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Comino Vence al Diablo AND
OTHER TERRIFYING EPISODES:
*Teatro Guiñol's Itinerant Puppet Theater
in 1930s Mexico*

A hush fell over the gathering of fidgety kindergarteners on a May morning in 1934 in an Ixtapalapa schoolyard, as stage curtains drew apart to reveal an animated stereotypically black hand puppet (*El Negrito*) laboriously hauling firewood back and forth at the behest of his *patrón*. El Negrito complained about his plight, and the children's eyes widened with terror, reflecting the fear demonstrated by the puppet when the *patrón* threatened the arrival of the devil if he did not keep working. Enter Comino, a cheeky young boy puppet, whose grandmother, accusing him of slothfulness, had brought him to the *patrón* to learn some work ethic. A devil puppet loomed large on the makeshift stage, bellowing out vague threats. Two kindergarteners burst into tears. Not wanting to disturb the rest of the captive audience, the teacher removed the terrified girls and brought them around to the back of the stage so that they could see the puppeteers manipulating the cloth, felt and wooden dolls. Despite her efforts, the girls remained inconsolable and refused to watch the rest of the show.

Back on stage, Comino announced that he was not afraid of the devil and, roping in an unconvinced Negrito, set out to prove it with violence. El Negrito and Comino spent the remaining acts brandishing sticks, eventually finding the elusive devil and knocking him senseless. The devil's mask slipped off to reveal none other than the labor-exploiting *patrón*. The curtain closed on a smug Comino and relieved Negrito looking on as the *patrón* lugged his own firewood across the stage.¹

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1. Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Educación Pública (AHSEP), Departamento de Bellas Artes, Serie Teatro 1932-1936, Caja 71, Exp. "Teatro del Niño," 1934.

The play, entitled *Comino Overcomes the Devil* (*Comino vence al diablo*), formed a staple of the Fine Arts Department (Departamento de Bellas Artes) of the Ministry of Education's (SEP) itinerant puppet theater repertoire Teatro Guñol in the 1930s.² It appeared alone or alongside other proletarian-themed puppet scripts in widely distributed publications of the SEP.³ Government-sponsored itinerant puppet shows in the 1930s reflected both the optimism and the bureaucratic stumbling blocks that marked revolutionary nation-building efforts. In the case of Teatro Guñol, government officials and members of the intellectual bourgeoisie constructed an aspect of children's culture that they hoped could be universally distributed and uniformly received. Yet evidence indicates that in the process, children took an active role in their socialization, and were not simply passive recipients of revolutionary education projects.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Mexico experienced an optimistic period of cultural transformation and the implementation of reforms outlined in the Constitution of 1917, a product of the revolution. Recent literature examines the contradictions and successes characteristic of these nation-building decades, and the competing ideologies proffered by the modernizing government officials and the faith-based reformers.⁴ Cultural projects designed to educate and socialize children during these years provide evidence of this dynamic, and go further to highlight fissures in the not quite monolithic regime as bureaucratization and institutionalization tempered the independence and artistic license of revolutionary ideologues. Walter Benjamin noted that the Bolshevik Revolution had no sooner planted its Red flag than it turned its attention to the children; likewise, one of the first organized activities to unite sectors of Mexican government and civil societies in the aftermath of major battles was the 1921 First Mexican Child Congress, in which professionals and educators diagnosed and mapped out the future of the nation's revolutionary generation.⁵

Much historiographical treatment of the cultural revolution has emphasized socializing children.⁶ Yet recent scholarship demonstrates the ways that, on a local

2. Also sometimes written as Teatro Guignol. The name Guñol comes from a prodigious Italian puppeteer in the early 19th century, named either Guignol or Chignol, reportedly responsible for the popularity of puppet theater expressly for children throughout Europe. The makeshift stage itself soon became known as *teatro guignol*. Roberto Lago, *Teatro Guignol Mexicano*, 3d. ed. (México: Federación Editorial Mexicana, S.A., 1987), p. 15.

3. *Comino vence al diablo* appears first in an anthology of three plays by Germán List Arzubide, *Tres comedias infantiles para Teatro Guignol* (Mexico: Departamento de Bellas Artes, 1936). The play also appears in *El Maestro Rural* Tomo XI, No. 10 (October 1938), pp. 20-21, 25.

4. Mary Kay Vaughan and Stephen Lewis, *The Eagle and the Virgin: Nation and Cultural Revolution in Mexico, 1920-1940* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

5. Walter Benjamin, "Program for a Proletarian Children's Theater," *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings* Vol. 2, 1927-1934, Trans. Rodney Livingstone et al (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 202.

6. Patience Schell, "Nationalizing Children through Schools and Hygiene: Porfirian and Revolutionary Mexico City," *The Americas* 60: 4 (April 2004), pp. 559-587 and Schell, *Church and State Education in Revolutionary Mexico City* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2003). A classic view of this process of nation building is Eugene Weber,

level, cultural projects were mitigated by both individual and community interpretations; top-down efforts to exercise control in the education sector conformed to local understandings, resulting in a dialogue between ruling government officials and the community.⁷ Individuals imagined what it meant to be part of a nation based on their reception of these cultural projects, and children also experienced the real and virtual expansion of the worldview facilitated by government-funded mass media and curricular innovations.⁸ Evidence exists of the ways that children participated in their socialization, albeit often unknowingly, thus contributing to the construction of national identity.

Teatro Guiñol provided children with access to another child-centered cultural project in the 1930s. One story, emerging from lore surrounding the origins of renowned pedagogue Gregorio Torres Quintano's "Escuela Racionalista," credited a troubled adolescent in Yucatán named Humberto with beginning the tradition of using puppet theater in the schools in 1917. According to the tale, the reclusive and sickly lad squirreled away in the woods for weeks, pilfering materials needed for costumes and set design, and eventually emerged with a puppet show that was met with tremendous acclaim.⁹ Theater, for adults and children alike, served as one of the most effective ways of fomenting a sense of national identity.¹⁰ Living vicariously through the puppets' capers, children encountered enemies ranging from bacteria to exploitative bosses, and learned the appropriate ways to combat social ills. Yet while puppeteers and intellectual engineers constructed the healthy, moralized worlds that the cloth and wooden dolls presented to children, the children often transformed the intended meanings of the performances according to their personal tastes.

BUREAUCRATS AND VISIONARIES

In the early 1930s, the Ministry of Education decided to resurrect puppet theater as a didactic tool for the nascent socialist education project, based on the legendary but faded success of the Rosete Aranda brothers' puppet shows that

Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976). James C. Scott offers a critique of the modern, centralized state in *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

7. Mary Kay Vaughan, *Cultural Politics of Revolution: Teachers, Peasants and Schools in Mexico, 1930-1940* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1997). See also Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Nugent, "Popular Culture and State Formation in Revolutionary Mexico," *Everyday Forms of State Formation*, eds. Joseph and Nugent (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), pp. 3-23.

8. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Editions, 1983).

9. José de la Luz Mena, *Escuela racionalista: doctrina y método*, 2nd ed. (México, 1936), pp. 153-156.

10. An example of the conscious use of theater to promote national identity comes from Spain in the short-lived Second Republic from 1931-1936. See Chapter 3 in Sandy Holguín, *Creating Spaniards: Culture and National Identity in Republican Spain* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002).

had toured the country since 1832.¹¹ Puppet theater in the nineteenth century was renowned for its elaborate sets and its performers that bore striking resemblance to the character types made famous by lithographer Claudio Linati in the 1820s. Audiences were familiar with puppets, the tropes they represented, and the national values they conveyed. Yet if puppets were to be employed for more didactic purposes, the theater scenario would have to be scaled down in order to maximize the number of daily performances. First of all, hand puppets replaced the complicated string-operated marionettes; this not only facilitated transportation by eliminating the tangling of strings, but it also allowed for each puppeteer to operate two puppets at once, one on each hand. Second, the stage became a simplified frame-and-curtain affair that two people could set up in minutes, with minimalist scenery replacing the exquisite pastoral countryside backdrops featured in the Rosete Aranda presentations. Finally, keeping in mind the youthful audience, puppet show playwrights based the storylines on actions rather than abstract morals that would resonate with the daily activities and icons familiar to children.¹²

Teatro Guiñol started off in 1932 as a small enterprise, comprised of a tightly knit group of radical intellectuals, artists, writers and bohemians, most of whom had spent time honing their socialist ideology in Russia and Paris. Mexican diplomats and bureaucrats who visited communist Russia experienced disillusionment with the implementation of socialism during the 1920s, and politicians turned the revolution in a more conservative direction upon their return home, distancing themselves from the Bolsheviks by breaking diplomatic relations in 1930.¹³ Yet the cultural sector did not respond in the same manner to what they saw in Russia. The intellectual architects of the Teatro Guiñol found the inspiration for their educational project through direct observation of the Bolshevik's socialist school puppet theater, at its zenith in 1928, promoting ideas about anti-alcoholism, literacy, and political fervor.¹⁴ Briefly exiled in Russia, Germán List Arzubide, a prolific playwright, was enthused that the Russians had hit on the most age-appropriate form of disseminating revolutionary culture, and nourished the seedling idea with his compatriots, the artists Lola and Germán Cueto,

11. For more about the development of nineteenth-century Mexican national identity through stories from the Rosete Aranda puppet troupes, see William H. Beezley, *Mexican National Identity: Memory, Innuendo and Popular Culture* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2008) and "Cómo fue que El Negrito salvó a México de los franceses: Las fuentes populares de la identidad nacional," *Historia Mexicana* 226, no. 2 (October-December 2007), pp. 405-444. See also: Francisca Miranda Silva and William H. Beezley, "The Rosete Aranda Puppets: A Century and a Half of an Entertainment Enterprise," *The Americas* 67:3 (Jan 2011), pp. 331-354.

12. List Arzubide, *Tres comedias infantiles*, pp. 5-19.

13. Daniela Spenser, "Encounter of Two Revolutions: Mexican Radical Elites in Communist Russia during the 1920s," *Strange Pilgrimages: Exile, Travel, and National Identity in Latin America, 1800-1990s*. Eds Ingrid E. Fey and Karen Racine (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 2000), pp. 147-162.

14. "El Teatro del Muñeco," *El Maestro Rural*, Tomo VI, No. 7 (April 1935), pp. 36-37.

in Paris.¹⁵ They saw the medium as the ideal tool in fomenting a sense of class consciousness, through which the youngest generation would come to understand ideas of fighting for equality and against oppression. The proletarian message that the puppets could bring forth would provide the basis for a new morality, and combat superstition rampant in the countryside.¹⁶ In Mexico, they worked and lived in community around the corner from Diego Rivera and Guadalupe Marín's house, creating the scripts, characters, and scenarios that would convey the official socialist education program to students in collaboration with like-minded colleagues: Roberto Lago, Angelina Beloff, Dolores Alva de la Canal, Elena Huerta Muzquiz, Enrique Assad, Fermín Revueltas, Graciela Amador, José M. Díaz Núñez, Juan Guerrero, Julio Castellanos, Leopoldo Méndez, Teodoro Méndez, and Ramón Alva de la Canal.¹⁷

The puppeteers professionalized puppet theater by giving it a name, Teatro Guiñol, and by working as an agency of the Ministry of Education, thus transforming the genre from an entertainment to an educational vehicle. Carlos Chávez, then head of the Department of Fine Arts, quickly took the reigns of Teatro Guiñol, incorporating it into the subsection Teatro del Niño.¹⁸ The first performance, *El gigante* (about an exploitative puppet who grew enormously fat off of the food and labor of others) took place in central Mexico City and was attended by dignified functionaries, including Chávez and Narciso Bassols, who were seated among neighborhood children. By 1933, the group had developed an ambitious itinerary that would take them to nearly 400 schools in the first six months alone.

Shortly, Teatro Guiñol split into two groups—Grupo A (Comino) and Grupo B (Rin-Rin)—and eventually others in the following years. Nearly every day, each group would present the half-hour show of three plays with a cast of four to six characters, often presenting at more than one school a day. For example, in the second half of 1933 alone, the two groups gave 377 presentations to kindergarteners, an average of four plays each day.¹⁹ Schools had access to 87 fixed and portable theaters, a number that escalated with demand.²⁰ To broaden access to the puppet theater in the wake of much acclaim, in 1935 puppeteers Ramón Alva de la Canal and Graciela Amador received a government commission to teach

15. List Arzubide's brief exile resulted from his vocal anti-imperialist demonstrations, causing an outcry when he denounced US intervention in Nicaragua by representing the US flag being trampled by Sandinistas. His exile bolstered his credentials as a bona fide revolutionary nationalist. Carmen Carrara, "Presentación," in Germán List Arzubide, *Tres comedias infantiles* (Mexico: UNAM, 1997), p. vi.

16. AHSEP, Department of Bellas Artes, Serie Teatro, Caja 4949, 1934.

17. *Época de oro del Teatro Guiñol de Bellas Artes, 1932-1965*, CD-ROM. Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 2005.

18. Lago, *Teatro Guignol*, p. 20.

19. AHSEP, Departamento de Bellas Artes, Serie Teatro, Caja 71, Exp. 43, 1934.

20. *Memoria de la SEP*, Tomo I (1933), p. 121.

puppetry techniques and content to teachers-in-training at the Escuela Normal Superior.²¹ The Golden Age of children's puppet theater lasted until the middle of the 1960s, and expanded its activity to the farthest reaches of the republic, as well as international ventures in Cuba, Venezuela and the United States.²²

The puppeteers worked at a feverish pace, driven at first by their revolutionary fervor, then increasingly by pressure from SEP officials to meet the demand that the wildly popular puppets had generated in schools. Letters to Chávez from Grupo Comino and Grupo Rin-Rin reveal some of the daily stressors that compromised the quality of their performances. They requested more consistent access to the single SEP vehicle that each group borrowed every day, arguing that one was often not enough to transport all of the people and equipment required. Often they received the vehicles with no gas, and had to pay out of their pockets to fill the tank. This caused them to be late to some of their appointments, and mothers complained that they had to wait at the school when they arrived to pick up their children, because the puppet show was running into the afternoon. Furthermore, the road conditions between the pueblos took a toll not only on the SEP vehicle, but on the equipment that it carried as well; Germán Cueto of Grupo Rin-Rin requested an upgrade to a 33-RPM record player, since their current 78-RPM machine suffered broken bulbs every time they transported it in the rattletrap car. At the moment, they complained, they could not perform the play *Rin-Rin Renacuajo* because the required accompaniment of a Silvestre Revueltas record was damaged beyond audibility.²³

The puppets emphasized the socialist values and vocational training espoused by the cultural revolution, especially those promulgated by the SEP Cultural Missions sent out to the countryside. The puppet protagonists found themselves in a series of predicaments that taught them lessons about the value of work, the dangers of exploitation, the evils of capitalism, the importance of hygiene, the beauty of collectivism, and the merits of living and working in the countryside. Comino, the protagonist of many of the plays, learned life lessons through interactions with the other characters, often enduring a terrifying episode in the process. In *Illiterate Comino* (*Comino analfabeta*), the stubborn young puppet no sooner declares that

21. *Época de oro*, 2005.

22. For a summary of the evolution of Teatro Guiñol as well as a complete bibliography and select images of the puppets and puppeteers, see *Época de oro*. The puppets earned international acclaim fairly early on; one letter from a schoolteacher in Madrid requested more information about the "saladísimos muñecos" that have captured the imaginations of Mexican children, and sought guidance on how to replicate the experiment in his own primary school classrooms. AHSEP Departamento de Bellas Artes, Serie Teatro, Caja 72, Exp. 56, 1934.

23. AHSEP, Departamento de Bellas Artes, Serie Teatro 1932-1936, Caja 71, Exp. 43. Music was an important part of the plays; every play started off with a musical prelude, often recognizable as folkloric, of popular pieces such as "La bamba," "El jarabe tapatío," and "La bicicleta." Silvestre Revueltas, who at the inception of Teatro Guiñol was the director of the National Conservatory, composed some original pieces, such as "El renacuajo paseador," specifically for the puppet shows. *Época de oro*.

he does not want to learn to read then he finds himself in a pit of despair along with an illiterate day laborer and an illiterate woman, both of whom lament their ignorance. Only by invoking the letters of the alphabet does Comino escape. The final scene, the apparition of an illuminated modern building bearing the phrase, “The prosperity of a nation is the culture of its children,” drives home the moral of the direct link between supporting elementary education and patriotism.²⁴

In another story, *Ignorant Comino* (*Comino ignorante*), Comino gets lost in the spooky Illiteracy Alley because he does not know how to read street signs. Fortunately, he stumbles across one of the government literacy centers, learns to read, and begins to “make justice” by teaching others to do the same²⁵; this lesson is lifted directly from the Cultural Missions in which literate children were organized into the Children’s Army of the Campaign Against Illiteracy (*Ejército Infantil*), teaching their peers to read in areas where rural schoolteachers were short-staffed.²⁶ As a reward, child literacy soldiers that taught five or more of their peers received certificates proclaiming them a “Good Mexican,” and guaranteeing them preferential status for future employment by the Ministry of Education.²⁷ Comino’s experience at the literacy center provided young audience members with a visual example of the satisfaction one could expect to receive from such civil service. Furthermore, the play reinforced government policy during the 1920s and 1930s that children be incorporated actively as agents of revolutionary reforms.

In a cultural milieu rife with didacticism and moral imperatives, few popular forms of entertainment for children passed muster with revolutionary pedagogues, eugenicists, and administrators. Movie theaters were refuted as centers of vice and often maligned as the spaces in which juvenile delinquents acquired and practiced the tricks of their trade.²⁸ In fact, in 1935, child specialists recommended that minors be prohibited entrance to movies, theaters, bullfights, and wrestling arenas.²⁹ Teatro Guñol, deemed wholesome and educational, changed the pace of life in rural areas isolated from the Center. One teacher from a village in Puebla pleaded that they be included in the upcoming tour, claiming that they had no other diversions, and that children and adults alike would enjoy the show. She

24. “La prosperidad de la patria es la cultura de sus hijos,” in María de los Dolores Alva de la Canal [Para la Campaña de Alfabetización], “Comino Analfabeta,” *Epoca de oro*.

25. Jorge Contreras Sánchez [Para el grupo Comino], “Comino Ignorante,” in *Epoca de oro*.

26. As early as 1922, scarcely a year after the institutionalization of the SEP, an estimated 5,000 children were signed up for the Ejército Infantil, and had taught 8,947 of their peers the basic tenets of reading and writing. *Boletín de la Secretaría de Educación Pública* (SEP), Tomo I, No. 3 (1922), pp. 468-469.

27. *Boletín de la SEP*, Tomo I, No. 4 (1923), pp. 83-85.

28. Susana Sosenski, “Diversiones malsanas: el cine y la infancia en la ciudad de México en la década de 1920,” *Secuencia: Revista de historia y ciencias sociales* 66 (Sept-Dec 2006), pp. 37-64.

29. Abelardo González Garza, “Proyecto de reglamento para la asistencia de menores de edad a los espectáculos públicos,” *Memoria del VII Congreso Panamericano del Niño*, Tomo I (México: Talleres Gráficos de la Nación, 1937), p. 191. Religious publications spoke out against the movies and their negative influence on children, especially *La Vanguardia: el periódico de los niños* (1921-1922).

noted that the village council struggled to invent pretexts for festivals.³⁰ Indeed, photos of puppet shows from the era often feature as many adult audience members as children, men crowding each other's view of the stage with their wide sombreros. Perhaps in part because of the high demand for this innovative pedagogical tool, the plays and playwrights quickly came under the scrutiny of educational authorities lest the popular form become corrupted in its dissemination.

The didactic purpose took precedent over entertainment value as children's puppet theater rapidly became professionalized. Concerns about the integrity of the puppet show content led Bellas Artes directors to form the *Comisión de Repertorio*, a committee designed to censor and edit the plays and eventually to approve them for performance. In a February 1934 memo, Bellas Artes head Chávez wrote that observations of some of the productions of Teatro del Niño before smaller audiences and in some of the kindergarten shows revealed that the puppeteers frequently falsified the concepts, words and even the spirit of the plays through improvisation, and he implored that the plays be learned by memory and properly practiced so that the interpretation would be exact and their educational value would not be compromised.³¹

The censoring committee's activities provide evidence of the professionalization of revolutionary children's cultural projects, a trend consolidated with the 1921 First Mexican Congress of the Child, the first national conference dedicated solely to child-related issues. The Congress also drew public attention to children as one of the most important social groups to have their special needs addressed in the reconstruction of the nation. The rise of specialization in child-related professions became strengthened in the Pan American Congresses on the Child that lasted into the 1940s.³² Pan American Child Congresses met nine times from 1916-1948, during the era of heightened hemispheric solidarity. A product of this scientific climate, the puppet shows were taken seriously, and the opinions of experts in the emerging fields of child psychology and pediatric medicine were taken into account. List Arzubide drew from child psychology in the introduction to a published volume of three of the most well-known plays, making note that children had not yet developed critical thinking skills, so the puppet shows served as visual surrogate experiences from which the children could draw life lessons.³³

Most importantly, the plays needed to be ideologically in line with the socialist education program. Mexico's socialist education experiment, which flourished

30. AHSEP, Departamento de Bellas Artes, Serie Publicaciones, Caja 64, Exp. 41, 1935.

31. AHSEP, Departamento de Bellas Artes, Serie Teatro 1932-1936, Caja 71, Exp. "Teatro del Niño," 1934.

32. The relationship between these congresses and feminism is outlined in Donna Guy, "The Pan-American Child Congresses, 1916-1947," *Journal of Family History* 23: 3 (July 1998), pp. 272-292. See also *Memoria del Primer Congreso Mexicano del Niño* (México: El Universal, 1921).

33. List Arzubide, *Tres comedias infantiles*, pp. 9-10.

under the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940), grew out of provisions in Article 3 of the Constitution of 1917 that called for the secularization of education. Under the Cárdenas administration, the SEP established a department dedicated to the oversight of this project, the Institute of Socialist Orientation. The seemingly innocuous puppets proved to be among the champions of this reform; one schoolteacher noted that the Teatro Guiñol had promoted more revolutionary works than most contemporary statesmen.³⁴ Indeed, the plays contained practical representations of some of the most fundamental goals of the revolution. In the play *Comino va a la huelga*, Comino teaches his puppet friends about the provisions for labor reform in the Constitution of 1917: eight-hour days, overtime on weekends, and restrictions on the number of hours that children could work. The puppets exercise their constitutional right to strike. When the patrón wants to continue to force erstwhile laborers like the Negrito to work 17-hour days, the exploited puppets chant out their demands while taking recourse to their trademark symbol of resistance—beating the patrón with sticks.³⁵ Officials encouraged heavy-handed material such as Comino at the strike, preferring it to anything too artistic.³⁶

In 1935, Bellas Artes held an open contest for the submission of plays to be added to the puppet theater repertoire. In a statement, the department head announced that they sought the participation of young writers with clear socialist affiliations to write plays for all children—but especially for those from the working masses. Children should learn the benefits of a humane and just social organization, teaching them who their class enemy was, how to defend themselves from exploitation, and how to separate themselves from individualist ideas in preference of the collective good. This repertoire must be especially well chosen, because, in his opinion, as well as adhering to proletarian ideology, playwrights should also avoid the use of certain expressions that would result in weepy sentimentalisms that might cripple children's will to engage in class struggle.³⁷ Educator Juan Bustillo Oro, in a 1938 contribution to *El Maestro Rural*, expressed the firm position of the SEP regarding the moral and ideological content of the plays taking precedence over their entertainment value. He cited *Comino vence al diablo* as the premiere example of the genre, that its unmitigated stance denouncing labor exploitation—punctuated by Comino's violent blows upon the patrón—embodied the type of proletarian message that children's theater was meant to disseminate. He lauded List Arzubide as being faithful to his revolutionary orientation, and applauded him for writing pieces without any artistic pretense. Bustillo Oro

34. León Cárdenas, "Letters to the Maestro Rural: How to Make a Teatro Guiñol," *Epoca de Oro*.

35. List Arzubide, "Comino va a la huelga," *Tres comedias infantiles*, pp. 47-58.

36. AHSEP, Departamento de Bellas Artes, Serie Teatro, Caja 3969, Exp. 18, 1935.

37. AHSEP, Departamento de Bellas Artes, Sección de Teatro, Actividades 1935, Caja 3969, Exp. 18, 1935.

enthusiastically proclaimed that such plays served as the “water, mop and broom that would clean the tormented spirits” of the nation’s children.³⁸

The censoring committee exercised its authority to make drastic changes or pull plays from the program. For example, the committee rejected one play written by Elena Huerta entitled *Comino escudero de Don Quijote*, a children’s adaptation of Cervantes’ classic, because they vaguely said it lacked clarity and force. One committee member, General Inspector of Kindergartens Rosaura Zapata, contributed her opinions about the play *Firuleque de vacaciones*, in which the environmental hazards of living in the city contrast with idyllic and hygienic living in the countryside. Zapata recommended a revision of the play since most children comprising the viewing audience did not have the opportunity to frequent the countryside; furthermore, she feared they would misinterpret the message, and mimic the play’s details about the wrong ways to cure illness such as keeping rooms closed, not washing the face, and taking too much medicine without the guidance of a doctor. Zapata also argued that instead of being child-centered, the play educated only mothers about hygiene, and suggested that the play be modified accordingly. In the play *Comino vendedor ambulante*, about exploitation of child labor, Ms. Zapata expressed disappointment that the apples that Comino sold were from California and not San Ángel, a detail she regarded as “depressing.” She also suggested changes in some of the language: “I’m going to send you to jail,” ought to be softened to “I’m going to punish you.”³⁹

The committee often replaced the figure of the devil, always controversial in comments from teachers and children, with another character deemed more appropriate. Miss Castañeda, kindergarten director in Atzacapotzalco, wrote in to Bellas Artes with a list of concerns about her students’ responses to the puppet show. The devil character in *Comino vence al diablo* had provoked some troublesome questions that she did not quite know how to address, given her school’s position as a strictly secular educational institution; students were asking: “Is it true that the devil exists?” “My mother says that the angels make the devil go away.” “Is it true that the devil can’t see God?” “The patrón was only playing devil but the devil does exist and nobody can hit him except the angels.” She maintained that, as a socialist educator, she should not have to address such questions; it would be best if such controversial shows were not brought into the classroom, but rather left for popular venues where parents could take their children and answer their queries. Furthermore, Miss Castañeda objected to the grotesque portrayal of the grandmother puppet, which she felt did a disservice to this venerated figure in most children’s lives. Finally, Miss Castañeda asserted that her students had

38. Juan Bustillo Oro, “La moral en el teatro infantil,” *El Maestro Rural*, Tomo XI, Nos. 11-12 ((Nov-Dec 1938), p. 37.

39. AHSEP, Departamento de Bellas Artes, Serie Teatro, Caja 73, Exp. 11, 1934.

entirely misunderstood the underlying message of the play, and had interpreted Comino's character as a lazy boy who would go to any lengths, even resorting to physical violence, to get out of doing work (another schoolteacher, Angela Martínez, had even missed the metaphor, citing its title as *Comino Hits the Devil*).⁴⁰ Her letter, along with scores of other teacher reports documenting children's responses, triggered a flurry of evaluation and analysis in the offices of the theater section of Bellas Artes, and eventually resulted in some modifications.⁴¹ Regarding the issue of religion, SEP officials' noncommittal response suggested that secular schools should take a neutral position, but that teachers should neither attack nor defend religious teachings.⁴²

By 1936, the restrictions of the Comisión de Repertorio created a strain on the creative directorship. In an annual activities report, Roberto Lago, one of the group's founders and director of Grupo Rin-Rin, complained that some of the plays his group presented did not achieve their objective because the censoring committee set out to purge, and even mutilate, the best of each play. Lago worried that the strange, random committee remained completely removed from the "ambiente infantil" and unaware of its issues. Most egregiously, members of the groups had neither voice nor a vote in the categorical decisions made by the Comisión that served only to obstruct and impede the logical development of the Teatro del Niño. In his treatise, Lago expressed his hope that the Department of Bellas Artes would rectify such problems based on the comments and experience of someone who has been working in this arena for two years.⁴³ As the puppet program gained popularity and the puppets themselves gained fame through exposure in the Sunday supplement of the newspaper *El Nacional*, for example, letters began pouring in from rural teachers all over the country requesting that the puppet shows be brought to their schools and communities.⁴⁴ Facing such a surge in popularity, the creative directors found themselves under increasing pressure from the bureaucrats to standardize their performances in the interest of providing a uniform educational service. Visionaries and bureaucrats found themselves at odds about the creative direction that the puppet shows should take.

RECEPTION

Bureaucrats and the puppeteers struggled over creative license and ideological content in the process of constructing the children's puppet theater program for

40. AHSEP, Departamento de Bellas Artes, Serie Teatro, 1932-1936, Caja 71, Exp. 43.

41. AHSEP, Departamento de Bellas Artes, Serie Teatro 1932-1936, Caja 71, Exp. "Teatro del Niño," 1934.

42. AHSEP, Departamento de Bellas Artes, Serie Teatro, Caja 4949, 1934.

43. AHSEP, Departamento de Bellas Artes, Serie Teatro, Caja 73, Exp. 57, 1936.

44. Many requests from teachers can be found in AHSEP, Departamento de Bellas Artes, Serie Teatro, Caja 72, Exp. 56, 1934.

cultural dissemination. A second, and equally important, aspect of Teatro Guiñol is the way that the intended audiences received these shows. Clearly, audience reception remained at the forefront of educators' and artists' minds in the production of Teatro Guiñol; the existence of the Comisión de Repertorio structured to receive feedback on the plays proves the pivotal role played by the audience, a concept theorized as the "democratization of theater."⁴⁵ Comino and company enjoyed a wide audience; the publication of *Comino vence al diablo* and other plays in the monthly SEP publication *El Maestro Rural* indicated that not only did educational officials intend for teachers to stage Teatro Guiñol plays on their own, but that Comino had access to rural classrooms far beyond the geographical limitations of the puppet troupes in the 1930s.⁴⁶ *El Maestro Rural*, edited by the SEP beginning in 1932—the same year as the Teatro Guiñol's inception—saw a circulation of 12,000 copies in its second year, and reflected official recognition of the first successes of educational reform, namely, a more literate peasantry.⁴⁷ The appearance of Comino on these pages, which in some cases was rural schoolteachers' only tangible link to the intellectual forces of the SEP that they represented in the countryside, makes use of the abilities of the literate few in spreading proletarian ideas through puppetry to both children and community members alike.⁴⁸ In fact, *El Maestro Rural* printed detailed instructions for schoolteachers and their students to construct their own elaborate puppet stage; one article features the three-week diary of sixth grader Andrés Rodarte from the Centro Escolar "Revolución" in Mexico City, writing his detailed impressions of the process of building the stage.⁴⁹ Schoolchildren also made their own hand puppets and wrote their own plays, encouraged by teachers to incorporate as much folk knowledge and local vernacular as possible.⁵⁰ Through the literary vehicle *El Maestro Rural*, rural peasants and their children learned to become self-sufficient in the production of revolutionary knowledge.

Theoretical attempts to codify cultural reception often fall flat when applied to children; how does one categorize a child's collapse into screaming terror

45. Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 128.

46. "Literatura para niños. Comino vence al diablo," *El Maestro Rural*, Tomo XI, No. 10 (October 1938), pp. 20-21, 25.

47. The magazine was intended to link the SEP to both rural schoolteachers and newly literate campesinos. *El Maestro Rural* was also circulated among Mexican schoolteachers working in the US, and throughout South America and the Caribbean. In 1936, Cárdenas changed the goals of the magazine so that it targeted primarily an audience of rural schoolteachers. Guillermo Palacios, "Postrevolutionary Intellectuals, Rural Readings, and the Shaping of the 'Peasant Problem' in Mexico: *El Maestro Rural*, 1932-1934," *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (May 1998), pp. 309-339.

48. For examples of the impact that *El Maestro Rural* bore on the morale and sense of integration of rural schoolteachers, see their letters to the editor in *El Maestro Rural*, Tomo VI, no. 1 (January 1935), pp. 38-39.

49. "Trabajos de Teatro Infantil," *El Maestro Rural*, Tomo IX, No. 4 (September 1936), pp. 38-39; "La construcción del teatro infantil y de títeres," *El Maestro Rural*, Tomo IV, No. 12 (June 1934), p. 31.

50. Rafael M. Saavedra, "Instrucciones para orientar y facilitar la creación de la obra de teatro," *El Maestro Rural*, Tomo V, No. 3 (August 1934), p. 25-27.

upon seeing a devil puppet, or her frank observation that the grandmother puppet's voice sounds mean, as "reflective" or "reactive" reception?⁵¹ Children responded to Teatro Guiñol in various ways, sometimes positively and other times with fear or misunderstanding. Many of these responses made their ways to the levels of production, and thus transformed how puppet theater was carried out by its authors through official mandates from the SEP. In this way, children participated in the cultural dialectic that formed their own childhood experience.

Pupils of the socialist education program saw puppet theater as an important part of their education. The March 1935 First Congress of the Proletarian Child attended by child delegates between the ages of 10 and 13, took place in the educational sites in working class neighborhoods across Mexico City, and was organized by students of the Socialist Experimental Schools.⁵² Education officials saw it as a forum for children to express frankly their perceptions about their living conditions. The First Congress of the Proletarian Child was a bureaucratized celebration of class consciousness, a highly organized affair featuring calisthenics, choreographed dances, and well-groomed student speakers. Among other demands put forth by selected young orators—including respect for their toys and playtime, parents being persuaded to let them take school field trips, and not being obliged to work in factories—came a plea for children's theater in all of the schools.⁵³ A photograph accompanying the text of the conference proceedings in *El Maestro Rural* depicted children constructing their own stage and performing their own puppet shows.⁵⁴ By 1935, children and adults alike identified puppet theater with the socialist education project, and had learned to employ revolutionary rhetoric to make a case for it to be included in their communities.

By 1940, Comino and crew had begun taking their antics and messages to rural areas in the states of Michoacán, Tamaulipas, Puebla, Hidalgo, and Tlaxcala. Children often recognized Comino and the other characters, demonstrated their affection for him in letters and poems and even plays that they wrote based on the shows they had seen. Professor León Cárdenas, in an article for rural schoolteachers, proclaimed that both the adults and children loved the performances.⁵⁵ Teachers began logging their students' responses to the plays, carefully comparing their reactions relative to previous years, and keeping the SEP apprised regarding the changes. Schoolteacher Ana Aragón, in Ixtapalapa, noted that anticipation

51. For a discussion of cultural reception of Soviet film in these terms, see Yuri Tsivian, *Early Cinema in Russia and its Cultural Reception*, Trans. Alan Bodger (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 1-12.

52. *Memoria de la SEP*, Tomo I (1935), p. 35.

53. "Aspiraciones infantiles," *El Maestro Rural*, Tomo VI, No. 7 (April 1935), pp. 15-17, 28.

54. *El Maestro Rural* Tomo VI, no. 7 (April 1935), p. 17.

55. Cárdenas, *Época de oro*.

for the puppet shows built with each successive year, as previous generations of schoolchildren relayed memories of the plays to their younger peers.⁵⁶

The Department of Bellas Artes issued a bulletin to all schoolteachers hosting the puppet troupes asking for their feedback and the reactions of the children to the plays. The teachers' letters contain rare details about the children's responses to the puppets as well as their own pointed opinions, as we saw in Ms. Castañeda's concerns about *Comino vence al diablo*. Ms. Aragón reported that her kindergarteners were clearly surprised at the unexpected appearance of the puppets, and anxiously watched as the puppeteers constructed the stage. The play that they watched, *Comino el desaseado*, shows a dirty Comino plagued by parasites and lice. The lice were so vivid and nasty that they incited fear in the children. For days now, she noted, the children had been obsessed with being lice-free as a result of seeing the play.⁵⁷

The children at the "Zaragoza" kindergarten in Colonia Villa G. Madero clearly stated their critiques of the puppets. A spruced-up version of the Comino puppet did not pass muster without hair, they thought, and the gym teacher's appearance struck them as sloppy. The teacher noted that the children presumed the puppets to be living beings.⁵⁸ As soon as the curtain lifted, she reported that the kindergarteners turned into little actors in their own right, candidly shouting out responses to the questions posed by Comino's grandmother. For days following the spectacle, even in their simple language, they talked about the puppet shows in animated detail and could not wait for it to return. In another school, the children pointedly said that some of the puppets were ugly. Ms. Gomez, their teacher, added that she considered the puppeteers to be talented, and if they took the children's critiques and comments seriously into account, they would be successful in their educational goals.

Though the Comisión de Repertorio tried to constrain the spontaneity of the artists' interactions with the public, teachers' reports suggested that student interaction with the puppets was one of the most effective aspects of the theater. They responded best to Comino, who had developed into something of a celebrity through press coverage, and were delighted when he played with them by peeking around the curtain or directly greeting them from the stage. Perhaps they identified most with Comino because he was a human boy puppet, and not an abstract creature, animal or monster. One kindergarten teacher noted that she was

56. AHSEP, Departamento de Bellas Artes, Serie Teatro, Caja 71, Exp. 43, 1934.

57. AHSEP, Departamento de Bellas Artes, Serie Teatro, Caja 71, Exp. "Teatro del Niño," 1934 and Exp. "Teatro del Niño," 1936.

58. See the discussion by Stephen E. Lewis in this Special Issue about the reception of puppets in the Mayan Highlands as spiritual advisors.

grateful that the puppets had finally, and more realistically, been furnished with feet, so that the children had a better understanding of how they moved.⁵⁹ Standardization of the plays, as requested by the head of Bellas Artes, would reduce student interaction with the puppets, possibly risking the retention of some of the plays' propaganda.

Despite official attempts to perfect the didactic purpose, due to the varying ages and levels of comprehension of the children, misinterpretations of the plays were bound to take place. Perhaps because the young audience responded so immediately to the puppets, some teachers expressed concerns about the kinds of language and messages they would absorb. One teacher took exception to the vulgar language that Comino's grandmother used, not to mention the patrón's physical, verbal and psychological mistreatment of the Negrito. Furthermore, one teacher interpreted the grandmother's voice as "aguardentosa," or alcoholic, and demanded that this character be revised. She added that children idealized their schoolteachers and grandmothers and found them to be beautiful, and that as a result the puppets representing these characters ought to be treated with more respect by the artists, and not be the subjects of a cavalier caricaturist.⁶⁰ Even though the devil's mask fell off and revealed the patrón, the devil terrified the youngest of the children. Teachers recommended finding other ways to stimulate the children that did not rely on instilling fear or resorting to poor treatment of others. In many cases, Bellas Artes officials sought out such feedback and responded positively, allowing schoolteachers and children themselves to shape this aspect of the cultural education project. As an example, in 1934, the puppet theater added a third group, Grupo Pirulete, which featured streamlined plays, sets, puppets and language more appropriate for children under the age of six than the more grotesque puppets of Grupo Comino and Grupo Rin-Rin.⁶¹ In addition, education officials responded to critiques of certain characters by saying that they were genuinely interested in the children's response, and made the point that the children already idealized the female authority figures in their lives, and they therefore would see beyond superficial ugliness. Their only goal, SEP officials claimed, was to make the characters humorous.⁶²

In addition to the written feedback provided by teachers based on direct observations of their students, SEP officials and the puppeteers themselves took photographs of their young audience, rapt with attention and apparently unaware of the camera. In these images, children gape wide-eyed as the dolls come to life on the

59. AHSEP, Departamento de Bellas Artes, Serie Teatro, Caja 4949, 1934.

60. AHSEP, Departamento de Bellas Artes, Serie Teatro, Caja 4949, 1934.

61. AHSEP, Departamento de Bellas Artes, Serie Teatro, Caja 71, Exp. "Teatro del Niño," 1934.

62. AHSEP, Departamento de Bellas Artes, Serie Teatro, Caja 4949, 1934.

FIGURE 1.



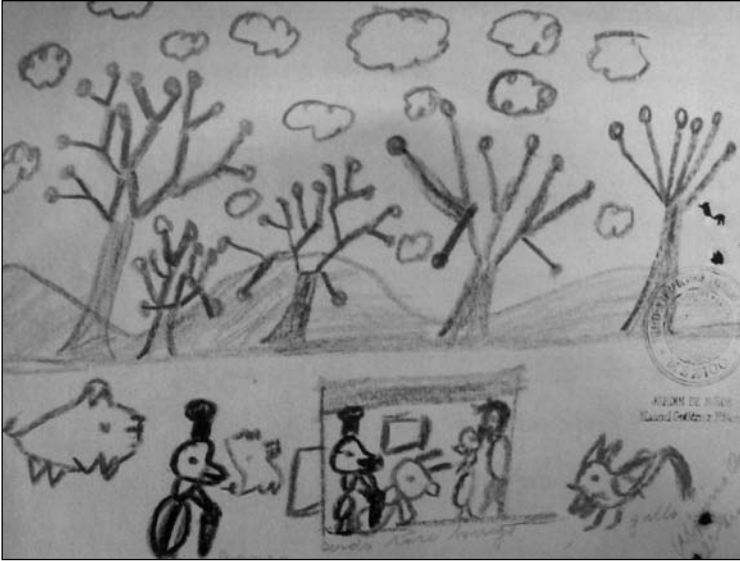
A child's drawing of the Teatro Comino presentation of Teatro Guiñol demonstrates an awareness of the performative nature of the show through the depiction of puppets enclosed in a stage with curtains (1934). Source: AHSEP, Departamento de Bellas Artes, Serie Teatro 1932-1936.

makeshift stage before which they are crowded. Some are caught in a moment of disbelief, others demonstrate surprise, and nearly all appear to be utterly engrossed.

Proof of children's retention of the ideas and images paraded before them for a brief half hour can be found in their artwork. Since 1921, art played a large role in the socialist education program when SEP minister José Vasconcelos created the Special Department of Drawing and Artistic Education, placing artist Adolfo Best Maugard at its helm.⁶³ Throughout the 1920s, schoolteachers taught realistic drawing featuring nationalist motifs and subject matter on par with traditional courses in math, reading, and science. Evidence of the pervasiveness of art culture among students can be seen in the popularity of the Department of Drawing's children's magazine, *Pulgarcito*, widely distributed nationwide and internationally and hosting prize-winning competitions in which children could participate. After

63. For a summary of these methods, see Adolfo Best Maugard, *Método de dibujo: Tradición, resurgimiento y evolución del arte mexicano*, 2nd edition (Mexico: Editorial Viñeta, 1964).

FIGURE 2.

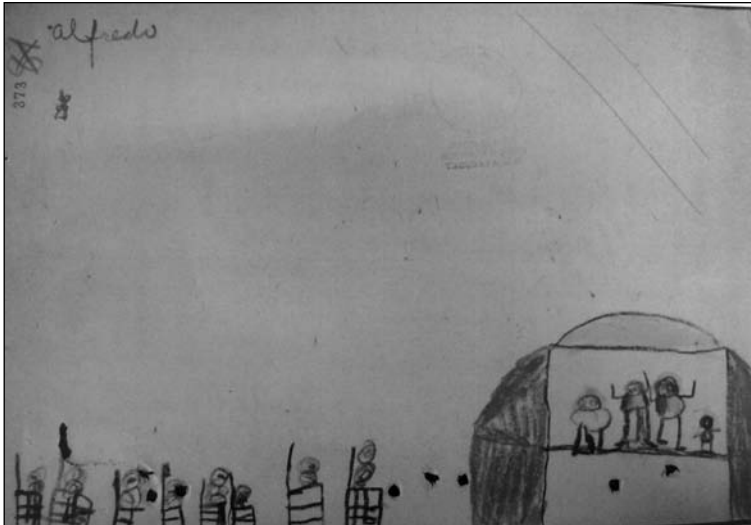


A younger child's drawing places the stage in the context of the rural, natural setting. Aside from the stage, the puppets are not distinguished from the live animals that surround it (1934). Source: AHSEP, Departamento de Bellas Artes, Serie Teatro, 1932-1936.

the stage had been packed off and the puppet troupe moved on to another school, teachers often gave students a time for free expression in the form of drawings (see Figure 1). These drawings, found in the archives of the SEP, confirm that the young viewers paid close attention to the layout of the stage, the clothing and movement of the puppets, and to specific scenes.

Furthermore, the drawings indicate different levels of sophistication in the ways different age groups absorbed the play. Kindergarteners focused on one single character, taking pains to reproduce its basic form. Often the youngest children's drawings contain no indications that they understood the context, or even that they understood that what they had seen was anything other than real. The puppets in the younger children's art live and have adventures in a world that looks very much like the world surrounding the children, with no boundaries between fantasy and reality. For these children, what they had seen on stage was indeed, as List Arzubide had described it, a visual substitute for their own experiences. A drawing from a younger child after viewing a Teatro Guiñol presentation depicts a puppet stage with its characters in the middle of a natural setting (see Figure 2). Comino and company perform not before an audience of children, but rather in the midst of the daily lives of chickens, pigs and fish that roam in the countryside.

FIGURE 3.



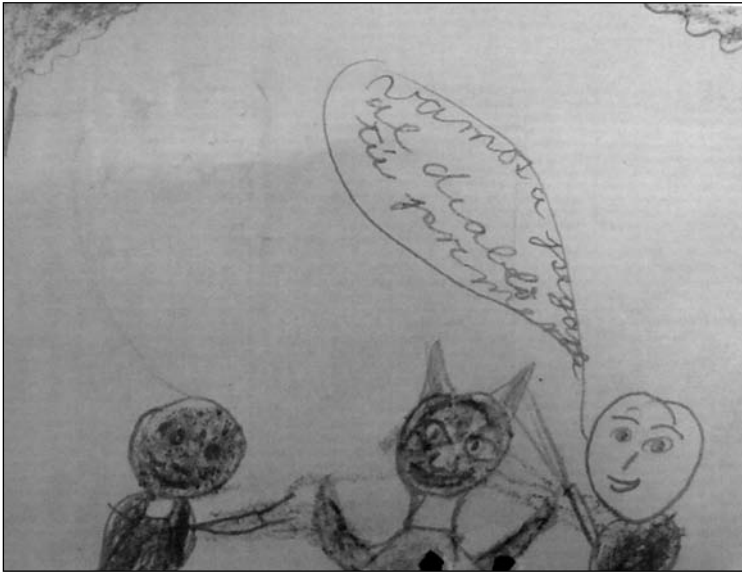
A fifth-grader's drawing of Teatro Guiñol demonstrates spatial awareness, self-reflective presence as a member of the audience, and difference between puppets and children (1934). Source: AHSEP, Departamento de Bellas Artes, Serie Teatro 1932-1936.

This young artist did not demonstrate awareness that the puppets in the “box” were any different from the living animals that populated the village.

By contrast, the drawings of older children indicate that they fully understood the concept of a dramatic presentation. They included more physical context, such as chairs and an audience, and almost always boxed the characters into a stage and hedged the action with curtains. The most advanced students demonstrated a sense of self-awareness, drawing themselves and their classmates as audience members, an insightful detail that suggested their awareness of a sense of performance, as well as their role as members of the audience and consumers of a form of education and entertainment. In one example, fourth grade student Alfredo depicted himself and his classmates carefully arranged in rows, their gaze attentively fixed on the four puppets acting on the colorfully depicted stage (see Figure 3). The audience takes up an equal amount of space on the page as the characters on the stage. This awareness of dimension, scale, and space also suggest that older students like Alberto distinguished between the reality of their presence and the fiction of the puppets' experiences.

Not surprisingly, after a show of the popular play *Comino vence al diablo*, the devil figured prominently in many of the children's drawings, while the patrón did not

FIGURE 4.



A drawing of Comino and El Negrito beating the Patrón, disguised as the Devil, is one of many appearances of the Devil in children's artistic responses to Teatro Guiñol (1934). Some children may not have realized that the Devil was a disguised character. Source: AHSEP, Departamento de Bellas Artes, Serie Teatro 1932-1936.

(see Figure 4). This suggested that the message about the exploitation of labor was perhaps lost in the sense of terror and mystery embodied by the Devil puppet, and underscored teachers' concerns about this character confusing younger students. Furthermore, violent beatings administered by Comino and El Negrito often appeared in the drawings, occasionally with Comino wielding a sharply pointed stick. Children's drawings suggested that they retained the message about violence as a solution to social injustice, while the intended message about the evils of labor exploitation did not resonate as clearly.

CONCLUSIONS

Children's puppet theater in the 1930s demonstrates the extreme lengths to which government administrators and policy makers went to implement an ambitious cultural program to supplement the socialist education project. Mounting layers of bureaucracy, represented by the Comisión de Repertorio, curbed the creativity of revolutionary intellectuals as children's puppet theater became absorbed into the increasingly institutionalized educational system. Evidence suggests that

educational officials attempted to standardize and perfect the puppet shows in order to close the cultural gap between urban and rural schoolchildren and disseminate revolutionary ideals through an age-appropriate medium. Even so, the revolutionary values played out by Comino and friends (and enemies) did not mold a malleable young generation without contest. Certainly the allegorical puppet characters' proclamations of thinly veiled propaganda had some effect on budding socialists, as cultural missionaries and socialist educators reinforced ideology in the community and classroom. Yet rare evidence of children's immediate responses to the plays indicates that reception was not uniform. The child audience members, directly through their drawings and indirectly through their mediators, the schoolteachers, interacted with the intellectual authors of the puppet program, frequently enacting modifications of the presentations. Children's often unintentional participation in their own socialization reveals one example of the uneven process of nation building when viewed from the perspective of the individual beneficiaries of top-down cultural projects.

In 1938, Comino went to the birthday party of four-year old Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, son of the President of the Republic.⁶⁴ That same year, Cárdenas nationalized petroleum to euphoric public applause. Comino starred in a new play entitled *La expropiación petrolero*, and children across the country flocked to donate their *centavos* to the nationalist cause. Not long after the nationalization of oil, Lázaro Cárdenas went to another of Comino's presentations, this time in the Otomí town of Ixmiquilpan. The children were beside themselves with excitement—at the arrival of their favorite puppet. After the show, the President took the stage in typical populist fashion and asked the audience what it was that they most wanted. To his surprise, they did not call out for the return of ejidal lands, nor did they cry for equal educational opportunities, nor support for labor unions. The unanimous shout that rang out in the crowd was simply: “Bring on Comino!”

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64. Cárdenas, *Época de Oro*.