

Pueblo rechazado: Educating the Public Through Reportage

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Vicente Leñero first won literary distinction as a writer of novels and short stories. His second novel, *Los albañiles*, later successfully adapted for the stage, won for him Spain's prestigious Premio Biblioteca Breve in 1963. In 1967, however, he turned to playwriting, presumably because he had been stalled in the writing of a novel.¹ A year later *Pueblo rechazado* was staged as part of the cultural program of the XIX Olympics in Mexico City, marking the beginning of documentary theatre in Latin America.

The play is based on the reportage of a somewhat sensational religious polemic that exploded in Mexico in 1967. Gregorio Lemerrier, the founder and Prior of the Benedictine monastery Santa María de la Resurrección, located in the vicinity of Cuernavaca, had as far back as 1961, introduced psychoanalysis in his community to determine the vocational suitability of its members for the priesthood. Having obtained the support of his Bishop, the liberal Méndez Arceo, and the approval of his superiors in the Benedictine Order, Lemerrier was able to conduct his experiment unhindered until 1965, when the Vatican was informed of his activities and sternly condemned them. Without having heard his case, the Church authorities ordered his removal to Belgium, the country of his birth, but through the intercession of Cardinal Ottaviani a trial was ultimately authorized by the Pope. It lasted eight months and the final verdict prohibited Lemerrier from upholding "en público o en privado la teoría o la práctica psicoanalítica."²

The case ended in September 1967 with Lemerrier publicly announcing his break with the Church. During the final weeks of the trial the Prior had become the center of a passionate polemic which was reported in detail in the press; priests, reporters, intellectuals and foreign reporters participated in it. Leñero, both a professional reporter and a Catholic intellectual, had followed the case with interest; not only did he find himself implicated ideologically but he had discovered in the incident all the essential elements for a documentary play, a

genre that relies primarily on published accounts in the press for its source materials.

The trend toward reportage in the arts became an international vogue in the sixties. In the United States such well-known authors as Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, James Baldwin and Mary McCarthy have based works of prose fiction on the actual reporting of recent historical facts, and in France, reportage was at the heart of the experimental *cinéma vérité* and the political plays of Jean Vilar, Armand Salacrou and Armand Gatti. But it was a group of playwrights in Germany, Rolf Hochhuth, Heinar Kipphardt, Peter Weiss and others, who became the leading exponents of documentary theatre.

Significantly, the modern documentary play³ emerged only after 1961, the year of the Eichmann trial. Viewed by the Israeli government as a universal drama, the trial had its effect on a wide public through the international communications system, turning the grotesque events of the War, which were too quickly becoming history, into a subject of immediate concern.⁴ Given this impact, it is not surprising that the young playwrights discovered in the trial both content and form for a politically oriented theatre. Moral and political responsibility could be stressed on stage by probing for the truth in recent historical events as reported in the news media, and in the findings of investigation committees and court trials.

Yet this approach to the theatre was not entirely their discovery. Experiments with performances based on documentary evidence had been in the vanguard of German theatre in the 1920's. Erwin Piscator produced a political chronicle, *Trotz alledem!* as early as 1925, while Bertolt Brecht was implementing his new concepts of the stage. A Marxist and a rebel against the theatre of illusion, Brecht, like Piscator, advocated the "epic" theatre, a mode of presentation that he defined as "being strictly historical" and that constantly reminds the audience that "they are merely getting a report of past events."⁵ He strongly favored experimentation with technical devices to produce effects of estrangement (*Verfremdungseffekte*), for the purpose of epic theatre is to emphasize social and political obligation and awaken the audience to the need for change.

The documentary drama of our day, though it incorporates the essential elements of Brechtian theatre, has gone far beyond it. Political trends and social developments of the atomic age, different from those of the twenties, have conditioned the new dramatists, determined their tastes and influenced their intellectual development. Acutely aware of the effect of the mass media on the public, and especially concerned with what they see as a distortion of facts on the part of the press, documentary dramatists strive to discover objective truth in the findings of investigation committees and court trials, in testimonies and reportage.⁶ They avoid all invention, presenting the audience with authentic material that has been edited in form but remains unaltered in content. The initial stimulus for a documentary play must arise from an incident that has been widely publicized by the news media, that transcends the simple dimensions of an isolated case, and that poses questions leading to attention, consciousness and reflection. Ideas must be expressed clearly and forthrightly, and if the play is to have validity as a work of art, it must be a form of artistic expression.

The first documentary play performed in Mexico City was Kipphardt's *In*

the Case of J. Robert Oppenheimer, staged coincidentally the same year the Lemercier case erupted. Whether Kipphardt's play had a direct influence on Leñero is not clear.⁷ What is certain, however, is that the Mexican author, despite his proclaimed insecurity about his incursion in the theatre (p. 12), had completely assimilated the fundamental concepts of documentary drama by the time he undertook writing *Pueblo rechazado*. Since his initial venture, he has continued to demonstrate his dexterity with the documentary form in several other plays: *El juicio*, based on the stenographic record of the trial of Obregón's assassin; *Compañero*, on "Che" Guevara's *Diary*; and *Los hijos de Sánchez*, on Oscar Lewis' famous study of *barrio* life.

In the Lemercier case as depicted by the mass media, Leñero had discovered an incident that held broad implications for the Church and for society. In his introductory remarks to the published version of *Pueblo rechazado*, he points out succinctly his grasp of the situation: "Me interesé en el *affaire* Lemercier no sólo por lo que tenía en sí de conflicto, de espinoso, sino sobre todo por lo que a mi juicio simbolizaba para el momento actual de la Iglesia y de la sociedad." And he enumerates: "En el orden eclesial (reforma de la Iglesia, desacralización, diálogo ecuménico, psicología y religión, vida religiosa) y en el orden público (crisis de autoridad, quiebra de instituciones, evolución técnica y científica. . .). No era este un simple caso aislado. Era un incidente característico y revelador que rebasaba—en su contenido más valioso—sus dimensiones anecdóticas." (pp. 11-12)

With this insight into the ramifications of the conflict and its broader implications, Leñero was able to undertake an investigation of the material and report the result of his findings to an audience whose thinking he wished to provoke. He also confesses to have been persuaded to dramatize Lemercier's dispute with the Vatican because of the possibilities it offered for plastic expression on stage: the monastic setting, ecclesiastic robes, Gregorian chants, Church ritual and the Vatican tribunal. He could lend his drama a liturgical quality and at the same time bind his audience to twentieth century reality by scenes of suggested or implied violence, as when reporters burst on stage aiming their pencils and cameras at the members of the peaceful community.

In accounting for his sources (documentary drama frequently includes a bibliography to substantiate its contentions), Leñero cites newspaper reports, magazine articles, taped or personally witnessed interviews as well as Lemercier's book about his disagreement with the authorities of the Church. The fact that the author had visited the monastery on several occasions before 1967 for private and professional reasons and that he had met Lemercier and Quevedo, the psychoanalyst, may have contributed to his interest in the case but, he claims, it did not interfere with his treating the material objectively. He did not know these people intimately, and besides he had no interest in writing a historical document, rather "una obra de carácter documental, que por supuesto no es lo mismo." (p. 14) The research Leñero conducted qualifies as impersonal, though the rendering of the findings must ultimately be judged as subjective. As in all genuine artistic endeavor, selectivity is at work in documentary drama, the dramatist reporting only those facts and issues that interest him.

Originally divided into four *tiempos*, a temporal division in keeping with the conventions of epic theatre, *Pueblo rechazado* in its published version consists of

two acts; the first is mostly expository and highlights the need for psychoanalysis in the monastery, while the second focuses on the central question of science versus religion. Also in the manner of epic theatre, the individual characters are not developed psychologically, the choruses fulfill a narrative function, and the action, present, mental and retrospective, transpires in numerous short, quick scenes on an essentially bare stage and supported by a variety of technical devices. At all times the audience is made aware that they are in the theatre and that what is being shown has a purpose beyond entertainment.

Suspense in documentary drama does not depend on the final outcome (everything is known from the beginning) but emanates from the conflicting attitudes of the different political or social groups represented in the play. In *Pueblo rechazado*, the main issues are debated by four characters: the Priest unyieldingly defends the dogmatic position of the Church; the Prior, the Bishop and the Analyst, despite their ideological differences, are earnest and righteous in their appeal to expose those elements in the Church and in the world dominated by science that work against the good of the individual and society. The chorus of Monks fulfills a dual role. Individually, the monks act out their inner satisfactions or conflicts, while collectively, forming a choir, they serve an esthetic purpose. The choruses of Reporters, Catholics and Psychoanalysts, on the other hand, constitute a more negative element, reflecting the bigotry of their respective interest groups and their intent to distort the facts and twist the truth.

Though Leñero is careful to touch on all the issues raised by the Lemercier case, his emphasis is clearly on the failures of the Church authorities. Through his three spokesmen he castigates them for their lack of faith, for their failure to provide inspired leadership, for their cowardliness in confronting the questions of people living in a scientific age. Science, traditionally viewed as the antagonist of the Church, should simply be recognized for what it is—not an adversary, not a substitute for religion, but as one more means to help people understand the human predicament and the physical world around them. The Church's refusal to deal openly with the pressing problems of our time, not modern atheism, has led to its dissolution and to the deterioration of its authority.

However, in airing the shortcomings of the Church, Leñero at all times keeps before the audience the venerable traditions and enduring values that institution has offered its followers through the ages. He extols the Church's teachings as a means toward human purification through spiritual joy and suffering, the beauty and harmony of its ritual, and the benefits and achievements, both spiritual and artistic, of monastic life. He weaves Church liturgy and biblical stories and parables into the texture of his play, thus subduing the tones of reportage and establishing a contrast between the violence of the outside world and the peaceful pursuits of monastic life. Especially effective in this respect is a scene in Act II. During its entire sequence the Prior, facing the public, celebrates the mass in the background, while downstage the choruses act out the uproar and the general confusion created by the news media over his dispute with the Vatican. Action and implication collaborate to enlighten the audience.

In documentary drama the language must be precise and the message unequivocally stated. The audience must be convinced of the truth with logical

and reasonable argument. Thus the Bishop in addressing the tribunal of the Vatican states his view simply and emphatically:

No me explico el silencio del Concilio ante el psicoanálisis. El psicoanálisis se presenta ante nosotros como una auténtica ciencia, con su objeto, su método y su propia teoría. Esta ciencia no está aún completamente madura, y no está desprovista de peligros—lo cual es preciso tener en cuenta—, pero no podemos por esta sola razón ignorar la revolución psicoanalítica, que no es menos importante que la revolución técnica. . . El discurso analítico forma parte de la cultura humana, impone una renovación del concepto del hombre y suscita problemas que antes ni siquiera se sospechaban. La Iglesia, a causa del dogmatismo anticristiano de determinados analistas, ha tomado una posición que recuerda el caso de Galileo; pero no existe ni un solo campo de tarea pastoral en el que no haya que tener en cuenta al psicoanálisis. . . Las intervenciones de la Iglesia, demasiado impregnadas de desconfianza, no han ejercido hasta hoy la más mínima influencia sobre aquellos que se ocupan de esta ciencia. (Pausa)

No faltan católicos que se entregan a la ilusión de un psicoanálisis cristiano o católico, cuando a la verdadera ciencia no se le puede pegar ninguna etiqueta, sea cristiana o no cristiana. . . . Por consiguiente, si la Iglesia desea entablar un diálogo sincero y leal con el hombre actual, no debe ignorar a los analistas auténticos, a quienes ha de acudir directamente y no a través de la moral o la teología. De ello se derivaría un gran bien porque esta ciencia posee una virtud capaz de ayudar considerablemente a los hombres cuya fe está mezclada con desviaciones psicológicas que la pervierten o la inhiben. (pp. 62-63)

The Bishop's long but coherent argument in favor of a more open attitude of the Church hierarchy toward psychology is countered by the three Cardinals presiding over the tribunal with dogmatically clichéd statements uttered in an abrupt staccato. It is not difficult for the spectators, who have been placed in the role of the jury, to weigh the testimony put before them. Though they must judge for themselves, on the basis of the evidence presented—which is an objective investigation of the truth—they are expected to reject the official verdict that finds the Prior guilty.

The Prior's steadfastness in his quest for faith and his independence of spirit define him as a unique individual, a true follower of Christ. Like Riccardo in Hochhuth's *The Deputy*, he is passionate in temperament and abundantly endowed with moral energy to persevere in his convictions, even at the risk of great suffering. In contrast, the Analyst, though he too appeals for a more rational acceptance of psychoanalysis, falters and gives up in defeat when he is expelled from the group of Psychoanalysts. The Bishop, always reasonable and benevolent, displays throughout the play his integrity as an individual and as a spokesman for the Church. At the end, his admonitions to the Prior and all Catholics who want to follow the dictates of their conscience in questions of faith lead up to the final resolution. Having supported and defended the Prior in his dispute with the Vatican, he is now beset by doubts about the Prior's decision to break with the Church: "Emprendo un camino nuevo, dice usted, un nuevo camino que está

dentro y fuera de la Iglesia al mismo tiempo, paradójicamente. . . . No sé. No lo entiendo." (p. 89)

What he fears most, however, is that the widely publicized conflict over psychoanalysis may have created a real danger for Catholics, that an excessive confidence in the new science could mislead them to believe in the supremacy of psychoanalysis over religion. Finally, the Bishop challenges the Prior's conviction concerning the reciprocal salutary effects of the encounter between psychoanalysis and religion with the biblical parable that when an impure spirit leaves a man, it will wander in arid places and finding no repose, it will gather seven other spirits more evil than itself and return to possess the man. Firmly, conclusively the Prior retorts: "Volveríamos a luchar y a comenzar desde el principio, siempre. . . . Tengo fe y coraje. No necesito más para el camino." (p. 91)

The documentary play has two principal functions: to report the results of an author's investigation of a recent historical event and to educate the audience. Leñero chose to dramatize the case history of a living person that had stirred up a nationwide controversy in a country where religious matters remain a vital issue. His play, a stage success, did not escape criticism for being untruthful to the specific facts of the case. Actually, the playwright had not made major changes. He had, however, maneuvered facts, an action he does not consider detrimental to the truth. As an artist, he has no desire to serve the interests of history or to come to the defense of Lemerrier. Thus the truth Leñero establishes is not derived from official reports but from his inquiry into the case. He sees in Lemerrier a kind of modern Galileo whose experiments led to the discovery of an undeniable truth that the Church was not prepared to accept. But unlike Galileo, who sacrificed his moral integrity to pursue scientific interests, the Prior takes a firm and courageous stand on the side of the individual and society.

Because documentary drama is so unequivocal about its pedagogical purpose, it is now time to ask whether the documentary dramatist overestimates the power of his work. Ever since Brecht failed to persuade his bourgeois public to think for themselves, writers and critics alike have had to concede that the theatre as an isolated effort can not change society. But Leñero as a novelist turned playwright realizes that a successful play reaches a wider audience and has a greater impact, for the time being at least, than works of fiction.⁸ What the documentary dramatist can do is to write from the standpoint that the audience should be informed, and that audiences in general can enjoy documentary drama as an art form. What is also evident is that the documentary dramatist's desire to state the facts clearly and make the truth known indicates his will to assume, as an individual, a role of social responsibility. Certainly Leñero has chosen this role for himself.

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Notes

1. This novel, *Redil de ovejas*, was completed and published in 1973.
2. Introduction to *Pueblo rechazado* (México: Joaquín Mortiz, 1969), p. 11. Subsequent page references to this edition will appear in the text.
3. Rolf Hochhuth's *Der Stellvertreter* (*The Deputy*), 1963, marks the beginning of this important trend.
4. "The dispersal of facts uncovered by the Eichmann Trial and political pressure forced the German government, which had been rather lax up to that time, to pursue and bring to trial

many Nazis who had already assumed respectable roles in the new German society." Jack D. Zipper, "Documentary Drama in Germany: Mending the Circuit," *The Germanic Review*, XLII (January 1967), 60.

5. Martin Esslin, *Brecht: The Man and His Work* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961), p. 25.

6. See Peter Weiss, "The Material and the Models," *Theatre Quarterly*, No. 1 (Summer, 1971).

7. Though he makes no reference to Kipphardt's play, Leñero mentions that Brecht's *Galileo Galilei*, staged in Mexico City that same year, was a significant inspirational factor to his continuing *Pueblo rechazado* (p. 17).

8. Walter M. Langford, "Vicente Leñero—A Mexican Graham Greene?" in *The Mexican Novel Comes of Age* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1971), p. 165.

Teatro Universitario de Trujillo

En lo que a nuestra labor se refiere en el 75 estrenamos dos obras: *Mesa Pelada*, sobre el movimiento guerrillero de 1975, y *Misa de gallo*, teatro infantil que desmitifica la Navidad y sus contornos de alienación y penetración cultural y, diversas obras cortas de Teatro Agitación nacidas al calor de las luchas populares, pues fueron creadas a nivel de la problemática particular-general de Sindicatos en huelga. De esta manera nuestra labor totalizó 96 funciones en comunidades campesinas, sindicatos y demás sectores populares y estudiantiles, tanto de Trujillo como de otras regiones del país.

Con la participación de otras agrupaciones se llevaron a cabo las siguientes jornadas culturales: Jornada de Solidaridad con el Pueblo Chileno (setiembre) y La Cuarta Semana de Arte Popular en homenaje a Ernesto Che Guevara, Luis de la Puente Uceda, la Revolución Proletaria de Rusia, y a La República Popular de China. Asimismo se preparó un Curso de Capacitación Teatral para Profesores: Educación por el Teatro.

En lo que respecta al aspecto organizativo y como trabajadores del teatro nos compete asumir, consolidamos, a partir de las bases, el Comité Departamental de la Federación Nacional de Teatro Popular (FENATEPO), cuya presidencia ha sido encomendada al suscrito.

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Rocky Mountain Council on Latin American Studies

At the annual conference of the Rocky Mountain Council on Latin American Studies held at New Mexico State University in March of 1976, the following papers were given in the Latin American Literature section, chaired by Yvonne Guillon Barrett:

"Los Mundos Prohibidos de Nélide Piñón," Teresinha Pereira, (University of Colorado).

"The Negro in the Spanish American Theater," Robert L. Morris (Texas Tech University).

William Grupp of the University of Colorado served as commentator.