

Rodolfo Usigli

Apostle of Mexican Drama

The Walter Havighurst
Special Collections Library
Miami University

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Rodolfo Usigli



The Man and his Work

Rodolfo Usigli was born in Mexico City in 1905, the son of immigrant parents. His father's death and the difficulties of life in Mexico during the Revolution forced him to leave school and find work at an early age, but his determination to become an intellectual and playwright focused his efforts to educate himself. In 1935 he received a Rockefeller scholarship to study drama direction and composition at Yale University. Returning to Mexico he taught drama at the university and worked for the Institute of Fine Arts, reviewed plays, translated poetry and drama from both English and French, and wrote his own plays, including his signature piece *El Gesticulador* (*The Impostor*). He had reasonable commercial success with some of his plays but, generally, his controversial treatment of political and social themes did not find favor with a rather provincial and intolerant public. Despite his limited success, he believed strongly in the role of theater to reflect and influence the character of a nation and sought to develop a truly Mexican dramatic style.

Unable to establish himself as a dramatist and encountering political opposition, Usigli entered the

diplomatic corps and served for over two decades in France, Lebanon and Norway. During this "diplomatic exile" he continued to write essays and drama, completing his great trilogy of Mexican history, the *Corona* plays (*Corona de fuego*, *Corona de luz*, and *Corona de sombra*). Throughout his career he was also able to meet and correspond with European and American artists and intellectuals such as Henri René Lénormand, Jean Cocteau, T.S. Eliot, George Bernard Shaw, Bruno Traven, Clifford Odets and Elmer Rice. Not a bad record of intellectual and artistic accomplishment for someone who never attended college and had to complete the last two years of secondary school education taking night courses normally reserved for workers and the poor. Upon his return to Mexico in 1972, Usigli was honored with Mexico's highest literary award, the National Prize for Literature, and acknowledged as the founder of modern Mexican theater. He died in 1979. The "Centro Nacional de Investigación, Documentación e Información Teatral "Rodolfo Usigli," (CITRU)," the most important center dedicated to the study of the dramatic arts in Mexico bears his name.

The Collection

The Rodolfo Usigli Archive was acquired by Miami University in 1995 and is housed in the Walter Havighurst Special Collections Library. Since its acquisition the Archive materials have been rehoused in acid-free containers. A preliminary survey of the collection has been completed and plans are underway for the preparation of an online catalog record and finding aid for researchers.

The Archive is the definitive research collection relating to Usigli's life and career. Stored in more than 70 boxes with multiple files, with close to a quarter of a million items, it includes correspondence, both manuscript and typed drafts of original plays and translations of works by other artists, personal, theatrical, and diplomatic photographs, essays, books, playbills, posters, theses written about Usigli, awards, 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 joint 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 "Manifiesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art!," both produced as a result of the visit by Breton.

The Dedication of the Collection

The dedication of the Usigli Archive at the Walter Havighurst Special Collections Library in November 1996 was part of Miami University's campus-wide, year-long "Celebration of Latin America" in 1996-1997. It was a major event in a series of interrelated public programs which were meant to highlight Mexican culture and, more specifically, to celebrate Rodolfo Usigli's artistic and literary accomplishments. In conjunction with the library dedication there was an international symposium on Usigli, a mainstage production of Dr. Ramón Layera's English translation of Usigli's *The Impostor*, a semester-long library exhibit from the Usigli

Archive, and English and Spanish dramatic readings of Usigli's *Corona de sombra (Crown of Shadows)*. Señor Alejandro Usigli, youngest son and literary executor of Rodolfo Usigli, spent two weeks on the campus helping with the cataloging process of the archive, meeting with faculty and students, and assisting in the production of *The Impostor*.

The Walter Havighurst Special Collections Library

at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, houses rare, unique, and valuable books, manuscripts and other research materials. Collections include the 1841 Collection, extant books from the University's library in 1841; the Samuel F. Covington Collection of 19th century America, focusing on the Old Northwest Territory and the Ohio River Valley; the Edgar W. and Faith King Collection of Juvenile Literature. There are a number of literary and subject collections including Matthew Prior, the William Dean Howells Collection, and the Andre L. de Saint-Rat Collection of Russian History, Literature and Art. Manuscript collections include: the Rodolfo Usigli Archive, the Samuel W. Richey Collection of the Southern Confederacy, the Robert C. Schenck Papers, the James T. Farrell Collection, the William Holmes McGuffey Papers, and the Eldon C. Hill Collection on Hamlin Garland. Special Collections also houses the Spiro Peterson Center for Defoe Studies and the Native American Women Playwrights Archive (NAWPA). Acquisitions in Special Collections are made possible through gifts and donations.

The Walter Havighurst Special Collections

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