

Hugo Hernán Ramírez (2009) *Fiesta, espectáculo y teatralidad en el México de los conquistadores*. Iberoamericana/Vervuert (Madrid/Frankfurt), 232 pp. €24.00.

With *Fiesta, espectáculo y teatralidad en el México de los conquistadores*, Ramírez makes a significant contribution to the cultural history of early colonial Mexico City. By exploring how theatricality and performance became part of the fabric of urban space and social relations in the early sixteenth century, this book argues that the history of theatre in New Spain should go beyond the study of dramatic texts, their authors, and their known performances. Fully formed playwrights, plays, and theatre buildings did not spring to life from nothing in the 1570s, but emerged out of a more gradual process in which elements of a theatrical tradition were formed through the staging of festivals, parades, processions, and other public events in the earlier part of the sixteenth century.

Perhaps this argument could have been strengthened with the addition of a final chapter tracing connections between the urban culture of theatricality in the earlier part of the sixteenth century and the substance of formal theatrical performances in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Nevertheless, Ramírez gives detailed attention to the period between 1521 and 1563, where, in addition to tracing the development of theatricality in urban life, he navigates the changing political landscape as the colonial administration gradually stripped power and influence away from the conquistadors.

Ramírez's second key argument purports that civic actors were just as important, if not more so, than religious actors in shaping the development of public festivals, the culture of theatricality, and, ultimately, theatre itself in early colonial Mexico City. Through excellent and thorough use of the *Actas del Cabildo de la Ciudad de México*, Ramírez successfully demonstrates the role of the Cabildo in organising and controlling urban space, in planning festivals and parades, and in managing the personnel and finance involved in

these events. These documents, alongside detailed readings of many chronicles of the era, are also used to demonstrate the considerable overlap and interdependency between civic and ecclesiastical occasions, authorities, and spheres in early colonial society.

Chapter one provides a theoretical overview of the concepts of “teatro,” “teatralidad,” and “espectáculo”, justification of the author’s periodisation, and a preliminary exploration of the complex socio-political relations involved in the construction of a colonial society. Chapter two focuses on the Cabildo’s attempts to forge a Hispanic renaissance city out of the ruins of Tenochtitlan through the architectural development of the city, the organisation of festivals in the urban space, and the regulation of the urban population’s social behaviour. Chapters three and four, meanwhile, give detailed and fascinating accounts of annual religious festivals, such as San Hipólito and Corpus Christi, and more irregular public events, including performances of the historic battles between Moors and Christians, and the mourning practices associated with the death of the Spanish monarch Charles V in 1559.

The rich detail provided throughout the book will prove deeply interesting for any scholar, student, or curious reader eager to know more about Mexico City’s cultural history during the early colonial period. In parts, however, detailed descriptions seem to come at the expense of detailed analysis, particularly regarding the engagement or contestation of different indigenous groups and individuals with regard to the development of urban theatricality. Although Ramírez provides ample details of the indigenous city’s organisation before the conquest in chapter two, and indicates how the indigenous elite were engaged in the cultural formation of the city at various points throughout the book, these discussions often lack analytical depth. For instance, in chapter two, he makes an insightful observation about how Hernán Cortés made ‘un espectáculo’ of ‘la devastación de la ciudad’ (p. 55) to awe other indigenous groups into submission in the aftermath of the fall of Tenochtitlan. But this could have been developed to explore how different groups of indigenous people

experienced the development of theatricality in the early colonial crucible, as the violent *espectáculos* of the conquest gave way to normalised displays of colonial domination in urban civic and religious culture.

Discussing the *fiestas de moros y cristianos* in chapter four, Ramírez does consider more fully the possible meanings of these performances for the indigenous population, but the emphasis remains more on the political struggles between conquistadors and the growing power of colonial administrations. Ramírez rightly makes these struggles a point of focus in his analysis, since they were of enormous significance to socio-cultural developments in early colonial Mexico City, and clearly shaped the materiality and practice of urban theatricality. Nonetheless, Ramírez's account would have been much more satisfying had equal analytical space been devoted to the power struggles between Indians and Spaniards, and indeed between different social and ethnic groupings of indigenous people.

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