

Luis G. Basurto (1920-1990)

Luis G. Basurto, one of Mexico's most productive and commercially successful playwrights, died in Mexico City on July 9, 1990, of a heart attack. Basurto's age was a closely guarded secret; he was born somewhere between 1914 and 1921, with 1920 the most commonly given date. He was the author of 26 plays and countless editorials, film and theatre reviews and columns commenting on the passing parade. He also studied film and screenwriting in Hollywood. After working as a journalist and studying law and then literature, in a pattern traditional for Mexican writers, Basurto began writing for the theatre in the 1940s. He was also an impresario, producer, director and actor, and for some years had his own company with which he toured Mexico, Spain, Central America and the United States.

Basurto was an able craftsman in dealing with the machinery of the theatre. One of his favorite and most successful themes was the evil and viciousness of slum life, often presented in naturalistic fashion but with loosely allegorical overtones suggesting links between moral suffering and religiosity. Among his many hits in this vein was *Cada quien su vida* (1955), which has been performed more than 7,000 times, was a successful film and is currently being adapted as a musical. Another popular play dealing with a related theme is *Los reyes del mundo* (1959), treating life, love and hope in a squalid slum in allegorical fashion. As in many works, there is a series of highly theatrical characters, but there is a lack of dramatic focus and a panorama of unrelieved depravity.

Many of Basurto's plays were written from a Catholic point of view, and a good number deal directly with the effect of the characters' Catholicism on their behavior, studying their human weaknesses and their struggles with evil. *Miércoles de ceniza* (1950) deals with the well-worn theme of a priest's efforts to redeem a prostitute. Along the way she falls predictably in love with him, ending in her finding faith and his realization of his false pride. As in many of Basurto's works, the tendency to static wordiness weakens the characters. *Asesinato de una conciencia* (1969) treats the moral dilemma of a revolutionary priest. Basurto's last completed play, *Corona de sangre*, deals with Padre Miguel Agustín Pro, executed for treason without trial in 1927 and recently beatified by the Vatican. The story of Father Pro is a polemical one in Mexico, symbolizing the entrenched attitudes revolving around the assassination of Obregón and the *cristero* wars. Basurto was not afraid to adopt here and in his other works a vehemently Catholic position. His last produced play was *El candidato de Dios*, which ran for four years. Probably his greatest commercial success, it presents the last few hours of Pope John Paul I.

Basurto's place in Mexican theatre is hotly debated. His emphasis on themes involving various kinds of degeneracy caused many critics to deplore their sensational and obvious nature, while others lauded the social message presented. The mechanical structure of many of the plays and reliance on sensational effect are for many outweighed by the undeniable sincerity of his themes.