

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

LATIN AMERICAN THEATRE

Susan Smith Nash, Ph.D.

Overview Latin American theatre as an art form has an interesting history. Before the arrival of the Europeans, narrative forms of performance and religious rituals constituted the theatre of the Maya, Aztec, and Inca, and they generally took the form of dance. The dancers enacted the roles of gods and of critical points of time in their history, and the dances themselves may have culminated in sacrifice and ritual blood-letting. Later, after the Conquest by the Spanish and the repression of indigenous religion, many of the Catholic holidays and traditions began to incorporate some of the dance and theatric traditions of the past. At the same time, European literary influences were felt, resulting in a more formal European tradition of drama as well. The two paths – folklore and formal – have continued to the present day, with efforts to preserve folkloric dance (and theatre) forms, while adopting the formal and often avant-garde theatre of Europe.

ANCIENT

Maya: The Maya incorporated dance and performative art in their religious ceremonies. They wore elaborate costumes of feathers, headdresses, paint, rattles, spears, and more to depict the gods and events. The rituals corresponded to specific points in the Maya calendar, and the goals were twofold: to “merge” with the god spirit and allow that spirit to enter the body; and second, to please the gods and maintain balance in the universe. The rituals often ended in blood-letting and sometimes human sacrifice.

POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

Aztec: The Aztec calendar consisted of 18 months, and each had a number of days dedicated to the devotion and appeasement of the gods, in particular to the sun god, Huitzilopochtli. The sun god, Huitzilopochtli, required blood sacrifice in order to conquer the forces of the night (and darkness), and so the rituals (which were performative enactments and could be considered theatre), were elaborate and invariably ended in human sacrifice.

Inca: The most important Inca rituals (and performative enactments) took place in the “huacas” – the locations in the earth where each tribe supposedly emerged from the earth after the bearded giant from the stars buried a clay figurine that transformed into people. Each “huaca” corresponded to a specific star or constellation that was thought to be their place of origin, and thus the Inca truly considered themselves to be people from the stars. The rituals and theatrical enactments would include the carefully preserved mummified remains of their ancestors, whom they dressed in finery and even fed. The most important festival was the Inti Raymi (Sun Festival) event.

EARLY MODERN PERIOD (Colonial)

Patron Saint Days: The Conquistadors established a church in every town, and it served as a point of control and cultural cohesiveness. In establishing Catholicism, the Europeans were able to subsume the indigenous religions, and also tacitly acknowledge the fact that the native beliefs never really died. Each community had a patron saint, which not only corresponded to a saint in the Catholic Church, but also often took on attributes of indigenous gods. Thus, the parades, dances, and performative enactments represented a profound fusion of European and indigenous belief systems. The celebrations take place once a year, and are typically a week long, and filled with parades, rituals, dances, and end with fireworks that include religious symbols.

Carnival / Semana Santa: The week before Easter became one of the most important festivals in Latin America, and represents a profound fusion between the European and indigenous traditions. In Europe, Mardi Gras and other festivals take place, with parades and performances that center around the idea of a sin-penance cycle. In Latin America, the tradition incorporates personae who resemble many of the ancient deities, namely sun gods, feathered serpents, and animal spirits (jaguars, snakes, condors).

Brazilian Carnival: In Brazil, Carnival is dominated by African influences, not only in dance and music, but also in rituals that incorporate symbolic acts derived from West African religious practice, which merged with Catholicism to become Santería. The core belief of the African religion is that there is divine energy in the world

that takes expression through the worship of deities and through music, dance, and ritual. The dances, costumes, and expression of Brazilian Carnival are a performative enactment of that belief, and designed to instill procreative, regenerative energy in the participants.

Carnival in Oruro, Bolivia: Dance with the Devil. One of the most unique of the fusions of indigenous and Catholic beliefs, the performative rituals of colonial mining town of Oruro, Bolivia, include the famous dances with the devil, which dramatically enacts the conflict between good and evil, light and dark. The performances include extremely elaborate and colorful costumes. La Diablada (Dance of the Devils) emerged from the miners who revered and feared “El Tio” (god of the underworld) would punish them for sharing their devotion with the Virgin Mary. So, to honor and please El Tio, the miners decided to dress as Diablos (devils) and dance in the festival. The Diablo costumes feature horned masks, velvet capes, and costumes with sequins and gold embroidery. Their boots contain elaborate designs of snakes.

European-Influenced Formal Theatre:

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: The Mexican nun who wrote poetry and philosophical essays, also wrote three plays: *The Pawns of a House*, *Love Is More a Labyrinth*, and *Second Celestina*. They were performed in the 1680s in conjunction with celebrations for the viceroyalty. The plays are well-respected for their structure and form, which incorporate many of the tropes of European plays, including mistaken identity, love doomed by fate, and more.

19TH CENTURY

Patronage and “Actos”: Many one-act plays, or “actos” were written and performed in conjunction with celebrations of the viceroys and governmental officials of Latin America. Actos were also written and performed in the church as “morality plays” and “virtue / vice” plays, similar to those in the Middle Ages. Their function was to educate largely illiterate indigenous populations about Biblical stories and parables.

Folkloric Theatre: Preserving the performative arts of Latin America gained momentum after nations became independent from Spain and during the costumbrista movement. The cultural patrimony became newly important, not only intellectually and artistically, but as a great source of economic development in the form of the development of national identity. Performative art blended religious devotion with an emerging local and national pride. The energies were also used for recruiting soldiers for wars.

20TH CENTURY

Marco Antonio de la Parra (Chile): Best known for his play, *Lo crudo, lo cocido, lo podrido* (The Raw, the Cooked, and the Rotten), written in 1978, de la Parra attacks what he sees as corrupt and ultimately mediocre politicians and the overall political system. The play features three protagonists who come to a restaurant where their conversation reveals them to be not the great men they are thought to be, but instead, shallow, cruel, even sadomasochistic. De la Parra’s other works continue the same themes, and also attack consumer culture and the invasion of alien pop culture.

Roberto Ramos-Perea (Puerto Rico): Born in Mayagüez, Puerto Rico, Ramos-Perea has written numerous plays as well as essays and columns. His most-acclaimed works, *Miéntame Más* (*Lie to Me Some More*) and *Morir de Noche* (*To Die by Night*) have been widely performed. *Miéntame Más* explores the impact of unethical medical experimentation and the ultimate uselessness of revenge.

Rodolfo Santana (Venezuela): The author of more than 80 works of art, Santana first won recognition on the stage for *La Muerte de Alfredo Gris* (*The Death of Alfred Gray*). His work has also been made into movies, such as *El caracazo*, *Travelling Companion*, and more. His work explores the nature of relationships and perception.

Eduardo Rovner (Argentina): In one of his most lauded works, *Tinieblas de un escritor enamorado* (*Darkness of a Writer in Love*), contains echoes of the surrealist tradition of the Boom and Post-Boom writers. In it, the protagonist, Ernesto, enters into an altered state of consciousness (either post-death or in a fantasy) and then embarks on a quest for a long-lost love. In the labyrinths and catacombs of the psychological netherworld, converses with people along the way and explores the nature of connections, the past, and the essential fragility of true love.

Guillermo Schmidhuber (Mexico): Considered one of Mexico's most important writers, Schmidhuber's plays build on his literary research, which includes work with long-lost manuscripts of Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz that he discovered and translated. His play, *Los Héroes Inútiles (Useless Heroes)* three soldiers in the Mexican Revolution find themselves trapped in someone else's aspirations, and instead of being able to rise and achieve their dreams, they are trapped in banality and mediocrity.

Maritz Núñez (Peru): In addition to writing plays, Maritza Núñez has received acclaim for her works of poetry. Her play, *La Niña de Cera (The Wax Child)*, is a play in two acts which explores the life of Chilean poet and educator, Gabriela Mistral. The play touches on the wrenching childhood and traumatic formative events in Mistral's life and how she used the tragedies to transform herself.

Nelson Rodrigues (Brazil): Originator of the concept of the "Theatre of the Unpleasant," Rodrigues was born in Recife, northeast Brazil, and then moved with his family to Rio de Janeiro, where his father owned a newspaper. Covering stories for his father's paper, Rodrigues was exposed to many aspects of Brazilian society, and in doing so, he formed a philosophy of theatre in which he believed it should hold a mirror to society and reveal, with unflinching honesty, its true state.

Ariel Dorfman (Chile): In *La Muerte y La Doncella (Death and the Maiden)*, Dorfman explores what could happen when a victim of torture encounters her torturer. She kidnaps him, and then contemplates subjecting him to the same tortures he exacted upon her. In a move reminiscent of *A Clockwork Orange*, Schumann's Death and the Maiden is the work always played during the torture sessions, with deep psychological consequences.

Discussion/Questions

1. When the Spaniards arrived in MesoAmerica, they were shocked to see the enactment of what could have been theater, religious rite, or a dance festival? Which was it? There may have been relatively benign or happy performances, but they were not what caught the Spaniards' attention. They were riveted by the torture, dismemberment, and death, performed as a spectacle. The Spaniards were undoubtedly familiar with bloody fight-to-the-death bullfights. What would make these enactments different?
2. When the Europeans and the African slaves inhabited Latin America, they brought their own traditions. However, the traditions did not stay completely intact. Instead, they began to incorporate aspects of many cultures at the same time. Select a few examples and analyze how the blend of cultures made them into a theatrical / performative event that could satisfy the need to resolve the painful history of the Conquest.
3. The formal theatre of the Europeans was often enacted for very different purposes than the popular folkloric theater and performance. The European theatre when performed in Latin America did two things. First, it reinforced cultural dominance and the authority of the crown and the viceroyalty. Second, with plays that enacted Biblical history, the church was able to teach the stories from the Bible, and at the same time, were able to teach moral lessons. How might some of the European traditional theatrical forms have been also coopted and subtly subverted? Please give at least two examples.
4. The plays of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been very political, with messages that could be dangerous because they enact political repressions, kidnapping, torture, and the efforts of a military dictatorship to suppress dissent or resistance. Consider the examples of the plays that have political themes and discuss whether they stand up as works of art rather than propaganda. Why or why not? How can they be meaningful during times of peace?

Readings

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