

*Rodolfo Usigli in Mexican Literature and the Arts:
a Centennial Tribute*

by
Dr. Ramón Layera

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WELCOME to the latest exhibit presented by the Miami University Libraries. We regularly offer public exhibits featuring materials from the Walter Havighurst Special Collections and from the University Libraries' more than two million volume collections. The variety of subjects presented in recent years include children's literature, the brothers Grimm, Matthew Prior, Rita Dove, St. Petersburg, Russia: 1703-2003, Russian history and culture, history of lighting, cookbooks, Benjamin Harrison, Shakers, history of reading, 100 years of Miami's School of Education and Allied Professions, McGuffey and his readers, anti-slavery and civil rights, steamboats on the inland rivers, stagecoaches, the book as art, Nicholas and Alexandra, just to name a few.

The present exhibit is a centennial tribute to Rodolfo Usigli, a Mexican playwright, novelist, essayist, educator, theater critic, and diplomat. We were able to acquire the Rodolfo Usigli Archive in 1995, and it is housed in the Walter Havighurst Special Collections.

Many individuals contributed to the mounting of this exhibit. We are indebted to Dr. Ramón Layera, Assistant Chair of Miami's Spanish/Portuguese Department who coordinated this effort. Thanks to the library staff including Janet Stuckey, Elizabeth Brice, Suzanne Haag, Jim Bricker, Jacky Johnson, John Millard, Anthony Jones-Scott, Lisa Santucci, James Callahan, Karyn Young, Ting Gan, Jodi Perkins, Stan Brown, Andy Farler, Mike Bomholt, Bonnie Fannin, Deborah Wright, Frances Yates, Jason Jackson, graduate students Andrew Barnes, Marianelly Hughes, Lilia LaGesse, Kweku Ocran, and students Amber Ashe, Jake Goetz, Ashley Gratz-Collier, Melissa Nye, and Lindsay Pearce.

We are pleased to be part of the international celebration with the Centro Nacional de Investigación, Documentación e Información Teatral "Rodolfo Usigli" (CITRU), the most important center for the study of the dramatic arts in Mexico that bears his name. I would like to thank Rodolfo Obregón, Director of the CITRU and curator, for his efforts in coordinating the events in Mexico City. Also my thanks to Octavio Rivera, professor at the Universidad de la Americas in Puebla, Mexico, who came to Oxford as designated curator to select images to be part of an exhibit in Mexico. The exhibit in Mexico will be on tour at the CITRU, the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (INBA), the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), and the Universidad Iberoamericana.

We hope you enjoy *Rodolfo Usigli in Mexican Literature and the Arts: a Centennial Tribute* and that you will return for future exhibitions at the University Libraries.

Judith A. Sessions
Dean and University Librarian

RODOLFO USIGLI: THE PLAYWRIGHT OF THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION

THE EARLY YEARS

A widely published author, drama historian, and teacher as well as a successful playwright, Rodolfo Usigli was a powerful and effective force in the creation of a national drama movement in Mexico in the early part of the twentieth century. Because of his multiple talents and stubborn dedication, Usigli is singled out among several important dramatists of his generation as “the Playwright of the Mexican Revolution” or “the apostle” or “redeemer” of Mexican theater. In most general histories of Latin American literature and, more specifically, in histories of Latin American drama, he is listed as one of the founders of modern Mexican drama.

Usigli was born on 17 November 1905 in Mexico City. He was the youngest child of a recent European émigré couple who had arrived during the years leading up to the violent upheaval of the 1910 revolution. Having grown up during that chaotic period, he was deprived of a complete formal education; yet, by dint of individual effort, he became one of the most complex and learned scholars of his generation. From his intellectually motivated, polyglot mother (in addition to Spanish, she spoke German and French), he learned the value of foreign languages and the importance of literary and intellectual pursuits. In 1917 he made his debut on the stage, appearing as a paid child extra in a play at the Teatro Colón. At that same age he had already started working as an errand boy for an American distributor of patent medicine. He also began to study French and English on his own. His command of these two languages proved to be valuable tools in his development as an artist and intellectual and, later, in his career as a diplomat.

The 1920s were a propitious time for the early development of Usigli’s artistic and intellectual project. The election in November 1920 of President Alvaro Obregón marked the end of the military phase of the revolution and the start of the reconstruction of Mexico along populist, reformist lines. Obregón’s presidency also signaled the start of an artistic and intellectual renaissance in post-revolutionary Mexico. The appointment of the essayist José Vasconcelos as secretary of education brought a redefinition of the role of the state and of the artist and intellectual as builders and purveyors of a new vision of Mexican cultural identity. Mexico’s nascent modern drama movement also began to take shape during this climate of artistic and intellectual ferment.

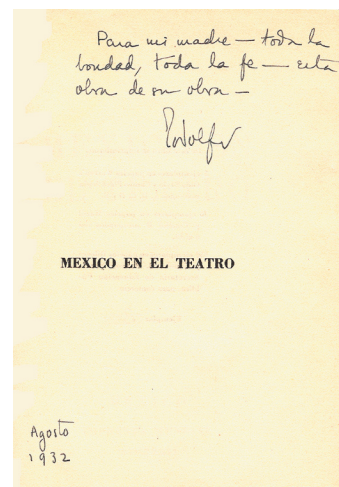
ARTIST AND INTELLECTUAL

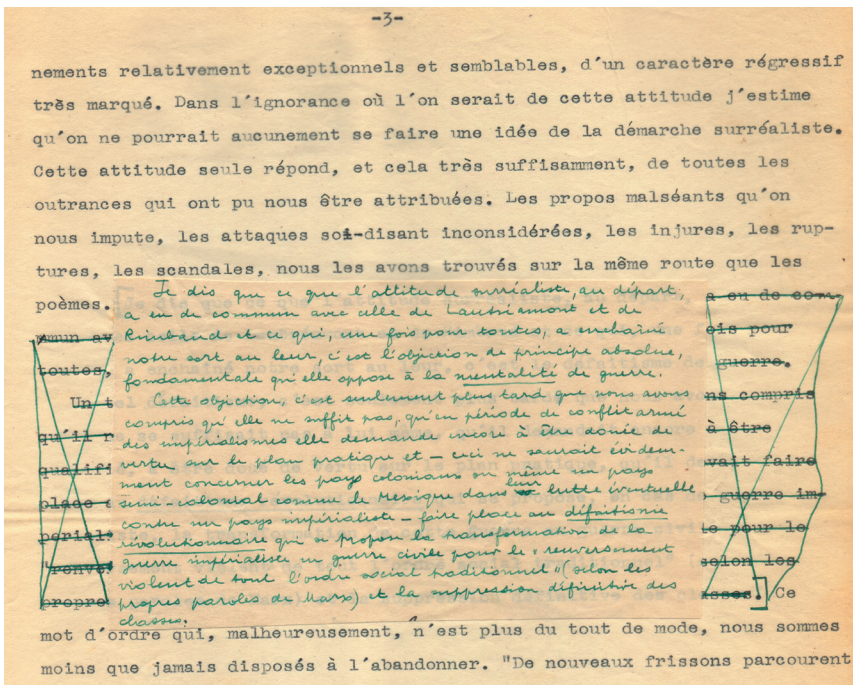
The 1930s brought significant advancement in Usigli’s professional career. By this time he had achieved considerable expertise as a theater scholar: he published his history of Mexican drama *México en el teatro* (Mexico in the Theater) in 1932. His knowledge secured a teaching post for him at the national university (later the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, UNAM) and an administrative position at the Ministry of Education, where he directed a radio program that put drama classics on the air. More importantly, he earned a Rockefeller Foundation scholarship to study drama in the United States. He spent the academic year 1935-1936, together with fellow-playwright and poet Xavier Villaurrutia, studying drama composition and direction at Yale University. Upon his return from Yale he went back to teaching at the university and, in 1936, served as press secretary for President Lázaro Cárdenas. In 1938 he became the director of the theater section at the national institute of fine arts.

Usigli was particularly prolific during the 1930s as he wrote more than a dozen plays, including some of his most successful efforts; several of them, however, remained unpublished and unperformed until much later in his career, in some instances because of their political and satirical nature. The plays that he wrote during this decade can be grouped into those of a political and social nature and those that focus on psychological issues.

CULTURAL ACTIVIST - The Surrealist Week

André Breton, one of the leaders of the Surrealist movement, visited Mexico between April and August of 1938. Usigli was the head of the theater section at the Department of Fine Arts; because of his position and his knowledge of French and French literature he was able to facilitate some of Breton’s activities. Breton was scheduled to give a series of lectures on cinema,



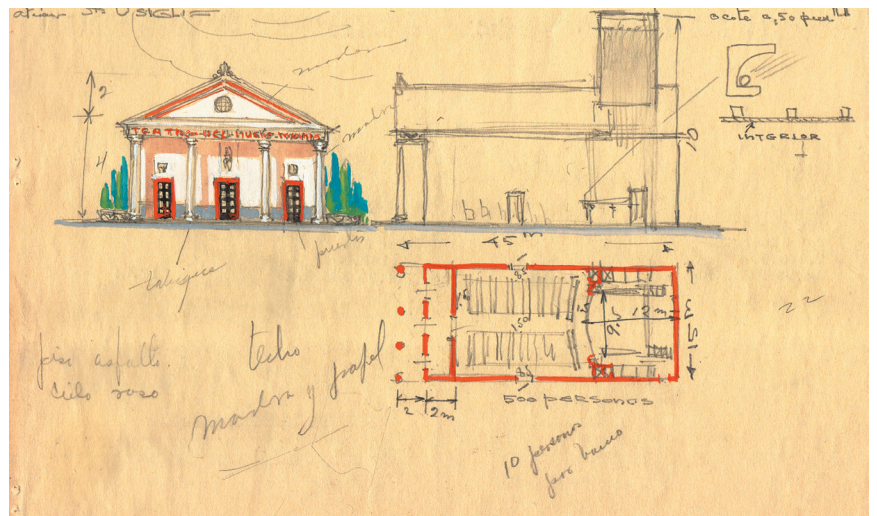


literature, and art during his stay in Mexico but was able to give only two due to political opposition and student unrest at the university. Usigli translated Breton's lectures and worked together with Diego Rivera on the publicity for the Surrealist week. On May 17 Breton gave one of his lectures at the Palace of Fine Arts on the same night when Luis Buñuel's classic film "Un chien andalou" was presented for the first time. The second lecture at the national university took place in a climate of intense political and student unrest. During the visit Breton discussed with Rivera and Leon Trotsky the organization of a federation of independent artists. During these meetings Trotsky and Breton drafted a widely publicized manifesto for a free and independent art, which Rivera and Breton signed. As correspondence shows, Usigli worked with Rivera in the preparation of a woodcut intended for a poster that was used as publicity for Breton's visit titled "Communicating Vessels (Homage to André Breton)." In addition to the correspondence and the typescripts of his translations of the Breton lectures, Usigli saved among his personal papers a

rare print of the poster as well as a typed French-language draft and a rare Spanish-language broadsheet with the famous "Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art." All these materials are now in the Usigli Archive. Clearly, Usigli played a key role in this important event in the history of Mexican literature and art.

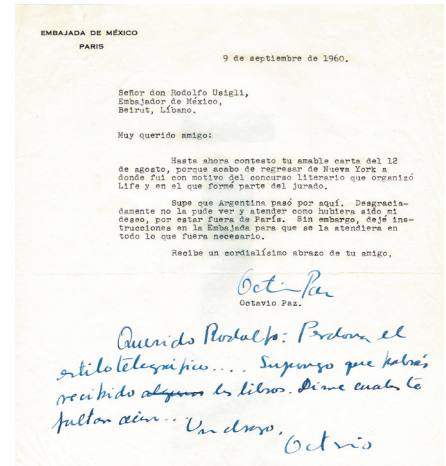
The New World Theater Project

Usigli had taught history of Mexican theater, dramatic theory, and composition at the university since the early 1930s. Starting in 1937 he worked with others in the development of a curriculum intended for the professional training of actors, stage and costume designers, and other personnel for the theater arts. These efforts had limited results. After his stint as director of the theater section at the Department of Fine Arts, he renewed his efforts, this time with the support of other leaders in the fine arts community. In the early 1940s he spearheaded the initiative to form a legally constituted private organization specifically designed for the establishment of a drama and film school. They named the organization "The New World Theater." Once the society was established they scheduled a complete theater season with the goal of collecting funds for the project. They also requested financial commitments from public and private entities and asked for a government donation of a plot of land in downtown Mexico City to build a theater and classroom space for the proposed drama and film school. The Usigli Archive has drafts of the theater season and of the proposed curriculum and correspondence with various government officials and members of the arts and business community. There are also architectural plans for the theater. Of special historical interest are letters in which Usigli explains to General Lázaro Cárdenas the artistic, social, and civic goals that are being pursued by the New World Theater Project. Although this particular initiative did not come to fruition, its artistic and educational objectives became the foundation for future drama schools in Mexico.



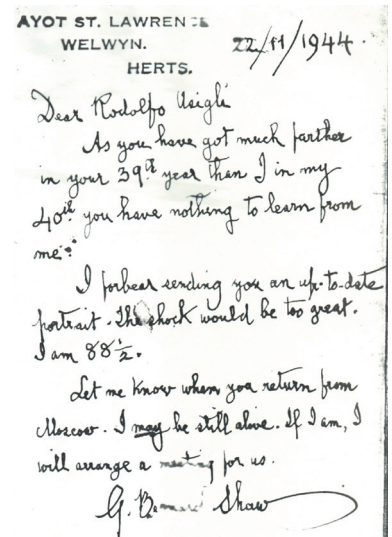
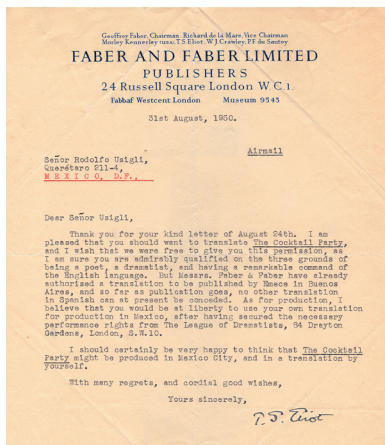
LITERARY INFLUENCES AND RELATIONS - Octavio Paz

During the next two decades Usigli left Mexico twice for extended periods as a member of the diplomatic service. Like many Latin American artists and intellectuals, he found it convenient and rewarding to travel overseas in order to experience firsthand a reality that he only knew through reading, to have access to other cultural and intellectual centers, and to meet some of the writers he admired. The first time, he served as the second secretary in the Mexican embassy in Paris from 1944 to 1946. The third secretary was his friend Octavio Paz, with whom he shared many intellectual and artistic interests. Although they later parted ways over their reactions to political events in 1968, Paz still considered Usigli "the best [Mexican] playwright in this century." Extensive and heretofore unknown correspondence between Usigli and Paz was found among Usigli's papers. Usigli's second, more extended period in the diplomatic service, this time as ambassador, took him first to Lebanon in 1956 and, finally, to Norway in 1962. In addition to this work, he participated actively in the leadership of Mexico's moviemakers' guild, representing it at cinema festivals in France, Italy, Czechoslovakia, and Belgium.



George Bernard Shaw and T. S. Eliot

Postwar Europe provided Usigli with an opportunity to seek out the company of the most important writers. Although he met with Jean Cocteau and Henri René Lenormand, the French dramatists were not particularly friendly. T. S. Eliot (whose "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" [1915] Usigli translated into Spanish in 1938) and Shaw were far more receptive. Shaw had read some of Usigli's dramatic output in English translation and had offered to sign "an Irish certificate of vocation as a dramatic poet" for him. He had even praised Usigli's talent by writing (on a postcard now in the Rodolfo Usigli Archive) "Mexico can starve you; but it cannot deny your genius." During one of the two visits that Usigli paid to Shaw in his country home he was able to film his host. A rare 8 mm film with images of both Shaw and Usigli was found among the Usigli papers and is now in the archive. The visit with T. S. Eliot in London was even more gratifying as Eliot shared some of Usigli's views on drama. Usigli credited Eliot (whose tragedy in verse *Murder in the Cathedral* he greatly admired) for his decision to write two plays, *Corona de fuego* (Crown of Fire) and *La exposición* (The Exhibition) in verse. Usigli wrote elaborate descriptions of not only his visits with Shaw and Eliot but also his meetings with Elmer Rice, Clifford Odets, André Breton, Bruno Traven, and others which he published in book form as *Conversaciones y encuentros* (Conversations and Encounters).



MAJOR WORKS - *El gesticulador* (The Impostor)

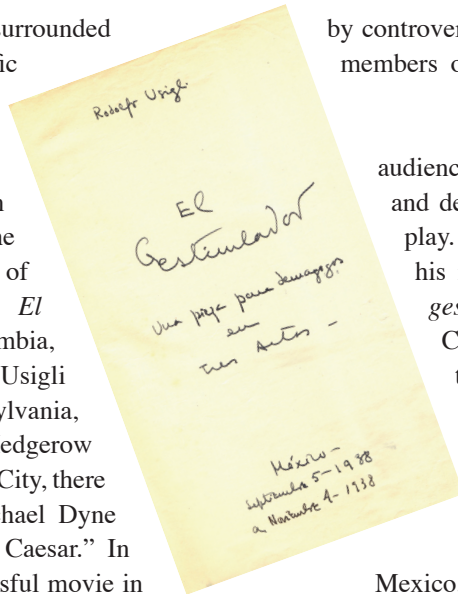
After he returned from France in 1946, Usigli experienced both success and failure as a dramatist. At age thirty-five he had already written about half of his entire dramatic production and had received a moderate degree of recognition. His composition in 1938 of *El gesticulador* (The Impostor, performed in 1947, published in 1944), his most sophisticated political play, was further proof that during the 1930s he had reached the most advanced stage in his development as an artist. But the play had to wait a decade until it was finally put on the stage. *El gesticulador* is by now a true Latin American drama classic with a growing body of critical commentary. Initially, the play was praised for its realistic portrayal of the Mexican family and of Mexico's corrupt political establishment, and, especially, for its thematic association with the Mexican Revolution.

The performance history of this play deserves special attention, as critics have established its premiere as the start of Mexico's modern theater. Even before its two-week run starting on 17 May 1947, *El*



gesticulador was surrounded by extension, specific success.

His contemporary political corruption complexity of the the universality of Usigli's lifetime *El* such as Chile, Colombia, Poland. In 1953 Usigli Rose Valley, Pennsylvania, of his play at the Hedgerow 1953, in New York City, there adaptation by Michael Dyne the title "Another Caesar." In made into a successful movie in premiere at Miami University in Ohio of the newest English translation of *The Impostor* (by Ramón Laya) drew 1,779 spectators during a successful seven-day run attended by Alejandro Usigli, the playwright's son and literary executor. Significantly, Melissa Blackstone's costume designs for this production won a Barbizon Award at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.

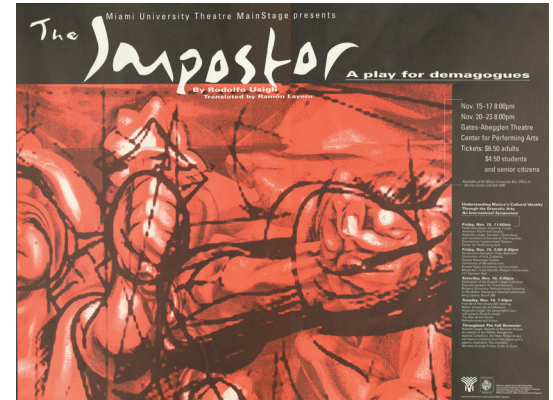


by controversy. Usigli was accused of attacking the ideals of the revolution and, by members of the government elite. Still, the play was a resounding box-office

audiences not only saw the relevance and incisiveness of his criticism of and deception but also intuitively perceived the structural and presentational play. Audiences in other countries around the world also identified with his message (tellingly, in Soviet-era Eastern European countries). During *gesticulador* was produced many times in Mexico and in other countries

Czechoslovakia, and traveled to Moylan, to see a production Theater. Also in was a television of the play with 1960 the play was

Mexico. The 1996 world premiere at Miami University in Ohio of the newest English translation of *The Impostor* (by Ramón Laya) drew 1,779 spectators during a successful seven-day run attended by Alejandro Usigli, the playwright's son and literary executor. Significantly, Melissa Blackstone's costume designs for this production won a Barbizon Award at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.



Fire, Light, Shadows: The Corona Trilogy

Dissatisfied with the mixed reception of his political plays, Usigli turned in the 1950s to other subjects. He had already explored the possibilities of psychological drama, but he was finally rewarded for his efforts in this decade. In 1951 and 1952 Usigli enjoyed financial success with the commercial productions of *El niño y la niebla* (The Child and the Mist) and *Jano es una muchacha* (Janus Is a Girl).

Another and more significant task in the 1960s was the completion of his *Corona* trilogy: the earlier *Corona de sombra* (Crown of Shadow) was followed by *Corona de fuego* (Crown of Fire) and *Corona de luz* (Crown of Light). Since the early 1930s Usigli had harbored the hope of completing a group of plays that would summarize and symbolize the very essence of the social and historical reality of the New World. In the *Coronas* he did as much for Mexico. Taken chronologically, the *Coronas* are centered on three crucial moments in Mexican history and in the evolution of the country's national cultural identity. According to Usigli, the significance of these incidents resides in the fact that at each of those historical crossroads Mexico wrested, respectively, its material, spiritual, and political sovereignty from Europe. In chronological sequence, the first moment, in *Corona de fuego*, takes place during the clash between Aztecs and Spaniards at the start of the Conquest. The second moment, in *Corona de luz*, occurs during the miraculous appearance of the Virgin of Guadalupe to an Indian, Juan Diego, on the hill of Tepeyac outside of the Mexican capital in 1531. Finally, in *Corona de sombra*, the exceptional moment occurs during the execution of Emperor Maximilian in 1867 at the end of the French occupation. Judging by the critical interest that the three plays have generated as a group, they can be considered an artistic success; further, because of their novel thematic content and interpretive breadth, they have served as both model and challenge for successive generations of Mexican playwrights.



AWARDS AND RECOGNITIONS

Despite his humble origin and lack of formal education Usigli was able to accomplish many things. He was an exceptionally gifted, stubbornly persistent, and dedicated individual whose entire artistic and intellectual project can be summarized into three basic categories: he was a theater practitioner, a drama scholar and teacher, and a playwright. He participated in the foundational period of Mexico's modern drama and played a key role in defining the artistic parameters of a theater movement that began

in the latter part of the 1920s and early 1930s. During the 1930s his administrative post in the Ministry of Education enabled him to influence the direction of artistic and theatrical trends. As one of the first professors of dramaturgy at the national university in the 1930s and 1940s, Usigli taught a whole generation of Mexican playwrights. His disciples and successors recognize his exemplary role and credit him with their own development of a similar professional dedication to the craft and genuine interest in a wider diversity of thematic, ideological, and aesthetic concerns. In addition to teaching the next generation of playwrights, he was a drama scholar in his own right: he wrote or co-authored the first histories of Mexican drama as well as manuals of dramaturgy and composition. But his greatest contribution came in the form of a corpus of dramatic works that has withstood the test of time. His *El gesticulador* and his *Corona* trilogy are among the best-known and most anthologized and produced plays in Mexican and Latin American drama. For all this he was awarded the National Prize for Literature in 1972.

Throughout a remarkable career that began at a difficult time in the history of Mexico, Usigli expressed a passionate commitment and an unswerving dedication to the development of a national theater. In recognition of his contribution to the promotion of the dramatic arts, the Centro Nacional de Investigación Teatral Rodolfo Usigli (CITRU), one of Mexico's most important centers for theater scholarship and research, bears his name. In an epigraph to one of his essays, Usigli stated his philosophy: "Un pueblo sin teatro es un pueblo sin verdad" (A people without drama is a people without truth), a philosophy that he lived and expressed eloquently in his writings.



MANY ROLES, MANY MEMORIES

In addition to his literary and artistic accomplishments, Usigli received recognition for his work as a diplomat, public intellectual, and cultural activist. He was also able to meet, maintain friendships, and exchange correspondence with Nobel Prize winners (Miguel Angel Asturias, Gabriela Mistral, and Octavio Paz), actors and actresses (Charles Chaplin, Paul Muni, Cantinflas, María Schell, Lupe Marín, Jean Simmons), film and theater directors (Luis Buñuel, Max Reinhardt), monarchs, presidents, and dignitaries (the Shah of Iran and his wife Soraya, Emperor Haile Selassie, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru), painters and muralists (Diego Rivera, Manuel Rodríguez Lozano, José Clemente Orozco). The Usigli Archive has an extensive collection of photographs and scrapbooks as well as documentation and correspondence about these meetings and exchanges. In addition to the framed National Prize for Literature, the archive has commemorative plaques, diplomas, and several other awards such as the King Olaf Grand Cross from Norway and Lebanon's Cedars from Lebanon Medal.

AFTER THE STORM: USIGLI AND THE BIRTH OF MODERN MEXICAN DRAMA

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RODOLFO USIGLI ARCHIVE

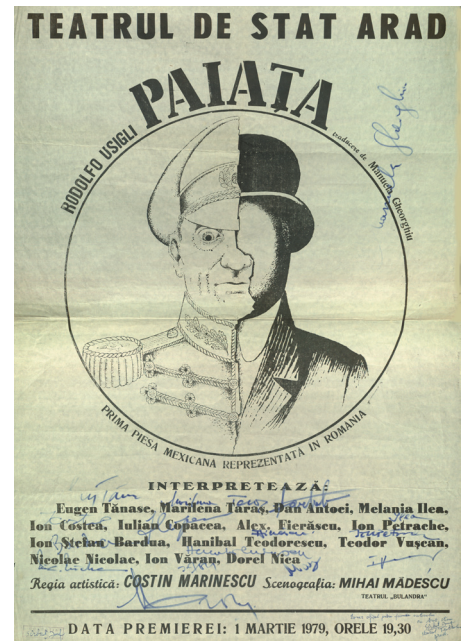
The Rodolfo Usigli Archive, located in the Walter Havighurst Special Collections, is the definitive research collection relating to Usigli's life and career. Stored in more than 70 boxes with multiple files, and more than a quarter of a million items, it includes correspondence, both manuscript and typed drafts of original plans and translations of works by other artists, personal, theatrical and diplomatic photographs, essays, playbills, posters, awards, theses written about Usigli, newspaper and magazine articles, memorabilia and ephemera. The correspondence includes letters to and from George Bernard Shaw, José Clemente Orozco, Octavio Paz and many others. The archive also includes rare materials such as Usigli's unpublished poems, plays and short stories, and the correspondence between Usigli and Diego Rivera regarding their going efforts to publicize André Breton's lectures during the 1938 Surrealist Week in Mexico City. The archive not only has copies of Breton's lectures, which Usigli translated for the occasion, it also has a rare print of Rivera's poster "Communicating Vessels (Homage to André Breton)" and a broadsheet with the famous "Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art" both produced as a result of the visit by Breton.

DR. RAMÓN LAYERA is a native of Chile, completed his undergraduate education in Chile, earned a MA at the University of Washington and a Ph.D. from Binghamton University. He taught at the University of Chile, Carnegie-Mellon University and the University of Texas at Austin before coming to Miami University in 1985.

Professor Layera teaches in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese. He is also a former President of the Friends of the Miami Libraries. His *Usigli en el teatro: Testimonios de sus contemporáneos, sucesores y discípulos* was published in Mexico, and his English translation of Usigli's signature play *El gesticulador* (The Impostor) will appear in 2005. He enjoys traveling, visiting his grandchildren in Seattle, and assisting his wife with her natural habitat gardening and Monarch monitoring and tagging program.



Scenery sketch, *The Impostor*, Miami University production, 1996



Paiata (The Impostor), Bucharest, Rumania (Rumanian)

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