

## Bridging the Quantum Gap: Considerations on the Novelist as Playwright

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One of the astonishing developments of contemporary physics is the fact that the rules which govern the everyday physical world do not seem to apply in the strange world of subatomic particle physics. Observing a particle's behavior affects the manner in which that particle behaves. This phenomenon serves as a handy metaphor for the theatre, for there too the rules applicable to the world of literature are subject to odd and sometimes perplexing variations. To pursue the analogy one step further, when we observe a play in performance, that is, when we act as does the scientist measuring a particle, we get similarly unpredictable results: no two productions are ever exactly alike, and everyone involved with theatre is fully aware of the extent to which the audience affects the actors' performances. The rules by which a dramatist works are different from those that govern the novelist's craft. This is hardly news, but the number of plays recently written by major novelists makes it a matter of interest to the critic, and the following pages will attempt to offer some preliminary considerations of the problems involved.

It has never been unusual to find a novelist writing an occasional play or adapting one of his own books for the theatre, usually with limited success, since the novelist tends to regard drama as a sort of extension of fiction, and there are frequently severe technical problems. Often these authors simply attempt to translate their novelist concerns to the stage, as in Eduardo Mallea's *Gajo de enebro*. The results are predictable, something like a novel in dialogue, and often ponderous in the extreme. The theatre has its own laws, and not every novelist is aware of them. It is depressing to read some of the scripts written by novelists of the 1930s and 1940s, particularly those which tend toward metaphysical speculation or social denunciation. Very often there seems to be no clear idea of the difference in requirements of the two genres.

What makes this distinction between genres especially intriguing is the fascination which the theatre holds for some of the novelists of the Boom and post-Boom: Fuentes, Vargas Llosa, Donoso, Puig, and so on. There are dramatists who occasionally produce fiction of a high caliber (Carballido) or even abandon the theatre entirely for fiction (Solórzano), while others, like

Luisa Josefina Hernández and Vincent Leñero, seem to function with equal ease in both genres. All this raises fascinating questions: how are the technical characteristics of each author's plays different from or like those of the novels? Are they original works or a translation to another medium of the same themes and tricks of the trade? When a novelist writes a play based on or adapted from one of his novels, to what degree is this a different work?

These are not idle questions, for the difference between the two genres is both considerable and important, and the requirements for success hardly identical, facts which the implacable dehumanization of critical theory in the last few years has largely ignored. The reader with a novel in the quiet of the room, able to put down the book and suspend reading until another moment if necessary or desirable, is participating in a meeting between text and reader, with no intervention by anyone or anything else. The theatre, in contrast, is multi-logue between all those who intervene in any given production: actors, director, text and audience. Any one of these factors--or any change in a factor--can have a decisive impact on that particular performance.

Two playwrights who exemplify these problems, as well as being very different one from another, are Roberto Arlt and Carlos Fuentes. Arlt is an unusual case in several ways: he is the first major Latin American novelist to write extensively for the theatre; he is also that rarity, a novelist who virtually abandoned fiction for the theatre. His plays revolve largely about the themes of anguish and alienation which dominate his novels; there are also important affinities to Dostoyevsky and Pirandello, and a strong influence of Freudian psychoanalysis. Arlt's best known work, *Saverio el cruel*, is an early exercise in metatheatre with strong links to much more recent theatrical trends. Although it begins as realistic comedy, the relations with the grotesque tradition are soon visible and the play rapidly unfolds into a multilayered examination of tragic levels of reality and personality. One of its curiosities is an awkward and sometimes artificial dialogue, particularly in the scene in which Susana is apparently pretending to be mad. It is often said that Arlt prefigures the absurd and that his language is deliberately parodic; the scene in question lends itself to parody. But parody has its limits, if indeed it was so intended, and it is difficult to imagine anyone on a stage actually saying ". . . para salvar la vida tuve que disfrazarme de criada y huir por un subterráneo semejante a ignominiosa vulpeja." Whereupon Juan adds, "Episodio para amedrentar a una robusta matrona, cuanto más a una virginal doncella" (Arlt 49). Such dialogue may work in a novel where it can be prepared adequately, but in a theatrical text it is startling, to say the least. We may reasonably suspect that Arlt never really comprehended the fact that the theatre is not exclusively a verbal medium.

Arlt also had serious problems with endings. The final scenes of *Saverio* are truly striking. In an ornately stylized set with Freudian overtones--scarlet decor, candles and the tragifarical throne--the scene brilliantly develops ironic foreshadowing:

Juan (guiñando el ojo a todos): ¿Quién es el loco aquí?  
 Todos (haciendo círculo en derredor de Susana, señalándola con el dedo): Susana.  
 Susana (amablemente): Y quiero seguir siendo loca, porque siendo loca pongo en movimiento a los cuerdos, como muñecos.  
 (77)

Juan even says "Preveo una carnicería" (78) and there is one. Enter Saverio, knowing that they have all lied to him and pretending not to know that they are pretending, in a typically Arltian questioning of reality. Before his murder by Susana, he achieves true tragic perception: "Mi drama es haber comprendido . . . que no sirvo ni para coronel de una farsa . . ." (84). But the problem is that after the truth of the entire terrible situation is clear, the moribund Saverio abruptly points a finger at Susana, saying "No era broma. Ella estaba loca." (88) This is unnecessary and obvious, reminiscent of the overacting typical of silent films. It may indeed be part of Arlt's experimentation with language--and in a novel it might work--but in a moment of intense drama, it has to fall flat.

Much of Arlt's theatre functions on a double level such that weaknesses in dialogue can be fatal. For example, *El fabricante de fantasmas*, a commercially unsuccessful but highly interesting examination of the relations between drama, dream and psychology, is very artificial and talky. Three years after being found innocent of murdering his wife, a crime of which he is in fact guilty, Pedro has turned the situation into a successful play dealing with a criminal who has apparently forgotten aspects of the crime when he is again interrogated. The Judge who cleared Pedro has seen the play and congratulates him, but is suspicious. All of this is rather implausible, but typically Arltian. The judge speaks on two levels at once, and the whole play is almost a debate: ironic, metaphysical and cynical. The difficulty is that the dialogue is obvious, like a mix of *teatro de tesis* and Freud. In the same way, in Act 3, after Pedro's breakdown induced by guilt, a strange violinist plays silently, in an effective symbolic representation. But Pedro says "Parece que expresaras el sufrimiento de todos los hombres de la tierra." (I, 180) Again, the comment might work on the printed page but here it is obvious and unnecessary. There is real potential in *El fabricante de fantasmas* but it is all but paralyzed by obvious Freudian rhetoric.

While many of his plays are powerful works of lasting value, Arlt's theatre is weakened by his use of language, his insistence on lengthy speeches--what Etchenique calls "su hábito monologante"--and the melodramatic endings (110). As one more example, *La fiesta del hierro* is a moving anti-war tract which ends in a powerful ritualized finale complete with sacrifice, including human. But as the true dimension of the play's horror is revealed, Arlt cannot resist making his point yet again, and a man rushes in crying

"¡Victoria! ¡Victoria, señores! ¡La guerra! ¡Ha estallado la guerra! (Muestra un puñado de telegramas.) Pedidos de armas, miren. ¡Piden armas!" (159)  
It is a classic example of belaboring the obvious.

What does Arlt have in common with Fuentes? They are drastically different as novelists and as dramatists, but they share a problem with endings. Fuentes' plays end in an unexpected and seemingly arbitrary fashion: the abrupt transition at the end of *Todos los gatos son pardos*, in which the opposition between Moctezuma and Cortés as metaphors for power is suddenly a metaphor for American commercial exploitation, and the irruption of the guerrillas at the end of *El tuerto es rey*, abruptly change the entire focus of the plays. These endings have been defended on a variety of grounds, but what such defenses usually have in common is to assimilate the plays to the novels, as though they were much the same thing. These earlier plays, until recently, awakened interest primarily among specialists in Fuentes' narrative work and not among those working with theatre. Another common approach to Fuentes is the often revealing search for intricate parallels and meanings. Such searches are fascinating, and it is almost certainly true that his plays are shot through with abstruse pre-Hispanic allusions. But it is necessary to ask whether the upshot of all this is the recognition that these plays are really not conceived as being any different from the novels, that is, as metaphysical speculations too intricate to really function on the stage without drastic alteration.

A notable exception is *Orquídeas a la luz de la luna*, a dazzling examination of the nature of identity and reality. It too has serious problems at the end, with the confusing fall of the two pseudostars and the Fan into a glittering but dramatically disconcerting display of punning, but it is several steps ahead of the earlier plays. One reason seems to be that *Todos los gatos son pardos* is clearly related to *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*, *La región más transparente* or the massive later novels in the way in which Fuentes manages large casts and the essentially essayistic focus. The problem is that the technical virtuosity of a novel like *Artemio Cruz* is not visible, perhaps not even possible, in *Todos los gatos*, with the result that the play is much more straightforward, bordering on a dramatized essay.

*El tuerto es rey* is closer to *Orquídeas*, and its play of reality and fantasy is more manageable; the two characters work out a series of variations on the theme of identity, which makes the abrupt ending even more startling. The endings of these earlier plays have been defended as Brechtian, but it is not possible to simply terminate a play and appeal to Brecht. These endings are abrupt and arbitrary because the plays are not firmly conceived as theatre and written for the theatre. *Orquídeas a la luz de la luna* is a different matter. From the beginning it is highly visual and theatrical, and its focus is closer to the shorter novels. Fuentes is a master of the word, and there is probably no one better at creating these deft examinations of identity. He is also at times a remarkably visual writer (has no one else wondered why *Aura* and even

*Cumpleaños* have never been dramatized?); but his earlier plays are conceived in much the same way as the novels, and it is not at all clear that they resist this conception.

Mario Vargas Llosa seems to have been able to resolve these problems. *La señorita de Tacna* and *Kathie y el hipopótamo* do not even attempt the large-scale social panoramas of *La casa verde*, *Conversación en la catedral*, *La guerra del fin del mundo* or *Pantaleón y las visitadoras*. Both plays are on a smaller scale and deal with limited casts; *Kathie* is almost claustrophobic. At the same time, the author adheres to the obsessions basic to the novels. The principal figure remains the failed writer locked into a scribbler's existence; the Santiago of *Kathie* bears the same name as Zavalita of *Conversación*, and in the background of *Kathie* once more appears, if only in passing, the monstrous Pedro Camacho. Both plays also deal with two of the author's most obsessive ideas: the nature of individual identity and the relationship between life and creation, between reality and illusion.

Vargas Llosa specifically does not abandon the technical characteristics of the novels: the masking of personality, the leaps from one narrative level to another and the abrupt time shifts. Raymond Williams has pointed out that "the dialogues in *Kathie y el hipopótamo* function in a fashion similar to the telescoped dialogues initially apparent in *The Time of the Hero* and then fully employed in the later novels. When Santiago and Kathie are speaking, for example, their conversation leads to an interchange between Kathie and Juan similar to the telescoped dialogues of the novels" (163-164). But Vargas Llosa does this in the plays on a much reduced scale. In *La señorita de Tacna* he handles different time levels and even several simultaneous levels of memory by having characters move physically from one area to another. In the same way *Kathie* employs a complex series of shifts of memory, fantasy and character by having the actors move back and forth from one time to another, from one personality to another. These zones of action include both the realistic (in which the characters function) and the nonrealistic (the shifting levels of memory which obsess their every movement and thought). This is not necessarily easy to do on stage, but it basically theatrical rather than novelistic in its conception, and its end product is a series of complex and rich dramatic figures.

José Donoso employs a very similar technique in *Sueños de mala muerte*, which has roots in the tragicomic *sainete*, with characters who are economically marginal, set in a *casa de huéspedes*, and with a structure based on a series of short scenes rather than a steady development of a central relationship. The action of the play alternates between sections of the house, contrasting the various members while at the same time gradually developing the relationships which will lead to the unhappy resolution. The author specifically credits the group ICTUS, which premiered the play in 1982, with major input into the final version, and the title page even lists the author as "José Donoso Yáñez (en colaboración con el ICTUS)." One might wonder

to what extent Vargas Llosa's success in handling the exigencies of the stage may be a result, at least in part, of his collaboration with the actors featured in his works.

Vargas Llosa never falls victim to the temptation to attempt to bring to the stage the enormous casts of characters and the sweeping social panoramas of the novels. Although he bases *La Chunga* on characters from *La casa verde*, in reality it is a totally new work. The characters appear in the novel and are, in the case of Lituma, among its leading figures, and the play takes place in one of the various establishments known as the Green House, but this is irrelevant to the play itself. *La Chunga* is a somewhat more scabrous variation on themes established in the earlier plays: identity, variant visions of reality, and so on. The most interesting aspect of the play is its use of fantasy to create these themes, as each of the Inconquistables in turn fantasizes his own version of what happened on the fateful night when Josefino rented Meche to La Chunga for 3,000 soles. The reader/audience is also driven to fantasize that fateful night, since the play's enigmatic last words are, as La Chunga falls exhausted into her bed, "Hasta mañana, Mechita" (116). *La Chunga* is not unlike *La señorita de Tacna* in its use of stage movement to establish variant time zones. At its heart is one of Vargas Llosa's obsessive themes: the nature of creativity. His creatures are forever involved in weaving their own versions of reality, creating chains of commentary on life and literature. The Inconquistables, with their fantasized recreations of the most significant night of their squalid lives, are like Mamaé adapting and modifying memory, or Kathie and Santiago engaging in a joint recreation of reality. As Vargas Llosa has said, "literature is only one province of that enormous undertaking of the inventing of stories present in all cultures" (*La señorita* 9).

A serious problem for a novelist is the transformation of works originally written as narratives, for the living audience in the theatre. There are the difficulties in dealing with the formal structures imposed by the new genre, not to mention the problems of condensing or dealing in some other fashion with the lengthy prose text. Those familiar with John Fowles's novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and its film version know that the latter adopted a completely different structure in order to be able to communicate the novel's double ending. Adapting a novel for the stage is even more difficult, since the physical resources of the screen are not unlike the verbal reach of the novel, both of which are lacking on the stage.

One of the few efforts to translate a narrative text directly for the stage has also been one of the most successful: Manuel Puig's *El beso de la mujer araña*. This is somewhat unexpected; the literary atmosphere and the deliberately 1920s dialogue of his *Bajo un manto de estrellas*, reminiscent almost of imitations of Noel Coward, seems a real obstacle to any successful stage presentation. *El beso de la mujer araña* would appear to present insuperable difficulties: if it is almost exclusively dialogue, it also consists largely of descriptions of 1940s films. Curiously, Rita Gnutzmann, in one of

the very few studies devoted to the transformation of a novel into a play, states that the narrative version has two advantages in this regard: its emphasis on dialogue and its almost total acceptance of the three Aristotelian unities.<sup>1</sup>

The novel depends on the description of film as a device to present the awakening to each other of the two protagonists, Valentín and Molina, and the development of each from his own narrow conception of liberation toward a broader and more humane understanding of the other. Puig has pruned the novel's text drastically, deleted the more philosophical exchanges and the lengthy footnotes, but left relatively unaltered considerable sections. The film from which the novel takes its title is, in the play, the only film which Molina tells, rather than one of several, and it is interspersed with the scenes of food poisoning, the interviews of Molina with the prison director, and the final growth of love and understanding between the two men, all of which occur in the novel against a much broader backdrop. The dialogue between the two has been cut considerably, but what remains is relatively unchanged. The result is a dramatic text which is tighter and more manageable without in any way losing the peculiar force of the narrative original.

A serious problem for the author in his adaptation was the ending, which has always seemed to some readers somewhat diffuse and unnecessarily ambiguous. Chapter 15, the next to last, is a detailed report by the policemen assigned to watch Molina upon his release, in the hope that he would lead them to Valentín's fellow activities. Chapter 16 begins with a page in which a medical technician has mercy on the beaten and tortured Valentín and gives him morphine, followed by Valentín's dying dream. The dramatic version handles the ending with much greater control and effectiveness. As Valentín and Molina say goodbye prior to the latter's release, the lights fade and in the darkness we hear the voices of the two, who present in greatly condensed fashion--about a page and a half--what in the novel requires nearly twenty pages. Aside from the more immediate impact of the stage version, it clarifies, as Puig clearly wished to do, the causes of Molina's death. In both novel and play, he is shot by gunmen in a passing car. In the novel, his death is attributed in the police report to the activists' fear that Molina will break under torture or even to Molina's willingness to be eliminated in case of a police trap. The resulting ambiguity is somehow unsatisfactory, and Puig must have felt the same; in the play Valentín states, "Mis compañeros desde el coche en fuga te balearon a muerte, como lo habías pedido vos, en caso de que te agarrara la policía" (139). After Molina's eulogy of Valentín's death, Puig has added a final touch which sums up the whole play in its touching vision of men who have in the face of suffering and death come to understand the meaning of each other's humanity and the finality of suffering: "Se abre la puerta, Molina y Valentín se abrazan con inmensa tristeza, Molina sale, la puerta se cierra, cae el telón" (140).

This kind of problem is exemplified in the two versions of *Los albañiles* of Vicente Leñero. The novel is notably complex, and interpretations are not

in any real agreement about its meaning. One of its principal aspects is the fact that the identity of the detective is really more important than that of the criminal. That is, it is more important for the detective to discover *himself* than for him to resolve the crime. Leñero declared that he does not know who murdered don Jesús (Cervantes 9). The search takes on resonances inherent in the detective story since its beginnings in *Oedipus*. On transferring to the stage his fable of a search for identity, Leñero had to abandon one of the most important aspects of the novel, the question of the detective's name. Throughout the novel he is referred to as the man in the striped necktie, and it is only at the end that we learn his name is Munguía. This revelation has the same function as the changes of name of Alonso Quijano or the Licenciado Vidriera: he has passed through the ordeal and come out the other side changed by his sufferings and the perceptions they have engendered. The identity of the criminal and even the startling question of the identity of the new watchman at the novel's end are less important than the result of all this process on the detective.

In the dramatic version this was all impossible, since the audience did not have a printed text. The detective is Munguía from the start and the entire focus of the work is shifted. Lois Grossman points out that Munguía's role at the end of the novel, what she calls his "personal confrontation with the paradoxical nature of the universe" (10), is transmuted into a more overtly religious statement. She also notes that the shifts made necessary by the change in genre enlarged the role of the dead man and diminished that of the detective. The change of proportion alters considerably this aspect of the work.

The notorious ambiguity of the novel is maintained in the play; the shifts of time and place which are somewhat difficult to manage in the novel are handled easily by means of chronologically different actions taking place simultaneously in the two areas into which the stage is divided; the similarities to Vargas Llosa's handling of equivalent problems is obvious. The modulations are carried out by having a character pass from one plane to another, violating time and space but maintaining what Leñero called "la unidad psicológica que rige los acontecimientos de la historia" (22). Thus, two different temporal chains are carried out simultaneously or interwoven; as Eugene Moretta says, "The two series of events--one, ending with the murder; the other, beginning in its aftermath--are played out on separate stage areas that are alternately illuminated and darkened as the action moves back and forth in place and time" (53). *Los albañiles*, the novel, deconstructs a kind of formal text characteristic of our time, detective fiction. The author employs a genre whose formal meaning is the quest for truth, to show that such a search leads only to failure, and that the only possible goal is the discovery of one's self (which may well be the *true* formal meaning of the genre). *Los albañiles*, the play, does the same, except that it adds one more deconstructed text, the novel of the same name.



This same kind of deconstruction of his own pre-existing text is visible in *La carpa*, based on the novel *Estudio Q*. Once more the author creates variations on his prior text, but here the problem of the text is the real subject of the play. The protagonist, Alex, is a television actor who discovers that his own life follows strictly the script of a soap opera which he is taping. His efforts to break the script and impose his own will invariably lead to the discovery that such efforts are really only a script change which had already been put into effect. Alex's actions faithfully follow a libretto with which he had not been familiar at the time of acting. The dividing line between life and fantasy, reality and fiction, has completely disappeared. Script is text is life; Leñero appears to be saying that we are all programmed by some text of which we are ignorant.

The final humiliation is the inability to do *anything* that is not foretold by a script that Alex/we do not know, the suspicion that we are puppets in the hands of who knows whom. The director in his elevated cabin is the Demiurge, obvious representation of a divinity, or perhaps of a more satanic being, but he is also the system, all the Other. Significantly, the director always throws the responsibility for the text on the harassed scriptwriter. There are clear echoes of the classical motif of life as theatre in all this, and Leñero underlines them in an incisive fashion in *La carpa* by using three areas of simultaneous action which intensify the theme. One represents the soap opera which is being taped, another the television studio, and the third is the cabin of the omnipresent threatening director. There is a moment when Alex leafs through his script and discovers speeches which come successively from *Hamlet*, *La vida es sueño* and *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. The metatheatrical implications are clear; Nora Eidelberg has proposed Fellini's *8 1/2* as point of departure for both the novel and the play (37). *8 1/2* presents the problems of a director whose artistic and personal wells of creativity are drying up. There is a close relationship between form and theme in the film, a relationship heightened by Fellini's confession of the film's autobiographical roots, so that there is a network of interrelationships between the various creative levels. The similarities with *La carpa* are clear; without attempting to assimilate the text to the author's biography, it is, among other things, a mediation on the relations between life and creativity, on the role and the nature of the creative act. But if one antecedent is Fellini's film, another is Leñero's novel, so that there is a considerable intertextual dynamics at work.

The whole play is a montage of texts aimed at the question of to what extent we control our own destiny. At the end Alex discovers that the script ends with the suicide of his wife Silvia. He convinces her to escape with him through the audience, while the director shouts to them, "¡Necios! ¡Necios!" (142). Does this mean that Leñero believes escape is really possible, somehow, perhaps by rejecting prefabricated recipes, the revealed texts with which we govern our lives, in order to construct a more meaningful existence?

Or do they abandon the stage only to find themselves in some other equally inflexible script? It is typical of Leñero to propose these questions without offering prefabricated answers, more revealed texts to be deconstructed.

The plays mentioned here are notable for their complexity; we are dealing with sophisticated works by highly sophisticated artists, and any effort to reduce them would be foolhardy. At the same time, there are certain broad resemblances which occur across the spectrum. First, the extent to which the concerns of the novels are maintained, both in adaptations of the novels and in original works written for the theatre. Chief among these is the question of identity, the interrelationships between society and the individual personality, the relativity of individuality and indeed of verifiable reality. Second, the effort to recreate in theatrical terms the complex techniques of the novels: Fuentes's games with time, Vargas Llosa's "vasos comunicantes," Leñero's shifts between variant versions of external reality, Puig's use of other kinds of texts. In almost each case, the authors have chosen to use movement between multiple areas of the stage--a dramatist's trick--to communicate shifts of time, space and personality. In a sense, we have discovered what we knew all along: that the macrospace of the novel lends itself to these grand designs, but in the theatre they must be scaled down, cut drastically to fit the microworld of the stage. What we perhaps did not realize was just how effectively these novelists have also become men of the theatre.

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## Note

1. "Una semiología del teatro: *El beso de la mujer araña* de Puig," in *La Crítica Literaria en Latinoamérica. Memoria de 24 Congreso del Instituto de Literatura Iberoamericano*, Lima?, III, 1987, 123-130. Once again Aristotle gets the credit, or the blame, for something he didn't do; there are no three unities in the *Poetics*.

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