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Asaltos al escenario: humor, género e historia en el teatro de Sabina Berman, by Priscilla Meléndez. México City: Bonilla Artigas Editores, 2021. 384 páginas.

Priscilla Meléndez, a leading figure in the field of Latin American theater and author of previous groundbreaking publications including *La dramaturgia hispanoamericana contemporánea: Teatralidad y autoconsciencia* and *The Politics of Farce in Contemporary Spanish American Theater*, among many others, once again balances deep, detailed, satisfying analyses with a comprehensive, birds-eye view in her study of one of Mexico's greatest playwrights: Sabina Berman. *Asaltos al escenario: humor, género e historia en el teatro de Sabina Berman* builds on Meléndez's previous work on Berman to present a complete picture of the Mexican author's ability to create dramatic experiences which keep audiences laughing (and occasionally crying) as they witness, experience, and consider the most salient topics of Mexico's past, present, and future.

Berman's dramatic arrival was most definitely an attack on Mexico's some-would-say stale stage of the '70s and '80s, and Meléndez credits the book's title to critics who affirm that Berman and her generation (la nueva dramaturgia mexicana) assaulted the scene with their iconoclastic plays and performances. She chose the title to underscore "la vitalidad, el activismo y el riesgo" that is the hallmark of Berman's plays and that her work represents (16). The book is comprised of a comprehensive bibliography, thematic index, and two sections representing Berman's major theatrical pieces: "Humor, caricatura y sexo en el gran Teatro del mundo: del suplicio colonial al 'placer' posrevolucionario" and "Las crisis históricas y la cultura de la muerte: de la Inquisición al narcotráfico." The former (Parte I) treats the plays *Águila o sol*, *Molière*, *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* (also produced as a film) and the unified collection *El suplicio del placer*; while the latter (Parte II) includes *En el nombre de Dios*, *Rompecabezas*, *Backyard* (a screenplay that was both published in a literary journal and released as a film), and *El Narco negocia con Dios*.

As the section title suggests, part one of *Asaltos al escenario* is perhaps the more playful of the two parts of this book, though Meléndez is quick to point out that Berman's plays resist easy categorization and constantly cross, question, and obliterate borders. Indeed, Meléndez's reading of *Águila o sol* demonstrates this fluidity. The play is carnivalesque and presents a humorous caricature of Hernán Cortés yet treats the brutal conquest of Mexico. This chapter ("La ética del humor: *Águila o sol* o la có(s)mica Conquista Mexicana") includes supporting theories about humor, including the work of Simon Critchley, and underscores the liminal, line-blurring approach to many topics seen in the work of Berman, even if in the topics at first seem to be a question of heads or tails. "(In)Genio y figura hasta la sepultura: Molière, Racine, Berman y sus asedios al teatro" looks at this same topic, but this time the two sides of the

coin are comedy and tragedy, among many binaries, and Meléndez keenly observes Berman's maneuver: "La obra destaca [...] cómo el poder político se sirve de estas dicotomías como medio de establecer su propia hegemonía" (123). In the following chapter, "Marx, Villa Calles, Guzmán...: fantasmas y modernidad en *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda*," Meléndez grounds herself thoroughly in previous scholarship (as she does in all chapters) and proposes a new angle on the play: the profound parody of two key Mexican anxiety-producing concepts, "el deseo revolucionario y el ansia de modernidad" (128). The last chapter of part I, "Placeres, apetitos y acidez: Género y farsa en *El suplicio del placer*," points to this collection of vignettes as a 1978 harbinger of many themes Berman tackled in subsequent years and interrogates the lines between Latin American farce and the experiences of women in *machista* societies.

The second part of Meléndez's impressive tome, like two sides of a coin, is a continuation of the first with a tilt toward plays that present more specifically current crises. "Sacra escritura y secreta oralidad en *En el nombre de Dios*," chapter one, treat a play that like many other of Berman's pieces has had more than one title. In this case the previous title was *Herejía*, and Meléndez creates a dialogue between versions of the play, which both challenge Mexican historiography, with the Inquisition as a backdrop. The following chapter, "Trotsky y la teatralización de la muerte en *Rompecabezas*," among other themes, continues the sharp analysis of Berman's *modus operandi*, which is "la yuxtaposición entre lo referencial y lo ficcional" in a way that undermines history and demonstrates the disruptive power of art (264). The penultimate chapter ("Cuerpos y delitos en la frontera: Los feminicidios en el guión cinematográfico *Backyard*") looks at real and imagined borders in order to show how Berman explicitly denounces violence against women and girls and to assert that from time to time there are heroes who seek justice. The final chapter of the book treats an equally devastating topic—narcotraficking and its myriad contexts—but with more of Berman's signature humor. In "Teo- y narco-logías: Los mercaderes del tiempo en *El Narco negocia con Dios*," Meléndez argues that Berman plays with time to parody religious discourse and, ultimately, shows that "la pieza de Berman subraya la imposibilidad de los personajes de asumir posturas morales coherentes dentro del marco histórico del presente" (339).

Priscilla Meléndez's *Asaltos al escenario: humor, género e historia en el teatro de Sabina Berman* is a must-read for scholars of Latin American theater. From cover to cover she presents a thorough, engaging, accurate, and unified study of a powerhouse author. After reading Meléndez's book it might feel there is nothing left to be said about this grouping of Berman's pieces, but Meléndez is a generous writer who leaves doors open for aspiring critics.

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