

The Metatheatrical World of Wilberto Cantón

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In recent years, drama scholars in the United States have focused considerable attention on various aspects of metatheatre, the large majority employing critical theories established by Lionel Abel in his ground-breaking 1963 study, *Metatheater: A New View of Dramatic Form*. Abel re-evaluated important dramatic works such as *Hamlet*, and reached the conclusion that it and many other theatre pieces are "about life seen as already theatricalized," and that such plays "have truth in them, not because they convince us of real occurrences or existing persons, but because they show the reality of the dramatic imagination, instanced by the playwright's and also by that of his characters" (60). Of such plays, he added, "The play's the thing."

A large number of Spanish American playwrights have experimented with metatheatrical devices or themes, and there has been a growing interest among Spanish American drama critics in metatheatre,¹ perhaps fueled by the significant amount of work being done in the field of metafiction.² While much research has been undertaken, a great deal still needs to be done, especially in the cases of the more established playwrights, those whose works have been widely discussed critically, but not in the relatively new context of metatheatre. John Kronik provided a model for such studies in his article entitled "Usigli's *El gesticulador* and the Fiction of Truth." Here he examined a play previously discussed principally in social terms, and reached a new conclusion: that it is a piece of metatheatre which "molds the theatrical medium into a vehicle of socio-political commentary [but it] also turns inward onto itself to unmask and probe the medium that it is" (5). Following Kronik's lead and employing Abel's theories, this study examines metatheatre in Wilberto Cantón's work and shows how the Mexican dramatist developed and employed metatheatrical devices in several plays before he wrote *Juegos de amor*, an as yet unpublished piece which is a fascinating example of fully developed self-conscious and self-reflective theatre.

Wilberto Cantón (1925-1979) was one of Mexico's most popular mid-century dramatists, but he was not generally known as an experimenter, since most of his plays have been and should be classified under the heading of traditional representational realism. His dramatic output was initially surveyed in 1971 in an article by S. Samuel Trifilo, who concluded that his drama was basically of two types: 1) History plays--those employing historical settings and characters with fictional plots (*El nocturno a Rosario*--1955 and *Tan cerca del cielo*--1961), or those with purely fictional characters but set against a backdrop of widely-known Mexican history (*Nosotros somos Dios*--1962 and *Murió por la patria*--1964), and 2) Social plays--works dealing with widespread problems in Mexican society (juvenile delinquency in *Malditos*--1958 or political power and corruption in *Nota roja*--1963). Other scholars have followed Trifilo's lead and discussed Cantón's theatre, but always within an historical/social framework.³ While Cantón was certainly an inventive playwright, most scholars do not think of him as a playwright who experimented frequently with metatheatre. Beginning in the mid 1960s, however, Cantón began to incorporate devices and themes which reflect his growing interest in theatre *about* theatre, leading to a culmination in *Juegos de amor* (1976), a play which is pure artifice and flaunts its status as such.

Cantón began his path to metatheatre with simple narrative presence, similar to that in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* (1938) where a stage manager presides over the action, relating information in direct address, breaking the theatrical frame, and stepping into the world of the audience. Cantón employed a narrator in *Todos somos hermanos*, a play for children based on Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, and first performed in August of 1963.⁴ A "Pajarero" opens the performance with a direct address to the spectators, inviting them to join him in a world beyond reality: "Y si ustedes creen en la ilusión hecha realidad, con un aplauso el telón se levantará"(2). It is also an invitation for audience members to aid in the creation of illusion; reality thus conspires in the fabrication of theatre. The "Pajarero" introduces his fellow characters as they go about their business in the play, oblivious to the narrator and the audience. There is much in *Hermanos* to appeal to children and adults alike--color, lights, fireworks, simple but good people, a Scrooge-like miser/villain who recognizes the evil of his deeds just in the nick of time, music, a happy ending--in short, a marvelously entertaining piece of theatre. The "Pajarero" drifts in and out of the action, frequently explaining things directly to the children spectators or moralizing, and just as frequently taking part in the play, pretending that the audience does not exist. There are no other characters in *Todos somos hermanos* who manifest awareness of themselves as participants in an illusion or in any way draw attention away from their attempt to imitate reality.

In *Nota roja*,⁵ with the subtitle "reportaje en dos actos," first performed in October of the same year (1963), there is another character who breaks the frame. This time a newspaper reporter performs the dual function of

narrator/character. The production opens with the reporter Víctor seated on the edge of the stage, reading to the audience from a newspaper, sounding like a film narrator from a 1930s "B" movie: "Robos, crímenes, trata de blancas, chantaje, drogas: cada día la página roja marca el pulso criminal de la gran ciudad en que vivimos" (I,ii). Cantón's intent in this play is to dramatize society's corruption at the highest levels. Víctor, filling in the backgrounds of his fellow characters for the spectators, mentions the playboy son of a rich politician on the verge of becoming president of the country: "Su padre es millonario, aunque eso ustedes ya lo sabían, y también la forma en que amasó sus millones" (I,ii). By this remark, the spectators are not only drawn more deeply into the play, they are also forced to be co-creators of the work. Víctor's "ya lo sabían" clearly implies that the audience already knows the supposedly make-believe world being presented, while the "y también la forma en que amasó sus millones" extends this relationship so that explanation is unnecessary. The audience's imagination is given free rein as it is invited to invent the way in which this politician amassed a fortune, with the political reality of Mexico adding to the irony. Víctor, like his counterpart in the first play, provides information for the audience and aids in the transition between acts or scenes, then turns to play a role in the action:

VICTOR: (*Entra a escena*) Esa noche yo hacía mi acostumbrada ronda por las delegaciones de policía en busca de información . . . (*Se acerca al Agente*). Buenas, Licenciado. ¿Cómo va la chamba esta noche? (I,ii).

As is the case in *Todos somos hermanos* with the "Pajarero," Víctor in *Nota roja* is unique because no other characters give evidence of an awareness of their theatricality.

With *Inolvidable*⁶ (1961) and the one-act *El juego sagrado*⁷ (1967), Cantón began experimenting with two other age-old metatheatrical devices, role-playing and the presentation of a play-within-a-play. Eugene L. Moretta, in his article entitled "Spanish American Theatre of the 50's and 60's: Critical Perspectives on Role Playing," says that:

spontaneous forms of human conduct which could properly be called theatrical often arise in the fictitious world created by a given work. Faithful to very basic patterns in day-to-day existence, these would include any kind of behavior governed primarily by a character's effort to sustain a particular image of himself and, often, to impress it upon the perceptions of another character or other characters, who thus become his special *audience*. (5)

In *Inolvidable* the author examines five characters' abilities, or lack thereof, to control their lives. Four are members of a family hiding a great secret: an incestuous relationship between a brother and sister. As the mother, two daughters, and son-in-law unravel their histories, the audience discovers that all have lived as if they were characters in plays, dissembling not only for the benefit of those around them, but also for themselves. The fact that their lives have been theatre is emphasized visually throughout the play as Cantón's stage directions indicate that on his set "grandes máscaras cómicas o feroces cuelgan por todas partes" (I,i). As the action develops, each character takes off his mask, sheds his role, and reveals a truth.

Marcela, who slept with her brother, Damián, has a long scene with her mother, Gertrudis, where each takes off her disguise and tells a secret: Marcela, that she and her brother had consummated their love, and Gertrudis, that her love and jealousy had driven Damián to suicide. Ana, perhaps the most interesting character, long ago realized that her husband, Jacinto, has remained with her only because of his hopes of receiving a huge inheritance when her mother dies. He has played the role of devoted husband, complete with cloying, well-worn, and well-rehearsed endearments such as "venadita." Ana's role-within-a-role is that of a loving, gullible child, her means of avoiding the truth. She has decided that denial of a harsh truth for the sake of an attractive fiction is the only way she can survive; thus, theatre on a daily basis is her reality. As she acts in the play as witnessed by us, Cantón's audience, we can see that she has created another role for the benefit of herself and her fellow actors, her audience. Like the stage on which she plays her double role, she displays masks, one for *her* play and another for ours. When she is finally forced to acknowledge the truth about her husband--that he had once attempted to seduce Marcela--Ana responds by shedding one of her masks for a brief moment. She steps out of one character and into another, stating:

No puedo volver a empezar. Ya estoy vieja y sé que en cada vida sólo puede lograrse una cosa real, verdadera. Para mí ha sido Jacinto. Por el cerré los ojos y acepté todo, para no perderlo; he tratado de ser eternamente la niña que él conoció, para gustarle; renuncié a pensar y a juzgar para quererlo. Por eso prefiero creer que no es cierto lo que dices, Marcela. . . . (III,ii)

This is her final comment in the play. She has chosen which role she wishes to continue, which mask she wishes to wear. Her "sé que en cada vida sólo puede lograrse una cosa real, verdadera" is a realistic creed, but in the play she has created an illusion, herself, in order to gain a reality, a husband. Jacinto, ever desirous of obtaining the inheritance, also returns to his role, even after delivering such frank lines to his wife as "yo siempre te he odiado, venadita" (I,iv). Both characters choose to continue their daily theatre.

Marcela and Gertrudis, however, stop their acting and return to their authentic selves.

El juego sagrado contains only three characters, but all play more than one role in several plays-within-a-play. Instead of masks on the set as in *Inolvidable*, a metaphorical reminder, Cantón's blatantly theatrical elements here are costumes, props, and makeup. His lengthy and detailed stage directions at the beginning underscore the highly theatrical nature of the play we are about to witness:

¿Qué edad tendrá Bella? Sería difícil adivinarlo al verla ahí, sentada en el suelo, en medio de viejos juguetes de niño: ositos de peluche, caballitos de madera, un tren de cuerda. Su rostro, excesivamente maquillado encima de las arrugas, es ya una máscara coronada por su revuelta pelambre rojiza, de un tono inverosímil.

A su alrededor, suntuosos muebles, cuadros y espejos, venidos seguramente de otra casa mucho más amplia, se amontonan en las paredes de este apartamento modesto, refugio de una riqueza decrepita. (41)

June Schlueter, in her study *Metafictional Characters in Modern Drama*, discusses the set in *The Ride Across Lake Constance* by Peter Handke. Her comments concerning his play perfectly describe the situation in *El juego sagrado*:

Within moments of the play's opening . . . it is clear that the carefully arranged furniture is not before us because [the playwright] wishes to create an impression of realism, but rather because he wants to undercut the impression, for in the central context of [the author's] unrealistic drama, the realistic drawing room quickly becomes precisely what it is: an obviously artificial stage set. (109)

Bella appears to be an aging actress, seated backstage, surrounded by old props and theatrical clutter, and we are thus prepared to view a play about playing, illusion, and reality.

As the action of Cantón's drama begins, we see Bella and Manolo, her husband, in the roles they have enacted for thirty years. Bella once had a lover, Gerardo, who left her for another woman. In an attempt to induce him to return, she allowed their son to drown in a garden pool. Gerardo did not come back and Bella stopped time; she replays her scene every day, pretending it is June 12, 1932, and Gerardo is due back that night, according to her prop--his note of that date. Manolo has continued to love her and allowed her to direct him as an actor in *her* daily drama. Shortly after the opening of the play *we* are watching, Manolo assumes the role of director and puts on his

own play. He is aided by the arrival of a third actor, a young census-taker in our play. As he enters, Bella thinks he is Gerardo in her play and leaves the stage to put on makeup and change her clothes. In her absence, Manolo strikes a bargain with the man. He will fill out the government forms if the census-taker will assume the role of Gerardo and read the lines in Manolo's script. After he agrees to the role, he expresses his lack of confidence: "Es un papel difícil el que me señala; no sé si podré representarlo." Manolo responds: "Tómelo usted como un juego . . . una escena de teatro, un capítulo de novela" (48). Thus, three plays run simultaneously from this point forward:

1. Cantón's play, *El juego sagrado* (I have not mentioned the obvious use of the word "juego" and its possible connotations.)
2. Bella's play, which we might call *The Return of Gerardo* or, borrowing from Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, *The Long Delayed But Always Expected Something That We Live For*.
3. Manolo's play, perhaps entitled, *Let's Quit Playing*.

As all three plays run, their separate actions begin to merge. As Bella assumes her role and relates her plot, she reaches her final scene in which she must kill her Gerardo and then herself because of their mutual responsibility for the child's death. Manolo, who has no role in her play, but who has remained nearby to prompt and direct the census-taker as Gerardo in his play, must intervene to prevent her from killing the young man in everybody's play. Bella's dramatic creation ends as follows:

MANOLO: ¡Basta, Bella, baja ese revólver!
 BELLA: (Como despertando de un sueño, obedece y aprieta el revólver contra su pecho.) Gerardo.
 MANOLO: (Al joven.) Por suerte llegué a tiempo.
 JOVEN: Gerardo no merece vivir.
 MANOLO: Pero usted, sí.
 JOVEN: ¿Yo? Por un momento creí ser la encarnación de su fantasma.
 MANOLO: Aquí tiene sus papeles. (Se los da.) El censo está hecho. (Va a la puerta y la abre.)
 JOVEN: El inventario de la realidad.
 MANOLO: Nosotros seguiremos nuestro sueño.
 JOVEN: (Ya en el umbral.) ¿Dónde termina la realidad y dónde comienza el sueño? (52)

This also ends Manolo's play, and we are left with only *El juego sagrado*, which also ends with Bella and Manolo assuming new roles in yet another play. Bella sets the scene for Manolo and for us:

- BELLA: (*Brillante.*) ¿Qué importa el tiempo, Manolo? Sigamos soñando. Tú tienes veinte años. Eres eternamente joven. Y bello. Y alegre. Y encantador. Estamos en Viena. Nos amamos. Somos felices. Voy a traer champán. Le pediré a la orquesta que toque un vals. El más hermoso vals que haya escuchado el mundo. El vals que tú y yo bailaremos por toda la eternidad. (*Sale.*)
- MANOLO: Sí, Bella. Por toda la eternidad . . . ¡en nuestro sueño deslumbrante! Espérame, Bella. Iré contigo. ¡Seguiremos juntos! (*Suenan dos disparos fuera de escena.*) (53-4)

Cantón's debt to Calderón's *La vida es sueño* is profound. Like the great Spanish dramatist, Cantón reveals the force of our illusions and makes us aware of the tenuous grasp we all have on the "reality" we create.

In *Todos somos hermanos*, *Nota roja*, *Inolvidable* and *El juego sagrado*, Cantón created metatheatrical devices, situations, and characters. But these plays are still essentially *about* something, or, put in a negative way, not about theatre. The subject is something else. Unlike these works, *Juegos de amor* is pure metatheatre. Lionel Abel makes the following statement illuminating this distinction. He says that in metatheatre, plays are:

. . . about life seen as already theatricalized. The persons appearing on the stage . . . are there not simply because they were caught by the playwright in dramatic postures as a camera might catch them, but because they themselves knew they were dramatic before the playwright took note of them. What dramatized them originally? Myth, legend, past literature, they themselves. They represent to the playwright the effect of dramatic imagination before he has begun to exercise his own; on the other hand, unlike figures in tragedy, they are aware of their own theatricality. (60)

Juegos de amor exists in two manuscript versions, the earlier one bearing the intriguing title of *Soledad de dos en compañía*. The later version includes a subtitle, "Juegos matrimoniales." In both titles and in the subtitle, the use of "juegos" and "en compañía" reinforces the theatrical element, reminding us that the spectacle is not "real" in the sense of representationally realistic. Rather, it is a game, and/or a play, with rules, players, and conventions of its own, recognized not only by the spectators, but also by the actor/characters themselves. Cantón further emphasizes the theatricality of this work when he insists in the stage directions that ". . . la escenografía no deberá intentar una reproducción meticulosa, sino recordar a los espectadores que se encuentran en un teatro . . ." (2).

The only two characters, referred to in the cast list simply as "El" and "Ella," play numerous roles: she interprets seven, he does six. Again Schlueter's comments on Handke's theatre prove useful. The German playwright does not give his actors fictive names, because, according to his stage directions, they are and play themselves at one and the same time. The result is:

that there is none of the usual consciousness on the part of an audience of an actor's assuming the part of a character for the sake of performance. Here we are viewing an individual who at the outset possesses no prescribed role identity. We are actually witnessing character-in-the-making. (114)

As *Juegos de amor* begins, we see that Ella is preparing to leave El during his absence, but his early return surprises her. Her comment is the first of many which make direct reference to their existence as actors on a stage: "Hemos jugado mucho. Es tarde. Los niños tienen que regresar a sus casas" (3-4). Very shortly afterwards, she turns to the audience and says:

Señoras y señores: Siento informarles que por un pequeño error, no verán ustedes el final que estaba previsto. Mi compañero anticipó su entrada (eso suele ocurrirnos a los cómicos) y la gran escena no podrá realizarse. Mis disculpas. (*Hace una caravana burlesca.*) (4)

Throughout the performance of the play, the actors refer to themselves as actors, comment on their dialogue, discuss their costumes and makeup, criticize the plots in the plays they compose and perform for each other, direct one another, sing, dance, engage in mime, confer about television, theatre, and films, and make references to theatrical figures such as Stanislavsky and Brecht. El and Ella also deceive one another by lying, hiding their emotions and punning; they try to hurt with accusations, insults and criticism of acting ability. As Michael Roloff observed about Peter Handke's characters, El and Ella also:

discover who they are onstage in terms of each other, give each other identities, play identities, are captured by their identities--their identities become their roles or vice-versa; are held together by the relationships they establish with each other--which at first are only a playing, but into which they get locked. (165)

Near the middle of *Juegos de amor*, El and Ella, now calling themselves Ariel and Isela, re-enact the separation scene with which the play began, but he returns, just as he did in the beginning. After more acting and playing,

they conclude the drama by revealing their hatred for one another, and he announces another departure. She responds to his threat with the following, the first part a commentary on the actor/audience relationship in the theatre:

No puedes irte. Nos necesitamos. Somos los espejos paralelos. Yo sólo existo porque me reflejo en tí. Tú sólo existes cuando miras en mí--tu imagen. (*Pequeña pausa.*) No te irás, ¿verdad? Yo sé que no te irás . . . ¿qué tienes, Ariel? ¿Por qué no contestas? ¿Ya no quieres jugar? (81)

He counters with: "No puedo más, Isela. Siento que me pierdo en este interminable juego de espejos . . ." (81). He exits, but she continues to speak as if he were still on stage. As she gradually becomes aware of her solitude, she calls out: "Ariel . . . Ariel . . . vamos a seguir jugando" (82). The play has stopped. After a long pause during which she is alone, saying nothing, listless, in fact not existing, the doorbell rings. Suddenly, as her fellow actor returns, she springs to life. She runs to the door and opens it, repeating the play's final line: "Entra. Vamos a seguir jugando" (83).

The drama ends as it begins, with the two actors playing and replaying their roles in the only script they know. Caught up in the circle of acting out their story, they have no existence except a theatrical one. As Abel states: ". . . the revels have not ended. The action continues. Illusion and reality cannot be separated; they will continually change places, and be the Same to the Other, the Other to the Same" (82). Cantón has shown us a theatrical *mise en abyme*, merely *one* reflection of an endless series of mirrors, each reflecting an image of itself. The characters were theatricalized before the audience saw them and will continue to be theatricalized long after the spectators are home in bed. *Juegos de amor* is pure theatrical artifice which struts and frets for a while, pauses, then resumes its strutting and fretting.

So ends Wilberto Cantón's flirtation with metatheatre. Beginning in 1963 with simple devices in *Todos somos hermanos*, he started a long experiment. The first tentative forays into a metatheatrical world in *Todos somos hermanos* have become an all-out exploration of reality and illusion's role in it by the time we encounter *Juegos de amor*. Abel's question about characters, "What dramatized them originally?" is intriguing, and his response may hold the key to this last play: "myth, they themselves" (60). El and Ella, in the footsteps of previous characters, write a script, cast themselves in it, assemble props, costumes and makeup. In every sense they are the creators of this work. Circular dialogue and action, the ending which returns to the beginning which is also an ending, place the play firmly in the realm of cyclical myth. Playmaking here returns to its ancient ritual origins. The participants re-enact roles which are unchangeable, but which alone bring them to life.

Notes

1. See Ronald Burgess, "Willebaldo López: Mexico on Stage," *Latin American Theatre Review* 14.2 (1981): 27-39; Daniel Zalacaín, "Los recursos dramáticos en *Soluna*," *Latin American Theatre Review* 14.2 (1981): 19-24; Gabriela Mora, "La dama boba de Elena Garro: Verdad y ficción, teatro y metateatro," *Latin American Theatre Review* 10.2 (1983): 15-22; Denice M. DiPuccio, "Metatheatrical Histories in *Corona de luz*," *Latin American Theatre Review* 20.1 (1986): 29-36; and Becky Boling, "From Pin-ups to Striptease in Gambaro's *El despojamiento*," *Latin American Theatre Review* 20.2 (1987): 59-65.

2. See, for example, Robert Alter, *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975); Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1980); and Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1984).

3. See John F. Tull, Jr., "El mundo teatral de Wilberto Cantón," *Duquesne Hispanic Review* 6.2 (1967): 1-7 for another historical/social survey of a half-dozen of Cantón's plays; Robert L. Bancroft, "The Problem of Marcela's Future in Cantón's *Inolvidable*," *Romance Notes* 14.2 (1972): 269-274 for a discussion of morality in the author's works, focusing on his controversial 1961 play with a prostitute as protagonist; Roberto M. Assardo, "Temas existencialistas en *Nosotros somos Dios* de Wilberto Cantón," *Caribe* 2.1 (1977): 33-46 for a traditional critical treatment of the author's most popular play; and my "A Curriculum Operum of Mexico's Wilberto Cantón," *Latin American Theatre Review* 13.2 (1980), a 63-item catalogue of the author's theatrical and literary accomplishments.

4. Performances at the Teatro del Bosque, directed by Clementina Otero de Barrios. A review by Rafael Solana is included in his book *Noches de Estreno* (México: Ediciones Oasis, 1963): 345-347. To my knowledge, the play has never been published.

5. Made its debut October 17 at the Teatro Milán in Mexico City, directed by Fernando Wagner.

6. Although performed in April of 1962 in Buenos Aires, it did not appear in Mexico City (perhaps because of the incest theme) until August of 1970, revised and with a new title, *Unas migajas de felicidad*, at the Teatro Granero, later moved to the Tepeyac.

7. In a letter to me dated 23 March 1974 Cantón wrote: "En el próximo mes de mayo, según me han escrito, se presentará en Nueva York, en español, mi obra en un acto, *El juego sagrado*, junto con otras dos piezas breves de Carlos Solórzano y Sergio Bodanovich [sic]." My research has not yet revealed that this performance ever took place.

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_____. *El juego sagrado*. Included in *12 obras en un acto*, edited and with a prologue by Cantón. México: Ecuador 0^o 0^l 0^{ll} [Revista de Poesía Universal], 1967: 39-54.

- _____. *La soledad de dos en compañía*. Manuscript on file at the SOGEM (Sociedad General de Escritores Mexicanos) Archives, Mexico City. Registered 16 julio 1973.
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