

## Surrealism and the Grotesque in the Theatre of Ricardo Monti

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In his well-known study, *An Introduction to Surrealism*, J. H. Matthews identifies the objectives of the Surrealist work of art in the following manner: "Surrealism remains a search, undertaken by the artist through the experience of the irrational. . . . In the world of the irrational, to which insanity furnishes one of the keys, man is introduced to a universe in which he may try out his knowledge of himself, testing the limitations of this knowledge and pushing them back, as he gains confidence in his capacities, and finally learns what identity is."<sup>1</sup> The Surrealist theatre of the young Argentine dramatist, Ricardo Monti, projects an oneiric ambience through which his characters and audience undertake just such a search for political and metaphysical identity and self-understanding.

*Una noche con el señor Magnus e hijos* (1970), Monti's first play, contains in its foreword a number of "sugerencias" from the author that serve to underscore the fundamental role of Surrealism and the grotesque in the work. The actors are instructed to utilize "una máscara de maquillaje dibujada sobre el rostro, con rasgos estereotipados y clownescos"<sup>2</sup> and to infuse their performance with "gestos furtivos, o falsamente patéticos, arbitrariedad de la imaginación por sobre todas las cosas, multiplicar las alusiones internas en un juego infinito de espejos, quebraduras salvajes de ritmo, salto sin transiciones a distintas zonas de realidad: en suma, cada gesto debería ser creado" (p. 5). The clown face or mask that either clashes with or reinforces the identity and emotions of the characters is the very basis for the Italian grotesque theatre of Chiarelli, Pirandello, and others; the abrupt shifts in the levels of reality are associated with the irrational mutability of Surrealism. The use of varying styles of music and the

prominence of lighting effects all contribute further to the instability and threatening nature of the world as reflected in Monti's Surrealist vision.

The central role of the dream is established in the prologue of the play where Gato relates to his brother Wolfi his nightmare about the gruesome slaughter of a fat rat.<sup>3</sup> This dream anticipates the climax of the play in which the three boys—Wolfi, Gato, and Santiago—slay their father, Magnus. This grotesque union of man and animal is central to Monti's view of life as a nightmare.<sup>4</sup> Magnus, in introducing his boys to Julia, a girl whom he has met in the park and brought home, refers to them as "ratitas," further underscoring the central equation of man with one of the most vile of creatures. The fusion of the human and the bestial is reinforced throughout the work by the character of Old Lou who imitates a dog, the animal whose identity he has assumed to reflect the way in which he has been treated by Magnus.

The sudden and irrational changes in the tone of the drama or the behavior of a character (especially Julia) evince the unstable and menacing nature of reality. Julia is seen in all of the diverse roles of woman, from the maternal to the sadistic, from the virgin to the whore. She, like so many of Monti's characters in this and subsequent works, struggles to find her identity, to define herself within the context of a threatening, arbitrary world.<sup>5</sup> In such a world, objective truth becomes highly elusive. Simulation, for Monti, is the only possible response to the artificiality of life resulting from authoritarianism.<sup>6</sup> This simulation takes the form of ritual ceremony, the genesis for all theatre which has been rediscovered and revitalized by twentieth-century avant-garde dramatists.<sup>7</sup> Ordinary chronology is destroyed by these theatrical ceremonies. Examples include the following: Julia and Magnus reenact their initial encounter; Lou and Magnus act out the interactions between buyer and seller; a reference during that "play within a play" to Magnus' murder of his wife, Bibí, necessitates the replication of her funeral; Magnus and his son Santiago dramatize the struggle between Marxism and Capitalism; and, of course, the climactic ritual that recreates the opening nightmare of the play is the act of parricide.

The mock funeral of Bibí demands further consideration because of its utilization of the grotesque to disarm man's fear of death. With the music of a requiem in the background, Lou's canine-like howls, and the boys' distorted voices, this bizarre ceremony prompts Julia to comment: "Pero esto es un manicomio!" (p. 28). The omnipresence of insanity in life and death affirms Matthews' analysis of Surrealism presented at the inception of this study. And these rituals repeat themselves endlessly in the play; Bibí's portrait looks just like Julia, while the boys' assessment of the grotesque funeral rite is that it was better last week. In his *Irony and Drama*, Bert O. States remarks: "Plays are not grotesque simply because they contain monsters and freakish events . . . but because the world of possible normalcy seems to have been engulfed, or is seriously threatened by some prodigious tendency to self-repetition and unbounded growth."<sup>8</sup> The grotesque, then, plays a pivotal role in the rituals and ceremonies throughout *Magnus*, and its importance is further evidenced by the nature of the central, unifying figure of Magnus himself.

The opening scene of the second and final act presents a grotesque banquet in which the characters all gorge themselves. Magnus asserts his supremacy by

outing all of his sons. When Julia marvels at his capacity, Gato comments: "Tragar y cagar es uno y el mismo camino, como dijo el viejo Heráclito. ¡No! Todo es relativo, Julia. ¡Epa! Todo está mezclado. La destrucción y el amor; todo está mezclado" (p. 33). This union of opposites, expressed here in what might be termed an "excremental vision"<sup>9</sup> of life, employs the grotesque to portray the socio-political power incarnated by Magnus, Monti's symbol of both the abstract forces of totalitarianism in life and the military-industrial complex in Argentina. Ironically, but logically, it is the grotesque figure of Magnus who defines those around him,<sup>10</sup> browbeating his sons, stealing Lou's woman (Bibí) and money, and seducing Julia. The struggle of Julia and the boys to find their own identities ends on an ambiguous note; their rebellion is tempered by guilt and is relegated to a level of dream. Despite this element of ambiguity, a clear message does emerge from the playwright's oneiric and grotesque dramatic milieu; it is articulated by Virginia Ramos Foster in the following manner: "The elaboration of this social parable allows Monti to protest vigorously man's entrapment by social and economic forces that both hypnotize him and distract his critical attention."<sup>11</sup>

*Historia tendenciosa de la clase media argentina* (1971) is Monti's most overtly political work. Its chronologically structured series of satirical sketches depicting Argentine history would seem to have little relationship to the oneiric, interior world of his other plays. However, as several of Argentina's leading theatre critics have convincingly demonstrated, the work does evolve quite logically from *Magnus*. Emilio Stevanovitch, in his review of *Historia tendenciosa*, links the two plays in the following manner: "En su producción debutante, Ricardo Monti sentó una premisa lacerante, diluida en la vida de una familia. La misma ahora se amplía, adquiere nombre y apellido, ritmo coreográfico-musical, mayor despliegue y levanta vuelo conformando una biografía nacional, de sólido andamiaje dramático."<sup>12</sup>

Monti's allegorical examination of the Argentine national conscience during fifty years of history derives its unity from the figure of the Old Whore, La Pola, who symbolizes her entire nation. Her description of herself is reminiscent of Monti's notes about make-up in *Magnus*; both introduce the grotesque in their evocation of the face-mask motif. La Pola's words are as follows: "Los tiempos cambian. La imagen se deteriora. Relojeá. Hay tanto maquillaje que a veces tengo la sensación de mirar por dos agujeros. O que debajo del polvo y la pintura no me queda piel (Risa agria). Una blanca y fría calavera."<sup>13</sup> Her bitter laugh of self-recrimination anticipates the audience's reaction to her and to the play; their laughter represents the mandated response to the dialectical mode of the grotesque which, like Pola, is central to the theme and structure of the play.<sup>14</sup>

*Historia tendenciosa* juxtaposes a caricaturesque and often grotesque view of actual events in Argentine history with actors' improvised memories of their own feelings and actions ("Implosiones") during those critical times in their national history. The result is a virtuosic mix of the poetic and the vulgar which, together with the humorous interjection of English and French into the dialogue, produces a strongly satirical vision throughout the play. Examples of satire and caricature abound: the "absurd" government of Peludo (Yrigoyen)

is ended in a duel with a caricaturesque General (Uriburu); British Imperialism, personified by Mr. Hawker, is devoured by the American Imperialism (Mr. Peagg) that followed. This act of cannibalism, which concludes with Peagg returning to stage still cleaning his teeth, is indicative of the grotesque emerging from extreme caricature.<sup>15</sup>

A central group of characters in *Historia tendenciosa* is the archetypal middle class family, the Filipeaus. The scene in which the mother pushes her son toward a successful career constitutes a surrealist interlude, as indicated by Monti's stage directions: "El clima de la secuencia siguiente, hasta la salida del hijo, es angustioso, onírico. El tiempo acelera. Hay una especie de confusión en los movimientos y en las palabras" (p. 24). The resultant disorientation produces a sharp break with reality; absurd juxtapositions incorporate the grotesque which serves to underscore the chaos and irrationality permeating socio-political life in Argentina. In one sequence, the son, Augusto, kicks his mentally defective aunt; his scholar-father insults the mother in French, while the latter finds Augusto's report card and discovers that he has received a zero in Latin. As the parents attempt to deal with this latest obstacle to their boy's quest for "success," Perón's October 17 speech is heard over the radio and Augusto's sister sings the "operatic" aria, "¡Qué dolor! ¡Qué desorden!" (p. 26). This confusion reaches its climax with the mock death of the father who is eulogized by the mother's vacuous platitudes while being sufficiently alive to sneeze and to accept a cigarette from Boñiga, the representative of the Argentine landed aristocracy. The grotesque serves here to undermine and disarm the horror of death; however, the seriousness of that theme is quickly reaffirmed on another plane in the moving and poetic conclusion of the first act which alludes to the "Operación masacre" of the post-Perón period in which a number of innocent men were illegally executed.<sup>16</sup>

The concluding act of *Historia tendenciosa* intensifies the circus-like atmosphere of the work. The clowns Niconor and Anselmo are introduced and proceed to wrestle to reconcile their inherent curiosity with their irrational fears. Niconor later metamorphoses into the archetypal fascist dictator, a grotesque figure combining the exterior gaiety of the clown with the rhetoric of absolutism. Mr. Peagg solidifies his victory over Argentina, forcing Boñiga to pretend to be a cow (a grotesque symbol of Argentine natural resources exploited by Imperialism). All then honor Peagg, singing a Brechtian song—"Brothers of the world unite, hacia la soledad, donde la explotación del hombre por el hombre no sea una utopía sino una hermosa realidad" (p. 49). A circus parade of all of the characters seems to end the play, but the artists refuse to obey the allegorical figure, Teatro, and leave; they insist on remaining to find an answer or at least to identify the QUESTION.

Monti's *Historia tendenciosa* combines satire, allegory, caricature, humor, poetry, songs and improvisations to examine national reality. It is a collective work, composed and realized jointly by the playwright, the director and the cast. As such, it is episodic and uneven, but in its more inspired moments, moving and disturbing. Despite the absence of Monti's unifying Surreal vision, the play "implica una saludable insistencia en la revisión crítica del pasado

reciente y conflictivo de la Argentina, en la búsqueda de la comprensión, esa llave maestra que servirá para abrir muchas puertas en el futuro.”<sup>17</sup>

*Visita* (1977) takes the aesthetic ambience of *Magnus* as its point of departure and intensifies its Surrealist component, plunging the spectator immediately and completely into a magical realm that is totally removed from waking reality. As in Monti's earlier plays, the stage descriptions introduce the grotesque through the motif of the mask. The character Perla is described as follows: “Su cara es una máscara en la que una pintura exagerada acentúa la expresión cadavérica.”<sup>18</sup> The boundaries of time and space are completely eradicated in this play; Perla's husband Lali only reads magazines that are at least fifty years old. And the ride of Equis, the protagonist, into the magic realm of eternity unites the theme of the work with its surrealistic ambience. Lali describes this magical realm to Equis in the following verses:

Allí destellan las estrellas inmortales  
y la materia es un río transparente  
que fluye permanente y sin cauce.  
Allí todas las formas  
son una sola forma  
que se genera a sí misma  
eternamente.  
Una sola forma inseparable  
sin límites ni grietas.  
Allí la muerte ha perdido su vigencia.  
Ni divide, ni gasta, ni afea.  
Allí no hay otros  
y todo es uno mismo. (p. 15)

In his flight through time and space, Equis experiences the ecstasy deriving from the union and synthesis of antithetical forces, an essential component of “the theatre of the marvelous.”<sup>19</sup> Equis' internal journey affords him a momentary glimpse of the immortality that Lali and Perla enjoy and which he, the symbol of man, can only intuit within the confines of the dream play. Man's fear of death (and nothingness), then, is central to the entire play.

As in earlier works, the grotesque is employed to permit the alleviation of uncertainty and anguish through laughter. Perla feigns death at the end of the first act, and the second act opens with the preparation of her body for the funeral: “Aparece en la puerta cargando con Equis el cuerpo de Perla, quien está ataviada en un vestido de novia lleno de tules, que hace de mortaja. Gaspar se mueve frenéticamente a su alrededor, arreglando los tules” (p. 25). Lali, in high spirits, sings operatically to the “corpse” and alludes to the previous funeral, exuberantly affirming the forms and ceremonies that such events inspire. In the midst of this ceremony, replete with Latin and Bible passages, Perla suddenly sits up, commenting, “Me estaba meando” (p. 30). After trivializing death, the concept of immortality is also ridiculed by Perla, who relates her experience with death in a farcical manner; her endless fall into an abyss was interrupted by a ludicrous encounter with Queen Victoria.

Equis finally decides to terminate his visit; he must leave this realm to face the reality of his precarious existence which is subject to sudden and total cessa-

tion. While he wrestles with these transcendental issues, Perla and the dwarf Gaspar angrily quarrel over inconsequential, absurd matters. This sort of juxtaposition produces the dialectical quality of the grotesque while underscoring the instability and confusion inherent in man's interior and exterior life.

The final "desechado" of the play contains Equis' ritual murder of Lali and Perla. They have decided that Equis is their long lost son and proceed to dress him in children's clothing. The pants contain the pocket knife that becomes the instrument of their "death." But Equis and Gaspar (who removes his mask revealing an adult's face on his child-size body) are not truly free. They cannot open the door; the house is hermetically sealed, and a mysterious stranger is peering through the window. The action of this section of the play is revealed to be an illusion in the final stage directions: "Los viejos han quedado inmóviles como grandes muñecos sin vida . . . Durante segundos el escenario se ilumina intensamente, hasta poner al descubierto toda la maquinaria teatral, lo ficticio de los decorados, lo ilusorio de la representación" (p. 47). Equis cannot escape from himself and his reality, but he can, through the magic of the Surrealist ceremony, transcend at least momentarily the confines of both his inner and external existence. Concomitantly, we, the spectators, can catch a glimpse of that process through the "window" or curtain in front of Monti's hermetic dream play.

Equis' visit, like his flight on the back of Lali, occurs only inside his mind. *Visita* projects a subconscious realm on the stage. Lali and Perla, the immortal couple, are, in Monti's own words, "los dioses, sus padres interiores, el poder desde dentro."<sup>20</sup> And Gaspar, the dwarf child-man, is an intermediary between the gods (Lali and Perla) and man (Equis), a "ser humano entregado a la ilusión, un ser humano enanizado."<sup>21</sup> *Visita* is Monti's most abstract work; national concerns vanish in this projection of man's collective subconscious and the forces therein that are most threatening and of gravest consequence. As Charles Driskell concludes in his discussion of the work: "*Visita* is original in its grotesque, or tragicomic vision of man's complexities, his suffering, and his struggle to retain his freedom—which is, in turn, a life-death struggle—in a rigid and sinister world."<sup>22</sup>

Ricardo Monti's theatre can be related to that of various avant-garde dramatists, from Strindberg and Genet to Artaud and Arrabal. Like those playwrights, his work utilizes a form of Surrealism to create a highly personal and original theatrical ambience. Parallels with past and present playwrights notwithstanding, Monti, at the young age of thirty-five, has created an important theatre that is uniquely his in style and imagery. He has utilized Surrealism and the grotesque to deal with national and human concerns in a manner that is at once universal and profoundly Argentine. With the departure of Griselda Gambaro to Spain, he remains Argentina's most individual, innovative and serious voice in the theatre. His latest venture, *Marathon*,<sup>23</sup> promises to seek the further integration of the national and the universal into a theatrical ceremony utilizing language, visual imagery, music, and the force of memory to project a vital and unique vision of man's place in contemporary life.

## Notas

1. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1965, pp. 127-28.
2. Buenos Aires: Editorial Talía, 1970, p. 5. All references to this play will be from this edition.
3. Monti possesses a good command of English. I would suspect that he was conscious of the English translation of "rata gorda," and that the resulting nonsense rhyme in English translation adds to the black humor of this grotesque image.
4. Studies of the grotesque in art and literature frequently identify the disturbing union of the human and the animal as an essential motif of the grotesque. Examples range from the etchings of Goya to Kafka's "Metamorphosis." One of the many studies that associates this motif with the grotesque is Wolfgang Kayser's seminal work, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), p. 183.
5. In my discussion with Monti in Buenos Aires on May 2, 1979, he identified the source of Julia as two intellectual adolescents that he knew, and said of her that she begins the play as a nothing, without definition. It is her encounter with Magnus that causes her to find the determination to be something. Most of Monti's characters "surgen como imágenes"; in that respect, this precise source for Julia is rather unusual in his theatre.
6. Charles Driskell, "Conversación con Ricardo Monti," *Latin American Theatre Review*, 12/2 (Spring 1979), 52.
7. Artaud's "Theatre of Cruelty" provides a starting point. Playwrights that utilize ceremony in their dramas include Jean Genet, Eugène Ionesco, Fernando Arrabal, and numerous others.
8. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971, p. 77.
9. A term aptly coined by Donald Bleznick in analyzing Quevedo's grotesque in his book *Quevedo* (Boston: Twayne Press, 1972).
10. A view supported by the author in his interview with Driskell, p. 52.
11. "Theatre of Dissent: Three Young Argentine Playwrights," *Latin American Theatre Review*, 4/2 (Spring 1971), 49.
12. "Theatre" section of the Argentine magazine *Siete Días Ilustrados* (11/8/71).
13. Buenos Aires: Editorial Talía, 1971, p. 7. All subsequent references to this play will be from this edition.
14. Critical definitions of the grotesque unanimously identify a comic component that coexists with the horrific. One widely accepted definition is the following: "The unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response." (Philip Thomson, *The Grottesque* [London: Methuen and Co., 1972], p. 27.)
15. As Thomson states, there is a norm for caricaturesque exaggeration, a norm of abnormality. When that norm is exceeded and the caricature is no longer merely funny, but truly monstrous (Daumier, George Grosz), then we have the grotesque (p. 39).
16. See Rodolfo Walsh's book, *Operación masacre* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de la Flor, 1973), for a detailed account of that event. This section of the play was written by Monti's director and collaborator, Jaime Kogan, the artistic director of the Payró in Buenos Aires.
17. Kive Staif in *La Opinión*, October 28, 1971.
18. Buenos Aires: Editorial Talía, 1971, p. 7. All subsequent references to this play will be from this edition.
19. Gloria Orenstein, *The Theater of the Marvelous: Surrealism and the Contemporary Stage* (New York: New York University Press, 1975). Orenstein's study analyzes Surrealist plays in terms of the symbolism of Alchemy and Tarot. Monti's theatre, in my estimation, is only tangentially connected with the works she examines. But her book does provide an excellent framework for the consideration of any drama in which Surrealism plays a significant role and is particularly illuminating with respect to this one important episode in *Visita*.
20. My discussion with Monti on May 2, 1979.
21. *Ibid.*
22. "Theatre in Buenos Aires: 1976-77," *Latin American Theatre Review*, 11/2 (Spring 1978), 107.
23. *Marathon*, slated to open at the Payró Theatre in 1979 or 1980, was still not completed when I spoke to Monti on May 2, 1979. The play deals with a group of participants in a dance marathon who are competing for an unidentified prize. At the end, the most desperate, rather than the strongest, remain. The play will consist of a large number (about twenty-eight) of short scenes; it will not be made known how much time has passed between the scenes, nor will they be presented in chronological order. To add further to the temporal confusion, scenes from Argentine history will be integrated into the play (e.g., Pedro de Mendoza, founder of Buenos Aires, decided to undertake his conquest when he was already in the final

agonies of syphilis. His counterpart in the marathon is the tubercular "albañil" who is striving to pay off the mortgage on his house before he dies. The two characters will be portrayed by the same actor). Once again, the production will be directed by Jaime Kogan, who won the Molière prize in 1977 for his direction of *Visita*.