**Teatro de Ulises** and **Teatro Orientación**

*Teatro de Ulises* and *Teatro Orientación* were companies founded in Mexico City in the early twentieth century by members of the modernist/avant-garde literary group *Contemporáneos.* Celestino Gorostiza (1904-67), Xavier Villaurrutia (1903-50), Salvador Novo (1904-74), and Gilberto Owen (1904-52) founded the Teatro de Ulises in 1927. The company dissolved in 1928, but in 1932 Gorostiza went on to found the Teatro Orientación, which had two runs (1932-1934 and 1938-1939). Both companies aimed to bring translations of international modernist and avant-garde plays to the Mexican stage, a goal that earned them criticism from nationalist contemporaries. While Teatro de Ulises focused entirely on European and North American plays, Teatro Orientación also staged new works by Mexican playwrights. Both groups represent significant elements of modern Mexican theatre, and several of their members went on to become foundational figures of twentieth-century Mexican drama.

Both Teatro de Ulises and Teatro Orientación were formed by members of the Contemporáneos, a literary group often associated with the Mexican *vanguardias*. Teatro de Ulises opened its doors at Mesones Street #42 in Mexico City’s historic downtown in 1927. The space, in what had once been a large home, could hold up to fifty audience members and was financed by the social activist Antonieta Rivas Mercado (1900-31). The company relied on weekly premieres for funding. Other members of the Contemporáneos who participated in one or both of the group’s theatrical endeavors include Julio Bracho (1909-78), Julio Jiménez Rueda (1896-1960), Agustín Lazo (1896-1971), Salvador Novo (1904-1974), Gilberto Owen (1904-52), Roberto Usigli (1905-79), and Xavier Villaurrutia (1903-1950). The members of Teatro Ulises were concerned with bringing modernist and avant-garde European plays to the Mexican stage in translation.

The company’s resurrection as Teatro Orientación, on the other hand, was supported by the Mexican state. Once Gorostiza advanced to the upper echelons of national cultural officialdom, Teatro Orientación could shake off Ulises’ humble beginnings thanks to its state sponsorship. Gorostiza secured the Palace of Fine Arts for the premiere of Teatro Orientación’s production of Massimo Bontempelli’s *Minnie la Cándida*, and the company spent five seasons in the old Teatro Hidalgo of the Secretariat of Public Education as well as presenting in the Palace of Fine Arts. Teatro Orientación presented translations as before but also expanded to stage the works of Mexican playwrights. In 1938 Gorostiza left the company to direct the government Department of Fine Arts, leaving the Teatro Orientación in the hands of Julio Bracho, Rodolfo Usigli, and Xavier Villaurutia.

In Teatro Orientación, a focus on Mexican playwrights would gain importance. Company members translated and staged works by Paul Claudel, Jean Cocteau, Lord Dunsany, Jean Giraudoux, Henri-René Lenormand, Roger Marx, Eugene O’Neill, Claude Roger-Mark, and Charles Vildrac, and often acted in the productions as well. Mexican playwrights whose work was represented include Juan Bustillo Oro, Carlos Díaz Dufóo, Jr., Gorostiza, Mauricio Magdaleno, Alfonso Reyes, and Villaurrutia. Both Teatro de Ulises and Teatro Orientación aimed to bring innovative, European and U.S. theatre to the Mexican stage. Group members could often be found in Paris, where Lazo, for example, learned Stanislavsky’s new method and attempted to apply it in Mexico. In the program for Teatro Orientación’s 1933 season the group reveals its ambition to renovate and dignify the Mexican stage after years of vulgarity and decadence in commercial shows. The theatre was meant to be a laboratory for experimentation to form a repertoire of plays from what was described as the timeless, universal theatre, and, at the same time, to promote Mexican theatre.

The use of translations into Mexican Spanish, rather than the peninsular accent that had been preferred before, was an implicit assertion of national values and reflected the Contemporáneos’ desire to introduce the new theatre to the Mexican middle class. At the same time, Teatro Orientación´s innovative practice of presenting of new Mexican plays like Díaz Dufóo’s *El barco,* Reyes*’ Ifigenia cruel*, and Villaurrutia’s *¿En qué piensas?* and *Parece mentira* alongside translations of European works like Jean Giraudoux´ *Anfitrión 38* (*Amphytrion 38*) brought Mexican theatre into dialogue with international modernism.

**List of works**

Díaz Dufóo, C. (1931) *El barco*, Mexico City: Impr. Mundial.

Gorostiza, C. (2004) *Teatro completo,* Mexico City: CONACULTA-INBA.

Reyes, A. (1989) *Teatro complete de Alfonso Reyes*, Monterrey: Instituto de la Cultura de Nuevo León.

Villaurrutia, X. (1974) *Obras*, Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica.

**References and further reading**

Dauster, F. (1955) ‘The Contemporary Mexican Theater’, *Hispania* 38 (1): 31-34.

Mendoza-López, M. (1985) *Primeros renovadores del teatro en México,* Mexico City:IMSS.

Mullen, E. J. (1970) ‘The *Revista Contemporáneos* and the Development of the Mexican Theater’, *Comparative Drama* 4 (4): 272-82.

Unruh, V. (1994) *Latin American Vanguards: The Art of Contentious Encounters*, Berkeley: U of California P.

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[see possible images attached to email]

Captions:

Image 1: A ticket for entrance to Teatro Ulises’s performance of the play *Les temps est un songe* (translated as *El tiempo es sueño*)by Henri René-Lenormand. The ticket is signed by the group’s patron Antonieta Rivas Mercado.

Image 2: The cover of the program announcing the 1933 season of Teatro Orientación.

Images were scanned from the book *Primeros renovadores del teatro en México*by Margarita Mendoza-López, IMSS, Mexico City, 1985.