

# Target-Language Theatre as Lived Experience: Politics, Phenomenology, and the Toss of a Coin

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## Abstract

During Spring 2011, a University of Wisconsin-Madison Spanish class studied Latin American theatre and performed a play, Sabina Berman's *¿Águila o sol?*, whose political content informed and was informed by the students' experience of the real-life political events affecting their campus and city: Gov. Walker's conflict with senators, public employees and citizens. Interviews conducted participants revealed their insights on how their participation in the play intersected with events in their community and state. Students also reflected on how their participation influenced their understanding of world events connected to the Arab Spring.

## Spring 2011 Time Line: Wisconsin Protests and Spanish 555

Wed, 1/19: First day of class

Fri, 2/11: "Budget Repair Bill" unveiled.

Sun, 2/13: First protests begin at Capitol, Governor's Mansion.

Mon, 2/14: UW students and professors organize a protest outside the Governor's office.

Tue, 2/15: Protests at the Capitol swell to around 15,000 people. People begin camping out overnight.

Wed, 2/16: School cancelled in Madison due to high number of teacher absences. *Span555* cancelled, prof. asks students to go to Capitol to observe events, theatricality of the situation

Fri, 2/25: Bill passes WI Assembly in a pre-dawn vote

Mon, 2/28: Public access to the Capitol is restricted. *Span555* reads and discusses *¿Águila o sol?*

Wed, 3/9: Senate rewrites, passes bill, skirting quorum. 6,000-7,000 protestors flood Capitol

Thurs, 3/10: Assembly passes amended bill

Friday, 3/11: Gov. Walker signs bill into law

Sat, 3/12: Approximately 100,000 people protest at the State Capitol grounds

Mon, 3/21: *Span555* reconvenes following spring break, discusses text selection. Class ends without a final decision; students go home to reread *El viaje de los cantores* and *¿Águila o sol?* prior to next class meeting.

Wed, 3/23: *Span 555* decides on *¿Águila o sol?* and holds auditions for roles.

Fri, 5/6 - Sat, 5/7: performances of *¿Águila o sol?*

## Professor's Email

(2/16/2011)

Querida clase,

Debido a las circunstancias que estamos viviendo, me gustaría llevar nuestra clase de teatro a una práctica social y participar de la protesta que habrá hoy en el capitolio. Parte de estudiar el teatro y la teatralidad es VER cómo se llevan a cabo diferentes posibles reacciones a acciones gubernamentales, sindicales y sociales. En este caso, les pido que vayan para no sólo participar, sino también para estudiar desde la óptica teatral este evento. Quiénes actúan? Quién es la audiencia? Qué tipo de relación se construye entre el discurso y la mirada? De qué sirven las pancartas (se podrían ver como ciertas acotaciones? Hay un elemento de control?

En este caso, les doy tiempo hasta el lunes para entregar su trabajo analítico. Les pido, a la vez, responsabilidad. Es decir, el lunes tendremos que hablar de lo posdramático, lo metateatral y la obra *Volvió una noche*. Si ya tienen el trabajo terminado, pueden pasar por mi oficina hoy o por mi casillero.

Nos vemos,  
Profe

## Methods and Data Collection

I conducted phenomenological interviews with undergraduate participants of Spanish 555: Theory and Practice of Hispanic Theatre, a mixed-level course in which students read plays, theory and criticism in the target language and then selected, produced, and performed one of the texts for the public. Students discussed their learning experience in a course that included native speakers and graduate students, identifying both advantages and disadvantages. They also discussed the course's relationship to political events of early 2011 having to do with the Wisconsin Protests and the Arab Spring. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for important themes. A Bakhtinian lens was applied to interpret the findings.

## Findings

Students commented on:

connections between the political situation and their future career prospects  
the impact on family members, peers involved in the protests  
their own greater awareness of events related to the Arab Spring as a result of the Wisconsin Protests  
the role of social media in the protests; its connection to the figure of Malinche and *Visión de los vencidos*  
parallels between the final scene of *¿Águila o sol?* and events that took place at the Wisconsin State Capitol

A Bakhtinian analysis of student comments reveals carnivalesque aspects of their experience of "a world turned upside down," and dialogized heteroglossia is evident in the interplay of language and images from the play, the Wisconsin Protests and the events of the Arab Spring.

## References

- Bakhtin, M. (1965). *Rabelais and his world*. Cambridge: M.I.T. Press.  
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