

Xavier Velasco: Guardian Devil

By Jacqueline Adams

Xavier Velasco, one of Mexico's foremost young novelists, strode into the Center for Latin American Studies all amused blue eyes and Beatles' hair, wearing an orange shirt, bright red shoes and yellow socks peppered with the word "YES!" Preparing to read from his latest work, a collection of short stories titled *El Materialismo Histórico: Fábulas cutrefactas de avidez & revancha*, he suddenly stretched his long, lanky body out on the table in the front of the room and began to act out the story, referring to text entered in his cell phone. He had become one of the characters in the novel, a therapy patient on the couch.

After this horizontal soliloquy, which left his audience in stitches, Velasco took to his feet and discussed his trajectory as a writer. Although he studied humanities in college, he had never seen writing as a career. Rather than a vocation, writing was a game, "a secret vice," which began for him as a child conceiving scenes and situations and putting them to paper.

Velasco spent years working various jobs to pay the rent — going from "rock journalism to the nocturnal chronicle, from advertising to Hell, and from Hell to the novel" — before he began writing full-time. Disillusioned with his career as an advertising copywriter and realizing that a novel would require his complete attention, Velasco persuaded a friend to support him financially so that he could give up his job and write. This set-up left him feeling both slightly fraudulent and jubilant at the idea that he was now, at last, a professional writer.

The checks he received from his patron each month, however, began to "burn his hands" as he was unable to produce any writing. Late one night, wracked with guilt, he drove out into the streets of Mexico City in search of a story. At 3:30 a.m. he saw a beautiful woman on the side of the road. He rolled down the window. "Do you speak English?" she asked. He said he did,

but also Spanish. A Russian, she wanted to stick to English.

She offered him an apple. He offered to drive her back to her hotel. As he followed her directions, he couldn't help but notice that they were not heading for the sort of neighborhood that usually harbors tourists; it was more the type of place where one might expect to be mugged or killed. He almost bolted when she invited him in, but, determined to live out the story, he followed her upstairs. She left the room for a few minutes "to fetch some hot water," leaving him time to panic, certain that this was a mafia set up and that a band of Russians would leap into the room at any moment, rob him of the little he had and cut his throat. Just as he had decided to escape, she returned, offering instant soup. It didn't look enticing, containing as it did a lump of melting cream cheese. But when she fed him the soup from her own lips, it became the most delicious broth he had ever tasted. She suddenly confessed, to his disappointment, that she would normally charge for what she was doing. The outlines of his first novel, *Diablo Guardián*, had begun to take shape.

In order to write the novel, Velasco felt that it was important to learn about women: "I dedicated myself to studying the soul of women," he explained. Another of his jobs — working with beauty queens — proved very handy for this purpose. He took notes as they talked for the cameras, listening to the rhythm of their speech and the words they used. As part of his effort to create a realistic woman's voice, Velasco started a Web site called "Virginia Wet." Initially the people who responded to the site did not appear to be convinced that he was a woman. However, when women began to write in seeking advice from "Virginia," he realized that he was getting it right.

Velasco's research paid off. *Diablo Guardián*, winner of the 2003 Premio Alfaguara, explores



Photo by Dora del Ramos.

the love-hate relationship between Mexicans and Americans, through the story of Violetta, a Mexican prostitute who speaks the language of Mexico City. Mexicans like to say they are “pure,” explained Velasco, that is, not influenced by the United States, yet Americanisms permeate their lives: they vacation in the United States and mix English words with Spanish in their speech. As this mix is not considered entirely acceptable in Mexico, Velasco wanted to be sure to use it in his novel. He also wanted to play with rhythm, an interest he developed while working as a rock critic. When writing about music, he tried to transmit the experience, the rhythm itself, through language, an effort which inspired him to seek out writers who paid attention to rhythm in their work.

The tough-talking Violetta traverses the physical as well as the linguistic landscapes of both the U.S. and Mexico in her quest to become an American, a New Yorker, and to escape the *arriviste* environment of her upbringing. At the age of 15, she steals money from her family and the Red Cross and winds her way north

from the Distrito Federal to New York City. Having arrived, desperate for money, she turns to prostitution. In the passage Velasco read, Violetta reflects humorously on what it is to be a “puta,” recalling that as a little girl, she had often wondered what it would be like. She remembers the disapproving attitude of the nuns at her school, her confessions to the priest about wishing to try her hand at the profession and the strict frugality of her father who would try to force the household to use only cold water in order to save money. “I can sympathize with Violetta,” Velasco laughed, “having been a puta myself during my days at the ad agency.”

Xavier Velasco is the author of *Diablo Guardián*, for which he won the Premio Alfaguara in 2003, and *El Materialismo Histórico: Fabulas cutrefactas de avides & revancha*. He spoke at CLAS on September 15, 2005.

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Xavier Velasco makes himself comfortable during his talk at CLAS.