

The New Dramatists
of Mexico
1967-1985

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THE UNIVERSITY PRESS OF KENTUCKY

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1. Introduction

The Formation of a Generation

The task of characterizing a literary generation is perhaps most wisely, or at least most easily, done after the fact. In the light of historical perspective one can define with some assurance the circumstances and events that unified and then held together a group of writers. Lost in this long view, however, are the immediacy and insights gained through personal contacts that exist only at the moment of formation. It is this immediacy and even a certain sense of urgency that lie behind this book. The urgency exists because the current group of young Mexican dramatists is something of a lost generation. For many years they were ignored by the Mexican public, by publishers, and by producers, and discouraged by the many obstacles placed before them during a period when the latest Broadway hits were preferred over Mexican plays. As a result most of the young playwrights of this new generation have remained almost completely anonymous. In fact, almost all of those who made up the original group eventually stopped writing drama, if for no other reason than economic necessity.

Happily, those early, discouraging days seem to be passing. There is more interest in plays by Mexicans and with good reason, since several of the newest dramatists have the potential to create an impact on theater not only in Mexico but in Spanish America in general. Suddenly many new playwrights are actively producing quality plays, they form a definable group, and

they find themselves closer than ever to emerging as a potent force in Mexican literature. For these reasons now is the time to capture their first, formative years, to organize existing information, and to present the entire generation to the public in some sort of unified fashion. The purpose of the chapters that follow is to chronicle the early development of the most recent generation of Mexican dramatists, and to provide commentary on them, on their works, and on the principal elements that characterized them during the period from 1967 to 1985.

The designation of a new generation of writers and the selection of a nineteen-year span in which to situate them require some explanation. In the late sixties several young writers, still laboring in university workshops (primarily those of Emilio Carballido), began to write and then to publish and stage plays in university magazines and theaters. At the same time or shortly thereafter, other classes and workshops were begun under the direction of Luisa Josefina Hernández, Hugo Argüelles, Héctor Azar, and Vicente Leñero, to name only the most well-known. The "new generation," then, has in common a group of teachers and a point in time when they began to be active.

In the intervening years three separate actions have recognized more formally the existence of a group. First, Carballido published three anthologies of plays, *Teatro joven de México* (two collections with the same title) and *Más teatro joven de México*; in 1979, the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana initiated a series of stage productions under the title of "La Nueva Dramaturgia"; and finally, one publishing house offered a series entitled "Serie Nueva Dramaturgia" devoted specifically to young Mexican dramatists. Clearly several diverse sectors and individuals perceived the presence of a cohesive group.

All of these perceptions can be substantiated somewhat more concretely by examining the birth dates of the writers under consideration. All of the dramatists studied here were born between 1939 and 1954, precisely the years indicated by José Juan Arrom in his *Esquema generacional de las letras hispanoamericanas* for the group due to come of age in the second half—that is, in 1969—of the "Generation of 1954." Arrom's scheme is discussed in more detail later in this chapter, but for now it need only be noted that the writers included were chosen on the basis of their

activity and common characteristics; the coincidence of their birthdates appeared after the fact.

While the birthdates include a given set of writers, they exclude others, such as Carballido, Azar, and Leñero, who also wrote during the period mentioned. Their works are of interest as background for the more recent generation, but their previously established reputations as writers and their status as teachers exclude them from membership in the same group as their students.

These criteria provide an initial, if somewhat nebulous, framework for the existence of a group or generation. History provides another and perhaps more concrete clue. Mexican theater in the twentieth century has seen a series of high points and low points, beginning on the down cycle. Ruth Lamb and Antonio Magaña Esquivel, in their *Breve historia del teatro mexicano*, indicate that the early years of the century saw a decline in quality from previous years: "El auge que parecía haber alcanzado el teatro mexicano en cierto momento del último cuarto del siglo XIX decae en los primeros años del XX" (117). In his own *Medio siglo de teatro mexicano*, Magaña Esquivel says that prior to 1928, "El teatro mexicano no encontraba su asiento y los nuevos autores se hallaban desamparados" (28). In addition, a new "dramatic form"—the movies—began to attract the public that previously had formed the primary audience for theater. A new life for the theater, a "renovation," came in 1928, though, with the "Teatro de Ulises." Both the *Breve historia* and *Medio siglo* make mention of this important moment, and Margarita Mendoza López has detailed the rejuvenation of 1928 and the years thereafter in her *Primeros renovadores del teatro en México*. The year 1928 was clearly an important one in the development of Mexican theater.

The activity in the years that followed—activity initiated by Xavier Villaurrutia, Salvador Novo, Gilberto Owen, and Celestino Gorostiza, among others—brought Mexican theater into the mainstream of world drama. After some years, however, the force of the movement began to wane, and by the 1940s the theater found itself in another period of decline. Magaña Esquivel explains that, "Hacia 1947 el teatro, según las apetencias del público, era un espectáculo venido a menos" (*Medio siglo*,

99). As if in confirmation, in *Historia del teatro en México*, Yolanda Argudín entitles one section, "El teatro decae en los cuarentas." Lamb and Magaña Esquivel insist even more strongly, stating bluntly that, "el teatro mexicano entonces padece la crisis más amarga de su existencia" (126).

As all of these writers point out, though, this "crisis" came to an end in 1947, with the reorganization of the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes and its theater department. This new stimulus thrust Mexico into one of the most important periods of theater in its history (the 1950s and early 1960s) when more than two dozen dramatists were busy publishing and staging Mexican plays in unprecedented numbers. This period represents one of the high points in Mexican drama and includes what Argudín calls "la temporada de oro del teatro mexicano" (161).

This important stage of activity lasted into the mid-1960s, when once again Mexican theater assumed a new face—this time, Broadway's. Argudín explains: "El melodrama gana la guerra en la taquilla. Se importan sumisa y minuciosamente todos los éxitos, musicales o no, del teatro de Broadway" (172). Mexican drama slowly fell out of favor, and the resulting lack of interest in staging such plays at precisely that moment produced an almost fatal impact on the generation of writers that was just beginning to express itself. Argudín details the effects on the members of the pending generation: "En México difícilmente encontraron nuevas oportunidades, para vivir tuvieron que dedicarse a diferentes actividades y no a la teatral. De aquí el desmembramiento de lo que prometía un futuro en el teatro mexicano" (197).

The force of this blow fell on the new group especially, but all of those involved in theater were concerned, as evidenced by a series of conferences held during the mid-1960s, the texts of which were gathered into a book, *¿Qué pasa con el teatro en México?* The answers, given in more than a dozen presentations by some of the most important figures in Mexican theater, are overwhelmingly negative and pessimistic. Specifically, to the question posed by the title of the series (and later of the book), came responses such as: "En este momento suele resultar muy desolador estudiar una cartelera mexicana y ver lo que se está poniendo" (Luis Guillermo Piazza, 37); "no pasa nada, o pasa muy