

Dragún's Distancing Techniques in *Historias para ser contadas* and *El amasijo*

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Dramatists such as Dürrenmatt, Dragún and Brecht create a nontraditional theatre to confront society's problems. In the latter part of the 20th century we have come to expect experimentation in the use of narrators, flashback episodes, choruses, and visual elements, to name a few. These techniques illustrate the frustration of man in a society that a traditional method and form cannot accommodate. Osvaldo Dragún perpetuates his own quarrel with a dehumanized society in two plays discussed here, *Historias para ser contadas* and *El amasijo*. It is Dragún's interpretation of characters and dialogue that effects the Brechtian theory of distancing between spectator and actor.

Although theoretically Dragún and Brecht employ common structural elements, there is a substantial difference between the two. We can suggest that both belong to *el teatro comprometido*, but Brecht's is a socio-political theatre rationally portrayed. In contrast then, are Dragún's *Historias* and *El amasijo* that reflect the Theatre of the Absurd. The theatre of the absurd addresses the rupture between man and society that results in dehumanization. Both Dragún and Brecht wish to demonstrate this rupture by creating another rupture in the form of alienation between spectator and character. Since the dramatists employ similar techniques, it is attitude that determines the difference between the two. As Martin Esslin has suggested, Brecht relies on a rational process, but the absurdist abandons logic to integrate the structure and theme of the drama. Thus, the theme and structure reciprocate to effect the rupture between audience and actor.¹ A rational approach does not elicit the response Dragún wishes to achieve. Dragún, in fact, calls the *Historias* studies in the grotesque.² He identifies grotesque as the deformity of what should be natural in life; it is the study of the dehumanization process that he calls *animalización*. Generally, his works represent universal themes rather than those specifically political. The dragunescque characters find themselves in hostile environments to which they must adjust. It is not existentialism in which man searches for his identity in the cosmic sense. Rather, it is that each

person must confront his own weaknesses and circumstances within a devalued or indifferent society. Dragún focuses on the senselessness of life that results in *animalización*.

There are a variety of ways to depict the *fracaso* of man. In *Historias* we find several instances of structural technique in Dragún's character portrayal. The play is comprised of four brief sketches performed by only four actors. A prologue opens the play. An actor offers the audience not an explanation of what transpires in the stories, but a declaration that the problems revealed in the episodes are universal: each person has value and his story must be told. Technically, the prologue does several things to establish Dragún's method of characterization. First, the actor delivering the prologue functions as a narrator, and as such he seeks to create a union between spectator and theme. It is the narrator and not the protagonist who is controlling audience participation at this point; and it is the socio-political universality of the theme that invites empathy, not the protagonist.

The instance of the prologue illustrates that from the beginning the logical dramatic progression traditionally associated with the theatre is destroyed. This point is important since it clarifies the difference in attitude between Brecht and Dragún. Brecht assumed that each spectator would respond cerebrally. However, it is endemic to the human condition that we desire empathy and commiseration and thus seek aspects in characters with which to identify. The result can be identification with an individual character rather than with the theme. In the theatre of the absurd, however, the context and form of the drama integrate to elicit the sense of *fracaso*.

Dragún continues the pace he has set in the prologue as the dialogue of the actors relates the details of the story about to be told: the story is the telling of a story. They offer explanations to inform us of what is going on and which roles they are portraying, making it clear they are assuming roles: Actor I tells his audience, "Para guiarlos, cuando vean que me coloco los anteojos, significa que soy el dentista. No lo olviden."³ The explanations by the narrator-now-turned-actor do not invite us to participate in the story in terms of the "real" world as we know it.

In the most recent edition of *Historias*, a fourth story has been added and appears as the first of the series. *Historia del mono que se convirtió en hombre*, is the only one of the four that actually assigns parts to a *Coro* and *Cantor*. A rhythm is established which fluidly relates a story of deterioration in the guise of civilization. *Monos* are brought from the jungle, civilized, then dehumanized. This parody of the social evolution of the human race possesses characteristics similar to the other three *Historias*, but through the function of the choral presence creates a cadence that inexorably signals impending doom. Of the four stories, Dragún's interpretation of the grotesque is most vividly portrayed in this one. When El Mono says his first word (*aúlla*, according to stage directions), *socorro!*, he is shouting the single imperative for survival of the human race. Later, El Mono becomes adept at coping with society's values. When asked what he is building, he answers, laughing:

¡Eso no tiene importancia! ¡No es cosa mía! ¡Yo construyo! ¡Para eso me pagan! ¡Un hospital, un campo de concentración, una escuela, un

laboratorio de bombas atómicas, un horno crematorio, un jardín de infantes, una cámara de gas . . . ! “¡Yo contruyo, señor!”⁴

The story is appropriately placed at the beginning as it initiates the reader into a grotesque world where reason is of small importance. It also further establishes distance between performer and spectator by allowing a “mono” to play the role of protagonist, fulfilling Dragún’s imperative of *animalización*.

The second story, “*Historia de un flemón, una mujer y dos hombres*”, is that of a street vendor who is dying of his poverty. He seeks medical assistance for a tooth infection, but has neither the time nor the money to properly recover his health. Furthermore, the problems of the street vendor are of small concern to the dentist. The point of the story suggests that the social system repressing the masses is absurd. The dehumanization that exists is the *flemón* of a society and like a *flemón*, it can infect and destroy the fabric and integrity of a society in general, and each person in particular.

The third story is conspicuous by its title: *Historia de como nuestro amigo Panchito González se sintió responsable de la epidemia de peste bubónica en Africa del Sur*. The third story begins the same as the others. The actors relate what has already happened, not as it occurs in the present. In this way Dragún utilizes the use of past tense to break the illusion of reality. The spectator is sure that the action has been completed and the audience was not there to participate.

A newsboy introduces the audience to the disaster in the life of the protagonist. His is an interesting situation of exploitation and expedience at the expense of the poor. Due to a shortage of funds, Panchito accepts a job that requires him to solve the problem of hunger in another country. Panchito elects to sell rats from his country to Africa to serve as a remedy for hunger; the result is the epidemic. The hypothesis is absurd, but the point is well made and demonstrates the universality of the work. The problem of hunger surpasses all boundaries to exclude no one: each person counts.

Panchito’s wife accuses him:

ACTRIZ—Mira, no me gusta como estás cambiando en estos días.
Vos no eras así.

PANCHITO—¿Y cómo era?

ACTRIZ—Te importaban los demás. (p. 30)

Thus Dragún has said it, we are our brothers’ keepers. Panchito tries to placate his conscience by asking others to condone what he is doing. But everyone is busy with his own tasks, and in the final analysis, no one really cares. It is a decision Panchito must make by himself, and he confesses, after all, that he would make the same choice again if he had to. He must support his own family, even if at the expense of others.

The most absurd of the stories is the last one, *Historia del hombre que se convirtió en perro*. For lack of gainful employment, one man assumes the role of a watchdog to earn his living. Finally, it is the only job he is able to secure and he begins accustoming himself to the life of a dog even to the extent of sheltering himself in a doghouse. As in the other stories, none of the characters is completely developed. Each one is a type that many times carries no personal name. The actors play various roles rather than fully develop any one

role. The audience always knows that these are actors and not persons with whom to identify. Thus, Dragún does not suggest that the spectator identify with a man who pretends to be a dog. Rather it is to show that the dehumanization of one man signals a society in which human values have deteriorated. The methods that prevent identification are the same ones that incite the sense of *fracaso*. That which fails for Brecht succeeds in the Theatre of the Absurd due to the combining of an illogical technique with an illogical content.

We see the same method of character underdevelopment in the play *El amasijo*. Esslin describes the absurd drama as a theatre of situation, not of consequential happenings.⁵ *El amasijo* is the play that defines Esslin's statement. Two characters of *El amasijo*, José and María, by the similarity of their lives, are male and female counterparts of the protagonist.

The third character in the play, Ricardo, ties together the fragmented action. He portrays multiple roles to exemplify all of the characteristics Dragún attributes to his drama. Ricardo appears in the past, the present and the future of María and José. His part is one of dialogue and not of action; the conversations among Ricardo, José and María reveal to the audience the particles of their lives. It seems that Ricardo is not a character, but rather an actor whose role includes the narrating of what is happening. His is a function similar to that of the actors in *Historias*. The use of an actor who moves from role to role without transitional signposts intensifies the lack of unity and represses the opportunity for identification. Dragún tells us of his play that:

(El amasijo) presents a scenic game through which problems of time (mixture of past, present, and future in the same instant, without any change of scenery) are treated, and in addition it presents the idea that a man is: his past, his present, his future, and besides that, his truth and his lie.⁶

Dragún has given a key for exploring the use of his characters; we are more interested in their situations than in them.

As do those of Brecht, this drama focuses on the lives of members of the lower social class who are unable to break the monotony and confining circumstances of their lives. José and María meet by intention of their friend Ricardo. The encounter is awkward and is a highly visible demonstration of the impossibility of communicating. The dialogue is presented in such a manner that it is impossible to know the time sequences to which each part belongs. Further, it is impossible to determine if the dialogue represents actual events in the lives of José and María or an invention of their own making. At times, the repetition suggests a second life "a la Walter Mitty" as a method of alleviating the monotony of their lives. Yet Dragún tells us *El amasijo* is not a play merely about bored, shy office workers. It is a story about relationships. Their lives represent a society so dehumanized that personal relationships are not possible. They invest themselves in avoiding making any sort of commitment. Dragún describes José and María as "dos seres que viven huyéndose, inventándose mentiras."⁷

Technically, the fluctuations in dialogue support the thesis of the Theatre of the Absurd that their lives are disordered and without purpose; it is another

method of signaling the lack of unity in their lives. Many times the dialogue appears as fragments, punctuated by ellipses and incomplete thoughts. The ellipses give concrete expression to their fragmented and incomplete system of communication:

Typical of their communication is the following:

JOSÉ—¿Cómo va su trabajo en la oficina?

MARÍA—¿Que?

JOSÉ—Su trabajo . . . en la oficina . . . ¿Cómo va?

MARÍA—Bien, bien . . . (*Pausa. Bebe su café*) ¿Y el suyo?

JOSÉ—Es aburrido, pero . . . son cosas que uno tiene que hacer bien. ¡No!

MARÍA—Claro, claro . . .

JOSÉ—Sí . . . (*De pronto*) ¿Me gusta cómo huele su casa!

MARÍA—Muchas gracias. (*Pausa*) ¡Es increíble! Hace siete años que trabajamos en la misma empresa, y recién hoy . . . por accidente . . . hemos podido charlar como amigos. ¿No le parece increíble, señor José?

JOSÉ—¡Sí! ¡Bueno, la vida está llena de cosas así, increíbles, Señorita María!⁸

And so the conversation continues innocuously.

José and María are as fragmented and incomplete as their conversations. They represent situations rather than individuals. The effort to present a life without worth does not require characters completely developed. It is unlikely that we can know about their lives or their pasts and therefore it is important not to analyze the work according to full personality portrayals by the characters. We cannot presuppose the history of a character in order to explain his present actions and problems. It is this creation of an incomplete protagonist that lends itself to the absurdist environment. By the structure of the play, the dramatist details a society in which man means little. By a technique very creative and effective, Dragún creates an imperfect and incomplete character for an imperfect and incomplete society. The characters function as the rest of the structure: they help create an atmosphere of devaluation.

This is a departure from the logic and unity that characterize Brecht's plays. The spectator intuits the problems of the characters of both Brecht and Dragún, but by different means. Brecht's characters are flesh and blood with thoughts and feelings the audience can reach out and touch. Certainly their lives are ruptured by social inequities, and we can feel the anxieties they feel, but in a response unlike that to Dragún's characters who are not palpable.

Thus, Dragún uses dialogue and characters to expose the absence of personal relationships. Clearly it is not a theatre meant to entertain its audience or to offer a panacea. As Brecht, Dragún aspires to the security of a society in which each person not only has value, but also can live without the oppression of social class discrimination. The rhetorical question posited, then, is whether an attempt to recover human values and dignity is quixotic. Probably so; monetary and political expediency are powerful structures that are repressed temporarily only to return in due time. However, that is not the most important of the issues involved. That which is essential is the continual

outcry of injustice in many forms. Dragún's dramatic technique is one form which serves as a cogent and effective reminder that man is not a being to be exploited, but a person whose story is to be told until the corpus of stories has been depleted.

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NOTES

1. *The Theatre of the Absurd* (New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1969), p. 6.
2. "Osvaldo Dragún: Teatro, creación y realidad latinoamericano," entrevista, en *Teatro: Hoy se comen al flaco, Al violador*, eds. Miguel Angel Giella and Peter Roster (Ottawa: GIROL Books, 1981), pp. 14-16.
3. *Historias para ser contadas* (Ottawa: GIROL Books, Inc., 1982), p. 22. All other references are in text.
4. The *Historias*, p. 17.
5. Esslin, p. 358.
6. In a letter to Donald Schmidt, "The Theatre of Osvaldo Dragún," in *Dramatists in Revolt*, eds., Leon F. Lyday and George W. Woodyard (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1976), p. 91.
7. Dragún, *Teatro*, p. 34.
8. *El amasijo in 9 dramaturgos hispanoamericanos*, eds., Frank Dauster, Leon Lyday and George Woodyard. (Ottawa: GIROL Books, Inc., 1979), I, 213.