



**Yes, and . . .**

I have just inherited two important historical testimonials: a complete collection of the *Latin American Theatre Review* and a short but equally intriguing bibliography entitled “Studies on the Latin American Theatre, 1960–1969” by Leon F. Lyday and George W. Woodyard. My benefactor and dear friend, María A. Salgado, helped me to cart these documents to my office as she cleared out after more than three decades of teaching and research at UNC-Chapel Hill. She witnessed the first group of women graduate here with four-year degrees in 1967; she paved the way for women professors at our institution; and she is one of many people who made it unnecessary to answer the question Lyday and Woodyard cite, and hope to render obsolete, in the introduction to their above-mentioned bibliography printed in *Theatre Documentation, II (1969–1970)*: “Does any theatre really exist in Latin America?”

I did not have to answer this question when I presented my dissertation prospectus on Mexican political theatre. Nor did I have to answer it when I went into the job market. And I will not have to answer it next year when I turn in my tenure dossier. I will never have to do so, precisely because others have created space (in classrooms, on MA reading lists, in libraries, at conferences) in which we can perform our desire. Our field, in the end, is exemplified by the people—authors, teachers, students, critics, performers—who have made it possible to make a living out of that which we love. The collection of texts that we study and produce is somehow secondary, skeletal compared to the living stages of our profession, compared to the flesh and blood of the myriad mentors of the field who have made it acceptable to study Latin American theatre.

Despite my acknowledgment of those who have come before, I lack the historical distance, not to mention the practical experience, to comment on how the field of Latin American theatre studies will evolve; I can only write about how I have been involved. My role, of course, is minor. Yet, perhaps there is a correlation between my experiences in a literature department and a more universal tension that is building as cultural and performance studies continue to work their way into the imagination of literary criticism. I wrote my first (and only) book on Mexican theatre. It is a piece of literary criticism grounded in literary theory, history, and economics. This manuscript came out of what had been, in many ways, a safe dissertation project; it paralleled the work that is expected, if not demanded, in many literature departments, and while it was informed by live plays, there was always a printed text to which I could turn, an academic touchstone that guaranteed a stamp of approval. It begged no questions of legitimacy, and elicited no disapproving frowns when I went into the job market. Conversely, I am increasingly aware that my next project will, in some quarters, educe a new question, the question that now faces many of us who work in literature departments: “What does your work have to do with literature?”

Specifically, I am writing a manuscript on Mexican performance (covering everything from the Zapatista leader Comandante Ester taking the stage in the Mexican Congress to street demonstrations protesting the hundreds of brutal murders in Ciudad Juárez) that stretches what I consider to be the boundaries of literary criticism. I will, of course, include some plays in this study; however, many of the themes I

pursue will be fleeting, out of reach for those who consider studying life as performance to be alien, extradepartmental territory. Despite a growing interdisciplinary openness, there is no dearth of remarks questioning the validity, or the so-called proper place, of research that is not related to the written, preferably fictitious, word. Regardless of the challenges to what it is I do, or to what I'm trying to do, I know that the barriers I face pale in comparison to those faced by the people who established the field of Latin American theatre. Perhaps, though, the same spirit of the scholars who formed the field can lead to a broader, more all-encompassing idea of what it is to study theatre and theatricality (from within departments of literature), an idea that will include but not be limited to the performance of everyday life, the seriously playful act of being human. My project does not require that I be particularly courageous; precursors have taken risks for me. I must also admit that for every person who has questioned my dedication to literary studies, another has affirmed that my work is valid, so much so that we must ask to what extent change is inhibited by self-censorship and not by the powers that be.

My interest in cultural and performance studies is by no means groundbreaking. I recognize that to some extent I am living a trend, a trend that has two troubling strata, both of which relate to market forces. The first is the well-documented difficulty, for scholars of all academic ranks, in publishing books of literary criticism. This fact is related in large part to the negative pressure university presses face to become economically self-sufficient, or even to turn a profit. It is also, however, an indication that if we want our work to be read—and I do, especially in the undergraduate classroom—breaking away from what is considered traditional literary criticism may be politically advantageous. If this leads to socially committed work that reaches and affects a wider audience, it is a positive move, though it is also crucial to note that a turn away from the purely literary must not inhibit the study of literature for literature's sake, of cerebral conjecture and critical thinking, or even of self-gratification or the pursuit of pleasure. The second troubling issue, skepticism (postmodern skepticism, if you prefer), also relates to exchange value. While a breakdown of Enlightenment notions of truth and progress has created the very climate that makes interdisciplinarity a feasible goal, and while this breakdown has led to vigorous self-criticism within many fields of study, conservative currents within postmodernism champion the so-called free market as the only legitimate governing force, erasing the perceived worth of both literary criticism and a broader study of performance. To forge a postmodern stance that allows for a critical edge, as Latin Americans like Martín Hopenhayn have done, is crucial to belying relativity in the extreme, a relativity that makes political change appear impossible.

In the study of Mexican theatre, what most strikes me is the pertinence of plays to our students' lives (the exact opposite of relativist apathy), and the fortunate fact that each avenue of inquiry one pursues can benefit from the crossing of the text/performance barrier: reading recent plays on the serial killer in Ciudad Juárez leads to other performances of resistance, like the pink or black crosses painted on dozens of telephone poles in this border city; studying political cartoons and plays about Vicente Fox leads to other forms of expression, like the diminutive performance by street children mocking the president; seeing a show by Mexican performance artist Jesusa Rodríguez that parodies the government's stance on gay marriage leads us to her own marriage, and that of hundreds of other gay and lesbian couples, in a public

Valentine's Day celebration in Mexico City; studying a play by Subcomandante Marcos published in Mexican newspaper *La Jornada* is complemented by the analysis of the theatricality of government reactions to the 1994 Zapatista uprising. Discourse theory might tell us that these combinations are more natural than the barriers that divide them; so might many of you, who regularly navigate between the written word and performance. Thus, perhaps what is needed in literature departments—in the same fashion that for decades Latin American theatre scholars have answered the question relayed by Lyday and Woodyard (“Does any theatre really exist in Latin America?”) with a resounding “yes”—is answering with solid, creative research the question of our day, the (not always disparaging) question posed by some of our colleagues, the question of our commitment to literary criticism, the question that might be answered with a “Yes, but . . .” Or, better yet, with a “Yes, and . . .” In Latin American theatre studies, the old guard is the safeguard, not the obsolete obstacle. The tradition that they protect is one of inquiry and evolution; they are a series of mentors—to me and to the field itself—who give those of us starting out the nerve to say, “Yes, and . . .”

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### **Rising to demands: Argentine and Brazilian theatre**

My principal areas of interest are Argentine and Brazilian theatre. A fundamental difference exists between the two traditions: whereas anything particularly innovative in Argentine theatre takes place pretty much in Buenos Aires, Brazilian theatre is decentralized among five major cities (the two megalopolises, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo; and the second-tier cities of Porto Alegre, Belo Horizonte, and Curitiba), making it far more difficult to enjoy an adequate range of firsthand experiences. Of course, one can find interesting theatrical activities in other Argentine cities, and some theatre of note is found in third-tier Brazilian cities.

I wish to address two issues here regarding my dual interest, one that has to do with the difficulties of incorporating Brazilian theatre into Latin American theatre studies, and the other having to do with the fortunes of theatre in the current climate of economic and social fluctuations in both countries.

There are two forces that impede the adequate incorporation of Brazil into Latin American theatre studies. The first has to do with the continental presence of Brazil within the boundaries, both geographic and abstract, of Latin America. Since Brazil is the size of the United States, it manifests a cultural production—as it does in everything else—that is characteristic of a country of such size. Although its population is not as evenly distributed as is that of the US, it in fact benefits from the megalopolitan nature of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, and the fact that its second-tier cities are larger than the second-tier cities of the US (such as Philadelphia, Phoenix, and San Diego). Since theatre is necessarily driven by a certain concentration of potential audiences, Brazil profits from a demographic base that is broader than that of other Latin American countries. (I have in mind the extreme difficulty of a sustained theatrical activity of quality in Mexico's second city, Guadalajara, or in the second city