

Constructing the Alternative Version: Vicente Leñero's Documentary and Historical Drama

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Whether as written text or in performance, drama is continually in the process of creating "possible worlds." Although based on real world events, environments and people, dramatic worlds remain hypothetical. According to Kier Elam, they are "'(as if)" constructs, that is, they are recognized by the audience as counterfactual (i.e. non-real) states of affairs but are embodied *as if* in progress in the actual here and now."¹ Characters in a play can only refer to real-world counterparts. However, the referential function of, for example, a character based on an historical figure can be strengthened considerably if that person's "essential properties" are preserved as they travel from the real to the dramatic world.²

Like all drama, documentary drama bases its "possible worlds" on real-world structures. Yet, the dramatic world constructed by a documentary playwright does more than reflect actual situations. Segments of life—documents—are organized in the most effective manner for presentation, placed on stage and become, not counterfactual occurrences, but alternative views of factual events. The "as if" rule and the "referential" rule make it possible for documentary drama to emphasize the relationship between the dramatized alternative and actual incidents. Action unfolds on stage transforming the recent past into the present for the audience. Essential properties of real-life figures are chosen to enhance the referential nature of a character and to underscore the significant aspects of their involvement in the event that the play is exploring.

The methods each documentary dramatist uses in the construction of a dramatic world may differ. Nevertheless, their goals are very similar. Peter Weiss believes that dramatizing documentary material allows the playwright to re-create certain aspects of recent history by using selected elements from a polemical event. Documentary material is presented to the audience "unchanged in content but adapted in form."³ An alternative to mass media

interpretations is thereby presented. Vicente Leñero's documentary drama also represents the playwright's use of documentation to create an alternative version. For Leñero, the theatre is "un foro abierto . . . en que discutir cosas que resultan polémicas."⁴ His documentary plays are a personal reflection which he shares with the audience in an open discussion. Leñero does not offer answers; instead, the spectator is presented with the playwright's concerns, questions and subjective interpretations of history or historical figures.

Leñero derives his characters from their real-life counterparts to give his work universal dimensions. The essential properties Leñero's characters absorb from the people they represent must be both particular—related to a specific personality, and general—identifiable with others in similar circumstances. Although the characters in *Pueblo rechazado*, for example, are easily identified with those who participated in the controversy, their actions on stage do not re-create the conflict exactly as it happened. For Leñero the incident implied more than a difficult situation in the Catholic Church in Mexico: "No pensaba en una obra estrictamente testimonial porque temía que el conflicto quedara reducido a una simple anécdota local. Ambicionaba que mi obra tuviera dimensiones universales y sirviera para ilustrar sobre todo la libertad de búsqueda en la Iglesia y la crisis de las instituciones."⁵ According to Leñero, the significant element in any historical event is what it suggests, and particularly what it suggests to the writer or playwright. He affirms that it is not a question of preserving history:

No se trata de conservar esos acontecimientos, sino lo que sugieren esos acontecimientos; lo que sugiere la actuación de esos personajes; lo que sugiere la actuación del Che Guevara o lo que pueda representar en un contexto más amplio. . . . Pero al reflexionar así sobre ellos, ellos pierden su propia realidad . . . para uno ya no son personajes de una crónica periodística convertida en crónica teatral . . . sino que son elementos que sirven de base a creación de personajes.⁶

As Leñero sees it, there is no essential difference between historical and documentary theatre. Historical theatre like that of Magaña or Sartre is effective when, "su finalidad es extraer del hecho histórico significados más universales, con respecto al hecho histórico . . . más intemporales."⁷ History should not serve as a model or a lesson for the present but as another way in which man can reflect on his own reality. The playwright transforms history, recent or otherwise, into a theatrical moment because the crisis it represents coincides with his own personal concerns. A play is a combination of "vivencias personales . . . que se convierten en teatro."⁸

Pueblo rechazado, *El juicio* and *Compañero* have been characterized as documentary drama primarily due to their portrayal of recent, contemporary history through the use of documentation. For *Pueblo rechazado*, Leñero used books by Prior Lemerrier, newspaper and magazine articles and his own personal contact with the participants.⁹ *El juicio* is an adaptation of court records supported by material related to the trial of José de León Toral and Concepción de la Llata for the assassination of General Alvaro Obregón in Mexico on July 17, 1928.¹⁰ *El diario del Che en Bolivia* and other works on Che Guevara served as the basis for *Compañero*. *Martirio de Morelos* reaches farther

back in time than the above-mentioned works—to the nineteenth century—and concerns the last few days in the life of José María Morelos, a priest and revolutionary leader during Mexico's struggle for independence from Spain. Because the incident the play recalls is no longer a part of living communal history (i.e. no one now living experienced the event), it can be classified as historical drama. *Martirio de Morelos* is, nevertheless, very closely related in structure and theme to Leñero's documentary work.

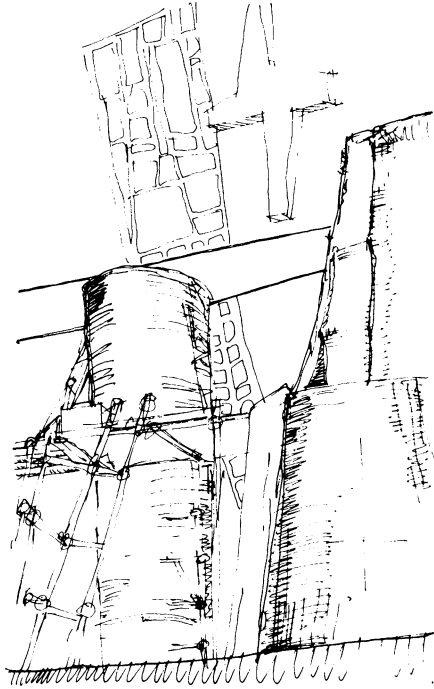
Each of the plays to be examined here represents Leñero's subjective, alternative version of historical events or figures which symbolize recurrent motifs encountered in Latin American history in general and Mexican history in particular. *Pueblo rechazado* studies the traditional church (or institution) in conflict with man's desire to transform his world. *El juicio* investigates the phenomenon of political assassination. *Compañero* and *Martirio de Morelos* invite a review of the spectator's image of the revolutionary hero as mythical figure. The purpose of the remainder of this discussion is to identify and examine the dramatic structures and techniques (mostly Brechtian) that Leñero employs in focusing audience attention on his dramatic-world alternative to each real-world incident.

Leñero's inspiration for *Pueblo rechazado* was the controversy between the prior of a Mexican monastery who wished to use psychiatry to help the monks in his charge and his superiors, who felt that these methods went against the teachings of the Catholic Church. The case was well publicized and received a great deal of attention. For Leñero, the newspaper accounts and other related material served as point of departure. He constructed the event in a dramatic form which would reveal not the facts, but what those facts implied. His work would function "al margen del hecho histórico."¹¹

There are three principal Brechtian structures in the play. First, there are choruses representing groups involved in the public and private aspects of the conflict. Second, the entire play is fragmented into a series of scenes often broken or confused even further by dream sequences. Third, the characters themselves are anonymous—signs for particular interests; for example, the bishop and the prior, who respectively signify the forces for, and against, the supposed interests of an established institution like the Catholic Church. The impersonal, group character portrayed by the chorus is sometimes broken by an individual spokesman, but the break usually reflects group sentiments. The individual monks who leave the monastery or choose to stay voice personal opinions, but they are divided into those who support the prior and those who do not.

Of the play's Brechtian devices, the choruses are the most important. They consist of members of the monastery and others representing the various interest groups: the Catholics, the Journalists, and the Psychiatrists. Their function is to frame the conflict from each point of view and to act as a background for the conflicts among the central characters. Their persistent chanting and rapid delivery of stereotyped accusations often create an impression of mob madness and chaos.

The chanting of the monks is much less violent than that of the Journalists or Catholics. Their collective character is still evident and their fears are revealed through the background they frequently provide. For example, after



Vicente Leñero, *Pueblo rechazado* (Mexico City, 1968; set by Toni Sbert). Drawing by David G. Saile.

the prior becomes aware of the mental problems affecting the monastery's population, the monks chant together from their individual cells revealing their collective anguish. When help arrives in the form of a psychiatrist, the monks chant warnings that he is the devil, foreshadowing later accusations made by representatives of the Church.

The personal conflict, which concerns the motives behind the prior's decision to call in a psychiatrist and the latter's desire to offer his skills to the Church is also underscored by the chorus. After Church authorities reject the bishop's attempt to explain the reasons for the prior's effort to help his monks through psychiatry, the analyst's colleagues accuse both him and the prior of vanity and selfishness. The chorus of Catholics characterizes the prior as a victim of the analyst and the chorus of analysts calls the psychiatrist a victim of the priest.

Although not the only means for scene fragmentation, the choruses emphasize movement from one segment to another and focus attention on the theme of a particular moment. At one point, the analyst is working with the monks in a pantomime of a psychiatric session while the chorus of monks sings the 23rd Psalm. Suddenly the scene is interrupted by the entrance of the Catholics and the Journalists, who begin to chant about the emerging controversy. The constant, violent transitions from scene to scene increase the impact of the central conflict by forcing the audience to proceed rapidly from

one debate to another. It is the chorus that indicates the direction or path the audience must follow from point to point within the controversy.

Because *El juicio* is the dramatic adaptation of a trial, the characters in the play have a significant referential function. Leñero did find it necessary to alter some of the documents he used so that the material would adhere to the limits of a dramatic production. Nevertheless, whenever possible the actual words spoken in the courtroom are preserved. This is an extremely effective structure in the play, for it brings the audience into immediate contact with an incident it might have experienced only through newspaper articles or historical accounts. Presented with the event in a dramatic reproduction, each spectator is able to approach, along with the playwright, its social and political implications from a point of view other than the one offered by the mass media of the time.

As noted earlier, *El juicio* deals with the assassination of Alvaro Obregón, during a period of intense conflict between the Catholic Church and the state. Acting on the belief that God had chosen him to save the Church from evil, León Toral assassinated the President-elect. He was immediately arrested and accused of having conspired with, and been under the direction of Madre Conchita Concepción de la Llata. Although Toral was executed and Madre Conchita was sent to prison, it was never proven that she indeed had been a co-conspirator in the assassination. It is this aspect that intrigued Leñero and which becomes the most compelling element in the play. Dramatic structures which interrupt the flow of the "real" trial underscore the characters' efforts to discover or reveal the truth and their failure to do so.

A Brechtian narrator frames the dramatized trial recalling the role of the news media. In the opening scenes, the narrator supplies historical background while movies illustrating the incident are projected on a screen. The narrator closes the play by offering the audience information concerning the fate of the defendants. The introduction gives the audience the information it needs to understand the trial's development and the epilogue encourages reflection on the fate of the participants, without supplying any answers to the question suggested by the play. Other structures which call attention to theme and interrupt the action are flashbacks, off-stage voices, and an off-stage riot. Of these, the flashbacks are the most effective in making the audience conscious of the questions posited by the play. They consist primarily of the recreation of conversations witnesses would normally repeat in testimony and focus on those moments in the defendants' relationship that might reveal the existence of a conspiracy.

Early in the testimony presented in the play, Toral describes a discussion with Madre Conchita in which he comments on the death of Carranza. He approaches her and they reproduce the conversation as if it were taking place at that moment. Both express a desire to see Obregón and others dead, but when Toral returns to the present (the trial), he explains that Madre Conchita was merely expressing an opinion.

Other flashbacks occur at various points throughout the trial when Toral and witnesses recount conversations about the assassination or previous attempts on Obregón's life. Witnesses called to testify against Madre Conchita change their testimony on the stand while previous statements are

reviewed in retrospect. Flashbacks allow the “truth” revealed in the past to be contrasted and compared to the “truth” of the here and now of the dramatic moment.

Compañero is Leñero’s version of the last hours in the life of Ernesto “Che” Guevara. Although based on Che’s diary, the play does not re-create Guevara’s view of himself and his actions. Instead it provides an alternative to his popular image. According to Leñero:

El plan general de mi obra fue un intento de desmitificación. Yo quería para mí mismo, ante todo, para aclarar y sopesar mis propias ideas— reflexionar libremente sobre Ernesto Guevara. Al hacerlo en una obra de teatro yo estaría, desde luego, construyendo un personaje mío propio que no obstante provenir de la figura histórica sería gobernado por las leyes internas de mi obra.¹²

Leñero was attracted to an essential conflict in Guevara’s character—the one between revolutionary theory and action. In order to underscore these opposing forces, Leñero gives Che two separate personalities on stage. This division is the instrument within the play that assists both playwright and audience to accomplish the necessary demythification. Background pictures and flashbacks are used in *Compañero* to underscore the dialogue between the two men that portray Che. The stage is also divided—into a schoolhouse and a battleground, the two places functioning as supporting signs for the character’s two selves.

When the play opens, Comandante 1 is brought to the schoolhouse where the Bolivian army will keep him until his execution. He begins a conversation with a teacher who at first accuses him of murdering her people and later adopts the name of Che’s childhood teacher, Julia. She is witness to the debate between two Che Guevaras and becomes a participant in its resolution. Comandante 1 teaches her about the revolution and as he does this, a flashback to the revolution fought in the mountains of Cuba produces his alter ego: Comandante 2. Their discussion gradually reveals Comandante 1 to be Che, the thinker, and Comandante 2 as Che, the man of action. For Comandante 2, the revolution began in the mountains and remains the future, whereas Comandante 1 seeks answers in a past that is even prior to the Cuban revolution.

Their debate examines the reasons for becoming a revolutionary and the direction the revolution should take. Flashbacks reveal incidents from the past according to the points of view of Guevara’s separate personalities. Finally, Comandante 1 takes the gun away from the Bolivian soldier who is to execute Che and shoots Comandante 2. Comandante 1 kills himself so that the idea, the theory of the revolution might continue. It is at this moment that Julia completes her transformation, traveling from the present into the past and becoming her historical counterpart.

The division of Che into two parts of one man who is given the opportunity to debate himself, makes it possible for him to be seen from an uncommon perspective. This Che is the component parts of the legend which “shows” the audience various facets of his character, much like Brecht’s Galileo. The audience should change along with Julia, in that for each

spectator the revolutionary figure must acquire new and varied dimensions through Leñero's unique, dramatic rendering of the character.

Martirio de Morelos also focuses on a revolutionary hero who has taken on mythical qualities with the passage of time. The character's dual nature is revealed, but not by a physical division of the man. Instead, contrasting views of Morelos show him in the last ordeal of his life as a man involved in a political struggle and as an historical figure framed by the implications of his actions.

José María Morelos joined Hidalgo during the war of independence against Spain. When Hidalgo turned his back on the struggle, Morelos began to lead the insurgents. He was very successful in the campaign against the Spanish army; however, after General Félix María Calleja was appointed to the post of viceroy, Morelos was captured. Tried by both the Church and the government, he was executed for treason in 1815. Leñero's play accompanies Morelos from the moment of his defeat by the Spanish forces to his death by firing squad.

The character Morelos is like most others in Leñero's documentary drama, in that Morelos' essential properties have been selected with the purpose of allowing the audience to see him from an alternative point of view. This is effected through a narrator called Lector who presents historical background for each scene. He is not separated from the other characters nor is he Morelos' inner voice. At times Lector participates in the action and gives opinions concerning decisions made by, for example, the authorities. In the introduction to the play, Leñero explains that his character's dialogue is based on ideas and concepts expressed by Morelos' biographers.¹³ The "official version" of historians aids in the construction of the alternative version presented in the play.

In the first scene, Lector enters to find Morelos leafing through a book which turns out to be about the "hero" Morelos. The text describes him in the following manner: "Ninguno como él, entre los hombres de la independencia de México, desplegó tanta actividad y tantos recursos que sólo al ingenio es dable improvisar" (p. 18). Morelos cannot agree with the book's description of him as a hero and a national martyr. For him the hero's defeat was more than an unfortunate occurrence in the war: "derrota tras derrota . . . sumido en la desesperanza. . . . Quedó solo frente al enemigo. Abandonado en un campo de batalla que no era el suyo, sin armas para esa lucha" (p. 19).

Lector provides history's view of Morelos' significance and Morelos counters with a personal reaction to his image. The martyred hero he was to become in the future is contrasted with the defeated and troubled man he was at the time of the revolution. The play reviews each step in the process of his defeat and final humiliation, even after death. When Morelos is executed, Lector calls him a great leader and a statesman, but is stopped by the viceroy who presents him with a letter Morelos allegedly wrote. The letter is a retraction, a repudiation of Morelos' actions. As in the beginning of the play, Morelos is defined by two images: the heroic figure who dies for his country and the hesitant man who no longer believes in himself or his cause. It is the

presentation of the two possible figures of Morelos that requires the spectator to re-examine the man as mythical hero.

In the documentary and historical plays discussed here, Vicente Leñero has carefully constructed dramatic worlds in order to offer the audience or reader an alternative to real-world events. The public is invited to reflect on the implications of each incident or the actions of a particular figure depicted on stage. Guided by the plays' effective dramatic techniques and structures to focus on significant aspects of possible worlds as conceived by the playwright, the audience is afforded the opportunity to collaborate in a re-evaluation of historical events whose real-world interpretation it might otherwise have accepted without question.

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Notes

1. *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (London: Methuen, 1980), p. 102.
2. Elam, pp. 106-07.
3. Franz Haberl, "Peter Weiss: Documentary Theatre," *Books Abroad* (Now titled *World Literature Today*), 43 (1969), 359.
4. Vicente Leñero, personal interview, July 1975.
5. Vicente Leñero, *Vivir del teatro* (México: Editorial Joaquín Mortiz, 1982), p. 24.
6. Leñero, interview.
7. Leñero, interview.
8. Leñero, interview.
9. See Vicente Leñero, "Introducción," *Pueblo rechazado* (México: Editorial Joaquín Mortiz, 1969), p. 14. Analysis of the text is based on this edition. Also see Leñero, *Vivir del teatro*, p. 24.
10. See Vicente Leñero, "Introducción," *El juicio* (México: Editorial Joaquín Mortiz, 1972), pp. 9-12. Analysis of the text is based on this edition. Also consult Leñero, *Vivir del teatro*, pp. 101-05.
11. Leñero, *Pueblo rechazado*, p. 14.
12. "¿Por qué un teatro documental?" *Vida literaria* 4 (1970), 9.
13. "Advertencias," *Martirio de Morelos* (México: Editorial Ariel y Seix Barral, 1981) pp. 7-10. All page numbers cited in the text refer to this edition.
14. For other studies of Leñero's documentary drama, see Fred Clark and María A. Salgado, "Documentary Theatre in Mexico: Vicente Leñero's *Pueblo Rechazado*," *Romance Notes* 13 (1971), 54-60; Fernando Wagner, "Teatro épico," *Vida literaria* 4 (1970), 10; Oscar Villegas, "Enajenación política," *Vida literaria* 4 (1970), 13, 16; Edmundo de los Ríos, "Visión cristiana vs. visión revolucionaria," *Vida literaria* 4 (1970), 11-12; Tamara Holzapfel, "Leñero: el teatro como institución moral," *Texto crítico* 10 (1978), 23-31; Pedro Bravo-Elizondo, "La realidad latinoamericana y el teatro documental," *Texto crítico* 14 (1979), 200-10.