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Performance Review: *El año de Ricardo*

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El año de Ricardo. By Angélica Liddell. Company: Foro de La Fábrica. Directed by Alonso Barrera. Actors: Maria Aura, Juan Velázquez



Actor: Maria Aura. Photo: Izaak Ferro

On the surface, it seems that Foro de La Fábrica's move to produce Spanish playwright Angélica Liddell's blatantly political play, *El año de Ricardo*, would be an odd choice. The company, housed in a trendy and popular refurbished factory building in Querétaro, Mexico, complete with a modern restaurant and retail stores, maintains a healthy following through a variety of productions, including popular original comedies and crowd-pleasing family dramas. La Fábrica recently presented Liddell's play in nearby, ex-patriot destination spot,

San Miguel de Allende, and plans to include the production in the upcoming Fringe Festival in the same town. A Mexican tour of the production is to follow. The artistic and financial investment in political drama here seems, on the surface, at odds with the bucolic atmosphere found in this region of Mexico. This is after all, a region that has been relatively free from media coverage of drug lords and immigration strife. So why would this company choose to take on an ambitious and disturbing text that stands to confuse and alienate its audiences?

Angélica Liddell's troubling and complex play *El año de Ricardo* probes its audience to contemplate the political structure of democracy and its ability to obscure the abuse of power. Using Shakespeare's title character

as a metaphor, Liddell goes beyond political constructs and delves into the psychological and deeply emotional human mechanisms that render world leaders corrupt, abusive, and ruthless. The metaphor is brutally captured in Liddell's play, not in the sort of dramatic action found in the traditional well-made play, or in the sweeping historical context of Shakespearean drama, or in the type of social conditions depicted in Brecht. Liddell carves a new genre of political theater through a volcanic monologue vomited forth by her central character. The metaphors explored through the torrent of words can be applied not only to political leaders but also to individuals who possess any degree of power over another person in any situation, anywhere in the world. The result is not only an indictment of politicians and authority figures, but of human nature itself. The play asks audiences to contemplate unpleasant aspects of the human psyche and therefore is clearly in search of an audience that is intelligent, self-reflective, and brave enough to enter a troubling and foreboding psychological landscape. It is important to note that although Liddell has been a known figure in Spanish and European theater since the mid-1990s, it was the two and one-half hour *El año de Ricardo*, which the playwright-director-actor performed at Festival d'Avignon in 2010, along with a second work, *La casa de la fuerza*, that introduced her to a broader international audience of critics and academics. She has received several high profile awards, including the 2013 Silver Lion Award for Theater at the Venice Biennale and the 2012 National Prize for Dramatic Literature (*La casa de la fuerza*), given by Spain's Ministry of Culture.

Director Alonso Barrera and company members of Foro de La Fábrica clearly understand the profound intent of the play and bravely challenge audiences by presenting an artful and paradoxically graceful production. The stage is white and spare, few set pieces are used, and strategically disturbing photographic images of war are used only at the climax of the play. A screen with general supertitles is provided for English speakers. Barrera understands that all elements of the production are in service of Liddell's complex and highly intelligent text and therefore uses the elements on hand to support this version's one and one-half hour monologue performed by actor María Aura as Ricardo. The director creates an internal logic in this production that seems to borrow from the influences of Brecht, Robert Wilson, Commedia dell'arte, Cantinflas, and even Stanislavsky in rendering the world of this Ricardo, the politician, dictator, and tyrant. The result of this combination is theatrically thrilling, but thrilling to the degree that audiences are willing to work toward a comprehension of the images, gestures, and flood of words that



Actor: Maria Aura. Photo: Izaak Ferro

fill the theatrical space. This is a production that refuses to spoon-feed results. Willing to risk alienating audiences, Barrera sides with Liddell here in seeking an audience that defines theater as art rather than popular entertainment.

Barrera's insightful direction is matched and even sometimes superseded by María Aura's engaging and impressive turn as Ricardo. Throughout the production, Aura manages to vacillate between impish charm, primitive hunger, sexual tension, greedy narcissism, and deep psychological megalomania. This is an accomplished and excellently trained actor devouring material that showcases her formidable talents. Her ability for interpretation of text alone is remarkable, but beyond that Aura manages to embody the full humanity of a character that speaks only in a highly elevated language comprised of ideas, conjectures, and political platitudes. A measure of humor, a grotesque joke, a play on words, or a physical gag. Nothing is left vague. Commitment is evident in every word, gesture, and stage picture. Through Aura, Barrera emerges as a director capable not only of crafting a deeply moving and memorable visual language through the actor's body, but also of creating a disturbing theatrical landscape of mind and metaphor through audio pace, rhythm and silences. Aura's use of her body in realizing the character is a study in stage physicality. She is alternately (and sometimes simultaneously)

a puppet, a cartoon, a two-dimensional image on a television screen, a demon, and a man. Under Barrera's direction, the actor is able to shift in a moment from extreme physical gesture to deep human emotion. These are some of the most moving and provocative moments in the piece. The team manages to imbue Ricardo with such humanity that at times, dare we think it?—we care for him and all the while despise what he symbolizes.

Barrera and Aura are supported well by the presence of Juan Velázquez, the other actor in the piece, who serves to flesh out the world in which Ricardo operates. Velázquez's character does not speak, but Barrera makes great use of his imposing physical frame, a sharp contrast to Aura's diminutive physical size. The contrast alternately serves for humorous sight gags and disturbing symbolisms of power and privilege.

The creative team from Querétaro's Foro de la Fábrica excels in providing a thought-provoking, disturbing and graceful interpretation from one of the world's current voices at the forefront of political theater. Not only is great theatrical artistry on display in this production, but also the company dares to present the play in their own country, a country that suffers from a history of corruption and vice. During the weeks prior to the premier of the production, forty-three students disappeared in the state of Guerrero. No clear answer for the disappearances has been formally announced and the government is holding no one accountable. At the time of this writing, protests are taking place in various locations all over Mexico. Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto took office in December of 2012 and the country continues to suffer from tremendous disparity of economics and few answers when it comes to abuse of power. Barrera and his team seek out not only audiences who understand the artistry that is possible in the theatre, but also audiences with the courage to look deeply at the world, their country, and themselves.

The University of Vermont