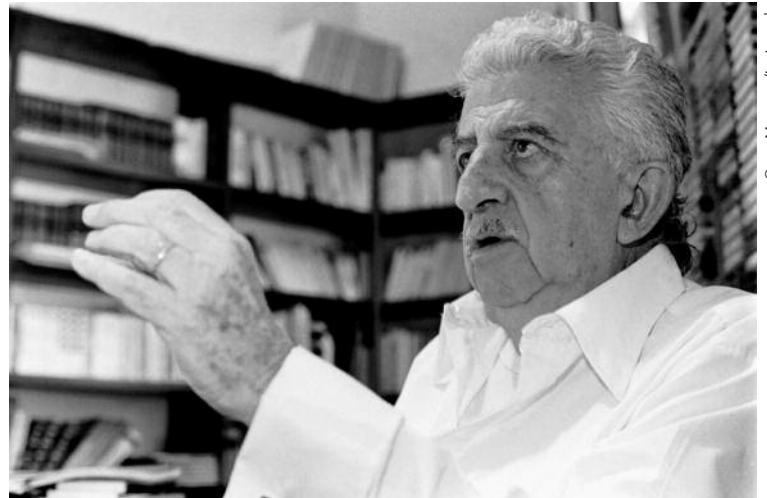


Héctor Azar

Until We Meet Again

Rabindranath Espinosa*



Omar Menees/La Jornada

The goats bleat in Biblos and I hear them through a window near my back, from where I catch a glimpse of the Monastery of Marun Sea, just as from the Inmaculada I can see San Miguel's Hill with its convent on its slopes.

“Palabras habladas”
Héctor Azar

“El Puerto Libanés, Bonetería fina,” the family clothing store, at 6 Independence Avenue in Atlixco, Puebla, would be the jumping off point for a passionate life and life’s work.

Place: Atlixco (“face of nurturing water” in Nahuatl)

Date: October 17, 1930.

Name: Héctor Azar Barbar

Destiny: Untiring creator

Nickname: Zoon Theatrykon

The pendulum of Azar’s baroque oscillates between the Lebanese and the Mexican. An enriching, maddening, explosive, marvelous and brutal combination, it produced third-degree burns that never healed.

Azar, the teacher, talked about how on Mexican Independence Day, his Mother, Perla or Lúhulu, would dress him up in the full regalia of a traditional Mexican “charro” cowboy dress suit, but that on his shirt, instead of a Mexican eagle, she would put a ceder of Lebanon embroidered by his sister Guadalupe.

The first part of his childhood transpired among images and events that would be the source of creativity for his literature. Amid the gunfire between members of the Mexican Workers Confederation (CTM) and the Revolutionary Confederation of Workers and Peasants (CROC); the virginal Inmaculada and her little dog Colombina, white like her

owner who visited Doña Perla and her inseparable Singer sewing machine in the early hours of the afternoon. From that time dates the Octagón soap box that the precocious Héctor would make into a little theater where the life force of this Dionysus would grow. In his hometown, little Héctor became aware of the horror of rumors, gossip, scorn, religious hypocrisy, of pretense and smothering immobility. All this is in his poetry and his characters in plays, short stories and novels.

I want to think that his vocation for restoring historical monuments was born during his service as an altar boy in the San Agustín Church. This vocation came to fruition when he directed the Alarcón Festival in Taxco, Guerrero, and when he was minister of culture of the state of Puebla. Recovering the past, not allowing it to be forgotten, making sure new generations were aware of who had preceded them were

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his concerns as a restorer, a great promotor and disseminator of culture. His generosity was limitless.

The premature loss of his father is another determining factor in Héctor Azar's work: the search for the figure of the absent father, present —though not physically— in all his theatrical work; something like Hamlet's father, the spark that sets off catastrophe for the young prince of Denmark.

Blessed childhood, how much it gives us, how much it takes away! Sometimes an entire life passes and we cannot let go of our "tin drum." The shadow of Oscar Matzerath pursues us as the only possibility of staying alive.

In 1938, the family moved to Mexico City. "El Puerto Libanés" became "La Cenicienta," at 759 Mar Okhotsk in the very tough Tacuba neighborhood. This place, like Atlixco, had a perturbing fantastic zoology. The nearly adolescent Azar found himself in a rough and tumble world, where lives rode on a throw of the dice, where everyone knew they were in the here-and-now because who knew about tomorrow. But as often happens in the sordid episodes of life, you either drown in the river or swim to the other side and walk out; young Azar not only walked, he ran, flew and is now immortal. He resolved in those surroundings the Shakespearean dilemma of "To be or not to be." And he was.

His schooling began to make sense. His concerns began to take form: in chemistry, in his triangle for geometric drawing, in the lines of technical drawing themselves and, of course, in literature. His active, creative spirit was being nourished. This stage of his life took place in the schoolrooms and hallways of the Junior High School Number 4, of National Preparatory School Number 1 and the Law School of our

dear, mistreated National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). His first inclination for chemistry was satisfied by links with Breton and his taste for cooking as a marvelous encounter of cultures. Sharing a table with him was always a special experience. He was a great connoisseur of food and drink and a creator of both. In his quest for life, his interest in drafting and line made him an honorary member of the Mexican Architectural Academy (1991) and of the Society of Mexican Architects (1994). His secret love of letters, however, became his encounter with freedom and life.

His experience at the UNAM was definitive in his career as a teacher, creator, researcher, cultural promotor and founder of institutions. Dignity, equality, honesty and a vocation for service were not only ideas to him: combined with his pride in being part of Mexico's foremost center of higher learning, they were values that marked his life and all his professional activity.

From the hinterlands of UNAM High School Number 5, the university theater and the Theater in Coapa (1955), he would cross the Atlantic in an Intercontinental flight carrying a banner saying "Bon Voyage to the University Theater Company" and arrive in Nancy, France in 1964. He would bring back the first prize from the First World Festival of University Theater, with a production of Ramón Valle-Inclán's *Divinas palabras* (Divine Words), directed by Juan Ibáñez, the first and only international prize of that stature that Mexican theater has ever won.

In the UNAM, Héctor Azar founded the University Theater Center (CUT), the theater magazine *La cabra* (The Goat); he was a first-generation teacher at UNAM High School Number 5, the

director of the House on the Lake cultural center and of the Theater Department, a teacher in the School of Philosophy and Letters and researcher at the Institute for Philological Research. In 1987, the UNAM bestowed on him the National University Teacher's Prize. He was about to renew his teaching at UNAM's School of Philosophy and Letters, but since he saw how mistreated the university was, he preferred that the delicate, nourishing breeze Motolinía had found in the state of Puebla pick him up, *auream post meridiem*, and softly carry him to the promised land.

His work in the National Institute of Fine Arts was no less productive. He inaugurated the Julio Jiménez Rueda Theater, the Center for Children's Theater, the Trashumante Theater and the Seasons of Student Theater; he founded and directed the National Theater Company. On February 2, 1975, the heavy pine doors at 26 Centenario in Coyoacán opened to begin a fascinating adventure that 25 years of work had made a reality: the Center for the Dramatic Arts (CADAC) opened in Mexico City. It would be followed by the CADACS of Atlixco in 1985, of Taxco in 1989 and of Puebla in 1992.

His works, honors and activities are innumerable. *Estancias* (Sojourns) and *Días santos* (Holy Days) were his first incursions into poetry. In theater, we have *La appassionata*, *El alfarero* (The Potter), *El corrido de Pablo Damián* (The Corrido of Pablo Damián), *Olímpica*, *Inmaculada*, *Higiene de los placeres y los dolores* (Hygiene of Pleasures and Pains), *Doña Belarda de Francia* (Doña Belarda of France), *Las alas sin sombra o la historia de Víctor Rey* (Wings without a Shadow or the Story of Víctor Rey), *Juan de Dios o la divina tragedia de amar y ser amado* (Juan de Dios or

the Divine Tragedy of Loving and Being Loved). Among his novels, *Las tres primeras personas* (The Three First Persons) and *Locura de Juan Ciudad* (The Madness of Juan Ciudad); his short stories, *Palabras habladas* (Spoken Words); art books, *Teatros de México* (Theaters of Mexico), *A la luz de la Puebla* (In the Light of Puebla), *Crónicas de Coyoacán* (Chronicles of Coyoacán), *Facetas poblanas* (About Puebla), *Juan de Dios Santo en acecho* (Juan de Dios Santo in Wait), *San Angel entre las horas detenido* (San Angel Detained within the Hours).

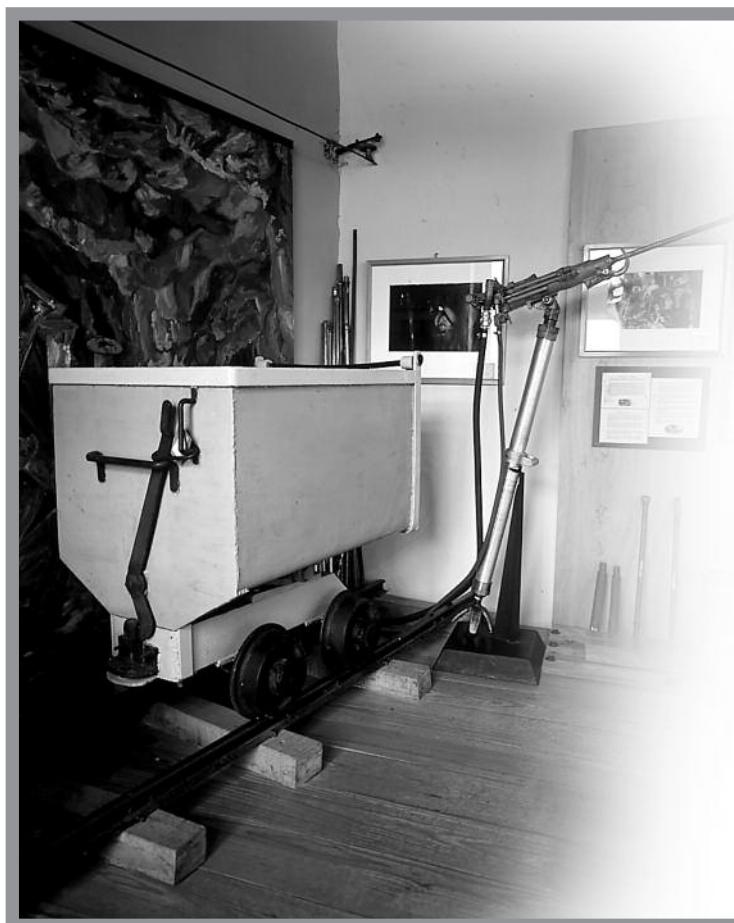
Now for the avalanche of prizes and accolades: he had a fellowship from the Writers Center of Mexico and another from the Guggenheim Foundation. He received the Xavier Villaurrutia Prize

for literature five times; the Academic Palmes from the French government; the Order of the Cedars of Lebanon; and the Nezahualcóyotl Medal given by the General Society of Writers of Mexico. He was a full member of the Mexican Language Academy and of the Seminar of Mexican Culture and was given an honorary doctorate by the Autonomous University of Puebla. He was awarded the Ignacio Zaragoza Prize by the Puebla state government; the Duarte, Sánchez and Mella Medal by the Dominican Republic; the Benito Juárez Medal by the Geographical and Statistical Society; the National Prize for Culture from the state of Guerrero; and a diploma and gold medal from the International Institute of the Mediterranean Theater in Cairo.

Héctor Azar, how much the culture of this nation owes you! Now you are with your gods of the holy theater: Shakespeare, Sophocles, Tirso de Molina, Juan Ruiz de Alarcón, Lope de Vega, Brecht, Ibsen, Strindberg, Valle-Inclán, Wilde, Shaw, Cervantes, Ionesco...

Héctor, our teacher, you had "such a big heart that it didn't fit in your chest. The holy firmament of glory opened up to await you; Paradise bloomed awaiting you body and soul." Here on Earth, here in CADAC, here in our hearts, now and forever, beloved teacher.

I dedicate this to your wife, Tony, and her infinite tenderness, and to your children: to the Phoenician Cecilia Guadalupe, to the Etruscan Francisco Xavier, to Carlos Eduardo from Palenque and to Virginia, the invincible sister. **VM**



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