Juan Mayorga
Six Plays

Edited by Jerelyn Johnson and David Johnston

ROUTLEDGE

Juan Mayorga

Juan Mayorga: Six Plays is the first collection of Spanish dramatist Juan Mayorga's plays in English, offering a compelling insight into the extraordinary range and quality of one of the Spanish-speaking world's most distinctive voices.

The six plays are presented in translations that are both readable and eminently performable. Each is accompanied by a translator's note that discusses the strategies and decisions used in making the play performable in English as well as the play's key themes. The book also features an introduction to Mayorga's life and work, emphasising his commitment to plays whose range of forms and innovative theatre-making practice re-imagines the nature of theatre and performance each time anew. The plays themselves are brilliant treatises on our times, inspiring conversation about and critical examination of our troubled world.

These scripts will be of interest to professional practitioners but are no less suited to both university and amateur settings, making this the definitive collection of Mayorga's work in English for theatremakers, students, and scholars.

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Juan Mayorga is Spain's most renowned living dramatist, best known in English-speaking countries for his 2004 play *Way to Heaven* (*Himmelweg*).

Juan Mayorga

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Edited and translated by
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Contents

Preface

When Juan Mayorga was elected to the Royal Spanish Academy in 2019 as the then youngest member of that august body, his accession speech was simply entitled *Silencio* – "Silence." Of course, silence is anything but simple. As part of a stage language, it can be a very concrete thing – a moment of escape, a pause to reflect, a truce, an instant when language is overwhelmed by emotion or contemplation, its capacity for meaningful response stripped away. Silence disturbs, unsettles, creates unpredictability, suggests confusion, or brings to a dead end a situation that is growing increasingly untenable. Of course, it can also be a command, and in the mouth of the tyrannical Bernarda Alba it is the closing word of Lorca's final play, *The House of Bernarda Alba*, written in 1936 just as the Spanish Civil War was about to flare, prefiguring a silence that in many ways was to last throughout the long Francoist dictatorship, those nearly four recent decades that linger still painfully in memory. Chekhovian, Beckettian, Pinteresque, the theatre world of Juan Mayorga stages a constant battle against the unsaid, against evasion, against the fear of communication that locks us into privacy. The hovering presence of silence in his work is always there, a tangible and audible reminder of what happens when language fails.

In his speech Mayorga refers to himself as "suffering (*enfermo*) from theatre, my life hanging on what people do with words and what words do with people." In many ways, again like Chekhov, Beckett and Pinter, Mayorga lifts much of his drama from the apparently mundane. He finds in everyday banality (the banality that Hannah Arendt saw could mask even the most appalling evil) both the visible traces of repressed pathos, tension, anxiety, violence and desire, and the roots of the great philosophical questions, now translated into the dilemmas and predicaments of ordinary lives that become, in their living, less than ordinary. His is a theatre that weaves together the words of everyday life into mathematical patterns (he refers frequently to the figure of the ellipse) and around philosophical echoes. This is language as both a shaped and lived phenomenon. Mayorga continues in the same speech:

> I don't study language. I'm a pickpocket, a rag and bone man, a cobbler together. Always on the lookout for words, words overheard on the street or on the metro, that perhaps, stitched together with other words, might deserve one night to find themselves on stage.

In that way, in this obsessive concern with the language and situations of everyday life, Mayorga has created a theatre that translates, although perhaps it is more accurate to say that it is open to being translated. Not in the sense of any spurious universality, because that is a category to which very few things indeed may aspire – all acts of translation are based on securing the bilateral, two-way relationships between one language and another, one moment in time and space with another. But to say that his is a body of work especially open to translation is to highlight his storytelling, the way in which, to use his phrase (in translation), he cobbles together patterns of words that bring dramatic structure to the very recognisable human dramas playing themselves out behind those words. For that reason, time and time again, we read that he is one of the most translated of Spanish writers, and this book, in the translations of six of his plays that it offers, is nothing but timely. It is certainly not that his theatre is unknown in English, and there have been professional productions of his plays throughout the English-speaking world. But this book is geared towards the next step, which is to bring a broader selection of his extraordinary plays to the attention of the Anglophone theatre world.

We use the wider descriptor Anglophone rather than British/Irish or American, because this book is transatlantic, its editor-translators American and Irish respectively. The perceptive reader will notice tiny differences of language use, which we have chosen to maintain as an indication of our distaste for the homogenised. Juan Mayorga's work is receiving increasing attention on both sides of the Atlantic, and the book also seeks to address practitioners and scholars right across the English-speaking world. Inevitably, its ultimate aim is to prompt new productions of plays published together here for the first time, and on the basis that translation and performance alike are ephemeral manifestations of a written source text (usually), always in transition towards a notionally better or more complete re-creation, the detail of these translations should not be considered as being metaphorically written in stone.

Translation and performance are always conditioned and shaped by interpretive choice. So too is editorial choice, and some justification of the specific plays included in this volume is called for. It is idle to say that they are plays chosen for their stageworthiness, and of course each translation is offered as being equally stageworthy. But, in the broadest of terms, these six plays reflect a cross section of the diversity of Juan Mayorga's theatre, capturing something of the radical and innovative vision of his theatre-making that they embody. Subjectivity is no less embodied in choice on the part of editors, and we do not claim that these are, objectively speaking, Mayorga's greatest plays. But they are certainly among them. In the final analysis, they are only part of and reflect a body of work that is characterised by its commitment to making and re-making performance. Moreover, a number of the other plays that are included in that body of work are discussed at various points in these pages.

The plays themselves are the stars of this volume. But context is also important; they are preceded by a general introduction to the work of Juan Mayorga, with detailed reference to the six chosen plays themselves, so that

the reader might situate them in his wider writing practice. This scene-setting is followed by a thematic essay that looks at his theatre from the perspective both of its performance dynamics, and of its concerns with language and the great philosophical questions that he sees as insinuating themselves inextricably into the predicaments and impasses of our everyday being. Finally, each of the individual plays is prefaced in turn by a Translator Note that sets out the interpretive understanding of the translated play that the translator has been working to, as well as discussing some of the decisions at work within the translation itself.

In conclusion, a note of profound thanks to a number of people who have contributed in different ways to this book; first, and above all else, to Juan Mayorga himself for making his plays available to us as translators, and for the warmth and unfailing loyalty that he brings to all of his relationships; second, to the directors and actors, too numerous to mention by name, whose work has helped us shape our understanding of what these plays are and what they can be; and third to so many colleagues, students and theatregoers, with whom we have discussed and debated the impact of these plays on stage.

Jerelyn Johnson
David Johnston

Action, Emotion, Poetry, and Thought

An Introduction to Juan Mayorga and his Work

Jerelyn Johnson

I Juan Mayorga

Action, emotion, poetry, and thought: four words that characterize the theater Spanish playwright Juan Mayorga (b. Madrid, 1965) aspires to write, attend, and promote. He is a theater director, philosopher, mathematician, academic, artistic director, and perhaps the most lauded Spanish playwright working today. He is also the contemporary Spanish playwright with the broadest international exposure, with his work having been performed in 43 countries and translated into 32 different languages.[1] Despite this, few English speakers will be familiar with his work. While a few English translations of his plays have been published in different venues, this volume represents the first attempt to publish a collection of his works in English.

To illustrate Mayorga's stature in Spain, here is a look at the 2021–22 theater season in Madrid: In October 2021, his play *Voltaire* was produced at the Teatro Galileo, directed by Ernesto Caballero; in November, a revival of *La lengua en pedazos* in the Teatro del Barrio, directed by Mayorga himself; in January 2022, *Silencio*, in the Teatro Español, directed by Mayorga and starring the renowned actor Blanca Portillo; in February, a new play *El Golem*, in the Teatro María Guerrero of the Centro Dramático Nacional, directed by Alfredo Sanzol; and in April, his adaptation of the seventeenth-century novel *El diablo cojuelo* at the Teatro de la Comedia (which had premiered in Valencia the January prior). In the 2022–23 season, two other plays were produced: *Amistad*, and the new play *María Luisa*, which he directed. And, he directed *La colección* in March of 2024. This is not including the dozens of productions scheduled across Spain and the globe.

So, what is Mayorga's appeal? Why do so many want to produce Mayorga's work, both within Spain and abroad? Mayorga himself explained the public receptivity to his work in this way: "I have been loyal to certain questions … basically one, the same already proposed by the Greeks: the fragility of human beings, and, at the same time, their right to freedom, dignity, and beauty, which violence and injustice continue to oppose" (Ojeda).[2] That is, regardless of the setting and characters of the individual plays, what remains constant in his work is the examination of the vulnerability of these human rights when

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presented with violence and injustice. His plays are also contained in a limited theatrical space, small in scale, easily adaptable to most stage circumstances, and take an original and nuanced approach to the critique and examination of current societal concerns. His plays provoke the audience to reflect on our shared, difficult history, and they do not offer easy answers.

To date, he has written 35 original full-length plays and 44 one-act plays. He is also the author of dozens of essays about theater and society. He revisits and revises these plays continually (which is a source of perpetual anxiety for his translators). But he does not stop there: he has written adaptations of 16 classic and canonical works ranging from Euripides to Dürrenmatt. This is a writer who is constantly working. He revisits his plays; writes new ones; responds to current events through essays or a new work; directs his own plays; writes adaptations of classic Spanish and world theater; serves on the Real Academia Española de la Lengua (Spanish Royal Academy of the Language); directs the master's program in Theatrical Creation at the Carlos III University in Madrid; directs the Teatro Abadía Foundation; and continues to give his time generously to those who study his work. It is remarkable that such an internationally acclaimed playwright does not have more attention paid to him by scholars and theater practitioners in the US and in the UK.

Mayorga, born and raised in Madrid, where he continues to reside, received his BA in Philosophy from the National University for Distance Education (UNED), and Mathematics at the Autonomous University of Madrid (UAM), both in 1988. He continued his philosophy studies in Münster, Paris, and Berlin, and received his Doctorate in Philosophy in 1997 from UNED, writing on Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history under the direction of Reyes Mate, a renowned Spanish intellectual whose focus is on the place of philosophy in a post-Holocaust world. His dissertation and subsequent first book are both titled *Conservative Revolution and Revolutionary Conservation: Politics and Memory in Walter Benjamin*. He later taught playwriting and history of thought at Madrid's Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RESAD), and directed the seminar "Memory and Thought in Contemporary Theatre" at the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC). His many awards include the 2022 Princess of Asturias Award for Literature; the European Prize for Theatrical Realities (2016); the National Prize for Dramatic Literature (2013), among many others. His play *El chico de la última fila* (*Boy at the Back*), included in this volume, was adapted by François Ozon for the film *Dans la maison*, which won the Concha de Oro prize for Best Film and the Special Jury Prize for best screenplay at the San Sebastian Film Festival in 2012.

Fascinated by the theater since a class trip to see Federico García Lorca's *Doña Rosita the Spinster* at age 16, Juan Mayorga has dedicated his life to the theater. He started attending playwrighting workshops at the suggestion of a friend, and from there, he and other playwrights he met at these workshops formed the theater group El Astillero. From the beginning, his work has been based on collaboration with other intellectuals and particularly other theater

practitioners. In an interview with the Spanish daily newspaper *El País* on the occasion of being awarded the 2022 Princess of Asturias Prize in Literature, Mayorga responded with his usual collaborative focus, saying that the recognition of his work

> signals the relevance of dramatic literature … and with that, the theater, because dramatic literature cannot exist without the theater. For that reason, I consider a part of this prize is for the actors, directors, set designers, costume designers, and all the artists and technicians that have accompanied me on my trajectory. And of course, the audience.
>
> (Vidales)

As this quotation reveals, Mayorga considers his work to be, fundamentally, a partnership with everyone involved in producing a stage production.

Mayorga is aware, as an author and also as a director, that there is a dynamic and creative interplay between the written text and the process of interpreting, directing, and staging a live performance of the text. He is known to alter his plays for the benefit of the stage, and then, as a director – and even as a spectator of another director's version of his plays – he continues to learn about his own plays, as he so often says, and then will subsequently edit and revise his plays based on his own evolving understanding of the work. He understands that

> the text will come into conflict with its staging. It will have no more authority over it than that which it earns. It will be subject to rewrites as corresponds to the nature of an art that is made in a particular time […] A text knows things that its author does not.
>
> ("Razón" 72)

Accordingly, the performance is not simply an enactment of his literary text but might be said to be the framework on which the "form" of a play can be built around. As he has said:

> The form of a play is irreducible to the structure of the literary text. The type of word constitutes form. Space, light, and sound constitute form. The type of acting, the actors' relationship with the spectators, and their position on the stage constitute form. The performance space constitutes form.
>
> ("Razón" 71)

The respect he has for theater practitioners, and the subsequent freedom he gives them to stage his plays makes this a collection of intriguing possibilities for any theater company. As a playwright and director, he recognizes that there are multiple stages of creativity that must be respected between the intent

of the writer and the moment of aesthetic engagement with an audience in performance:

> When you write you are the reader's representative and, when you direct, the spectator's [...] A play isn't made based on a text, but in conflict with it. A clash between the two of them is inevitable [...] This produces a permanent agitation, which later will lead one to ask themselves which text to finally turn in to the publisher. You don't know up to what point the discoveries that surfaced during the staging should remain in the final version, or to the contrary, could close off new interpretations by other directors.
>
> (Ojeda)

His plays give directors the latitude to express their vision. For instance, Mayorga has a light touch when it comes to stage directions, so much so that many of Mayorga's plays are best understood only after they have been interpreted by a director and realized by the actors, rather than when first read – the shape, the intent, the pace, and the tone often need to be discovered in production. The plays in this collection have a varying number of characters in each, ranging from three to twelve, demand little in terms of set design, and can be easily adapted to any performance space. Because Mayorga's work is imaginatively engaged with the social, cultural, and political questions of our time, any staging will encourage discussion, in the theater itself, over a post-show dinner, or in seminar.

Mayorga's work has a broad interdisciplinary application for many academic settings as well as public intellectual discussions, including, but not limited to, courses, seminars, or festivals, in theater, Hispanic studies, and Judaic studies; and could also be valuable resources for any event or course organized around themes of politics, art history, education, and history. He is an astute and prolific critic of his own theater, and of theater in general. He has published several articles in which he analyzes his own works and that of others. A literary critic as well as a philosopher, Mayorga himself provides a theoretical prism for the study of the role and power of the theater, and these ideas are then put in to practice in his plays.

Mayorga would argue that it is difficult to find a vehicle more efficient than the theater for providing us with the tools and perspective needed for critical, cultural, self-examination, and that in our current age, we need the theater as much as we ever have, holding before us the spectacle of the subjugation of human dignity, perpetually rationalized by the discourses of political necessity or expediency. By highlighting historical moments – the Holocaust, the "war on terror," and so on – Mayorga reminds us that history is not an ineluctable, dialectical trending towards a better world but is instead a continual recurrence of human inclination toward the application of power to achieve dominion over others, with the siren call of revanchism always in the air. The gravity of past ills – easily forgotten and unexamined – are always at work beneath the surface, struggling to be rediscovered and re-integrated into the present.

So, for Mayorga, the theater is clearly not principally about entertainment or diversion, but has a deeper, more ritualistic potential, as a desirable element in a healthily functioning society that needs to be engaged in the ongoing work of self-examination. He deems the theater to be inherently political because it brings the polis together in a community setting to challenge the community's unexamined assumptions. It is the community talking to itself about itself, even speaking of things that it might prefer not to know about itself:

> Some citizens, actors, convening people in order to represent certain possibilities of human life: that is the theater. It is born from listening to the city, but it cannot settle for simply returning its noise. It must deliver a poetic experience. It's not a carbon copy of reality, it is a map. That poetic experience is inevitably political because it is made before an assembly.
>
> ("Teatro y cartografia" 86)

Mayorga's plays create a theatrical space in which the polis is confronted by a map of its own lost history, repressed memories, and forbidden landscapes. He treats historical and socio-political themes while eschewing a naturalistic presentation. His plays are difficult to watch, engrossing, and a challenge to the spectator:

> Within the conflicts that the theater can offer, there is none more important than that which is not on the stage, but between the stage and the audience. The theater convenes the city to challenge it; to present a map of what the city doesn't see because it is unable or reluctant to see.
>
> ("Teatro y cartografia" 87)

His work relies on the spectator to imbue the meaning in to the work, and depends upon theater practitioners, like himself, to accompany the spectator on that journey.

II The Plays in this Volume

While all six plays in this volume are representative of his work as a whole, and are richly philosophical and morally substantive, they can be thought of as falling into three thematic clusters to which Mayorga returns: those concerned with general issues arising from political structures (*Perpetual Peace* and *Reykjavik*); those stemming from the contemplation of historical trauma (*Way to Heaven*, *The Mapmaker*); and those concerned with cultural values and personal relationships (*Boy at the Back* and *The Collection*). The political plays examine issues surrounding dehumanizing covert and explicit governmental and institutional policies, including the use of state-sanctioned torture in the so-called war on terror (*Perpetual Peace*), and state activities during the Cold War (*Reykjavik*). *Perpetual Peace* depicts three dogs as characters in

competition for a top security position within the state apparatus, ultimately probing their willingness to use violence in dealing with a suspected terrorist, if that violence might prevent a terrorist attack. *Reykjavik* uses the World Chess Championship match of 1972 in Reykjavik, Iceland, between Bobby Fischer and Boris Spassky as a compelling metaphor of the Cold War.

Of particular note are the two plays included in this collection set during the Holocaust: *Way to Heaven* (*Himmelweg*), loosely based on the sham, Potemkin-style Jewish village set up in the Theresienstadt (Terezin) concentration camp; the other, *The Mapmaker*, in the Warsaw Ghetto. These two works reflect Mayorga's interest in developing theater about the Holocaust as a way to both memorialize and recognize what happened, and to keep us vigilant with regards to similar injustices and barbaric behavior today. In an oft-cited article "La representación teatral del Holocausto" ("Theatrical Representation of the Holocaust"), that has been reprinted in several venues, Mayorga addresses the challenges faced when trying to represent the Holocaust. He asks "how can we represent something that seems to have an intractable opacity? How can we communicate that which seems incomprehensible? How can we recover that which should be unrepeatable?" (170). He justifies his work on the Holocaust as necessary and urgent because "[t]he memory of the Shoah is our best weapon in the resistance against old and new forms of humiliation of one person by another, and the theater cannot stay on the margin of this battle" (170–71). He adds that a theater that addresses the Holocaust will make the audience more critical and more compassionate, more vigilant, and more courageous in resisting these new and present ways that humans subjugate each other (172). Mayorga works toward this awareness in his spectators not by simply attempting to replicate a carbon copy of history, but by using the plays as if they were a map, leading us from waypoint to waypoint to our own discoveries: we are not watching a facsimile of the past, but are continually moved to connect lines, points and traces of that past, and in doing so, see how they may be alive and functioning in our present. Utilizing fractured narratives of time, space, and memory, these plays require the performers and the audience to use their imaginations to develop a personal, interiorized picture of the whole canvas that cannot help but draw on our own cultural familiarities and personal experiences of disorientation, erasure, and injustice, and can be used as a point of departure for conversations about the mechanics of political oppression and injustice.

Lastly, two plays in the volume reflect and investigate a world of more domestic, small-scale moral compromise and exploitation, this time through the relationship between a teacher and his student; and one between an older couple looking to bequeath their renowned art collection. In *Boy at the Back,* a writing teacher becomes fascinated by and ultimately drawn into the life and fantasies of a pupil. Ultimately, the desire to observe and imagine the lives of others – to become the other, just like the characters in *Reykjavik* – drifts into voyeurism and appropriation. The play questions the moral ambivalence that lies at the heart of our current construction of culture and how this too can

lead to a dehumanization of the other. In *The Collection*, we meet an elderly, childless, married couple who are looking for an appropriate heir for their significant art collection. Could we consider this potential heir as yet another acquisition for the couple's collection? Through this frame, the playwright explores marriage, inheritance, nostalgia, desire, and power. It is also a play about the passing of time, and about the mysterious relationship between people and their objects.

All six plays are, in this way, concerned with power relations on an historical and personal scale, while simultaneously engaging the audience in a self-examination of their own personal and political complicity in the dynamics represented on stage. These are plays that present compelling indictments of moral failure while at the same time recognizing that we rarely have access to all the facts or the benefit of complete understanding. They are plays that never let the audience settle back into the role of the mere spectator, or allow us to disengage from history as though time has made us exceptions to the mechanisms of power that have created our world, from which we have both benefited and suffered. And a world for which we nevertheless remain morally responsible, regardless of our wish to believe that the passage of time, or our circumstances, or cleverness or good intentions, have insulated us.

Way to Heaven (Himmelweg) (2002)

Way to Heaven (*Himmelweg*) is regarded by many as one of the most powerful Spanish plays of the last fifty years as it addresses the vulnerability of historical memory to revision and manipulation. This is explored through an imagining of the creation and the theatrical presentation of a sham Jewish village, much like the model village the Germans constructed in the Theresienstadt/Terezin concentration camp, which was presented to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) as a means to disguise the camp's true purpose. We witness a tormented Red Cross observer tell his story of how he visited the camp and, duly fooled, proceeded to write a positive review of conditions at the camp having seen nothing amiss. We are then presented with the Commandant of the camp as he constructs and directs his particularly misleading piece of theatre, directing several prisoners in various scenes – two boys playing with a top, a young couple having a lovers' spat on a park bench, a little girl teaching her doll to swim in a river, and so on – preparing their performances for the pending visit. Through a non-linear structure and dislocation of time and space, Mayorga implies that the historical injustices of the past are always in danger of being forgotten, misrepresented, written out of the narrative, and subject to distortion while being packaged for palatable consumption in the present.

Boy at the Back (2006)

In *Boy at the Back*, a bored and disillusioned secondary-school literature teacher receives a series of compelling written accounts of daily life in the

wealthy household of one of his pupils. The accounts are written by another pupil – Claudio – a boy who normally sits at the back of the class and who, as an apparent confidant of the rich boy, has schemed and lied his way into his classmate's home. The teacher's wife, the owner of an art gallery – which is becoming increasingly economically unviable – warns him that Claudio's duplicity is incompatible with art, especially within an educational context; but the teacher is increasingly caught up in the rhythm and darkly suggestive implications of the young intruder's accounts of the lives of others. The teacher believes the boy has talent as a writer, and isn't it the responsibility of the teacher to nurture this talent? Claudio, it emerges, seems determined to save his classmate's mother from an existence he views as loveless. Very quickly, the boundaries between life and art, teacher and pupil, observer and observed, begin to blur and the lives of others, as imagined in these snooping accounts, maliciously seep into the teacher's sheltered and comfortable world.

Perpetual Peace (2007)

Perpetual Peace examines the question of what is permissible in the interests of national security, and the extent to which we are willing to sacrifice human rights in order to guarantee that security. In the play we see three dogs, Odin (Rottweiler), Immanuel (German Shepherd), and John-John (Mixed Breed), competing for a single, coveted position with an elite security organization. The dogs pass through a series of tests overseen by human masters to see which one is worthy of the white-collar. One of the tests, the final one, presents them with the dilemma of whether it is against their moral code to torture a human being in order to acquire information that could potentially save thousands, perhaps millions of others. The play poses questions such as: just how far would we go to protect the state in the name of security? When is state-sponsored violence morally acceptable, if ever? If we succumb to these security needs, how will the world remember us? The use of animals as characters instead of humans ingeniously allows the audience to better sympathize with the dilemma – these are only dogs after all, facing impossible moral choices that must be made in a split second, with limited knowledge and faculties, driven as much by affection and instinct as by high moral reasoning, much as are we.

The Mapmaker (Warsaw 1:400,000) (2010)

In *The Mapmaker (Warsaw 1:400,000)*, Mayorga explores the resonances and echoes of undigested historical and personal trauma. Set in Warsaw, both in the present day and in 1943, *The Mapmaker* centers around Blanca, the wife of a Spanish diplomat who has recently been transferred to the city. Walking the city's streets, Blanca stumbles upon an exhibition of photos from the Warsaw Ghetto in an old synagogue, and there she hears the legend of a mapmaker of the ghetto, who, along with his granddaughter, is said to have created a map

meant to preserve the memory of Jewish life in the days and weeks prior to its liquidation. Intrigued, Blanca investigates further – seeking confirmation of the existence of the map, the mapmaker, and his granddaughter. In the process she finds herself beginning to map her own, personal trauma, the source of which the audience will eventually become aware of. In a separate narrative strand, presented concurrently, but set during the period of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, we also meet an elderly mapmaker and his granddaughter as they struggle to finish a map of the ghetto. The play overlays these two narratives, a woman trying to uncover a map of a past that has been erased partly out of a need to map her own loss and grief, while we simultaneously watch a map being created of a world that will ultimately be erased, only to survive in our imagining. Similar to *Way to Heaven*, where the non-linear structure supports the metaphor of a type of dislocated map as an optimal way to construct and represent an otherwise unrepresentable historical event, *The Mapmaker*'s structure – a series of scenes alternating between different pasts and the present but moving forward through time – comments on the indissoluble if fractured relationship between the past and the present.

Reykjavik (2014)

Reykjavik centers around the meeting of the Russian chess player Boris Spassky and his American opponent, Bobby Fischer, in the World Chess Championship in Reykjavik, Iceland, 1972. It is an attempt to understand the men behind the match of the century, their idiosyncrasies, and the political pressure they faced. Like chess, this play is about memory and imagination, a re-imagining of the quintessential duel of the Cold War, a meeting of two pawns in a larger game of confrontation and strategy. Just as the United States and the Soviet Union lived the Cold War through these two men, Waterloo and Baylen, the two characters we meet in a nondescript park, live their present through the lives of Bobby, Boris, and countless others who are wrapped up in the Fischer–Spassky duel. These two characters, along with a third who serves as spectator and eventual participant, will act out several characters in the play. With only the dialogue to signal changes, Mayorga complicates the representation of time and space, of character and performance through the presentation of multiple historical figures, settings, and moments in time.

The Collection (2024)

The Collection is a masterpiece of construction and tension. A childless couple, who have devoted their lives to amassing works of art for what is rumored to be the finest private collection in the world (we only ever see it through the eyes of others), have invited a young woman to their house (which may or may not be part of the collection) to assess her suitability as a possible heir. Also in the house is a young man, ostensibly the assistant to the couple, but possibly another competitor to inherit the collection, or even part of the collection

himself. Through the self-contained and relentlessly self-obsessed atmosphere of a house where the only thing that ostensibly matters is art, the play sets out a fascinating debate between the value of the life of art, perceived as eternal, and the quality of lives lived with a sense of responsibility to others. The young woman is herself a collector in her own right and has to balance the demands placed on her by the couple's increasingly inquisitive assessment, and an opportunity to buy a letter that she has been stalking for some time. But when it finally comes, the letter as a work of art opens up new perspectives on what our responsibility to each other might actually entail. (*The Collection* will be staged in Madrid in March 2024, and the text will be published around the same time).

This Edition

As noted in the preface, this collection of translations of six of Juan Mayorga's most significant plays is a transatlantic collaboration between David Johnston of Queens University, Belfast, Northern Ireland, and Jerelyn Johnson of Fairfield University, Fairfield, Connecticut, United States. Due to this unique collaboration, we have decided to avoid a standardization of our use of English. That is, David Johnston's three translations will be written in British English, while Jerelyn Johnson's three will be in American English, with any specific usage explained in the translator's notes to each play. We believe this distinction adds to the richness of the collection and speaks to the broad universal appeal of Juan Mayorga's work.

The plays are presented here in chronological order, as above in this introduction. They represent the most recent version of the plays as of this writing, but readers and practitioners should be aware of Mayorga's propensity to revise and republish multiple versions of his plays.

Notes

1 For a list of all Juan Mayorga's works and prizes, please see the Appendix.
2 All translations of Mayorga's critical essays and interviews are mine, unless otherwise noted.

Theatre, Translation, Philosophy

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I

Translation is at the heart of this book – in part, of course, in terms of how it is conventionally thought of, as a transaction between languages and cultures, the prime mover of cultural transmission that drives the key shaping processes of world literature. In that regard, put simply, Juan Mayorga is the most translated Spanish-language playwright since Federico García Lorca. But no process of translation can or should be reduced to a simple "of course," and accordingly each play in this volume is prefaced by a translational foreword that discusses how it has been translated, the strategies and decisions employed in the balancing act of making the play performable in English while ensuring that it remains recognisably itself. The concern with translation that underpins the theatre of Juan Mayorga, on the other hand, takes much more the form of a profound and sustained meditation on language in all of its slipperiness, on its deceptive synchronicities, and its capacity to manipulate while suggesting just the opposite.

The practices of translation and theatre alike inevitably query the ethics of language as a tool of representation, prompting a constant and restless interrogation that, in turn, lies at the heart of Mayorga's intellectual anxieties. In that way, his theatre makes an extraordinary contribution to an ethics of recognition, hostile to the fictions that, consciously and unconsciously, animate the individual and collective unfreedoms of our times. The result is a body of work that powerfully examines the hidden folds of each individual life through a different lens each time, as every play emerges from and embodies a new way of making theatre, a new way of exploding the self-serving pieties and peddled commodifications of quietism. In that way, the individual play itself is an act of translation, confronting and attempting to respond to complex ethical questions about how we represent the lives of others, questions that in Mayorga's case are embedded in a distrust of the surface slickness of the performative and representational, and driven by a commitment to seeing and understanding the confused entanglements of human relatedness. Theatre and translation, as practices concerned more with representation than communication, are disabled, stripped of their capacity for meaning, when they refuse to explode

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quietist complacencies and to expose the manipulations inherent in the most persuasive and apparently self-assured of our speech acts – the use of the term "speech act" is deliberate here, reminding us of the way in which language creates whole worlds that envelope us in the force of their ostensible truths.

Towards the end of *Hamelin*, Mayorga's multi-award winning play of 2005, the child psychologist Raquel pigeonholes Josemari, a ten-year-old victim of sexual abuse, as the subject of a clinical case study in order to initiate the due legal process that sequesters him into a care home. The play's Commentator turns to the audience:

> "Life project". She's talking about a ten-year-old boy. "Life project". The words should ring out in the theatre. Words: "Care Home". "Child Protection Agency". "Human Rights". This is a play about language. About how language forms and how it deforms. Raquel is still talking at the other side of the table. She doesn't say "family", she says "family unit". She doesn't say "Josemari", she says "patient". Raquel talks and Montero looks through the window. Some boys are playing football outside. Montero watches one who isn't joining in. Montero would love to break the window to see out, to be able to breathe.
>
> (Johnston, unpublished translation, performed in London 2014)

There is already a translational issue here in that the Spanish name of the Commentator is *Acotador*, a term whose range of meanings falls somewhere between scene-setter (in the sense of stage directions) and qualifier (in the sense of enabling, making qualified). In that way, the given translation of Commentator is open to debate, as all translation should be. What matters is that the character in performance never functions as a Brechtian narrator, ideologically certain, but rather, as the range of Spanish meanings suggests, one who both contextualises the action and complicates things, particularly language and its powers of representation. This is a character designed both to require and enable the audience to engage intellectually and emotionally with the lives of the characters of this highly charged world, while at the same time reminding them that so-called facts are constructions of language and that knowledge is inevitably riddled with the epistemological gaps arising from what John Berger calls the "the relationship between what we see and what we know [that] is never settled" (*Ways of Seeing*).

II

"Never settled" but always to be examined, the uncertainties that bedevil thought and understanding, but which cannot be allowed to define human life. It is around this challenge, this paradox, of epistemological deficit and ethical responsibility, that Juan Mayorga's theatre coalesces as philosophical enquiry, Cartesian in its scepticism, Socratic in its determination to uncover the truths of our condition. Returning to *Hamelin*, Montero is the investigating

judge who, in the Spanish system, is charged with assessing whether or not the wealthy and publicly significant accused has a case to answer. His "I'm looking for the truth. The origin of the evil, that's what I'm looking for," broadens judicial response to the extreme criminality of paedophilia into a timeless enquiry into moral darkness, so that Montero the judge comes to represent the conscience of the spectator on a black-box stage on which the interrogation of the great epistemological paradox inevitably merges with the theatre act itself. Montero and the Commentator, taken together, are respectively the moral compass of a striving to know and the agent of distanciation, not in the Brechtian sense of alienation from the affective, but instead, nudging the spectator towards the realisation that the acts of representation performed by others are often smokescreens; that, ultimately, to strive to know is a parlous task. In the end, in order to fill in the gaps of our understanding, between the so-called facts that we currently purport to know and what is important to know beyond those facts (the accused is certainly guilty, but what drives such evil?) Montero finally resorts to the sort of complex understanding that is enshrined in myth rather than deduced history, from the metaphoricity of narrative shape rather than the reductionism of identifiable fact. The "Pied Piper of Hamelin", Robert Browning's narrative poem of 1842 that retells, via Goethe and the Brothers Grimm, the notorious events of thirteenth-century Hamelin, becomes the only meaningful way he can find to meditate on the seemingly indissoluble unity of opposites in human life – lure and threat, generosity and greed, hope and despair, good and evil.

Mayorga's plays engage audiences through the ragged edges of unexpected – simply fascinating – juxtapositions of character and situation. It is through these improbable concurrences that fiction enacts the complex lie through which easy truths are most meaningfully dismantled. David Hare, in his essay "The Play is in the Air" (24–37), reminds us that theatre happens somewhere between stage and auditorium, that from the play as truthful fiction emanates an energy that seeks to advance understanding in the minds or imaginations of those spectators who care enough to pay attention. It is a telling phrase. "Being in the air," Hare's version of Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind," is an assertion that whatever the play might be about, the energies it generates are directed towards the as yet unrealised, that any hope that it raises is not transcendent, but rather immanent in the potentials and willingness of spectators to think and feel. The sharp distinction which Hare draws in the same essay, between the truth seeking of playmaking and the commodified truths of bad journalism, takes us into the heart of the pragmatics of communication, how language can be pressganged into as many uses as there are intentions and agendas. At the heart of this contrast, indeed schism, between language as the bulwark of the invariant, and language as, in the words of anti-Francoist Spanish poet Gabriel Celaya in his poem of 1955, "a weapon loaded with future" (*Cantos Iberos*), stands the great collective challenge of our history. Of what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has termed keeping "the door open to the 'to come'" (6).

"We are all called to be philosophers" is, accordingly, Mayorga's defining statement of his sense of the relationship between theatre and audience ("Todos estamos llamados a ser filósofos"). The fact that many of his plays draw upon and frequently cite a range of philosophers, including Aristotle, Pascal, Kant and Hegel, as well as Walter Benjamin (of whom, more later), suggests stodgy thesis theatre, worthily cerebral rather than vividly dramatic. Nothing could be further from the truth. Mayorga is an extraordinary storyteller. Anyone who has ever been in his effervescent company knows how he continually leaps to his feet in order to transform his ideas into a gestural language that, in turn, translates meaning into situation and action. All theatre happens through acts of physical imagination, and Mayorga's theatre, as the plays included in this volume eloquently attest, restlessly offers different frames of performance and angles of scrutiny to explore how our experience, the dilemmas and machinations of everyday life, remain anchored to the great ideas of the past, fully intelligible only within this temporally extended context. In that way, this is a theatre that physicalises philosophy as a metacommentary on human life, so that if the spectator is called to be a philosopher, it is in the guise of someone who wrestles to understand what is actually happening under the canopy of those ideas.

III

Past ideas contour future actions. In order to keep the door open, in Spivak's sense, between how the past has shaped us and what future might emerge from that shaping, the theatre of Juan Mayorga returns obsessively to how we use and abuse language, how language measures up to the pressures of the contexts it has to address. And how so frequently it obfuscates any real understanding of those contexts. Like Harold Pinter, Mayorga creates a theatre that is resolutely and comprehensively existential in its refusal of commodified symmetries and clichéd resolutions, Pinteresque, too, in his creation of a stage language that is deceptively direct, structured around internal loops and repetitions, and punctuated by carefully orchestrated pauses and silences. It is language that, through its poetic interplays of verbal recurrences and silences, exerts a magnetic force in the way it draws spectators into the heart of the situation; but at the same time refuses to allow them to reduce the human dilemmas playing out within that situation to ready categories of understanding. This is why Montero, echoing Hare, is suspicious too of journalistic shorthand and as the case develops, dismisses press reports as "irresponsible. I can just see the journalist rubbing their hands: 'the story of the year'. They've got the story of the year so they write cheap literature instead of sticking to the truth." The facts. The truth. Theatre, of course, has no direct access to either. But it does constitute a process – cognitive, affective and hermeneutic – through which the spectator is prompted towards understanding, towards Mayorga's radically liberal concern not for the abstract discourse of rights or justice, but for what Vaclav Havel called "responsibility to an order of being" (19). In Havel's case,

in the post-Communist Czech Republic, that order is individual freedom, politically conceived and resistant to the homogenising discourses of nationalist identity, while in Mayorga it lies in what we might think of as a call to consciousness. To be aware is the great responsibility of our times.

In that way, his theatre stages its own philosophical enquiry, in the final analysis no less political than that of Hare or Havel, but always focussed on the moral, on the ethical duty to search out what is silent and what is hidden. Theatre in that way, as Mayorga puts it, is a dialogue, a "marginal interlinear space" (*Elipses* 14) between actor and spectator, between what is seen and not seen, between what is said and not said, so that the spectator is always witnessing a story that moves in and out of visibility and invisibility, weaving itself between conditions of narrative presence and absence. Mayorga is the most economical of storytellers, not only in terms of narrative rhythm, but also in these suggestive interplays of what is said and seen and what is left open only to meaningful conjecture. Or to use the more technical term, to hermeneutic scrutiny. In that way, his theatre responds to the same interplay of presence and absence that Berger, probably the most connected English cultural theorist of the last six or so decades, detects in the form of the photograph:

> The true content of a photograph is invisible, for it derives from a play not with form but with time. One might argue that photography is as close to music as to painting. I have said that a photograph bears witness to a human choice being exercised. This choice is not between photographing x and y: but between photographing at x moment or at y moment. The objects recorded in any photograph (from the most effective to the most commonplace) carry approximately the same weight, the same conviction. What varies is the intensity with which we are made aware of the poles of absence and presence. Between these two poles photography finds its proper meaning. The most popular use of the photograph is as a memento of the absent. ("Understanding a Photograph" 2)

What happens on stage is, of course, an illusion, a contrivance. The real is invoked but rarely present, as the Commandant in *Way to Heaven* suggests when he says, "When an actor is hammering a nail, he is doing two things: he is hammering a nail, and he is doing absolutely nothing." But this absence of the real on stage does not invalidate theatre as a referent of the real. The whole purpose of the Camp Commandant in his theatrical montage of Hitler's model village is to dupe and silence the only spectator who matters in this case, the Red Cross Delegate who, both historically and in this extraordinary play, has come to bear witness to the truth of the Holocaust. The play, in that way, captures most completely the century-old tradition of disquiet at the treachery of images, from Magritte through Foucault to Berger, treachery – *trahison* in Magritte's original – residing in the deceptive synchronicities referred to earlier in this essay that come into play when slickness of representation lulls the viewer into dulling certainty.

This is certainly one of the reasons why Juan Mayorga's theatre constantly makes and unmakes its own forms, continuously experimenting with the conduits of relatedness that happen in the air between stage and auditorium. Not only this; he is also constantly rewriting and retouching notionally finished plays (often to the chagrin of his translators) so that his whole body of work, in terms of its forms and language, presents itself in a state of flux, always provisional, embodying the search of the philosophical mindset for, in Berger's words, the never settled, for the invisible set outside the immediate field of knowing. Seamus Heaney, writing about W.B. Yeats, notes similarly that any sense of completion, in the act of writing and in the processes of knowing and understanding alike, is ultimately a lurch into complacency:

> He reminds you that revision and slog-work are what you may have to undergo if you seek the satisfaction of finish; he bothers you with the suggestion that if you have managed to do one kind of poem in your own way, you should cast off that way and face into another area of your experience until you have learned a new voice to say that area properly. (110)

In the same way, the theatre that Mayorga both imagines and writes captures in its forms and impacts the functioning of the life of the restless mind. Life, of course, does not happen wholly in the mind; but theatre provides that special place where an audience reflects both on what it sees and what is hidden from it, piecing together stories from the evidence available (which, in the case of Mayorga's plays, tends to be distanced and fragmented behind silences, hidden agendas, and situations that outstrip the expressive capacity of language itself). We know the actor is not really hammering a nail, but that suspension of disbelief should not stop us from examining the truthfulness inherent in the world of the stage. And it is the spectator, like Montero, who is called upon to understand the story in terms of the complex moral and philosophically rich hinterland in which Mayorga invariably sets it.

IV

It is precisely in this interplay between absence and presence that Mayorga's theatre connects most completely with translation as both writing practice and cognitive method. In the most direct sense, of course, any text in translation stands in a metaphorical relationship to the absent original, negotiating patterns of sameness and difference with another text that, for the vast majority of readers or spectators, will invariably remain invisible to them. So, for example, the word Commentator emerges from the original *Acotador* necessarily carrying with it the translational paradox of hermeneutic surplus and semantic deficit, recognisable but also inevitably different in terms of nuance. For that reason, in view of the fact that the semantic and pragmatic contours of words do not map accurately from one language culture to another so that