

On Memory and Imagination

The burgeoning exchange between Mexican and U.S. writers is not a simple theatrical transaction

BY ANDREA THOME

The first time I went to Mexico City, I arrived on an overnight bus from the northern city of Monterrey. I had fallen asleep riding through deserts and mountains, Vicente Fernandez singing in glowing VHS from the bus's TV screens above me, and woke up navigating seemingly endless waves of streets and squat buildings that spread forever under a giant silvery sky. Row after row of clay-topped city rooftops rippled outward like the vast lake that once lay in that valley, lapping the feet of the volcanoes that ringed it. The city was low, the streets wide. The sky was huge. Once in a while a single tower or metallic needle reached up above the surface and tried to pierce the smog-hued sheen, but was soon pulled back by the city's steady gravity.

In my half-awake state I imagined the flowering cactus from Aztec history—a lone vertical form on an island in the middle of a lake—and the eagle that perched on it, eating a snake, signaling that this was to be the site of the Aztecs' new home, Tenochtitlan. *La ciudad de México, en el Distrito Federal*. El D.F. The closer our bus got to the center, the more I was certain that we really were heading into the navel of the world. And when I saw the main plaza, *el zócalo*, the words of Bernal Díaz del Castillo, a foot-soldier with Cortés, echoed in my head: "Some of the soldiers among us who had been in many parts of the world, in Constantinople, and all over Italy, and in

Rome, said that so large a market place and so full of people, and so well regulated and arranged, they had never beheld before." By the time my first trip to el D.F. was over, I believed what I had always heard from my father and read in stories: Mexico City was the center of the universe.

The city is full of green, more than you might expect for a city of more than 20 million people. Ribbons of lush plants and trees sprint down the middles of never-ending avenues or creep through pockets between buildings, spill out of corner parks and hidden plazas, peer high over rooftops of tile or concrete.

The 11th time I come to Mexico City, I find myself in the middle of the largest of green spaces, el Antiguo Bosque de Chapultepec (the Ancient Forest of Chapultepec). Twice as large as Central Park and used as a park for 500 years longer, it was once an Aztec royal retreat and botanical garden, and is still the most iconic and richly historic of Mexico City's parks, filled with lakes, centuries-old woods, a castle and the remains of pre-conquest sculptures. I am there to see a play...or am I? It's a misty night, and the sound of singing insects echoes from the trees as about 30 "audience" members board a trolley by the Casa del Lago, a former car club for Mexico's elite but now the park's cultural center. We are a mix of old and young, hip theatre kids and genuine children, but all of us are excited to be inside the park at night (it's normally off-limits after 6 p.m.); the childlike thrill of getting to do something forbidden and mysterious makes us co-conspirators. Amplified by



A scene from Elena Guiochins's *Desmontaje amoroso*.

ROBERTO BLENDA

the train's speakers, a young woman acts as our guide on this night tour.

The trees and tall rock formations of the park rise ahead of us as the train curves down a path. Suddenly, a bell rings and a bicycle emerges from the fog—and on it, a man dressed in the antique uniform of a Night Guard, complete with button coat and cap, circa 1900. He catches up to the train, waving and pedaling next to us, and tells us that he is the *Guardia* of the park, a job he's had for over 500 years...since before the Spaniards came, when the poet-king Nezahualcōyotl had his palace here...

So begins *Paseos nocturnos por el Bosque de Chapultepec* (*Nighttime Strolls in the Forest of Chapultepec*), a wondrous and immersive experience created by the Mexican playwright and director Alberto Villarreal. For the next hour and a half (or more, or less—I don't know, because time seems to stretch and melt and become malleable), the *Guardia* accompanies us through the park, adding his stories to our guide's script while he tries to court her from his bicycle.

Past and present intermingle: Songs of the Revolution play over the trolley's speakers. We step off to surround one of the Ahuehuetl trees planted by Moctezuma; next we ride on to the site where the Niños Héroes (Child Heroes) died—one of them dramatically jumping from Chapultepec Hill—rather than surrender to the invading U.S. Marine Corps during the Mexican-American War. We see places we have never seen before and feel that we may never see again—as if, when we ride away, these places will dissolve into the night and the past, that only our timeless *Guardia* can conjure them. And all through the journey, we watch this *Guardia* romance our very modern-day tour guide, a flirtatious wrestling between the past and the present that eventually transforms into a love story. As we ride and walk through the park, we palpably move through time—back and forth, forward and back, a constant dialogue.

In the theatrical worlds of Villarreal and many of his fellow Mexican playwrights, time feels fluid, permeable and cyclical. Sounds and images layer over each other and waken one's sense of perception. States of existence can melt in a moment, and physical separations can disappear and appear within the same scene.

In Elena Guiochins's play *Desmontaje amoroso: Fragmentos de un*



Paola Izquierdo in various guises in her *De príncipes, princesas y otros bichos*. COURTESY OF PAOLA IZQUIERDO

discurso escénico—translated by playwright Andy Bragen into English as *A Lover's Dismantling: Fragments of a Scenic Discourse*—two couples try to resolve the dynamics of their fluctuating relationships. But in Guiochins's reality, she explains, “Time does not exist as an absolute,” and not even physical bodies limit the storytelling: Actors become and un-become characters for a moment, a scene or various scenes, trading partners or slipping in and out of shared dialogues. One of her characters, speaking of human consciousness, could just as well be summing up the dynamically fragmented and visceral yet elusive universe of Mexican playwriting when she says, “There are only two kinds of thoughts: memory and imagination.”

“What strikes me most about the work of the Mexican dramatists that I've encountered so far is a strong preoccupation with theatrical form very much influenced by post-dramatic theatre, especially from Germany,” writes playwright Caridad Svich, who has translated works by Mexican playwrights Silvia Peláez, Verónica Musalem Moreno and Hugo Alfredo Hinojosa. “There's also a very distinct, dark sense of humor—very funereal and wicked, cheating and laughing at death. Also an often-coded discussion of class, gender, sex and racial differences. The work on the whole tends to be bold and defiant, and very much connected to a climate and culture of violence represented on stage and/or intimated in the language.” Villarreal, whose work constantly plays with aesthetic borders and experiments with structure, has said that the post-dramatic emphasizes “what already existed in Mexican new writing, which is fragmentation of time and space, and the ability for dreams and death to coexist.”

I've had the chance to get to know a number of Mexican playwrights intimately since New York's Lark Play Development Center, in partnership with FONCA (Mexico's National Fund for Culture and Arts), began hosting a U.S./Mexico Playwright Exchange in fall 2006; I serve as the program's director. Villarreal and Guiochins are two of the 16 Mexican playwrights that have come to this translation laboratory to play and collaborate with



Alberto Villarreal's *Paseos nocturnos por el Bosque de Chapultepec*, in Mexico City. COURTESY OF ALBERTO VILLARREAL

U.S. playwrights, directors and actors who strive to create English-language versions of their plays that can live and breathe in a different cultural context. Five of these artists and plays—including Guiochins's *A Lover's Dismantling*—will travel to Chicago this July for the Goodman Theatre's biennial Latino Theatre Festival, where festival director Henry Godinez and literary manager Tanya Palmer invited five local Latino theatre companies to select a Mexican play translated through the Lark program. Working with the original playwright and translator, each company will present a staged reading of the play for Chicago audiences, July 23–25.



ADRIAN MARTINEZ

Guiochins

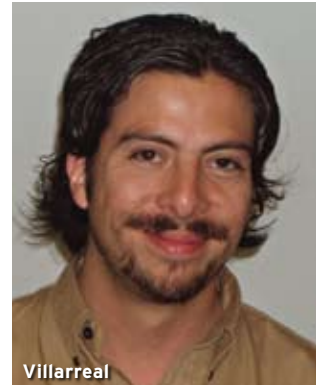


Hinojosa



LARK PLAY DEVELOPMENT CENTER

Izquierdo



Villarreal

I AM SOMETIMES JEALOUS OF MY PLAYWRITING

colleagues in Mexico. Like many other U.S. playwrights (and many other playwrights throughout the Americas), I am constantly trying to figure out how to make a living, cobbling together adjunct teaching and part-time theatre jobs, the occasional grant or commission, and freelance gigs. When I talk to fellow playwrights in Mexico, and they tell me about the many grants available for playwrights there, my eyes spin and I get wistful. There's the grant called Jóvenes Creadores, which gives 200 artists aged 18–34 8,000 pesos (about \$640) per month for a full year and connects them with mentors and gives them a national forum.

And that's just for the beginners. For artists with more experience, there is the Sistema Nacional de Creadores (the National System of Creators). Recipients of this fellowship receive roughly \$25,000 a year for three years to support their work as playwrights. This money goes straight to the artist, not to a mediating institution or to production funds. And there are many smaller fellowships, project-based production funds, international residencies, publishing opportunities, prizes and other resources available to playwrights—opportunities that number in the hundreds. Most of these are funded or co-funded by the Mexican state, and administered through FONCA, the National Fund for Culture and the Arts.

But every system has its problems. Playwright Verónica Musalem Moreno, who brought her powerful play *Adela y Juana* to the Lark, has spoken about an unintended consequence of state support for new work: Since so many of the slots available to writers for funding and production have to be granted by the state or by universities, those who don't make this cut find it difficult to forge their own way. In the non-state-supported realm, she says, so much depends on the ability to court theatre stars and renowned directors—unless you decide to direct your own work, as many playwrights do. Javier Malpica, whose play *Papá está en la Atlántida* (*Our Dad Is in Atlantis*) was translated by Jorge Cortiñas in 2006

and has since been produced in several U.S. theatres (as well as published in this magazine), believes the challenge for new plays is a lack of producers and “support to take your projects forward.” His own play is an example: *Our Dad* was not produced in Mexico until after it was translated and produced in the U.S. Soon after, he also finally received “official” acknowledgment for his longtime work in the form of a three-year National System of Creators grant. This summer at the Goodman, audiences will have another chance to see “what immigration looks like, not from here but from over there,” as Cortiñas describes *Our Dad*.

Another challenge: Mexico City's theatre venues are mainly rental houses without governing aesthetics, so that one week they might present an avant-garde piece and the next a boulevard comedy. This makes it difficult for audiences to identify a venue as representing a certain kind of work or artistic mission.

I wonder, though, if what many Mexican playwrights see as problems are actually net positives. With few producing houses with a particular identity or aesthetic, and with many playwrights scrambling to produce themselves, the result is a proliferation of theatrical styles, languages and processes among the plays you might find on stage on any given night in the Distrito Federal. Maybe the lack of these kinds of cultural arbiters actually means that the idiosyncratic variety and approaches and worldviews of each playwright and theatre creator is actually more reflected in the theatrical scene's offerings. Maria Fernanda Coppel, the U.S. playwright who translated Edgar Álvarez's play *Gourmet Homicide: or the Fine Art of Murder*, concurs: “Mexican playwrights are willing to take huge risks in their work because many times they don't have producers to answer to.”

Could it be possible that in this case, artistic waves are generated not by institutions, but by the artists on the ground, making and producing their own work, and supporting, arguing with and responding to one another?

IT WAS ON MY SECOND VISIT TO MEXICO CITY, IN 2004, that I found myself sitting around a giant square luncheon table under the 20-foot ceilings of what had been a grand colonial house, with more than a dozen Mexican theatre artists. I was there with John Clinton Eisner to forge the partnership that would turn into the Lark's U.S./Mexico Exchange, and an invaluable partner on the Mexican side was the gracious, wise Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda, then head of Mexico's writers' union (SOGEM). Rascón Banda,

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who died in 2008, was a veteran playwright who had broken formidable intra-cultural barriers against *norteños* like him (his birthplace, and his preferred setting, was the state of Chihuahua). As progressive as the cultural elite of Mexico City may be, some still share a national stereotype of Northern Mexicans as backwards or even “savage.” Rascón Banda defied these prejudices and consistently put on stage the people and stories of his home. Perhaps his status as an outsider who successfully crossed barriers within his own country is part of what gave him the vision to see the value of artists communicating across national borders as well.

Playwright Cutberto López shares not only Rascón Banda’s Northern heritage (he lives and works in the state of Sonora, along

the border with Arizona), but also his commitment to depicting the souls and stories that surround him. His play *Yamaha 300* tells the story of the “little people” that work on the fringes of the narco-trafficking world: the small fishermen who, in order to survive, have given up fishing for drug-ferrying along the coast of Sinaloa. Yamaha 300 is the name of the beloved engine of the motorboat that a naïve young drug smuggler relies on (and sings to, and caresses) in order to try to make his modest dreams come true. That his fantasies end darkly is only too reflective of the reality that López must acknowledge every day; indeed, he could not even present the play in the town it’s set in because the actors’ lives would be in danger from narcos who could interpret the story as referring to

real events. It will be presented a thousand miles away, however, in the Chicago festival this summer, by Teatro Vista. And López’s work lives in the heart of another border playwright from the other side—the translator of *Yamaha*, Mando Alvarado—who speaks of his collaboration with López as “more than just a textual exchange, but a conversation in two languages, two stories, two souls being raised apart but coming together because we came from the same mother. It felt like home.”

Chicago theatregoers will also have the chance to hear Tijuana playwright Hugo Alfredo Hinojosa’s play *Desiertos* (*Deserts*) at the Latino Festival, both in the original Spanish (in a reading by Aguijón Theater) and in Svich’s masterful translation (to be directed by the Goodman’s TCG New Generations fellow

Julianne Ehre). Svich describes the play as a “surreal, stark journey into and through a landscape of voices that bleed the land and tell it its stories of weeping, chaos and dreaming.” She says that Hinojosa told her the play is “not only about Mexico but about Africa and the many countries and liminal places where people cross: the deserts of the soul many live with and others allow to exist.”

Hinojosa is also, like Rascón Banda, a transplant working and writing in a theatre scene that is heavily weighted toward work (and writers) from the country’s “center,” Mexico City, where the work and subject matter of “regional” writers is not always taken seriously. An eloquent critic of these distinctions, and of the frequent cultural isolation of Mexican theatre artists, Hinojosa says, “The theatremaker from the North of the country does not know the one from the center, and the one from the center looks down on the one from the North because the Northerner’s subjects may lack that false cosmopolitanism that you find in foreign plays.” He feels that an overvaluing of foreign—particularly European—aesthetics and subject matter has been a problem in Mexican theatre, and that the culprits are Mexican directors. “Mexican playwrighting is at an excellent level, but the directors in Mexico would sooner stage a foreign text because they don’t know and aren’t interested to know the work of their peers.”

Not that Hinojosa is prescriptive about what Mexican writers should write; just as he doesn’t think theatres should look too much to Europe, he doesn’t think they have to write only about the “gritty” North. “We have to start by tumbling walls and mistaken foreign worldviews that cling to the stigma of thinking that in Mexico we can only write about predetermined regional subjects and can’t establish our own poetics,” Hinojosa says. “We are a country that can write about what we want and how we want. The first mistake of the Mexican theatre lies in the lack of identity, and in how easy it is to colonize the world of Mexican theatrical ideas with the ideas of other cultures. Mexican theatre lacks an identity because we look down on each other’s knowledge.”

FOR ENCOURAGING SIGNS OF A consciousness that transcends such mistrust and prejudice, look no further than el D.F.’s artistic neighborhood of Coyoacán. Once home to Mexico’s most famous art couple,

Frida and Diego, it’s now home to Jesusa Rodríguez and Liliana Felipe, cabaret artists who, from 1990 to 2005, ran a groundbreaking, provocative and legendary political cabaret called *El Hábito* (The Habit). From its start, *El Hábito* was a dynamic and open space for women, gay rights activists, artists, intellectuals and anyone seeking to engage society through critical and intelligent—and screamingly funny—satire. With its wide, shallow stage surrounded by tables and a long bar on the side, the performance space was adorned with an image of two wryly affectionate noblewomen pinching each other’s breasts.

States of existence can melt in a moment, and physical separations can disappear and appear within the same scene.

Rodríguez trained as an actress but broke from the traditional theatre world to create unflinching political satire; Felipe is a musician and singer originally from Argentina who left for Mexico at the start of the dictatorship in 1976—her sister was one of that “dirty war’s” tens of thousands of *desaparecidos*. In Mexico, Rodríguez saw Felipe in the audience of one of her shows and reportedly said, “I’m going to die with that woman.” Soon after, they were shaking up the political establishment and the hegemony of a very hierarchical Mexican society with satirical humor and songs—theatrical weapons that slayed sacred cows and mercilessly exposed the hypocrisy, inhumanity and idiocy of those who abused power.

On Valentine’s Day 2001, Felipe and Rodríguez symbolically married in a public ceremony/performance at *El Hábito*, in solidarity with hundreds of same-sex couples who celebrated their love in a giant collective ceremony in the streets of Mexico City, called “*El Amor en los Tiempos del Cambio*,” in support of the city’s *Leyes de Convivencia* (Cohabitation Laws), which generated rights for people who lived together, whether of the same or opposite sex. It was a prophetic gesture: Just this year, Mexico City became one of the first municipalities in all the Americas (including the U.S.) to legally

grant same-sex couples the right to marry.

Rodríguez and Felipe also renovated a small theatre across the inviting courtyard from the cabaret space, called *La Capilla*—“the chapel,” which it once was—whose intimate space and almost fancifully tall and pointed ceiling simultaneously pull the audience and actors together as if around an altar or hearth and create space for our imaginations to float upward, like smoke curling up a chimney to the sky. In the hands of Boris Schoemann, a theatre director and friend of Rodríguez’s, *La Capilla* still serves as a home for young playwrights in Mexico, who can produce works in the space and benefit from the surrounding artistic community. One of the rare directors in Mexico known for championing playwrights, Schoemann has begun a small publishing house for new plays under the imprint of *La Capilla*. He also co-directs the *Semana Internacional de la Dramaturgia Contemporánea* (International Week of Playwriting), which gathers playwrights from Mexico and other countries to share readings, talks and projects each year (including Lark’s U.S. playwrights), and he is planning a theatrical translation conference in November. *La Capilla* also hosts a playwrights’ workshop, led by Schoemann and the extraordinary playwright Ximena Escalante (whose play *Andrómaca Real I* had the honor to translate), where writers bring new material to share with their peers and hear in the mouths of actors, and forge a community of support and mutual learning.

Rodríguez and Felipe have since moved on to work on what Rodríguez calls “mass cabaret”—direct engagement with activist movements, to whom she brings her understanding of theatre, performance and the power of satire as a weapon. Though the name *El Hábito* has been retired, the cabaret space has been rechristened *El Vicio* and been happily inherited by another group of “incorrect” women, a satirical cabaret ensemble called *Las Reinas Chulas*, whose work is clearly influenced by the artistic challenge laid down by Rodríguez and Felipe, as is the work of many independent theatre artists in Mexico.

One of these artists is Paola Izquierdo, whose cabaret performance piece *De príncipes, princesas y otros bichos* (*Of Princes, Princesses and Other Creatures*) will be presented by Chicago’s Teatro Luna at this summer’s Latino Theatre Festival in Chicago. The challenge of translating this piece was taken

on at the Lark Exchange by Susana Cook, an Argentine-born veteran of political cabaret and radical performance. Her understanding of the daring, lucid and uncompromising sensibility of many Latin American *cabareteros* and political performers made her uniquely able to collaborate with Izquierdo to create a translation that commented on its particular context (New York City) as immediately and specifically as the original critiqued class and gender in Mexican society, without losing the creative, linguistic and imaginative essence of Izquierdo's original monologues.

Izquierdo faces another kind of prejudice common in theatre communities the world over. "Even though I have put on stage everything that I have written (and co-written), people have a hard time considering me (or any cabaret artist) a playwright." Cabaret artists who also have careers in literature or academia, like Carlos Pascual, are considered writers, she points out, but those who've worked exclusively in cabarets, like Tito Vasconcelos and Jesusa Rodríguez, don't receive the same honor. "I don't think either of them is interested in the title anyway, if it means not being able to say, without censorship, what they think about what's around them," Izquierdo says.

IT'S A PARTICULARLY LIVELY MOMENT for collaborations between U.S. and Mexican artists. Besides the exciting Mexican presence at the Goodman's Latino Theatre Festival this summer, several theatres and artists have ongoing trans-border artistic relationships. Just last year, the Internationalists produced a bilingual production of José Alfonso Cár-camo's *Decomposición (Decomposition)*, a play translated through the Lark Exchange by Mariana Carreño. Director Barclay Goldsmith from Borderlands Theater in Tucson, Ariz., not only brings Mexican actors and writers to Tucson—including Cutberto López—but also works frequently in Mexico, directing Mexican actors in productions at an independent Mexico City theatre run by actor/producer Victor Carpinteiro.

And there's the Lark program, whose success we owe to the vision of such early collaborators as Rascón Banda, playwright Silvia Peláez, Mario Espinosa (the former director of FONCA, who established the partnership with us), Schoemann and former co-director of Semana Dramaturgia, Luis Mario Moncada. Thanks to their collaboration, almost 20 Mexican playwrights (along

with other visiting Mexican theatre artists) have come to the Lark and been translated into English by remarkable U.S. playwrights, including Svich, Bragen, Cortiñas, Carreño and Alvarado, as well as Migdalia Cruz, Alex Beech and Rogelio Martinez.

This artistic conversation goes two ways: U.S. artists like director Debbie Saivetz have long been doing work in Mexico, working with Mexican artists to translate the work of contemporary U.S. playwrights like Sarah Ruhl and creating productions with artists in Oaxaca and other cities. This spring, Luis Valdez's classic *Zoot Suit* was translated and produced by Mexico's newly reformed National Theater Company in one of the biggest theatres in Mexico City, directed by Valdez (see page 38). And DramaFest, spearheaded by the extraordinary and fearless producer, actress and musician Aurora Cano, every year brings artists from one specific country or zone of the world to Mexico to collaborate with Mexican directors, writers and actors. Aurora's choices are bold and ambitious: When the zone of focus was the U.S., Aurora brought down the director Tea Alagic to direct Villarreal's *Events with Life's Leftovers*; she asked eclectic Mexican director Richard Viqueira to direct a production of David Henry Hwang's *Yellow Face*; and she invited Eisner to lead a workshop on new-play development and forms of production. With the Lark and the Lark's partners, playwrights Rajiv Joseph, Chantal Bilodeau, Samuel D. Hunter, Henry Guzmán and Saviana Stanescu have seen their work live and breathe in Spanish as well.

This conversation necessarily includes translation, an extraordinarily intimate way for one playwright to get to know another. Playwright Alex Beech, who has translated plays by Mexican playwrights Luis Ayhllón and Noé Morales Muñoz, says, "Working with Mexican playwrights has transformed my notion of the possibilities of theatre—not only to tell stories but also to build cultural bridges in unique ways. This was evident this year, when our cast—which included an Asian American, an African American, a Puerto Rican, a Brazilian-Filipino American, and a white American—sat in rehearsal with Morales and discussed his beautiful play. Translating became an anthropological challenge, and by the end, we were all closer to each other. We learn by making theatre, and then by seeing it. We fall in love with each other, and by extension, our cultures."

When people ask me, "Why Mexico?" my only answer is: How could it not be Mexico? How could we not continue this symbiosis and this search for understanding through art, through stories, through the deep and intimate and often more honest communications of theatre?

Migdalia Cruz answers this question more eloquently than I could. As a translator, she worked with two playwrights, Ernesto Anaya and Jorge Celaya. "The most surprising thing happened," Cruz recalls. "I learned to translate myself. I was reminded that what I know is valid and that I am capable of taking journeys others had dreamt of first. Getting on the bus at a later stop still means you have to get to the same place—and working directly, intimately and profoundly with these two playwrights taught me that I could take any journey and still find my way home."

BACK IN THE BOSQUE DE CHAPULTEPEC at night, our *Guardia* has taken us to Don Quixote's fountain, a place that in the daytime you can only glimpse through a wrought-iron gate erected to protect the delicate painted enamel tiles that surround the fountain and cover the curving benches that lie around it in concentric circles. Each beautiful tile depicts a scene from Cervantes's book. On one side of the fountain, a little statue of Sancho Panza gazes across the fountain at Don Quixote, who stares into the darkness (into his dreams?) on the other. "No one is allowed into this place during the day," says our *Guardia*. Only at night, with our time-crossing guide, are these spaces of the imagination open to us. Our magical mystery tour ends when the trolley drops us off at the lake: By its banks, we hear the sound of oars through water, and our *Guardia* calls our tour guide's name. He rows to the shore and, singing to her from below, convinces her to climb down the stone wall face and into his boat. As they row off across the water, into the unseeable dark, we can hear their voices singing. Watching them, the moon, the water, the castle, it could have all happened a thousand years ago, or yesterday. 📌

Andrea Thome is a playwright who has translated works by Mexican playwrights Ximena Escalante and Richard Viqueira. She is a member of New Dramatists and co-directs the bilingual satire group FULANA.