

Theatre of Dissent: Three Young Argentine Playwrights

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At present, Argentine playwrights share the same problem that confronts dramatists throughout all of Latin America: the creation of a theatre that authentically reflects national realities.¹ This does not mean that the plays cannot treat international themes—the reflection of national realities does not mean provincialism. The national reality is part of the international scene and therefore one should not be surprised to find, as in one play, the mixing of Vietnam war themes with a critical attitude towards Argentine national myths. Fortunately, some success in this direction was found in the 1970 theatrical season in Buenos Aires with the emergence of three young promising dramatists who are socially committed as well as artistically gifted: Víctor de los Solares, Guillermo Gentile and Ricardo Monti, who are all in their twenties. This dominance of the young in the Argentine world of drama was especially refreshing and welcome during a season that was otherwise undergoing a crisis because of public apathy and the lack of significant productions. The theatre, particularly the “new theatre,” is active but not flourishing in Buenos Aires. This decline could be attributed to demands of the “new theatre”—such as audience participation, extemporization and mixed media—which are so far removed from the traditional theatre as to be apparently unacceptable to important theatre-going segments of the Buenos Aires public. The rise of a truly sophisticated cinema has also served to divert attention from the theatre. And, one should not discount the dampening effect of the closing during the winter of 1971 of the cultural activities of the Instituto Torcuato di Tella, whose Centro de Experimentación Audiovisual was a major focal point of dramatic activities in the sixties,

that government censorship is puted to have been involved in the closing makes it all the more disheartening.

The common denominators of de los Solares, Gentile and Monti are not only youth and talent but also a propensity for renovating the theatre through strong dissent. Víctor de los Solares is the youngest (21 years old) and the most committed in the socio-political sense. *Hoy Napalm hoy, motivación en un acto* is indeed a short but provocative composition, open-end in form. The play is a combination of an inquisition, ceremony and improvisation intended to move the audience to participate emotionally in the political experience of the times. In a very intimate theatre in Los Altos de Florida, de los Solares also directed the work presented by the Agrupación Teatral de Avanzada [sic]. Several allegorical figures (Libertad, Argentina, Guerra, América and Paz) appear on the stage to protest and to indict the war-torn world and to prophesy the future of Argentina and mankind. The future, of course, involves a destructive war by napalm and total annihilation of the physical environment. Such shocking facts surprised an apolitical and passive Argentina. De los Solares is quite bold in his overt attack considering the prevailing strong official censorship of the arts in Argentina; taboo themes such as political commentary are usually avoided. His vanguardistic technique includes a bare stage, a gloomy atmosphere, a frequent interpolation of music from Vivaldi and the Beatles to reinforce and interpret the action, and direct dialogue with the audience. Most unsettling in the work is Paz's lament to the audience, a censure of mankind for failing to understand her. Upon her death, a funereal litany, a *mea culpa* is chanted:

Argentina: Te olvidé para independizarme. Perdón.
 América: Te olvidé para no perecer. Perdón.
 Libertad: Te olvidé para poder nacer. Perdón.

When Argentina and Libertad (the former subsequently kills the latter) address the public, several immediate political issues are evoked: Cambodia, Vietnam, Biafra, Israel, Cuba, Laos, student unrest and the Negro situation. Thus, audience and actors become one—the drama has become a communal art, a dynamic experience for all concerned. *Hoy Napalm hoy* somehow has been allowed to survive in Buenos Aires and has been well received by a small but enthusiastic public anxious to support the appearance and development of the experimental theatre of protest.

Guillermo Gentile also identifies with the drama of protest in *Hablemos al calzón quitado* (originally as *Amorfo 70* the winner of the Bertolt Brecht award in the VIII International Festival of Theatre in Brazil in 1969). Gentile's talent lies in his ability to frame a very contemporary concept of revolution: the liberation of the individual must be the first process in the creation of a true revolutionary movement. Hence, he rejects the Marxist

theory of the liberation of discreet social units in favor of individual change and freedom. That is to say, social change is essentially to be effected through the awareness and maturation of the individual rather than through the revolutionary change of social institutions exclusively.

Hablemos al calzón quitado, based on a *refrán criollo* which can be freely translated as "Let's put our cards on the table," is a rather clumsily-told story of Martín, a 25-year-old hippie revolutionary (a Christ, Che Guevara, and Don Segundo Sombra figure rolled into one) who befriends Juan, a 24-year-old socially retarded youth. When Martín accepts lodging in the abnormal household of Juan, he quickly realizes the need to "educate," change and inspire his friend. Martín sees that his work as spiritual revolutionary is cut out for him in this grotesque household, a prison in which Juan has been a captive of his homosexual-transvestite father (the mother years ago had abandoned father and son). "Papa" has become the alpha and the omega of existence for Juan, who suffers from an Oedipal complex, with the father readily accepting the role of the mother. This conceitful interplay between Oedipal complex and homosexual role reversal, of course, constitutes a major dramatic interest for the audience. The latter soon discovers that the father still bathes Juan, puts him to bed, plays kooky games with him—all evidence of his complete assumption of the maternal role. Then, outfitted in sexy feminine attire, he leaves each evening to pursue his "profession"—that of holding up taxi drivers.

Appalled by such goings-on, Martín attempts to educate Juan politically and socially. A month has transpired with Act II, and the theories introduced by Martín concerning "Life as a novel" and "History as change" continue to penetrate the abnormal, decadent and hermetic world of Juan. Physical change in the house serves as an objective correlative to demonstrate Juan's mental and social development. Of course, the father objects violently, forcing Juan to choose. A brilliant nightmare scene is effected on stage to highlight the opposing positions of the two men vis-à-vis Juan. Later, both men abandon Juan—the father because Juan has rejected him; Martín because his mission has been accomplished—and Juan is forced to decide his own destiny and to form his own identity. In desperation he walks out into the audience begging for help and for someone to "desinflar los cachetes" (a favorite game between him and his father), but the audience typically remains distant. Thus, Juan is left alone to decide.

Like many contemporary plays, *Hablemos al calzón quitado* is open to varying interpretations. It is interesting to note that Gentile may be compared to the Negro American writers (notably James Baldwin) who identify social abnormality with psychological abnormality and that political liberation and individual liberation become one and the same. As a whole, Gentile's play sustains interest and dramatic tension and provides as well many humorous moments. The most negative feature is the blatant use of obvious

symbols (naive *pueblo* versus enlightened revolutionary), repetitive "philosophical" dialogue on liberty, revolution, love, life, as well as lamentable preaching directly to the audience. However, Gentile is to be commended for his glorification of the individual and for his originality in elaborating the problems of modern man caught up in a web of social and political maladjustments.

The most original and outstanding work, *Una noche con el señor Magnus e hijos*, is the first professionally presented play of Ricardo Monti. Monti, a 26-year-old student of sociology and psychology, is to be praised for his remarkable work, a work which is complex both in dramatic structure and meaning. The complexity of *Una noche . . .* bespeaks an effort on the part of the dramatist to restore a missing vitality to the stage: to return the theatre to the people in order to create sensitivity and awareness in the public. Monti's characters go so far as to comment on dramatic metatheory in the work itself: "Hay que sentirlo—vivirlo—entender no es necesario."

The two-act play, somewhat of a sociological parable, is struggle oriented. Magnus, a Caligula figure, has built an empire of material splendor void of spiritual values. His domain of possessions includes three sons, helpless captives in his mad monarchy: although Magnus' house has many doors, there is no exit for any of his vassals. No one escapes his diabolical treatment. Devoid of moral or emotional conscience, Magnus, the wild despot, has no concept of "the other." His sons are: Amancio ("El Gato"), a rebel asphyxiated by his father's power; Gualterio ("Wolfi"), a servile and repulsive creature somewhat esteemed by his father; and Santiago, an egotistical and accommodating young man who manages to tolerate existence. Also, there is Lou, once Magnus' competitor in business, now reduced to a canine status in the Magnus household.

It is within this world that Monti shapes a microcosm of a living hell, thus evoking a humanitarian protest against a bourgeois, capitalistic and dehumanized society. Resorting to a surrealist, grotesque and savage brutality, Monti allows the audience to witness one of the many harrowing evenings with "Magnus e hijos," an evening filled with family rites, games and ceremony. This particular evening is also shared by Julia, a young girl ("una nada") whom Magnus has picked up and brought home.

Act I portrays the present and refers to the past of Magnus and family through the use of often highly symbolic *racconti*, theatre within theatre whereby multiple levels of reality are sustained, mainly actual reality versus the representational reality of the stage. That is to say, Magnus' sons live through the games they play in a constant reenactment of their experiences. Magnus, of course, dominates and hypnotizes the imaginations of all concerned, for he is the magician (the "magnus magus"), the exorcisor of this cathartic gaming. It is precisely through these games that Magnus' ruthless past is revealed. He has murdered his wife, destroyed the lives of others,

cheated and demeaned his fellow man in every way. As he and his sons, together with Julia and Lou, move from one reality to another, there persists the fighting and restless spirit of the underdog, who rebels within the meager means of his grim situation.

Act II further develops the cathartic gaming as well as the extravagant affection for pleasure, but the point of reference is intensely ideological. Hence there occurs a brusque change of pace involving more preaching, a change of mood and tone and inevitably some disintegration. At the mock Last-Supper banquet, equally reminiscent of a Roman bacchanal, discussion includes various contemporary issues: the generation gap, social injustices affecting the working classes, art, the role of the intellectual in society, and so on. "Gato" even addresses the audience, advising them on how to live within the framework of capitalism. Then as apparent reality turns to semi-fantasy, the nightmarish last game—prefigured by the Last Supper—finds the sons, assisted by Lou and Julia, stabbing the anti-Christ, Magnus. Magnus is killed not by the universe he has shaped but by the strong wills he has long suppressed as well as the ultimately uncontrollable games he has instituted. Thus his victims acquire some existence, possibly an identity, through their act.

The elaboration of this social parable allows Monti to protest vigorously man's entrapment by social and economic forces that both hypnotize him and distract his critical attention. Most important, however, is that a definite optimism can be detected in Monti's commentary that man does possess the possibility to achieve justice and dignity, or at least he is able to turn the games that dominate him against their nefarious contrivers.

Although *Una noche con el señor Magnus e hijos* suffers from some technical flaws—obvious symbols, an overdose of shock scenes and a brusque change of mood—it remains an imaginative and convincing work. It is hoped that Monti continues his commentaries on the human condition in such a creative way in future works.

It is too soon to see how these three young playwrights will develop and whether the youth movement of dramatists will survive in Buenos Aires. Their future will depend on their ability to produce meaningful dramas combining skillful craftsmanship, artistic imagination and an authentic preoccupation with both Argentine and international themes. At least we can expect major works from these writers on the basis of their first productions. Indeed, these show promise and have for the present given new life to Argentine drama.²

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Notes

1. *The Drama Review*, 14, No. 2 (Winter 1970), devotes an entire issue to the Latin American theatre. Two articles in particular include mention of current Argentine drama: "Theatre of a Forgotten Continent," by Joanne Pottlitzer, pp. 34-38, and "Argentine Subversive Art," unsigned, pp. 98-103. Contemporary Argentine dramatists are discussed in the article by Bonnie Isman, "III National Theatre Festival (Córdoba, Argentina)," *Latin American Theatre Review*, 3/2 (1970), 73-75. See also the recent survey of the theatre in Buenos Aires, "Búsqueda afanosa de una salida salvadora," *Visión* (México), 39, 7 (10 de abril, 1971), 45-46, 48.

2. The research for this paper was supported by a grant from the Organización de los Estados Americanos, 1970.

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