

## Enrique Buenaventura's Theory of the Committed Theatre

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Enrique Buenaventura has won a reputation as one of Colombia's foremost playwrights during the last fifteen years. His theatre has been staged in Colombia, Canada, Europe, Cuba and the United States. Born in Cali, Colombia in 1925, he is a member of that group of Latin American playwrights referred to by some critics as "writers of the committed theatre." Buenaventura's commitment is to the solution of Latin American social problems, especially the problem of cultural dependency, through the creation of a theatre which will inspire its audience to change the structure of society.

Although he has won international prizes, Buenaventura's theatre has received little critical attention beyond short articles in Colombian magazines and mention in general works on the Latin American theatre.<sup>1</sup> A careful study of the pre-1969 essays, prologues and interviews in which he defines his concept of dramatic art is useful for further critical studies on his individual plays. These writings reveal his esthetic theory and the methods he proposes to carry out this deeply felt social commitment.

Buenaventura's theatre has undergone a constant evolution throughout his career. One can observe how his ideas about theatre progress toward a greater amount of social commitment. His earlier plays, *En la diestra de Dios Padre* (1960), *La tragedia del Rey Cristophe* (1963) and *Un requiem por el Padre Las Casas* (1963)<sup>2</sup> express social concern through traditional presentations of reality; that is, studies of individual characters and an external description of events. But with the staging of *La trampa* in 1966, a play based on the political corruption of the Guatemalan dictator Ubico's regime, Buenaventura's theatre group subsequently lost its government funding. At this point, his plays change radically both in form and content.

In *Teatro y cultura*, written in 1968, he shows his own awareness of this change. He says, "La experiencia de 'Los papeles' (traducida al inglés con el

título 'Documents from Hell') era, después de 'La trampa,' el intento más serio que habíamos hecho en el T.E.C. de meternos, de integrarnos a la vida y a la muerte de nuestro pueblo."<sup>3</sup> *Papeles del infierno* (1968) and *Tirano Banderas* (1969)<sup>4</sup> all reflect a much deeper commitment to social change with the added dimension of the author's new interpretation of reality and stylistic fusion of form and content.

Central to the concept of the social purpose of his theatre is its role as a didactic tool for social change. A play should act as a type of mirror in which society will see itself, arrive at a better self-knowledge and as a result of this knowledge be moved to change itself, even to the point of social revolution. In *Teatro y cultura*, Buenaventura states that the "purpose of the theatre is not to cluster the masses around a few minimal purposes, but to present maximum proposals."<sup>5</sup> Using Marx's definitions, we could say that the goal of Buenaventura's theatre is to produce a social revolution that will change the structure of society from within, instead of reforms that do not change the system itself.

Buenaventura proposes to bring about social change through a technique very similar to Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre.<sup>6</sup> Instead of creating communion with his audience, he strives for division. "I make the kind of theatre that divides, separates people, sets them up in combat."<sup>7</sup> He adds that the theatre-goer has to be made to listen, to be dragged in and forced to listen. The director has to pull down the barriers that man builds around himself and leave him alone without defense. Once man's defenses have been pulled down, the mirror effect of the didactic theatre takes place. The audience sees itself in the play and as a result of greater self-knowledge is directed to revise its system of values.

In order to create this type of social mirror, Buenaventura relies primarily upon two tools: his interpretation of realism and the use of historical antecedents. Realism, he feels, should be based on actual experience. The playwright should have himself lived through the experiences which he presents to the theatre-goer if he is to challenge effectively society's problems from the "solid ground of experience." The relationship is clearly specified when he states that "where his (the playwright's) personal experience intersects with those of the mass of society, there at that point of intersection you have an art of synthesis."<sup>8</sup>

Buenaventura's theatre is particularly concerned with the alienations of our everyday life. In "The 'Teatro Experimental de Cali' Today" he states:

We start out with the more visible and tangible problems, with the anxieties that concern us directly, with the alienations that we experience in ourselves, and using these problems as a basis we then establish the relationship between the work and our public and draw conclusions about that relationship. These conclusions . . . both define and also provide substance for the field of our action.<sup>9</sup>

In the play *La trampa*, Buenaventura focuses on this theme when he says that the play deals with "la alienación del pueblo, usado para reprimir al pueblo." The main character, Sgt. Dinamita of the Guatemalan Army, is ordered by a general to shoot Gen. Von Grass, the German military expert retained by the former dictator, Ubico, to organize the Guatemalan Army. Sgt. Dinamita decides not to shoot Von Grass, choosing instead to await developments in the political situation. When the situation is reversed and Von Grass is in command again, he ironically

orders Sgt. Dinamita shot for not following orders. As Buenaventura says, "un mecanismo creado por personajes concretos y en base a intereses no menos concretos, aliena y mueve a esos mismos personajes, creando, al mismo tiempo, contradicciones estructurales que muestran la debilidad del mecanismo. . . ." <sup>10</sup>

Buenaventura's concept of realism differs from the traditional one in that he is more interested in the analysis of reality and its stylistic representation than merely in the accurate reproduction of the content of reality. In an essay written in Cali in 1966 he clearly states:

Art uses expressive material (colors, sounds, words) which cannot be separated from the content of the work of art. In the concrete case of literature, we have to understand that although literature is a form of apprehending reality, it is, specifically, a form of apprehending. It doesn't explain reality, it is reality, and so in other words it helps change reality. . . . But by placing an exaggerated emphasis on content and by neglecting form, literature becomes descriptive, discursive, and automatically becomes a *medium*, a more or less useful and agreeable tool of philosophy and of science in general. It ceases to produce works of art and becomes an artistic way of explicating or analyzing reality. <sup>11</sup>

In his later plays, Buenaventura skillfully develops this concept of realism. Through the use of symbols and poetry in *Papeles del infierno* and *La trampa*, he presents an incisive study of social reality.

Another aspect of Buenaventura's interpretation of reality is the generative function of the stylistic image of reality. In "The 'Teatro Experimental de Cali' Today," he states, "we think that concrete reality approaches its own transformation when, through us (actors, playwrights, directors), it generates out of itself contradictory images, which, by recreating it, by depriving it of its 'ordinariness,' by laying its mechanism bare, begin to transform it." <sup>12</sup> He fuses this thought with his preoccupation with artistic form when he states, "If I want to write about an incoherent world my writing will not describe this incoherence unless it is itself incoherent, with an incoherence more apprehendable than the incoherence of reality: an incoherence which is also itself testifying. It criticizes incoherence." <sup>13</sup>

Buenaventura believes in the use of historical subject matter in theatre as a way of bringing about the desired social change. He strives to give Latin America a sense of the historical background of the struggle for social justice. Only then, he believes, will its people be able to conquer what he calls "cultural colonialism," that is, the slavish imitation of European and North American cultural life and the materialization of life's values." Latin Americans will develop a sense of tradition and of an independent culture through recreating historical figures in literature and the theatre. As he says, "Me he propuesto que la historia de Colombia y de la América Latina en general sean ampliamente discutidas y ampliamente conocidas. Porque un país no puede trazarse un destino si no mira hacia atrás. Porque un país no puede pensar en el futuro si no conoce y no discute su pasado." <sup>14</sup>

Though he never completely abandons his belief in the use of historical themes, Buenaventura's use of historical antecedents is most clearly portrayed in his early plays: *La tragedia del Rey Cristophe* and *Un requiem por el Padre Las Casas*. The characters of Rey Cristophe and Las Casas are both figures in the struggle for justice for the Negroes and Indians respectively. In *La tragedia del Rey Cristophe*

the struggle takes place inside Cristophe's mind. His initial idealism is gradually replaced by an imitation of the pomp, grandeur and tyranny of the French court. Cristophe finally becomes an egocentric dictator. In *Un requiem por el Padre Las Casas*, cultural colonialism is represented by the characters of the Spanish bureaucrats and colonists who destroy Las Casas' attempts to bring about an understanding of the Indian's culture. In these two plays, Buenaventura shows how the goals of these ethnic groups are destroyed by the social system in which they live.

In addition to cultural dependency, Buenaventura sees the materialization of life's values as the other evil of cultural colonialism. He finds evidence of this materialization in the commercialization of the theatre and says, "the theatre has been turned into a business and art has barely survived the process."<sup>15</sup>

As a solution to cultural colonialism, Buenaventura does not propose naive and insular Latin Americanism; instead, he suggests what he calls "popular theatre."<sup>16</sup> He outlines "popular theatre's" relationship to foreign authors when he says, "Lo que hemos intentado hasta ahora es escoger aquellas obras que tengan una relación con lo que, acertada o equivocadamente, eso lo dirá el tiempo, consideramos lo fundamental de nuestra problemática: el colonialismo y la dependencia. Sabíamos que el colonizador que nos impone su cultura nos da también las armas de liberación. Pero esas armas sólo podemos usarlas a condición de incorporarlas a nuestra realidad concreta."<sup>17</sup>

Popular theatre, Buenaventura believes, is to be characterized by the use of popular sources, such as the *mojiganga* from Antioquia and the coastal *sainete*.<sup>18</sup> He bases one of his best-known plays, *En la diestra de Dios Padre*, on just such a source, a *mojiganga*.<sup>19</sup> Buenaventura does not advocate purely folkloric theatre, but instead proposes the use of popular themes as a means of communication to structure real experience in such a way as to reach the audience directly. He firmly believes in the innate capacity of the people to perceive art and to appreciate it.

Basic to Buenaventura's definition of the theatre is the concept that a play is above all a performance, written to be staged rather than read. Since the text itself should rise out of the stage, he conceives of a play as a viable element which is transformed every time that it is staged. Thus the hierarchy of author-director-actor is completely reversed, and the continuance of the creative process throughout the different presentations becomes more a part of the actor's art than the author's. The author even rewrites the role in accordance with the different insights of the actor who portrays it. Of his play *Un requiem por el Padre Las Casas*, Buenaventura says that he did not really understand the main character until he saw the play on stage.<sup>20</sup>

Closely linked to Buenaventura's conception of the play as essentially a performance is the role of the audience in the creative process. In "The 'Teatro Experimental de Cali' Today," he states that any representation of reality is dependent on the preparedness of those who participate in the representation, that is, the actors and the audience. For this reason, it is very important that a director know his *habitués* and not direct a play in a country in which he does not know his audience.<sup>21</sup>

At the core of Buenaventura's "committed theatre" lies the profound belief

in the function of dramatic art as a tool for social change. His plays deal with the social reality of Latin America, at first through an external presentation of this reality, later through a stylized analysis of it. To Buenaventura, the author's creative process continues during the various performances of a play, which changes as a result of the actors' and audiences' participation in the performance. Latin American historical themes give his audience a sense of their heritage while they are led to greater self-knowledge, and as a result, greater awareness of the social change needed.

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## Notes

1. Carlos José Reyes, "Enrique Buenaventura, el dramaturgo," *Letras Nacionales* No. 1 (marzo-abril, 1965); Willis Knapp Jones, *Behind Spanish American Footlights* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1966), pp. 335-336, and Frank Dauster, *Historia del teatro hispanoamericano. Siglos XIX y XX* (Mexico: Ediciones de Andrea, 1966), p. 106.
2. These dates refer to the first performance of these plays as stated by Buenaventura in an interview with the author, Cali, September 4, 1969. See also Alvaro Monroy Caicedo, "La tragedia del Rey Christophe," *El Tiempo* (Bogotá, Colombia), March 5, 1963, p. 11-E.
3. *Teatro y cultura*, an unpublished document by Enrique Buenaventura, July, 1969, p. 1.
4. Watson interview, September 4, 1969, and Monroy Caicedo, p. 11-E.
5. *Teatro y cultura*, p. 10.
6. Peter Demetz, "Introduction," *Brecht—A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1962), p. 4.
7. Buenaventura, "Directing a Play is Like Directing a People Toward Their Liberation," an unpublished interview by Jan Vesscher; May 14, 1968, at the Communications Center, Simon Fraser University, Canada; translated by Michael Bawtree, p. 5.
8. Interview with Enrique Buenaventura conducted by Michael Bawtree, June 1968; p. 3.
9. Enrique Buenaventura, "The 'Teatro Experimental de Cali' Today," an unpublished press release, 1968; translated by Michael Bawtree, p. 2.
10. *Teatro y cultura*, p. 12.
11. Enrique Buenaventura, "Realism in Ubu," *Ubu*, unpublished theatre program for the production of *Ubu* by Alfred Jarry, Cali, 1966. Translated by Michael Bawtree, p. 1.
12. "The 'Teatro Experimental de Cali' Today," p. 2.
13. Buenaventura, "Realism in Ubu," p. 1.
14. Monroy Caicedo, p. 11-E.
15. Interview with Enrique Buenaventura conducted by Maida Watson on September 4, 1969, in Cali, Colombia.
16. Enrique Buenaventura, "L'Art N'Est Pas Un Luxe," *Partisans* (Paris), No. 36 (Feb-Mar, 1967), 80.
17. *Teatro y cultura*, p. 11.
18. See Arturo Escobar Uribe, *Rezadores y ayudados* (Bogotá, Colombia: Imprenta Nacional, 1959), p. 124 and Agustín Jaramillo Londoño, *Testamento del Paisá* (Medellín, Colombia: Editorial Bedout, 1961), p. 495 for a detailed explanation of these terms. Both *mojiganga* and *sainete* refer to short plays put on by groups of country people for the entertainment of their neighbors.
19. *El teatro hispanoamericano contemporaneo, Vol. I*, Carlos Solórzano, editor (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1964).
20. Gabriel Ma. Flórez Arzayús, "Prólogo," *Teatro*, Enrique Buenaventura (Bogotá: Ediciones Tercer Mundo, 1963), p. 7.
21. "The 'Teatro Experimental de Cali' Today," p. 2.