

Three Plays of Egon Wolff

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Egon Wolff, a Chilean playwright of German descent, began writing plays in 1956 when he was thirty years old and a practicing chemical engineer. In the relatively short period between the appearance of his first plays in 1957 and the present time he has won popular and critical recognition that places him among the most important contemporary Spanish American dramatic writers. A brief consideration of Wolff's bibliography will illustrate this recognition.

Wolff's first two plays, *Mansión de lechuzas* (anthologized in *Teatro chileno actual* in 1966) and *Discípulos del miedo*, won honorable mention in the yearly competition sponsored by the theatre of the University of Chile in 1957. Both plays were produced the following year, and in 1959 *Discípulos del miedo* was awarded the Premio Municipal de Literatura. *Parejas de trapo*, produced in 1959, is cited by Domingo Piga in *Teatro chileno del siglo veinte* as the most popular contemporary drama by a national author. *Parejas* . . . also won the Primer Premio in the competition of the Teatro Experimental, the group that had awarded first mention to the two first plays Wolff wrote.

In 1959 the Teatro Experimental reorganized and changed its name to the Instituto Teatral de la Universidad de Chile (ITUCH). The next mention Wolff received from this group was an honorable mention granted to *Esas 50 estrellas* in 1961. (The earlier title, *Esas 49 estrellas*, was updated after Hawaii acquired statehood.) In 1962 Wolff was in the United States on a scholarship. During that year his play *Niña madre* was produced both in Chile, by the theatre of the Universidad de la Concepción, and by Yale University. In 1964 *Niña madre* won the Premio Municipal de Literatura—Wolff's second—and according to Gabriela Mora's recent article in *Revista*

Interamericana de Bibliografía, the play was published in 1966 by the Instituto Chileno Norteamericano de Cultura in Santiago, Chile. The last entry in the *Teatro chileno . . .* bibliography is *Los invasores* which was produced in 1963 and anthologized in Carlos Solórzano's *Teatro hispanoamericano contemporáneo* in 1964. In 1965 *Los invasores* was staged in Lima, Peru, and in Santiago de Cuba, making it the most widely diffused of Wolff's plays, and strangely enough the only one of his plays not awarded a critical prize by the date of publication of *Teatro chileno actual*, 1966.

We are indebted to Señor Wolff himself for information about his most recent work. In a letter to this writer dated January 16, 1969, in response to the question, "What have you written lately?" Wolff responds: "What have I written lately? Many things. I am a person who cannot live away from the keyboard of his machine. . . . I think that I must have at least six or seven finished or half-finished works lying around here, maturing. Dying? I'm not sure, unfortunately, and that is the misfortune. While I feel this way, they will stay here."

One work that did escape such implacable judgment and which elicited a warm critical reception, is the two-character play, *Flores de papel*. Wolff says that the play has been described as "hair-raising." Wolff's reaction to this comment is "I don't understand what they mean. Perhaps I have a 'hair-raising vision of life.'"

Another completed play that Wolff mentions is *El sobre azul*. The title refers to the blue envelope handed an employee at the time of his severance from his employing company. I have not yet seen the play, but Wolff describes it as a satire in which it is his intent "to censure . . . all those who take business too seriously—the 'serious fools' of finance—who are here more bountiful than money itself. You know; the smaller the peddler, the bigger the voice. It is a work that takes place during a continuing pandemonium of mutual accusation, distortion of truth, unexpected situations, and empty rhetoric. It ends in complete madness. I laughed a great deal while writing it. . . . Or could it be that laughter sounds a little like crying?"

These nine plays, in my understanding, comprise the body of Wolff's theatre, the completed, published, or produced plays. What kind of theatre is it? Are there any salient characteristics that justify one's speaking of "Wolff's theatre"? Are there recurrent themes, preoccupations, or attitudes? For the purpose of suggesting some answers to these questions, we are going to consider three of Wolff's plays: *Mansión de lechuzas*, from Wolff's earliest writing, *Los invasores*, which comes exactly in the middle of his production, and *Flores de papel*, his most recently produced play. In addition, we are fortunate in that we may consider some of Wolff's own comments on what he hopes to achieve in his theatre.

In the *Sobre mi teatro* section accompanying each of the plays in *Teatro chileno actual*, Wolff states that "it doesn't matter whether one has sought

laughter or pain, complaint or absurdity in order to bring an idea to the stage; what must endure is that 'I feel—I understand' that accompanies the spectator on his way home. . . . My understanding of theatre is that it is an enormous effort for human communication. . . . I am interested in those characters that have within themselves the stature, the depth, the 'voice-within' that will permit them to undertake the difficult task of attempting to work their way out of their states of conflict. . . . In short, I want characters that are equal to the height of the conflict." In addition, Wolff states that "there no longer exist any new ideas to be expressed on the stage. . . . What is important is to take a common emotion, a complaint, the rebellion that throbs in the multitude of individuals who go to the theatre, and give it shape in a real situation. . . ."

Wolff is obviously primarily concerned with the expression of ideas, although he specifically decries plays that "are like intellectual hothouses in which ideas struggle in vain to reach the air." *Mansión de lechuzas* develops the conflict between generations, the nearly crippling effects of protective maternal love upon two teen-age sons. *Los invasores* explores the inevitable destruction of a bourgeoisie indifferent to the social conditions surrounding it. *Flores de papel* again focuses on a process of destruction, but more narrowly this time on an individual rather than a social class.

Between the first of these plays and the later two, in spite of Wolff's continuing interest in expression of ideas, there has been a shifting of mode of expression, a simplification and refinement. The elegantly balanced symmetry of *Mansión de lechuzas* has in the later two plays been compressed into a stronger and more effective channeling of dramatic tension. This modification has been intentional on Wolff's part. In the letter previously referred to, Wolff says, "The only thing I can tell you is that everything I said in the book you know [*Teatro chileno actual*] is still valid, almost in its totality. I still believe that the communication of ideas, the mutual interchange of illuminating sensations in a room submerged in darkness, is one of the enchanting miracles of theatre. There has been, nevertheless, an evolution in my work since the days I said that. . . . Now I believe a little less in the possibility of undertaking great moral preachments on the stage. As the years go by the human being seems every day less the product of a formation made by ideas, and every day more the consequence of his own existence, free of influences, free of direction. The theatre of conflict, therefore, is disappearing from my work. . . ."

In spite of Wolff's intelligent appraisal of his own work, I would amend that last statement to read that it is not so much that conflict has disappeared from his work, but that the focus has shifted from conflict between ideas to conflict between individuals, the conflict that inevitably results in any situation where the interests of two or more persons or groups of persons are involved. In the early play the conflict is an abstraction which has been

given characters to work out. In his later plays Wolff is more concerned with people in a situation of conflict. And this change of focus, or shift of emphasis, has been beneficial to his work.

As an example, *Mansión de lechuzas*, with its definite Gothic overtones, must have been contrived as a vehicle for the expression of a conflict. It is carefully conceived. The balance between the old and the new is perfectly maintained, the elements of the conflict are equal. The disintegration of the gardening equipment necessary for economic survival, the decaying condition of the old house, is paralleled in the stultification and suspension of life within the house; the encroachment of lower middle class houses upon what were once spacious formal grounds is paralleled in the menace the outside world poses to the isolation that Marta, the play's mother figure, is trying to conserve as a shelter for her two sons. The weak point of the play, though, is that the tension as it is developed by Wolff hardly seems worth the source of that tension, which is Marta's desire to protect her sons from the knowledge of their dead father's true character. Since the situation seems somewhat artificial, the author must resort to exaggeration for heightening a tension that does not develop naturally, given the situation. The mother, therefore, is seen attempting the impossible; she makes exaggerated efforts to prevent the intrusion of the outside world upon the fictitious one she has tried to create. The boys' innocence is exaggerated to a degree that seems unrealistic in the twentieth century; then finally, too easily, all the energy and crisis of the play are discharged through the simple revelation of the truth about the father by an outside, offstage, character. What emerges after a careful consideration of the play is the impression that the characters are in service to the idea expressed by the author.

In *Los invasores* on the other hand, the idea expressed is still of tantamount importance—an indifferent bourgeoisie is nurturing the source of its own destruction—but the manner of expression has changed. The tension, the *drama* of the play, is expressed *through* the characters, not merely *by* them. The conflict embodied in *Los invasores* lies between social groups. The invaders are the poor, the invaded are the well-to-do; the inevitable victors are the invaders. Wolff develops his theme through the medium of some powerful characters. Gabriela Mora mentions that these characters represent ideas, not persons. She allows that they are human enough to be convincing, but believes that each is really a symbol of a social class. The Santiago industrialist Meyer and his pampered wife are, it is true, typical members of a very comfortable bourgeoisie and their two children—the girl a continuation of their own type, the boy a reaction to it—are typical contemporary characters. The vicious Alí Babá is similarly typical of a constantly more actively rebellious lower class. But the fact that these characters are typical does not necessarily make them only symbols or stereotypes. Meyer expresses opinions that make it difficult to decide if one's sympathies

are with him or against him, and it may be precisely because each of the family group is so familiar to us that each seems so realistic. The two remaining principal characters especially are just the opposite of stereotypes. Toletole, the sad little clown, and the ambiguous China are magically real characters; China is never really defined, and the development of the play lifts both characters into the world of the unreal. It is the mystery of China and Toletole that makes *Los invasores* such a powerful play. They lead the spectator from a realistic world through the progressively more disjointed and disorganized reality that creates the special quality of the play. The discovery that the reality perceived has been a dream-reality underlines and emphasizes the terror of what is to come. The end of the nightmare is not an end; it is only the beginning.

In *Flores de papel* Wolff again considers the intrusion of a terrifying invader into a world that was until that time relatively secure. There are only two characters in this tightly organized play, a thin, dirty tramp, "El Merluza," and Eva, a rather elegant, middle-aged woman, living alone. As in *Los invasores* the play's line of action leads toward destruction. The action takes place within the boundaries of Eva's comfortable, immaculate and feminine apartment. There is little reference to outside events. The confinement of the arena of the play echoes its narrow focus. For reasons that are first compassionate, and later more complicated, Eva invites "El Merluza" to stay in her apartment after he has carried home bags of groceries for her. During the course of the play the guest/invader assumes a position of mastery in the relationship established between the two characters. The span of the play marks an exact reversal of roles. This is a theme that has appeared intermittently in twentieth-century theatre. What is particularly interesting, however, is the fact that the indigent, shattered "El Merluza" does not raise himself to the comfortable middle class position available to him through Eva, but instead drags her down to the complete social and personal disorganization of his own situation. This is the most terrifying element of *Flores de papel*; neither the guest/invader nor the host/invaded survives the invasion with any remaining trace of civilization. The destruction is complete.

Wolff employs a very interesting unifying symbol in the play, the paper flowers of the title. Using old newspapers "El Merluza" early in the play fashions beautiful flowers and animals as gift offerings in return for Eva's kindness to him. As the action develops the always more carelessly made ornaments gradually displace Eva's carefully chosen furnishings until the setting of the last scene depicts a shambles: furniture has been torn apart and nailed and bound together again in haphazard fashion, floor lamps are hanging from the ceiling and those which were hanging are standing on the floor. There are crude drawings and graffiti on the walls. A proliferation of paper flowers, singly, in chains and garlands, covers the walls, ceiling

and floor. As the play ends "El Merluza" has exhausted the possibilities for destruction in the apartment and is instructing a disoriented, bewildered, subjugated Eva about the dangers of the river's edge shanty town where she is to exist—one cannot say "live." As last evidence of Eva's degradation, "El Merluza" has jammed an enormous, shabbily made paper flower into the neckline of her ragged dress. It is so large that its petals cover her face. Eva has been completely erased.

Wolff is a very careful craftsman. The symmetry of *Mansión de lechuzas*, the circular construction basic to the concept of *Los invasores*, and the unifying symbolism of the paper flowers in *Flores de papel* are eloquent testimony to the precision with which Wolff shapes his dramas.

In regard to the content of the plays, three continuing preoccupations may be observed. The first is the need of the human animal to be loved. Andrés, the elder son in *Mansión de lechuzas*, representing his mother and isolated by her from normal emotional outlets, is depressed to the point of self-destruction when deprived of fulfillment of this basic human need. Toletole, in *Los invasores*, exists, one feels, only on the strength of her love for China. But the strongest illustration of the need for love is found in Eva. It is her loneliness, her openness and receptivity to the possibility of a fulfilling relationship, her terrible need, that creates the situation that destroys her. The fact that she is destroyed, that she cannot prevent herself from being destroyed, simply reinforces the strength of the need.

The second recurrent theme of the three plays is that of the destruction of the old (status quo) by the new. Marta's illusory past glory gives way to realistic compromise. The bourgeoisie in *Los invasores* is crushed under the relentlessly advancing poor. And Eva's way of life is destroyed to be replaced by a new and terrifying existence.

The third, and most important, theme is Wolff's continuing exploration of our social reality and of the absurdity and illogicity of what happens in this reality. This theme is, of course, inextricably linked with the second, the destruction of the old by the new. There is an almost text-book progression of treatment of this theme in the three plays discussed. In *Mansión . . .* the entrance of "that outside" into the world of the play is seen as a healthy thing. What is dead was within; life enters with the world. The message of *Los invasores* is somewhat different. Life is without. What is within may be only illusion. If one chooses illusion over truth, he is choosing his own destruction. The established world may have been invaded against choice, but the implication is that if one then chooses truth over illusion there may still be time for a satisfactory accommodation between the two worlds. The resolution hinges upon the choice. In *Flores de papel*, however, the possibility of choice has been removed. One has waited too long. Along with the possibility of choice, logic and order have also disappeared. Eva does not really choose to invite "El Merluza" to stay—she is powerless to do

otherwise. The deck is stacked against her. She does not will her destruction, but neither can she prevent it. The invader, once inside, destroys what he has won and all that is left are two invaders where there had been only one.

Wolff's warning is very clear. He is in agreement with Beckett, Ionesco, and Pinter. We are living in an illogical and absurd world. We may already have lost our greatest gifts and the only possible sources of our salvation: the option of choice and the employment of that choice in the betterment of the condition of all human beings. If the opportunity is still open to us, and if we deny it, annihilation is the sole and inevitable consequence.

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