

After the Coup: Four Dramatic Versions of Allende's Chile

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In his preface to Víctor Torres' *Una casa en Lota Alto* (*A House in Lota Alto*, 1973) Augusto Boal, renowned Brazilian director, playwright and drama theoretician, makes a penetrating observation about the nature of contemporary Latin American theatre and its relationship to European and American theatrical trends. Boal speaks of a "disheveled" or "unkempt" theatre which stands in contrast to the supposedly better groomed and more refined dramatic forms imported from Europe and the United States. In his analysis, the practitioners of the so-called "disheveled" theatre find little use for "an aesthetics of the Absurd, of Cruelty, of Asceticism." More specifically, they proclaim their dissociation from those Latin American dramatists who follow aesthetically-oriented European and American trends while turning their backs on the history and reality of their people.

Four of the best known plays written by Chilean playwrights about the Allende years illustrate the paradox inherent in Augusto Boal's proposition.¹ Víctor Torres' *Una casa en Lota Alto*, Sergio Vodanovic's *Igual que antes* (*Same As Ever*, 1972-73), Jorge Díaz' *Mear contra el viento* (*Piss against the Wind*, 1972-74) and Alejandro Sieveking's *Pequeños animales abatidos* (*The Beavers*, 1975) are plays which combine an obvious historical and political commitment with a variety of imported dramatic forms. The very effectiveness of these plays, in fact, stems from the hybrid nature of their conception, and their European dramatic underpinnings in no way diminish the "hirsute" vitality of their political message.

The Chilean experience between 1970 and 1973 illuminates, in part, the paradox implicit in Boal's commentary. In the course of Chile's socialist experiment, practically every aspect of society was questioned and put to the test. The theatre which had grown out of the universities was far from exempt. Playwrights, whose work had, in many instances, contributed to create the conditions

for President Allende's election, found themselves unable to participate actively in the social process and to reflect and represent it in dramatic terms.² The most important developments in the Chilean theatre at the time occurred, in fact, outside traditional theatre circles. By September, 1973, when the coup took place, there were nearly six hundred unprofessional theatre groups operating in factories, union halls, peasant settlements and neighborhood organizations.³ In most instances, these amateur groups created their own dramatic texts. They had to do so in the absence of suitable plays which would meet the expectations of their audiences.⁴ In simpler terms, the established theatre movement was literally superseded by the popularly-oriented theatre which catered to less literary inclined majority audiences. The plays examined in this study reveal the artistic resolution given to the dilemma which confronted four of the more established Chilean playwrights at that time.

Víctor Torres and Jorge Díaz had little difficulty confirming their belief in a dramaturgy committed to social and political ends. Torres, a young playwright who had written two successful plays for the workers' theatre movement, provides, in *Una casa en Lota Alto*, a dramatic representation of ideological and generational conflict in a coal mining family. Díaz, on the other hand, moves away from the absurdist orientation that had characterized his work and produces in *Mear contra el viento* an intensely political indictment of multinational and United States involvement in the affairs of Chile.

Sergio Vodanovic and Alejandro Sieveking, obviously more concerned with artistic questions and less politically committed, wrote two plays which deal essentially with the same socio-historical reality. *Igual que antes* and *Pequeños animales abatidos*, however, are dramatic pieces which minimize political realities while concentrating on personal and generational conflict, on social maladjustment and the more specifically human dimension of the Chilean tragedy. Even though Torres and Díaz indulge in theatrical experimentation, their message seems to overshadow the artistic impact of their plays. Conversely, Vodanovic and Sieveking's use of expressionistic technique adds artistic validity to their plays in spite of the undisguised political overtones of their plays.

Following Brechtian principles, Torres has the actors explain at the beginning of *Una casa en Lota Alto* that they are about to represent factual events in order to induce understanding of the problems and to motivate the audience to constructive action. To lend verisimilitude and an element of objectivity, the actors inform the audience that the facts presented on the stage have all been compiled by a team of social scientists. We are told, then, from the start, that artistic distance is not only undesirable but counterproductive.

The play states, in general terms, the existence of ideological hurdles which obstruct the path of those working for the good of the poor and the oppressed. With the help of tape-recordings and mimicry the actors reenact an historical debate between President Allende and a student leader from the extreme left who implicitly berates Allende's life-long dedication to bourgeois legality. The rest of the play dramatizes the same general premise but centers on the personal and political antagonisms of a father and two sons in a coal mining town in southern Chile. The final outcome shows that generational barriers are only manifestations of ideological differences which can and should be resolved for the benefit of the dispossessed.

Jorge Díaz' play, which was originally produced for European television audiences, makes no attempt at attaining primary aesthetic objectives. Written in Sweden a year before the coup in collaboration with Spain's Francisco Uriz and based on Jack Anderson's ITT memoranda, it aims at documenting and publicizing the covert operations and financial dealing which led to the 1973 coup and President Allende's death. Following in the steps of Erwin Piscator and his theories on documentary theatre, Díaz avoids emotion and concentrates on the objective presentation of facts. Departing, no doubt, from the Piscatorian norm, however, he recreates imagined behavior and adds psychological complexity. The final product is a morally revolting international parade of corrupt public and corporate officials, politicians and generals which, at times, is too unpleasantly familiar and credible. The unidimensional character portrayal and the ritualistic, almost incantatory quality of the scenes are reminiscent of medieval liturgical drama. The association would certainly be accurate if evil were not represented with so many different faces and good deeds were to be found somewhere in the play. To be sure, Díaz' *Mear contra el viento*, its European origins notwithstanding, is most certainly the most "disheveled" of these four plays.

Sergio Vodanovic, unlike Díaz, sticks to his traditional mode of expression.⁵ In *Igual que antes*, as in other plays, he concentrates on psychological development and interpersonal relations while using basic elements borrowed from the expressionistic canon. Except that, given the circumstances and the plot elements, the indirectness and suggestiveness of his play have more the appearance of a self-imposed form of censorship than a conscious artistic desire to disfigure objective reality. Whatever his motives may have been, the result is an engaging dramatic interpretation of very prosaic social phenomena.

Igual que antes tries to be a literary vindication of all the assumptions Vodanovic had made in his earlier plays. The fiction of the past, now confirmed by facts, becomes dramatic discourse again. We are shown a Chilean family in the process of decomposition as an extended metaphor of a society unable to control itself and to insure its own survival. An apparently liberal-minded industrialist rides the wave of change while unrelenting centrifugal forces scatter away the pieces of his marriage, his daughter, his factory, and the fantasy of his own progressive ideals of student days. His wife, the perennial matriarch, attempts to hide her own defeat and to retain the fictitious normalcy of her home by means of ritual, oblivion and the suspended reality of family portraits. The daughter, a potential matriarch, leaves her home to implement her own "liberation" through games, sex and drugs. Her lover, a young upper class revolutionary, disillusioned with himself and the rottenness of his own family and social class, abandons their sanctuary and goes to live, and die, with the poor and the oppressed. In *Igual que antes* Vodanovic demonstrates his faithful dedication to an aesthetic program which harmonizes dramatic methods with the need to express his critical appraisal of the society that surrounds him.

Alejandro Sieveking, in his *Pequeños animales abatidos* succeeds, along the same lines, in making a strong indictment of contemporary Chilean society while retaining his allegiance to a strict aesthetic set of principles.⁶ Also utilizing expressionistic methods, but adding a metaphorical content absent in Vodanovic's play, Sieveking gives a more concrete and domestic perspective to the same CIA

intrigue presented in Díaz' play. The CIA agent is here a friendly, easy-going American student of Spanish literature doing his research in Chile months before the coup.

In spite of its direct connection with recent Chilean history, *Pequeños animales abatidos* does not suffer from the familiar slice-of-life syndrome. Sieveking deftly avoids that by juxtaposing past, present and future time sequences in which the living and the dead coexist. A turn-of-the-century upper middle class couple living in frolicsome bankruptcy keeps reappearing as a haunting image from Chile's past while the protagonists, two actors expecting their illegitimate child, attempt to reconstruct their lives with the help of an older, rich female friend. Their friend, a witch-like individual endowed with extrasensory perception, has the ability to foresee and predict the death of those who surround her. When the American exchange student comes in she can see blood on his hands and unexpected wealth in his future.

In conclusion, the four plays discussed above may all deal with the same socio-historical correlatives, but the texts show that the approaches all differ in varying degrees of artistic sophistication and historical relevance. Torres' *Una casa en Lota Alto* is perhaps too permeated by local public issues to retain universal appeal. On the other hand, Díaz' *Mear contra el viento*, in spite of its unadorned reproduction of an all too familiar issue, will always touch a sensitive nerve among Third World audiences. With the passing of time, Vodanovic's *Igual que antes* and Sieveking's *Pequeños animales abatidos* will perhaps cease to be exclusively associated with the painful reality of Chile's tragedy.

Regardless of their fate, these four dramatic versions of Allende's Chile show that of all human endeavors the theatre is, without a doubt, one of the best vehicles for artistic expression as well as a faithful mirror for the reality that informs it.

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Notes

1. The four plays referred to in this article are: Jorge Díaz and Francisco Uriz, *Mear contra el viento*, *Conjunto*, 21 (July-Sept 1974), 8-50; Víctor Torres, *Una casa en Lota Alto* (La Habana: Casa de las Américas, 1973); Alejandro Sieveking, *Pequeños animales abatidos* (La Habana: Casa de las Américas, 1975); and Sergio Vodanovic, *Igual que antes* (Unpublished manuscript, 1972-73).

2. Hans Ehrmann, "Chilean Theatre, 1970," *LATR*, 4/2 (Spring 1971), 61-64.

3. Pedro Bravo-Elizondo, "Teatro social-popular en Chile: 1971-73," *Literatura Chilena en el Exilio*, 1/2 (Abril 1977), 2.

4. Sergio Vodanovic, "El Grupo Aleph," *LATR*, 4/2 (Spring 1971), 61-64.

5. For an analysis of Vodanovic's dramatic production see my "Contribution of the Argentine and Chilean Theater to the Mode of Protest and Social Denunciation: The Case of Agustín Cuzzani and Sergio Vodanovic," pp. 232-254, in "Contemporary Spanish American Drama of Denunciation and Social Protest: The Case of Argentina and Chile." Unpub. Ph.D. diss., State University of New York at Binghamton, 1977.

6. See Ramón Layera, "Translating Latin American Drama," *Paintbrush*, 4/7-8 (Spring-Autumn 1977), 39-42.