

Dramatic Irony and Lyricism in Historical Theatre: *El pobre Franz* and *Falsa crónica de Juana la Loca*

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If we begin by defining historical theatre as those dramatic works which center on a familiar figure or incident from history, then by definition such theatre is predicated on dramatic irony, since the events and their conclusions are already known to the spectator but not to the characters themselves.¹ In general the goal of contemporary historical theatre, like documental, is to uncover the hidden meaning behind the surface appearances. The spectator already knows what happened; the play will try to present the unknown interplay of forces that prompted the action, or it will demonstrate the latent significance of that synecdochic action. Thus, historical drama inherently comprises two levels: the official, the visible, the history the audience already knows, and the unofficial, the invisible, the untold tale, often revealed in the kinesic and proxemic codes. At the same time one might expect that historical drama, because it is so explicitly founded on a presumably verifiable reality, would be more prosaic than drama in general. In fact, however, if the examples I have chosen are paradigmatic, historical theatre conversely evinces a tendency for the lyrical, poetic, and sensorial. And, I suggest that this lyricism is a direct product of the dramatic irony.

The two plays I have chosen for detailed examination are *El pobre Franz*, written by Argentine Alicia Muñoz and staged in Buenos Aires in 1983, and *Falsa crónica de Juana la loca*, written by Mexican Miguel Sabido and staged in Mexico City in 1985.² Based on Franz Kafka's letter to his father, *El pobre Franz* dramatizes both the writing of that letter and the events which led up to its composition, focusing principally on family life, such as it was, in the Kafka household. The play opens as Franz sits at his desk and composes the letter out loud while his father, from the opposite corner of the stage, addresses, not Franz but rather the audience, in response to his son's accusations. Thus, from the beginning, the audience, which presumably is already somewhat familiar with the contents of the letter, is cast in the role of judge and jury, a posture which prefigures the later dream sequence where the tribunal sits in judgment

of Franz's "impostura, hipocrecía, falsedad y cinismo" (18).³ What soon becomes apparent to the audience (although never to the major characters) is that in spite of their difficulties, dramatically at least, Franz and his father essentially mirror each other, each accusing the other and each addressing the audience in search of support and understanding as each fails dismally at communicating with the other. On some level too, Franz sits in judgment of his father in much the same way as the tribunal judges him in the dream sequence.

Structurally, the work continually moves in a triangular pattern from the composition of the letter, to the father's responses, to the reenacted events, always depicted from what presumably would be Franz's point of view. The text of the play concludes after the mother destroys the letter entrusted to her for delivery to the father. In the final moments a hopeful Franz, believing the letter has been delivered, addresses his father with the question, "¿Ahora entiendes por qué te tengo miedo?" (22), and his father responds with the question which has structured the entire work, "¿Miedo a mí? ¿Por qué?" Poignantly, in spite of all the discourse proffered there still has been no communication between the two. The Buenos Aires production, however, ended on a more positive note, for in these final moments Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* was heard while a smile spread slowly across Franz's face, leading us to conclude that even if the communication chain had been broken, the discourse at least had exorcised the father's negative influence.⁴

As its title promises, *Falsa crónica de Juana la loca* is an unofficial account of the life of the daughter of Fernando and Isabel, Juana, whom history books uniformly and casually dismiss as mad. In the Sabido play we see Juana, "la verdadera reina durante los años en los que . . . México se descubrió, se conquistó, se organizó como país" (7-8), not as insane but merely more humane and sensitive than others: in love with her husband, Felipe (a possibility unprecedented in a political marriage), horrified by Fernando's use of his own children and later hers as pawns in a political chess game, and a true believer in the Catholic faith, if not in the political abuses of the clergy. The performance opened emphatically with the sound of Juana being whipped by the monks as she, rather than horses, pulled Felipe's funeral cart--a kinesic code which provided an eloquent if indeed pathetic contrast to the linguistic code, for simultaneously the monks exalted her grandeur:

Juana Primera de Castilla.
Emperadora de las Indias Occidentales.
Condesa de Bilbao y Marquesa de Barcelona.

...

Gran inquisidora del Santo Tribunal de la Fe.
Capitana de la mar oceána.

...

Engendradora y paridora del muy amado emperador del mundo.

. . .

Heredera por su propio derecho al reino de España
Soberana de León y después de Navarra

. . .

Reina de los reinos de México-Nueva España, Filipina y Perú (19-20).

After her "¡Basta ya!" (20), the play goes on to depict her victimization as she is divested of her sovereignty and power, first by her husband Felipe, then by her father and the Church as represented by Cisneros, and finally by her own son Carlos. As the play advances Sabido employs an effective spatial metaphor, as Juana embraces a progressively smaller area. In the early scenes of the play she travels throughout Spain with Felipe's body, later she is restricted to the capital, and finally she is imprisoned in the shuttered room in the tower of the castle at Tordesillas. In the final scene of the text, after forty-six years of imprisonment in Tordesillas, Juana, nonetheless and against all odds, still prevails as she defies death and her condemners because, as she expresses it, "El que ama es el que crece, el que florece, el que permanece. El que es amado se va, no existirá, no existe ya. Yo amé" (88). Later, in a lyrical listing of attributes which parallels that of the opening scene, she describes herself as, "Fuente de amor, manantial de amor. Catarata de amor, río de amor, océano de amor. . . . Torre del amor. . . . Amor infinito. . . . Espejo del amor. . . . Estrella del amor. . . . Arca del amor. . . . Rosa del amor. . . . Puerta del amor" (88-89). The curtain closes with an inversion of the roles of the opening scene as she triumphantly whips those representatives of society who had exploited her. Patently, however, the irony is bidirectional, for we knew Juana's historical destiny all along, and her final ascendant role in this work is a direct product of literature. Her triumph no doubt rests in Sabido's re-creation of her.

The January 1986 stage production also included a brief moment of dramatic splendor which, for this spectator at least, may well be one of the most memorable in the history of Mexican theatre.⁵ Throughout the play the character, Death, a large, very buxom woman in a low cut black dress and a mask, lurked about the stage (generally on a platform upstage), even taking the lead role as the director of the political chess game.⁶ Since the figure of death is traditionally imaged as a female, only her grotesquely erotic overtones distinguished her from other death figures and attracted the attention of the audience. In the final scene of the production, in her ultimate confrontation with Death, Juana ripped away Death's mask and the front of her dress, exposing *her* as a male, masquerading as a female.

Although in both works there is an overt self consciousness (each work posits itself as discourse based on prior discourse), obviously they differ in their stance toward official history. The Muñoz play accepts Kafka's letter as the valid culmination of extratextual events and then tries to re-create those events, echoing the re-creative gesture of the letter itself. Sabido, on the other hand,

while he perhaps accepts the veracity of Juana's final madness, does not endorse the official version of that insanity; instead he offers an alternative interpretation, particularly of those events which have been officially proffered as proof of her derangement. Nevertheless, both works depict discourse, but specifically writing, in terms of a loss: Franz's letter is destroyed by the mother, lost to its addressee; Juana is lost to history, her country, and Mexico as she is effaced by patriarchal voices of authority, while the signing of her name to Fernando's document (73) occasions the loss of her sovereignty and perhaps her sanity.⁷

Nevertheless, because of the dramatic irony, that is, because the playwrights do not have to focus on communicating the events/actions to us, they are afforded more freedom of form and thus can focus more on the lyrical and artistic aspects of that moment in history. Thus, the "story" becomes not the end itself but patently a means to an end, the seed of an artistic product. The artistic techniques, the forms, the product as art, become equally the focus of the dramatic work, as is demonstrated, for example, by the use of actors in more than one role, a technique which emphasizes the non-naturalistic, the poetic license.⁸ As a result too, both the linguistic and the non-linguistic signs become less transparent, less denotative, and more connotative, lyrical, evocative. The goal of the dramatic text then is no longer mimetic but rather to make visible the invisible, and clearly the invisible can be "seen," comprehended best by means of non-intellectual, poetic processes.

At the same time, both plays center on socially marginal protagonists, whose mental stability was questionable. It is their marginality and instability which again afford the dramatists the freedom to move away from naturalism and to employ non-naturalistic techniques in their respective plays: dream sequences, plays within plays, magical rites, political intrigues dramatized as chess games, characters portrayed by dolls rather than people, etc. Since the audience accepts as a precondition that these are not "normal characters" and that their perception of events will not be typical, it condones (perhaps even expects) a more poetic, artistic treatment of them.

The lyricism which informs the plays is also evident in the simplified stage settings which provide merely a shadowy outline which needs to be filled in by the spectator's imagination. The Muñoz play proffers "un lugar neutro" (1) while the Sabido play is set in an "escenario . . . grande y oscuro como una gran caverna. . . parecería un gran yermo" (15). In both cases the spectator becomes an active force, an agent in the play, who will fill in those blank spaces, making something of nothing.

Nevertheless, the principal dramatic technique used in both plays is also the same mechanism which highlights and reinforces the dramatic irony--the narrative frame--as the two works alternate between performance and narration and structurally divide their discourse into the official and the unofficial. What both plays present is a series of framed episodes, only loosely connected except for the recurring characters but bound together by the narration. Thus, by

means of the narrative frame, both works are able to start at the end and go back (often in causal not chronological order) with that paradoxically ahistorical gesture which oftens structures the writing of history.⁹ *Juana la loca* begins with the death of Felipe which on some level is also her own death ("yo también estoy muerta / y estaré muerta hasta que llegue el día bendito de mi / muerte," 23); *El pobre Franz* opens with the writing of the letter which postdates all subsequent action. In this respect, the official rendition of the historical events manifests itself in the narrative frame, the unofficial, in the internal plays, those depicted as plays within the narrative frame plays, in the plays recognized as such. Mary Ann Caws has analyzed reading frames in non-dramatic works as a means of enhancing and enclosing the denser, more dramatic, more poetic consistency of what is enclosed within the frame (3), and surely the narrative frames in these two plays even more overtly serve the same ends. At the same time there can be little doubt that the clash of genres effected by the narrative frames parallels the clash with society as experienced by both socially alienated protagonists.

In *El pobre Franz* the sections of the letter Franz quotes provide the narrative which reminds the audience of the "historical facts,"¹⁰ sets the scene for, and comments on the coming dramatized moment. In *Juana la loca* Mariana recounts the more historical, official version of events, a narrative which provides an ironic if indeed tragic contrast to the action which unfolds in the intermittent episodes. In this case the opposition between the official and the "falsa crónica" is all the more poignant as we recognize that both interpretations of events are equally plausible in spite of their antithesis.

In both plays the continuous fluctuation between the dramatic and the narrative is emphasized particularly in the proxemic relations and in the physical divisions of the stages. In *Franz* the stage is divided into three sections: stage right delineates Franz's bedroom, locus of the production of literature, the letter; stage left is the space the father occupies as he addresses the audience directly in response to the accusations of the letter, a space designated as "un lugar neutro que sólo existe en la imaginación de Franz" (1); while center stage is reserved for the reenactment of the scenes Franz evokes in the letter. In a mirroring of the larger structure of the work, the action of these last two spaces is also framed by, indeed a product of, the space of the letter, the narrative, which paradoxically includes its own unofficial version of history (embodied in the father's imagined responses to the accusations of the letter). The result of course is a redoubling of Franz as we watch Franz as the writer and Franz as the actor in the drama which to a greater or lesser extent he imagines, externalizes, and then directs.¹¹ Thus, each of the dramatized scenes, be it the father's responses or the family life, is framed and focused by Franz's recitation of an excerpt from his letter. Our identification with Franz and acceptance of his version is facilitated by his physical proximity to the audience. This proxemic code is reversed only at the conclusion of the play, when Franz makes his final appeal to his father. During this speech, the father

is seated at center front stage with spot lights behind him. The effect is a huge shadow which is cast over the audience, making the father seem all the more gigantic and Franz, further in the background, all the more insignificant. This shadow evokes the vast range of the father's influence over Franz's life, the letter, and his subsequent writings as well as this play. Paradoxically, of course, the very writing of the letter, by making explicit and public Franz's sense of inadequacy, further magnifies the already overwhelming dimensions of the father and minimizes Franz himself, while simultaneously ever placing the father between himself and his public.

This framing technique is used with equal success in *Juana la loca* and embodied in the figure of Mariana, who, in a proxemic code that parallels that of *El pobre Franz*, generally performs from the front of the stage, somewhat spatially separated and distanced from the scene being represented, as she symbolically embraces an intermediary position between us and the action, often commenting on the latter as she does in the chess game. Many of the scenes begin with her narrative;¹² indeed the "Primera escena" opens with her formulation of the question which structures the play, "¿Y cómo fue que la reina se volvió loca?" (29).¹³ At the same time Mariana often exemplifies the voice of society, the official version of history, as is apparent in her first two speeches. In addition, she treats Juana as society presumedly has, turning her back on her (40), calling her "cochina" because she loved Felipe (40), and drawing the action to a close in the final scene, while paradoxically calling into question the official version of the story:

Y el final de la historia
fue que todos perdieron la memoria
y colorín, colorado
el cuento se ha acabado
y todos vivieron felices para . . .

. . .

¿Y vivieron felices?
¿Quiénes?
La loca era reina . . .
Todos los demás estaban . . . estamos
somos . . . cuerdos . . . cuerdos . . . cuerdos . . .
Y cuando se iba a morir
la abandonaron
y la dejaron
y la olvidaron
y la acusaron
y la condenaron.

. . .

Tenían razón. (86)

Then, in a gesture which again reflects society and history's attitude toward Juana, Mariana spits in her face three times.

But, let us consider more carefully this voice of history and examine who and what Mariana is. According to the list of characters she is "una enana, bufona de la corte" (13), a description which surely provides a commentary on this voice of authority. The stage directions which accompany her first entrance describe her as "una enana vestida de 'menina' de Velázquez [who was the *official* painter of the court]. Lleva unas flores en la mano que va arrojando al público mientras canta y baila torpemente en primer término del escenario" (21).¹⁴ Clearly, Mariana throws her flowers to the audience like her speeches, and Sabido intends for us to view her words as valueless as her flowers and as inept as her singing and dancing. Already in her first utterance, ostensibly simple, we find several linguistic characteristics which begin to draw our attention to the disputability of this official version:

Todo el mundo sabía
que la reina Juana de amor por el rey Felipe fenecía.

The irony and absurdity of this statement is apparent immediately. "All the world knew" merely signals that the basis for this truth was the gossip of the commoners, thus highlighting the inventiveness of this "truth." And, obviously, the queen did not die because of her love for Felipe; on the contrary, she lived some forty-six years longer and died of old age and/or incarceration at the hands of her father and son. The unreliability of Mariana's narrative, and thus the official version, is further highlighted in the introductory scene when immediately following Juana's "Ayyyyyyyyyyyyy . . . / y tú estás muerto . . . / muerto . . . / muerto . . ." (26), Mariana declares,

Pero la reina era la reina
la más grande de Castilla
del mundo y de Alejandría
y ella insistía
que el rey sólo dormía
que el rey sólo dormía. (27, emphasis added)

Obviously, the queen's previous speech directly negates the validity of Mariana's. Similarly, Mariana's incompetence with language, which will be apparent throughout the play, is further highlighted in the second section of her first speech:

Cuando el Rey murió
la Reina ordenó.

Que el cuerpo no se sepultara.
 Claro que la corte entera se escandalizó.
 Pero a ella no le importó.
 Pero a ella no le importó. (21)

We find not only dependent clauses separated from the source of meaning ("Que el cuerpo no se sepultara" has meaning only when joined logically with the preceding clause, not separated from it by a period) but also unnecessary repetition. These qualities become much more apparent as the play continues with Mariana's frequent repetition of a simple word or phrase ("no había, no había, no había, no había," 22). Also in the "Primera escena" Mariana mixes languages, sometimes forgets to conjugate her verbs, or conjugates them incorrectly:

Doña Juana tuvo suerte
 su padre molto quererte
 diatribus in signo tuo
 como padre amante y bueno
 don Fernando con sus hijos jugó.

*De pronto se da cuenta de que algo está mal
 en lo que ha dicho.*

No: ¿jugo? ¿jugo?

No: juagaba . . . juagaba
 juagaba . . . (30).

Surely, too, Sabido uses a kinesic code to undermine the official version, for Mariana's actions and gestures are incongruous with her words. As she describes the decay of Felipe's body, in detail, she inappropriately dances with her pandereta as if she were describing a joyful event. Later she throws flowers (symbolic words of wisdom?) to the audience as she states inopportunely, "El cuerpo comenzó a apestar" (24).

Clearly, the function of the narrative frames, in addition to the obvious --reminding the audience of the historical versions--is to demonstrate the limited capabilities of language. In each case the narrators, Franz and Mariana, are in the same position in relationship to the inner play as the audience is in relation to the entire play: both the spectators and the narrators (spectators of the inner plays) are trying to understand, trying to verbalize the visual, the experiential course of events. At the same time those narrative frames organize the referent for us and make it readable (Caws 18). The frames and the dramatic irony they punctuate force us to focus on what the dramatists consider important in a manner which is more direct than what we might have experienced without the frame. And, there can be little doubt that both dramatists, by means of the dramatic irony, call discourse itself into question.

Both plays, but particularly *Juana*, emphasize the need to see beyond language and not accept official versions quite so readily. The end result, of course, is that each of the two dramatic works, as much as anything else, comments on the status of discourse and its limited capacity to convey Truth. Franz and his father cannot communicate because neither controls a discourse which is capable of embodying a single, universal truth. In fact it is important to remember that Franz openly acknowledges in the letter that all his father's responses are creations of his own (235), which makes the father also a product of discourse, a partial truth.¹⁵ At the same time, as the letter repeatedly states and as the play repeatedly dramatizes, Franz's principal problem is that in person he is less than totally articulate. His father is apparently in complete control of the patriarchal discourse and is able to speak with authority. Franz, because he lacks these qualities, must establish his authoritative voice through the medium of the written work. Thus, his written discourse compensates for the inadequacies of real life and provides an escape from that life, as evidenced in his continual flights from the scenes with his father to his room and the letter.

In an almost inverse situation, Mariana, the voice of patriarchal, written history, is often incoherent. The express goal of *Falsa crónica* is to "rewrite" history as it were, replace the literary, historical document known as the chronicle with a new one, for Mariana, the "testigo" upon which historical discourse, particularly the chronicle, depends, proves unreliable. Ironically, however, even the new chronicle, the play, is overtly acknowledged as false, as perhaps all products of writing must necessarily be.

But, it is the narrative frame, on the side of history, which has allowed the plays within the plays to present their less than naturalistic, more lyrical versions of partial truth on which the dramatic irony is based.¹⁶

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Notes

1. I acknowledge the obvious oversimplification of both my definitions here. Volumes have been written in an effort to define irony, and I shall not attempt to repeat, refute, or reconcile those often contradictory definitions. For our purposes it is sufficient to recognize the imbalance of knowledge which is inherent to dramatic irony. At the same time it is important for us only to recognize that historical theatre centers on a specific time, place, and events, already recorded, as opposed to other theatrical forms which derive their universality from their non specificity. In this regard, historical theatre is always a rewriting or rereading of prior discourse. Thus, historical theatre cannot be interpreted apart from its historical context and/or that prior discourse.

2. Alicia Muñoz is the author of a number of plays: *El plantado*, *Ciudad en fuga*, *El año de la peste*, *La taberna del cuervo blanco*, *El pobre Franz*, and *La cornela*, many of which are based on events from history. She resides in Buenos Aires. See my interview with her for details.

Miguel Sabido has directed, created, and/or adapted a number of works for the Mexican stage. For details on his work and this play in particular, see the Introduction and the *Curriculum vitae* of *Falsa crónica*.

3. Our assumption that the audience will be familiar with the Kafka letter is based on our perception of the Argentine audience as a middle to upper middle class, well read, literate audience. In addition, in conversations with the playwright I learned the play was written to be performed as part of a celebration of Kafka. Thus, the author clearly envisioned a public which would have been most familiar with the letter.

4. Since Muñoz worked closely with the director, Ernesto Torchia, and the Grupo Taller on the production of the play, I presume that the alternate conclusion met her approval.

5. Again, since Sabido himself directed the play, he obviously felt this conclusion was an improvement on the original text.

6. Death directs this inner play (in both senses of the word) to the extent that the death of a metaphoric chess piece influences the outcome of the game.

7. After Juana signed the document, and to a greater or lesser extent, as a direct result of that signing, she was banished to Tordesillas for eleven years, a situation which might well have contributed to, if not in fact produced, her madness.

8. Sabido goes so far as to indicate which of the roles are to be played by the same actors, not only offering the most expedient use of the actors, but perhaps also positing an interrelationship among roles. Muñoz does not specify which roles are to be played by the same actors, but the fact that she foresaw this possibility is evident that the three judges who act in the dream sequence are not even listed in the cast of characters.

It is no doubt relevant too that in both plays it is precisely in the scenes of condemnation where the performance varies most from the written text. I have already noted Juana's confrontation with and exposure of Death, a moment which forms part of the scene in which all condemn her. In addition, the dream sequence in the production of *El pobre Franz* casts the mother and two of the sisters in the roles of the judges and accusers.

9. Let us not forget that history is always written after the fact, when the historian knows or believes (s)he knows the conclusion, the effect, and seeks the causes, events, which led up to that end.

10. By "historical facts" I refer to the existence of the letter and what Kafka presents as the "facts" of the situation. Again, the irony is implicit for what Kafka portrays as facts and truth and what the reader of the letter accepts as such, may be neither. I discuss this with Muñoz in our interview.

11. This redoubling of the protagonist to present him both as writer/creator and as actor has frequently functioned as an effective dramatic device. Vargas Llosa's *La señorita de Tacna* and the Grupo FYL's production of Dostoevsky's *Memorias del subsuelo* come immediately to mind. See my comments on both in "The Spring 1983 Theatre Season in Mexico," *Latin American Theatre Review* 17.1 (Fall 1983): 69-75; and "The 1984 Theatre Season in Buenos Aires," *Latin American Theatre Review* 19.1 (Fall 1985): 83-90.

12. I use the word narrative in its broadest sense, as a story or referent to be communicated. Obviously, the word is somewhat misleading since Mariana's "narrative" is in verse form.

13. The "Primera escena" begins in this manner, although that scene is prefaced by the scene of Juana pulling the funeral cart (a scene I designate as the opening scene). Mariana does not appear in the latter until after the start of the action.

14. It is no doubt significant, too, that at the time of her first entrance (21) her speeches are sometimes titled Mariana and sometimes labeled Enana.

15. This notion of the father as a creation of Franz, who verbalizes Franz's own perception of himself, is most evident in the final scene of the play. In the time lapse between when the mother offers the father the letter and when she tears it up, he, from the neutral zone created by Franz's imagination, delivers an entire speech about the letter he has not read!

16. I had occasion to see the 1986/1987 "new" production of *Falsa crónica de Juana la loca* after completing this study. The most significant, "new" aspect to the play was the elimination of the character, Mariana, whose lines were taken on by other characters, principally la Muerte. The result, of course, was quite a different play from the one described here. In a conversation with Sabido, I learned that the change was due to a disagreement between the two actresses rather than any thematic or artistic concern.

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