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Performing Culture(s): Extras and Extra-Texts in Sabina Berman's *eXtras*

Jacqueline E. Bixler

Since the late 1970s, Mexican dramatist Sabina Berman has been writing and producing plays that question and often ridicule notions of gender, political credibility, historical authority, and cultural identity.¹ Born in Mexico City (1955) into a family of European Jewish émigrés, Berman is profoundly Mexican and at the same time acutely aware of the artificiality and the permeability of cultural markers and boundaries. A common feature of her dramaturgy, which now includes nearly twenty titles, is the insertion or intrusion of an outsider who threatens the order of things, whether that order be of a cultural, sexual, or political nature. In 2003, twenty-five years and several major awards after her first full-length play (*Bill [Yankee]*), Berman produced and directed *eXtras*, wherein a Hollywood film crew invades the small town of Chiconcuac to create yet another romantic, culturally warped, made-in-Mexico blockbuster. Interestingly, however, *eXtras* is not a Berman original, but rather a translation and adaptation of Marie Jones's highly acclaimed *Stones in His Pockets*.²

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This essay is dedicated to George Woodyard—teacher and friend.

¹ For an extensive bibliography of works by and about Sabina Berman, see *The Theatre of Sabina Berman. The Agony of Ecstasy and Other Plays*, trans. Adam Versényi (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003). Versényi's translations include *The Agony of Ecstasy*, *Yankee*, *Puzzle*, and *Heresy*.

² *eXtras* premiered in Mexico City on 6 February 2003 in the Teatro Julio Castillo. Sabina Berman and Isabelle Tardan produced the play with support from CONACULTA (Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes), INBA (Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes), and CNT (Coordinación Nacional de Teatro). The 700-plus seats were regularly filled for each of the five weekly performances until the play closed in September 2003. It reopened again in February 2004 in the Teatro de las Artes of the Centro Nacional de las Artes, with the same actors, director, etc., and, at the time this article goes to press, is scheduled to play until mid-July 2004.

Stones in His Pockets premiered in Belfast and then in London in 1999. After winning the Olivier Award for Best Comedy in London, *Stones* was produced throughout Europe and finally on Broadway. The published text soon found its way into the hands of Sabina Berman, who recognized the universality of Jones's story of exploitation, cultural domination, and globalization in a small, poor town in Ireland and pondered the potential for translating and adapting it to Mexican reality and to the Mexican stage. She was surprised to learn, however, that the rights to produce the play in Mexico

Indeed, the bold, capital X and the multiple connotations of the word “extras” are but the external wrappings of a complicated text/translation/performance that extends from Ireland to Mexico, from actor to audience, from spectator to critic, and finally from Hollywood to the rest of our globalized culture.³

eXtras and its source play epitomize what Richard Schechner terms “intercultural performance,” which “arises as response to and in some cases as protest against an increasingly integrated world.”⁴ Both the original and the translation include only two actors, who play not only the role of two local extras in a made-for-Hollywood film production, but also the roles of Hollywood producers, movie stars, townspeople, and cows. In their multiple and endlessly mutating roles, the two extras provide an intertextual and intercultural performance that foregrounds the misunderstandings, disruptions, fears, and hilarities that occur when cultures collide, overlap, or try to resist one another. While the “Hollywoodization” of County Kerry or Chiconcuac is undeniably comical, it also serves as a sobering metaphor of globalization, a process cynically summarized by Schechner as “a Hollywood production full of high tech special effects starring American superheroes who dissolve national, cultural, and economic boundaries as they spread free market capitalism to every corner of the world.”⁵

The multiple levels of text, subtexts, and extra-texts all ultimately relate to the concept of performance, whether it be in the traditional sense of the word (i.e., two actors performing onstage) or within the wider, postmodern context of performance studies, which includes notions of cultural identity, transculturation, and globalization. Berman follows her Irish muse in proposing a play that, in her words, “returns to the essence of drama, and drama means action, acting, nothing more than acting.”⁶ Performance theories shed light on the complexity and playfulness with which Berman translates, adapts, stages, and ultimately subverts Hollywood’s hold on cultural representation and, by extension, the hold of US culture on those parts of the world where dire economic conditions and free-trade capitalism force local culture to sell out to global (i.e., first world) culture. Through the performance of cultural resistance and through the relationship that these extra-ordinary actors forge with their audiences, Marie Jones, Sabina Berman, and their own hired extras underscore what it means to be an extra in the full sense of the word and in today’s global(ized) society.

It is not the purpose of the present essay to compare and contrast the various theoretical angles that have been taken on the phenomenon of performance, but as a

had already been obtained by Demian, Odiseo, and Bruno Bichir, brothers and well-established actors. The solution was obvious: Berman wanted to translate and adapt, while the Bichir brothers wanted to act, so the only thing lacking was a director. Having already directed other texts of her own, including *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* (Between [Pancho] Villa and a Naked Woman) and *Krísis* (Crisis), Berman was easily persuaded to direct this one.

³ Berman used a similar technique in 1996 with *Krísis*, in which the K (a letter appearing in the Spanish alphabet only in borrowed words) and the superfluous accent advertise the play’s parodic and transgressive nature.

⁴ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies. An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 226.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁶ Haydé Murakami, “Cuando los hermanos se encuentran . . .,” *Reforma*, 10 January 2003, <http://www.reforma.com/primerafila/articulo/259594>. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

working definition, we follow that of Richard Bauman: "all performance involves a consciousness of doubleness, through which the actual execution of an action is placed in mental comparison with a potential, an ideal, or a remembered original model of that action."⁷ Bauman's definition of performance as a conscious double-coding not only complements Linda Hutcheon's description of postmodern art and literature, but also sets the stage for a consideration of multiple levels of doubleness: *eXtras* vis-à-vis *Stones in His Pockets*; the text versus the performance of both plays; the performers who get paid to play extras in a play that is about extras who get paid to play extras; and the audience's double role as complicitous extras in the play and noncomplicitous extras in the extra-textual context of our globalized world.⁸ Initiated by Marie Jones, the process of cultural self-reflection continues with Berman's translation of the text from English to Spanish and with its transcultural crossing from Ireland to Mexico. As Diana Taylor explains, the term "transculturation" was coined by Fernando Ortiz in 1940 to refer to "the transformative process undergone by a society in the acquisition of foreign cultural material—the loss or displacement of a society's culture due to the acquisition or imposition of foreign material, and the fusion of the indigenous and the foreign to create a new, original cultural product."⁹ Both *Stones* and *eXtras* foreground the process of transculturation, as Hollywood and US culture invade and "Americanize" every aspect of the host culture, from its language to its economy. Yet, rather than conclude with the complete conquest or Hollywoodization of Irish or Mexican culture, *Stones* and *eXtras* end with a celebration of local, indigenous culture. Transculturation is not, then, simply a passive reception of foreign culture, but rather what Angel Rama describes as "the rediscovery of primitive values almost forgotten within one's own cultural system that are capable of standing up to the erosion of transculturation."¹⁰ Ultimately, Jones, Berman, and their onstage extras fly in the face of globalization as they make a stand for cultural uniqueness and dignity.

While no translation or adaptation is simple, *Stones in His Pockets* presents a socioeconomic situation that readily lends itself to Mexican reality. Jones's play presents two characters, Jake Quinn and Charlie Conlon, who play extras in a double sense; they serve as extras in a Hollywood film production set in their sleepy native town in County Kerry, and at the same time take on extra roles in Jones's play as directors, managers, Hollywood actors, and townspeople. In short, two actors represent in two acts and two hours what Jones calls "the whole disintegration of rural Ireland."¹¹ Looking for their lucky break from lifelong poverty, Charlie and Jake pitch

⁷ Richard Bauman, "Performance," *International Encyclopedia of Communications*, ed. Erik Barnouw (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), quoted in Marvin Carlson, *Performance. A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1996), 5.

⁸ See Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1988) and *The Politics of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1989). While Hutcheon does not refer to theatre or performance in her books, references to her general theory on postmodernism appear repeatedly in performance studies. As Schechner notes, "One of the decisive qualities of postmodernism is the application of the 'performance principle' to all aspects of social and artistic life" (*Performance Studies*, 114).

⁹ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire. Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 94.

¹⁰ Taylor, 105. This is her translation of Angel Rama, *Transculturation narrativa en América Latina* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 1982), 39.

¹¹ Marie Jones, *Stones in His Pockets* (New York: Applause, 2001), 6.

in and gladly do whatever is asked of them, including the literal pitching of cow manure in a scene where they play, ironically, the role of dispossessed farmers. All goes according to the standard Hollywood *modus operandi* of invade-film-and-leave until a real-life tragedy occurs. Thrown off the set and then out of the local pub, young Sean Harkin sees his dreams of Hollywood stardom destroyed, fills his pockets with stones, and drowns himself in the lake. Yet his life is not entirely wasted, for his death rouses the local extras from their obedient stupor, re-awakens whatever Irish pride they might have had, and ultimately leads them to rebel against the foreign producers and directors, who, by extension, represent not only Hollywood but all forms of foreign influence and control. Despite the tragedy of Sean's death, the piece ends with a playful, carnivalesque twist as Jake and Charlie, playing themselves—two local men looking for a way out of their current economic dead end—decide to create their own movie, in which the drowned boy will play the lead role, cows will dominate the scenery, and Hollywood stars will be cast as extras.

On the basis of this short summary of Jones's text, one can easily understand why Berman lamented not having written it herself.¹² The multiple levels of meaning, the emphasis on performance as a cultural and political act, the pervasive irony, the witty dialogue, and the final, playful subversion are indeed all trademarks of the Mexican author's own plays. Yet, instead of creating an original, yet similar play, Berman recognized that the acts of adaptation and translation themselves convey what is perhaps the most important message of *Stones in His Pockets*, which is that US culture—particularly that produced and marketed by Hollywood—has a pervasive and pernicious effect on the rural, impoverished, desperate, and brainwashed masses, not only in Ireland but throughout the world. In other words, the act of translating the play is itself a form of intercultural performance, or what Carlson calls "the weaving of complex patterns of contact with other cultures or other cultural performances."¹³ Translation is not just a way of knowing each other, but also, in this case, a means of recognizing and subsequently resisting sameness. Geographically and linguistically, Ireland and Mexico are worlds apart, yet the persistent metaphorical reference to cows suggests that their rural populations, like herds of cattle, graze, ruminate, and passively watch as global culture passes by. In the words of performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña, "For many, the only options for participating in the 'global' economy are as passive consumers [cows] of 'global' trash, or providers of cheap labor or materia prima [extras]."¹⁴ Not surprisingly, both plays conclude with the actors' pantomime of cows. These cows, however, are "big spotted slobbering cows" that represent not mass passivity but rather cultural resistance and reversal.¹⁵

¹² Berman said, "I became obsessed with the text and kept thinking, 'Shit, what a shame I didn't write it myself!'" María Sevilla, "Transforma Berman a los hermanos Bichir," *Reforma*, 1 February 2003.

¹³ Carlson, 32.

¹⁴ Guillermo Gómez-Peña, "The New Global Culture," *TDR: The Drama Review* 45, n. 1 (2001): 9. The extension of this concept of globalization to cows and extras is mine.

¹⁵ Berman, 50. Although Berman's play is a translation of *Stones*, it differs from the original in many places. Therefore, I provide my own translation of Berman's text in the main body of the essay, along with page citations from the original Spanish text. Note: The dramatist frequently attends the performance of *eXtras* and after each performance makes small adjustments to the text, which means that both the text and the performance will continue to evolve until the show ends and the text is finally published.

A close textual comparison of *Stones in His Pockets* and *eXtras* suggests that the Mexican dramatist has been remarkably faithful to the original in terms of plot, roles, and sequencing.¹⁶ Indeed, given the similar economic conditions that prevail in rural Ireland and rural Mexico, one could say that Berman needed only to translate the words, the setting, and certain cultural images. The two actors from County Kerry, Jake and Charlie, become José and Charlie of Chiconcuac, a pueblo in the impoverished state of Morelos. The oldest extra in *Stones* is Mickey Riordan, whose claim to fame is that of being the last surviving extra from a famous made-in-Ireland Hollywood production, ironically titled *The Quiet Man*. Even more ironic is the fact that the current movie, yet another sentimental blockbuster, is called *The Quiet Valley*, a title that suggests a shift from individual to mass passivity, a concept further conveyed in both texts by the constant reference to cows. Nonetheless, in both versions, the repetition of the adjective “quiet” belies a growing discontent and rebellion among the extras. For example, this last surviving extra of *The Quiet Man* translates in *eXtras* into the oldest surviving extra from the made-in-Mexico Hollywood production of *Viva Zapata!*, a title that carries strong connotations of rural revolution with its specific reference to revolutionary general Emiliano Zapata and his ragtag army of dispossessed farmers. Significantly, Morelos not only is Zapata’s birthplace, it also has a long history of dispossession. At the beginning of the Mexican Revolution of 1910, Zapata led a local revolution in which the peasants regained lands that had been taken from their indigenous ancestors in 1607. Berman’s choice of Morelos as the locale merely increases the irony of the film extras being asked to act like dispossessed landowners.

Even more politically significant is the fact that the many pairs of shoes that line the stage of *Stones* and which the actors use to indicate changes of identity are translated by Berman into a simple red scarf known as a *paliacate*.¹⁷ Shoes not only take longer to change, but also bear no cultural significance. The red bandanna, on the other hand, is recognized by Mexicans nationwide as a symbol of political subversion and cultural resistance. In particular, it is widely associated with Mexico’s Zapatista rebels. On 1 January 1994, the North American Free Trade Agreement [NAFTA] went into effect, a deal that immediately became a metaphor for a globalized economy controlled by the US. On that same day, the Zapatistas launched a massive rebellion against NAFTA.

While Berman retains Jones’s use of the movie title *The Quiet Valley*, here it refers paradoxically to the valley of Morelos, the cradle of the Mexican Revolution of 1910, and to the seething resentment of the extras who are currently playing the role of the dispossessed in this purportedly bucolic setting. Jones’s Hollywood star, Caroline Giovanni, translates into Karina Santos, whose lamentable linguistic ability and concomitant lack of understanding of Mexican reality provide a constant source of humor. For instance, when asked her opinion of Mexico, Karina gushes, “Oooh es mágico . . . es una país muy dramático, como oh su magueys” (45).¹⁸ As an emblem of Hollywood stardom, and one bearing a name that is at least pseudo-Hispanic, Karina is perceived

¹⁶ The present analysis is based on Sabina Berman’s unpublished playscript, Marie Jones’s published text, and the performance of *eXtras*, which I saw twice in July 2003 and again in March 2004.

¹⁷ Berman has never seen a stage production of *Stones*, but she did find on the Internet a photo in which the actors stand before a line of shoes, which they use to indicate role changes.

¹⁸ Any attempt to translate Karina’s butchered Spanish would sacrifice Berman’s intended parody of Hollywood’s idea of spoken Spanish.

by the extras as the promise of an economic miracle in the sense that they, too, could become Hollywood stars. Sean, the young lad who drowns himself rather than face a future of guaranteed poverty, translates into Cutberto Rodríguez, who insists on being called “Brad Pit [*sic*].”¹⁹ Images of Irish culture are likewise easily adapted to Mexican reality. The forty quid paid to the Irish extras translate into *dólares*, the Irish pub becomes a Mexican *cantina*, pints become *chelas* (beers), the Irish egg-and-onion sandwich translates into *tacos al pastor*, the Irish background that offers “forty shades of green” is replaced by the Sierra Madre and the snow-capped volcanoes, and the flowers shipped in from Holland for the grand finale become fresh flowers from a rural town whose indigenous name is comically mispronounced as “Tlayacapapapan.”²⁰

While Jones’s text presents the invasion of one English-speaking culture (rural Irish) by another (Hollywood), Berman’s adaptation further foregrounds the difficulty of intercultural communication through the linguistic clash that occurs between English and Spanish. According to Diana Taylor, “The task of working toward intercultural communication (as opposed to consuming otherness) [. . .] is urgent.”²¹ As victims of the Spanish *conquista* and more recently of a US cultural and economic conquest, Mexicans have long perceived themselves, and also have been perceived by others, as doubles, “both pre- and post-, both indigenous and Spanish, bilingual, bicultural.”²² Translation and intercultural communication have been an issue since the initial encounter of Hernán Cortés, Moctezuma, and their translator, Doña Marina or La Malinche, who has long served as Mexico’s premiere symbol of cultural betrayal. The thorny nature of translation, in particular what Taylor terms “transnational decipherability,” is key in the confluence and conflict that occur in *eXtras* among languages and their respective social registers.²³ Berman’s text is not simply a Spanish translation of the original text, but rather a complex mixture of Spanish, English, and the linguistic hybrid known as Spanglish. For starters, Charlie and José have their own special laughter-inducing lingo that includes colloquial, often vulgar *mexicanismos* and broken English (José worked for a while in the US and came back broke, while Charlie watched about four videos a day in his mom-and-pop video store until Blockbuster put him out of business).²⁴ The pervasive and oftentimes unconscious use of English in Mexico is ironically underscored when Karina insists that José speak to her only in Spanish, to which he responds, “Okey.” Moving rapidly among twelve additional

¹⁹ Whether it was intentional or not, the misspelling of “Pitt” reflects the distortion that occurs when other cultures try to imitate Hollywood (i.e., American) culture. It is precisely this kind of slippage between referent and representation that provides the parody endemic in postmodern performance.

²⁰ “Tlayacapapapan” is most likely a parodic and ironic reference to Tlaltizapán, a small town in Morelos that Emiliano Zapata used as his headquarters and which became, according to cultural historian Enrique Krauze, the “moral capital of the Revolution” (*Mexico. Biography of Power* [New York: Harper-Collins, 1997], 297).

²¹ Taylor, 235.

²² *Ibid.*, 100.

²³ *Ibid.*, 212.

²⁴ Berman explains that some critics have deplored the use of common Mexican vulgarities, but maintains that she is simply reproducing the form of Spanish regularly spoken among friends (personal conversation with author, 6 March 2004).

roles, the two actors/extras switch gender, nationality, social rank, languages, intonation, and accent. The star, Karina, in a naive attempt to go ethnic, insists on speaking terribly and hysterically incorrect Spanish. Charlie and José repeatedly mock Karina's feeble attempts to blend in with the local population, most of whom would be a mestizo mixture of indigenous and European blood. In particular, Charlie scorns her unexpected appearance in the local cantina as an attempt "to give herself a mestizo bath" (13). On the other hand, Cutberto/Brad's use of Spanglish reflects his life as a video junkie and his desire to become American. English also peppers the speech of the assistant directors, who repeatedly say "okey" and control the shooting with standard Hollywood film terms, such as "close up" and "action." Simón and Fabiola constantly use invisible walkie-talkies, an action that underscores the process of transnational communication as they attempt to translate and relay messages between the mostly invisible, English-speaking Hollywood directors and the Spanish-speaking extras. Linguistically and culturally caught between the two groups, Fabiola and Simón perform as human walkie-talkies in this comic process of transcultural (mis)communication.

The characters speak multiple brands of Spanish, which reflect not only different means of intercultural communication, but also Mexico's internal socioeconomic class system: the colloquial, often vulgar Spanish spoken among friends; the gringo Spanish spoken by the American director, Cliff; the correct, albeit frantic Spanish spoken by Mexican assistant director and Hollywood wannabee Fabiola; the exaggeratedly peninsular Spanish spoken by first assistant director Simón; Hollywood's version of Spanish, which is full of false cognates as well as the usual grammatical and pronunciation errors; and the very simple and honest Spanish spoken by Don Macario and all the other locals who have never left Chiconcuac. The correlation between linguistic registers and social status is best conveyed in the relationship between Spanish first assistant director Simón and Mexican third assistant director Fabiola. A descendant of Mexico's former conquerors, Simón presumes superiority over his Mexican counterpart. Nonetheless, as he loses control of the Mexican extras, he is forced to recognize that within the context of Hollywood, he is simply another Hispanic extra:

JOSÉ: Goddamned Spaniard [. . .] you're Hispanic, too, even if it hurts you to admit it.
 SIMÓN: You're right about that, my Hispanic brother, because every time you guys screw up, the Americans bite my ear off. Have you heard the expression, what can you expect from a Hispanic? . . . unfortunately they tend to lump us all together as extras.

[40, 41]

Hollywood, long a symbol of cultural hegemony and at the same time of cultural ignorance, not only regards most Spanish speakers as extras in the film industry, but also lumps them into one large mass of Latinos. Consequently, the producers of *The Quiet Valley* see no need for cultural accuracy, directing the extras to shovel cow manure to the rhythm of an Argentine tango and to celebrate the Big Happy Ending by clapping to the beat of Spanish sevillanas.

Berman remains faithful to the original script, but not to the original title. Ironically, she seems to have shared the reaction of Jones's intratextual Hollywood producers, who respond to Jake and Charlie's proposed title, *Stones in His Pockets*, with the

comment: "Doesn't say much . . . not very catchy . . . a bit nondescript."²⁵ Berman's decision to create an entirely different title, *eXtras*, was nothing short of brilliant, for its graphic configuration catches the eye and at the same time teases the mind with its multivalence. In Spanish as well as in English, the word *extra* has many connotations, most of which are at least negative, if not derogatory. Even as actors, extras are denied recognition: "Extras, who do nothing but walk and stand in costume, are seen as 'actors.' [...] without doing anything we could distinguish as acting."²⁶ In an interview with Myrra Yglesias, Berman explains that extras perform a job that is at once "honorable and masochistic, for they are at the same time close to and far from the stars. Their job consists of being anonymous, while [the stars] can say whatever they want. It is a thankless job."²⁷ To be an extra is to be at once anonymous and superfluous. An extra is a faceless member of the masses. An extra can be asked to play any role, or even multiple roles. An extra is what is left over when the process, in this case the filming, is complete. An extra is replaceable, dispensable, while the Hollywood star is not. The term extras extends easily beyond the aspiring locals to the whole town of Chiconcuac, which is one of thousands of extra, marginal, and easily forgotten or ignored towns of rural Mexico. The lower-case *e* and upper-case *X* further diminish the status of the referents of the title, denying them a proper name and at the same time underscoring their anonymity ("una persona X" is a term often used in Spanish to mean "So-and-So" or "John Doe"). Also, as a signature commonly used by the illiterate, the *X* precludes individuality. Finally, is it merely a coincidence that extra forms a part of the Spanish word *extranjero* (foreigner) or that *x* is the initial letter of *xenofobia* (xenophobia), a term that designates fear of and/or contempt for cultural and political difference?

In sum, Berman's magnified *X* connotes the anonymous, the nullified, the eradicated, the crossed-out, the different, all of which accurately describe how many rural Mexicans perceive themselves vis-à-vis the global economy as well as their own national government and its neoliberal politics. In just one example of the black humor that pervades the play, the extras are criticized for their inability to project enthusiasm in their role as the dispossessed. Assistant director Fabiola shouts: "Masses: faces of the dispossessed, please. Dispossessed, meaning without possessions, meaning poor" (8). Given Mexico's particular historical background, Berman gets play out of the ironic request that the extras act like dispossessed. The role comes naturally, given that the majority of Mexicans have been dispossessed since the fall of Mexico to Hernán Cortés in 1521. Physically conquered by the Spaniards and dispossessed both of their lands and their indigenous culture, Mexicans lived under colonial rule until independence in 1810. Since that time and despite the Revolution of 1910, Mexico has progressively been conquered—culturally by the United States, psychologically by the

²⁵ Jones, 92. Berman explained in a private conversation that the expression "stones in his pockets" did not seem to convey any meaning in Spanish or within Mexican culture.

²⁶ Michael Kirby, *A Formalist Theatre* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), 10.

²⁷ Myrra Yglesias, "El trabajo de extra es digno y masoquista: Sabina Berman," *La Jornada*, 21 Feb 2003, <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2003/feb03>. It is interesting to note that during the early years of her theatrical career, Berman occasionally worked as an extra in television soap operas directed by Antonio Serrano, who now at times has the honor of directing the plays of his former extra.

illusory promise of wealth propagated by Hollywood, and economically by the global free-trade market.

Nonetheless, oblivious to the irony of her request, Fabiola instructs them to go home and practice looking like dispossessed farmers. Yet when Simón throws the inebriated Don Macario off the lot, the latter sets the record straight: "Look at the ground you are standing on, you little idiot. This land was owned by my grandfather, and before that by my great-grandfather, a *nahua* prince" (45). Don Macario thus retains his individuality, not only as the remaining surviving extra of *Viva Zapata!*, but also as an icon of native culture and pride.

The anonymous identity of the extras as faceless masses extends to the audience as well. During the performance, Charlie occasionally seats himself among the spectators, who are thereby forced to assume the role of extras when the Hollywood director addresses them as part of the group. A bonding occurs as it becomes increasingly clear to the audience that the extras are being exploited and that on an extended level, they, too, are being exploited by mainstream (Hollywood-produced) culture. As the play progresses, the audience comes to share what actor Bruno Bichir describes as the disturbing consciousness that "we are all extras in the political, economic, and social life of our own country."²⁸ The abuse of the extras intensifies as the directors become more and more pressured by time restrictions, weather conditions, and the impatient, capricious demands of the male and female Hollywood leads. Ironically, the tragic suicide of Cutberto/Brad, who failed to become even an extra, coincides with the happy finale of the movie, in which the dispossessed are told to put on happy faces as they celebrate:

FABIOLA: This shot is really important . . . it's the final scene, in which Ricardo is now the owner of the *hacienda* . . . and he's now married to Yadira, so you all know that he is going to give the land back to the *pueblo*, meaning, to you. We need huge smiles, please, lots of happiness . . .

[32]

At this point, the two extras seat themselves among the audience, and the group as a whole becomes the object of scorn and blasphemy when they fail to comply with the directors' demand for happy faces and jubilation. To the extent that the Bichirs are able to establish a relationship with their spectators, the latter become complicit extras, joining in with jeers, vulgarities, and other signs of noncompliance and rebellion.²⁹

The phenomenon of audience complicity leads to the question of audience identity. What kind of spectator is drawn to Berman's play and why? To begin with, the dramatist cleverly used publicity and marketing as a first call. Large, flashy, well-designed posters dominated Mexico City's metro stations and bus stops, where they are most likely to catch the eye of the middle-class millions who use public transportation. The playful, visual configuration of the title intrigued, the large X hinting at the

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ The level of audience complicity varies from one performance to the next. The first performance I saw was not nearly as successful in engaging the audience as the one I attended several nights later. Of course, it is impossible to say whether it was the combination of brothers or simply the composition and mood of the audience on those particular nights.



Cover image from playbill for *eXtras*, Mexico City, 2003.

forbidden. Word leaked out that only two of the three famous Bichir brothers would act in each performance, with the result that one of them always acts as an extra-textual extra, awaiting his turn behind the curtain.³⁰ One cannot overlook the irony of having real-life movie stars play the role of two extras who ultimately decide to make a movie in which the extras will be the stars and the former stars will serve as extras. It is probably safe to say that as many spectators are drawn by the well-publicized image of the three Bichir brothers as by Berman's fame as a playwright, producer, and director. The publicity hype included not only these suggestive posters and large ads in cultural supplements, but also a much-delayed premiere and numerous post-premiere reviews, all positive, from such leading critics and renowned intellectuals as Olga Harmony and Carlos Fuentes. While some spectators went primarily to get a live, close-up look at the famous Bichir brothers, still others, like myself, were foreign extras (or *eXtranjeros*), drawn by Berman's established reputation as a clever, daring, and irreverent boat-rocker.

As a consciously playful and subversive text and a site for cultural resistance, *eXtras* corresponds to Victor Turner's concept of "liminoid performance," which in turn includes Clifford Geertz's two levels of play: shallow and deep.³¹ Shallow play involves those spectators who attend mainly in response to the star appeal of the

³⁰ Production assistant Héctor Chávez explained to me that while all three brothers are trained to play all of the roles, Bruno normally acts in each performance while his brothers, Demian and Odiseo, routinely flip a coin to see who will perform as the other extra. The fact that in real life they are well-known actors adds yet another level of irony to their performance as extras.

³¹ Carlson summarizes Geertz's theory and explains that liminoid performance offers "a site for social and cultural resistance and the exploration of alternative possibilities" (24).

Bichir brothers. They laugh at the antics of the extras, applaud their little uprising against the Hollywood producers, enjoy the ridiculization of Hollywood and by extension all things gringo, and leave the theatre without giving the event much further thought. Meanwhile, the inextricably playful nature of the piece, combined with the ironic and self-conscious utilization of traditional forms pertaining to the world of Hollywood as well as Mexican *carpa* (informal, usually urban, popular theatre), appeals to both levels of public. But the more competent audience perceives further levels of meaning, those of "deep play," which involve the playful critique of what might be termed a globalized world with a one-culture rule. This more intellectually sophisticated audience also recognizes that Cutberto's death, while tragic, serves as the catalyst for cultural resistance and that the final scene, in which José and Charlie pitch their script for a film to be titled . . . *Extras*, is not just a cute little metatheatrical trick, but a further and final carnivalesque form of cultural resistance and subversion.

In the handsome playbill distributed at the performance, Berman suggests that we all start at a sort of ground zero and see where we end up:

Silence. An empty stage. Anything could happen. [. . .] There is nothing more exciting than zero. Pure suspense: zero. [. . .] Let's say we are in the countryside of Morelos, today. This is our first agreement, our first mental convention. Let's suppose that two *eXtras* are working in a Hollywood film production. Let's accept that and more. Much more. Let's see how far we can go together: that is the challenge.

But is it really possible for all of us to arrive together at the same point when our backgrounds might be entirely different? A review of *eXtras* published in the *Miami Herald*, for example, would suggest that at least one spectator not only failed to have heard of either Marie Jones or her hit play *Stones*, but also failed to recognize the blatant critique of globalization, not to mention the use of Hollywood as a metaphor of cultural hegemony. Ironically, this misguided reviewer epitomizes the cultural ignorance that pervades Jones's and Berman's postmodern parodies of globalized culture.³²

While one could wonder what cows have to do with Mexican reality, much less with globalization, Berman adapts Jones's emphasis on them to convey and subvert the herd effect of globalized culture, a culture in which everyone acts (or should act) the same. Unlike Ireland, where cows dot the landscape and contribute significantly to the national economy and diet, in Mexico they are not a cultural icon, the basis of Mexico's economy, or even a very common sight. Yet, despite the apparent nontranslatability of these beasts, cows function as a metaphor for conformity and passive consumption. A flashback reveals that young Cutberto's dream was to grow up and have the best herd of cows in Morelos, but his dream ended when his father sold their land to foreign investors. At the age of eight, Cutberto reads aloud a short essay in which he inadvertently predicts his own fate as a cow: "Cows. Cows are big useful beasts. They are more useful than humans. [. . .] Cows are the business because many people live off of them and they don't bother you as long as you feed and milk them. [. . .] If I were a cow I would feel very useful" (37). The herd of extras is, after all, a bunch of placid locals who do not complain as long as they have food and water. Significantly, the text opens with a scene in which José and Charlie meet while standing in line at the

³² John Maxim, "Extras—Slapstick in spanglish." *Miami Herald*, Section C, Sunday 13 July 2003.

catering truck. The cruel irony of Cutberto's concept of usefulness plays out on the Hollywood set, where most of the extras' acting consists of shoveling cow manure while, in their not-so-fictitious role as dispossessed farmers, they await the return of their land. At times, the exasperated directors refer to the extras as cattle, threatening to use an electric prod when the promise of food, drink, and dollars fails to get them moving. Further reference is made to the herd effect in *eXtras* when young Cutberto predicts that after the new landowners get done replacing all the farm hands with machines, even the cows will have to leave. When his friend Felipe asks him where the cows will go, he responds simply, "I don't know, America" (31).

One aspect of Jones's text that required more than translation is the repeated use of the word *American*. The most logical Spanish translation, *americano*, is highly problematic, since it is considered throughout the Americas to be yet another example of US cultural appropriation. Berman adds to her adaptation a dialogue that comically conveys the lack of resolution to this persistent problem of terminology:

- JOSÉ: [. . .] I was in the United States.
 KARINA: Estados Unidos no.
 JOSÉ: No? Why not?
 KARINA: Because Mexico is also called "United States of Mexico."
 JOSÉ: All right, North America. Estados Unidos de Norteamérica.
 KARINA: No, because Mexico is a part of North America, just like Canada. Don't ever discriminate against Mexico, José.
 JOSÉ: OK, so what the hell do we call the United States?
 KARINA: Don't call it anything; they didn't get their name right; they don't have a name, OK? Use Spanish!
 JOSÉ: OK, then, I was in your nameless country . . .

[31]

Whatever that country might be called, it is undeniably considered the promised land, and just as cows follow one another in search of greener pastures, Mexicans have crossed the border, one after another, in search of that land. In this case, however, the promised land, ironically titled *The Quiet Valley*, is a mere illusion, a part of the big silver screen. Denied access to this celluloid illusion and even to the herd, Cutberto/Brad sees no alternative but suicide.

The Hollywood producers are not only ignorant of the local culture, but also insensitive to the needs of the local population, the majority of which works as extras in the film. The announcement of Cutberto/Brad's suicide at the end of act 1 is followed by Simón's directive: "And the gate is clear. We'll continue tomorrow at 6:00 all bathed and ironed" (29). Yet, despite their craving for food, drink, and dollars, the extras find themselves unable to go on with the show. The day of the funeral ironically coincides with the final shoot, in which the extras are to celebrate ecstatically the arrival of the new landowner and the long-promised return of their land. Their inability to put on a "happy face," along with the approaching clouds, forces the directors to break so that everyone can attend the boy's funeral. When filming resumes, Don Macario shows up drunk and the directors try to throw him off the set. After decades of considering himself indispensable, Don Macario is forced to acknowledge that he is just another member of the herd. Yet, his dignity prevails. In a symbolic act of cultural rebellion, he reminds the directors that they are standing on land once owned by his royal Nahua ancestors and walks off the set by his own free will. Don Macario's final act, much more deserving of Zapata's heritage than his former role as

an extra, inspires José to think beyond the box, beyond the herd, and to envision a different kind of movie: "Suppose that we are making a movie about a movie that is being filmed when a young man commits suicide . . . in other words, imagine that the stars in this movie become the extras in the other movie; then the extras become the stars . . . and then it becomes the story of a Brad who drowns himself and the story of Don Macario who leaves the set, and the story of the people of this town" (47). The starring role, however, will be granted to the cows, who will open and close the movie and literally overshadow the former stars:

- CHARLIE: So all you see is the countryside and the cows, every inch of the screen covered with cows . . . cows, just cows, and in the middle you see these tiny, little suckers all dressed up in their designer clothes.
 JOSÉ: Huge, dirty, REAL . . . enormous beasts . . . looking at you . . . wide shots.
 CHARLIE: Yeah, mid-range shots.
 JOSÉ: Yeah, close-ups.

[50]

At this point, José and Charlie close the play, heads down, hands behind their buttocks, mooing loudly and swaying like cows: center stage, in the starring role, no longer just a passive part of the herd.

The dominant image of the cows also serves to convey the idea of a watchful and pensive, albeit placid, eye. While commenting on the use of cows in the postmodern, parodic painting of Mark Tansey, Linda Hutcheon states: "who better [than a cow] to adjudicate the success of such 'bullish' realism and who better to symbolize ironically the 'innocent eye' assumed by mimetic theories of the transparency of representation."³³ Berman translates the cows to Mexican reality not as an icon of Mexican culture, but rather because, as the epitome of placidity, they cast an ironically innocent eye that underscores the double coding of the play as both reality and illusion. The transparency of illusion is also reflected in the huge silver screen that serves as backdrop and as a constant shimmering reminder of Hollywood and of the power of illusion. On a cultural level, the silver screen reflects the fact that the image of the Mexican, as we know it here in the US, is in large measure the product of the Hollywood screen, which has produced since the 1930s the all-too-familiar stereotypes of the Latin lover, the smolderingly sexy female, the border bandit, the lazy fieldworker, and, most recently, the border drug traffickers. The influence of Hollywood on what is perceived as Mexican extends as far as the language, as we see in a dialogue exchanged between José and Charlie:

- KARINA: Ustede han sufrido mucho queridos amigous míosssss.
 FABIOLA: The director says that that's great, Karina.
 [. . .]
 JOSÉ: Get outta here! If they told me that she was speaking Russian, I would believe it.
 CHARLIE: Well, I believed her. That's the way Mexicans talk in movies. I swear it's true. That's the way we talk in the movies that get seen out there. Hasta la vista amigou: Shwartzenegger [*sic*].
 JOSÉ: No problema: Traffic.
 [6; the humor conveyed through the use of Spanglish is untranslatable]

³³ Hutcheon, *Politics*, 99.

One of the many clever ads that have been used to publicize the play states, "Life is a Hollywood movie in which you and I are . . . extras," which suggests that our world image is produced and controlled by Hollywood and that the great majority of the world's population plays the role of extras, a role that requires the voiceless representation of a celluloid reality.³⁴ Those who fail to perform according to Hollywood standards are ejected from the set. Berman's stereotypical portrayal of Hollywood producers as insensitive, condescending, cultural cretins who chronically distort Mexican reality is, by extension, a critique of globalization, its lack of respect for otherness, and its push toward massive sameness.

Berman was faithful not only in her linguistic and cultural translation of Jones's dramatic script, but also in her translation of the text to the stage. The use of just two actors on an empty stage foregrounds the extraordinary acting skills of the performers and at the same time creates the sense that they are extras, or human leftovers. For two hours, they continuously move among a total of fourteen roles that include female and male characters, young and old, rural Mexicans and Hollywood producers, Spanish and English. The dizzying pace of the acting at once keeps the audience riveted to the stage and relays the pressure under which extras are forced to work and their overwhelming desire to please and ingratiate. José, for example, always responds with a loud "Okey!" to the directors' requests. The fragmented text creates the sense of a Hollywood set as the actors, extras, and directors move forward, back up, reshoot, and change locale, costume, and mood. With lightning speed and just a red bandanna and a red baseball cap, the two actors/extras switch from one character to the next. The bandanna moves from head to ear to neck to waist to hand as it signals a walkie-talkie, a worry rag, protection from the sun, etc. While relocating the scarf or cap, the two actors change languages, accent, and walking style to signal changes of identity. The speed with which they speak and move among roles not only dazzles (and exhausts) the audience, but also conveys the overwhelming—at times desperate—desire of the extras, the marginalized, to please, to earn a speaking role, and to fulfill their dream of living in "the quiet valley."

Berman scored not only with the Bichir brothers as her leading men, but also with Philippe Armand, arguably Mexico's most talented scenographer.³⁵ Colored lights wash the stage and create moods, as rolling visual images, such as bubbles, pastures, and passing clouds, project onto the silver screen. Free on this virtually empty stage, the Bichir brothers fit the bill for what Carlson terms the "new vaudevillians," who, while physically oriented, still "rely heavily upon language to provide an intellectual and often political or artistically self-reflexive depth to the physical display."³⁶ The unbelievably fast pace of their movement and dialogue at once reflects the virtuosity of this two-man show and the desperate desire of all extras, both textual and extra-textual, to fit in, stay in, and survive.

The extras' constant self-degradation operates paradoxically as a form of cultural resistance by making the audience even more aware of the power of the silver screen

³⁴ Back cover of Mexican theatre magazine, *Pasodegato* 1, n. 6 (2003).

³⁵ Philippe Armand's brilliant stage design and illumination were complemented by outstanding choreography (Ruby Tagle), coordination of sound and music (Daniel Hidalgo), and video projections (Pablo Corkidi and Gildo Ramírez).

³⁶ Carlson, 116–17.

to create illusions, both visual and psychological. The timing of the premiere of *eXtras* could not have been more opportune, for it coincided with the United States' declaration of war on Iraq, a war justified in large measure by hyped mass media reports of weapons of mass destruction. When the rest of the world was asked to join in and sign up as active but voiceless extras, Mexicans united in protest and declared a boycott on all US products. One of the actors, Bruno Bichir, explains in an interview with Myrra Yglesias, "The idea of globalization disturbs me in light of international events. I find it intolerable that the United States should decide what the world is like and what Mexicans are like."³⁷ Berman could not have chosen a better moment for the staging of such a scathing critique of globalization, a term that has become synonymous with US cultural, political, and economic dominance. While José and Charlie staged their own rebellion of sorts, proposing a play in which the Americans would serve as extras, Mexico as a country voiced its opposition to the war and struck back in the only way it could, by refusing to buy American products—that is, by refusing to buy into American culture or, by extension, US cultural politics. José and Charlie's film proposal is ludicrous, yet at the same time carnivalesque and symbolic in its inversion of the usual economic, political, and cultural order of things. As a whole, *eXtras* affords what Joseph Roach describes as "ways of thinking about how cultural productions at every level and from many locales dynamically interact."³⁸

The actors/extras of *eXtras* perform cultural identity, cultural marginalization, and cultural resistance. As Marvin Carlson notes, postmodern performance is concerned with the "desires, and even the visibility of those normally excluded by race, class, or gender from consideration by the traditional theatre or indeed by modern performance."³⁹ In this case, the concerns are doubly foregrounded through the self-reflexive performance of two actors playing the part of extras, a marginalized, anonymous class that extends well beyond the stage to the audience and to all those who do not belong to the dominant culture. Berman's translation/adaptation of an Irish play presents identity and culture as "constructed, relational, and in constant flux, with the porous or contested borders replacing centers as the focus of interest—because it is at these borders that meaning is continually being created and negotiated."⁴⁰ *eXtras* at once reflects the translatability of globalization and at the same time what Renato Rosaldo describes as "a world marked by borrowing and lending across porous national and cultural boundaries that are saturated with inequality, power and domination."⁴¹ As a translation and a cultural borrowing, *eXtras* at once embodies and performs the process of transculturation. It is not only a translation of *Stones*, but also a translation of the loss of cultural identity, both personal and national, inherent in the process of globalization. Nonetheless, while the performance ends with José and Charlie mooring and ruminating over their future, these extras have scored, albeit on a minor scale, by turning the Hollywood-style celebration of repossession into a Mexican-style funeral. As part of an intercultural performance, this funeral marks not only the death of Cutberto and his dreams of Hollywood, but also, albeit symbolically, that of US

³⁷ Yglesias.

³⁸ Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead. Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 183.

³⁹ Carlson, 144.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 188.

⁴¹ Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 45.

cultural domination. Charlie and José not only reappropriate and celebrate their native culture, but also subvert the dominant culture by conceiving a film project in which the cows/extras/marginal masses, symbolically at least, prevail. In the final analysis, *eXtras* is a translation/adaptation and not an original play. Berman's translation of cultural otherness, however, leads to the discovery of cultural sameness. *eXtras*, like *Stones in His Pockets*, performs culture(s) as one giant, made-for-Hollywood movie in which everyone but the US stars are cast (and treated) as extras. The box-office success and critical acclaim of *Stones* and *eXtras* suggest that both plays do more than simply cross linguistic and geographical boundaries and borders.⁴² Whereas the slapstick performance of two actors on a bare stage may seem like *teatro light* to those unable to move beyond shallow play, most audiences will recognize this intercultural performance of extras and extra-texts as a sign of our times; that is, a paradoxical performance of cultural uniqueness and shared humanity.

⁴² So far, *Stones* has been produced not only on Broadway and in other parts of the US, but also in England, Scotland, Australia, Iceland, Sweden, Poland, Germany, France, Israel, Japan, and Canada, among others. As if it were not already ironic enough that Jones's and Berman's bare-bones critique of Hollywood has played in big-ticket London, Broadway, and Mexico City theatres, plans are being made for a movie version of Jones's play.