

Vázquez Touriño, D. (2020) *Insignificantes en diálogo con el público. El teatro de la generación Fonca*. Madrid: Editorial Verbum.

### **A brief summary**

This book is the first comprehensive study about the generation of playwrights that prevails on the Mexican scenes from the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century until nowadays. As this research shows, the innovation of this new Mexican dramatics sources from three changes of paradigm: the new rules for funding culture in Mexico since 1988 (Fonca), the prevalence of postdramatic theatre as the dominant aesthetics, and the adoption of neoliberal Economics in Latin America. *Insignificantes en diálogo con el público* traces the impact of these changes of paradigm in the plays of some of the most influential authors of the generation (Luis Mario Moncada, Legom, Edgar Chías, Barbara Colio, Alejandro Ricaño, Richard Viqueira), and presents the common features of this generation: self-referentiality, community based theatre, hypertrophy of the narrative devices, humor and untragic loser protagonists. By clearly defining the dramatics of this new but powerful group of authors, the book aims to become a key reference for scholars on Mexican or Latin American theatre.

### **A detailed summary**

The introductory chapter proposes a hypothesis that provides justification for the relevance and originality of the study. The argument goes back to the emergence of the Generation of the 50's, an exceptional group of playwrights who, taking advantage of the nationalist cultural policies of post-revolutionary Mexico, developed a prolific, diverse, innovative and inquiring theatrical production about the reality of their country. As part of the legacy of that generation, this chapter highlights the predominantly literary character of that dramaturgy, based on a text-centered theatrical philosophy. As a consequence of this centrality of the text, Mexican theater criticism and historiography have also shown a tendency to perpetuate a kind of analysis based on a conception of theater as the staging of a text. Although contemporary Mexican dramaturgy is founded on very different premises -aesthetic, economic, cultural-, most of the studies carried out on the theater of the last decades keep using tools that are perhaps not the most appropriate. For this reason, chapters 1, 2 and 3 introduce paradigm shifts that are essential to understand in order to confront contemporary dramaturgy.

The first chapter of the book fulfills two tasks. On the one hand, it outlines the object of study and, on the other, it discusses the first paradigm shift, that of the theater's economic funding in Mexico, a change that took place after the founding of the National Fund for Culture and the Arts (Fonca) in 1989. Drawing on works in the sociology of theater (Jiménez, Enríquez, etc.), the chapter argues that this change in funding, based now on a horizontal peer review structure that replaces state planning of theatrical activity, is the cause of a new approach to playwriting. This is now community-centered writing, with the prevalence of plural artistic subjects offering long-term projects that involve a well-defined audience. This paradigm shift in theatrical production, therefore, fully affects the generation of authors who began to premiere in the 1990s and who have been hegemonic since then until now. The chapter also discusses the suitability of the concept of generation itself, and rejects, following Sánchez Carao, its mechanical use associated only with dates of birth, although it concludes that, in this case, the change of funding is a circumstance common to the authors of this generation and, moreover, leads to a common aesthetic response. The study therefore proposes the term "Fonca generation" to designate this group of writers.

The second chapter deals with the paradigm shift that took place in the performing arts since the 1960s (what Fischer-Lichte calls the "performative turn") and its impact on contemporary theater writing. The prominence of contingency as the foundation of stage arts to the expense of mimesis is a second fundamental factor that determines the theater writing of the Fonca generation. Based on the theoretical works of Erika Fischer-Lichte, Denis Guénoun, Óscar Cornago, Hans-Thies Lehmann, José Sánchez or Jean Pierre Sarrazac, the chapter identifies the most remarkable features of this new writing that is the dramaturgy of a post-dramatic theater: the presence of the game, the involvement of the spectator, the self-referentiality, the mediality and, especially, the materiality of the text, which ceases to be dramatic and becomes lyric or political. The chapter offers several examples of how this new poetics appears in various authors of the Fonca generation, but it will be in the following chapters where this aspect will be elaborated. Finally, the chapter highlights the political dimension of this new theatre that, following Cornago, one could associate with the rejection of mimesis as a resistance to the society of the spectacle enunciated by Debord.

The third paradigm shift that must be considered in order to understand the theater writing of the Fonca generation refers to globalization as an economic, social and cultural context that serves as a frame of reference for the works of these authors. This paradigm shift is important to understand the evolution of aspects such as Mexicanism or political commitment (or the absence of both) in contemporary theater. The new economic conditions, stemming from the implementation of neoliberal policies, lead to a major presence of issues such as criminality, migration or informal employment, not surprisingly. But, apart from these socioeconomic phenomena, globalization also brings changes in cultural aspects, such as hyperconnectivity or technological nomadism. Chapter 4 concludes by discussing the engaged nature of the new theater writing. By renouncing the use of theater as representation and founding the theatrical experience on the creation of a community with the audience, this type of theater abandons the "classical" denouncing type of commitment. The political dimension of this new writing is not so much in the taking of sides as in the community and the shared experience. For this reason, the chapter concludes, the Fonca generation can be described as "post-national and post-progressive".

Chapter 4 exposes some of the writing strategies frequently used by these playwrights to provoke effects of self-referentiality and turn their writing into a writing in accordance with performative or post-dramatic approaches. In works by important authors such as David Olguín, Jaime Chalbaud, Bárbara Colio or Claudio Valdés Kuri, effects such as the theater within the theater, the inversion of spectator-audience roles or the corporealization of the actor (as the opposite phenomenon of the embodiment of a character) can be traced. However, one of these antimimetic resources has reached a clear preponderance in contemporary Mexican theater writing, and that is the hypertrophy of narrative elements, to the point that theater critics have coined the term *narraturgia* (instead of *dramaturgia*) to refer to this type of theater. The second part of this chapter -the longest in the monograph- explores the origins and rationale of this important *narraturgical* trend. It is significant that the origin of the movement were the experimentation with the dramatization of narrative texts carried out by Luis Mario Moncada and Martín Acosta in the mid-1990s. These experiments highlight an aspect that the book considers fundamental for this generation of writers: the subjectivity (and authenticity?) of the narration addressed to the public as opposed to the supposed objectivity of mimetic representation. It is this premise that enhances the immediate dialogue between the artist and

the spectator that articulates the creation of the main authors of this movement (Legom, Edgar Chías, Alejandro Ricaño). For this reason, the book emphasizes the importance of the figure of the rhapsodist (actor, narrator and character at the same time) and the rhapsodic character of most of the texts studied.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 are dedicated to the three most representative authors of this movement: Édgar Chías, Luis Enrique Gutiérrez Ortiz Monasterio (Legom) and Alejandro Ricaño. The works of these authors explore the possibilities of rhapsodic writing to the fullest, each with his own personal hallmark. Édgar Chías, author of emblematic works such as *El cielo en la piel*, is also one of the main theorists of rhapsodic writing, a term originally conceptualized by Pierre Sarrazac. Legom, whose theoretical contributions about the new theater writing are of great importance and will be discussed for a long time, stands out for his poetics that questions the process of character creation, with innovative and provocative plays such as *Sensacional de maricones*. Both the chapter on Chías (chapter 5) and the one on Legom (chapter 6) provide a detailed analysis of a large part of their plays. In order to address matters of drama theory - and to relate them to the tools provided by performative art- the method of analysis known as "dramatology" and elaborated by José-Luis García Barrientos is used above all.

In chapter 7, dedicated to Alejandro Ricaño, the author who has probably developed the most effortless and fresh style in the exploration of rhapsodic writing, apart from the analysis of his most successful works, the chapter offers a reflection on the type of leading character that is most common in the creation of the Fonca generation. This is a type of "loser of globalization" (Bixler), a being who fails again and again in his attempts to access the here and now of liquid modernity (Bauman), but who, instead of rebelling against it, ridiculously reproduces a discourse -that of asserting himself in the globalized world- that does nothing but humiliate him. These characters define themselves in Ricaño's most important work as "insignificant". The chapter argues that these insignificant characters -who connect with a type character of the Mexican theatrical tradition, the "*pelado*"- are yet another of the fundamental characteristics of the writing of the Fonca generation.

A final chapter analyzing plays from this generation, chapter 8, addresses other writing strategies that, without being *narraturgy*, are also particularly characteristic of the Fonca generation. One of them, characterized as "*rodeo*" by Jean Pierre Sarrazac, arises from the

impossibility of directly confronting contemporary horrors, so the artists wrap their works in allegories and alternative realities. Richard Viqueira and Martín Zapata are excellent prime representatives of this type of theater based on the *rodeo* effect, with their texts developing conflicts in orbital stations, between oriental characters or in superhero plots. The second particularly significant phenomenon of this generation studied in Chapter 8 concerns the exploitation of multimediality. At this point, the book relies on theories of intermediality in theater, such as Bay-Cheng or Kattenbelt, to analyze the intermedial trilogies of one of the crucial authors of the generation: Luis Mario Moncada. The structure of pieces such as *9 días de guerra en Facebook* do not abandon the rhapsodic and performative approach, but also explore the relation between theater and the nomadic identity (Braidotti) of the theatergoer, an identity disseminated in the space of the virtual as well as present in the theatrical ceremony.

The last chapter summarizes the particular features of this generation and underlines the particular approach used to carry out the analyses. This chapter also offers a consideration of the necessity of completing this panorama with the study of less "text-centric" artists who otherwise share the idiosyncrasy and many concerns with the studied authors. These are companies such as *Largatijas tiradas al sol* or the performative cabaret theater of Jesusa Rodríguez. Such a possible study would complete the panorama of contemporary Mexican theater.