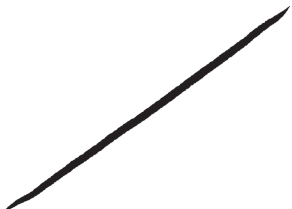


SURVIVING FROM THE MARGINS: TEPITO ARTE ACÁ AND ITS COUNTER-NARRATIVE OF MEXICAN HISTORY

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Abstract: This text examines the survival strategies of the Mexican theatre collective Tepito Arte Acá, founded in 1980 in México City's iconic Tepito neighborhood. Using Juan Villegas's framework of theatrical subsystems in Latin America, the group is analyzed as a liminal case: its historical-political discourse and popular aesthetic align with the third subsystem (the "new revolution"), while its production mode—a pragmatic "economy of adaptation" based on diversified funding—operates within the conditions of the fourth (postmodernity and globalization). The analysis contrasts Villegas's macro-theory with Patricia Chavero's study of cultural policies in Mexico City (1997-2012), which documents the state's withdrawal as a funder. The article argues that the group's longevity can be attributed to navigating Villegas's "double process of appropriation," tactically negotiating with institutional power while maintaining autonomy through box office sales, particularly from a stable school audience. Combining theoretical analysis with qualitative research—including testimonies from founder Virgilio Carrillo and co-author Susana Meza—the study shows how a marginal theatrical discourse managed to sustain a prolific, historically revisionist repertoire for over four decades.

Keywords: Mexican popular theatre, Mexican history, community theatre, Tepito Arte Aca.

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Introduction

Mexican theatre that addresses national history has been a terrain of dispute between official narratives and critical revisions. Within this panorama, the theatrical discourse of the group Tepito Arte Acá, founded in 1980 in the iconic and stigmatized rough neighborhood (barrio bravo) of Tepito in Mexico City (CDMX), presents a singularity: its repertoire constitutes a counter-narrative of Mexican history from a popular perspective. By counter-narrative we understand those discourses that subvert the master narratives imposed by power, giving voice to those who have been excluded from the official account (Espino, 2008, p. 69). This scenic counter-narrative aesthetically links the group to a committed theatre that seemed extinct. How has this collective managed to keep a historical theatrical discourse alive, from the margins, for more than four decades—above all, in a context defined by the neoliberal turn and the withdrawal of the State as a funder of culture?

The aim of this article is to examine the scenic mechanisms (mode of representation) and the management mechanisms (production mode) that have allowed the group Tepito Arte Acá to construct and sustain that discourse. To do so, the group will first be situated within the historical-theatrical framework

proposed for Latin America by Juan Villegas (2011). Next, antecedents of historical theatre in 20th-century México will be traced through the works of Juan Campesino (2017) and Donald Frischmann (1985, 1992), which will make it possible to identify convergences and divergences between these antecedents and the proposal of Tepito Arte Acá. At a later point, this general framework will be contrasted with the concrete analysis by Patricia Chavero (2016) of the policies of scenic production in Mexico City during the governments of the democratic transition, which will make it possible to contextualize the challenges of cultural management in that period. Finally, this theoretical and contextual web will be put in dialogue with two internal voices of the collective: the testimony of Virgilio Carrillo, founding director of the group Tepito Arte Acá, obtained in a semi-structured interview (2026), and my testimony as co-author and member of the group from 1995 to the present, derived from participant self-observation. Part of this testimony can be consulted in my work *La producción teatral del grupo Tepito Arte Acá de 1980 a 2015* (2017). In this way, this work combines historiographic analysis with qualitative research in order to understand the strategies that have allowed, despite marginality, the persistence of the collective and the production of a repertoire that rewrites the history of México from a popular perspective.

1. Tepito Arte Acá: a marginal discourse between two subsystems

To understand the unique position of this collective within the Mexican theatrical field, we will turn to the theoretical framework of Juan Villegas (2011), whose tools will prove central to this work. First of all, his classification of theatrical discourses, within which that of Tepito Arte Acá would be a marginal discourse. Second of all, his concept of the “double process of appropriation,” which partly explains the persistence of the group’s production method, despite its marginal condition. Finally, his periodization of the history of Latin American theatre, in which the collective would carry out its praxis in one period (subsystem, in Villegas’s vocabulary) while maintaining a mode of representation that the Chilean theorist finds characteristic of the previous period.

But what does it imply that Tepito Arte Acá’s is a marginal theatrical discourse? To answer, it is useful to reconstruct the distinction Villegas makes between hegemonic and marginal theatrical discourses. The hegemony of a theatrical discourse is defined by the producer’s belonging to a hegemonic cultural sector, independently of the audience it addresses (Villegas, 2011, p. 29). On the contrary, the lack of correspondence with that aesthetic and ideological code, and the marginality of the producer and/or the receiver, turns the theatrical discourse marginal, a condition that carries the risk of being left out of the history of theatre

(*Ibid.*, p. 30). This situation is confirmed in the present object of study by the few mentions that the collective's work has earned in specialized texts, beyond my own publications (Meza, 2017, 2021, 2022).

Tepito Arte Acá fully embodies this category of marginalized theatrical discourse, both because of its origin in the stigmatized neighborhood of Tepito—which has been linked to marginality since the refounding of Mexico City after the Spanish conquest, when it was designated to be a “barrio of Indians” outside the layout of the New Spanish city (Aréchiga, 2003, p. 83)—and because of the group's adoption of popular aesthetic codes, such as the teatro de carpa (tent theatre) and the albur (in which we will pause shortly), and because of the profile of its audience: residents of Tepito, students of public middle-schools in Mexico City and its outlying areas, children who live or work in the streets, indigenous and popular communities...

It is worth briefly touching on the aesthetic codes just mentioned to illuminate the collective's mode of representation. The teatro de carpa is a popular Mexican scenic tradition that emerged in the 1920s, characterized by being staged in portable structures made of canvas or cloth and whose programming was given in “tandas” (sets) that featured a variety of dances, songs, and humorous sketches, using direct language, a festive tone, and, in the nighttime sets, erotic allusions (Nomland, 1967, pp. 171-173). From the teatro de carpa, the group recovers the humor, the dance, the irreverence, and, occasionally, the structure organized around sketches. The albur, for its part, is a play on words based on double meaning, where an apparently everyday statement is interpreted, with the listener's complicity, with a sexual connotation. Indeed, colloquial language, including double meaning, has been a constant feature in Tepito Arte Acá's stage productions.

It is with this irreverent poetics that the group approaches historical themes. A few examples illustrate this approach: the beginning of the armed struggle for Independence (1810) is represented with a *hip-hop* choreography and with some “remembering clowns” who act as narrators of the feat (Carrillo y Meza, 2008). To represent the struggle between conservatives and liberals during the 19th century, the characters confront one another in a chaotic soccer match where there even come to be two soccer balls (representing the two simultaneous presidencies that México had during the War of the Reform from 1858 to 1861) (Carrillo y Meza, 2005). The outbreak of the Mexican Revolution (1910) is represented with a *ska* choreography in which the performers are the skeletons of the revolutionary masses (Carrillo y Meza, 2005) and its narrator, who directly addresses the audience, is a “wise teporocho” (“teporocho” is a Mexican colloquial term designating an indigent and alcoholic person) (Carrillo y Meza, 1998). With the same brazenness, in another show, the Spanish conqueror, Hernán Cortés, enters the scene on a skateboard singing a children's couplet (Carrillo, 2024).

Nevertheless, returning to the categorization of Tepito Arte Acá's theatrical discourse as marginal, it is necessary to clarify that the label is not embraced by the group's founder, Virgilio Carrillo (2026). For him, the term may be associated with a stage of minimal resources, which runs counter to his constant aspiration toward a certain spectacularity. Against the logic that tends to impose reduced casts on independent groups, Tepito Arte Acá has systematically opted for stagings with between twelve and twenty-five performers on stage who use flashy lighting and multi-level sets. This will toward spectacle is verified in the milestones of its trajectory: the achievement of long seasons in hegemonic theatres (such as the 400 performances of *Noche de califas* at the Teatro Jiménez Rueda, the Teatro Tepeyac, and the Wilberto Cantón from 1992 to 1994), the participation in legitimized spaces such as the Festival Cervantino (1983) and the Museo Nacional de Antropología (1985), and the celebration of its forty-fifth anniversary at the Teatro de la Ciudad (2025).



Photograph of a choreography by Ricardo Higuera for the play *Noche de califas*, directed by Virgilio Carrillo. Jiménez Rueda Theatre, 1992. (c) México City. Photo source: Tepito Arte Acá's Archive.



Photograph of the plaque unveiling ceremony for the 45th Anniversary of Tepito Arte Acá by Diana Rosas. De la Ciudad Theatre, 2025. (c) México City. Photo source: Tepito Arte Acá's Archive.

Thus, the group's practice unfolds in a double circuit: that of non-conventional spaces (public plazas, tenements, church atriums, parks, basketball courts, and school courtyards) and that of theatre buildings, mainly of cultural institutions and unions and, to a lesser extent, of private enterprise. Carrillo's reluctance toward the label of marginal is understandable if the term is associated with an aesthetics of scarcity. However, in Villegas's opinion, "marginal" does not constitute a judgment about the quality or the format of the staging, but rather a category that describes a position within the cultural field. Villegas is explicit in noting that "there is no «essentiality» of theatrical marginality, inasmuch as it is a historical category" (p. 29). A group is marginal to the extent that its codes do not coincide with those of the hegemonic emitters and, therefore, it operates from a position of relative exteriority with respect to the center of legitimacy. Thus, the spectacularity sought by Carrillo and the intermittent access to theatre buildings and to certain institutional economic support—part of which, symptomatically, comes not from cultural institutions but from agencies relating to public security or to territorial matters (Meza, 2022)—do not invalidate its condition as marginal; rather, they make it more complex. They demonstrate that marginality can be a position from which one negotiates, disputes, or bursts into the hegemonic scene.

This negotiation is, in fact, a concrete manifestation of the "double process of appropriation" described by Villegas (p. 41) for the historical period to which the group's scenic practice corresponds. In this process, the hegemonic and the marginal sectors instrumentalize one another. In the case of Tepito Arte Acá, the group is intermittently appropriated by agencies of power. In turn, the collective pursues that support in order to obtain economic resources and a

“quota of legitimacy” materialized, for example, in newspaper articles that allow it to accumulate the prestige necessary to give continuity to the project. The next section will address in more detail how this “double process of appropriation” took concrete shape over the trajectory of Tepito Arte Acá.

Up to this point, the marginality of Tepito Arte Acá’s theatrical discourse has been established, and it has been noted that the dynamic of the “double process of appropriation” is palpable in the group’s case. We will now situate the collective’s scenic praxis within a broader context thanks to the periodization Villegas makes of the history of Latin American theatre. On the basis of the displacement of hegemonic discourses, the author divides this history into four systems: the first corresponds to the indigenous cultures prior to the arrival of the Spaniards; the second, to the colonial period; the third, to the theatricalities of the enlightened bourgeoisie of the 19th century; and the fourth and last, to modernity (Villegas, 2011, pp. 34-35). Each of these historical periods is, in turn, divided into subsystems. The system of modernity is subdivided into four: the first covers the first decades of the 20th century; the second, from 1930 to 1950; the third, also called “of the new revolution,” runs from the Cold War to postmodernity; and, finally, the fourth comprises the theatricalities of postmodernity and globalization.

As regards the group, as already mentioned, it emerges in 1980, the year in which Villegas establishes the beginning of the fourth subsystem, that of postmodernity and globalization. The researcher characterizes this period through a distancing from the grand narratives, the primacy of artistic experimentation and, as for the modes of production, a determining structural change: “the modality of groups financed by the State loses currency in the face of free-enterprise and privatization policies, making «self-financing» a basic duty” (Villegas, 2011, p. 223). In this scenario, theatre artists have been forced to seek new sources of financing, frequently orienting themselves toward international festivals or toward the strategies of commercial theatre, such as the inclusion in their casts of actors made famous by their television work (*ibid.*, p. 224). Nevertheless, Tepito Arte Acá’s mode of representation and political commitment link it to the third subsystem, that of “the theatrical discourses of the new revolution,” characterized by “the attempt to socialize theatrical production” and “the use of codes associable with Brechtian epic theatre” (*ibid.*, p. 40). Among the exponents that Villegas identifies in this period are the Colombian Enrique Buenaventura, founder of the Teatro Experimental de Cali and author of historical works such as *Crónica*, which addresses the Conquest from the indigenous perspective; his compatriot Santiago García, founder of the group La Candelaria; the Brazilian Augusto Boal, with his influential theatre of the oppressed, for whom “Theatre is a weapon, and it is the people who must wield it” (*ibid.*, p. 149), a maxim that synthesizes the will to social transformation

with the popular appropriation of the theatrical means; the Cuban group Teatro Escambray and the Peruvian Yuyachkani, which incorporates the Andean world into its performances; and the Cuban playwright Abelardo Estorino, author of several historical works (*ibid.*, pp. 161-177).

The corpus of Tepito Arte Acá's historical works shares features with the Latin American referents that Villegas presents as representative of the third subsystem. Like Buenaventura, it carries out a rereading of the Conquest from the indigenous perspective in two productions: *Cinco minutos para la medianoche* (2005 to the present) and *Acá comienza tu historia* (2024 to the present). Just as Yuyachkani draws on Andean culture, the Tepito group takes up Mesoamerican myths in *Nahui Ollin* (1985), *Noche de guerreros y chamanes* (2001 to the present), *Somos de maíz* (2017 to the present), *Calaquitas* (2018 to the present) and the aforementioned *Acá comienza tu historia*. Tepito Arte Acá has also addressed other moments of national history, such as the Independence of México (*Hidalgo: memoria y sangre*, 2008 to the present), the Reform, when the struggle between liberals and conservatives would lead to a separation of State and Church (*Juárez o la República*, 2005 to the present), the Porfirian repression that led to the Mexican Revolution (*¡¡¡Mátenlos en caliente!!!*, 2005 to the present), and the 20th century and its resonances in the present (*No hay mal que dure cien años*, 1998 to the present), including the evolution of the role of women in the history of México in *Canto de mujer* (2002 to the present). Works, for the most part, co-authored by me together with Virgilio Carrillo. In this dramaturgical corpus, history ceases to be a distant and sacralized narrative and becomes raw material for appropriation and reworking from the perspective of popular culture as we understand it in Tepito Arte Acá.



Photograph of a scene of the play ¡¡¡Mátenlos en caliente!!! in Ferrocarrilero Theatre.

Photo by Gerardo Ortíz. 2020. (c) México City.

Photo source: Tepito Arte Acá's Archive.

Throughout this section it has been established that Tepito Arte Acá's theatrical discourse is marginal because of its origin, because of the aesthetic codes used in its mode of representation, and because of the profile of its addressees. It has also been established that its survival has depended, in part, on the double process of appropriation with hegemonic agencies. Furthermore, its praxis has been situated in a liminal place: located chronologically, and by its production mode, in Villegas's fourth subsystem (postmodernity), but linked to the third subsystem (the new revolution) by the modes of representation of its historically themed corpus.

Nevertheless, this appropriation of history by means of a peculiar mode of representation does not represent an isolated case, as has been seen in the coincidences with the works of other Latin American theatre groups belonging to the third subsystem. It is now worth situating this appropriation of history and this mode of representation in relation to other Mexican authors and groups that have addressed national history, or with whose modes of representation the group shares significant features—that is, with the Mexican groups of the third subsystem, which Villegas does not manage to mention in his ambitious work. In this regard, the works of Juan Campesino and Donald Frischmann prove useful for identifying both the convergences and the divergences.

2. Historical theatre in the fourth system and the counter-narrative of Tepito Arte Acá

Campesino documents how, from the post-revolutionary period (beginning in the third decade of the 20th century), theatre in México was linked to an educational function oriented toward the construction of national identity. As regards theatre of historical content, this impulse generated diverse lines: from monumental theatre (with massive spectacles in Teotihuacán that came to involve up to 3,000 performers) and school theatre (an unfinished project of the List Arzubide brothers), to the committed Teatro de Ahora of Mauricio Magdaleno and Juan Bustillo Oro. Campesino notes that, subsequently, authored theatre has disappeared from the school sphere and theatricalities with a heavy charge of indoctrination appeared in the patriotic celebrations (2019, pp. 19-27). In general terms, Villegas's account of the continent in this period coincides with what Campesino observes for the national case. Nevertheless, the Mexican researcher broadens the perspective by showing that, beyond an authored theatre, different modes of representation of theatre with historical content coexisted that responded to this nationalist project. It was, to a large extent, an emergent scenic *master narrative* at the service of the post-revolutionary State. Master narratives, as

Espino notes (2008, p. 69), are those accounts that the dominant culture inserts into social structures in order to obtain and maintain power.

A different impulse that linked theatre, history, and social transformation, but now from a critical and popular position, was taken up decades later by the movement that Donald Frischmann categorized as the “new Mexican popular theatre,” that which “exists of, by, and for the popular classes; incorporating elements of traditional popular theatre, reinterpreting them according to the people’s life circumstances; it eclectically brings together contemporary methods of creation and acting; it presents dramatic conflicts from the perspective of change and incorporates the spectator, insofar as possible, as an active participant in the show” (Frischmann, 1985, p. 34-35). This definition coincides with the characteristics of Villegas’s third subsystem: political and social commitment, the socialization of production, and the use of codes close to popular culture. Moreover, in the body of his work, Frischmann will also find the influence of Brecht’s epic theatre in these groups’ proposals.

The North American researcher classified these Mexican experiences according to their production mode, or subsistence, identifying three categories that reflect the diversity of strategies within the same aesthetic-ideological impulse: (1) Popular theatre within the State (Teatro Conasupo, Proyecto de Arte Escénico Popular, and Teatro Popular del INEA). (2) Proletarian popular theatre (the CLETA movement and its founding groups). (3) Independent popular theatre (Grupo Cultural Zero and the playwright Felipe Santander, to whom, in a later work, he will add the groups Zumbón, Zopilote, Matlazincas, and Tecolote (Frischmann, 1992, p. 58). Counter-narratives are commonly found in the scenic works of this tradition, even when state financing is available. Counter-narratives have the purpose of deconstructing master narratives and giving voice and centrality to marginalized communities (Espino, 2008, p. 69-72). It is within this line of popular theatre, whose counter-narrative brings together marginal companies and communities, where the most coincidences are observed with respect to the work of Tepito Arte Acá.

A first example, *El tornillo suelto*, a production of the Brigada Flores Magón, under the direction of Rodolfo Valencia, for the Teatro Conasupo. There a historical revision is proposed through characters whose madness leads them to assume various figures of the past. The work runs through the history of México in order then to address contemporary problems of the time, such as transnational industrialization and corruption, underscoring that the historical benefit has corresponded only to a minority. Coincidentally, Tepito Arte Acá developed, without knowing this antecedent, a work based on the same point of departure, the aforementioned *Cinco minutos para la medianoche* (2005). Although

here the characters address only the Conquest and modernity, and how in both periods the greed of a few destroys cultures and endangers the world—hence the title, which is updated in accordance with the Doomsday Clock, which, in 2026, has 85 seconds left (Yoon, 2026), and where “midnight” represents the global catastrophe—, both stagings coincide in offering a counter-narrative of Mexican history: they dismantle the official version through irony and estrangement, and they place at the center the subjects of popular roots. The work of Tepito Arte Acá incorporates, however, an additional layer of violence that does not cancel out the playful: the historical journey is not fortuitous, but is occasioned by the imminent death of a character murdered during a choreography to the rhythm of “Santa Muerte,” by the Mexican *hip-hop* group Cartel de Santa, and which is expressed in the following way: “They say that when one is dying one sees one’s whole history pass by; at this moment, and knowing that I have a few minutes left to die, I see the history of the country pass by” (Carrillo y Meza, 2007).

A second point of contact is found in the work of the Brigada Xicoténcatl, directed by Soledad Ruíz. Its stagings *Xochipitzahuac* and *El campesino y el rico* incorporate, respectively, a Nahuatl fertility rite and a denunciation of the abuses against peasants (Frischmann, 1985, p. 51-59). The interest in indigenous rites and social denunciation are also present in the corpus of Tepito Arte Acá. In all cases, the recovery of indigenous worldviews functions as a counter-narrative that opposes history of a Eurocentric cast.

Finally, Frischmann notes that this theatre takes up elements of traditional popular theatre, the teatro de carpa, already mentioned, being its main referent in the Mexican urban context. This legacy was incorporated by groups such as Zero (*Carpa Zero*), Los Zopilotes (*La carpa de Soledad*) and Zumbón (*La carpa nacional*). As I was able to attest myself, in the third case the appropriation used the carpa more as a symbolic space than as an active aesthetic principle. By contrast, Tepito Arte Acá’s relationship with this tradition is more direct: the group takes up specific scenic codes of the carpa, such as humor, double meaning, and the inclusion of choreographies, in order to integrate them as the basis of its own spectacular language and, thereby, to enunciate a more radical counter-narrative.

For his part, Virgilio Carrillo had closeness with the new popular theatre: as audience, friend, and collaborator. In its first work, the group premiered a text by Enrique Ballesté, *Benito Gómez o el paraíso de los pobres* (1980), at the Foro Isabelino of CLETA; in addition, it had the collaboration of Ignacio Betancourt, of the Zopilotes group, in the dramaturgy of *Una historia para bailar* (1983) y *Rumbera* (1986). On the basis of these experiences, Carrillo questions the category of independents that Frischmann assigns to some of these collectives. His critique centers on the production mode; he argues that these groups depended structurally

on state subsidies without developing alternative financing strategies, and so they did not come to attain real autonomy, with the exception, according to Carrillo, of Grupo Zero, backed by its frequent tours in the United States. Already then Carrillo himself warned: “If we don’t sell tickets, we will not be free” (2026), thus prefiguring the strategy of pragmatic flexibility that would distinguish Tepito Arte Acá: the pursuit of independence sustained by the diversification of resources, including, but not limited to, the box office.

Carrillo’s critique of these groups’ model of state dependence transcended mere ideological disagreement in order to posit a principle of economic autonomy. Eventually, with the end of the welfare State—which affected the continuity of the movement—for Tepito Arte Acá this stance ceased to be a choice and became a necessity.

3. Cultural policy in the transition: the fourth subsystem in practice in México City

The analysis by the Mexican researcher Patricia Chavero of the cultural policies relating to the performing arts in Mexico City between 1997 and 2012 makes it possible to contrast the structural description of Villegas’s fourth subsystem with its materialization in a specific context in which part of Tepito Arte Acá’s theatrical production is developed.

From the outset, the commodification and the withdrawal of the State are confirmed as the axes of the period established by Villegas. Chavero documents this process precisely: after a first administration with significant investment, the arrival of “republican austerity” in 2001 caused an 83% budget cut to the cultural sector of Mexico City (2017), in addition to a growing transfer of public spaces to private enterprise (2016). These measures led to a reconfiguration of the field in which the pursuit of private sponsorship and self-financing became imperative, just as Villegas foresees. An example of cultural policy in keeping with this forecast is provided by EFITEATRO (González, 2025), a tax incentive, created in 2011, that allows high-income taxpayers to support scenic projects in exchange for tax reductions and where the role of the State is limited to regulation.

However, a divergence arises in the relationship between the cultural field and the political field. Villegas characterizes the fourth subsystem by noting that “the producers of theatrical discourses tend to marginalize themselves from political power” and “commit themselves less politically” (Villegas, 2011, p. 40). Chavero’s evidence shows a more conflictive dynamic: a direct subordination and instrumentalization: “In these first years we see how the advance in the organic-administrative autonomy of the cultural entity in the city, and the consequent

autonomy of the field, quickly found themselves subordinated to the political field,” where the cultural agenda was “subjected to the broader political agenda” (Chavero, 2017, p. 5). This does not represent a distancing, but a subjection to the electoral cycles and the image projects of the governing officials in turn (exemplified in the administrative swings and the forced resignations that the author details), which makes the consolidation of an autonomy of the cultural field impossible.

This evidence of political subordination and austerity defines the concrete operative framework that the theatre groups faced. Chavero’s survey shows that the cultural field of Mexico City was subject to abrupt interruptions and reorientations with each change of government, when programs and support tended to disappear. In the face of this institutional instability, the researcher found a case of resilience: the Faro Oriente, a public cultural space that, through mechanisms of self-management and community rootedness, managed to sustain itself thanks to international economic support (2016).

This specific context explains the need to develop diversified financing strategies. A practice that the group Tepito Arte Acá has sustained since its origin. This tactical adaptation constitutes a response to its condition as a marginal discourse operating within the already described “double process of appropriation,” which has allowed it to navigate sociopolitical changes and to capitalize on opportunities when the decision-making bodies have sought in the group their own legitimization.

4. Voices from practice: marginality, the double process of appropriation, and autonomy

Carrillo’s critique of the state dependence of some of the groups of the new popular theatre prepared him, without his planning it, for the reconfiguration of the cultural field described by Chavero: the withdrawal of the State as a funder and the obligatoriness of self-financing that Villegas identifies as a structural feature of the fourth subsystem. Although the Chilean locates the beginning of this period in 1980, Carrillo situates its materialization in México in the mid-nineties, with the economic crisis derived from the so-called “December error,” coinciding with my entry into the group in 1995. The Tepito native recalls that, before that date, institutions came to buy from him packages of between 50 and 100 performances of the work *Sucedió entre changos*, with which the group toured the country. By contrast, in the last decade, the maximum support for a project has not exceeded the purchase of twelve performances.

However, survival in this new scenario was not achieved through an absolute rejection of the institutional, but through a complex and persistent negotiation.

This involved everything from a year's persistence in *lobbying* to obtain a grant, to the invention of ceremonies such as the unveiling of a commemorative plaque in order to capture an official's attention, by way of the strategy of participating, like so many companies, in the increasingly demanding public calls for proposals. Through Carrillo's testimony and my own as co-author and member of the group since 1995, the concrete mechanisms of an economy of adaptation are observed which, far from being a mere survival tactic, constituted an example of agency within the double process of appropriation.

In this sense, it is worth noting that the group's aesthetic conception was organically nourished by shows of strong popular roots. Carrillo identifies as referents the political satire of the actor-impresario Jesús Martínez "Palillo" and the visual impact of the revue theatre of the Teatro Blanquita (2026), which explains the constant pursuit of a certain spectacularity. This substrate was fused with a reflection on Mexican identity influenced by readings such as *El laberinto de la soledad*, by Octavio Paz, circulated by the novelist, also from the neighborhood, Armando Ramírez, author of several works in the repertoire, among them *Ratero*, *Noche de califas*, *Quinceañera* and *Déjame*. This nationalist outlook was also nourished, according to Carrillo, by the Marxist orientation inherited from some of his teachers during his academic training. From its origin, the group adhered to the multidisciplinary cultural movement of the same name, Tepito Arte Acá, founded in the seventies with urban popular culture as the source of its poetics.

The evolution toward a systematic historical theatre occurred, however, in a circumstantial way. The commercial seasons attracted teachers and school principals interested in bringing theatre to the school. Over the years, and after numerous visits, teachers and principals requested specific themes from the history of México in keeping with the study programs. Although Carrillo aspired to the collective writing of the text, this was carried out in a very limited way. The research required to address historical themes did not awaken interest in other members of the group, and so, from 1998 onward, the task fell to the Carrillo-Meza co-authorship, who define the central dramatic structure. The actors, nevertheless, then enrich the texts with improvisations that bring them up to date or with direct addresses to the audience that produce a comic effect. Our production over these four decades exceeds thirty stagings, with more than ten shows in active repertoire, and it is articulated along two axes: the chronicle of neighborhood life and the critical revision of national history.

As Nel Diago (1994) notes, certain historical anniversaries generate a specific demand. We already had works such as *Hidalgo: memoria y sangre* (2008) or *¡¡¡Mátenlos en caliente!!!* (2005), produced for our school audience, and we have taken advantage of junctures such as the celebrations of the bicentennial of

Independence and the centennial of the Mexican Revolution, in 2010, to show and promote our scenic work. We have not started from the commemorative date in order to create, but we have used it pragmatically to gain legitimacy before our own audience and also before other sectors of popular stripe (in the Carpa Bi100 alone we sold out the approximately 600 seats for a month).

The aesthetic project of Tepito Arte Acá has been sustained thanks to the desire to keep making theatre, to the creation of an audience that allowed the team and its repertoire to consolidate, and to the implementation of diversified management strategies. Carrillo's reluctance toward state dependence crystallized in the maxim "theatre that sells," a principle linked to the commercial tradition of the neighborhood documented since the end of the 19th century (Aréchiga, 2003, p. 215) and summed up in the saying "In Tepito everything is for sale, except dignity" ("En Tepito se vende todo, menos la dignidad"). For the group, this does not constitute a mercantile slogan, much less an attempt to seek personal economic benefit (which is usually absent), but a principle of autonomy that provides the only way to keep making theatre and that materialized in stages: an initial phase that combined popular formats with the contracting of performances by the State, and a defining second phase, from 1998 onward and with greater force between 2001 and 2011, which counted on the consolidation of a stable school audience by means of self-managed seasons at the Jorge Negrete theatre, which we rented from the ANDA. The solid infrastructure of this theatre allowed us to formally improve the shows, to accelerate production, and to broaden the historical repertoire. This stage coincided with the social discontent in the face of neoliberalism and the "war on drug trafficking," a context that fed the social critique of our works.



Photograph of a scene of the play *Hidalgo: memoria y sangre* in Carpa Bi100, Zócalo México City. 2009. (c) México City.
Photo source: Tepito Arte Acá's Archive.

This box-office model, however, was never pure. The pursuit of autonomy demanded a constant diversification of resources in a concrete manifestation of the double process of appropriation described by Villegas. On the one hand, the group is intermittently employed by state agencies, cultural or not, for purposes of symbolic inclusion, crime prevention or, in the case of our historical repertoire, civic celebrations. On the other hand, Tepito Arte Acá appropriates those resources, those spaces, and that legitimacy in order to finance and sustain its own artistic project, integrating institutional support, community circuits, and workshops with mixed financing (self-sacrifice, institutional support, patrons, and community cooperation). This hybrid strategy has had a high operating cost. Institutional support, paid months in arrears, forces the financing of projects with bank loans whose interest—never budgeted for—and whose mandatory deadlines generate persistent debts. Within this framework, the loss of the venue at the Jorge Negrete and the move to the Teatro Ferrocarrilero, of larger dimensions, distanced the relationship with the audience, affecting ticket sales. Even so, the project persists, surviving even the COVID-19 pandemic, during which, adapting to the conditions of lockdown, we reached our audience through digital platforms.

Conclusions

The trajectory of Tepito Arte Acá demonstrates that the theatrical subsystems described by Villegas do not succeed one another in a mutually exclusive way, but can coexist. The group operates from a liminal stance: its historical discourse and its political commitment, materialized in a corpus that rewrites history from a popular perspective, align with the third subsystem, while its production mode, an economy of adaptation based on the diversification of resources, responds to the material conditions of the fourth subsystem.

By navigating the double process of appropriation, the collective turned its structural marginality into a position from which to negotiate with power, thus employing the resources obtained at the box office as well as those coming from government programs and civic commemorations, without renouncing the autonomy granted to it by the connection with its own audience. On this basis, the group has built a counter-narrative of Mexican history: a scenic discourse that gives voice to the excluded by means of humor, irony, double meaning, and other resources of popular theatre. The collective not only inherited the will to rewrite history from below, but has sustained it for more than four decades with an economy of adaptation that other groups to which it was related did not manage to sustain. Thus, the case shows how a historical theatre of popular roots can persist even from the margins, provided that it implements flexible management strategies and maintains a sustained bond with its audiences.

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6. *Déjame* (2019-2020) Directed by Susana Meza [Salón Los Ángeles, CDMX]
7. *Hidalgo: memoria y sangre* (2008-2025) Directed by Virgilio Carrillo y Susana Meza [Jorge Negrete Theatre, Carpa Bi100 and others, CDMX].
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