

## Theatre and Politics in Contemporary Peru

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From its beginning, the artistic literary expression in Peru, including the theatre, has characteristically been of a conservative and introspective nature. From the sixteenth to the twentieth century the theatre in Peru has been a veritable mirror of the significant socio-political changes that have affected, particularly, the urban coastal sectors. It is this artistic combination of the inward nature and *peruanidad*, moreover, that best explains the abiding reluctance of Peruvian dramatists to accept or foster foreign esthetic trends in their works that treat any aspect of the national, social, political, and even philosophical reality.

During its recent period of growth, Peruvian theatre has, for the most and the best part, been centralized in Lima. From the mid-forties to the mid-sixties, for instance, more than eighty percent of the national theatre was written by *limeños*. Their works were set in the capital, dealing almost exclusively with middle class phenomena—from attacks on the municipal government to daily life in the *mercado*. This concentration of dramatic fervor was to be expected because, since 1960, more than fifty percent of the national population has been urban centered, mostly in Lima, and because the vast majority has been composed of the burgeoning proletariat.

In addition to the better known realistic expressions by Sebastián Salazar Bondy, such as *La escuela de los chismes* and his usually satiric one-act *juguetes*, the plays by Rivera Saavedra (1999, *Los Ruperto*), Ramón Ribeyro (*Vida y pasión de Santiago el pajarero*), Rafael del Carpio (*La chicha está fermentando*), Sarina Helfgott (*La señorita Canario*), and Elena Portocarrero (*Hoy no, mañana tampoco*) are enduring reminders of this theatre's thematic and philosophical indebtedness to the rather stable economic and socio-political existence that the middle-class *limeño* enjoyed under the presidencies of Odría, Prado, Pérez Godoy, and during the initial years of the term of Belaúnde Terry.

Of course, the spectacular growth of the urban middle sectors during these years was common throughout Latin America. But the Peruvian experience since the mid-forties has been unique because "unlike other Latin American

countries where the new middle sectors were exclusively urban, in Peru, rural middle groups were coming into existence."<sup>1</sup> And with the rise of this rural proletariat there has been a gradual, yet still limited, decentralization of the social, political, and even the educational power structure. In 1940, for instance, there were only seven universities in the entire country, mostly in urban coastal areas, and their combined student enrollment was only 3,389. In 1964 there were thirty such institutions, now scattered throughout the provinces, with a combined enrollment of more than 48,000 students.<sup>2</sup> The steady growth of this rural middle class and of its demands for recognition helped to cast the national theatre in a new role. Since the mid-fifties, at least, the Lima-based theatre has been forced to contend with, and to reflect, this unique provincial reality. Plays such as *Collacocho* by Solari Swayne, *El Rabdomante* and *No hay isla feliz* by Salazar Bondy, and *El huaquero* by Alonso Alegría can all be viewed as testimonies directed to the rural middle class, in the sense that they were inspired by provincial reality and were meant to address the national indebtedness to those who, beyond Lima, were contending on a daily basis with a variety of problems related to the indigenous population and their geographic isolation from Lima.

It was also during these years, especially from the mid-fifties to the late sixties, when the national government first evidenced a genuine preoccupation with the traditional pluralistic division of the population into the indigenous communal tradition in the sierra and the non-indigenous capitalistic system in the coastal urban areas. And this official recognition of the Indian masses was almost immediately recorded in the theatre. As Belaúnde, for one, attempted to integrate the *serrano* into the national mainstream, without forcing him to surrender his traditional social identity, the Indian drama,<sup>3</sup> composed by and for the *serrano*, reached its zenith. But this was a short-lived phenomenon; its rapid demise was practically guaranteed by its declamatory nature and its almost total lack of dramatic appeal, even to the uneducated Indian masses.

There can be no doubt that the period from the mid-sixties to the mid-seventies was one of endless frustration for the Peruvian theatre, at that time a synonym for the theatre in Lima.<sup>4</sup> These were years in which older, experienced writers of long (usually three- to five-act) plays that were inspired by nationalistic and naturalistic concerns and were directed to the urban lower and middle classes gave way to a cadre of younger, less experienced writers. The latter group characteristically preferred brief (usually one-act) poetic and intellectualized works intended to transcend the socio-political concerns and limitations of their predecessors. Their goal as dramatists was to promote and achieve the essence of semantic and structural universality with their plays. Julio Ortega (in the eleven brief plays collected in *Ceremonia y otros actos*), Rivera Saavedra (*El Gran Tú* and *Por qué la vaca tiene los ojos tristes*) and Sara Joffré (*Cuento alrededor de un círculo de espuma* and *En el jardín de Mónica*) epitomized their efforts.

As we look backwards now, we can more readily assess the tumultuous, often dismal, existence of the theatre in Lima then. It was a period, as now, when increasingly difficult socio-political and economic exigencies beset the urban middle class, a people which could find no solace in, and could not identify

with, the esthetics of a theatre that, for the most part, failed to reflect their reality and seemed to turn its back on the middle class need for recognition. Despite the singular efforts of a few to resort to the semantics of economic and political reality, as Ortega in *Mesa Pelada* and Joffré in *El embudo de la ley*, many of those who constituted the Lima theatre between 1965 and 1975 gradually divorced themselves from popular support and even from their own interests as playwrights.

Despite its general failure to sustain audience appeal and the rather gloomy predictions that were inevitable four years ago, it is now apparent that the Peruvian theatre has entered yet another stage of development. This may be a transitional period, but in Lima the theatre has made its most radical departure from its usual conservative, introspective identity. There are essentially two trends that underline the present offerings. The first, and the most successful at the box office, is the sensational, thematically experimental theatre bringing for the first time works that deal with gay liberation, homosexuality, and psychological deviations such as those dramatized in *Equus*, in which nudity is essential. These works, of course, are primarily foreign imports that have easily shocked the sensibilities of the older, conservative theatre-goers in the Capital.

The second trend we would characterize as an over-zealous revolutionary theatre. It is one whose socio-political fervor too often obscures its intended appeal to the proletariat sectors. In this group, writers such as José Adolph and Hernando Cortés have met at least temporary success with *Trotsky debe morir* and *Los conquistadores*, fictitious, political works with an implied criticism of the abuses of imperialism. Hopefully, the long awaited third work by Alonso Alegría, *El terno blanco*, a work that also deals with the use and misuse of power, yet in a transcendent fashion, will set a higher standard for those *limeños* who are still groping for a model by which they can measure the quality of their own creations.

To abbreviate these observations, we may conclude that the theatre in Lima since 1975 has shown change, but little or no improvement in the quality of plays by Peruvians. Perhaps its most serious shortcoming is that this theatre is unable to compete for middle class support with foreign plays and films of the experimental, sensationalist ilk that have easily delivered the urban proletariat beyond the problems and burdens of the daily struggle.

Now we turn to the most significant event in recent Peruvian theatre history—the birth of what may be termed the autochthonous provincial theatre. It is one that, free of the influence (for some, the “contagion”) of theatre groups, individuals and trends in Lima, is thriving on provincial reality and is finding constant sources of inspiration within its own multifaceted milieu, *pueblo* and *campo*. To be sure, this is not indigenous theatre; it is, instead, the obvious manifestation of the rural middle class that has been growing for the past thirty years. This is a theatre which, despite geographical isolation and regional peculiarities, is already beyond its formative stage. For instance, the largest of the provincial theatre organizations, the Federación Nacional de Teatro Popular del Perú (FENATEPO) has already held theatre festivals and organizational meetings in the northern port of Chimbote (1972), the southern sierra city of Arequipa (1973), the middle sierra town of Ayacucho (1974), in the northern

coastal town of Chiclayo (1975), Cajamarca (1976) in the northern sierra, and in Trujillo (1977), another coastal city in the north.

As we review the progress of these provincial groups and organizations, the first impression is that, once again and in the traditional Peruvian fashion, the national theatre has found a new conservative, still introspective, and very Peruvian vantage point from which to ponder and reflect what may become the most significant changes ever in the socio-political, economic, and philosophical fabric of the country. And there is little doubt that, for many *provincianos*, recent events in the Capital and its theatre are a false mirror, a true deformation of the *pueblo* and its reality. As a result, and as if in support of the revolutionary goals of the federal government, the provincial theatre is often aimed directly toward such targets as capitalistic institutions and foreign investors that threaten the rural middle class worker. This theatre undeniably smacks of revolutionary Third World directives and interests. The provincial theatre has the potential to be worthwhile, yet as we search for works and individuals of proven value, we have to admit that none has yet been found.

Those who maintain any defense at all of the Peruvian theatre, even in the general sense, would point out that, as an expression still in its initial stage of development, we are encouraged by the parallels between this incipient provincial theatre and the early development of the Chicano theatre in this country. The latter, too, was born of social protest by unknown writers who used the theatre to focus on such concerns as labor organizations and their problems, education, economic discrimination, and a variety of other socio-political ills. The theatre presently being cultivated in rural Peru follows suit. It is a protest theatre composed and presented by inexperienced writers and groups with limited regard for dramatic artistry and whose principal *raison d'être* thus far is protest. They have few if any physical facilities, they are usually unfunded, and are still amateur in production and direction techniques. Furthermore, their presentations are too often mere spectacle—at the best, spontaneous music, mime and dance or, at the worst, patent political oratory. But it may be that the rural theatre in Peru, as the Chicano theatre here, will yet succeed. Despite being moribund for at least ten years, the theatre in Peru has begun to give evidence that it may ultimately profit from the divergent and competitive trends that presently characterize its provincial and cosmopolitan counterparts.

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## Notes

1. Frederick B. Pike, *The Modern History of Peru* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967), p. 303.

2. Pike, p. 304.

3. Representative authors are Andrés Alencastre Gutiérrez (whose pen name in Quechua is Kilku Warak'a), Rafael del Carpio, and Víctor Zavala.

4. Further information may be gleaned from Daniel R. Reedy and Robert J. Morris, "The Lima Theatre, 1966-67," *Latin American Theatre Review*, 1/1 (Fall 1967), 26-38, and from Robert J. Morris, "Las tres últimas décadas del teatro peruano," *Texto Crítico*, Año IV, no. 10 (mayo-agosto, 1978), 120-125.