

A Virtuoso Performance: George Woodyard and Latin American Theatre

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George Woodyard impresses those who meet him with his unpretentious lucidity and down-to-earth good humor and with the warm engagement of his audiences. Good sense, unassuming intelligence and, above all, reader-friendly clarity are qualities that characterize his writing. Upon reading his numerous publications, one observes somebody who is attuned to Latin American cultural experience and who has assumed – even decades before the current wave of performance theory – that theatre is something that unfolds, not in a literary text, but in a concrete time and place before a live audience. The Latin American theatre festivals that he has organized are notable for the high level of international participation. These events have brought together theatre groups, actors and directors, playwrights, scholars, and students in an intense exchange. The dynamic and inclusive atmosphere of the festivals has provided a remarkable learning experience for the many graduate students in attendance from around the country. At these events, Woodyard has gone out of his way to welcome each one personally into a community of Latin American theatre practitioners and scholars that has been fundamentally shaped by his own career as a scholar and teacher.

George Woodyard's most important qualities as a scholar are an internationalist scope sensitive to cultural context and difference; a vast and profound knowledge of Latin America and of every aspect of theatrical activity; lucid and accessible critical writing grounded in a genuine desire to communicate with an interested audience; and a strong commitment to the close ties between research and teaching. So while the goal here is to talk about Woodyard's scholarship, it is impossible to do this without looking at his teaching and professional work as well because, in his case, they have been so resolutely intertwined.

After earning a B.S. in Education at Eastern Illinois University, an M.A. in Spanish at New Mexico State University, and a Ph.D. in Spanish at

the University of Illinois, Woodyard began his academic career at the University of Kansas in Fall 1966. At Kansas, he has served as Chair of the Department of Spanish and Portuguese (1974-78); Associate and then Acting Dean of the Graduate School (1978-84); Associate Vice Chancellor for Research, Graduate Studies, and Public Service (1980-89); Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs (1981-84); and, most recently, Director of the Center for International Programs (1984-1996) and Dean of International Studies (1989-1996). In keeping with his strong commitment to international education, he directed the Department's Summer Language Institutes in Barcelona and Guadalajara a total of nine times. In his varied administrative roles, he has helped bring numerous external grants to the University of Kansas, from the U.S. Department of Education, the United States Information Agency, the National Association for Student Affairs, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Kansas Arts Commission, and the Kansas Committee on Humanities, among others.

While this record in university administration and international education would certainly have been enough to constitute an ample and challenging professional life for any normal high-achieving mortal, Woodyard's parallel scholarly and teaching career in Latin American theatre has been in every way as vast. The year after he arrived at K.U., the first issue of *Latin American Theatre Review* appeared, and for thirty years Woodyard has edited this journal, which has been the first, the most comprehensive, and the most enduring of its kind. He has taught graduate courses and seminars in Spanish American Theatre, Argentine Theatre, Brazilian Theatre, Caribbean Theatre, Mexican Theatre, Latin American Theatre of the Absurd, Latin American Women Dramatists, Theatre and Myth, Historical Theatre, and Theatre and Film. He has directed eleven dissertations on Spanish American theatre, eight of them written by the authors of the articles in this special issue of *LATR*. Through dynamic teaching, he has also captured many converts, that is, Kansas Ph.D.'s specializing in other genres, who have undertaken a strong secondary research commitment to Spanish American Theatre and have published significant work in the field. With the support of colleagues and cadres of dedicated graduate students, in 1982 and 1992 he organized enormously successful National Endowment for the Humanities-funded Latin American Theatre festivals that included numerous play performances, round table discussions among theatre practitioners from throughout Latin America, and scholarly presentations. Woodyard has participated actively as well in countless other theatre festivals and symposia

in the U.S. and Latin America, in Asunción, Berlin, Buenos Aires, Bogotá, Cádiz, Caracas, Havana, Manizales, and Puebla. His contributions to theatre study have been widely recognized in Latin America with the Ollantay Prize for *Latin American Theatre Review* (Caracas 1979), with an award for meritorious service to Latin American Theatre at the X Festival Internacional de Teatro (Caracas 1995), and with the Premio Armando Discépolo for Theatre Research, presented by the Grupo de Estudios de Teatro of the University of Buenos Aires at the IV Congreso de Teatro Iberoamericano y Argentino (Buenos Aires 1995).

Woodyard's far-reaching scholarship on Latin American theatre weaves through this teaching and professional activity, simultaneously providing both its source and its final product. It is quite possible that George Woodyard has read more Latin American plays – and critical work about those plays – than any other individual in the U.S. or Latin America. More importantly, he has put that vast experience to the most generous of uses by making it available to others in several venues. He has been a scholar in the most ecumenical sense of the word, helping to chart the terrain of what was still, when he began his career, a very new discipline in the U.S. academic world. In this vein (and along with Frank Dauster and Leon Lyday), he helped establish in this country the field's parameters and content, including what have come to be regarded as its canonical texts, extensive fundamental information on key authors, works, and groups, and bibliographical resources for other scholars. He also disseminated fundamental models for how Latin American theatre criticism might be done in a U.S. academic milieu. *LATR*, in turn, served to open out Woodyard's individual work as a critic into a broader community of academics and theatre practitioners in the U.S. and Latin America, by providing a reliable forum of high quality in which an ongoing conversation about Latin American Theatre could take place. This dialogue has been unfailingly inclusive in its diverse methodologies, its theoretical and ideological underpinnings, and its active encouragement of innovative approaches.

Carefully edited play anthologies constitute the groundwork in Woodyard's foundational project. These editions have made many of the most important 20th-Century Latin American plays more widely available in both Spanish and English to students and scholars in the U.S. and Latin America. These editions include *The Modern Stage in Latin America: Six Plays*, (1971), with translations of works by Emilio Carballido, Alfredo Dias Gomes, Jorge Díaz, Osvaldo Dragún, René Marqués, and José Triana; 9

dramaturgos hispanoamericanos (1979), with Frank Dauster and Leon Lyday and containing key works by Emilio Carballido, Jorge Díaz, Osvaldo Dragún, Griselda Gambaro, René Marqués, José Triana, Rodolfo Usigli, Xavier Villaurrutia, and Egon Wolff; *3 dramaturgos rioplatenses* (1983), also with Dauster and Lyday, including plays by Florencio Sánchez, Roberto Arlt, and Eduardo Pavlovsky; and, with Marion Holt, *Drama Contemporary: Latin America* (1986), with plays by Carlos Fuentes, Manuel Puig, Antonio Skármeta, and Mario Vargas Llosa. Woodyard has also shaped subsequent scholarship on this body of work by providing the extensive literary-historical, contextual, biographical, and bibliographical information and tools that have facilitated their in-depth study. The *Bibliography of Latin American Theatre Criticism, 1940-1974* (1976, with Leon Lyday) constitutes a landmark work of this nature, as have Woodyard's far-reaching and copious ongoing contributions to key reference works on drama and Latin America. In this vein, he edited the Spanish American Drama sections of the *Library of Congress's Handbook of Latin American Studies* in 1980, 1982, 1984, 1986, 1988, and 1990; he wrote the sections on Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Latin America, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Puerto Rico, Uruguay, Venezuela, and on Chicano and Hispanic theatre in the U.S. for the *Cambridge Guide to World Theatre* (1988); he composed the entries on "Theater of Latin America" and on Emilio Carballido, Isaac Chocrón, Jorge Díaz, Osvaldo Dragún, González de Esclava, Virgilio Piñera, Carlos Solórzano, and José Triana for the *Encyclopedia of Latin American History*; and he wrote the sections on Hispanic theatre in the U.S. and Chicano theatre for the *Cambridge Guide to American Theatre* (1995). With Martin Banham and Erroll Hill, he edited the *Cambridge Guide to African and Caribbean Theatre*, preparing the sections on Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico. The considerable significance of these contributions lies not only in the sheer volume of material they have made available to other scholars but also in the fact that they have inserted Latin American theatre study into increasingly wider and more international contexts. In this spirit, Woodyard's approach in these numerous essays has consistently been simultaneously comparatist and culturally specific. Through careful interweaving of theatrical material, historical background, and cultural context, he has demonstrated the interaction of Latin American theatre with international innovations, but always within its own contingencies.

If these publications have disseminated the primary and secondary materials necessary to generate a thriving critical dialogue on Latin American

theatre, Woodyard has also provided pioneering models for the dialogue itself. To this end, his most important early contribution to an emerging Latin American theatre criticism was unquestionably the landmark anthology *Dramatists in Revolt: The New Latin American Theatre* (1976), edited with Leon Lyday. This collection of essays was both an exceptional contribution to the field and a model that new critics might follow in addressing the post-World War II profusion of highly innovative drama that was simultaneously radical in its technical experimentation and critically attuned to the surrounding social crises in Latin American life. The collection, which has been one of the most widely read and studied of its kind among graduate students and theatre scholars, includes fifteen essays, on Antón Arrufat, Emilio Carballido, Agustín Cuzzani, Jorge Díaz, Osvaldo Dragún, Griselda Gambaro, Carlos Gorostiza, Luis Alberto Heiremans, Luisa Josefina Hernández, René Marqués, José Triana, and Egon Wolff from Spanish America, and, from Brazil, Jorge Andrade, Alfredo Dias Gomes, and Plínio Marcos. Each essay, written by a specialist on the theatre of the individual playwright or of his or her country of origin, provides an in-depth, comprehensive and developmental view of the playwright's work that focuses on its distinguishing technical and thematic features. Woodyard's own essay in the collection, for example, "Jorge Díaz and the Liturgy of Violence," carefully analyzes how Díaz experiments with dramatic form and language to construct a particular interpretation of a social reality. An important feature of this collection is its inclusion under the Latin American umbrella of both Spanish America and Brazil, a framework that has also always shaped the editorial content of *LATR*. One of the most remarkable things about the collection is how well most of the studies it contains have held up over time, even as theoretical models and premises for studying theatre have changed.

Woodyard's own essay on Jorge Díaz in this collection set a high standard of conceptual breadth and depth, critical insight, and, as always, clear and accessible writing. It is also a paradigm of his own numerous studies of the individual work of Latin American playwrights, many as comprehensive in scope as the Díaz study, others focussing on key plays or periods in a playwright's career. Over the years, these have included studies of José Agustín, Enrique Buenaventura, Roberto Cossa, Osvaldo Dragún, Abelardo Estorino, Griselda Gambaro, Eduardo Pavlovsky, Eduardo Rovner, Hebe Serebrisky, Ricardo Talesnik, José Triana, Oscar Villegas, and Egon Wolff. Consistent in fundamental informative content and perspicacious analysis, as a group these studies exemplify as well Woodyard's sustained attention to

theatre's performative qualities and his openness to innovative approaches that he always tailors to the singularities of each playwright's work and context. Over the years, he has addressed such issues as cultural codes and Artaudian ritual in Triana, metatheatre, games, and the postmodern in Pavlovsky, the demythification of historical or legendary figures by several playwrights, and intertextuality, theatrical space, and socio-political critique in Roberto Cossa. A choice example of his receptiveness toward critical innovation is the essay "The Tortured Magic of Hebe Serebrisky," forthcoming in Catherine Larson and Margarita Vargas's collection on Latin American women dramatists. In this comprehensive study of Serebriksy's ten plays, Woodyard draws on psychoanalytic and gender theory to demonstrate the singular performative qualities of this playwright's inquiry into family dysfunction and the human psyche.

This agility in shifting from one critical register to another points to Woodyard's profound knowledge of international theatre currents as well as his enduring interest in specific theatrical genres and their permutations and transformations in Latin America. Relying on his vigilant critical radar, which perceives shifts in the genre and in the critical discourse that surrounds it, Woodyard has written five key studies that on the one hand have identified and defined critical trends just beginning to emerge and, on the other, have generated subsequent attention to those developments among other scholars. These pieces are all comparative in nature, addressing generic shifts in international theatre through their manifestations in Latin America. The early pioneering article "The Theatre of the Absurd in Spanish America" (1969), which may well be Woodyard's most cited piece, interweaves its interrogation into the absurdist genre with observations about its singularity in the Hispanic world. This study also generated several subsequent in-depth studies on the topic by other scholars. "Toward a Radical Theatre in Spanish America" (1973) investigates the concept of "radical theatre" as well as its historical specificity in the work of Latin American groups and playwrights. Subsequently, a number of articles and dissertations addressed the continent's new theatre of protest. "Myths and Realities in Latin American Theatre: The French Connection" (1985) gave particular attention to the impact of Camus and Sartre, Artaud and Genet, and, in its time, simultaneously exemplified and encouraged existentialist and Artaudian critical approaches to Latin American drama. "El teatro histórico: Abrazando tres continentes" (1994) synthesizes Woodyard's more recent inquiry into the changing nature of historical drama, manifested as well in his studies of dramatic representations

of Tupac Amará and Cuauhtémoc. In keeping with the current wave of performance theory, Woodyard's recent study "Dramatischer und theatralischer Text: Übereinstimmung und Divergenz" (1993) registers the shifting attention toward performativity in Latin American theatre since 1968, not only in the conception of the genre itself but also in the critical conversation that has surrounded it.

As I noted at the beginning of this piece, Woodyard has been attentive to the relationship between theatre and performance from the time he entered the field, as evidenced by his contributions to theatre festivals throughout Latin America, the festivals he has organized in Lawrence, and the long-standing editorial commitment of *LATR* to include performance and festival reviews in its pages. Because Woodyard has always treated theatre as an integral part of the public cultural life of specific groups of people at given historical moments and as a phenomenon with institutional manifestations, this direction emerges in his scholarship as well. Thus he edited an extensive section on Latin America in *Theatre Companies of the World* (1986) and published an engaging study of Panamanian director José Quintero and his impact on the U.S. theatrical scene (1995). Most recently, he edited with Argentine theatre scholar Osvaldo Pellettieri a comparative volume with a strong performative bent, *De Eugene O'Neill al "Happening": Teatro norteamericano y teatro argentino 1930-1990* (1996). Woodyard's own essay in this collection, "El teatro argentino en las universidades norteamericanas," documents the presence of Argentine drama in U.S. universities through translations, critical studies, and performances.

Woodyard's trendsetting published work notwithstanding, the most eloquent testimony of his intellectual contribution may well be the impact his vital and enduring presence has had on others, including the students he has sent into the profession and whose work appears in this issue of *LATR*, as well as the numerous playwrights, theatre practitioners, and Latin American and U.S. critics and scholars through whom he has generated a vigorous and resonant transcontinental conversation. This exchange becomes most palpable when Woodyard brings it to Lawrence in the shape of a theatre festival, as he has done in 1982, 1992, and now in 1997. But it actually began in 1967 and has continued unabated through the pages of *LATR*. The publication is not just a journal but rather an intricate and unlimited network of theatrical activity, critical work, and dialogue, a network embodied in George Woodyard's persona and career. As the critical studies in this issue of *LATR* make clear, that dialogue continues to unfold through his students, whose intellectual

development and publication records constitute a significant contribution as well. According to student testimony, Woodyard's teaching is characterized by the same unpretentious intelligence, wit, and desire to communicate clearly that marks his published work, and, like his scholarship, fosters critical exchange. Students praise his openness to innovative approaches and his mentoring encouragement to think of themselves as critics in training, to make presentations at professional conferences, and to revise seminar papers into publishable work. If Woodyard's publications like *Dramatists in Revolt* have furnished critical models, students report that his own hard work and dedication have provided an inspiring example for emulation.

Masks from all over the world cover the walls of Woodyard's study at home, and these provide a fitting visual metaphor for his life-long fervor for all things theatrical and for the transformative powers of performance. Occasionally he has even been known to don a disguise himself, as he did with headphones and antennae during the 1992 theatre festival in Lawrence. But masks evoke the drama of multiple personas and changing identities. By contrast, in his own scholarship, teaching, and myriad professional contributions to Latin American theatre, George Woodyard has executed a remarkably consistent and well integrated virtuoso performance, one that deserves our gratitude, our respect, and our sustained applause, even as we await the next encore.

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