

The Usual and Some Better Shows: Peruvian Theatre in 1981

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Of the inevitable year-end roundups (like this one), 1981's most publicized one, in Latin America, was that of the *sur-les-lieux* offices of the Agence France Presse. It stated that what characterized 1981 was "the unusual preference for local authors and themes, a more numerous audience and better quality of the works presented," and, this notwithstanding, "the pertinacious cosmopolitanism of certain theaters traditionally devoted to the 'classical' genre" (*El observador [inter alia]*, Lima, 12/29/81). The AFP-survey mentions as the most interesting productions *Ultimo round* by Venezuelan Rodolfo Santana, *La señorita de Tacna* by Peruvian Mario Vargas Llosa, *Don Elías Campeón* by Argentina's Hebe Serebrisky, and *La mar estaba serena*, an *obra colectiva* by the Chilean group ICTUS.

As for the Peruvian theatre in 1981, the social, literary and gossip- sensation was the production (Ana Blutrach y Asoc.) of *La señorita de Tacna* (text available from Seix Barral, Barcelona, 2nd ed. May, 1981, from which I quote *infra*). It is a rather perplexing play, seeing who wrote it, in that it combines very skillfully Vargas Llosa's confessed love for melodrama and *truculencia* (here a pretty mild and domestic one, very close to the execrable Latin American or US *telenovelistica*—the author's very premeditated attack against the prevalence of *huachaferia* in South America by "giving them what they crave"?) and his superb techniques in handling time, space, and memory. As a text, the play requires a study apart. The production, in Osvaldo Cattone's Teatro Marsano, was incredibly successful and, clearly, proved the (secret?) point I think Vargas Llosa wished to make. Those putting on the play were an Argentinian group, which before had had a resounding success with it in Buenos Aires (Premio Anual de la Crítica).¹ Director was Emilio Alfaro, Mamaé, the principal figure, was Norma Aleandro, a very good actress. The *mise-en-scène* was interesting (though often distracting by too much going on all over the stage), the acting somewhat uneven. For understandable

reasons, the *text*'s references to its own melodramatic essence were cut. For instance, this one: "Ah, Belisario, y eso es lo que tú criticabas tanto en los escritores regionalistas: el color local y la truculencia" (p. 106), which glosses Vargas Llosa's theory of the novel.

Being in Lima, the troupe emphasized all the *telenovela*-aspects (or, if you prefer, the memories a spectator may have carried into the theatre of Pedro Camacho's *radionovela*-chapters in Vargas Llosa's *La tía Julia y el escribidor*): "la mujer mala" came out in a red dress; the "indiecita de Camaná," played by Argentine-German, tall, blonde, and most seductive Katja Alemann, who also did "la mujer mala," had to writhe naked on a table, before the "good guy," Abuelo (Leal Rey), got to "know" her and actually to maintain, in a letter to his wife confessing the sinful congress, that "Fue pensando en ti, ávido de ti" (p. 135). The oddest aspect of the production was that the stand-in for Vargas Llosa, Belisario, played unconvincingly by Chilean Franklin Caicedo, in all seriousness had to show us how a writer writes: with a pencil and throwing away lots of sheets. It was like the composers in early Hollywood pictures composing right there on the screen: la, la, la, li—no! lo, etc.). Belisario's desk was placed upstage center. When from time to time he runs to renew his memories and, therefore, materials for writing, he actually, like a lamb, crouches *at the feet* of Mamaé, position a *reader* of the play would surely consider one of the author's jokes. In the *text*, he'll also find this: ". . . deja de escribir un momento para besar la mano y el lápiz con los que está escribiendo" (p. 40). Still, the production was professional and up to the standards Argentine actor, director, and producer Osvaldo Cattone has introduced to Perú. The audience raved the night I was there, the last of the run, and indeed stood up to applaud this well-earned satisfaction of its most intimate and bourgeois visions of the world. Vargas Llosa must have been laughing daily on his way to the bank. Not surprisingly, according to the newspapers, Venezuela is to make a *telenovela* of the play: 52 shows! Critic-director Jorge Chiarella Krüger announced recently that Vargas Llosa is planning to write a farce, "whereupon the nation will be able to consider the consecrated writer to have been definitely won for our theatre" (*Comercio*, Dominical, 12/27/82).

In the auditorium of the Asociación Nacional de Escritores y Artistas (ANEA), the excellent and original playwright César Vega Herrera organized the first public reading of plays by their authors between June 11 and November 15. A second cycle has begun in January 1982. Vega Herrera: "Readers were Gregor Díaz, Juan Rivera Saavedra, José Schul, Estela Luna, Aureo Sotelo, Delfina Paredes, Jorge Díaz Herrera, Carmen de Navarro, Hernando Cortez, Alberto Mego, José Adolph, Marcos Leclère, Sara Yoffré, César de María, Filiberto Ramírez, Magda Portal, Carlos Clavo, Hérmán Hérmán, all with unpublished plays The next round will present Edgardo de Habich, Porfirio Meneses, Felipe Buendía, Víctor Zavala, Pedro Benavides, César Vega Herrera, and especially invited people like Sergio Arrau who, while not Peruvian, writes about topics of interest to us because he has lived many years in Perú" (Chiarella Krüger, interview, *Comercio*, Dominical, 11/22/81). Asked how the public responded, Vega Herrera stated: "It was the public that saved us. In the beginning there was fear of a failure because of

lack of audiences, and to be on the safe side we invited directors, actors, technicians, etc. But in the end it was the common and run-of-the-mill public which accompanied us in the readings." As for the existence of a common denominator in the plays read, Vega H. said: ". . . all manifest an almost active vocation of denouncing, being witness to, and questioning the problems of this part of the world. . . . All show a rejection of a state of affairs that oppresses man" and "that is why the tone of the readings, of the authors' texts, is sad, tends to melancholy. . . . And also ironical or realist in the extreme . . . even by way of the absurd or the joke, most of them come together in, return to, sadness." Finally, Vega H. commented: "It is notorious that there is an absence of joyous and dynamic works, mine included. Our theater is serious. Perhaps too serious. It lacks laughter," and complained that "nobody or almost nobody sees to it that Peruvian works are put on. . . . All authors agree that there are no occasions for a Peruvian playwright to see his work on the stage, except with groups . . . like Cocolido, Yuyachkani, Los Grillos, Nosotros and now Alondra."

Possibly, Vega Herrera was exaggerating a bit here, for his interviewer, in his own year-end roundup, states: "As far as authors are concerned, it's pleasant to see in the lists of plays ever more of our own playwrights. Rivera Saavedra [an uncommonly productive writer: he has at least 100 plays to his name today] turned out to be the most produced author with his works *Por qué la vaca tiene los ojos tristes?* (Escuela Nacional de Arte Dramático), *Deshojando la margarita* (Cía. Teddy Guzmán), *Alberto el bueno* (Grupo Elecho), *El gran tú* (La silla), *El crédito* (Teatro Universitario Villareal), and *Amén?*, collectively created with the Grupo Alondra" (*Com.*, Dom., 12/27/81). He continues: "On the other hand, Gregor Díaz with his *El hombre que vendía globos*, produced by the Teatro Universitario San Marcos and the group Expresión, is the playwright who has remained on the *cartelera* the longest time. Finally, Víctor Zavala is the one who has been the most-produced nationwide."

Other Peruvian authors produced were Aureo Sotelo, Julio Ortega, Julio Ramón Ribeyro, Filiberto Ramírez, Sebastián Salazar Bondy, and the classics Leonidas Yerovi and Segura. Looking at the ever more fashionable collective creations, Chiarella Krüger lists: *Los hijos de Sandino* (Yuyachkani), *Lucía*, *Manuel y un viejo cuento* (Telba), and *Oh, mensaje a los poetas* (Cuatrotablas). As the most successful production, the critic mentions *La divina comedia* by Rafael León and Nicolás Yerovi: "Strictly speaking, [the play] does not reach theatrical quality, but, produced by the Grupo de Teatro Monos y Monadas [a satirical weekly, since defunct], it turned into a hit, for from beginning to end, over three months, it always had a full house" (*ibid.*).

In August 1981, there took place in Cerro de Pasco (14362 ft.) the VIII Muestra de Teatro Peruano, in which participated 23 surely breathless groups from all over Perú. The next *Muestra* is to be in Tacna. Thereafter, it is to be a biannual affair, alternating with regional *muestras*.

Among books and *revistas*, there were, besides Vargas Llosa's play, *Atusparia* by Julio Ramón Ribeyro, an historical drama published by Rickchay Perú (with an introduction by the poet Washington Delgado that contains some of the most erroneous comments imaginable); *Veinte años de críticas te-*

atrales by Alfonso La Torre (fifth volume of *Teatro Peruano* edited by Los Grillos); *Juegos dramáticos para educación inicial y básica regular* by Ernesto Ráez (Centro Cultural Nosotros), as well as *La fiebre de oro* and *La fábula de los ricos* by Víctor Zavala, and Roger Deldime's *El niño en el teatro* (transl. Sara Yoffré; Belgian Embassy in Perú). Ediciones Yuyachkani started the periodical *Documentos de teatro*; the Club de Teatro of the ANEA of Arequipa published two more numbers of *Revista Teatro*; Alberto Mego further two numbers of *Cuadernos de teatro*.

Peruvians or their works abroad were invited by diverse organizations, Alonso Alegría, whose *El cruce sobre el Niágara* was put on in Washington, D.C. (Folger's Theatre, in English) and in Buenos Aires; Elvira Travesí (France), Osvaldo Cattone's company (on an unsuccessful tour in the USA), the critics Jean Rottmann (Argentina) and Alfonso La Torre (USA); the group Cuatrotablas (Venezuela and México), J. Chiarella Krüger (USA), Alberto Isola (Italy and Venezuela) as well as the Grupo de Teatro del Sol (more than a year in Europe and the Americas, according to the newspapers). The Yuyachkani-group has been invited to the "Horizonte '82 Festival" in Berlin (5/29-6/20/82). Foreign visitors in Perú were Nola Rae (Britain), the Japanese Puppet Theatre, the Actors' Touring Company (London), and the Argentine company that put on the play by Vargas Llosa.

There is one new theatre in Lima, the Teatro Larco in the Avenida of the same name in Miraflores, a *sala* opened thanks to the private initiative of Adinar and Jaime López Lozano and at this writing showing "El gran deschave" with Orlando Sacha and his wife Elvira de la Puente. In contrast, Chiarella Krüger writes (and most critics said the same): "There is no doubt that the lack of a cultural policy on the part of the State — and a theatrical one on that of the Instituto Nacional de Cultura [at present under the direction of Luis Enrique Tord] — is one of the worst hindrances for Peruvian artists. . . . There is no help, no theatres are being built, there are no competitions, there are no workshops . . . , the Teatro Nacional Popular is doing nothing, and the theatre La Cabaña has been in repair for over a year." He adds: "The only subsidy that the Government has conceded (and outside the INC's budget) went to the Club de Teatro de Lima, thanks to the initiative and the connections of that organization. With the money, the Club has begun an *alfabetización teatral* creating *teatros pilotos* in all districts of Lima and Callao and starting a vast promotional plan, which must be supported by all means" (*Com. D.*, 12/27/81). Director of the CTL is Reynaldo d'Amore.

The year 1981 was one of *conmemoraciones* in Perú: the centenary of Leónidas Yerovi's birth (whose complete works still have not been published); the tricentenary of Calderón de la Barca; the twenty-fifth year after Brecht's death, for which occasion the very active Grillos organized a retrospective exhibition; the ANEA became 35 years old; the Grupo Histrión celebrated its golden anniversary; the Teatro de la Universidad Católica twenty years, Yuyachkani ten, as did Lola Vilar's troupe. A long number of actors and actresses looked back on 25 years on Peruvian stages. Three died in 1981: old-timer Lucho Córdoba (who lived mainly in Chile, coming to Lima from time to time), Carmen Escardó, and Haydée Orihuela.

Jean Rottmann, theatre critic of *La Prensa*, in an extensive roundup under the title "Una temporada poco memorable" (1/1/82), writes this about the tendencies discernible in 1981: "The [economic] crisis has not allowed important works to be undertaken," wherefore "plays whose production costs little were the remedy." He mentions a smaller number of *estrenos* in 1981 than the year before: "in this newspaper we published approximately 50 reviews of works of all types, and this year only 26." As each year, the critic then goes on to list the best *puestas en escena* (coinciding in his choice with most of the other critics that can be taken seriously): (1) *Las aventuras del soldado Shveik en la Segunda Guerra Mundial* by Brecht in a very imaginative production directed by Alberto Isola [Cocolido; Isola is one of the most talented Peruvian directors of recent years]; (2) *La divina comedia* [Cocolido; cf. supra]; (3) *Amén?* by the new group, Alondra, directed by Chiarella Krüger, a collective creation of the group and the playwright J. Rivera Saavedra; (4) celebrating the International Year of the Physically Handicapped, Osvaldo Cattone gave us Mark Medoff's *Hijos de un Dios menor* [Teatro Marsano]; (5) *El gran deschave* [Teatro Larco; cf. supra]."

When leaving Lima, the following plays were en *cartelera*: *Papito Piernas Largas*, *Acapulco Madame* (Yves Jamaïque), *Amén?*, *La orgía* (E. Buenaventura), *Se necesita marido* (Andrés Verstein), *Revolución en América del Sur* (A. Boal), *El marido humillado* (Molière), *Si me permiten hablar* (Domitila Chungara's testimony), *Teatro clásico* (anthology), and *La corbata*.

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Notes

1. I translate from the program notes, "Críticas de *La señorita de Tacna* en Buenos Aires: "*La Nación*: Talent and sensibility in a fascinating work. Exceptional production by Emilio Alfaro with a dazzling Norma Aleandro. *Escenario*: One of the noblest and most remarkable spectacles I have been called to see in thirty years of reviewing. *El Día*: The theatrical event of the year. *Diario Popular*: A deafening ovation for the trio Vargas Llosa-Aleandro-Alfaro. *Somos*: The audience went wild and applauded standing, tears from Vargas Llosa. *Humor*: *La señorita de Tacna* soars and explodes as an homage to the Theatre. *El cronista*: The most important spectacle of major quality that today can be found on the playbill. *El Territorio*: Total success of the work by Vargas Llosa. *Criterio*: The world première of *La señorita de Tacna* received an exceptional response. *Clarín*: A great night for the Latin American theatre. *Convicción*: *La señorita de Tacna* is a spectacle of rare quality. The audience was ten minutes on its feet. *La Razón*: Vargas Llosa incorporates himself into the Theatre with all the attributes of a great creator."