

The Theatre of Grégor Díaz

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The instability that has characterized Peru during the past two decades has notably affected the literary creativity and production of its writers. For some, whether fiction writers or reporters on a beat, the heavy hand of official censorship, government intervention, and a variety of socio-economic ills have constituted a formidable barrier to creativity and free expression. Some others, on the other hand, have been invigorated by these same phenomena, using them to nurture their creative energies as they elaborate a response to the national situation. The theatre has figured prominently among the most effective genres for these writers who dare denounce the bonds that wed the oligarchical government to industrial capitalists and maintain the middle and lower classes in a state of abject subjugation. Some of their dramatic works have been so well received and are so significant within the context of the contemporary Peruvian theatre that they have come to constitute the basis of what may be termed "The Newest Peruvian Theatre." These authors have no formal personal or esthetic ties, however. They are associated only by their common determination to speak out in defense of the rights of the proletariat and against the injustices of abusive social, political, and economic powers. More importantly, theirs is what Nora Eidelberg terms "didactic" theatre and has defined as one intended:

"a inducir una ideología político-social contestaria en el público ... rechaza los juegos intelectuales del teatro lúdico en los que sólo puede participar un público elitista, asidua del teatro, y dirige sus mensajes en forma directa y explícita a las masas de proletariado y del campesinado, presentándoles alternativas de conducta. La propaganda dialéctica o de agitación que manejan los teatrístas ayuda a facilitar la percepción de la realidad y a la elección de una toma de conciencia colectiva. (Eidelberg 193)

Within the context of contemporary Peruvian drama, such works are based primarily on the urban experience and reflect the reality of the mass of middle class workers who prefer to identify with the bourgeois social norms and biases, but, given their economic reality, actually belong to the proletariat.

There are at least three Peruvians who have written plays that clearly match this definition of didactic theatre during the past six to seven years. Two of them, Julio Ortega and Alonso Alegría, are well known outside of Peru for plays written before 1980 and that have only a coincidental correspondence with didactic theatre as defined by Eidelberg. Since that year, however, both have written plays which, in addition to being based on specific national events, are properly understood as an attempt to persuade the working classes of the possibilities of public response to governmental or institutional dictates. In their most recent plays, each of these writers has spoken forcefully in defense of proletarian rights and in condemnation of governmental and industrial powers that have turned a deaf ear to the common plea for socio-economic justice.¹

The third dramatist, Grégor Díaz, has been writing for the stage since the late 1960's and thus far has composed ten major works. Even though Díaz is not yet well known outside Peru, he has steadfastly cultivated his production as a didactic expression, as defined above, and few, if any, of his compatriots have equalled his success as a dramatist and spokesman for the working masses.

Díaz's first published work, *Los del cuatro*, was written in 1968 and published in Sardiñas and Radillo's *Teatro selecto contemporáneo hispanoamericano* three years later. Despite its dissemination in a textual form, the play has not been as successful as Díaz's subsequent pieces due to its excessive length. One should not be too swayed by the duration of *Los del cuatro*, however, before careful consideration of its well sustained story, its well wrought character delineation, and its usually well executed dialogues. Moreover, the play is a worthy introduction to the remainder of Díaz's production--it is profoundly Peruvian, intended as a testimonial sympathetic to the proletarian cause, and didactic. Herein Díaz is concerned with the daily reality of the lower working class, especially the pernicious circle of poverty, the lack of education, and unemployment; social vices including alcoholism and deviant sexual practices; and the distrust of authority, particularly of the government and in the work place. Besides being a reflection of the workers' reality, *Los del cuatro* is a powerful assertion that a collective response by the proletariat against the powerful rich is the only way to change the common condition. In all of his plays, Díaz demonstrates his identity with the proletariat by having his sympathetic characters include themselves and the audience in a collective "we" that is clearly separated from the oligarchical "they."

Uno más uno is strongly reminiscent of *Los del cuatro* with regard to the plays' similarities in dramatic structure, length, and *costumbrista* appeal. *Uno*

más uno takes place in an inner-city "corralón," a back alley area with many living quarters that, for all intents and purposes, is a microcosm of Peru's urban proletariat. As the numerous characters come and go, their discussions of their separate life struggles come to constitute the thematic fabric of the play--the on-going sacrifice of the nation to the whims of "they," the power brokers. Díaz clearly lays the blame for the national demise at the feet of the rich and powerful in the final moments:

Juan	¿Quién ha muerto?
Capuchino 2	¿De veras no lo saben? ¡Qué horror . . .
Capuchino 3	Antes de morir, agonizando, agregó: . . . ¡Si ustedes son a quienes más he dado...!
Capuchino 1	. . . el cura, agachando la cabeza, avergonzado, se alejó . . .
Capuchino 2	Lo mismo lo hizo el General . . .
Capuchino 3	Y el "Señor" de la Hacienda . . .
Jorge	Pero . . . ¿quién ha muerto?
Capuchino 2	No fue muerte natural . . . Han matado al Perú.
	. . .
Capuchino 3	Le clavaron muchas puñaladas. (71-72)

Even though the play is set in the early 1940's, with this final scene one can not avoid Díaz's implication that life was not better years ago, and that the death of the nation has been going on for decades.

Despite the thematic and structural similarities of this work and *Los del cuatro*, *Uno más uno* is technically superior. The latter offers the best proof of Díaz's good sense of timing and his imaginative use of stage properties. For example, his instructions regarding the use of lights and music to affect the dramatic tempo, the use of mime and off-stage voices for special effects, and even the use of a split stage to reinforce the static condition of the national welfare over the years do much to enhance the appeal of this play. Without such technical highlights, the length of the play could easily prove a detraction.

"*La huelga* constituye el primer trabajo de teatro proletario en América Latina," according to the cover of the first edition in 1972. The play is also Díaz's first chronologically, being written in 1968. A play in which the conflict is derived from the long standing clash between "we" who work to improve Peru and "they" who do not, it clearly exhorts the members of the construction workers' union as they prepare to strike against those capitalists deemed detrimental to the common good. Even with several overextended dialogues, the rather pedestrian plot, and the final scene marred by inflated patriotic speeches and symbolic excesses inherent in the workers' surrounding a bleeding Peruvian flag, *La huelga* is significant to any overview of Díaz's production because it underscores his conviction that progress toward a more

equitable society will be aided by a syndicated proletariat. It bears mention, too, that the play also evinces Díaz's concern with what may prove the most formidable barrier to such progress--incorporating into the national mainstream the indigenous serrano who has come to the city.

Meaningful public response to Díaz's artistry began to jell in 1971 with the debut of his first brief plays, *Los cercadores* and *Cercados*. These are his first works to afford an insight into the intimate problems often associated with proletarian life. As such, they go beyond the personal disinterestedness one normally expects from socio-political theatre to highlight common and adverse emotional aspects of worker reality. *Cercados*, for instance, presents a destitute, yet loving couple that is forced by unemployment to give over their child to an employed and so-called "professional" couple, obviously "they." In an effort to counter the nihilistic implications of the situation, i.e. the play's severe condemnation of societal passivity before the cause and effect of such abject misery, the final scene emphasizes the determination of the now childless couple as they struggle to improve their lot. Now allegorical representatives of the masses and swaying to "una melodía triunfal, no militar, no religiosa," they answer a factory whistle and enter the work place, the beginning of a better future.

If the second 1971 play were presented as the follow-up program piece, the utopian resolution implied by the first piece would be quickly forgotten. There is no such positive attitude anywhere in *Los cercadores*, a revealing indictment of a sexual perversion that Díaz sees to prey upon those at every socio-economic level, particularly those of the lower classes--rape. Based on the individual histories of two pregnant and unmarried secretaries, the action centers on the womens' dramatization of their rape by businessmen, "they," who left them pregnant and with only false promises of a better life. Díaz's imaginative light and sound techniques are particularly effective in those moments when, as each female relates her experience, the other assumes the corresponding male role. With *Los cercadores*, Díaz reminds us, women victimized in this fashion also are usually abandoned without support and are automatically labeled as social outcasts. *Cercados* and *Los cercadores* are closely bound by their dramatization of the real consequences of human sexual behavior, a topic seldom elaborated with candor by contemporary Peruvian dramatists. The more significant bond between the two plays, nonetheless, is Díaz's incisive commentary on the manipulation of the working class family and private sexual life by those in control of the market place. The destruction that results from the restrictions imposed by "*Los cercadores*" ("they") on "*Los cercados*" ("we") clearly transcends the individual accounts of the two plays.

There are few contemporary Peru plays as poignant or as cleverly conceived as *Con los pies en el agua* (1973). The action centers on two street urchins sitting with their feet in a cold water sewer. Theirs is a game in which they try to keep their feet in the water, to feel the different objects that drift

submerged. The real purpose of their game, however, is to have the icy water distract their attention from the hunger pains that wrack the rest of their bodies. For Díaz, the kids' game is a symbolic version of a much larger and deadly game, the one played by the society that attempts to overlook its own ills. As the work points out, the ultimate tragedy is the neutrality of "they" before the struggle by "we" to satisfy basic emotions and physical needs.

As the kids' game proceeds and they assume various roles of "we" and "they" stereotypes, the depth and breadth of the proletarian struggle is reiterated; the plight of "we" only worsens. The thematic climax comes when the kids, now convinced they are truly abandoned and alone in their struggle, accept their fate ("A lo mejor Dios ha muerto") before they die of cold and hunger. In the final moments Díaz takes good advantage of the focus on the personal tragedy to emphasize the didactic value of the play. With an ingenious use of "las luces (que) agigantan sus figuras y las multiplican por todo el escenario . . ." Díaz clearly reminds the others that there is no permanent escape from the consequences of the callous disregard of those who struggle merely to survive.

The next two plays by Díaz constitute a valuable contribution to Peruvian dramaturgy of the past decade because of the candor with which "they" question socio-economic class distinctions reinforced by institutionalized religious practices. *Cuento del hombre que vendía globos* (1975) is a brief, one-act work also known as *Clave 2 Manan* (1978). The stage action centers on the conversation of two beggars who, in the now familiar game/role swapping routine, resort to a combination of sacrilege and sexual perversity to satirize the supposed sanctimony of the rich "they" and of the pagan nature of the poor "we." The beggars insist, for example, that "they" have even changed the Bible to dominate "we" in the name of God. If their lot is to be improved at all, the beggars conclude, their only recourse is to become aggressive in their demands for social equality. Pointing out that even the Chileans are in a better situation, the beggars are convinced that they must imitate "they" and become *cercadores*. Their determination to resort to force if necessary ends the work with an unambiguous message--that revolution is a potential consequence of social inequality.

Requiem para Siete Plagas is a long, yet enticing work in which Díaz takes full advantage of religious satire to enhance his exposé of lower class reality. In order to focus on the absurdity of that reality, this play goes beyond the mundane, proletarian reality of normal social and religious values to a sub-world of sub-humans with perverted values. The action takes place in a cathedral where the mother and friends of Siete Plagas have come for his wake. The characters' perverted, indeed inverted values and the true nature of the rite to be celebrated are soon apparent when they begin a game, Santa Inquisición. The characters, all typical of the low class worker, assume stereotypical roles held by "they," those who constitute the main stream of society. The existential absurdity for those beyond the norm is clearly

dramatized as the characters, now "they," successively bring one of "we" to trial for trivial or false transgressions. As an example of the inversion of values that eventually characterizes the entire work, in the first "letargo" the mother of *Siete Plagas* is brought to trial for cursing, but the charges are changed to sleeping with her monstrous son whom her accusers now declare the son of God. The depth of Díaz's satire is not completely fathomed until the final moments of the play when the mother condemns her son to hell and then reveals how she has sacrificed her own humanity because of the love she had and could not overcome for her monstrous, sub-human *Siete Plagas*. For this reader there is no more powerful moment in all of Díaz's drama than the end of *Requiem para Siete Plagas* (1978), when the mother reveals the horrid nature and complexity of her agony:

Una madre que tiene un hijo como Siete Plagas, tiene la obligación de ser más madre. Y, cerrando los ojos, llorando . . . tomé ese algo duro de entre sus piernas y con mis manos, con estas manos que agarran esta Cruz, con estas malditas y benditas manos, le di a mi hijo la única satisfacción que podía sentir. Le acariciaba el sexo todas las noches sin importarme el insulto de todos ni la repugnancia que yo misma sentía al hacerlo . . . y loca me repetía: Padre nuestro que estás en los Cielos . . . Santificado sea tu nombre. . . . (56)

The mother's confession of her sacrifices and how they haunt her then return us to the play's final allegorical inversion. Before the curtain, all sing their praise of *El Niño Siete Plagas*. Now, however, instead of following the allegorical Biblical source, wherein the Kings render gifts of life unto the Christ child (life), the poor render gifts of despair, even violence, unto *El Niño Siete Plagas* (death).

Díaz's last two pieces return us to the more normal world of proletarian reality in Peru, yet these plays also confirm a basic shift in his dramaturgy in that they are notably brief and consciously poetic. Both dramatize society's assault on the dignity of the poor urban dweller and man's absurd isolation within his own society. *El mudo de la ventana* opens with a provocative insight into the most intimate details of the relationship between *El* and *Ella*, semi-professional workers who are childless. Díaz's emphasis is on their base, deteriorating language, their preoccupation with their own sexuality, and the materialism which thwarts the couple's spiritual growth. As the couple dress for work (a nude scene), their petty insults turn profoundly offensive as each tries to impugn the other's dignity and self-identity. In her expression of the frustration of her unfulfilled physical and emotional needs, for instance, *Ella* ridicules his impotence, and *El* her frigidity. The significance of *El mudo*... is not derived from this common fare, however, and is first hinted when the two characters, now off stage, assume the voice roles of their older neighbors.

Their conversation reveals how the neighbors' mute child is the victim of his father's abuse and rejection and, in turn, the cause of his mother's debilitating guilt (for bearing him). Until this point the work hinges on the existential irony of the relation between the two couples, that based on the desire of the first to have a child and on the regret of the second for having one. This irony is replaced by the tragedy that besets the child and is defined as the curtain closes on him, facing another day listening to the television in the young couple's apartment. The child's only consolation in life is the violence he hears on the television that Ella tunes in for him daily before she, as have the other adults, leaves for work.

El buzón y el aire (1985) brings together the best of Díaz's poetic artistry and restates the essential message of all his dramatic production. Elaborated on Díaz's familiar structure, a conversation or debate between only a few players, this work concerns a chance encounter by two representatives of the philosophical extremes in man. One is a worker who is proud of the home he has dug for his family in a sewer, and the other is a solitary wanderer whose parents left him alone with no family. The first is the social optimist who believes himself a realist, but is blind to his existential tethers; and the second has only a pessimistic view of society and as idealist roams free in search of the beauty of the natural world. The first has a hate/envy relation with "they" and has faith in the Biblical statement that the poor will inherit the earth, the second ignores "they," has no goals, and will be content to wander, as he says, "por secula seculorum." *El buzón* . . . is unlike any of Díaz's other plays because its characters are not in real conflict with society and it is not intended to resolve a defined conflict. The most clearly allegorical of all of Díaz's production, the play is best viewed as a study of separate philosophies of social conduct. The conclusion is that neither man represents an acceptable social philosophy: the worker, "we," will never alter his reality if he continues to live underground or wander aimlessly.

For more than twenty years Díaz's drama has exposed the weaknesses and the strengths of the proletariat as individuals and members of the society. Nonetheless, no one who views or reads the works of this dramatist is likely to dispute that they are of a writer committed to improving the welfare of the urban working class. In each of his plays Díaz's purpose has been to extoll the value of the common effort to improve the common lot while he presents alternative modes of social conduct to the middle and lower classes. Just as they are a sympathetic indictment of the proletariat, however, Díaz's works are undeniably a protestation. They have been among the country's most effective denunciations of those political, economic, and other institutional powers which have subjugated poor workers during the past two decades.

In addition to the thematic considerations of Díaz's production, the artistic and dramatic innovations that have come to characterize his craft deserve commendation. This is not to suggest that each of his works is an artistic gem, but to assert that in twenty years of writing he has achieved

notable success for his imaginative prowess, particularly in such areas as stage lighting. Admittedly, the first three plays (including one not dealt with here) are overly long, exude Díaz's early slavery to narrative dialogue, and are decidedly objective, save for an occasional emotional and symbolic finale. Moreover, the characters in his earliest works adhere rigidly to Peruvian stereotypes, lack convincing psychological depth, and their conflicts are somewhat pedestrian, despite Díaz's attempts to weave a web or so of suspense. Even so, these plays stand apart from most other Peruvian works of the same period due to the author's clever use of sounds, lights and stage utilities. But these enhancements only hint at the superiority of his later refinements and innovative technical creations. With *Cercados* and *Los cercadores* in 1971 Díaz earnestly begins to experiment with the technical aspects of dramaturgy and departs from the representative characters and dramatic situations that characterize his first plays. In his most recent works Díaz's portrait of the lower class workers' reality reflects a poetic sensibility that, by way of contrast with that of his previous works, is even more refined. This is not to suggest, however, that Díaz's protest motif or didactic intention also have been altered by his recent esthetic innovations. Even in his last works, *El buzón . . .* and *El mudo . . .*, Díaz still proposes a radical shift of the socio-economic structure of Peruvian society in favor of the proletariat. Grégor Díaz's theatre is still a coherent affront to those offended by its defense of the proletariat.

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Notes

1. Alegría, whose *El cruce sobre Niágara* has been well received in a number of countries for its value as psycho-drama, has also written *El color de Chambalén* (1981). The work is based on fact and begins with the recent fall of Peru as a leader in fish harvests. It dramatizes the impact of this economic setback on a fishing village and the people's battle to avert a takeover by the government.

Ortega, best known in circles such as this as a literary critic, has also written works recently that are a significant departure from his previous works of an existential nature. During the mid to late 1970's, before going to the United States, Ortega worked in Lima as a journalist for a daily that was in constant conflict with and eventually closed by the military government because it was printing "the other side of the story." A number of the newspaper articles Ortega had published on the Peruvian "revolution," as he called it, were eventually collected in his own *La cultura peruana* and thereafter formed the inspirational basis, in part, of three one-act plays. The articles and the plays are a revelation of the common struggle and suffering from the point of view of a writer who was included among "we."

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