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## **Panamanian Theatre for Social Change: Notes from an Interview with Playwright Raúl Leis**

### **Katherine Zien**

Playwright and theatre producer Raúl Leis Romero (1947-2011) was one of Panama's most significant public intellectuals. In addition to his long-running involvement in Panamanian theatre, Leis was a sociologist, journalist, human rights activist, political commentator, and prizewinning author. Leis reported on social and political events in Panama during the Torrijos and Noriega dictatorships (1968-1989), Panama's invasion by the United States, the Panama Canal's transfer to Panamanian sovereignty (1977-1999), and the post-handover context. In Panama, Leis led the Panamanian Center for Research and Social Action (CEASPA), in addition to serving as a member of many organizations dedicated to adult literacy and popular education across Latin America and Europe.

When Leis passed away suddenly on 30 April 2011, eulogies poured in from colleagues around the world. Yet among these, few if any mentioned Leis's extensive theatrical activities.<sup>1</sup> In this regard, I am fortunate to have interviewed Leis about his theatre practice in 2010. The following narrative is based on our interview.

### **Biography**

Leis grew up in a marginalized community in Colón and was soon involved with local activist groups. Influenced by liberation theology and radical politics, Leis experienced a transformation of his social consciousness at fifteen, at which point he decided to dedicate his life to community outreach. In the early 1960s, Leis joined the Servicio Voluntario Nacional (SVN), a Panamanian government program providing volunteer aid. Working in isolated, heavily indigenous, *afrocolonial*, and rural regions like Bocas Del Toro and Kuna Yala, Leis began to experiment with the use of theatrical

techniques in local conflict resolution processes. In workshops, he employed *creación colectiva* practices inspired by Enrique Buenaventura's methods. Leis found that the use of simple puppets enabled community members to express grievances more freely. His workshops were overwhelmingly successful, leading Leis to codify his techniques in the volume *Guía para un teatro popular* in 1973. In the first half of the volume, Leis introduced his method for community theatre, which he called *sociodrama*, adapting Boalian methods to Panamanian contexts. His workshops became institutionalized as the Teatro Voluntario de Cambio Social (TEVOCASO) program, which he administrated for two years. When General Omar Torrijos Herrera took power in 1968, the Panamanian state absorbed the SVN and proposed to make Leis its national coordinator, a salaried government position. Rejecting the offer, Leis chose instead to study sociology at Panama's Universidad de Santa María la Antigua.

At this time, Leis started to write plays, winning the Ricardo Miró Prize—Panama's highest national award for theatre—at 21.<sup>2</sup> Leis often worked closely with directors and actors. His most frequent collaborators included: El Salvadoran director Norman Douglas; Miguel Moreno, actor and founder of the Teatro Estudiantil Panameño; actor and producer Danny Calden; and Anselmo Cooper and Dagoberto Chung, creators of the Unidad del Teatro Colonense and the Teatro de la Ciudad, who still work with at-risk youth in Colón. All of his plays have been mounted, several touring to Colombia, Cuba, Nicaragua, Mexico, and Peru.

### **“La Toma de Conciencia”: Themes and Influences in Raúl Leis's Theatre**

Leis's aesthetic production centers on his understandings of grassroots activism and social critique. A creator of political theatre with distinctly Panamanian stylistic overtones, Leis wanted his productions to contribute to the creation of “un mundo en que valga la pena vivir” (personal interview). Rosalina Orocú Mojia comments: “El tema central en las obras de Leis es ‘la condición humana’ en sus dimensiones sociales y subjetivas... [Leis] se enfoca en la opresión, la exclusión social, la apatía, la injusticia; y la solidaridad, la humanidad y la historia como modo de educación.” According to Carlos Fong, director of the Panamanian Ministry of Culture's national literacy program, “[Leis] creía en las utopías realizables, no en las quimeras y los sueños imposibles, sí en utopías concretas, ‘generadoras de acciones posibles.’ Raúl Leis era un hombre que construía utopías a través de acciones

puntuales y reales. [En sus obras] nos encontramos con este tema: la solidaridad y la unidad como propuesta para la reconstrucción del tejido social.”

Performance and utopia, as Jill Dolan notes, are often linked. Both conceive of other worlds, projecting an idealized or phantasmatic “no-place” onto a present stage. Artists have frequently employed theatre’s heterotopia to rehearse plans for (im)possible futures and iterate subjunctive “as-ifs.” Yet as much as Leis’s plays engage with utopian world-making, they also address Panamanian and Latin American lived experiences. Focusing on cultural production and the raising of subaltern consciousness, Leis’s work constitutes a decolonizing project in its desire to devise a theatre practice that will aid in disentangling legacies of colonialism and cultural alienation that have produced internalized inferiority. In *Guía para un teatro popular* Leis notes: “La dominación cultural es el instrumento principal de la dominación política y económica [...] La presencia de un enclave colonial en nuestro suelo demarca y encausa la deformación de nuestra cultura popular, por medio de la intromisión de valores alienantes” (4-5).

In affirming the necessity of popular education, Leis extends Marxian alienation and its post-Second World War manifestation in postcolonial thought to the Panamanian cultural sphere. Considering the place of culture in coloniality and class struggle, Leis details social, juridical, and psychological ramifications of cultural alienation, such as the practice of *mimeticismo* among Panamanians, who privilege metropolitan (i.e., colonial) culture above their own, debasing themselves through a fatalism that will not admit alternatives: “siempre ha sido así,” “así somos y no podemos ser de otra forma,” “estamos salados” (7). This “repliegue en la costumbre” begets a subordinated demeanor that views the colonizer’s culture as a guarantor of progress. Extracting examples from quotidian life in Panama, Leis demonstrates the constant and often imperceptible devaluation of that which is one’s own, even while recognizing that there is no “propio” for, in cultural subject formation, “todos somos ladrones” (5).

How, then, to attain a liberatory state of self-reflexivity? Leis shifts to a discussion of popular theatre, augmenting his outline of the methodologies of *sociodrama* and puppetry with scripts and field notes: “El teatro debe ser una forma dialéctica y viva de comunicación que trate de establecer la responsabilidad histórica del individuo dentro de la sociedad; cada hombre es responsable de la vida de los demás y en consecuencia de la suya y por lo tanto responsable de todo lo que suceda en su tiempo” (11).

Influenced by Brecht, Boal, Piscator, Peter Weiss, Buenaventura, and Jarry, among others, Leis's plays are nevertheless rooted in a sense of vernacular Panamanian expressivity. The city of Colón pervades his work, almost as a character in itself: "Yo nunca he perdido el contacto con Colón. Y Colón está muy presente también en las obras, en una manera directa. Por eso yo digo siempre que por Colón no se pasa impunemente. Eso quiere decir que tú puedes nacer en una ciudad...pero no te marca especialmente. Y tú puedes haber nacido en una ciudad que te marca, para bien o para mal. Colón es una. Lo que yo diría de Colón: no solamente de la situación del 'ghetto,' marginalidad, lo que sea, sin también de lo *bueno*: de una ciudad alegre, una ciudad desenvuelta donde pasan cosas macondas – y pasan cosas insólitas" (personal interview).

In Leis's drama, *congos* and *cimarrones* debate Panama's history of slavery; *afrocoloniales* and *afroantillanos* clash with each other and with "Yanquis," and *campesinos* from Panama's interior take the stage *salomando*—uttering traditional salutatory cries. Leis also explored the Panamanian literary and dramatic canon, including first-generation vanguardists Rogelio Sinán and Demetrio Korsi and their descendants, such as the performance collective los Trashumantes and playwright José Jesús Martínez.<sup>3</sup> Like these artists, Leis is overtly anticolonial. Of his seventeen plays, seven address the Canal Zone as a political and social rallying point. *La cantina de Pancha Manchá* is based upon Korsi's racially fraught poem "Incidente de Cumbia" (1929), in which a *gringo*, ostensibly a soldier from the Canal Zone, seduces the prostitute lover of a minstrelized Afro-Panamanian, Chimbombó. Leis also dramatized historical events. *Viene el sol con su sombrero de combate puesto* treats the 1856 Tajada de Sandía conflict that spurred a U.S. invasion of Panama, while *Mundunció*n uses documentary theatre to tell the story of Pedro Prestán, who led a revolution in 1885 that burned Colón.<sup>4</sup> Erased from the historical record, Prestán is represented by Leis as a *cimarrón* leading *congos*, or fugitive slaves, in Panama's *afrocolonial* community.<sup>5</sup>

In *Viaje a la salvación y otros países*, which is likely his best known play, Leis describes the Swiftian journey of Librado Mancilla, "un marginado [quien] se atrevió a espiar el mundo civilizado para una futura conquista" (1). Born into an impoverished *barrio*, Mancilla is an autodidact who desires to improve his beleaguered neighborhood by forming an army of the poor and mounting a revolution. Seeking resources, he ventures into the Canal Zone, a church, and an elite intellectual enclave in a station-play composed with Brechtian techniques and infused with Marxist critiques of the "development

of underdevelopment.”<sup>6</sup> As Mancilla visits these various “countries,” each demonstrates its hypocrisies, hegemonic formations, and means of social control—that which Althusser denotes as ideological state apparatuses. The play is narrated by the shantytown’s inhabitants and richly interspersed with jokes, spoken verse, songs, and direct address. At the play’s end, Mancilla’s *barrio*, Rincón Oscuro, has taken over the city’s institutions in nonviolent protest, and a telecaster reports that Canal Zone officials are bringing in weapons. In the fifth act, the actors emerge to ask the audience how to end the play:

ACTOR QUE HACE DE PEPE: (*Al público*) Quieren el final, ¿verdad? ¿Saben qué sucedió? ¿Cedimos? ¿Nos masacraron? ¿Logramos algunas ventajas? ¿Cambiamos la sociedad?

ACTRIZ QUE HACE DE MARÍA: Lamentable, no se lo podemos decir. Somos solo actores. El director es solo el director... (91)

Culminating in dialogue, the play seeks to politicize its public.

While discussing Panamanian politics and theatre with me, Leis lamented many Panamanians’ “de-ideologization” after the canal’s handover. Although Panama’s theatre activity increased post-1999, Leis noted that those involved in political theatre’s peak period (1965-1985) were increasingly forgotten as new practitioners privileged costly spectacle over thematic continuity. As usual, Leis was actively seeking solutions. He had just finished *Curados de espanto*, a play whose cast, composed of laborers linked to the Instituto Panameño de Estudios Laborales (IPEL), used forum theatre to raise awareness of child labor in Panama. A week later, I was present at the Ascanio Arosemena auditorium for what would be Leis’s final production. Funny, entertaining, and politically transformative, the piece deftly interwove elements of Leis’s general *oeuvre*. At the end, the house lights came up and two hosts came onstage. They pointed to the colored strips of paper that we had been given and asked us to raise a strip corresponding to their questions. As I note in a separate review of the production, the questions were simultaneously mundane and haunting, forcing us to concede the ubiquity of child labor as well as its social invisibility. To cite Brecht, we left having “cast our vote,” and I appreciated Leis’s use of theatre to articulate politicized relations in time, imbuing us with new orientations toward the *puestas en escena* that constitute our lives.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A sampling of posthumous tributes: Deivis Eliecer Cerrud, "Muerte de Raúl Leis conmociona a Panamá," *La Estrella de Panamá*, 1 May 2011, <<http://bit.ly/kQvac4>> [accessed 2 May 2011]; Eric Jackson, "Raúl Leis, 1947-2011," *The Panama News*, 1 May 2011, <<http://bit.ly/jDNGQc>> [accessed 2 May 2011]; "Raúl Leis," *El Universal*, 2 May 2011, <<http://bit.ly/jcaJYK>> [accessed 2 May 2011]; Eduardo Mendoza and Urania Cecilia Molina, "Despiden a Leis con homenaje póstumo," *La Prensa*, 5 May 2011, <<http://bit.ly/mD71kK>> [accessed 5 May 2011]; "Siembra comunal junto a Raúl Leis," "Otramerica," 5 May 2011, <<http://bit.ly/mfG2Er>> [accessed 5 May 2011]; Fernando Aparicio, "Adiós, Raúl Leis," *La Prensa*, 6 May 2011, <<http://bit.ly/jLq5CK>> [accessed 6 May 2011]; Héctor Collado, "Dónde está, muerte, ¿tu aguijón?" *Panamá América*, 20 mayo 2011, <<http://bit.ly/jvnNis>> [accessed 20 May 2011]

<sup>2</sup> Raúl Leis's plays include: *Viaje a la salvación y otros países* (premiere 1973, published 1974); *Viene el sol con su sombrero de combate puesto* (published 1976); *Lo peor del boxeo* (premiere 1979; published 1982); *María Picana* (published 1980); *Lucecita González, sola* (premiered 1980, published 1980); *El nido del macuá* (published and premiered 1982); *Primero de mayo* (published 1986, premiered 1986 by a Latino theatre group in Chicago); *No hay derecho, señor* (premiered 1990); *Maestra vida* (premiered 1991); *El fuego que nunca se apaga* (published 1989); *El señor sol* (published 1996); *Mundunción* (premiered 1988, published 1992); *Carta a Héctor Gallego* (premiered 1999); *María* (premiered 1999); *La cantina de Pancha Manchá* (premiered 1999); *El palo de las letras* (1998); *El puente* (published 2001; premiered 2004); *Curado de espantos* (premiered 2010). In addition to *Viaje a la salvación y otros países*, Leis received the Ricardo Miró prize for his plays *El nido del macuá*, *Mundunción*, and *El puente*, which garnered second place in the Juegos Florales Centroamericanos, Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, in 1980, and won the Tirso Molina Prize in 1994.

<sup>3</sup> See Sonja Stephenson Watson, "Black Atlantic" Cultural Politics as Represented in Panamanian Literature. Dissertation, University of Tennessee-Knoxville. Ann Arbor: ProQuest/UMI, 2005. (Publication No. AAT 3188902). 77-95.

<sup>4</sup> On his use of documentary theatre, Leis states: "Este tipo de teatro selecciona su material para caminar hacia un tema social o político. No altera el contenido del suceso sino que estructura su forma. Va hacia el pretérito con interrogantes como ¿Por qué un personaje histórico, un periodo, una época, son sepultados en el olvido? ¿Quiénes se benefician con esta omisión?" (*Mundunción* 7).

<sup>5</sup> For further information on *congo* traditions in Panama, see Renee Alexander, *Art as Survival: The Congo Tradition of Portobelo, Panama*. Dissertation, Northwestern University. Ann Arbor: ProQuest/UMI, 2005. (Publication No. AAT 3200893).

<sup>6</sup> See Frank.

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