

Matías Montes Huidobro: His Theatre

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In discussing the exiled Cuban playwright Matías Montes Huidobro, or any other Hispanic author now living and writing in other than his native land, care must be exercised not to succumb to the temptation to consider the author, and by extension, his work, as two separate entities—pre and post exile—totally unrelated the one to the other, or to take cognizance solely of the work in exile as though that which preceded it had no value in itself or relationship to the author's later work. To insist on this point of view is to ignore the essential fact that at any given time in our lives we are the end result of the various forces, experiences, circumstances and limitations that have influenced us up to that moment. Only if a given author began to write after his exile can one presume to discuss him in terms other than those of his native experience—and then only provisionally. The writer, his technique and his work evolve from the sum of his life experience.

Matías Montes Huidobro wrote half of his fourteen plays after leaving Cuba early in 1961. The later ones testify to his growth in dramatic perception and structure—his increasing maturity as a playwright. Nonetheless, these more recent works cannot be treated adequately without considering the earlier works written in his homeland. Indeed, a cursory reading of Montes Huidobro's theatre reveals the undiminished persistence of the Cuban experience throughout his dramas: thematically in the indirect references to the Cuban situation, and lexically in the frequent appearance of uniquely Cuban expressions and turns of phrase.

In a letter to Rodríguez Sardiñas and Suárez Radillo, the editors of an anthology of Spanish American theatre which includes his *La sal de los muertos*, Montes Huidobro acknowledges a less obvious, but nonetheless significant kinship with contemporary Cuban playwrights. During his research for a proposed book on contemporary Cuban drama, certain elements appeared with such frequency that he recognized them as constants in this theatre: "the buried presence of the spirit of Martí . . . the manifestation of the Hispanic spirit in

general which goes from reality to the dream; a devouring desire, fierce and cannibalistic, for increasing powers within the Cuban family nucleus . . . that directs itself towards its own destruction, filled with hates and Freudian complexes; a preferential dramatic technique (theatre within the theatre); a constant distortion of language and situations, a constant frustration, a repeated fixation of . . . now lost beloved objects that bring one to the edge of schizophrenia; . . . a desire to obtain special powers so as to be able to realize by means of magic and faith those dreams denied us. . . ."¹

Montes Huidobro states further that he was unaware of the presence of these factors in Cuban theatre, or in himself, even when writing *La sal de los muertos*, a pivotal work in his evolution as a playwright. In retrospect he acknowledges their presence in him as part of an "interior throbbing that, as is probable in the case of the other authors, impelled us towards a truth: the truth of Cuba . . . the truth of centuries which obliged us to write. . . ."² This admission by the playwright of a spiritual or motivational oneness with Cuban writers implies a more significant import to this theatre than the more obvious use of linguistic regionalisms or references to his native land. Nonetheless, one must not take the author's words literally. A thoughtful reading of his plays reveals that in spite of a common inspirational source with other contemporary writers of Cuba, and in spite of the Cuban "flavor" of his works, all of his dramas are not necessarily Cuban either in setting, characterization, or subject.

With the exception of *El tiro por la culata*, which offers a version of the age-old tale of the lecherous "amo" foiled in his attempts to seduce the nubile daughter of a "peón" who owes him money, Montes Huidobro's work falls into the general category of theatre of the absurd. Consistent with this classification, there is rarely great emphasis on stage settings. The Cuban playwright usually sets forth the stage decor in somewhat imprecise form only to conclude by leaving the final determination to the director's discretion. He states his position on this issue in the closing sentence of the stage directions for this more traditional of his plays. "En resumen: la pieza no está en la escenografía, sino en la acción y las palabras."³ In his theatre, therefore, Montes Huidobro focuses on ideas and people, people who could be any people, anywhere. "Lo absurdo" serves simply as a point of departure for the author's consideration of man in this world—his plight, his purpose, and his relationship to time prior to and after the moment which we share with him. Montes proclaims no thesis nor comes to any conclusion about the human circumstance in the majority of his plays.

This position of the author manifests itself in his drama as early as 1959 in the one-act play *Los acosados* as well as in his most recent one, the three-act *Ojos para no ver* (1977). The former details the struggle of a young married couple, known simply as "El hombre" and "La mujer," to survive the multitude of pedestrian problems confronting them—economic as well as family and personal—over a period of several months. While the prosaic intensity of this piece cannot compare with the stylized ambience and frenzied close of *Funeral en Teruel* or the pervasive fear and impelling sense of inevitability that brings *Ojos para no ver* to a close, it shares with them and the majority of Montes Huidobro's theatre the author's reluctance to take a clearly articulated position on the situations or problems presented in his works.

Through these plays, as through most of the Cuban dramatist's work, there runs a preoccupation with time. It is not time as ordinarily measured by hours, days, months, or years, nor time perceived historically in epochs or periods. For Montes Huidobro time has no finite limits. He conceives of it in a more complex manner than usual, perceiving time as a constant, a continuum in which man lives. What we call actuality—the moment in which we exist—is not the only time in the Cuban playwright's scheme. For when we leave this moment, we do not cease to be but persist in other aspects of this one continuum of time, even though these aspects are not necessarily perceived by those living here and now.

Evidence of this temporal concern appears in early works such as *Los acosados* and *Sobre las mismas rocas*, continuing in other pieces to *Funeral en Teruel*, where it attains its fullest expression. In this work time has no limits. Though set in the present, some characters dress in contemporary styles while others wear the styles of 1217. The plot—a variation of the legendary and frustrated love of Isabel and Marsilla—occurs in the present, but is constantly challenged by new morals and priorities with references, among others, to Castro, Caligula, and the Old Testament. At the close of the play Montes Huidobro has neither reconciled nor resolved the temporal conflicts nor the concomitant moral and ethical ones.

La sal de los muertos is a key work in understanding the evolution of Montes Huidobro's theatre. Written in 1960 and printed just after the author's departure from Cuba in 1961, it was confiscated by the Cuban government, only to find publication ten years later in the Rodríguez Sardiñas and Suárez Radillo anthology mentioned earlier. The plot, a deceptively simple one, relates the problems of a family in Cuba in 1958 presided over by the aging and venal patriarch Tigre. Caridad (a long-time family maid), Cuca (Tigre's second wife), Lobo (the son), Aura (his wife), and Lobito (their fourteen-year old son) complete the household. With the exception of Caridad, all anxiously await Tigre's death so as to lay claim to the old man's fortune, consisting of a presumably enormous quantity of money and silverware, the latter prominently displayed in the one room in which the play occurs.

Lobito, cut in his grandfather's mold, cannot wait for the old man's death and makes off with the silver. In an absurd confrontation between the two, both die, leaving the others to ponder the whereabouts of the rest of the fortune and to torture themselves with self-recriminations in the half-crazed and aimless ambience which brings the play to its close.

Here we have themes and concerns incompletely developed or briefly alluded to in earlier works, and the new directions and emphases which Montes Huidobro's theatre will take more clearly delineated.

In *La sal de los muertos* we see for the first time in the author's drama the conjunction of those constants identified by him as common to contemporary Cuban theatre. For example, the play within a play appears in the "juego de damas" played by Aura, Lobito, and Tigre as a prelude to the death of the latter two. The struggle for power within the Cuban family nucleus, "filled with hate and Freudian complexes," finds expression in the conflict among the family members and particularly in Lobito's challenge to Tigre's control in his ambitions

and the actions he takes to realize them. The "distortion in language and situations" finds its most apt expression in the scene between Lobo and Aura, in which the former temporarily assumes Lobito's identity and the latter goes back and forth confused between the actual and the assumed identity.

Time, which appears quite definite and concrete at the onset of this play, acquires less precise limits as the work progresses. The author suggests this in the confusion voiced by various characters concerning the mysterious footsteps that preceded the equally mysterious disappearance of the family silver, counted as a major part of the inheritance due to them at Tigre's death. He carries it to a point suggestive of the development to come in *Funeral en Teruel* in Caridad's recounting of experiences realized other than in this world at some imprecisely defined point in time. "Everyone began to entreat me, but at the bottom there was only an abyss. . . I began to run as if that flight had meaning, but it didn't . . . And there was no meaning to opening doors because it was all the same. I knew that on the other side of each door I'd only find the abyss . . . And no one gave a hand to help me. . . ."⁴ The complete statement brings the first act to a close. It appears again in a more developed form with certain religious inferences almost at the close of the second and final act, giving impetus to the crazed and wandering dialogue between Aura and Lobo with which the work ends.

To comprehend the evolution and import of Montes Huidobro's dramatic work, his plays must be considered in the chronological order in which they were written. Such a view affords an insight into his aesthetic development and confirms the presence in his drama of those factors he identified earlier as constants in modern Cuban theatre. Significantly, other elements become more apparent, elements identifiable as concerns of the author, such as criticism of the socio-political circumstances that brought about the present situation in Cuba, a sympathy for the victims of official immorality and oppression, man and his existential aloneness and longing, man's inability to communicate with his fellow, an infinite rather than a finite conception of life, and a probing for the "raison d'être" of human existence. A long range perspective of the author and his work reveals the artist still in the process of formation, a man who has yet to come completely to terms with himself and his experience and nonetheless, one who, in the attainment of his artistic maturity, will surely leave his mark on the history of the theatre in Latin America.

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Notes

1. Orlando Rodríguez Sardiñas and Carlos Miguel Suárez Radillo, eds., *Teatro contemporáneo hispanoamericano* (Madrid: Escelicer, 1971), Vol. III, pp. 120-121. (Translations by the author.)

2. Rodríguez Sardiñas, p. 121.

3. Matías Montes Huidobro, *El tiro por la culata* (Cuba: Ministerio de Mananao, 1961), p. 5.

4. Rodríguez Sardiñas, p. 172.