

## *Kindergarten*, A New Play by Egon Wolff

MARGARET SAYERS PEDEN

The appearance of Egon Wolff's *Kindergarten* (in rehearsal Fall, 1976, for a December premier in Santiago and Buenos Aires) is a signal event. We have not had a play from this major Latin American playwright since *Flores de papel* (1970). However, in that interval Wolff's homeland has undergone a continuing series of political and economic crises; he has completed a novel, *Amor sin rieles*; and, one easily forgets, in addition to being an author he continues in his career as a chemical engineer. Happily, he has recently relinquished some of those duties to free more time for his writing.

At its simplest level, *Kindergarten* is a play about three elderly people and the games they play.<sup>1</sup> The "playground" is the home of these aging members of the formerly proud line of Sánchez-Uriarte. All the action of the play takes place in the living room of the home. The family "business," an umbrella shop, is located in a front room that opens off the living room. Other exits lead to the kitchen and the upstairs bedrooms. With his customary insistence on the importance of setting, Wolff describes the room in graphic detail:

Puesta con la sofocante meticulosidad con que se decoran las habitaciones cuando sólo se cuenta para ello con recuerdos familiares y objetos heredados. Luce muebles antiguos de variados estilos, alfombras gastadas, vitrinas llenas de bibelots y antiguallas, carpetitas, grandes marcos dorados que contienen pequeños oleos oscuros, y mucho olor a hebra vieja, a esperma, a moho y tabaco rancio.<sup>2</sup>

Odor, of course, cannot be recreated on stage, but the small detail of how the room *smells* conveys to director and actors an explicit knowledge of the characters.

The two male Sánchez-Uriarte live together in constant bickering, often comic in its absurdity, and at the same time with a kind of pathologically hidden affection for one another—a sibling George and Martha. Miguel (Mico) Sánchez-Uriarte is a drone, joylessly tending the umbrella shop, performing the household

chores, and ineffectually nagging his recalcitrant brother to uphold his half of the responsibilities. At first appearance Miguel is an ascetic, but this quality is later revealed as raging sexual appetite. This superficially "good" and "upright" brother is described by Wolff as being sharp-featured, and slimmer than his brother. He is sloppy in his dress, but in comparison to his brother's ravaged features, Miguel's face shows only the "normal" depredation of age.

Antonio (Toño) Sánchez-Uriarte holds in common with his brother his age, his mean surroundings, his sexuality, and his sibling irritation. In other ways he is his brother's opposite. He is constantly grooming himself, and though his clothes are worn, they maintain traces of a certain elegance. Toño dwells openly on his sexual conquests—a constant source of annoyance to Mico—happily claiming to be powerless before the wiles of a beautiful woman. And he is absolutely conscienceless in his aversion to work. He claims to be a dreamer, a man who enjoys the "vision" lacking to his brother. He plays an aging grasshopper to Mico's dreary ant.

The two have lived together for an unspecified but apparently substantial amount of time. But just before the opening of the action a third figure enters their lives to disturb the established equilibrium of their daily routine, their resigned but not entirely miserable state of warfare. Mercedes (Meche) Sánchez-Uriarte is the true ne'er-do-well of the family, a butterfly bearing the visible scars resulting from having so often flown too near the flame. Mercedes has returned to visit her brothers in order to use the family home as a base of operations from which to reclaim the daughter who was "torn" from her arms when she was only seven. The fact that this seven year old is now a grown woman with a child of her own seems not to disturb Meche in the least. She does not offer, nor does she seem to feel the need to offer, an explanation of what has detained her in her purpose for so many years.

These are the characters of *Kindergarten*. Wolff, for our examination, carves out a segment of their deprived, essentially meaningless existence, a paradigm of the lives of elderly men and women who somewhere have lost all sense of purpose.<sup>3</sup> Under his microscope we see that reunited in age the three return to childhood modes, re-assume childhood roles, replay childhood games. When contrasted to the sordid reality of the present, the games are at first bittersweet, but as they continue they are seen to be the dramatization of undercurrents and stresses that foreshadowed the adults who were to emerge from children at play.

As in the two-character *Flores de papel*, Wolff sets for himself the ultimate challenge: creation of dramatic tension within a static situation. The two acts of kindergarten take place entirely within the confines of the living room (though activities and dialogue can be heard from the kitchen, the upstairs bedrooms, and the umbrella shop). And there is always the traditional limitation of the dramatic genre: the dramatist is proscribed from the freedom of narrative excursions.

In *Kindergarten*, Wolff develops drama primarily from internal tensions, that is, those inside the home, the constantly shifting friction/affection expressed among the three Sánchez-Uriarte. The audience witnesses the latest crises in the lives of Toño, Mico, and Meche—the new struggles among the three, and those between Mico and Toño of much more ancient venue. In addition, two events in

the "outside" world reach into the home, changing realities there. The first is related to Toño. He is obviously nervous about telephone calls, about the possibility of being seen through the shop-windows from the street, and about tending the shop itself, where the public comes and goes freely. And it is a telephone that alerts Mico and Meche to the fact that Toño is being threatened from "outside." Toño tries to pass off the call, attributing it to a bill he owes his tailor. When that explanation is dismissed as patently absurd, he "confesses" that he has been gambling, and that the men on the phone mean to collect what he owes them. It is clear that money is his prime concern. Unwillingly playing a submissive role, Toño begs Miguel, who controls the pursestrings, for the money. Toño's search for money, and Miguel's refusal, is a constant throughout the play.

The true threat is revealed near the end of the action. We learn that Toño is the victim of a common con game. He has been photographed in a compromising situation with a young girl. And more, there is on police files the record of a previous charge of child molestation. This ultimate threat, humiliation to the *name* of Sánchez-Uriarte, affords a kind of resolution to the action, forcing Miguel to give Toño money, and subsequently precipitating their final psychological confrontation.

The second, and minor, line of involvement with the "outside" is related to Meche. Early in the second act, after attempting to re-establish lines of communication with her daughter through the family of her former husband, she returns home, apparently defeated. But finally she does communicate, and her success also contributes to the resolution. To keep in contact with her daughter, she will remain where she is. The not-too-welcome guest will be converted into a permanent member of the establishment. Two will become three, and things will not be the same.

Suena el teléfono. Meche acude presurosa a atenderlo.

MECHE: ¿Alo? ¿Angelita? ¿Eres tú, mi hijita? (casi un sollozo)! ¡Sí, tu madre, mi linda! ¡Oh, sí, sí, eh, sí No, nunca más. Sí, en casa de tu tío, Miguel. ¡Sí, con ellos! Sí, viviré con ellos, no te preocupes.

TOÑO MIRA A MIGUEL . . .

TOÑO: ¡Oh, Cristo, parece que es irrevocable! Tres Sánchez-Uriarte bajo un mismo techo!

. . . Esto cierra el círculo infernal. Dos, ya era insoportable, y ahora, tres! Esto nos sume para siempre en la desgracia! (p. 54)

Wolff effects his "internal" tension through the shifting and precariously balanced state of domination/submission, affection/repulsion games played between the two brothers and the sister. Several times, at moments of deep probing into past emotions, of confessions—unsought and provoked—each seems *almost* able to reach through the time-thickened layers of defenses and habitual falseness and to touch true emotion. Inevitably, in each instance either real inability to act with sincerity or a deep and perhaps unrecognized delight in continuation of the game prevents communication.

One such moment derives from the brothers' constant argument over Toño's

overt sexual appetites. In rebuttal, after chiding his brother about his abstinence and questioning him concerning the truth of the family gossip about his attempt to castrate himself with a kitchen knife, Toño drives Mico to confessions never before revealed:

MIGUEL: ¿Ves que no entiendes? Sentí el arder de mi carne cuando tú aún jugabas con soldaditos de plomo. No podía ver un muslo de mujer sin que me preparan duendes. Un seno me hacía ahogarme en los borbotones de mi propia sangre. Siempre fuí un niño muy desgraciado. . . .

Un día, me abracé a un tragaluz, a espiar como [la tía Adelaida] hacía el amor con el tío Abdón. (Pausa) ¡Cien veces moría ese día, pegado a esa mampara! Juré arrancarme esa obsesión. Comencé a bañarme en el agua helada del estero, cuando aún me despuntaba el día. De noche, dormía con un crucifijo sobre el pecho. . . .

(Un grito, casi un estertor) ¡Oh, Jesús y María, Toño! Aún me satisfago yo mismo! Lo hago, Toño. ¡Lo hago, y después me golpeé el pecho con el rosario empuñado! (p. 30)

Toño is unable either to accept these terrible confessions or to comfort his brother. Instead his reaction is, "Oh, creo que voy a vomitar." Wolff then underscores this inability to communicate: "Toño observa a su hermano. Está conturbado y confundido. No es hombre para estas situaciones. No sabe enfrentar ni el dolor propio ni el ajeno" (p. 31). In this round of "gotcha," Toño triumphs, Mico has gone further than he would have wished, and Toño rubs salt in the wound:

TOÑO: ¿Qué fue: teatro o verdad? Porque te aseguro que si fue teatro, Lawrence Olivier se pondría frambuesa de envidia, viendo tu Ofelia. (Impaciente) Oh, vamos, no sé qué haces con esas sensiblerías! ¿Qué crees que soy? ¿Sigmund Freud, o algo así? (p. 31)

Later, however, in the last confrontation of the play, Mico effects his revenge. After Mico and Meche learn the truth about the extent of his disgrace, Toño has been forced to play the submissive role in an old game of mortification (the three have long practice in humiliation). Forced to a point he had apparently never before reached, he has fallen to his knees to beg Mico's help. After this degradation, he resorts to the ultimate of insults. He reminds Mico that it was *he* who always played the undesirable role in the childhood games. And then he hurls the unforgivable insult of their private vocabulary: *solterón*.

La palabra "solterón" parece desatar una tempestad en el alma de Miguel. Se lleva las manos al cuello. Toma aire. Parece ahogarse. Cae sobre una silla. Se aprieta el pecho, emite un gruñido, y cae exánime. (p. 53)

Toño is suspicious: "(A Meche) ¿Qué está haciendo? Bromeando? Mico, ¿qué te pasa?" He becomes fearful; finally, he is in a passion of remorse:

Levántele la cabeza! ¡La cabeza! (Olvidándose de la presencia de Meche) ¡Oh, viejo, no! No te estás muriendo, ¿no es verdad? No puedes hacerme esto, mi viejo lindo! (Pausa) Oh, vamos, vuelve. ¡Vuelve, estúpido!

Vuelve, maldito pepino albino! (Lo sienta, lo abraza) ¡Oh! ¡Oh! Cristo y Barrabas! ¿Qué he hecho? (A Meche, desolado) Si se muere, yo me muero, Meche.

Miguel abre un ojo.

MIGUEL: ¿Desesperado, mh? ¿En la vena circense, mh? (p. 53)

Following this encounter, the score, temporarily, is evened. But the audience knows the old battles between Toño and Mico will continue. However, the teeter-totter will no longer rise and fall between two opposing forces. The weight of a third player, unless maintained precisely at the fulcrum of the board, if shifted even slightly towards one or the other sides, radically changes the equilibrium. The games of the *three* Sánchez-Uriarte will be played under new rules.

After reading *Kindergarten* I was vividly aware of something I must always have known subliminally about Egon Wolff's theatre: We can speak of a consistent and outstanding characteristic of his work, something more than a trend, a hallmark. Now we know how consistently Wolff writes of the struggle between the external and the internal, how often his plays are based on the threat of the *outside* against the *inside*. I touched on this previously when writing that one of Wolff's themes is the destruction of the status quo. But the scope of this characteristic is actually much broader than I had realized, as we can see in reviewing some of his plays.

In *Mansión de lechuzas* the *internal* is represented by the basic metaphor of the piece, the once-grand home of the family. The *external* forces here are seen in the form of the literal encroachment of a lower middle-class housing development, and the figurative encroachment of middle-class values. The protagonist/mother-figure of *Mansión de lechuzas* has actually perverted her sons in her intense struggle to hold to the old values as contained *within* the home. The antagonist here is all that threatens from *outside*.

In *El signo de Caín* the action takes place entirely inside Portus's apartment. This sanctuary is not one built upon lost wealth or status, although obviously Portus has known both. It represents, rather, a haven he has constructed against the outside world as it is linked with the past. In contrast to Marta, Portus has consciously *rejected* the past. His world is the present. But this world, too, is threatened and eventually destroyed by the intrusion of the *outside* world. A friend who comes with the intent of "rescuing" Portus from himself, destroys instead the artificial equilibrium of his asylum.

Wolff's best-known plays, *Los invasores* and *Flores de papel*, also follow this pattern. By now, all students of Latin American theatre must be familiar with the hand thrust through a broken window pane that signals the beginning of the invasion in *Los invasores*. No clearer instance of the threat of the external can be conceived than this depiction of a process of destruction of upper class privileges. China, an ambiguous character himself, clearly triumphs over Meyer. A home and family—along with their values—are totally obliterated by forces from the *outside*.

*Flores de papel*, again, is faithful to the mold. The action is set *inside*, in the comfortable apartment of Eva. The threat, in this case the unforgettable

"El Merluza," comes from *outside*. And El Merluza destroys Eva. The internal world again falls before external evils. The most frightening aspect, perhaps, of this enactment of invasion is that El Merluza might have become an inhabitant of the *inside* world, but chooses instead to force Eva into the uncertainty and fear of life *outside*.

Similarly in *Kindergarten*, two threats from outside intrude into the overcrowded, musty, petrified space inhabited by Toño and Mico. One threat is physically destructive: when denied payment, the blackmailers destroy the umbrella shop that is the livelihood of the Sánchez-Uriate. The second threat is more subtle, but will be of more permanent influence: Meche adds a triangular apex to the existing dichotomous tensions between the two brothers. Once again, the *internal* world cannot exist against the eternal buffeting of forces from *outside*.

What may this pattern suggest about Wolff's plays? First, I would suggest that it in no way diminishes their effectiveness. Though there is a consistency of thesis, there is no diminution of power: the last three plays are tighter, dramatically more tense, and dense, than the earlier plays.

Does this pattern reflect a psychological set on Wolff's part? Consciously or unconsciously, his oeuvre does demonstrate the assault of external forces on the individual. Is this the assault of society upon the self? Does it reflect a socio-political reality? the insecurity of Chile's recent political past? Does it reflect a concern for unprotected Man, his isolation, his vulnerability in an existential world, the familiar twentieth century leitmotif? I cannot suggest a solution, I merely pose the question.

Whatever the origins of the thesis, Wolff maintains a wonderful ambiguity in its latest embodiment, *Kindergarten*. Comic and moving, its characters are both to be pitied and despised. If this disturbing work is any indication, we can be glad that more plays are coming, as indicated in a recent letter from Wolff: "Puedes estar cierta, que leerás 'new plays' y 'new plays' de E. Wolff." It is good to hear his voice again.

*University of Missouri-Columbia*

## Notes

1. The theme of games, gamesmanship, and games players is inescapable in second half of the twentieth century, too obvious to need further comment here.

2. All page numbers are taken from a manuscript copy sent the author by Wolff. In future quotations, the ellipses are mine.

3. In a letter of October 12, 1976, Wolff comments: "Nada de esto (me refiero especialmente al tema) se había hecho en mi país. Los viejos patéticos y solitarios, son, sin duda, una parcela olvidada en nuestra dramaturgia, y la del mundo. ¡Están todos siempre tan preocupados de la juventud! ¿Será que es expresión de un mundo que valora más las sensaciones que la sabiduría?"