The Theatre of Maruxa Vilalta: A Triumph of Versatility

Tamara Holzapfel

One of the newest names among Spanish American dramatists of the New Theatre is that of Maruxa Vilalta. Born in 1931 in Spain, she has lived in Mexico City since 1939. Although also known as an author of novels, short stories, essays and criticism, she has succeeded in gaining substantial recognition mostly as a playwright. Her first notable success came in 1970 when she won the Alarcón Prize of the Mexican Critics Association for her one-act play *Esta noche juntos, amándonos tanto.* Since then she has achieved even greater prominence in the theatre with her prize winning *Nada como el piso 16* (1975) and *Historia de él* (1979). Her plays thus far, however, have received little scholarly attention.[1]

In a review of *Esta noche juntos, amándonos tanto* and *Nada como el piso 16* Jeanine Gaucher-Schultz notes that Vilalta expresses similar thematic preoccupations in them, "enfocando particularmente la lucha entre el amor y el odio, el maridaje del poder y el egoísmo y el crudo sadismo resultante," and that a major shift in technique has occurred, "desde el absurdo vanguardista en *Esta noche juntos* . . . hasta un nuevo realismo social en *Nada como el piso 16.*"[2] The recurrence of certain thematic concerns and the search for a suitable form in which to cast these ideas may indeed be considered a trademark of Vilalta's theatre. But the shift that has occurred properly begins with *Esta noche juntos, amándonos tanto.* Vilalta made her first mature contribution to the theatre with *El 9,* a play that, although it has a socio-economic theme, incorporates all the allegorico-expressionistic devices that characterize the Theatre of the Absurd. In *Esta noche juntos, amándonos tanto,* however, she moves away from strictly absurdist form to a theatre that combines absurdist techniques with Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekte* to accommodate an overt social message. In *Nada como el piso 16,* on the other hand, she uses representational techniques. But despite the patina of realism here, it is clearly something other than the conventional realism we associate with social protest writing. The following analysis of three of her plays—*El 9*

(1965) and those mentioned above—traces Vilalta's development from an absurdist dramatist to a more daring, innovative one whose dextrous and versatile treatment of form is a measure of her achievement in the theatre.

"Writing an acceptable absurdist play is not difficult at all,"[3] claims William I. Oliver, an assertion that may be justified if we consider the large number of such "acceptable" plays that have been written in Latin America and elsewhere. Vilalta's *El 9* seems to belong to this category. A tidy distribution of allegorical and expressionistic symbols serves to express here what has become a commonplace in modern art: the inescapable dilemma of humans reduced to numbers in a world dominated by the machine and the idea of Progress. True to absurdist form, *El 9* represents a thoroughly static situation, using mechanical language and monotonous action to reflect the effects of the mechanization of life. The encounter between the two adult characters, Nueve and Siete, does not lead to action but functions presentationally to illustrate their entrapment by a system that hides its brutal authoritarianism behind an amiable mask. This system, symbolized on stage by the confining gray walls of a canning factory, alludes to the state of society as well as to the world order as a whole, both characterized by an unbridgeable division between those who wield power and those who are powerless. But while a shifting power relationship in a struggle for dominance gives shape to the action of *Nada como el piso 16,* the dynamics of the power play are lacking in *El 9* and may be the reason for its intellectual flatness and philosophical vagueness. All three characters of the play, the factory workers Siete and Nueve and a young boy, are hopelessly trapped in a situation controlled by "others," whose identity remains faceless: "Ellos, los demás . . . todos y ninguno," says Nueve, "son los que nos han excluído de la participación de la vida. Nos han puesto a un lado del juego."[4] The use of a loudspeaker to direct and control the workers' lives in lieu of a human authority figure corroborates this anonymity. The instructions and orders, broadcast by the kind of sugary-sweet voice we associate with radio commercials, camouflage a vicious authoritarian system that is never completely unmasked in the play. An anonymous and unfathomable power in Absurd Theatre emphasizes the absurdist assessment that all action is futile. But in *El 9* "los otros," although they remain anonymous, can be identified as that sector of society that acts as the oppressor.

An invidious comparison between the workers' passive existence and the action-filled lives of the anonymous sector serves to underscore the socio-economic theme. Nueve says: "Nosotros no contamos. Nosotros no participamos, son ellos los que pasan ahí afuera. Ellos los que comen. Van y vienen. Piensan. Luchan. Triunfan. Pasan. Y nosotros los miramos pasar, ir, venir, pensar, luchar, triunfar. Nosotros no participamos" (p. 56). As a consequence of this isolation the workers appear as completely deprived individuals, functioning as mere cogs in a system that exploits and dehumanizes them. Indeed, their fate is worse than death. For death, as Nueve's suicide signifies, is a liberation and a kind of fulfillment of his hope for self-determination. He expresses this hope in terms of finding an opportunity, or making his own choices and decisions, and of asserting his free will. These assertions made in the third *cuadro,* prior to the announcement of his suicide in the fourth and final *cuadro,* provide the play with a measure of ironic distance:

> Es no participar más en su juego, pero no porque me hayan puesto a un lado, sino por voluntad propia. ¡Es elegir yo mismo el papel que voy a representar y no a repetir lo que otros me han dicho que repita! . . . Pero un día, te decides. Todo es cuestión que te decidas. y un día, un maravilloso día bueno dejas de girar. Te paras . . . ¡Cómo te ríes de todos ellos! La oportunidad. Es cuestión de una, sola, pequeña oportunidad.
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> (pp. 59-60).

Nueve provokes an accident and is killed by the machine. Dead, he has a smile on his face and a name—José—to signify that he has now recovered his human identity. However, the process of the mechanization of man is rooted in social determinism. For el Niño is there to replace him as a cipher and to begin anew the struggle against the machine.

The theme of self-determination in *El 9* is bound up with the idea of game playing, as the characters' concern with play demonstrates. The boy desires Nueve's flute as a toy. Later, when he inherits it, the instrument becomes a symbol of his future reenactment of Nueve's role. Siete is also a younger duplicate of Nueve and his opposite because he engages in children's games. Of the three characters only Nueve is preoccupied with the "real" game, to which he simply refers as "el juego." It is from this game, the game of effective living, that he and those like him have been excluded as players, but in which they are the pawns of impersonal, life-destroying forces. At stake in this game is the human self-determination which Nueve attains, ironically, through his voluntary death. The game, however, is controlled by anonymous players and subject to secret, perhaps inscrutable rules, which points beyond the social theme to an absurd world order.

From a technical standpoint the one-act *Esta noche juntos, amándonos tanto* also depends to a great extent on the allegorico-expressionistic devices of the Theatre of the Absurd. However, Vilalta attempts something new here when she boldly subverts absurdist meaning and form with Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekte*. While in *El 9* the gray monolith of the factory displaces all action, the situation dramatized in *Esta noche juntos, amándonos tanto*—the relationship between individual egotism and institutionalized violence—is inherently more dynamic and dramatically more effective.

The play begins as Absurd Theatre. The protagonists are an old married couple, El and Ella, named Casimiro and Rosalía, who have chosen to live in complete isolation from the rest of the world. Their extreme egotism is obvious not only in their hostile attitude toward humankind in general, but also in the hatred they have for each other. Although they frequently make protestations of mutual love and affection—also alluded to in the title—these stand out as ironies in a relationship that is a perverse one in every respect. A quotation selected at random illustrates this point:

> **Ella**—Tú y yo siempre estamos juntos, Casimiro.
> **El**—Juntos, sí.
> **Ella**—Y unidos.
> **El**—Muy unidos.
> **Ella**—Te detesto.
> **El**—Yo quisiera verte muerto.[5]

El and Ella are united only in their total disdain of all humanity and are thus reduced to an existence that consists of a daily routine of waiting for supper time. Ever since Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* we readily recognize this absurd routine as "habit which prevents people from reaching the painful but fruitful awareness of the full reality of their being."[6] As the absurd characters they are, El and Ella cannot change and function throughout the play as an embodiment of egotism. Additionally, the action involving an invisible character—a dying neighbor who repeatedly appeals for their help and is refused even as she expires at their doorstep—only serves to flesh out the allegory of their utter selfishness.

Vilalta breaks with absurdist convention in the second half of the play to illustrate, in a series of scenes, the whole gamut of institutionalized violence. These are scenes of mental action. As El and Ella read to each other reports from old newspapers, an actor appears alternately as general, policeman, executioner, concentration camp guard, soldier and dictator. At the same time the violence associated with each role is illustrated with slide projections that evoke events of recent history or situations made familiar by the news media. The intention is to shock the audience into recognition, for the slides depict "real" events—a device from Epic Theatre—of institutionalized violence such as war, police brutality, capital punishment, mass murder, military abuse of civilian populations, and the scourge of dictatorship.

That Vilalta is a playwright concerned with social questions is already evident in her absurdist phase, as we have seen in *El 9*. In *Esta noche juntos, amándonos tanto* the combination of absurdist devices with techniques from a socially committed theatre to convey a theme of social criticism turns out to be an eminently successful one.

The play is also successful from the standpoint of language and foreshadows Vilalta's achievement in dramatic poetry in *Nada como el piso 16*. This language is poetic in the sense that it is charged with meaning that transcends the ordinary meaning of words, as in the passage that leads to Casimiro's unexpected action of opening the "ventana aislante," their window on the world that they keep bolted shut. In this passage—not quoted here in its entirety—the characters' chief preoccupation seems to be to harass each other about the rather humdrum activities that are part of their daily routine of waiting for supper time—her knitting and his pipe smoking:

> **El**—Este tejido no conduce a ninguna parte. ¡No es nada! Toma, cerciórate por ti misma. (Se lo devuelve.) No puedes seguir tejiendo porque no sabes lo que tejes. Lo que no conduce a ninguna parte está terminado antes de empezarlo. No existe. No puedes dar un punto más.
>
> **Ella**—No puedo dar un punto más. (Deja el tejido.)
>
> **El**—¡Mi pobre Rosalía! Tendrás que pensar en otro pretexto para seguir viviendo.
>
> **Ella**—Casimiro, mi amor, el tabaco que estás fumando es el mismo de ayer, estoy segura. Y anteayer también.
>
> **El**—Es un tabaco excelente.
>
> **Ella**—Excelente, excelente, eso se dice siempre. Las cosas siempre empiezan por ser excelentes y después se vuelven hábito, rutina. Este tabaco es el mismo del martes, el mismo del lunes, el mismo del domingo.
>
> (p. 24)

More than a mere description of their routinized existence, this passage deals with the meaning of existence, filling both the characters and the audience with a vague, unsettling realization that theirs is meaningless. It is this subliminal awareness that prompts Casimiro to the radical action of unbolting the window. However, El and Ella are incapable of reaching a fuller consciousness of their reality. The world outside is too threatening; it horrifies them and henceforth the window will remain permanently shut.

A departure from absurdist essence—in subject matter—in a play that in many ways is a repertory of the techniques of the Theatre of the Absurd was already apparent in *El 9.* But while in the earlier play we can point to philosophical inconsistencies that undermine the integrity of its absurd meaning, *Esta noche juntos, amándonos tanto* suceeds because its unique form is plainly anti-absurd. The "absurd" and the "epic" scenes combine effectively to deal unequivocally with moral and social questions, and to confront the audience with the irrationality of egotistical behavior and its consequences, the violent conditions prevalent throughout the world today. The audience is thus persuaded to reject both egotism and violence and to recognize that it is up to the individual to change himself and society.

Thematically, *Nada como el piso 16* resembles *El 9* insofar as it is also concerned with human self-determination, the concomitant notions of free choice and free will, and the opportunity to exercise them. As in *El 9,* the protagonist is a worker who struggles against insurmountable odds and is defeated in his quest for self-determination by an enigmatic opponent. But in contrast to *El 9,* it relies on representational techniques and the idea of game playing becomes an action metaphor.

The power game is played in an elegant Manhattan apartment, an appropriately capitalistic setting, and acted out between its owner Max, a corporation executive, and Jerome, an electrician making a house call. The three acts of the play mark the various stages of the suspenseful game: Jerome's seduction by Max's way of life and his obedience training determine the action of the first two acts, while in the third act Jerome momentarily gains control over Max. There is nothing to be gained by this grueling game, however. Winners turn losers, while the trump card is held by an enigmatic player.

The dramatic tension of *Nada como el piso 16* rests entirely on the mechanism of game playing. After the initial encounter between the domineering but apparently well-intentioned Max and the resentful and embittered Jerome, the action turns into a game of seduction as Max—with affable playfulness—entices Jerome to share his life. He tempts the young man with his luxury apartment and its beautiful view, with drinks, dinner, and Stella, the attractive prostitute living with him, as well as with a job in his company. Sex and economics win out over Jerome's initial reticence. Then, in Act Two, the game takes a more sinister turn. Training Jerome in obedience, Max now engages in sadistic play to demonstrate that total domination of another human being can be achieved through material and psychological control. Jerome succumbs once again, to Max's gloating satisfaction: "Desarmar el juguete lentamente . . . Dominar a un hombre hasta anular en él toda resistencia, toda fuerza de voluntad. Placer del que sólo pueden disfrutar los privilegiados."[7] It is revealed in Act Three that Jerome's obedience training

was also a lesson in the rules by which the game of power is played and won. The young man is now as unscrupulous and egotistical as Max, and resorting to blackmail, he momentarily achieves dominance over Max. But the latter loses control only temporarily, for he recognizes that Jerome is his creature, nothing more than a bad imitation and a caricature of himself. Nevertheless, Jerome now has the power to destroy him. Yet this achievement is meaningless. In the process of having mastered the game and having become Max's equal and rival, Jerome lost his humanity.

An electric clock visible from the window of the apartment on the same level serves as an objective correlative of the changes taking place in Jerome's conscience as he "rises" in the world. In the first act, luxuriating in the Land-of-Cockaigne atmosphere of the apartment and far removed from his sordid existence, he perceives the clock as an indication of everything being nearer his reach. But the proximity of the clock in the second act merely fills him with a sense of deception. And finally, in the last act, the clock becomes for him the innocent object it really is, having nothing whatsoever to do with him. His indifference to the clock at this point is a reflection that he has lost his humanity, for he has left behind—without regret—love, guilt, and suffering, the emotions associated with Kate, his former sweetheart, and his war experiences, and that had made him a worthy member of the human race.

The game played between Max and Jerome does not end, however, in a tie. There are other powers with which these clever players had not reckoned. Stella, who all along had been a passive instrument in their hands, unexpectedly announces that it is now her turn to enter the game. But the nature of her role in the new game, related to obscure, irrational forces, remains an enigma. She refuses to show her hand and the play ends "Ahora cuando el juego se pone interesante" (p. 103). The characters have been engaged in playing the God-game, tracing for us the gradual exchange of role between master and mastered, a process that alludes to a cycle of replacement that will apparently continue.

In *Nada como el piso 16* Vilalta shares commitments with other social realist dramatists to what may seem totally realistic plots, characters, and language. The dramatic situation is commonplace: A young worker on a routine work assignment succumbs to the allurements of sex and materialism. The dialogue strikes us as a fairly accurate transcription of ordinary speech. Yet beneath the realistic prose we can discover something akin to poetry that transmutes the everyday material. Of central importance to the play is the idea of the game as an action metaphor. The social questions raised are subsumed in the power game. Acceptance of the rules of the game, not anger with them, underlies the dramatic action. In the final analysis there are no solutions or resolutions, only motives that defy definition and feelings that elude classification.

Vilalta consistently draws on two sources of poetry: attitudes for which ordinary meanings of words are inadequate and language that conveys something other than the meaning of what has been said. For instance, the sequences of conversation about Kate, and about Jerome's and Stella's former selves allude to a complex symbolic network concerning the identity of the characters. The question of human identity, although also related to the

more social theme of individual self-determination, has a broader, more poetic meaning here. The complex symbolism that surfaces in these conversations serves to mirror man's legendary quest for his identity and the impossibility of his ever discovering it. Kate died unfulfilled. Jerome is absorbed by Max's world, and Stella assumes a new, enigmatic identity.

Other important instances of dramatic poetry are conveyed by a variety of poetic symbols. The room in which the entire action transpires functions symbolically as a "womb-room" to create an atmosphere of menace.[8] Even one of the characters has a definite symbolic dimension. Stella is too fantastic to be a real woman, representing rather an archetype of the adolescent/erotic daydream. She is an object of the desire of both men who play games of seduction with her. On Max's insistence she dresses in white to preserve the appearance of innocence and youth. Toward the end of the play Jerome proposes to call her Samantha and dress her in "rojo escarlata" which, in his opinion, is a color more becoming to her. The change of names—from the original Jane to Max's Stella and Jerome's Samantha—marks her progress in evil: "Sí, Stella era peor que Jane. No me arrepiento. Samantha será peor todavía. Le diré a Max que quiero cambiar de nombre" (p. 96). This change veils a threat that goes unheeded by the two men, and they continue to play out their rivalry over her. Stella's decision to become Samantha, as it turns out, coincides with what she refers to as her "toma de conciencia" (p. 100). Her new assertiveness comes as a surprise to the men, but they cheerfully accept the challenge to play the game "entre iguales." However, Stella, having assumed her new mask, remains a riddle. As the players take their places to play yet another round, Stella-turned-Samantha freezes in an enigmatic pose: "Enigmática, ella fuma su larga boquilla" (p. 104).

Taking off where the somewhat stunted *El 9* ended, *Nada como el piso 16* in an original fashion combines a genuine dramatic poetry with social commentary. The action of the play commences precisely at the point where the worker Jerome, initially an outsider, enters this world of power—the elegant living room of a Manhattan apartment. The atmosphere of this "womb-room" however is charged with menace and violence, and Jerome's passive desire for security will become an active agent of evil. Eventually, this environment will wear down his resistance and absorb him completely. He succumbs to both the impenetrable design of an unknown power, embodied in Stella, and to the perniciousness of capitalist materialism, represented by Max. Mexican audiences, especially, will be alerted to the play's ideological intentions when they hear the owner of the apartment introducing himself as Maximilian. That the imperialism is now of a different sort and purely economic in nature is borne out by the setting and the emphasis on material display. And when Max reminds Jerome that they are living in a developed country, the latter caustically remarks, "Desarrollado gracias a que otros están subdesarrollados" (p. 50). Jerome's seduction by materialism and his ambiguous triumph articulate a warning to Latin American audiences that has been sounded since the days of Rodó and Darío. But, as we have already seen, the play in the drama between the real world and an unreal, absurd one points to other meanings as well.

The advent of the absurdist revolution in the 1950's and the almost simul-

taneous rediscovery of Brecht's politically-oriented theatre constitute the two most significant trends of influence on the avant-garde theatre in Latin America. While during the sixties the avant-garde tended to favor the absurdist mode which rejected overt social commitment, the latter part of the seventies has seen the return of a theatre concerned with social issues. Vilalta's shifting away from absurdist form coincides with this change in the climate of the contemporary theatre, which one critic has identified as the "demise of the age of the absurd in drama."[9] It would be wrong, however, to view this return to a more overt social commitment as a regression to a dated social realism. In the interval, under the influence of Brecht and absurdism, it has taken on a new strangeness. It is in this sense that Vilalta's achievements in the theatre can best be understood.

University of New Mexico

Notes

1. See, for example, references to *El 9* in L. Howard Quackenbrush, "Cuestión de vida y muerte: Tres dramas existenciales," *LATR*, 8/1 (Fall 1974), 49-56.
2. "La temática de dos obras premiadas de Maruxa Vilalta," *LATR*, 12/2 (Spring 1979), 87.
3. "Between Absurdity and the Playwright," in *Modern Drama: Essays in Criticism*, edited by Travis Bogard and William I. Oliver (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 11.
4. Maruxa Vilalta, *El 9* (Mexico: Ecuador 0 0' 0", 1966), p. 56. Subsequent page references to this edition will appear in the text.
5. Maruxa Vilalta, *Esta noche juntos, amándonos tanto* in *Teatro de vanguardia*, edited by Myrna Casas (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath & Co., 1975), p. 21. Subsequent references to this edition will appear in the text.
6. Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961; Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1969), p. 38.
7. Maruxa Vilalta, *Nada como el piso 16* (Mexico: Joaquín Mortiz, 1977), p. 73. Subsequent references to this edition will appear in the text.
8. The term "womb-room" appears in critical studies on the plays of Harold Pinter, whose dramatic interiors have a hemming-in quality, creating an atmosphere of claustrophobia, terror and violence. See, for example, Herman T. Schroll, *Harold Pinter: A Study of His Reputation* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1971).
9. Richard Gilman, "Out Goes the Absurdism—in Comes the New Naturalism," *The New York Times* (March 18, 1978).