

Enrique Buenaventura's *Los papeles del infierno*

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Enrique Buenaventura's dramatic miscellanea, *Los papeles del infierno*,¹ was first presented by the Teatro Experimental de Cali in 1968.² Buenaventura has called this collection of one-act plays "a testimony of twenty years of violence and undeclared civil war" (prologue). The background for this group of playlets is Colombia from the mid-forties to the mid-sixties. During that time Colombia was politically divided between the Liberals and the Conservatives. These two groups often found themselves engaged not only in political conflict, but also in actual physical conflict. This period in Colombian history is depicted as a bloody and violent time of unrest whose end product is evident even today. None of these one-acts is based on a particular historical event, but Buenaventura has made use of an atmosphere of social struggle in order to show the effects that *la violencia* had on the Colombian community.

The first sketch, "La maestra," concerns the teacher in a small town who refused to live after she was raped by her father's murderers. She is dead, and speaks directly to the audience while scenes of her funeral take place around her. Several people address the body and ask why she rejected their efforts to make her live again. Finally there is a flashback of the scene which takes place just prior to the rape. Some soldiers interrogate the teacher's father and accuse him of taking advantage of the townspeople while he was mayor. Although it does not change what happened, the teacher now answers the questions that her father was unable to answer.

The teacher immediately introduces herself to the audience and states her condition when she says: "Estoy muerta. Nací aquí, en este pueblo" (p. 1). As each new character enters she also introduces him as he asks why she did not respond to his efforts to revive her will to live. She does answer each question, but she directs her responses to the audience, not to the questioner because there is "ninguna relación directa entre ella y los personajes de esas escenas" (p. 1). An example of this technique is seen below:

La maestra: Me trajeron al anochecer. Venía Juana Pasambú, mi tía.

Juana Pasambú: ¿Por qué no quisiste comer?

La maestra: Yo no quise comer. ¿Para qué comer? Ya no tenía sentido comer. Se come para vivir y yo no quería vivir. Ya no tenía sentido vivir. (Pausa) Venía Pedro Pasambú, mi tío. (p. 1)

"La maestra" contains a unifying symbol, that of a river. Buenaventura's river is actually a road which turns into "un río lento de barro rojo" (p. 1). The soldiers marched into town on this road, and when they left, the red clay was once again turned into a muddy, blood-red river. The road symbolizes the violence experienced by the town. During the dry season the red dust covers everything without really affecting the town. The mud of the rainy season penetrates everywhere and touches everyone as did the violence the soldiers brought to the town.³ Ironically the soldiers' reason for entering the town was to set up and organize free elections. They killed the teacher's father and started the river of blood in the town because to them he was a hindrance to their intended progress. The soldiers then left by the same road on which they had entered.

The second of the brief plays included in *Los papeles del infierno* is "La tortura," which concerns an excerpt from the lives of a torturer and his wife. The wife shows her disgust for her husband's work, so he retaliates by accusing her of having various lovers, including his boss. During the course of the argument he reveals that he had had a prisoner that day who would not confess. His wife then becomes the prisoner he was unable to "break" and he vents his rage on her. He screams for her to "confess" and he reveals an obsession with the sad eyes of his prisoner, which now merge with those of his wife. There is a blackout, and when the lights come back up three detectives are in the torturer's house. Through these men the audience learns that Juan, the torturer, has killed his wife and torn out her eyes.

This sketch demonstrates how an atmosphere of violence affected a torturer. Until this point he had been able to separate his profession from his private life because all of the people with whom he had been in contact broke under the pressure of violence as represented by the torturer and his profession. But when he was confronted by a prisoner who would not confess, he was no longer able to cope with the reality of his situation and instead, allowed it to conquer him. Buenaventura illustrates here that one cannot live a double existence where violence, in the case of "La tortura," the torturer, is present. If violence occurs and is condoned on the governmental level, it will only be a matter of time until it penetrates the private life of an individual. Violence creates an infectious atmosphere which soon becomes a social epidemic: violence will become the rule rather than the exception.

"La autopsia," the third play of the collection, presents the struggle found between youth and the older generation concerning their respective desires to reform and to survive within the social structures.⁴ The action takes place in a doctor's office where the doctor and his wife discuss the false autopsy he is to perform that day. His false autopsies consist of a verification of an individual's cause of death which always agrees with the opinion of the police, whether it be correct or not. The only difference between this autopsy and any other is that

it is to be performed upon the body of his murdered son. His son had been a political prisoner because "no podía soportar la injusticia" (p. 1). Although the parents are not able to condemn their son and his ideas, they are willing to go through with the false autopsy in order that the doctor may keep his job. As soon as he is notified that his assistant will perform the autopsy and sign the false statement, the doctor's attitude towards his superiors among the police takes an optimistic turn. Before the notification he considers that his job is an obligation, a mere social security, and that it is his duty to discharge it in order to prove that he was not contaminated by his son's political beliefs, thereby hoping to retain his post. After the notification he comments: "Siempre me tuvieron mucha estimación all" (p. 5). His wife even adds that they are "muy amables" (p. 5), although a few moments before she had urged her husband to resign because he was expected to perform this autopsy as usual. The doctor is then grateful to the system which has relieved him of the responsibility of choosing between his position and compromising himself—or compromising the reputation of his only son.

In "La autopsia" Buenaventura considers the older generation a contributing factor in the continuation of the violence because they accept the system which upholds it.⁵ He does this symbolically as well as thematically. The symbol here is a missing button. The doctor has lost one of the buttons from his coat and his wife replaces it with one that is similar. He fears that people will notice the difference. For the doctor this odd button represents public opinion⁶ and the mark his son's reputation has left on him. Before he was excused from the autopsy, he found the unmatched button suitable. Although his son was socially unacceptable, like an odd button, he questions the performance of his duty as he questions the wearing of the button. At that point the doctor still has some compassion for his son and finds it difficult to reject him totally; in fact he is capable of resigning his position for the sake of his son's beliefs and reputation. Later when he finds out that he may keep his post, he worries about the button and insists that it be changed, because "la gente se fija" (p. 6). He loses all compassion for the memory of his dead son. He concerns himself solely with what others may say about him.

The next one-act, "The Dream," consists of five separate scenes, each with three male characters. In each scene two men watch while the third sleeps. When the third man awakens in the first scene, he places a yoke on the first two men. In the second scene, the third man awakens and orders the second one to kill the first. The next scene shows the third man force the first and second men to parade the yoked men of the first scene around the stage. The first and second men are then ordered to shoot the yoked men. The third man removes the yoke and places it on the remaining two. In the fourth scene the first two men place the yoke on themselves and chase away the third man. The fifth scene consists of the first two men watching over the third man who has been kidnapped.

One of the most obvious characteristics found in "The Dream" is the use of repetitious elements. First one notices the similarities in the action and characters found in each of the five scenes. Each scene consists of three men in which the first two watch over the sleep of the third. This is not the only similarity; one

also notes similarity of dialogue. The conversation between the first man and the second man are almost identical in scenes one, two, and four:

SCENE ONE	SCENE TWO	SCENE FOUR
First: He snores like a pig.	First: He snores like a pig.	First: He snores like a man with his belly full.
Second: That's all he is.	Second: That's all he is.
First: How many things had to happen before we realized	First: How many things had to happen before we realized	Second: How many things had to happen before we finally realized
Second: He had to kill us.	Second: And how many times the same things had to happen over and over again.	First: He had to kill us a good many times. (pp. 12-13)
First: We had to die —not once, but often. (p. 11)	First: He had to kill us. Second: We had to die . . . repeatedly. (p. 11)	

The idea of dying repeatedly is quite prominent in this playlet, as may be observed in the above dialogue. The repetition symbolizes the idea of the different variations of death present in "The Dream." The first type is that of the third man killing the first two, symbolized by placing the yoke on them. This act of dehumanization signifies spiritual death. The second variation occurs when the second man's killing the first is an example of betrayal—thus death by a trusted companion. The last and most important type of death is placing the yoke on oneself, as in the fourth scene. In this one-act play death evolves from a spiritual death caused by an outside force to a self-imposed death.

Although "The Dream" contains many repetitious elements, it is by no means circular. Through these five scenes Buenaventura has shown the trajectory of the reign of violence. This can be seen in the evolution from the first scene in which a third person forces his will on two others in order to humiliate them, then mutual betrayal, even the example of two men betraying themselves. The yoke, then, symbolizes the dehumanization brought about by the violence in Colombia. At first the humiliation is forced on the people, but then it is generally accepted. The victims in these situations show no resistance, but rather become so saturated by it, and so immune to it, that they place the yoke upon themselves, and willingly submit to violence. This can best be seen in the fourth scene when the second man says that "he killed us with our own hands" (p. 13), and the first answers simply, "that was where his power lay" (p. 13). The fifth scene, then, shows the result of the evolution of the violence: total absurdity and denial of reality, along with a desire to return to an innocent unborn state. In this scene the two men tell the third that his relatives did not send the ransom; therefore

he must die. When the victim asks why, he hears only the illogical explanation that "that's the way it's always been," and "that's the way it has to be" (p. 14). He cannot reconcile himself to such an absurd explanation so "he lies down in the position of a fetus and desperately looks for sleep" (p. 14).

One cannot ignore the double meaning of the word "dream" in this play. On one hand the "dream" is a kind of Utopian perfection, the goal of the violence, a goal that is never realized. The violence in Colombia was the means through which the people hoped to achieve some sort of ideal state. In the second scene the first two state that all they had were their "bodies and the dream" (p. 12). At one time each person had his own dream, for which he would suffer the dehumanization afflicting him. But this dream did not remain an idea controlled by the individual, instead, it becomes a "boss's dream" (p. 13). A political boss has realized the collective potential of the people's dreams, so he appropriates them for his own purposes. The *caudillo* sees what he can gain for himself by deceiving the people and misusing their "dreams." Those who suffer from the results of the violence no longer know why it exists, and they have no control over it. Subsequently, the dream becomes a symbol for the cause of the violence, and for *caudillo* power, rather than the *end* to be reached through it. The kidnap victim's family gained their wealth by fulfilling their dream at the expense of others. Since the victim had slept and dreamed, he had to die, because "the dawn hasn't broken yet" (p. 14). In the minds of his kidnapers, the young man represents the violence brought about by the "dream," even though the young man himself probably had no direct connection with it. He is to be sacrificed because the new morning still has not arrived when one can face reality instead of an unattainable dream.

"La orgía," the next playlet of the series, takes place at the residence of an old lady and her mute son. With gestures, the son accuses his mother of stealing the money he has earned. She denies this and the mute son exits. The beggars begin to arrive who participate in the orgy that takes place on the thirtieth of each month. As each enters, he dresses up to play a role as one of the old prostitute's former lovers. After this game they are to eat and drink, but on this occasion they are not allowed to eat. The beggars complain that each month their portions have gradually been more and more reduced; they rebel against La Vieja and kill her. They decide to search for the money everyone says she has stolen from her son and hidden. When they see the mute returning, they leave. He looks at the dead body of his mother and makes a gesture to the audience that indicates "why?"

Through this absurd scene, Buenaventura presents the decadent society that exists in Colombia today as a result of the reign of violence. An interpretation suggests that La Vieja represents Colombia, and her entourage of "suitors" symbolize the four oligarchies of Colombian society.

The first *mendigo* plays the role of Jacobo, a wealthy lover who takes La Vieja to the theatre. The problem of this masquerade is that the beggar has tuberculosis, and it disgusts the old woman. The illness not only affects the *mendigo*, but also the aristocracy Jacobo represents. La Vieja worries that he may stain her clothes when he spits up blood, as the aristocracy caused the spilling of blood throughout Colombia during the reign of violence.

The second *mendigo* removes his rags to reveal the striped clothes of a convict. For the orgy he wears a velvet overcoat over this outfit. His first action is to ask for more money since he lives farther away than before and must take the bus. La Vieja says she cannot pay anymore and still continue the orgies. The beggar says, "eso es explotación" (p. 9), when in reality it is he who is exploiting La Vieja. The second beggar represents the politicians who cover up their criminal acts and indulgences and accuse others of what they themselves have done.

In this charade the third *mendigo* plays the role of El Coronel. He lost one of his legs fighting against the Liberals; therefore, he feels that he is more valuable than the others and should, accordingly, be paid more. He symbolizes the third oligarchy in Colombian society, that of the military. El Coronel, like La Vieja, is someone who revels in past glories, although he is a cripple and unable to repeat them. He stands for the decadence of the military institution of Colombia, weakened by *La violencia*.

The fourth oligarchy, the Church, is represented by La Enana who enters saying "¡viva yo!" (p. 14). La Enana is dressed in the robes of a bishop and emphasizes that she is "al lado del Gobierno" (p. 16). In Latin, she blesses the meal that is never eaten, and she urges La Vieja to allow them to eat, since "Cristo repartió los panes y los peces y los frijoles y arepas" (p. 17). La Enana is afraid that La Vieja will discontinue the tradition of the orgy; therefore, she kills her, "biting the hand that fed her." Of course La Enana remains a good Christian and absolves her victim.

Through "La orgía" Buenaventura has shown how the oligarchies in an attempt for self-survival will destroy Colombia. El Mudo represents the masses in Colombia, their "silent majority." Through the years they have been exploited by the government for the purposes of the oligarchies. As the mute does nothing to change what happened to his mother, neither do the people of Colombia do anything to change what is happening to them—they all stand back and ask "why?"

One of the more interesting technical aspects of "La orgía" is found in a scene using theatre within theatre. Traditional roles are reversed when La Vieja and Jacobo pretend to be attending a performance but are in actuality observing the real audience. La Vieja says that the actors are merely presenting their own boring lives, and she and Jacobo gossip about all those who attend. Ironically, the comments they make concerning the banal life on stage really refer to the life style of the aristocracy; in other words, they are watching their own lives.

The sixth play of *Los papeles del infierno* is "El menú"⁷ which deals with the one day each year set aside for the glorification of the beggars so that the rest of society will not have to concern itself further with the matter. El Secretario puts it this way: "El Círculo ha resuelto consagrar este día del año a distintos actos de solidaridad. Por la mañana desayunan con los tuberculosos. Muy sencillo. Así la gente puede olvidar esas cosas el resto del año y sabe que hay un día especial consagrado a eso" (p. 166). On this day the beggars are disinfected and required to change clothes. They are to attend a banquet given for "their" candidate, after which they receive the scraps from the meal. But on this occasion they do not

receive as much food as promised. The beggars resent the fact that the candidate eats all the food he can; even so, they adhere to the rules of the day.

The candidate has been chosen from the lower classes in order to make the beggars feel that they too can achieve great heights—that the system is, after all, a “círculo abierto” (p. 176). The candidate does not run for any office in particular, but rather is used mainly as a figurehead. His only duties are those he will perform this day. The disgruntling truth is that the candidate does not resemble anything human. He wears “una máscara impersonal” (p. 178) and his only talent is for making “gestos de político profesional” (p. 178). This candidate is a substitute; originally the brother of the beggar, El del carrito, was to be the candidate. After the banquet is finished and the officials for the day have left, the beggars attack the candidate and remove his mask. Much to their surprise, they do not find the brother they expected, but rather a revolting mass which resembles “los ahogados de tres días” (p. 188) or “un cadáver entre verdolaga” (p. 188).

Much of the action of the play centers around the candidate's training. La Mujer-Hombre takes charge of his education in the finer things, directing him, for example: “mastique con la boca cerrada” (p. 180); “para el omelette se usan estos cubiertos” (p. 183); and most importantly, “no vomite” (p. 185). The candidate must learn to eat in the proper manner, even though he is never able to utter a word. The candidate's appearance and his ability to do things properly are more important than any political platform. The framework of the political system found in “El menú” cloaks the illogical and absurd actions contained within the system.

Within “El menú” one finds a highly structured hierarchy of rules and regulations, an “espiral de jerarquías” (p. 176), that govern the ceremony. Circularity is of great importance in this one-act play. Buenaventura has created in “El menú” a circular society that is “una política convenida a nivel de círculos y centros” (p. 175). “El menú” presents a circular, rather than the normal linear, hierarchy of class-structured society. There are four defined circles of which “la vida se compone” (p. 177). Of these four, the red circle is life, the black death, the yellow melancholy, and the fourth (no color given) is jealousy.

The circular structures are not only found within the play, but “El menú” itself is circular. The work starts with the *mendigos* who march in singing “La Canción de la Muñeca” (p. 159). After the beggars' entrance through the audience, a *niño* appears to sing his song. This boy is chased away and exits through the audience where he begs for money. After the candidate has been carried away, the beggars, too, exit through the audience, once again singing “La Canción de la Muñeca.” When the stage is empty, the young boy returns to sing his song. “El menú” ends when the boy goes out through the audience and asks alms of the spectators, just as at the beginning of the play.

Another example of the structural aspects of “El menú” is found in the regimented ceremony leading up to the banquet. El Secretario is in charge of the ritual, aided by two *criados* and El Metre. The ceremonies begin with the arrival of El Cocinero, and as he enumerates the food he has brought for the feast, he displays it. As he names a dish, the name is repeated by the others present:

El Cocinero: ¡Langostinos!
 Los Mendigos: (en coro) ¡Langostinos!
 El Metre: ¡Langostinos!
 El Secretario: ¡Langostinos! (p. 164)

This scene gives a military or regimented atmosphere to this play. A similar scene occurs when El Secretario and a *criado* prepare the materials for disinfecting the beggars. This scene is especially reminiscent of presurgical preparations:

El Secretario: Atomizador grande.
 Criado 1: Listo.

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 El Secretario: Atomizador pequeño.
 Criado 1: Listo. (p. 166)

The concept of “tendrá que cumplir el reglamento” (p. 172) is repeated many times in “El menú” and is important throughout the play. The banquet and the initiation of the candidate must follow strict rules, because that is part of the system. The candidate must go through four *etapas*, or stages, in order to make himself worthy of his position. Each stage of his training has its corresponding ceremony. The first *etapa* begins when El Metre serves the first course while the beggars hum a Gregorian chant; and at the same time, El Secretario places the first *cojín* on the candidate’s shoulders. This ceremony is repeated two more times, with two more courses and two more cushions. After the candidate completes, or merely survives, the third stage, the same ceremony occurs—without the food. The ritual is accelerated “como si realmente corriera el riesgo de estallar” (p. 185), and then El Secretario makes the official announcement that “el círculo ha lanzado a las alturas un hombre nacido de la gleba” (p. 185). When the ceremony has ended, the candidate is left behind and must be retrieved.

Another element that adds to the atmosphere of ceremony and ritual in “El menú” is that of religion and its corresponding rituals. Buenaventura has used El Fakir and La Iniciada as the representatives of a religious world. So that La Iniciada will agree to be disinfected, El Fakir tells her “es la comunión” (p. 168); then she complies. The religious aspects of “El menú” extend beyond these two token characters. In the opening pages, Buenaventura indicates that the table is to be set by two of the servants in the manner of “dos sacerdotes arreglando el altar” (p. 161). The making of the candidate is compared to an “apoteosis que es, al mismo tiempo, sacrificio del candidato” (p. 179).

Although “El menú” presents a highly structured framework, the action within this logical structure is totally absurd. What good is the initiation of the candidate if, as El Fakir says, “todavía tenemos hambre . . . y miedo” (p. 188). One day a year dedicated to beggars does not relieve their miserable condition. When La Mujer-Hombre leaves, following the ceremony, she indicates that the beggars have not been helped; they are still in “el círculo de la miseria” (p. 186).

Through “El menú” Buenaventura has shown the absurdity of the Colombian political system. The system has the appearance of order and organization, but it is entirely superficial. The framework *is* the system, and nothing exists within

it because it wreaks its own destruction. This can be seen in the opening song which foreshadows the fate of the candidate. "La Canción de la Muñeca" tells of the dismemberment of a doll resembling the candidate, "reducido a una masa oscura" (p. 187)—i.e., the dismemberment of Colombia as a result of *la violencia*. On this level one sees the candidate, Colombia, as having become an unimportant element of its own political system. Although the parts that comprise Colombia will destroy it, in "El menú" Buenaventura has offered a possible cure for this social disease as he sees it. The *niño* who sings "Yo soy el vengador / todo de negro / en mi caballo blanco" (p. 189) is Colombia's possible salvation. Like the candidate the boy is a beggar; and again like the candidate who is a black mass, the boy is dressed in black. The only difference between the two is that like a storybook hero the *niño* rides a white horse. By using a beggar, Buenaventura has shown that the hope for Colombia lies within the lower classes. One should note here that the "hero" is "todo de negro" rather than "todo de blanco" like the usual storybook hero. This may suggest that the answer for Colombian society is a political system usually thought of in unfavorable rather than ideal terms—perhaps a marxist system favored by Buenaventura where the class structures as presented in *Los papeles del infierno* do not exist. Even considering these possibilities, one must remember the circular nature of "El menú," and ask himself if the *niño* will be able to break the vicious cycle which drove him away earlier in the play.

"El menú" and "La orgía" have many characteristics in common. Both plays center around an absurd ritual representing Colombian society. In each play, the beggars must change clothes and personalities in order to take part in the ceremonies. The beggars in "El menú" have a role comparable to that of El Mudo in "La orgía"; they do nothing to change what they do not like. When El del Carrito suggests they attack the others at the banquet when no one is looking, his companions reject the idea, since "uno tiene que contentarse con su suerte" (p. 171) and "ocupe su lugar, si quiere sobrevivir" (p. 183). Both of these plays involve the audience in the action. La Vieja and Jacobo attend the theatre, exchanging roles with the audience. In "El menú" the entrances are made through the audience and the beggars are concerned that "el público está mirando" (p. 160).

Although these plays can be considered separately, together they more effectively present the evolution of *la violencia* in Colombia. Buenaventura shows the effects of the violence on the people of Colombia during the time it was prevalent, as in "La maestra," "La autopsia," and "La tortura." The next stage of the evolution is a psychological one as exemplified in "The Dream." "La orgía" and "El menú" present the type of society that has developed as a result of the violence in Colombia.

The picture of Colombian society that Enrique Buenaventura paints in *Los papeles del infierno* is a bleak one. He uses the epilogue to sum up his thoughts on Colombian society today. In the last scene of the collection two oligarchs enter walking on their hands. They comment on how everything "is upside down, . . . completely turned around" (p. 21). Because of the violence, Colombian society has become the polar opposite of a Utopian community where all the parts work together for the good rather than the destruction of the whole. Colombia has

been presented as a society filled with handicapped people such as Tobías el Tuerto in "La maestra," the one-legged beggar in "La orgía," and La Manca and La Tuerta in "El menú." These types are an obvious side effect of the violence, but they also represent the people of Colombia today who are not only physical, but mental or psychological cripples as well, incapable of changing their lot in life. Enrique Buenaventura shows this negative side of Colombian society in order that his public see the ills which surround them and be motivated to change them.

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Notes

1. At one time or another the following plays have been considered components of *Los papeles del infierno*: "La maestra," "La autopsia," "La requisa," "La tortura," "El entierro," "La orgía," "El menú," and "The Dream." Because of difficulties obtaining texts, only the following can be used for this study: "La maestra," "La autopsia," "La tortura," and "La orgía" all in typescript; "El menú" in *Teatro actual latinoamericano*, Carlos Solórzano, ed., (México, 1972), pp. 157-189; and "The Dream," from the typescript of *Leaves From Hell* translated by José Barba-Martín and Robert E. Louis. The English typescript also contains a prologue and an epilogue authored by Buenaventura. All references will be from these typescripts, each paginated separately, and from this edition.

2. "El menú" was added in 1970, and the date for "The Dream" is not known.

3. Maida I. Watson, "The Social Theatre of Enrique Buenaventura," published M.A. thesis, University of Florida, 1971, p. 67.

4. Watson, p. 67.

5. Watson, p. 67.

6. Watson, p. 63.

7. The only reference found which included "El menú" in *Los papeles del infierno* was in Oscar Collazos, "Buenaventura: quince años de trabajo creador," *Conjunto*, III, No. 10 (1970), p. 9. For purposes of this study, "El menú" was considered to be from *Los papeles del infierno*.