

"Máscaras mexicanas" in Rodolfo Usigli's *Jano es una muchacha*

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Despite Rodolfo Usigli's towering presence in Mexican theatre, very few critics have written about his work. *El gesticulador* and the *Corona* trilogy have received a limited amount of critical attention, while the master's 35 other plays have drawn little more than lip service. Some of these plays are not at all masterpieces. For example, his earliest plays would prove very difficult to perform, and thus hold value primarily because they reveal Usigli's development as an artist. On the other hand, at least ten plays have considerable artistic merit, but have fallen undeservingly into obscurity.

Usigli's career as a dramatist spanned more than 40 years. As a young man 26 years of age, in 1931, he wrote his first play, *El apóstol*. In 1972 he wrote *Buenos días, Señor Presidente*, his final dramatic effort. The conception and premiere of *Jano es una muchacha* in Mexico City in 1952 marks almost the exact chronological mid-point of Usigli's literary career. At that point his prolific pen had yielded 24 plays, 13 of which had been performed. It appeared five years after the premieres of *El gesticulador* and *Corona de sombra*, but predated the other two-thirds of the *Corona* trilogy. Usigli published *Corona de fuego* and *Corona de luz* in 1960 and 1968, respectively. Although *Jano's* box office success did not equal that of *El niño y la niebla*, which in 1951 had a record breaking run of over 450 performances during an eight-month stretch, the public received it well and gave it a respectable run.

Despite its popularity with the masses, critics, with one exception, have done little serious analysis of *Jano*. For example, Wilder P. Scott called it "a virtual classic of the Mexican stage." He did not, however, examine it further. In 1953, Vera F. Beck termed it the most original of Usigli's plays; nonetheless, plot summary dominates the page and a half she dedicated to the play. She lauded its bold treatment of sexual issues and its dramatic effect (380-81). To date, Barbara Ann McFarlin-Kosiec's dissertation is the most substantial work of criticism on the drama. In it she translated *Jano* and analyzed it in the "British American or formal tradition of criticism." She found that "it contains principles of aesthetic form--organic unity, theme, thematic variation, balance, hierarchy, and evolution." The unbridled praise voiced in these opinions indicates a drama worthy of widespread critical attention, yet it has remained virtually ignored.

In contrast with *El gesticulador*, in which political issues dominate, *Jano es una muchacha* highlights social concerns. Regardless of this fundamental difference, both plays have at their heart the idea of "máscaras mexicanas," which Octavio Paz develops in *El laberinto de la soledad*: "Viejo o adolescente, criollo o mestizo, general, obrero o licenciado, el mexicano se me aparece como un ser que se encierra y se preserva: máscara el rostro y máscara la sonrisa" (26). Paz thinks all Mexicans hide their true selves through dramatic recourses. Donning masks is just one part of their personal dramas, for they also serve as dramatist, producer, and director:

El simulador pretende ser lo que no es. Su actividad reclama una constante improvisación, . . . A cada minuto hay que rehacer, recrear, modificar el personaje que fingimos, hasta que llega un momento en que realidad y apariencia, mentira y verdad, se confunden (36).

Significantly, Paz uses terminology directly from the world of drama. In fact, Paz cites César Rubio as an example of "el problema de la autenticidad" (30). Several literary critics have examined roughly the same issue in *El gesticulador* under the banner of metatheatre (Kronik; Foster), but the idea of "máscaras" remains, for they examine the issues of illusion and reality, truth and fiction, authenticity and deception.

Jano es una muchacha illustrates the reality of "máscaras mexicanas" just as forcefully as *El gesticulador*. In fact, in some ways the problem of personal authenticity requires even more effort to untangle in *Jano*. In his book on metadrama, Richard Hornby indicates five distinct varieties of the phenomenon. *Jano* features two of these types: "The Play within the Play," and "Role Playing within the Role."

Jano's first metadrama belongs to the category of the "Play within the Play," even though it does not take place on an actual stage upon the stage. Regarding this type Hornby states: "for a play within the play . . . to be fully metadramatic requires that the outer play have characters and plot . . .; that these in turn must acknowledge the existence of the inner play; and that they acknowledge it as a performance" (35). Metadrama "A" of *Jano*, which includes the first scene of the first act and the second scene of the second act, meets Hornby's definition. The parlor of a brothel constitutes the "stage" of this metadrama.¹ In the first scene, Felipe, the outer play's protagonist, arrives at the brothel in search of memories. As a young man he frequented the establishment and fell in love with a woman there. He now finds in the locale a drama consisting of several scenes. The employees of the house perform as actresses, while Felipe acts as the lone spectator. The manager of the establishment, Dora, directs the play, but as she introduces her cast, she interacts with her audience as a performer. Felipe finds her on the "stage" when he enters the parlor. .

Felipe recognizes the theatrical nature of events in the brothel. For example, shortly after arriving at the house, he says to Dora:

Diría yo que detrás del maquillaje tiene usted una cara muy mona--una cara de persona decente. . . . Le ruego a usted que no se moleste. Es una observación general. En la actualidad, por ejemplo, es un hecho que la mayor parte de las señoritas tienen aspecto de otra cosa, en tanto que la mayor parte de la otra cosa tienen aspecto de señoritas (391-2).

Felipe does not stop at asserting that illusion dominates this scene in Dora's metadrama, but suggests that it also exists in day to day living. These preliminary comments foreshadow the more subtle forms of role playing in *Jano* which belong to another variety of metadrama. We learn that Felipe formerly wrote for a living, which seems to help him distinguish between illusion and reality. Furthermore, we learn that he distrusts fiction, because when Dora asks him if he continues to write, he replies: "Ya no escribo nada. Me da asco escribir, me parece una de la profesiones más prostituidas del mundo" (399-400). This statement carries double irony given the setting of the metadrama and the autoreferential nature of the play. Dora realizes that Felipe sees through the theatrics of the situation, and her response also holds autoreferential value: "Aquí se vende ilusión, no realidad" (429). In spite of his avowed distrust of fiction, he maintains hope in the possibilities of his present situation:

A veces encuentra uno aquí el verdadero amor--el desinteresado: la mujer que se entrega. Claro que no es común, porque aquí la mujer no debe entregarse, ni el hombre tampoco. Es un pequeño juego. Pero a veces se hace trampa, y se enamora ella, o se enamora él (394).

In her double role as manager of the establishment and director of the metadrama, Dora presents, one by one, the subplay's other actresses. Each woman performs alone during her scene; the most convincing actress extracts from the audience the most money. During their respective scenes, Dora's first three actresses fail to seduce Felipe either figuratively or literally. Obsidiana's beauty does not offset her dispassionate acting, and Felipe promptly rejects her. The second performer's acting does not compensate for her unimpressive figure, as she fails to establish a convincing character. Instead, she wavers between her dramatic persona and her "real-life" role, as she recurs to comments such as: "esta vida es muy dura, y yo tengo que sostener a mi anciana madre y a mis hijos" (397). The third actress, "La Casta Susana," mechanically presents a worn-out act worthy of Romanticism: "no soy de esta clase. Pertenezco a una de las mejores familias de Guadalajara" (398).

None of these actresses appeals to Felipe; they represent three types of failure in performance. Nonetheless, Felipe rewards their efforts by buying them each a drink.

Dora heralds as extraordinary the actress of the final scene. The scene becomes even more conspicuously metadramatic because stage directions indicate that Camila, who serves drinks and summons actresses, should now walk like a marionette. Her mechanical movements aptly introduce *Jano's* most overtly metadramatic scene. She calls Mariana, who in her act professes agelessness despite youthful traits. She claims to have had several husbands, to have travelled extensively, and exotic subjects dominate her dialogue. Mariana intrigues Felipe. He recognizes her act as fiction, and her persistence in maintaining the role piques him. Felipe immediately becomes infatuated with her and her act. Yet he seeks something beyond illusion. He yearns for love, and he senses he will not find it in fiction: "Mira, chiquita, no hagamos literatura . . ." (401). In spite of his plea, she continues in her role. She represents committed, professional, successful acting. After she makes sure that he has paid his bill to the brothel, she abandons him, and Felipe encounters "la carcajada crispante, obscena, de todas las mujeres de la casa" (403). The actresses delight in seeing Felipe fall for Mariana's expert acting. He can do no more than shrug his shoulders and smile. He knows well the pitfalls of fiction.

The second and final act of metadrama "A" takes place the following day at the end of *Jano's* second act. Felipe is searching desperately for Mariana. The first act of the metadrama has affected him deeply and he thirsts for more. When Dora pretends that Mariana does not exist and never has, Felipe comments on his active participation in the metadrama: "la ilusión estaba en mí mismo" (430). His statement suggests that dramatic success in general depends heavily on active audience participation. Despondent, he prepares to leave the brothel; however, Mariana interrupts his exit with a highly dramatic entrance. Her arrival, the figurative final curtain of metadrama "A," coincides with intensely dramatic moments in two of *Jano's* other metadramas.

The following chart indicates relationships between *Jano's* metadramas and the play as a whole.

	ACT I		ACT II		ACT III
	Scene 1	Scene 2	Scene 1	Scene 2	
Setting	Brothel	House	House	Brothel	House
Day	1	2	2	2	2
Hour	10pm	12noon	3pm	9pm	10pm
"A"	*****			*****	
"B"	**	*****	*****	*****	
"C"	< **	* * * *	* * * * *	**	*****
"D"					* ** >

The end of the first act of metadrama "A" coincides with the beginning of the second metadrama ("B"). The latter, along with the play's remaining metadramas, corresponds to the type Hornby calls "role playing within the role," which he defines by stating that in this variety of metadrama "a character for some reason takes on a role that is different from his usual self" (67). Less conspicuous than the "play within the play," this category of metadrama is more subtle and complex.

We recognize metadrama "B" at the end of *Jano's* second scene. The living room of a comfortable, bourgeois, provincial house provides the setting for the three scenes not set in the brothel. The house belongs to Víctor, a friend Felipe has not seen for twenty years. Víctor boasts a sterling reputation as a notary public. At the end of the act, after a friendly conversation between the two friends, Víctor's daughter enters the house. She is the sole actress of metadrama "B." The father proudly introduces her as Marina, but we recognize her as Mariana, the intriguing actress of metadrama "A." Her presence astonishes Felipe, for Víctor's reputable house contrasts starkly with the brothel. She emphatically denies knowledge of Mariana and scoffs at Felipe's suggestion that she leads a double life. Her demeanor backs her claims. According to the stage directions, in this setting she has more depth than at the brothel; she speaks infrequently and modestly; she represents innocence personified (412). Felipe's suggestion that he saw her at the brothel clashes with her claim of experience limited to home and school. Ironically, she attends school in a convent. In short, her attitudes and behavior differ dramatically from Mariana's. The title of the play derives from this metadrama, for upon observing the vastly different roles which Marina/Mariana plays, Felipe compares her to the Roman god Janus, who has two faces, and then declares that Janus is a girl. He recognizes, as does the audience of the play, that Víctor's daughter lives in a world of fiction, or in several. Felipe seems to think that Mariana, the seductive temptress at the brothel, is more authentic than Marina, the chaste daughter of an honorable citizen. At this point in the play, we do not know which of her roles corresponds to her more authentic self.

Between the acts of metadrama "A," Marina verbally denies Mariana's existence: "No comprendo. Probablemente me confunde usted con alguien más" (412). Although stage directions leave no doubt that Marina and Mariana are one and the same, during a performance Marina's insistent refutation of a double life could cause the audience to doubt. Nevertheless, her actions convey ample evidence that she dons a mask. For example, early in act two Marina performs a variety of piano pieces, concluding with "el vals Recuerdo," the number performed in the brothel immediately prior to Mariana's appearance. Furthermore, moments before the scene changes from the home to the brothel, Marina abruptly turns to Felipe and kisses him on the

lips. The stage direction indicates that she should turn to him like a top. This signals Marina's return to her role as Mariana.

In act two, when Felipe returns to the brothel, Dora feigns ignorance regarding Mariana. She weaves a tale of his activities there the night before:

Pidió usted una botella de champaña, se la bebió, se quedó medio dormido casi a oscuras y de pronto dio dos o tres gritos y se fue. . . . Ahora que lo pienso, me parece que efectivamente, gritó usted, dos o tres veces algo así como Laureana, Graciana o Mariana (428).

At Dora's bidding, Camila, the housemaid/marionette of metadrama "A," confirms her story, at which point Felipe gives up hope of finding Mariana there again. Nevertheless, Mariana suddenly appears. This time, however, the script indicates that Marina (not Mariana) performs these lines. When the scene clears for a personal conversation between Felipe and the star of metadrama "B," Felipe tries to resolve posthaste the question of authenticity: "¿Eras Marina entonces?" (436). She maintains her metatheatrics by denying her role as Marina just as adamantly as she had denied her role as Mariana in her father's home: "¿Por qué me llamas Marina? No es mi nombre" (436). She scoffs at his observations about her other role, returns to her act of agelessness, and suggests that Felipe has had too much to drink. Usigli seems to indicate here that successful performances entail absolute denial of reality beyond the drama. Felipe loses patience, and interrupts her act: "...quírate la peluca, los dientes postizos" (436). Before long, he tires of the actress's insistence on her role, and starts to leave.

Metadrama "C" overtakes Marina/Mariana's metadrama at this, the play's maximum dramatic moment. Before Felipe can reach the door, Dora arrives on the scene. The stage directions indicate that her attitude has sobered, signaling the fact that metadrama "A" has also finished. She coldly informs Marina: "Chiquita, aquí se acabó el kindergarten. . . . Tengo aquí el dueño de la casa, y te pide" (438). The demand traumatizes Marina, whose bold, reassured speech patterns give way suddenly to babblings. After stammering that she had agreed to "act" only in public, she discontinues her metadrama. She highlights the transformation by shifting to the "usted" form with Felipe, and pleads: "Ayúdeme usted a salir de aquí" (438). She even finally admits that she had merely invented the role of "Mariana." Felipe again takes leave, but once again another character's entrance interrupts his exit. The arrival of the owner constitutes a shocking revelation.

We discover that Víctor leads a double life as the owner of the brothel. He directs and acts in metadrama "C," one which has been going on much longer than metadramas "A" and "B." Until his grand entrance at the brothel, Víctor's metadrama differed from *Jano's* other metadramas because he had managed to conceal his role-playing. His audiences did not suspect any

performance. During almost the entirety of *Jano's* first two acts we consider metadrama "B" its primary focus. Nevertheless, at the end of act two we discover that Janus is also a man. With Felipe, we wink at and savor the first metadramas, but "C" poses serious problems. We wonder what is real and who is authentic. We lose confidence in our abilities to distinguish between truth and fiction.

Only in retrospect do we detect that the real Víctor did not match his image of public decency. Víctor's arrival contrasts with the glowing report Felipe receives from Víctor's sister-in-law, Eulalia. She says that Víctor has led an exemplary life: "consagrado a su trabajo y a su hija--es el notario más respetado de la ciudad--, construyendo donde los políticos destruían, ayudando a la cultura y al espíritu" (402). Yet when Víctor arrives, he immediately offers a drink to Felipe--a vague echo from the brothel. We recognize another echo when Felipe jokingly compares Víctor's line of work to being an "autogigolo" (408). Although he makes the comment in jest, he inadvertently brushes the truth. Felipe tells Víctor: "Ninguno de nosotros había encontrado lo que tú tenías: una vida sexual limpia, armoniosa, normal, única . . . te envidio aun ahora esa aureola de santo" (409). During this type of homage, Víctor maintains an awkward silence. His past, especially regarding his marriage, makes him uneasy. Marina's performance of the "Vals Recuerdo" bothers him greatly because the song triggers unpleasant memories. He understates: "En realidad, tú no sabes mucho de mí, ni yo de ti" (420). And when Marina asks him to tell her all about her deceased mother he absolutely refuses. Indeed, insinuation of Víctor's double life exists, but Marina's flamboyant metadrama draws attention away from her father's.

The climactic moment of revelation at the end of act two horrifies both father and daughter. Both assume the worst, and both hypocritically condemn the other's double life. We suspect that Marina dons a mask in metadramas "A" and "B" and that her life at her father's bourgeois house and the convent constitute her usual self. In contrast, as act two closes, we are unsure of Víctor's true identity. Act three addresses this enigma.

Jano's third act follows a remarkably tense scene. The beginning of act three gives the audience a rest by retreating from the fervent emotion of the prior action. Even the "focalization" changes to further the emotional retreat. During the first two acts the public and Felipe share roughly the same experience. We discover the truths of the metadramas in the same sequence he does. In contrast, the angle of experience transfers from Felipe to Eulalia in the third act. She and Víctor hold a lengthy conversation during which he refers to losing his daughter and having something catastrophic occur in his life. Eulalia merely thinks he has had too much to drink. When he finally tells her of Marina's metadrama the play continues in a lull, because during her next seventeen utterances she still expresses disbelief, continues to blame Víctor's drunkenness, and insists that he quiet down and go to bed. Finally

Marina and Felipe appear on the scene and the intensity of the play once again starts to build.

In the concluding two-thirds of the final act, Marina and Víctor find themselves stripped of the masks they wore during their metadramas. As act two hinted, Marina is the more authentic self of Marina/Mariana. We witnessed with Felipe her only performances as Mariana. In contrast, since before Marina's birth, her father has merely worn a mask of decency. In fact, his outwardly upright facade has shrouded not only his own true identity, but that of his deceased wife as well. Ironically, Marina's performance in metadrama "B" mimics her mother's life. Arcelia had been a prostitute who, like her husband, donned a mask of public respectability. Arcelia and Víctor feigned blissful marriage, but in reality he led his wife to prostitution and then kept her there. Víctor considered Arcelia's death a relief, but he ended up hiding two falsehoods behind his polished exterior. Víctor had kept Eulalia, Marina and Felipe entirely in the dark regarding his true identity. They thought he had valiantly denied his sexual passions, but he had merely presented that image at his family home, while indulging himself in his secret one. They had regarded him as peaceful and decent, but he is exposed as violent and indecorous. He does not even know whether he is Marina's biological father. A dark reality lay behind Víctor's public and family life.

In spite of the play's title, Víctor's metadrama constitutes *Jano's* most problematic and intriguing play between illusion and reality. As with César Rubio in *El gesticulador*, Víctor's metadrama also ends with the actor's death. In Víctor we witness the harmful effects of hiding behind a mask over a long period of time. When his authentic self becomes public, his suppressed feelings surface. He becomes inconsolable and even irrational. After recklessly proposing marriage to Eulalia, he reneges, calls ahead to his other house, the brothel, and arranges to spend the night there.

Víctor's metadrama ends violently, for when he rejects Eulalia's suggestion that he commit suicide, she puts him out of his misery. Ironically, although Eulalia wants to turn herself over to authorities, Felipe and Marina create a mask of innocence behind which the slayer will now hide. They alter the physical evidence so that Víctor appears to have taken his own life. They justify their new metadrama ("D") with the following logic: "En realidad, Víctor se suicidó al casarse" (459). In spite of their prior negative experiences with "máscaras mexicanas," they continue creating more.

Each of the metadramas in *Jano* carries autoreferential overtones. Each has at its heart the conflict between illusion and reality, simulation and authenticity. When the characters of the metadramas find themselves stripped of their masks, trauma marks their "authentic lives." In Marina's case, her brief life of duplicity led her into tremendous difficulties. After Víctor's extended use of an artificial image, dismantling the reality of his dual life leaves him with a deeply troubled "authentic self." These metadramas, and the play as a whole, portray harmful effects of deception. At the same time, the

play illustrates that some good can come of fiction. Felipe proves this through his constant quest to separate truth from fabrication. In the end, a disheartened Marina asks whether she can ever recover from the effects of the metadramas. Felipe answers: "La realidad te curará. Es lo único que hay. . . . Construyamos sobre la verdad" (454-5). The play implies that Marina and Felipe will indeed build a solid relationship together based on truth. Although *Jano es una muchacha* demonstrates very clearly the idea that donning masks can have a crippling effect on individuals, Felipe's quest demonstrates that active, insightful, persistent audiences find truth within fiction, then transform it to benefit their lives.

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Notas

1. Lionel Abel, in his seminal work on metatheatre, cites *The Balcony*, another play set in a brothel, as metadramatic (80-82). These plays seem to suggest that brothels lend themselves to role-playing and performance.

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