

Emilio Carballido

A Profile

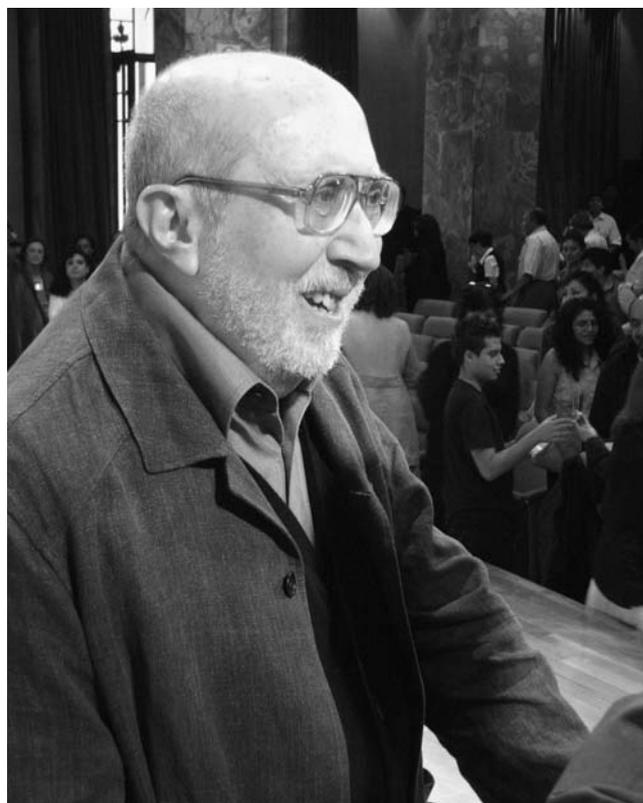
Sabina Berman*

1. Carballido had two secrets. The first was that he made two days fit into one. In the daylight hours he went about the world building and disseminating theater—his own and other people’s. He gave workshops, directed plays, edited the most important Spanish-language magazine about plays, *Tramoya* (Stage Machinery) (which he founded himself), compiled the best anthologies of Mexican theater and traveled to congresses and to the dress rehearsals of his plays, whether in Chihuahua or in Cartagena.

In addition—or perhaps we should say, above all—he wrote. Short stories, essays, novellas, novels and theater. Above all, theater. “What time do you write, *maestro*?” I asked him one afternoon in his living room. Carballido scratched the head of a white cat aptly named Marilyn with his right hand, and the cunning scoundrel narrowed his eyes at me and said he wasn’t going to tell me.

“Boo, hoo, boo, hoo,” he said, “You don’t ask such things, Sabinita, boo, hoo, boo, hoo.” (Well, the one who told me this was Héctor, Héctor Herrera, his life partner for the last 20 years.)

Before the crack of dawn, Carballido would go up to the third floor of his house and write. He wrote in those big old, hard-covered accounting books. He wrote under the cone of lamplight with blue ink, large and fluid letters, as though he were drawing, as though the heart could be translated into language with no complications at all. By the time the light had fully invaded his study and through the window he could see Vicente Leñero pounding away on his type-



(1925-2008)

Sadi López E./Cuartoscuro

writer on the third floor of the house next door, Carballido closed his big book.

He had fulfilled his mission of putting life into words and he went out on the street to live it.

That’s how easy writing was for him. On a flight from South America to Mexico, Carba wrote *Rosa de dos aromas* (Two-Scented Rose), Mexico’s first feminist play, written, curiously, by a man. Its first production ran for six years; its second, for four; and then it was produced in more than seven countries.

That’s how easily he also wrote the television series *Tiempo de ladrones* (A Time for Thieves), the story of Chuchito el Roto,¹ and when the Televisa network didn’t want to produce a piece that political, in a heartbeat he turned it into a play with a unique modular structure.

* Mexican narrator, poet, playwright and film director. Author of *Un soplo en el corazón de la patria/Instantáneas de la crisis* (A Murmur in the Heart of the Homeland/Snapshots of the Crisis) (2006).

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Just that easily, he wrote more than 100 plays, nine novels, half a dozen novellas, many prologues, two volumes of short stories. As I said recently to the director of the Fondo de la Cultura Economica publishing house, Consuelo Sáizar, when we were talking about gathering and publishing his complete works, “Consuelo, start collecting paper because Carballido’s complete works are going to fill more than 20 volumes.”

I have never known a less tormented, less insecure writer. And why should Carballido have been tormented or insecure if his second secret was a perfect synchronicity with the public?

It was a rare work of his that was unsuccessful, and it was a rare line of his that did not produce exactly the effect he wanted to achieve in the audience. I once went with him to a rehearsal where he arrived with a stop-watch. He wanted to measure the silences so the audience’s laughs would fit right. Another time, I heard him tell a pair of actors that they should slow down the dialogue so people would start to weep at such-and-such a line, and continue weeping until they dissolved in sobs at such-and-such a silence.

This was mastery acquired during a lifetime of writing and observing the effect of what was written on the faces of the audience, which in the theater is not something the writer imagines, like with prose or poetry, but live people. But it was something more.

Something more: it took me many years to decipher this second secret, although it was the first one that brought me to him.

2. I was traveling by train to Monterrey, to a national theater festival. I was going through the cars on the way to my seat when I recognized him sitting in the dining car. I went up to him and said, “Hello, Carballido,” with the insolence of all my 20 years, “You really look like the photos on the backs of your books.”

I was surprised he knew who the devil I was. He said, “Hello, Berman. Sit down. I’m going to publish you in an anthology. Somebody sent me some of your work. The damned

things are pretty awful.” He said and narrowed his eyes at me, the cunning scoundrel.

“Say, Carballido,” I continued, prolonging the ironic tone, “are you going to punish me for the sin of being Argüelles’s student for minutes or days?” (I was referring to my teacher, Hugo Argüelles, his archrival since their youth.) He laughed and we decided my sin had been paid for in full. I started praising his *Rosa de dos aromas*, which I had seen twice at the theater, and I sprang the question on him that I was interested in: “Say, Carballido, how do you get every sentence to frighten the audience or make it laugh? How do you manage to not have even one minute without emotion? Do you cross out the dull lines? What do you do?”

Carba ordered two *petróleos* (tequila with Worcester sauce) and we began a conversation that never even touched on Carballido’s technique, but did delve into 30 other topics, and we only stopped when we got to Monterrey. I went to sleep off the seven *petróleos* and he went to a dress rehearsal of one of his plays that was being performed at the festival.

When we met up again the following night in the elegant lobby of the Ancira Hotel, he invited me to his table for dinner and pointed out to me how several critics and theater people around us were eating and drinking like they were starving, until they made themselves sick, all on the government tab.

Drunken, with red eyes, big bellies and coarse laughs, the indecent blather of alcohol-fueled presumption. “Look,” he whispered to me, “really look. Take note. Never separate human beings from what they write.”

And then he pursed his lips to plant a phrase in my ear that has remained with me intact in my memory: “Anyone who gets used to eating lobster on the government tab becomes a courtesan.”

That was the first class I received from Carballido, although the topic—that some theater people were courtesans—wasn’t the one that interested me.

3. In the 1980s, the director Abraham Oceransky looked up Carba because the Fine Arts [Institute] had commissioned him to direct his play *El día que se soltaron los leones* (The Day the Lions Escaped). “They picked that play,” said Oceransky, “because it’s yours and because it’s the most inoffensive of all your plays. Since you wrote it 15 years ago, its political punch is so debilitated that it seems like a children’s play.” “And so?” asked Carballido. “And so,” said Oceransky, “I want you to come to a rehearsal and see it with the new ending we’ve written for it.”

In truth, Oceransky's assistant director had rewritten the end, a young playwright just starting out: me. And when Carballido came to the rehearsal at the Julio Prieto Theater and sat down in row 30, raising his hand in greeting, my mouth went completely dry.

The stage lit up and there was actor Carlos Ancira dressed as Emilio Carballido, in wide pants, a denim shirt, a corduroy jacket, hair ruffled. There he was, imitating his gestures and the onomatopoeias he always used to express himself. Clap, clap, clap, with a full-toothed smile; boo, hoo, boo, hoo, with the face of a sad mime.

Carballido was taken aback for the first five minutes of watching himself portrayed on the stage, and then he began to celebrate Ancira's imitation, laughing uproariously.

The play ended: Carba-Ancira was shot down by the Chapultepec Park Zoo police. "Super," he told Oceransky, Ancira and me. "Clap, clap, clap to the third degree," foreshadowing the applause that the ending would, in effect, provoke.

That he wasn't upset by our intromission, that he didn't react with a raging attack of ego, like almost any other writer would have, that he thought of the theater as an open system: that was another key to deciphering Carballido's dramatic aim.

Then, around then, I saw something else that made me understand him better. Carballido told me a long story about something an actress in Colombia had recently told him: her earthshaking encounter with her country's secret police, how they had kidnapped her and how she had gotten away. As though it were nothing, Carballido finished by saying, "Tomorrow I'm going to write it up." And he did: a monologue he sent to the actress so she could stand in front of the audience and tell her story.

The story impressed me. I thought about it and compared it to the complex discourses of other playwrights. And I began to understand Carballido's attitude. His trick was that there wasn't any trick. That he accepted the obvious: theater happens in front of people if it happens. The theater is people performing in front of people. And Carballido had no distance to shorten to achieve it: he considered himself people.

Aside from his pre-dawn writing, he was always surrounded by people. Students, *Tramoya* workers, actors and directors, friends, academics, and more and more friends.

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That's why his writing was so fluid. He wrote about people and for people. That's also why he had such infallible dramatic aim. He had people integrated into his consciousness: where he laughed when he wrote, his fellows would laugh; where his tears fell, they would weep.

Each year Carballido invited his "intimates" over on his birthday. The center of the party was the round dining-room table where ten "intimates" —and no more— could all sit down to a plate of turkey in *mole* sauce, rice and tortillas, all homemade with the flavor of dreams. You ate the delicious *mole* with the other nine and then you went out where the other 50 "intimates" were bursting out of the living room or the study or the patio or the stairway, and you started saying hello to people. Because, while you had been eating *mole*, the "intimates" you had said hello to when you came in had already been replaced by another 50 "intimates."

Two years ago I went to visit him in Jalapa. A stroke had paralyzed half his body and when he spoke, half his mouth refused to enunciate and he was hard to understand. "Can you not write, *maestro*?" I asked, almost stating it as a fact, suffering in advance from the expected answer.

I heard him mumble something incomprehensible: "Mmm rt dktng." We were in his living room, with a big bay window looking out onto Jalapa's blue watercolor sky. I bent over to his lips to decipher what he was saying.

"Certainly I am," repeated Carballido, syllable by syllable with great difficulty. "I'm dictating. I already dictated two books of stories, one for children and one for adults, and I'm preparing two new plays that I already have outlined. Clap, clap, clap."

The playwright most produced in Spanish; the most direct wordsmith life has had in the theater in Spanish: Emilio Carballido. **■**

NOTES

¹ A famous Mexican real-life Robin Hood figure. [Translator's Note.]