Spectacles of Disappearance: Migration, Man, and Machine

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In October 2017—as the Trump administration began testing multiple prototypes of the president's promised "big, beautiful" new border wall on the United States' southern border—the Mexican theatre troupe Teatro de Línea de Sombra (TLS) presented *Amarillo* in Chicago Shakespeare Theatre's new venue on Navy Pier, as part of the inaugural Chicago International Latino Theatre Festival *Destinos*. The production is a poignant meditation on the lives and deaths of migrants who traverse the increasingly dangerous borderlands between the USA and Mexico.

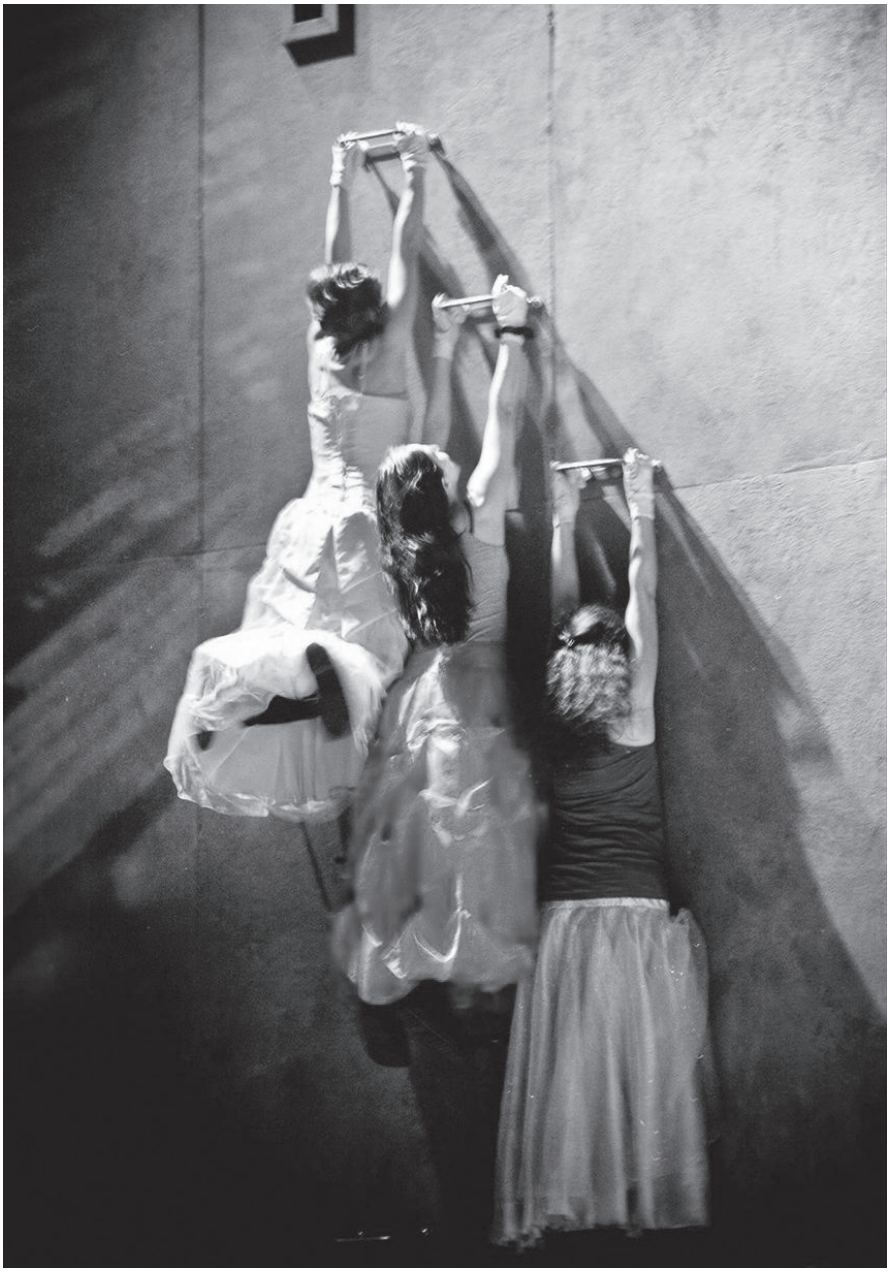
Amarillo will be considered here in tandem with *Article 13,* an immersive installation first created in 2012 by TLS in collaboration with the French group Cie Carabosse and performed outdoors in March 2016, as part of the Kimmel Center's Philadelphia International Festival of the Arts. Both productions examine the plight of migrants moving from the Global South to the North as they search for economic opportunities and better lives. The use of the actors' bodies, scenery/machinery, media projections, and pyrotechnics bring into focus the various uses of spectacle, the long maligned "lowest" of Aristotle's six elements of theatre. From the massive fireball of *Article 13* to the minimal stage aesthetics of *Amarillo,* these are not only spectacles of extravagance and excess (as spectacle is usually understood), but they are also spectacles of disappearance: they use visual imagery and non-narrative texts in ways that allow the spectator to *see* absence and the lack of the body. By seeing the unseen, they bear witness to the invisible spectacle of the suffering migrant and they focus the audience on the migrant body and its labors, which are usually hidden through misinformation and misrepresentation in politics and popular media.

The stage at the beginning of *Amarillo* is mostly bare, with only a few industrial shelving units on either side. These shelves hold gallon-sized plas-

tic water bottles, miscellaneous items of clothing, and handheld flashlights. Posted on the front of some of these shelves are the pictures of migrants who went missing on their journey to—or within—the United States. Throughout the performance the plastic water bottles are a central image, calling attention to the human body's most basic need, reminding us that on the long journey made by many migrants across deserts and oceans the access to fresh drinking water can often mean the difference between life and death. A large plywood wall constructed at the back of the stage defines the performance space and is also an allegorical border wall for the cast members to collide against as they run, jump, dance and climb on it throughout the performance. The wall reminds us of how walls force migrants to the USA into more desperate and dangerous places, like the perilous desert landscapes in the Southwest or the *coyote* smuggler's airless box truck.

As I sat in the theatre before the beginning of the performance, taking in the minimal stage aesthetic, I was struck by how it seemed to typify the concept of *poor theatre* championed by Polish theatre-maker and director Jerzy Grotowski. The program note confirmed that TLS artistic director Jorge A. Vargas studied with Grotowski in Poland and was greatly influenced by the poor theatre concept "that strips down the art form to its essential elements in order to purify and refresh the theatre" (program note). This bare aesthetic is intended to draw the spectator's attention away from extravagant sets and costumes, back to the most elemental aspect of theatre, the body of the actor: its presence, its physicality, and—in this performance—its absence. Through the simple set and physical staging of the show, we become acutely aware of the effects that the journey of migration has on the body of the migrant and those bodies (often of the women) left behind.

The precise "beginning" of *Amarillo* is hard to pinpoint, as both male actors (Jesús Cuevas and Raúl Mendoza) are present onstage long before the audience is ever directly addressed. Even after Mendoza, the main actor in the play, utters his provocative opening line "¿Qué? ¿Qué me ven? Yo soy nadie..." (What? What are you looking at? I'm nobody...), the house lights remain on. By placing Mendoza—in his unassuming red hoodie, dirty jeans, a plain black backpack and gallon-sized water bottle—seated on the ground and leaning against the allegorical border wall, the play blurs the real world "outside" of the theatre and the "inside" of the play. It also makes a non-remarkable image of a poor migrant into something to *see*, something worth the spectator's attention, worthy enough to examine through the looking



Three performers hang precariously from "*el muro*," the wall, that dominates the back of the performance space in *Amarillo*. Photo: Sophie García.

Performer Raúl Mendoza takes a rest on his journey to *Amarillo*, amongst a sea of plastic water bottles placed throughout the stage. Photo: Sophie García.

glass of theatre. The tragic non-linear narrative of the play bears witness to the many people who have simply disappeared in the process of migration.

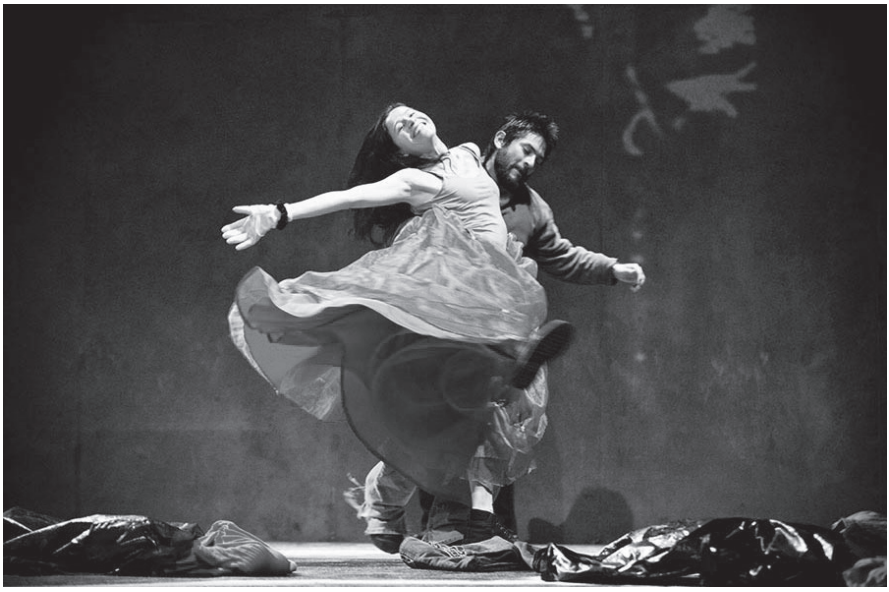
Mendoza continues to explain that his name is "Juan, Pedro, Fernando, Manuel... Julieta, María..." We quickly learn that this actor is not portraying a singular character, but an Everyman who stands in for the millions of migrants who journey away from family and home. The opening line is repeated many times throughout the play by Mendoza and later by one of the four female performers in the piece (Alicia Laguna, María Luna, Vianey Salinas, and Antígona González), revealing the central themes of both *Amarillo* and *Article 13*, making visible the plight of migrant mobility and the exploitative labor that draws them. These performances attempt to make legible the lives consumed by transnational flows of bodies and capital.

As the performance progresses, Mendoza reveals that he is invisible and forgotten, that he "promised to return, but has not yet arrived." Those left behind by migration are represented by the cast of female actors who fill in as the stage crew at the beginning of the play, manipulating onstage

cameras that produce live-video projections, creating haunting images on the back wall. The use of projections alludes to the role the media plays in constructing narratives of "illegals" and "aliens." In the second half of the performance the women don colorful skirts and enter the narrative action of the play as the wives and mothers left behind when the men leave their home and families to journey north. Here the play highlights how the tragedy of migrant disappearance not only affects the individuals who are lost, but also the families and entire communities left behind.

Exploring similar themes of migration and disappearance, *Article 13* was staged over a sprawling outdoor area on Penn's Landing. Described on the Kimmel Center's website as a "grand spectacle of fire, sand, water and multimedia," the production's name refers to Article 13 of the United Nations' 1948 Declaration of Human Rights that proclaimed the international "Right of Human Movement." Entering this immersive performance, the spectator is met by dozens of wooden figures staged to seem as if they are climbing up the stairs from the Delaware River to the entrance to Penn's Landing, suggesting mobility and migration.

Once at the river, spectators enter a large outdoor area filled with multiple installations. The installations contrasted large metallic sculptures, some with



Amarillo fuses dance, text, multi-media projections, live video, and original music into a haunting interdisciplinary performance. Photo: Sophie García.

pyrotechnic elements manned by performers in protective fire gear reminiscent of space suits, with more human-scale installations focused on the labors performed by migrants. One such installation was simply a rectangular area, delineated by candles in metal canisters. On one side of the space there was a wall created by the same large plastic water bottles used in *Amarillo,* as well as piles of clothes and a number of empty pairs of shoes illuminated by flashlights. In the center of the rectangle space was a large pile of dirt, like a fresh burial, handwritten signs placed upon it with messages like, "Dejaste Familia," "Sin Duelo," and "Bestia," referring to the infamous train that brings migrants from Central America across Mexico to the USA border. In another installation, similar signs in English read "Dreams are not illegal" and "I will return when I have something to believe in." The smaller installations provide a stark contrast to the large-scale spectacles of fire and machine. With the messages like "Comercio Justo" and "Trabajo Infantil" written on a pair of plastic bottles, they offered a reminder to consider the exploitative labor practices that support the capitalist profit machine.

The climatic focal point of the non-narrative performance was provided by a huge round sculpture forged out of metal and hay, which was set ablaze midperformance, creating a visual and auditory spectacle that was impossible to ignore. It also provided a welcome amount of warmth against the bracing cold winds off the river, drawing spectators to linger in its immense glow

Plastic bottles echo throughout both performances. Here two bottles in *Article 13* are marked with the words "Child Labor" and "Fair Trade." Photo: Joshua L. Truett.

and heat. However, in my experience of the performance, I was drawn most to the human-scale installations that made use of the minimalistic aesthetics of "poor theatre," such as those mentioned above.

Some of these installations also featured performers. In one, three male performers dragged bags of sand as they endlessly turned around in circles. One man asks, "Where is my cousin? Where is the body of my cousin?" In another, a powerful image was created by a woman moving her way up a large cross-shaped metal pole. As she raised herself up the pole, a large accordion-like pink skirt expanded below her. When she reached the crossbar at the top of the pole, she broke free of the skirt to dangle precariously from the bar, yards above the ground. The physical performance was accompanied by an ambient soundtrack of women talking about their experiences working in the sex trade, one recounting how she turned to prostitution to pay for college. The image of the woman dangling from a pole, like so many strippers, and the soundtrack remind the spectator that many women are lured or forced to migrate because of global sex trafficking. The focus on labor is reinforced throughout these smaller installations. In one of the most active installations, three performers cut and display fresh flowers in neat bouquets for consumers to purchase, with handwritten signs "Trabajador" and "Will work for low wages" placed in front of them.

The potent installation that I witnessed as I departed *Article 13* reminds us of the themes so powerfully staged in *Amarillo*. The performers throw wet shirts on iron grates above flaming-hot coals. As each shirt hits the hot surface of the grates, they steam and sizzle in response to the heat. As two long-sleeved white dress shirts frame the installation, bodiless and dancing in the wind, they seem to echo the words of Mendoza's Everyman in *Amarillo,* "What are you looking at? I'm nobody... I'm invisible."

The Ohio State University

A bodiless white shirt and pair of leather boots remind the viewer of those who have been forgotten, an example of the spectacle of disappearance performed in the installations of *Article 13*. Photo: Joshua L. Truett.