

RAPPACCINI'S DAUGHTER

OCTAVIO PAZ

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Taken from
LATIN AMERICAN PLAYS
Selected, translated and introduced by
Sebastian Daggart



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An Introduction to Latin American Theatre

by Sebastian Duggart

Latin American theatre is an untapped goldmine for the English-speaking world. While the region's novels and poetry are widely read and respected, its theatre remains largely unknown. Few Latin American plays are published or produced in English, and these often suffer from unsympathetic translations. School and university courses mostly ignore Latin American theatre and there is a dearth of critical studies on the subject. The main purpose of this book, therefore, is to encourage the reading, study and staging of Latin American drama.

The book has three sections. First, it presents original translations of five contemporary Latin American plays, which have been prepared in collaboration with the playwrights themselves, and chosen for their high literary and dramatic quality. Although they have specifically 'Latin American' features, they retain qualities that give them a universal accessibility. To test this, all five plays were staged in the UK by English-speaking performers, and these productions have yielded fresh insights into the authors' intentions, which have been incorporated into the translations. The plays' broad range of styles and subject matter is representative of the rich diversity of drama written since the 1950s. The chosen writers represent four of the most historically vibrant centres of Latin American theatre – Cuba, Mexico, Argentina and Peru – and their work is concerned with many of the issues and patterns that have preoccupied Latin American dramatists for over five

centuries. The second section of the book contains interviews with the playwrights, giving the writers a chance to explain to an English-speaking audience the intentions behind their plays, and to reveal some of their literary and personal sources. The third section is this introduction which contextualises the plays through a historical survey of drama in Cuba, Mexico, Argentina and Peru, and then discusses some of the challenges involved in translating and staging Latin American drama in English.

A Brief History of Latin American Theatre: Pre-1492

Our knowledge of the pre-Columbian period is very limited. Europeans who discovered indigenous spectacles judged them to be primitively heretical, banned public performances, and destroyed local records. What information we do have comes from Catholic missionaries, whose reports agreed that throughout the region there was theatre in the form of 'ritual spectacles', such as Cuban *areitos*, in which Arawak Indian actors dressed up to enact historical and religious stories using dialogue, music and dance, until they were prohibited by the Spanish colonial administration in 1511. The Aztecs in Mexico used a mixture of dance, music and Nahuatl dialogue to depict the activities of their gods. According to Fray Diego Durán, a Dominican friar, one Aztec festival required a conscripted performer to take on the role of the god Quetzalcoátl. As such, he was worshipped for 40 days, after which, to help Huitzilopochtli, god of daylight, fight the forces of darkness, his heart was removed and offered to the moon. His flayed skin was then worn as the god's costume by another performer. While the Incas ruled Peru, the Quechua are reported to have performed ritual spectacles involving dance, costumes and music, but probably not dialogue, to purify the earth, bring fertility to women and the soil, and worship ancestral spirits. The Inca Tupac Yupanqui used his warriors to re-enact his