Usigli's *Medio tono* and the Transition to Modern Mexican Theatre

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Many, including the author himself, consider Rodolfo Usigli to be the father of modern Mexican theatre (Rodríguez 67). His best-known plays include *El gesticulador*, the antihistorical trilogy (*Corona de fuego, Corona de sombra, Corona de luz*) and works of psychological realism such as *El niño y la niebla*; but during his long career, Usigli experimented with all dramatic genres. Among his early plays, *Medio tono* (1937) stands out for several reasons: it was Usigli's first commercial success on the Mexican stage, it realized his ambition to write a deliberately realistic play, and it represented a true break from the presentational style from then practiced in Mexican commercial theatres. Well into the 1930s, notes Fernando de Ita,

> la concepción escénica y la manera de representar las obras de los dramaturgos de la modernidad no estaban a la altura de la nueva sensibilidad dramática. Abundan los testimonios para afirmar que . . . las divas y los histriones . . . imponían su nombre en la escena y hacían girar todo el peso de la representación en su propia órbita. Su ampulosa forma de actuar estaba por encima de cualquier consideración estética. (10)

In contrast, Magaña Esquivel observes that *Medio tono* "rompe con la muralla de las compañías comerciales" (133) – that is, the play lacks a dominating role; no one character mesmerizes the audience with speeches of great emotion. *Medio tono* shows the Sierra family's economic decline, but unlike Romantic precedents, neither a hero, a distant rich relative, nor a mysterious stranger arrives in the nick of time to save the Sierras. The absence of these conventions, plus the quick dialogue turnover and the natural quality of the characters' behavior and speech indicate a definitive break from both the

kinds of plays and the kind of presentation that the Mexican commercial theatre inherited from its Spanish antecedents.

For theorists like Richard Schechner, a drama is not fully realized until someone performs it. Richard Hornby agrees that a playscript is "a performance *in potentia*" (108), but he also feels that "there is always a sense in which a good playscript is a finished work," and that we cannot ignore its literary aspect (101). When reading a play, we have the option of imagining different possible stagings, but the text usually imposes some limitations on these alternatives. "The armchair reader," advises Kirsten Nigro, "might do well to start by establishing which performance conventions are called for or at least suggested by the playtext" (104). For example, Usigli's early political farces do not depend on naturalistic acting in order to achieve their desired effect – to entertain and criticize. (For the purposes of this discussion, I use J.L. Styan's definition of "naturalistic": a style that "reproduces the speech and behaviour of real life" [144].) The characters have well-defined but two-dimensional personalities; they do not develop or change as individuals. Thus, the presentation need not be naturalistic: we do not feel compelled to proceed, as Stanislavski would, to construct biographies for these characters, nor to elaborate motivation for their actions. Using exaggerated or stylized gestures and movements would emphasize the absurdities suggested by the dialogue.

Usigli's plays dating from the late 1930s through the 1950s generally involved more character development than the earlier farces and included situations that more closely imitated everyday real life; therefore, naturalistic acting became increasingly important to him. When he began to write realistic plays, however, both Mexican and touring Spanish theatrical companies still operated under the "trillado sistema comercial de primer galán o primera dama," who often edited playscripts to suit their own talents or egos (Dauster 41). Because producers and theatre owners demanded that companies premiere a new show every week, actors depended heavily on prompters; memorizing lines was out of the question. By 1937, this system no longer seemed viable to Usigli, especially in light of acting innovations now practiced by professionals around the world. In 1935-36, with the help of a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, the young playwright had visited Yale University. According to Usigli, "Fue muy importante porque en la escuela [de teatro] había una serie de disciplinas, de cosas que estudiar y que observar, que aprender" (Rodríguez 59). During his stay, he attended productions at Yale,

on Broadway, and at regional theatres around the United States. Noting the differences between what he saw in this country and what existed in Mexico, he decided that in order for the Mexican theatre to enter the modern era, its acting companies had to hire professional directors, reduce the power of the dominating star, eliminate the prompter, and establish more equitable casting methods (*Itinerario* 106). Moreover, in plays such as *La función de despedida*, in his book *México en el teatro*, and in essays, Usigli complained: "resulta imposible para un espectador devoto recuperar en la segunda representación detalles que observó y que le agradaron por su naturalidad en la primera" (*TC* III 440). He clamored for the adoption of a natural (i.e. Stanislavskian) style of acting, in which movement and gesture would become integral parts of an actor's performance –choreographed and rehearsed rather than accidental or spontaneous.

This impulsive type of acting actually occurred when *Medio tono* opened in 1937. The director (whose name is never mentioned in Usigli's essays) let the actors improvise their own gestures (*TC* III 440-41). As a result, several characters diverged significantly from Usigli's original vision, as he states in "Discurso por un teatro realista." In that essay, Usigli laments the broad gestural conventions inherited from the Spanish commercial theatre that the Mexican actors used:

> En su aspecto físico la representación de *Medio tono* se acercó apenas al movimiento y al diálogo original, y a la verdad psicológica de los caracteres.... Un muchacho como Víctor, con un genuino y sobrio sentido de lo elegante...resultó...fifí, majadero, y mezquino a causa de las "morcillas" creación del actor. De un muchacho sano y equilibrado...Julio vino a ser un incendiario maniático, ignorante, un comunista de *meeting* mexicano.... (*TC* III 440-41)

The director also undermined the text by cutting key portions of the dialogue that contributed to character development. However, despite the play's dialogue cuts, several contemporary reviewers still attacked its length. Usigli caustically responded to one critic who complained about the long third act: "Toda obra es larga cuando se dice dos veces, una por el apuntador y otra por los actores. Toda obra es larga, e inmóvil, mientras no se memoriza" (*TC* III 443). Thus, Usigli's early attempts to reform Mexican theatre from within failed because the directors and actors still clung to old production methods, and no system existed to train them in the new ones.

Perhaps not coincidentally, the same year that *Medio tono* debuted, Usigli accepted the job of initiating the theatre program in the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. Two years later, Japanese director Seki Sano established his own program in Mexico City based on his experience with Meyerhold, Stanislavski, and other European innovators (de Ita 10). However, the Mexican commercial system resisted change. Not until 1948, with Sano's production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, did a play enjoy adequate rehearsal time to accommodate the new acting methods (de Ita 11). Thus a new generation of professional actors, trained to subordinate individual will to the success of the ensemble, made possible the flourishing of Mexican realism in the 1950s.

Returning to *Medio tono*, Frank Dauster summarizes the play's theme neatly: "estudia los problemas de la clase media, en especial el peligro de la disolución familiar por el desorbitado anhelo económico" (56). In this case, the family's economic comfort is threatened by Mexico's postrevolutionary political system: their problems escalate when the father loses his government job in the aftermath of new elections. Family members reflect diverse components of middle-class Mexican society. David, the oldest at 35, suffers from tuberculosis, which makes him somewhat detached and philosophical. Enriqueta, 32 and happily married, represents the traditional point of view. Gabriela, 25, eventually proves to be more pragmatic than romantic, while her younger sister Sarah fully embraces her romantic love to a poor boy without a secure future. Víctor is the dandy of the family, in contrast to the politically committed Julio. Finally, Martín, at age 15, worries about how to keep his pet dog from being evicted from the apartment building.

In the first act, Usigli introduces the characters through the eyes of the visiting Eduardo, a young journalist interested in Gabriela. Toward the end of the act, Gabriela decides to attend a political meeting with Julio and Eduardo, just to see what it's like. This action carries tremendous repercussions after the three end up in jail following a police raid: Gabriela eventually loses her job due to the scandal, and Julio's need for a lawyer puts additional stress on the family's already limited resources. At the end of the play, the family prepares to separate. The parents and the younger children will move to a smaller apartment. Julio decides to go to Spain and help the Republicans in their fight against Franco. David leaves for the sanatorium, and Enriqueta travels North to join her husband who has found work in Monterrey. Gabriela ultimately rejects the advances of Eduardo and opts to wait – not for a

"Príncipe Azul" – perhaps just for someone who can provide a comfortable and stable life for her.

Many factors contribute significantly to the realism in *Medio tono*. First, Usigli's detailed description of the scenery allows for the creation of a realistic dramatic space (in this case, a living room), which the reader/spectator may absorb in the opening minutes of the play. Later changes in the furnishings signal the economic decline, which becomes the focus of the dialogue in the last act. By setting the play in a common room where any or all of nine people may appear at any moment, Usigli makes it difficult for characters to maintain intimacy and privacy, let alone continuity (especially in terms of ongoing conversations). Usigli's use of interruptions, therefore, heightens dramatic tension by postponing resolutions. In addition, when family members enter a scene they immediately seem to grasp the situation in progress (perhaps because they were able to overhear part of the conversation as they moved through the house); their subsequent (and usually unsolicited) opinion provides counterpoint and humor. Characters may also seem to have more depth than they actually possess because, like real siblings, they take sides, tease each other, and bicker, sometimes quite passionately. The constantly changing dynamics among the very different personalities in the large cast prevents one character from monopolizing the audience's attention, and significantly, also "prevents us from isolating any character as the play's protagonist" (Beardsell 109). Finally, Usigli creates instances in which two sets of characters participate in simultaneous conversations occurring on different parts of the stage. Given the play's ensemble nature, *Medio tono* represents Usigli's first serious attack on the old ways of producing theatre in Mexico, because old-style declamation or dependence on a prompter would greatly impair the play's fast pace and interactive dialogue.

The opening scene in Act One employs physical and verbal comedy to establish the exposition of both plot and character. In this scene, Gabriela and Sra. Sierra try to clean house and prepare a big Sunday dinner at the same time. In addition to family members, they expect a visit from Eduardo, a young journalist infatuated with Gabriela. Because the two women try to accomplish several tasks simultaneously, they cannot concentrate on any one task at a time. Their constant interference with each other works against them, resulting in a physical comedy that at times approaches slapstick. For example, when Sra. Sierra accidentally drops the vase of flowers she is arranging, Gabriela tries to help, but her mother insists that she will clean it up herself. In the ensuing tug of war, the vase falls again, and this time it

breaks. The women continue to converse as they exit and re-enter, cleaning up the mess and shouting to each other as necessary from the living room (onstage) or the kitchen (offstage) (*TC* I 494). Their constant movement reinforces the nervousness evident in their dialogue and in their airy, good-natured acceptance of these small calamities.

As the scene progresses, dialogue parallels movement: the women move from subject to subject as easily as they move from room to room. The ability of mother and daughter to follow seemingly abrupt changes demonstrates their close relationship and their mutual understanding. In the following example, Usigli inserts a second topic into the ongoing conversation without indicating any type of transition. Neither punctuation nor special stage directions indicate a change of tone:

> SRA. SIERRA: No sé por qué invitas a ese muchacho, ni para qué viene él. Tú no lo quieres. Algo se quema.
> GABRIELA: Tampoco yo lo sé.
> SRA. SIERRA: Estoy empezando a creer que tienes dos corazones, uno para Carlos, y otro, nuevecito, para Eduardo. Tendremos que sacarte una radiografía.
> GABRIELA: Mamá, algo se quema.
> SRA. SIERRA: No huelo nada.
> GABRIELA: Pero si acabas de decírmelo. (*TC* I 496)

The entire first scene follows this pattern: the conversation moves easily and without transition between the topic of Gabriela's boyfriends and the normal household tasks the two women attempt to perform. Between them, they share some 13 entrances and exits until Eduardo's appearance on the fourth page of the play (approximately ten minutes in performance time). Despite the fact that everything seems to be going wrong, the tone remains light because of the attitude of bemused resignation the characters exhibit under the circumstances. This realistic bantering between mother and daughter also induces the reader/spectator to empathize with the characters.

When Eduardo finally arrives, the tempo slows momentarily. The speech becomes more formal because Eduardo is not a close friend of the family or even of Gabriela at this point; they address each other as *usted.* Eduardo barely settles into polite conversation when one by one the other family members arrive for dinner. Within the space of five printed pages, Eduardo and the reader meet five new characters, all with markedly individual and idiosyncratic personalities, which quickly become apparent from their dialogue. In the following example, Usigli presents Víctor's preoccupation

with style and appearance, and contrasts it humorously with Julio's leftist ideals.

> SRA SIERRA: (*Entra Víctor, con su traje nuevo.*) ¡Ah! Da la vuelta.
> ENRIQUETA: ¡Qué guapo!
> VICTOR: (*Furioso.*) Parece que no han visto un traje nuevo en su vida....
> SRA. SIERRA: Te queda perfecto.
> JULIO: (*Entrando por primera izquierda.*) Ya está pavoneándose el principillo. Hola, Henry.
> ENRIQUETA: Salud, camarada.
> VICTOR: Habla de envidia. A él nunca le puede quedar bien un traje. Creo que por eso es comunista.
> JULIO: Lo has adivinado. En el nuevo régimen todos pareceremos figurines de la avenida Brasil, como tú. (*TC* I 512)

Although Víctor and Julio represent different points of view, their mutual teasing indicates that their disagreement relates more to individual preference than to uncompromising adherence to a particular philosophy or doctrine. Usigli's use of humor prevents his characters from becoming caricatures or self-parodies, or from becoming unsympathetic to the audience.

In addition to conversations that take place while characters enter and exit, *Medio tono*'s dialogue features instances that emulate simultaneous conversations in different areas of the set. Act Two opens with an excellent example. In the first few lines, we find out that the previous night, the police raided the communist meeting that Julio, Gabriela and Eduardo attended, and took everyone to the station for questioning. The following day, the police release the innocent bystanders; but Julio, one of the leaders, remains in jail. While on one side Sr. Sierra discusses with his lawyer how to free Julio, in another area of the stage Víctor and Sarah conspire to call in sick for each other. Their speeches interweave as follows:

> VICTOR: (*Pasa por la primera izquierda a la primera derecha.*) Sarah.
> SARAH: (*Dentro.*) ¿Qué quieres?
> SIERRA: Hmmm. Supongo que mi hijo merece pasar un rato encerrado para curarse de
> esas cosas; pero no puedo dejarlo allí. Por su madre, usted comprende.
> VICTOR: Llama a mi oficina para decir que no voy a trabajar.
> EL ABOGADO JOVEN: Naturalmente.

> SARAH: A condición de que tú llames a la mía después. (TC I 519-20)

The contrast between the serious and the frivolous continues in the family's subsequent reactions to Gabriela's night in jail. Gabriela herself jokes about it:

> SRA. SIERRA: ¿Cómo puedes encontrar divertido eso? ¿Has pensado que pudiste recibir un mal golpe – qué sé yo – un tiro?
> GABRIELA: Pero no lo recibí, mamá.... Lo que creo que he recibido es una pulga. Voy a bañarme. (TC I 525)

David understands why Gabriela calls the experience *divertido*, and Martín shows normal curiosity; but Sra. Sierra and Enriqueta are scandalized. Each person represents a point along the spectrum from very traditional and conservative thought (Enriqueta) to liberal acceptance of the circumstances (David). Once again, the family serves as a microcosm of the Mexican middle class. Yet although the characters remain true to the personalities Usigli establishes in the first act, only Gabriela seems willing to accept another's opinion. She reluctantly agrees when her mother points out that she may lose her job if her boss finds out about her "adventure" (which does happen later).

In Act Three, Sr. Sierra's struggle with money problems becomes clearly evident, first through the change in the set décor, and later through the dialogue. In Act One, Usigli's stage directions indicate a baby grand piano and a Chippendale-style chair, along with "chucherías y grabados de buen gusto" (*TC* I 493). Between Acts Two and Three, Sierra has decided to move to a less expensive apartment. He has already exhausted the money he received from pawning or selling his possessions. Nevertheless, the changes seen in the décor represent a transformation or substitution of, rather than an elimination of, certain items:

> La misma escena; pero el mobiliario ha sufrido una transformación completa. El piano de cola, el radio, el confortable, la mesa de dentro, la alfombra, la lámpara y la silla Chippendale han desaparecido. Quedan los retratos y grabados de la pared. Hay algunos paquetes y maletas en el suelo. Un viejísimo piano vertical, un viejo sillón Morris, exhumados del sótano, en bastante malas condiciones; una mecedora de bejuco, una mesa, resto de un juego de recámara, y tres o cuatro sillas desbarnizadas componen el mobiliario.... (*TC* I 542)

The family still clings to the appearance of culture: a shabby upright is better than no piano, and the artwork still graces the walls.

Once Usigli visually establishes the family's economic decline, he recapitulates it in both speech and gesture (implied by demonstrative adjectives in the dialogue), as Sr. Sierra carefully recounts the contents of his wallet:

> Un mes de sanatorio para David, que lo necesita para reponerse. El dinero para mudarnos. Setenta y cinco pesos para que llegue Sarah a Oaxaca. Esto es para el gasto; esto para Enriqueta. Cincuenta pesos para Julio – no, cien, va demasiado lejos. ¿Cómo? ¿No queda más? (*Duda un momento, vuelve a contar. Víctor lo mira con ansiedad.*) Tienes suerte. Quedan justamente ciento cincuenta pesos que iba yo a dedicar a un asuntillo personal. (*TC I* 547)

Until now, the father has shown strength and ability in his role as breadwinner and problem solver. Although he has suffered failure in the world outside his home (he was fired after the last elections and cannot find a new job), inside he still reigns as head of the family. Now, however, Usigli turns the tables; as Sierra's situation takes its final downturn in the play, he comes to represent the *medio tono*, the mediocrity of the Mexican middle class. In this scene, the manager of his apartment building has come to remind Sierra in a friendly way that he owes two months' rent. Sierra reveals that he cannot pay, and therefore plans to move out. He hopes that his long record as a model tenant will satisfy the manager until his financial situation improves. The manager, who is enjoying a "social" call on his "respectable" tenants, does not expect this outburst of honesty. Shocked, he leaps up from his seat and coldly demands that Sierra sign an IOU for the rent, leaving the remaining furniture behind as collateral (*TC* I 549). Sierra tries both reason and emotion in his appeal to the manager, but the latter has the upper hand:

> SIERRA: ¿Cree usted que voy a dejar sin camas a mi mujer y a mis hijas?
>
> EL ADMINISTRADOR: Hace mucho que no creo en nada, señor. He conocido a demasiados inquilinos morosos.
>
> SIERRA: Pero legalmente no puede usted hacer esto, despojarnos de...
>
> EL ADMINISTRADOR: Si tiene usted un abogado y quiere meter pleito, hágalo. Los muebles se quedan aquí. Buenas tardes. (*TC* I 550)

Julio, moved by his father's humiliation, threatens the manager, who flees in alarm. Sr. Sierra reacts to this scene by turning his back on Julio. His expression of disapproval encompasses more than just the preceding scene – it includes Sierra's inability to understand or approve of Julio's recent decision

to go to Spain and join the fight against Franco. The father reinforces his physical rejection by verbally distancing his son with the formal mode of address: "No quiero tratar con usted" (*TC* I 552). Nevertheless, this man who has revealed tenderness in earlier scenes cannot maintain his emotional distance from Julio. Both his speech and movement indicate his internal battle and subsequent change of heart: "(*Llegado a la puerta [Sierra] se detiene y vuelve bruscamente sobre sus pasos.* ¿Por qué haces esto? (*Con esfuerzo*)" (*TC* I 552).

The conversation soon involves the whole family in a discussion of personal and generational differences. The level of physical activity and comedy decreases as the characters now take turns expressing their ideas in speeches that are longer and more abstract than those in the comic scenes. Momentarily, the emphasis shifts from the naturalistic to the dialectical. Sierra reiterates his earlier question: "¿Por qué vas a pelear una batalla que no es tuya, que no es de tu país?" (*TC* I 552). David, whose tuberculosis has made him contemplative and observant, explains Julio's desire:

> un deseo de cambio, una desilusión del mundo que ustedes nos han preparado, y sus mayores a ustedes. En Julio es el comunismo; en Sarah es el amor; en Gabriela es otra cosa, en Víctor es la atracción del lujo. Julio quiere (*tose*) salir del medio tono de la clase media de México – quiere ser cualquier cosa, menos mediocre y sofocado. (*TC* I 554)

Enriqueta's arrival interrupts this fairly dispassionate discussion, returns the emphasis to the characters as individuals, and restores some of the play's earlier liveliness. She brings good news: though her husband's job in Juárez fell through, he has found work in Monterrey, and has sent a telegram asking her to rejoin him. Although not a blood relative, he obviously shares the Sierras' sense of humor: "Haz lo que puedas venir en seguida o me busco otra" (*TC* I 555). In a new flurry of activity, multiple exits make way for the final scene between Gabriela and Eduardo, in which she tells him that they must separate, despite their mutual passion. The experience of seeing how poverty has affected her family has made her pragmatic. Rather than live with Eduardo and remain poor, she chooses to wait for a chance with someone who can offer her financial security. One cannot help but think of the contrast to Gorostiza's romantic *Contigo pan y cebolla*, as Eduardo exits sadly.

Among the many factors that Usigli skillfully manipulates in *Medio tono*, his stage management stands out as one of the most important in terms of creating a sense of realism. The Sierra family consists of nine individuals

of almost equal importance, who all share a tendency to tease one another about their respective idiosyncrasies. Usigli allows these characters to express themselves through colloquial language in a naturalistic dialogue filled with interruptions and simultaneity. Usigli also includes stage directions for naturalistic gestures (such as instructions for Víctor to model his new suit), and he provides suitable motivation for the many entrances and exits that punctuate the family's arguments and discussions. His egalitarian characterization calls for a strong ensemble cast, since rarely does any one character monopolize audience attention. The dialogue, often involving quick turnover, demands memorization, for the intervention of a prompter would (and historically did) destroy the carefully controlled pace and the illusion of spontaneity.

Even though one could designate *El niño y la niebla* (1936) as Usigli's first play calling for naturalistic acting due to its emphasis on realistic psychological development, its small cast could have been managed under the old Spanish tradition. And while *El gesticulador* (written 1937, staged 1947) represents for many "la fundación de un teatro mexicano verdadero" (Rodríguez 55) because of its explicit political theme, the characters' metatheatrical posing does not necessarily demand naturalistic acting. In contrast, the characteristics mentioned above make *Medio tono* a landmark play among Usigli's works and among Mexican drama in general. As written, it represents something completely unattainable under the old Mexican system of one week for rehearsals, a plush part for the star, and reliance on the prompter. By combining modern staging techniques with a national theme, Usigli brought Mexican theatre one step closer to catching up with its North American and European counterparts.

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