

Spanish fly

Four productions *en español* take the main stage at the Lincoln Center Festival. By Kerri Allen

Remember this year's Oscars, when that trio of films by Spanish-speaking directors got a slew of nominations, causing (mostly white) critics and audiences to collectively slap their heads and say, "Goddamn, there's some talent out there, we never knew!" even though it was there all along? That could happen again, this time in the arena of New York theater.

The annual Lincoln Center Festival gets going on Tuesday, July 10, with Chile's Compañía Teatro Cinema's whacked-out play *Gemelos*, one of four featured Spanish-language productions. The polyglot approach is a first for the fest—in its previous 11-year history, only three South American countries have been represented. This year marks the debut of Argentine and Chilean companies. (If your geography is fuzzy, there are 12 nations down there.) The focus also shines light on a larger issue: In a city where Hispanics make up one third of the population, there's a relative lack of theater *en español*.

The LCF remedies that, at least for a few weeks: In fairy-tale fashion, *Gemelos* reimagines a haunting Hungarian novel from 1986, about the effects of war on children. Among its trademarks, the company throws in Michel Gondry-esque film techniques—such as an iris effect and forced perspective—and conveys the illusion that the cast is puppet-size by performing on a small-scale stage.

Argentine group Proyecto Chejov follows with the no-less-ambitious *Un hombre que se ahoga* ("a man who drowns"), a "freely interpreted" version of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* (July 17–19)—so free, in fact, that all gender roles are reversed, and there's no theatrical lighting, costumes or makeup. Despite what could be seen as gimmickry, director Daniel Veronese doesn't have any agenda. "I don't look for anything ahead of time for the audience 'to get' from the work. Not in New York or in Buenos Aires. Usually when the public leaves a play satisfied with 'understanding something,' it hasn't done much more than validate their beliefs."

Mexico represents with Teatro de Ciertos Habitantes' farcical *De monstruos y prodigios: La historia de los castrati* ("Monsters and prodigies: the history of the castrati") (July 20–22). As if talking about the pros and cons of castration weren't bizarre enough, the actors throw food at the audience, and a real horse sashays onto the stage.

Finally, the festival kicks it old-school with a classic Spanish play from Madrid's Centro Dramático Nacional. *Divinas palabras* ("divine words") (July 26–28) is a 40-character, 23-actor

extravaganza from one of Spain's most pioneering dramatists, Ramón María del Valle-Inclán (1866–1936). It has been adapted from the 1919 original by contemporary Madrilenian playwright Juan Mayorga.

The fest's Spanish theme came courtesy of Cuban native Olga Garay, who was just hired as the general manager of the city of Los Angeles' cultural affairs department. Before decamping westward, she organized this special series for the festival. "It was amazing to me that, in a city as international and as big a hub for Latinos from all over this hemisphere and beyond [as New York], there was no major venue for really intelligent, well-crafted performing arts [in Spanish]," she says.

Garay visited 14 nations and settled on companies from Argentina, Chile, Mexico and Spain. ("In the U.S., there seems to be a dichotomy between Spain and Latin America because of colonialism," she says. "I felt it was a false construct not to include Spain.")

It takes a lot of pesos (or euros) to transport casts, crews and heaps of production equipment up north or across the pond. Garay worked on just four of the fest's 16 productions and her budget alone was an impressive \$1.5 million. "Not many Latino countries have the resources to undergird their artists to the same degree, so you have to depend on the host organization. There haven't been very many well-heeled, flush, Latino-based organizations in New York that have been able to do that."

René Buch is the artistic director of Repertorio Español, the preeminent Spanish-language theater in New York, which has consistently imported talent from Spain and Central and South America for more than four decades. Compared with the deep coffers of Lincoln Center, Buch's budget was just \$2.1 million last season. Still, he's happy that the festival has the wherewithal to focus on Latin America this year. (Besides his company, you'll also find the bilingual Thalia Spanish Theatre in Sunnyside, Queens; the bilingual Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre; and, umm...)

"It's about time," Buch says. "You see, the Armada lost in 1588, and we've been under the shade ever since. This country is delighted to ignore Latin America, but they cannot take away the fact that we are an important segment of New York City. There is a snob element that is included in this project," he says of the fest. "But it's about time that our art and culture is given the respect it deserves."



Divinas palabras

Garay, for one, hopes LCF will start a trend. "We chose the best companies and the most diverse—I wanted to have things that are not typically seen here, to introduce people to a whole new dialogue that is very exacting and very provocative."

Good thinkin', Lincoln

You've got three weeks to pack in music, dance, opera and theater. Here's a trio to get you going.

La Comédie-Française

July 10–15

Robert Wilson (snore) hooks up with Europe's oldest theater company (aha!) to imagine *Fables de La Fontaine*, a dreamscape based on the work of poet Jean de La Fontaine (hmmm). Oh, and the actors wear black suits and animal masks (sold!).

Heisei Nakamura-za

July 16–22

If everything you know about Kabuki comes from *M. Butterfly* or *Sgt. Kabukiman N.Y.P.D.*, you'll be both edified and entertained by this. The Nakamura family are old pros—it's been doing Kabuki since the 17th century—presenting a street-theater-like take on the ancient art, with modern references included.

Der Ring des Nibelungen

July 13–21

At press time, a few tickets were still available for Richard Wagner's 200-hour epic, copresented by LCF and the Met Opera. It's all in Russian. It's the Kirov Opera of the Mariinsky Theatre. It's now or never.

For more info, go to lincolncenter.org.