

## *Los albañiles*, Novel and Play: A Two-time Winner

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Vicente Leñero, born in Guadalajara, Mexico in 1933, has written five novels and six plays to date, the latter all since 1968.<sup>1</sup> He began his career as a novelist and published four novels between 1961 and 1967, when he rechanneled his energies in a new direction: theater. "Yo pienso que llegué al teatro por el camino de la simplificación," he explains. "Las novelas que yo quería escribir eran demasiado complejas. El teatro era más sencillo, tal vez por ser un terreno nuevo para mí."<sup>2</sup> He resumed his novel-writing in 1973, when *Redil de ovejas* (the novel whose complexities drove him to theater) was released in Mexico; but his finest work is still *Los albañiles*, his second novel, published in Spain in 1964. It is a well thought-out and carefully constructed narrative which centers on a very believable and intriguing group of protagonists. The setting is an apartment house under construction in present-day Mexico City. The story line is deceptively simple: the night watchman has been brutally murdered and a police investigation is undertaken to determine the killer's identity. The reader's attention is focused on three areas: the suspects and their interaction (in retrospect) with the victim; the building itself, whose presence is essential to every character's awareness (since they are all involved in its construction), and finally, the detective, as he penetrates the world of the suspects of the crime.

In 1969, Leñero adapted *Los albañiles* for the stage<sup>3</sup> with possibly even greater success than he achieved with the novel, winner of the prestigious Premio Seix Barral. The play won the National Critics Association award and the *El Heraldillo* trophy for best work of the year, and has had runs in Mexico almost every season since. The adaptation is a skilled one, especially considering Leñero's lack of experience. Basically a journalist, short-story writer, and novelist, he had tried his first experiment with dramatic form only the year before, in 1968, with *Pueblo rechazado*, a dramatization of a celebrated religious polemic in Mexico. He hesitated to undertake a dramatic piece, he confesses, "for fear of the dialogues and dramatic form," but his fascination with the "plastic and visual elements" won

out.<sup>4</sup> Leñero's instincts for the genre are solid and creative. As his novels—especially *Los albañiles*—illustrate, he has an excellent ear for dialogue and linguistic detail and uses it to great advantage in his plays. A large part of the success of the dramatic version of *Los albañiles* is due to the skill of the dialogue. Another factor in its stage success is the unifying presence of the building, which is such a vital element of the novel. It occupies almost the entire stage. The most important factor, however, is the characters, for the Mexican audience is able to identify closely with them. They are basically unchanged from the way they appear in the novel, even in their speech patterns; but their importance is proportionately greater in the play because of certain fundamental changes which Leñero made in the structure and theme of the novel when he revised it for the stage.

Of course, over the five-year period since the publication of the novel some changes were bound to occur in Leñero's literary outlook. But most of the modifications—at least the structural ones—reflect the inescapable restrictions involved in going from a written medium to an audio-visual one. This is especially true in the case of *Los albañiles*, which has a subtle and complex narrative structure. Commenting once on the complexity of his novel, Leñero explained: “no quería que hubiera tiempo atrás, dentro del libro, sino que todo el tiempo se diera instantáneamente.”<sup>5</sup> By varying the narrative techniques and using cinematic devices, Leñero does achieve the desired effect in the novel, at least as much as is possible in a linear medium. There is no question of reading all things simultaneously, but of taking in the entire story at once; since this comprehension process is controlled and triggered linguistically rather than verbally, it cannot be operated merely through dialogue, as in a play. A comparison of the novelistic and dramatic structures will reveal how Leñero transferred the “instantaneous” principle from one genre to another, but before dealing with the structural details, the changes in the thematic content must be reviewed.

In the introduction to the published edition of the play, Leñero discusses his approach to the new version: “Emprendí la versión teatral de la novela convencido de que los recursos escénicos podían proporcionar a mis personajes nuevas e interesantes posibilidades de supervivencia.”<sup>6</sup> The new version represented quite a bit more than a simple translation of novelistic to theatrical language, he says. It gave him the chance for a “sincere reconsideration” of the original story and its “symbolic implications.”<sup>7</sup> By “symbolic,” Leñero—a firmly Catholic author—means “religious.” He asserts that despite the view of most critics, who have seen in the novel only the murder-mystery format, the portrait of the contemporary urban worker, and the structural complexities, there is also an “implicit symbolic element” which transcends the apparent content.<sup>8</sup> This symbolic element is certainly present in the novel, but is so understated that the critics cannot be blamed for overlooking it as a principal consideration. It has long been my own feeling that Leñero intended to set forth his religious themes, and even thought that he had succeeded; but in fact, and perhaps unknowingly, he submerged the Catholic question of guilt and redemption within a farther-reaching and more universal theme, namely, what is the nature of reality. Thus it is quite natural that Leñero, given the chance, should seek to rework the religious symbolism. Even from the purely practical point of view, a religious theme would be easier for a Mexican audience to follow, as well as being structurally and intellectually

less complicated than the "nature of reality" idea. The religious motif is also easier to work with mechanically than the more abstract concept. An example that comes to mind is the festival cross of the Third of May, which is hung on the highest part of the building to commemorate the patron saint of the bricklayers. At least three times in novel, mention is made of the cross, which the workers forgot to remove the day after the feasting. But the effect is less significant than the visual impression the cross makes all through the play, and Leñero is careful to mention it in the stage directions.

As Leñero realized in retrospect, the religious aspects of the novel are present, but they are not explicit, nor are they clearly defined. The night watchman's name is Jesús, but he is closer to an antichrist, being an epileptic and alcoholic, drug user, child molester, homosexual, thief, liar and so on. He dies a violent death at the hands of his fellow man and in a certain sense rises again, but this does not really make *Los albañiles* a novel of sin and redemption. In the first place, don Jesús is unaware of his potential as Christ Redeemer in the novel. Second, the individual and collective guilt of the six suspects finds no expiation and seeks none, for in the end, their guilt is less important than the new theme that emerges when the focus shifts to the detective, Munguía, in the last chapter. His real concern finally is not to determine innocence or guilt, but to find the truth. His quest for the truth and its philosophical implications vis-à-vis the nature of reality transcend the religious symbolism in the end, and Leñero has prevented a similar shift in emphasis in the play by diminishing Munguía's importance.

The published edition of the play is prefaced with an epigraph from II Corinthians: "A quien no conoció pecado, lo hizo pecado entre nosotros para que fuésemos justicia de Dios en él" ("For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him"), which Leñero explains as follows:

Al escribir esta versión para el teatro me empeñé con una gran necesidad en subrayar ese elemento [simbólico]; no sólo a través del epígrafe que acompaña la presente edición, sino impulsando y quizá forzando a don Jesús a proyectar, en forma más clara, su carácter de sui generis redentor. Violentada de su contexto, la frase paulina representa para mí la mayor síntesis de la obra aunque no, desde luego, su única posibilidad interpretativa.<sup>9</sup>

The epigraph and the textual changes in the theater version effectively limit the possibilities to one, at least for the reader of the play. Whereas in the novel the only accusations are from one individual to another, in the text of the play, Isidro, one of the suspects, twice accuses the whole group of the murder, and the owner of the housing project also blames the group as a whole. Another significant departure from the novel is the appearance of don Jesús' wife, Josefina, during the investigation. She uses the word "guilt" twice during her scene, blaming herself for the murder. The most outright statement of the redemption theme comes from the night watchman himself (again a total departure from the novel), when he says: "Para eso estoy aquí: para cargar con tu mugre y con la de todos los demás."<sup>10</sup>

At no point in his prefatory discussion does Leñero mention Munguía or refer to any change in the detective's role in the play. It is as though he wished

to minimize all of the elements that the critics seized on, except the religious and social ones. He thereby sacrifices Munguía's role completely to the end of advancing the other characters' importance. In the novel, Munguía is known only as "the man in the striped tie" until the last chapter. This epithet is the most subtle symbol of guilt in the novel, since it implies that the characters, too afraid to meet the detective's eye, stare at his tie while he talks with them. They fear that he will read in them their own reasons for wishing the old watchman dead. The tag also enhances Munguía's anonymity and omniscience in the novel. As a detective, he has the job of accumulating data and formulating results. Since he is given no personal identity until the end of the story, the process of data-gathering and conclusion-forming is almost independent of the interrogations, or at least so it seems to the reader at first. It is only at the end of the novel that the reader can form a clear idea of the structure of the narrative and how the individual elements are articulated. The first ten chapters, for instance, are not set out chronologically; the ninth is the continuation of the fifth (although stylistically it is completely different), and the tenth continues the seventh, etc. The only continuity in the chapter structure is that the first ten chapters are all segments of Munguía's interrogation sessions and the eleventh and final chapter presents the conclusions. Leñero uses a wide variety of techniques in the narrative, many of which are used only once, either in one chapter or a series of related chapters. For instance, Chapter 5, the first session with the plumber, is a straight verbal interchange with absolutely no narrative or descriptive inserts. The continuation of that same session in a later chapter is a standard, third-person narrative of past events. Chapters 7 and 10 constitute the interrogation of Jacinto, another suspect, which comprises only Jacinto's responses to Munguía's questions (which are not part of the text but are implied by the context). Most of the chapters are less uniform, making use of several techniques. Whereas the four chapters described above all give detailed, chronological accounts of the suspects' past histories or alibis for the night of the crime, the other chapters are not centered on one character but on the whole group (although one particular character may provide a narrative axis for long segments at a time). The story jumps continually from one time-period to another, constantly shifting from one character's point of view to another's. Eventually it is clear that these shifts correspond to the internal logic of Munguía's omniscient reconstruction of the crime, but this fact is obscured by the detective's anonymity and by the author's technique, which is also deliberately anonymous. As Leñero has stated, his intention was to have the reader absorb the story directly and instantaneously. In order to achieve this, he avoids the use of indirect techniques of description and narration, using instead spoken dialogues and monologues or indirect discourse.

Aside from the actual mechanics of representing time- and space-shifts, Leñero's biggest problem in converting *Los albañiles* to the stage was Munguía. His physical presence made anonymity impossible, and having to transform all of the diverse narrative expedients into dramatic dialogue forced Munguía's role as internal narrator into the open.

The mechanical problems were solved by dividing the stage into two areas: a small one on the proscenium and a large one occupying the stage proper. The small area represents Munguía's office at the precinct and the large one is the con-

struction area. A note to the reader explains that all of the scenes in the building, except the discovery of the body, take place before the crime and all the scenes at the precinct take place after, i.e., during the investigation. He adds:

Las violaciones de tiempo y de espacio que cometen los personajes al cruzar del área policial a la zona del edificio, o viceversa, deben entenderse como eso: como violaciones cronológicas y espaciales, como súbitos rompimientos que sólo justifica la unidad psicológica que rige los acontecimientos de la historia.<sup>11</sup>

Since much of Leñero's novelistic technique is cinematographic in nature, this staging expedient is quite effective in conveying the complicated time-structure of the novel. The problem of the detective presented greater difficulties for Leñero, for Munguía's role as internal narrator is fundamental to the structure of the novel and involves linguistic as well as formal intricacies. Thus, as Leñero acknowledges in the introduction, the theater version had to be much more than a simple conversion of novelistic language to stage language. While the language of the stage is direct dialogue and gesture, only a small portion of the novel *Los albañiles* is expressed as conversation or monologue. The far greater portion is conveyed by a personalized third-person narrative mode that I term "indirect dialogue." It is used with a combination of direct and indirect discourse and third-person narrative, as in the segment below:

... ¿De veras te asusté, Isidro?

—No.

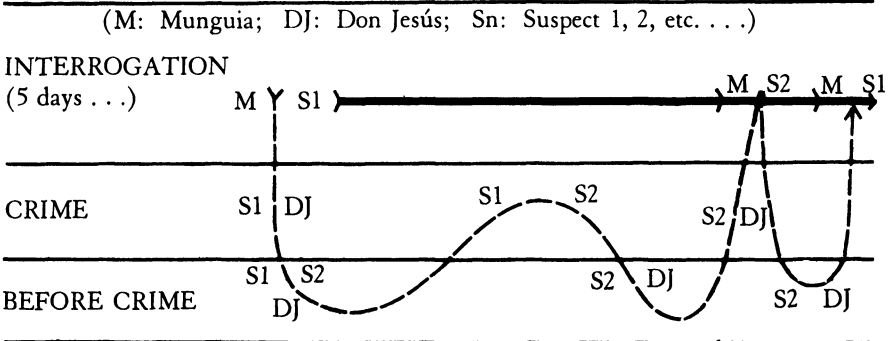
—¿De veras no?

—Deveras no. —Y para demostrárselo, esa tarde se quedaría con él hasta las once. Después de todo, como decía Jacinto, eran entretenidas sus vaciladas.

—No son vaciladas, es la pura verdad. —Lo que el anciano de cabellos plateados le predijo eso ocurrió exactamente. No hubo ni habría modo de frenar un destino . . . quienes mataron a su padre irían a matarlo a él— ¿entiendes?— Don Jesús muchacho aún, no quiso seguir oyéndolo. (p. 10)

"Y para demostrárselo" begins a shift from dialogue to a segment of indirect discourse, responded to directly with "No son vaciladas." In the section beginning "Lo que el anciano" there are two narrative voices: first don Jesús and then the *anciano*. No authorial intervention identifies a new speaker; the context alone is the reader's guide. It is equally impossible for the reader to determine exactly where one voice leaves off and the other begins. This sort of superimposition and fade-and-dissolve technique is basically cinematographic and cannot be represented on a stage where the characters must move physically from one area to another to indicate a spatio-temporal shift.

Another technique in the novel that is linguistically controlled is the organizing substructure of each chapter. The following diagram attempts to illustrate the dual motion:



The solid line represents the interviews between Munguía and the other suspects and witnesses. It is the line that governs the chapter divisions and establishes the forward chronology of the novel, which begins with the finding of the body and ends when Munguía is taken off the case. The dotted line is the vertical chronology, the recreation of the past events leading to the crime. It is thus the actual story-line, the content—observed, related or imagined—of the interrogations. This technique is deliberately vague in the novel; that is to say, the three areas of content—observed, related and imagined—are not clearly defined. The reader can merge his own reconstruction of the crime with Munguía's logical reconstruction, with the suspects' own versions, and with the author's construction of the novel. Final comprehension comes in the last chapter when Munguía is revealed by name and makes his definitive accusation: "You killed Don Jesús," he says, in effect; "you killed him because. . . ." And then the motive, modus operandi, and particular details are stated. Within a single extended paragraph, and without ever substituting a name for the "you," he confronts each of the six suspects in turn, reconstructing a chain of events for each one. It is only then that the reader realizes that Munguía is in possession of all the information in the story, including things of which he could not logically have had knowledge—i.e., items that the reader apparently overhears directly in the mind of a character. The reader is now overwhelmed by Munguía's omniscience. He knows all the facts, and yet he cannot solve the mystery. The truth has eluded him. He is removed from the case and goes out to get drunk, returning in the dawn for one last look at the building. He is greeted by the night watchman, who may or may not be don Jesús: the circle is complete. Munguía smiles and extends his hand amicably and the novel ends.

The same ending closes the play—the multiple accusation and the "second" watchman. The scene loses none of its dramatic effect, but it does lose much of its philosophical impact. What in the novel is Munguía's personal confrontation with the paradoxical nature of the universe, in the play is a religious statement about don Jesús' death, reinforced by a pantomime which Leñero inserts just after the accusations of Munguía, in which don Jesús fights with the invisible assailant just before the final scene with Munguía. Munguía's importance in the play is considerably diminished and don Jesús' proportionately increased. The detective is no longer so mysteriously all-seeing; nor is he the anonymous "man in the striped

tie." He is merely the head detective and hardly stands out from the others at all. He is not omniscient; he is just well-briefed on the suspects' activities. More importantly, Munguía is no longer the Quester of the Truth. The quest theme, although developed really only in the last chapter of the novel, is one of the dominant thrusts of the story. Like Borges' Erik Lönnrot ("La muerte y la brújula") and Robbe-Grillet's Wallas in *Les Gommés*, to mention two other detectives in contemporary literature, Munguía is an anti-hero. He symbolizes twentieth-century man, caught in a web of worthless material and empirical values in a maelstrom of disoriented and disorienting realities. Like theirs, Munguía's path to the truth will double in on itself and lead him back to the starting place: the night watchman.

In the play, the theme of truth-seeking is as forced as the Christ-Redeemer theme. After offering to beat a confession out of one of the suspects, Dávila, one of the detectives, says: "aquí está lo que buscas." Munguía answers: "no es eso lo que busco, Dávila" (p. 47). At the beginning of the second act a similar exchange takes place:

Pérez Gómez: . . . Munguía: qué es lo que buscas.

Munguía: La verdad.

Pérez Gómez: Sí, ya sé, pero . . .

Munguía: Busco la verdad. (p. 76)

The same sort of scene occurs still a third time, later in the act. Depending on the importance a director places on these exchanges, of course, the theme could be developed more fully or less fully. But it is only in these moments of interaction with his staff that Munguía's personality develops, whereas in the novel Leñero uses most of the last chapter for that purpose. It is clear that—for whatever reasons—Leñero wanted to play down the quest idea and Munguía's corresponding thematic importance.

Yet despite these radical modifications, *Los albañiles* in its theater form captures the flavor of the original. The workers and don Jesús are the same and so is their language. To conserve that integrity of personality and language was certainly Leñero's most important goal, and he was apparently satisfied with the result:

Al encarnarse en los cuerpos tangibles de los actores, al traducirse en diálogo toda la acción y todos los recursos descriptivos, los personajes rescatan y devuelven el gesto con que la realidad ha conformado a los obreros de la construcción. Ellos constituyen, al fin de cuentas, el cimiento de la obra literaria, la trabe en que se apoya esta simple estructura de ficción. Los verdaderos albañiles son, por supuesto, mucho más importantes que mis personajes.<sup>12</sup>

The last remark is Leñero's well-known modesty speaking. It is not a question of whether the bricklayers are more important than the artist's fictional representation of them. Once the basis for a work of fiction is given, its relevance to us—who participate in receiving the work—is not determined by its intrinsic relevance, but by how, and how effectively, the artist communicates his vision to us.

It is difficult to assess the artistic values gained and lost in the expression of a writer's vision in two different media. As we are made aware from studying the

two versions of *Los albañiles*, it is not the same vision at all, because the medium and content are too inextricably fused to change the one without changing the other. The most we can do is affirm or fail to affirm that each work is successful in its own medium. In the case of *Los albañiles* we can make a positive assertion: the novel is as good as a novel as the play is as a play. Their respective successes are virtually independent, and certainly not predictable from one to the other. Both works share certain properties: the basic themes (or most of them), the characters and their living language, and the structural concept of "instantaneousness." The fact that Leñero has successfully achieved two different artistic visions from these ingredients is a credit to his own abilities, not to any inherent magic in the ingredients themselves.

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## Notes

1. The novels are *La voz adolorida* (Xalapa: Universidad Veracruzana, 1961), re-issued as *A fuerza de palabras* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1967); *Los albañiles* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 2nd ed., 1964); *Estudio Q* (México: Joaquín Mortiz, 1965); *El garabato* (México: Joaquín Mortiz, 1967); *Redil de ovejas* (México: Joaquín Mortiz, 1973). The plays are *Pueblo rechazado* (México: Joaquín Mortiz, 1969); *Los albañiles* (México: Joaquín Mortiz, 1970); *Compañero*, printed in *Diálogos*, No. 32 (marzo-abril 1970), 14-27; *La carpa*, 1971; *El juicio* (México: Joaquín Mortiz, 1972); *Los hijos de Sánchez*, 1972.

2. Carmen Aguilar Zinser, "'El teatro en México es inexistente,' V. Leñero," *Excelsior* (8 agosto de 1971), p. 17B.

3. The 1970 edition states that the work was first performed at the Antonio Caso theater on June 27, 1969.

4. These comments are found in the lengthy introduction to *Pueblo rechazado*.

5. Beatriz Espejo, "Entrevista con Vicente Leñero," *Ovaciones* (23 mayo de 1965), p. 5.

6. Introduction to the play *Los albañiles*, p. 7.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Los albañiles*, play, p. 87.

11. Introduction to the play, p. 14.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 8.