

## A Theatre of Contradictions: The Recent Works of Emilio Carballido

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Emilio Carballido's dramatic contribution may best be measured by both the number of works he has created and the quantity of critical studies those plays have inspired.<sup>1</sup> After nearly four decades of playwriting and close to one hundred plays, Carballido continues to delight and challenge his audience and critics with his winning combination of diverse dramatic forms and levels of reality. The play of opposites, such as that which occurs between classical myth and modern existentialism, the fantastic and the commonplace, humor and pathos, has made difficult, if not impossible, the classification of his theatre. Margaret Peden, for instance, notes that "because of Carballido's variety and diversity, we can arrive at no satisfactory groupings of plays based on the division between realism and fantasy, on structure or technique, or on subject matter" (*Emilio Carballido* 90). In the majority of Carballido's works, however, the impossibility of classification owes as much to the presence of contradictory elements in each as to the structural, technical, and topical diversity of his theatre.

During the past decade, Carballido has written five full-length plays: *Las cartas de Mozart* (1974), *José Guadalupe (las glorias de Posada)* (1976), *Fotografía en la playa* (1977), *Orinoco* (1979), and *Tiempo de ladrones. La historia de Chucho el Roto* (1979)—all of which are equally difficult to categorize due to the dramatist's penchant for opposition, whether it be between different planes of reality, dramatic styles or modes of perception.<sup>2</sup> Aside from the basic contradiction present in each play, these five pieces have little in common. The juxtaposition of incongruous elements in these works may initially seem puzzling, but ultimately it leads to an appreciation of Carballido's complex view of reality as anything but unidimensional. The play of opposites in his theatre calls to mind Martin Esslin's comments regarding the ambiguous nature of drama: "Drama is as multifaceted in its images, as ambivalent in its meanings, as the world it mirrors" (118). Carballido repeatedly penetrates the surface of everyday reality to reveal the mysteries and truths that lie hidden beneath the seemingly ordinary.

The presence of diverse elements in Carballido's theatre necessarily involves the theatregoer, who experiences an ambivalent reaction when confronted with multiple aspects of a given dramatic situation. According to J. L. Styan, there are two primary patterns of audience perception in the theatre. The first involves a gradual fusion of like impressions, while the second produces an opposition or fission of impressions, which leads to a final fusion of concept. The pattern of fission, which is the one that characterizes Carballido's theatre, is naturally the more challenging for the audience, who is left to close the fissure, or bridge the conceptual gap. As Styan explains, "it is for the audience to take from the play the impressions and images from which to construct its *concepts*; by this act of apparent discernment it enjoys the excitement of apparent discovery" (31). Each of these Carballido plays invites the audience to participate in the production of the work's meaning by challenging it to formulate the conceptual link between the diverse levels of reality.

*Las cartas de Mozart* offers a delightful interplay between the socially repressive reality of nineteenth-century Mexico and a fantasy world based on Mozart. What initially appears to be standard comedy, with its typical boy-meets-girl situation, is soon complicated by the parallel development of these opposing worlds. The desired fusion of concept only becomes possible when the worlds of reality and non-reality ultimately merge into one, thus allowing the audience to resolve its feelings of ambivalence.<sup>3</sup>

The poles of reality and fantasy are quickly established by a divided stage, which juxtaposes the dark, drab interior of a small store with the alluring, mysterious Alameda, "una impresión de sombras y reflejos [. . .] gasas temblonas, traslúcidas" (39). This visual contrast parallels and helps to communicate to the audience the growing conflict within the young Margarita, who is torn between a craving for adventure and the security, albeit oppressive, offered by her family. Although she continually rebels in small ways against the restrictions set by family and by society in general, Margarita is unable to make major decisions regarding her future. The threat of a forced marriage to the lecherous Marcelo, however, prompts her to seek refuge from this undesirable reality. Relief appears in the form of El Joven, a mysterious, ragged lad who helps her take the necessary steps toward freedom and fantasy: first, the use of her entire inheritance to purchase three old Mozart letters; later, a walk down the magical Alameda; and finally, the decision to accompany El Joven to Europe.

While clearly delimited at the outset of the play, the worlds of reality and fantasy slowly merge as the result of Margarita's gradual transition from one to the other and the periodic occurrence of fantastic events, such as the apparition of Margarita's dead mother, within the real world. The final fusion is complete when Margarita dons her wedding gown, not to marry Marcelo, but rather to depart for a new life in Europe with El Joven, who has metamorphosed into a young Mozart clad in silk.

The fusion of the real and fantastic worlds represents the realization of a phenomenon suggested by Margarita in German in the opening scene, which translates literally as "the world becomes a dream, the dream becomes the world." The conceptual interplay between the two worlds becomes more

complex when one considers the fact that what is treated as fantasy in this work—the world of Mozart—is historical reality. Nonetheless, the opulent and romantic life of Mozart is easily made to seem fantastic to the audience as well as the characters through the temporal distance of a century and the contrast with the unsophisticated society of nineteenth-century Mexico. The historical world of Mozart, as conveyed by the three old letters, seems but a dream to the deprived Margarita. Yet this same dream ultimately becomes reality when El Joven and Margarita transform into the famous composer and his young bride Constanza and set sail for Europe.

The worlds of reality and fantasy convey opposing concepts. The first, steadfastly maintained by the lewd Marcelo and the adulterous Aunt Renata, becomes associated with the world of base passions, ambition and greed. The fantasy world, represented by the kind and generous Joven as well as the light, music and butterflies that accompany him, becomes symbolic of individual freedom and creativity. The initial opposition of the two worlds and their ultimate fusion into one suggests to the audience that man, provided an open mind and adventurous spirit, has the creative capacity to change his life and thus to determine his own destiny. *Las cartas de Mozart* is an entertaining and well-constructed combination of the real and the fantastic, the historical and the fictitious. In this music-filled comedy, Carballido and El Joven lead Margarita and the audience down the magical Alameda to the realization of their wildest dreams.

*José Guadalupe (las glorias de Posada)* represents a radical departure from the relatively conventional style of *Las cartas de Mozart*. Whereas in the earlier play history served as background and source of fantastic happenings, in *José Guadalupe* history is the basis for artistic transformation, both in Posada's lithographs and in Carballido's dramatic revue. The combination of history and art, or fact and imagination, performs the dual purpose of at once paying tribute to one of Mexico's greatest artists and refamiliarizing the audience with the tumultuous events of the past century. The play's metatheatrical, anti-illusionistic style highlights the mixture of art and history while prompting an active response from the spectators, who must make the connection between their knowledge of Mexican history and the highly theatricalized actions on stage. The audience is in fact twice removed from historical reality, for Carballido's revue is based on Posada's prints, which only then refer directly to historical fact.

*José Guadalupe* is an "epic" montage of historical events from the latter half of the nineteenth century, which have been condensed into fifteen short sketches. Although these sketches vary widely in terms of content, style and tone, all are inextricably linked by the large Posada illustrations projected in the background. The range in dramatic style corresponds to the emotional extremes of the historical period depicted, which extends from the rise of Porfirio Díaz to the birth of the Revolution and which parallels almost exactly Posada's life span. A farcical *sainete* portraying the affections of two dandies, for example, switches abruptly to the chilling monologue of an infamous rapist and throat-slasher. The musical accompaniment is similarly diverse, including opera, polka, vulgar rumbas, and revolutionary *corridos*. The revue's diversity allows the audience to experience briefly but intensely the predomi-

nant emotions of the times: the pseudo-romantic aspirations of the young, the humiliation of 41 homosexuals deported to the Yucatan, the hope instilled by the newborn Revolution, and the fear of God's wrath.

Despite the lack of transition between scenes, the audience gradually perceives the underlying relationship among the illustrations, the dramatic sketches and the historical background. In addition to the visual correspondence between projected prints and dramatic action, the audience's perception of the relationship is facilitated by an actor who appears in three of the scenes, representing the young, middle-aged, and elderly Posada, respectively. These three monologues convey the illustrator's views on his role as both popular artist and historiographer. Those familiar with Carballido's work will surely be reminded of La Intermediaria of *Yo también hablo de la rosa*, who shares Posada's awareness of the contradictory and multifaceted nature of reality:

Hago la Realidad y la pongo en las manos del pueblo, contradictoria como es, múltiple como es; pues nada más el Arte puede tratar de todo: de la infinita gama, de los extremos intocables e idénticos, de los muertos, de los vivos, de la trivialidad cotidiana, de lo que miro como visión dentro de mis ojos, de lo que miro fuera [. . .] de lo que las generaciones heredan [. . .] Y en mi trabajo y en mi vida, soy un artista. Y soy el Pueblo. (2)

Posada's prints, like Carballido's revue, are neither pure history nor sheer fantasy, but rather a mixture of inner vision (art) and outer vision (historical reality). Lionel Abel's classic definition of metatheatre as "theatre pieces about life seen as already theatricalized" (60) applies well to Carballido's stylized recreation of some of the most dramatic moments in Mexican history. By blending art and history into a new dramatic reality, Carballido communicates not only his awareness of the inherent theatricality of history but also of art's role in capturing and preserving his country's past.

In his next work, *Fotografía en la playa*, Carballido appears to revert to a more conventional and realistic style. One of the principal themes of this work, however, is that of deception, which applies to the audience's relationship with the play as well as to the relationships among the characters. Numerous short plot lines emerge and interweave as the dramatist captures the interactions of a large family during the course of one afternoon. This pattern corresponds to what Robert Corrigan has called polylinear drama, which progresses "not through a predetermined subject and plot, but through an increasingly intense and revealing series of emotional states" (150-51). Margaret Peden has summarized this play perfectly as "un día, una familia, y tantas complicaciones emocionales como combinaciones geométricas de personas" (*Fotografía* 18). Character combinations evolve and dissolve on stage as Carballido reveals the emotional relationships, both feigned and suppressed, that exist among the many family members.

As four generations of this family, accompanied by friends and lovers, arrive for a reunion in Veracruz, it soon becomes apparent to the audience that their rejoining has brought to the surface problems and tensions that had remained forgotten or repressed since their last gathering and that the converging family lines are actually diverging. The semblance of convergence

owes to two events. The first is the reunion itself, which suggests a move toward harmony and unity. The second is a gathering on the beach for a family portrait. This photo, taken in the play's last scene, serves as a final converging point for lives which soon thereafter will continue in their former, independent directions. Amidst the smiles and hugs, each member shares with the audience his or her private thoughts while waiting for the photographer to finish his work. Celia, for example, thinks aloud of "mi piel tersa y sin manchas, mi cuello lindo, como entonces," and young Chacho proudly reminds himself, "les gusto a las mujeres, caigo bien, puedo ser lo que quiera" (238). The fact that only the audience hears these reflections underscores the contrast between the physical proximity of the characters and the invisible emotional distance that exists among them.

In relating to the audience the characters' secret concerns as well as their conversations with one another, Carballido reveals their true nature, which is, for the most part, hermetic and egotistic. Even the most likable of the characters, Abuela, isolates herself in a world of past memories by feigning deafness, myopia and senility. Daughter Celia is a vain and worthless mother, more preoccupied with soap operas and her own fading beauty than with the welfare of her children. One of them, Constanza, has always taken care of Celia and Abuela, but a growing fear of spinsterhood prompts her to seek freedom from home and family. Yet her three brothers are too concerned with their own personal lives and careers to help with family responsibilities. Even the younger fourth generation expresses its desire for self-assertion and independence, be it through vulgar language, unconventional clothing or sexual promiscuity.

Although the characters show scant interest in one another's lives, there are two members—Héctor and Abuela—who provide the family, and by extension the play, with a sense of structural and thematic unity. Abuela is the central, static matriarch around whom the others revolve in pursuit of their respective goals. The family disregards her infantile behavior and morbid remarks as signs of senility, whereas the audience readily senses through her insightful comments concerning each person's activities that she is the only one truly conscious of the world around her, or in the words of Peden, "la vidente de la pieza" (*Fotografía* 19). Yet it is Héctor, professor and member of the third generation, who gradually emerges as the play's spokesman. His comments on the sea and on life's changes, in particular, suggest that the characters are part of a larger universal pattern. Life, according to Héctor, is as deceiving as the sea: "Lo que vemos, todo, es una especie de fantasía. No es cierto que esté quieto, ni que así sea. Cualquier cosa que vemos, es como el mar" (7).

The portrait taken on the beach reinforces this dichotomy between illusion and reality. After the photograph has been taken, the characters remain absolutely still on stage, as if preserved forever in that harmonious state. Their off-stage voices, however, reveal that the ensuing years indeed brought many changes to the family. The audience is suddenly projected into the future as several members of the third and fourth generations describe their untimely deaths. The disparity between the characters' fixed smiles and their tragic monologues suggests that the portrait is nothing but an illusion of permanence

in a rapidly changing world. This final visionary scene, along with the play's formal development and the symbolic images of the sea and the photograph, conveys the idea that life, while brief, is deceptively complex and ambiguous.

In *Orinoco*, Carballido combines optimism and fatalism, illusion and fact, in the form of two performers-*cum*-prostitutes, whose contradictory interpretations of reality challenge the audience's perception of their unusual predicament. En route to their next engagement on the banks of the Orinoco, the two cabaret performers awaken one day to discover that the entire crew, with the exception of one gravely wounded man, has disappeared, leaving no one at the helm. The majority of the play portrays Mina and Fifi's conflicting explanations for their plight and their efforts to determine the course of their lives as well as that of the boat, which are symbolically one and the same.

The audience of *jOrinoco!* is continually confronted with two distinct views of the real world, one absurdly optimistic and the other irreversibly fatalistic. The world of positive thinking is advanced by Fifi, a slender woman in her late twenties, while her fading and overweight partner, Mina, perceives only the negative, ugly side of reality. The contrast between their viewpoints is highlighted by visual disparities, which range from their clothing—"batas o trapos viejos de entre casa, aunque algún destello de fantasía conservan encima" (21)—to the setting, which opposes the splendor of a colorful tropical dawn to the squalor of the deteriorated cargo boat. The ironic name of the ship, the *Stella Maris*, the temporal vagueness of the play ("en los años de 196 . . . , 197 . . . , o . . ."), and the noises of the Amazon all lend a fantastic background to the unattractive foreground of the dilapidated vessel and the two shabby showgirls traveling in it.

The visual juxtaposition of the beautiful and the ugly is reinforced by the continuous dialogue between Mina and Fifi. Despite their contradictory views, their relationship is one of intimacy and interdependence. They complement one another totally, for each perceives what the other is unable or reluctant to see. Fifi relies on language not only to glorify their status, but also to create new worlds. For instance, she describes the two of them as "las fantásticas estrellas de variedad [que] flotan sobre las aguas rumbo al triunfo máximo de sus carreras" (6), while Mina summarizes their condition as that of "dos putas abandonadas en un bote viejo" (14). Mina systematically destroys each one of Fifi's extravagant ideas. She quickly points out, for example, the similarity between Orinoco and *orinar* when Fifi decides to change her name to Fifi de Orinoco. Likewise, when Fifi proposes a series of wild explanations for the crew's disappearance, ranging from flying saucers to mass suicide, Mina explains the illogic of each idea and remains steadfastly pragmatic—"Yo creo que el negro los mató a todos" (15). The doomed women never compromise, even to the final curtain, at which point Mina foresees only darkness and confusion. The last word, however, significantly belongs to Fifi—"Y falta lo más hermoso todavía" (35).

The audience is left to decide what "lo hermoso" will be and to resolve the play's basic opposition between optimism and fatalism. While Mina's pessimistic views are certainly more realistic than Fifi's poetic illusions, the resolution to their dilemma lies somewhere in between. There are, however, aspects of the situation which defy any rational explanation, either by the

audience or the characters. Instead of searching for answers, Matías Montes Huidobro suggests that "en las situaciones más cotidianas hay un fondo incomprensible y misterioso que no necesita explicarse sino vivirse intensamente" (15). As Mina and Fifi attempt to explain the countless mysteries surrounding their voyage, from the dawn's bright streaks—"Quién sabe qué querrá decir ese cielo" (5)—to the nonsensical comments they find in the captain's diary, it becomes clear that there ultimately is no single explanation for the events that occur around them. The conceptual irresolution of *Orinoco* is therefore simply another one of life's insolvable mysteries.

For the last play in this series, Carballido returns to the historical setting and metatheatrical form of *José Guadalupe*. In *Tiempo de ladrones. La historia de Chucho el Roto*, fact and fiction are juxtaposed in the contrary meanings of "historia" as either "history" or "story," and in the protagonist, Chucho el Roto, a Mexican Robin Hood who has become a mixture of fact and legend. Due to the focus on Chucho el Roto, the basic contrast of the play is a social one, the black-and-white division of Mexican society into rich and poor, a contrast which was never sharper than during Porfirio Díaz's regime. The play's political message is, however, counterbalanced by the humor produced by Chucho and his gang as they repeatedly outwit the highest ranks of church, state, and society in order to give to the poor what they consider rightfully theirs. As a result, this play is at once socially engagé and highly entertaining.

In terms of spectacle, *Tiempo de ladrones* is one of Carballido's most ambitious endeavors. The cast includes no less than 114 characters, as well as additional groups of policemen, townspeople, servants, and the like. The play's two "tandas" together consist of four "jornadas," which in turn contain a total of twelve episodes. Moreover, Carballido has appended four additional episodes, entitled "Aventuras para sortear," from which the potential director may choose.

Each episode is complete in and of itself and therefore functions independently within the overall work. Nonetheless, each playlet is linked to the others by the presence of Chucho el Roto and the repetition of the same basic format—the execution of elaborate schemes whereby the wealthy fall victim to their own ignorance and greed. Despite the repetition of situation and social themes, the play continually entertains and intrigues the audience thanks to Chucho's ingeniousness and the intricacy of his plans. While his profession is clearly immoral, not to mention illegal, Chucho is a thoroughly likable fellow. He is brave, generous and above all, kind. As a consequence of Chucho's endearing character and Carballido's satirical and melodramatic portrayal of the rich as callous pseudo-sophisticates, the audience repeatedly finds itself siding with the underdog, which is precisely the effect desired by the dramatist.

*Tiempo de ladrones* stands alongside *Un pequeño día de ira* (1961) and *¡Silencio, pollos pelones . . .!* (1963) as one of Carballido's most overtly political pieces. During Chucho's lifetime, President Juárez, friend to the poor, dies, while Porfirio Díaz, friend to the rich, rises to power, and the gap between rich and poor grows increasingly wider. Despite the temporal distance of more than a century, Carballido draws a clear parallel between the social conditions of the past and those of the present. Chucho could just as well be speaking today

when he explains the workings of the socioeconomic system: "Quien dirija los sindicatos va a corromperse, por dinero y por amor al poder; será mimado de los gobiernos, robará libremente, y los gobiernos reprimirán al que se le oponga" (23). The use of the future tense here, in particular, carries the past situation up to the present and on to the future.

In each of these five plays, the audience must assume an active role in perceiving and resolving contradictions between social classes, dramatic forms or levels of reality and non-reality. The presence of oppositions in these plays, coupled with the wide range in focus and dramatic styles, continues to challenge those who would like to group Carballido's works into distinct dramatic genres. More importantly, however, the contradictions present in his theatre mirror in various dramatic forms the same ambiguities existent in our daily world.

At this point, it is impossible to predict where Carballido's dramatic path will lead him in the future—whether to further recreation of his country's history, exploration of the fantastic, satirization of church, state, and high society, or realistic portraiture of human relationships. One cannot be sure. This critic, however, agrees optimistically with Fifi that the best is yet to come.

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## Notes

1. The most comprehensive studies to date are those by Mary Vázquez-Amaral, *El teatro de Emilio Carballido (1950-1965)* (Mexico: B. Costa-Amic, 1974), Frank Dauster, "El teatro de Emilio Carballido," *Ensayos sobre teatro hispanoamericano* (Mexico: SepSetentas, 1975), 143-88, and most recently, Margaret Sayers Peden, *Emilio Carballido* (Boston: Twayne, 1980).

2. The present study picks up where Margaret Peden left off, with *Las cartas de Mozart*, (1974). The works written prior to 1974 are amply discussed in Peden's book as well as in the studies by Vázquez-Amaral and Dauster, which end at 1965 and 1969, respectively. Due to a limit of space, I am unable to treat here the many one-act plays that Carballido has also written during the past ten years. These include *Por si alguna vez soñamos*, *La pesadilla*, *La miseria*, *Dificultades*, *¡Unete pueblo!*, *Sucedido de ranas y sapos*, *Apolonio y Bodoconio*, *Nahui Ollín*, *Los días*, and *Conmemorantes*. I should also mention that while only three of the five plays discussed here have been published (*Las cartas de Mozart*, *Fotografía en la playa* and *Tiempo de ladrones*), all but *José Guadalupe* have been staged: *Las cartas de Mozart*, 1975, Mexico; *Orinoco*, 1982, Caracas, Mexico, and New York, 1985; *Fotografía en la playa*, 1984, Mexico; and *Tiempo de ladrones*, 1984, Guanajuato and Mexico.

3. For a more thorough discussion of the fantastic, see my "Freedom and Fantasy: A Structural Approach to the Fantastic in Carballido's *Las cartas de Mozart*," *Latin American Theatre Review* 14/1 (1980): 15-23, where I refer to Todorov's theories on the fantastic to elucidate the function of the fantastic and its effect on the reader/spectator.

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