

La noche de los asesinos: Playscript and Stage Enactment

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J. L. Styan has stated that plays are meant to be seen and not read, which is not to say that they cannot or should not be read.¹ Nor does such a statement deny that drama qualifies as literature. The published playscript, however, is a special kind of book that has not been written so much for a reading public as for an audience of theatregoers.² The readers of a dramatic text engage in a private activity, whereas the audience's experience of that same text is social and communal. The readers hold in their hands the blueprint of a complex, four-dimensional art form; the audience shares the end-product of a collaborative effort which transforms that blueprint into the total theatre event. The theatregoer's perception and understanding of a play comes from the way in which the diverse elements of the performance are orchestrated, in time and space, to produce a desired effect. In the readers' case, the script substitutes for the performance and is the primary means of grasping a play's essence. If necessary, the text can be read numerous times, an opportunity not afforded to the viewing public. Yet the readers' experience is somehow incomplete and should be supplemented by an imaginary staging of the text. As Styan notes: "The reader of a play must be ready to see and hear in his mind's eye and in his mind's ear."³ It is little wonder then that the reading of playscripts demands the full use of what Shakespeare referred to as *imaginary puissance*.⁴

S. W. Dawson has stated that "the ideal commentator on drama would combine a scrupulous critical concern with the text with as close a concern as possible with the necessities and potentialities of actual performance."⁵ In this way drama and theatre, text and performance, are not seen as separate or antagonistic entities, but as existing "each because of the other."⁶ Both have a common goal or purpose, which is to convey a unifying idea or central dramatic image, what Edward A. Wright calls a play's substance.⁷ The text, therefore, can be viewed as a complex system of signs that functions simultaneously to express the play's

substance and to indicate how this substance could be translated into stage enactment.

The following study of *La noche de los asesinos* (1964), by the Cuban playwright José Triana, is an attempt to better understand the dynamic relationship between text and performance. Our tentative and partial translation into stage enactment is imaginative, but as Raymond Williams stresses: "The imaginative effort itself does not need apology. It may, in particular cases, succeed or fail, but it is a faculty which no living study of the art of drama can do without."⁸ There are, however, certain difficulties inherent in such an approach. For example, one is forced to explicate in discursive terms that which is ultimately experienced in a non-discursive way. Also, the visual, spatial, auditory and kinesic elements that comprise the theatre event are perceived as isomorphic by the audience, an experience that is difficult to express in writing. Hence, the necessity of treating these component parts individually and then collectively. Finally, to attempt the complete translation of a text into stage enactment would mean assuming the role and tasks of everyone involved in the collaborative venture that ends in an *actual* performance. This is not our purpose here, but rather, to first establish what the text's unifying substance might be and then, to suggest some possible ways in which that substance could be conveyed and enriched in an imaginary staging of the play's opening scenes.

La noche de los asesinos is a complex work, by no means clear in its first reading. The play's dramatic action introduces us into the claustrophobic and demonic world of children obsessed with a need to murder their parents. Lalo and his sisters, Cuca and Beba, retreat to the basement or the garret of their house, where they engage in private and forbidden games. These young adults, who have about them an air of withered adolescence, enact the brutal knife-killing of their parents, as well as the sensational press coverage and police investigation of the heinous crime and finally, Lalo's arrest and trial. In a whirligig of role-playing, the cast of three multiplies itself, as the siblings assume the parts of their parents, their neighbors, some newspaper vendors, the police, and the judge and prosecuting attorney at Lalo's trial. This dazzling play-within-a-play is, however, unfinished; its climax and denouement, the *actual* murder, has yet to be performed. Lalo, Cuca, and Beba seem unable to transform their play-acting into reality, caught as they are in a web of mutual and self-hatred as all-consuming as the hatred they feel for their parents. The two acts which comprise *La noche de los asesinos*, therefore, are seemingly a preparatory rite, doomed to be repeated again and again, until the children can finally consummate their criminal act.

The dramatic action, insofar as it speaks for itself, tells us that: 1) the children despise their dictatorial parents who, in turn, are associated with other elements of society (e.g., the police and their gossipy neighbors); 2) these games, as the *children* see them, constitute an heroic act meant to overthrow the forces of repression; 3) Lalo, Cuca, and Beba are engaged in their own internecine power struggle, each bent on dominating the others; 4) their would-be uprising is at a standstill. At first glance the play's major theme appears to be about revolution—its origins, the difficulties in carrying it out and its possible consequences. If one chooses to underscore the private battle waged among the three characters, the

play could suggest that history, particularly that of modern Cuba, is cyclical; one dictatorship replaces another, *ad infinitum*. That is to say, the three rebels are as brutal as their parents and once in power, they would behave no differently.⁹ On the other hand, by stressing the second of the above points, these forbidden games could be viewed as the proem to a holy and necessary shedding of blood. The three characters' autocratic ways would thus become a factor of subsidiary importance.¹⁰

Throughout the play, however, and notably during its final moments, it is clear that the parents are not the hyperbolic demons that their children, especially Lalo, would make of them. They are in fact pathetic little nobodies who have spent their conjugal life quarreling over money, always anxious to climb the social ladder and to forget the reason for which they had to marry. Their failures and frustrations are diffused into the abuse they heap on each other and on their children. This petty, middle-aged couple is not the stuff of which bloody dictators are made, nor are their children. By the same token, the parents are too ordinary and mundane, their power too fragile to merit the exorcism elaborated by their progeny. Consequently, the noble and courageous connotations attributed to the characters' activities would seem to be highly ironic.

As in much contemporary drama, substance in *La noche de los asesinos* is not explicit and an analysis of its dramatic action can yield only a partial understanding of the text. The play is clearly an example of experimental, non-illusionistic or presentational theatre and its resemblance to Jean Genet's *Les Bonnes* and to Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade* is striking. All three works are plays-within-plays that touch on the subject of insurrection and show the dichotomy between the domineering and the domineered. At the same time, Genet's play, as he is wont to emphasize, is not an exposé of the demeaning conditions under which maids exist, but has more to do with the apotheosis of crime. *Marat/Sade*, among other things, is "also a play about the physical and psychological difficulties of making a play: of confining dramatic action to the stage, to the time and place of its performance; of holding the play within the rule-governed structure of character and event that it is supposed to occupy; of distinguishing between the performers of the play and its multiple audiences."¹¹ And, *La noche de los asesinos* does not speak to us only about revolution, although this is of some thematic importance when the text is given a literal reading.

While Triana's play is multivalent, it does make a central dramatic statement which is glimpsed not so much in the play's story as in its overall structure. According to Edwin Wilson, a play's "own internal laws, its own framework . . . give it its shape, strength and meaning."¹² This framework or structure helps to communicate the unifying idea of a dramatic text, as is the case with *La noche de los asesinos*, where substance is largely conveyed by the way in which the dramatic action is made to happen.

When Beba announces early in the play that "La representación ha empezado,"¹³ and Cuca reacts by asking "¿Otra vez?" (p. 3), we know that we are witnessing the repetition of a formalized and prescribed activity. We also recognize that ritual, with its reiterations and reenactments, forms the basis of the play's dramatic structure. The two acts together outline a more general ritualistic

design; but the second act is also a variation on the first and constitutes yet another ritual repetition, as illustrated by the following summary:

Act I: (Begins)

LALO: Cierra esa puerta. (Golpeándose el pecho. Exaltado, con los ojos muy abiertos.) Un asesino. Un asesino. (Cae de rodillas.)

CUCA: (A Beba) ¿Y eso?

BEBA: (Indiferente. Observando a Lalo.) La representación ha empezado (p. 3).

Act II: (Begins)

Al abrirse el telón, Lalo, de rodillas, de espaldas al público, con la cabeza inclinada hacia el vientre.

CUCA: (A Beba) Míralo. (A Lalo.) Así quería verte. (Riéndose.) Ahora me toca a mí. (Largas carcajadas.)

LALO: (Imperioso.) Cierra esa puerta (p. 55).

Act I: Lalo's domination of the games and Cuca's opposition.

Act II: Cuca's domination of the games and Lalo's growing opposition.

Act I: Visit of the imaginary neighbors, Pantaleón and Margarita.

Act II: Visit of the imaginary police, Cuco de Tal and Bebo Mascual.

Act I: Shouting of sensational front page news concerning the crime, accompanied by the RIC-RAC sound as Lalo rubs the knives against each other.

Act II: Lalo's interrogation at the police department, accompanied by the TAC-TAC sound as Cuca and Beba mime the typing of Lalo's confession.

Act I: Cuca-as-Mother accuses Lalo of subverting order.

Act II: Cuca-as-Prosecuting Attorney accuses Lalo of subverting order.

Act I: (Ends)

LALO: Abre esa puerta. (Se golpea el pecho exaltado. Con los ojos muy abiertos.) Un asesino. Un asesino. (Cae de rodillas.)

CUCA: (A Beba) ¿Y eso?

BEBA: La primera parte ha terminado (p. 52).

Act II: (Ends)

CUCA: (A Beba. Entre risas burlonas.) Míralo. (A Lalo.) Así quería verte.

BEBA: (Seria de nuevo.) Está bien. Ahora me toca a mí (p. 110).

This ritual structure has three integrated functions. Firstly, it serves as retrospective exposition and provides much background information to the dramatic action. For example, the characters' repressive childhood and their parents' thirty years of matrimonial failure are encapsulated in the brief and often repeated scenes of the play-within-a-play. Secondly, the ritual pattern also "take[s] the place of plot development in a traditional play."¹⁴ Missing then is the logical cause-and-

effect chain of events so characteristic of the well-made play in formal realism. But, as Peter Brook has said, ritual makes it "possible to present more meaning, more swiftly than by a logical unfolding of events."¹⁵ Because the ritual pattern itself is often imbued with meaning, it can, by association, also make a comment on the dramatic action. Edwin Wilson has noted that in The Performance Group's production of *Dionysis in 69* the ritual structure affords a secure feeling to those who take part or observe because it has a symbolic meaning "acquired both through repetition and through the significance invested in [it] from the past."¹⁶ This same structure, however, can have exactly the opposite purpose and effect, especially when framed in a play-within-a-play. As in the drama of Pirandello, Genet and Weiss, it underscores the very tenuous boundaries between reality and illusion. It is in the latter context that the structure of *La noche de los asesinos* fulfills its third function and tells us something about the play's total substance.

Woven into the fabric of Triana's play is an intricate design of mirror reflections, which produces a deliberate confusion between the illusory and the real. The first and second acts are variations on the same situation and the play as a whole is the repetition of something that has happened many times before. As a play-within-a-play, furthermore, *La noche de los asesinos* is a refracted miniature of itself, in which actors enact the roles of characters who in turn are themselves actors. Triana clearly emphasizes in his first stage direction that "los personajes, al realizar incorporaciones a otros personajes, deben hacerlo con la mayor sencillez y espontaneidad posibles. No deben emplearse elementos caracterizadores" (p. 2). The distinction between the principal characters and the parts they assume is not meant to be well-defined but rather to have the same vertiginous mirroring effect of the play's structure. Thus we become increasingly aware that what we read or see and hear in performance is not necessarily what it appears to be.

When Beba asks Cuca: "¿A quién le tienes miedo? ¿Quién es el coco?" (p. 16), she is posing a key question, the answer to which is very much the crux of the play's substance. As the play's structure etches a reiterative pattern that reveals the children to be indistinguishable from their parents, the *coco* or bugabear then becomes each and all of them. What makes them each others' double is their fear—of the world, of one another and principally, of themselves. The motif of fear is recurrent throughout the play and emphasizes the fact that the characters are not so much slaves as they are self-enslaved. Thus the demons to be exorcised are the private ones who dwell in the recesses of the mind, where they grow and fester, until they convert the small obstacles in life into seemingly undefeatable dragons. Lalo, as the Father, recognizes this when he says: "Y sentía unas ganas terribles de irme, de volar, de romper con todo. . . . Pero tenía miedo; y el miedo me paralizaba y no me decidía y me quedaba a medias. Pensaba una cosa y hacía otra. Eso es terrible. Darse cuenta al final. . . . No pude. . . . Por miedo, por miedo, por miedo" (p. 107).

This is not to say, however, that *La noche de los asesinos* is essentially a psychological drama. What it does underscore is that the children's games, while ritualistic in their structure, are not so in their content or purpose. These games do not represent a shared feeling of communion or belief, and although the children attribute to them the power ultimately to change or alter existing conditions, such is not the case. The participants hide behind their activities so as not to

recognize the true nature of the conflict which divides them. Their games, therefore, separate rather than unite them. Rather than participating in a ritual, in its truest sense, their games are a habit or a routine that allow them an emotional escape.¹⁷ The fact that Cuca, in particular, is reluctant and sometimes violently so, to join in underlines this basic lack of community. That they themselves should refer to the play-acting as a *comedia de fingimientos* suggests that while they know it to be a charade, they refuse to admit that it is.

The play-within-a-play serves as a subterfuge to obstruct rather than enhance communication between the characters. They use the dramatic medium to hide in their assumed roles. The ambivalence in the dramatic dialogue throughout the play highlights this fact. For example, in the last pages of the text Cuca-Madre and Lalo-Father confront each other in what could be called a final *showdown*. After years of matrimonial hell, they confess their ferocious hatred for each other:

- CUCA: (Como la madre. Retadora.) Habla . . . Dilo, dilo todo. Vomítalo, que no te quede nada por dentro. Al fin descubro que me odias.
- LALO: (Como el padre. Firme, convencido.) Sí, es cierto. Y no sé por qué. Pero sé que es así. . . .
- CUCA: (Como la madre. Retadora.) Sigue, sigue. No te detengas.
- LALO: (Como el padre. Firme.) No querías criar sobrinos. Odiabas a los muchachos. . . ¿Pero soltera, quedarte soltera. . . ? No, no. Tú ibas a tener un marido. Sea quien fuere. Lo importante era tenerlo.
- CUCA: (Como la madre. Acercándose a él, furiosa.) Te odio, te odio, te odio.
- LALO: (Como el padre. Retador.) Un marido te daba seguridad. Un marido te hacía respetable. (Irónico.) Respetable. . . .
- CUCA: (Como la madre. Desesperada.) Mentira, mentira, mentira.
- LALO: (Como el padre. Violento.) ¿Me vas a dejar hablar?
- CUCA: (Fuera de situación.) Estás haciendo trampas otra vez.
- LALO: (Como el padre.) No quieres que la gente se entere de la verdad.
- CUCA: (Fuera de situación.) Estamos discutiendo otra cosa.
- LALO: (Como el padre.) Tienes miedo de llegar al final.
- CUCA: (Fuera de situación.) Lo que quieres es aplastarme (pp. 104-05).

Although this exchange makes known the parents' miserable relationship, it also shows that behind the verbal smokescreen of their role-playing, Lalo and Cuca are referring to each other and express, albeit indirectly, what they really feel. Yet when their words hit too close to home, as it were, Cuca rebels and steps out of her role. They have transgressed the boundaries of their make-believe world and are perilously close to admitting openly *la verdad* to which Lalo-Padre alludes. Therefore, until the characters purge themselves of their own crippling fears, whatever love or affection could or does unite this family will be aborted by their self-deluding and onanistic game. Lalo seems to realize this when he says: "Ay, hermanas mías, si el amor pudiera. . . Sólo el amor. . . Porque a pesar de todo yo las quiero" (p. 110). Cuca mockingly rejects Lalo's plea and demands that their play go on as before. Lalo, Cuca, and Beba, in a very real sense, are their

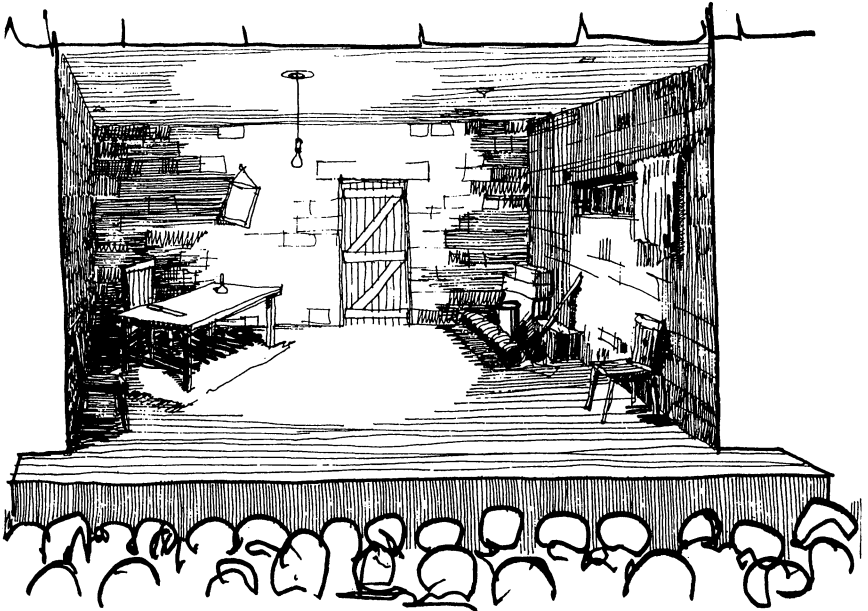
own assassins, in that they condemn themselves to live a lie, one which ultimately denies them any reality of their own.

La noche de los asesinos is much more than a play about dictatorial parents and their rebellious offspring. The unifying dramatic statement made by the playwright, largely through its dramatic structure, points to the inability, fear or refusal of people to communicate, to the ways in which the dramatic medium itself can be contrived so as to alienate rather than bring people together, and to the poisoning effect these things have on the individual, the family, and society. When understood in these terms, it becomes painfully clear why Triana prefaces the text with the following quote from T. S. Eliot: "Can we only love / Something created by our own imagination? / Are we all in fact unloving and unlovable? / Then one *is* alone, and if one is alone / then lover and beloved are equally unreal / And the dreamer is no more real than his dreams."

Theodore Shank has pointed out that the process of creating dramatic art involves a series of choices, each born of and limited by some previous choice: "It is customary, for example, for the playwright to make the initial choices which determine the broad outlines of the action, thereby delimiting the scope of all other artists and establishing what might be called the guiding form of the ultimate work."¹⁸ An analysis of the playscript thus leads to other choices based on the interpretation of its unifying dramatic image. According to the reading of *La noche de los asesinos* outlined in this study, these choices could be guided by the following elements which help to define the play's substance: the dichotomy between illusion and reality; a feeling of fear, isolation and entrapment; a lack of communication or an unwillingness to communicate; and a sense of sameness among the characters and the roles they assume. In the actual theatre event these elements would be given expression and meaning through the orchestration of multiple theatrical sign systems that define the performance, e.g., speech and its paralinguistic features (intonation, pitch, intensity), kinesics (gestures and body motion), proxemics (the spatial relationships of actors on a stage), costume, lighting, scenery, sound effects, props, etcetera. While recognizing that these individual sign systems are structures within a total, integrated structure, the following imaginative staging of the first pages of Triana's text will concentrate mainly on the ways in which the setting and the dramatic dialogue combine with certain kinesic and proxemic aspects to help convey the playscript's central image.

Triana indicates that the play's action can take place either in a garret or a basement, both being places that are separated from the rest of a house. The choice of a basement, however, would not only emphasize isolation, but, by association, it would also insinuate the subterranean forces of the unconscious where fears are not easily rationalized. The cellar, the *dark entity of the house*, is associated with madness, crime and the mysterious, as noted by Gaston Bachelard: "Verticality is ensured by the polarity of cellar and attic, the marks of which are so deep that, in a way, they open up two very different perspectives for a phenomenology of the imagination. Indeed, it is possible, almost without commentary, to oppose the rationality of the roof to the irrationality of the cellar."¹⁹ The stage as a basement would therefore be a visual commentary on the play's action. It would denote place, but far more importantly, it would connote alienation, entrapment,

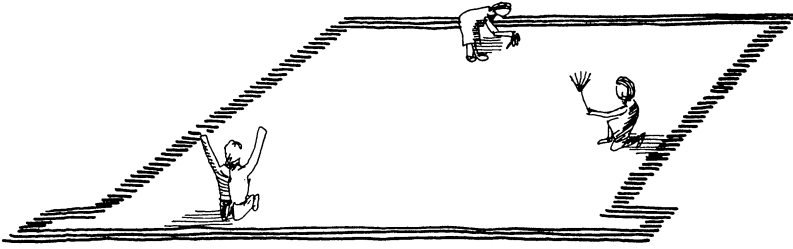
and fear, while setting the appropriate mood. The use of the much maligned proscenium stage in this case might well be appropriate to further enhance the connotative level of the setting.²⁰ The conventional division between audience and actors could emphasize the ironic nature of the characters' games, which do not share the traditional ends of ritual, but just the opposite. A thrust or arena stage could create a feeling of community quite absent from the play itself. The proscenium stage, moreover, makes *voyeurs* of the audience, an effect that the play seems to ask for, as there are various instances when the characters direct themselves to the audience, but only as an invitation to *observe* their play-acting (sketch 1).



From the moment that Act I begins, most of those elements seminal to the play's substance are orchestrated so as to produce a unified impression, which helps to orient the reader or the theatre public. As the curtain rises, we can imagine the three characters already on stage, frozen in their positions. Beba, up-center, is cleaning pieces of old furniture and sundry junk; Cuca, left, tidies up a table and some chairs with a feather duster; and Lalo, down-right, faces the audience with his arms extended and head raised high. No pretense is made to make this seem a natural, realistic situation. We see them instead as actors on a stage who will begin performing for us as soon as the so-called *fourth wall* is made invisible. Our attention rapidly focuses on the stage setting itself and on the three figures widely spaced in a slightly distorted triangle (sketch 2).

Then Lalo initiates the dramatic dialogue:

LALO: Cierra esa puerta. (Golpeándose el pecho. Exaltado, con los ojos muy abiertos.) Un asesino. Un asesino. (Cae de rodillas.)

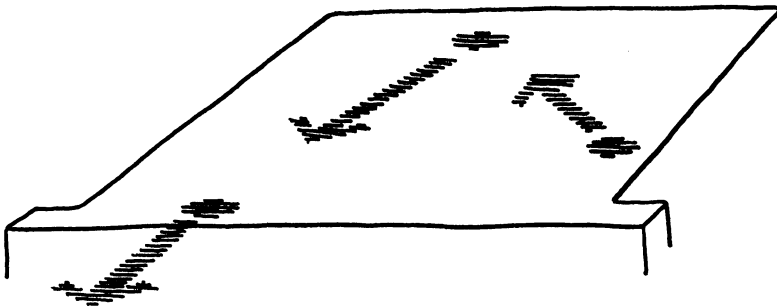


CUCA: (A Beba.) ¿Y eso?

BEBA: (Indiferente. Observando a Lalo.) La representación ha empezado.

CUCA: ¿Otra vez? (p. 3).

In a few brief seconds, much *information* has been *communicated* to us. We learn that they are play-acting, that their representation concerns a murder and that this is not the first time they have engaged in such activities. But we *perceive* much more than this. The spacing of the characters separates them, while they are engrossed in their individual activities. As Lalo directs himself to the audience, Beba glances at Lalo, and Cuca, in turn, looks at Beba (sketch 3). There is no focal point of attention among the characters, although we are drawn to Lalo because of his dominant position on stage. However, we are quick to perceive this lack of cohesiveness, as well as the incongruity and contradictions in the characters' gestures, poses and tone of voice. Lalo is nearly ecstatic, as he falls to his knees, rolling his eyes and pounding his chest. He speaks in an exalted and commanding tone. The girls' reaction of indifference quickly undermines Lalo's posture. As he gravely pronounces the word *asesino*, they continue their cleaning chores. Lalo's reference to a murderer may conjure up images of lethal weapons, but these will be shattered instantly by the reality of the cleaning rag and feather duster which Beba and Cuca, respectively, hold in their hands. We are thus put on guard and begin to wonder what is *really* happening. We also note that Lalo's command to close the door is not heeded, as the door is already closed. By having the actors on stage before the curtain rises on both acts, there are no entrances onto or exits from the stage. The claustrophobic feeling that this produces further underscores the setting's symbolic value, and the references to



opening and closing the door take on an added significance, reminiscent of Sartre's *Huis-Clos*.

The dramatic dialogue continues:

BEBA: (Molesta.) Mira que tú eres. . . ¡Cómo si esto fuera algo nuevo!

CUCA: No te agites, por favor.

BEBA: Tú estás en Babia.

CUCA: Papá y mamá no se han ido todavía.

BEBA: ¿Y eso qué importa?

LALO: Yo los maté. (Se ríe. Luego extiende los brazos hacia el público en ademán solemne.) ¿No estás viendo ahí dos ataúdes? Mira: los cirios, las flores. . . Hemos llenado la sala de gladiolos. Las flores que más le gustaban a mamá. (Pausa.) No se pueden quejar. Después de muertos los hemos complacido. Yo mismo he vestido esos cuerpos rígidos, viscosos. . . Y he cavado con estas manos un hueco bien profundo. Tierra, venga tierra. (Rápido. Se levanta.) Todavía no han descubierto el crimen. (Sonríe. A Cuca.) ¿Qué te parece? (Le acaricia la barbilla con gesto pueril.) Comprendo: te asustas. (Se aparta.) Contigo es imposible (pp. 3-4).

We are provided with more information, as we come to know that the murder is associated with their parents, from whom the characters feel alienated, and that there are conflicts among the children themselves, especially between Cuca and Lalo. Yet again, what we see and hear on stage is vital to our comprehension of the import of this information. Although Lalo holds a privileged position on stage, his sisters continue to pay little attention to him. Cuca speaks of their parents as being alive and registers no surprise when Lalo claims to have killed them. His histrionic pose and pontifical tone are quickly undercut by the girls' reaction of boredom and disgust. We are suspicious of Lalo and even more so when he asks us, as Peeping Toms, to see what is not there. There are no caskets, no tapers and gladioli on stage. Suddenly we remember Lalo's previous demand that the door be closed, and we begin to understand that an integral part of the play concerns the boundaries between the virtual and the real, between dramatic illusion and its reference.

As Cuca and Lalo continue to dominate the stage, the following verbal confrontation ensues:

CUCA: (Sacudiendo los muebles con el plumero.) No estoy para esas boberías.

LALO: ¿Cómo? ¿Consideras un crimen una bobería? ¡Qué sangre fría la tuya hermanita! ¿Es cierto que piensas así?

CUCA: (Firme.) Sí.

LALO: ¿Entonces qué cosa es para ti importante?

CUCA: Deberías ayudarme. Hay que arreglar esta casa. Este cuarto es un asco. Cucarachas, ratones, polillas, ciempiés . . . el copón divino. (Quita un cenicero de la silla y lo pone sobre la mesa.)

LALO: ¿Y tú crees que sacudiendo con un plumero vas a lograr mucho?

CUCA: Algo es algo.

LALO: (Autoritario.) Vuelve a poner el cenicero en su sitio (p. 4).

Triana's stage directions call for very few props: "Una mesa, tres sillas, alfombras raídas, cortinas sucias con grandes parches de telas floreadas, floreros, una campanilla, un cuchillo y algunos objetos ya en desuso, arrinconados, juntos a la escoba y el plumero." While this paints a picture of a moth-eaten and somewhat cluttered room, it does not necessarily indicate the filth to which Cuca refers. By using only those props indicated by Triana, the stage is a visual sign that contradicts Cuca's words. As she goes about cleaning invisible cobwebs and stepping on imaginary cockroaches, she becomes as suspect as Lalo was a few seconds before. A significant pattern is emerging, one which makes us doubt the *characters'* perception of the boundaries between the make-believe and the real. We also begin to understand the nature of the conflict between Lalo and Cuca, which pits her mania for order against his determination to subvert it. These two warring sides are clearly defined from the beginning of the play and are in constant confrontation. However, a parallel conflict runs throughout the play's over-all design, in which the Mother is identified with order and the Father with disorder. Rather than functioning as a sub-plot, in a traditional sense, the parallel between the parents and their children helps the reader and/or audience to make associations and connections that reinforce the mirroring effect between the children and their parents.

The quarrel between Cuca and Lalo is abruptly interrupted when "Beba, que estaba en el fondo, limpiando con un trapo algunos muebles viejos y cachorros de cocina, avanza hacia el primer plano con una sonrisa hermética, sus gestos recuerdan por momentos a Lalo" (p. 7). As Beba advances, Cuca, left, remains kneeling next to a chair she is dusting and observes her sister out of the corner of her eye. Lalo, standing over Cuca, moves a few paces away and listens with excitement as Beba, assuming her brother's pontifical tone and exaggerated gestures, proclaims that she too sees her dead parents: "Veo esos cadáveres y me parece mentira. Es un espectáculo digno de verse. Se me ponen los pelos de punta. No quiero pensar. Nunca me he sentido tan dichosa. Míralos. Vuélan, se disgregan" (p. 8). While we see and hear Beba, we are reminded of Lalo and as the dramatic action develops, we will become more and more aware not of any differences, but of a haunting sameness in the three characters and the roles they assume. When Beba speaks, furthermore, we also realize that she too would have us see what does not exist, thus making us recognize from the outset that none of the characters on stage is to be completely trusted or believed. An important attitude has been established in the audience, who will begin to question the children's motives and the real meaning of their demonic games.

Since drama in performance is a temporal as well as a spatial art, it is "complete only in retrospect, when the work of art no longer exists."²¹ That is to say, its *final* form and import are not perceived until the performance is over. Hence, Charles Morgan has spoken of the form in suspense of dramatic performances, which is organic and controlled by the exigencies and nature of a particular play.²² Our brief stage rendering of the opening moments of *La noche de los asesinos*, therefore, means only to suggest a possible *foundation* for that form in suspense,

based on our interpretation of the structure and substance of the text. As mentioned earlier, Triana's play is exemplary of nonillusionistic, presentational theatre and the playscript can be best understood by considering the patterns and associations it develops through its numerous ritual repetitions and mirroring effects. While the text establishes the general form that it will take on stage, the first few pages of the text immediately introduce the major component parts which will help to build the performance. Everything in the opening scenes works together to provide the audience with the signs necessary to orient it. Ironically, to do this the audience must first be disoriented and be made aware that what they are about to experience will not be standard theatrical fare. The actors on stage, pretending to be nothing other than actors, frozen in their positions as they wait for the performance to begin, the way that the performance does begin, with Lalo's histrionics and his sisters' indifferent reaction to him, are key signs that prepare the audience for the non-realistic nature of the play. At the same time, elements which are pivotal to the play are quickly insinuated—the ritualistic role-playing, the tension between reality and illusion, the fear which plagues the characters, their isolated existence, and the important fact that none of the characters can be looked to or counted on for an explanation of what is happening.

Throughout the rest of the performed play, the repetitions, variations and refractions of the signs defining these first scenes will help to build the play's suspense of form, and will reinforce, rather than modify, the import of these signs. Although they are part of a structure of theatrical signs, they are not born independently of the written, symbolic code of signs which is the text. These theatrical signs come to be and are significant because of what and how the text means; they do not work against the playscript, but rather with it. They help to translate the printed word into the imaginary theatre event, which becomes a necessary if somewhat imperfect alternative in the absence of the actual stage performance.²³

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Notes

1. *The Dramatic Experience: A Guide to the Reading of Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1975), p. 1.

2. Theodore Shank quite rightly points out that "No one would assume that he has experienced a work of art after looking at building plans, a musical score, a motion picture scenario, or a diagram for a dance, even if such devices became the stimuli for imagining the building, the music, the motion picture or the dance. Yet, many assume they have experienced a work of dramatic art when they have merely read its script, much as they might experience a work of literary art such as a novel by reading it. Much can be gained by such a study of dramatic scripts, but an understanding of drama as an art has suffered from the assumption that . . . the script is complete in itself. . . . This conclusion results mainly from the fact that the script is the only part of the work which endures, but there is the further implication that, if the script is indeed thought of as a complete work of art, the staging of it can only be redundant." See Shank's highly recommended *The Art of Dramatic Art* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1972), p. 17.

3. *The Dramatic Experience* . . . , p. 3.

4. The term comes from the prologue to Shakespeare's *Henry V*: "Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts: / Into a thousand parts divide one man, / And make *imaginary puissance*; / Think, when we talk of horses, that you can see them / Printing their proud hoofs i' the receiving earth."

5. *Drama and the Dramatic* (London: Methuen, 1970), pp. 6-7.

6. Raymond Williams, *Drama in Performance* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1972), p. 4.

7. *Understanding Today's Theatre*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p. 22, *et passim*.

8. *Drama in Performance*, p. 5.

9. For a similar interpretation see Matías Montes Huidobro, "Máscara familiar: esquizofrenia mágica," in *Persona, vida y máscara en el teatro cubano* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1973), pp. 413-27.

10. Readings of the text which view it in comparable terms are those of Julio Ortega, "La noche de los asesinos," *Cuadernos Americanos*, 164 (May-June 1969), 262-67; and Frank Dauster, "The Game of Chance: The Theatre of José Triana," *Latin American Theatre Review*, 3/1 (Fall 1969), 3-8. Also see Dauster's "José Triana: el juego violento," in his *Ensayos sobre teatro hispanoamericano* (Mexico: Sep/Setentas, 1975), pp. 9-36; and "The Game of Chance: The Theatre of José Triana," in *Dramatists in Revolt: The New Latin American Theater*, ed. Leon F. Lyday and George W. Woodyard (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1976), pp. 167-89.

11. Susan Wittig, "Toward a Semiotic Theory of the Drama," *Educational Theatre Journal*, No. 26 (December 1974), 452.

12. *The Theater Experience* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), p. 141.

13. José Triana, *La noche de los asesinos* (La Habana: Casa de las Américas, 1965), p. 3. Hereafter, citations from this edition are incorporated in the text.

14. Wilson, *The Theater Experience*, p. 141.

15. *The Empty Space* (New York: Avon Books, 1969), p. 47.

16. *The Theater Experience*, p. 140.

17. Anne C. Murch also emphasizes that the children's games do not mean to unite them to any group or community, a purpose generally attributed to ritual. See her "Genet-Triana-Kopit: Ritual as 'Danse Macabre,'" *Modern Drama*, No. 15 (March 1973), 369-81. For a distinction between the terms *ritual* and *routine* in their application to drama, see Anthony Graham-White, "'Ritual' in Contemporary Theatre and Criticism," *Educational Theatre Journal*, No. 28 (October 1976), 318-24.

18. *The Art of Dramatic Art*, pp. 67-68.

19. *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), pp. 17-18.

20. Herbert Blau, while not defending the proscenium stage *per se*, points out its viability even in today's experimental theatre and makes a convincing case for its use in Genet's *The Balcony*. See *The Impossible Theater: A Manifesto* (New York: Collier Books, 1965), pp. 13-14.

21. Shank, *The Art of Dramatic Art*, p. 44.

22. Refer to Morgan's "The Nature of Dramatic Illusion," in *The Context and Craft of Drama*, ed. Robert W. Corrigan and James L. Rosenberg (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1964), pp. 125-38.

23. This study is a much revised version of a paper read at the Kentucky Foreign Language Conference in April, 1976.