la Huerta is chosen president interim after an extraordinary session called by Congress. See Meyer’s essay “Mexico: Revolution and Reconstruction in the 1920s” for a detailed account of post-revolutionary Mexico.

De la Huerta when he reveals that even when the ‘Riguladora de frijoles’ fails, he steals all the money, and flees the country, he will come back and the government will name him ‘Ministro de Hacienda.’ In the case of De la Huerta, after participating in the rebellion against Carranza, he was named Ministro de Hacienda when Obregón took power in 1920. By using *choteo* to mock De la Huerta, Pascual reveals a comical parody of the interim president. The audience must have laughed because of the honesty with which Pascual reveals his plan to rise to power by stealing money and betraying formal allies. He uncovers not only the greed but also the corruption and fickleness of the government of the time.

On the other hand, Homóbono mocks Álvaro Obregón’s rise to power. Obregón also initially supported Carranza at the end of the Revolution by leading the constitutionalist army in the north against Pancho Villa. With the promise that Carranza would help him in his run for president at the end of the Revolution, Obregón moved to Navojoa, Sonora to focus on his agricultural business.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, when Carranza's presidential period came to an end in 1920, Carranza endorsed Ignacio Bonillas, the Mexican Ambassador to the United States, to succeed him. This choice, needless to say, earned him Obregón’s swift retaliation. Along with De la Huerta and Calles, among others, Obregón organized an armed rebellion against Carranza in the north, something mocked by Homóbono in the following passage:

PASCUAL: ¿Y tú?  
HOMÓBONO: Veras:  
Si el generalato busco  
Con diez hombres me levanto  
Y me voy al puro Ajusco;  
Y de mis puras pistolas que es la ley universal,

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<sup>29</sup> See Editorial Porrúa. *Diccionario Porrúa de historia, biografía y geografía de México*. 6th ed. Vol. L-Q. Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, S.A. 1995: 2512.

De aquellos diez encuerados  
Me declaro General;  
Allí vacilando espero  
El triunfo del primer Plan  
Al instante me lo adhiero  
Y hasta el asenso me dan.  
PASCUAL: Cualquiera así onque de números  
O de melicia no entienda.  
HOMÓBONO: Puede ser de visionario  
PASCUAL: O Sicritario de Hacienda  
Y hasta la vista Homóbono.  
HOMÓBONO: Hasta la vista, Pascual.  
PASCUAL: Ya estará, señor Menistro  
HOMÓBONO: Ya estará, mi General (48).

In his career path, Homóbono details the steps he'll take to raise a miniscule army and retreat to the mountains to plot. He affirms that in this remote mountain region, he will declare by his 'puras pistolas' that his is the law of the land. From this comfortable position, Homóbono plans to wait for the triumph of the 'primer plan.' The 'primer plan' is a reference to the Plan de Agua Prieta, written by Obregón in April 1920. In this document, Obregón repudiates Carranza for endorsing Bonillas and defends his right to rise in arms to defend "the nation" against Carranza. Along with other northern military leaders, they drive Carranza out of Mexico City and he is ultimately assassinated in Veracruz in May of that year. Homóbono's plan mocks the idea that anyone who was unhappy with the government could rebel and simply proclaim his law the law of the land. Homóbono is confident that through this strategy, he will easily ascend to the position of general and in the case of Obregón, even president.

From the dialogue above, it is clear that both characters are stand-ins for the Sonoran generals: De la Huerta and Obregón. This *cuadro* makes Guz Águila the ultimate *choteador* in using the seemingly non-threatening voice and language of two pot smoking *pelados* to mock and disavow the credibility of the newest leadership taking

power in Mexico. More subversively, the dialogue makes a mockery of the Revolution itself. By 1920, the social ideals of the Revolution had already been co-opted by those in power and used to gain the support of the people, promising not only peace but the implementation of those revolutionary ideals. Through *choteo* and laughter, Guz Águila and his audience became complicit in a carnivalesque criticism against a government that utilized the ideals of the war and emptied them of meaning by making them into empty slogans and party platforms.

Continuing to look at *revistas* and how they incorporated humor, the following *cuadro*, included in the *revista Trapitos al sol*, by Carlos Ortega and Pablo Prida, discusses the elections of 1928 at the end of Plutarco Elías Calles's presidency. This *revista* was first released in 1924 to critique the transfer of power between Obregón and Calles. It was later used in 1928 when Calles was supposed to transfer the presidency back to Obregón. Before the *revista* was staged, however, Obregón was assassinated, so Ortega and Prida modified this *cuadro*, adding two new characters.<sup>30</sup> The recycling of scripts was common practice at the time; it allowed writers to modify them based on changing situations in Mexico. On one hand Ortega and Prida added Plutarco, a direct representation of Calles and on the other they included Fulchina, a Chinese washerwoman who cleans his clothes on a regular basis. Fulchina, whom the writers identify as Chinese, not only through a play on her name but also through her accent, is an example of a popular representation of the immigrant population in the city.

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<sup>30</sup> Soon after winning re-election Obregón was assassinated in a Mexico City restaurant. José León del Toral, an anti-government, Roman-Catholic, was charged with the crime and soon after revealed he plotted the assassination along with several others in response to the severe government repression against priests, the Catholic Church, and Catholics in general during that time. Though it was during Calles's regime that the Cristero War (1926 – 1929) erupted, Obregón had initiated the anti-Catholic campaign during his 1920-1924 term.

The following scene begins with Plutarco scolding Fulchina for not bringing him clean clothes. Fulchina asks to be forgiven, saying she had read in the newspaper that he was busy and not receiving anybody, alluding to the fall-out from Obregón's assassination, something the audience would have understood. To this Plutarco responds:

PLUTARCO: Pues qué te has figurado ¿que yo no me cambio de camisa?

FULCHINA: Sí, señor; ya leí en sus discursos, ya sé que ahora tengo que lavarle la camisa institucional, que es la que acaba de estrenar.

PLUTARCO: Pues lávala bien que necesito ponérmela el día que entregue el Poder a don Emilio

...

PLUTARCO: No me la vayas a confundir con otra camisa de otro cliente y a la mera hora me venga apretada y me vaya a molestar a la hora de la entrega.

FULCHINA: No, señor; lecuélde usted que está maldada con un letlelo que dice "Sufragio efectivo y no reelección" (María y Campos 337).

This humorous interaction between a client and a washerwoman shows how Prida and Ortega used an everyday scene to critique political happenings. The clothes washed and the conversation that ensues are used to expose the skeletons in Calles's presidency. When Fulchina identifies Plutarco's shirts from other clients by placing a "Sufragio efectivo y no reelección" sign on it, she comically enacts a public airing out of his secrets. One of the more poignant 'secrets' is his pretense of upholding the non-reelection policy of the 1917 Constitution, yet remaining in power as Secretary of War during Emilio Portes Gil's term. Though Calles officially transferred the presidency to Emilio Portes Gil, by cleaning and hanging new titles on the same old shirts, Fulchina reveals how Calles planned to continue to remain in power simply changing his own titles, but not his hold on power.

As the dialogue continues, Fulchina reveals other clients whose shirts need laundering, including Luis N. Morones, the Secretary General of one of the most

powerful worker unions of the 1920s, the Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana (CROM).

PLUTARCO: Ah, pues entonces no puede confundirse. ¿Y cómo va tu negocio?

FULCHINA: Pues muy bien, porque ahora no sólo lavo la lopa paltical, sino también de otro género. Por ejemplo ahora me ha caído una chamba muy buena, estoy lavando toda la lopa del señor Molones.

PLUTARCO: Sí, y como está gordo, suda mucho y se cambia muchas camisas (338).

In celebrating a surge in business Fulchina mentions adding 'Molones' as a new client. Plutarco mockingly responds that this is because Morones is fat, sweats a lot, and most likely has to change his shirts frequently. Though Plutarco mocks Morones physically, the constant washing of clothes points to the dangerous ease with which Morones' loyalties change. Morones, who had initially supported Álvaro Obregón in his 1920 election, quickly changed alliances when Obregón agreed to the "Tratado de Bucareli" (Villegas 336). In this convention, the Mexican government promised to pay U.S. citizens for damages suffered during the Revolution. This agreement infuriated Morones, who'd been pushing for the implementation of Article 27 of the Constitution, where foreign land expropriation would be enforced. The dialogue alludes to doubts that existed on whether the CROM leader, a staunch Calles supporter, potentially masterminded Obregón's murder. The scene ends with Plutarco brainstorming what his next career move will be.

PLUTARCO: Entonces no sería mal negocio poner una lavandería ahora que me retire a la vida privada.

FULCHINA: Ni te lo aconsejo, mejor vete de Diletol de los Felocaliles o de Ministlo al extlanjelo.

PLUTARCO: O de Jefe de un partido político.

FULCHINA: Es muy peligroso, porque ya ves lo que está la gente hablando y a lo mejor dicen que eres el Jefe de la Imposición y que quieres seguir sacando castaña con mano de gato.

PLUTARCO: ¿Habrá quien dude de mis palabras?



FULCHINA: Como no sea el general Antonio Villaleal, no cleo que se atleva ninguno.

PLUTARCO: Entonces en lugar de hablar, hay que obrar. Así que te voy a dar todos mis trapitos de la gestión pasada. Quiero que me los dejes muy limpios. Échales bastante cloruro.

FULCHINA: No, mi general; yo no usa esas cosas; con pulitito sol es lo que blanquea mejor.

PLUTARCO: ¡De modo que vas a sacarme los trapitos al sol!

FULCHINA: ¡Y en presencia de estos señores! (338)

The dialogue ends with Fulchina convincing Plutarco to remain in politics, since few would dare to contradict or doubt him. Plutarco then asks her to ‘whiten’ all of the ‘trapitos’ from his previous term so he can re-use them, to which Fulchina responds that she will ‘whiten’ them by hanging them out to dry in the sun. Ortega and Prida end the *cuadro* embedding the title of the *revista* in Plutarco’s exclamation: ‘¡De modo que vas a sacarme los trapitos al sol!’ to which Fulchina responds ‘¡Y en presencia de estos señores!’ The ‘señores’ Fulchina refers to is the audience. Through this conversation, a washerwoman, whose job is to make him look clean, airs Plutarco’s secrets.

The irony in this *cuadro* highlights the deep contradictions that existed during Calles’s government. Portilla asserted that irony, especially when used in a humorous way, suggests a certain discrepancy, a contradiction. He affirms that “la ironía es, entonces, inmanente a una conciencia que juzga y que advierte la distancia entre la posible realización de un valor y la realidad de quien pretende haberla llevado a cabo” (65). In other words, irony is a way in which to view the world by highlighting the contradictions that exist in it. In being able to see and name these contradictions, irony destroys them by highlighting the pretense. The irony used in *Trapitos al sol* dismantles the “clean” pretense of political figures and union leaders, and reveals them as conniving. This dialogue disrobes the political system and uncovers these figures as corrupt criminals.

These are just two examples of how *revistas* used humor and laughter as tools to criticize the political pundits of the time. These *cuadros* show the experimentation and embodiment of the popular classes' understanding of politics. The laughter created in these spaces is a subversive laughter that mocks the political leaders who were attempting to establish themselves as the future of a modern, Mexican nation. It points to a boldly critical point of view coming from the popular classes, who challenged the image and discourses surrounding the post-revolutionary government. More importantly, it also set up the foundation for a characteristically Mexican type of humor that continues to be used as a platform for political and social criticism in the works of Rodríguez and Vasconcelos.

Alternatively, to understand the significance of black humor developed in *teatro de carpa*, Bergson's observation that laughter denotes a person's detachment from sensibility and emotion is helpful.

Here I would point out, as a symptom equally worthy of notice, the absence of feeling, which usually accompanies laughter. It seems as though the comic could not produce its disturbing effects unless it fell, so to say, on the surface of a soul that is thoroughly calm and unruffled...laughter has no greater foe than emotion (10).

Philosopher John Morreall describes a similar distance describing the difference between Greek Tragedy and Comedy. Morreall explains that both Comedy and Tragedy represent life as full of struggle, danger, and tension: the audience's reaction to Comedy and Tragedy contrast. According to him "Tragedy valorizes serious, emotional engagement with life's problems, even struggle to the death...Comedy, by contrast, embodies anti-heroic, pragmatic attitude toward life's incongruities." (*Philosophy of Humor* 2012). Moreover, as opposed to tragedy, which invites the audience to become immersed in the emotional turmoil of the hero, comedy creates situations where the

audience becomes disconnected enough from the main character's problems that they can laugh at them. In other words, to laugh, we have to distance ourselves from a situation.

For the audience and sometimes even the comedian, laughter affords a vehicle through which to transcend the immediate and individual experience in favor of a more objective and rational perspective. In the sketches made for the *carpas*, the jokes told were based on quotidian drama experienced on a daily basis in the streets of the city. Although at times tragic, the humorous way in which these scenes played out permitted the spectators to escape feelings of self-pity. Comedians used black humor to create an emotional detachment necessary to mock and to laugh about the daily injustices and aggressions the marginalized citizens of the city suffered on a regular basis. In this sense Portilla's definition of black humor is useful in understanding the effect it had on the audience and comedians of *carpas*.

(L)a comicidad es el signo de la liberación. Sólo se puede reír si se guarda distancia de aquello de que se ríe. Un hombre en ciertas circunstancias puede resultar cómico para los demás, pero no para sí mismo, como ya lo hemos indicado. Mientras los otros ríen, él puede sentir vergüenza o dolor. Pero si es capaz de retroceder ante la propia situación y colocarse en actitud de espectador puede reír de sí mismo. Al hacerlo, exterioriza su libertad-trascendencia. Esta capacidad de alejamiento es el humor y, cuando las circunstancias son atroces, llamamos al conjunto "humor negro" (76).

Portilla further explains how black humor helps a person escape a feeling of *patetismo* that can be crippling. This sense of *patetismo* or self-pity is an emotion Portilla describes as paralyzing because it prompts the idea of thinking of oneself as a helpless victim. By using black humor to ridicule ones' circumstances, the power of these conditions is diminished.

During an interview with Merlín, a famous comedian of the time, Roberto Sánchez Montúfar described how black humor is used in *carpa* sketches. In answer to a

question about how he would incorporate current events into his sketch acts, he describes a sketch scene he was working on which dealt with a new change in policy for vehicles driven in Mexico City in the 1990s.

Hace poco escribí uno acerca de mi silla de ruedas: “Salí por la avenida Juárez con mi silla de ruedas y me detuvo un tamarindo, me dice a dónde va, lleva exceso de velocidad, además hoy no circula.” Entonces ya estoy al día, ya estoy hablando de lo que está sucediendo ahorita. “Me dice: su calcomanía-me levanto la cachucha y la llevo pegada en la frente-. Además trae vidrios polarizados-los lentes-. Está prohibido, además viene usted despidiendo smog. Pero cual smog –le digo-. Cómo no, viene fumando. Pero cómo si vengo en mi silla de ruedas –le digo-. Viene usted rebasando al de la Ruta 100, son los únicos que tienen derecho a echar smog. Usted no. Así que hágase a un lado porque me lo voy a llevar al corralón. Solamente que nos pongamos a mano con dos retratos de Lázaro Cárdenas...Pero cómo dos retratos, en dónde los consigo –le digo-. No sea tonto dos billetes de a 10.000 (Merlín 97).

Although this sketch is not representative of the 1930s, Sánchez’s example provides a visualization of how black humor was used. The act represents a common dichotomy between institutional policing and the people who have to navigate it. In this sketch, the ‘tamarindo’ is a corrupt police officer enforcing the new traffic rules for personal gain.<sup>31</sup> In his quest, he charges Sánchez, a physically incapacitated man, with driving his ‘vehicle,’ a wheelchair, too fast on a day when the vehicle is not supposed to be circulating. Furthermore, he accuses him of polluting the air through the ‘smog’ his cigarette is expelling and also of having tinted windows, his sunglasses, which were prohibited. Though the comedic character tries to defend himself by questioning the application of the new traffic laws to his situation, the officer threatens to impound his vehicle and remit it to the ‘corralón’ unless he is willing to pay a bribe to let it slide.

This sketch mocks the ‘Hoy no circula’ program that was created in Mexico City in 1990. The city's government instituted this program as a way to control the level of air

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<sup>31</sup> Tamarindo’ is the popular term used in reference to these officers, it is a play on the brown color of their uniforms.

pollution, by limiting the days a car could drive. Based on one's license plate as well as the age of the car, a person could be prevented from using their car in the city one or two days a week. These rules, more likely, disproportionately affected the poorest citizens of the city who typically had long distances to travel with few to no public transportation options. Since this interview took place in 1991, a year after the program started, Sánchez was able to play with his audience's dissatisfaction with it. Sánchez's sketch also provokes laughter by mocking the police force's corruption. While he does not necessarily unveil the corruption himself, his extreme take of this reality pushes the audience to laugh at their own situation. Through their laughter at the ridiculous situation, the audience shows their recognition of the reality and the comedian's mocking take on it. He reinforces their sentiment towards the police and provides them an escape valve to laugh at it instead of steeping themselves in anger or self-defeat against police corruption. In a country where asking for bribes, blackmail, and fraud occur daily, this sketch reduces the importance of that adversity through black humor. In this way, *carpa* comedians continued the fortification of irreverence and laughter as a way to mock and disempower authority.

The final legacy left behind by *teatro de carpa* is the comical staging of encounters between a disorderly, humorous character and a serious character. To understand the significance of staging and developing the dynamic of these two characters, Portilla's definition of the *relajiento* and the *apretado* is helpful. Portilla describes two types of subjects who participate in a situation where *relajo* ensues. On the one hand, we have the *relajiento*, a subject who doesn't believe in anything and whose goal is to interrupt the seriousness of others. "El hombre del relajo, por el contrario, detesta el orden y lo destruye cada vez que puede" (93). Although humor and laughter are not the only ways a *relajiento* interrupts the *apretado*, these tools are often utilized to

create a festive type of chaos. Alternatively, Portilla describes the *apretado* as a “snob” or “tightwad.” The *apretado* is a person who takes things too seriously and emulates that which he holds in high esteem, even if nobody else does.

El espíritu de la seriedad es pura gesticulación, una exteriorización exagerada que tienen, más a mostrar la propia excelencia y a subrayar la propia importancia que a realizar el valor. El espíritu de seriedad es reflexivo, la seriedad es espontaneidad pura; aquél que es exteriorizante, ésta es “intima”; aquél es un comportamiento frente al prójimo; en la seriedad auténtica estoy solo conmigo mismo frente al valor (19).

The *apretado*, furthermore, fully commits to what he finds valuable regardless of what others may think.

El otro debe inclinarse respetuosamente ante él en la realización del valor, puesto que él, el *apretado*, es el valor. Cuando el otro se niega a esa sumisión, el *apretado* dice que es un “alzado” o un “levantado”; es decir, un hombre que se resiste a inclinarse. El *apretado* quiere, esencialmente, que el otro se doblegue ante él, quiere que se doble (93).

When the *apretado* confronts someone who is unwilling to become submissive and on top of that mocks him, he sees this person as dangerous to himself and society. The *apretado* is the guardian of the sanctity of seriousness to a fault. “Si dice una estupidez, si comete un error, esto no prueba nada, puesto que se tratará de una estupidez dicha por un hombre muy inteligente; se tratará del error de un funcionario eficaz” (87-88). In this sense, the *apretado* views appearance and status as paramount to success.

In finding ways to create chaos or make fun of serious characters, commonly known as *patiños*, the humorous characters became the championed anti-heroes in *carpas*.<sup>32</sup> According to Alejandro Rosas, Ricardo Bell, an American circus clown who came to Mexico with the Orrin Circus at the end of the nineteenth century, was of the first to use *patiños* on stage (García 193). The name derives from Carlos Patiño, Bell’s

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<sup>32</sup> Initially these characters could be recognized because they painted their faces white and looked very similar to circus clowns. This is due to the roots these sketches had in circus acts (Merlín 93).

serious sidekick (María y Campos 403). Whether it was because they represented authority, a law-abiding citizen, or a hard to get woman, *patiños* were a necessary counterpoint for the disorderly humorist (Merlín 150). So important was this relationship between the comic and the *patiños*, in fact, that Mario Moreno, a Mexican comic film and theater actor better known as Cantinflas, would not have become as famous as he did without his partnership with Estanislao Schilinsky, who was his loyal *patiño* (M.A. Morales 147).



Illustration 3: Cantinflas and Schilinsky in character (Granados 104)

In “Instituciones: Cantinflas. Ahí estuvo el detalle” Monsiváis describes Cantinflas’s character as that of the quintessential *peladito*. He defines the character of the *peladito* as a smiley *pícaro* of the city limits which was a harmless version of the feared *pelado*.<sup>33</sup> Though comedian José Muñoz was the first to stage *el peladito* in the 1910s

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<sup>33</sup> In the same *crónica* Monsiváis quotes Mexican philosopher, Samuel Ramos who describes the *pelado* in the following way: “¿Qué es el pelado? El despojado de todo, el ser apresado en la falta de vestimenta del cargador, el heredero y compañero del lépero, aquel que sobrellevó la lepra de la pobreza y de la falta de atención social...Es un marginado de la distribución de ingreso y por tanto recibe el nombre genérico que lo sustrae de cualquier realidad y lo sepulta en la abstracción. (88-89). Ramos defines this character as the elemental nature of Mexico’s national character in *El perfil del hombre y la cultura en México* (1934).

through his character Chupamirto, Cantinflas was the one who wrestled him into a likable, picaresque character (Monsiváis 90).<sup>34</sup> Alternatively, Schilinsky was the actor who created the prototype for the serious character that later would give rise to other famous *patifños* like Don Ramón in “El chavo del ocho.” The sketches between Cantinflas and Schilinsky established a model through which spectators, mostly coming from poorest neighborhoods of the city, related to authority.

The dichotomy between *relajientos* and *apretados* that Portilla observed in Mexican society is brought to life in *carpas*. The character that is championed in each sketch is the one who can interrupt and mock the values imposed by the *apretado*. Characters like the *peladito* are celebrated for navigating the world and taking advantage of those who guard the sanctity and seriousness of our value system. Sánchez described this dichotomy in the following example:

“Los dos muertos” eran dos que se fingían muertos que no eran más que dos vivos, pasaban dos personas, una veía primero al muerto y se compadecía del otro que le estaba llorando, entonces le daba dinero al vivo. Luego se iba la persona y el vivo le decía al muerto “Ya párate manito”, en eso regresaba el que había dado dinero y le decía que le daba para el azúcar, para el café y como veía que el vivo lo estaba levantando las tomaba contra él y el vivo le decía que lo levantaba para que echara el “apostema”, salía la persona y ellos se repartían el dinero. Cuando entraba otra persona se acostaba el vivo para hacer de muerto y el ahora vivo decía “Una limosnita para mi hermano que se acaba de morir” y lloraba. El que pasaba se compadecía y le daba dinero. Cuando salía se repartían el dinero. Entonces entraban los dos que habían dado dinero porque eran amigos, y como los dos muertos estaban parados, y discuten sobre quién era el muerto, entonces los dos muertos se dejan caer. Los dos amigos discuten sobre quién era el muerto y empiezan a apostar hasta llegar a los cien pesos, entonces los dos muertos se levantan y gritan: ¡Yo era el muerto, yo era el muerto! (Merlín 96)

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<sup>34</sup> In *Cómicos de México*, Miguel Ángel Morales describes this comedian as the prototype for Cantinflas. Chupamirto was a character created by comedian José Muñoz, as well, as the name of a popular cartoon of the same name. It is not clear whether Muñoz was inspired by the cartoon or the other way around, what is evident is the close relationship political cartoons had with *carpas*.



This sketch highlights the ultimate *relajiento* act by mocking the values surrounding both life and death. These two *peladitos* take advantage of people's feelings of compassion and pity by pretending to raise money to bury a loved one. This sketch mocks the pain commonly associated with death, as the two *peladitos* pretend to be dead and mourn each other to raise money. The sketch celebrates them as astute characters that are able to take advantage of situations and people for personal gains. It establishes and reflects a way of being where the comedic *relajiento* rather than the *apretado* is supported. This is an example of how this performance space served as a site to practice non-conformity with conventional social values.

Carlos Sanchez asserts that given Mexico's historical circumstance as marginal to Western history, "...relajo could be considered an act of resistance against the forces of history and violence which have imposed value onto and demanded seriousness from the colonized and oppressed (Sánchez 38). Sanchez argues that, although Portilla criticized the proliferation of *relajo*, in his view *relajo* is a key to "...usher an age beyond seriousness, one where options are always open, and non-conformity is the norm" (121).

Clearly, *teatro de revista* and *teatro de carpa* created a sound foundation in the development of a critical type of humor essential to the Mexican narrative. Through *choteo* and black humor, artists and audience were able to criticize and mock the political and social elite in a way that would never have been possible without the spaces created by these unique theater genres, a tradition that continues today within the works of Rodríguez and Vasconcelos.

#### **MEXICO'S OTHER REVOLUTION - MEXICAN RATAPLÁN AND THE WOMEN THAT JARRED DEFINITIONS OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY**

While the role of humor was critical to the success and acceptance of *revistas* and *carpas*, these performance sites also provided an opportunity to explore and creatively

challenge the boundaries surrounding women's gender and sexuality. The transgression by female artists in *revistas* and *carpas* was especially poignant at a time when the government was redefining Mexican identity. Within their work in theater, women began to re-delineate their role within theater moving beyond the roles of singers and dancers to becoming comedians and entrepreneurs, many owning theaters and theater companies.



Illustration 4: *Tiples* of Bataclán, Archivo Casasola (1920)(García 294)

Social magazines and the proliferation of the postcard industry prominently featured these pioneering women. This phenomenon began in the 1910s but continued in the 1920s. By posing for photographs that appeared in the covers of magazines and also reproduced through the burgeoning post-card industry, these artists became a key piece in the construction of a modern and cosmopolitan Mexican identity. Alongside the building of theaters, bull fighting rings, polo sports fields and hippodromes, the establishment of the Mexican Diva was a significant aspect in elevating Mexico's cultural world to the

same level as other modern Western nations like France, Spain, and the United States.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the creation of the Mexican Diva fueled the success of *teatro de revista*.

Though steeped in a field that was highly sexist and one that objectified their bodies, singers and dancers, colloquially known as *tiples* explored the stage and photography as a platform to propose a different vision of femininity in Mexico. By using their humor, body, and sensuality as tools to experiment, they broke rigid feminine roles heralded by Porfirian society and carved out a space to be independent.

To understand these artists' transgressions, it is helpful to comprehend the condition of women in Mexico. In her anthropological study *Cautiverios de las mujeres: madresposas, monjas, putas, presas y locas* (1990), Marcela Lagarde developed the theory of *cautiverio*, as a system in patriarchal society where women are relegated to five "circles of captivity," that of the 'mother-wife,' the 'nun,' the 'whore,' the 'prisoner' and the 'insane.' These circles, Lagarde affirms, keep women confined to specific gender and sexual roles. She further elaborates that women actively participate in these *cautiverios* by believing in and giving life to these socially constructed roles.

De esta manera el impulso que mueve a la existencia y que da sentido a la vida de las mujeres es la realización de la dependencia: establecer vínculos con los otros, lograr su reconocimiento y simbiotizarnos. Estos procesos confluyen en una enorme ganancia patriarcal: la sociedad dispone de las mujeres cautivas para adorar y cuidar a los otros, trabajar invisiblemente, purificar y reiterar el mundo, y para que lo hagan de manera compulsiva: por deseo propio (17).

In other words, Lagarde confirms that in order for a patriarchal system to work, women need to take part in the perpetuation of that system, becoming active participants in their own oppression where learning, experimenting, and daring seem impossible.

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<sup>35</sup> According to Pablo Dueñas, the first industries that focused on artistic postcards were born in France in 1870 with the popularization of frivolous theater. The images that predominated were those that showed the female artists naked or semi-naked (67).

Within *revistas* and *carpas*, female performers were viewed as less than savory women, which ascribes them to Lagarde's *puta* circle. She believes this circle to encapsulate the following characteristics:

El erotismo femenino en cambio, caracteriza al grupo de las mujeres expresado en la categoría de putas. Las putas concretan el eros y el deseo femenino negado. Ellas se especializan social y culturalmente en la sexualidad prohibida negada, tabuada: en el erotismo para el placer de otros. Son mujeres del mal que actúan el erotismo femenino en el mundo que hace a las madresposas virginales buenas, deserotizadas, fieles, castas, y monógamas” (32).

The *puta* 'circle of captivity' in other words is used as a counterpoint to the 'mother-wife' circle. The women that are part of the *puta* circle are traditionally shunned by society and considered dangerous to the nuclear family. Women in *revistas* and *carpas*, especially when burlesque was introduced in the mid 1920s, were seen as dangerous women who, through photographs and on stage, publicly brought to life the sexual fantasies of their predominantly male, heterosexual audience.<sup>36</sup> Yet what is also evident is that they experimented with and challenged traditional definitions of gender and sexuality for themselves and their female audiences as well. *Tiples* became women who used their public performance of sexuality to their advantage. Through it they gained power and prestige.

The embodied transgressions that *tiples* took part in are best seen through photographs of the dance and song numbers of a 1925 *revista* by José Campillo entitled *Mexican Rataplán*. During the first years of the 1920s, Mexico lived through a relatively peaceful period where foreign theater companies again added Mexico City as a stop in their international tours. Though not of the best quality, these shows were well attended

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<sup>36</sup> In *Escenas de pudor y liviandad* Monsiváis describes the mass production of these images: “A la fotografía masificada, las mujeres llegan como objeto de devoción o consumo. Serán las madres abnegadas, las novias prístinas, las divas reverenciadas, las mujeres anónimas cuya desnudez trastorna, las vedettes de belleza a la disposición de las frustraciones (*Escenas de pudor y liviandad*, 25).

by the capital's elite who thirsted to see Western-style shows. One production, however, changed the face of *teatro de revista* in Mexico forever. This was the much-acclaimed French production *Voilà Bataclan!* produced by Madame Rasimí in 1925.

*Voilà Bataclan!* became an instant success despite the scandal it created in the conservative, upper class, Mexican audience. It was shocking because it was the first performance in Mexico where women stripped on stage. For the audience, the wish to be seen as cosmopolitan by attending a French theater production clashed with the reality of a performance where singers and dancers undressed on stage. A critical review by Roberto Núñez y Domínguez, "El Diablo," shows how the scandal was mitigated in the newspapers by elevating the westernized style and beauty of the women viewing a high-culture performance. Through the language and descriptions Núñez y Domínguez altered the narrative of the performance and what might have been considered inappropriate, became must-see theater.

Cual si fuesen los áureos heraldos de la primavera, las lindas francesitas hicieron irrupción en nuestro valle. La pecaminosa alegría de Montmartre se tendió sobre la metrópoli como un radioso velo de Tanit...Las ocho beldades que, como esculpidas en un friso heleno, decoran el cuadro titulado "El besamanos" de la revista *Voilà Paris!*, se antojan las notas de la escala de la voluptuosidad...inquietante pentagrama de Madame Rasimí, riman sus corpóreas armonías para lograr una música ideal, que no soñó Arquímedes al escuchar el himno de las constelaciones (Núñez y Domínguez 236).

Núñez y Domínguez speaks of the nudity in the show, comparing the dancers to Greek sculptures and their voices to choirs that would even stun Archimedes. Through metaphors and sublime imagery he enticed readers to attend the performance while providing them the language needed to defend seeing an erotic show as a high culture, cosmopolitan activity. He promoted Rasimí's production as an appropriate activity for the political and social elite, helping sell out all dates in Mexico City.

Upon the show's unparalleled success, José Campillo, a well-known *revista* writer, adapted the style and story of *Voilà Bataclan!* and created a Mexican parody of the show. With *Mexican Rataplán*, he produced the first burlesque style spectacle centered on Mexican female nudity. This shifted the focus within *revistas* from featuring social and political criticism to one where women's bodies and sexuality became another layer for *revistas* to explore.

As described in *El país de las tandas*, the plot of *Mexican Rataplán* takes place in Vacilópolis, a city where Emperor Fox seeks to annex music from the whole world to enlarge Foxquilandia, his kingdom. Remaining faithful to *teatro de revista*, Campillo populates Vacilópolis with popular, urban stock characters like: maids, police officers, prostitutes, drunkards, and soldiers. He alternatively shifts the gaze from daytime urban scenes to depicting the city's nightlife and underbelly. In *Mexican Rataplán*, Campillo was able to blend the *costumbrista* scenes, the street language, and popular humor with a French style burlesque show, creating a uniquely Mexican risqué performance.

One of the most important divas at the time made her debut in *Mexican Rataplán*. In an interview with Miguel Ángel Morales, Delia Magaña describes this show as being one of the highlights of her career. From here, she was able to launch herself successfully as a singer and dancer. Despite the likelihood that she stripped during the performance, something that would not have been acceptable at the time, Magaña became a renowned and beloved actress. Magaña also points out that *Mexican Rataplán* was essentially copied from the French version and recreated with a Mexican audience in mind. "El Rataplán eran los mismos cuadros del Bataclán nada más que hechos a la mexicana." (M.A. Morales 86). Campillo therefore, used the tools he found useful from the French show while exploring a Mexicanized form of sexualized female identity.

Contrasting with the reviews *Voilà Bataclan!* received, theater critics acidly criticized *Mexican Rataplán*. Núñez y Domínguez himself didn't waste any time in sourly disparaging the show as a cheap, lower-class copy of the French show.

Como no podía menos de ser, dado el vicio imitativo que es uno de nuestros defectos, acaso porque no se estimula debidamente el espíritu creador y no pudiendo explotar lo original, tenemos que resignarnos a usufructuar lo ajeno, el hecho es que apenas caído el telón la noche del deslumbrante debut de la Compañía Francesa de *Revistas* en que el arte poliforme y la elegancia brumelesca ... rinde todas las admiraciones, los autorzuelos mexicanos se dieron inmediatamente a la tarea de confeccionar una parodia nacionalista de la obra *Voilà Paris!* Y a la siguiente semana de la presentación del Ba-Ta-Clán, hemos asistido al (Teatro) Lírico al estreno de la revista forjada al margen de la ofrecida por Madame Rasimí. Era natural que *Voilà Mexique!* alcanzara un éxito rotundo como reflejo del obtenido por la farándula parisién, que por sus precios caros y por la barrera del idioma, no podía ser paladeada por determinado sector del público (Núñez y Domínguez 237).

In contrast to his review of *Voilà Bataclan!* Núñez y Domínguez describes Campillos' production as a 'nationalist parody' and another example of the lack of imagination and originality coming from the Mexican *revista* genre. He not only disparages the writer, but also the audience of this show who, in his view, most likely could not afford to see the French show nor were cultured enough to understand the French spoken in it. In comparing these two reviews even further, it is evident that the audience of *Voilà Bataclan!* were lured into enjoying this style of theater as something exotic, foreign, and desirable. It was easier to eroticize and fantasize about foreign female bodies because it stayed in the realm of fantasy. It was even de-scandalized by normalizing it through sublime descriptions like that of Núñez y Domínguez. In his review, sexuality and nudity were not only acceptable but also celebrated in Rasimí's production. In *Mexican Rataplán* however, the same approaches to exploring gender and sexuality were met with resistance and outcry; this was deemed something neither appropriate nor acceptable for the Mexican woman. In this way, this show is a prime

example of how *revistas* challenged the traditional images of female Mexican identity, proposing a more liberated vision of what she could look like.

Contrasting with Rasimí's show, Campillo's production utilized locally sourced materials to decorate the sets and make the singers and dancers costumes. He gave these objects new meaning by using them to transport the audience into a fantasy world that although imaginary was not foreign or far off. He then challenged this negotiated imaginary by casting an array of Mexican *tiples*, many of whom were dark-skinned, short, and had markedly indigenous features. In doing so, Campillo promoted mestizo and indigenous looking sexual icons, women whom the audience could potentially identify as being their sisters, daughters, wives and girlfriends. Although Monsiváis acidly criticized the sexism and machismo which later ruled burlesque shows in Mexico, *Mexican Rataplán* broke with static gender roles by empowering the women on stage to flaunt their bodies and seduce their audiences.<sup>37</sup> The *tiples* that were part of this show raised the stakes and shifted the sexual paradigm using the public display of their sexuality to gain a unique type of power, something that this dissertation sees echoed in the performances of both Rodríguez and Vasconcelos. Set photographs from *Mexican Rataplán* performances clearly show this shift taking hold.

What is striking in the images of *Mexican Rataplán* is how *tiples* are not only showing off their legs but also their midriff, leaving little to the imagination. For example, the picture of *La Guardia Blanca* features an army of *tiples* marching as a group of irregular paramilitary forces.<sup>38</sup> They all wear a costume composed of a straw

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<sup>37</sup> In his *crónica* "Mexicanerías: El Burlesque" Monsiváis defined this performance genre as one in which machismo and sexism ruled. It is here where women become sexual objects, they lose the features that make them individuals to become pieces of meat for men to enjoy. "(Con el burlesque) se normaliza el desnudo y hay una visión humorística de las contrariedades del apetito sexual" (*Escenas de pudor y liviandad* 255).

<sup>38</sup> In his book *La Revolución Mexicana: Del Porfiriato al nuevo régimen constitucional* historian Alan Knight refers to these armed civilian armies as irregular paramilitary groups organized by rich



*campesino* hat that is pinned down on one side with a feathered brooch. Their hair is up in a bun or cut short and hidden beneath the hat. All of them also don a loose fitting, white, button-down shirt, a matching pair of white shorts, and a pair of leather huaraches.

The image captures sixteen *tiples* mid-movement, with their right legs lifted as if marching to a drum. They are lined up in four lines of four *tiples*, all about to take a unified step forward with wide grins spreading across many of their faces. Their white costume and choice of footwear are reminiscent of what paramilitary irregular forces wore during the Mexican Revolution. Though their garb would have been similar to what southern revolutionary rebels wore, the “guardias blancas” were counterrevolutionary groups of peasants who were paid by rich ranchers and landowners to fight against the rebels. In the case of the representation the *tiples* created for Mexican *Rataplán*, they added flair to the uniform through the feather brooch they attached to the hat. Moreover though their shirt is loose fitting, the sleeves are rolled up showing off their arms and the shorts are cut off mid-thigh, something that was very scandalous at the time.<sup>39</sup> Their uniforms show off a voluptuous vision of beauty and sexuality. This photograph is emblematic of how *tiples* sexualized and appropriated symbols and signs of male dominance and mocked it on stage.

Another wonderful image from *Mexican Rataplán* is that of *tiple* María Luisa Montoya, which appears in *El país de las tandas*. In it, Montoya stands at the center of

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conservatives to defend major cities and land from revolutionaries. More specifically he mentions that with major economic losses at risk, foreign oil companies significantly contributed to the fight against the revolutionaries sponsoring “guardias blancas.” Foreign companies were not the only ones, powerful ranchers would arm their cowboys to control cattle theft in their land. “En general, esos grupos no eran manifiestamente políticos, no estaban comprometidos de manera directa en el apoyo a Huerta ni se oponían a la Revolución, pero en ese ambiente de guerra de guerrilla, la defensa de la propiedad y la lucha contra el “bandidaje” (término ambiguo, como hemos visto) podían adquirir sentido político.” According to Knight, as the revolution continued these paramilitary groups switched from simply defending land or property to re-capture what had been lost to the revolutionary armies. (617-618).

<sup>39</sup> In *200 años de espectáculo* Rosas explains that in the 1920s *tiples* began to show their bodies more and more, leaving little to the imagination.

the image striking a pose reminiscent of a dancing goddess. Her right hand is raised upward as if picking fruit off a tree as her left hand rests on her hip. She is smiling, yet her gaze is not directed at the camera but at what she seems to be plucking from mid-air. The backdrop she stands in front of appears to be part of the set and depicts ornate chandeliers. Her costume is equally ornate. On her head sits what looks like a helmet or crown. Covering her breasts are two hand-painted bowls that are held together with a fragile string. These bowls look like hand-painted *jícaras* sold in markets. She also wears a pair of dark knickers which are decorated with these hand-painted bowls and what look like matching hand-painted spoons. From her right hip to her raised right arm, a long string of these spoons attaches to her hand.

This image is even more shocking than that of *La Guardia Blanca*, because Montoya is practically naked. More significantly, the materials used to make the costume show a public and sexualized display of a traditional, private feminine space: the kitchen. By using everyday kitchen utensils to decorate her minimal outfit, Montoya breaks with the silence and privacy of these sites. More significantly, she sexualizes what Lagarde refers to as the *madresposa* circle of captivity, a circle that limits women to being virginal, good-natured, de-eroticized, faithful, chaste, and monogamous.

“El cautiverio de la materno-conyugalidad da vida también al grupo social específico de las mujeres que se definen por ser material y subjetivamente madresposas. En ellas, la conyugalidad debería expresar la sexualidad erótica de las mujeres y el nexa erótico con los otros; sin embargo, debido a la escisión de la sexualidad femenina, el erotismo subyace a la procreación y, negado, queda a su servicio hasta desvanecerse” (39).

In bringing these objects and symbols into a burlesque show, Montoya and other *tiples* propose an alternative identity for the *madresposa*. In their reimagining this woman can be loud, sexy, and explore fashion to redefine her own identity. Although Campillo saw the obvious economic advantages in producing a show like *Mexican Rataplán*, this

production also broke with some of the suffocating conventions surrounding how women were expected to behave. The dancers, singers, and comedians brought to the forefront a new type of independent woman.



Illustration 5: Army of *tiples* in the *cuadro* La Guardia Blanca in *Mexican Rataplán* (A. Morales 70).

The power these women garnered through their work is reflected in powerful fan bases they had in politicians, some of whom became their lovers. Emilia Trujillo, for example, was regularly picked up by General Huerta's escort and driven to Café Colón at night after her shows (María y Campos 156). Additionally, General Enrique Estrada, the nation's Secretary of War during De la Huerta's and Obregón's tenure, was frequently found in Celia Montalván's dressing room where it was said to be easier to speak to him about military matters than in his own office (María y Campos 303). One legendary story that highlights the power *tiples* held while on stage, took place during a performance by María Conesa at the height of the revolution. Conesa was a very attractive singer and dancer whose performances became mandatory stops for military troops passing through the city during the Mexican Revolution. According to Rosas, revolutionary soldiers said

that when they came to the city they would make sure to: “Visitar a la Guadalupe en la Villa y a la María en el Colón” (García 258). Conesa was even crowned La Tiple de la Revolución because she was the only one who didn’t close her theater’s doors during the war. Even when there was fighting in the city, she continued to perform. Conesa is representative of an artist who used her sexuality as a tool for negotiation and power. She was one of Mexico’s first divas and became a prosperous business entrepreneur.<sup>40</sup> In a legendary encounter vividly described by María y Campos, sometime in the mid-1910s, a moment when Francisco Villa had taken control of the capital, to celebrate he went to see Conesa perform at the Teatro Colón:

La propia María Conesa me ha referido que Villa gozaba extraordinariamente ocupando las lunetas laterales en unión de jefes de su Estado Mayor y correligionarios, y que una noche que se representaba Las Musas Latinas, en el número de “Las percheleras” de Málaga, en el que María acostumbraba bajar a las lunetas, con una filosa navaja de afeitar en la diestra, para jugarles bromas a los espectadores, pinchándoles el sombrero, arrancándoles trozos a las corbatas, o haciendo saltar los botones a los chalecos, llegó hasta donde estaba el general Villa y entre bromas y veras le arrancó, con la peligrosa navaja, los botones del uniforme militar. Como tenía que ocurrir, y había ocurrido antes con otros jefes militares de la Revolución, Villa se enamoró de la Conesa (166).

This example depicts Conesa’s intimate knowledge of the power she held when on stage. Walking a fine line between enamoring and angering her guests, she used her attractiveness and sexuality to seduce and then ridicule Villa, something that would’ve earned many a severe punishment. As Monsiváis describes in his *crónica* on Conesa: “Al instante ella lo comprende: en un medio reprimido, las alusiones divertidas al sexo son escenificaciones clásicas al orgasmo colectivo” (319). In a society that was limited by conservative values and rules imposed on by the Church, all of the *tiples*, including Conesa, are necessary and cathartic outlets not only for men but women as well. They

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<sup>40</sup> For more information on María Conesa’s life see Alonso Enríquez’s biography *María Conesa*.

provided a different vision of an irreverent and powerful woman who used her sexuality and sensuality to her advantage.

Equally important to the role *tiples* played, was the extraordinary work of female comedians on the stages of both *carpas* and *revistas*. They were trailblazers through their irreverent songs, as we saw in María Conesa's example, but also in the characters female comedians created. In the second generation of women who took on comedic roles, Amelia Wilhelmy is probably the most renowned.<sup>41</sup> Roberto Soto, a famous comedian of his time and owner of his own theater company, discovered her in 1928 acting in *carpas* in the north of Mexico. She debuted in her most beloved role however, in one of Carlos Villanave's *revistas*.

Ella misma escribió su parte en aquella ocasión, como en tantas otras, pues es de admirar cómo la talentosa artista escribe monólogos, parodias, pequeñas escenas y versos alegres, con raras facultades de escritora festiva. Y aquella noche de su debut obtuvo su primer gran triunfo, al aparecer como el diminuto soldado mariguano (M.A. Morales 106).

In her role as Juan Marihuano, Wilhelmy characterizes a pot-smoking soldier who speaks of his military campaigns in a funny and fragmented way. She became hugely successful because nobody had ever done anything like that, especially not a woman. In an interview Wilhelmy comments:

Esta es la caracterización—le comenta—que ha gustado quizá más al público. ¿Por qué? Es muy sencillo: yo he estudiado profundamente a estos Juanes desventurados que, aprovechan los asuetos del cuartel, visitan, a escondidas de sus superiores, las cantinas y las pulquerías de las barriadas de México. Ya ebrios

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<sup>41</sup> Emilia Trujillo, was one of the first actresses famous for not only cross-dressing as a man, but also creating urban types like *la china poblana*, *la peladita*, *la indita* and *la borrachita*. The first time *la borrachita* appeared onstage was in the spectacle *México Nuevo* in the *cuadro* "La comisaría" (María y Campos 73). Equally important, Lupe Rivas Cacho was the first to get drunk and smoke marihuana on stage. Although Amelia Wilhelmy "La Willy" became famous for doing that when she interpreted "Juan Marihuano", her pot-smoking soldier, Rivas Cacho was the first to risk this on stage. According to M.A. Morales, singing and speaking about alcohol and marihuana was part of the Rivas Cacho's regular repertoire (M.A. Morales 72-73).

hablan de sus campañas militares. Sus fantásticos triunfos. Su arrojado valor y heroísmo. Y todo esto salpicado con citas de algunos jefes: mi general Villa...mi general Diéguez..., mi general Obregón...(108).

In cross-dressing as a pot-smoking soldier and becoming the comedic character on stage, “La Willy” continued the radical work of Lupe Rivas Cacho and Emilia Trujillo. All of them built an alternative role in popular theater for women. ‘La Willy’ was not limited to only singing, dancing, and wearing provocative clothing to allure her audience. She became an essential part of the theater circuit as a skillful comedian who brought to life urban types on stage. As Mexican theater critic Pablo Dueñas writes: “...se volvió imprescindible en los teatros importantes y en las postales de moda, donde no apareció desnuda (no tenía el físico requerido, sino en traje de charro, de borracha y de dama del barrio)” (Dueñas 74). Through Juan Marihuano, Wilhelmy criticized military and government decisions right after the end of the Mexican Revolution. Wilhelmy broke with the idea of women only being able to represent objects of desire. She transformed her body as a tool for humor and laughter, something that Rodríguez masterfully picks up in her performances as we will see in the last chapter.

U.S. Latina cultural critic Iris Blanco, who saw Wilhelmy several times on stage, explains one of her main acts: “La Wilhelmy,...siempre con rebozo y sus guaraches,...de aquí vienen las imitaciones como la India María...se amarraba el rebozo...(a) la cintura y se hacía un nudo [en frente] entonces todo su chiste era hacer ese baile de brincar la panza para arriba y todo eso. Claro eso era la grosería. Era la peladaza más peladaza.” (Urquijo-Ruiz 38). This observation points to how unafraid Wilhelmy was of sexual and bawdy acts, which were traditionally performed by men.



Illustration 6: The *tiple* María Montoya in *Mexican Rataplán* (A Morales 73).

Though the objectification of women's bodies and the sexism soon plagued *revistas* after burlesque was introduced in Mexico, it is also significant to recognize that female artists had positive impact on their female fan base. Women were also attracted to these artists. For example, in a review Núñez y Domínguez wrote about Esperanza Iris, a famous *tiple* of the time, he concludes by relating how even when singing vulgar songs that would shock anybody, she was not only forgiven but celebrated. To show this he quotes an older woman joyfully yelling at the end of Iris's performance: "¡Qué muchacha tan loca!" amidst claps, smiles and laughter (70).<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, reporter Cristina Pacheco also picks up on this connection between female artists and their female fans in her interview with another successful singer and actress, María Victoria:

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<sup>42</sup> See 1918 entry on Esperanza Iris in Roberto Núñez y Domínguez's collection of theater reviews titled *Descorriendo el telón 1900-1930*.

Si me convertí en símbolo sexual fue por accidente, pero en mi vida he sido de otra manera. Me encanta mi casa y mi familia... Y aunque quisiera ser una mujer normal, cuando me casé el público se resistió; pero luego lo reconquisté con una ventaja: las mujeres, que me habían visto como una disquera enemiga peligrosa, empezaron a mirarme con simpatía, a identificarse conmigo (Pacheco 65).

Though *tiples* and the women that admired them continued to be limited by the lines drawn in the various intersecting circles of captivity described by Lagarde, seeing public challenges and methods of survival is significant to consider. In her 2009 essay “‘I’m Allowed to Be a Sexual Being’: The Distinctive Social Conditions of Fat Burlesque Stage” Lacy Asbill observes the relationship created between contemporary American fat burlesque dancers and their audience. She explores burlesque performance as a way to redefine the fat body as “an object of sexual desire and as home to a desiring sexual subject” (300). A parallel exists between the artists she describes and the ones that inhabited the stages of *carpas* and *revistas*. Through their acts, these performers invoked, inhabited, and challenged limiting cultural conceptions about Mexican women’s sexuality, purposefully creating social commentaries about their own bodies. *Tiples* use the performance space to present, define, and defend their sexualities, while comedians highlight their quick wit and masterful impersonations. The cheers and admiration from an audience, but especially from their female audience bolstered and energized the performers. Alternatively, seeing these female artists on stage created a space for the female fans to perhaps occupy their own bodies in more affirming ways.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> The work of female artists also led the way for queer artists. A fascinating example that needs to be explored more is the work of Goyo Dante. Rafael Solana, a theater critic of the time, remembers a new, “exceedingly sexual” show was debuting in the *carpa* Madame Rasimí, and many wanted to see it.: “Un detalle chusco de esa inauguración fue el siguiente: El desfile de mujeres, recogidas por ese rumbo que por allí había, fue muy pobre; eran unas viejas gordas, mal maquilladas que no sabían cantar ni bailar y la gente ya se estaba impacientando mucho, sobre todo los de más atrás, los rancheros que esperaban un espectáculo sensacional, escandaloso y sicalíptico. Hasta que de pronto salió una tan hermosa, toda plateada, desde la peluca plateada hasta los zapatos de tacón alto plateados. Cantó muy bien una canción que se llama Hastío de Agustín Lara. Entonces el público dijo ‘¡Qué diferencia!’, está sí que es una mujer encantadora’ y cuando terminó de desnudarse se vio que era hombre. Era Goyo Dante que vino de Monterrey y su debut



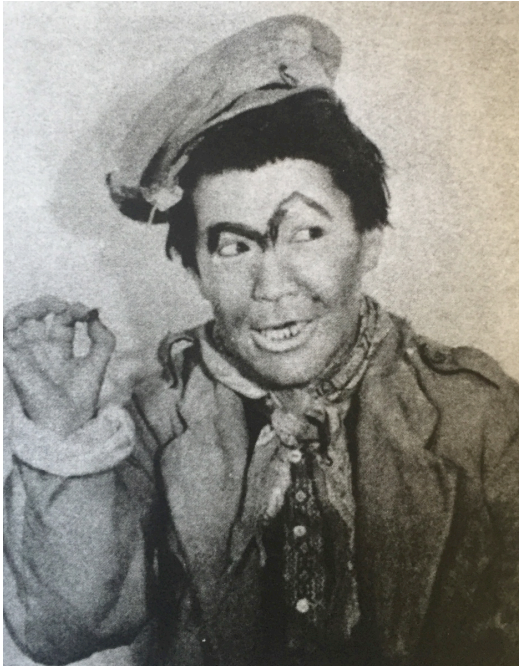


Illustration 7: Amelia Wilhelmy as the soldier, Juan Marihuano (A. Morales 98).

To conclude, a performance that marks an example of a *revista* that proposed a paradigm shift in thinking about women's rights in Mexico is best exemplified in *Colorines* (1927) by Prida and Ortega. In the *cuadro* "Política casera", a progressive type of feminism emerges from a humorous dialogue between Ponciana and Santiago, a husband and wife. Even by today's standards the questions being explored in this *cuadro* are revolutionary. Though right after the Mexican Revolution there were some conversations about the citizen rights, the condition of women was not something at the forefront of official discourses.<sup>44</sup> In fact it wasn't until 1954, after fighting a slow and uphill battle, the first women's movements in Mexico achieved their goal for women's

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sorpresivo lo hizo vestido de mujer. Bañó a todas las mujeres auténticas con su elegancia y con su *savoir faire*" (Merlín 156).

<sup>44</sup> In her introduction to *Plotting Women* Jean Franco describes how though most politicians saw women's religious "fanaticism" as an obstacle to revolutionary ideology, supporters of women's emancipation included men like Venustiano Carranza, General Salvador Alvarado and Felipe Carrillo Puerto (ix – xx).

suffrage.<sup>45</sup> In this sense, *revistas* were ahead of their time. While the scene that follows continues the tradition of political satire we've seen so far, this *cuadro* also pushes the boundaries of traditional female roles bringing the existence of these roles into question.

SANTIAGO: La mera verdad Ponciana  
te golviste una malora  
ya no eres aquella vieja.

PONCIANA: Pos claro. ¡Si ora soy otra!

SANTIAGO: Antes eras obediente,  
antes eras hacendosa,  
te pegabas al fogón  
y remendabas mi ropa.

PONCIANA: ¡De taruga!

SANTIAGO: Nada de eso,  
Es que eras muy cariñosa  
y mirabas a tu viejo  
como el rey de tu persona.

y hoy me tienes decretada  
de una manera traidora  
la huelga del calcetín.

PONCIANA: Porque no soy remendona.

SANTIAGO: Y si me quito un zapato  
y enseño el pie cualquiera hora  
asomo los cinco dedos  
que son los dedos de moda.

PONCIANA: Es que ya llegó pa' mi  
la libertad y soy otra;

y ora soy yo la que mando  
¡Por algo soy de Sonora!

Mi abuela con mi abuelito implantó la misma cosa  
Y dominó al marido.

SANTIAGO: ¿También era de Sonora?

PONCIANA: No viejo, era de Oaxaca, pero brava en igual forma  
Y como entonces mandaba don Porfirio y su matona,  
mi abuelo tenía que hacer lo que quería su señora

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<sup>45</sup> See *Against all Odds. The Feminist Movement in Mexico to 1940* by Anna Macías. This study traces the feminist movement in Mexico to the 1890s, though its influence didn't get very far. As the book suggests, overwhelming obstacles like the prevailing attitude of machismo, opposition by the Roman Catholic hierarchy, divisions among women activists, indifference of government officials, and ridicule of the press, prevented the movement from advancing women's rights. Women in Mexico did not obtain suffrage until 1954.

y lo tenía agorzomado  
y sujeto a su persona.  
SANTIAGO: ¡Pos no veo la consecuencia!  
PONCIANA: ¡Porque quien manda es Sonora!  
Y como tú eres de aquí,  
el mandar me toca a mí (María y Campos 326-327).

Politically, this dialogue is a direct criticism of the state of the government in 1927. At the time, General Calles was serving the last year of his presidency but was also reticent to give up his power. By claiming Sonora as her state of birth and reasoning that because of who was in power at the time, she would no longer answer to her husband's whims and needs, Ponciana embodies Calles's childish stubbornness. To make this correlation even clearer, she refers to a similar power struggle between her grandmother and grandfather. In this case, because her grandmother was from Oaxaca, the same state as former president Porfirio Diaz, her grandfather had to bow down to her.

While staking one's power to subdue another by place of origin could be interpreted as flimsy and superficial, Ponciana uses the parallel relationship to her advantage. She adamantly refuses to fulfill many traditional female responsibilities including her role as mother, which she sarcastically delegates to her husband.

SANTIAGO: ¿De modo que los botones  
Que le faltan a mi ropa  
No se los pegas como antes...?  
PONCIANA: ¡Para algo soy de Sonora!  
SANTIAGO: ¿De modo que ya no friegas  
el piso de la accesoria  
ni lo pintas de amarillo...?  
PONCIANA: ¡Para algo soy de Sonora!  
SANTIAGO: ¿De manera que al chamaco  
Ya no le das en la boca  
La chiche (sic) para que mame...?  
PONCIANA: ¡Para algo soy de Sonora! ¡Si quieres dásela tú!  
SANTIAGO: ¡Esta mujer está loca!  
PONCIANA: ¡Lo que estoy es redimida!  
SANTIAGO: ¡Lo que estás es retemota!

Y está bien que yo trabaje  
Y te dé toda la mosca,  
pero no abuses tanto.  
PONCIANA: ¡Para algo soy de Sonora!  
Y desde hoy voy a exigirte  
para servirte la sopa  
un tostador (un tostón – 50 centavos de plata) diariamente (María y Campos 327).

In her act of defiance, Ponciana refuses to clean the house, feed her son, or mend her husband's clothes. Her husband pleads with her, but she demands compensation for her household duties. It shows a rational logic surrounding how the work traditionally done by women is taken for granted. This scene shows a woman who is questioning her role as *madresposa* and taking control of her world, asserting herself as a member of the nuclear family and of society who also deserves compensation.

While taking on an advanced topic, this dialogue is a hilarious one, too. At the time, though some would not see the exchange as something they agree with, it is framed within a context they recognize in life. What this provides is a space for artist and audience to have conversations about gender roles and power. There were few spaces where women's rights and roles were discussed. Though government officials showed some interest it was not enough to make this a priority in Mexican politics. Even though Ponciana stakes her claim to power through her Sonoran origin, the biggest defiance in the scene is the idea of a homemaker earning money for the work she does. A stay-at-home mother and wife earning a salary is something that even today, is a revolutionary thought. Ponciana proposes a female character that challenges the societal expectations by confronting her captor. More broadly, what this scene elucidates is the significant role *revistas* and *tiples* had in shifting the paradigm of women's roles and through performance, staging an upending of traditional power dynamics.

## CONCLUSION

The role of *teatro de revista* and *teatro de carpa* has paramount significance in the creation of a foundation for criticism in popular Mexican theater. The life of both of these genres was short, in part because of the censorship applied by the government, but also with the development of other, more lucrative entertainment industries like radio, film, and television. Moreover, though part of what made these spaces dynamic was the constant attendance of important political figures, in the end the content of these shows was also co-opted by the political establishment to promote folkloric and nationalistic visions of what the government wanted for a post-revolutionary citizen.<sup>46</sup> It is important to recognize however that initially and in their height *revistas* and *carpas* were urban spectacles where the rowdy, popular classes saw themselves, their language, and their sexual and mocking humor reflected on stage for the first time. It is here where a three way playful yet political dialogue was established between artist, politician, and audience. The profound and painful changes happening in the city and country were reflected on stage.

Even more significantly to this project, understanding the role *revistas* and *carpas* played in establishing a space for criticism and irreverence is paramount to understanding how these theater genres helped facilitate conversations about taboo subjects. By looking at the way Mexican Divas changed and challenged the collective discourse surrounding the female condition in Mexico, we can discern a radical and progressive voice arising

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<sup>46</sup> In his book María y Campos describes several instances where military and political leaders attended *revistas* and *carpas* because they enjoyed them, but also to find out what was being said about them. In the ultimate example of the co-optation of these spaces by political leaders is María y Campos's description of a day when Obregón attended a rehearsal: "Obregón, asiduo concurrente a la platea intercolumnia del lado derecho del teatro Fábregas, siempre acompañado por amigos o miembros de su Estado Mayor, fue autor, aunque indirectamente, de muchos de estos *couplets*, porque les daba a los autores la idea, que después estos desarrollaban para atacar, naturalmente, al general González o a Bonillas... 'Pongan ustedes que el candidato que más conviene al pueblo es el general Obregón, porque como nada más tiene un brazo, será el que robe menos'" (230).

from popular theater genres at the time. It also laid the foundation and created a lasting tradition of using humor for political and social criticism that was later re-tooled by artists like Tito Vasconcelos and Jesusa Rodríguez to develop a critically queer theater genre in the 1980s and 1990s. The adaptation of these tools by Vasconcelos and Rodríguez aided them in opening new collective spaces for criticism while promoting and advocating oppressed sectors of the Mexican population like that of women but also of the LGTB community in Mexico.

## CHAPTER 2

### **Among Divas and First Ladies: Camp, Transvestism, and Humor in the Work of Tito Vasconcelos**

#### INTRODUCTION

Hacer cabaret es un acto absolutamente liberador. (Este) Es un momento en que el cabaret es un instrumento indispensable. El cabaret le da al público una perspectiva humorosa sobre la vida cotidiana, y (sobre) el momento histórico y político que estamos viviendo (Vasconcelos, *La Vedette informa*, 2012).

The stage is dark except for a spotlight on a young man dressed in a black button-down shirt and black slacks sitting in front of a Yamaha synthesizer. It is 2001, and this is the first act to the closing ceremony of the performance art conference *Memory, Atrocity, and Resistance* organized by The Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics. As the musician plays out the introductory notes to *Don't Cry for Me Argentina* (1976), by Andrew Lloyd Webber, he also welcomes the official presidential spokeswoman Marta Asegún. In a parodic rendition of Mexico's first lady, Tito Vasconcelos walks on stage smiling and waving at the audience as if at a political rally. The name the performance artist chose for his character is a play on Marta Sahagún's last name and the vernacular pronunciation of *según*, which means 'according to.' Beginning with his wardrobe, Vasconcelos mimics Sahagún's love for expensive clothing and jewelry. He chooses a white, tailored woman's suit, adding a pop of color through a silky red blouse, and strappy, black leather high-heels. His make-up very closely resembles that of Sahagún who often chose to contour her eyes using smoldering smoky eye makeup topped with thick, fake eyelashes, and a pearly pink lipstick. He also dons a brown-haired wig that closely mimics Sahagún's short crop.

As she walks on stage, she waves lovingly at her audience. The musician prompts them to holler her name: 'Martita, Martita,' mimicking the clamor that prefaces Webber's iconic song. *Don't Cry for me Argentina* was written for the musical *Evita* (1976), which

in 1996 was celebrated through a box-office movie hit featuring Madonna as Evita. Vasconcelos counts on the audience's immediate recognition of the song, but he also chooses it for his introduction because by that point Sahagún had made several comments about how much she admired and aspired to be like Argentinian first lady, Eva Perón (1919-1952). Through the performance of this song, Vasconcelos mocks the then presidential spoke-woman's wish to become Mexico's first lady.

By June 2001, Sahagún's image was already a source of parody and criticism. There had been high hopes for political change after Vicente Fox came into power in 2000, because he represented the first break in a seventy-year party dictatorship by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI for its initials in Spanish).<sup>47</sup> His presidential term, however, soon became the butt of many jokes as many of his campaign promises fell through. Fox's personal relationship to the then official presidential spokeswoman Martha Sahagún, was also a source of gossip since it was rumored that they were involved, though the relationship had not been made official.<sup>48</sup> Though Vasconcelos's performance took place a couple of weeks earlier, Sahagún's relationship to Fox and her desire to become first lady were already obvious to the media and the Mexican people.

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<sup>47</sup> The PRI was founded by Plutarco Elías Calles in March of 1928 under the name Partido Nacional Revolucionario. The party's first candidate was Pascual Ortíz Rubio who was appointed president in November of that year. José Vasconcelos, then ex-dean of the UNAM, made the first accusation of electoral fraud committed by the party with less than a year in formation. This year marks its 87<sup>th</sup> year in existence and is the party of the now president, Enrique Peña Nieto. For more information on the history see <http://www.sinembargo.mx/04-03-2016/1631870>

<sup>48</sup> A year after he began his term, Fox finally married Sahagún in a private civil ceremony at the presidential residence in Los Pinos on July 2<sup>nd</sup> 2001, a date that not-coincidentally marked the then president's 59<sup>th</sup> birthday and also the anniversary of his election. Despite making their relationship official as a married couple, soon after the announcement Mexican Cardinal, Norberto Rivera criticized the presidential couple for not taking the steps to make their marriage official in a Catholic ceremony. Their relationship was deemed irregular because Fox had not annulled his first marriage to Lilian de la Concha, his former wife. For a detailed chronicle of the morning of the wedding read Fabiola Guarnero's July 2001 article "Se casan Fox y Sahagún."



Since she had also been Fox's campaign spokeswoman, she had already gained notoriety in the press.

In this performance Vasconcelos takes all of these rumors and the already bad reputation Sahagún had with the press, and personified a scorned, elitist, corny Marta Asegún. After some giggles from the audience Asegún belts out a modified version of Webber's song:

Será difícil de comprender  
que a pesar de estar hoy aquí  
soy de Celaya y jamás lo podré olvidar.  
Deben creerme  
el puesto es solamente un disfraz,  
pues primera dama seré y sé que lo voy a lograr.

Tenía que aceptarlo, debí cambiar,  
y dejar de vivir en Celaya,  
siempre haciendo cajeta sin lugar bajo el sol.  
Yo solo quiero sentirlos muy cerca,  
poder intentar abrir un periódico y ver  
que ya no me van a insultar.

No lloren por mi mexicanos  
Vicente está conmigo  
Su vida entera  
se la ha cedido  
No nos critiquen,  
o me los chingo.

With these few lines Vasconcelos begins a parody of one of the most controversial women in Mexican politics.<sup>49</sup> The modified lyrics mock Sahagún's not-so-secret love affair with Fox and her thirst for power. For this performance, Asegún is supposed to be the keynote speaker for the closing ceremony at the conference. Though

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<sup>49</sup> In 2003 Argentine journalist, Olga Wornat published a book based on Marta Sahagún's life titled *La jefa: Vida pública y privada de Marta Sahagún de Fox*. The book became an instant success because it revealed the level of corruption in which the First Lady and her sons were involved.

she attempts to bring together the most important aspects of the conference, in the end, she concludes that what the scholars and artists are doing there “a nadie le importa, pero ustedes insisten.” She goes on to sing a medley of songs including *Es mi hombre* by Argentinian performance artist Nacha Guevara, *I Wanna Be Loved by You* famously sung by Marilyn Monroe in *Some Like It Hot*, and *Aburrida* by Cuban singer Elena Burke. All of these songs allude to Sahagún’s relationship to Vicente Fox, whom she loves, but finds simple-minded, boring, and easily manipulated. Through the performance Asegún breaks with the traditional fourth wall of the theater by directly addressing the audience at several moments and threatening them if they even think of criticizing her or publishing anything about her performance at the ceremony. Through his camp style, his employment of humor and irony, and the creation of a drag version of Sahagún, Vasconcelos produces a grotesque parody of the First Lady hopeful. This character is an example of Vasconcelos’s use of camp and cross-dressing as strategies to mock and criticize the vices of the Mexican political elite.

A multiplicity of voices, styles, and subject matters characterize political cabaret theater in Mexico. Though there is to date no definite recipe, there are key aspects that characterize most of these performances. In his essay “Dramaturgy, Citizenship, and Queerness: Contemporary Mexican Political Cabaret,” Gastón Alzate identifies some of the genre’s more prominent features. Firstly, these shows, for the most part, take place at night in bars or small independent theaters. This choice allows for close interaction between artists and the audience and less institutional control. Furthermore, most artists update their sketches on a weekly if not a daily basis, incorporating the latest news stories and political and social scandals, making each performance unique. Hand in hand with this aspect is the heavy use of improvisation and expected audience participation during the shows, which end up making each performance inimitable. Finally, Alzate affirms

that the genre attracts artists that transgress gender and sexual norms in Mexico (Alzate 62). As is evident from Chapter 1, these unique aspects that Alzate points out in his essay, reflect the most salient characteristics of *teatro de revista* and *teatro de carpa*. As this chapter and the following will show however, though political cabaret theater's roots came from a solid foundation in these early genres, each artist molds and uses the tools to make their performances one-of-a-kind.

Vasconcelos, regarded as a primary figure in the political cabaret scene, worked extensively with Jesusa Rodríguez and Liliana Felipe producing a plethora of cabaret shows in the 1990s. Of the few performances of Vasconcelos captured on video, *Performance by Tito Vasconcelos: Martita, Primera Dama* (2001) can be viewed in the Hemispheric Institute Digital Library and a 2014 version of *La pasión según Tito* can be seen on YouTube. These performances will serve as the basis for this chapter's analysis of this artist's work.

Although there is a growing corpus of criticism on queer Mexican performance artists, many of these studies focus predominantly on female artists like Astrid Hadad, Jesusa Rodríguez, and Liliana Felipe.<sup>50</sup> To expand on the style and content explored in this genre, the chapter investigates the work of Tito Vasconcelos, a little-studied male artist. In doing so, this chapter's aims are two fold. On one hand it hopes to give a wider scope of the themes and issues contemporary cabaret artists are tackling and how they are a conversation with each other. On the other hand it also aims to highlight the tools Vasconcelos borrows from *revistas* and *carpas*, accentuating the way in which he alters them to fit the goals of his performances.

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<sup>50</sup> Some of the most well-known analyses can be found in *Performing Mexicanidad: Vendidas y Cabareteras on the Transnational Stage* by Laura Gutierrez, *Holy Terror's: Latin American Women Perform* edited by Diana Taylor and Roselyn Constantino, and *Teatro Cabaret: Imaginarios Disidentes* by Gastón Alzate.

The questions that drive the chapter are: What characteristics does Vasconcelos borrow from *carpas* and *revistas* and how are they transformed in his performances? How does Vasconcelos expand on the strides made by the *tiples* of the 1910s and 1920s to advance his own agenda? How are humor and laughter used in his performances? In exploring these questions, this chapter displays how Vasconcelos employs what scholar José Muñoz denominates as disidentification, a practice that subverts traditional conceptions of identity in Mexico. Muñoz describes acts like Vasconcelos's in *Performing Disidentifications: Disidentifications Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. In his book, the introduction describes disidentification in the following way:

Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and re-circuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture (31).

Similar to Rodríguez, whose work is addressed in Chapter 3, Vasconcelos takes stylistic tools from *teatro de revista* and *teatro de carpa* and repurposes them to generate his own unique political cabaret style. These elements converge to speak about the state of gender and sexuality in Mexico from a male, gay artist's perspective. It is useful to tease out the differences between his style and that of *revista* and *carpa*, because he repurposes aspects of these genres, identifying with the tradition of humorous, political criticism but disidentifying with the misogyny, homophobia, and sexism they drew on. In his case, Vasconcelos utilizes recognizable humoristic tools of *teatro de carpa* and *revista* and imbues them with a politicized Camp to create a queer performance style. He expertly applies humor and improvisation to gain the audience's trust and then

manipulates the same tools to question entrenched social beliefs and constructs of gender and sexuality. Through his work Vasconcelos produces a vision of what a queer Mexican citizen can be: critical, informed, politicized, mobilized, and active. His work, along with that of Jesusa Rodríguez, expands the vision of Mexico City's political cabaret theater arena and opens a new window through which to analyze its queer aesthetic as an emerging contestatory site for both the artist and the audience.

The traditional Mexican theater community has criticized Vasconcelos many times for being a 'single-faceted actor' who can only perform in drag or can only *jotear* his male characters. However, his performances are much more complex than what initially meets the eye.<sup>51</sup> He uses a politicized camp aesthetic to hyperbolize his representations, taking his characters to unexpected extremes where he vacillates between being humorous and rude to being frightful and grotesque to some. Sometimes the audience does not know how to react, so they laugh uncomfortably. Vasconcelos knows how to take full advantage of those moments to push his audience to question social beliefs that promote discrimination. Through his representations, Vasconcelos establishes a space where he and the audience share in the construction of a different reality. He does not just provide entertainment for his patrons; he challenges them to become active participants in his shows. More importantly he pushes them to become active citizens, by continuing to question themselves and the social systems they help support.

Through an analysis of the 2014 version of *La Pasión Según Tito* as well as his 2001 performance for the closing ceremony of the second Encuentro organized by the Hemispheric Institute, the goal is to provide a range of the stylistic tools, themes, and issues Vasconcelos is tackling. The chapter's aims are to show the continuity between

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<sup>51</sup> See Ana Francis Mor "Desde la disidencia política y sexual, mil ocho mil espectáculos" in the Jun - Sep 2012 Dossier.

this genre and the foundations laid by *revistas* and *carpas* and also present a comparison between his style of political cabaret and that of another key artist, Jesusa Rodríguez. The first section of this chapter will delve into Vasconcelos's use of Camp in his spectacles. In her 1964 essay "Notes on Camp," Susan Sontag observes and describes a type of aesthetic she denominates as camp in the work of predominantly white, middle-class, gay artists in the United States in the 1960s. Vasconcelos, however, does not simply borrow it. He takes this 'frivolous,' 'excessive,' 'effeminate' aesthetic that Sontag describes and employs it as a comical lens to represent Mexican icons of the entertainment or political world.

Additionally, he uses humor as a tool to subvert traditional conceptions of identity. What I mean is that he takes the well-known style of humor that was fashioned in *teatro de revista* but more poignantly in *teatro de carpa* and subverts it to question the misogyny and sexism embedded in what is considered to be characteristic of Mexican humor. During his skits, he peppers his acts with modified political jokes and *albures*.<sup>52</sup> He takes advantage of the audience's identification with this type of playful humor and employs it to bring attention to the forefront regarding the issues the queer population faces in the country

Finally, this chapter explores the themes of gender and sexuality through Vasconcelos's utilization of transvestism as an instrument for symbolic terrorism. He employs cross-dressing, as a way to confront the audience, specifically his male, heterosexual audience, with their prejudices on gender and sexuality. Through his shows, he exposes many of the contradictions the spectators might experience and see every day but do not feel comfortable discussing. He impersonates reviled female political figures,

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<sup>52</sup> An *albur* is a play on words that has double-entendre and is for the most part sexually inflected.

well-known entertainment icons, and Catholic religious characters. With this array of options, he highlights gender expression as a performance, something we learn how to do as opposed to something we are born knowing. Furthermore, in using cross-dressing as a political tool and also bringing in sexuality as central to his humor, he breaks with the perceived normalcy of a binary gender system and heterosexuality in México.

### **EL CABARÉTITO OF THE ZONA ROSA –ACTIVISM AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP**

Tito Vasconcelos is a pillar not just in Mexican theater, but also in the LGBT movement in Mexico. He has worked within and outside the LGBT movement to provide safe spaces and equal rights to this community in Mexico.<sup>53</sup> Through his work as an entrepreneur and as an artist he creates spaces in which to collectively speak of the double standards and violence suffered by this community. Through his shows, Vasconcelos inserts himself and the LGTB community as an intricate part of Mexico City and the country as a whole.

The Mexican gay liberation movement first became visible in 1978 during a march in Mexico City to commemorate the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the student massacre at Tlatelolco in 1968. According to Héctor Domínguez-Ruvalcaba in his essay “From Fags to Gays: Political Adaptations and Cultural Transformations in the Mexican Gay Liberation Movement,” the Mexican gay liberation movement differed from the one taking place in North America. In Mexico it began embedded in a socialist agenda instead of a movement stemming from the civil rights era. The Mexican gay and lesbian protesters were a block within a larger student protest, which was fighting for democracy

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<sup>53</sup> An example of this took place in 2007 when Vasconcelos and his long time partner David Rangel, signed a Registro de Convivencia. This document, at the time, legally validated their union as a gay couple in Mexico City and protected the assets they had consolidated in the thirteen years they had been together. They did this both to honor their relationship, but also as a political act to encourage other couples to do the same and in this way give more visibility to the community. See more in Mario Alberto Reyes’s 2007 article.

with a socialist backdrop.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, Domínguez-Ruvalcaba also points out that whereas the movement in North America has become effective in legislating against discrimination and homophobia in Mexico, the movement faces significant setbacks. The human rights abuses, akin to the ones suffered in the indigenous and women's rights movements, have led to activist leaders being murdered ("From Fags to Gays" 119). Moreover, the criminal investigations into these murders, like many others suffered in the LGBT community, are stalled or minimized by the Public Prosecutors Office which qualifies them as crimes of passion. Domínguez-Ruvalcaba further asserts that the oppression and hostile environment for the LGBT community can be explained because homosexuality in post-revolutionary Mexico is considered a threat to national identity by their most important spokespersons (119). Significant to this homophobia is the centrality of traditional gender representations in popular culture representations, like the *ranchera* musical and film genre, *corridos*, and the *rumbera* films, which have historically represented a traditionally gendered Mexican identity. "In these the virile figure is privileged as the model of Mexicaness" (118). In this sense, the effeminacy of men is then equated to a corruption of national identity.

Furthermore, the appearance of an organized and unified gay and lesbian movement in 1978 also prompted the formation of significant political groups which included: Frente Homosexual de Acción Revolucionaria (FAHR) and Grupo Lambda de Liberación Homosexual. Unfortunately, these groups soon disintegrated because of disagreements over ideological positions and differing opinions in terms of leadership and organization.<sup>55</sup> Though their dissolution came at an unfortunate moment in the

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<sup>54</sup> For more on the differences between the emergence of the North American and the Mexican gay liberation movements, see "From Fags to Gays: Political Adaptations and Cultural Transformations in the Mexican Gay Liberation Movement" pg. 119-121.

<sup>55</sup> For more on this see "From Fags to Gays" pg. 119-121



movement's history with the AIDS epidemic at its height, there was a rise in smaller groups in the 1980s that provided relatively safe spaces for gay youth to turn to. Vasconcelos was an active participant in creating these spaces in the 1990s, both as an artist and as a small business owner.

The year 1978 was also a pivotal moment in Vasconcelos's career as an actor. As will be further explored later on, his production of *Y sin embargo se mueven* (1978) marked the beginning of what critics denominated *teatro gay* or 'gay theater' in Mexico.<sup>56</sup> This and subsequent shows provided both visibility and space in which to speak about the experiences and issues facing the LGTB community in Mexico. This production is described by Vasconcelos as a calculated and necessary political act, that happened in conjunction with the incursion of the Mexican gay and lesbian movement into the public sphere.

Furthermore, in the 1990s he saw an opportunity to participate in the creation of entertainment spaces directly catered to the LGTB population. He opened his first bar Cabaretito in 1998 in the heart of the Zona Rosa. This is a centrally located neighborhood in Mexico City known for its nightlife, shopping, and gay community. In Corporativo Cabaretito's manifesto it states that Vasconcelos and David Rangel, his longtime partner, opened Cabaretito, and other nightclubs and bars like it, in order to 'dignify' the image of the gay movement in Mexico.<sup>57</sup> They were of the first entertainment businesses that openly catered to the LGTB market. In opening these spaces they aimed to re-occupy this neighborhood, which for a long time was inhabited by police and criminals. Moreover,

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<sup>56</sup> See "Once divas en busca de un actor" by Patricia Vega.

<sup>57</sup> You can see more on the company's website in the section *Quiénes somos*.  
<http://www.cabaretito.com/web/index.php/quienes-somos>

Vasconcelos and Rangel aspired to provide viable entertainment options to gender and sexually diverse patrons.

What makes Corporativo Cabaretito's franchise unique, is that Vasconcelos and Rangel are both deeply committed to leading and being part of activities which highlight and strengthen the image of the LGTB population in Mexico. For example, for several years during the December festivities, they would host a money-raising event called Cheletón. This event is a positive spin off the now infamous Teletón, a fundraising event sponsored by Mexico's biggest multi-mass media company, Televisa. The UN harshly criticized the Teletón in 2014 for raising 40% of its funds through money given by the government.<sup>58</sup> In Vasconcelos's and Rangel's parodic satire of this event, however, the proceeds from the sale of alcohol go to help various organizations that work in the education and prevention of HIV/AIDS in Mexico. The first event of this type took place in 2001. The Cheletón is an example of how the couple mock Televisa's corrupt event, yet at the same time use the general spirit of it to raise funds for a cause about which they deeply care.

Furthermore, both Vasconcelos and Rangel began the Unión de Empresarios Prestadores de Servicios a la Comunidad Lésbica, Gay, Bisexual y Transgénero, AC (UNEGAY), which is a group that aims to create connections between the Mexican entrepreneurial sector who cater to the *mercado rosa* or queer market and connect them to various NGOs focused on this community's social and health issues. Finally, with education being one of the most important ways in which to further the LGBT cause in

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<sup>58</sup> In October of 2014, after an in depth investigation, the UN declared that the Mexican government and Televisa's Fundación Teletón was participating in fraudulent transactions when it was discovered that 40% of the foundation's funds were given by the government without the knowledge or approval of Mexican citizens. Furthermore the organization declared that by providing the majority of the money raised, the government appeared to be washing its hands of the responsibility to care for Mexican citizens with disabilities. <http://mexico.cnn.com/nacional/2014/10/06/la-onu-critica-la-entrega-de-recursos-publicos-al-teleton>

Mexico, the couple was also key to establishing the first community center that would also be home to a *preparatoria abierta* directed at queer youth of the city who have been forced out of their schools because of discrimination.<sup>59</sup> Currently, the Centro de Atención Integral Para Adolescentes y Jóvenes (CAIPAJ), a branch of Teatro & Sida A.C., has taken on this project. The Corporativo Cabaretito has been central to establishing the space for youth to gather and socialize and at the same time become educated in issues surrounding gender and sexuality.

These are a few of the social projects Vasconcelos helps lead and raise money for through his businesses. His activism is significant to point out because his commitment to raise awareness outside and within the LGBT community about health, rights, and general visibility also feeds his art. Besides with being places in which to have fun, dance, and drink, these bars and nightclubs have also become alternative performance stages at night. In this sense, they are a continuation of the alternative performance spaces created in the *carpas* of the 1920s. In both cases, they provide a place for patrons to eat, drink, and mingle, and be entertained by watching irreverent and critical performance acts. Furthermore, Vasconcelos's businesses, like that of Jesusa Rodríguez's cabaret/bar El Hábito among others, provided political cabaret theater artists the necessary small, independent theater spaces they needed to experiment and establish themselves at a time when these did not exist.

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<sup>59</sup> A *preparatoria abierta* is an educational service program started by the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP) to give the opportunity for people to complete their high school degrees without having to go to a school. Students can work at their own pace and schedule. In the end, when they finish, they receive a diploma accepted all over the country. See a full description of this program in the company's website. <http://www.cabaretito.com/web/index.php/quienes-somos>

## DISIDENTIFYING THROUGH CAMP AND HUMOR

In order to understand Vasconcelos's performance style, Susan Sontag's 1964 essay "Notes on Camp" helps identify a working definition of what camp is. Sontag wrote this essay to describe a type of aesthetic sensibility she observed predominantly in the work of male, white, performance artists. In the essay, Sontag describes camp as an aesthetic sensibility, which has a love for the 'unnatural' that emphasizes a sense of exaggeration, and over-the-topness that reigns over opinions of what is considered 'good' and 'bad' art. Camp is, therefore, a third type of aesthetic taste.<sup>60</sup>

According to Sontag, camp sees the world in terms of its degree of artifice and stylization. She believes its goal "(t)o emphasize style is to slight content or to introduce an attitude that is neutral with respect to content. It goes without saying that the Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized—or is apolitical" (Sontag 107). She further maintains that it also disengages with modernist sensibilities. By focusing on the degree of stylization rather than beauty, it aims to convert the serious into frivolous.

Why is this relevant and how do we take an aesthetic sensibility described in the 1960s in the United States and apply it to contemporary Mexico? In 1971, Carlos Monsiváis took Sontag's essay as a premise to write about camp in the Mexican context in a *crónica* entitled: "El hastío es pavo real que se aburre en la luz de la tarde. Notas del Camp en México." In it, Monsiváis uses camp to analyze Mexico's political and social identity. He asserts that there are two types of camp thriving in Mexico: the conscious and the unconscious. According to him, unconscious camp is the most dangerous and also the most prevalent in Mexico. He describes it similarly to Sontag in that, in Mexico, style is taken to its ultimate consequences, taken to excess. He differs from Sontag, describing camp in Mexico as a cult for a baroque style that has crossed the limits of

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<sup>60</sup> See "Notes on Camp" published in *A Susan Sontag Reader*.

aesthetics and art into politics. “(L)a sensibilidad del Camp en México puede ser un conducto eficaz para apreciar la vida pública...no porque pondere, sino porque logra reconocer a quienes ponderan el artificio como un ideal...la demagogia política” (“El Hastío,” 174). In other words, in Mexico, camp is characteristic of Mexican politics. It is typified in political speeches and discourse by the use of flowery vocabulary and prestigious quotes, which help decorate the absence of content and ideas.

The focus on form rather than content is reminiscent of the aforementioned description of the *apretado* in Portilla’s *Fenomenología Relajo*. The *apretado*, according to Portilla, is someone who will go to any length to protect style and form, even if his ideas lack substance, depth, and sense. Similar to Monsiváis he describes this type of person as being intimately connected to Mexico’s public life.

El apretado se tiene a sí mismo por valioso sin contemplaciones y sin reparos de ninguna especie. La expresión externa de esta actitud, su manifestación más periférica, es su aspecto. El apretado cuida su aspecto, expresión de su ser íntimo. Viste impecablemente, es un elegante o, por lo menos trata de serlo a toda costa...Tal vez no pase, todavía, de ser un funcionario probo...Si dice una estupidez, si comete un error, esto no prueba nada, puesto que se tratará de una estupidez dicha por un hombre muy inteligente: se tratará del error de un funcionario eficaz (Portilla 87-88).

Going even further in his own observation of these types of characters, Monsiváis describes this commitment to form as a sensibility that characterizes the Mexican people and political life, not just specific people in it. He stresses that what unconscious Mexican camp achieves in the end is to ‘repress,’ ‘harass,’ ‘excite,’ and ultimately ‘neutralize’ Mexicans’ ability to become outraged at the lack of ideas and solutions. They get caught up in the style instead of the emptiness that lies beneath (177).

El Camp Inconsciente (en México el mayoritario) posee como elementos básicos el fracaso de la seriedad, la desmesura y la carga abrumadora de sinceridad que contiene. Son los poetas de provincia, los declamadores, los oradores de las fiestas de quince años, los grupos de ballet prehispánico, los escritos literarios de

los funcionarios públicos, los vestidos elegantes de la clase media, los retratos de la esposa y de la hija mayor del nuevo rico realizados por pintores jaliscienses, las entrevistas con las estrellas de cine nacional, las declaraciones a propósito de la moral de parte de ex-funcionarios, los espectáculos folklóricos para visitantes eminentes, las campañas contra la pornografía (“El Hastío” 177).

Though the unconscious focus on style could be perceived as vacuous endeavor, being able to recognize it : “...puede, a contrario sensu, esclarecer las fallas o las imperfecciones de estilo de esa realidad con la consiguiente derivación política.” (“El hastío” 172-173). In other words, by recognizing an object or person as camp, the viewer observes this object or person from a critical perspective. In the end, the camp perspective in Mexico is: “la posibilidad de la revancha.” It proposes a comical vision of the world in a country where the official ideology rejects frivolity in the name of seriousness and solemnity. Yet, it is precisely this sensibility that allows us to see public life in Mexico as one that upholds form and artifice as an ideal.

Additionally, Monsiváis gives a more nuanced description by dividing the camp sensibility into three types: high, middle, and low camp. For him, high camp is style driven to its ultimate consequences. In doing so, it engenders its own parody. An example he describes of this type of camp comes from Emilio Fernández’s 1944 movie *María Candelaria*. In it Dolores del Río and Pedro Armendáriz become what Monsiváis describes as the foundational Adam and Eve of the Mexican Paradise (“El hastío “176). In other words the movie did not just present a countryside drama. The actors take their representation to its ultimate, melodramatic consequence, and in doing so become an unconscious camp parody of the institutional representation of Mexico’s indigenous origin. The movie and the actors helped to construct a modern, post-revolutionary, melodramatic indigenous archetype for the movies.

Middle camp, on the other hand, is a type of sensibility that knowingly represents and disseminates a particular aesthetic image. People who engage in this kind of camp

walk a tight rope between doing so consciously and doing so unconsciously. In this case, Monsiváis points to actors of the late 1930s and 1940s who knowingly perform a role in the country's national project. They knowingly appropriate the characteristics of a Mexican archetype and through repetition, supply that artifice with the benefits of institutionalized values. For example, through the roles they chose to represent, Doña Sara García or Doña Prudencia Griffel became the quintessential grandmothers of Mexico's national cinema. They knowingly represented "...la solidez eterna del núcleo familiar, la vejez como desmesura, la serenidad, la protección..." values that both the government and the Catholic Church upheld in post-revolutionary Mexico ("El Hastío" 187).<sup>61</sup>

Finally, low camp is a type that by definition identifies itself as unconscious. The champion in the Mexican context for Monsiváis is the actor and director, Juan Orol. Orol is known for his *Rumbera* films and also for producing some of the worst movies in the history of Mexican cinema. He directed and acted in a plethora of films where as long as he thought his audience would get the gist of the story, he did not care to build a cohesive plot nor for a reasonable development of action. His filming and editorial style lacked in technical skill and though many of his films took place in exotic locations he did not travel to them to make the film more believable. More evidently, he also did not worry if this was obvious in his films. For example, in *Los misterios del hampa* (1944), which was screen-played to take place in Chicago, he films a scene where the two main characters, a 'mala mujer' and a 'gangster,' meet up in a Chicago city bar. There is a noticeable sign at the entrance of the establishment however, that reads 'Comidas corridas y a la carta,' making it obvious that this was a Mexico City cantina. Monsiváis describes Orol's style

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<sup>61</sup> This is reminiscent of Lagarde's *madresposa* circle of captivity. This circle is a type of captivity constructed around two essential definitions of women: "...su sexualidad procreadora, y su dependencia vital de *los otros* por medio de la maternidad, la filialidad y la conyugalidad" (38).

as one that: "...avasalla, devora el nunca siquiera hipotético contenido." ("El hastío" 170). For Monsiváis, Orol's work is the ultimate example of low camp, because his films are the epitome of choosing to save as much money as possible over the quality and content of the film.

Though the focus on style could be perceived as vacuous endeavor, as Monsiváis points out: "...la perspectiva Camp en México, al acercarnos a la realidad en términos de estilo, puede, a contrario sensu, esclarecer las fallas o las imperfecciones de estilo de esa realidad con la consiguiente derivación política." ("El hastío" 172-173). In other words, by recognizing an object or person as Camp, the viewer observes this object or person from a critical perspective. In the end, the Camp perspective in Mexico is: "la posibilidad de la revancha." In other words, Camp style proposes a comical vision of the world in a country where the official ideology rejects frivolity in the name of seriousness and solemnity. Yet, according to Monsiváis it is precisely this sensibility that allows us to see public life in Mexico as one that upholds form and artifice as an ideal.

This section will explore the purposeful use of a camp style by Vasconcelos. Both Monsiváis and Sontag briefly point to a type of camp that is conscious and purposely envelops itself in artifice to parody and criticize. It proposes a comical vision of the world that goes against the grain of the institutionalized seriousness and solemnity with which governmental institutions address social and political issues. Vasconcelos's style of camp focuses on artifice as a way to satirize and parody authority or static conceptions of identity.

Vasconcelos's camp is multilayered in that it reuses religious forms, and recycles images and characters of national and international popular culture inserting them in these familiar stories. His style of camp is a theatrical pastiche that revels in exaggeration, sentimentality, theatricality, and irony. Through a recycling of various



genres, symbols, and characters, Vasconcelos rethinks and retools these to create a satirical representation. Antonio Prieto points out, however, that Vasconcelos's camp is dark: "it displays an almost sadistic delight with cruelty" (Prieto 86). This darker style is more similar to the one used in the late by American actor, director, and playwright, Charles Ludlum under whom Vasconcelos studied in New York (Alzate, "Breve Perfil" 13).

According to Bonnie Marranca in her "Introduction" to *Theater of the Ridiculous*, the Ridiculous style is an "...anarchic undermining of political, sexual, psychological, and cultural categories, frequently in dramatic structures that parody classical literary forms or reflection of American popular entertainments...a highly self-conscious style, the Ridiculous tends toward camp, kitsch, transvestism, the grotesque, flamboyant visuals, and literary dandyism. It is a comedy beyond the absurd because it is less intellectual, more earthy, primal, liberated" (Marranca 11). Vasconcelos applies the darker style of camp emphasized in Ludlam's *Theater of the Ridiculous* and applies it to Mexican popular entertainment, culture, and politics.

Camp is also one of the most salient differences between him and the types of characters that Jesusa Rodríguez picks. He tends to choose characters his spectators are much more likely to recognize because they are part of the national and international entertainment world. Via a superficial and playful identification with them he leads his spectators in the leap to becoming politicized as they witness his disidentification with key aspects of these characters. More importantly, this style lets him depict Mexico's politics of exclusion and inclusion in a highly gendered and sexualized way. One of the best examples of Vasconcelos's use of camp takes place in one of his best-known and longest running shows: *La pasión según Tito*. This piece is considered by some to be, the

single greatest cabaret production surrounding the Passion of Christ in Mexico.<sup>62</sup> First staged in 1997, the spectacle has since been performed on a yearly basis for the past eighteen years. In this show he uses a camp style filled with exaggeration, sentimentality, theatricality, and irony. It is a playful type of camp that maliciously ridicules popular entertainment and political characters on stage.

As we will see in Chapter 3, the parodic and satirical use of religious theater in political cabaret is not unique to Vasconcelos.<sup>63</sup> Biblical re-enactments of passages through *pastorelas* or *pasiones* also took place in *revistas* and *carpas*.<sup>64</sup> These representations were popular among their predominantly Catholic audience, because it was through these representations that these stories came to life using everyday language and humor. Moreover they also included renditions of urban, popular types as characters, which made these better able to be absorbed as part of Mexican popular culture.<sup>65</sup> A big difference between those representations and Vasconcelos's own rendering is that while performers of *revistas* and *carpas* used Mexico City's urban archetypes in their performances, he also includes a plethora of queer characters in his shows. One of his greatest inspirations is the transvestite figure, on whom he bestows one of the most acidly critical voices in the show.

Inspired by Dario Fo's *Mistero bufo*, *La pasión según Tito* also makes use of the tools of *commedia dell'arte* –namely improvisation and the use of stock characters –to re-

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<sup>62</sup> See Arturo Cruz Bárcenas's review of this show in *La Jornada*. (<http://www.jornada.unam.mx/ultimas/2015/04/27/la-pasion-segun-tito-montada-201cdesde-la-perspectiva-del-pueblo201d-171.html>)

<sup>63</sup> Both Rodríguez and Vasconcelos, among others, have created a large number of shows using the *pastorela* genre to loosely structure the plotline of their performances. *Pastorelas* are a popular, theatrical representation that stage the birth of Jesus.

<sup>64</sup> These performances were especially popular during the December and Holy week festivities.

<sup>65</sup> See Antonio Cortés's and Roberto Montúfar Sanchez's testimonies in Socorro Merlín's *Vida y milagros de las carpas*.

narrate The Passion of Christ within a Mexican context. In it, Vasconcelos and his actors take characters from the gospels—such as Mary Magdalene, Lazarus, and Saint Martha—and re-imagine them. They infuse their performances with Mexico City’s urban jargon, political jokes, and commentary informed by the day’s happenings. The bulk of the action takes place in the Hotel Santa Martha during the wake for Jesus after his crucifixion. Throughout the show, various characters who are there as guests, tell their most cherished memories of the Virgin Mary’s son. Following Fo’s version, all of the stories told are based on apocryphal gospels not included in the Bible. Significantly, through the stories these characters take apart the saintly halo surrounding the figure of Jesus in the Catholic religion. They instead humanize him for the audience. Camp in this spectacle is utilized to parody the Catholic Church’s marginalizing discourse against the LGBT community and to open the possibility of rebuttal. Vasconcelos constructs his characters using a campy, carnivalesque style that emphasizes his characters’ hard and grotesque features. He does this to, on the one hand, make fun of the Church’s discriminatory discourse, and on the other to bring humanity back to these religious characters.

This section draws on examples from a 2014 version of the show videotaped and uploaded to YouTube by Cuentarte.<sup>66</sup> Beginning with the characters’ physical appearance, the actors indicate the satiric tone this representation is going to take. The costumes in the 2014 rendition do not follow the ones typically seen in traditional representations of The Passion in Mexico.<sup>67</sup> In his version the cotton togas, satiny virgin

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<sup>66</sup> Cuentarte is a private company focused on oral narrative performances in Mexico.  
<http://www.cuentarte.com>

<sup>67</sup> One of the most recognized traditional representations of The Passion takes place in Iztapalapa, one of the municipalities that conforms Mexico City. Throughout Holy Week a scene from the story of The Passion is enacted, every day. In these representations actors wear costumes that closely mimic those in religious paintings depicting The Passion.

robes, or Roman military regalia are exchanged for traditional, Mexican folkloric costumes and more modern clothes like the public school uniform worn by Mary Magdalene's niece. The costumes visually identify the characters as markedly Mexican.

In the introductory scene, Vasconcelos appears dressed in a beautiful Tehuana outfit from the state of Oaxaca. The dress is composed of a long red *enagua* decorated with an intricate web of white lace and an elegant, black *huipil* ornamented with a flourish of gold embroidered flowers. He also wears a long, brown-haired wig covered with a white lace veil. The veil stands in for a *huipil grande* that is traditionally worn with this dress and gives the character a saintly appearance. He adorns his hands and arms with giant rings and jingly bangles, and his chest with a chunky necklace. This outfit pays homage to the folkloric re-imaginings *tiples* made when they wore sexualized versions of traditional dresses like that of *la china poblana*. Through it Vasconcelos also mocks the cliché of famous Mexican artists, politicians, actors, and intellectuals using traditional, Mexican dress in public appearances to show their Mexican pride. Some prominent examples include former PRI president Beatriz Paredes, María Félix, Frida Kahlo, and most presidents during their national tours. He parodies these superficial displays of Mexican pride and identity, by making these masks and costumes visible to the audience.

Moreover, his over the top make-up, more specifically the way he draws on his eyebrows, is his most obvious visual use of camp. His eyebrows are thick, dramatic, and half way up to his forehead. This make-up style, along with his deep raspy voice, lets the audience know he is performing a drag version of María Félix. Vasconcelos has pointed out in the past that the young María Félix has been a popular inspiration for transvestites

in Mexico.<sup>68</sup> In his version however, his Doña is not the beautiful, young diva of the Mexican Golden Age in cinema. The Doña he chooses to impersonate is the older, morose woman in whom he sees the ability to shock, not only through her over-the-top appearance but also through her strident, politically incorrect comments. What intrigues him is whom she has turned into later in life, as he explained in 2001:

También hago a María Félix, ¿no? Pero ya la hago como está ahora, ¿no?: viejita, necia, tonta, estúpida, dando declaraciones verdaderamente lamentables, ¿no?...Entonces mi observación es hacer el ridículo de esa mujer vieja (Prieto, “Interview with Tito”).

Though Vasconcelos’s ageism is evident in this comment, his aim is to give a parodic rendition of Felix’s character as one of the most salient examples of the use of unconscious camp in Mexico. According to Monsiváis she was the prime example of how the Mexican entertainment business was able to empty the Mexican Revolution of any social and political content during the post-revolutionary period.

María Félix como la mujer que hizo la revolución nos reveló que el gesto es violencia. La presunción comunicativa desde sus cejas, el enronquecimiento de la voz, la mirada despreciativa, el atavío masculinizado, dibujan una magnífica parodia del hecho revolucionario (“El hastío” 176).

Through her films, Félix becomes Mexico’s unconscious parody of the Revolution.<sup>69</sup> Her hyper-masculinity, best personified in her character of La Cucaracha, is not lost on Vasconcelos.<sup>70</sup> Through Félix he embodies the decadence of a post-

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<sup>68</sup> See Antonio Prieto’s interview with Vasconcelos in the Hemispheric Institute’s Digital Video library.

<sup>69</sup> Monsiváis analyzes the government’s post-revolutionary fanfare in constructing a new, post-revolutionary national identity which focused on the erection of public monuments, pompous burials, encasing of revolutionary heroes’ remains, military parades, and artistic works sponsored by the State. Monsiváis sees the government’s focus on form rather than content as a type of unconscious camp. See “El hastío es pavo real que se aburre en la luz de la tarde. Notas del Camp en México.”

<sup>70</sup> La Cucaracha is a film where Felix characterizes a *soldadera* who leads her troop of female soldiers. After the town she is in falls into a siege, she falls in love with the *villista* general who is in charge. General Zeta, initially falls for her but later on shows interest in a kidnaped woman from the town. The movie uses the Revolution as the background to this love triangle.

revolutionary Mexico, in a campy representation of one of its most important symbols. Yet in doing so he also creates a strident character that grates against normative conceptions of not only gender and sexual identity, but national, cultural and religious identity as well. Through exaggeration and under the guise of frivolity, he recycles and restructures a more fluid conception of identity.

As soon as he enters the stage, Vasconcelos immediately commands his audience's attention, by walking down it mockingly imitating the royal gate Félix commanded. Yet he doesn't lose any time to reveal his transvestism when he introduces himself. "Yo soy María Magdalena" (*La Pasión* 2014). As he says this, he flips his hair and dramatically leans on one of his arms as if expecting applause. When all he receives are disbelieving giggles, he responds with an annoyed stare, and with an irritated voice admits: "Está bien, no soy María Magdalena...Soy María Félix" (*La Pasión* 2014). At this admission the audience openly laughs out loud. Vasconcelos rearranges his long locks, and guiltily turns his face away admitting: "Está bien, tampoco soy María Félix. Soy Tito Vasconcelos, disfrazado de María Félix, interpretando a María Magdalena" (*La Pasión* 2014). The spectators again burst into laughter, except this time, it also comes accompanied with applause, cheers, and whistles. By revealing a three-fold drag, he uses the theatricality of camp to unmask and at the same time complicate his character.

As soon as the audience settles down, Vasconcelos continues his satire as this character. After waving at a few audience members, La Doña/ Mary Magdalene / Vasconcelos excuses herself for not making proper introductions. "Perdón, quiero presentarme porque este cruce de ideas entre mi hermana Marta y yo puede que haya quedado confuso para mucha gente que no lee" (*La Pasión* 2014). The audience laughs and she elegantly sits down, as if preparing for the many staged interviews Félix had with Ricardo Rocha or Verónica Castro in the 1980s and 1990s. In those interviews, Félix

usually sat on ornate chairs befitting a queen. In Vasconcelos's production, however, the stage is bare, and so she awkwardly sits down on the two small steps that separate the stage from the audience and declares: "Yo sé que todas postearon en el Facebook que extrañan a Gabo" (*La Pasión* 2014). The audience again bursts into laughter as she rearranges some of her giant rings and her chunky bracelets and then continues: "Aunque no lo hayan leído, aunque no lo hayan conocido, aunque no tengan ni una puta idea de quién es Gabo, hoy Gabo (laughter)...por eso tembló. Porque Gabo dijo: esas son mamadas...(laughter) ¡Primero que me lean y luego que me extrañen!" (*La Pasión* 2014).

This specific passage is an example of how Vasconcelos closely personifies Félix's sour and grating spirit and uses it to comment on the social media reaction to the latest happenings in the country. In this case, La Doña/Mary Magdalene/Vasconcelos is scolding the audience for what she views as a hypocritical social media response to the recent death of Gabriel García Márquez in April of 2014. After the author's death, thousands of people posted quotations, news articles, and rest-in-peace messages on their Facebook accounts. The triply masked character sardonically makes fun of the supposed mourning for an author she asserts these Facebook users did not even read. This practice recognizably comes from the *revista* and *carpa* genres, nevertheless Vasconcelos does not adopt this performance style in a nostalgic exercise of imitation. He makes this complicated character and the subsequent retelling of *The Passion* relevant to his 2014 audience by repeatedly and humorously reflecting on the present.

Another poignant example of the incorporation of current events takes place after she sadly welcomes the audience to Jesus's wake. Being at wake the character feels compelled to relate a moment when she witnessed Jesus's miraculous powers by resuscitating a little girl after she died. La Doña/Mary Magdalene/Vasconcelos makes the story current by re-describing the scene of the funeral as taking place on the median strip

of the well-known Mexico City street, Álvaro Obregón. As she narrates the moment when Jesus first approaches the coffin of the little girl, she makes her first jab at the Mexican Church by bringing up the pederasty and sexual abuse scandals that have consistently plagued the institution.

Entonces llegó como disfrazado, como oculto entre los apóstoles o los apuéstales o como se llamen...Llegó donde estaba la niña y la miró con esa mirada dulce que él tenía...sonrió...a él le gustaban los niños...Sí, pero no como al Maciel ese...Cuando él dijo: “Dejad que los niños se acerquen a mí, porque de ellos es el reino de los cielos...” No pensó en Marcial Maciel. Sí quería a los niños...lejos, pero los quería (*La Pasión* 2014).

In this joke, La Doña/Mary Magdalene/Vasconcelos makes fun of one of the most scandalous and disturbing cases of sexual abuse the Catholic Church has seen to date in Mexico. Marcial Maciel was a Mexican priest who founded The Legion of Christ, a powerful Catholic congregation where priests and seminarians studied for the priesthood. Since the late 1990s groups of men have come forward accusing Maciel of sexual abuse when they were boys studying in these schools. He has also been accused of drug and substance abuse and fathering children with women he met through the seminary. La Doña/Mary Magdalene/Vasconcelos ridicules Maciel by insinuating the theme of pederasty by affirming Jesus’s love for children. She makes a significant pause in which the audience laughs uncomfortably and then takes advantage that uncomfortable space to make her criticism. She achieves this by affirming that Jesus obviously had not been contemplating men like Marcial Maciel, who would utilize religious discourse to confound parents and boys. Through the uncomfortable silences in which sexual innuendoes are implied and by also quoting the scripture to attack priests who have used it to gain access to children, the triply dragged character addresses one of the most



terrible and silenced crimes committed by Catholic priests in Mexico. She makes the scripture current and exposes one of the Church's ugliest faces.<sup>71</sup>

In addition, Vasconcelos uses the glamour, extravagance, and over-the-top performing antics that distinguish camp, as a way to bring in themes of gender and sexuality into public discourse. As he says in an interview, his *Passion* is not attempting to mock his audience's faith, instead, he wants to tell the stories the Church forgets to narrate and that make Jesus, the apostles, the Virgin Mary, and Mary Magdalene more human and approachable. "Desde hace dieciséis años vengo representando esta versión de *La Pasión* basada, inspirada, en *El misterio bufo*, de Darío Fo, sustentado por el teatro religioso de evangelización, del cual he hecho investigación académica, que me parece una manera divertida de presentar a los personajes que normalmente aparecen como muy tiesos, como estatuas de iglesia, para humanizarlos y contar un poquitín las anécdotas que a la Iglesia se le pasa contárnoslas" (Cruz, *La Pasión*).

Through this three-fold character, Vasconcelos creates a performance filled with gaudy gestures and double-edged humor that threads in queer readings of this religious story. His campy characterization and that of the other actors is used as a form of playful seduction. Through camp and humor, Vasconcelos establishes the space for a comical humanization of Jesus and Mary Magdalene as sexual beings. This acting style closely resembles another characteristic Sontag observed "...to camp is a mode of seduction—one which employs flamboyant mannerisms susceptible to double interpretation; gestures full of duplicity, with witty meaning for cognoscenti and another, more impersonal, for outsiders" (Sontag 110). Vasconcelos's camp style is one that speaks at different levels to

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<sup>71</sup> Though a hearing with Pope Francis was promised to the victims of Eduardo Córdova, one of the worst pederasts the Mexican Church has seen the Vatican refused to hold this meeting during the Pope's 2016 visit to Mexico. See "Francisco desaira a las víctimas de pederastia en su visita a México" by Luis Pablo Beauregard.

both his queer and non-queer audiences. An example of this double-discourse happens when the triply dragged Mary Magdalene describes how she met Jesus while they were little.

Yo conocí a Jesús, junto con mi hermana cuando éramos así...unos chiquitos, preciosos, nos gustaba mucho. Ya Marta me parece que les contó un poco de las maldades que hacía Jesús. Era la piel de Judas, de veras la piel de Judas, pero ya se veía que iba a ser guapo, muy guapo (*La Pasión* 2014).

She begins her transgression through her description of Jesus as a boy. She puts into question the halo of goodness with which the Church has painted this figure, making him more like a lifeless oil painting. Initially she achieves this by describing Jesus as a mischievous boy who had a bad reputation. More outrageously however, she indicates how handsome he already looked when he was young. By saying this she addresses a hidden physical attraction or possibly an even sexual attraction that exists between Catholics and the image of Jesus. This admission is one that few would want to admit, but that from that point on will be a comment consistently made by many of the characters that come on stage to speak about Jesus and his life.

Mary Magdalene then goes on to mention that: “Dejamos de verlo cuando tenía doce años y regresó hace diez años cuando tenía 30. ¡Ay, qué cosa! ¡Qué cosa cómo regresó!” (*La Pasión* 2014). As she says the last two sentences her facial expressions and tone alert us to how attractive she thought he had become as an adult. After this comment, Mary Magdalene raises her arm and gaze as if trying to remember and show the audience how tall he'd grown compared to her. Then doubting her measurements, she kneels down and again uses her hand to point to where his head might have been. On one hand this could be interpreted as her comparing the height difference when they were adults and then children, but the more realistic and malicious interpretation is that Mary Magdalene is pointing out where his penis was in relation to her mouth. Soon after this

measurement, the audience explodes in laughter at the sexual innuendo and claps at a successfully performed *albur*.

Vasconcelos employs *albures* throughout his sketch to provide comic relief after touching upon a delicate matter. These *albures* mimic well-known jokes and tropes and at other times subvert the Church's discriminatory discourse. By making the audience laugh, he shakes the questionable morality behind the Church's damnation of homosexuality and its use by a large percentage of the population to come to terms with its own entrenched homophobia. In a country where control and repression is often violent and even fatal for queer identities, having a place in which to laugh about the contradictions coaxes the audience into the position of critic.

Another example takes place as Mary Magdalene describes the experience of witnessing Jesus's resurrection after being crucified.

Una de las cosas más bonitas que me tocó vivir con él...fue el asunto en el que está sustentada la religión que ustedes juran que practican...que es la resurrección de la carne...¡Uy, yo he resucitado a más de tres!...Es cuestión de saber usar la lengua...(La Pasión 2014)

In this *albur*, Mary Magdalene blurs the meaning of resurrection as both coming back from the dead and a penis becoming erect. She exposes the theme of resurrection and turns it into an *albur* by adding the words “de la carne.” By affirming that she has been able to resuscitate three, implying three penises, she introduces her sexual innuendo and then delivers her punch line by revealing that the secret lies in knowing how to use your tongue. The use of the tongue could be interpreted as knowing how to say the right words to bring someone back to life, yet a more playful and sexualized meaning marvels at the magic of literally bringing lifeless penises to life by knowing how to perform fellatio, though the one performing the blowjob is literally being penetrated, a position

feared and scorned in Mexican popular culture. By bestowing life-giving abilities to the feminized subject, this *albur* subverts this practice's typical power dynamics.

Vasconcelos makes a commentary full of duplicity. On the one hand, he reveals the silenced sexual nature of Jesus's and Mary Magdalene's relationship, but on the other hand he leaves the audience wondering whether he is making these assertions as a queer entity as well since she revealed the three-fold drag. In doing this, Vasconcelos shows what Sontag describes as an unacknowledged truth of taste in camp, which is: "...the most refined form of sexual attractiveness (as well as the most refined form of sexual pleasure) consists of going against the grain of one's sex. What is most beautiful in virile men is something feminine, what is most beautiful in feminine women is something masculine" (Sontag 108). In other words, the gender and sexual ambiguity through which Vasconcelos fashions his multilayered character is what makes it attractive. He applies camp as a seductive tool to lightheartedly engage his audience in a funny interpretation of *The Passion*, and then subverts it to also explore gender and sexual taboos.

Vasconcelos's camp is a disidentificatory tactic in that it recycles and rethinks a cultural text, like that of the *Passion*, and employs it to explore the breakdown of representation that occurs when 'a queer,' 'ethnically marked,' 'other subject' encounters their inability to fit within the 'majoritarian representational regime.'<sup>72</sup> In this sense, his camp style very much resembles that of Cuban-American performance artist Carmelita Tropicana. In "Sister Acts" Muñoz describes her use of camp in the following way: "It is a measured response to the forced evacuation from the dominant culture that the minority subject experiences. Camp is a practice of suturing different lives, of reanimating, through repetition with a difference, Although not innately politically valenced, it is a

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<sup>72</sup> For a more nuanced explanation of this conscious use of camp, please see Chapter 5 in José Muñoz's *Disidentifications*.

strategy that can do “positive identity – and community-affirming work” (Muñoz 128). In the case of Vasconcelos and *La Pasión*, he is searching to identify with popular Mexican faith and spirituality yet, at the same time, criticize the Catholic Church’s ostracizing discourse surrounding queer subjects. Moreover, through humor and camp he seeks to humanize the catholic faith in Mexico while at the same time being critical towards the institution. He, along with the audience, goes through a journey of estrangement with some of the more conservative aspects of Catholicism.

On the surface, Vasconcelos’s camp is a tool through which he carnivalizes and ridicules the vices of revered entertainment stars but on a deeper level applies it to criticize the discourses and processes of marginalization. He takes the drag queen idea to an extreme by doing it threefold: Tito Vasconcelos into María Felix into Mary Magdalene. The polyphonic voice and narrative created by sum of three different subjects is meant to cause confusion in the audience, and more importantly reveals the process of construction of this identity. Through his camp performance he breaks down the silence that surrounds the topic of sexuality in the Church’s discourse and gives voice to a woman traditionally labeled as a prostitute and sinner, and mixes it in with the also demonized transvestite figure. He ropes in a queer discourse by embedding ambiguity in the sexual nature of Jesus’s and Mary Magdalene’s first encounter. In this sense, Vasconcelos’s camp is carefully thought out and filled with subtext and critical meanings. He reconstructs a religious story exposing its universalizing and exclusionary maneuvers and reworks it to include minority identities.

Furthermore, the use of humor in Tito Vasconcelos’s work takes the structures and themes employed previously in *teatro de revista* and *teatro de carpa* and rework them to fit his own criticism. These comedic tools are not revived nostalgically to remember a bygone era in popular Mexican theater, but rather to keep them current and

alive by appropriating them and using them to introduce an empowered queer perspective. His humor identifies with the political and social criticism these genres developed on stage, but disidentifies with the often misogynistic and homophobic undertones this humor often carried. His re-appropriation of these tools in *La Pasión* permits him to criticize one of the institutions that have had a major role in the profoundly ingrained homophobia in Mexican society. By using humor and laughter, Vasconcelos is able to criticize these values in a way that is not grating against people's faith, but is critical of an institution that is two faced.

### **SUTURING IDENTITIES THROUGH LUCHA REYES: TRANSVESTISM IN THE WORK OF TITO VASCONCELOS**

There tends to be an unwillingness to understand differences, even within the gay community. But it's drag queens that have always been the most radical within the ghetto, since they are the ones who start the cultural and political demonstrations. Transvestites were the first to confront the police and get their jaws broken at the Stonewall riots. Transvestites have always been the cause of scandal, the ones who get murdered, and the ones to appear in tabloid newspapers. They are, so to speak, the tip of the iceberg, and that's why they are the most maligned. (Vasconcelos in Prieto, 87)

As we saw in the previous section, the conscious use of camp in Vasconcelos's work is a strategy of disidentification with normative conceptions of a traditionally gendered Mexican identity. Another equally important attribute in Vasconcelos's work is his choice to represent feminine characters on stage. Cross-dressing is not something new in Mexican popular theater. José Elizondo, a successful *revista* comedian and entrepreneur, was famous for both his male and female characterizations like that of *la borrachita*.<sup>73</sup> Perhaps more transgressively as we saw in Chapter 1, Amelia Wilhelmy's creation of Juan Pacheco, the pot-smoking soldier who criticizes the federal army in a drugged stupor, is one of the representations she is most remembered for. Furthermore, as we will see in Chapter 3, Rodríguez also engages in cross-dressing in her cabaret theater.

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<sup>73</sup> See *200 años del espectáculo. Ciudad de México* for images of Elizondo representing this character and a description of the actor's importance in *revistas* in Mexico.

Some of her best-known male characters are powerful political figures like Carlos Salinas de Gortari or Benito Juárez. As is evidenced in this section, however, Vasconcelos goes beyond cross-dressing in his shows. He is not only trying to represent well-known female public figures on stage; more accurately he is performing a drag version of these characters. In the following paragraphs I will elucidate why transvestism is not only salient in Vasconcelos's performance style, but how this performance strategy is also a queer form of resistance.

The first time Vasconcelos performed a feminine character, as he denominates them, was in the mid-1970s, during the awards ceremony for the *Asociación de Críticos y Cronistas*. In it he performed a sketch inspired by the column *Cartas teatrales de ultratumba* written by theater critic Luis Reyes de la Maza. In his column, Reyes de la Maza wrote theatrical reviews using the voice of dead writers, actors, and actresses. In his sketch, Vasconcelos revived 19th Century French actress, Sarah Bernhardt, to criticize a Mexican production inspired by her life and unsuccessfully staged by director Severo Mirón. In the 2001 interview with Antonio Prieto, Vasconcelos described the audience's reaction to his rendition: "Tuve un éxito extraordinario. Yo ya tenía una cierta carrerita y era una joven promesa, como nos decían a los actores: 'qué buen actorcito está saliendo.' Obtuve una ovación de pie de un público compuesto mayoritariamente por actores, críticos y directores."<sup>74</sup> For Vasconcelos this performance was an eye-opener, though already well respected in the theater community, the reaction of the audience was completely different. He noticed a different type of power through his feminine creation. Later on in 1978 Vasconcelos, along with Mexican director and musician José Antonio Alcaraz, co-created *Y sin embargo se mueven*, a play commissioned and produced by the

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<sup>74</sup> See 2001 "Interview with Tito Vasconcelos" published in the Hemispheric Institute Digital Media Library.

Department at Theater in the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM). As was mentioned before, this play is now considered one of the founding works of *teatro gay* in Mexico.

As Vasconcelos recounts, there had been other pieces like Nancy Cárdenas's controversial production of Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band* (1968) or as it was translated in Mexico *Los Chicos de la Banda* (1974). It was a play that also touched upon the theme of homosexuality, yet didn't relate it to the experience of being gay in Mexico City. In his interview with Prieto, Vasconcelos observes that all the actors in Cárdenas's production were heterosexuals or made a point of affirming their heterosexuality in interviews or post-show conversations by presenting themselves with their wives and children.<sup>75</sup> The production team emphasized the distance between the gay characters actors. The weight placed on the actors' performance took away from the importance of the content. In *Y sin embargo*, however, Alcaraz established a type of theater that was closely based on reality by incorporating staged testimonies improvised and inspired by the actors' own experiences of being gay in Mexico City. It was a courageous performance of coming out of the closet.<sup>76</sup>

For the play, the actors fashioned characters that spoke from diverse points of view that addressed the gay experience in Mexico City. Vasconcelos saw it as an opportunity to present what he views as one of the most marginalized voices in the gay movement, the *vestida*. For the play he revived Sarah Bernhardt and created a comedic

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<sup>75</sup> In the interview with Prieto, Vasconcelos describes *Los chicos de la banda* public relations strategy: "El elenco...era un elenco compuesto al 100% por actores heterosexuales o por lo menos eso... se hacia patente y notable, porque durante toda la temporada...hubo refuerzo periodístico de los actores presentando a sus esposas, a sus familias y a sus hijitos para que la gente no fuera a pensar que participaban de esa cosa...que nada más era escénica." For a more detailed account see "Interview with Tito Vasconcelos" at the Hemispheric Institute for Digital Media Library.

<sup>76</sup> Guillermo Osorno's novel *Tengo que morir todas las noches* is a must read to get an idea of the queer counter-culture emerging in Mexico City at the time.



sketch where she transformed into Shakespeare's Hamlet and sang a rock and roll version of the Danish prince's monolog.<sup>77</sup> Through his performance, he celebrated Bernhardt as one of the first actresses to become internationally recognized as a diva and a star in the late 1870s, but also as a woman who transgressed social, gender, and class norms. Furthermore, showing an on-stage transformation into the Prince of Denmark, he pays homage to Shakespeare, and also hints at his transvestism as the French diva. Through Bernhardt, and the many dragged characters that came after, Vasconcelos seeks to reformulate and re-imagine what the drag subject symbolizes in the Mexican imaginary. Instead of appearing on stage to consolidate or affirm the heterosexual, male subjectivity, his character was there to challenge stereotypes. What interests him about the effect of representing transvestites on stage, is to highlight the contradictory relationship Mexican audiences have historically had with this figure since the 'dance of the forty-one' in 1901. This scandal rocked the foundations of Mexico's Porfiriato and according to Monsiváis, was the event that gave birth to the concept of homosexuality in Mexico.<sup>78</sup>

For Vasconcelos then, the choice to represent Bernhardt, María Félix, María Magdalena, Evita, among many others is an opportunity to represent the point of view of

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<sup>77</sup> For a more detailed description of the play, please see Vega's article "Perfil Tito Vasconcelos: Once divas en busca de un actor."

<sup>78</sup> The 'dance of the forty-one' is one of the most notorious scandals in the twentieth century in Mexico. On November 20th, 1901, the police raided a private home in Mexico City where the police discovered a ball where only men were in attendance. Half of these men dressed in elegant Porfirian suits, and the other half dressed in elegant women's gowns, wigs, jewelry and make-up. Most shocking to the press was the discovery that one of the men in attendance was, Ignacio de la Torre y Mier, Porfirio Diaz's son-in-law. Though the police took forty-two men to prison, in the end, only forty-one remained because De la Torre y Mier had been removed from the group by Diaz to avoid a scandal. As part of their punishment, the day after the raid, the remaining forty-one were made to sweep and clean the streets of the city in a symbolic cleansing of their crime. From this point on the figure of the transvestite was used in political cartoons by José Guadalupe Posada and others, as a derogatory image to emasculate public figures. In his essay "The 41 and the Gran Redada," Monsiváis describes this scandal as the moment in which the concept of homosexuality was born in Mexico. You can find this essay in *The Famous 41: Sexuality and Social Control in Mexico c. 1901* along with another study of political cartoons and their relationship to homophobia in Mexico in the early 1900s by Robert Buffington titled "Homophobia and the Mexican Working Class, 1900-1910."

*la vestida* figure on stage. The visibility transvestites have in their self-fashioning is what makes them vulnerable targets for violence. At the same time, this visibility is also a strategy of resistance to hegemonic conceptions of gender and sexuality. In this sense, many of Vasconcelos's feminine characters including María Félix and Sarah Bernhardt, challenge the hypocritical and ambivalent relationship the audience has with the transvestite figure. Vasconcelos's transvestism is a necessary political act of making that experience visible as another facet of not only the gay reality in Mexico, but of a Mexican reality in general. In his essay "Camp, *carpa* and cross-dressing in the theater of Tito Vasconcelos," Prieto asserts that Vasconcelos's interest in the transvestite experience lies in that "they take their femininity to the last consequences of sophistication of mannerist contortions in what amounts to symbolic terrorism" (Prieto 87). This type of terrorism makes the audience uncomfortable and challenges their notions surrounding gender and sexuality.

To understand the symbolic terrorism that the transvestite figure represents, Judith Butler's description of the drag subject is helpful. She talks about this in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). In Chapter 3 Butler describes drag subjectivity in the following terms:

As much as drag creates a unified picture of 'woman' . . . it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself--as well its contingency (my emphasis). Indeed, part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of causal unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary (Butler 187).

For Butler, by taking femininity, or masculinity for that matter, to the 'ultimate consequences of mannerist contortions', drag subjects parodically reveal the

performativity of gender. They reveal how gender is socially constructed and in doing so challenge normalized conceptions of gender identity as something one is born with. Drag, therefore, is a resistance strategy against this normalization. In her words, ". . . (i)t is a production which. . . postures as an imitation. . . [a] parodic proliferation [that] deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities" (138).

How does this conception of gender performativity and the drag subject apply to the Latin American context and more specifically to Mexico? In this sense, Ben Sifuentes-Jáuregui's *Transvestism, Masculinity, and Latin American Literature: Genders Share Flesh* (2002) is valuable in contextualizing transvestism in this region. He differentiates his study from that of Judith Butler in that he wishes to look specifically at transvestism in the Latin American context, where corporeality, the body, and its place in Latin American cultures differ from what Butler observed in the United States. His study uses transvestism as a critical tool to understand the politics of gender of transvestite subject in Latin America, but more importantly to explore the world surrounding this figure. He clearly differentiates the effect the performance of transvestism has on a viewer *vis-à-vis* the transvestic subject herself. For the viewer, the transvestic performance is about 'representing' and 'occupying' the space of the Other. Sifuentes-Jáuregui asserts, however, that for the subject, it is about 'representing,' 'becoming' and 're-creating' the Self. In other words, transvestism is an act of self-fashioning not of occupying another's identity.

The subversive power of the performance of transvestism therefore lies in showing the Other's travesty through the denaturalization of gender. What the performance reveals is the falseness of the Other's own construction. Sifuentes-Jáuregui affirms that "...the question of national identity has produced and continues to put forth

(to dress up) a very “gendered” national subject – one that is almost always masculine, male, and heteronormative” (10). The construction of the national subject, therefore, is analogous to that of the transvestic subject in that it involves the careful selection of desirable characteristics and traits. In this way transvestism is a flexible construct that provides a mirror image of other identities as social constructs as well, for example ‘gender,’ ‘masculinity,’ and ‘nationalism.’ His description of the effect of transvestism and gender performance in Latin America is useful to understand Vasconcelos’s work in the following sense:

Transvestism is an act that penetrates and tampers with those who witness it. This introjection of the transvestite into personal, social and cultural psyches introduces a series of problems about uncertainty and authenticity, imposition, interiority, and exteriority. Transvestism is about the raw touching, gentle tampering, and literally, fucking up of any fixed notion of genders. Transvestism is the figure that describes in its embodiment and realization the difficulty of gender (Sifuentes 2).

The ‘tampering’ or ‘fucking up’ Sifuentes-Jáuregui analyzes in his studies, was also observed by Prieto when he described Vasconcelos’s engagement in drag in *Maricosas y Mariposas* as a ‘guerilla strategy’ that unsettles conventional gender roles.<sup>79</sup> As was mentioned before, however, this section posits that beyond challenging essentialist ideas regarding gender and pointing to how they are fashioned, Vasconcelos proposes that gender goes beyond the male/female binary; it is a more fluid concept. As we saw in the previous section, in the first scene of *La Pasión* Vasconcelos highlights his drag performance by revealing that he is a dragged Tito Vasconcelos disguised as María Félix who is doing an interpretation of Mary Magdalene. By revealing his performance as both an older diva and a scorned religious character, Vasconcelos exposes the complex

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<sup>79</sup> See Prieto’s essay “Camp, *carpa* and cross-dressing in the theater of Tito Vasconcelos” in *Corpus Delecti*.

self-fashioning he undertook to construct his character. He is a gay, cabaret artist exploring an assertive, despondent, proud, strident feminine characterization. To analyze Vasconcelos's alternative gender identity, Marjorie Garber's conception of the "third gender" in her book *Vested Interests* (1992) is helpful to understand Vasconcelos's work. "This tendency to erase the third term (a transvestite subject), to appropriate the cross-dresser as one of the two sexes, is emblematic of a fairly consistently critical desire to look away from the transvestite as a transvestite, not to see cross-dressing except as male or female manqué, whether motivated by social, cultural or aesthetic designs" (Garber 7-8). The idea of a "third gender" highlights that performing in drag affirms the possibility of the existence of a broad range of genders, sexualities, and identities for that matter. In this sense for those who witness his work, the gender performance of a transvestite 'tampering' or 'fucking up' any notions of who can perform femininity and/or masculinity can be considered gender terrorism.

Mexico City audiences, more specifically Mexican male, heterosexual audiences are familiar with drag queen shows. They have been a part of the city's nightlife since before the Mexican Revolution.<sup>80</sup> During these shows, *la vestida* figure performs in a variety of acts that typically include lip-synching performances as famous local or international divas or they also engage in comic relief sketches, in which they become the butt of jokes and the audience's mockery.<sup>81</sup> The laughter these performances inspire in

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<sup>80</sup> During his interview with Prieto, Vasconcelos speaks of the commotion an Italian performer, Leopoldo Fregoli, caused in Porfirian society. This fast-change artist or *transformista* performed in Mexico in 1901 and was known for his uncanny ability to fluidly and quickly transform into various characters including feminine characters during his show. Vasconcelos observes the entrenched hypocrisy in Mexican society where they are fascinated with Fregoli's show vs. the public scorn and outrage caused by the 'dance of the 41'. For a brief description of Leopoldo Fregoli see *The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville* by Anthony Slide, page 196-197.

<sup>81</sup> Antonio Marquet's *El Coloquio de las perras* is an in-depth study of the work *Joteando por un sueño* by Las hermanas Vampiro. The work of these artists differs greatly from the sanitized versions one might see at Chip and Dale's or television. Las hermanas Vampiro engage in an unforgiving type of mockery called *perreo* as a resistance strategy.

the male, heterosexual audience, generally serves to affirm their own heterosexual masculinity and perceived position of power over a feminized subject. Vasconcelos's transvestism breaks with the content and form of this type of drag performance by politicizing it.

How is Vasconcelos engaging in gender and symbolic terrorism through transvestism? Instead of re-affirming the audience's stereotypes and ideas surrounding the transvestite performance act he uses parody, humor, and song to confront the audience with its sexism, homophobia, and misogyny. In other words, he shifts the target of the joke or of the mockery to ridicule the homophobe and the misogynist in the audience. His characters and their performance propose an empowered, queer, feminist identity. To better elucidate how he does this, this section will analyze the use of song in his performance as a *ranchera* singer in the aforementioned Encuentro organized by Hemispheric Institute in 2001.

As was mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Vasconcelos performed at the closing ceremony for this conference. His spectacle lasted for about one hour and included two sketches. In the first one he performed as Mexico's soon to be first lady and in the second, he performed as the star and representative of Mexican folklore: Lucha. Throughout the second part of the performance there is a mixture of song and direct dialogue with the audience where his most powerful attacks come through the songs he sings, his modification of the lyrics, and in comedic breaks between each song. Though Vasconcelos pays homage to Lucha Reyes, a famous singer and actress of the 1930s and 1940s, and the *triples* like Conesa, his aim is not to produce an imitation of them. Vasconcelos utilizes them as a point of departure for parodic gender terrorism.

Before Vasconcelos transforms into "la representante del folklore mexicano", a lone musician plays *Me cansé de rogarle*, a popular *ranchera* song by José Alfredo

Jiménez. Vasconcelos did not choose the song randomly. Jiménez's music and *Me cansé de rogarle* specifically is an internationally recognized hymn of Mexican music. It is a ballad, which perfectly showcases what Monsiváis calls 'la vocalización de los vencidos' (*Amor perdido* 97). In his entry "José Alfredo Jiménez. No vengo a pedir lectores. (Se repite el disco por mi purita gana)," Monsiváis asserts that Jimenez's image and music in the 1930s and 1940s, solidify sharp and fixed notions of the stereotype of popular Mexican identity. In other words, Jimenez's music epitomizes: "el tono quejumbroso, la profesión de abandonado, la seriedad de ultratumba...la tristeza ancestral de la raza mexicana (91)." Therefore, by choosing this song to introduce his second act, Vasconcelos sets up the audience to search for and identify with what Monsiváis identifies as a Mexicanized type of 'sentimiento' that the *ranchera* entertainment industry sets up to characterize Mexican national identity. Yet when Vasconcelos steps onto the stage his *ranchera* satire immediately breaks with the audiences' expectations.

After *Me cansé de rogarle* ends, Vasconcelos walks out dressed in a sexy, campy version of a *china poblana* dress to the notes of *La Tequilera* by Lucha Reyes.<sup>82</sup> A glittery, white corset sits tight around his chest and is decorated with a colorful rendition of the Mexican coat of arms at the center. Furthermore, two bedazzled maguey plants adorn his would-be breasts. He also wears a short, sequined, fuchsia skirt embellished with shiny images of *nopales*. The mini-skirt bells out, giving the audience a full view of his black undergarments and shapely legs which he adorns with silky, black stockings and strappy, high-heeled shoes. His face is done up in glittery make-up, yet he does not wear a wig. Furthermore, he does not put on fake breast enhancements to augment his

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<sup>82</sup> According to *The Encyclopedia of Latin American History and Culture* Reyes was a pioneer in *ranchera* music in the 1930s and 1940s, as women did not typically sing in mariachi bands at the time. "Her distinct singing style, *el estilo bravío*...was an attack on social norms, including sexist treatment of women" (531). By choosing to begin his show with Reyes's song, Vasconcelos continues his tradition of representing popular, female entertainment icons that are rebellious.

cleavage nor does he try to soften his figure to make it more feminine. As he walks around singing and dancing, he exaggeratedly flips his non-existing hair in a parodic imitation of diva femininity. He adds a sexual note to his moves by swaying his hips to showoff his undergarments. Under the sequined skirt, he wears a pair of black panties that give him good coverage and don't try to hide that he has a penis.

Vasconcelos is a queer, transgressive *china poblana*. He is a parody of the national archetypes that popular culture has created for Mexican women. More importantly, he represents a transvestite masquerading as these archetypes. By walking an ambiguous line between genders and using national symbols for this purpose he exposes the malleability of a traditional conception of gendered national identity. Moreover, though Vasconcelos evokes the traditional lip-syncing drag show, he diverts from this type of show, by singing all the songs using his deep, male, husky voice. Though the songs he chooses on first look appear to pick up on the traditional *ranchera* themes, every single one subverts that image and the feelings it invokes either through the lyrics or his performance of them.

After finishing *La Tequilera*, a song that celebrates *la borrachita* archetype Lucha Reyes helped solidify. Vasconcelos reaches his hands up to his head and slowly undoes a patriotic green, white, and red bow. The audience snickers as he halfway unwraps the ribbon and lets it fall down his chest like two long braids, channeling a parody of *la soldadera*. After the first few giggles, he menacingly raises his gaze, and questions their laughter asking: “¿Qué tiene? ¿Qué no puede desarrollarse y progresar el vestido de folclórica mexicana, o qué?”<sup>83</sup> With this short quip, Vasconcelos questions the audience's mocking snickers by directly addressing what is making them laugh: a man performing a

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<sup>83</sup> For the full performance please view “Performance by Tito Vasconcelos: Martita, Primera Dama” <http://hdl.handle.net/2333.1/tb2rbp5t>



parody of the popular archetype of Mexican femininity. Though he directly questions their conservatism surrounding traditional Mexican dresses, Vasconcelos's query also challenges the audience's fixed notions about who is within the limits of the traditional, gendered, national identity. Moreover, the national identity he fashions in this subversive *ranchera* concert celebrates the music and personality of famous divas like Lucha Reyes, Lola Beltrán, and Lydia Mendoza, who subverted the genre during their time by singing with deep, strong, female voices. He also sings pieces by contemporary cabaret performance artists like Jesusa Rodríguez, Liliana Felipe, and Astrid Hadad, who have made this genre a platform to parody essentialized notions of what Mexican femininity is.

The second song Vasconcelos belts out is a cover of Astrid Hadad's *La Mensa*, a satiric song about a scorned woman whom people refer to as *la mensa* or 'the daft,' for being in love with a man who is unwilling to formalize their relationship. She speaks of how her community mocks her and predicts her destiny as a spinster. The lyrics' satire comes in how *la mensa* is 'aburrida,' 'cansada,' y 'destanteada' with her lover's flimsy sexual and love advances. So much so, that by the end of the song, she vows to find someone else to be with, in this sense escaping destiny as a spinster. This song is meant to be a parody of the type of Mexican femininity constructed in Mexican popular culture. It produces what Laura Gutierrez calls 'slippages,' where the audience, especially the female Mexican audience, will recognize the suffering that is believed to especially be inherent in Mexican femininity, yet through laughter disassociates 'women with notions of victimhood' (Gutierrez 88). Through the performance and modification of this song to also include queer identities, Vasconcelos produces these slippages with his queer audience as well.

Me siento lacia, lacia, lacia  
Tu amor me trae agorzomada.

Y estoy cansada y aburrida de tanteadas.  
Me traes de encargo y nomás quieres vacilar  
Pa' qué pretendes mis querencias,  
si bien lo sabes que no me has de ser formal.  
Por ti me dicen que soy mensa  
y que pa' vestir santos me voy a quedar.

*¡Ay, que flojera!  
Con lo que cuesta de trabajo de bajarle el brazo al santo.  
No, algo se me ha de ocurrir  
Ya lo verás, ya lo verás.*

Me siento lacia, lacia, lacia  
Tu amor me trae agorromada.  
Y estoy cansada y aburrida, destanteada.  
Me traes de encargo y nomás quieres vacilar

Pa' qué pretendes todo esto,  
si bien lo sabes que no me has de ser formal.  
Por ti me dicen que soy mensa  
y que pa' vestir santos me voy a quedar.

*¡Ay, qué flojera! Fíjate que no, ya se me ocurrió.  
Voy a poner mi anuncio en Clasificados del Universal:  
Muchacha ciento por ciento varonil. Jovencita, jovencita.  
Absténganse gordas y divas de vicio. ¿A verdad?*

Me siento lacia, lacia, lacia  
Y el corazón me anda fallando  
si no me quieres me lo puedes demostrar  
pórtate en serio y deja ya de vacilar

y aunque me siento lacia lacia  
no te afigures que me voy a conformar  
pues con otro daré el changazo  
pero pa' vestir santos no me voy a quedar.

*!¿Me Oyítes?! (Martita, Primera Dama)*

Through the modification of the lyrics, Lucha dissipates any fixed conceptions of who she is representing. In the second spoken stanza she says: “¡Ay, que flojera! Fíjate que no, ya se me ocurrió. Voy a poner mi anuncio en los clasificados del Universal:

Muchacha 100% varonil. Jovencita, jovencita. Absténganse gordas, divas de disco. ¿A verdad? (*Martita, Primera Dama*).” With these few lines, Vasconcelos’s character definitely changes the perspective of the song from that of a woman to that of a *vestida* who describes herself as being 100% manly. In other words, Lucha reveals her construction as a body that can both perform femininity and masculinity depending on how she chooses to present herself. This Lucha walks an ambiguous line between genders, refusing to choose between this imposed binary. Furthermore, she disassociates the idea of performing Mexican femininity as one that is mainly associated with selflessness and suffering.

Another example of this type of mockery happens when she sings *Por un amor* a song made famous by the likes of Lucha Reyes, Vicente Fernández, and most recently by Jenni Rivera. The song’s melodramatic lyrics speak of what one would do for love, especially when it is unrequited.

Por un amor  
me desvelo y vivo apasionada  
tengo un amor,  
en mi vida dejo para siempre amargo dolor.

Pobre de mi,  
esta vida es mejor que se acabe  
no es para mi

*No sé por qué sufro, pero de que sufro ,sufro.*

Pobre de mi  
Ay corazón,  
pobre de mi  
no sufras mas  
cuanto sufre mi pecho que late tan solo por ti

Dicen que por las noches nomas se le iba en puro llorar  
Dicen que no dormía nomas se le iba en puro tomar  
juran que el mismo cielo se estremecía al oír su llanto

como sufrió por ella que hasta en su muerte la fue llamando.  
(*Martita, Primera Dama*)

As evidenced by the lyrics, though the title of the song speaks of what one would do for love, the most important feeling or action described in the song is to embody the emotional suffering that comes from unreciprocated love. The lyrics are a musicalization of Monsiváis' image of *los vencidos*. This is the only song in the concert where Vasconcelos makes the audience participate by actively inviting them to sing with him the chorus of the song, which goes: "Pobre de mi/Ay corazón/Pobre de mi/No sufras más/Cuando sufre mi pecho/que late sólo por ti" (*Martita, Primera Dama*). As she sings the chorus, Lucha acts annoyed at the audience because so few of them know the lines and he has to mouth the lyrics to them. She shows her irritation by rolling her eyes and shaking her head in disdain. The exaggerated performance of her annoyance and the surprise it causes in the audience results in laughter, which helps them to disidentify with the feelings the song tempts them to associate with. This is also an example of Vasconcelos's incorporation of black humor to distance himself and the audience from the performance of suffering. Lucha's final blow at the song's melodrama happens when she interrupts the *ranchera* song and says: "No me acuerdo de por qué sufro, pero de que sufro, sufro." (*Martita, Primera Dama*) Through the parody and satire of *los vencidos*, more specifically pointing towards this stereotype surrounding women, Vasconcelos distances himself and his audience from this stereotype through the laughter he inspires.

The most rebellious part of this performance, in which Lucha advocates for a strong and empowered folkloric diva, comes almost at the end when she sings *El Protoplasma* by Liliana Felipe and Jesusa Rodríguez. She introduces the song saying that soon it will be part of the repertoire of all Mexican folkloric singers. This *ranchera* also takes a first person perspective and tells an alternative story of someone caught in an

unrequited relationship. It differs from *Por un amor* entirely, however, because this song is a description of how the feminized subject will take that person apart piece by piece until there is nothing left.

Te voy a sacar los ojos  
como a una vaca  
y me voy a hacer un licuado pa' que me veas  
desde el fondo del fondo del vaso  
pa' que me veas.  
Licuados tus ojos, licuado tu amor.

Te voy a arrancar la lengua  
pa' que no digas  
que no sabes, que no supistes, que ni te enteras  
que en el fondo del fondo del fondo  
de la garganta.  
Cortada tu lengua, cortado tu amor.

Te voy a chupar  
todo el protoplasma  
todo el protoplasma  
te voy a chupar  
A ver qué haces sin protoplasma  
a ver

*“¡Viva México Jijos de la Chingada!”*  
*Octavio Paz, Laberintos de la Soledad, Premio Nobel de Literatura.*  
*Yo no soy pelada, soy culta.*

Te voy a arrancar los pelos nomás por celos  
y te voy a dejar pelona  
como pelota  
pelo a pelo y a veces te voy a arrancar mechones.  
Poquito a poquito  
te voy a pelar.

Te voy a arrancar el alma  
con toda calma  
y te voy a hacer un tapete  
para pisarla  
desde el fondo del fondo de mi alma

para pisarla.  
Si algún día me dejas  
me dejas de amar.

Te voy a chupar  
No lo que tu quieres  
Sino el protoplasma  
Te voy a chupar  
A ver qué haces sin protoplasma  
a ver  
qué vas a hacer  
sin ojos, sin lengua, sin pelos, sin alma  
'Watchenme,' ¿sí?  
(Lucha raises her skirt and shows off her legs and undergarments)  
y aparte  
sin mí (*Martita, Primera Dama*).

This love song strays far from the traditional *ranchera* song, where the heartache that comes from betrayal becomes emotionally and physically crippling. Instead in *El protoplasma* the lyrics play with the verb *chupar*, which means to suck and alludes to giving a man a blowjob. As mentioned before, this sexual practice is traditionally read as a male subject asserting his power over the feminized subject. In this case, however, the sucking motion is so intense that every last ounce of the lover will be suctioned to the point of emptying the cells of their plasma. It is a humorous visualization of what would happen if a murderous lover actually acted on the anger she feels from being betrayed. From blending torn eyes into milkshakes, eating the tongue like a juicy steak, or weaving her lover's soul into a doormat she can stomp on, the lyrics inspire laughter through the grotesque and ridiculous descriptions of her lover's demise. Though the imagery causes laughter, what is subversive is that it proposes an empowered, feminine, first person voice that will not succumb to being an emotional and physical victim in love. Instead, in the song, the traditional victim turns into an assassin with the power to suck her body into oblivion.

More subversively, by performing a homage to this song, Lucha becomes a bold and strong answer to the domestic and social violence women and the queer communities are subject to in Mexico. The suffering that is trivialized in the *ranchera* genre has terrible consequences in real life. For example, though Ciudad Juárez in México has long symbolized ground zero for the phenomenon of femicides, the Estado de México, has for years, far surpassed Juárez in these types of crimes. Yet it took the government until July of 2015 to officially emit a gender alert to protect women in eleven municipalities in this state. According to the Observatorio Ciudadano Nacional del Femicidio, this is a far cry from what is needed but a historic action in a country that has never taken these types of crimes seriously.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, in a study published in 2014, the Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos (CIDH) places Mexico as the second country with the most violent crimes against people who identified as LGBT or were perceived as such in the last two years in Latin America.<sup>85</sup> Of the eighty-six cases documented in Mexico from January 2013 to March 2014, seventy-six were murders and seven were violent crimes. In a time when violence has become quotidian in the country, these hate crimes go unnoticed or are just chalked off to domestic disputes and blamed on the victims. Vasconcelos not only brings attention to these hate crimes, but confronts the audience when these matters are a cause for laughter. Right after singing *Por un amor* he talks to the audience about the theme of the conference: “Yo sé que estoy aquí en estas cosas de memoria, resistencia y perseverancia o como se llame lo que hacen...y pues quiero dar mi testimonio como mujer golpeada. (Audience laughs). ¿De qué se ríen? ¿O sea que les

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<sup>84</sup> OCNF is an alliance between forty-nine human and women’s rights organizations in twenty-one states and Mexico City. Its objective is to monitor and pressure government institutions to clarify crimes against women. For more on this alert and the OCNF’s position on it see

<http://observatoriofemicidio.blogspot.com>

<sup>85</sup> See article written in El Economista in December of 2014.

<http://eleconomista.com.mx/sociedad/2014/12/17/mexico-segundo-lugar-violencia-vs-comunidad-lgbt>

da risa que golpeen a las mujeres?... ¿Allí si se pusieron serios verdad?" (*Martita, Primera Dama*). This is one of the most powerful moments in the performance. Vasconcelos turns laughter into silence by ridiculing the idea that gender violence in Mexico is a laughing matter.

With this musical performance, Vasconcelos sets the carnivalesque yet subversive tone he wants his spectacle to take. He fashions a queer Lucha as the representation of Mexican Folklore for the international audience present at the event. He uses cross-dressing as a way to destabilize and deconstruct the audience's stereotypes about Mexican women and the image of the *vestida* in the Mexican imaginary. He deconstructs the stereotype of the Mexican drag subject as a representation of the demeaning archetypes brought on by Mexican popular culture. Instead, by singing songs by female *ranchera* pioneers like Lucha Reyes, Lydia Mendoza, and Lola Beltran and also paying homage to his contemporary, female cabaret artists like Astrid Hadad, Jesusa Rodríguez, and Liliana Felipe, Vasconcelos proposes a more empowered, feminist rendition of this subject.

## CONCLUSION

Tito Vasconcelos is a foundational figure in the creation of political cabaret theater in Mexico. He fashions shows that, under the guise of frivolous entertainment, bring the experience of the Mexico City queer community to life. As evidenced in the special Dossier published by *Paso de Gato* in the 2012 June-September issue, Vasconcelos continues to be a pillar not just in political cabaret theater, but also in Mexican theater in general. In the introduction to the Dossier dedicated to Vasconcelos, Patricia Vega relates that there was a time when the Centro Universitario de Teatro (CUT) used Vasconcelos as a cautionary tale for its students. Professors would warn



them about Vasconcelos's career path by saying: "los homosexuales no pueden ser actores porque luego luego se vuelven vestidas. Tito Vasconcelos hubiera podido ser un gran actor pero..." (Vega 8). In other words, their view reflects a deeply seeded homophobia that veiled for these professors, the wide range of genres, characters, aesthetics, and acting styles Vasconcelos experiments with in his work. According to Vega, despite the odds he has earned his place as the "padre-madre" of the new generations of cabaret artists like Las Reinas Chulas and Las Hijas de Safo. This title of "padre-madre" speaks not only of his influence in political cabaret theater but the deep imprint he has left in Mexican contemporary theater.

In order to better understand Vasconcelos's performance style, this chapter highlighted the importance of his political activism and vision as an entrepreneur. The section revealed the active political and social commitment Vasconcelos has with the LGTB community in Mexico, a commitment that is also evident in the themes and issues he tackles in his performances as well as the construction of his characters. The second section focused on his conscious use of camp and traditional Mexican humor as methods to produce feelings of estrangement from Mexican religiosity and nationalism. Vasconcelos's exaggerated, over-the-top, performance style reveals the self-fashioning that goes hand-in-hand with constructing any identity. In this sense he proposes a more complex and ambiguous sense of identity formation that is characterized by its irreverence and stridently critical point of view. Finally, this chapter addressed the transvestism in Vasconcelos's work as a type of gender terrorism that challenges his audience's fixed conceptions of gender and sexuality, by engaging in a affirming and empowering musical performance.

Vasconcelos's work is an example of the continuation of the tradition of using live entertainment and theater as sites in which to practice dissidence through irreverence.

Similar to what artists in *carpas* and *revistas* did, his presentation of shows late at night in bars, nightclubs, and other small theater venues permitted him to escape censorship and institutional control over content. Furthermore his heavy reliance on improvisation is akin to the style of acting perfected by *carpa* comedians like Cantinflas. This style of acting gives actors liberty from the director, and more significantly from the text. Additionally, comparable to comedians in *revistas* his spectacles rely heavily on current events, which makes each one fresh and different from the last. Furthermore it allows him the freedom to continue to run shows like *La Pasión*, where the general structure of the plot is kept, yet the content is reflective of the audience's current reality, a practice begun in *revistas*. There are, however, considerable differences in terms of his subversion of the traditional humor developed in both *carpas* and *revistas*, to both address the experience of the Mexican LGTB community and at the same time challenge the misogyny and homophobia embedded in it. He also integrates more recent aesthetic styles like that of camp to rarefy the nationalism and fixed identity markers that *carpas* and *revistas* helped establish. Finally, while what characterized and made *carpas* and *revistas* novel was their development of urban types, Vasconcelos adds transvestites and other queer identities to that repertoire, complicating that landscape on stage.

Today, Vasconcelos continues to produce spectacles like that of *La Pasión*, yet his attention has shifted more and more to use his spectacles as forums in which to launch new cabaret artists. He is, to date, the only professor teaching cabaret theater courses at the university level in the country. Several years after he solidified himself as an artist, Vasconcelos lived his own poetic justice when Raúl Zermeño, the dean of the Centro Universitario de Teatro (CUT), invited him back to teach political cabaret theater at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM). More recently he's taught in the Departamento de Bellas Artes at the University of Sonora (UNISON) in Hermosillo and

has given political cabaret workshops internationally, most recently at the University of Chile in 2014.<sup>86</sup> Vasconcelos is using the tools he honed as a cabaret artist to teach younger generations to create theater that is socially and politically committed. His imprint as a performance artist, businessman, activist, and educator in the country's cultural and political life in Mexico is undeniable.

Similar to Vasconcelos's polyphonic characters, one of the fascinating characteristics of political cabaret theater is the difference in styles that exist in this genre. The next chapter will delve into the work of Jesusa Rodríguez, another pillar in the foundation of this type of theater in Mexico. Like Vasconcelos, after training as an actress at the UNAM, she became disenchanted with the unwillingness to experiment and discriminatory experiences she had there. Though Vasconcelos and Rodríguez have collaborated extensively, especially at the outset, Rodríguez's style has significant differences that will be explored in the next chapter.

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<sup>86</sup> See "Once divas en busca de un actor" by Patricia Vega and "Influyente artista del cabaret mexicano dicta seminario en DETUCH" by Igora Martínez.

## CHAPTER 3

### **Secretos Debajo del Hábito: Heterotopias, Humor, Laughter, and Palimpsests in Jesusa Rodríguez**

#### INTRODUCTION

“Let’s be ambiguous, lets break with the taboo of ambiguity as something we permit ourselves only in dreams...let’s be ambiguous, as something involuntary, but full of intention, as objective; let’s assume the ridiculous and failure as an option to grow...I propose ambiguity in order to achieve, not ‘theater of the masses’ but in order to satisfy the vital necessity...of public expression” (Rodríguez in Seligson 158-159).

Miss Diablo appears standing nearly naked in front of a red wall. Her body is completely tinged in red, and a crimson sequined thong adorns her abdomen. Her white face is decorated with two horns that sprout from her forehead. Simultaneously grotesque and seductive, she gazes leeringly at the viewer through slit eyes and has dangerous red lips. Miss Diablo is tempting, risky, and full of ambiguity. The photo by Adolfo Pérez-Burrón was my first introduction to the work of Jesusa Rodríguez, a world-renowned Mexican performance artist based in Mexico City. What struck me the most was how she takes on the *lotería* style modern representation of El Diablo. She opts to show off her nude, seductively posed woman’s body, and contrasts it with a face decorated with a large, fake hooked nose and a bald head. As an alternative to using facial make-up to soften her features and feminize her face, she uses it to make them grotesque. She plays with the idea of seducing and scaring the spectator, posing her body as an object of desire and also a subject of power. She questions the use of the body as a site that is value free.

Through her appropriation of Mexican national symbols and (arche)types, and her use of humor and improvisation, Rodríguez proposes the creation of an acidly critical, Mexican, queer aesthetic. One of the shows for which she impersonates the Devil is an adaptation of Oskar Panizza’s *The Love Council* (1894). The original is set in 1495 during the first historically documented outbreak of syphilis. In scenes alternating

between heaven, hell, and the Vatican, the play portrays the dreaded disease as God's vengeance on promiscuous humans. Needless to say, it was immediately banned in 1894 when it came out in Germany. The most shocking aspect of Panizza's play and the reason for Rodríguez's attraction to it is its naturalistic depiction of the entities worshiped by the Catholic religion. God appears as a senile old fool while Christ appears as an immature, dimwitted, and weak young man. According to Roselyn Constantino, Rodríguez's adaptation, *El Concilio del amor* (1988), is still considered one of her most controversial pieces ("Visibility as Strategy" 73). Rodríguez's adaptation follows Panizza's original storyline; however, instead of choosing syphilis as the disease to punish humankind's promiscuity, God via the devil develops AIDS.

In her adaptation, God summons the Devil, played by Rodríguez, to devise the appropriate punishment for humanity. The Devil comes up with AIDS, a deadly disease she will spread by having sex with Salomé, the very symbol of the behavior God wants to punish.<sup>87</sup> Through her performance Rodríguez questions the Catholic Church's conservative discourse surrounding sex and sexuality, where sex is seen as a tool to reproduce more Catholics. Any pleasure deriving from sex and even masturbation is considered to be sinful. In a key scene of the play, the gender-ambiguous devil has a conversation with Jesus about his body and sexual desires after he guiltily confesses he has had wet dreams in the past. Miss Diablo in turn explains that wet dreams are natural and everybody has them. In realizing that Jesus is sexually awakening, she also teaches him how to use a condom. This piece of vital information is what in turn ironically saves Jesus from AIDS. As Roselyn Constantino poignantly maintains, Miss Diablo's sexual education class and its life-saving results stand in stark contrast to the Catholic Church's

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<sup>87</sup> Salome is often identified with the dancing woman that appears in the New Testament (Mark 6: 17-21; Mathew (14: 3-11). Christian traditions have often depicted her as an icon of the danger of female seductiveness.

irresponsible approach to the AIDS epidemic breakout in the 1980s. Rodríguez raises the question of the moral and ethical responsibility the Church has in helping miseducate people about sex and sexuality. More directly she criticizes the direct role discourses of abstinence and guilt play in the spread of this and other venereal diseases. As Miss Diablo shows, sexual education has the power to save lives. More importantly, by using parody to expose the systems of power she gives the audience the ability to pick apart the nature of knowledge, power, and truth (Constantino, “Visibility as Strategy” 75).

Rodríguez’s representation of the Devil is just one example of how she uses popular cultural symbols as tools to hook the audience into her performances. Similar to comedians of *revistas* and *carpas*, she engages them through humor and improvisation to create lines of communication through which they participate through laughter and banter. Like many others before her, she interrupts and degrades official discourses of knowledge and places the embodied discursive power to satirize and parody in herself and her audience.

Jesusa Rodríguez is one of the best-known female Latin American performance artists. She was born in 1955 in Mexico City and belongs to a generation of women considered by scholars like Jean Franco to be representative of the more liberated, feminist generation of intellectuals and activists in Mexico. Throughout her career she has worked as director, actress, writer, performance artist, stage designer, entrepreneur, and activist. Despite the fact that in 2005 she retired from the stage of *El Hábito*, her focus continues to be to use theater and performance as vehicles to speak-out against injustice and as tools to promote resistance amongst civilian society. In their artist profile description the Hemispheric Institute for Performance and Politics asserts that she currently leads the *Resistencia Creativa* movement in Mexico, through which she helps to organize *acciones* using art and performance. By *acción* I mean intentional and direct

artistic political actions artists and activists in Latin America use to intervene in public discourses.

Rodríguez began her career at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), with the idea of pursuing a career in theater. When she finished her degree, however, she became disappointed and repulsed by the male-run and artistically limiting theatrical and cultural institutions in México. In an interview with Diana Taylor, she recounts nasty comments made by well-known directors, which included being told that she had no place onstage because she was too ugly (Taylor, *Unimagined* 7). Realizing she would never be able to do what she wanted to artistically, she co-founded her own all-female theater company called *Divas A.C.* This collective included artists like musician Liliana Felipe and Astrid Hadad. The name was a nod to the Mexican divas of Mexico's golden era in cinema in the 1940s as well as the famous *tiples* of the 1920s and 1930s. This company presented their own pieces, as well as adaptations of other pieces like the previously mentioned *The Love Council*.

Jesusa Rodríguez's work has influenced her contemporaries and inspired the newer generations of cabaret artists like Las Reinas Chulas, Las Hijas de Safo, and César Enríquez. She is considered a foundational figure in this genre. Like many other cabaret artists, her *espectáculos* challenge traditional generic classification. Her work is varied and can go from classic Greek tragedy to opera, revue, *carpa*, *revista*, German style cabaret, and political street interventions. I'd like to place her work, along with that of Tito Vasconcelos in Chapter 2, on continuum of performance artists converting theatrical spaces into public spheres where artist and audience enter into collective political and social dialog.

Rodríguez's pieces incorporate well-known themes and dramatic tools developed in *carpas* and *revistas*, like the impersonation of political figures, the use of *albures* and

the incorporation of music. She however, doesn't just recycle these to bring back the bygone era of these genres. Rodríguez, along with others like Vasconcelos and Astrid Hadad, created the genre of political cabaret theater as a forum and medium to publicly challenge hegemonic national culture from a dissident perspective. Rodríguez follows in the footsteps of early twentieth-century comedians like Amelia Wilhelmy and Delia Magaña, who broke with the traditional female roles of singing or dancing to embody the irreverent, comedic voice usually taken on by men. Today, Rodríguez has become one of the most important critical, comedic voices of contemporary Mexican theater. She is part of the 'outsider' voices that Gastón Alzate describes as those who use theater as a forum for a playful political and social dissent ("Dramaturgy" 64). To understand Rodríguez's work, the questions I engage in this chapter are: What stylistic elements characterize Rodríguez's political cabaret? How does she evolve the tools established in *revistas* and *carpas*? How does she use humor and laughter in her shows? What are the elements that make her queer theatrical aesthetic different from Vasconcelos?

Rodríguez's performances are destabilizing acts that interrupt normative discourses of gender, sexuality, and heterosexual national culture. She is not afraid to represent her sexuality on stage. Like Vasconcelos, she not only breaks with the silence surrounding queer identities in Mexican society but also creates space for them to be represented on stage. Her theater and that of many other cabaret artists in Mexico participate in what Laura Gutierrez denominates a queer, world-making project.<sup>88</sup> The worlds Rodríguez creates on stage are spaces for desire, fear, and hope for both her

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<sup>88</sup> In the Introduction to *Performing Mexicanidad: Vendidas y Cabareteras on the Transnational Stage* Gutierrez describes: "It is my contention that these artists are not only challenging head-on heterosexist and nationalist discourses ("unsettling comforts," if we understand "unsettling" to function as a verb) but also participation in the construction of a queer world-making project...I also see potential for transformative politics within this type of world-making project...these projects, by their very own constitution...are simultaneously spaces of desire and fear" (19).



heterosexual and her queer audiences. Through her shows, Rodríguez pushes her spectators to engage in political cabaret theater as a forum to imagine a different reality for themselves and Mexico.

To understand Rodríguez's performance aesthetic, this chapter focuses on teasing out some of the most important characteristics of the political cabaret she produces to build a queer space of resistance. Although there might be profound discontent with the Church and the Mexican government, there are few public arenas where people have collective conversations about them. In the 1980s and the 1990s, Rodríguez along with many others found in cabaret theater a creative forum where they could marry their artistic work with their political and social identities. Their cabaret proposal goes beyond creating an entertaining spectacle. Through their shows, they created what performance artist and scholar Coco Fusco characterizes as a 'public sphere': a space where common people can criticize the governing elite (Fusco 13).<sup>89</sup> Exploring how the stage works as a mirror that reflects a carnivalized vision of the spectator's reality is critical to understanding the power of space in Rodríguez's work. The first section of this chapter will therefore analyze Rodríguez's public participation as an appropriation of a 'public sphere' through performance.<sup>90</sup>

The second argument analyzes of her use of humor as a tool to playfully open a forum that addresses uncomfortable themes: violence against women and other marginalized identities, corruption, cultural racism, and growing economic inequalities.

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<sup>89</sup> In *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), Habermas details a history of the development of the bourgeois public sphere from the 18<sup>th</sup> Century through the influence of capital-driven mass media. In it he describes the public sphere as an ideal communicative space where inclusive discussion could happen because interlocutors would treat each other as equals in an attempt to understand matters of common concern (160, 1989).

<sup>90</sup> An important work that delves into the tactics and strategies deployed by Mexican and Brazilian queer activists since the 1960s to gain access to more inclusive forms of citizenship and rights is Rafael De La Dehesa's *Queering the Public Sphere in Mexico and Brazil: Sexual Rights Movements in Emerging Democracies*.

One of the most distinguishable characteristics of her work is how she evolves the use of irony and black humor, first established by *carpa* and *revista* comedians, to build a playful rapport with her audience where laughter creates a safe space from which to speak about serious subjects. She uses laughter as a liberating act that frees her and the spectator from the fear of the adversity they are facing as individuals and that Mexico is facing as a country. She uses the type of humor established in *carpas* and *revistas*, identifying with the mocking purpose of these tools when they criticize powerful mechanisms of marginalization. She, similarly to Vasconcelos, disidentifies with the often sexist, misogynistic and homophobic cloak it traditionally comes packaged in. When spectators laugh during Rodríguez's performance, they also become complicit in her critiques on gender, sexual, and racial discrimination in Mexican society. It is through humor and laughter that she encourages the audience to interrupt discourses of marginalization.

Thirdly, Rodríguez's political cabaret is also characterized by providing dissenting interpretations of Mexico's past as well as its present. In this sense, she subverts official discourses surrounding history as something that is linear and frozen in time and space. She breaks with the idea that the only way to study and learn from history is through books, museums, and traditional archival documents. More transgressively, she challenges the idea that history only lives in our past. She instead places it front and center to understand where and why Mexico is where it is today and to envision where it will head in the future. She uses historical anachronism in her shows as a performative palimpsest where the past and the present are alive at the same time. José Quiroga's concept of palimpsest, developed in *Cuban Palimpsests* in 2005, is helpful to analyze Rodríguez's work. He bases himself on the literal definition of a palimpsest, which is a manuscript page from which the text has been erased so that the page can be reused for

another document. In her case, Rodríguez achieves an embodied palimpsest in her shows, which invites her audience to participate in a rereading of history as something that is alive and present in everyday life. In this space she, as a performer, interacts with history and current events through embodiment. Rodríguez lays the subjectivity of historical narrative bare and creates a new path through which to understand the usefulness of history for our present.

This chapter analyses Rodríguez's work as an art that establishes important spaces of resistance in which she and her audience can criticize and resist politics of control by the State and the Church. Moreover, in thinking about Diana Taylor's concept of *repertoire* or thinking of performance as an embodiment of knowledge, this chapter explores Rodríguez's work as an invitation to learn and create knowledge by embodying it ("Acts of Transfer" 2).<sup>91</sup> She questions the body as a site that is value free. Instead, she shows how it can become a site for "meaning making systems" where "cultural memories and political identities are configured" (Taylor and Townsend 25). Through Rodríguez's appropriation of Mexican national symbols and (arche)types and her use of humor and improvisation, she proposes the creation of an acidly critical, and *relajiento* Mexican identity.

To exemplify these arguments, this chapter will analyze three pieces she first produced in the 1990s: *El juicio a Salinas* (1995), *Sor Juana en Almoloya (Pastorela Virtual)* (1995) and *Partorela: El horror económico* (1997). Through an analysis of performance space, humor and re-enactments of history, the section explores how Rodríguez questions who is visible within the national imaginary, who is not, and why. Her work proposes a fractured and complex image of national identity. Her performances

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<sup>91</sup> Taylor defines *repertoire* as a 'non-archival system of transfer' that captures live events, something the historical archive has not been able to record or store.

interrupt the seriousness and formality surrounding Mexico's modernizing project, challenge Mexico's past constructions, and more importantly question where it is going.

### **CABARETEANDO HETEROTOPIAS IN EL HÁBITO**

It is valuable to consider the importance of performance space use within the practices of Latin American artists and compare them to Rodríguez's use of space. According to Fusco in *Corpus Delecti: Performance Art of the Americas*, in many Latin American countries the State not only plays a central role in determining the space art can live in but also the significance and function of art in society. State institutions give scholarships and grants and many times own museums and theaters where artists exhibit their work, exerting control over what is shown and where. Furthermore, Fusco denotes that in many countries the State also exercises its power by violently taking control over the bodies of its citizens (9). This type of oppression is evident, for example, in the Chilean and Argentinian military dictatorships of the 1970s, and more recently in Mexico as the government has embarked on a war on drugs. This violent attempt to control by the State moves artists to create alternative environments and spaces in which they can express themselves with more freedom. Some of these spaces are the alternative stages created in privately owned bars and coffee shops. In these less threatening environments, both artists and audience participate in something that French theorist Michel Foucault called a heterotopia.

In his essay "Of Other Spaces" (1967), Foucault describes the space of the stage and the theater as an example of heterotopia. He defines this as places where a culture can see itself reflected, represented, questioned and subverted (24). The power of the space lies in its function as a mirror, constructing an alternative world in the reflection. Here society gives itself more freedom to question and potentially act to change what is

happening in the reflection. In other words, at least temporally both performer and audience liberate themselves from social and political constraints and speak and act in ways they would not dare to otherwise. Jesusa Rodríguez is an example of an artist who was able to engender a physical heterotopia in her cabaret bar El Hábito (1990-2005), located in the Mexico City neighborhood of Coyoacán. In El Hábito she and her audience could voice opinions about the government and engage in critical conversations about Mexican society and politics.

El Hábito is a subversive public space that Rodríguez uses to build a theatrical heterotopia. Before being owned by Rodríguez and Felipe, the cabaret/bar had been the chapel of Mexican writer Salvador Novo's house. Through Rodríguez and Felipe it continued its legacy of being an independent space for experimental theater. The name the artists gave the bar is interesting because it has various meanings in Spanish. On the one hand, *hábito* means the routine practice or habit acquired by the repetition of an action. Additionally, the word also refers to the garments worn by monks and nuns in the Catholic religion. It is an appropriate name when one thinks about the work of Rodríguez. If we read it as the garment worn by nuns, it pays homage to the women who choose the nunnery as their alternative to marriage. Marriage and the convent are acceptable spaces for women in patriarchal societies like Mexico's.<sup>92</sup> With this name both artists celebrate the capacity of innovation of the women who chose the cloister as a space to exercise independence and freedom, the most prominent example being Sor Juana Inés de la

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<sup>92</sup> As previously mentioned Marcela Lagarde's work in *Los cautiverios de las mujeres* is a profound theorization and approximation of these roles and spaces as systems of oppression for women living under a patriarchal hegemony. She analyzes the categories of the mother-wife, the nun, the whore, the imprisoned and the insane, as symbolic references to the social and cultural stereotypes present in patriarchal societies. For the nun circle of captivity, she describes how women are encircled by it as a group that simultaneously negates both the *madresposa* and the *puta* circle. "Las monjas son mujeres que no procrean ni se vinculan a los otros a partir del servicio erótico. Sin embargo, esta mutilación encuentra realización social y religiosa: Las monjas no tienen hijos ni cónyuges, pero son madres universales y establecen el vínculo conyugal sublimado con el poder divino. Ésta es la forma específica en que realizan su feminidad" (39).

Cruz.<sup>93</sup> They used these spaces to advance their own knowledge and also produce work that expanded ideas of femininity in the New and Old Worlds.

In the introduction to her book *Plotting Women* (1989), Franco explains: “It was the convent, not the home, however, which produced a distinct form of feminine culture” (xiv). According to her, it is in these spaces where women were able to explore knowledge before only accessible by men. It is from there that they become recognized as intellectuals and writers. The idea of the cell as a space that confines but at the same time liberates is something that manifests itself in *El Hábito*.

Diana Taylor, a prominent scholar in performance art, has analyzed Rodríguez’s work extensively and described *El Hábito* as a place that made the audience feel relaxed and uncomfortable at the same time. “At *El Hábito*, the audience of lefties, lesbians, gays, and intellectuals can always expect to find new political satires and other kinds of outrageous performances by Rodríguez and Felipe” (*Holy Terrors* 7). As with the cabaret-bars that sprang up in the city during the 1920s and 1930s, *El Hábito* offered its patrons a cocktail and drink menu, as well as food options to enjoy while watching the show. The idea was to encourage people to relax, share a meal, drink, and have fun. By incorporating these seemingly intimate and familiar activities, Rodríguez prompted people to let go of some of their inhibitions in time for the show to begin. They became more willing to participate actively.

Alternatively, the cabaret-bar was unsettling at the same time: first because of its history as a former chapel, and second because Rodríguez and Felipe included a

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<sup>93</sup> Since the 1990s scholarship on Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz has burgeoned in the United States. For an overview of fundamental scholarship on De la Cruz, Stephanie Merrim’s *Feminist Perspectives on Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz* brings together various studies, some previously published but difficult to find, on the writer’s life and work. This book is an exploration of what it meant to be a woman writer and a woman writing in the 17th Century in Mexico. For one of the first works tackling De la Cruz’s sexuality, Victoria Urbano’s *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: amor, poesía, soledumbre* is a good start. María Luisa Bemberg also provides a queer fictionalized reading of Sor Juana’s figure in her film *Yo, la peor de todas* (1990).

scattering of church pews as seats. In toying with these seemingly contradictory ideas, Taylor points out that Rodríguez and Felipe were able to demystify the former chapel as a religious space and repurpose it into something else that was equally charged. *El Hábito* was not like the space of a traditional theater where one sits in silence or laughs on cue. In *El Hábito*, the idea was to make the patrons key components of the performance.

Beyond the physical design of the bar, Rodríguez legitimized her heterotopia through the spectacles themselves. Spectators became pivotal characters in the outcome of the piece. One important goal in Rodríguez's performances was to provide a rehearsal space for the audience to practice resistance and civic participation. A strong example of the kind of theatrical participation Rodríguez looked for happens during her show *El juicio a Salinas* produced in 1995. The show is a mock trial of ex-president Carlos Salinas de Gortari. In it, the audience is invited to participate in a national call for the government to hold the ex-president accountable for various crimes.

Initially it seems as if the Attorney General will be the one questioning Salinas however, soon after the exposition of his crimes—including embezzlement, corruption, and several murders—Salinas arrives and the floor opens up to the audience for questioning. Through some humorous coaxing, they become a principal character as the jury of deputies responsible for bringing the ex-president to justice. The audience uses its theatrical role actively and takes the opportunity to question 'Salinas,' a cross-dressed Rodríguez. In her role as Salinas, she defends him by delivering unsound and questionable alibis and reasons for money missing from the national coffers. In the end, they pass judgment and banish him to the notorious Almoloya penitentiary where his brother is also being held. In the video footage of the show we hear various pointed questions, accusations, as well as heckling from spectators. The mock trial provides at

least a symbolic form of justice for the audience. Through irony and parody Rodríguez jabs at the crippled Mexican justice system.

In this example we get a taste of how Rodríguez's shows open up different lines of communication between artist and spectator, but also between artist and politician, and politician and spectator when these public servants attend her shows. This type of public forum is not something common in Mexico. Franco speaks about this three-way dialogue in her interview with Rodríguez.

Verbal parleys have erupted during performances, at times breaking into emotional give and take with audience members. Jesusa recounts the attendance of the daughter of Fernando Rodríguez González, a legislative aid jailed on charges he allegedly helped arrange the assassination of José Francisco Ruiz Massieu, brother-in-law of Salinas de Gortari. The young woman yelled insults at the character portraying her father (played by Jesusa) with such insistence and volume that Jesusa stopped the performance, called the woman up on stage, and gave her the opportunity to explain her family drama ("A Touch" 68).

This three-way dialogue is not something new as it was also seen on the stages of the *carpas* and *teatros de revista política* in the Mexico City of the 1910s and 1920s.<sup>94</sup> It is a phenomenon that was lost when these itinerant theaters disappeared with the birth of cinema and radio and a heavy period of censorship in the 1940s and 1950s. Rodríguez, however, raised enough eyebrows with her shows that politicians began to attend her them to see what the hype was all about. Perhaps, initially, she and Felipe opened up El Hábito as a space where they could give free reign to their creativity without outside censorship telling them what they could or could not say on stage. El Hábito, however, became a true public plaza where the artists, the audience, and people working for the

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<sup>94</sup> There are several references to this happening in *El teatro de género chico* by Armando María y Campos. One of the most notable ones is where he describes María Conesa being visited by Pancho Villa during the Revolution. In her case, Rodríguez has mentioned in several interviews that she knows politicians come to see her. Evidence can be seen at the end of the performance *Partorela: El horror económico*.



government had dialogues with one another. In a country where public space and the bodies that transit through it are heavily regulated and many times violently repressed, engendering an independent space under the cloak of theater and entertainment provided a safe-haven not only for the artists but the audience as well.

### **CARNIVAL, HUMOR AND LAUGHTER IN *PARTORELA: EL HORROR ECONÓMICO***

El teatro y la música tienen una condición fantástica para mi gusto. Sólo existen mientras están ocurriendo. Es como el orgasmo. Sólo existe en ese momento, ni antes ni después, ni cuando se acabó, ya no hay nada (Rodríguez, Entrevista a Jesusa Rodríguez y Liliana Felipe (2001).

To further understand how Rodríguez builds a heterotopic space through her shows, comprehending Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of carnivalization is advantageous. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin analyzes the significance of the Christian festive season of Carnival to the society of the Middle Ages in Europe. Still celebrated today, it occurs immediately before the Christian season of Lent. According to Bakhtin, during this festivity there was a general loosening of societal rules. The festive mood this created, along with the use of masks and costumes to represent the religious and political elite, became a popular way to reverse social hierarchies and practice irreverence (Bakhtin 123). During these celebrations the poor flipped the power structures to make fun of the political and social elites. In Rodríguez's case, by using costumes and masks to represent historical and political figures and instigating laughter as a response, she moves her audience to bend the rules by being irreverent with her. She utilizes icons that in the past have symbolized institutional values of Mexican identity, and through carnivalization she dismantles them.

With her bar/cabaret, Rodríguez builds a troubling space in which people feel uncomfortable enough with the subject matter that they react. At the same time, they feel relaxed and safe enough to respond to what she is saying. She masterfully uses the playful aspects of Carnival and humor to break the ice and as a tool for defiance. She uses

tools founded in *revistas* and *carpas*, namely black humor, political jokes, and *albures*.<sup>95</sup> By irreverently representing Mexico's political and social elite, Rodríguez creates a safe space to communicate both for herself and her audience. She diminishes the hierarchy that traditionally exists between artist and spectator when she uses everyday jargon. She bets on the victory of laughter over fear and anger. Humor and comedy are used as a democratizing tool to level the playing field. They break down the bindings of *las buenas formas* and high academic language as the only legitimized way of speaking about Mexico's history and current political and social situation.

Humor and laughter as a human response have historically been traits that western philosophy has critically analyzed as negative.<sup>96</sup> Plato, for example, saw it as an emotion that overrode self-control. In his *Republic*, he said that "Guardians of the state should avoid laughter, for ordinarily when one abandons himself to violent laughter, his condition provokes a violent reaction" (388e). Alternately, in *Passions of the Soul*, although René Descartes admits that there are other causes of laughter other than hatred, in Part 3 he only describes laughter as an expression of scorn and ridicule.<sup>97</sup> In 1905 in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* Freud, analyzed laughter as a response to three situations: the joke, the comic, and humor. According to Freud, in all three, laughter was an unconscious process of letting repressed thoughts and feelings out.<sup>98</sup> To Freud,

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<sup>95</sup> *Albures* are still widely used in the streets of Mexico City and the country at large. Since 1998 the Fundación Arturo Herrera Cabañas has been organizing the Festival de Albures in Pachuca Hidalgo where contestants compete against each other using *albures*. According to the organizers: "Ante el déspota, la primera forma de venganza es lanzarle un albur." In these contests, the winner is the one who is able to leave the other with no possibility of response.

<sup>96</sup> In his entry on the "Philosophy of Humor" in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, John Morreall gives a comprehensive summary of what philosophers and thinkers have said about humor and laughter in Western philosophy.

<sup>97</sup> See René Descartes's "The Passions of the Soul" translated by E. Haldane and G.R.T. Ross in *Philosophical Worlds of Descartes*, Vol. 1.

<sup>98</sup> See Sigmund Freud. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* translated by James Strachey and Peter Gay.

laughter was a physical response utilized to release pent-up energy. The energy that was going to be used, for example, to feel emotions of pity, aggression, sexual repression or fear, was instead released as laughter because of the comic situation that made those feelings superfluous. In “The Joke,” for example, Freud speaks about sexual desire and hostility as the most repressed emotions in humans, so when we tell or listen to a sexual or hostile joke we ignore our internal censor and give vent to our libido. In “The Comic,” he speaks of a similar release of energy that is summoned to concentrate on understanding actions on stage, and then found unnecessary because of the blundering actions of a silly actor. For example, when we watch the clumsy actions of a clown, we laugh because these are actions that anybody would perform smoothly. So the excess energy we would’ve used to understand complex movements is released when the clown’s clumsy movements don’t need that much energy to understand.

Alternatively others like Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Soren Kierkegaard explain laughter as the result of perceiving something as being incongruous.<sup>99</sup> In other words, laughter comes when something violates our mental patterns or expectations. An example of this would be how stand-up comedians tell jokes: first they set up the joke and expectation, and then the punch line is what violates those expectations. For these philosophers, humor and laughter are irrational behaviors because they come from the violation of our rational assumptions. In this sense, they view them under a critical lens, which does not explain the widespread, contemporary appreciation of humor and laughter. According to Morreall, there have been few studies delving into humor and laughter as beneficial and rational behaviors.

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<sup>99</sup> For more on Immanuel Kant thoughts on laughter see *Critique of Judgment*. translated by James Creed For more on Arthur Schopenhauer’s thoughts on laughter see *The World as Will and Idea* translated by R.B. Haldane and J. Kemp. For more on Soren Kierkegaard see *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* translated by David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie.

One of the few who have studied the social and personal benefits that come with humor and laughter is Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Theologiae*. In this work he describes these traits as valuable. “Anything conflicting with reason in human action is vicious. It is against reason for a man to be burdensome to others, by never showing himself agreeable to others or being a killjoy or wet blanket on their enjoyment. And so Seneca says, ‘Bear yourself with wit, lest you be regarded as sour or despised as dull.’ Now those who lack playfulness are sinful, those who never say anything to make you smile, or are grumpy with those who do” (2a2ae, Q. 168, Art. 4). In addition, new ethological studies that focus humor as a type of play and laughter as a kind of game signal, make the link between humor and body language. These studies also show how laughter is overwhelmingly a social experience.<sup>100</sup> Thinking of humor and laughter as play helps us understand these both as ways humans explore serious situations in a safe space, and more importantly, in a pleasurable manner. Conceptualizing it this way is especially useful when we think about the use of humor in theater, in our case specifically in Rodríguez’s spectacles.

Rodríguez provides us with examples of how humor and the ensuing laughter she causes in her audience create the mental distance needed to laugh about the reality of corruption, economic crisis, and political turmoil present in Mexico. Without this distance the audience, or herself, for that matter, could become overwhelmed by it. Rodríguez is a master of black humor, placing herself and even her audience as the butt of many of her critical jokes. Jorge Portilla, a Mexican philosopher from the 1940s, defined black humor as a type of humor that allows the comedian and audience enough distance from the situation that they are witnessing or participating in to be able to laugh

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<sup>100</sup> According to one study, we are thirty times more likely to laugh with other people than when we are alone (Provine 45).

about it. In other words, a real humorist understands their own and their community's suffering and represents it in a way that causes a type of laughter that overcomes the paralyzing tendency to view oneself as a victim. Through laughter, both comedian and audience cease being crippled by feeling sorry for themselves. Portilla reflects that "(e)l trasfondo de la negatividad, de la adversidad, del dolor o de la miseria humana se haya igualmente presente y el acto humorístico consiste en reducir la importancia de esa adversidad" (77). In this way, at least for the time that her spectacle lasts, Rodríguez achieves a certain type of freedom from self-censorship and self-pity. Instead, she bets on irreverence to lay the seeds for potential personal change, but ultimately change within the country.

A representative performance of the carnivalesque imaginary Rodríguez conceives takes place in *Partorela: El horror económico* (1997), which was performed in El Hábito and which can now be seen in video in the Hemispheric Digital Video Library. There has been extensive analysis of Rodríguez's work in cabaret; however, less attention has been paid to the theater work she produced in non-traditional spaces. The production of *Partorela: El horror económico* is an example of Rodríguez's interest in extending the heterotopic space engendered in El Hábito and expanding it to the streets and public plazas of Mexico City. This show came about as the result of the foundation of the theater company: La Compañía Mexicana de Teatro La Chinga. Rodríguez founded it along with various other artists including Tito Vasconcelos, Liliana Felipe, and Diego Luna. These artists established the company with the help of an award from the Rockefeller Foundation in 1997. According to a promotional video La Chinga made, they were inspired by the 16th-century Italian theater genre, *Commedia dell' arte*

*all'improvviso*.<sup>101</sup> From it, they specifically utilized the genre's emphasis on improvisation, as well as the use of masks to represent popular archetypes. In the case of La Chinga the archetypes they represented were based on Mexican lithographs painted at the end of the nineteenth century by popular cartoonists like Posada, Escalante, Villasana and Cabrera among others.<sup>102</sup> These cartoonists were the first to depict Mexico City's urban types, and as we saw in Chapter 1, were also the inspiration for various comedians including José Elizondo, Amelia Wilhelmy, and Delia Magaña. Combining this knowledge, along with tools taken from *commedia dell'arte*, La Chinga, brought these characters to life on stage. This exploration was not a nostalgic endeavor rather, the company's purpose was to use these archetypes and repurpose them to speak about Mexico's current situation.

The title, *Partorela: El horror económico*, satirically alludes to a meeting Zedillo had with Mexican investors in December of 1994 to announce the devaluation of the peso and to ask for them to hold their assets. Despite the newly appointed president's plea, and wanting to protect themselves, the investors immediately bought dollars and renegotiated contracts. These actions caused major panic and a financial crisis the next day. This meeting has now come to be popularly known as 'el error de diciembre.'<sup>103</sup> Rodríguez plays with this economic crisis and scaffolds on the drama of the traditional *pastorela* of the Catholic religion. Spanish priests first utilized these popular plays to evangelize the indigenous population in the 1500s. As time has gone by, and as various authors rewrote

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<sup>101</sup> For a more in depth explanation watch La Chinga (promo reel) housed in The Hemispheric Institute Digital Video Library <<http://hidvl.nyu.edu/video/001150048.html>>

<sup>102</sup> In "La disidencia política: Jesusa Rodríguez y Liliana Felipe." Gastón Alzate gives a more detailed description of how the project came to be.

<sup>103</sup> Salinas who ended his tenure on November 30<sup>th</sup> of 1994, coined this term. He claimed that "las 72 horas transcurridas entre el 19 y el 21 de diciembre de 1994 condujeron al desastre nacional", and in different texts he blamed Zedillo for politically and economically mishandling the situation. See "El 'error de diciembre,' inicio de una gran crisis" by Felipe Gazcón.

the *pastorelas*, they became plays that depicted popular traditions and customs that take place in Mexico during the Christmas season. These performances still happen in cities and towns in Mexico during the first few weeks of December. The basic premise of the story is that a group of shepherds is trying to get to Bethlehem to see Jesus, but a group of devils places obstacles before them to derail them. In the end, an angel, usually Saint Michael, triumphs over Lucifer and his devils, and the shepherds reach Bethlehem bringing presents and singing *villancicos* to celebrate the birth of the baby.<sup>104</sup>

In *El horror económico*, this traditional drama is turned on its head. The resulting *Partorela*, is a pun for ‘parto’ which in Spanish can mean ‘delivery’ or ‘birth’, presents the story of La China, a female impersonation of Mexico City, who gives give birth to ‘El Niño’, a mixture of the climate phenomenon and the Blessed Child. The plot of the story is set mostly in Mexico City’s subway system. The basic plot is that the devil characters in this representation violently steal La China’s uterus and zygote. The first devil introduced is El Ejército, who represents the hyper-masculinized, violent, corrupt Mexican army. Secondly, we have El Maromero, representing the corrupt politician who always manages to survive any crisis. Finally, El Cura is the representation of the corrupt, sexually deviant Catholic Church. To get the constituting parts of her pregnancy back, La China is forced to negotiate with these characters. In exchange for what they stole, she has to relinquish Mexico’s Department of Education and the Ministry of Culture to El Cura. She also has to rescind control of the Treasury Department and the Presidency to El Maromero. After she recovers all of the parts she needs, she gives an extra-uterine birth. Her baby, El Niño, is a bigheaded baby with an uncanny resemblance to Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, the then mayor of Mexico City and leader of the Partido de La Revolución

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<sup>104</sup> For more information on *pastorelas*, *La pastorela mexicana: origen y evolución: Diciembre en la tradición popular* by Joel Salinas Romero is a good resource.

Democrática (PRD). At the end of the show the baby asks the audience to petition for anything they would like, since he will be running for president in the following elections. The play ends tragically when El Ejército, El Cura, and El Maromero crucify El Niño, leaving the question of what will happen in the 2000 presidential elections open for the audience to ponder.

As was mentioned before, through the use of masks, parody, and satire La Chinga establishes a carnivalesque space in the show. Bakhtin's conception of the carnivalesque in *Rabelais and his World* is enlightening to understand strategies of resistance in *El horror económico*. Beginning with the use of masks to represent popular characters, La Chinga carnivalizes the pillars of political and social power but also the everyday characters that pepper the streets of the city. According to Bakhtin, the disguising that took place during Carnival festivities in the Middle Ages often created a time and space where people could bend the rules. "Carnival is the place for working out a new mode of interrelationship between individuals...People who in life are separated by impenetrable hierarchical barriers enter into a free and familiar contact on the carnival square" (Bakhtin 123). In other words, inhibitions and social rules soften, and people give themselves the opportunity to subvert symbols and institutions through the use of costumes and masks. Rodríguez and her company successfully establish a subversive, festive space, creating a Carnival of Mexico on stage. In the process, the audience also becomes a pivotal character in the enunciation of criticism and irreverence, by becoming one of the most important carnivalizing agents.

The use of masks and Mexican archetypes in this show is key. Bakhtin describes how, during Carnival "(t)he mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery and familiar nicknames. It contains the playful element of life..." (40). In the case of *El horror económico* it is from the mask that the



carnivalization of the Mexican political and social world happens. In the aforementioned promotional video, Rodríguez describes La Chinga's deliberate intention of creating a theater company that heavily relied on improvisation and masks to represent Mexican popular characters that continue to live in the Mexican imaginary. They view the mask as a bridge for the audience to come face to face with their reality. Through these masks and the archetypes they represent, the audience faces the deep economic crisis in Mexico and its effects on their everyday life.

The actors, however, do not wear the only masks. El Hijo del Ahuizote, the narrator of the *Partorela*, places one of the most important masks on the spectators. The name of the narrator, as well as his critical nature, is inspired by the Mexican, satirical magazine: *El hijo del Ahuizote*. The magazine was founded at the end of the nineteenth century and became famous for criticizing the Porfirian regime. In the *Partorela*, El Hijo del Ahuizote converts the audience from being passive witnesses to the performance to being the main source of governmental criticism when he accuses them of the following:

¡Basta ya de criticar al presidente Zedillo, así porque sí! ¿Él qué culpa tiene? ¡Se nace pendejo, no es algo que se va adquiriendo! ¿Por qué entonces echarle la culpa de todo? Es un hombre ágil, un hombre veloz. Un hombre que pone todo su esfuerzo por tener una alerta amarilla en el Popocatépetl. Cuando de repente viene un huracán irresponsable, del otro lado, sin avisar. ¿Qué culpa puede tener él, qué responsabilidad en esto? ¿Por qué insisten ustedes en esta actitud subversiva? ¡Enemigos de México! ¡Trotskistas trasnochados! ¡Improvisadores del lugar común! ¡Desaprensivos y apologetas del totalitarismo maoísta! ¡Basta ya, de juzgar a un hombre que ha enviado 35,000 efectivos a Chiapas, 35,000 soldados. ¿Qué culpa tiene él de que ocurra una masacre justo donde no hay ningún soldado? Pero no, ustedes insisten. Porque eso es lo que ha hundido al pueblo de México. Esa desatención, esa falta de credibilidad. No creen ni en la virgen de Guadalupe...(*Partorela: El horror económico*).

Through these accusations, El Hijo del Ahuizote exposes the audience as one of the most important characters in the performance. By being present, laughing, and participating in the show, the spectators have revealed, to him, that in the eyes of the

governing elites, they are the true enemies of Mexico. The audience becomes an essential part of the cast along with the other characters. Masks, parody, satire, and laughter are the vehicles through which the audience and the performers will participate in the exploration of this story of birth. More importantly, through an irreverent and critical lens, they also examine the effects of the political, economic, and social crisis affecting Mexico.

In addition to making the audience members part of the performance from the get-go, Rodríguez further implicates them by making them laugh. In his analysis, Bakhtin names laughter as one of the most effective tools used by troubadours and peasants, to strip away the power of the Church, nobles, and feudal lords during Carnival. “It was the victory of laughter over fear that most impressed the medieval man. It was not only a victory over the mystic terror of God, but also a victory over the awe inspired by the forces of nature, and most of all over the oppression and guilt related to all that was consecrated and forbidden...It was the defeat of divine and human power” (Bakhtin 90).

One of the best examples of how *La Chinga* utilizes humor and irony transpires in what is intended to be a commercial break from the ‘televised’ religious story. The break parodies the setting and formality of televised messages that come from Los Pinos. In this case, it is a Christmas message from President Zedillo. In it the president appears in the form of a human-sized puppet, dressed in pajamas, and a mask used as the puppet’s head. These types of masks, along with those of Salinas and later Vicente Fox, were widely sold in markets and at traffic lights throughout the city. His cabinet, composed by El Cura, El Maromero, and El Ejército, controls all of the puppet’s movements. The choice to dress Zedillo in his pajamas demeans the solemnity and seriousness of these types of televised presidential messages. In them, the heads of state appear wearing dark suits and a red, white, and green sash always decorates their chests. In this show, the president is almost depicted as a child getting ready to go to bed early, to open Christmas presents the

next day. He begins his holiday message with the traditional salute, voice, and tone presidents use for these types of messages:

Compatriotas, declaro que...basta ya de obstruir la acción del gobierno en Chiapas. ¿Por qué se tienen que poner los indios enfrente de las balas, obstruyendo así la acción pacificadora del ejército? Sus críticas me parecen un círculo perverso, al cual le pienso encontrar la cuadratura (*Partorela: El horror económico*).

With these few sentences, the puppet reminds the audience that they continue to represent “the enemy of Mexico,” by criticizing his government’s actions in Chiapas, including the deployment of army troops to Chiapas to intimidate indigenous leaders. The laughter that ensues in response to these questions makes fun of the nonsensical ways in which Zedillo’s government tried to defend its actions in Chiapas. After this introduction, the presidential puppet then sings and dances a festive song inspired by the music of the early nineteenth century, which takes this carnivalization to its ultimate consequence. The puppet's erotic movement and the upbeat rhythm of the song, produce moments of laughter. These moments, however, become uncomfortable by the lyrics of the song:

CORO: Las víctimas de Chenalho,  
¿Quién sabe, quien sabe quién las mató?

CORO  
Yo no fui, yo no fui, fue Tete, fue Tete  
Yo no fui, yo no fui, fue Tete, fue Tete  
Yo no las maté.

CORO  
Viva la soberanía para matar a sangre fría  
Muerte a la autonomía, esa sangre no es la mía  
No me vengas con violencia, se me acaba la paciencia  
Ya no, que da mucha hueva  
Año nuevo, muerte nueva.

CORO  
No fue el gobierno, ni por omisión

Fue después de hecha esta declaración.  
Pongo a Labastida en gobernación,  
que va ir a Chiapas, pero sin presión  
(*Partorela: El horror económico*).

The reference made in the song regarding Chenalho concerns a massacre that took place on December 22, 1997, in the state of Chiapas. A paramilitary group named “Máscara Roja” killed forty-five indigenous people including women and children, who were attending a prayer meeting at a church in Acteal, Chenalho. Many of the victims were members of the pacifist group, Asociación Civil “Las Abejas,” that had expressed support for the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN). The Zapatistas and the survivors blamed Zedillo and his cabinet for ordering the attack.<sup>105</sup> This political ad in the middle of the performance is an example of the importance of improvisation for the company. The spectacle took place a few days after the massacre. They created this scene to address it and the unsuccessful attempts of the government to distance itself from it. Throughout the song, there is a mixture of laughter and silence coming from the audience. The silence stems both from the horror of these killings and the belief that the top levels of the government most likely gave the order. Instead of opting to address this in a solemn and serious way—which would create feelings of anger, sadness, and possibly even fear—La Chinga addresses it by creating a humorous song that lightens the mood. By witnessing and laughing, the audience becomes complicit in the disbelief regarding any version of ‘truth’ provided by the government. In this way, both the actors and the audience successfully turn the power dynamics upside down. The mockery and

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<sup>105</sup> Some of the survivors filed civil cases against him for crimes against humanity. The most recent civil case filed took place in the United States in 2012. The United States Supreme Court turned down the case because Zedillo was protected by sovereign immunity as a former head of state. For more information Catherine Soichet wrote a good summary in "U.S.: Ex-Mexican President Merits Immunity in Massacre Case <<http://www.cnn.com/2012/09/08/world/americas/mexico-ex-president-immunity/>>.

irreverence of the representation place both the actors and audience in a position of power by making fun of Zedillo and his cabinet.

Finally, Rodríguez and La Chinga bet on humor and laughter as vehicles through which to navigate reality. Laughter for them is not a reaction that happens because there is a lack of control, as Plato describes it, nor does it happen as a result of the release of repressed energy as Freud put it. They believe in the power of laughter and humor to create enough distance from one's reality to be able to laugh about it. In this sense, we can think of the use of humor and laughter as a playful way in which to understand difficult situations critically.

In the end, as with any other *pastorela*, La China (Mary) gives birth to El Niño (Jesus). As was mentioned before, this baby is not what the audience might expect. El Niño is a baby the size of a full-grown man, with an oversized bobble head. La China dissipates any doubt that he is anybody other than Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas by naming him Cuauhtemoquito. After some moments of hilarity after seeing the baby and hearing its squeaky toy voice for the first time, both La China and El Niño elicit the audience's participation by inviting them to ask any miracle of them. The audience interestingly takes the opportunity to verbalize their everyday concerns.

The action of asking a saintly baby for a miracle is something the audience is familiar with, especially during the December festivities. In Mexico, life-size representations of Baby Jesus continue to be venerated. Xochimilco, one of the city's municipalities, hosts one of the most famous ones: El Niño pan.<sup>106</sup> In the show the religious and reverential mood of this tradition is significantly lightened and carnivalized through the physical appearance of Baby Jesus as Cárdenas, as well as the elaborate

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<sup>106</sup> Throughout the year, the Blessed Child is kept at the house of one of the residents of Xochimilco. Especially during the December festivities, the community visits him, brings him presents, dresses him and in return, asks miracles of him.

questions and answers he squeaks to his mother and audience. La China, for her part, translates this ‘intrauterine gibberish’. This playful set-up, surprisingly, doesn’t prompt the audience to make funny requests to continue to lighten the mood. They instead take this moment to reflect on what is going on in the country and what they would ask of the Blessed Child/potential presidential candidate.

The requests made by the audience range from better education to the eradication of poverty, better safety on the streets of the city, and job security. What makes this back and forth, hilarious, however, is the misinterpretation La China does, not only of the audience’s questions but also of the answers El Niño gives. Although, superficially, this might be a way to keep the mood light in contrast to the problems the audience brings up. Rodríguez is doing something more subversive; through misinterpreting she makes fun of both Mexican politicians, and also of the audience. One of the best examples happens when she asks a man in the audience what he’d like to ask of the saintly child:

LA CHINA: A ver, por último, que no se diga que no viene uno aquí a toda la suidanía (sic), caballero...¿Tiene usted problemas de urticaria? ¿Le pasa algo? ¿Se siente bien? (Audience laughter.)

MAN: No, muy bien, me siento muy bien.

LA CHINA - Ay, lo felicito...y sí, se sienta medio de lado, pero no le hace, no le hace...(Audience laughter.) ¿Qué le quería usted pedir al Niño? Lo veo deseoso, ansioso.

MAN: No, no nada en especial...eh...

EL NIÑO - ¡Pide, pide, pide, pide, pide! (In squeaky toy voice)

HOMBRE: Pedir seguridad, como decían, siento que hace mucha falta en la ciudad.

LA CHINA - No me diga, ¿a usted lo han asaltado, le ha pasado algo? Porque veo que trae usted hasta marca de Chevrolet aquí en eso... (Audience laughter)

MAN: No, no es Chevrolet es Chrysler.

LA CHINA: ¿Le han bajado a usted las llantas?... (She says this as she points and admires the man’s stomach.) No, mire tampoco. (Audience laughter) A ver, ¿qué le ha pasado? Dígame.

MAN: Sería bueno que me bajaran las llantas...

LA CHINA: Allí está, ¡el señor está pidiendo que lo asalten a gritos! (Audience laughter) ¿Le ha pasado alguna vez?

MAN: No, específicamente, pero alrededor he visto muchos casos.

LA CHINA: No me diga, ¿y como... algo trágico? Digamos, ¿sucesos de sangre? Hemorragias, hemorroides... (Audience laughter).

MAN: Más o menos sí. La verdad, un poco de todo  
(*Partorela: El horror económico*).

First, Rodríguez lightens the mood by making fun of how the man is nervously fidgeting when she approaches him. He is nervous and doesn't want to participate, and she purposely misinterprets that as him having problems with hemorrhoids, which is why he cannot get comfortable. By bringing up bodily problems, Rodríguez emphasizes the grotesque. She makes fun of the unnecessary nervousness this man is showing, by highlighting the lower stratum. She does not do this simply to mock him; she does this to challenge him to speak up. It is meant to be a game; he should not be nervous. It also continues the light tone she wants to keep. She uses double entendre to lighten the mood and perhaps to loosen the man up more. This time and many others during this part of the performance she highlights the open, the penetrative, the 'lower stratum' of the body through *albures*. Bakhtin analyzes a similar style in Rabelais's work, where there is an emphasis on the body and its functions. He calls this grotesque realism. "In grotesque realism, therefore, the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all people" (19). Emphasizing the grotesque in Bakhtin's view is playful, positive and for the most part causes laughter. In other words, by degrading all that is high, spiritual, ideal, individual, private, and abstract, it transfers the conversation to the material level, to the sphere of the earth, the body, to the collective body. According to Bakhtin. "(t)o degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better...Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one" (21).

LA CHINGA: Usted qué propondría para la seguridad, como para ayudar al

chamaquito que pus está recién nacido y ahora sí se la puso dura y pues mire lo chiquito que está ,mire...

MAN: No, no se me ocurre...

LA CHINGA: No se le ocurre. ¡Que se le ocurra a ellos, pus para eso les pagan, ¿verdad? ¡A huevo Cuautemoquito...

EL NINO: ¡A huevo, a huevo, a huevo! (In squeaky-toy voice)

LA CHINGA: Digo...para eso se te está pagando...

(La Chinga, *Partorela: El horror económico*).

Through this whole sequence Rodríguez shows she is always one step ahead, trying to figure out a way to outwit and outplay the man. In this exchange she is staging a comical conversation between Portilla's *relajiento* and *apretado*. La China, in this case represents the humorous character that outwits the man, who represents the *apretado*. She makes light of the obvious concern the man has with safety in the city by misinterpreting his concerns or translating ridiculous solutions given by El Niño. She is reflecting the reality the spectators have to deal with in real life when they voice out concerns to governmental institutions and politicians and they, in turn, disregard them or come up with nonsensical solutions. She is mimicking the relationship between the people and the Mexican government. One key difference though is that this time around, Rodríguez asks the man, and by association the rest of the audience, what solutions he has to combat crime and violence. When he can't respond, whether it is because he's still microphone shy or because he has no answer, she finally retorts: "No se le ocurre...que se le ocurra a ellos, pus para eso les paga, ¿verdad?...A huevo Cuauhtemoquito...digo, para eso se te está pagando..." (*Partorela: El horror económico*). In a very succinct few lines, Rodríguez turns the mirror on the audience member himself. How are he and the audience contributing to crime in the city? How are they their own enemy? Pointing out the problems, and waiting for government officials to come up with solutions, is not good enough for her. She challenges the audience to go beyond asking for miracles; she challenges them to act.



In this sense, Rodríguez and La Chinga successfully use the stage as a heterotopic space, where the final societal reflection is directed at the audience themselves. In a 2001 interview with Marlene Ramírez-Cancio, Rodríguez explains how she feels her work impacts her audience:

Y yo trabajo en función de hacer que nos pongamos de frente la realidad. ¿Quién es el enemigo? ¿Dónde está el enemigo? ¿Son los indígenas chiapanecos? ¿Son los Zapatistas el enemigo? ¿O es este proyecto económico el enemigo? ¡Y resulta que la población vota por el enemigo!<sup>107</sup> ¡Por el proyecto económico que lo ha sojuzgado! Cuando tú vives eso, pues para mí es una lección, y yo digo, lo que yo hago socialmente no sirve para nada. Sirve, en este pequeño entorno y lo poquito que puede ir influyendo. ¿Pero pensar en que nuestro trabajo realmente afecta una población enorme? Eso no es cierto (“Entrevista a Jesusa Rodríguez y Liliana Felipe: (2001).

Although coming from a pessimist frame of mind, Rodríguez continues to bet on art and theater as effective vehicles to create change. In the specific case of La Chinga and their *Partorela*, what made Rodríguez’s goals different from what she had done before is that through this theater company she explored easily transmissible, irreverent tools from *commedia dell’arte* to help create a type of theater where anybody could participate. According to Gastón Alzate, “Esta utópica empresa intentaba a largo plazo producir un teatro auténticamente democrático que pudiera incluir especialmente a aquellos que no ingresaran a las escuelas de teatro” (“La distancia”). In other words, the aim was to establish effective discursive tools in improvisation, irreverence, humor, and laughter to become politicized. Though short lived, La Chinga taught workshops to encourage the audience to use a well-known story, like the *pastorela*, and improvise to make political and social criticism.

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<sup>107</sup>In the 2000 elections Vicente Fox won, breaking with the PRI’s seven-decade streak in power. Rodríguez made several plays warning that Fox was another peon for the PRI, and that voting for the most conservative party in Mexico, was not the answer. It was a step back.

More interestingly, through the show, the company and the spectators become part of the creation of a body of knowledge explored through performance. La Chinga's decision to use the *pastorela* genre as a skeleton for their irreverent production is a perfect example of what Diana Taylor denominates a scenario. Scenarios are some of the most commonly used performance methods to transmit history orally. In "Acts of Transfer" she analyzes scenarios as '...meaning-making paradigms that structure social environments, behaviors, and potential outcomes" (28). For example throughout Latin America there are performances of the discovery that have appeared throughout the past five hundred years. Taylor asserts that these representations of the discovery of America, make visible both for the performers and the spectators "the ghosts, the images, the stereotypes...The scenario structures our understanding. It also haunts our present, a form of hauntology that resuscitates and reactivates old dramas" (28).

In the case of *El horror económico*, La Chinga and Rodríguez take the well-known scenario of the *pastorela* and subvert its original intent through parody and satire. Rodríguez's goal is not to illuminate the solution for her spectators; in her view that is not the function of cabaret theater.<sup>108</sup> Her goal is to open up a space in which to have public conversations about serious subject matters through laughter, humor, and everyday language. Her pieces and the choice of her audience to see and participate in them is a resistance strategy that Rodríguez hopes will lead to the empowerment of individuals and ultimately to changes in the political system. She uses it as a paradigm to understand and criticize the power dynamics in Mexico. She decomposes the solemnity and the seriousness with which politics is talked about and treated, by irreverently tearing the

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<sup>108</sup> In a 2001 interview with Marlene Ramírez-Cancio and Clara Crosby, Rodríguez asserts that: "Cuando tú tocas un tema así (like feminism) a nivel de cabaret, no lo podemos hablar así como lo hablamos ahorita porque sería aburridísimo. Sería una aburrida conferencia estúpida. En el cabaret tienes que ironizar para poderle expresar y revelar.

content and form of these discourses apart. Rodríguez carnivalizes Mexico's political world through costumes, masks, improvisation, and humor. She and the company created a space of resistance that extended beyond the walls of El Hábito, and therein lay its power.

### **JESUSA RODRÍGUEZ'S EMBODIED PALIMPSESTS**

La revolución para mí está aquí adentro. Y adentro de cada uno de nosotros. Aquí es donde se genera el cambio real humano. Si se genera aquí, entonces vamos a empezar a coincidir miles. Pero si no se genera la revolución aquí, ni aquí empiezas a cuestionarte tú misma todo, y a encontrar dónde eres tú tu enemigo, entonces no se modifica nada y para mí el teatro, el cabaret, la ópera, han sido ese instrumento de yo misma decida ver, dónde yo soy el enemigo... el enemigo de lo que amo, la enemiga de lo que busco. (Rodríguez, Entrevista 2001).

Is it more helpful to know the important events that led from one thing to the next or is it better to explore history as a living imaginary that continues to affect the present? One of the key characteristics that stand out in Rodríguez's cabaret theater style is transposing history with the present –in other words, re-conceptualizing history as something that is alive and current in our everyday life. It is helpful to think of her work through José Quiroga's concept of palimpsest, which was discussed in the introduction. The definition of a palimpsest is a page from a book or scroll from which the text has been scraped or erased so the page may be reused. In his book *Cuban Palimpsest*, Quiroga uses this concept as a tool to re-visualize history for two opposite but complementary aims: to unveil the past in a different light, and at the same time, to reformulate the present. "The palimpsest does not reproduce the original, but it dismantles it, writes on top of it, allows it to be seen" (ix). Quiroga uses this concept to re-interpret history through a very personal view, where the past and the present co-exist and are explored simultaneously from a subjective point of view. In this sense, he questions the traditional way in which history is told and studied in the western world.

As one can imagine, reading and dealing with palimpsests is immersing oneself in multiple texts that are complex because they deal with traces, superimpositions, and simultaneity. Quiroga's method dismantles "...the privilege of the past and the idea of the present as timeless" (ix). Rodríguez's work creates a complex, live palimpsest on stage where she engenders an alternate and alterable interpretation of Mexican history and the present. It is an alternate interpretation of history because it goes against thinking of the study of history as something that can only happen through scholars, in books, classrooms, museums, and archives. It also takes power away from historians as guardians of this world. Instead, Rodríguez explores and evaluates the pieces of history that are helpful to understand and explore the present. It is, however, an alterable interpretation of history because she and the audience construct it every night. More importantly, she also shows how history is alterable, depending on the lens we visualize it through. She exposes the subjectivity embedded in historical accounts. She exposes history as a narrative we create surrounding people and events. In this same vein, when she juxtaposes her historical re-creations in the present, she questions the skewed narrative about current events coming from the Mexican media. She also visualizes what the future will look like if the country continues on its present course. Rodríguez is an "outside," queer, provider of an oral, irreverent vision of the past, the present, and the future. Her role is not to re-tell history, but to show how history will help her and her audience understand their present and their future. In this sense, she queers official discourse that holds history as frozen in time and a present and future that can only be read linearly.

Rodríguez achieves a live palimpsest on stage through various strategies. One of the most obvious and useful ways she does this is by bringing historical characters like Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, the Aztec goddess Coatlicue, La Malinche, or Benito Juárez

alive on stage. Her spectacles always place these characters in a present time by having them discuss current events or by making them speak using contemporary jargon when she specifically places them in a contemporary Mexican context. In this sense she continues the tradition, established in *revistas* and *carpas*, of making sure to keep her shows local and current by always bringing up the most recent happenings in Mexico's political and social life. What she does differently is that she uses historical characters and forces them to deal with Mexico's current political and social conundrums on stage. Her stage is a physical and metaphorical palimpsest where she superimposes past events to help her work through the present. This transposition is clear, for example, in her spectacle *Foximiliano y Martota* (2003). The plot of her play takes place in one of the stately living rooms of the Castle of Chapultepec, which in the late nineteenth century became the home of Mexico's only emperor, Maximiliano, and his wife Carlota of Austria. Today Chapultepec houses the National History Museum.

Rodríguez uses this architectural palimpsest to create her own by resuscitating Benito Juárez, Emperor Maximiliano, and Carlota. These three characters await 'history's judgment' in the present in one of the castle's waiting rooms. As they stand by, all three characters entertain themselves and the audience by playing various games where the outcome plays a direct role in the fate of the country today. For example, Juárez and Maximiliano play a game where the former bets that he can hammer a nail into the floor simply by throwing a hammer into the air and letting it fall on the nail. What is at stake is the country's future. If Juárez hammers the nail successfully, Mexico will be a republic, should he lose, then the country will be a monarchy as Maximiliano would have wanted it. There are many other examples, but the one that best shows Rodríguez's live

palimpsest and the subversive way in which she queers official discourses is in *Sor Juana en Almoloya (Pastorela Virtual)* (1995).<sup>109</sup>

This show premiered at El Hábito five years before the 2000 presidential election that interrupted the Partido Revolucionario Institucional's (PRI) seventy-year hold on power. From the first act, Rodríguez submerges her audience in an anachronistic world where Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz reappears in a future Mexico through a virtual world created by the Internet. From the very beginning, she exposes the shady reasoning behind her incarceration and also her profound concerns with the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) political party coming into power. The performance locates the audience in an obscure future time where Sor Juana finds herself locked up in the infamous penitentiary Almoloya de Juárez. Unsurprisingly she is assigned a paid-off public defender who does nothing to help free her. Therefore, her lover the vicereine cons the lawyer into swapping clothes with her so that she can visit Sor Juana. Despite both Sor Juana's efforts and those of the vicereine to negotiate with the public prosecutor, Sor Juana is condemned to spend the rest of her 'virtual' eternity in her cell surrounded by a fake library and a faulty computer.

Rodríguez sets her anachronistic world from the beginning by projecting the following text on a screen on an entirely dark stage. The text sets the time and space she wants her audience to imagine.

El espectáculo que verán a continuación es el resultado de años de experimentación con altas tecnologías: Corre el año del Señor, bienaventurado año del 2000, comienza el nuevo milenio y gracias a Dios el (PAN) Partido reAcción nacional ha llegado al poder en México y restablecido la moral, y las

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<sup>109</sup> For the purpose of this section, we will be using the 1995 version of this show. Rodríguez published the script in *Debate Feminista* and the Hemispheric Institute Digital Video Library has a video of this performance. Although, there is no medium that would replace the experience of actually seeing the show, the video and script help to elucidate some of the stylistic tools of Rodríguez's work.

buenas costumbres en la vida social y política de nuestro país. Cualquier semejanza con la vida real es virtual (*Sor Juana* 395).

After a couple of minutes, the stage lights are turned on and Sor Juana appears sitting by her desk accompanied by a backdrop that depicts her library. The image is immediately recognizable as a live rendition of a famous portrait of Sor Juana completed in 1750 by Miguel Ángel Cabrera. At the time, his portrait differed from other portraits of nuns in several important ways. For example, in his version, Sor Juana looks towards us, her gaze direct and assertive. She sits at her desk surrounded by her library and instruments of learning. Writing implements rest on the table, clearly alluding to her written works and intellectual pursuits. Rodríguez's live rendition, on the other hand, mimics the soul of Cabrera's portrait with some key differences. Along with globes, a feather pen, and an inkwell, a small, clearly dysfunctional Apple computer sits on the corner of her desk. When the play begins, she is gleefully looking over a letter ex-president Salinas sent the Mexican news media in December of 1995.<sup>110</sup>

The letter is also projected on the big screen in what appears to be a newspaper article. The center of the image shows a manipulated portrait of Carlos Salinas cross-dressed as a nun. He depicts a modern day representation of Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz, the bishop of Puebla, who in the late 1650s published a reproving letter to Sor Juana, under the pseudonym Sor Filotea. In the letter, he faults Sor Juana for neglecting her religious duties and instead following her intellectual and scientific pursuits. At the time, Sor Juana responded with one of her most famous texts, *La Respuesta a Sor Filotea* (1691), defending her right and that of all women to knowledge.

For the show, Rodríguez recycles this key event and text in Sor Juana's life. She re-interprets and ultimately repurposes the letter Salinas sent the Mexican media after

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<sup>110</sup> Salinas's letter was published in a Mexican newspaper, *La Jornada*, on December 4th, 1995.

fleeing the country in the mid-nineties. In the real letter, he protests the accusations of his involvement in the assassination of Luis Donaldo Colosio. He also denies responsibility for Mexico's economic crisis and decries his transformation into 'el villano favorito.' In the show, Salinas' epistolary self-defense, provides Sor Juana a successful example through which she might get herself out of Almoloya de Juárez. Sor Juana takes Salinas's example and decides to write her own self-defense letter to the Mexican media. She humorously titles it: *Respuesta Zopilotea*. Amelia Gladhart points out that: "The costume (in the manipulated portrait projected on stage) accords Salinas the false humility of the Bishop of Puebla's pseudonym and prepares the ground for Sor Juana's far from docile letter" (217). Sor Juana's reply in the show presents a satirical version of the nun's original response.

Ex-celentísimo, Ex-señor, Ex-presidente CSG. Carlos Sinvergüenza y Góngora. Salinas de Gortari, Familia de la Cerda, Portorratero de Cárdenas, Conde de Sanborns, Marqués de Agualeguas, Virrey de Liconsa y Gobernador actual del yate "Eco" en las felices costas de la Habana, Cuba:

No mi voluntad, ni mi justo temor, sino mi indignación han suspendido tantos años mi respuesta. ¿Qué mucho, si a primer paso encontraba para digitalizar mi torpe pluma dos imposibles? El primero (y para mí el más riguroso) es hallarme presa en la cárcel de Almoloya a donde me han traído engañada unos autodenominados Panistas, que usted (Salinas) apoyó para llegar al poder, y que mezclando perversamente con tecnología virtual el siglo XVII con el siglo XXI han impuesto en México un imperio de horror y persecución, refritando reglamentos muy antiguos en perjuicios de quienes, como yo, sólo pecamos de pensar libremente (*Sor Juana* 396).

By beginning the letter with a long list of ironic pseudo-noble titles to address and at the same time ridicule Salinas, Rodríguez also makes fun of Sor Juana's seventeenth-century original. In contrast to Rodríguez's version, Sor Juana's begins with:

Muy Ilustre Señora, mi Señora: No mi voluntad, mi poca salud y mi justo temor han suspendido tantos días mi respuesta. ¿Qué mucho si, al primer paso, encontraba para tropezar mi torpe pluma dos imposibles? El primero (y para mí el



más riguroso) es saber responder a vuestra doctísima, discretísima, santísima y amorosísima carta (The Answer 38).

Rodríguez mimics the use of the superlatives, adjectives and elaborate style of the language De la Cruz uses. However, in her response, Rodríguez finds clever, more direct ways to insult her recipient. From the beginning, she uses words like “Sinvergüenza,” “Portorratero,” and the suffix “Ex” - which celebrates the fact that he is no longer president. Through satire, Rodríguez mocks Salinas’s false humility in the face of blatant corruption and crime. In this way, between giggles and full-blown laughter from the audience, Rodríguez has shifted power relations. She mocks Salinas’s 1995 letter to the Mexican people in a way that news outlets and newspapers could not. Moreover, her satire extends beyond Salinas’s letter to more broadly mock and criticize this empty discourse that champions form over content in Mexican politics.<sup>111</sup>

Another difference in Rodríguez’s version is that what has delayed her response has not been her lack of health or fear as De la Cruz posits in the original. Instead, it has been the indignation she feels for being resuscitated, only to be incarcerated by the representatives of the conservative opposition party in Mexico: the Panistas. Because of her religious background, she points out her surprise at finding herself betrayed by the very people who would have supported her religious endeavors in the present. Perhaps the eeriest aspect of this letter, however, is that Rodríguez reveals that Salinas supported the PAN’s victory well before it happened. Her accusation is a premonition of a political

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<sup>111</sup> In “El hastío es un pavor real que se aburre en la luz de la tarde. Notas de Camp en México”, Monsiváis speaks about how public speakers in Mexico focus on embellishing their speeches through an abundance of adjectives, quotes and long words that add to the music of the language. They care not for the content. “El orador embellece (y el verbo no es gratuito) su discurso, porque no le pedirán ideas, sólo le exigirán abundancia de esdrújulas, citas prestigiosas y fe en el hombre, la música verbal que de cubre la ausencia de ideas.” This type of interest on form was also not lost in Portilla’s *Fenomenología del relajo*. In it he describes a character that is opposite to the *relajiento*. He denominates him as the *apretado*. The *apretado* is the typical bureaucrat who cares more for looking the part than having any meaning to what he says or does.

shift that did take place in the year 2000 when Vicente Fox, the PAN candidate, won the presidency. This change in power, at least superficially, ended the PRI's seven-decade dictatorship. However, what Rodríguez reveals is that power did not indeed change hands. Instead, the country is worse off in her eyes, because of the heavily religious and conservative policies the PAN represents. Through this letter and the show in general Rodríguez's premonitory performance, makes visible the concern over the outcome of mixing the current criminal government with the ultra-conservative right.

Rodríguez's satirical version of "La Respuesta" is a clear example of how she uses a historical document and manipulates it to comment not only on the present but the future of the country. Her live palimpsest goes beyond the dismantling of the patriarchal vision of Mexico's past; Rodríguez uses the past to understand her present and project her vision of what is to come. In De la Cruz's life and work, Rodríguez finds a parallel to the censorship she sees taking place on a day-to-day basis in the country. The main culprits are prominent news and entertainment sources in Mexico. In an interview with Jean Franco, Rodríguez discusses her views on censorship in Mexico. In her opinion, Mexico suffers from the worst type of censorship: self-censorship. It is a mechanism that is not easily identifiable nor easily defeated. It is a feeling that she sees as deeply seated self-discrimination and racism. "The place where I believe there is the maximum amount of self-censorship is in television, in Televisa. Censorship feeds the work of those people. They even distribute lists of words that cannot be spoken on television, situations that cannot be shown, and of course ideas that cannot be conveyed. Censorship is about not getting involved, not getting into problems" ("A Touch of Evil" 167). Self-censorship affects the work of independent artists as well because: "You actually realize that unless you censor yourself you are not going to please everybody, and they will put pressure on you. Also, there is a fear of taking risks, or risking one's economic position" (166).

The self-regulation that Rodríguez talks about comes from a governing system that instills fear in their citizens. If there were a feeling of freedom, the lists of censored words, jokes, and ideas would not exist. This self-monitoring system functions automatically, and what makes Rodríguez's work so important is that by using satire and parody she de-monumentalizes any sacred figure or myth. Rodríguez uses Sor Juana because she sees in her an opportunity to take apart normative visions of history, memory, and those that regulate and guard it. In Sor Juana's experience as a queer intellectual, she sees a kindred struggle.<sup>112</sup>

Moreover, Rodríguez furthers her critique by creating a caricature of the mythic figure of Octavio Paz, as a member of Mexico's accepted cultural scene and biographer of De la Cruz. Soon after she finishes and sends her letter off into cyberspace, Sor Juana receives an unexpected visit. Lysi, the Countess of Paredes, visits Sor Juana disguised as her public defender. After greeting each other, a narrator in voice-off makes an intervention mentioning the great interest Sor Juana's biographers have taken in knowing what type of relationship existed between the two women. The narrator reads from Paz's text in a familiar tone used by narrators in documentaries or shows focusing on Mexican culture sanctioned by the state. By including this scene, Rodríguez deconstructs the absolute judgments Paz has made, especially surrounding Sor Juana's life.<sup>113</sup> As the narrator describes the scene, the two women kiss passionately on Sor Juana's bed.

Octavio Paz, para no ir más cerca, en su obra *Las trampas de la fe* despeja todas las dudas que pudieran haber respecto de la relación decente, casta y pura que

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<sup>112</sup> For an overview of the positions of prominent sorjuanistas regarding Sor Juana's work and the relationship to her sexuality see "Sor Juana and her World" by Nina Scott.

<sup>113</sup> In *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz o las trampas de la fe*, Paz writes: "En términos de economía psíquica - para emplear la expresión de Freud - el mal de sor Juana no era la pobreza sino la riqueza; una libido poderosa sin empleo. Esa abundancia, y su carencia de objeto, se muestran en frecuencia con que aparecen en sus poemas imágenes del cuerpo femenino y masculino, casi siempre convertidas en apariencias fantasmales; sor Juana vivió entre sombras eróticas." (286)

existió entre la...Condesa de Paredes...y Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, religiosa profesa en el convento de San Jerónimo de esta muy noble y leal Ciudad de México. A continuación tendremos la oportunidad de entender con toda claridad el verdadero significado en términos que utiliza el prístino erudito para explicar esta amistad. (*Las dos mujeres se acercan peligrosamente.*) Nótese el safismo sublimado. (*Ahora se besan apasionadamente.*) Vedlas entregadas a las silenciosas orgías de la meditación. Una monja, la otra casada. ¿Qué podrían hacer estas dos juntas? (*Sor Juana salta encima de la virreina y ambas se repatingan a sus anchas*) (*Sor Juana* 402).

Through this scene Rodríguez not only makes fun of the suppositions Paz makes in his biography of Sor Juana, but also points to the present conservatism Mexico is wrapped up in. Liliana Felipe, Rodríguez's lifetime wife and partner, represents the Countess of Paredes. Through this scene, Rodríguez uses Sor Juana's life to complicate what it means to be a queer woman in Mexico and the possible consequences when one does not fall within the parameters of the heterosexual, national image. She parodies the questionable conclusions Paz has drawn about De la Cruz's sexuality. The reflection Rodríguez invites the audience to play with in her spectacle, is to demystify De la Cruz's and Paredes' sexual relationship by exaggeratedly acting out an encounter between the two. By acting out the scene with this official sounding voice as a background, she elicits a type of laughter from the audience that dismantles the validity of Paz's text. In this way Rodríguez flips the morbid focus from Cruz's sexuality to how odd it sounds when the narrator, invoking Paz, finds himself excited to actually "witness" an encounter between the two women. This criticism extends to the audience in that the fetishism and erotization of lesbian sex also becomes the butt of Rodríguez's and Felipe's joke.

Furthermore, as Amelia Gladhart asserts, the revealed "truth" of the relationship is undercut by the ironic exaggeration of the two women's movements. After this humorous scene, Sor Juana complains to Lysi about meddling and overly curious biographers, who, like Paz, focus on her sexual proclivities instead of focusing on what

she has to say. More importantly she parodies the Freudian psychoanalysis Paz uses to analyze De la Cruz's life, by reversing it and using its same logic on the writer himself:

Fíjate que con tu canción me pusiste en el imposible hermafroditismo de Octavio Paz que plantea Paco Ignacio Taibo III. En su biografía del poeta dice: “Lo único que se sabe es que en su relación con Marie Jo lo que importaba era el collage. Ese ir mezclando los elementos de la vida cotidiana con las recepciones formales. Por ello podríamos inferir rasgos de androginia espiritual, pues la profesión de intelectual de Televisa ha neutralizado la libidine del poeta e incluso hay quienes al verlo en pantalla lo confunden con Ofelia Guilmáin, aunque sólo espiritualmente, claro (*Sor Juana* 403).

In a few lines, Rodriguez fluidly and intelligently uses the same psychoanalytical logic that Paz used to describe De la Cruz to come to the conclusion that Paz himself is androgynous and hermaphroditic. She not only mocks Paz's reasoning, but shows that with such general psychoanalytic reasoning one could come up with equally ridiculous conclusions. Going even further, through her spectacle Rodríguez puts into question the predominantly masculine psychoanalytic traditions that have marginalized not only women but queer identities as well. In a well-crafted response to Paz and her other biographers, Sor Juana ends the scene writing a new poem that she titles “Hombres necios que acusáis.”

Hombres necios que acusáis a la mujer sin razón  
Sin ver que también las hay, que sí tenemos razón.  
Si con ansia sin igual solicitáis el Nobel  
¿Por qué queréis que hablen bien si seleccionáis a Paz?  
Asistís a su ponencia  
y luego con gravedad decís que fue liviandad lo que hizo  
toda la prensa.  
Merecer quiere de nuevo aunque les parezca loco  
Que le otorguen otro premio pues le pareció muy poco. Queréis con presunción  
necia, escribir mi biografía  
Y hablar de mi intimidad como si fuera Thalía.  
¿Qué humor puede ser más raro que el que falto de consejo,  
Él mismo se ve al espejo y piensa que es el más claro?  
Con el favor y el desdén tenéis condición igual

Quedándoos si os tratan mal con tal de tener poder.  
Opinión ninguna gana pues la que más recata si no os admira es ingrato y si os rechaza es lesbiana.  
Siempre tan necios andáis, que con desigual nivel aplaudís a Luis Miguel, y juzgáis a Monsiváis (*Sor Juana* 403).

With this, Rodríguez gives the final brushstrokes to the caricature she makes of Paz as the icon for the male-constructed image of Mexican identity. She criticizes the binary system that views and defines sexuality from a heterosexual point of view. More importantly she shows how flimsy this gender and sexual system is. Her point is not really to show us the truth. Instead, she is there to dismantle conceptions and ideas that the audience might have previously thought of as “natural” or “normal.” This point goes back to an idea that Laura Gutierrez points out in *Performing Mexicanidad*. In her opinion performance artists like Rodríguez expose heterosexual power systems and denaturalize static ideas of sexuality and nation. As Berlant and Warner have argued, heterosexual national culture or heteronormativity is closely linked to notions of intimacy:

Community is imagined through scenes of intimacy, coupling, and kinship; a historical relation to futurity is restricted to generational narrative reproduction. A whole field of social relations becomes intelligible as heterosexuality, and this privatized sexual culture bestows on its sexual practices a tacit sense of rightness and normalcy. This sense of rightness—embedded in things and not just in sex—is what we call heteronormativity (Berlant and Warner 554).

Thus through this particular scene Rodríguez deconstructs the way in which a heteronormative nation constructs sexuality as something intimate and natural and exposes it by successfully bringing it to the public sphere. In this way, she also brings into public discourse the notion of queer sexualities and their place in the political, economic, and social spheres.

By the end of the show, regardless of her undeniable intelligence and ability as a poet and dramaturge, Sor Juana ends up violently separated from Lysi and condemned in

perpetuity to life at the Almoloya penitentiary. Meanwhile the true criminals like Raúl Salinas de Gortari and Mario Aburto (Colosio's assassin) are liberated. By ending the play with projections of real newspaper articles announcing the release of these criminals while Sor Juana sits in her cell, Rodríguez denounces the faulty Mexican justice system, which categorizes Sor Juana as dangerous for producing art and loving women while it frees true criminals.

In conclusion, Rodríguez immerses her audience in a multi-temporal and multi-spatial world, which questions seemingly definite representations of history as events and characters frozen in time. Instead, she shows them as active participants in the present and future. Rodríguez's stage functions as a historical palimpsest where she uses past historical events—like the philosophical fight between Sor Juana and Fernández de la Cruz—and satirically transposes it to the present. She does this to explore the effects of Mexico's present state on its future. Rodríguez takes the character of Sor Juana and reinterprets not only her life but also her work so that it makes sense within the reality of the country, but more significantly for her, within her reality. Through embodying historical icons Rodríguez, creates a new understanding of history. She uses the performance of history as *repertoire*, through which to understand the past, the present, and the future.<sup>114</sup>

In his preface, after defining how he will use the image of the palimpsest, Quiroga asserts that it is a: "...queer form of reproduction, one where two sites, two lives, blend into one continuous present (Preface, ix). Rodríguez participates in this form of queer history building. She questions the way in which the lettered city has coopted Sor Juana and accorded her monumental status by naming her the Fénix de América or México's

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<sup>114</sup> Taylor defines repertoire as: "...traditions are stored in the body, through various mnemonic methods, and transmitted live in the here and the now to a live audience." (The Archive and the Repertoire 24)

Tenth Muse. She parodies the seemingly static, psychoanalytic logic with which male historians like Paz have tried to describe De la Cruz. She joins the work of other female artists and intellectuals who have taken an alternative route to understanding this writer.<sup>115</sup> In this spectacle, she explores Sor Juana's love story by transposing it to her own. She explores it as a parallel example of her experience and those of other women who happen to be lesbian and the violent experiences they deal with in their day-to-day life.<sup>116</sup> By showing this story she gives a non-hegemonic example of Sor Juana's life; she shows a character that transcends her historical cell in the convent, and the prison cell in the spectacle. By ending the spectacle with satirical re-working of the last profession she wrote in the book of professions of the Convent of San Jerónimo, Rodríguez dares her audience to change the course of history.<sup>117</sup>

After receiving her sentence, Sor Juana writes her epitaph. "Yo Juana Inés de la Cruz ratifico mi versión y firmo con mi sangre, ojalá toda se derramara en beneficio de la verdad. Suplico a mis amadas hermanas se apiaden de este país y no voten por el PAN ni por el PRI. Yo, la peor del mundo: Juana Inés de la Cruz." (Sor Juana 410) As she reads it, a newspaper article is projected on screen reading:

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz fue encontrada culpable y condenada a prisión perpetua en Almoloya. Al mismo tiempo y por fortuna se aclaró la inocencia del Ingeniero Raúl Salinas de Gortari, de Mario Aburto Martínez, y de algunas otras autoridades morales de nuestro país, que en apoyo a nuestro presidente zedillo (sic) han aceptado dar su testimonio (*Sor Juana* 410).

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<sup>115</sup> Argentine filmmaker María Luisa Bemberg, made the film "I, the worst of all" which chronicles Sor Juana's relationship with the vicereine of Spain and the effects it had on her work and life.

<sup>116</sup> Gloria Careaga's sociological study "Primero muerta que lesbiana", exposes the effects of living as a lesbian in Western society.

<sup>117</sup> The original reads: "Aquí arriba se ha de anotar el día de mi muerte, mes y año. Suplico, por amor de Dios y de su Purísima Madre, a mis amadas hermanas las religiosas que son y en lo de adelante fueren, me encomienden a Dios, que he sido y soy la peor que ha habido. A todas pido perdón por amor de Dios y de su Madre. Yo, la peor del mundo. Juana Inés de la Cruz." See more in *Obras Completas* page 876.



Each of the projections that follow shows a newspaper clipping with the image of various politicians celebrating Sor Juana's eternal incarceration. For example, Carlos Salinas is quoted as saying: 'La monja siempre fue corrupta.' Luis Donaldo Colosio's assassin, Mario Aburto, on the other hand, says: 'La monja es ojeis,' or 'The nun's a douche.' Jorge Hank, Mexico City's ex-mayor and well-known kingpin says: 'Ora sí agarraron a un pez gordo.' Last, but not least, Televisa owner Azcárraga Jean says: 'Todas las viejas son iguales.' These quotations stand in stark contrast with Sor Juana's situation. The audience is left thinking about Mexico's dark future. Rodríguez forces the spectators to situate themselves in relationship to what is happening on stage as witnesses but also as participants. Spectators need to be there as part of the 'act of transfer,' Taylor refers to when watching a performance ("Acts of transfer" 32). In this way, Rodríguez makes the construction of her live palimpsest a collective endeavor. The final result is left in the hands of the audience.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter explored the work of Jesusa Rodríguez, a Mexico City-based performance artist who played a critical part in the foundation of political cabaret theater in Mexico. Rodríguez represents one of the most important voices in contemporary performance art in this country. Her work has served as an inspiration for local and international performance artists for over three decades. She is a regular guest at the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics' Encuentros, one of the most significant performance art conferences featuring work produced by artists and performance art scholars in the Americas. Locally, her work continues to be transgressive in terms of style, but even more so in the subject matters she engages. She goes from

criticizing the catastrophic effects the government's neoliberal policies are having on Mexican's everyday life, to questioning thoughts on race, gender, and sexuality.

In her shows, she produces spaces of collective expression where she and the audience can criticize institutional powers, like the government and the Church, through irreverence, humor, and laughter. Her work revises official historical discourses and utilizes those revisions to judge the present and future of the country. Her goal, however, is not to illuminate the solution for her spectators, but rather is to create a space where a parody of reality is reflected, questioned, and finally subverted. By creating embodied historical palimpsests on stage and using irreverence and humor to deconstruct institutional discourses of power, she builds a space for dissidence for herself and her audience. Rodríguez aims to create an opening in which to have collective conversations about serious subject matters through laughter, humor, and everyday language. Her pieces and the choice of her audience to go and not only see them, but also participate in them is a resistance strategy Rodríguez hopes will lead to the empowerment of individuals.

Rodríguez's work provides another example of the continuation of using theater as a tool to engender sites of political dissidence, which first began in the *carpas* and *revistas* and is now continued in political cabaret theater. In founding El Hábito she and Liliana Felipe engendered a site where they could explore ideas, mediums, and music independently. Compared to theaters like the Teatro Lírico or Teatro Esperanza Iris, where *revistas* were performed, El Hábito has a much more relaxed atmosphere where the audience can drink and eat while they watch the show. In this sense, this space is more akin to the cabarets that opened in Mexico City's red light district in the 1920s and 1930s. Moreover, it differs from the space of the tents and packed dirt floors where *teatro de carpa* was performed. The audience of El Hábito tends to come from an educated,

middle to upper class that can afford the price of the tickets to the shows. Alternatively, the audience that enjoyed shows in the *carpas* came from the poorer neighborhoods of the city and was predominantly male. Finally, compared to Vasconcelos's Cabaretito, El Hábito is different in that spectators go there to see a show. Instead, the Cabaretito is first and foremost a nightclub where performers have to fight to gain the patrons' attention in order to have an audience for their show. All in all, what all of these spaces have in common is that they provide alternative and relatively independent sites in which irreverence towards political, social, and religious elites is cultivated through humor in a space masked by frivolity.

Furthermore, like Vasconcelos, Rodríguez also makes use of the improvisation introduced and cultivated by *carpa* comedians. As we saw in La Chinga's analysis, she mixes this tool with *commedia dell' arte*'s use of costumes and masks, along with the use of the *pastorela* genre. Her work, along with Vasconcelos's, is a pastiche of the theatrical and artistic tools she finds most useful to successfully produce shows that connect with her audience's reality. More importantly, for Rodríguez La Chinga's ultimate goal was to create a theater company that could train audience members as actors. In this sense she differs from Vasconcelos and *carpa* comedians in that Rodríguez tried to apply the use of cabaret as a medium for political change. This belief has carried over into her current project Resistencia Creativa, a movement that uses political cabaret as a tool for political action. According to Rodríguez, the group is "representativo de la indignación de los mexicanos por la situación actual del país y un eslabón mas del movimiento que pretende transformar la vida pública de México por medios pacíficos a través del arte, la educación política y el activismo creativo."<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> See more on Resistencia Creativa at <http://hemisphericinstitute.org/hemi/es/modules/item/624-jesusa-resistencia>

Through her representations, Rodríguez shows several facets of herself as a woman. The explorations of power, identity and history are carried out in her public plaza where she speaks out against oppression and at the same time loudly expresses her dissident *relajiento* voice. For Rodríguez ambiguity within oneself opens up spaces from which we can communicate without judgment. It is, in the end, from this queer heterotopic space, this ambiguous and dynamic space, that she initiates conversations that open up a continuous redefinition of the nation. Rodríguez uses ambiguity as a destabilizing element that opens spaces through which we can explore and redefine our identity continuously.

## CONCLUSION

This dissertation analyzed the performance stages of *teatro de revista*, *teatro de carpa*, and the work of Tito Vasconcelos and Jesusa Rodríguez, to show how each constructed cultural spaces of resistance and dissidence where humor and the politics of class, gender, and sexuality were utilized and molded into tools for political and social criticism. Moreover, although political cabaret theater in Mexico City, a genre in which Rodríguez and Vasconcelos are prominent artists, has been described as a collage of many different theater genres, one can trace its strong roots to *teatro de revista* and *teatro de carpa*. Through their use of improvisation to engage the audience, utilization of humor as a tool for political and social criticism, and finally the sexualization of the stage to queer normative constructions of gender and sexuality, both were able to question national identity. My dissertation also evolved Portilla's concept of *relajo*, which describes a form of repeated, collective, and at times strident mockery that in his view leads to a negative type of freedom. By investigating artists that purposely embody *relajo* as a political strategy to actively interrupt homogenizing and exclusionary discourses, this study uncovered performances of dissident *relajientos* who created a palpable space where artists and audience constructed alternative subjectivities, reaffirming their own humanity and validating their own process of self-fashioning. This study specifically analyzed the style and aesthetics proposed in the works of Vasconcelos and Rodríguez as a cultural product, presenting loud, hilarious, dissident, queer voices. Their works consist of acts designed to destabilize Mexican heteronormativity while creating space to reimagine alternative forms of desire and identity.

Chapter 1 described critical characteristics, tools, and styles developed in *teatro de revista* and *teatro de carpa* that helped create a strong foundation for political and

social criticism in Mexican popular theater. These were the first theater genres where popular street language filled with mockery and sexual connotations was used. It was also here where the first popular types inhabited the stage, often reflecting characters the audience encountered in their every day life. *Revistas* and *carpas* were the first urban spectacles which chronicled and reflected the changing demographics of the city, reflecting the mass migration from the country to the city. These performances became spaces in which styles and novelties coming from Europe and the United States, like fashion or music, were appropriated and experimented with to create something new and uniquely Mexican.

Chapter 1 continued with the analyses of humor and laughter as tools to interrupt and mock government figures. In the first section, “Establishing Critical Irreverence Through Political Criticism and Black Humor in Mexican *Teatro de Revista* and *Teatro de Carpa*,” the use of *choteo* and irony are discussed as tools used by writers of *revistas* to mock political leaders of the time. Through their representations, they turned power dynamics upside down by revealing the corruption and political ploys of the top leadership. It was through these performances, and not the newspaper, where writers felt free to criticize and mock. Additionally, this section studied the utilization of black humor within the *carpa* stage, which allowed both artists and spectators a detachment from the realities reflected on stage. The result of this was the ability to mock and laugh about the injustices suffered by the popular classes.

Additionally, by creating a tradition of staging encounters between a comedic character and a serious character, the *carpa* sketches reflected the tension between the *relajiento* and the *apretado*. By using humor, mockery, and laughter, the comedic *relajientos* interrupted the seriousness and solemnity of the serious *apretado* guards, making the latter the butt of the joke. The *relajientos* incursion on stage reflected an

existence beyond the seriousness and solemnity imposed by the post-revolutionary modernizing project. Essentially, the comedic characters proposed non-conformity as the norm.

The last section of Chapter 1 explored the sexualization of humor and the stage in *revistas* and *carpas* through an analysis of the work and roles of women. In particular, this section analyzed the performance of *tiples* in *Mexican Rataplán*. Through the costumes they wore, the songs they sang, and the dance numbers they participated in, these women reimagined and re-conceptualized traditional visions of femininity in Mexico. These *tiples* broke with traditional patriarchal roles and carved out a space to be independent.

Chapter 1 concluded with an analysis of a *cuadro* of the *revista Colorines*. Through an amusing argument between a husband and wife, the writers staged an adamant refusal by a woman to fulfill her role as *madresposa*, demanding compensation for her work. Though there was some discussion surrounding the importance of women's rights and their inclusion in the country's political life, the post-revolutionary government did not make this issue a priority, as is evident in women not gaining the right to vote until 1954. Through an exploration of the use of humor and laughter as tools for criticism, as well as the effects the sexualization of the stage had in *revistas* and *carpas*, this chapter aimed to highlight the important foundation these genres provided for the work of artists like Tito Vasconcelos and Jesusa Rodríguez.

Chapter 2 delved into the work of Tito Vasconcelos, a primary figure in the political cabaret scene. By exploring his work, this chapter gave a broader scope of the themes and issues contemporary cabaret artists tackle, while highlighting the deep imprint *revistas* and *carpas* had on his work. Globally, this chapter reads Vasconcelos's work as engaging in queer tactics of disidentification, which José Muñoz describes as

“recycling and rethinking encoded meaning” to expose exclusionary machinations present in normative discourses (31). Though Vasconcelos’s work identifies with the traditions of humorous political criticism of *carpas* and *revistas*, he actively disidentifies with the sexism and homophobia present in many of the sexually inflected jokes first used in these genres. Through his work, Vasconcelos creates a vision of an informed, politicized, mobilized, and active queer political cabaret.

Vasconcelos’s politicized camp aesthetic is understood to hyperbolize his representations, leading his audience to uncomfortable spaces where he proposes a questioning of entrenched social beliefs upheld by the Church. In “Disidentifying Through Camp and Humor,” this chapter examined Vasconcelos’s performance as the triply dragged Mary Magdalene in his spectacle *La pasión según Tito*. During this performance, Vasconcelos consciously and purposely envelops himself in artifice to parody and ridicule the vices of revered entertainment stars like María Félix. What is perhaps more significant, however, is his goal to expose the discourses and processes of exclusion upheld by the Church. Vasconcelos’s spectacle could be read as an example of a subversion of what Diana Taylor describes as ‘scenarios’ which are commonly used performance methods to transmit history orally. In the case of *La pasión*, he “resuscitates and reactivates” the well known story of the Passion of Christ to rope in a queer voice that fleshes out and humanizes religious characters flattened by the Church (Taylor, “Acts of Transfer” 28). Through this humanization, Vasconcelos’s proposal is a much more complex and inclusive set of characters. He also uses this performance as a platform to expose the Catholic Church’s active participation in the sexual abuse of children in Mexico, as well as homogenizing and exclusionary discourse (Taylor, “Acts of Transfer” 28).



In “Suturing Identities Through Lucha Reyes: Transvestism in the Work of Tito Vasconcelos” the chapter explored Vasconcelos’s representation of transvestites as a way to highlight the contradictory relationship Mexicans have historically had with this figure: often celebrating them on stage, but violently attacking them in every day life. Vasconcelos challenges this double standard by using his “feminine characters” as a way to engage in gender terrorism on stage by denaturalizing gender and proposing it goes beyond the male/female binary. Vasconcelos’s performance in drag affirms the possibility of a broad range of genders, sexualities, and identities. Through an analysis of his *ranchera* concert as Lucha, this chapter accentuated Vasconcelos’s use of parody, humor, and song to confront the audience’s sexism, homophobia, and misogyny. Vasconcelos fashions a queer Lucha that destabilizes and deconstructs the audience’s stereotypes about Mexican women and the figure of *la vestida* in the Mexican imaginary.

The work of Tito Vasconcelos is foundational in Mexican political cabaret theater. He continues the tradition established by *revistas* and *carpas* in establishing a tradition of using the stage as a site in which to practice dissidence and irreverence, yet he morphs this stage to make his performance space a site for queer resistance as well.

Chapter 3 explored the work of world-renowned Mexican cabaret artist Jesusa Rodríguez. Rodríguez found in humor and laughter a tool to create lines of communication to engage the audience in interrupting and degrading official discourses of knowledge. Along with Vasconcelos’s work, Rodríguez’s work has inspired and influenced the new generation of political cabaret artists including Las Reinas Chulas, Las hijas de Safo, and César Enrique Cabaret. Her work continues to be a part of the continuum of artists and writers, since the golden age of *carpas* and *revistas*, who convert theatrical spaces into public spheres where artist and audience enter an irreverent

collective political and social dialog. Rodríguez has created a space where counterpublics can imagine and challenge the mainstream.

“Cabareteando Heterotopias in El Hábito” inquired into Rodríguez’s and Felipe’s opening of the cabaret/bar El Hábito as an alternative space that opened a site in which they could express themselves with more freedom. In this sense, El Hábito is a heterotopia, defined by Foucault as a site where culture can see itself reflected, represented, questioned, and subverted (24). According to Diana Taylor, by founding a cabaret-bar at the site of a former chapel, Rodríguez and Felipe repurpose the formerly religious place into a space that was equally as charged. Instead of sitting silently and passively as witnesses to a performance, the audience was coaxed into participating in the irreverence and criticism happening on stage.

“Carnival, Humor, and Laughter in *Partorela: El horror económico*” analyzed the carnivalesque imaginary Rodríguez conceives through a representative performance entitled *Partorela: El horror económico*. This production is an example of her appropriation of *commedia de’ll arte*’s use of masks to represent popular archetypes inspired by nineteenth-century Mexican cartoonists. More importantly, this is an example of Rodríguez’s interest in extending the heterotopic space she created within the walls of El Hábito and expanding it to the streets and the public by performing the piece in public plazas around the city. This in turn provided a space to teach the audience how to engage in political cabaret theater by inviting them to use this performance as the foundation to create their own cabaret. Through the use of masks, parody, and satire Rodríguez and the company La Chinga established a carnivalesque space where power relations were turned upside down and the audience was able to face the deep economic crisis of Mexico.

“Jesusa Rodríguez’s Embodied Palimpsests” explored Rodríguez’s vision of Mexico’s history as a world that continuously weaves itself into Mexico’s present and

future. *Sor Juana en Almoloya* is one of the best examples of how Rodríguez embodies a palimpsest. Through the character Sor Juana, she makes pointed criticisms and asks questions about the Mexican justice system and the future of the country. She creates a heterotopia of space and body where the oppression and violent silencing of free thinkers and people who do not conform to the heteronormative ideals of the elite are made visible and criticized. In creating an embodied palimpsest, Rodríguez also queers how history is traditionally read, monumentalized, and frozen in time. Instead, she proposes a more fluid view of history that directly affects the present and can help us understand our future; she proposes an intimate and subjective use of history.

This dissertation uncovered and explored cultural productions within Mexican frivolous theater genres to understand the tools and styles developed to create social and political criticism. There is still, however, much to be done. In the case of *carpas* and *revistas*, for example, there is an important group of queer artists including Goyo Dante, Raúl del Mar, Chuy Santa Ana and Shalimar, whose work is yet to be uncovered and brought to light.<sup>119</sup> Furthermore, though this study sheds light on *revistas* and *carpas* that were critical towards the government, there are a number of writers and artists who built strong and lasting relationships with politicians. These spectacles were co-opted by political figures as a way to garner support and criticize rivals. This tricky relationship and the effect it had on the productions is also an aspect further attention.

In the case of political cabaret theater, there is a whole new generation of artists who are continuing to develop the political cabaret theater genre. The work of César Enríquez, Las Reinas Chulas, and Andrés Carreño take what has been done in the past and continue to evolve and push the boundaries of what is and what isn't acceptable.

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<sup>119</sup> These are mentioned in Gloria Alicia and Miguel Inclán's testimony to Socorro Merlín (138).

Their work is provocative, questions present-day issues, and is full of complexity in the same way as their predecessors work.

This dissertation brings to the forefront Mexican cultural productions, which provide performers and audiences a space to practice an irreverent, *relajiento* type of dissent to collectively grapple with the violence, censorship, and terror that the country is currently enduring. With the centennial anniversary of the Mexican Revolution complete, Mexico finds itself again steeped in a violent crisis. According to a Human Rights Watch 2015 report, the National Registry of Disappeared or Missing Persons has recognized over 25,500 cases of missing people since 2006 that have yet to be solved. “Prosecutors and police routinely fail to carry out basic investigative steps to identify those responsible, often telling missing people’s families to investigate on their own” (World Report 2016: Mexico).<sup>120</sup> According to an annual report by Article 19, an independent organization that focuses on human rights and freedom of expression, there has been a 21.8 percent increase in violence against Mexican press from 2014 to 2015. During that time, 397 different cases of violence against news reporters and photographers were recorded, with an increasing tendency by local, state, and federal governments to not only fail to investigate but in many cases being actively involved in the violence.<sup>121</sup> One notorious example was the assassination of photojournalist Rubén Espinoza and human rights activist Nadia Vera in a Mexico City apartment.

Despite President Enrique Peña Nieto’s affirmations that things are getting better, there have been 57,410 murders in the 32 months he has been in office. The work of *revista* writers one hundred years ago, as well as comedians who populated the stages of

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<sup>120</sup> See Human Rights Watch 2016 Report at <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2016/country-chapters/mexico>

<sup>121</sup> See “Informe 2015 de Artículo 19: Los agresores de periodistas odian más la prensa digital en México”

*carpas*, built the foundation that provided space for the people of that time to grapple with the political and social issues and challenges they faced, regardless of what they may have been. Today, when the reality for most Mexican people is one of violence and struggle, political cabaret theater and their artists are opening up those same spaces for a renewed questioning of social, political, gender, sexual, and personal norms. Like those before them, they are using their creative energy and talents to disrupt the status quo, encouraging people to talk with one another, starting a dialogue long overdue.

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