

Alonso Alegría: Dramatist and Theatrical Activist

ROBERT J. MORRIS

During the past few years, the number of Peruvian dramatists to establish a significant national or international reputation has not increased appreciably. Among the newcomers are Julio Ortega, Víctor Zavala, Sara Joffré, and Alonso Alegría. An apparent consequence of this decline in new dramatists is that the number of new plays has not kept pace with that of the first twenty years of the post-war era. In a more positive vein, however, most of the new works presented have fared well for having passed a more vigorous scrutiny before and after their debut. With the decrease in theatrical groups and public attendance in Lima in the past five years, competition for even local recognition has become keen among the writers. Now, more than in the recent past, Peruvian dramatists heed critical appraisals and are attentive to public reaction to their work. Quality, not quantity, is their guideline.

Within the scope of the present-day theatre in Peru, there is no individual whose activities and achievements better exemplify the positive results of this competition than those of Alonso Alegría. Alegría's reputation, however, is not based solely on his two plays staged to date; he has also been active as a director, producer, and theatrical entrepreneur for more than a decade, working in such roles during his early twenties.

Alegría was born in 1940, in Santiago, Chile, but received his primary and secondary education in Lima. By the late 1950's, as he began his university studies, he was already a serious student of theatre. It was in 1960, during his third year of architectural studies at the Catholic University in Lima, that Alegría finally determined to pursue a professional career in the theatre. This was not a radical or unexpected change since for more than a year he had been collaborating with the internationally acclaimed director Reynaldo D'Amore in Lima's Club de Teatro and with the Teatro de la Universidad de San Marcos. In 1960 he also founded Grupo Alba, an independent troupe, and directed several of its plays. One of these was his own adaptation of Saroyan's *The Beautiful People*. In addi-

tion to these experiences and to his own expertise, a major boost to Alegría's career development came in the early 1960's when he received a Fulbright Scholarship to Yale University. There he finished a B.A. in 1964 and, two years later, a Master of Fine Arts degree. Since then Alegría has worked professionally, producing and directing more than thirty plays with the Yale Repertory Theatre, the New York Shakespeare Festival, and with numerous groups in Lima. Since 1971 he has been the director of the Teatro Nacional Popular, a federally funded organization under the auspices of the Instituto Nacional (which replaced its predecessor, the Casa de Cultura Peruana, in 1971). The Teatro Nacional Popular (TNP) is expected to promote all aspects of the dramatic arts throughout the country, especially at the grassroots level. After assuming the directorship of the TNP Alegría pointed out that he did not intend to elaborate a plastic, absurd, or conceptual drama. His goal, in keeping with the design of the organization, is to foment theatre as a viable form of communication among the various segments of the populace.

For the skeptic, this may appear to be a futile, if not undesirable, assignment for some one of Alegría's preparation and artistic temperament. Alegría has admitted that he has not yet found material which he deems suitable or which conforms to the goals of the TNP. With respect to this problem, he has commented:

Esa es la gran búsqueda, eso es lo terrible, que no exista material escrito que se adecúe plenamente a los intereses del grupo. . . . Tiene que haber un proceso de elaboración, de adaptación, de reescritura, un proceso de decantación de gente para que se escriba para el teatro de acuerdo a este nuevo lineamiento.¹

Our purpose for delving into the scheme of the TNP is to point out that it represents one way in which the contemporary Peruvian theatre is actively seeking change and improvement and, in this instance, with government approval and support. No other group in Latin America is similar in its constitution and charge. Our primary intention, nonetheless, is to emphasize the active and multi-faceted involvement of Alegría in the national theatre—to show that even though the TNP has not yet reached its goal, it is not because Alegría has failed to rally public, private, and even additional government support for the organization. More forcibly than any individual in Lima today, he has contended that the future of the national theatre should be reckoned with now, that the outlook is optimistic, and that Peru needs to cultivate her own talents at every social and cultural level. His strong voice has been an invaluable stimulus to every sector of the theatre from the elitist to the popular.

As we turn to Alegría's dramas, it should be reiterated that he did not begin his career as a playwright and that, while his works undoubtedly account for much of his renown, he has always devoted the majority of his efforts to directing and producing. This is not to abase Alegría's production. To the contrary, it is to assert that, due to the demands on his several interests as a theatrical artist, Alegría has developed his literary talents in an irregular fashion. He is, of course, aware of the seemingly disparate division of his interests and last year offered the following observations on this aspect of his career:

No pensaba . . . seguir dramaturgia, pero me dieron una beca para dramaturgia y en el fondo todo el mundo quiere ser escritor. Es decir, en el

teatro, la más efímera de las artes, quién no quisiera dejar puestas en una página unas ideas que perduren más allá de la última función. Y poco a poco me ha ido gustando más y más escribir, hasta que ahora llego a considerarme tanto dramaturgo como director. Me he preguntado qué es lo que prefiero y no sé responder. Me he podido pasar sin escribir dos años, pero cuando dejo de dirigir extraño muchísimo, extraño los ensayos, el trabajo, las funciones.²

Alegría's first drama, *Remigio el huaquero*, had its premiere in Lima in 1965, when it shared the Premio Nacional de Teatro with *El Rábdomante*, the last work by Sebastián Salazar Bondy. *El huaquero*, a word derived from the Quechua *huaco* (almost any type of ceramic vessel), brings pressure to bear on an insistent foe of the Peruvian government in its struggle to preserve intact the national pre-Conquest treasures. A *huaquero* is one who illegally hunts, digs up, and disposes of the ancient relics, artifacts, and other such valuables left by the pre-Inca and Inca empires. The *huaquero* is often an uneducated individual who, in turn, is exploited by a clever swindler who secretly sells the treasures to private collectors. Alegría's drama, one of few Peruvian works to admit the continued existence of such individuals, is more than just a portrayal of personal greed; it is a comment on social graft and corruption.

Each of the three acts is divided into two lengthy scenes, five of which are laid on the arid coast of Peru near the pre-Inca ruins of Chancay. For years Remigio has searched these ruins for a fabled buried palace and its treasures, but it is Juan, his son, who accidentally uncovers a valuable golden vase. Enrique, a friend who illegally traffics in such treasures, subsequently appears to appraise the relic. Realizing his opportunity for considerable profit, he deceives Remigio and pays him only a pittance for the vase. The first act ends with the news that Juan has been stricken with the mysterious disease which killed his mother long before.

In the second act Remigio is convinced by a *curandero*, also a friend, that the vase must be recovered if Juan is to be cured. In his search for the vase, Remigio discovers that he has been deceived by Enrique, and that the latter, in turn, has been deceived by Gunter, a wealthy dealer in national treasures. The final act dramatizes the end of Remigio's career as a *huaquero* and his realization of the pernicious effects of wealth upon the greedy. When he returns home with the vase he finds that Juan's sickness was not serious and that even the *curandero* had lied with the hope of possessing the vessel for himself. When Remigio is alone and burying the vase, he speaks of the evil way in which men and friendships can be destroyed by greed. Moreover, convinced that his belief in the buried palace is only another deceit and a result of his own greed, he decides to search no more for its treasures. So great is Remigio's fear of wealth now, that he will not even sell the vase so his son may go to school.

There can be little doubt that Alegría's initial dramatic piece is intended for a local audience. The place names, the implied criticism of those who destroy the national treasures, and the character types are commonly known to most Peruvians. If it were presented to any other than an Andean public, in fact, *Remigio el huaquero* would certainly forfeit much of its popular appeal and thematic impact. Its most universal aspect, after all, is the implication that money is the root of all evil, and this point is stressed only in the final scene.

The characters represent some of the most common types of Peruvian society: Juan is the youth whose education is to suffer from another's avarice; the *curandero* and Enrique represent the individuals who thrive on the ignorance, gullibility, and superstitions of the masses; Gunter is one of the social elite who protect themselves with wealth and political influence; and Remigio, the pathetic individual who knowingly lives outside the law in his struggle to survive and is the logical victim of the greed of others. But since types such as those just described can be found in most societies, Alegría has reinforced the regionalistic appeal of the play by placing them within a representative stratification of Peruvian society, one based on racial and economic criteria: Juan and Remigio are pure Indians and, as such, are poor; the *curandero*, a mestizo, is barely more affluent than the *huaquero* and his son; Enrique, also a mestizo, is the middle class Peruvian of limited means struggling to survive in an increasingly commercialized society; and Gunter is the rich white merchant and member of the upper social strata. On the basis of such stereotypes, then, *Remigio el huaquero* can be construed as a weak protest of Peruvian society and an indirect statement that the country's class barriers, in particular, are a result of its own economic and social norms and priorities.

Despite its national recognition in 1965, *Remigio el huaquero* has not been made readily available to the public. This presentation, for instance, is based on Alegría's translation to English and is titled *The Buried Palace*.³ The unavailability of a Spanish version and the numerous errors in the English translation preclude a fair evaluation of Alegría's use of language. But some mention should be made of the fact that, even in the English version, the dialogues reflect considerable care in their presentation of ideas and exchanges and contain no objectionable extraneous elements. The play's greatest weakness is its length; the first act, particularly, would be improved if it were shortened. It is more than twice as long as the third act, and half again as long as the second. Otherwise, Alegría has followed traditional and conservative techniques and norms in its composition. He has adhered closely to the three unities, the play's satirical elements are subdued and general in nature, and, in a fashion reminiscent of nineteenth-century drama, the moralizing didactic is reserved for the end of the play. Despite the obvious dependence on proven formulas of the past, however, Alegría's work is a refreshing, perhaps nostalgic portrayal of a segment of Peruvian society which has escaped dramatization for a number of years.

Alegría's second drama is markedly different from his first. When viewed along with his other activities in the national theatre, it is the mainstay of his reputation as a major innovator. *El cruce sobre el Niágara* was composed in 1968, the year it won the Premio Nacional de Teatro for one-act plays and in 1969 it was presented in Lima by the Teatro de la Universidad de San Marcos and received the drama award offered by Casa de las Américas in Cuba.⁴ Since then the play has been presented by numerous theatre groups throughout the Americas and, more recently, a recorded version has been made available for educational purposes.⁵ Consisting of six scenes and a prologue, *El cruce sobre el Niágara* is based on the historical exploits of Jean François Gravelet (1824-1897), a French tightrope walker and acrobat known professionally as Blondin. In Alegría's drama, Blondin is portrayed as a realist, somewhat pessimistic and egocentric.

The second character, the younger Carlo, is a contrasting figure because he is more idealistic, overly optimistic, and frustrated by a sense of cowardice. Despite their apparent differences, it is soon evident that Blondin and Carlo have a marked likeness psychologically since each is living in an existential void and is looking for a way to recover his vital essence. Blondin admits that he no longer has pride in his performance, and Carlo confesses his need to prove his valor.

Carlo first approaches Blondin to accuse him of fraudulent practices, namely of preparing and eating an eight-egg omelette, rather than the twelve-egg version promised, while on a tightwire over Niagara Falls. After several such encounters with Carlo and in order to dispel other rumors of sensationalism and deceptive practices, Blondin accepts the challenge to cross Niagara Falls with his antagonist on his back. Carlo has convinced Blondin that a successful performance would give him a new sense of self-fulfillment and relieve his anguish. Carlo is also anxious to make the crossing in order to regain his pride and put an end to his own frustration. After weeks of preparation, the two men reach such a state of coordination that they accomplish the feat as if, mentally and physically, they were one being. This state of perfection they call Icarón. For those acquainted with the mythical tragedy of the son of Daedalus, the extended metaphorical allusion is apparent. There is the sobering reminder that the project Icarón, like the mythological personage after whom it is named, might succumb to a harrowing and watery death. Moreover, the swirling waters below Niagara represent the vital abyss from which this Icarón has symbolically ascended. In addition, their determination and ultimate success constitute the thematic implication that man must not abandon his struggle for self-fulfillment.

Alegría's coordination of the dramatic structure and thematic message is most discernible in the closing moments of the drama. It is then, after the long and careful preparation which led to the creation of Icarón, that the action climax—the crossing—is reached, manifesting the thematic intent. Each character realizes his most satisfying moment of personal fulfillment: Blondin discovers that his acceptance and subsequent dependence on Carlo has afforded him his most difficult triumph, previously only a dream, and Carlo has been imbued with a new sense of reality and has erased his conviction of cowardice. Each man has experienced the end of his loneliness and isolation. It is also of note that, in addition to the thematic importance of the final scene, the crossing is the most difficult portion to present on stage. Besides the physical strength and endurance Blondin would need if he actually bore Carlo on his back, this scene places heavy technical burdens on the director. Alegría anticipated such demands, however, and in addition to an elevated walkway for Carlo and the proper costumes to effect his being carried, he recommends the use of black light to help create the suspense of the moment and to accentuate the dramatic movements which approximate those of a ballet.

For anyone acquainted with these two dramas, it may indeed seem unlikely that they are by the same author. *Remigio el huaquero* is traditional fare with no dramatic or technical innovations, and offers a minimum of evidence to substantiate Alegría's originality as a dramatist. *El cruce sobre el Niágara*, on the other hand, reveals his capabilities as a creative artist, and, equally significant, it typifies the goals of the recent generation of dramatists in Peru: it is directed at a uni-

versal audience and, with a general absence of any regionalistic appeal, is a rejection of the popular dramatic formulas of the past. Carlo and Blondin do not represent any national racial or social types, and their language does not reflect any attempt to "Peruvianize" the play. Their dialogue suggests that one of Alegría's strong points is his controlled yet imaginative use of language. Throughout the drama, the author is careful to maintain the separate identities of the two characters and their dialogue is a spontaneous exchange free of extraneous digressions or lapses. At the same time, nonetheless, the dialogue gradually and subtly conditions the viewer to accept the appearance of the third dramatic being, Icarón. In dramatic as well as thematic terms, therefore, Icarón represents more than the physical and mental coordination of Carlo and Blondin's beings. For the *personae* and the viewer, Icarón is a character in his own right. It is important to reiterate that Icarón is not a sudden or unexpected creation. As early as the third scene Carlo describes what he is to be:

Yo no voy a cruzar con usted. No no. Mire. De lo que se trata aquí es crear un tercer equilibrista. Ni usted ni yo cruzamos, no los dos juntos tampoco, sino otro. . . . Un tercer equilibrista, ése va a cruzar el Niágara. (El cruce, p. 28)

It is during the crossing, however, that the language is most artistic. Throughout the scene Blondin and Carlo alternately speak very loudly (the italicized portions), as if they were speaking over the sound of the falls, and in more softened *apartes*, to indicate their separate thoughts and reactions to the feat. The effect of this technique is an intriguing combination of, first, their own dialogue and, second, their interior monologue:

Blondin *Y ahora, ¿no quieres ser equilibrista?*

Carlo *No. Yo soy científico.*

Blondin *Se te nota. Pasa en un pie, un pie en el alambre y otro en el aire . . .*

Carlo *Usted podría volar.*

Blondin *. . . sobre el río, en zig-zag, por donde quiera, porque el espacio está cruzado de mil alambres invisibles e infinitos, y yo puedo caminarlos todos. . . . (El cruce, p. 50)*

As the scene progresses, however, it also becomes clear that, in his *apartes*, each character is repeating significant phrases uttered by the other during the preceding segments of the play:

Blondin *Será un paseo lindísimo, Blondin, yo iré muy atento, de pura novelería, porque ¿miedo?*

Carlo *Nada más que aire por todos lados.*

Blondin *Usted es el mejor equilibrista del mundo. Usted nunca caerá al vacío.*

Carlo *Nada más que aire brillante y el sol, me parece que puedo caminar fuera del alambre. (El cruce, p. 51)*

This reversal of dialogue and its expression in the form of interior monologue is Alegría's most effective use of language in *El cruce* . . . because, besides indicating the extent to which each has accepted the other's thoughts and emotional

reaction to their feat, it reinforces their perfect state of psychological coordination (the concept of Icarón) and their mutual acceptance of the challenge.

El cruce sobre el Niágara also differs from *Remigio el huaquero* with regard to the basic structural changes. Alegría has turned to the use of brief and dramatically simple scenes in place of longer and more elaborate acts. With this change he has made excellent use of off-stage voices and music and such technical aids as lighting, sound effects, and costuming. His attention to the technical aspects of his work is particularly notable in the transition between scenes. At the end of the fifth scene, for instance, after the final decision has been made to cross the falls, Blondin puts his arm over Carlo's shoulder and they exit to the rising thunder of the falls. Since this sound does not cease until the final curtain, it assures that the anxiety of the fifth scene is sustained and transmitted to the last, which begins with Carlo and Blondin on the tightrope. To be sure, the impressive structural unity and dramatic intensity of *El cruce* . . . is largely due to Alegría's preoccupation with every aspect of his creation, especially the technical.

There can be no doubt that *El cruce sobre el Niágara* is among the most significant dramas of the past decade, if not the past thirty years, in Peru. In addition to its national recognition, it is also one of the few dramas by a contemporary Peruvian to be received favorably by the international audience. Partial explanation of its success lies in the universality of the characters and in the confident thematic conclusion that the anguish of the human condition can be relieved. From the first to the last scene, *El cruce* . . . is an optimistic expression of faith in man's struggle to give life meaning. For this reason, the play is not a pessimistic evaluation of man and his ability to escape the solitude of his existential vacuum. Moreover, Carlo and Blondin reach their personal fulfillment through absolute trust and dependence on each other, and their victory constitutes Alegría's contention that man cannot and is not meant to wage his existential struggle alone.

To conclude, it should be noted that Alegría is in the process of completing a third drama, *El terno blanco*. It is expected to be a long play divided into three acts with nine scenes and nine interludes. This work has been in progress for several years and, surely, is still incomplete due to the numerous demands on Alegría as a professional artist and administrator. Its delayed appearance reinforces our belief that Alegría's production is still in a formative stage and promises to be as multifarious as his career interests. But it is the balance of these interests, however contradictory they may seem, which best explains his success and points to a meaningful future for him as an activist in the Peruvian theatre.

Texas Tech University

Notes

1. Bruno Podestá A., interview with Alonso Alegría, "Teatro Nacional: Un teatro popular o la popularización del teatro?," *LATR* 7/1 (Fall 1973), 35.

2. Alonso Alegría, "El teatro es una infección," *Textual*, Núm. 2 (setiembre 1971), 4.

3. The ms. of this translation into English, made in 1964 at Yale University, is in my possession.

4. This presentation is based on a mimeographed copy of *El cruce sobre el Niágara* prepared by the Teatro de la Universidad de San Marcos in 1969. Future reference to this text will be indicated by *El cruce* and the appropriate page number within parentheses.

5. A printed copy and a tape recording of *El cruce sobre el Niágara* was first offered for sale in 1971 by The Center of Curriculum Development, Inc., 401 Walnut St., Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.