

Coetaneity: A Sign of Crisis in *Un niño azul para esa sombra*

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René Marqués' play, *Un niño azul para esa sombra*, written in 1958, won the "Eugenio Fernández García" theatre prize that same year in the Ateneo Puertorriqueño's Christmas Festival. This play, produced two years later during the Third Theatre Festival sponsored by the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, is, according to Frank Dauster, "probably Marqués' best play" and "one of the best in Latin America."¹ Like several of Marqués' plays, it is thematically based on previously-written short stories—in this case, "La sala," "El niño en el árbol" and, perhaps, "El juramento."²

The play tells the story of the child Michelín, caught between the liberationist ideals of his father and the materialistic, North-Americanized world of his mother. Although the play's various elements can be dichotomized between the two sides,³ and Michelín undoubtedly belongs on the freedom side, his position is really much more complex than would appear on the surface. The liberty for which Michelín struggles is that of the individual's right to his own unique identity. This child, however, is prevented from exercising that right because of the "shadows" that prevail in his life. His mother, Mercedes, controls his physical world and he lives in the material luxury that has resulted from the choices his mother has made in her life. His emotional, inner world, however, depends on a self-created, false relationship with a non-existent father. This is an illusory relationship originally encouraged by his father's adopted sister, Cecilia, and later developed as an integral part of Michelín's own imagined world. Both sets of values—the mother's and the father's—so dominate Michelín's life that he is constantly torn between them with never an opportunity to develop any meaningful values that are truly his own. In the end, the only freedom which Michelín can exercise is that of choosing to create the circumstances of his own death.

Acts I and III take place on Michelín's tenth birthday as the tension of waiting for the play's *denouement* parallels that of waiting for the arrival of the birthday party guests. The first act introduces Michelín's solitary world, based on dreams and illusions, in which his own anguish becomes related to

his mother's poisoning of a large *quenepo* tree which once shaded the terrace and which had been, for the child, a father-figure and make-believe protector. The retrospective second act takes place two years prior to both Acts I and III. This portion of the play, portrayed as part of Michelín's dream, establishes the tension between the child's past and his imminent future, thus creating his present moment—a present which contains both past and future. In Act II we witness not only the dissolution of the parents' marriage and the total destruction of his father's future, but the beginning of the child's own self-destruction as well. Act III brings the child back to reality and to the moments preceding the party. In this act he is confronted with the reality of his father's death and the falseness of the dream world in which he attempts to survive. This knowledge forces him to act, and suicide becomes a logical and a heroic choice.

The author experiments not only with the chronological presentation of the story, but also with the play's movement toward its own end. Structurally, the present surrounds and contains the past until the suicidal death of the child protagonist in the final moments. At that point, the child's past affirms his identity.

Through a series of interrelated signals transmitted to the audience, the play creates the impression of temporal coetaneity which signifies a life and death crisis for the child protagonist. Michelín, who finds himself trapped between the heroic ideals of his father and the worldly values of his mother, embodies a two-dimensional crisis: that of the anguished individual within the realm of humanity, and that of the island of Puerto Rico under the shadow of a large and powerful nation. Time does not merely "stand still," however, but rather it, like the child, is trapped in a kind of vacuum. In the temporal approach which Marqués takes in this work, the second act is of prime importance. Because the action occurs as part of the child's dream, no time actually passes in the play's story. In addition, although hours and minutes obviously do pass in the playing time of the drama, the audience is swept up by the illusion that time has stopped for a short while. Because of the nature of the second act, past, present and future co-exist in a world of circular, rather than forward movement. This combination of circular movement and temporal coetaneity guides us to an understanding of the present, real anguish which Michelín suffers, and of the symbolic meaning behind his death.

Circularity is apparent in the lineal structure of the work, the stage setting, and the imagery. In the first and third acts, the birthday party motif calls attention to the play's structural ellipsis. The work opens and closes on the protagonist's tenth birthday. Michelín has invited a friend, Andrés, to come earlier than his other party guests, all of whom have been invited by Mercedes. Andrés' presence serves to reinforce the play's temporal circularity:

ANDRÉS—Oye, ¿a qué hora empieza la fiesta?

MICHELÍN—A la tarde.

ANDRÉS—¿Y por qué me hiciste venir tan temprano?⁴

From this moment on we wait, with Andrés, for the celebration to begin. In Act II, the image of the birthday is implicitly present. As Michel, the

child's father, re-experiences his eight-year imprisonment for revolutionary activities in an expressionistic scene, the author's stage directions subtly reintroduce the birthday image:

(. . . Se oye un llanto de un niño de un año de edad. No es el llanto inconsciente y chillón de un bebé, sino el llanto de una criatura que empieza a descubrir con horror la vida. Michel se vuelve bruscamente hacia el fondo. El llanto arrecia),

and he shouts, "Michelín!" (p. 118). Although the cries are not those of a newborn infant, the fact that they *are* associated with the child protagonist as a baby brings to mind for the audience the idea of his birth, and by extension, the party which has yet to take place from Act I. Act III finalizes this image in the last scene as the offstage guests ironically sing "Happy Birthday," in English, to Michelín, who hangs dead on the trellis of the terrace. His birthday anniversary and his birth itself co-exist with his day of death, therefore making the play's physical structure also a temporal one in which beginning and end—or past and present—meet.

The stage setting creates the illusion of entrapment and is a physical representation of Michelín's own feeling of imprisonment. Acts I and III take place on the terrace, while Act II develops in the living room of the luxurious mansion. In both spaces, there are several supposed exits which, in fact, do not connect directly to the world outside. In the terrace scenes, a glass door opens upon the terrace from the living room. The terrace itself is surrounded by a railing which has one opening into the yard and another open space where the *quenepo* once stood, and where the trellis on which Michelín dies now stands. The author carefully describes this latter opening as follows: "En el centro mismo, fondo de la terraza, la baranda está partida dejando un espacio que hubiera podido ser salida del jardín" (p. 71). This description tells us, as the stage setting would show, that this space is not an exit even though it might seem once to have been. Ironically, it does serve as a way out for Michelín at the play's end when he dies on the trellis.

This living room of Act II has several dimensions of height and depth, as well as several exits from the room. There are the stairway on which we see Michelín as he witnesses the confrontation between his parents, and the vestibule which connects to a hall, and we assume, finally out of the house. At the very back of this area there hangs a large portrait of Mercedes, seemingly guarding any exits from the house and giving even more depth to the scene. The glass door at stage left is the one that opens onto the terrace, which as we know from the previous act, is also enclosed, thus intensifying the illusion of there being no exit.

In this Marqués play, the accumulating impressions and images of entrapment and death work harmoniously with the structure and the *mise-en-scene* to communicate to the audience Michelín's feeling of anguish and utter helplessness and to further support the creation of the "no exit" concept. Act I integrates many of these images into the dramatic presentation itself while in Act II, they appear expressionistically in the scene depicting Michelín's suffering, as well as in the dialogue between the parents. By the end of the

third and final act, Michelín's suicidal death is the logical extension of these accumulated impressions.

The opening scene introduces the idea of imprisonment as well as of death. Michelín enters carrying a caged canary across the terrace into the garden where we suppose he frees the little bird. Immediately following this action, and as the invited guest calls for his host from offstage, Cecilia, also offstage, sings a song about a dead child. This song dramatically associates Michelín with death as it subsequently becomes part of a kind of offstage dialogue between the child protagonist and Cecilia:

MICHELÍN—(Su voz fuera de escena) ¡Cecilia! ¡Cállate!

CECILIA—(Su voz más lejana en el interior)

El niño muerto
ya va para el cielo,
Los ángeles cantan
en el cementerio.

MICHELÍN—(Su voz fuera de escena, histérica ahora)

¡Cállate! ¡Cállate! No quiero oír esa canción. ¡Cállate!

(p. 77)

If the spectator does not, as a normal reaction, associate the song with the child, Michelín's strong, hysterical reaction forces such an association to take place. This act further creates a parallel between the child and death in the dream-like sequence depicting Mercedes' assassination of the *quenepo*, and again in the final dream sequence as the boy's father, closing the child's eyes by placing his hand over them, asks a blessing on his son.

In Act II, both parents bequeath an inheritance of imprisonment to their son. Michel, the father, on a darkened stage from which we hear only his voice, expresses the anguish of his eight-year confinement:

No es fácil convertir en sonido los pensamientos propios cuando hay tantos años de silencio—o de casi silencio—envolviéndolo todo: la luz matinal y la medianoche, la soledad, el cuerpo, la ventana y la puerta; los pasos, las manos. . . . Todo en fin! ¡Callado hasta los huesos de silencio! Las palabras circulando en el alma sin salida; prisioneras del tiempo, sin espacio! (p. 120)

These words express not only the physical confinement which reduced Michel's world to a window, a door and his own footsteps as he paced back and forth, but also the silencing of his thoughts and ideas, for which there is no outlet and so, therefore are also trapped, in the prison of his own soul. In this same act, Mercedes reveals that she, too, feels imprisoned: "Y las puertas cerradas. Como si las del presidio al cerrarse dieran la señal a todas las puertas del mundo: 'Ciérrense, puertas, ciérrense bien'" (p. 136). She adds in the same conversation: "sólo quiero que sepas que también yo supe del horror de sentirme prisionera" (p. 137). Ironically, Mercedes' "prison" is that fear of being excluded from the world to which she aspires so that she is, in a sense, trapped outside rather than inside. The legacy, then, that the child Michelín inherits from both father and mother is one of stagnation, and of the frustration of unrealized dreams.

Evidence of death and destruction prevails throughout the play, providing perhaps, the only apparent progression, albeit a negative one, in the work. The assassination of the tree in Act I and the violent acts against the tin Statue of Liberty in Act II culminate in Michelín's suicide in the last act. The depiction of those events in the order in which they are presented, while out of chronological sequence, makes the sacrificial suicide of Michelín the logical ending for the play. In the acting out of the tree's assassination, Michelín feels the pain of death as his tree-friend dies. According to the stage directions: "Michelín, quien observa la escena de espaldas a nosotros, se va encorvando, replegándose en sí mismo, como si sintiera los efectos del veneno, hasta que cae de rodillas mordiéndose los puños" (p. 89). This empathy and self-induced suffering reveal to the audience the boy's psychological state in the play's early stages.

In Act II, we see the motivating factors behind the child's violent tendencies and ultimate self-destruction. This act culminates in Michelín's violent act of aggression against a replica of the Statue of Liberty which stands near his house.⁵ His defacing of the statue, which for him represents both his mother as the destroyer of his own personal world, and the United States as the destroyer of his father's deals, makes clear his own preoccupations as well as his violent tendencies.

In Act III, although we do not witness Michelín's ingesting of the poison, we assume it, by focusing all of these past impressions of death which point towards that logical end. Each successive act of destruction involves Michelín more than the previous one. Although he apparently feels pain as he witnesses the tree's death, he is merely an observer of the ceremony. His mother commits the act. He himself carries out the attack in the second act, but directs it toward someone else. In Act III, as the circle closes in on the child and he cannot escape, he aims his destructiveness at himself.

We further sense the frustration of movement as we detect strong parallels between the young boy of Acts I and III, and his father of Act II. Throughout the second act, in which we seem to enter Michelín's innermost consciousness, we are made aware of the establishment of a very close symbolic relationship between the child and his father. This, in turn, leads us to perceive strong similarities in the life pattern of each one.

One of the strongest relationships develops out of Mercedes' destruction of the large *quenepo* that had once stood on the terrace, and of her similar destruction of Michel's manuscripts which were his only hope of creating a future for himself after his release from prison. Michel's words exemplify the importance of the tree and of the manuscripts in both lives. He says of Michelín's fondness for the *quenepo*: "Pero en su soledad nuestro hijo había hecho de él un compañero, un confidente, un . . . protector" (p. 139). Of his own manuscripts, he says: "La única esperanza que me quedaba . . . El único asidero . . . ¡Qué destrucción tan total!" (p. 141). In neither case was either father or son capable of preventing the obliteration of his last security. And, in both cases, Mercedes, representative of the materialistic world, is the person responsible for the total destruction of hope.

The accumulation of such parallels leads us to perceive the similar life patterns of Michelín and of his father. The father comes from a past whose

history is tied to France and to Puerto Rico during a period when his own father and grandfather were also searching for freedom. Those past worlds were not really Michel's own, however, as he is a man of thoughts, not of action, as Thomas Feeny so aptly points out.⁶ His own future lies in the Bowery of New York where he dies an alcoholic. Michelín's past consists of a father who was in prison for most of his son's life, a mother who has adopted foreign values, and of Cecilia—raised a sister to Michel—who offers the child an attractive set of values related to his father's family and to past tradition, but which prove to be false because Michelín, as an individual, has no place in that world. The final correspondence in the similar life patterns comes with death. The father destroys himself with alcohol while the son destroys himself with another liquid—the poison used to kill the tree. Both die a lonely death, the only difference being that the father leaves a son—a sign of optimism for the future—but the son leaves no hope for a future at all.

In the Puerto Rican colonial world, and in the family controlled by Mercedes' materialism, Michelín's father's ideals of individual freedom, though noble ones, are unable to create a meaningful life for either father or son, except in death. Carlos Solórzano generalizes this idea as follows: "El antagonismo entre la civilización actual y el deseo de libertad individual, que constituye el tema central de todo el teatro de la posguerra, cobra en esta obra perfiles de crueldad extrema."⁷ In each case—that of father and of son—the anguish resulting from the failure to liberate oneself motivates a painful and a solitary death. Although father and son represent two generations—normally a sign of forward movement in time—, their parallel life patterns in which failures repeat themselves and ideals are lost would indicate the incidents of time to be repetitive and non-progressive.

The play's actual structure in which the present of Acts I and III in fact surrounds the past of Act II provides the key to the definitive establishment of coetaneity within Michelín's world. According to Piri Fernández, the entire second act can be seen as "una continuación técnica del juego de Michelín en escena."⁸ That game is what Michelín calls "playing the past," in which he enters into a dream-like realm, conjuring up images and events from an earlier time. The end of Act I and the beginning of Act III find him on the terrace in that dream-like state, implying that all of the events of the second act occur within that same condition. The penetration into the interior of the house in Act II, which takes place in the living room, suggests the invasion of Michelín's innermost consciousness.

The interiorization into Michelín's dream world occurs on two levels: that of the game in which he himself evokes the past, seemingly at will, and that of a deep sleep, in which the audience perceives on stage what supposedly is happening inside of the child's mind. In the former case, Michelín is somewhat in control of his own suffering (for instance, as he painfully feels the tree's death). On this level he consciously elicits the help of Cecilia in playing the game, and even reveals it to his friend Andrés. We understand the latter, however, to be his unshared dream world, of which the game is only a symptom. In the words of Piri Fernández, Michelín "rehace los momentos del pasado a su antojo, trocando así a la realidad en sombras, y, en cambio, convirtiendo a las sombras de su imaginación en sus más preciadas real-

idades.”⁹ His game of “playing the past” is, in Michelín’s way, a solution to the problems with which he is confronted in Act II, since it is through this pastime on the superficial level that he can transform the present into a world with which he can cope.

Even though Michelín is not visibly present throughout Act II, the author subtly makes his presence known as the past events unfold.¹⁰ As audience, we realize that we are observing simultaneously *with* Michelín those same events that he previously witnessed. In the tense encounter between the parents in which the father accuses the mother of having brought about his own destruction, physically mistreats her, and then definitively leaves the family, we see Michelín’s hand on the staircase. Interspersed throughout the parents’ conversation the author’s stage directions describe the effect: “(La mano de Michelín aparece en la pared del recodo alto de la escalera.)”—and “(Tras la mano de Michelín empieza a aparecer parte de su cuerpo, de espaldas a nosotros, muy pegado a la pared, como si quisiera incrustarse en ella . . .)” (p. 141). Because of the child’s presence, this key scene does not exist primarily to disclose details of the plot to the audience, but rather to reveal the nature of Michelín’s past as a part of his inner present.

Michelín’s reaction to the scene he has witnessed pulls together the images of circularity and entrapment prevalent throughout the play. He descends the stairs, in the author’s words, “como si, de súbito, el buen Dios hubiese puesto una carga de siglos sobre sus espaldas” (p. 142). He then seems to try to leave, but cannot. He goes to the hall by which his father left only to find this exit seemingly guarded by the full-length painting of his mother. He runs to the glass door leading to the terrace but stops as if that exit, too, were closed to him. We see him motivated by all that he has learned from his parents’ conversation, trying to escape from that burden of knowledge which he has acquired, but at the same time physically and emotionally trapped. This, then, is the world which exists in the innermost sanctum of the child protagonist as he tries to survive his present exterior world.

The play’s coetaneity becomes an indicator of the dual-level crisis which Michelín personifies and points to the child’s heroic aspects as he becomes the sacrificial victim of the world of conflicts in which he lives. Caught between the libertarian ideals of his father and the materialistic world of his mother, Michelín’s personal conflict involves the suffocation of his own creative potential. Both value systems, at the same time, are intricately tied to the family’s past and to Puerto Rico’s history as a colony, first of Spain and later of the United States. These historical connections, then, bring in the second level of the crisis, that of political freedom. On this larger scale, Michelín’s conflict is that of the Puerto Rican island, caught between a search for individual identity and a materialistic world which gradually destroys the possibility of finding (or of developing) that identity.

In his treatise on human existence, Jean Paul Sartre claimed: “At my limit, at that infinitesimal instant of my death, I shall be no more than my past. It alone will define me.”¹¹ In this same spirit, Michelín’s death gives him an indelible identity, as the fusion of past, present and future into one instant invests meaning into the child’s suicide. The spectator realizes he is witnessing an approximation of the psychological time and state-of-mind of

the protagonist. It is therefore important to reflect on just who this child is and what he signifies in relation to the conflicts dramatized.

Michelín's age, his natural opposition to Andrés, and the ritual with which the protagonist is associated reveal him to be a symbolic representative of the future, a learning experience personified, and an expiatory victim of the present world in which he lives.¹² The fact that this protagonist is a child is significant in itself, inasmuch as children in general, on a symbolic level, represent the future of their own society. Furthermore, this is a child nearing adulthood which in many early societies was achieved at the age of twelve.

The natural opposition which Marqués creates between Michelín and his guest Andrés provides another clue to the protagonist's symbolic nature. Michelín's intelligence, intellectual maturity, sensitivity, and his poetic tendencies contrast with the personal qualities of Andrés, who is of lesser intelligence and lacks sensitivity, and is therefore incapable of understanding Michelín's game of the past. In the author's stage directions he says: "Andrés será, sin duda, en los años por venir, un hombre sabiamente pegado a la tierra; un ciudadano intachable, hasta un funcionario probo, pero jamás un ser humano en quien el género puede experimentar una experiencia heroicamente aleccionadora" (p. 74). In view of the series of contrasts established between the two, this statement would tell us that Michelín is a person through whom the human race can experience a "heroic" enlightenment.

Furthermore, nearly every action which Michelín initiates during the course of the play is of a ritualistic nature. Michelín's game of the past in which he forces Cecilia to participate is indicative of the ritual. First of all, he and Cecilia each take specific positions: she, near the door to the house and he, on the trellis itself, looking like a crucified victim. There are next certain words which are uttered to the rhythm of violin music: "El niño estaba en el árbol y dijo: '¡Odiame viento y azótame la cara!' (*Sube suavemente la musica*) Pero el viento estaba lejos, inflando la vela púrpura de un pescador en el mar. Y el árbol estaba inmóvil como si fuese de piedra. Y el niño estaba en la rama pensando en el árbol muerto" (p. 88). The chanted nature and the solitary meaning of his words indicate his isolation and state of helplessness as well as underline the fact that this is no child's game, but rather a most solemn ceremony. He approaches his other actions in a like manner: for example, after the "assassination" of the statue, he explains symbolically each of the designs he painted on the standard bearer of liberty. Likewise, his own act of suicide, paralleling the game of the tree's assassination, is of a symbolic nature, with the exception that this time it is no game, and Michelín himself takes the place of the tree. As a result of these rites with which Michelín is associated, he becomes the "niño-ofrenda," as Professor Juan Villegas so appropriately refers to him.¹³

Michelín is the representative of his own society—a society whose potential is exemplified in that of a child on the verge of manhood. He stands for a society, however, trapped in a state of non-progress, between the conflicting ideals of U.S. materialism and a quest for freedom and individuality—a conflict in which Puerto Rico's own identity and potential might become a victim as do Michelín's, or, might be saved because of the lesson to be learned from his example.

The play's coetaneity defines Michelín's identity which, in turn, symbolizes that of Marqués' Puerto Rico. All of the play's events co-exist in the present time: Acts I and III are, of course, the actual present; while Act II is Michelín's present inner reality. All together form the child's identity apart from which he does not exist. He performs a heroic act upon choosing suicide as a response to his dilemma because, in this case, the only freedom open to the child is the freedom to make this particular choice. His death is an ironic event (like that of Emilia and Inés in *Los soles truncos*) for while it is heroic and serves as a learning experience for the audience, it implies no future at all for the play's ill-fated protagonist.

Michelín's death is a message which demonstrates the dimensions of the conflict which the play portrays. This is a struggle in which the "status quo" relationship with the United States signals the death of cultural identity and political progress for the island of Puerto Rico, and in which materialistic ideals signal the destruction of artistic creativity and philosophical progress on the level of the individual.

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Notes

1. Frank Dauster, "New Plays of René Marqués," *Hispania*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Sept. 1960), 452.
2. "El juramento" was first published in the collection of short stories entitled *Otro día nuestro* in 1955; "El niño en el árbol" is from 1956 and won the Ateneo's second prize for short stories; "La sala" dates from 1958 and won first prize in the Ateneo's contest of that same year. All three stories are published in *En una ciudad llamada San Juan*, 4^a ed. ampliada (Río Piedras, Puerto Rico: Editorial Cultural, 1974).
3. See Juan Villegas' *Interpretación y análisis del texto dramático*, Colección Telón (Ottawa, Ontario: Girol Books, Inc., 1982), p. 68.
4. René Marqués, *Un niño azul para esa sombra*, in *Teatro*, Tomo I, 2^a ed. (Río Piedras, Puerto Rico: Editorial Cultural, Inc., 1970), p. 80. All subsequent references to the play are from this source and will be cited by page number in the text.
5. Such a statue still stands on the Avenida Ashford in the Condado area of San Juan and actually was at one time defaced by vandals.
6. Thomas Feeny, "Woman's Triumph over Man in René Marqués' Theater," *Hispania*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (May 1982), 188.
7. Carlos Solórzano, *Teatro latinoamericano en el siglo XX* (México: Editorial Pormaca, 1964), pp. 159-60.
8. Piri Fernández, "Temas del teatro puertorriqueño," in *El autor dramático*, Primer Seminario de Dramaturgia (San Juan: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1963), p. 163.
9. Fernández, p. 162.
10. For a brief discussion of the various ways in which the child's presence is made known, see Tamara Holzapfel's "The Theater of René Marqués," in *Dramatists in Revolt*, Leon F. Lyday and George W. Woodyard, eds. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976), p. 157.
11. Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, Hazel E. Barnes, trans. (New York: The Citadel Press, 1964), p. 91.
12. Juan Villegas sees the sacrificial victim motif as the basic signifier of the kind of world the play portrays. See "Los motivos en *Un niño azul para esa sombra*" in *Interpretación y análisis del texto dramático*, p. 93.
13. Villegas, p. 69.