

## Lima: Entropy\*

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Most newsworthy journalistically (for Peruvians), at the turn of the year, were three prizes for plays. The first, which I consider noteworthy, was the Spanish "Tirso de Molina—1976" First Prize awarded in Madrid to the forty year old *Arequipeño* César Vega Herrera for his drama "*¿Qué sucedió en Pasos?*" endowed with 100,000 pesetas. Typically—for Lima's nose for true talent—most newspapers took very brief note of this fact. Only *El Comercio* devoted more space to Vega Herrera, preceding an interview with him in its Sunday supplement (1/9/77), no less typically, with this: "But who is Vega Herrera, where did he study, what is his development. . . ?" Not one question about the play. For one, Vega H. received a "mención honrosa" in the 1969 competition of the Cuban Casa de las Américas for plays for his two-act piece *Ipacankure* (the word means nothing; the author liked the sound of it), a strange series of scenes about two young men looking for work and sharing a miserable little room. The play was produced, with relative success, in Lima under Vega Herrera's own direction, perhaps ten years ago, and later in Buenos Aires in an "off-Florida" theatre with better press-reactions than in Lima. Vega H. has also written a number of shorter plays, "El tren," "Gabriel," "Un muchacho llamado Tim," and "Día de las Gracias," as well as a number of short stories (*La muerte del angel*) and two books for children, *La noche de los Sprunkos* and, his most recent, which he presented at the Instituto Nacional de Cultura (no longer under the direction of Martha Hildebrandt but of Jorge Cornejo Polar) during the last week of 1967, *Pasaqón*. "The major part of the editions of my works have been my own, and I always went bankrupt. I have myself published poems and short stories, mimeographed editions, and that's how I sold them, 'to be continued,' in the cantinas. . . . And always I went bankrupt, brother" (*El Comercio*—interview). Vega Herrera has a basically poetic talent; his plays are *sui generis* in their vision of wonder at reality's many facets, their inoffensive irony,

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\* Take any of the acceptations of the term, as long as the "system" is Lima.—WAL

and their poetic view of the world. It was high time for his work to be honored "objectively," i.e. in Spain, instead of Perú.

Not to be outdone by the *madre patria*, Lima's Teatro Universitario de San Marcos, in its annual national competition for "Works with Small Cast" on "the fifth day of January of 1977," as the press release had it, honored César Vega Herrera again with a First Prize, but one he had to share with José B. Adolph. Vega's play is called "El padrino," Adolph's "Trotsky debe morir." Runners-up were Gregorio Díaz with "Valsecito del 40," and Jaime Saldías Barrientos with two monologues, "El sueño de un jubilado" and "Señora [sic] Rosinda Quinchis." Díaz is pretty well-known in Perú (his *Los del 4* is contained in the 1971 edition of Escelicer's *Teatro selecto contemporáneo hispanoamericano*). Jaime Saldías is unknown, at least to me.

Adolph, a German citizen until about two years ago, came to Perú at the age of five, studied there and briefly in the United States, later worked for seven years in Germany, and since his return to Perú has become probably the best Peruvian journalist (although since March of 1976 he has been "out of governmental favor"). As a narrator—his forte—his skills lie in the short story (he has published at least six collections of them, the most recent being *Y mañana fuimos felices*) and, especially and not very frequent in Latin America, in excellent science fiction. He has also published a political novel, *La ronda de los generales*.

Both authors promised me copies of their plays, but there was not enough time for them to get around to it. However, interviewed by Ismael León in *OIGA* (1/14/77: the first number after having been closed down by the Revolutionary Government for six months, together with a series of other political weeklies), Adolph—who earlier had written some plays for television—had this to say about *Trotsky*: "In a certain way, it's *política-ficción*; almost all the characters and almost all the events are real (sometimes down to the smallest details), but I would dislike it if the play were seen as a "political play," in the traditional sense: I see it as an attempt at psychological investigation, as an attempt to find out *why* each one of the persons connected with Trotsky's death acted the way he or she acted. Above all, I have wanted to make *good theater*: entertaining, agile, fascinating. . . . I have tried to construct one [possible explanation of Mercader's long silence], and that is where history gets resolved in fiction, in politico-psychological speculation." What Vega Herrera may have said about his play, if he was given an opportunity to, is still unknown to me. Both Vega's two plays and Adolph's *Trotsky* are to be produced this year in Lima.

There is yet another prize, this one coming up at this writing: the Premio Nacional de Cultura (in its several categories). One person who should have received it a long time ago, Dr. Guillermo Ugarte Chamorro, probably one of the best-informed men in all of Spanish America about the history of the theatre and Director of Universidad San Marco's Theatre Research Institute and himself a prolific publisher (the Institute's "Servicio de Publicaciones"), declined his candidacy in deference to Oscar Miró Quesada de la Guerra and Ernesto More who, he thought, were worthier of consideration than himself (*La Prensa*, 1/6/77). Another, although only occasional, dramatist who declined the candidacy was the novelist Julio Ramón Ribeyro. He felt there were other

"priorities." By the way, Ribeyro's collected plays have finally come out: *Teatro* (Instituto Nacional de Cultura).

A heavily advertised event was the première (and rapid disappearance from the two cinemas obliged by Peruvian law to show national products for at least a week) of the film-version of Ciro Alegría's (late father of Alonso Alegría) *Los perros hambrientos*. Except for some acceptable photography and one single lay-actor who had some natural talent, the whole enterprise was an artistic disaster. Director was Luis Figueroa. The dogs were nice, and so were the sheep.

For keepers of statistics, *El Comercio* (1/1/77) published a retrospective of the theatrical year 1976 under the title "The Will to Do *vs.* The Lack of Incentives." It began with the sentence: "The year that's ending has been full of first nights for foreign authors, while the Peruvian dramatist was limited almost exclusively to groups of aficionados." It went on saying that, in contrast with the situation in other nations, where state subsidies help the theatre, Perú "obliges the private producer to select only light comedies, with one set and at the most six actors. The exception to this norm is the Official Theatre, the TNP [*not* "Populaire," of course, but "Peruano"], which is able to have at its disposal budgets for steady productions and company." This may be so, but the results are not necessarily better than those the private companies manage to offer (and by no means always with only six actors): they are run as *business* enterprises and, though with lamentable fare, generally quite successful.

The TNP's boss, Alonso Alegría, in July of 1976 put on an adaptation of Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (with *valses criollos* and all, as well as music especially written for the production: no Weill for Lima!), calling it *La zarzuela del mendigo* (something like "The Beggar's *Opereta*"). As always—only this time it did not come off—Alonso Alegría was too ambitious, wanted too much to be "original." People expected really a *zarzuela*, which of course the production did not turn out to be. According to reports by non-Peruvians who saw the production (I was not able to stay until the première), it was not bad, yet totally out of the ken of Peruvian audiences, especially with the Weill-music missing, which many spectators would indeed have known. Another reason for the production's listless reception (it closed after some weeks and now lies, most expensively, under tons of mothballs) was that, for reasons still unexplained when I talked last to Alonso Alegría over Christmas, an English, very young, very capricious, very "genius" director, Gregory Dark, had been imported, who simply had no idea of how to get along with Peruvian actors and actresses or with the Peruvian *ambiente* in general. Alonso Alegría, a few days before opening, had to fire him and take over the final staging himself. During the opening night, Dark sat in the stage-left VIP-box, Alegría in the stage-right one, and after the show they received their respective *homages*, often overlapping, on the respective ends of the backstage platform. After dumping *Zarzuela*, Alonso Alegría revived *La tragedia del fin de Atau Wallpa*, allegedly a "very national" and old play by an anonymous (indigenous?) author on the death of Atahualpa (the Fourteenth Inca). I was informed that it was quite a success, not least because of the excellent organization of the bus-transportation to the production-site, Puruchuco, an ancient Inca-temple about 45 minutes from Lima up into

the Andes, and due to the impressive stage-machinery employed. Since then, the TNP has offered nothing new, which reduces its productions to two in 1976, certainly not very "steady" for an Official Theatre.

During my stay in Lima I had the opportunity of visiting Alonso Alegría, mainly because I was very interested in whatever had become of his, when I first read parts of it, most promising new play, *El terno blanco*. Parts of it had appeared quite some time ago in the Instituto Nacional de Cultura's publication, *Textual*; thereafter, nothing more had been heard of it. Its idea—not the *story*, though—is that of Gottfried Keller's "Kleider machen Leute" [Clothes Make People]. Then, approximately one year ago, Alonso decided to give his play a "revolutionary" (in the present Peruvian acceptance of the word) twist, to turn it into a play "all about power and its abuse." I heard him recite some scenes of this new version during a series of evenings at the Italian Cultural Institute in Lima and found it still very promising, indeed highly theatrical. Now, however, Alegría informed me he had decided to *put the whole play in verse*. Skeptical about this new turn of dramaturgic events, I went to listen to him read some scenes (and Alonso is a magnificent reader-out-loud of texts). Afterwards, I was, and am, still skeptical; I must admit, however, that he "has got something there," especially in an *ambiente* like Lima's where, even today, a political message gets more attention if it is *sung* cleverly, catches more converts when *rhymed* nicely and backed up by the strum-strum of a guitar, than when presented soberly and "as just words." My doubts persist, nonetheless, mainly because I fear that over a whole play, with a basically very simple fable, too much verse may deaden the message, for rhyme is not revolutionary. Anyway, Alonso Alegría took January 1977 off in order to finish the verse-version. The result will have to be seen, better: *heard* and seen.

To come back to *El Comercio*, the retrospective I mentioned gives, as one of its seven parts, a list of the shows put on in 1976, but it is too long to be reproduced here. May it suffice to confirm that the beginning sentence of the retrospective is right: too many foreign dramatists.

Beside this, what about the *quality* of the theatrical offerings? I selected only some, due to the brevity of my sojourn in Lima and also because I have over the years acquired a certain sixth sense for which group is worthwhile going to and in which plays. Here are my impressions: the first one I went to see was *Quererte como te quiero*, a "Theatrical Spectacle of Music, Poetry, and Theatre," as the newspapers had it, put together from texts by García Lorca. The motor of the whole thing was an Uruguayan, Juan Gentile, a refugee from we all know what. It was quite well done, had style and actors who knew how to articulate on stage, how to move—how to act, in one word. I was surprised, though, to see that even Uruguayan actors, not normally known for falling into such traps, would consider "drama" to be expressed best by shrieking and shouting. Not always, mind you, but enough to transport one back to Lima. Perhaps it was a concession to that city's taste.

Next I went to *Same Time Next Year*, in its Peruvian "versión libre de la comedia de Bernard Slade" (program): *El próximo año, el mismo día*. And very "libre" it was. The director was the normally good Chilean Sergio Arrau. However, he had to work with local actors (one of whom, Luis La Roca, while

in fact Argentinian, has adapted too much to Peruvian acting-habits over the years: he too shouts now), which had as a result that during the first six scenes there were exactly—I counted them—three laughs in the audience. The adaptation to Peruvian circumstances was detrimental to the play, because it deflated the original's verisimilitude: the place of tryst became Arequipa. Anybody who goes there from Lima to meet his/her lover, also from Lima, would two hours later have the affair known all over Lima *and* Arequipa. What I found most interesting in the production was the reaction of the public to some of the scenic gags. Before each new act or sequence, huge portraits of Peruvian events, statesmen, of fashions, magazine-covers, etc., were flashed onto the curtain, so as to indicate the characteristics of the respective periods of meeting between the lovers. When the characteristic of the pre-Revolutionary (before 1968) period came on, such as the Peruvian President ousted by the military in 1968, Fernando Belaúnde, a great part of the audience broke out into "bravos" and jubilant screams. When Velasco came on, the "ousterer" of Belaúnde, the hisses, whistles, and shouts of abuse were deafening. Mao-tse-Tung came on, too, and received nice peripheral applause. So, something may have changed in Perú. The show itself was too long, and comedy and its timing are not Peruvian specialties. The female lead (Silvia Gálvez) was by far better than Luis La Roca, and also very beautiful.

Other shows that I saw offered little to report on: *Alleluya, Alleluya*, a super-production by Peruvian standards (a whole regiment of actors, the kids all of the same family), was really a wildly distorted version of *Sound of Music* and became a smash hit, not at all badly done, although of course hammed up to the hilt and corny as hell.

The rest of the Limeñan theatre-scene (and there really is no other in Perú)? Well, here goes the concluding sentence of *El Comercio's* retrospective: "Quantitatively, the *café-teatro* dominated Lima's billboard, but it does not merit, most of it, any special mention, for its *niveau* is so shamelessly low."

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