

Performing a Performance

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In contrast with the visual arts or even literature, Mexican theater is not very well known and even less appreciated outside the country. I must recognize, sadly, that very often the same is true for inside the country.

Aside from pre-Hispanic performances —of which we know very little but in which dance is supposed to have dominated— Mexico's theater from the colonial period has been studied very little and performed even less.

From that period, we are familiar with Juan Ruiz de Alarcón and Sor Juana, but we forget about mystery plays, the popular theater tradition and political theater, usually all lumped together under folk culture.

Of the authors from after independence, everyone remembers José Zorrilla, who wrote *Don Juan Tenorio*, performed year in and year out, to the eternal misfortune of the author, a Spaniard who loyally followed orders from the House of Hapsburg.

It is not until the twentieth century that we can see clear indications of a truly Mexican theater, or at least a search for something different and original. In the twentieth century, writers who wanted to be considered as such had to test the waters of all the genres: poetry, essays, chronicles, journalism, short stories, novels and, of course, theater. Without the latter, they were incomplete.

It was a slow process —which does not necessarily make it beneficial— that brought playwriting into its own, giving it an independent place.

We would begin a short review with the Ulysses Theater —full of poetry and influenced

by France and the modernism of Rubén Darío— represented by members of the Contemporáneos group, among them Xavier Villaurrutia and, above all, Salvador Novo.

Productions worldwide and, slowly, in Mexico began to change. From *zarzuela* light operas, bedroom dramas, romantic heroes, swordplay and weeping and wailing —never, of course, with your back to the audience— the theater changed in an attempt to communicate with the Mexican audience, to create something that would assume all its national influences and speak to a specific audience. To everyone's relief, the theater began to breathe. Rodolfo Usigli brought us reality: postrevolutionary Mexico was a fertile source of stories, events and characters. The experiences of the relatively recent civil war contrasted with the previously popular melodramas that the Spanish theater companies put on year after year. The world had changed and the theater had to reflect the new ways of understanding reality.

Usigli is in the last analysis the first great master of Mexican playwriting. In his classes, he educated a first generation of writers dedicated wholly to the theater: Jorge Ibarguengoitia, Luisa Josefina Hernández and Héctor Mendoza,



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just to mention the most outstanding. Parallel to this emerged the figure of Emilio Carballido, who would be the teacher of the next generation.

In the late 1950s, Héctor Azar founded the Theater in Coapa almost at the same time that the Poetry Aloud movement emerged, including writers like Octavio Paz, Juan Soriano, Juan José Gurrola and, above all and to the forefront, the intelligence and sensitivity of Juan José Arreola.

This began a snowball effect. Each new playwright trained his disciples. In the 1970s we witnessed the onset of what has been called The New Theater.

Voices emerged like those of Vicente Leñero and Hugo Argüelles, the product of playwriting workshops, and they, in turn, encouraged a new generation that included Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda, Jesús González Dávila, Sabina Berman, Tomás Urtusuástegui, Oscar Liera, Alejandro Licona and many more. Creators like Hugo Hiriart and Juan Tovar coincide in time with that generation, although they are not considered part of the same group.

Mexican theaters, until then dominated by foreign playwrights, particularly the authors of Broadway and London hits, went through a radical change. Today, 80 percent of Mexican theaters are running plays by Mexican authors of all ages.

Although it sounds precipitous and risky, I would venture to say that the Mexican theater is currently going through a golden age. Never have so many generations and different proposals coincided in time, and, slowly, old audiences are beginning to revive and new ones be formed.

David Olguín is part of this important moment. Born in 1963, he graduated in acting from the University Theater Center (CUT), has a bachelor's degree in Spanish literature and studied stage direction at the University of London.

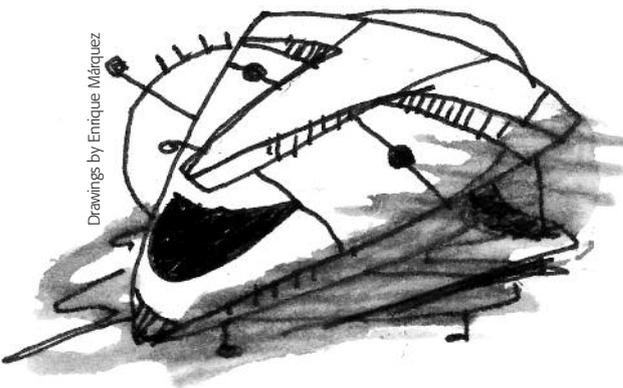
I think it is important to mention these studies because one way or another, they are a constant in today's theater in Mexico. People who do theater involve themselves in a much more overall way in productions, and this is visible in the results. Until not long ago, writers were only writers, directors directed and actors acted. Today, it is not only commonplace, but practically indispensable that a playwright direct, a director adapt and write or an actor do all three. The results are very clear. Plays are written for the stage, taking into account production needs and the real situation of our stages and audiences. This is one of the main characteristics of David Olguín's work. His plays are alive; many of them he stages himself and, perhaps most importantly, the theater becomes one of the main characters in his plays.

Seeing the stage as a reflection of reality or a metaphor for the world and existence is nothing new. In the Spanish tradition we can hark back to no less a personage than Pedro Calderón de la Barca and his *Gran teatro del mundo* (Great Theater of the World), in which performing appears as a passing form of existence, the stage as a mirror and reality as a drama that is unfolding.

In *La representación* (The Performance) (1984), David Olguín's first play, Ricardo Freyre, a neurotic, authoritarian writer, manipulates reality and the people around him. Ana, an out-of-work actress, willing to interpret the supposed ideas of a future play, becomes involved in Freyre's nightmarish world. Her identity becomes confused with that of Freyre's wife, a deaf-mute servant who reminds us somewhat of Harold Pinter's enigmatic characters, one of the most noticeable influences in Olguín's work.

In *La puerta del fondo* (The Door at the End) (1990), Olguín again resorts to theatricality to look deeper into his characters' world. Old Bartle,

Drawings by Enrique Márquez



a mediocre civil servant, is on the point of suicide. Before the mirror and in his mind, his married and work lives are presented to us in a flashback. The pathetic young Bartle is humiliated by his wife, a sinister Dr. Ramos and Mr. Rameau (both played by the same actor, according to the stage instructions. Another constant in Olguín's work is the mix of planes and blurring of realities). The games his wife plays with Dr. Ramos and Rameau are representations of frustrated fantasies: Emma Bovary as a cardboard tyrant in a boring, senseless world. Once again, theater within theater, and a sense of black comedy that incisively mocks the greyest day-to-day existence.

In *Bajo tierra* (Under Ground), Olguín turns to one of the origins of twentieth-century Mexican theater, particularly in the revolutionary period: historical drama. A student of Juan Tovar and clear admirer of Jorge Ibargüengoitia (in fact, he is currently rehearsing the National Theater Company production of Ibargüengoitia's *El atentado* [The Attack]), Olguín uses the figure of engraver José Guadalupe Posada to delve into a new metaphor of what the play presents. Like in a macabre medieval dance, death stalks Posada to take him to the underworld. The ingenious caricaturist, who did the best drawings of "the bony one herself," manages to temporarily elude Death by appealing to her vanity. His constant flight forces him to disguise himself and relive a good part of the history of the Mexican Revolution while coming into contact with a great many of its important figures.

Here, again, theater serves to perform the point of view of the playwright within a performance.

David Olguín is one of the clearest voices in Mexico's theater today. Just as the scene is always taken into account in his plays, his work has made dialogue a central part of the scene. Adaptations, staging, versions of other plays and translations are part of his constant work. Today, David Olguín is working on a series of short plays like the one *Voices of Mexico* publishes in this issue.

Several of Olguín's obsessions are clearly visible in *International Airport*: reality as something questionable and unknown that has to be unraveled throughout the performance; the violent, aggressive character who pulls the strings and knows the fate of others; the theater as a way of pulling off blindfolds and opening eyes; the ambiguous ending, open to the audience's reinterpretation, with no easy, moralizing conclusions; the mysteriousness of the scene that must be deciphered by the intelligence of the viewer who sees him/herself represented on the stage. ■■■

David Olguín

Born in Mexico City in 1963, David Olguín studied Spanish and English literature at the UNAM and acting at the University Theater Center (CUT). He has also studied directing with Ludwik Margules and did a masters in theater direction at the University of London. Among his published pieces are *Sábado: ida y vuelta* (Sábado: There and Back), an essay (1987); and the plays *Bajo Tierra* (Under Ground), (1982); *La puerta del fondo* (The Door at the End) (1984); *La representación* (The Performance) (1985); and *Dolores o la felicidad* (Dolores, or Happiness) in the anthology *El nuevo teatro* (The New Theater) (1998); and the novel *Amarillo fúnebre* (Funereal Yellow) (1999). He also edited the *Antología de teatro norteamericano contemporáneo* (Anthology of Contemporary American Theater) (1995).

He adapted or collaborated on the adaptation of productions like *Los enemigos* (The Enemies), *Querida Lulú* (Dear Lulú), *Jacques y su amo* (Jacques and His Master), *De la mañana a la media noche* (From Morning to Midnight), and *Morir, dormir, soñar* (To Die, To Sleep, Perchance to Dream), based on texts from Shakespeare. In addition to directing plays of his own like *Bajo Tierra* (Under Ground), *La puerta del fondo* (The Door at the End), *El tísico* (The Consumptive), *Dolores o la felicidad* (Dolores, or Happiness), and *¿Esto es una farsa?* (Is This a Farce?), he has also directed Strindberg's *Miss Julia*, Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River*, Federico García's *Así que pasen cinco años* (So Five Years Go By), Jorge Ibargüengoitia's *El tesoro perdido* (The Lost Treasure) and Larry Tremblay's *The Anatomy Lesson*. He has received grants from the Salvador Novo organization, Mexico's National Fund for Culture and the Arts, the British Council and the U.S-Mexico Fund for Culture, as well as Mexican government support for his productions. He has been an editor at the Ediciones El Milagro publishing house since 1992 and a member of the National System of Artists since 1999.