

Estela Leñero Franco

Pioneering Women in Mexican Theatre

For centuries women have narrated their history in silence. Sometimes scholars forgot them; sometimes women were present but in a limited way; otherwise they were totally excluded. Women sidestepped obstacles, made triple efforts and transformed themselves into several people at once, in order to integrate with the world of 20th century theatre. Those who worked in theatre in the first half of that century can be considered as the forerunners of those women who are working actively today in all areas of theatre practice. In Mexican theatre, the first thirty years of the past century were characterised by the splendour of the great divas on stage and their audience's admiration for them. The first female impresarios who built theatres and founded companies emerged from these divas, while other important women consolidated the developing project of public theatre in Mexico.

In Mexico, women's playwriting flourished particularly in the middle of the 20th century, with authors who managed to create openings in a macho society where theatre history was only seen from a male perspective. Women who wrote melodramas and personal plays started this process without worrying about dramatic structure and styles. In the 1950s these women made a great leap in search of new forms of theatrical expression, breaking with conventional themes and styles, and creating a basis for contemporary Mexican theatre.

DIVAS AND WOMEN THEATRE IMPRESARIOS

The transition from the 19th to the 20th century nurtured a controversy between Spanish theatre presented by Spanish companies, which came from Mexico's theatrical past, and a theatre that was the product of the Revolution. The latter confirmed its Mexican origin through variety shows, comedies and dramas, which were performed mainly by Mexicans.

The variety show functioned as a critical forum which satirised contemporary political and social environments.

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Some of them, like Celia Padilla, married and stopped acting in obedience to their husbands' wishes. Others became the lovers of politicians and officers, for example Emilia Trujillo or "La Trujis", who was General Victoriano Huerta's lover; or Celia Montalván who was the lover of General Enrique Estrada, a member of the government of Alvaro Obregón; or Delia Magaña, known as "La Magañita", who had an affair with General Francisco Serrano.

The divas gave a special flavour to the satires of the post-revolutionary period. They fascinated because of their voluptuous and half-naked bodies, their graceful dancing, or their sense of humour, which always contained a double meaning, while they represented typically Mexican characters. There were great beauties, like Lupe Vélez, Ema Duval or Alicia Pérez Caro, or comedien-nes like Ema, "La Willy", known for her character Juan Mariguano, or "Pingüica" Lupe Rivas Cacho and her drunken characters, or Delia Magaña in the role of the maid in *Mexican Rataplán*.

Some of the divas became impresarios thanks to their success on tour both abroad and within Mexico. Virginia Fábregas, María Tereza Montoya and Esperanza Iris built theatres, formed companies and decided the programmes for their theatre seasons and repertory.

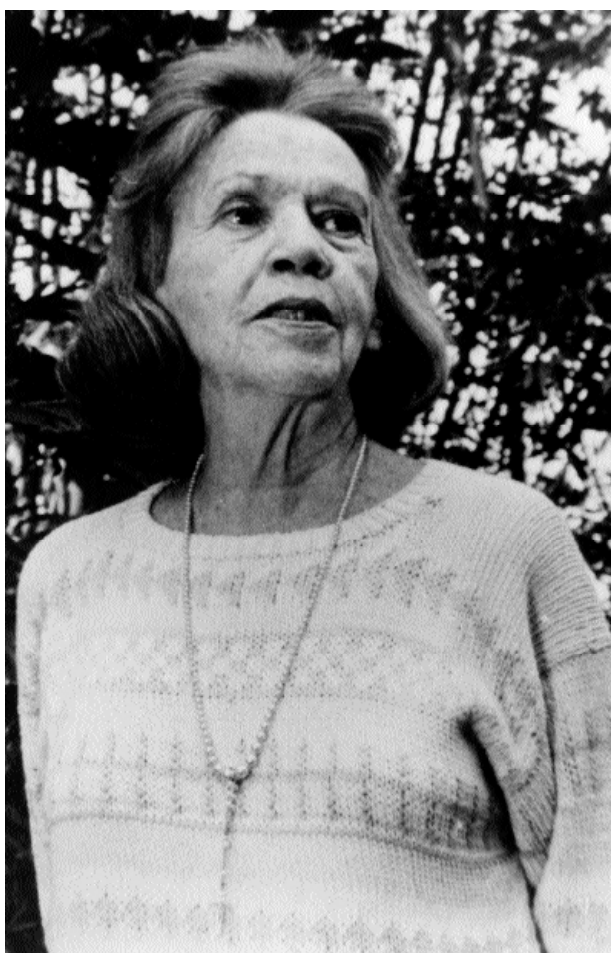
María Antonieta Rivas Mercado was an

exceptional female impresario, promoter and muse of the theatre. She was born at the beginning of the 20th century and she disposed freely of the fortune she had inherited. With Gorostiza, Novo, Villaurrutia and Owen, she founded the Teatro de Ulises, which was particularly representative of the performance trends of that era. As well as being a muse and patron of this group, she supported other artistic projects, like the publication of books and magazines, and the founding of the National Symphony Orchestra. She was one of the main patrons of the cultural campaign of Vasconcelos in 1929.

WOMEN THEATRE PROMOTERS

At the same time that theatre companies grew up around impresario divas, the Revolution resulted in the development of theatre projects financed by the government in order to strengthen a national theatre accessible to the Mexican people. Some women, in the fluctuations of this process, discovered their interest in promoting a theatre with a social vision. They came to occupy important posts in state cultural institutions and they formed autonomous theatre groups that had a strong influence on the theatre of their time. On one side we had the playwrights Amalia Caballero, María Luisa Ocampo and Concepción Sada, and on the other Clementina Otero, a leading actress of the Teatro de Ulises and the Teatro Orientación.

Amalia Caballero was the first Mexican woman to head a Ministry Office and an embassy. While she was deputy director of the Central Department of Mexico City, she organised "Cultural Recreations", that took theatre into schools, parks, workers' centres, prisons and poor neighbourhoods by using tents for performance. María Luisa Ocampo and Amalia Caballero were great instigators of the Comedia Mexicana, a group that



Elena Garro Photo: ADE

organised theatre seasons with Mexican authors from 1929 to 1938. Concepción Sada joined later. In the 1940s Concepción Sada and María Luisa Ocampo worked with the group Teatro de México led by Gorostiza, organising contemporary performances of national and foreign playwrights. They were also interested in children's theatre. Clementina Otero started the INBA project with performances that encouraged children from all social classes to go to the theatre. Years later, Concepción Sada continued this project by founding the children's theatre company of the INBA and functioning as head of department for SEP's children's theatre. They were also concerned with pedagogy and in 1946 they founded the School of Theatre Art, even though of them

all only Clementina Otero was to direct it eighteen years later, and then only for one year.

WOMEN'S PLAYWRITING

With the end of the Second World War, theatre production reflected Mexico's need to open up to an industrial world while simultaneously reaffirming its national identity, but it also analysed the artistic and plastic universality of performance. In the 1950s, women's plays were noticeable because of the forms and styles that pervaded them and the subject matter that expressed a specifically female way of looking at reality. The playwrights of this generation transformed the nationalism of the era into the search for an identity. They used new forms and themes not previously dealt with by women. They broke away from the linear narrative, they tried new dramatic structures, and they introduced non-realistic scenarios and reinterpreted historical characters.

The playwrights of the 1950s improved on realism and aspired to a kind of theatre which was more dreamlike, free, and elusive. Luisa Josefina Hernández and Elena Garro, the most outstanding playwrights of their generation, represent two different propositions: the first experimented with forms of storytelling, mostly in the provinces, and the second created curious allegories that transcended reality.

Luisa Josefina Hernández let herself be influenced by North American realism and offered us in-depth stories of tragic characters that rebel against their destiny. As rebels, women think, take decisions and change the course of their history or of their consciousness. *La calle de la gran ocasión* and *Los caprichos de Goya* are two ambitious plays that investigate narrative fragmentation.

The theatre of Elena Garro is full of poetry; it pervades her work with a surprising

magic and lyrical beauty. Her metaphors and symbols produce existential considerations. Her words provoke imagistic games. Her boundless imagination invites us to create other worlds beyond reality and to find a kind of freedom. A religious spirit underlies her work that, as she says herself, embraces the two hemispheres which science still cannot resolve, birth and death. Elena Garro is an author who follows a path of her own. In the last stage of her life homage was paid to her in the Palacio de Bellas Artes. Among her best works are *Felipe Ángeles*, *Un hogar sólido* and *La señora en su balcón*.

The playwrights of the 1950s laid the foundations for new generations of authors and for contemporary playwrights like Sabina Berman, Leonor Azcárate, Berta Hiriart, Silvia Peláez, María Morett, Maribel Carrasco, Carmina Narro and Elena Guiochíns from Mexico City, and authors like Dolores Espinoza from Culiacán, Elba Cortés from Tijuana, Coral Aguirre from Monterrey, Jissel Arroyo from Chihuahua, Teresa Rígggen from Puebla, Laura Madrid from Guanajuato - just to mention a few.

In contrast to playwriting, the activities more related to staging, like directing, stage and light design, were not really developed by women until the second half of the 20th century. In the 1970s Nancy Cárdenas' or Marta Luna's daring staging ideas were surprising. Women stage designers flourished mostly in the 1980s, having as a precedent Félida Medina, a stage designer who shone from the 1960s and influenced future generations like those of Tolita Fugueroa, Xochítl González and Mónica Raya.

The 20th century was the springboard for women to enter the world of performing

arts in Mexico. The process of women's participation began mainly in the field of acting, followed by production, and was consolidated in dramaturgy and playwriting.

The world of theatre opened to women little by little. Like the loved being who at first resists, theatre has let us come close without our presence being noticed. First it allowed us to touch its body through acting; we could be impresarios and theatre promoters. Halfway along the path of seduction, we reached its heart and started to write our own history; the history of what we observe, what we remember and of what we want to change. And so, as theatre leant on our bosom, we knew who it was and how it moved, and we recognised the place where our love could exist. We dressed it, decorated it and lit it. The love that started in the past century has not ended. With alliances and disagreements, discoveries and mistakes, we are tied to it until the end of our days.

So be it.

Translated from Spanish by Julia Varley

ESTELA LEÑERO FRANCO (Mexico) was born in Mexico City in 1960. She is an anthropologist who has devoted herself to theatre. She has published and staged more than fifteen plays, which include: *Casa Llena*, *Las Máquinas de Coser*, *Habitación en Blanco*, *Insomnio y Paisaje Interior*. Her journalistic work *Voces de teatro en Mexico a fin de milenio*, (Voices of theatre in Mexico at the end of the Millennium), a study she has carried out over the past ten years, is going to be published shortly.