

The Military in Government in Bolivia: A View from the Theatre of Raúl Salmón

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Turbulence has dominated political life in Latin America for so long that one almost begins to take unrest for granted. Many countries have suffered from the frequent disruptions that revolutions, *golpes de estado*, and insurrections have brought them. No country has suffered more from numerous upsets than Bolivia, for the pattern of violent overthrow of Bolivian governments has persisted since the birth of the nation. The nineteenth century period of strife over boundary lines, regional and class differences, and the eternal question of land reform produced various military figures who came to power violently and tried to lead the country. To show how patterns of violence from the past have dominated the present, Bolivian playwright Raúl Salmón has chosen the most dynamic figures in politics of the period from 1835 through 1871 as personages in three plays. The theatrical potential in the personalities of Andrés de Santa Cruz (1792-1865), Manuel Isidoro Belzu (1808-1865) and Mariano Melgarejo (1820-1871) make them appropriate choices for such dramatic treatment. It is the intent of this essay to analyze Salmón's theatrical view of patterns of continuing violence in Bolivian government as seen in the plays, *Viva Belzu*, *Juana Sánchez* and *Tres generales*.

Military men have not gone unnoticed by Latin American dramatists. Maximiliano, that staunch Viennese naval officer, has appeared in about a dozen plays, not to mention his appearance in histories, novels, poems, songs, and reminiscences. Santa Anna appears in F. S. Inclán's *Hoy invita la guerra*, Rosas in the many anti-Rosas plays, Iturbide in a play which bears his name with the subtitle *Amor y ambición* by the nineteenth century Bolivian playwright, José Rosendo Gutiérrez, and Nicolás Bravo in Nataniel Aguirre's *Represalia de héroes*, another play of the same period. The list of military figures in the theatre is a long one.

In an article on the Bolivian theatre, Carlos M. Suárez Radillo explores the

evolution of the use of historical figures and legends. Many of the nineteenth-century dramas served, according to Suárez Radillo, to arouse patriotic fervor.¹ He mentions Raúl Salmón's theatre in passing, but he gives no attention to Salmón's historical plays which are worthy of further scrutiny.

In *Viva Belzu*, a play first performed in 1952, Salmón draws upon two different moments in the life of Belzu for his inspiration. The first is a period of unrest when Belzu is President of Bolivia; the other is ten years later when he returns to power, but is killed in his moment of triumph. The opening of the play reminds one of the stories told about Lincoln during the Civil War when women would come to the President to plead for clemency for a husband or son. In this instance, Antonia Galindo comes to Belzu to intercede for a man supported by her poet son and other intellectuals—Melgarejo. Belzu agrees to pardon him, but warns Antonia that she will live to regret her intervention.

Salmón portrays Belzu as a *cholo* who has learned caution from his association with the Indians. Salmón demonstrates this, for instance, in a significant story that Belzu relates about communication. While his son-in-law Jorge Córdova trusts the military and advocates being on the best terms possible with them to avoid their treason, Belzu would deal with them more cautiously. His approach to the military would be to treat them as an Indian dog responds to the presence of its enemies. As he informs Jorge, "te falta penetración, Jorge. Escucha: cuando deambulaba confinado cerca del Desaguadero, los indios me enseñaron al *kamaķe*. Es el perro-zorro. Sigiloso, veloz, sereno; antes de caer sobre su presa, aprecia las ventajas y contrariedades. Ausculta el terreno y se decide. Debiéramos todos para no errar, aprender algo del *kamaķe*. Las palabras, Jorge, no hay que oír las, hay que verlas."²

Besides drawing on his associations with Indians for examples, Belzu reiterates during the play that the *cholos* and Indians participate actively in his government. Crowds have gathered outside the palace at another point in the play, and one of Belzu's advisors suggests shooting to calm them down. Belzu replies, "Esos cholos y esos indios son el Pueblo, y mi Gobierno es del Pueblo" (p. 98). Several times during the play, Belzu calms the crowds with his presence by facing them and talking with them.

Pancho, Belzu's right-hand man, represents the voice of the people. Salmón has him speak in a realistic fashion using incorrect forms of words at times. As Pancho sees the situation from the point of view of "los de abajo," as he calls them, they are in a period when, if the people ask for bread, they are given bread and not words. For that reason *el pueblo* cheers for Belzu, because they believe in him. Pancho says, "Si Dios es Dueño y Señor del mundo, el Tata Belzu es príncipe y rey de nuestras vidas" (p. 103). But even Pancho complains that Belzu may have become too thoughtful. "¡Es lo único que lo reprocho a mi lindo Tata; se está volviendo demasiado contemplativo con los aristócratas" (p. 103). This change in Belzu is noteworthy, however, because the author would seem to be indicating that the active military man must become reflexive if he wishes to be a statesman. He cannot simply apply the rules of battles to those of statesmanship. At another point in the play, Belzu hastens the construction of the bullring, carrying out the idea of bread and circuses, since he affirms that if the people have an outlet for their energy, they may be less restless.

Belzu considers himself one of the people. Once he addresses the crowd and informs them that their enemies, that is, the people "que no tienen el orgullo de la sangre mestiza, quiere a toda costa hacernos pelear entre hermanos y nosotros los hombres, hasta ayer preteridos, somos uno solo. ¡El color de la piel no hace la dignidad humana!" He has not reached power only to separate himself from his background. As he reminds the crowd, "¡Y, no lo olviden, cholo soy y soy del pueblo!" (p. 133)

Salmón uses Act IV of *Viva Belzu* as an epilogue. Ten years have passed between Act III and Act IV. In that time, Jorge Córdova and Melgarejo have figured among the four men who have governed the country. Now Belzu has risen against Melgarejo and wrested power from him. However, in the confusion when Melgarejo and some of his men are brought into the palace, Belzu is shot. In an instant, Melgarejo takes command after appraising the situation and faces down the crowd of Belzu supporters outside the palace, as he shouts, "¡Belzu ha muerto! ¡Quién vive ahora!" (p. 151) As the curtain falls, Melgarejo is sitting in the presidential chair after pushing the books from the desk and proclaiming the heart of his philosophy of governing, "¡A los pueblos de borregos no se los gobierna con libros! ¡Bala, látigo, bala!" (p. 152)

After dealing with Belzu, Salmón again takes up the political theme of the military in government in *Juana Sánchez* (opening date 1966). Although this play deals with a mistress of Melgarejo, it is Salmón's characterization of him, not her, that is of concern here. The moments that Melgarejo spends on stage reveal aspects of his character as a ruler. One of the most attractive scenes in this play occurs during the pre-Lenten masquerade party given by the mother of Juana Sánchez. A man appears in the street wearing a mask and with a sign on his back that affirms, "Yo soy el Camba" (p. 165). The word "camba" usually describes a person from eastern or northeastern Bolivia, but it was applied to Melgarejo because of his nose, similar to that of a Camba Indian. At first the man in the mask savors the reactions of the guests at the party to his audacity in imitating the President; upon removing the mask, he reveals himself as Melgarejo.

The theme of masks is popular in Latin American literature. It occurs, for instance, in Rodolfo Usigli's *El gesticulador* in which César Rubio goes so far as to assume the identity of another man. In this play, one finds a man pretending to be himself. Actually, there are two Melgarejos: the man who loves Juana Sánchez and who can be easily induced to do her will, and the brutal militarist who wants to test a new gun by shooting at the first person who crosses the plaza.

Under the mask is the man who learned how to govern by fighting and who carries the rules of warfare into politics. Melgarejo gives insight into his own background when he explains that waiting and figuring things out on paper was never his forte. His ideas came to him, rather, as he galloped along on his horse Holofernes, "y cuando alguna idea se presentaba rápida, atropellaba con mis 'Rifleros' y el enemigo quedaba reducido en menos de un santiamén. ¡He ahí la vida: atropellar!" (p. 180) Salmón portrays Melgarejo as a vigorous, brutal man who prefers action to contemplation. "¡Obrar, obrar, obrar! Eso es lo que hacen los hombres de pantalones. Lo demás: pamplinas" (p. 180). He would not argue with Juanita's unadmirable brother Aurelio who maintains that

"Las Constituciones sólo valen para entorpecer la acción de los gobiernos" (p. 190).

A quarrel has arisen in the Palace, because people of society have failed to appear for a dinner that Juana has prepared. Melgarejo has the male guests seized in their homes; some of the women rush to the palace to plead for the lives of their husbands. In a bit of macabre humor, Melgarejo has three women shut up in the formal dining room, where they will have to eat a dinner prepared for twenty people. Melgarejo commands, "Que en el sitio de cada una formen columnas con los platos llenos de comida . . . hasta que se empachen" (p. 195). Basically, Melgarejo does not fit into life as a ruler; he much prefers to ride off to put down a rebellion as he does at the end of Act II.

In his article on the evolution of the use of historical themes into "lo humano contemporáneo," Suárez Radillo lists some titles of nineteenth century patriotic historical plays and asks, "¿Es necesario añadir algún comentario a estos títulos para que quede claro el apasionado espíritu patriótico y el exaltado afán de recreación histórica que caracteriza a todo este período?"³ Such is not Salmón's intent in bringing to life military figures of the past. His purpose comes closer to what Suárez Radillo calls "el pasado en función del presente."⁴ This can be seen plainly in *Viva Belzu* and *Juana Sánchez* and is even more evident in *Tres generales* in which Santa Cruz, Belzu and Melgarejo confront students of the present time. Salmón starts beyond the grave and works his way into the lives of the three generals. In the prologue, two students are in the cemetery discussing how boring it is to be dead when the three military leaders appear and challenge the political ideas of the students. After this preliminary discussion, the reader or viewer follows each leader back in time to another period in history: each of the three acts corresponds to a moment in Bolivian history with Santa Cruz, Belzu and Melgarejo. The play dates from the late 1960's.

Salmón subtitles the work "pieza histórico-social, en tres actos, prólogo y epílogo." The prologue is a commentary on present-day Bolivia, and the presence of the dead students in the cemetery reveals the similarity between the current and past situations. He chooses, for example, to depict Santa Cruz in 1835 in the sixth year of his presidency. Salmón shows Santa Cruz's political astuteness in his handling of Olañeta. Olañeta, while trying to get an audience with Santa Cruz, has said that "el poder es pasajero en Bolivia" (p. 29). Since Olañeta desires more of that power for himself, Santa Cruz cleverly rids himself of the possibility of rebellion by Olañeta by making him ambassador to France. Santa Cruz understands that perhaps the greatest problem facing the Bolivians at that moment is their lack of unity: the mutual distrust of Indians, *cholos* and whites prevents them from working together to achieve common goals. There is, declares Santa Cruz, greater love of "patria chica" than of "patria grande" (p. 32). And, indeed, this problem of lack of union among the different elements in society is one with which other Latin American countries can identify easily.

The crucial scene in Act I is scene viii in which Agustín Gamarra comes to persuade Santa Cruz to intervene in Peru, which had been divided by a three way struggle among Gamarra, Salaverry and Orbegoso. The conversation between Santa Cruz and Gamarra in this scene takes place on two levels: the regular conversation between the two men and the recorded thoughts of Santa

Cruz and Gamarra in which they speculate on each other's motives. In scene x when the voice of his Indian past calls upon Santa Cruz to reunite the Peruvian empire, the leader does not resist and the act closes with his declaration that the Bolivian army will cross the Peruvian frontier June 15, 1835.

In Act II, Salmón, without giving a specific date, depicts unrest during the Belzu regime after 1861, unrest stirred up by the impending execution of Pedro Iturri. Pancho, Belzu's loyal aid, gives insight into the mechanism of a revolution when he affirms that he at one time was among the kind of crowds outside the palace, inciting them to riot in favor of Belzu. Iturri is being used as others had been used in the past to anger the crowds for someone's own political motives. One of the dead students in *Tres generales* has been shot in the back for similar reasons to provide a martyr for the current revolution in Bolivia.

Another insight into revolution and succession of leadership is given by Salmón in the best scene in Act II, scene vi, in which not a word is spoken. Córdova, son-in-law of Belzu, is alone in the President's office and without thinking, sits for a minute in the President's chair. Then he realizes what he has done and he assumes a pose as if he were the first citizen of Bolivia. Salmón demonstrates in just a few minutes the ambitions of this particular man, but at the same time, he reveals the desire of any man who longs for power that another possesses and occasionally dreams of what he would do if he were in the "right" chair.

Belzu catches Córdova in the midst of his dream of glory; he already understands that Córdova is an ambitious man. Belzu resolves the current situation of unrest by pardoning Iturri, an action that will satisfy the crowd temporarily. He realizes that it is time for him to bow out of political power. At the end of the act he has promoted Córdova to general and confides to Pancho that although Córdova will be the next President, he will not last.

Salmón must find this scene of one man dreaming of inheriting another man's power a particularly intriguing one, for he has the scene in *Viva Belzu*. However, a slight variation in that play shows Belzu removing the presidential ribbon and, in his absence, Jorge Córdova putting on the symbolic ribbon and then sitting in the President's chair.

The relationship between Belzu and Jorge Córdova reflects the feelings between the man in power and the man who wishes to replace him. Córdova has made a speech to celebrate his own birthday dinner, and Belzu knows what he has said and how to interpret Córdova's words correctly. Belzu discusses with Jorge what he has tried to accomplish as President. He has tried to bring into the government the voice of the people. "El belcismo está acentuando un sentido de bolivianidad, desterrando lo europeizante acomodaticio de doctores, letrados y militares" (p. 56). He has wanted to integrate into the government the Indians and *cholos*, people who never had counted before.

Act III corresponds with a moment in the dictatorship of Melgarejo. While Belzu thought about integrating the *cholos* and Indians into government, Melgarejo plots to get land away from the Indians. The key to Melgarejo's way of ruling is revealed when he says, "Hay un sabio aforismo que dice: 'Cuando más fuerte es el Ejecutivo . . . más dócil es el Legislativo'" (p. 67). He, for instance, would have anyone unwilling to agree with him whipped in the plaza. Mel-

garejo, a self-made man, affirms that you cannot afford to be sentimental, because if you turn your back, you may be hit from behind. He concludes cynically that "Cada país tiene el gobierno que su gente merece" (p. 70).

Although it is now after 1861, the same disunity exists in Bolivia that Santa Cruz had mentioned earlier as a problem. Aurelio, the brother of Juana Sánchez, talks about the lack of trust among the people of the different cities of Bolivia. This disunity is a problem other Latin American countries have faced and continue to face. When there is a revolt, Melgarejo sends Aurelio, also a general, to quell it.

Tres generales ends with an epilogue in which the students and generals in the graveyard once more react to what has happened during the course of the play. Here, as Salmón plainly says, the leaders have tried three ways of governing: "Tres ensayos, tres intentos: moralizar administrando honestamente (Santa Cruz); reparar la injusticia dando al débil su lugar (Belzu); y usar la fuerza para poner orden en el desorden (Melgarejo)" (p. 82). All their governments were overthrown, and a hundred years have not changed the basic unrest in Bolivia.

The most significant words in *Tres generales* occur in the epilogue when Belzu declares that "El país es una repetición." He and people like him, he adds, have used the same recourses for over a hundred years. And to prove his point, he turns up a transistor radio ". . . y el cambio de estructuras impone no solamente austeridad sino sacrificios porque el campesinado, los obreros y las gentes de la clase media al sostener la Revolución estamos preparando transformaciones económicas y sociales" (p. 80). According to Belzu, the terminology has changed but the arguments are the same. Fundamental changes have not been made nor will they be effected in spite of the political phrases. Thus, through Belzu, Salmón enunciates the pessimistic view that the country is a repetition. As Belzu, Melgarejo and Santa Cruz advance toward the audience, the first two ask, "Quién ha fallado?" and Santa Cruz adds, "Hoy hemos hablado los muertos. Que la lección sea de provecho." But as the curtain falls a voice on the radio shouts, "¡Viva el Nuevo Gobierno!" and the closing line is Belzu's, "Otra revolución" (p. 82).

In conclusion, it would be pleasing to be able to affirm that these Salmón plays are outstanding examples of Latin American theatre at its best. Unfortunately, that statement would be trifling with the truth. They lack profundity, and the language Salmón uses is frequently somewhat pedestrian. They are, rather, three plays with varying degrees of interest because of the portrayal of military leaders in government, and the insight into revolutions that one gains from them. They deal with Bolivia, but they could just as easily present similar leaders in other Latin American countries. There is no doubt that Salmón, director-actor-playwright, has a didactic purpose in writing this kind of historical play in which he emphasizes the platitudes of reigning poorly or well. No attempt is made here to delve into the accuracy of Salmón's theatrical interpretation of historical figures. The dramatist does acknowledge his debt to a dozen historical references in writing *Juana Sánchez* in another edition of that play (Ediciones: Teatro social).

One sees the intent of the dramatist working to create a situation within the play with which the audience can identify. In the Belzu speeches, the color of

one's skin is seen to be unimportant to human dignity. Since Belzu is one of the people who has risen to the highest office in the land, they, too (the crowd and the audience) may aspire to a similar triumph. Another idea that Salmón reiterates through Belzu and Santa Cruz is that working for unity among all segments of the population is essential for a strong nation. Also, mistrust among people of different regions should not continue. Salmón insists on the importance of creating a national consciousness. His plays are not directed at a comfortable middle-class audience but at the *pueblo* for whom they have been performed in large arenas. History, as he affirms, repeats itself. Why not learn from its lessons? Surely there is virtue in recreating historical figures and re-examining them from time to time, as Salmón has done in these three plays.

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Notes

1. Carlos M. Suárez Radillo, "El teatro boliviano: De lo histórico a lo humano contemporáneo," *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*, nos. 263-264 (mayo-junio 1972), 342. This paper on Salmón in slightly different form was delivered at a MALAS meeting October 1974.

2. Raúl Salmón, *Teatro boliviano* (La Paz-Cochabamba, 1969), p. 92. All further quotations from the three plays *Viva Belzu*, *Juana Sánchez* and *Tres generales* will be taken from this edition, and will be identified by page numbers in parentheses immediately following the quotation.

3. Suárez Radillo, p. 342.

4. Suárez Radillo, p. 347.