

Barking from the Stage

An Interview with Ludwik Margules

María Tarriba Unger*

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.”

Born in Poland in 1933, Margules lived in Europe until the age of 24, surviving World War II and the Russian invasion of his homeland. When he arrived in Mexico after studying journalism at the University of Warsaw, he tried his hand at very different occupations: he was a school prefect; he worked in a brick factory; he was a photographer’s assistant and a film student. Finally he decided to dedicate himself completely to directing in the theater.

Beginning in the 1970s, Margules became a teacher and started producing plays distinguished by a style simultaneously severe, original and imaginative. A myth began to grow around him: actors and students complained of his being excessively demanding, although at the

same time they expressed their extreme admiration for him. His productions have always been controversial both with audiences and theater critics. “Talking about Margules” became one of the main amusements of university theater students. And, truth be told, throughout his career, Margules has logged up impressive achievements like the productions of *Faust*, *King Richard the Third*, *Uncle Vanya*, and *The Life of the Marionettes* by Bergman.

In 1996 he staged *Quartet*, a National Theater Company Production, by Heinrich Müller, which was a smash hit.

The play, based on a novel by Laclois, was later adapted for the screen to make *Dangerous Liaisons*. Ludwik Margules used the story to explore the difficult terrain of the links between eroticism and power.

This interview for *Voices of Mexico* took place at Margules’ home. The director speaks in such a low voice—it is almost inaudible—that it creates the impression of someone used to being listened to with great attention. He expresses himself vehemently with extremely long pauses, making it seem that he is concerned with communicating his ideas with great precision.



Margules during a rehearsal of *Quartet*.

Photos by José Jorge Carreón

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María Tarriba: Before coming to Mexico, you spent a large part of your youth in Poland. What meaningful experiences do you remember from that period of your life?

Ludwik Margules: 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.

MT: I understand you lived through both World War II and the Russian invasion. How did those events affect your perception of life?

LM: Yes. In the first place, those events meant I spent six years in exile in Russia.

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. When I returned to Poland in 1946, I found a country that had been invaded by the Nazis and then subjected to Soviet totalitarianism. All of that made me skeptical, very skeptical about Man and the possibility of being able to create some kind of organization among human beings. And, I would say, it also was the source of a redoubled essentialist quest.

MT: A redoubled quest? Could you elaborate on that?

LM: Yes, yes. It was precisely because of my skepticism about the goodness of Man that I became interested in a redoubled 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.

MT: Among your actors, your students and the people you work with in general, you have the reputation of being a "hard man." Were the experiences you mentioned about the war somehow the cause of that personality you are said to have?

LM: No. That has nothing to do with the war. Rather, it is related to being very demanding of myself. 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.

MT: Why did you start doing theater?

LM: I have always said that the answer to that question is treacherous and manipulative. The thing is, [by this time] one



Quartet was a smash hit.

has already developed an “over-rationalized” answer, which may well have something to do with vanity itself, since whenever you try to explain why you work in one art and not another, you become slanderous. Perhaps the answer is that I work in the theater because of intuition or compulsion or certain tendencies. You see, I’ve seen a lot of theater. I don’t have the perfect answer to the question. But besides that, I think that the difficulties of adapting to Mexico —another climate, another way of life, with both great obstacles and attractions— may well have contributed to opening up something that had already been there since childhood. In any case, 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. I have seen commedia dell’arte without knowing it was commedia dell’arte. I have seen German expressionist theater, the great Russian theater and also the theater of the Russians who, in their own way, imagine that it is universal theater. I have seen a great deal of theater —American theater, too. My whole life I have been nourished by the theater. I am very grateful to Mexico for how difficult it was to adapt to it; that may well have to do with my being in the theater. But, for me, the most important thing is the need to speak, or, as I say, the need to “bark” from the stage.

MT: How would you situate Mexican theater within the context of international theater?

LM: I think that in terms of the organization of the theater, we are totally in the dark. But in terms of talent, I would say we are the same or better than other

countries. However, very often talent is squandered and wasted for the lack of a full theatrical life, quality theater, that would have some kind of continuity from one generation to another. Edward Gordon Craig once said that the theater is the highest expression of human intelligence since it manages to fuse all of human experience together through the different arts that go into making a production.

MT: You once referred to the director’s job as an attempt at “playing God.” Why?

LM: The director creates life on the stage. To that extent he becomes omnipresent. Besides, it just could be no other way if we think of directing as authorship in which all the elements are recodified. Then, I would speak, rather, of a poetic endeavor, of a director who shapes a poetic endeavor through his fiction, through a narration on stage. In that sense, the director is really a god, a creator who discovers worlds to shape a fiction through which poetry is expressed. This is the way the director works.



In *Quartet* Margules explored the links between eroticism and power.

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: While you are directing, what kind of relationships do you try to create among your collaborators?

LM: Relationships of teamwork. Relationships where each person contributes with his or her abilities to develop the collective task. It is a concert of the individual values of each artist who is part of the community of creators to develop the piece.

MT: What behind-the-scenes problems do you have with your collaborators during rehearsals?

LM: Different problems. But in general, you confront the difficulty of orga-

nizing different sensibilities, sensibilities that often do not find expression in collective work. This sometimes manifests itself as a need for individual self-affirmation or, rather, self-centeredness. We sometimes have diametrically opposed personalities who, although they are in the same field, have great difficulty contributing harmoniously to putting on a play. You have logistical conflicts, personal explosions, conflictive situations, but, all in all, thanks to the artists' and the technicians' sensibilities coming to the fore, even if in conflictive form, they finally all participate in making theater; they do it, they build it and they conform.

MT: In putting on a play, different languages are used: the script itself, the scenery, blocking, etc. How do you manage to combine these different languages?

LM: I talk to the person in charge of each of the different disciplines involved in the language of his or her discipline.

Woe be it to any director who is not better than his set designer or who doesn't understand the processes of actors' assimilation better than the actor himself. All this is part of the theatrical, cultural baggage that directors must have.

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

LM: It means 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. In the last analysis, organicity is finding the linkages. I would add that ornament, adornments, wordiness, fireworks, histrionic excess are all factors opposed to organicity in a performance. It is, then, the triumph of a style over rhetorical dispersion.

MT: You have taught directing for many years. 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.

MT: Doesn't being a director, insofar as it necessarily implies domination, sometimes encompass a hidden ambition for power?

LM: The ambition for power, which frequently appears while preparing a



Margules' productions have always been controversial. Here a scene from *Don Juan*. A National Theater Company production.

piece, is an obstacle to getting the job done. It's not a question of governing; it's a question of producing a work of art. There is a director, who directs a group of people involved in putting on a play, and this group must necessarily express the artistic vision of the person who creates, who puts into movement the work of the theater. In that sense, the director is the leader, the leader of a group which cannot and must not betray the idea of an artistic project, and, at the same time, each collaborator in putting on the piece has to develop his or her discipline contributing his/her own sensibility. The director has to take care that the project not get distorted and is enriched by the contributions of everyone involved. The tone or styles of communication the director uses with his group frequently vary. Some make the group's communication easier, others make it more difficult, but they are only different tones, ways of approaching teamwork. 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, of his ability to express his ideas through the performance.

MT: In your work as an artist, do you identify recurring themes? Or, more clearly put, what are your obsessions?

LM: Oh, yes. I would say that a theme that has interested me for many years is how power works in Man's behavior. Man in the sense of a being, a doer and a victim of power, the kind of power that can make Man's misery possible, the presence of both the magnificent and the miserable in human beings and their behavior. 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.

MT: How do you understand the conflict between eroticism and power?

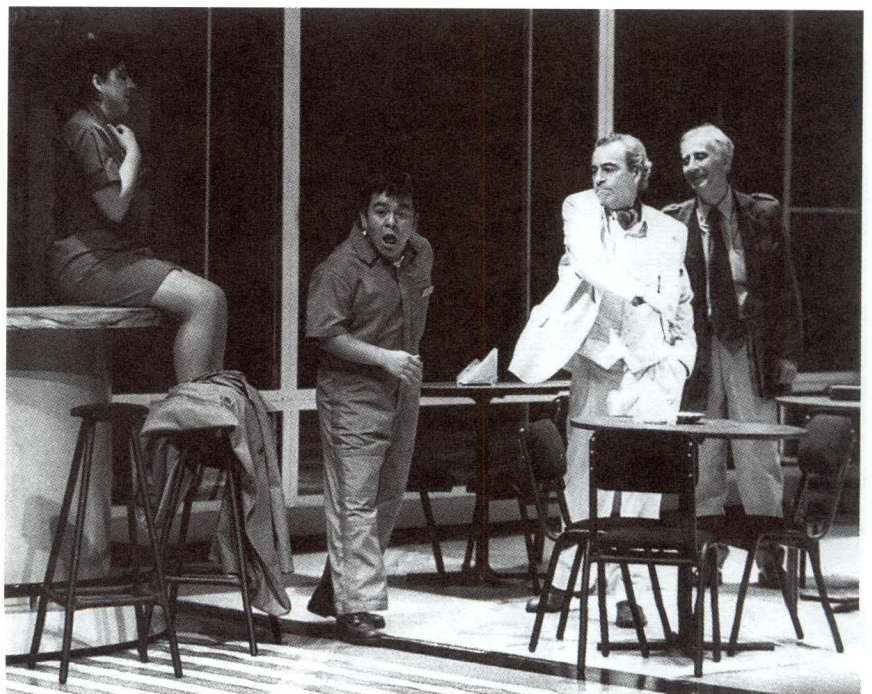
LM: That conflict is always present and I see it as the essence of the tragic spirit. I believe that the imperious need of being realized in love turns into acts of power.

MT: Could you say something about the process that goes from the first idea about a general topic to its crystallization on the stage?

LM: It's all related to having the right strategy for organizing the work that goes into staging a piece. In the end, besides all the analytical work that comes before going into rehearsal, the strategy consists of never breaking the bridges of communication with your own sensibility under pressure; the most terrible obstacle to this is being demanding of yourself. And secondly, the ability to create a strategy that permits effective communication among the collaborators, the aim of which is the performance itself.

MT: What about the search for an effective strategy for communicating with the audience?

LM: There are no recipes for that. There is only experience, and in every work, in every audience's coming together with the performance, the experience is different. The director sets himself the task of seeking mutual participation with the members of the audience. Putting



One of Margules' obsessions has been discovering the different facets of human behavior.

himself in the same range of ideas, of sensibility. In the end, he aspires to finding the same latitude, the latitude of perception, the same latitude of the ability to be amazed. This is essential for building fictions on stage.

MT: To what point are you interested in being understood by a given audience?

LM: Naturally, there is a desire to be understood by an educated, sensitive audience. I'm interested in the most sensitive member of the audience and it is with that person that I try to communicate. If on the way it turns out I am understood by another person, or many other people, I consider myself lucky. The "general public" does not interest me. There is no such thing. Audiences are defined by tastes, aspirations, desires, their situations. There is no "audience" as such. There are carnival audiences, and vaudeville audiences, and "cultured" audiences (the narrowest minded of all). And, of course,

there is the sensitive audience, which is not highly educated but which is a wonderful audience. There is also the better educated audience, which has the theatrical culture that allows it to be the most open, the most sensitive. It is this audience which wants to communicate with the director's internal world, with the performance, even though this implies a certain level, aspirations, selectivity and critical ability. Above all, there is an audience which wants to join emotions and intellect, and not separate these human qualities.

MT: What is your opinion of the new forms of art presented on stage like dance-theater and performance, among others?

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.

MT: What currents do you see in Mexican theater today?

LM: I would say that, above all, there is a search for identity in general, and specifically, the search for theatrical identity, through the use of the raw material that is Mexican history. I'm referring here to the work of Vicente Leñero, or David Olguín, for example. I would also mention attempts at sensorial communication clearly in detriment of intellectual values. In the last few years, there have also been what you could call pamphleteering productions, although I can also see great acting talent bursting onto the scene, particularly among women. I would mention the search for contemporary values in the classics. There is also a lot of "didactic" work, in the pejorative sense. But I would also say there is a great flow of talent. We have a great set designer like Alejandro Luna. I think there is a tendency toward enormous use of the plastic arts in theater production. There is really nothing revolutionary in our theater. Commercial theater is generally badly done. It would be nice if they had real professional aspirations.

MT: Hobbies?

LM: Photography, cooking, skin diving. Diving is very special; it is the maximum sensation of freedom, of beauty.

The interview ends when Margules, characteristically brusque, abruptly turns off the tape recorder. **NM**



When putting on a play, Margules strives to communicate the essence without ornament.