

The Children of Sánchez on Stage

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Oscar Lewis was one of the most controversial figures in modern anthropology, largely because he refused to stay within its traditional boundaries. His main efforts from 1959 until his death in 1971 were centered in urban studies, an area more often included in the realm of sociology than anthropology. His three major publications of the sixties—*The Children of Sánchez*, *Pedro Martínez* and *La Vida*—read more like autobiographical novels than anthropological case studies. *The Children of Sánchez*, the first of the three life-story works, has already become a stage and screen property. It was made into a play at Lewis' request by Vicente Leñero, the well-known Mexican novelist and playwright. An English version of Leñero's play was adapted and performed in April of 1977 by Louis Roberts and the Theatre Arts Department of the University of Massachusetts, Boston, and a film version is under way in Mexico starring Anthony Quinn and Dolores del Río.

An examination of Lewis' writings over the years makes it plain that he deliberately encouraged this outcome, that he consciously directed his efforts toward making his work accessible to the general public through the mass media. His goals were humanitarian rather than purely scientific. He became involved with his "informants" as individuals rather than as data sources and he sought to devise methods of investigation that would highlight the individual instead of using him as a mere statistic.

The data for *The Children of Sánchez* came directly from the tape-recorded interviews that Lewis had with the Sánchez family over a period of months and years, so they constitute autobiographies in the truest sense, and Lewis the editor and author was following the instincts of the novelist rather than those of the science writer in compiling the data. He knew the Sánchez family intimately and considered himself their personal friend and vice versa. This intimacy led to greater depth in the interviews than in the cases of *Pedro Martínez* and *La Vida*. Another and unpredictable reason for the depth is the flair that the Sánchezes showed for self-expression, to which Lewis refers admiringly in several of his

writings. Although Lewis does not say so directly, it seems probable that the idea of publishing his findings solely in the form of reconstructed first-person narratives was a direct result of his own emotional response to the life stories as they were told to him. He appears to have immediately appreciated the impact such stories could have on the general public. He also had his own theory about the role of the novel versus the role of anthropology as an instrument for the interpretation of reality. In the introduction to *Five Families*, the study that immediately preceded *The Children of Sánchez* and which included a day in the life of the Sánchez family, Lewis explains why he chose the day as the framework for his studies:

The selection of a day as the unit of study has been a common device of the novelist. However, it has rarely been used and certainly never exploited by the anthropologist. Actually it has as many advantages for science as for literature and provides an excellent medium for combining the scientific and humanistic aspects of anthropology. . . .

The study of days presented here attempts to give some of the immediacy and wholeness of life which is portrayed by the novelist. Its major commitment, nevertheless, is to social science with all of its strengths and weaknesses. Any resemblance between these family portraits and fiction is purely accidental. Indeed, it is difficult to classify these portraits. They are neither fiction nor conventional anthropology. For want of a better term I would call them ethnographic realism, in contrast to literary realism.¹

The particular ethnographic reality that Lewis was concerned with was the plight of the urban and rural poor in developing societies. In the introduction to *The Children of Sánchez* he reminds the reader that in the nineteenth century, when social science was only beginning, the novelists, playwrights, journalists and social reformers were the recorders of the effects of urbanization and industrialization. Now, in the twentieth century, similar social conditions exist in many Third World countries, but with no universal literature to help improve our understanding of the process and effects of urbanization on the people. "And yet the need for such an understanding has never been more urgent," says Lewis; and this situation, he claims, "presents a unique opportunity to the social sciences and particularly to anthropology to step into the gap and develop a literature of its own."²

The political implications of this philosophy aroused some concern when *The Children of Sánchez* was published in Mexico in Spanish in 1964. Formal charges were made against Lewis and the publisher by the Mexican Geographical and Statistical Society for writing and publishing an "obscene and denigrating book." Lewis, according to the charges, "exaggerates the ignorance and degradation of poor families . . . criticizes the Government and suggests a change in the Mexican system."³ Aside from the street language and often explicit sexual references (which reflected the informants' words, not Lewis'), the main point of contention was the bad image of Mexico that was inevitably projected by the book. The case excited a great deal of public opinion and Mexican intellectuals rallied to defend Lewis, his work, and above all the freedom of the press. The result of the hearing (the text of which was appended to the second Mexican edition by Joaquín

Mortiz) was that the charges against Lewis and the publisher were judged unfounded and were dismissed.

Whatever difficulties the legal scandal may have occasioned for Lewis, the net result was favorable to his original purpose, which was to bring the situation of poor people to the public's attention. Unfortunately, Lewis would never see Leñero's play, which would again bring the Sánchez story into the public's eye; it was completed only one week before he died.

The Children of Sánchez PLAYS

As one Mexican theatre critic notes, since many people thought that *The Children of Sánchez* was a novel, it seemed quite natural that Lewis should choose Leñero to do the theatre version.⁴ Leñero was already well known for his stage versions of two of his own novels, *Los albañiles* and *Estudio Q*.⁵

Leñero's dramatic conception of the story is a felicitous merging of his interpretation of Lewis' work and his own evolution as a dramatist. He articulated Lewis' principle of multiple autobiographies through the use of a divided stage with several sequences of simultaneous or overlapping actions. The "Rashomon-like" effect in the book—that is, the multiple versions of a single event by different informants—is scarcely felt in the play, since all the action moves in a forward chronology without flashbacks. However, since the staging allows for up to four separate simultaneous action sequences, there is an element of immediacy in the presentation nonexistent in the narrative version.

The mechanics of the staging function spatially along the lines of *Los albañiles*. In that play, action flowed rather freely from the proscenium, which represented a police precinct station, and the set occupying the rest of the stage, the construction site which was the scene of a brutal murder being investigated by the police. A move from one area to another often indicated a shift in time as well as in space, and this was indicated also by changes in the lighting as the characters moved across stage. A similar use of lighting was incorporated into *The Children of Sánchez* set, but a review of the opening performance mentioned that some technical problems with the light and blackout sequences hampered the effectiveness of the staging.⁶

Louis Roberts translated and adapted Leñero's version of the play, and it was first performed on April 21, 1977. Roberts, who had staged his adaptation of *Los albañiles* in 1973-74 (*The Construction Workers*), was thoroughly familiar with both Lewis' and Leñero's work. In his adaptation of *The Children of Sánchez* there are several small but significant departures from Leñero's script, generally adhering even more closely to the Lewis original. Basically, however, Roberts follows Leñero's set design and text quite closely with one exception, which will be mentioned later.

The story of Jesús Sánchez and his children is set in a perspective of time from which Jesús and his sons and daughters look back on and recreate their lives from earliest memory to the present. This "present," the taping of the interviews with Oscar Lewis, begins when Jesús is 50, Manuel 32, Roberto 29, Consuelo 27 and Marta 25. Leñero (and Roberts) sets his version in a present when Marta is around 15, Consuelo 17, Roberto 19 and Manuel 22. Jesús' age is set at 48. The

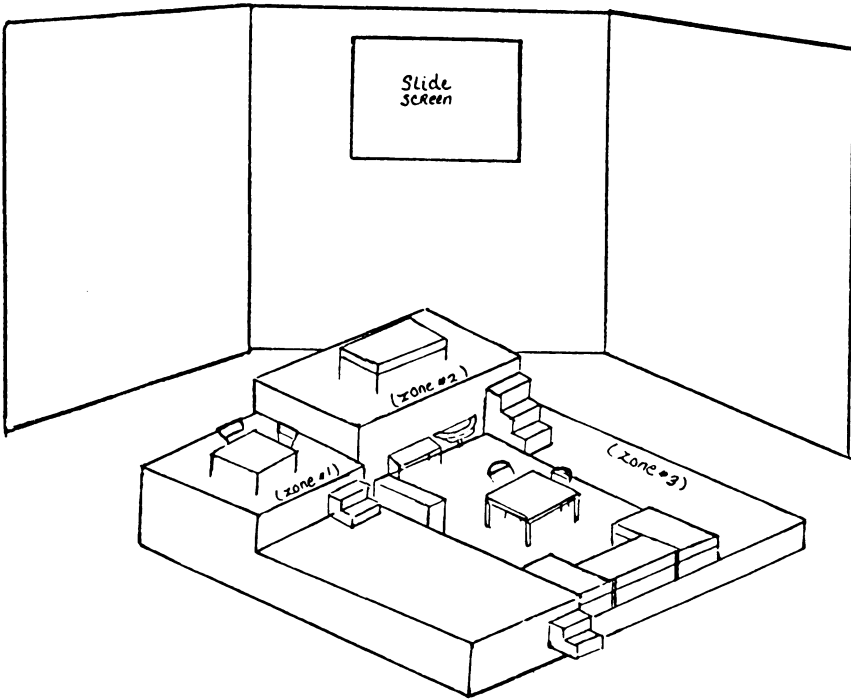
events of these years in the lives of the Sánchez family are recounted by the four children in what roughly corresponds to Part II of the book, Part I being the earlier childhood memories and Part III centering on the post-adolescent years. Leñero chose these events because they are the most dramatic ones. They cover Marta's elopement with Crispín, Consuelo's escape to Monterrey with Mario, Roberto's return from the army and subsequent imprisonment and also his incestuous feelings for his half-sister, Antonia, and Manuel's trip to the United States as a migrant worker after the death of his wife, Paula.

The point of the play is the nature of the children's relationship to their father. The four major events depicted occur during the most critical moments of the passage from childhood to adulthood, a step that none of the four children is successful in taking. The ties that bind them to their father have crippled them; the culture of poverty that sets the patterns for their lives has sealed them into self-defeating cycles of behavior that they will never be strong enough to break. They remain both spiritually and materially dependent on their father, who will always provide for them with one hand and slap them with the other by undermining their weak characters even further with his open contempt for their failures. The devastating climax of the play shows Jesús, stage center, talking almost to himself about his children, wondering how things went so wrong in their lives. From the four corners of the stage the outstretched hands of his children beseech him: Manuel asking for the fare home from California, Roberto crying out to him from behind jail bars, Consuelo wailing in despair from a cheap hotel room in Monterrey and Marta, abandoned by Crispín and pregnant with her first child, calling to him from the doorway. Jesús, unheeding, mutters "why have they turned out so badly . . . I don't understand."

Leñero's play was successful in Mexico, despite the difficulties occasioned by its scabrous themes and vulgar language. The director, Ignacio Retes, commented in an interview on the attacks by the critics, who judged the work to be "naturalist" rather than "realist" theatre. He defended the portrayal of the lower classes, stating that the degrading picture that Lewis gave of the fifties has only worsened by the time of the seventies. He also defended the use of street language, however crude ("in truth, the language used is a liberty we are gaining in the theatre") as an integral part of the actual and artistic realities of Mexico today.⁷ Retes seemed basically satisfied with the production, adverse reviews notwithstanding; but Leñero does not consider the experience one of the best he has had with theatre. The script, for instance, has never been published, although all of his other plays have been. When I asked Leñero about it, in January of 1977, he replied that there had been many problems in getting the play onto the stage. First there was the public scandal that the book had caused and the still-present reticence about the language and some of the subject matter. Then, of course, there was the unexpected death of Lewis, and the complications caused when his wife took over the supervision of the adaptation. Leñero says he cannot remember how many scripts were written and rewritten until a final version was agreed upon. On the whole, Leñero decided to set aside the project rather than to try to untangle the red tape that publishing the play would have entailed.

One aspect of the play that apparently has remained constant (at least since August of 1971, when the prologue and first act were read by Retes in a public

lecture in Mexico City) is the setting. The stage is divided into four areas. The main and center portion is occupied by the Sánchez apartment. It is surrounded by three raised platforms or zones. Zone One holds a table and chairs, serving variously as a café, card table, and office. Zone Two has only a simple bed, serving as a bedroom and hotel room. Zone Three is an empty platform which serves as a street, patio, and marketplace. The areas are interconnected and easily accessible to each other and the stage entrances, although they are dealt with as if they were completely separate buildings. Only once in the play, at a critical moment in the story, is the spatial integrity violated by a character moving directly across a zone boundary. The sketch below is adapted from the set design used by Louis Roberts in his 1977 student production:



According to Arturo Cova, the reviewer who commented on the lighting difficulties in Leñero's opening performance in July of 1972, visibility was another snag in the production. The audience could not always see all the action on all the platforms clearly, a difficulty compounded further by the lighting failure. On the other hand, Cova praises highly both the casting and the acting.⁸ Roberts' production faced quite the opposite problems. He overcame the lighting and set design difficulties that hampered Leñero's opening. The College II Theatre is small and the tiers of seats are set very steeply, allowing almost complete visibility of all areas of the stage from almost any position in the audience. The platforms were clearly divided and the spotlights were effective in isolating one zone from another when necessary. Roberts' biggest problem was casting. Since it was a

student production, he had to "age" his characters, and he was dependent on a cast of Americans of mixed ethnic and racial types to portray Mexicans. He was able to offset this handicap in part by an effective use of slides, which were projected onto a screen at the back of the stage during blackouts. These were mostly pictures of faces of Mexican men, women and children in ordinary street scenes, mostly poor people, of the lower classes from which the Sánchez family comes.

Roberts made changes in several places in the text, often for the better. For instance, when Manuel's wife dies, in Leñero's version the scene ends with Manuel pounding his fists into the wall, shouting "God doesn't exist . . . God can't exist." Roberts' version, which is also closer to the book, is more dramatic. Manuel begs the priest who had administered the last rites to marry him legally to his wife. The priest rebuffs Manuel coldly and leaves. "I will pay you, Father! Please! I will pay!" he shrieks, as the curtain falls.

The final scene is also more effective in the Roberts versions. Jesús' last speech, when he wonders what went wrong with his children, is given as a monologue while Jesús stares, tear-blinded, at a picture of his four children and their dead mother. His last lines are uttered softly as Manuel, Roberto, Consuelo and Marta cry out to him in their suffering from all sides:

. . . (Angrily.) Who can I complain to? What have they done for me?
Why have they turned out so bad? (Flat.) My name is Jesús Sánchez.
(Looks at the fragments of photographs.) And this is my family.

This use of the photograph is Roberts' innovation, and it is effective because it provides a focus for Jesús' monologue and creates a mood of nostalgia that envelops him completely. The self-absorptive mood helps to make more plausible the necessary stage illusion that Jesús does not see nor hear his children calling out to him.

One departure of Roberts' from Leñero's play that was only partly successful in performance was the addition of an unseen and unheard interrogator, whose questions were to trigger the responses that are the content of the frequent monologues in the play. In both Roberts' and Leñero's versions the monologues contain the same lines, but they are delivered in quite different manners, because Roberts' actors rehearsed with scripts containing lines for the Interrogator and they paused during the performance as though they were in dialogue with him. The italics below represent the Interrogator's lines in the working script:

INT—What is your name? How long have you lived here?
JES—My name is Jesús Sánchez. I have lived here in Mexico City for more than thirty years. . . .

Rather than the uninterrupted stream of monologue called for in Leñero's script, Roberts' actors delivered a halting, self-conscious series of remarks. The self-consciousness was precisely the effect Roberts was trying to achieve, in accordance with his own theory of the presentation. As he correctly points out,⁹ the Interrogator was implicitly present in the original work by Oscar Lewis and was edited out in the final book just as Roberts deleted him from the actual performance. He identifies the Interrogator not as Lewis in particular, but as

the "researcher, investigator, case worker, market sampler . . . in short, the ubiquitous pulse-taker of all our days and nights." Roberts conceives *The Children of Sánchez* as tragic drama, not documentary drama, the motivating agent of tragedy being the interrogator himself. He is the instrument that heightens self-awareness in the Sánchezes and induces the raised level of consciousness that transforms the play into true tragedy.

The emotional impact of both the book and the plays supports Roberts' thesis that *The Children of Sánchez* is a tragedy of the human condition and not just a social document. He is also correct when he observes that the Interrogator induces levels of awareness that are decisive for the tragedy to be. However, it is doubtful whether anything was gained by writing the Interrogator into the working script, particularly with a student company. The physical presence of the interrogator, or at least his voice, would have been a better alternative than the continual pauses in the monologues for his unheard questions.

In its own way, *The Children of Sánchez* is already a modern classic. Vicente Leñero and Louis Roberts have each given it new viability and universality through the theatre and Anthony Quinn and Dolores del Río must surely leave the stamp of their personalities upon it. Yet the credit for this creative work must be given to Oscar Lewis, the non-artist. Although he was reporting the factual results of a scientific investigation, he knew that his work transcended the bounds of science. The data were provided by the Sánchez family, but Lewis was responsible for selecting, editing and arranging the materials. "If one agrees with Henry James that life is all inclusion and confusion while art is all discrimination and selection, then these life histories have something of both art and life," he writes in the introduction to *The Children of Sánchez*.¹⁰ Oscar Lewis entered the life of the Sánchez family, studied it, reported on it, and in doing so changed it. What we have before us in book form, on stage or on screen is now purely a fiction because it has ceased to be the reality of the Sánchez family. Ironically, it has become more truly art because it is less truly life.

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Notes

1. Oscar Lewis, *Five Families* (New York: A Mentor Paperback, 1959), p. 18.
2. Oscar Lewis, *The Children of Sánchez* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), p. xxiii.
3. These remarks are translated by me from the Spanish as quoted by Domingo Miliani in "Los hijos de Sánchez: Diario íntimo de un escándalo," in *Actual*, I, no. 1 (enero-abril, 1968), 23-37.
4. Arturo Cova, "Los hijos de Sánchez, en la adaptación dramática de Vicente Leñero," *Nacional* (25 julio 1972), p. 5.
5. Vicente Leñero, *Los abañiles* (novela) (Barcelona: Scix Barral, 1964); *Los abañiles* (teatro) (México: Joaquín Mortiz, 1969); *Estudio Q* (México: Joaquín Mortiz, 1965); *La carpa* (versión teatral de *Estudio Q*), in *Teatro mexicano 1971* (México: Aguilar, 1974).
6. Cova, p. 5.
7. Antonio Marcos, "Ignacio Retes hablo sobre *Los hijos de Sánchez*," *Nacional* (13 octubre 1972), p. 86.
8. Cova, p. 5.
9. Louis Roberts, "Notes to *The Children of Sánchez*," unpublished.
10. Lewis, *The Children of Sánchez*, p. xxi.