

From the Theater of the Unloved

Rodrigo Johnson Celorio*



In contrast with other literary genres like narrative and poetry, Mexican theater boasts a large group of women writers who fortunately have not made women's questions a leitmotif.

From Sor Juana in the seventeenth century to today, women playwrights have told their stories from a more universal perspective. In the twentieth century, figures like Elena Garro and Luisa Josefina Hernández opened the way for new generations. Sabina Berman, Beatriz Novaro, Bertha Hiriart, Leonor Azcárate, Elena Guiochins and Carmina Narro are only examples.

Narro is worth taking a closer look at. She is a young writer who in a relatively short time has

managed to consolidate her own presence and a very particular voice. Carmina Narro writes mainly in two genres, modern tragedy and comedy. She always uses a realistic setting, jettisoning easy metaphors and turning to her characters' complex internal psychological world, where conflicts originate from their most intimate contradictions and primary emotions, evolving to create unique personalities.

In *Credencial de escritor* (Writer's Credentials), Narro explores conflicting emotions: ambition and envy clash with gratitude and duty. A literature teacher with three students endows a scholarship for studying in Paris. This source of dissension shakes the characters' little world, bringing them face to face with their own most

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profound pettiness. The professor, on the other hand, personifies power and the authority figure, manipulating the situation to his liking, exercising unlimited dominance.

In contrast with Eugène Ionesco's *The Lesson*, Carmina Narro unmaskes the depravity of power in ordinary daily life in the classroom. Violence becomes internal and a bitter sense of humor wanders freely through the vicissitudes of the human comedy.

Carmina Narro is also an actress and director. A play she has directed was recently running in Mexico City: *Mexican Beauty (el armario)* (Mexican Beauty [The Wardrobe]), written by Alejandro Cabáñez, a young writer who is her student at the Writers' Association of Mexico (Sogem) school.

Narro has directed all her plays and, while it would be good if in the future other directors took over, clearly the productions have benefited her writing, created for actors, the lines direct, thought out for the stage with simple spaces, unity of time and rigorous structure. Her plays invite staging, with human stories to challenge the actors and few production requirements.

In contrast with other playwrights of her generation, Narro's theater keeps its distance from fantasy and the historical. Her stories develop in the contemporary world and her characters are ordinary people. Their thoughts are revealed through keenly honed language and the extreme situations in which she places the beings that people her world.

In *Aplausos para Mariana* (Applause for Mariana), until now perhaps her most ambitious play, she uses the world of theater dressing rooms to tell a story of desolation, secrets and guilt. Mariana is an actress of about 40, an alcoholic whose past includes incest with her brother who, because he adores her, has become her dresser. Here, the play's director occupies the place of the teacher, the being with absolute power who mocks and plays with other people's lives, showing just how pathetic senseless authoritarianism is. In her production of *Aplausos para*

Mariana, Narro had all the characters use orthopedic apparatuses as an image of the fragility and the malformations that their internal blocks cause them.

Toward the end of the play, when we see the performance that the characters have prepared, Mariana directs all her hopelessness at the audience, firing a gun into it, and three members of the audience fall out of their seats, shot.

Broadening her range and on the opposite end of the spectrum, Carmina Narro plays with comedy in *¡Ay mi vida qué tragedia!* (Oh, My Darling, What a Tragedy!), a title reminiscent of vaudeville—still a favorite with Mexican audiences—in addition to overlapping with drama.

A forty-ish divorced father, Santiago, unexpectedly welcomes his 21-year-old daughter into his home after she had lived with her mother. The woman he is having a stormy romance with is the same age. The generational clashes and conflicts within the couple this causes again remind us of the enormous loneliness of the individual and his selfishness, all framed with a fine, biting sense of humor.

As part of a trilogy of short plays about love relationships, Narro wrote *Round de sombras* (Shadow Boxing), which we print in this issue of *Voices of Mexico*. The piercing quality of the subtext becomes decisive, terrible action, in which once again disfigurement and mutilation are a constant. As with all her productions, this piece's style is somewhat reminiscent of a Chekhovian tone of deep comedy and modern tragedy, and Juan Carlos Onetti's melancholic air marked by absences. Her characters have nothing left over; they lack everything. Human beings' deficiencies and their consequences are a constant theme in her work. Stories of the lack of love and hopelessness, which, face to face with a vacuum, resolve themselves violently. Forceful endings that, like the outcomes of perfect stories, knock out the audience which is taken by surprise.

Carmina Narro is currently preparing the production of her most recent play, *La luna en escorpión* (The Moon in Scorpio). **MM**

Carmina Narro Flores

Born in Los Mochis, Sinaloa, in 1969, Carmina Narro Flores studied with Héctor Mendoza and Raúl Quintanilla at the Theater Studies Nucleus. She went on to study playwriting in Hugo Argüelles' workshop; theater analysis with Vicente Leñero; and direction with Juan José Gurrola, with whom she also worked as assistant director. She is also a short story and script writer and an actress.

She has written and directed five of her own productions:

Recuerdos de bruces (Memories of Falling Headlong) (1992), her first professional work as playwright and director, which won the Theater Critics Association Salvador Novo Prize for a newcomer; *Credencial de escritor* (Writers' Credentials) (1995), awarded the Bravo Prize for Best Comedy of the year and published by *Tramoya*, a theater magazine edited by Emilio Carballido; *Round de sombras* (Shadow Boxing) (1996); *Ay mi vida, qué tragedia* (Oh, My Darling, What a Tragedy!) (1997), published in the magazine *Documenta CITRU*; and *Aplausos para Mariana* (Applause for Mariana) (1997).

She also adapted and directed *Look Back in Anger* by John Osborne in 1994.

In June 1998, Narro participated in the series of play readings called "Work in Progress" with her play *Memories of Falling Headlong*.

She has published short stories in the *Sábado* (Saturday) supplement of the national daily *Unomásuno*; in the UNAM's *Los Universitarios* magazine; *Galeras* (Galley Sheets) published by Fondo de Cultura Económica; and *Nitro* and *Complot* (Conspiracy) magazines, among others; as well as in anthologies like *Látex azul cielo* (Sky Blue Latex), put out by Moho publishers. She has written theater criticism for *Correo Escénico* (Stage Newsletter) magazine and scripts for film and television, including a soap opera (*El amor de mi vida* [The Love of My Life], produced by Productora Argos from 1998 to 1999).

In 1999 she taught playwriting at Mexico's Writers' Association (Sogem) school.

Her acting credits include parts in *Autos* (Cars), by Martín Morales (1986), for which she won the best actress award at the Fourth Mexico City Theater Interward Contest; *Fefú y sus amigas* (Fefú and Her Friends), by María Irene Fornés (1990); *El criminal de Tacuba* (The Criminal of Tacuba), by Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda (1991); *Criaturas del aire* (Creatures of the Air), by Fernando Savater with the monologue *La gorda Margot* (Fat Margot) (1996); and in *Ellas solas* (All by Themselves) two Lanford Wilson comedies (*The Great Orion Nebulous* and *The Ludlow Fair*) (1997-1998). In addition, she has acted in different television programs, videos and short subjects.