

RENÉ BUCH: BUILDING ON THE DREAM

René Buch is the founding artistic director of Repertorio Español in New York City, one of the few theaters in the United States to perform both classic and contemporary Spanish plays entirely in the Spanish language. The theater is also unique for its classical repertory model, with a company of actors and a schedule of rotating repertory.

In this interview by Edward A. Martenson, conducted in Spring of 2010 at Yale School of Drama with students of theater management, Buch discusses the founding of his theater, the importance of the work, and his views on multiculturalism in the United States.

René Buch holds an MFA from Yale School of Drama and a Law Degree from Havana University. In 1968, along with Gilberto Zaldívar, he founded Repertorio Español. Buch has earned respect from critics, peers and audiences alike for his innovative stagings of Spanish classics and contemporary plays. He was awarded the Theatre Communications Group's Theatre Practitioner Award and the Arts & Business Council's ENCORE Award as well as numerous HOLA and ACE Awards.



EDWARD A. MARTENSON: Calderón's *Life is a Dream* [*La vida es sueño*] is one of great plays in the literature, and I'm continually struck by the fact that this play, along with many others by Calderón and Lope de Vega, is mostly unknown to US audiences. How do you explain the fact that these plays are so little known?

RENÉ BUCH: Because the Armada was destroyed! [LAUGHTER] If the Spanish Armada had won, everybody here would know Lope de Vega and

would know Calderón, but instead, all they know is Molière. French is classic. German plays—Schiller and Goethe—are well known. But you say, 'Have you read Lope de Vega?' and people say, 'What?' They just don't know it, and when you think of the Spanish classical theater, Lope de Vega alone wrote 1500 plays and Calderón wrote 500. The wealth is enormous but unknown. Even by us who work in it: I just saw two plays, one that was brought from the Theatre Murcia to my theater, which was a Calderón play I'd never read, that I did not know even

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existed. And in Puerto Rico, they just did a Lope de Vega play that I had never heard of. After seeing them, I know why—[LAUGHTER]—but when they are good, they are excellent.

MARTENSON: Is this part of the reason why you started Repertorio Español?

BUCH: We started Repertorio because I wanted to introduce to audiences a repertory that no one saw, that no one knew about in New York. Before I started my company, I saw a production of *Life is a Dream* that was performed in English and in Spanish simultaneously, and it was not well done at all. Much of the theater of Spain that I saw in this country was awful. I felt—I knew—that that was very wrong. I saw a production of Lorca's *Yerma* when I was here at Yale School of Drama, and the people appeared with hats and little hanging collar things. I thought, 'When people think of Spain here, and they think of the Mexicans sleeping outside.' They were totally ignorant of Spain, and that made me very angry. A country that is in an international position like the United States cannot be proud of its ignorance. Americans are delighted to not speak any other language than English, and I found that it was hurting the United States, which I loved.

So a group of us came together and we decided to produce a play that would get together people of all the nationalities from the Americas who spoke Spanish and were in New York. I knew that if I did a Mexican play, then the Mexican colony would come but not Argentinean one, or the Guatemalen. We decided to start with Calderón de la Barca because everybody in Latin America studies the classical plays. You go to high school there and you have to read them.

MARTENSON: What were your influences when you were forming your theater?

BUCH: When I was in Cuba, I was very influenced by Louis Jouvet, the renowned French actor and director. When Jouvet and his company came to Havana during World War II, France fell to Germany and they couldn't go back. So Jouvet stayed in Havana for six months, playing every night—six plays in repertory. One night he would play a main

part, and then another night he would play a walk-on in the third act.

I saw that and it amazed me. I thought, 'This is the kind of theater that I understand.' And so when I started Repertorio Español with Gilberto Zaldivar, we decided to have a single, steady company and to have the work alternate in repertory so that we do, as you see now, 15 plays at once. And we play almost every day.

We do more than 400 performances a year in our theater without counting the tours, and we are the greatest secret in the life of theater in New York. We do more plays and more things than everyone else. We call it the "Little Met"—the little Metropolitan Opera House—because of the amount of work that we do and the way that we rotate through our repertory, just like the Met. We don't have the millions of dollars that they have, of course!

MARTENSON: One of the most remarkable characteristics of your theater is that performances take place entirely in Spanish. If I tried to put myself back in the formative moment when you originally made that choice, I would think, 'this is not very feasible.' But on the other hand, it's the thing that's enabled Repertorio to become a "Little Met."

BUCH: Yes! We were one of the first theaters in New York doing Spanish plays in Spanish. There were other theaters that were doing English plays in Spanish or Hispanic plays in English—which is a mistake, I think. No one in the United States is interested in seeing those plays because they don't know them. And even if you put them in English, they're not the same. We have to start with the beginning and the beginning is the reality.

MARTENSON: A significant part of your repertory is focused on the classics.

BUCH: It was for reasons of popularity that we used the classics—it was better for us, at the beginning, than doing a contemporary play.

MARTENSON: How did you move from that choice into performing entirely in Spanish? I'm still perplexed by the idea that in the United States we

know the French, Scandinavian, and German plays better than we know the Spanish ones. Do Spanish plays not translate well?

BUCH: The Spanish theater is a poetic theater, and to have a play translated, you need a poet. Lorca, for example, hasn't been translated very well. I love the language, and I want everybody to love it. The sound is just different: the Spanish, the poetry—everything becomes music in Spanish, especially in the particular type of Spanish writing of Calderón and Lorca and those writers.

MARTENSON: Repertorio also now offers simultaneous translation of the plays into English.

BUCH: Yes. Thanks to our saint, Lila Wallace, who gave us the money to make audio translation possible, now we have two actors reading the play in English into microphones—in another room—while the actors are playing it on the stage. The audience can listen to it on headphones if they want to. I don't particularly like it that much, though—I don't like the translation, and I don't like the idea of it. Before the opera had subtitles, you may not have known Italian, French or German, but you would go because it was beautiful and you understood it anyway. That's what I have been trying to do. I want people to feel the beauty of our plays and take that away instead of complete understanding. Theater is primitive. Theater is a compendium of emotional and intellectual forces, and if you don't feel that, you don't have theater. You don't need to know every word.

I remember being in Amsterdam, and I decided to go see a play, called *Monsieur Chasse*. I went to the box office and asked the woman, 'May I have a ticket for tonight?' I didn't recognize the play. But it was the only thing that was playing and I wanted to see it. And she said, 'It's in Dutch.' And I said, 'Yes, I know.' She looked at me again and said, 'Do you speak Dutch?' And I said, 'No,' and she said, 'Oh.' [LAUGHTER] And I said, 'You don't want me to see it?' And she said, 'Oh, yes, yes!' And Dutch is a language that I haven't the slightest understanding of—you can have a slight idea about German, but not about Dutch. [LAUGHTER] It was a farce and I didn't understand it completely, but I enjoyed it tremendously anyway. I think people should go to

the theater for the importance and the strength of the emotions.

MARTENSON: I lived for 10 years in New Mexico, where two-thirds of the population was Spanish or Mexican. Many of the people that I knew there, who were my age, were parents who spoke no English and their children spoke no Spanish. Which way should that go in the future?

BUCH: I hope that it will go my way, that the United States learns Spanish, French, Italian, Arabic, and Chinese. When I became an American citizen, I remember that when I was sworn in, I was scared because, I said, 'If the judge tells me I have to become part of the mass, the melting pot, I was going to spit at him or her.' But when we went there, the judge said, 'I want to thank all of you.' And we were Chinese, Korean, everybody. 'I want to thank you for wanting to become an American citizen,' he said, 'please bring to us what you have from your own culture so that we can be enriched.' And that: I got it. That's what I'm trying to do—that's what I'm trying, trying to do.

MARTENSON: It seems to me that the judge's speech is one that will be less and less likely as time goes on, at least in the drift of things in the US. Do you see it that way?

BUCH: It changed me! It made me do Repertorio Español. If we can convince one person at a time that we're doing well, and eventually, everyone will be. This prejudice against the Spanish population, the Latino, this immigration policy. If you're out there telling the world how wonderful the United States is, are you surprised that people want to come? It's normal. We have to open up. That 'normal' is a crime, and I think dogmas are malignant. Everything has to open up—accept the other, I feel free to talk here about it. Juarez said once, 'Respect to an alien idea is peace.' And it's true, but it's dangerous! Especially when there is a Republican in office.

STUDENT (in audience): Is there an interest from families to start sending their children to theater in Spanish?

BUCH: No, the teachers are the ones. The parents

could care less. They want their children to be Americans.

MARTENSON: Does the rapid growth of the Hispanic population promise good things about that, or not?

BUCH: Yes, it does, as long as the United States learns Spanish. The moment that the Hispanic population stops trying to pass on the Spanish language, they become second-rate Americans, and that is pitiful. When I speak to students who come to my theater—we have a program to show them the dignity of being Hispanic—I ask them, ‘Do you speak Spanish?’ and they say, ‘No.’ They are from Hispanic families, and I discovered that some parents don’t teach them Spanish because they want them to be successful in an American society, and that they should always speak English. I find that monstrous. Because if you have two languages, you have two ways of thought. What I think in Spanish, or in French, or in Italian, it is different from what I think and feel in Spanish, or in English. And that’s a crime—everybody in this country should speak five languages.

MARTENSON: Tell us about working with Gilberto Zaldivar, your founding partner and producer.

BUCH: Gilberto was someone with a very practical sense. And I have none. [LAUGHTER] I enjoy doing what I’m doing, and Gilberto enjoyed doing what he was doing. Gilberto’s way of thinking was the box office—the audience. And it’s true: without an audience, there is no theater. I remember years ago that I wanted to do Calderón’s *Secret Injury, Secret Revenge*. I went to Gilberto and said, ‘I want to do this play of Calderón’s,’ and he said, ‘Ay, Rene, no one knows this play in this country. All they know is *Life is a Dream*. Why don’t we do *Life is a Dream*?’ And I said, ‘I haven’t read it since I was in high school, but I’ll read it again.’ I did read it, and I saw it was a masterpiece. So we did *Life is a Dream*, and it was a success for us.

Gilberto had that point of view, of seeing what is feasible and what is more productive for the theater overall. I remember someone asking, ‘What do you do Gilberto?’ And he said, ‘I make possible what Rene does.’ And that’s it! If you have a good artistic director in your theater, protect him—or her. That’s



Gilberto Zaldivar, in front of Repertorio Español's Grammercy Arts Theatre in New York City.

how it was until Gilberto died, and now, Robert Federico, who was my leading designer and friend, and friend of Gilberto, took over as Executive Director, and he has been doing a very good job of keeping us alive. This is the first time in 45 years that we have a small deficit, because of the economy!

MARTENSON: You have an acting company, you have classic plays, you have contemporary interpretations, and you have repertory. How do you go about finding new plays?

BUCH: We have a contest every year for Hispanic writers who deal with the problem of the Hispanic population in the United States. We’re doing a play right now called *Boxcar*, which is about the immigration fights in Mexico, and the people who come over to the United States from there. It was written by a woman, Sylvia Gonzalez S., and it is about seven people who died asphyxiated inside of a boxcar crossing the frontier. The play has been successful, we’ve played it for three years in repertory.

Another play, *La Gringa* is about the experience of a woman who was born in the United States of Puerto Rican background. She adores Puerto Rico even though she’s never seen it, and she goes to

Puerto Rico to become one with her past. But when she gets there, the Puerto Ricans treat her as a gringa. 'You're not Puerto Rican, you're an American! You were born in the United States,' they say to her. We have performed that play in Latin America and even in Bolivia, and I thought they wouldn't understand it, but in every audience, someone had a person in his or her family that had come to the United States and had gone through all that!

STUDENT (in audience): You have a balance of the classic plays as well as the new plays and new types of theater. When you are choosing your programming, how do you balance those different things?

BUCH: It has to do with fighting for your ideas. Sometimes I win, sometimes I don't. I have for some time been after the play *Once Five Years Past*, by Lorca, because it is the only play of Lorca that I haven't done, and I don't want to die without doing it. It's a tough play and it's a lovely play—it's somewhat legendary. And of course, it's not commercial. So I've had to fight to get it into the repertory. And it takes me a long time, but I'm very persistent. When I want something, if I don't get it now, maybe I won't get it tomorrow, but after time, I'll get it because that's the way artists work. You cannot do what everybody else does, and that's it.

MARTENSON: Following up on that, it can't be true that you love all the plays that you do equally. How do you think about the plays you don't love quite so much?

BUCH: I give them to a guest director! [LAUGHTER]

MARTENSON: Why do you choose them in the first place?

BUCH: It's because it's necessary for the theater sometimes.

MARTENSON: For the casting, for the box office?

BUCH: Always for the box office. The important thing is for the box office. You get the casting after you get the actors—actors are always willing to work, and when they're right, they're right, no? We do, however, also have the danger of popularity of

television actors. We have stars of television playing with us, and they are good actors—but people should come to theater for the theater, for the play, not just to see Francisco Gattorno, who is in every telenovela now that you see. He's a very good actor, but we're trying to maintain the integrity of our theater as a theater, of theater in Spanish. We want people to know first and foremost that that a language like Spanish demands the best, because it's an incredible language, and it deserves the best as theater.

MARTENSON: So when you think in terms of the box office do you think in terms of what the audience want to see, or what they need to see?

BUCH: I try to put up what they need to see, but sometimes I say instead this is what they want to see. For instance, for our gala in June, I'm doing a play that I would not have chosen. But the gala is for the people who give us money and for our Board of Directors, a very respectable board that has helped us very much. And they want to have a party—the gala party. So I suggested for the gala that we would do *Life is a Dream*, which is a big part of our repertory. But no, they wanted comedy that lasted 90 minutes. Since we need the money that comes with the gala, I'm doing a play which is called *El Insólito Caso de Miss Piña Colada—The Preposterous Case of Miss Piña Colada*. [LAUGHTER] And it's a very funny play. I didn't like it when it was first read to me, but I started working on it and it's a pretty good play. It's funny, it's fast—we've edited it so that it will be short and painless—and it's going to be a success.

MARTENSON: How long do you have to know your audience before you know what will work?

BUCH: We really don't know. I never know what is going to be good. When we did *La Gringa*, I thought it would be for one season and now it's been playing for fifteen seasons. There have been seven actresses for *La Gringa* and people who have started with it are no longer with it because they got old. But that's theater, naturally.

MARTENSON: Could you talk about the disappearance of classical acting companies? Do you see that as a philosophical matter or a practical matter?

BUCH: Well, the point is that my company has become my family. And when there's family, there is love. People know that they can't make much money with us, but they know we do a fair thing and we allow them to do side things like voiceovers, advertising. They are proud—I hope they are—of belonging to Repertorio Español, and I find that it's because of love, because I have actors that have worked with me for 30 years and don't retire until they fall dead. But the actors who have retired are still getting their salary. We have their health care and all the things that I think have to be done. I think that without these actors there is no theater.

MARTENSON: I'd like you to talk more about that because you deliver those benefits and the employment security not just because you're a good guy. There must be benefits to the work?

BUCH: Yes, there are benefits for me, because they know me, and when I do something like shrug, they understand, and they do what I need them to. When I'm working with another company that doesn't know me, oh boy, the first rehearsals are hell! I can mount a play at Repertorio Español in three or four weeks. One learns not that you're not going to be perfect, but that you're going to be efficient and that is a one thing that repertory company has: they play together, they know each other, they're in it together.

The first cast of this production of *Life is a Dream* is one of the best casts that I've ever had. But then the actor who was playing the king Basilio died in the middle of the run and I had to take another from my company to take over the role. He's the one who is doing it now, and he's brilliant, too—the company, the work goes up exactly the same way. That is what we call in Spanish “el toro” [“the bull”], which is when we put an actor in a play without preparation.

We can do it because the company is malleable. We have a mechanical prompter that we use to prompt the actor on the stage if he or she needs it, but they just do it! They save the performance. We never cancel. And boy, there've been times when we almost died with substitutions, but everybody hangs on in the company because someday, he's going to be at a performance and someone is going

to go in to save him at the last minute. And they know that!

Our plays last so long in rep, and maybe sometimes one of our actors will get an outside contract. Like one of my actresses was playing in five plays of mine when she was offered a telenovela in Puerto Rico that would pay very well. So I needed to substitute for her, she went to do her telenovela, and when she came back she took over her roles again. The actress who had took on her roles was an actress who had been the second wife the original actresses' ex husband. She went ahead and played, and they became friends! [LAUGHTER] That, I think was an achievement for her and for the lady that she is. I adore my cast, I adore my actors.

MARTENSON: The classical theater model, with a company of actors, is disappearing in the United States. Now there's you, the Alley, and the Shakespeare Theatre, and the Shakespeare festivals that still have an acting company. What's to become of this idea?

BUCH: Life is a transition. I'm not terribly optimistic about it, and I sincerely hope that my theater can survive and that the philosophy will not die, that someone will go on with this idea. Because it's a good idea and it's a powerful idea.

MARTENSON: You told me earlier that over the course of the next period of time you're going to be looking for somebody that could take over Repertorio. How are you going to decide? What are you looking for?

BUCH: I'm looking for an artistic director that will not follow my instructions, someone who will bring new ideas. They have to have the talent to maintain what can be maintained of the structure of my theater—I don't know what that is. Federico followed the lines of Gilberto as managing director, but he's bringing in new thoughts. He's an American who didn't know Spanish when he joined the theater, and now he speaks Spanish; he's willing to learn. I hope I don't harm anything. I hope that what I do will remain important. I'm too close to it to know for sure.

STUDENT (in audience): If the person who succeeds you is an American, then it's likely that the

person will be bilingual. Would you flip over in your grave if that person produced in English at Repertorio Español?

BUCH: Oh God! [LAUGHTER] That would be treasonable for me, because for 45 years we've been holding this belief without doubt. We just do it because of love, I guess. The person who comes after me, who I hope I'll be around to see, I hope that this person sees the good things that we have done and would take that, see the wrong things that we have done and stop that. And bring his or her own ideas.

MARTENSON: I have a follow-up to that question. If, heaven forbid, somebody says Repertorio Español should start performing in English, the company of actors that you have now—could they perform as well in English?

BUCH: No.

MARTENSON: So, this would mean a different group of people, and the family would be undermined.

BUCH: Yes. Ofelia Gonzalez is the only actress in the United States I think, who has won an Obie Award for her theater work without having said one word of English on the stage. She lived 30 years with us here and she finally got an Obie for a play that she was doing in Spanish, and I was delighted that for the first time, an actor was recognized even though he or she was acting in a different language. That's a step in the right direction.

STUDENT (in audience): If you had all the money you wanted for your theater, what would you do with it? And also, would you want that much money, or do you actually like being constrained and smaller?

BUCH: Well, when you're constrained you have to create. When you can go for the moon, it's easy. For instance, some of my guest directors, their productions are far more complicated than mine. They ask for this, they ask for that. I use hardly any props, my sets are completely abstract because of necessity: our theater is small and we don't have a place to put scenery. I haven't seen a flat on the stage of my theater for years now. A friend of mine

used to call it a no-chair theater, because we don't have the capacity. So we depend on the actor. There are no telephones—in *La Gringa*, for example, the telephones do not exist. And the bed of a guy who's dying has to become a wheelchair—everything has to be adapted.

If I had all the money in the world, I would do an endowment for the theater. We have a small endowment now, and in my will it's recognized. We need people to keep the endowment alive so that we can survive in bad times.

MARTENSON: You wouldn't want a new theater with that money?

BUCH: I would love to have a new theater. But I'm also scared if we have a theater with a capacity of 1000, or 900, or 700, are we going to fill it? Are we going to be able to do as we do now, that we have a 90% attendance in our 145-seat theater? I don't know.

MARTENSON: But if you had 1000 seats, you would probably also have room backstage to store all those flats that you don't have now.

BUCH: But this is all an aesthetic decision. I think if you turn on the faucet on stage and water actually comes out, I will leave the theater—I will not buy that! [LAUGHTER] Theater is imagination. Seeing everything for real is television, it is movies. They do that there because they are keeping a distance from the audience and because everything is photographed. You can be realistic as you want, but it's only a photograph. When you have a theater and you start being ultra-realistic and ultra-logical—to me, no, that's not theater.

Theater is like life. It's an experience you can have only once. You go to the theater today, you see a production and you go tomorrow you see a different production—and not because it's a different play. It's the same play, but there's a change. There's a different audience, there's a different way of doing. Maybe the actor has a belly ache and has to do it differently, all those things make the theater an experience that you cannot duplicate.