

## Theatre in El Salvador during the Eighties

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Theatre in El Salvador during the 80s means wartime theatre, and theatre has had a tough time surviving censorship, political persecution, and the battlefield. The explosion of the civil war in 1980 led to increased repression in the art world. Many Salvadorans involved in the arts were compelled to seek temporary haven elsewhere. Many had to stop their artistic endeavors altogether. Many joined the fighting. Although most of the arts suffered losses at this time, the blow was particularly strong in the theatre. Human loss was great, and the creative surge of the seventies was jeopardized. During the seventies, the basis for a Salvadoran theatrical expression had been established, but these forms were all still very new and fragile, and many did not survive.

During the fifties and the sixties, the Teatro Universitario, and later the government sponsored Compañía Nacional de Bellas Artes, both headed by the Spanish Republican Edmundo Barbero, had provided most of the theatre in Salvador. Barbero's main objectives had been the production of classical theatre, post WW-II European Drama and the development of local playwrights. In the late sixties, different groups began multi-media experiments, the most important being the Taller de los Vagos. In the seventies, largely due to the existence of the Centro Nacional de Artes which housed a theatre school in which actor-training was provided, there appeared innumerable groups dedicated to the concept of collective creation: TGI, Maíz, Sol del Río 32, and ELTU were among those with the most interesting development.

During all of these periods, the Salvadoran playwrights, very often politically committed (the Círculo Literario Universitario of the 60s remains the most productive period in Salvador's dramatic literature), produced a body of work reflecting an attachment to the dramatic structure of the theatre of the absurd and to existential philosophy. Character and plot development were often sacrificed to idea. The advent of the collective creation concept unfortunately did not produce new playwrights.

## Playwrights

In the early eighties, there was not much dramatic writing in Salvador. The extremely tense political situation, and the fact that the seventies had largely opted for the collective creation concept, are two of the main reasons that the nascent playwrighting generation of the 60s (Roberto Cea, Roberto A. Menéndez, Roberto Armijo, Alvaro Menén Desleal, and J. Napoleón Rodríguez Ruiz), had ceased to write for the theatre, and/or were no longer being produced. In 1980 Jaime Suárez Queiman, a poet and journalist, began to write for the theatre. Savagely murdered that year, he left one manuscript, a monologue for an actress, *El dulce encanto del matrimonio*.

The epic form was revisited by David Escobar Galindo who wrote *La hoguera de Itaca* in 1984, a symbolist drama based on Ulysses' return. During this period, Matilde Elena López wrote a new version of the 19th century Indian uprising of Anastasio Aquino, also in epic form. Theatrically, these authors always remain in the great shadow of Francisco Gavidia, whose early twentieth century plays are still considered unsurpassed in Salvador. In a surrealist vein, with references to the war, Ricardo Lindo wrote *El palacio en llamas en otoño* in 1989; Miguel Angel Chinchilla wrote a theatrical fable *Las abejas*. But these authors all come to the theatre from the world of poetry and the structure of their plays often remains literary.

It is interesting to note that no writer in Salvador has yet matched the dramatic force in the writings of Salarrué, whose prose, written largely in the forties (*Cuentos de barro*, *Cuentos de cipotes*, *El Cristo Negro* etc.) continue to be a source of dramatic inspiration for theatrical and television productions. Influenced by cinematic structures, and reflecting the great conflicts of persons involved in both sides of the war, J. Luis Ayala García wrote *Crónica de una traición*. Giovanni Galeas, a young poet who left Salvador while still a teenager, now lives in Mexico. He has written several plays, one an allegory of revolution which has been produced in Mexico. Like him there are many Salvadorans abroad who may be writing for the theatre, but information on these efforts is not readily available.

Near the end of the decade appeared Edgar Roberto Gustavo, still in his twenties. He began to write short, compact, urgent, very "actable" plays which reflect the times. In one, a woman prepares a picnic for her family, but only Death will appear--everyone else has been murdered. In another he shows a pregnant militant woman out with a contract to execute her former lover and professor, the father of her child. In yet another, we see the plight of a girl who discovers she is the product of incest.

In 1989, Baltazar López wrote, produced and performed in a Beckett-influenced parable on the war in which two men meet; one lacks his right hand, the other his left. The excellent poet, Roque Dalton, murdered by his own faction at the beginning of the war, did not write for the theatre, but his writings have been used in the theatre.

### **The Bachillerato en Artes**

The seventies marked the hey-day for the Bachillerato en Artes, a high school for the performing arts imagined by Walter Béneke, then Minister of Education. The school replaced the Compañía Nacional de Bellas Artes which had not produced a single play in several years. The arts school program (which offered Music, Visual Arts and Drama certificates recognizing graduates as professionals) was included in Béneke's controversial educational reform program, which critics saw as an endeavor to furnish the nascent industries with top-quality/low-income workers. In the arts school, however, things did not take that direction at all. The fact that a state-subsidized arts school was suddenly accessible to the nation's poor created a dynamic force so strong that its effects are still felt today. The objective of the Theatre section of the Bachillerato en Artes was to form Salvador's future actors, directors and playwrights. The students were generally between 15 and 18 years old upon enrolling for a three year intensive actor's training program. From 1970 until 1975 an average of five productions a year were performed for urban as well as rural audiences. The courses were taught by first-rate teachers coming from Madrid, New York, Buenos Aires, and Moscow.

In 1975 the National University was once again closed down. This event was to be of great significance for the Bachillerato en Artes. As of that moment, left-wing groups of all tendencies began to enroll new members at high school level. The first tangible result of this new phenomenon was a considerable slow-down in theatrical production due both to prolonged student absence and to student opposition to any work that was not directly political. Different independent theatre groups began to form, each political faction looking for a representative, each group looking for a sponsor. This was the time of pinning labels onto any theatrical endeavor which surfaced: "stalinist," "maoist," "syndicate," "communist," "anarchist," or "petit bourgeois," this last epithet applying to any manifestation which was not linked directly to an organized political faction. Every teacher, every method was violently questioned. If a teacher focused on a technique, he/she was judged as irrelevant to the times; any idea that was put forth was immediately attacked by the other factions. While dealing with this terror from within, teachers

were threatened by government or para-military persecution from without. In this climate, teaching theatre was no longer possible. The Bachillerato en Artes still exists today, but it no longer produces works, and enrollment is low.

### Universities

With the National University constantly under siege, Mario Tenorio, who directed what was left of the university's theatre department, set up shop in the National Theatre. In 1979 Aristophanes' *Clouds* and *Montecalvo* by Jairo Aníbal Niño were produced. Another production was Molière's *Doctor in Spite of Himself*, which toured considerably.

The Catholic University developed several theatre laboratories in the early 80s. One was to be a "sign" searching experience, in order to invent a new theatrical language. Findings were regularly published by the *Taller de Letras*, a literary publication of the university, which never ceased publishing. Another was to continue the work that an independent group, Maíz, had undertaken within the poorer communities, coordinated by Dimas Castellón. These efforts were geared towards producing new forms which would reflect the miserable conditions of the poor, and in their own language.

### The National Theatre

During the seventies, the National Theatre, a 19th century Italianate building, had been thoroughly renovated with luxurious equipment installed. But the plans to make the theatre work were never implemented, and no cultural policy was established. Since then the theatre staff has had to deal with events on a daily basis, with no program and no concrete outlook. The theatre has however served as a haven for the occasional productions which have surfaced, and is home to the Symphony Orchestra.

### Independent theatre companies

In 1980, San Salvador's two most productive independent theatre companies ceased their activity and left the country: Sol del Río and Actoteatro. Both companies had been very prominent during the seventies, and they represented new directions on the Salvadoran theatre scene. Sol del Río had set out to find popular forms which would reflect the values of the masses, and Actoteatro's proposition was to provide a space destined to mold a not yet existent critical urban audience by exposure to different ways of



*Los derechos del prisionero. Puppeteer.*

envisioning theatre. In a country with very little theatre-going tradition, two companies were giving equal importance to form and content.

Sol del Río began its activity in 1973 with a group of students in the Bachillerato en Artes. Two of its original founders, Saúl Amaya and Fidel Cortez, have been at the core of the group ever since. The group's productions include works by Enrique Buenaventura (*La autopsia*), Osvaldo Dragún (*Historias con cárcel*), Alberto Adellach (*Criaturas*), Carlos José Reyes (*La fiesta de los muñecos*), Roque Dalton (*La segura mano de Dios*)--all collective creations. In 1977, the group asked Carlos Vides (London and Madrid-trained Bachillerato en Artes graduate) to direct. The company grew to fifteen members and produced a play originally written in Catalan, Jordi Teixidor's *El retablo del flautista*. The play was very successful and the group travelled to other Central American countries. In 1980 the group left El Salvador, for Mexico and then Nicaragua. The group split up--some stayed on in Mexico, others in Nicaragua, while still others went to Canada. The group surfaced in Denmark, and produced a new version of Roque Dalton's *La segura mano de Dios* in 1984. Fernando Umana (Leningrad-trained Bachillerato en Artes graduate) joined the group as director. The group decided to return to Salvador in 1988. Since then, the group has produced Karel Capek's *Apócrifos*, Lorca's *Las Rositas*, Eugene Ionesco's *Delirio a Duo*, and Francisco Gavidia's *Júpiter*.

Actoteatro started in 1975 with a production of Eric Bentley's *Antigone, a Time to Die*. Coinciding with a student massacre three blocks away from the theatre, the play was interrupted after five performances. Actoteatro then produced three plays for young audiences: *Manuelita* (based on songs by the Argentinian María Elena Walsh), *Jorge del Dragón*, an original work and Alfonso Sastre's *La muñeca abandonada*. In 1977 three Actoteatro members, Naara and Roberto Salomón, and Tilly Schulz started a downtown cultural center containing a theatre, restaurant, art gallery, book-store and workshops. The theatre's first production, Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* was very successful and was performed in Guatemala as well. In 1980 Actoteatro held 150 public performances. These included new productions (Julio Mauricio's *La depresión*, Eugene Ionesco's *Bald Soprano*), and numerous three-night multi-media performances involving recent local research in poetry, dance, music, and film. Actoteatro closed down in December 1980 and six company members formed a touring company which toured in Europe for a year with *Antigone, Land of Hope and Ashes*, a bilingual production, along with the original young audience productions. The company disbanded in Switzerland in 1982.

## Puppet theatre

In the late seventies, as it became increasingly difficult for groups to gather and ensure performances, several puppet theatres began to develop. Their productions were principally short children's plays, with a "consciousness" bearing message. These puppeteers walked a very thin line. Roberto Franco, an excellent manipulator who performed all over the country for several years, did not survive the storm. He and his puppets "disappeared" in the early eighties and were never heard from again.

Another very different experience was that of José Amaya's *Bululú*. Started in Actoteatro after the theatre closed down in 1981, his puppets were at one point put to the service of the International Red Cross in order to teach the army soldiers the contents of a booklet entitled "The Rights of the Prisoner." The presentation combined puppet-theatre techniques as well as impersonations of soldiers and guerrillas.

## Theatre in guerrilla-occupied zones

"Teatrillo" is the denomination for the theatrical form of expression used in zones under guerrilla control. Theatre is viewed there as a means of consolidating communal relationships. Active participation mixing hierarchies is encouraged. The form is caricatural and enormously humorous. Often the sketches represent the evil capitalist and the corrupt politician exploiting the peasant and the worker who give them their dues. Plays dealing with the theme of love and marriage among fighters, and the problems of machismo have also been performed, but little information on this form is available.

## Commercial ventures

During the eighties, the most successful experiences, in terms of public appeal, came from the development of commercial ventures. Productions announcing light, superficial comedies packed in audiences. Queues formed to see plays in which the principal conflict was that of a husband cheating on his wife, or vice-versa. A new audience was born at this time, and the producers of these plays did not assume their cultural responsibility with this new middle-class audience. The idea was that these inane pieces were what audiences wanted to see, and that there was a rejection of thought due to the war. At the end of the decade Dora de Ayala produced and starred in *las prostitutas heredaran el reino de los cielos* in which the audience's need for redemption was satisfied: Christian values, racy language, fast-moving comedy

and a moral message turned the actress into a considerable local star. The undeniable fact was, however, that a theatre-going audience had developed during the war.

The year 1980 marked the beginning of a long period of separation for people involved in the arts in El Salvador. As of this writing, peace seems to be in the foreseeable future. Given that possibility, one can only hope that artists will return and bring with them new techniques and experiences and satisfy the audience need for theatre.

*San Salvador*

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