

Mexican dramatists at the end of the millennium

Victor Weinstock *

Mexico's theater would seem to be in danger of extinction. Yet it is encouraging to discover that virtually all of this country's young dramatists are conscious of the precarious situation we find ourselves in, and that there is a broad range of proposals for dealing with the problem of empty performance halls. Theater in Mexico is vigorous precisely because of its diversity. Thus any attempt to establish "models" is doomed to failure.

Having said that, it may be that the most basic model for this generation of dramatists is commitment to their work. I am not referring to a commitment to this or that political tendency, as some allegedly serious analysts would have it. "The committed dramatist," Rafael Sánchez Navarro taught me, "is the one who knows that commitment is based on honesty in the interpretation of a play, respect towards the work of one's colleagues, and devotion to the audience."

Financing and publicity are the key elements in our theater's famous (or infamous) crisis. During his last visit to Mexico the Italian master Eugenio Barba told us that nobody forced us to become dramatists, so we shouldn't complain. Still and all, the Odin Teatret that he directs would be a poor example of self-sufficiency. It

receives a subsidy of up to 45 percent from the Danish government, as well as considerable support from other governments, including Mexico's, allowing it to travel around the world nine months out of every year.

It is true that the governments of the world have other priorities—controlling the AIDS epidemic, for example. That is how the U.S. master Edward Albee, recently awarded his

third Pulitzer Prize, answered a question from Juan José Gurrola last year. A people's health certainly does take priority over its artistic festivals. But it is also true that art, and the theater in particular, is a product and reflection of a healthy society, one which is prepared to question its own foundations and goals. Government must actively participate in the cultural development of those it governs.

Juan Manuel Marentes.



Scene from *Personal Assassin*, directed by Rocío Carrillo.

* Writer and theater director.



Scene from Hugo Hiriart's *The Performance or Dangers of the Game*, directed by Alberto Lomnitz.

During the spring of 1994 I carried out a survey of young Mexican dramatists. Artists of all tendencies participated —directors, playwrights, actors, producers, set and lighting designers, etc.— many of whom wear more than one hat in the theater business.

It would have been impossible to interview all the participants in Mexico's theater world. Among those who could not be included were such key personages as Estela Leñero, Enrique Singer, Mario Iván Martínez, Pilar Mata, Luis Mario Moncada, Francisco de la O, Mauricio Jiménez and all those working in provincial theaters.

● What do you expect from the audience when it confronts your work?

■ *José Acosta*. I hope they have a good time, that they have fun, not

with the trivial things but with what's different.

■ *David Olguín*. What I aspire to do is cause a crisis for the spectator. If we take into account that theater is an art which delves into the human condition in the most direct way, it should have a real impact on the spectator's sensibility. I am interested in polemical audiences, some of which may surrender while others put their guard up.

■ *Rocío Carrillo*. We do "personal theater"; we take our guts onstage and show them to the audience. I hope they understand this, that they're not watching a fiction.

■ *Antonio Serrano*. Since theater is a kind of conversation with others, a kind of relationship that ranges from love to hate, what I hope for is that the audience will listen to me, feed me, because after all stories are born

from the audience. My work is like a filter for the reproduction of what they tell me.

■ *Laura Rode*. My greatest hope is that people will go to the theater with their minds blank. I want people to have fun like I do. Sometimes audiences are too solemn. If the audience relaxes we can put on more complex shows which are very rich in visual terms and in every other way. If the audience were more receptive we would grow together.

● Looking at it from the other side, what do you hope for when you go to the theater?

■ *José Acosta*. That it surprise me, that it show me something I don't see in my daily life. Even if it's a naturalistic work, I hope to see magic.

■ *Alberto Lomnitz*. If the play is good, it seems like time isn't passing, even if

the play lasts three hours. If it's a bad play it seems eternal. I try to lose myself in the conventions it presents me; but some works make this impossible since I'm distracted by their bad construction, their falsity.

● Taking Mexico's economic situation into account, where do you think the resources for financing the theater should come from? What should be the role of government and/or private enterprise?

■ *David Olguín*. One model I'm familiar with, which has produced very good results, is England's Arts Council. It's a question of achieving independence for artists. On the one hand the government should provide minimal but constant financial support, while on the other it hopes that artistic groups learn how to stay in the black. Attempts have been made to imitate this in Mexico, through competitions organized by the

National Fund for Culture and the Arts (FONCA) and the Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS), for example. In both cases efforts failed because of the institutions' own inertia. The good will of Mario Espinosa at IMSS was not enough, since he was tied up in an administrative apparatus that doomed projects to failure. There's no continuity. If you receive support from FONCA you just put on a show, and

A bit about the interviewees

José Acosta (Puebla, 1957). Director of the Taller del Sótano (Basement Workshop), with which he produced *El otro exilio* (The Other Exile), *De nota roja* (From the Crime Page) and *Alicia*. His group has won several prizes; as an individual he was awarded a prize as director of the year. Has received support from the National Fund for Culture and the Arts (FONCA) and the Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS) and participated in several international festivals.

David Olguín (Mexico City, 1963). Author and director of *Bajo tierra* (Underground) and *La puerta al fondo* (The Door in Back). He has received scholarships from the Mexican Writers' Center, FONCA and the British Council. In addition to his plays, he has published the book *Ernesto Sábato: Ida y vuelta* (Ernesto Sábato: There and Back).

Rocío Carrillo (Mexico City, 1963). Director of the "Secret Organization," which came out of the La Rendija (Split) group. Key works include *Infinitamente disponible* (Infinitely Available) and *Asesino personal* (Personal Assassin). Her group has received support from FONCA and was nominated by the Association of Theater Journalists as best independent group.

Alberto Lomnitz (Santiago, Chile, 1959). Director of the *Seña y Verbo* (Sign and Word) group, composed of both deaf and hearing actors. With this group, he put on Hugo Hiriart's *La representación o los peligros del juego* (The Performance or Dangers of the Game). He was also in charge of the premieres of Estela Leñero's *Casa llena* (Full House) and *Toodos los días* (Each and Every Day). New York's Hunter College invited him to write and direct a play on the 500th anniversary of Columbus' arrival in America, *Moros y cristianos* (Moors and Christians). He is the protagonist of *De nudos* (On Knots). He has received support from FONCA, IMSS and the Mexico/USA Trust for Culture.

Rafael Sánchez Navarro (Mexico City, 1958). He is known above all for his performances in *Cómo ser una buena madre judía* (How to Be a Good Jewish Mother), *Cuentos de Chekhov* (Tales by Chekhov), *Las memorias de Raquel* (Memories of Raquel), *Amadeus*, *El hombre elefante* (The Elephant Man) and *Modigliani*. Among works he has directed are *Drácula*, with José Alonso and Diana Bracho; *Harvey*, with Ignacio López Tarso; and *Amantes* (Lovers), with Julio Alemán and Sergio Corona.

Antonio Serrano (Mexico City, 1955). Director of *A destiempo* (At the Wrong Time) and *Doble cara* (Double Face). Author and director of *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas* (Sex, Shame and Tears). These three works have been awarded prizes, and he was given an individual prize for the third. He is currently preparing a new work, *Café Americano*.

Laura Rode (Mexico City, 1962) has been a visual designer for several operas at the Palace of Fine Arts, among them *Gianni Schicchi*, *Madame Butterfly* and *La vida breve* (Short Life), the last of which went on tour to Florence. Outstanding theater work has included designs for the productions *Fuenteovejuna*, *Muertos de la risa* (They Died Laughing), *Rita Julia* and *Adorables enemigas* (Adorable Enemies). She has been nominated several times by critics and won the prize for best set design for *¡Qué plantón!* (What a Wait!).

that's it. With no continuity in financial support, in the long run it's impossible to keep a company going. To me it seems unlikely that the private sector would participate in producing art theater; what's more likely is that they would buy artists for their own projects.

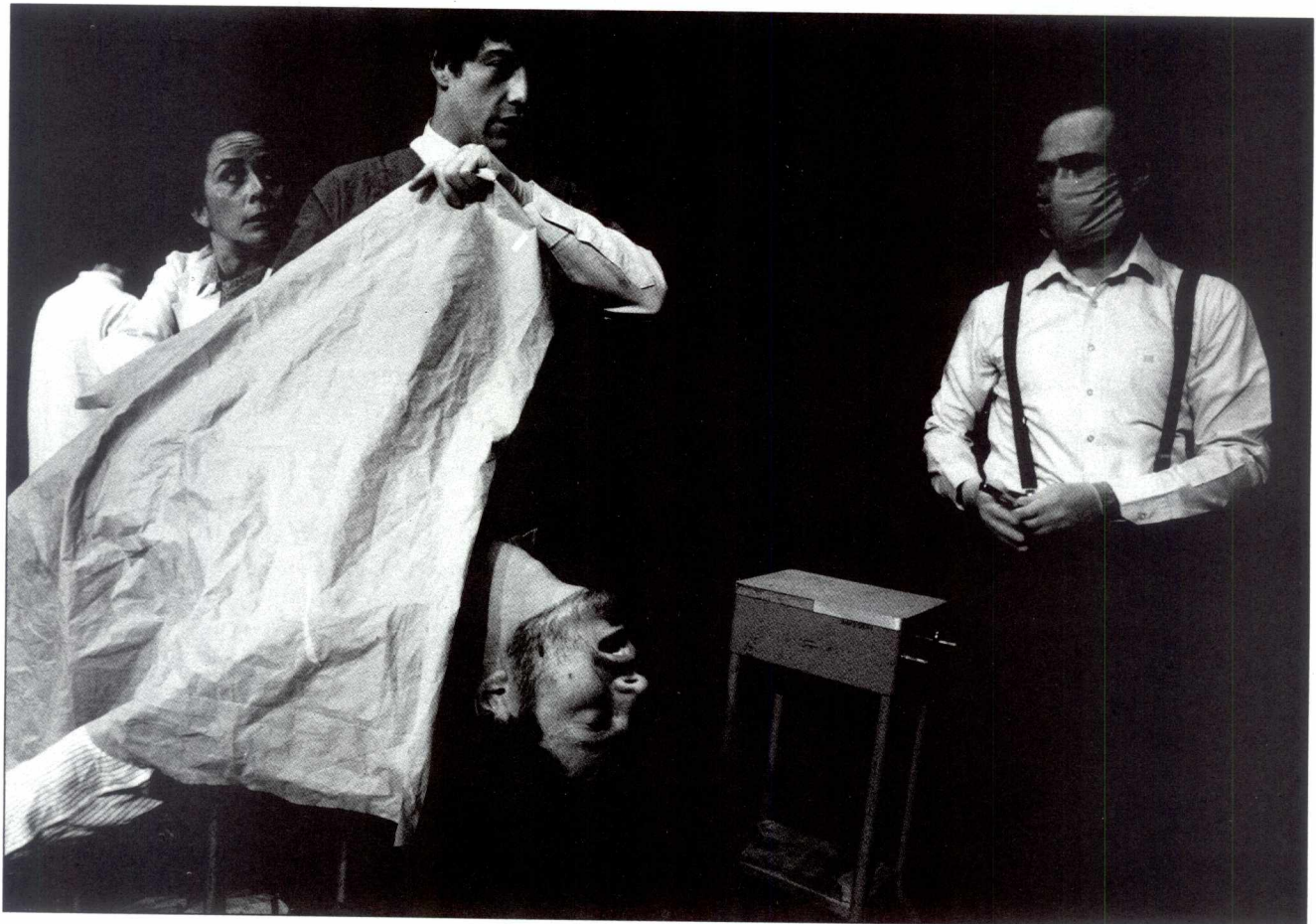
■ *Rocio Carrillo*. We are obligated to create our own infrastructure. You have to learn to survive with what comes from the box office. At any point now we're going to have to take over spaces, put on a performance and take off running. You have to learn to recycle scenery and costumes. We have to make a lot of noise and hope that the specialists will support us. I wish there were a personal relationship with institutions'

functionaries. I don't think the anonymous selection of projects is a good thing. Government has an obligation to support art; this isn't a question of paternalism but of responsibility and cultural memory.

■ *Alberto Lomnitz*. The idea in recent times has been that theater ought to be financed by the box office. I think that's a mistake; I think it is very important that government and private enterprise participate. The government should modify the law so dramatists can receive tax-exempt donations. This is a simple process in the United States, and it's helped keep independent groups going. Private enterprise should feel that it's in its own interest to invest in the theater, for fiscal and publicity reasons. The Mexican government, which has

traditionally supported the arts, should change existing legislation so as to seduce private investors.

■ *Antonio Serrano*. The government has abandoned its paternalistic and managerial stance towards the economy. There has been an opening to private enterprise. I feel the same thing should happen with the arts. I don't see why art should be the government's responsibility. Just as productive and service goods are produced, so too there are people who produce artistic goods, even if at the utilitarian level they have no real value. The fact that the theater has been subsidized for so many years has created the sort of megalomaniacal and onanistic monstrosities that we sometimes see on our stages, which seem to have no



Scene from performance of *The Other Exile* at Chicago's International Festival.



Scene from *The Door in Back*, written and directed by David Olgún.

interest in communicating anything to the public. Obviously that's reflected at the box office. Surviving by box-office receipts prevents the staging of spectacles which are just a cult to their creators.

■ **Laura Rode.** The price of tickets is very low; it doesn't cover costs. I feel it is the government's obligation to finance high-quality shows, since no private producer can do it. A private producer invests in the theater for one of two reasons: because it seems like good business or because it looks like fun. If it's the first reason, he's making a mistake. And if he wants to have fun, I think the government should support those producers, open the official theaters to them, whatever is necessary.

● Do you think there really is a crisis of the Mexican theater? If so, do you have any proposals for solving it?

■ **José Acosta.** I think we are not giving the public what it needs. While

theater will never be replaced by videos or movies, the audience at the end of the 20th century has other expectations. It gets many stimuli that the 20th-century theater, which we stubbornly continue to produce, does not satisfy.

■ **David Olgún.** Yes, there is a crisis. But in the midst of that crisis there is a very talented generation. It's been a long time since such an important generational phenomenon appeared in Mexico. There are various proposals, but demand is minimal. The public has abandoned the theaters... it's the economic crisis, television, who knows. And drama schools are no longer offering solid training. There are no serious theater journals, apart from *Repertorio*, and it looks like even that will be shutting down. Theater is a second-class citizen in our country. That's how we're treated. But there is some hope, since our generation is a very purposeful one.

■ **Rocío Carrillo.** The old masters created a formula for success and stuck with it. There's no longer any impact. Then there was a generation of flash-in-the-pan explosions. Finally, our generation seems to be very preoccupied with achieving the masters' perfection, and takes few risks. That is the crisis.

■ **Alberto Lomnitz.** There is a lot of supply and little demand. The theaters are empty. It's common to hear the new generation say, "I don't like the theater." Maybe that's because we're not doing very good theater. "Neo-liberal" ideas are pushing us into the market of supply and demand. Supposedly the theater will purify itself naturally since it will have to survive by what it earns at the box office. I don't believe in that. What will be achieved, in the best case, is a popular theater. But we all know that including a TV star in the cast, even if they can't act, or including the word *sex* several times in advertisements, will attract people to the theater. Yet that doesn't mean the play is any

better than others. The day I figure out how to solve the crisis, I'll call you right away.

■ **Rafael Sánchez Navarro.** The theater of commitment has always been in crisis. This is a very hard trade. It's not the glamour that people see from the outside. We ought to learn from the young creators of the new Mexican cinema: their subject matter, their commitment, their solidarity. Distribution was one of the keys to the success of films by Carlos Carrera and Alfonso Cuarón, for example. People heard about them, people filled the movie theaters, and the film makers didn't let them down. I wish institutions and private enterprise would provide dramatists with the same kind of help. An independent theater group can't pay the same amount as a big supermarket chain can for television time and space in the papers. We cannot compete. If the public finds out about it, they attend. And if they don't... it's tragic, because the theater is ephemeral. Mexico City has twenty million inhabitants. Since there is no promotional support, the theaters are empty. At one time the General Office of Radio, Television and Cinematography provided support to dramatists in the form of publicity. Today, Televisa helps its actors; radio stations offer interviews and commercials in return for tickets. There's some support, but a lot more is needed.

■ **Antonio Serrano.** I've heard this tale about a crisis since I was born. It's true that people don't go to the theater. Many think that's the fault of the alienation produced by the mass media and consumerism. I ask myself, haven't we caused this famous crisis of the theater ourselves, because we've forgotten about the audience? What do we have to tell them, why do we want them to come? What's in crisis is the content and the way of saying what we want to say X