

THEATER PREVIEW

El Brote and *Desvenar* explore supporting players and cultural archetypes

Argentina's *Compañía Criolla* and Mexico's *Kraken Teatro* make their North American debuts in *Destinos*.

by **Alejandro A. Riera**
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Roberto Peloni in *El Brote*, presented by Argentina's *Compañía Criolla* as part of the seventh *Destinos: Chicago International Latino Theater Festival*

Credit: Courtesy *Compañía Criolla*

You've seen them playing the soldier bringing an urgent message to the king or sent by the king to deliver a message (any of Shakespeare's plays); running down a rickety mountain made of cardboard, paper-mache, and wire screaming in Castilian Spanish "Automobile!" (George Bernard Shaw's *Man and Superman*); or as an elderly Italian couple on the way to their hotel room (Robert E. Sherwood's *Idiot's Delight*). They are the actors cast to play the thankless roles that help populate a playwright's world onstage. Had it not been for Tom Stoppard, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern would have been as forgotten and inconsequential as those who are here one fleeting moment, in front of you, and the next moment, *exeunt*.

But what of the actors who play these characters? What about their dreams, their ambitions? That is the question at the heart of *El Brote* from Argentina's *Compañía Criolla*, written and directed by company founder Emiliano Dionisi, which is receiving its North American premiere at the Den Theatre next weekend as part of the seventh [Destinos: Chicago International Latino Theater Festival](#), produced by the Chicago Latino

El Brote

10/2–10/5: Wed–Sat 8 PM; Den Theatre, 1331 N. Milwaukee, clata.org and thedentheatre.com, \$31 general, \$26 students/seniors, recommended 15+. In Spanish with English supertitles.

Roberto Peleri plays one of those actors in this one-man show: Beto, a Pirandellian character who begins to doubt his own reality as he shares with the audience his frustrations, backstage gossip, and even lines from classic plays. Peleri portrays dozens of characters in this 90-minute show—from characters straight out of the plays produced by the repertory company he works for to the fictional actors who play those characters, while Beto stands in the background waiting for his brief moment in the spotlight. It's a physically demanding role, which is why, according to *El Brote* producer and company cofounder Sebastián Ezcurra, he avoids booking daily, back-to-back performances of the play as much as possible.

“This is not a show that can be presented Tuesday to Sunday,” said Ezcurra during a recent Zoom interview in Spanish from Buenos Aires. “We can only program two shows per week due to the play’s physical requirements.”

“Roberto practically doesn’t speak before that evening’s performance. He is quiet all day. He drinks ginger tea and does everything you can think of to take care of your voice,” Ezcurra continued. “Besides being a great actor, he is also a great singer, having starred in musicals like *Shrek* and *Phantom of the Opera*. His voice projection is spectacular. He not only puts his entire body but his entire voice to work. It’s an exhausting job. In fact, Roberto always says that each performance feels like the World Cup final.”

The play was in development for a year; Dionisi presented it as a work-in-progress to theater students in the outskirts of Buenos Aires. But no matter how many changes Dionisi made to the play, he, Peleri, and the members of Compañía Criolla were concerned that *El Brote* could be seen as too self-referential, that only theater people would get it and most in the audience would feel left out. Then came opening night on February 13 of last year, at the 100-seat Teatro del Pueblo, Argentina’s first independent theater. They played to a packed house and the reviews *El Brote* received were overwhelmingly positive. After months at Teatro del Pueblo, Ezcurra had to secure a larger venue given the high demand for tickets.

“I am not going to lie to you: we were surprised,” said Ezcurra. “We didn’t think it could speak to so many people on that one weak aspect of being human: the feeling of frustration. We all have dreams, we all have wishes, and we all get frustrated and think that sometimes we don’t have the luck or we don’t get what we deserve or those opportunities pass us by.”

Under Dionisi’s direction the now 15-year-old company has given a rather eccentric, playful, contemporary shine to such classics as *Cyrano de Bergerac* (*Cyrano de más acá*), *The Comedy of Errors* (*La comedia de errores*), *Macbeth* (*Mabel, a Scottish Tragicomedy*, featuring two male actors in kilts performing all the roles), and *Romeo and Juliet* (*Pocket Romeo and Juliet*, where two academics attempt to conduct a master class on the classic tragedy).

Mexico’s Kraken Teatro, also making its U.S. premiere next weekend as part of Destinos with *Desvenar*, seems to share Compañía Criolla’s quirky, playful sensibility. Their most recent one-woman show, *Hombruna*, uses giant balloons to tell the story of an infamous serial killer who targeted elderly women in Mexico City; and in *Dios Juega Videojuegos y Yo Soy su Puto Mario Broz* (*God Plays Video Games and I Am His Damned Mario Broz*), the stage is a giant video game arcade where gods play with human nature.

Desvenar

10/3–10/5: Thu–Sat 7:30 PM; National Museum of Mexican Art, 1852 W. 19th St., clata.org, \$30, \$25 students/seniors. In Spanish with English supertitles.

Desvenar focuses on that fruit that is part of Mexicans' diet, one that gives that country's diverse cuisine its flavor: the chile. Written and directed by company founder Richard Viqueira, *Desvenar* explores the chile's symbolic role in shaping Mexico's identity—from its humor and music through its politics—via three representative characters: the Pachuco, the Cholo, and the Adelita, the archetypal woman warrior who fought during Mexico's revolutionary war.

“One is that immigrant who decides to leave because he doesn't feel represented by nor identifies with the culture and values that exist. He is also allergic to capsaicin, the active component found in chiles. Then there is the Mexican who returns because he misses the food, the music, the whole country. And then there's his wife, the Adelita, who stands for the large number of women who stay behind to raise the family and ends up being the head of the family,” explained Valentina Garibay, who plays the Adelita, during a Zoom interview in Spanish from Mexico City. The two other characters are played by Viqueira and Angel Luna.



Valentina Garibay as “the Adelita” in *Desvenar*, presented by Mexico’s Kraken Teatro as part of the seventh Destinos: Chicago International Latino Theater Festival

Credit: Courtesy Kraken Teatro

Like *El Brote*, *Desvenar* went through a yearlong process of development, rewrites and revisions, of trial and error, before it premiered in September 2019 at the Sala Xavier Villaurrutia in Mexico City. “If you asked me what our signature [as a theater company] is, that would be to work with freedom during the experimentation process. These are not plays that are assembled and ready within a month. Yes, there is a script and there’s that formal element of memorizing your lines. But the play’s structure changed from its premiere to its second outing: parts were removed, others were modified. *Desvenar* is a play that tries to dialogue with the spectators, within the realms of the Mexican albur [word games and double entendres common in Mexican comedy and colloquial Mexican speech],” explained Garibay.

“We never think of the chile as this symbol that represents us because we use it so often,” Garibay added.

“When Richard started his research, he assumed that he would find so much information on the Chile’s influence on Mexican culture and, surprisingly, he didn’t find as much as he imagined.”

The fact that Kraken Teatro are making their U.S. debut in a city with the second largest Mexican population in the country and where, according to a recent study by the [UIC Great Cities Institute](#), Mexican families are the majority in 15 of its neighborhoods, fills Garibay and the rest of the company with anticipation.

“We don’t know if they are children of immigrants, if they speak Spanish, if they don’t speak Spanish. The way in which each family decides to transmit their culture is different. There will be people [in the audience] who have lived there for 20 years or more, people who have lived there for a short period of time, who have the possibility to return, and those who have decided not to,” said Garibay. “We are looking forward to seeing how this play will allow us to engage this audience in a dialogue. We believe that we will be able to make this connection. We hope this will also allow us to engage with other communities in different parts of the United States.” 📺

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