**Teatro del Murciélago**

Teatro del Murciélago (Theatre of the Bat) was a group that gave what appears to have been its only public performance at the Teatro Olimpia in Mexico City on September 17, 1924. Inspired by La Chauve-Souris, a touring revue troupe formed by Parisian-based Russian émigrés, the Murciélago brought together figures linked to the avant-garde movement known as *estridentismo* and artist-ethnographers who had worked among indigenous communities in central Mexico. Although its existence was ephemeral, the group served as an inspiration for other artists over the following decade and is regarded as one of the most significant theatre experiments of the Mexican avant-garde.

One of the roots of the Teatro del Murciélago grew out of a project led by Manuel Gamio, known as the founding father of modern anthropology in Mexico. In conjunction with his archaeological excavation of the ancient Toltec city of Teotihuacán, Gamio organized an anthropological study of the indigenous communities who lived in the surrounding valley and employed several artists whose task was to create pieces of ‘regional theatre’—stylized depictions of indigenous customs with the faint outlines of a plot, most often revolving around scenes of daily life and local fiestas. These short, simple plays were performed in an open-air theatre by indigenous actors for other members of the community as well as for tourists from urban areas as part of Gamio’s project to encourage an ‘ethnic’ or ‘cultural fusion’ among the nation’s diverse peoples.

Not long after the first public performances in 1922, three of the artists—playwright Rafael M. Saavedra, musician Francisco Domínguez, and painter Carlos González—accepted an invitation from José Vasconcelos, the founding director of the Secretariat of Public Education, to undertake a similar project among the *purépecha* (also called Tarascan) Indians in the Lake Pátzcuaro region of the state of Michoacán. At this point the plays became more overtly aestheticized and were classified as *teatro mínimo*, reflecting the further compression of the material into a series of short “instants” in which music and the visual element played an ever more important role. It was the modernist poet Juan José Tabladawho first noted a similarity to the spectacles of La Chauve-Souris, a Russian theatrical revue with roots in the Moscow Art Theatre and its actors’ after-hours cabaret shows in intimate cellar-club theatres. Mexican intellectuals who saw the show during its lengthy run in New York were charmed by its depictions of pre-revolutionary life, including customs of the Russian peasantry, the old aristocracy, and the famous Parade of the Wooden Soldiers. The artists who formed the Teatro del Murciélago made no secret of the fact that its name was a literal translation of the Chauve-Souris and even billed their spectacle as proof that ‘Mexico has more color than Russia’ (Quintanilla 1).

The driving force behind the Teatro del Murciélago was Luis Quintanilla, a Guatemalan-born poet and diplomat who was a member of the estridentista avant-garde. Several other participants were also loosely linked to estridentismo, such as the Swiss anarchist Gaston Dinner and the Italian-born actress and future photographer Tina Modotti. Francisco Domínguez and Carlos González joined them as (respectively) music director and set/costume designer, though the playwright involved in the ethnographic project (Rafael Saavedra) did not take part. Like the Chauve-Souris, the Murciélago was identified as a form of *teatro sintético* that aimed to combine diverse art forms and compress space and time into short, ‘synthetic’ tableaux. In the words of Quintanilla, ‘the Bat is not the name of a comedy or drama but refers instead to a new, special genre of today’s theater in which music, song, dance, mimicry, and painting collaborate and elements are harmoniously ordered to elicit an exquisite emotion promised to all’. This avant-garde impulse to mix artistic genres and media was also implicitly linked to the discourse of *mestizaje*, or racial mixture: the group juxtaposed short, picturesque scenes of urban (‘European’) and rural (indigenous) life with the intention of ‘presenting to the public, especially abroad, in a synthetic and suggestive form, all those aspects of our national life that are characteristic of our color, our melody, and our poetry’ (Quintanilla 2).

In fact, the Murciélago’s debut took place in Mexico, though its audience was indeed international: the performance was sponsored by the municipal government and local business leaders as a special evening of entertainment for the American Industrial Mission, a delegation of U.S. executives whose task was to establish economic ties with the new post-revolutionary regime. Quintanilla played the role of emcee, and Gaston Dinner and Quintanilla’s American wife Ruth Stallsmith appeared in acting roles, as did Tina Modotti, who played a *purépecha* woman enacting the annual ritual for the Night of the Dead on the Island of Janitzio in Michoacán. Indigenous performers under the direction of Nicolás Bartolo Juárez provided the music and also appeared in scenes such as the *Danza de los viejitos*, the traditional Dance of the Old Men. Scenes of urban life included *Camiones* (Tramcars) and *El aparador* (Storefront Window), in which human actors played the part of dolls in a display representing ‘typical’ Mexican figures such as the *charro.* Although the performance received positive reviews and was hailed by many as the germ of a truly Mexican theatre, the group would never again perform.

**References and further reading**

Ortiz, A. (2005) *Teatro y vanguardia en el México posrevolucionario*, Azcapotzalco: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana.

Quintanilla, L. (1924) *Teatro Mexicano del Murciélago*, Mexico City: Talleres Gráficos de la Nación.

De los Reyes, A. (1991) *Manuel Gamio y el cine*, Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

**Sarah J. Townsend, The Pennsylvania State University**

**NOTE: All of the images from the program of the Teatro del Murciélago are in the public domain (I know one has been used as the cover of a book in Mexico). I assume those from the program for the Chauve-Souris are also in the public domain. Both publications are available at a number of libraries in the United States.**

**Image 1**

Carlos González’s cover of the program for the Teatro del Murciélago (Theater of the Bat) depicts the folk performance called the Dance of the Moors. Source: Quintanilla, L. (1924) *Teatro Mexicano del Murciélago*, Mexico City: Talleres Gráficos de la Nación.

**Image 2**

The cover of a booklet/program for La Chauve-Souris spectacle during its New York run depicts a carousel and some of the characters that appeared in the show. Source: Sayler, O. (1923) *F. Ray Comstock and Morris Gest Have the Honor to Present Balieff’s Chauve-Souris, Bat Theatre, Moscow*, New York.

**Image 3**

A watercolor by the artist Soudeikine of the scene ‘Babi (The Russian Peasant)’ from the booklet/program from La Chauve-Souris spectacle during its New York run. Source: Sayler, O. (1923) *F. Ray Comstock and Morris Gest Have the Honor to Present Balieff’s Chauve-Souris, Bat Theatre, Moscow*, New York.

**Image 4**

A watercolor by the artist Soudeikine of the scene ‘The Moscow Fiancées’ about the pre-revolutionary Russian aristocracy, from the booklet/program from La Chauve-Souris spectacle during its New York run. Source: Sayler, O. (1923) *F. Ray Comstock and Morris Gest Have the Honor to Present Balieff’s Chauve-Souris, Bat Theatre, Moscow*, New York.

**Image 5**

A sketch by the artist Remisoff of the famous Parade of the Wooden Soldiers scene, from the booklet/program from La Chauve-Souris spectacle during its New York run. Source: Sayler, O. (1923) *F. Ray Comstock and Morris Gest Have the Honor to Present Balieff’s Chauve-Souris, Bat Theatre, Moscow*, New York.

**Image 6**

Carlos González’s illustration of the scene called ‘La ofrenda’ (The Offering) from the Teatro del Murciélago show in which Tina Modotti appeared as a *purépecha* woman performing the traditional ritual in honor of the dead on the Island of Janitizio in Lake Pátzcuaro, Michoacán. Source: Quintanilla, L. (1924) *Teatro Mexicano del Murciélago*, Mexico City: Talleres Gráficos de la Nación.

**Image 7**

An illustration by Carlos González of the scene featuring *purépecha* performers in the traditional ‘Danza de los viejitos’ (Dance of the Little Old Men). Source: Quintanilla, L. (1924) *Teatro Mexicano del Murciélago*, Mexico City: Talleres Gráficos de la Nación.

**Image 8**

An illustration by E. García Cabral of the urban scene called ‘Camiones’ (Tramcars). Source: Quintanilla, L. (1924) *Teatro Mexicano del Murciélago*, Mexico City: Talleres Gráficos de la Nación.

**Image 9**

An illustration by Carlos González of the scene called ‘El aparador’ (The Store Window), which featured actors playing dolls depicting ‘typical’ Mexican figures such as the *charro* in the large sombrero. Source: Quintanilla, L. (1924) *Teatro Mexicano del Murciélago*, Mexico City: Talleres Gráficos de la Nación.