

Seeking Common Ground

Latinx and Latin American Theatre and Performance

Edited by

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Miss Julia

J.Ed Araiza

Vueltas Bravas—Bogotá, Colombia



5 *Miss Julia*, Vueltas Bravas Producciones, Bogotá, Colombia, 2014. Photo: Federico Rios.

Critical Introduction

Carla Della Gatta

Entering the LATC's blackbox theatre, audience members walked onto a runway stage, with a window set toward the small back wall and rows of seats on each side. A live band played a cumbia, and although it was only 10:30 a.m., shots of rum were handed to us so that we could drink and dance our way to our seats. The rhythms of the acoustic band carried the festivity of the Encuentro de las Américas into the fiesta atmosphere of *Miss Julia*. People clapped and danced, and eventually sat down, only to realize that we occupied the position of the partygoers just outside where the dramatic action takes place.

J.Ed Araiza's *Miss Julia* is a compressed tale of power dynamics between servant and master, confounded by gender, cultural, and linguistic differentiation. The gravity of the themes and the realistic premise of the struggles between dominance and submission are set in the kitchen of a mansion during La Noche de San Juan, the eve of the feast day for Saint John the Baptist, and the contrast between the indoor (and inner) conflict and the celebration outside elevates the stakes to high theatricality.

An adaptation of August Strindberg's 1898 play *Miss Julie*, *Miss Julia* retains the terse dialogue, naturalistic set, pantomimed choreography, and class dynamics of the original. Strindberg dramatizes the disastrous results of competing psychoses and ideas of free will and natural selection through a story of class disparity. Miss Julie entices her male servant, who is already married to fellow servant Cristina, to have sex with her, but gender and class dynamics intersect to result in her downfall.

Strindberg's play was written in Swedish, set in Scandinavia, and first performed in Copenhagen. While Latinx adaptations and appropriations of European classics have increased in quantity and complexity over the last decade, the strategies of adaptation vary widely. Araiza abbreviates the already tense one-act Strindberg play into a three-person play with an optional Greek chorus who appeared once in performance. The transposition is clear: Strindberg's setting of Midsummer's Eve becomes *La Noche de San Juan* and the characters' names and some of the dialogue are translated into Spanish. Complicating class difference by adding on ethnic and linguistic difference, *Miss Julia* brings forth a more contemporary inter-ethnic dynamic. In so doing, Araiza puts a white Western standard-bearer such as Strindberg in direct conversation with Latinx culture and the Spanish language.

Here the servants, Juan and Cristina, are Colombian and Miss Julia is of "Anglo European heritage." While Miss Julia can speak Spanish, albeit with an unpractised accent, and both servants can understand and speak English, language and ethnicity amplify the class distinctions. The clear divide between the Colombian servants and the Anglo Miss Julia is evident in every moment. From Miss Julia's attempts to speak Spanish, her attire, movements, and sometimes confusion at what the peasants are singing, she is distinct from Juan and Cristina. But the dialogue does not include one line explicitly acknowledging ethnic difference. Ethnicity is understood as an implicit foundation for Miss Julia's entitlement of superiority rather than made a priori.

Questions of translation arose throughout the Encuentro and became an ongoing discussion point. Productions at the 2017 Encuentro de las Américas were in English or Spanish, and some were bilingual. When Culture Clash's predominantly English production employed some Spanish, translations in English were projected onto the wall. *El Apagón* switched back and forth between languages, with translations in both languages projected on the wall throughout. Other productions such as *La razón blindada* were entirely in Spanish with no translations into English. But *Miss Julia*, twice translated from Swedish to English, then from English to partly in Spanish, required its audiences to be fully bilingual to understand the action of the play.¹ The play begins in an exchange between Juan and Cristina, entirely in Spanish. Like bilingual speakers, they begin to slip between languages, by the ninth line of the play, with Juan saying, "En serio. I saw everything!" and Cristina replying, "¿What??? ¿Qué pasó?"² When Juan reports to Cristina on Miss Julia's behavior, he does so in Spanish, so that the Spanish-speaking audience knows what has happened before the monolingual English-speaking audience does.

In Strindberg's play, Miss Julie is first heard speaking to someone outside, then she speaks to Christine about the abortion elixir she is making for the pregnant dog, and only after Jean interrupts the women does she ask/command him to dance. In Araiza's play, she enters "with a strong intent" and speaks Spanish, "Juan, come—*baila con migo*."³ Her Spanish is (mostly) grammatically correct, punctuated by a forced accent,⁴ and simplistic in sentence structure. She begins the play with a command and addresses

Juan in the familiar. “¿No me prestas Juan?”⁵ as Juan continues to address her formally. She finishes the scene stating, “Tonight we are all the same, no ranks, no orders.”⁶ When Juan maintains the class distinction and linguistic formal tense, she responds, “‘Gracias’. Y usted, ¿no’t you have some too?”⁷ Miss Julia’s desire to be linguistically equal while simultaneously reinforcing the class hierarchy later becomes defunct when the misogynistic structures in the culture betray her ability to either be master or equal.

The Spanish language forces the clear distinction between the formal and familiar tenses of direct address, and a bilingual Spanish–English play therefore amplifies this difference. In the original, Miss Julie throws out some phrases in French and is surprised that Jean responds in French. This provides a moment of intimacy and elevates his perceived class mobility. Jean has worked in Switzerland and shows his aptitude and interest in acquiring a speaking command of another language. Jean responds that he worked at the “biggest hotel in Lucerne”⁸ and when he serves her a drink says, “Mademoiselle!”⁹ French comes up between them again, as flirtation, command, but always a sign of shared experience/status and in short form. Whereas Strindberg uses language to denote experience, education, and travel, Araiza plays with language intimacy and exclusion. At the end of the first act, Miss Julia cannot understand the vulgarity of the campesino song in Spanish, and Juan serves as her translator to information about the people she supposedly outranks and employs.

Reviewing the *Encuentro de las Américas* in its entirety, Marci R. McMahon and I wrote, “language differences will not inhibit us from communicating with each other across regions and countries.”¹⁰ The sessions at the *Encuentro* were simultaneously translated in English and Spanish. The dominant languages of the US and Latin American theater were a process point (translators sat in the back of all large sessions), a debate (how should we communicate across communities), and a dramaturgical theme. When Juan tells Miss Julia that he wants to start a hotel, she asks about capital. He responds, “I’ve got my expertise, my professional experiencia, my knowledge of English, I think that’s a lot of capital” (20).

Along with this realistic comment about the benefits of bilingualism and multilingualism, physical language figured prominently as a means of expression and communication. The playwright and the actors met at a SITI Summer Intensive in Saratoga Springs, and *Miss Julia* grew out of this experience. Movement, physicality, and international collaboration inform the SITI experience, and *Miss Julia* bridges any confusion resulting from language shifts with choreography, no-dialogue scenes set to instrumental music, and physical gesture. Strindberg’s play incorporated pantomime as to not interrupt the naturalistic dialogue and scene with set changes and cumbersome actor entrances and exits. Araiza, by contrast, made these pantomimes “somehow ritualistic and out of time.”¹¹ Regarding the *Encuentro* conversations, Olga Sanchez Saltveit wrote, “Language is an essential element of theatre, and mixing languages can affect audiences differently with their different tempos, cadences, implications.”¹² This includes non-verbal languages, and in the case of *Miss Julia*, the mixture of Spanish, English, music, and physicality worked together affectively to reach a culturally and linguistically diverse audience.

Strindberg ends with the sounds of outside authority. “*Two loud rings on the bell.*”¹³ Jean says, “It’s horrible. But it’s the only possible ending. Go!” And Miss Julie “*walks firmly and through the door.*”¹⁴ Araiza ends his play with Miss Julia asking a question, “What would you do if you were me?”¹⁵ and Julia and Juan fight in silence, with perhaps

Julia prevailing as stronger.¹⁶ Miss Julia remains onstage to fight, stopping and starting, but still engaged in the action. Ultimately, many of the conversation topics at the Encuentro—languages, adaptation, the stories that we tell, and the fiesta outside the theater door—cohered in this adaptation of a familiar tale. And *Miss Julia* theatricalized the interplay between them.

Notes

1. The Encuentro program said that subtitles would be included, but I sat through a performance where there were none. Moreover, *Quemar de las naves. El Viaje de Emma* was another adaptation of a Western classic, Homer's *The Odyssey*. It was a movement and visual piece performed with no spoken text.
2. J. Ed Araiza. *Miss Julia* (unpublished script, 2018), 2.
3. Araiza, 4.
4. In performance, Miss Julia was played by Australian actress Tina Thurman, who spoke English with a flat, American accent.
5. Araiza, 4.
6. Araiza, 5.
7. Araiza, 8.
8. August Strindberg. *Miss Julie*. Translated by Michael Meyer. Ed. David Thomas and Jo Taylor. (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 9.
9. Strindberg, 10.
10. Carla Della Gatta and Marci R. McMahon, "Coming Full Circle: the 2017 LTC International Convening." HowlRound. December 21, 2017. Accessed March 1, 2018.
11. Araiza, no page number
12. Olga Sanchez Saltveit. "Estamos Juntos / We are Together: Report-Outs from the Latinx Theatre Commons International Convening." HowlRound. 20 Nov 2017. Accessed March 1, 2018.
13. Strindberg, 46.
14. Strindberg, 46.
15. Araiza, 34.
16. Araiza, 34.