

Chilean Theatre: 1971-1973

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The story of Chilean theatre during the two years and ten months of government by the Unidad Popular may have considerable interest, but is hardly exciting in actual accomplishments. It was a unique situation and the theatre, for various reasons, did not succeed in reflecting it.

Overnight, the rules of the game changed from a rather set pattern to new objectives that may have been clear from an ideological point of view, but whose theatrical implementation was often vague and lacking in actual support. The result was that the *new* theatre only sprouted sporadically, while its traditional forms (Santiago downtown companies) were caught off balance by the situation.

This was a period in which politics ruled supreme; in which there was a continuous and irreconcilable clash between the forces struggling to establish socialism in the country and those opposing it.

Chilean theatre had practically been reborn in the early forties with the university theatres. These began as amateur groups and, by the late fifties and early sixties, had developed into full-fledged, subsidized, professional companies. Graduates from drama schools and alumni of these theatres founded or joined with new companies working in small downtown houses and, by the late sixties (except for oldtimers Lucho Córdoba and Américo Vargas, with their boulevard fare at the Maru and Moneda) the theatrical movement had developed out of the University of Chile and Catholic University companies. But fissures were already visible: no new playwrights were emerging; there was a great deal of slovenly acting; most directors tended to be rather unimaginative and the choice of plays was, on the whole, far from exciting.

The theatre audience—in spite of cheap admissions—was barely 1% of Santiago's three million population and tended to decrease. A hit would attract some 30 thousand spectators, but there were only one or two of these a year and the average play would usually draw an audience of about ten thousand, hardly enough to provide a secure economic background for a company.

Audiences were basically middle class and attempts to increase them more often than not led to concessions in the choice of plays. On the other hand, the absence of new playwrights had a logical explanation: films. Miguel Littin and Raúl Ruiz, for example, had turned out promising work but, after two or three plays, concentrated on films, a field in which they were very successful. They are now in their early thirties and it is quite reasonable to suppose that a series of other film makers of their generation might have become involved in the theatre, had they lived a few years earlier.

Reasons for the switch: films were felt to have a more global creative potential, to be a better medium for reflecting reality and, above all, were not subject to the theatre's audience restrictions, enabling the artist to reach a far wider range of spectators. Film makers wanted to escape from a theatre audience they considered stale and ingrown and reach out to the *pueblo* with their films.

At the same time, the university theatres were well past their prime and no longer had clear objectives. The University of Chile company's initial aims (such as presentation of classical and modern theatre and the establishment of a theatre school) had been accomplished; later targets (like professionalizing the actors and obtaining a theatre for its exclusive use) were also achieved. But, in so doing, the impetus of youth had been lost and, after a period of growth and assimilation, decline began with the development into a somewhat unwieldy and bureaucratic company that subsisted from play to play, lacking a long range policy and turning out an increasingly uneven level of productions. One result was that this theatre's onetime solid and faithful audience thinned out considerably. Another shortcoming, that went back to the company's prime, was its lack of interest in stimulating local playwrights, presented occasionally to comply with a law relating to tax exemptions.

The Catholic University did not commit this error. In fact, upon reaching the danger point in its development, it decided to concentrate on Chilean plays, very sensibly considering that this was, by far, what Chilean actors did best. The only weakness to this policy was that the company's actors had already demonstrated that in classical and international contemporary plays their assets were rather limited.

Later this theatre became involved in the university's reform movement. The *Teatro de Ensayo* came to an end and was replaced by the promising *Taller de Experimentación Teatral* (1968-9). This was unfortunately nipped in the bud when the university decided to establish the *Escuela de Artes de la Comunicación* (theatre, cinema, TV), whose theatrical policies have been somewhat nebulous, in spite of occasional high quality in its productions.

Of the companies that grew up in the wake of the universities, the most interesting was Ictus. This group took up the theatre of the absurd, through foreign plays and works of Jorge Díaz, a playwright who was closely associated with the company for several years. When they felt that this movement was fading, there followed a slightly uncertain transition period, and then work started on improvisational collective creations. Ictus, during the late sixties, was Santiago's liveliest theatre ensemble.

This was the approximate situation of the major companies when the Unidad

Popular began to rule in November 1970. Nothing changed overnight, but emphasis was increasingly placed on social significance; evaluations were frequently made, not in terms of aesthetic values, but of political analysis: basically, what did a play—Chilean or foreign—signify in terms of the *proceso chileno*? Was it positive or negative in this respect? There is no denying that this sometimes led to sectarian attitudes, but the continuity of cultural life was not questioned. Those who would maintain that everything in the past was bourgeois and expendable, and that the time had now come for an exclusively proletarian culture, fortunately were an insignificant minority.

On the other hand, theatre companies obviously needed audiences to survive economically; during previous years the theatre-going public had been happy to support and enjoy plays of strong social and political content that attacked or satirized bourgeois values. But, by the end of 1971, political polarization had become increasingly intense and the middle classes were closing ranks with the opposition to the Allende government. Plays that would formerly have been applauded were now considered to be just one more attempt to indoctrinate and such plays would be reduced to preaching to the already converted. Besides, as everyday life became increasingly tense and difficult, spectators felt that they experienced enough drama in their own lives without living through more of the same in the theatre. This new twist to an old argument caused light comedies and escapist fare practically to become the norm. The University of Chile theatre, practically the only company to emphasize social content in its plays, paid the price of strong audience abstention.

Thus, the subject matter of plays at downtown theatres tended to become more removed from life than at any previous period, in spite of a majority of the actors siding with the government. But they had little choice, if they wanted to survive economically. However, this was hardly the sort of theatre one would theoretically have expected in the country at this time.

Within this general context, there was nonetheless some interesting work. For example *Teatro del Angel*, which opted for quality plays, both classic (*La Celestina*, Ibsen, Shaw) and modern (Orton's *Loot*) or the municipal *Teatro del Nuevo Extremo*, which specialized in catering to secondary school audiences with works like García Lorca's *The Prodigious Shoemaker* or Molière's *Tartuffe*. Their last presentation was an imaginative production of Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, shortly before the military takeover. Noisvander's *Teatro de Mimos* had a hit in *Educación Sexymental* and so did Ictus with *Tres Noches de un Sábado*, which was a collective creation by the actors, based on ideas provided by three authors.

However, the traditional theatre formed only part of the picture during the Allende years. Parallel to it there existed a tentative emergent culture, created by and for workers and peasants; but this did not mature and consisted basically of isolated manifestations. The reasons were several: absorption by the day-to-day political struggle on every level, which left little time for work in the cultural field; unions that were too engrossed in economic problems and helping to run nationalized factories to find time to set up cultural departments; and, last but certainly not least, the lack of a cultural policy.

This term does not imply that a government dictum established the type of

art, literature or theatre that should be produced as was socialist realism in the Soviet Union. What it did imply was a series of measures to motivate, develop, and coordinate cultural activities within the context of the general situation. This was no longer a simple matter of subsidizing theatre and ballet companies or orchestras, but of providing stimuli and technical advice in areas which were previously deprived of cultural activities. Far too little was done in this field and, although some items were certainly of interest, no cohesive whole emerged, causing these sporadic activities to be considered representative of an established and widespread tendency.

The *Teatro Nuevo Popular*, for example, was formed by graduates of the University of Chile theatre school who took its productions all over the country presenting them, mainly in union halls. "Tela de cebolla" was typical of its productions and dealt with the problems that arose at a factory when it was requisitioned by the government after a workers' sit-in. This subject matter was of course easily accessible to audiences who—through their own experience—often knew more about it than the author or actors. In fact, several rehearsals were held at a requisitioned factory with frequent interruptions of "No! It wasn't like that," which led to considerable revisions in the text.

This problem of verisimilitude in the theatre was taken a step further by a class of theatre students from the University of Chile. Instead of the traditional end of year exam, they opted for a novel alternative. At a government-controlled factory, they spent several months talking to the workers and elaborated a real-life episode into a play. The exam took place in a warehouse at this factory, with packing cases as scenery and seats. When the play reached its climax, the professor stepped forward and said to the audience: "This is it. Now you help us finish it." The problem was whether a union official who had doublecrossed the workers could be trusted again—whether he would continue to play ball for the bosses or come round to the workers' side.

In the hour-long discussion that followed, the *obreros* insisted on literal reproduction of what had happened to them, while the student-actors explained to them how and why theatrical truth was different, how literalness did not necessarily lead to a theatrical effect equivalent to reality, how a play had to project not only to one specific audience, but to many sets of spectators.

Practically all the plays dealt with variations on the subject of class struggle, with the ruling class on one side and the workers and peasants on the other. The *Teatro del Carbón's Grisú* described the miserable working conditions at the Lota coal mines and the various conflicts that led to their improvement. The actors of this group were miners and their families. *History of Our Families* dealt with a similar subject out on the land and was presented by the Vietnam Center of Agrarian Reform. Acted by peasants, the play was elaborated through improvisations with no written text. In both cases, workers were assisted by an experienced director-adviser. There were other groups of this type, but not many and certainly not enough to establish a solid basis for a grassroots theatrical movement.

Then there were student groups who presented plays like Sergio Arrau's *Nosotros, los de abajo* which, being rather Brechtian in style, provided a revision

of Chilean history, from a proletarian point of view. But there were practically no new playwrights, and those who had made their name in the sixties wrote very little and did not particularly try to find outlets during this period, with which they perhaps found it difficult to cope. Victor Torres had been much heralded as *the* new playwright of the left, but *Los Desterrados* turned out a dismal failure that did poorly with audiences and was unanimously panned by the critics, irrespective of their political persuasions. By this time, such a situation was in itself unusual.

Plays and productions like those mentioned would hardly stand up to judgments based on traditional values. In fact, were someone to suggest that a lot of them sound rather like thirties agit-prop, he would have a point. The contrast between these plays and those presented by downtown theatres could well be considered one more expression of the polarization that made itself felt in all walks of life. But one point must be made: whatever their shortcomings, one aspect favors them. They did not present a world remote from their spectators, but were developed specifically with a working class audience in mind so that the spectators could easily identify with the characters and situations, and thus feel that they themselves were the protagonists of the plays.

The theatre of the Allende years obviously had strong limitations, but this does not imply that there was a lack of drama. It was found everywhere in daily life: in divided families, in discussions on busses, in union meetings, in factory production committees, at massive street demonstrations pro or against the government. More's the pity that this extraordinary wealth of raw material was not absorbed by and elaborated at the time by the theatre.

Santiago, Chile