

## Alonso Alegría since *The Crossing* . . .

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Alonso Alegría came to the fore of international attention as a dramatist in 1969 with the Lima premiere and acclaim of his second drama, *El cruce sobre el Niágara* and, especially, with its recognition by the Casa de las Américas as the best play of that year. Since then *El cruce* . . . has been performed hundreds of times throughout Europe and the Americas on stage, radio, and even television in Czechoslovakia and Poland. He has finished two plays since *El cruce* . . . : *El color de Chambalén* (1981) and *Daniela Frank* (1982). These pieces are of unusual interest because they distinguish Alegría as somewhat of an anomaly among Hispanic American dramatists today: he has become a bilingual and bicultural director and composer intent on creating within and for each of the linguistic and cultural worlds in which he so ably functions. The fact that he has translated and directed his first three plays in English and the the fourth was originally composed in English, for instance, clearly underlines this dual nature of Alegría's talents. Without denigrating the importance of the author's personal capabilities, however, it is clear that the artistic significance of these works should be sought within the context of their dramaticity and not within the context of the author's translations or bicultural nature.

In 1972 the Peruvian magazine *Textual* published excerpts of "El terno blanco," a play Alegría had been laboring over for more than three years.<sup>1</sup> By the time of its premiere September 20, 1982, as *El color de Chambalén, una novela fantaseosa para teatro* in Potsdam, Germany, however, those early scenes and the author's original ideas had undergone a radical metamorphosis.<sup>2</sup> In addition, it is of note that Alegría had translated the work to English for the second time before its premiere.

To a considerable extent *El color* . . . is based on fact because it begins with the recent and actual fall of Peru as a world leader in fish harvests. The once prosperous Chambalén is now on the brink of total abandon because the fish have disappeared from the coastal waters. As the text explains, the phenomenon is due to the unusually warm Humboldt current and the resulting scarcity of fish. As an outside opportunist, Kikirikí has come to take advantage of the

impending ruin by buying the individual owners' fishing boats for practically nothing. The fishermen are at once elated with the prospect of being able to sell, even at low prices, but they are also saddened and embittered knowing certain destitution is forcing them to sell to the representative of The Company, which they suspect to be backed by the government and its military.

One townsman, the tailor, has already abandoned Chambalén, leaving his business inventory, including a white suit, to four fishermen. When these four wear the suit on one last fishing sortie, they return with full nets and the townspeople are convinced that the suit is responsible for the miracle. Even though they themselves are not sure what to believe at first, the four do not hesitate to take advantage of the return of the fish and of the people's sudden belief that the suit is sacred. As its official guardians, the fishermen soon find themselves elevated to a practically dictatorial position. And things go well for a while for the four and the town; Chambalén is well on its way to being a true utopia. By the third act, however, the members of the committee are convinced, yet agree to keep secret, that the suit is only an ordinary one. Moreover, when Kikirikí threatens to expose their deceit, they have him murdered. Thereafter the play moves quickly toward the end as the four quarrel over whether to divulge the truth. Their situation is especially perilous because they need the faithful townspeople as an army to defend Chambalén against the military forces now approaching.

Even without reading the numerous parenthetical notes and stage directions within or the comments on the style, rhythm, staging and music that preface the text, the script of *El color . . .* is still unusual to the viewing public because it is replete with a variety of easily recognized literary forms, or expressions: there are brief excerpts from a historical novel being composed by one of the committee (the novel is based on the very events of the play), poems by another, songs by yet another, and even frequent direct address to the audience by the characters and the author. In fact, when one considers the title and peruses the text, the inevitable conclusion is that this is a generic potpourri, that it freely mixes types of expressions characteristically associated with poetry, song, and drama with those normally characteristic of documentary narrative and historical documentation. And so, while the work is undoubtedly drama and composed for stage presentation, it also appeals as fictitious narrative, a brief novel, appropriate for the single reader. Between these extremes, moreover, it has an almost unique appeal as either a musical drama or a dramatic novel.

In addition to the variety of generic structures woven into the fabric of the play, the use and significance of what Alegría terms *lo fantaseoso* is also of special significance. Regardless of the accepted inability to define the term fantastic (or even *fantaseoso*) to the satisfaction of most literary critics, *El color . . .* does share at least two attributes considered characteristic of the genre, the fantastic, by a majority of the treatises on the subject: ambiguity and vacillation. In the play each of these is a function of the townspeople's belief in the white suit. The fantastic moment occurs in the second scene when their belief is suspended, when it vacillates, as Todorov would describe the phenomenon, between the opportunistic and the miraculous coincidence of

the return of the fishes.<sup>3</sup> The fantastic, then, originates in and exists with their hesitancy before the ambiguous significance of the coincidence. But then as the marvellous or the supernatural power of the suit is accepted, the fantastic subsides, in keeping with its evanescent nature. All traces of vacillation and ambiguity vanish with the popular determination that the suit is sacred and is to be revered as a religious idol. It is not until later, when the four are convinced the suit is only ordinary, however, that the initial relevance of the fantastic as a dramatic device is especially clear. By the end of the second act, it is also obvious that the fantastic, which originated the ironic relationship between the committee and the townspeople, has afforded Alegría's dramatization of the manner and the extent to which blind faith may nurture perverted power. Without their faith, the town would have been abandoned, the utopia would not have been. Of course, neither the irony nor the social protest ends there. As the townspeople believe even more in the suit and as the town prospers, the determination of the government and The Company to control Chambalén increases, too. And the perversions of the committee also increase in order to perpetuate the town's blind faith. The end, when the town is called to combat outside Chambalén, then, is a particularly poignant commentary. The impending destruction of everything accomplished by the town is to be a result of blind faith in the suit. Theirs was a fantastic deceit at first, but it will now be a real deceit.

Alegría's most recent play, *Daniela Frank*, is also predicated on a deceit, but not a fantastic one.<sup>4</sup> Some may consider it an irony, however, that the play, the best example of Alegría's biculturalism, is predicated on the recent sham of those who award the Pulitzer Prize, one of the most respected awards for excellence in writing in this country. In this instance, a reporter, Janet Cooke, was dismissed from *The Washington Post* after it was discovered that her Pulitzer prize-winning story on a child drug addict was untrue. In this one-act play *Daniela*, a Peruvian recently divorced from an American, is a reporter for a large newspaper in one of our larger cities. She is, as Alegría, a person who has an exceptional understanding of two cultures and two languages. *Daniela Frank*, however, is more than a drama of the curious hoax she authors and of the grief it brings. It is a vehicle for presenting a problem of Interamerican concern: drug addiction and the suffering it engenders. In this play the tragedy and the danger of drugs are epitomized by the resulting loss of personal identity and by the erosion of public trust in social institutions, namely the integrity of the press and of the justice system.

*Daniela's* situation is all the more dramatic since her brother recently disappeared because of drugs. Indirectly, she is a victim of his habit. But Daniela also suffers a sense of guilt because she brought him as an addict from Lima to the United States where he was swallowed up by the big city drug culture. The play action originates with Daniela's determination to use her only source of strength to fight for at least a symbolic victory over her personal enemy, as well as that of all society. She invents an interview with Timmy, an eight-year-old Latin American mainliner who lives at the whim of his mother's pimp. According to Daniela's published account, if Timmy's true identity is revealed, the pimp will surely murder him and his mother. The story is an immediate success because once published, and even before

winning the Pulitzer, public and institutional sympathies swell, then turn to a demand that such tragedies be prevented, and that this society's war on drugs be increased. This outpouring of concern is at first a victory for Daniela despite the fact that the police, who have rejected her plea and have searched diligently for the child, accuse her of inventing the story. Daniela finally decides to capitulate to police insistence and to admit the hoax publicly. Before the press conference, however, the police reveal to Daniela they have found Jimmy, a child whose situation is identical to that of Timmy. But Daniela chooses not to lie—to say that Jimmy is Timmy. Instead she takes advantage of the discovery of the real child in order to perpetuate the public's real declaration on the war she instigated with a lie. In the meeting, she admits the first hoax, and insists that Jimmy is real. To prove the point she challenges the journalists present to interview Jimmy, to prove that he is real, and thus save his life. The play ends as Jimmy's recorded voice is heard in the background while Daniela says:

Listen: he's telling about the lakes of Nicaragua . . . and about an uncle . . . he was very tall . . . who went up to the mountains. . . . This is the voice of Jimmy Cienfuegos, an eight year old Nicaraguan. No matter what you've read in the papers, what they've told you on television, now you know he exists. Writing this play was the only way I could find to do something about Jimmy before I have to leave the country. He may or may not be dead by now. He may or may not ever be rescued and cured. In a way, that is up to you. Because he's there. Or others like him (p. 47).

Without wishing to dismiss the value of *Daniela Frank* for dealing candidly with an important social issue, further commentary on such matters as the work's defense of the integrity of the press, the propriety of society's response to Daniela's interview, and even the play's implied criticism of the system of justice would seem to belabor the obvious at this point. There is, however, one other aspect of *Daniela Frank* which, even though it is not immediately conspicuous, is nevertheless indispensable to its dramatic appeal.

In a broad sense, our reference is to the dramatic poetics *Alegría* has created for the play and which consist of his novel use and combination of ordinary modes of expression. The first of these is what I would describe as an unconstrained personal mode, one likely to be used in a diary. It is most often apparent in Daniela's monologues, in those moments when she confesses the intimate details related to the loss of her brother, those having to do with her previous marriage, or those she uses to explain why she invented the interview with Timmy, the first addict. In these portions of the text, the tone is introspective, and Daniela is portrayed as a lonely, vulnerable person, a remorseful writer whose determination to pen the false interview elicits more sympathetic admiration than condemnation.

The second mode is a forthright, direct expression, one likely associated with a newspaper article. It is particularly evident during those moments in which Daniela is confronting the police, dealing with her colleagues, or urging other reporters to interview Jimmy, the second child. The dialogue in these portions reflects the aggressive, the curious, and the objective nature of

Daniela. She is the extrovert, the credible representative and defender of society's ideals and virtues. She is the opposite, the other image of the first Daniela.

The third mode is the artist's dramatic mode of expression. It is the one in which the first two modes of expression function and in which they have meaning. It is a form best described as dramatic because it is the mode that joins the introspective nature of Daniela with the outgoing—the emotional and subjective with the objective and rational. It is, then, the poetic mode that blends fact and fiction and makes *Daniela Frank* credible drama and theatrical reality. The quintessential combination of the three forms I have referred to occurs just before the curtain, in the portion quoted. That is the moment in which the fate of Daniela the victim and Daniela the warrior against drugs coincides with the fate of Jimmy. It is the dramatic climax, the moment of utter doubt.

For some hispanists, the inevitable question may well be whether *Daniela Frank* is Hispanic American theatre. The query seems especially appropriate since, of Alegría's four plays, this one was composed in and is available in English only. Despite Alegría's success in translating his other works to English from the original Spanish, he has been unable to translate this last play into Spanish to his own satisfaction. To my mind, however, Alegría will eventually succeed in his translation efforts and any cultural bias some may assign *Daniela Frank* will be veiled by the play's universal significance. There can be no denial, moreover, that the characters and problems it dramatizes know no boundaries, especially those of the Americas.

As one reviews Alegría's production it would at first seem that only his last two works reflect a tendency toward dramas of social concern. In reality, however, only *El cruce* . . . is a deviation from Alegría's abiding interest in social drama. Since his debut as a dramatist, his clear intention has been to dramatize man's struggle against his own social system. I would insist, nonetheless, that, while Alegría's social preoccupations are commendable, they are not unique. What sets each of his last two works apart is not so much the expression of social concern as the artist's ability to create seemingly commonplace modes of expression and then to combine them in an original drama.

To conclude, *El color de Chambalén* and *Daniela Frank* are important dramas because they do more than distinguish Alegría and Peruvian theatre: they also help distinguish the Hispanic American theatre in general as one of constant renewal. So far, we know, critics and historians have been unable to label and date this theatre as they did the "absurd," for instance. They have found such a task almost impossible because artists such as Alegría are concerned with the vitality of their own works and because their works, in turn, ensure that the Hispanic American theatre remains a dynamic expression.

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## NOTES

1. *Textual. Revista de Artes y Letras*, Núm. 2 (septiembre 1971), 6-15.

2. Alonso Alegría, *El color de Chambalén*, (Gambier, Ohio: 1965), 105 pp. A mimeographed copy of the work was graciously given to me by the author.

3. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic. A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 25 et passim.

4. Alonso Alegría, *Daniela Frank* (Gambier, Ohio: 1982), 47 pp. This commentary is based on a typed copy given to me by the author.