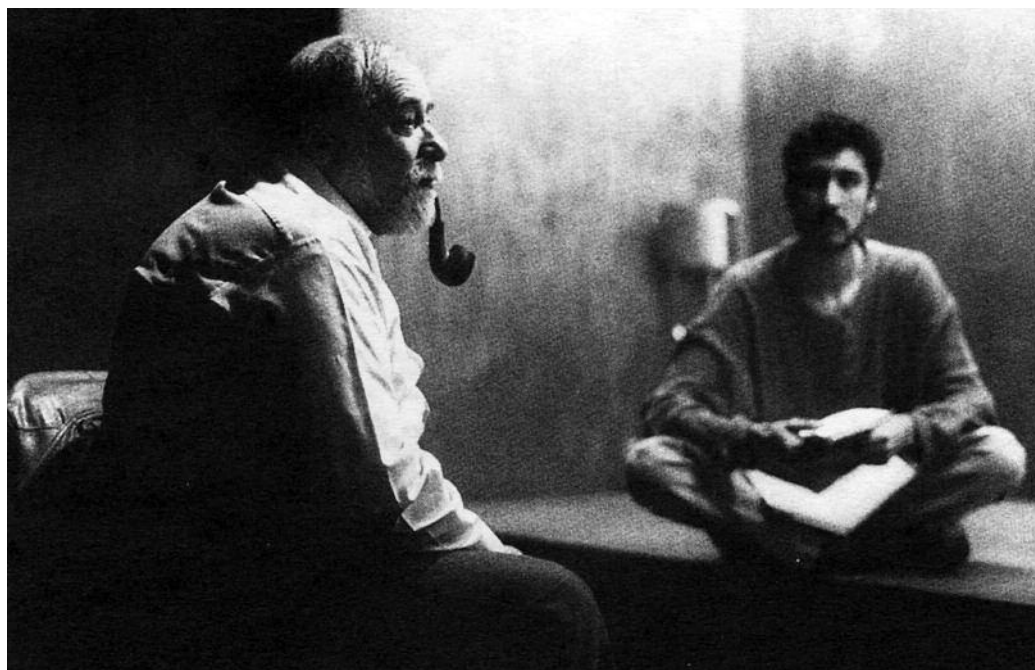


# Ludwik Margules

## Master of the Scene<sup>1</sup>

(1933-2006)

Juan Villoro\*



José Jorge Carreón

Margules during a rehearsal.

“When I rehearse, I turn into a war machine,” Ludwik Margules used to say. He liked to say things that were very often ironic displays of affection. I remember the afternoon he told me about his career as a soccer player. With the endearing tendency of Poles to drop their articles, he said, “I was impassable tank.” When he had only recently arrived in Mexico, he had participated in a team made up of theater people. The play he was most proud of was a terrible block that sent a burly forward through the air. “That giant died two years later. When I met his son, I told him, ‘I killed your father.’” Ludwik punctuated the story with his black humor laugh. To

protect himself from his intense emotions, he liked to boast about his evilness: “If I kick you now, you die in two years.”

Few people have been as generous as this player with his outbursts as an ogre. In 1988 he phoned me. He had heard that I was translating Lichtenberg’s aphorisms. He asked me to go see him so he could tell me about his Polish commentators. Out of the sessions in which he translated Jelénski emerged a friendship determined by his unflagging interest in other people.

An epicure of excess, he breakfasted on sweet-meat *menudo* soup as though it were yoghurt. If something upset his stomach, he used a terrible experiment to see if he was really sick. I remember the afternoon that he ate three pickled herrings to test his stomach, compensating

\* Mexican writer.

with bowl of rice pudding. His wife Lydia watched the whole process with her sweet face, smiling like one who understands barbarous behavior as mischievous.

Ludwik had many interests: the *corrido* song about drug traffickers (or *narcocorrido*) *Came-lia la texana*, that he included in his production of Molière's *Don Juan*; the resurgence of anti-semitism in Poland; the intolerance of the dogmatic left ("they never rectify when they make a mistake; on the contrary, they always believe their mistake was not having been sufficiently inflexible"); the town of Tlahuitoltepec in the Mixe mountains, where the children learn to read mu-

Margules understood the theater as a crusade. His students had to display religious fervor for the cause. That is how he created the Contemporary Theater Forum.

sic before they learn to read words and where he filmed a documentary; the talent of Roger Daltrey, the Who vocalist, performing *The Beggars' Opera*.

His obsession with a production began with the discussion of the script. The smoke from his pipe announced a man with a mission. Ludwik took in all the possibilities to then opt for the essential. A minimalist trapped in the body of someone from the baroque period.

I translated for him Heiner Müller's *Quartet*, based on Laclos's *Dangerous Liaisons*. The text allowed him to talk about the Enlightenment, the insatiable career of the libertines (he had done a magnificent production of Stravinsky's opera *The Rake's Progress*), the Marquis de Sade's mechanical eroticism, Bataille's mystical eroticism, the possession of the beloved, the degradation of affection in an authoritarian environment.

Born into Warsaw's Jewish community in 1933, Ludwik was a child of war, an experience he shared with Müller, a child of the German front.

A chronicle of devastation, *Quartet* takes place in a bunker, depicted with frozen perfection by Mónica Raya, a jail for the limits of Eros. The last romance of *Quartet's* main character happens with his own body, as his cancer metastasizes. While Margules was rehearsing, Müller died of cancer and his wife became gravely ill. "The production is cursed," he said, with the vehemence of someone who understands theater as prophecy.

I admired Margules from the time I saw his production of Harold Pinter's *Birthday Party* in the 1970s, but he was uncomfortable with praise. When I congratulated him for his production of Milan Kundera's *Jacques and His Master*, he answered sadly, "Yes, but in a few months, who's going to remember the theater?" I asked him why he answered complements like this, and he spread his arms wide in resignation, "It's the Slavic soul." To confirm that, he asked me to talk to Slawomir Mrozek on the telephone. Very few people knew that the great Polish writer lived in Río Frío, married to a Mexican woman.

"Tell him really nice things and you'll see that he gets sad," Ludwik said, smiling his Mephistopheles smile. I thought it was ridiculous to talk to the author of *The Hump* to measure the state of his depression.

"He makes jam in Río Frío," added Ludwik, as though compotes sadden men. For the first time I felt what actors under his direction must have felt: that there was no way to contradict him. The conversation with Mrozek was a miniature theater of the absurd. Ludwik looked at me with sparkling eyes, sure that my praise was sinking his friend. The last thing the playwright said was, "I'd like to talk to you when I'm less depressed." Ludwik raised his arms like the boxing champion he had always wanted to be. He had shown that Poles are plants made for the shade.

"Sad but brave" was another one of his mottos. When I went to a photographic exhibit of his production, he looked peevisly at the shot of tequila I was drinking. "Oh, Juanito, you're a cocktail drunk." Then he explained that alcohol drinkers were divided into two kinds: the timorous who sipped a little glass and the brave, who

downed a bottle. "I did that on an opening night and they had to hold my wake on stage," he smiled with the happiness of the tomb.

Margules understood the theater as a crusade. His students had to display religious fervor for the cause. That is how he created the Contemporary Theater Forum. When he took over the Xola Theater, he brought together a group of friends, took his pipe out of his mouth and exclaimed, "We have left the catacombs!" However, that effort, which required a broader audience, did not fit the minority, risky quest of the theatrical explorer. Rodolfo Obregón prepared Margules's conversational memoirs, the indispensable log of that path of passion.

Ludwik got the news of his wife's death during a rehearsal of Janusz Glowacki's *Antigone*

in *New York*. He came late to the funeral home, as he always did, full of pain and life. He talked about his loss without stopping talking about his projects.

In his childhood, Margules knew the horror of a century of extermination. He did not look for calm in his adopted country where he recently died at the age of 72. "I believe in conflict. I don't believe in anything else," he wrote to his admired friend Heiner Müller. Ludwik made his war among us. The dark hole of the theater was his battlefield. Watching that struggle was our victory. **MM**

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A version of this article was published in the daily newspaper *Reforma*.

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## Barking from the Stage<sup>1</sup>

Ludwik Margules, with a long and distinguished career, is considered one of the most brilliant directors in Mexican theater. While we can detect certain recurring topics and obsessions in his many productions, Margules is an untiring explorer of the means whereby he may, as he says, “bark from the stage.”...

**Ludwik Margules (LM):** I came to Mexico at the age of 24. I studied journalism in Poland. At that time, the Journalism Department of the University of Warsaw was very vibrant politically. I’m referring to about 1956, a time of great events... Stalinism, Hungary. It enveloped us all in an atmosphere of great artistic and cultural ferment. There was a great flowering of Polish theater and European theater in general. Brecht in Warsaw. The great Polish theater unfolded thanks to a permanent atmosphere of spiritual growth....

The experience of the war and the invasion also made for a twisted childhood, or rather, the absence of a childhood in the conventional sense of the term....

It was because of my skepticism about the goodness of Man that I became interested in a quest for his essential values. During the war, I saw things no one should ever see. That was what turned me into a mature person, I would say, my greater knowledge of the world and the human condition....

The myth of the “hard man” was propagated by people who are not very demanding of themselves. It is like saying that you are demanding because you try to get the most out of everyone who collaborates in putting on a play, and that’s not being hard. Not at all....

I have always been tremendously attracted by the theater. Perhaps I went into the theater because I couldn’t do film. I wanted to do cinema. I think that having been immersed in a theatrical culture also had an influence.

The director creates life on the stage.... The director is really a god, a creator who discovers worlds to shape a fiction through which a poetic fiction is expressed. This is the way the director works.

**María Tarriba (MT):** How would you define stage poetry?

**LM:** It is the maximum capacity of synthesis for expressing something. Of synthesis and purity in articulating words and other theatrical elements.

**MT:** What does the theater give you?

**LM:** A reason for living...the most important reason....

**MT:** You often use the term “organicity” when talking about putting on a play. What does an “organic” performance mean to you?

**LM:** I mean the lack of ornament, the merger of all the elements in the performance in a single style, a language in itself. It is the preponderance of the structure of the performance, conceived in terms of the maximum economy of means....

**MT:** What character traits do you think favor the vocation of director?

**LM:** First of all, more than character traits, the conditions have to exist. One of these is having something to say about art, the world, and having a vital need —instinctive and necessary for survival— to speak from the stage and to create fictions. Character traits? You need to have poetic imagination, which includes sensibility, wanting to speak truths through the mouths of others and stick to the story, which is very hard. Having organizational ability, leadership and charisma....

You should never confuse directing with a political event or a fight: in the end, it is an authorship. It is a question of articulating the stuff of the director’s dreams through the participation of a group of people....

**MT:** What are your obsessions?

**LM:** I have always been interested in the grotesque, in human degradation. Obsessions? I would also mention a permanent obsession for speaking in the most precise manner in every play, for avoiding dispersion, avoiding digressions, for communicating the stuff of dreams without ornament, for communicating its essence. I am extraordinarily attracted to the encounter of the tragic spirit and discovering the different facets of its behavior. Sensual things, the erotic world, violence. Trivializing the erotic has always interested me in my productions....

**LM:** I am a great enemy of all that. I am an enemy of multimedia in the theater. Sophocles doesn’t need multimedia and all that.

**MT:** Then, what is the theater for you?

**LM:** Well, it’s a staged operation of time and space that requires the presence of actors, movement, space, the script and other elements that create images that condense into meaning....

<sup>1</sup> Passages of an interview by the Mexican theater critic María Tarriba Unger with Ludwik Margules. “Barking from the Stage. An Interview with Ludwik Margules,” *Voices of Mexico* no. 43 (April-June, 1998), pp. 27-32.