*The Americas*
67:3/January 2011/315-329
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AMERICAN FRANCISCAN HISTORY

# Puppet Theater in Eighteenth-Century Mexico

Puppet theater was considered a marginal form of entertainment during Mexico's colonial era. People saw puppet plays on temporary stages outside of churches, at various fairs, and in private homes. The puppet groups were officially overshadowed by the theater performances, especially those at the Coliseum of Comedias, one of the financial channels for the Hospital Real de Naturales. Leasing the coliseum provided one of the major sources of income for this royal charity for indigenous health care. In order to maintain the Coliseum's profitability and the benefits derived from it, colonial authorities prohibited most theater groups from performing outside of the Coliseum.[1] The lease owner often called for government assistance against puppet troupes, in particular when they threatened attendance at the theater. This resulted in the so-called "League Comedy" (*Comedia de la legua*), which was a performance given at least five leagues outside of the central theater district of Mexico City, Puebla, and Guadalajara.

Against a backdrop of concern about Coliseum audiences and profits, this essay follows the development of the puppeteers' trade, especially company directors, often called the author or the playwright of comedies, during the eighteenth century. The puppeteer, also called the *cómico de la legua*, was an actor who handled the puppet strings on stage. Although it is said that the world is an eternal comedy, in it the puppeteer was only able to play the unfortunate role of an itinerant actor who traveled to different places offering shows with a constant, urgent need to earn an income.

No legislation described the trade of puppeteers in Spain. Nonetheless, in 1247, Giraldo Riquer de Narbona, in his famous *Suplicatio al rey de Castela* lamented

This essay is part of a dissertation "Muñecos, circo y teatro en las ciudades de México y Puebla (1770-1830; 1870-1910)," done at the Instituto de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades de la Universidad Autónoma de Puebla. This selection was translated by Diana Montaño and edited by William H. Beezley.

1. Miguel Ángel Meléndez, "Los espacios recreativos y los protocolos festivos oficiales en la ciudad de México, 1747-1877" in *Los espacios públicos de la ciudad, siglo XVIII y XIX*, Carlos Aguirre Anaya, Marcela Dávalos and María Amparo Ros, eds. (México: Casa Juan Pablo/Instituto de Cultura de la Ciudad de México, 2002), p. 71.



https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003161500000043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

before King Alfonso "the Wise," that those who juggle or manipulate puppets are called *jongleurs.* Giraldo's declaration discussed those who lived vulgar lives such as those who made monkeys, goats or dogs jump and performs and who could not appear at court; those who displayed puppets, imitated birds or performed a little play and sang among the poor for small amounts of money should not be labeled as jongleurs, he argued. As a result, King Alfonso distinguished actors in five classifications in the *Ley de Siete Partidas*, the code he promulgated in the thirteenth century:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Histriones* | (actors, buffoons) |
| *Trovadores* | (troubadours) |
| *Joculadores* | (acrobats and magicians) |
| *Bribones* | (knaves) |
| *Cazurros* | (puppeteers) |

The king considered most jongleurs to be individuals who "offered their bodies for vile uses, degrading themselves before everyone" for a few coins. He did not place puppeteers and acrobats among this group because they demonstrated skills. On this basis, for centuries some puppeteers had access to the royalty and their palaces.[2] The puppeteers wanted to present their shows at court to secure a positive welcome in the rest of the country, because if they were successful at court, they would receive a good response from the general public.[3] Beginning in the seventeenth century, permanent puppet theaters appeared at court to entertain the princes more so than the kings. Prominent families hired puppeteers for personal performances.[4]

Miguel de Cervantes de Saavedra declared that puppeteers were vagrants who treated divine things indecently because they turned devotion into laughter with their puppets. They also indiscriminately packed together all the figures of the Old and New Testament, and would put their sack on the floor in taverns, where they sat over it to drink. In *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, Cervantes included the adventure of Maese Pedro's puppet show, using the alias Ginesillo de Pasamonte, and it was such an ancient performance that even Greeks and Romans knew of it.[5]

A contemporary of Cervantes, the author of *La pícara Justina*, says in his second chapter:

2. Francisco Porras, *Titelles teatro popular* (Madrid: Editora Nacional, 1981), p. 82.

3. Vicente Suárez, *Entremeces, bayles, saynetes y comedias* (1663), Foja 38-39 (Edición Facsimilar) (Madrid: Ministerio de Educación y Cultura, Biblioteca Nacional, 1997), p. 85.

4. Henrik Jurkowski, "Los títeres y el poder del Estado," *Consideraciones sobre el teatro de títeres.* Trans. Penny Francis (Bilbao: Centro de documentación de títeres de Bilbao, 1990), p. 85.

5. Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *El Quijote de la Mancha* (México: CONACULTA, 2002).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003161500000043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> My grandfather used to perform puppet shows in Sevilla. His puppets were the best . . . and his stage was the best dressed that was ever seen in that town. . . . It was such a pleasure to see him give an impassioned speech with his puppets; the fruit sellers, and those who grilled and sold chestnuts and the other vendors followed him . . . for the enjoyment of hearing him.[6]

Antonio de Cotarelo, in his book *El teatro de Cervantes*, mentioned that puppeteers were vagrants and rogues. They seemed to use their profession to hide their tricks, a fertile talent among them, which they used to earn a living. They traveled to all the corners of the kingdom with no more luggage than a box of torn puppets, which attracted the curious. To the sound of bells, the puppets performed in castles and cities singing songs and other scenes about heroes, stories and battles.[7]

Still, no legal definitions existed for the puppet enterprise, although literature did offer some descriptions. For example, in 1661, Spanish playwright Vicente Suárez wrote *Saynete de los títeres* for the Coliseo del Buen Retiro that described what was regarded as the common experience of puppeteers.

Alcalde: Who are they?
Eferiuano: A puppeteer with his wife and two children. Due to some debts, by the leasing order from Madrid, we have seized their stage machinery, chest, coffers and puppets.
Alcalde: And tell me, what is that trade of puppeteer?
Regidor: Don't you know?
Alcalde: No, and I'll be pleased to know, because that sounds like something entertaining.
*(A man comes out with his wife and two children)*
Eferiuano: Well, the author himself will make us experts of his trade.
Author: Sir, I am the author of a Máquina Real that I bought from some pygmies, and that performs comedies . . . , plays, prologues, new dances by Benavente, Cancer and other dead poets.

Alcalde: Quien fon?
Eferiuano: Un titerero con fu muger, y dos hijos,que aquí embargados tenemos por unas deudas, y por orden del arrendamiento de Madrid, con fus tramoyas, arcas, cofres, y muñecos.
Allcalde: Y dezidme, ¿qué oficio es effe de titeretero?
Regidor: luego no lo fabeis
Alcalde: No, y me holgaré de faberlo, porque effo llama a fer cofa de mucho entretenimiento
*(Sale un hombre, una muger, y dos chiquillos)*
Eferiuano: Pues; pero el autor mifme de aquefta materia dueño os hara.
Auor. Señor, yo foy el autor que reprefento con una Máquina Real, que traygo de unos Pigmeos comedias. . . , autos, loas, bayles nuevos; de Benavente, de Cancer, Y de otros Poetas muertos

6. Francisco López de Úbela, *La pícara justina* (1604). See chap. 2.
7. Roberto Lago, "Retablos y títeres en España," *La hoja del titiritero independiente* (Unknown Publisher, 1990), p. 5.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003161500000043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Alcalde: And who are the puppets?
Author: Me, my wife, six puppets, and those two children who play the role of the old people.
Alcalde: And the puppets, are they big?
Author: No, they are very small.
Alcalde: Let's see if they are good for the little prince.
Author: That's why they are famous.
Alcalde: Well take them out right now and let's see the four of them.[8]

Alcalde: y los títeres quien fon?
Autor: Yo mi muger, feis muñecos, aqueftos dos niños, que hazen los papeles de los viejos.
Alcalde: Y los títeres ¿quien fon grandes?
Autor: No fon fino muy pequeños
Alcalde: Veamosos, a ver fi fon para el Prencepito buenos?
Autor: Para effo fon famosos
Alcalde: Pus facaldos al momento, y veámoslo—los quatro.

When the first explorers crossed the Atlantic, puppeteers traveled with them in search of new theatrical opportunities. After the conquest of Mexico City, puppeteers became a part of the acculturation process. What must the indigenous have thought of the puppeteers as they tried to entertain and teach them respect and obedience towards the kings and the Church using the rag and wood dolls? Perhaps they recognized a remote relation with the mud figures elaborated for their rituals or with images that represented their deities. The marionettes also continued to entertain the Spaniards. In 1538, Bernal Díaz del Castillo reported that a puppeteer accompanied Hernán Cortés on his trip through the forests of Honduras. Cortés commented that the actors that traveled with him did farce, juggled, and performed with puppets.[9]

The first theatrical performances in Mexico City came in 1569 when the cómico de la legua, or puppeteer, Juan Zamora petitioned authorities for permission to perform three plays during Easter in Texcoco. In his petition, he assured the authorities that they need not fear the plays would provide a bad example to Indians, causing them to sin.[10] This suggests that the plays generally focused on sin in daily life. By the early eighteenth century, the puppet shows enjoyed a following and social interest in the main cities in the viceroyalty of New Spain. This proved detrimental to the interests of the theater companies, because they recognized that actors and actresses often became part of the puppet cast. As for the puppeteers, the newspapers rarely bothered recording their names or their place of origin; normally, they were just called "tent actors." In both Spain and New Spain, the puppeteers banded together and traveled to the "pueblos más perdidos de nuestra geografía" to perform low budget shows in whatever location was available. The actors, grouping together and looking for a place to work, moved

8. Suárez, *Entremeces, bayles, saynetes y comedias.*
9. Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera de la Nueva España* (México: Porrúa, 1980), p. 278.
10. Cited in José R. Benítez, *El mundo de los títeres: morfología de los títeres del mundo* (México, Botas, 1940), p. 66.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003161500000043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to different areas of New Spain. The performers were organized and directed by a manager-entrepreneur called either the author or the playwright.

The term playwright was frequently used in the puppeteers' petitions to authorities to obtain permission for their shows within New Spain. It drew on the long-standing concept of the playwright in Spain, specifically in Madrid, which included having the responsibility for managing theatrical performances. For example, a document from 1636 reported that Salvador Palomo, the playwright, and his company that included *matachines* dancers, *arliquines* or puppets, a monster, and acrobats would perform at the fiesta in Villa de Torrejón de Ardoz, on the day of the Holy Sacrament. Another similar document, dated in Madrid, January 13, 1636, reported the payment of five hundred *reales* to the author of a company that provided performances and fireworks at the end of Lent. In 1698, Pedro de Rivas, the king's clerk in the Villa of Madrid, reported that the author of one of the court's comedic companies, Juan de Cárdenas, was preparing a fiesta of puppets for their Majesties.[11]

By defining the title "playwright," it is possible to understand the significance of the position within dramatic troupes. An individual who wrote a play for the theater was called the *autor dramático* and it was understood that he or she imagined and developed the plot, elaborated the dialogue, and included annotations and indications for its interpretation as a scene. For example, if an author employed a legend to create a drama for the stage; he was the author of the play even if other dramatists had also dealt with the same topic. Even if the latest author borrowed from previous works, it did not prevent him from claiming authorship of the play, provided it had a different character, location or context from those that had preceded it. If what had been borrowed was of such importance that the play was merely a revision of an older one, then the creator was called an adapter. At times the line between the original play and the adaptation could be difficult to determine as it varied according to different eras and points of view. The title "author" identified the creator of a literary art work, a drawing, a musical piece, a painting, a theatrical play, and even a comedic company. In this sense, the playwright was not only any individual who invented or created a play, but also one that formed a group of people committed to the theatrical business.

In New Spain, the term "playwright" was used for the manager of a company of actors as well. More specifically, the author referred to the director of an entertainment company but it also extended to the entrepreneur responsible for the company itself, since anyone could exercise his talent to create, adapt and inter-

11. J. E. Varey, *Historia de los títeres en España (Desde sus orígenes hasta mediados del siglo XVIII)* (Madrid, *Revista de Occidente*, 1980), pp. 254, 255, 271.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003161500000043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

pret certain plays. The term "playwright" was used in 1645, in the city of Guadalajara, in which the town council mentioned that the community had not enjoyed comedy entertainment for a long time and therefore invited a company from Mexico City.[12]

In the seventeenth century, the playwrights organized the entertainment. Town councilors issued contracts to *autores de comedias* for the performance of plays and other entertainments during the novena of festivities for Corpus Christi. They used the title "playwright" for the director of puppet companies. An example can be found in 1763 in Querétaro, when the town magistrate ordered that "playwrights and their puppets . . . provide entertainment" only in private homes.[13] Playwrights carried out many different roles for the company: entrepreneur, director, actor and writer.[14] This was done with the collaboration of other performers who helped with the musical pieces and with moving the poor and almost nonexistent scenery, along with the many other, diverse activities of the colonial theater.

Whenever an individual formed a theatrical group to stage a comedy, he had the obligation of vouching for the moral and artistic standing of the actors, guaranteeing their behavior to the authorities. This resulted from the low opinion that authorities held of puppeteers. Generally they believed the actors lived an anarchical and immoral lifestyle. The Intendant of Puebla, Manuel Flon, after investigating the lifestyle of the puppeteer Mariano Casabona,[15] found that his company was composed of eight men and three women, and that he and his woman claimed to be married, but they were not and that their two children never attended classes. Indians reported that acrobats and puppets never paid the bill for what they ate or drank, nor did they pay for housing. And yet, they were celebrated by audiences when they appeared on stage to manipulate the puppets.

Among other things, the author or playwright had to oversee the contents of the play. In 1795, José Sánchez received the title of playwright in New Spain. Whenever he sought a license for a puppet performance, he had to provide a list of the members of his company and had to assume responsibility for their moral behavior in order to get the permit. Sánchez's troupe was comprised of eleven members—with himself as the fool and one of four gentlemen, three ladies, two villains, a maid, a singer, and a drummer. Obtaining a permit required colonial authorities to ensure that actors were not guilty of crimes, including addiction and

12. Juan López, *Actas de cabildos de la ciudad de Guadalajara,* Vol. 2, 1° de enero del año de 1636 al 18 June 1668 (Guadalajara: Ayuntamiento de Guadalajara, 1984), pp. 89-90.

13. AGN, *General de Parte,* 1763, Vol. 41, F. 350.

14. José Rojas Garcidueñas, *El teatro de la Nueva España en el siglo XVI* (México: Sepsetenta, 1973), p. 112.

15. AGN, *Media Annata*, Vol. 59, F. 150.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003161500000043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

scandalous or irregular behavior. Once an investigation concluded that they had no crimes on their records, and they were neither addicts nor scandalous individuals, the authorities granted permits to perform the play. For the company's actors to move from one place to another they had to appear before the authorities to be recognized and to receive certification of their behavior. During the second week of Lent, the company's playwright and its performers had to be in the city to appear before the coliseum's contractor, who had to see each actor. A case similar to that of José Sánchez was that of José Rodríguez Leal, whose company performed in Guanajuato, Valladolid, Guadalajara and other places in the kingdom. A puppet company's playwright had to organize the theatrical enterprise and the actors took up the artistic tasks, performing in all of the plays in the repertoire.[16]

Finally, during the eighteenth century, colonial officials developed laws governing the puppet trade. According to the Public Entertainment Regulations, a playwright had to meet the following requirements: the individual in this post had to have many years of experience as an actor, as he needed to have a deep and exact theatrical knowledge to solve the problems that frequently arose among individuals in the companies; to know the artistic responsibilities of each and every one of the actors; and to know the leaseholder's corresponding contractual obligations, as only in this way would he be capable of carrying out such a delicate and precise task. He also had to arrive at the theater, with no excuses, half an hour before the rehearsals and one hour before the performances in order to make sure that there was nothing missing from what the director had requested for the show's performance; also, he had to review the new comedies and tragedies and pass them to the government's assigned censor for approval. Finally, he had to keep a book in the cloakroom that listed the play's cast and all the things placed there by the director, so that when a call for rehearsals was made, an announcement in the theater would list those who had to attend and no one could claim that they forgot or did not know about it.[17]

The *autor de la compañia* had other responsibilities. He was in charge of making sure that all the actors were inside the theater promptly and ready for the performances. According to the regulations, he was to notify the director and the company's accountant of the day's performance. Also, the autor had to supervise the cloakroom attendant, the doorman and the theater's errand boys in their tasks. He was responsible for backdrops, ensuring that none were lying around except those used daily, forcing the individual in charge to put the decorations and the backdrops in the warehouse. All of this was to prevent the continuous wear and tear these materials suffered when they were piled up in the corners of the

16. AGN, *General de Parte,* 1795, Vol. 73, Exp. 124. Fs. 124-218; 161-163.
17. "Diversiones Públicas y privadas" in *Pandectas Hispano Mejicanas.* Tomo II (México, UNAM, 1979).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003161500000043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

CHART 1. Puppet Playrights in Mexico City

| Year | Season | Entrepreneur |
|---|---|---|
| 1715 | Comic Year | Gabriel Ángel Carrillo |
| 1722 | Comic Year | Maria Tomasa Rascón |
| 1723 | Comic Year | Antonio Meneses |
| 1759 | Comic Year | Francisco Silva Bernal |
| 1761 | Comic Year | Luis Arana de Zelaya |
| 1775 | Comic Year | Francisco Cortés |
| 1792 | Comic Year | José Lucas Escanilla |
| 1792-1793 | Comic Year | Francisco Juan Ramirez |
| 1793 | Comic Year | José Antonio Morales |
| 1793 | Comic Year | José Josquín Ayala |
| 1793 | February | Ignacio Estela Jerusalém |
| 1793 | February | José Nicanor Roa |
| 1793 | December | Francisco Ramirez |
| 1793 | March | Mariana González |
| 1793 | | Micaela Campo |
| 1793 | November | Maria Juana de la Pelía Lozano |
| 1793 | December | Juan Vicente Cuadodo |
| 1793 | | José Ignacio Muñoz |
| 1793 | | José Mariano Montes Negro |
| 1794 | February | Felipa Aguilar |

Source: AHDF, *Ayuntamiento de la ciudad de México*, Diversiones Públicas, Rentas Municipales; AGN, Historia, General de Parte, Archivo Histórico de Hacienda, Media Annata, Gubernación. AAP, Diversiones Públicas.

theater, as he was responsible for any damages; its omission, might be charged to the company. Thereby, the post of autor de comedias was responsible for the actors and singers, the wardrobe and the places where the staging took place. He also had the commitment to obtain contracts for the company and pay salaries.[18]

The playwright of a puppet company was generally a Spanish migrant. In the 1790 census, during the government of Viceroy Revillagigedo, the registered population of Mexico City was 68,503 inhabitants.[19] The census indicates that out of the 68,503 inhabitants, 60.65% were born in Mexico City and 34.38% arrived from other regions of New Spain; 4.9% came from outside the country,

18. AGN, *Historia*, "Bando aparecido el 1 de enero de 1814" (11 Dec. 1812), circuló a los jefes políticos superiores de la misma Península Ibérica por parte de la Regencia del Rey.

19. Of the 32 districts in which the city was divided, data from only 19 districts are available. AGN, *Estados Generales y Resúmenes*, "Censo de Revillagigedo, ciudad de México, 1790." Archivo Histórico del Estado de México. Los cuarteles: 1, 2, 7, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 23 y 24, y la parte que corresponde a tributaria, por los cuarteles: 8, 15, 16, 18 y 19. Sonia Lombardo Ruiz, "Los migrantes externos en la ciudad de México, en 1790," cited in *Imágenes de los inmigrantes en la ciudad de México, 1753-1910* (México: Plaza y Valdez/CONACULTA/ INAH, 2002), p. 51.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003161500000043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

CHART 2. Puppet Playrights in Puebla

| Year | Season | Entrepreneur |
|---|---|---|
| 1784 | August | Joseph Andrés Murillo |
| 1784 | August | Maria Josefa Dávila Galindo |
| 1791-1803 | | José Brito y su esposa |
| 1793 | | Juan Bonilla |
| 1808 | October | José Ignacio Caro |
| 1802 | June | José Castellanos Zarco |
| 1802 | July 02, Lent 03 | Manuel Mauleón a nombre de José Cisneros |
| 1802 | For the rest of Lent | José Cisneros |
| 1806-1807 | | Mariano Villaverde |
| 1806 | 1 comic year | Mariano Casabona |
| 1813 | | Camilo Islas |

Source: AHDF, *Ayuntamiento de la ciudad de México*, Diversiones Públicas, Rentas Municipales; AGN, Historia, General de Parte, Archivo Histórico de Hacienda, Media Annata, Gubernación. AAP, Diversiones Públicas.

primarily from Spain. Most of these peninsular immigrants, according to Norman Martín, thought that with the conquest of the Indians in Mexico that they could cross the sea and escape manual labor. From these groups, puppeteers arrived in New Spain, including both Mexico City and Puebla, to exercise their trade. These were individuals between 21 and 30 years old, most of them male.[20]

They arrived looking for opportunities and several turned to the *compañías de cómicos*, as the puppet groups were known, as a source of financial profit and social recognition, with the title *oficio de cómico* related to artistic creation and aesthetic activities.[21] They formed companies, especially in the eighteenth century, with stock, or stereotypical characters. The typical puppets included the *galán* (young gentleman); the young man; *barba* (a beard), an older man; *dama* (a lady); a young woman, and *gracioso*, the comedian or fool.

In 1794, the Spaniard Máximo Antonio Várela, driven by economic desperation, organized a puppet company mainly of Spanish members, but with some *castas*. His wife, a Spaniard, played the maid, four Spaniards were the gentlemen puppets, the mestizo tailor also acted as the old man, another mestizo served as the

20. Ibid., p. 55. In fact, the movement of peninsular women had considerably declined from the 17th Century as single women were prohibited to relocate (with the exception of Nuns) and married women only could travel accompanying their husbands or traveling alone if they had been sent for by husbands established in America. Thus the urban migration to New Spain in the 18th century was fundamental masculine. Cited in Guadalupe de la Torre Villalpando, "La población foránea en la ciudad de México, en el padrón de 1753" in *Imágenes de los inmigrantes en la ciudad de México*, p. 20.

21. Norman F. Martín, *Los vagabundos en la Nueva España, en el siglo XVI* (México: Jus, 1957), pp. 36, 132.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003161500000043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

fool, two women, one a Spaniard and the other a *pardo*, played the ladies, and the pardo's husband, another pardo, provided music by playing a drum. A Spanish widow played the fool. Varela declared that all of the people who made up his company were decent members of society, but the local district attorney wanted to investigate them because in his mind they represented a socially disruptive risk, wandering the colony at will. The attorney asked Don José Rincón, the Coliseum Theater's administrator, for his opinion of two of the members of the company and the administrator vouched for Varela and his puppeteers. With this information, the license was issued to the company to perform throughout the colony, with cautions about their behavior.

Many Spaniards had the attitude that they merited special consideration from the colonial government. Várela argued that the government should give him preference as a white Spaniard.[22] This kind of Spaniard believed, wrote Alexander von Humboldt, "even if he goes barefoot on his horse," he belonged to the noble class.[23] Várela's claims for privilege notwithstanding, on March 8, 1794, the district judge ordered an investigation of his life, customs, and residence. On April 4, the playwright assured authorities that he had always asked the town councils for permits in order to present the shows without disturbances. [24]

Nevertheless the playwrights or company directors were not always Spaniards nor men. Several women managed puppet troupes. The first to appear in records is Anamaría de los Ángeles, who worked in Puebla. In 1632, Gonzalo Jaramillo went before the viceroy to ask for the protection of her company, that was made up of children and was in great demand for its presentation of new comedies in the city. When the rival company of Fernando Ramos tried to monopolize the best locations in the town's plazas, the viceroy protected her enterprise.[25] Another company manager was Ana María Celis, who received the title of puppet playwright in 1687 from Melchor Portocarrero, the Count of Monclova, and the director of the Hospital de Naturales. To earn the title, she had worked for several years in the Coliseum Theater and in the viceregal palace as an actress. She then appealed for the title, pointing out her low salary and, while other performances had received miserable reputations, she had directed twelve comedies recognized as the best performances in the hospital and in the viceroy's palace. She argued that directing the performances had taken away from her acting career and begged for the "title of playwright." She promised that as company director she would ensure that the hospital would once again have good earnings from the

22. AGN, *Historia,* Vol. 468, Exp. 2, Fs. 4-13.

23. Alexander de Humboldt, *Ensayos políticos sobre el reino de Nueva España.* T. II (México, Pedro Robredo, 1941), p. 141.

24 AGN, *Historia,* Vol. 468, Exp. 2, Fs. 4-13

25. Archivo del Ayuntamiento de Puebla, Ciudad de Puebla (AAP). *Actas de Cabildo*, 1632, Lib. 18, F 43v.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003161500000043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

performances to raise money for the charity. Authorities granted her petition to serve as company director for those theatrical performances in which "there were no male playwrights present or available"[26]; other examples of discrimination against women appeared as well.

In 1722, María Tomasa, a playwright for a puppet company, obtained a license from the Marquis of Casafuerte, who considered marionettes a harmless entertainment. The company worked in Mexico City for several months and then became the target of the Coliseum Theater's contractor, who blamed the puppet show for reducing the theatre's audiences. He presented a complaint before city authorities and they announced a few days later that the licenses for all the puppet plays were rescinded. Referring to the decree, Maria Tomasa responded that "with a family to support and without a way to provide for them," she had "arranged the legal entertainment" of a puppet play because she had previously worked with marionettes. The puppet shows had enabled her to make a living and she begged for a license for puppet programs in the district.[27]

In another case, Josefa Morales, known as *La Española*, in 1798, appealed to authorities for a license to stage puppet plays to restore the opportunities for her daughter, Mariana. The daughter worked as a singer and comedian for two years in the Coliseum of Veracruz, until it closed. She had then been reduced to working as a cigar roller in a cigar and cigarette factory, before moving to Puebla to be with her mother. Because the daughter had no way to support herself, Josefa had had to sell clothing and jewelry at a loss to support the girl. She assured authorities that the puppet performances would provide the necessary income for them. She had organized a company of five males and five women, including a singer. Josefa had to testify to the good moral character of all the troupe members. She received a permit for performances outside of Puebla City in the period 1798-1799, on the condition of notifying the Coliseum's contractor.[28]

The license requirements notwithstanding, it appears the puppet companies enjoyed a good deal of freedom in regard to staging their plays. Antonio Meneses, a puppet playwright, staged his plays every day of the year and earning his livelihood often without having a permit.[29] In May 29, 1722, Esteban Roque de Dávila y Quezada, who had leased the Coliseum, complained to the authorities that the puppet companies often did not follow the rules requiring applications and reviews to obtain a license. The next year, Meneses requested a permit for his Máquina Real or puppet troupe. This was a protective strategy so

26. AGN, *General de Parte*, Vol. 16, Exp. 19.
27. AGN, *Historia*, Vol. 467, Exp. 3. Fs. 1-3.
28. AGN, *General de Parte*, Vol. 77, Exp. 32, Fs. 49-50.
29. AGN, *Historia*, Vol. 467, Exp. 3. Fs. 1-3.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003161500000043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that no individual or locality could prevent his company from giving puppet performances.[30]

Some actors joined the puppet troupes in courtyards and patios of private houses after finishing their performances in the Coliseum. These performances included light entertainment, but also pastorelas and other religious drams. For example, on January 10, 1792, in the patio of a private home in the Alameda barrio, the puppets appeared in *El redentor Jesucristo* (*Jesus Christ, the Redeemer*) and *Nacimiento de Jesús o El más humilde cordero* (*The Birth of Jesus or the Most Humble Lamb*). The performance did not end until eleven o'clock at night.[31] The theater authorities reproached the actors for neglecting their human plays to participate in puppet shows. Other puppeteers were older actors and, in the worst cases, failed actors or simply individuals who had not found a place in the performing world of the time. Nonetheless, some puppet companies had well known actors, based on whom the Coliseum's contractor had integrated into his cast. Playwrights Rafael Sánchez and José Vicente Ladrón de Guevara often tried to draw on the performers at the theater for their puppet performances.

Silvestre Días de la Vega, judge of the Hospital and the Coliseo de México, on November 18, 1786, ordered the court clerk Mariano Zepeda to begin an investigation to find out which actors and dancers from the Coliseo company also worked in the puppet shows that took place in several houses, after their nightly performances had ended. At this time, it was common to find several houses in which puppet shows were staged. The investigation revealed that several puppet companies were working without the viceroy's permits: Francisco Alcántara on Venero Street; Francisca Tomasa Montoya y Cadena, on Puente Colorado Street, an actress who had worked in the best theaters until retiring due to her age; and on Portal de Tejeda Street (today Mesones), the company of the Spaniard José Estrada, who had rented the puppets of Felipe Manjarres for eight pesos per month, among others.[32]

The playwright Silvestre Días would not show his permit to the court clerk Zepeda, who had determined to revoke it, because he had discovered that the entrepreneur and stage machinist was a comedian from the Coliseum. In the puppet shows, the actors who represented the characters were two gentlemen, a *simpático* individual, two sopranos, and two other singers. Since all of these puppeteers were members of the Coliseum's theater cast, they were sentenced to jail for presenting puppet shows without the required permit.[33]

30. AGN, *General de Parte*, 1744, Vol. 34, Exp. 26. F. 37-38.

31. Archivo Histórico del Distrito Federal (AHDF), *Diversiones Públicas*, 1793, Vol. 796, Exp. 10.

32. Gilberto Ramírez Alvarado, "Los títeres en México durante la colonia, del siglo XVI al XIX," *La hoja del titiritero Independiente* (1990), pp. 13-15.

33. Ramírez Alvarado, "Los títeres en México durante la colonia, del siglo XVI al XIX," pp. 13-15.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003161500000043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In 1799, Mariano Malpica requested a permit to stage a puppet show in the neighborhoods of Mexico City. He explained his purpose was to overcome the torment of his family's poverty by earning a livelihood by giving puppet shows. In a similar example, José Sánchez, founder of a company, requested a permit to present his show in areas outside the capital. The reason for taking his show outside Mexico City was that he was denied the permit to perform in the city. This had caused damages to his family's budget, he claimed, that had forced him to pawn his furniture. After reviewing the case, the authorities granted the permit for a year starting on March 2, 1800. Gregorio Martínez received a permit for six months, but had to present himself before the *alcalde* (mayor) of each barrio where he performed, causing some difficulties. Two other puppeteers engaged in the trade were José Joaquín Ayala, and José Antonio Morales, who worked in the Barrio de Nealtican.[34] Among the ethnic backgrounds of the puppeteers, occasional African slaves joined the performers. They danced, sang, and played music instruments. One of the principal examples was Juan de Arellano's acrobatic company that included three slaves.[35]

There were several interesting applications for permits for puppet plays and acrobatic performances. One of them came from José Iturriaga, of Mexico City, who wrote:

> finding myself with a growing family and no way to meet the calamitous time, but with intelligence and dexterity in acrobatics and in the diversion called puppetry, it occurred to me to ask for a license out of your charitable goodness to give these performances in the neighborhoods of the city.[36]

Another case was that of the puppeteer José Ignacio, who said: "we have been working in the alleyway and have had no complaints until the day before yesterday, when an order arrived from the police superintendent," because of disturbances caused by the acrobats and puppeteers promoting their performances. Like the majority of their fellow performers, they could not read or write, so they relied on shouting at passersby, like the town crier, that the puppet plays were about to begin. José Ignacio disagreed with the order and said his group was the only one that made public announcements without creating disorders. He reminded officials that "other actors are allowed to advertise with music and they have not been stopped from doing so." A typical example were puppet troupes who made announcements throughout town about the evening's performance beginning at seven in the morning; at noon the actors went through the streets beating on

34. AHDF, *Diversiones Públicas*, 1793, Vol. 796, Exp. 10.
35. AGN, *Archivo Histórico de Hacienda*, 1778, Vol. 1073.
36. AHDF, *Diversiones Públicas*, 1811, Vol. 797. Exp. 21.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003161500000043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

drums, and with the male actors talking to women, and the female actors talking to men about the evening play.[37]

In the performances during this time, a few puppets obtained general acknowledgement. Among these marionette celebrities was one called Don Folías, who had an elastic neck, ruddy checks, and a gigantic nose. The puppeteer used a crosspiece with the strings that controlled Folias. José Aragón, in his plays, introduced the puppet, who raised his arms as he walked toward center stage with heavy flamenco-like steps, announcing in this way a prelude to the play. He would declare: "I am Folias who comes to entertain you; I am the big-nosed Prince who is going to mock the jealousy of El Negrito, by knocking him down with a sneeze in order to laugh in his face. Here [on this stage] I am going to entertain you." Folias was recognized as a foreigner who had crossed the sea in a ship.[38] Meanwhile, El Negrito appeared on stage, and told the audience in an enraged voice:

> Today, I want to stop kidding myself. If my wife is unfaithful to me, if I see her with Don Folias, it can be fixed. With my knife, I will make *tasajo* [thin, dried meat] out of the two of them. Because I am not some runny-nosed youth; I have tough fangs. And, if they talk in a sly way, they can count on death, because my jealousy is my weakness. There are sayings that are certain and I remember with pain one that says, 'the best friend is a traitor.'[39]

In another popular play entitled *Rapto o Robo*, the heroine, Cándida, after an exchange of amorous dialogue, asks her lover "Are you going to abduct me? Oh, how nice! I say, Shame on you!" Meanwhile, the second *galán* (or young man) has been captivated by her. He appeared on the scene, and each romantic comment back and forth between the couple was an arrow through the poor man's heart. The lover wore a brilliant suit, and his checks had the exaggerated color of a pair of fresh tomatoes. His black moustache (painted with burnt Cork) had such pronounced curves it looked like a pair of balls. All of this, made the second galán even more jealous:

> Angelito: (*whistles*) If the question is not decided tonight, I am going to kill myself. Yes, I am going to commit suicide with a bottle of champagne; no, not of champagne, because I am really broke. I will commit suicide with a bottle of tequila.
> Cándida: (*approaches the balcony*) Are you there, Angelito?
> Angelito: No, my little Cándida, I still have not arrived.
> Cándida: Well, what are you doing?[40]

37. AHDF, *Diversiones Públicas*, 1703, Vol. 796, Exp. 11.

38. Ramírez Alvarado, "Los títeres en México durante la colonia, del siglo XVI al XIX," p. 13.

39. Archivo de la Biblioteca del Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH-Archivo). 1ª. Serie, Leg. 16. Obra de teatro de títeres, editada por Antonio Vanegas Arroyo.

40. Fragment from the play, *Rapto* o *Robo*, Archivo Histórico del Estado de Tlaxcala (AHET), Fondo Rosete Aranda.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003161500000043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The play continues from there with numerous humorous exchanges of dialogue. Together both plays emphasize relationships, love, jealously, and romance. These domestic dramas never failed to create laughter among the members of the audience.

Near the end of the colonial era, the puppet company, often called the *Máquina Real* during the eighteenth century, consolidated actors and several cultural activities. That is, the authors conceived independent shows, away from the lease-holder of the *Coliseo de Comedias* (Teatro Principal), so he could not intervene in their performances. Thereafter, the number of independent groups increased given the need to make a living. Similarly, an itinerant company known as the "Cómico de la Legua" (with better actors) also emerged at the end of the eighteenth century. With the increase in the number of puppet shows and with the development of their aesthetic appeal, the operation of many family enterprises changed, and over the course of time tended to become increasingly professional. In 1811, Ignacio Miranda requested a license to open a theater school that would be the first of its kind in New Spain; his plan also called for a puppet theater.[41] To demonstrate that his plan was a professional undertaking, he explained that neither the school nor the puppet performances would extend past ten o'clock p.m. and the performances would be advertised by posters, not disruptive shouts in the street. He also promised the plays would promote honest, agreeable enlightenment and entertainment. The theater was to have separate entrances and divided seating to prevent the indiscriminate mixing of classes and ethnicities. It was also a way to increase the pleasure of the audience. Ticket prices were not to exceed three reales for an entire evening. The goal was to make acting a professional career.

Despite the low reputation of actors and puppeteers, there were exceptions. José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi, the autor de comedias in Mexico City, certainly was an individual of high caliber.[42] Others included Gabriel Ángel Carrillo, Mariano Villaverde[43] and Antonio Meneses,[44] who had a genius for puppetry. These actors were not widely recognized in New Spain, otherwise they would have been as celebrated as Cantinflas and Tin-Tán, and no doubt some of the actresses would have been as well known as Sara García or María Félix in recent times.

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41. AHDF, *Diversiones Públicas,* 1811, Vol. 796, Exp. 21.
42. AGN, *General de Partes,* 1819, Vol. 483, Exp. 15, F. 2.
43. AGN, *General de partes,* 1715, Vol. 3, Exp. 302, F. 218.
44. AGN, *General de partes,* 1723, Vol. 34, Exp. 23, Fs. 37-38.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003161500000043 Published online by Cambridge University Press