

## The Anti-theatre in *El suplicante* by Sergio Magaña

HOWARD QUACKENBUSH

It is always difficult and even hazardous to define dramatic categories, and the labels used often fall short of the mark, leaving misnomers which hardly do justice to the works they are supposed to describe; i.e., the Theatre of Cruelty, which in theory is more shocking than cruel, and the Theatre of the Absurd, whose only absurdity is to mirror the oddities—irrational behavior and illogic man. Another such inconsistency occurs in the use of the term anti-theatre whose label would appear to refer to opposition to theatre arts when in reality just the contrary is true and the writer simply wishes to create a less contrived and more life-like experience for the theatre public. The realism of anti-theatre, which capitalizes on the example established by Pirandello, intends not to portray reality but the illusion of reality: "All the usual elements of the dramatist (are) abandoned. . . . The characters (are) enmeshed in reality and illusion—the real and the unreal—as actor and as character."<sup>1</sup> It neutralizes the audience's predisposition to an obviously fictitious theatrical presentation and brings them to a true suspension of disbelief or acceptance of what they see as reality. Most anti-theatre, including *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, never achieves that level of acceptance in the mind of the audience. No one really believes that six people, a walking play, just came through the stage exit doors in defiance of natural law. It is another theatrical contrivance that the audience tolerates, ingenious as it may appear. At no time does the public actually believe that what is happening on the stage is real, neither are they ever in doubt. Of course, there are those who believe "that the theatre must only seem real and not be real."<sup>2</sup> One might respond that if life is a play then why not create a play that is life, or to alter slightly a well-known quote by Seneca "a play is like life, it's not the length but the excellence of the performance. . . ."

In the development of the anti-theatre illusion there is a marked difference between what is accepted by the audience as a realistic convention on the stage

and action which the audience believes to be authentic and spontaneous, not controlled by any play or written script. A play that approximates this latter quality is *El suplicante* by the Mexican dramatist Sergio Magaña.<sup>3</sup>

The struggle between reality and drama begins at the very outset of the play when the director pleads for the audience's indulgence, telling them that for reasons beyond his control the cast will be unable to present the work announced on the program. Instead of *El suplicante* two *sainetes* by Sor Juana will be staged (p. 53). From the perspective of the audience, an unforeseen difficulty in staging the scheduled play is a normal if uncommon occurrence which the viewer fears but also anticipates, particularly if there is a slight delay in raising the curtain for the first act. The audience is all too prone to imagine several possible reasons for the change in program, the last of which may be that it is an integral part of the play. Even the most seasoned playgoer or skeptic is disposed to accept as valid the excuses of the director of the play. Therefore, the natural inclination of the audience plays into the hands of the astute dramatist who planned this illusion from the beginning. It should be remembered that the title of this play is *The Suppliant*, the petitioner, the director who humbly asks for the public's indulgence. Unwittingly, the audience has helped set the stage for the very play they do not believe they will see, and the well-planned anti-theatre reality begins to take shape. In addition, this deception is much more easily recognized by the reader of the play than it would be by the viewer. Once the illusion is discovered (and this may not occur until well into the work or even until after the final curtain) the reader-viewer realizes that three plays develop simultaneously, each as a result of the others, following the pattern of the anti-theatre technique of a play within a play. The first, of course, is the work in its entirety, from the appearance of the petitioning director to the last speech and the curtain, as perceived by the reader of the script of *El suplicante*. The second play, Sor Juana's *Sainete primero de palacio*,<sup>4</sup> serves as an open frame and pretext for the rebellion of the protagonist, Carlos, and the presentation of his play to the public. The latter can be considered the third play, constituting the main action of *El suplicante*, the play that the public unknowingly has come to see. The three threads of plot are carefully intertwined by the author to create a continuity that at first glance seems to be non-existent and which only becomes a reality when all three are seen as *El suplicante*. Strangely enough none of the three is acceptable to the cast, who makes excuses and asks forgiveness at different times for each. The director says, "Esperamos que la benevolencia de ustedes nos perdone por este cambio imprevisto. . ." (53). When Carlos and his antagonist Manuel interrupt the dialogue of the *sainete* with their arguing and fighting, the prompter tries to calm the audience, saying, "Señores, por favor, señoritas les ruego que no se alarmen. No es nada esto. Va a pasar ahorita" (57), and finally, when the illusion is complete Carlos apologizes to the audience, "Perdónenme ustedes. Lo demostraré, perdón. . ." (59). All three speeches give meaning to the work and add significance to the title of Magaña's imaginative play.

The reference to Sor Juana's *sainetes* should not be interpreted as coincidental. The selection of Sor Juana's theatrical work assumes new significance when viewed as an antecedent of the theatrical method used by Magaña. Just

as the reference to the *sainetes* constitutes the second plane of theatrical development in *El suplicante*, the *sainetes* themselves serve the traditional purpose of dramatic interludes between the acts of the full-length *comedia*, *Los empeños de una casa*,<sup>5</sup> a technique which was very popular in the Spanish Golden Age theatre.

It would seem that Magaña has purposefully selected Sor Juana's *sainetes* for the second plane of anti-theatre reality because he saw in them many of the technical elements that he wished to develop in the total impression afforded by *El suplicante*. In Sor Juana's *comedia*, just as in Magaña's play, there are three distinct presentations in each dramatic whole, even though it should be noted that Sor Juana includes a *loa*, poems, and choral pieces within the confines of *Los empeños de una casa*. The thematic unity of the piece is apparent, however, in the interdependence of the three parts, the two *sainetes* and the *comedia*. Also contributing to Magaña's selection of Sor Juana's work would be the contempt of the players of one play or level of action for the dramatics presented on another plane. From the second *sainete*, we read these lines:

. . . ¿Quién sería  
el que al pobre de Deza engañaría  
con aquesta comedia  
tan larga y tan sin traza? (118)

The reader witnesses this unifying similarity again in the Director's or the playwright's personal antipathy for the subject matter of customs being developed on the stage. In the case of Magaña's play, it is the Director who refuses to present Carlos' play, and for Sor Juana it is her own personal experience at the court which colors the dialogue in the first *sainete*. As a result of these structures common to both plays, Magaña's mention of Sor Juana's *sainetes* has direct bearing on his blueprint for the anti-theatre.

Whereas in many works of anti-theatre the dramatist is satisfied to create merely a temporary illusion, only to abandon it later in the play, and never attempting to unify the thematic content and the innovative technique, Magaña uses as many of the conventions of that method as apply to enhance the total impression of his work. The effect produces a credible, all-encompassing anti-theatre, even to the point of including the stage crew and technicians. The arguing and scuffling of Manuel and Carlos, which disrupts the presentation of the *sainete* by Sor Juana, also precipitates extremely human and natural reactions in the other actors and supporting crew, as well as the appropriate stage effects. The stage directions state that, "El telón empieza a bajar, pero se interrumpe a la mitad. Sube, vuelve a tratar de bajar, pero queda fijo a la mitad. . ." (56). The Director shouts, "Los dos quedan expulsados del grupo, ¿lo oyen?" (57), and a stagehand adds, "Esta porquería no funciona." When the prompter acknowledges that the continuation of the play is useless and pleads with the audience to leave, Carlos reacts even more violently: "De un salto, baja Carlos del escenario y corre a la puerta del teatro. Ahí se coloca con los brazos en cruz para impedir el paso. El Director corre para alcanzarle, forcejea con él" (57). The result is planned chaos; the audience has no alternative than to accept as reality what is happening. The effectiveness of the scene depends entirely upon

the expert acting, or better yet the natural reactions of the cast to the scene of bedlam, for any hint of acting in the canned or melodramatic sense of the term would be disastrous to the effect being created. Even more important will be the cast's skillful handling of the audience reaction that will erupt from this scene, and no theatrics or condescending behavior should be tolerated. The cast has to seem as scandalized as the audience and join with the public in its condemnation of Manuel and Carlos, if that should occur.

The next step in Magaña's illusion is to unmask the players, establishing their "true identities." This is done when Lucrecia cries from the stage:

LUCRECIA: ¡Carlos, hermano! (Al público) Es mi hermano, ay, no sé decir nada.

OLGA: Ya para qué.

LUCRECIA: ¡Cómo pudo pasar! ¡Nos quitarán el teatro!

DIRECTOR: Hazlo por tu hermana Lucrecia. (58)

The final touch to this scene is the common anti-theatre method of "salting" the audience with very ordinary appearing actors who, together with the natural reactions for the viewers, permit Carlos to state his case and be heard, thereby making the transition from the contrived scene of the *sainete* to the assumed reality of the moment:

UNO DEL PÚBLICO: ¿Esto es lo que dan en lugar de función?

CARLOS: Sí, compañero. Los señores no tenían nada que ofrecer.

UNO DEL PÚBLICO: ¿Y cree que no merecemos que nos respeten?

CARLOS: (Cambia de actitud.) Si ustedes me dejan explicar, los convenceré de que perdonen esto. Señores, señoras, ¿están dispuestos a oírme?

OTRO DEL PÚBLICO: Ya déjelo hablar. (59)

If the dialogue has been effective and convincing, the public has experienced for perhaps the first time a true suspension of disbelief and the atmosphere is perfect for the development of the main conflict, the other play within this play. Apologetically, Carlos begins: "Este . . . Yo escribí una obra. . ."

DIRECTOR: Es cierto, escribió una obra. Lo que pasa es que nos negamos a representarla.

The audience is given to believe that the work referred to is the play *El suplicante* that they came to see, and an intimate dialogue evolves between members of the cast and the audience through the use of confidential asides. Quite obviously a new anti-theatre perspective develops on stage as the romantic triangle between Carlos, Lucrecia, and Manuel and the theme of incest not only become a human reality but the core of Carlos' play. The boundaries between theatre and life become blurred and the drama again changes into reality.

Carlos' play is based on the Biblical account of Amnón, his sister Tamar, and Amnón's friend Jonadab. The complicity in the story related in II Samuel, chapter 13, is not identical to Carlos' interpretation, but the events are similar. There is an incestuous relationship between brother and sister, but the similarities end there; Jonadab, played by Manuel, is Carlos' enemy, not his accom-

plice as the Bible relates the story, nor is Amnón (Carlos) killed for forcing himself on Tamar, played by his sister Lucrecia. In keeping with Magaña's goals the realities are not what they appear to be. Carlos does not intend to stage an Old Testament story. In a very masochistic sense, he wants all to know that he and his sister have had intimate relations and thereby eliminate Manuel, his rival. The play is anything but a dramatization of that Bible text; on the contrary, it assumes the stature of a stage reality. For this reason the actors have refused to present the work "por asquerosa" (60), because on the stage the incestuous relationship is no fabrication, as evidenced by Manuel's statement directed at Carlos, "descubrimos por qué la habías escrito" (60). Carlos' play, therefore, may remain an illusion of reality to the viewer who lacks the added perspective of a written script, but to the reader it is fictitious, merely a more refined variety of anti-theatre. The reader occupies a more removed and objective vantage point from which to view the action, and his awareness may not be shared by the theatregoers; the audience still may not distinguish illusion from reality.

The title, just as the action itself, can be seen in double perspective, its structural nature apparent in the requests for patience or forbearance, separating the scenes and major conceptual divisions of the work and signaling the use of anti-theatre devices, and the use of variations of the term *suplicante*, or the verb *suplicar* in thematic contexts within the play itself. An example of the latter occurs in a key exchange between the three principal actors:

- AMNÓN: Es cierto lo que dices. Tamar, quiero suplicarte algo.  
 THAMAR: (Sin volverse.) Sí, hermano.  
 JONADAB: (Con intención.) Tú siempre suplicas algo a tu hermana.  
 AMNÓN: Aun la súplica es ruda para acercarse a Tamar. ¿Acostumbras tú a hablarle de otro modo?  
 JONADAB: Yo no suplico nada a nadie. Me parece humillante y ridículo el hombre que por algún motivo oscuro se convierte en un eterno suplicante. . . . (66)

The overlapping of theatrical realities and the weaving of reference to the symbolic nature of the title intensify the action and interpersonal conflicts of the actors. In addition, the theme of incest serves to unify these varying levels of reality, also giving purpose to the performance. This personal obsession of Carlos and its function as the framework for his play serves as a pretext for the expression of his innermost desires toward his sister. Again, an anti-theatre reality is superimposed upon the drama presentation.

It becomes apparent to the audience that Carlos is unable to separate drama from life. In the revelation of the incestuous desires of both brother and sister, the author combines theme and title into one as illustrated by the jealous speech of Jonadab:

- Traidora, sucia, como él, manchada por el mismo pecado. Algo ausente había en ti, algo. ¿En quién pensabas al besarme? A quién nombrabas en el fondo de ti cuando tu cuerpo languidecía? Sucia, sucia. No era yo quien te invocaba; ahí estaba Amnón, la sombra de Amnón el suplicante (68).

The two plays converge and in a parallel sense the personalities of Lucrecia-Thamar and of Carlos-Amnón each become one composite individual, as theatrics are suspended and the anti-theatre reality prevails. Jonadab or Manuel has discovered Carlos' and Lucrecia's secret, not a Biblical, historical account, but a human reality:

- THAMAR: (Se descubre la cara. Ve a los dos. De pronto, grita frenéticamente.) ¡Mátalo, Amnón, que él sabe!  
 JONADAB: ¡Ah, Thamar, perra!  
 THAMAR: ¡Mátalo, Amnón, y que su muerte nos purifique!  
 ¡Mátalo, Amnón, para que sea sólo tuya!  
 ¡Mátalo, Amnón! ¡Mátalo, mátalo! (69)

Amnón becomes Carlos and Jonadab Manuel again, with Carlos clutching Manuel and beating him unmercifully. Theatrics or real-life? How should the audience evaluate Carlos' play? The work has taken on an even more poignant realism, and the other actors emphasize the dramatic confusion:

- OLGA: ¡Carlos, Dios Santo, Carlos! ¡Pero ya están actuando!  
 EVA: ¡Suspende la escena, Carlos, suspéndela! (70)

The anti-theatre message is reinforced in Carlos' realization that his brutal action is absolutely logical, "Si es lógica, fundamental (se da uno y otro golpe), lógica (continúa), lógica . . . es lógica, es una escena fundamental" (70), and Manuel is left dead or dying in a pool of blood.

Both the audience and the reader should see in the symbolism of Magaña's stage directions a possible allusion to the most famous of all anti-theatre productions as, "Los seis actores se van acercando. . ." (70), and we are reminded of the similarly tragic finale of that great piece. Magaña has learned his lesson well, bringing the master's technique into even better focus. In the final moments of the work Carlos reverts to his role of *suplicante* and in a stupor mumbles, "No. . . perdón. . . no sirve, esto no sirve. . . ." He covers his face with his hands and sobs, "No sirve. . . . No sirve. . ." (70). What is it that does not work or is worthless? Could it be that his play, which really is not a play at all, does not function; perhaps incest is worthless, maybe life itself does not work, or is it that the realities of the moment should never push man to extremes of brutality and murder? Let us hope that Carlos is not trying to say that the play within a play, fiction within a staged reality, does not function. Carlos' creation represents only one segment of Magaña's dramatic whole, and as such gives unity to the anti-theatre continuum. In isolation none of the individual parts of Magaña's play functions within itself or separated from the unifying whole. Therefore, Carlos is justified in stating that his particular segment does not work, and yet, paradoxically, the play could not be more unified when viewed in its entirety. It should be noted also that comments by the players, such as "no vamos a ofrecerles la obra anunciada," "Esta porquería no funciona," "Qué cosa más insoportable," "La obra no sirve. Teníamos que rechazarla," and "Suspende la escena" interspersed throughout the work form a motif for the action of the composite play.

The conclusion of *El suplicante* demonstrates the true nature of this dramatic

form. The anti-theatre is itself a creature born of enigma and paradox. The several superimposed realities and the plays within a play, together with the cast-audience interplay and the *suplicantes* (beginning with the Director himself), compose elements of both drama and reality. And what is real; who can determine where reality ends and fantasy begins? Carlos' human struggle and Magaña's anti-theatre master plan turn dramatic enigma into reality. But what of presumptuous articles which pretend to explain or clarify such dramatic paradoxes? The impossibility of that task would have us echo the words of the director: ". . . suplicamos encarecidamente, otra vez, mil disculpas. Muchas gracias."

*Brigham Young University*

## Notes

1. Edward A. Wright, *Understanding Today's Theatre* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1972), p. 74.

2. Wright, p. 153.

3. Sergio Magaña, *El suplicante*, in *Tres dramas mexicanos en un acto*, eds. Jeanine Gaucher-Shultz and Alfredo O. Morales (New York: Odyssey Press, 1971), pp. 47-71.

4. Portions of this paper were read at the Symposium on Latin American Theatre held at Florida International University, Miami, April 21, 1979. During the discussion that followed the presentation, Robert Morris commented that additional evidence of Sor Juana's influence on Magaña would be of interest to the reader of the published text of the paper. The point was well taken, as Sor Juana's technique is of direct relevance to the total impression sought by Magaña, and additional information was added to the text.

5. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Obras completas, comedias, sainete y prosa*, intro. Alberto G. Salceda (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1957), pp. 117-18.