

## The Teatro Nacional Popular and Peruvian Cultural Policy (1973-1978)

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After the military takeover of Perú on October 3, 1968, the Gobierno Revolucionario de la Fuerza Armada (GRFA) under the leadership of General Juan Velasco Alvarado embarked on a radical plan of social, economic, and cultural restructuring. Within three months of assuming power, the GRFA had taken the first steps to control Peruvian theatre. By the end of 1968, the government had cancelled all aid to theatre groups and set aside funds for the creation of a state sponsored national theatre company ("Temporada" 76). Other reforms, however, occupied the government and delayed the full implementation of the government's cultural policy until 1972. One year earlier, the government created, as its main instrument of cultural reform in the theatre, a state funded company: the Teatro Nacional Popular (TNP).

The TNP began to function in 1971 under the direction of Peruvian playwright Alonso Alegría. While the TNP produced one play that year, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, financial limitations prevented Alegría from hiring a permanent company ("Algunas preguntas" 34) and from producing any productions in 1972 (Cajiao 70). In 1973, Alegría was finally able to organize a permanent company and begin regular productions (see Podestá 33-41, "Hacia" 31-33).

During the years 1973 to 1978 the TNP faced much criticism over its choice of plays. In 1973, Daniel Caballero Lastres, theatre critic for the Lima daily *La Prensa*, complained that Peruvian audiences were unfamiliar with the subject matter of the TNP's first production, Pablo Neruda's *Fulgor y muerte de Joaquín Murieta*. He questioned the wisdom of choosing a play by a Chilean about Chileans in the California gold rush for a Peruvian national theatre. In 1978, after the TNP had mounted a number of productions and received a measure of critical acclaim, noted Peruvian playwright Juan Rivera Saavedra still complained that the TNP's productions were neither national nor popular in nature (*Teatro Peruano IV* 49).

A cursory glance at the TNP's productions seems to suggest that these criticisms are valid. If, as Caballero and Rivera suggest, a Peruvian national theatre should produce plays by Peruvian playwrights or on Peruvian subjects, then most of the TNP's repertory was not that of a national theatre. In the five years the TNP was under Alegría's direction, it produced more works by non-Peruvian authors, including Neruda's *Joaquín Murieta*, Lope de Vega's *Fuenteovejuna*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and Beckett's *Waiting For Godot*, than works by Peruvian playwrights.

Also, few of these works easily lend themselves to the experimental style and revolutionary themes associated with the "popular theatre" in Perú during the 1970s as practiced by groups such as Yuyachkani, El Teatro Universitario de Trujillo (TUT), and Cuatrotablas. Alberto Mego, a playwright and director, analyzed 19 popular theatre groups which were active in Lima during the 1970s. He describes several common characteristics that distinguished these groups. First, the purpose of popular theatre was to proclaim a revolutionary message. As Mego put it, popular theatre should "stir up the mechanisms of the society in which [the spectator] belongs, take sides with him, discover those guilty of his misfortune and denounce them theatrically" (12). Mego also believed that popular theatre must be "committed to the Peruvian people and to the direction which their history is taking" (12)<sup>1</sup>. This commitment means that popular theatre should perform for all classes of society. In order to reach this audience, popular theatre must use what Mego calls "desacralized space," or in other words, "any place, more or less open, a courtyard, a hall, [or] a park" (31), in which to perform. As Mego explains, this non-traditional use of space creates a new type of theatre:

Fundamentally, popular theatre signifies a political rupture with the traditional forms of theatrical expression and is, at the same time, an awareness of substantial changes in the spacial references of the performance: its works evolve in open and desacralized spaces. Consequently, the structure of the piece is generated by other means, resulting in better scenic alternatives. (32).

Many of the Peruvian critics held similar views of popular theatre. Gustavo Bueno, writing during Alegría's directorship of the TNP, defined the basic premises of popular theatre as: "[1] the necessity of reflecting on stage the inherent contradictions of the system, uncovering its oppressive character and [2] the search for [theatrical] forms which, at the popular level, best express the new contents" (61). However, the TNP did not use these common definitions of national and popular theatre, but rather it followed the government's definitions of these concepts in the choice and direction of the plays it presented.

The military government's only published statement of cultural policy, "Bases para la política cultural de la Revolución Peruana," (PCRP), sets out the basic guidelines of the government's cultural policy. While this document was not written until 1975 (see Conejo 92) and not published until 1977, its guidelines follow the contents of article 3, sections a, b, c, and d of Decree Law No. 19268, "Organización y funciones del Instituto Nacional de Cultura," which was issued on January 12, 1972 ("Instituto" 4). Since this law also officially created the TNP, it is reasonable to conclude that the definitions of national and popular culture found in the PCRP are those which guided Alegría in his choice and direction of plays.

While the government's cultural policy, which proclaims itself "anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist," calls for the decolonization of Peruvian culture (PCRP 15)<sup>2</sup> and the use of culture to affirm national values (18), it does not advocate a blanket rejection of all foreign influences. Rather it suggests that advantageous elements of foreign culture should be assimilated into Peruvian culture, while "inappropriate foreign cultural values" should be rejected (15-16). Thus, a national culture is defined as a mixture of "indigenous values . . . and [of values which] form part of the universal human heritage . . ." (18-19). While the policy never specifically enunciates which values, foreign or indigenous, are necessary to create the "revolutionary cultural democracy" it proposes for Perú (23), its definition of national culture allowed the TNP to produce works by non-Peruvian authors as part of the national theatre.

Alegría often took pains to point out that TNP productions of foreign plays contain appropriate cultural values. In an interview prior to the opening of *Joaquín Murieta*, Alegría explained that he chose the play because it "has a very current message. . . . [the] fight against imperialism from within the empire, a situation in which not only Chileans, but also Peruvians live . . ." ("Hacia" 32). The government's cultural policy was based on the assumption that Perú was dominated both culturally and economically by the developed nations (PCRP 13) and that this domination prevents Peruvians from being culturally self-fulfilled (25). The anti-imperialist message of Neruda's play clearly supported this theory of cultural domination and therefore was an appropriate cultural value for Perú's new revolutionary culture.

When a play did not have a theme that was as clearly identifiable with the government's cultural policy as in the case of *Joaquín Murieta*, Alegría emphasized the cultural values in the play that were most relevant to Peruvian culture. In an interview with Luis Freire of *La Prensa* before the opening of the TNP's 1975 production of *Hamlet*, Alegría explains that he directed the production in an overtly theatrical style so that "the audience would distance themselves from the character [of Hamlet] and question [his inaction]" (Freire 11). In this way, Alegría hoped that the production would "guide the audience's possible interpretations [of the play] toward [the] political implications" of the total destruction of Denmark's political power because of Hamlet's inaction (11).

The inherent criticism of political inaction in Alegría's theme for *Hamlet* reflects the revolutionary nature of the government's cultural policy which advocated a "sustained effort" by the state to bring about cultural reform (PCRP 19). Alegría's description of Hamlet's tragic flaw--"Hamlet doesn't Do, he makes decisions but doesn't carry them out, because he begins to think about the implications of what he is going to do" (Freire 11)--also describes the state of the military government after the fall of its radical leaders in 1975. The new leaders continued the revolutionary rhetoric, but failed to carry through with the radical reforms. Thus the underlying message of the "To Do or Not to Do" political theme of the TNP's *Hamlet*--that inaction causes ruin--not only reflects the tone of the government's cultural policy, but also the political situation in which it was produced.

Alegría also attempted to make foreign works part of the national culture by adding Peruvian elements to the production, such as in the TNP's 1976 production of *The Beggar's Opera*. Alegría called the production a "zarzuela," a Spanish genre of light opera which had been popular in Perú since the 18th century, and set the play's lyrics to traditional Peruvian tunes and to original music (Luchting "Entropy" 61). The use of traditional music was an attempt to find a Peruvian equivalent for the popular English tunes which made the original such a success in 18th century London.

Most of the TNP's productions also fit the definition of popular culture found in the government's cultural policy. PCRP defines three types of works as popular culture:

- (a) anonymous tradition (folklore); (b) the works of known authors, written in a folkloric style, which are traditional, but inevitably bear the author's stamp; and (c) popular works written in a free style, which are not traditional, but may become so, if by virtue of their inherent qualities, they become popular, are praised and changed, until they are perfectly adapted to the popular mentality. . . . (16)

Instead of the emphasis on revolutionary politics and experimental style found in other theatre companies which claimed to be popular, a company that followed the government's definitions of popular culture would emphasize traditional Peruvian culture or works which contain the same "inherent qualities" as traditional Peruvian culture.

While not every TNP production falls neatly into this definition of popular culture, Alegría clearly attempted to integrate it into his productions. One of the TNP's 1976 productions, *La tragedia del fin de Atau Wallpa*, was actually an example of traditional Peruvian theatre. Versions of this anonymous 16th century Peruvian play are still produced annually during festivals in Peruvian villages (Rubio 23). Alegría emphasized the traditional elements of this play by initially staging it at Puruchuco, an Incan temple in the mountains near Lima ("Movilidad" 20). Other TNP productions had elements

that identified them with traditional Peruvian culture. For example, the narrative tone of *Joaquín Murieta* and its archetypal story of the hero-robber both identify it with folklore. The addition of traditional music in *The Beggar's Opera* was also tried to evoke tradition Peruvian culture. Since the government's definition of popular culture also includes works that have "inherent qualities" which would allow them to become part of the popular culture, most of the TNP's other productions could be classified as popular, especially when considered in light of the government's definition of national culture. Since the government's cultural policy advocated nationalizing the best of foreign culture, then works such as *Hamlet* and *Oedipus Rex*, which have become part of the Western tradition, can be viewed as works which would "enrich the natural dynamics" of Peruvian popular culture (PCRCP 16).

The government's view of a popular social order, which it called participatory democracy, was also reflected in the TNP's organization. In terms of cultural policy, participatory democracy meant allowing all classes of Peruvians to participate in cultural activities, either as actors or spectators (PCRCP 18). The concept of participatory democracy appears to have influenced both the composition of the TNP and the circumstances in which it presented plays. Rather than choosing the best actors from the different acting companies in Perú, Alegría held open auditions and selected actors from a wide social and economic range ("Hacía" 32). Also in 1973 and 1974, the TNP attempted to bring its productions to audiences that would not normally have access to the theatre, performing at schools, housing developments and other "unconventional settings" throughout Perú (INC "National" 36). However, after 1975 the TNP opted for a means of bringing its productions to all Peruvians that would not require such unconventional spaces. It began to disseminate its productions through national television (see Chiarella 14). By using these principals of participatory democracy in its organization, the TNP could also claim to be a popular theatre in terms of its function as well as its content.

The TNP closed its final season in December 1978. Early in 1979, Alegría was replaced as director of the TNP by Peruvian actor and director Carlos Gassols. By the end of February, the government transformed the TNP from an active company to "an entity to promote theatrical activity throughout the country" ("Teatro Nacional" 9). While no reason was given for these changes, Perú was experiencing severe economic problems at the time and government money for cultural activities decreased significantly. Budgetary problems had reduced the TNP's 1978 season to two small cast productions: an adaptation of Mario Vargas Llosa's short novel *Los Cachorros* and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* ("Estrenarán" 14). Evidently, by 1979 there was no longer any money to support an active theatre company.

While under the direction of Alonso Alegría, the Teatro Nacional Popular tried to create a theatre that reflected the government's view of national and popular culture. However, due to its shortage of trained actors and Alegría's

over ambitious direction (Luchting "Entropy" 61; "Proliferation" 73), many of its productions fell short of this goal. For example, Wolfgang Luchting praised the TNP's *Hamlet* for its theatricality, but could not see the political implications *Alegría* tried to bring out ("Saison" 81-83). *The Beggar's Opera* closed after a few weeks partly because audiences did not appreciate the mixture of traditional Peruvian music with the 18th century classic (Luchting "Entropy" 61).

Other productions, however, did fulfil the TNP's mandate to be both national and popular. The TNP's production of *Atau Wallpa* was both a popular and critical success, so much so that *Alegría* successfully revived the production to replace the disastrous *Beggar's Opera* (Luchting "Entropy" 61-62). Another measure of its success is that the influence of the TNP's productions continue to be felt in Perú today. In a 1989 review of a new production of *Joaquín Murieta*, Javier Monroy pointed to the TNP's production as achieving the balance between being popular and presenting a message of national importance (55). Despite its failings, the TNP in its attempt to create a theatre that was both popular and national, left its legacy on Peruvian theatre.

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## Notes

1. All translations are the authors, unless otherwise noted.
2. References from PCRP are from the English translation of this document published by UNESCO.

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