

An Interview with Isaac Chocrón

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The perfect setting for a *teatrero*, a “man of the theatre” as Isaac Chocrón describes himself. Upstairs at New York’s Spanish Theatre Repertory Company. A small sitting room, almost a drawing room lifted from a Victorian play itself (but really the *antesala* of the Ladies Room). Dim and quiet, punctuated with the sounds from the Sunday matinee audience filing out after seeing Chocrón’s provocative play dealing with a *menage à trois*, *OK*. Later, sounds from the actors themselves, already in rehearsal for the group’s next production.

Smiling, totally comfortable, as at home in English as in Spanish, Chocrón *is* theatre: his gestures, his emphatic enunciation, in effect, his “delivery” belie the actor, while his spontaneous, but marvelously quotable answers reveal the writer. He says he is a writer first.

Chocrón says he has been writing all his life and so it is not a habit for him but rather a way of life. Chocrón points out that he lives the ideal situation for a playwright, total involvement in the theatre. He is president of the theatrical association “El Nuevo Grupo” and he writes for the theatre as well. Consequently, his works are many and have been presented in New York, Madrid and Frankfurt as well as throughout Latin America. Chocrón’s plays include *OK*, *Mónica y el florentino*, *La última felicidad*, *El quinto infierno*, *Animales feroces*, *Asia y el lejano oriente*, *Una mínima incandescencia*, *Alfabeto para analfabetos*, *Amoroso*, *A propósito del triángulo* and *Tric Trac*. He has also written three novels, *Pasaje*, *Se ruega no tocar la carne por razones de higiene* and *Pájaro de mar por tierra*. Presently he is working on a fourth novel called *Rómpase en caso de incendio* (Break in Case of Fire).

Chocrón seems especially attached to his works which have received scandalous receptions, particularly *Animales feroces* and *La Revolución*. His eyes light up as he animatedly describes the circumstances, twelve years ago, before *Animales feroces* opened. The Jewish establishment heard that Chocrón had written an anti-semitic play and their vociferous protests all but suspended the opening, but María Teresa Otero, President of the Ateneo of Caracas, insisted that the play be

presented. Chocrón did, however, include a leaflet in the opening night programs explaining that he is Jewish and that it is his artistic right to examine the bitter passions that can wrack any family, including the Venezuelan Jewish one in this particular case. A similarly volatile atmosphere surrounded the opening of *La Revolución*, which the Spanish Repertory Theatre Company presented in New York during 1974-1975. *La Revolución* depicts the bitter, sordid, yet affectionate relationship between an aging transvestite and a third class waiter.

Chocrón is enthusiastic about the general direction of Latin American theatre. He insists that Latin America belongs to the future and that Latin American theatre, as an embodiment of that future, generates interest precisely because it is not so traditional in its use of language and ideas, not so inexorably tied to the past as European theatre is. Just as the United States is present-oriented, he describes Venezuela—and, by analogy, Latin America—as having “Everything to do and everything to be done.”

Does there exist a continental sensibility towards Latin American theatre? For example, can you do a Puerto Rican play in Venezuela or a Mexican play in Guatemala?

Very much so, very much so. Right now we are presenting Talesnik's *Los japoneses no esperan* and Gorostiza's *Juana y Pedro*. We have done Brazilian, Colombian and Chilean plays. There is quite an interchange. As a playwright, I am produced in practically all the capitals of Latin America.

The Puerto Rican playwright, Luis Rafael Sánchez, has posed the problem of plays that don't "travel well." He mentioned the experience of some Argentine theatre companies that "just don't work" in Puerto Rico.

I believe that what cannot work are idiomatic things. But that can be arranged. For instance, when my plays are done in Buenos Aires, on the contrary, I encourage the director to change things; not change the meanings, but to change words and to introduce Argentine idiomatic expressions which give the play an immediacy that is very favorable.

Would you say there is a new Latin American theatre? Is something different happening?

I don't know; I could not really properly say. I believe that in Venezuela it is happening because in Venezuela there is a great development of the theatre: new theatres, new companies and groups, and more and more playwrights. But to say that there is a new Latin American theatre would imply that there is a new tendency and I really don't feel confident in saying that.

How important is the theatre today in Venezuela?

The popularity of the theatre is growing. However, we still need to create a theatre audience and to cultivate it. I am president of “El Nuevo Grupo,” a non-profit theatre institution. We have two theatres: one seats 200 and the other seats 130. Since we began eight years ago, we have toured all over the country, giving numerous performances on a very tight schedule in all kinds of makeshift “theatres,” often in school gymnasiums. . . . I have often thought about the

parallels between the Latin American theatre and Shakespeare's theatre, in regard to the demands made on the viewers' imagination. And they do respond.

It has been said that the most imaginative work in Latin American theatre is being done by directors and not by writers.

Well, you know, not only in Latin America, but in the world, I'd say that from 1950-1960, and until very recently, the director was king of the theatre. After the war, in America, there was Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and a few other minor writers after them, and then there was a great renaissance of the playwright, and then all of these experimental tendencies: the Living Theatre, the Actors Studio. As a consequence, all these different tendencies put the director in a main role in the theatre. I think that is true of some of the countries in Latin America. In Brazil, for example, I understand that the real luminaries, the real stars of the theatre, are the directors. In Latin America we don't have that many professional actors and actresses and no performer, even in Buenos Aires or Mexico, can earn a living exclusively from the theatre. He or she has to do television and radio or other things. This means then that there are quite a number of theatre groups where the director is really head of the group and they often prefer to take young actors or people without any theatrical training and rehearse them for a production. Of course that means the director is of crucial importance. But I think in the last four or five years, not only in Latin America, but all over the world, the theatre of text is coming back. In the next few years we are going to witness a renaissance of the playwright. I have that feeling.

What about "collective works" in the Latin American theatre? Do they mean there are no good dramatists? Or is it a new direction?

I think collective works are interesting but I think they are interesting as experiments, as spectacles, as "theatre-theatre." I think it is better when you have a good text and you are disciplined by the intentions of that text. But of course I am speaking as a writer. I suppose a director might say that he doesn't need me.

Since the advent of the theatre festivals in Cuba, Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia and Puerto Rico, do you see a real growth in communication throughout the continent?

Frankly, I haven't been to that many festivals; the only ones that I have attended are the two in Caracas. For me, going to the theatre is very boring. It's really a trial. I rarely go, because I am in the theatre all day long. I have to go to innumerable rehearsals, I have to read innumerable plays and I have to see innumerable actors, so by the time of the performance, no matter where it is, I really don't feel like going to the theatre anymore. I just want to escape. I would rather have a drink with some friends. Getting back to your question though, it does seem to me that the festivals have made some very significant contributions to experimental theatre groups in Latin America. Also, it's interesting that you mentioned collaborative efforts, because most of the groups that go to Manizales are avant-garde theatre groups. In the last two years however, it has become very much like a political arena, even more than a theatrical experience, which I think is a shame. If you want to do politics, there is a real need for good politicians; or if you want to do sociology, then you should be a good

sociologist; but if you want to do theatre you should do theatre, and not use it as a springboard for anything else.

Some writers in Chile, for example, or Puerto Rico, feel that their situation is such that they must express their anguish and protest in some creative way.

All good theatre is political. But that is different from using theatre as a platform, or the theatre of demagoguery. I believe theatre can make political statements but should not be a political poster.

Fernán Silva Valdés said that a dramatist should write theatre rather than literature. Does such a dichotomy exist for you?

I guess what he means is that when you write for theatre you have to know that it is going to be performed by actors and it has to have a certain rhythm and a certain style of language; but if you are going to write your plays with metaphors, well, it might be poetry, but it will not be very effective theatre. Now, I have never stopped to think whether theatre is literature or whether literature is theatre. One vital truth about the theatre is that once the play is written, that is when it begins. You finish a play, but it has to be performed in order for it to be a play.

Like most Latin American dramatists you have commented on the lack of serious, professional theatre criticism. Do you think that situation is changing?

I don't think it has changed very much. Unfortunately most of the critics that I know are reviewers, more like social commentators, and criticism can only really be useful when it is done in depth. I know for instance that *Círculo de Lectores*, the publishing house in Spain, has just published a volume of my two plays, *Animales feroces* and *OK*, with a critical introduction to my work by the Spanish critic Juan Merino. I quite enjoyed reading it and I was curious to find several observations and conclusions that I never noticed.

*That brings me to a question about audiences. *Quinto infierno* is both a loving and scathing indictment of contemporary Venezuelan society. Isn't it true that precisely the people you are criticizing, the middle class and the intelligentsia, are your audience?*

Yes, it's true, but I think a writer is a witness. There are not many writers, there are not many witnesses as writers; and audiences, just like readers, want to hear the opinion of the witness. In the case of *Quinto infierno*, *Asia* and *La Revolución*, I think the audience liked to be confronted by my thoughts and provoked to examine their own attitudes.

The Puerto Rican dramatist, René Marqués, criticizes precisely that facile practice of the middle class: to go to the theatre, identify with the portrayal of its own impotence as a political group, in effect exorcise its conscience and its responsibility, and then leave the theatre purged, having experienced a catharsis which has led to complacency, rather than to action.

But I have never written a play with the intention of shocking people, or with the intention of showing people that they must change or act in a certain way. I write a play because a situation is provocative, and that situation begins

obsessing me, and when the situation becomes an obsession then I sit down and start writing a play. My plays are about people; the theatre is people. Of course, they are people who move in our society, so that they have to reflect values and situations in our society. After all, any serious work of creativity necessarily is a reflection of the society it comes from. But I don't start a play saying, "Well, this play I am going to write in order to make sure that everybody doesn't wear shoes." When I start a play, I know where I am going to be at the end, but I don't know what's going to happen in the middle. I think the most important thing is the passage; I mean if I go from New York to Washington, the most important thing is not to get to Washington, but rather what happens from New York to Washington—the process. That's why I like writing; it's exciting, it's difficult. And the fact that as academicians, or professors, or lovers of the theatre, you see certain themes, is very good. It is very good for you to see them, but if I saw them beforehand it would never work, because I would not be a writer, I would be an IBM machine that catalogues things like, "Now I'm going to write about red blouses." I suppose commercial writers do that: they realize that Women's Liberation is a hot idea right now and they say, "I want to write a play about Women's Liberation." I have never done that, because for me, writing is like doing a striptease.

In the publication, THE NEW VENEZUELAN THEATRE distributed by the Central Office of Information, you make a point of mentioning the women pioneers in the Venezuelan theatre, Ana Julia Rojas, Juana Sujo, Maria Teresa Otero, Josefina Palacios, and the growing number of female playwrights, Ida Gramcko, Elizabeth Schön, Elisa Lerner, Mariela Ibarra. Are they fully integrated into the mainstream of the theatre world, or are they peripheral?

Not really. They are a minority compared to the men. It's a shame. In some instances the women write one or two plays and then they don't write again. That is the situation with some of the women you have mentioned. So many of the women playwrights have been basically poets and they have gone back to poetry. They have taken a voyage to the theatre and that is a voyage to Hell. There are not many people who stay. Like novelists who write plays or poets who write plays. They write one, or maybe two, plays and they go away scared from the theatre. The theatre is awful; it's very difficult. As I said before, it's like a hell. It's such a mystery whether the thing is going to come off or not. Truly it's a disease, a terminal disease. . . .

*I'm very interested in your female characters. Two who I thought were very strongly delineated are Betsy in *Quinto infierno*, and Mina in *OK*. They seem to embody the struggle and anguish that women are experiencing in discovering themselves. I know these plays were written in '61 and '69. Has the contemporary movement for female liberation affected your work?*

Not really. I have met women before the Liberation Movement and after the Liberation Movement who have influenced me.

*There are the "Auras," those insatiable women in *Amoroso*, who "reveal facets of extraordinary cruelty" as the critic Suárez Radillo comments. . . .*

The trouble is that I did not write all of those women simultaneously. I wrote them over fifteen years.

How has an essentially ambivalent attitude of both protest and imitation towards the United States and its cultural forms affected the development of theatre in Venezuela, and in Latin America in general?

The colonial condition is expressed in all Latin American theatre, not only in the theatre that is openly political and that used theatre as a political platform. It is very difficult at the present. I believe that now there might be a new wave of American cultural aggression in Venezuela, due to the latest developments in the oil situation.

*You situate your own play, *Quinto infierno*, in New Jersey. Other playwrights, René Marqués in *El sol y los Macdonald* and Walter Bénéke in *Funeral home*, also use North American settings. Does an American setting affect the play's reception in any visible way?*

No, not at all. *Quinto infierno* was my second play. It was really the play that established my career, not only because of the interest of the play itself, but because it had a good production and a fantastic portrayal by Juana Sujo. She was brilliant in her portrayal of Betsy. Really, the few direct allusions to New Jersey are not enough to disconcert the audience.

*I wonder if you feel more comfortable going in the more experimental direction of *Asia* and *Tric Trac*, or the more realistic direction of *OK* or *La Revolución*.*

I'm not really comfortable answering that. You know, in Merina's introduction he gives what I consider a logical response to why I have moved in these different directions. He says I am looking for my own style and that in *Asia* I found it and that the subsequent plays, you can see that they are mine. That's something a writer always likes.

What's the difference for you between writing a play and a novel? From the way you describe the theatre, it would seem to be a less anguished experience for you to write a novel.

My first novel was *Pasaje* and then I didn't write another one until I wrote *Se ruega no tocar la carne por razones de higiene*. I found it so delicious to write novels and to know that it was a long work and that I could write it slowly and I could polish it to the maximum because I didn't have rehearsals—even though I hate to polish. I didn't have to deal with anybody. And then I sent it to an editor without my name to see what the reaction would be and the editor answered that they were interested in publishing the novel and they thought the novel was written very much in the style of Chocrón. He guessed that it was me and they asked me to do another novel and so I wrote *Pájaro de mar por tierra*. And now I am finishing a novel called *Rómpase en caso de incendio*. I very much enjoy writing novels. It's a very lonely task though. It's not as amusing as writing for the theatre, but I think it's good to get away.

Are you working on something else now?

I am going to work on a translation into English of *OK*. When I came to New York we were thinking of several people who might do the translation, but then Clive Barnes suggested that I try it myself. So I plan to.

One final, loaded question: I can't help noticing the violence, the frustration, the anger and disappointment that your characters experience in their personal relationships. Could you elaborate on the pessimistic statement you seem to be making about modern human relationships.

I don't think it's pessimistic. I think it is a realization that love is a very painful business and happiness is not a reality. There are relative degrees of complacency but that once you love, it's because you suffer. It's not a masochistic sort of thing. You feel very happy loving, but it is not a happy business. I think that's the exciting thing about living, and what I'm trying to communicate in my plays, are my experiences with trying to live with this realization.

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