

The Game of Chance: The Theatre of Jose Triana

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José Triana, born in 1932, is one of a brilliant group of young dramatists who have made the Cuban theatre one of the most vital in the Spanish-speaking world today. Preoccupied with the irrational and the incoherent in human behavior, he has examined these violent characteristics in his three major plays, *Medea en el espejo*, *La muerte del Ñeque* and *La noche de los asesinos*.¹

Medea en el espejo, written in 1959 and first staged in 1960, transforms the Medea theme into a *tragedia de solar*. Triana follows Euripides closely: Medea becomes María, Jason is Julián, Creon becomes Perico Piedra Fina. The only substantial plot change is that Julián's perfidy becomes known gradually, whereas Jason's treachery is clearly established at the beginning of the play. But radical changes are made in the characters: María is a *mulata*, Julián her white lover, an unsavory individual who is planning to abandon her and marry the daughter of the local political boss, Perico Piedra Fina. Although he appears much less than Jason, of whom H. D. F. Kitto has said, "In him it is impossible to find anything that is not mean . . .,"² Julián is of the same stuff. In the conversion of these figures and the minor characters, who are a gallery of urban motley, Triana is dangerously close to the picturesque in his effort to discover something of lasting significance underlying a sordid social reality. Rine Leal has said of the play that it ". . . mostró a su autor rebajando la dignidad del coturno a la humildad de la chancleta, transformando los mitos helénicos en chismes de solar, descubriendo en nuestros personajes populares la existencia de una realidad diferente e inesperada."³

It is in the figure of María that Triana remains closest to Euripides. She is a woman all fire and passion, unthinking and uncontrolled; only her love

for Julián matters. Her murder of Perico and his daughter, the butchery of her children, are of no import. In this she is close to her source, of whom Kitto says that she was “. . . possessed of a passionate nature, quite uncontrolled in love and hate . . .”⁴ *Medea en el espejo* is the affirmation of precisely these human qualities, of the possibility of human importance regardless of social level. Triana has deliberately made María a *mulata*, Julián a fringe member of the underworld and Perico Piedra Fina a vulgar corrupt politician and slumlord because the play is an attempt to find structure, what we might call significant form, at the lowest, most abandoned levels of society. María is obsessed with mirrors, hoping to find in them her true face, the nature of her meaning. But the mirror is all surface, like her seeming reality, and she must go further. The murders are an affirmation of self, beyond moral codes. Triana has opted for what Calvert Casey calls “. . . la vía de la reivindicación del personaje como ser humano y emplea para ello el símbolo del espejo. Medea quiere verse, quiere ser ella, no la madre de dos criaturas; exige ser amada por lo que es en sí misma.”⁵

Medea en el espejo is an interesting but highly uneven play. The parody of classical tragic speech is sometimes self-defeating, and the effort to find equivalents to the Euripidean sources sometimes leads to grandiloquence and exaggeration. María, however, does fit the pattern of the tragic rhythm to an extent which is almost schematic.⁶ Her purpose, clearly enough, is the reconquest of Julián, her passion the terrible moment when all rational control is lost, and she becomes a vengeance-figure, unable to perceive the disastrous consequences of her revenge. In this failure lies her weakness as a tragic figure; there is no final revelation of the significance of her actions. But Triana has, to a considerable degree, accomplished his purpose. It would be exceedingly simplistic to say that he has created a Cuban Medea, but he has come close to showing both that Medea was a flesh and blood being and that twentieth-century flesh and blood are capable of the same catastrophic passions. He has subverted the established order by taking the ordinary, which might appear to be only a singularly sensational crime, and invested it with significance.

In December, 1963, Triana premiered *La muerte del Ñeque*. The action takes place in the same murky fringe world of *Medea en el espejo*, but the violence and criminality are here more clearly defined. The Ñeque—which means unlucky as an adjective, and evil or malignant as a noun—is the *mulato* Hilario García, who has risen, through chicanery and murder, to a position of power and influence in the corrupt police administration. His mistress is Blanca Estela, white, and a former prostitute, whom he won in a gambling game. The triangle is completed by Juvencio, son of one of Hilario's victims, who plots both the seduction of Blanca Estela and the murder of Hilario. Another triangular situation involves Hilario's white

son Pablo, who has an ambiguous attitude toward both Blanca Estela and Berta, a young *mulata* who loves him.

Triana has made good use of traditional tragic form in his effort to raise this story of the downfall and murder of Hilario to another level. Hilario is as rough and uncomprehending, and as doomed, as any Mycenaean chieftain; his house is as cursed as the House of Atreus. Hilario's total faith in his own strength is his *hybris*, and there is even a *peripeteia* as the anticipated rise to greater power is suddenly, inexplicably thwarted. Even the scene of his murder is the *sparagmos*, the ritual tearing-apart of the divine king, as the three murderers dance about a baffled and doomed Hilario. But there is no *anagnorisis*, no perception in this truncated tragedy. Hilario dies as uncomprehending as he lived, except for the dim vision that all he has believed is false.

Hoy me he dado cuenta, he visto claro . . .
 Todo es mentira. Algo que se nos va entre los dedos (p. 107)

There can be no true tragic vision because there is no tragic meaning. Hilario falls abandoned by fate as inexplicably as it had favored him. This is not the tragedy of a man upon whom the gods exact the expiation of his sins, but the tragedy of a man who falls because it chances to be so, because of what Kitto has called ". . . one of the most purely tragic situations: the Flaw in the Universe."⁷ Hilario is a flawed being, but his flaw has no relationship to his rise and fall. Pure chance rules; it has favored him with wealth, power and women, and now it abandons him.

This complex fabric is unified by three fascinating figures, the murderers Ñico, Pepe and Juan el Cojo. They are the Eumenides, the Fates, or whatever passes for these in a world without laws; in dramatic terms, they are the chorus, forever present commenting on the action. Not coincidentally, Juan is black, Ñico is white and Pepe *mulato*; they are the Cuban world, as the Greek chorus was the Greek world. But they are also the mythos of evil. Their actions sustain the tension and inexorably increase the horror. Further, they are consistently associated with games. As the play begins, they shoot dice in an atmosphere of random evil. At the close of Act I, Juvencio and Blanca Estela engage in an erotic scene as the three murderers-to-be watch from below. The lovers disappear in order to culminate their actions, and the three engage in an imaginary game of billiards, whose rapid, rhythmic and highly suggestive vocabulary heightens the erotic symbolism of the game's instruments. Act II ends on a similar note, as they dance grotesquely, burlesquing a children's game, and the climactic murder of Hilario is a horrifying echo of the same game. "Los tres personajes entran, agarran violentamente a Hilario. Luego hacen una rueda. Hilario lucha por salir de la rueda. Los tres personajes lo arrastran hasta la escalera

y allí lo matan" (pp. 126-27). And against a background of *maraca*, *clave* and *bongó*, the three smiling murderers advance singing their denial of any complicity. In one sense, they are indeed innocent, for they are only the instruments of chance, imposing the only pattern possible, a pattern of random evil.

Games have been referred to repeatedly and deliberately. The word itself recurs constantly throughout the play, and the characters regularly refer to their actions as a *juego*, just as Pablo, rejected by Blanca Estela, menaces her by saying, "Pronto hablaremos, tú y yo, frente a frente. Entonces . . . veremos. Ese es el juego" (p. 51). Specific games are used as metaphors of the sexual act and the murder, and each of the characters plays at various roles. Triana uses this insistence on games to underline his vision of this doomed house and of all existence. The murderers are addicted to games of chance because in their character of instruments of fate, they are chance incarnate. We are all toys of the gods, children playing some monstrous random game.

Triana's latest play is *La noche de los asesinos*, written in 1964 and first produced in 1966, when it won the 1965 award for best play of the Havana Concurso de Teatro Latinoamericano. It has since been performed successfully in Paris, London, the United States, Italy, Poland, Uruguay, Chile, Mexico and Argentina, and received an award at a Colombian theatre festival. The play consists of three characters who play out an intricate series of shifting relationships. Cuca, Beba and Lalo are two sisters and a brother, apparently in late adolescence, although they are described in the text as somewhat older. The first act begins with news of a murder, but we learn that the murder is a game at which these murderous children play repeatedly, and it leads into a savage parody of the adult world, in which the adolescents play out all its repugnant aspects.

As this strange game unfolds, it becomes increasingly serious, until it is a ritual preparation for the simulated murder of the parents. And suddenly the game ends, as Lalo thrusts a sharpened knife into the table. The audience is caught in this convoluted world of make-believe, uncertain whether this is a gruesome game invented by angry and frustrated children or some sort of bloody ritual dress rehearsal.

The bulk of Act II consists of the game of police investigation after the imaginary murder. The hardened attitudes of Act I slowly crumble; as the three give their testimony, the parents appear less as monsters than as confused, angry and frustrated people, much like their offspring. Abruptly, the play within a play ends. Lalo, the presumptive murderer, is shaken: "Ay, hermanas más, si el amor pudiera . . . Sólo el amor . . . Porque a pesar

de todo yo los quiero" (p. 109). But Cuca and Beba, who had been reluctant, have been hardened by their ritual ordeal; their moment has come.

Cuca: (A Beba. Entre risas burlonas.) Míralo.
(A Lalo.) Así quería verte.

Beba: (Sería de nuevo.) Está bien. Ahora me toca a mí. (p. 109)

The game has ended, but it will inevitably begin again.

In this phantasmagoria of plays within a play, of characters who shift roles rapidly, who are within a play while others engaged in the same dialogue are in their own reality, Triana has completed an enormously complex exposition of the tensions within a family. In the mad-house which is this home, all are guilty and all are innocent. *La noche de los asesinos* is a dramatic metaphor of a decaying institution, a desolated view of the relationships between generations, a great blasphemy against the foundations of society. Like María of *Medea en el espejo*, Cuca, Beba and Lalo are searching for their own faces. It is their tragedy that the symbolic murder of authority leads only to chaos. Again, it is the myth of unreason, of violent irrationality. The game of murder is a ritual ceremony, performed before and to be performed again. But this is no hollow rite from which all the substance has been removed, performed as symbolic celebration of an act long done, but a preparatory cleansing. It is ritual before the deed, rather than after, and as such, far grimmer.

As we might expect, *La noche de los asesinos* shows the same preoccupation with games as formalized structure. As Cuca says, "En esta casa todo está en juego. Ayúdame a dar los últimos toques" (p. 60). Although in its context the remark refers to the rearrangement of furniture which so obsesses them, they are also about to give the final touches to the game and to the preparation for murder. In her role as policeman, Cuca says, "No me irás a decir que todo ha sido un juego" (p. 67). It has been a game, a game which will lead to fact, as Triana constructs ever wider circles which recreate the past and prefigure the future. And again, Cuca as prosecutor speaks: "¿Qué tipo de juego tenían en la casa? (Pausa.) ¿No había en él algo . . . enfermizo? (Pausa.) Responda: ¿No era un juego monstruoso?" (p. 85). Which is exactly what it has been, a monstrous game performed by three potential murderers, just as the same ritual preparation was played out in games by the murderers of Hilario.

José Triana is no social critic in the ordinary sense. In his obsessive presentation of the mythos of violence and irrationality in Cuban life, he does not comment on economic or political problems. Rather, he is profoundly critical of moral blindness. He is preoccupied by the precarious existence of man, and his theatre is a tenacious examination of our foredoomed effort to find our own face in spite of the conspiracy of the irrational and vengeful fates.

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Notes

1. All references in this paper are to the following editions: *El Parque de la Fraternidad* [includes *Medea en el espejo*] (Habana: Ediciones Unión-Teatro, 1962); *La muerte del Ñegue* (Habana: Edics. R, 1964); *La noche de los asesinos* (Habana: Casa de las Américas, 1965).
2. *Greek Tragedy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1954), p. 198.
3. "El nuevo rostro del teatro cubano," *La Gaceta de Cuba*, II, 193 (3 junio 1963), 12.
4. *Greek Tragedy*, p. 202.
5. "Teatro-61," *Casa de las Américas* (enero 1962), 104.
6. All references to tragic rhythm are based on Francis Fergusson's *Idea of a Theater* (Garden City, New York, 1953).
7. *Greek Tragedy*, p. 10.