

Politics as Metatheatre: A Cuban-French View of Latin America

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Eduardo Manet was born in Havana in 1927 but has spent half of his life outside Cuba, experiencing exile first under Batista and then under Castro. For the past twenty years, he has lived in Paris where he has written his major works of theatre. Among Latin American dramatists of the French stage, he is, as Osvaldo Obregón notes, "el que ha logrado una mejor acogida de público y de crítica" (37). Manet's use of the French language, however, cannot disguise his Latin American identity. Most of his plays reveal his Hispanic origins either directly, through their setting or characters, or indirectly, through their structure, style, or themes.

Nowhere is the Hispanic presence in Manet's theatre more visible than in *Un Balcon sur les Andes*, an overtly Latin American play that was first staged in Nice in 1979-80 and produced the following season at the Odéon, a national theatre in Paris. An exuberantly Brechtian text, ostensibly set in the mid-nineteenth century at a time of great political turmoil, it presents an episodic account of a French theatrical troupe's travels through Peru, Bolivia, Paraguay and Brazil. Manet, who delights in inventing bilingual and even multilingual dialogue, exploits this basic situation by introducing within the text extensive passages of Spanish and, to a lesser extent, Portuguese. Indeed some of the plays-within-the-play are done in French with a running consecutive interpretation to Spanish.

Although Manet has evolved as a playwright, to varying degrees his works are always metatheatrical. According to Richard Hornby, the most fully developed kind of metadrama, the play-within-the-play, surfaces when society becomes cynical. Theatre functions as a metaphor for life. If the play is but an illusion, then "by extension, the world in which we live, which also seems to be so vivid, is in the end a sham" (45). It is this full-blown approach to metatheatre, with its concomitant cynicism, that we find in *Un Balcon sur les Andes*. The dual subject, as the title suggests, is theatre and Latin American politics, or, more precisely, the theatre of politics and the politics of theatre.

We, as spectators, shall have our balcony seat to enjoy the spectacle: a contredanse of power.

If it is the playwright's intention to tear away the mask of political power and reveal the face of tyranny beneath, then metatheatre is a splendid vehicle for doing so. In his comparative overview of possible French influence on contemporary Latin American theatre, George Woodyard has correctly pointed out the persistent use of metatheatrical games in the works of many dramatists of both stages. But metadrama obviously antedates the twentieth century, and its use by Hispanic playwrights may also be readily traced to Spain's Siglo de Oro. It is the potentially subversive impact of metadrama that explains its appeal for many Latin American playwrights, whatever their country of residence. Few French playgoers recall that the late Copi was Argentine, but his corrosive 1969 text, *Eva Perón*, would doubtless never have been written by a non-Latin American. In it the title character feigns her illness and death and has an unwitting double buried in her place. The historical Evita's physical suffering is presented as a farce. Even if the spectator rejects this premise as fiction, the suggestion remains that Latin American politics is a world of sham in which the citizens are manipulated and victimized. As in García Márquez' *El otoño del patriarca*, those in power have their doubles so that they may never die. Manet, too, introduces the dictator and his double in a key episode of his complex political satire, *Un Balcon sur les Andes*.

The play consists of 44 scenes. For purposes of performance, these are divided into two parts, with the break occurring between scenes 19 and 20. The written text, however, is divided into three sections, respectively labeled "Les comédiens" (scenes 1-15), "Les politiciens" (scenes 16-26), and "Les guérilleros" (scenes 27-44). A multileveled set facilitates rapid changes of scene and, as the rhythm increases, simultaneous action. There is a Brechtian use of placards to indicate shifts in historical time and geographical location and to announce the plays-within-the-play. A small orchestra provides further narrative commentary through the varying ethnic music they play and the accompanying changes of costume.

The action begins in Paris in 1848. Erroneously believing that the revolution has triumphed, Blaise and Tarassin present a pro-liberty farce. They are imprisoned, manage to escape, and flee to South America. By scene 8, they are in Peru, and up to their old theatrical tricks. Their troupe prospers. They add local talent to the cast, begin to learn Spanish, and, in a burst of capitalist inventiveness, sell food and the services of prostitutes. But, because of the subversive content of their performances, they are in constant trouble with those in power. Like Mother Courage with her wagon, they keep moving on. They continue to do so even after their wagons are confiscated by thieving soldiers. (Instead of the traditional "Esconded las gallinas, que vienen los cómicos," the actors learn they must hide their belongings when the soldiers are coming.)

Finally the troupe falls into the hands of General Palomares, the Francophile dictator of a not-yet-existent nation. Palomares, who controls a vast amount of land, is in constant war with Paraguay, Brazil, and Argentina--not to mention the indigenous guerrillas. Tarassin (alias Tarrasco) adapts happily to the luxurious lifestyle of Palomares, but Blaise leaves, taking part of the troupe with him, and eventually joins the revolutionaries. Palomares is assassinated by Colonel Zaldívar, who replaces the general and is assassinated in turn by Gutiérrez, who is assassinated by Ramiro. Tarassin serves each general in turn, typically joining the conspiracy when the general is still a colonel, and thus is able to save his friends Blaise and Jacques when the guerrillas are destroyed. In a final scene, General Ramiro accepts the support of the United States; Tarassin, now a colonel himself, visually covets Ramiro's seat of power; and the MGM lion flashes on the backdrop screen. Versailles has been replaced by Hollywood. Imperialism, cultural or political, has shifted from Europe to North America. And the game of musical generals goes on.

Throughout *Un Balcon sur les Andes*, there is a constant interplay between the theatrical and political worlds. The former is clearly one of "let's pretend." For example, in the opening play-within-a-play, Tarassin is the king. His role in the farce is established by his costume: "Tarassin-Roi est absurdement, pauvrement habillé en roi" (15). Blaise is the queen, by virtue of his costume and the high-pitched voice he assumes to establish his character's sex. By association, the external political world is seen to be equally theatricalist. Palomares' throne is but a prop, and Zaldívar, Gutiérrez, and Ramiro can become the ruling general merely by usurping the previous dictator's uniform and medals. The transfers of power, in which each survivor in the chain of command puts on the uniform of his new rank, are handled as spectacle: a Versaillesque carnival or a ritual ceremony carried on before a bank of mirrors. Even Palomares' imposition of the French language is but a kind of role-playing, a superficial assumption of culture that can no more turn the Indians into Europeans (Palomares' stated intention, 73) than Blaise's stage voice can make him female.

As George Szanto has shown, theatre is always political, whether the political message is overt (agitation propaganda), covert (integration propaganda), or more subtle and hence thought-provoking (dialectical propaganda). Repressive regimes may fear theatre because of its subversive potential but they also tend to exploit the stage to promote their own ideology. In Manet's work, General Palomares hopes to use Tarassin's troupe to enhance his self-image. He commands Tarassin to create a text extolling his life and deeds. Tarassin, who places greater value on creature comforts--and personal safety--than on freedom of expression, is happy to oblige. He will become the dictator's double in order to play the role. But Zaldívar manipulates Palomares' script to meet his own ends; he takes advantage of the

double's presence at a public function to sequester and kill the real Palomares. The political stage is thereby set for the arrival of the new dictator.

The visual signs establish clearly that the uniform makes the general, but the equation politician = actor is given verbal expression as well. Colonel Gutiérrez explains that Tarassin has been chosen for an international mission precisely because of his acting skills: his ability to memorize texts, to create a character, to disguise himself, and to pretend. Great diplomats are, Gutiérrez says, part clown, part actor. In each country he visits, Tarassin-Tarrasco will speak their language and, as needed, lie with panache (97). To be sure, this is what Tarassin has been doing all along with the series of colonels and generals and what they have been doing with everyone. From the opening scene, the stage directions indicate the audiences for the plays-within-the play should consist in part of life-size dolls. The technique not only underscores the text's essential theatricalism but implies that the spectators of the larger political stage may also be reduced to mannequins.

In the series of episodes dealing with the generals, there is a grotesque, dehumanizing quality, reminiscent of Valle-Inclán and Goya. Palomares, for example, is described as being a little thin man with a large bald head. The dark glasses he wears are small and round, making him look like a death's head (67). (Tarassin's portrayal as Palomares' double is, of course, simplified by an appearance that is basically a mask.) In the stage direction describing the execution wall set up by General Zaldívar, Manet acknowledges the Hispanic influence when he indicates that "le souvenir de Goya est présent" (82). The ceremonies marking the transfer of power to a new general are juxtaposed with the sound of the firing squad. All of those associated with the generals' repressive regimes, including Tarassin, are subjected to the deforming effects of the *esperpento*. Whether they are playing the role of puppet or are temporarily pulling the strings, they are all *farsantes*. They are further dehumanized by the use of doubles for flashbacks and recorded narrative voices in scenes that juxtapose two moments in time. Significantly, these staging techniques are never used in portraying the guerrillas. If the spectators, like Blaise and his companions, are ultimately led to take the side of the guerrillas, it is because the revolutionaries are free of role-playing and project a humanity and authenticity totally lacking in the world of the politicians.

Clearly *Un Balcon sur les Andes*, true to its Brechtian antecedents, is political theatre. But it is also political metatheatre, that is, a treatise on political theatre as well as a political satire. Eschewing the tenets of socialist realism, Manet's text suggests both that theatre for entertainment's sake has a value and that any play, no matter how frivolous it seems, may be laden with ideological significance. For that reason, any play may prove dangerous to the health of the actors or of those in power.

Some of the defense of political theatre is directly expressed by Blaise, whose committed stance is diametrically opposed to Tarassin's willingness to

collaborate with whoever is in charge. Back in France it was Blaise who urged the agit-prop farce defending liberty and attacking absolutism. Once in South America, he promotes an underground theatre that will deal directly with the problems of the peasants; he states that such a theatre existed among the Indians before the Spaniards came (58). He later convinces the guerrillas that theatre can provide the relaxation they need after a day of battle. Everyone will laugh, and laughter will make them all feel better (94-95). Not surprisingly, he creates a script that they can easily interpret to their satisfaction: "A celui qui vole un voleur tout sera pardonné" (He who steals from a thief will be forgiven) (98).

Through the plays-within-the-play and the audience response to them, Manet foregrounds the subversive potential of theatre. Contemporary critical theory teaches us that any literary text is open to multiple readings. The dramatic text in performance is notoriously polyphonic and polycentric: a censor's nightmare. Not only may the director or actors change the written dialogue or, through other sign systems, alter its meaning, but each spectator may shift the focus and find a different message. The play is both text and context, and the context of any one performance may differ from previous ones, thus affecting the meaning received by the audience. Manet demonstrates these principles by providing examples of texts in performance that give rise to unpredictable reactions.

The agit-prop play-within-the-play in the opening scene is a case in point. The queen usurps power from the ridiculous king and proclaims liberty for the people. This is harmless propaganda as long as it is consistent with the dominant ideology. But, as the police in the audience for the play-within-the-play forcefully reveal, the dominant ideology has just changed. Yesterday's harmless propaganda is today's punishable subversive act.

The equally agit-prop play ordered by General Palomares also proves to be a text out of the control of its creator. The final curtain to his idealized biography is not one he planned. But even before Zaldívar provides his ending to the real Palomares' script, Blaise sets aside the planned dialogue relating to the fictionalized General. Arriving drunk to the performance, he begins to ad lib a satire of the dictator. The other actors, terrified, drown him out with trumpets and drums.

The meaning of any dramatic text is subject to the multiple readings the spectators may give it. Manet illustrates this polycentric aspect of theatre through clever variations on the bedroom farce: the eternal triangle of deceived husband (Tarassin), faithless wife (Blaise), and treacherous lover (Jacques). It is the "safe," non-political text that Tarassin recommends in Peru after their escape from the French prison. In their first performance, the actors discover that the Peruvian spectators do not react to the text in the expected way. They throw rotten fruit at a surprised Tarassin and shout, in Spanish, of course: "Fuera, tarrudo! Abajo los maridos cornudos! Deja joder tu pobre mujer, cabrón! Vivan los amantes! Fuera! Fuera!" It is a reading of

the text encouraged by the native interpreter: "El cobarde y asesino marido llega para golpear su dulce mujercita. Duro con él! Duro!" (38). The audience effectively imposes a reversal in the anticipated good guy/bad guy roles and the legitimacy of marriage is called into question.

Nor is the bedroom farce, epitome of bourgeois comedy, necessarily non-political. In his recent *The Field of Drama*, Martin Esslin recounts an episode in Czechoslovakia after the Russian invasion that illustrates the ever-present metaphorical overtones in any dramatic text. Czech theatre people found it unwise to stage almost anything: either their own classics or Western plays would be read by the censors as anti-Soviet statements. So they settled on the safety of the bedroom farce. "But then, when in one of the cliché farce scenes, the husband opened the cupboard and found the lover hiding there, the line: 'You have no business in my cupboard' brought the house down" (167). The eternal triangle had become a political allegory with the treacherous lover in the role of the Russian invader.

Although Manet has ties to the theatre world in Czechoslovakia--indeed it was his opposition to Castro's pro-Soviet stance in 1968 that precipitated his departure from Cuba to France--he had not heard this anecdote (Interview). By coincidence, then, in *Un Balcon sur les Andes* he exploits the metaphorical potential of the bedroom farce. In its several variations among the plays-within-the-play, the husband, portrayed as a soldier, comes to symbolize the repressive military. The wife, and, in an expansion of the cast, her son as well, are victims whose cause is championed by the heroic lover-bandit. The popular audiences identify the cuckolded husband with the soldiers they hate. Even Palomares reads the text his way; the military that is satirized is not his private army but rather the regular armies of the countries he is fighting. The stock bourgeois comedy has become an agit-prop farce open to shifting identifications of the political symbolism.

In the fast-paced *Un Balcon sur les Andes*, there are no fewer than nine plays-within-the-play, that is scenes that are wholly or partially focused on a performance in progress. As we have seen, the reception to these plays-within-the-play varies from spectator to spectator, and the plays themselves are subject to change. However, although Blaise and Tarassin create new scripts to meet new circumstances, the deep structure of Blaise's texts in particular remains more or less unalterable: the subservient individual sides with the outsider in rebellion against the oppressive authority figure (e.g. the queen joins the people in rejecting the king; the wife joins the lover-bandit and rejects the husband-soldier). The downtrodden--and freedom--triumph. The political world within Manet's text provides an inverted mirror image of this theatrical world. Politics and theatre reflect each other faithfully in the sense that each political scene is subject to different interpretations by the citizen-spectators and that the script may change (a monarchy is restored, a general is assassinated, etc.). Nevertheless, even when the geographical or historical scene shifts, the deep structure remains unalterable: power remains

in the hands of the exploiters and the people continue to be victimized. If the play is to be given a subversive meaning, the message (that is, the answer to the political mess) lies in Blaise's plays-within-the-play: it is time for the bandit-lover to unite with the people and overthrow the bad marriage with the military dictator.

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