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*Dolores, or Happiness* by David Olguin.

## Young Mexican Theater

*María Tarriba Unger\**

By young Mexican theater we mean theater by creator-directors, dramatists and actors born in the 1960s, whose aesthetic proposals not only lead them to break with previous generations, but also brings about a true renaissance in the performing arts. Both in play writing and direction we have artists of rigorous academic formation, no impediment to their using all their imaginative potential, audacity and a great sense of humor, often to explore the darkest facets of human nature.

Less than a decade ago it would have been unthinkable to talk about a "generation." Young people in the performing arts had to work alone or under the tutelage of already well established directors. Many limited themselves to imitating their teachers, and their initiatives in pursuit of an authentic proposal were

rather timid. Today, despite the fact that these young people's stagecraft and play writing differ widely, they do form a group. According to Mexican playwright Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda, "They are



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*Bar and Desert* by Jorge Celaya.

total theater people because they have lived it from the point of view of different crafts, or rather, from the point of view of all the theatrical crafts. They are not like the writers of the previous generation who devote themselves exclusively to the craft of writing. They are extremely active. They do not wait at home for a producer or director to come along. If there is no director, they direct. If there is no producer, they figure out how to produce their works austere. If they cannot find the right actor, they go up on the stage themselves. If there are no critics, they do their own critiques. They live in the theater; they form workshops, reading groups, and they help each other."<sup>1</sup>

These young people do not seem to be particularly interested in strictly national political questions. Their topics deal with issues that can be situated anywhere in the world. Corruption, the abuse

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have to simultaneously act in soap operas, translate, work in an architect's office or as a waiter. For a long time, the theater has been a wonderful example that confirms Darwin's theories: those who survive are the ones most able to adapt and, in this case, those who also have an overriding passion for the theater. Lack of resources often translates into surprising displays of imagination that in the end make up an un-predetermined aesthetic. Public garbage dumps may well provide interesting possibilities for an imaginative set designer. Mónica Kubli designed a set for a play by Jorge Celaya (one of this generation's playwrights, actors and directors) in collaboration with a steam roller operator who squashed metal garbage cans scavenged from the public garbage dump, making futuristic columns reminiscent of Stanley Kubrick. This recycling technique, made obligatory by lack of resources, would be to the liking of more than one ecologist.

"It is unfortunate that adults have lost the good habit of listening to the young," complained Oscar Wilde. In this same vein, we have our new playwrights who have shown that you can be young and profound at the same time. The prolific young dramatist Estela Leñero surprises us with texts about personal worlds in which it is hard to identify any influences. Experimentation seems to be the impulse that drives each of her creations. She moves agilely between the planes of reality and the world of symbols. One of her recurring themes is anxiety. Rascón Banda, to whom we owe the broadest study to date about the work of these young people writes, "Their characters suffer internal anxiety; they live in uncertainty; they confront the unknown and

of power and other questions that are part of a social critique are perceived more generally and often as an intrinsic part of the dark side of humanity. We could speak of an "intimist" theater in the sense that the problems in the family (the abuse of power, just to mention one) are the same and have the same dynamic as problems on the level of the whole society. The search goes from the microcosm to the macrocosm, with a non-specific geographic location, an eclecticism of form that shamelessly mixes the classics with rock stars, pornography with existentialist inquiry, in what seems to be an attempt to find the nature of a human essence underlying the multiplicity of forms.

Given the precarious financial support assigned to cultural activities, doing theater in Mexico means being willing and prepared to do almost anything; it is common for a director or a playwright to

Young Mexican theater seeks to establish a critical dialogue with today's reality.



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*Room in White* by Estela Leñero.

try to break the ties binding them."<sup>2</sup> One of Leñero's most noteworthy works is the piece *Insomnia*, where she experiments with silence on stage. In this production, the audience takes on the role of voyeurs as they sit behind a window and observe a woman trying unsuccessfully to go to sleep. From their comfortable, nose-y position, each member of the audience imagines his or her own story through the silent images of this woman's intimacy.

Considered a dramatist of ideas and conceptions of his own, David Olguín has been able to make his own statement with a wonderful sense of humor, despite the fact that his questions are often acid and skeptical. His stage language uses poetic imagery, metaphors and symbols. It is surprising how this director can present a desolate, pessimistic landscape of the human condition in performances where the dominant note is a sense of humor. In one of his most brilliant productions, *Dolores, or Happiness*, David Olguín takes us through the absurd, laughable labyrinth where our obsessive desire to "be happy" takes us, leaving us dismayed at the prospect of spending our lives like rabbits running after the carrot on the stick, to finally ask ourselves about the nature of happiness and whether it is possible to experience anything similar in our lives on Earth. According to Rascón Banda, "David Olguín is a special author who follows uncharted paths in our play writing. A cultured and well-informed man, surprising in each of his production proposals because of their construction of worlds with laws of their own and his wisely polished texts, where work on the values and destiny of Man can be observed ... his theater goes beyond an examination of immediate reality. His char-



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Luis Mario Moncada's *Super Heroes of the Global Village* directed by Martín Acosta.

Creator-directors use their imaginative potential to explore the darkest facets of human nature.



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*The Door at the End* by David Olguín.

acters move in non-temporal spaces, go through profound existential conflicts, and in them, one can see a serious ontological analysis being carried out about values like happiness, power and death."<sup>3</sup>

Another central figure in young Mexican theater is Martín Acosta (1964). Far from conventional theater, Acosta has always focused on theater liberated from the absolute tyranny of the script to bring out the potential of the other performing arts. In most of his work, movement and the actors' gestures reveal and detail other meanings underlying the text. Lighting and set design combine with blocking to make a language where symbols and metaphors predominate. His shows, subjected to the exploration of abstract scenic visual arts, have not succumbed to the danger that threatens this kind of exploration, that is, the dispersion and darkness that often torment the daring audiences of experimental theater. Martín Acosta's works



Fernando Moguel

Both photos on this page are from *The Motel of Intercepting Destinies* by Luis Mario Moncada.

stake. While the amusing anecdotes of the life of Friar Servando entertain the audience a couple of hours, Jorge Gidi, like his colleagues, takes advantage of the story to explore the language of the stage. His use of virtual reality is impressive. After almost 15 minutes of watching a stage crammed with images, where numerous actors portray different characters, with lights everywhere, impressive costumes and many set changes, the audience is suddenly confronted with a bare stage, white light discharging the humble function of illuminating a few actors dressed in crude black mantles. We owe this impressive experience to able handling of the different languages that make up the theater. The director knows how to amalgamate them so that each could express itself in harmony with the others. Movement, music, gesture, costume and choreography speak, and the result is a sort of symphony of signs that invite the audience to submerge itself in a very particular stage experience allowing much of the production to be constructed in the imagination.

Playwright, actor, director and cultural official, Luis Mario Moncada may be the prototype of the multifaceted dramatist of this generation. His sense of the absurd, as well as his absolute lack of solemnity, have meant that often his creations are dubbed irreverent. The fact is that in his productions of works like Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Moncada has been able to transform "great literature" into a stage production of immense vitality that manages to establish a very contemporary dialogue with today's audience. About one of his most controversial works, *Super Heroes of the Global Vil-*

are neither dark nor dense. He has something to say, he knows what to say and, most importantly, he knows how to say it. His success is due to a balance of poetic imagination, a sense of humor and, last but not least, good sense.

Despite any explicit concern with political questions, young Mexican theater seeks just the right material in Mexican history to confront critically and establish a dialogue with today's reality. One of the pieces with the most impact on audiences is *Servando, or the Art of the Fugue*, written and acted by Jorge Gidi. Here, Gidi presents the adventures of Friar Servando Teresa de Mier, a figure famous for his flamboyant life and polemical discourse about Coatlicue, the mother goddess of the Aztecs. Teresa de Mier held that Our Lady of Guadalupe, a key figure in Mexican culture, was sneakily used by the Spaniard missionaries to take Coatlicue's place in order to more effectively

convince the indigenous population to embrace Christianity. Needless to say, this discourse brought the audacious friar a step away from being burned at the



Fernando Moguel

lage, Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda writes, "This is theater with no borders, that breaks through space, time and dramatic convention. It is a new written theater which requires a new stage production and, therefore, a new audience. Here we do not have a story, a dramatic line and a plot in the conventional manner. The penetration of Nintendo and Atari in day-to-day activities, the creation of media that generate myths, the accumulation of data without analysis or reflection and the reign of cybernetics has transformed the audience and the genre of theater. For the audience that does not require a story and sees the world and its events in fragments, this show is end-of-century theater....Like on a screen, robotized punks appear on the stage in an interminable march, as do the tired heroes created by the mass media, some of whom are surprised in decisive situations and others in futuristic fictions. The myths by couples: a cunning Fidel Castro, a survivor of himself, and a sick, tired Che Guevara; the singer Sid Vicious and his girl Nancy, moments before death.... The dramatic material is fresh and up-to-date in this sociological essay of our times and the mass culture that fragments life."<sup>4</sup>

This obsession with finding new possibilities for the language of the stage may be considered something that all the proposals of the new Mexican theater have in common. As the young director Iona Weissberg says, "There is concern with searching for a theater that would be effective as a means of communication, and to find it, we start with establishing new conventions, the rules of the theatrical game, that can be identified by the audience. Once the appropriate convention is established, the audience has



Wolf by Jorge Celaya.

the codes that allow it to submerge itself in the aesthetic experience of the show."<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the concern for the language of the stage, the new Mexican theater



Vicente Leñero's *Don Juan in Chapultepec*, directed by Iona Weissberg.

ater sets itself up as a forceful answer to the complex and very often chaotic situation of Mexico today. These men and women of the theater are not trying to preach or give absolute answers to a disquieting reality. Rather, they seek to elicit new questions and reflections from the audience through a language which literally submerges it in an unusual aesthetic experience, establishing the bases for a solid proposal where the planes of imagination and dreams coexist with the harsh reality of the daily life of the Mexican people. **NM**

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda, introduction to *Nuevo Teatro* (Mexico City: Ediciones El Milagro/Conaculta, 1997), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Rascón Banda, op. cit., p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Rascón Banda, op. cit., p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Rascón Banda, op. cit., p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> Iona Weissberg in a conversation with the author.