

Pugilism as Mirror and Metafiction in Life and in Contemporary Spanish American Drama

L. Howard Quackenbush

In recent years the topic of boxing has become the focus of several dramas from very different parts of Latin America.¹ The fact that theatrical performance has turned to one of the more savage forms of athletics to find expression for existence in these countries may reveal a renewed social and ethical preoccupation with the course of human events in this area of the world. Through the ages, pugilism has served as a vent for pent-up antagonism and, in a real sense, it has sublimated antisocial drives, purifying and refining them in a socially acceptable fashion. In addition, it has provided the more unfortunate or dispossessed segments of society with the means to rise up out of their misery and attain some semblance of prosperity and/or respectability, if only through the battering of other human beings:

Of course, those who would take boxing away from the strugglers offer no plan to replace it. And no one wants to acknowledge that it may be irreplaceable. The high-minded view is that boxing will exist only as long as whatever it reflects in mankind exists, . . . Perhaps, the true horror is that there has always been a class poor enough for this, and maybe that's why so many people avert their eyes. Why others have to watch is a perplexity, and why some have to cheer is personal. (Callahan 71)

Accordingly, it might be argued that the theatre is a very natural medium for the expurgation of violence and brutality. Immediately, we perceive a corollary between the tenets of the Theatre of Cruelty of Antonin Artaud and the staging of a boxing contest in a theatrical setting. As Artaud stated in the First Manifesto:

The theatre will never find itself again—i.e., constitute a means of true illusion—except by furnishing the spectator with the truthful precipitate of dreams, in which his taste for crime, his erotic obsessions, his savagery, his chimeras, his utopian sense of life and matter, even his cannibalism, pour out, on a level not counterfeit and illusory, but interior. (Artaud 92)

The participatory and self-conscious identification of both the spectators in the prize fight and the theatregoers who view its theatrical counterpart, convert the dramatic portrayal into a multilevel, metafictional, mirror of life. In a larger metaphorical sense, the dramatization of the pugilistic confrontation may very well represent a socially acceptable sublimation of much deeper, uglier, and disquieting maladies suffered and tolerated by the citizens of most countries, including those of Latin America:

An explanation for boxing, at least an excuse, has never been harder to summon or easier to see than it is now, simmering in the eyes of Mike Tyson. Muhammad Ali's face, when his was the face of boxing, at least had a note of humor, a hint of remorse, even the possibility of compassion, though he gave no guarantees. Tyson does: brutal, bitter ones. The usual case for boxing as art or science is rougher to make in the face of this face. Valor can be redeeming; so can grace, poise, bearing, even cunning. But this is a nightmare. The monster that men have worried was at the heart of their indefinable passion, of their indefensible sport, has come out in the flesh to be the champion of the world. (Callahan 66)²

The psychiatrist, psychodramatist and playwright Eduardo Pavlovsky together with Carlos Herme wrote *Ultimo Match* (1967); and, later, Pavlovsky produced his own sequel and logical continuation of the first play entitled *Cámara lenta: Historia de una cara* (1979). Both works focus on the human degradation and disintegration of the champ, his trainer, and cortege, but in a real sense the audience is faced with the authentic Argentine backdrop of the "desaparecidos" during "la guerra sucia" and the repressive military dictatorship of those years. Eduardo Pavlovsky understands the roleplaying capabilities inherent in psychodrama, as well as in the boxing event. He also appreciates the theatre's therapeutic value as a mirror in which the individual character and the national superpsyche may be viewed and evaluated. Pavlovsky's comments about the underlying meaning and his psychological involvement, as

author, in the development of *Cámara lenta* . . . shows this play's parallel to recent Argentine history:

metafóricamente era el proceso del deterioro que sufrimos socialmente un sector bastante importante de los argentinos. Era la metáfora del pueblo, de los golpes del pueblo y las cicatrices. Porque yo pienso que no son solamente los golpes y las desapariciones sino son las cicatrices que tenemos y que no sabemos cuáles son, porque son cicatrices internas. El boxeador tiene la cicatriz de afuera, pero lo que no se sabe y ahora se estudia con microcirugía es que cada golpe produce una microhemorragia; es decir, que no se ven a la visión normal pero cuando hacés una autopsia, te das cuenta que el cerebro del boxeador tiene microhemorragias. De alguna manera los argentinos tenemos microhemorragias a pesar de que por la cara podemos estar no heridos como si durante un tiempo nosotros hubiéramos ralentizado todo nuestro intelecto, nuestra capacidad de discernir, la interiorización de la violencia se hizo obvia, la represión no era afuera sino que ya se transformaba en adentro. Hemos tenido que disimular o crear personajes, como si un actor se convirtiera después en un personaje que representó en teatro. (Giella 57-58)

Boxing, as sport, is bewitching and consuming for many of its fans, and it serves as a wonderful medium for Pavlovsky's commentaries on human psychology. Of even greater importance, however, is the fact that the boxing match is more than sport or a living, or even sadomasochistic brutality. It is drama; better yet, it is metadrama. There exists the play within the fight and the fight within the play, *mise en abyme* taken to its infinitely inventive possibilities, both farcical and serious. Lucien Dällenbach could not invent a better scenario for infinite duplication. The spectators created by Pavlovsky who view *Ultimo Match* from within this play, for example, reflect the action in the ring. They become emotionally and psychologically involved in the bout to the point of falling victim themselves to the aggression and barbarism that they view in the pugilistic event. Their actions constitute a play within the fight within the play, which frees itself from the activity in the ring and establishes several other dramatic levels of performance. Some of these parallel the fight action (fights within the fight, for instance), and others of a less bellicose nature seem more passive to the havoc which occurs. There are multiple referents created for the metadramatic action—the ring into which individuals are thrown to continue the "metafights" of the play, the spectators on stage

who create their own fights within the fight, and the older couple seated in the window above the ring level who eat dinner and listen to the fight on the radio, but who glance down at the stage from time to time to "view" the other action which is taking place there, breaking their own internal fourth wall and superimposing their action "somewhere out there in radio land" upon the activity within the arena. The amount of spectator involvement on stage creates a grotesque, distorted atmosphere, and this may bewilder an audience which expects a more realistic and less metaphorically artistic dramatization of a boxing match:

(Todos rodean al líder. Todos se burlan del hombre ofendido. El líder y su rival mueven los puños sin acortar distancia. Arrecian los gritos del público.)

Líder. —Vení, vení. . . . Vení que me vas a encontrar.
 Público 1. —Dejá que te calce con una y vas a saber quién soy. *(Pero no se pegan. De pronto, el hombre ofendido se sienta tranquilamente y extrae chokolatines de sus bolsillos. Se los come a boca llena. El líder se sienta con aire triunfal, palmeado en la espalda por sus adictos. . . .)* (15)

The reader or viewer of the play must question whether these multiple visions of "stage reality" are not symbolic of the larger national and international picture of Argentine fighting in general ("Las Malvinas," "La Guerra Sucia," or the interminable skirmishing with the Chileans in the Beagles?).

The play uses the unique staging device of "hombres-ring" who represent (or who hold) the ring ropes. They function as human ropes and posts, and likely they symbolize the country and people of Argentina who support, sustain and keep the boxers fighting. One might assume that Pavlovsky's use of the boxing medium for his theatrical expression may be more metaphorical than it is real, although other Argentine authors like Julio Cortázar were and are avid fans of ring action. Nevertheless, the metatheatrics and actor/audience involvement in the action of the play would lead us to believe that these scenes represent much more. Whereas in *La muca*, *El señor Galíndez*, *El señor Laforgue*, etc. the author adapts the individual's private struggle to group, gang or government lawlessness or violence within Argentina, with his two boxing plays he seems to be making a more generalized statement. The latter two pieces point more directly to the decline of hope and of values and living standards of the general populace and to a government "out of control" and

unconcerned with the ethics of its public policy, rather than merely pinpointing certain individuals that it wishes to purge, although, as with most fine drama, by extension or symbolically, the other works may be seen to represent the population as a whole.

The Argentine public's addiction to violence is parodied in many ways. When the ring is vacant the spectators comment that somehow it must be filled immediately with fighting:

- Líder. —El ring está vacío.
 Público. —(*Como un eco.*) Completamente vacío. (*Se repite la breve risita anónima.*)
 Líder. —Hay que seguir peleando. Para eso está el ring.
 Varios. —Claro que hay que seguir peleando.
 Líder. —(*Cada vez más inquieto.*) Hay que seguir antes que suene el gong.
 Todos. —(*A coro.*) Antes que suene el gong. (*Se oye la risita misteriosa. Cunde la inquietud. Todos se miran con desconfianza.*)
 Líder. —(*Es una orden.*) Dije que el ring está vacío. (*Se produce un forcejeo y dos hombres son arrojados al ring.*)
 Todos. —Peleen. Peleen. (16)

Could this "Líder" symbolize, perhaps, the Argentine military dictatorship of the period, which used the excuse of fighting internal and external wars as a means to distract people's attention from the real economic and political concerns of the nation and the problems created by the government's incompetence and extreme policies? The Argentine public was unable to understand that the smoke screen of the "Malvinas" war served to hide the disastrous state of the economy in the country, and the physical, emotional, and spiritual toll that the "guerra sucia" took on all unbiased Argentines is an awareness that continues to grow in that country. It is possible that Pavlovsky is demonstrating theatrically the public's thirst for blood and mayhem and its need to find a quick and easy scapegoat which may be sacrificed, instead of seeking solutions to the difficult and endemic problems of a society which has lost a clear vision of its values and future.

In 1982, in Colombia, Esteban Navajas writes *Canto triste a una sombra de boxeo*; and, although the present level of vice, terrorism and murder could not have been anticipated at that time, the seeds of destruction had been planted and the indifference and complacency of the public to drug lords and

gangland murders of judges and elected officials were already evident. The corruption of a promising fighter through bribes, throwing fights, lying, cheating, and taking falls may be metaphors for a vice-ridden culture:

Kid: No les muestro más. A mí como sombra me da asco recorrer mi vida de aquí en adelante. Amigos que duraron tanto como duró el dinero de mi billetera; pependencias en los bares; peleas arregladas. Si me pagaban por caer en una pelea, caía. Me convertí en un palooka para promover figuras nuevas. El barranco. (67)

Perhaps, the breadth and depth of its symbolism may appear distorted or exaggerated, but the artistic and literary community has long pointed to the bestiality and ferocity of the boxing match as symptomatic of the attitudes and predilections of the nation as a whole.

It is no wonder, then, that Vicente Leñero, long a critic of the decline of social values and of moral awareness in Mexico, should produce *iPelearán! Diez Rounds* (1985), and it is interesting that Leñero's play, if seen from a historical or political perspective, may well represent the reality of Mexico's boom and bust cycle of the past two decades. For instance, only recently has the extent and pervasion of the graft, extortion, pay-offs, and theft in the Mexican petroleum industry become public knowledge and a few of those middle to high echelon officials who perpetrated the waste and corruption have been brought to justice, albeit in a most haphazard fashion.

As is the case with the boxing plays by Pavlovsky, Leñero's *iPelearán!* . . . seems to depict and be directed at different segments of the population from those of his earlier works or his "teatro documental" period. More than strictly theatre protest, or views of the exploited and downtrodden, this play would have Mexicans avoid foreign domination, both individually and collectively, counseling them to be wary of those "friends or loved ones" who would exploit their talents for self-gain. It would have them elevate their vision, seeking higher, more lofty ideals. In this sense, *iPelearán!* . . . could be viewed as a transitional play between the former works already mentioned and those to follow shortly, such as *Nadie sabe nada*, *Jesucristo Gómez*, and *El infierno*, which see Mexican human events through much more generalized (even spiritual) eyes.

iPelearán! Diez Rounds shows a repetitive, cyclical structure which gives the impression of multiple possibilities for action and interpretation. There exist several variations on the theme of rising to the top and, then, being beaten decisively, either by other fighters (one might think of outside, foreign

banking interests, Mexico's heavy borrowing at high interest rates which led to speculation during the euphoria of the oil boom in the '70's, only to accumulate an enormous foreign debt which brought the country virtually to its knees a decade later), or by internal self-interest and manipulation by those close to the champ, seen in the play as the manager and the wife. Many Mexican nationals, even ex-presidents, stole from the nation, fled the country, and transferred huge quantities of Mexican assets abroad, pounding Mexico into the canvas. For a period, Mexico was "knocked out" by these many self-serving, corrupt, politically expedient, special interest groups.

Leñero's play begins, and rebegins, with the fighter Bobby Terán face down, "noqueado," on the canvas of the ring: "*Bobby está tendido sobre la lona, boca abajo, con los brazos en cruz, como un boxeador que ha sido noqueado de manera definitiva . . .*" (45). The action of Bobby's wife María, who confronts him in the gym, frames the entire play and establishes the two possible outcomes for the performance. In the first, María tells Bobby that if he does not withdraw from the fight, she will shoot herself, but Bobby disarms her. In the final episode of the play this action is repeated, but this time María shoots Bobby. In the intervening scenes of the play, the audience follows the fight sequence, and Bobby is knocked out and his hopes of becoming champion are dashed. In each setting, the lights come up and Bobby is seen lying face down on the canvas, but only after María shoots him does the count begin:

- Réferi: (En off) Uno. Dos. Tres. Cuatro. Cinco. Seis. Siete. Ocho. Nueve. . . . ¡Fuera! . . . *aparece Mánager Hernández, con su maletín. Sube al ring*
 . . .
- Mánager H.: Cabeza de piedra. . . . (Pausa) ¿Te vas a quedar aquí toda la vida? (*Bobby sacude la cabeza y trata de incorporarse.*)
- Bobby: ¿Qué pasó?
- Mánager H.: ¡Güevón! *Oscuro.* (162-63)

The play ends as it began. The variations on the theme are innumerable and highly mutable. The vicious circle of rise and fall and of brutality continues within the ring and the gym, but it extends far beyond. It represents symbolically the suicide or murder of individuals, groups, and perhaps even of the nation itself—everyone who has been connected in some way with this struggle for ascendancy:

Only the most expendable men are boxers. All of the fighters who ever died—nearly 500 since 1918, when the *Ring* book started to keep tabs—haven't the political constituency of a solitary suburban child who falls off a trampoline. Observers who draw near enough to fights and fighters to think that they see something of value, something pure and honest, are sure to mention the desperate background and paradoxical gentleness. (Callahan 67)

Regardless of our position on the symbolic interpretation of these battles for survival and power, what cannot be disputed is the inherently theatrical nature of the activity surrounding the entire boxing scene. Important matches have always been media events, and the boxers, to one degree or another, become actors on the stage that is commonly called a ring. Even their personal life becomes a drama, and we need only think of Mike Tyson and his actress ex-wife Robin Givens, their marital sparring, the cameras and the reporters, to realize how much of a "show" can be made of these activities. Their life is pure (soapy) drama. The ring is a stage and the boxers perform for their audience in a metatheatrical, dramatically self-conscious, manner. These actors are aware of the drama they are enacting. They dress in robes and warm-up clothing that tend to be garishly adorned, showy and dramatic. The match announcer dresses in a tuxedo which contradicts and parodies the melee of flying fists that will soon follow. Navajas's play *Canto triste a una sombra de boxeo* captures magnificently this aspect of the boxing spectacle. The Colombian Kid Anchoa comes to New York's Madison Square Garden arena for his fight:

- Periodistas: Increíble / Me pasé de copas . . . / No veía algo así desde el cuatro de julio . . . (. . . *al rato entra el Tiburoncito seguido por el Cubano y Pacholo. Tiburoncito tiene puesto un sombrero alón repleto de bombillitos intermitentes. Su terno es azul eléctrico y, encima de todo, atigrado. Los pantalones son de terciopelo vinotinto. Tiene un anillo en cada dedo, y los zapatos también tienen foquitos que se prenden cada vez que pisa. . . . El Oklahoma rechaza el saludo de su oponente. . . .*).
- Cubano: (*Pasándole el brazo por encima.*) No le haga caso. Eso es parte del show. (51)

Even the weigh-in sessions become plays-within-plays in which the fighters verbally spar with one another; and, regularly, the bout assumes a circus atmosphere when, as if introducing an animal act or a death-defying performance, the ring announcer shouts, "Ladieeeee aaand gentlemeeeen, theee maaaain eeeveent. . . ." The face-off between two fighters when the referee gives them his instructions is always full of dramatics and toughguy antics. The fighters are completely aware of their theatrics, often mimicking or poking fun at their opponents, and feigning injury. The T.V. cameras focus in for close-ups of the fighters' faces. Neither fighter blinks an eye, trying to stare down his opponent, and the cameras catch every twitch of their facial muscles. It could be a sequence out of "Rocky," and the fight and the fighters are turned into players in a movie or a dramatization for television. The fighters act out their parts, parts they have learned from the movies and T.V. They are players playing themselves, and the real contest becomes a "metafight," and a fight within a television show as well.

Muhammad Ali (Cassius Clay) comes to mind, and we think of his "rope-a-dope" acting, as he toyed and played with opponents. The poems he recited to reporters and followers have become part of the folklore of boxing, and we remember the similies "float like a butterfly" and "sting like a bee." He and his entourage were always putting on a show for their public and the cameras. To some extent, Ali's famous phrases have come to exemplify the dexterity of great fighters in general. The trainer/manager in Pavlovsky's play, *Cámara lenta: Historia de una cara*, would have us believe that the footwork of his fighter should be described in the same Ali fashion:

Atención prepare la derecha . . . ¡ya! bien Dagomar . . . le rompió
la ceja . . . le sale sangre . . . le abrió una herida de dos
centímetros . . . bailotee Dagomar . . . *como una*
mariposa . . . (énfasis mío, 27)

Each bout is a drama with a cast of hundreds. The main event becomes the primary plot, with trainers and spectators establishing their own subplots to the extent that they become physically and emotionally involved in the action in the ring. The principal characters may metatheatrically become independent of the primary action and their activities outside of the ring (stage) may appear to be more theatrical than the action that takes place on the stage. We need only think of the human dramas enacted outside the ring by Mike Tyson, Roberto Durán, Sugar Ray Leonard, or Leon Spinks. Other athletes as well have invaded the sanctuary of the ring to exploit its dramatic and lucrative potential, such as football stars like Too Tall Jones; and, perhaps,

sometime in the future others who have expressed an interest will give it a try, even if fleetingly, as was the case with Mark Gastineau. We remember also the news report of the mother of the English fighter who climbed into the ring when her son was fighting and hit her son's opponent with the point of her high heel shoe—pure metadramatic audience participation and involvement, approximating the metadramatics of "All Star Wrestling." But there is also an overriding pathos which shrouds the ring. This down side to the glitter, jest and merriment merely precludes the inevitable defeat, the Grim Reaper who patiently awaits every champion in the form of "The Contender":

It was halfway between performance art and barnstorming. . . . So it was that on Sunday, at Tokyo's Korakuen Stadium, Mike Tyson, the undisputed, undefeated heavyweight champion of the world, provided real theater. . . . [I]t was impossible to conceive what would happen at 1:23 of the 10th round. James (Buster) Douglas, so secure in boxing anonymity . . . lifted Tyson upright with a right uppercut, hit the suddenly defenseless champion with two more punches and then floored the reeling Tyson, already more horizontal than perpendicular, with a chopping left hook. . . . It was probably the biggest upset in boxing history, and certainly the unlikeliest result of all recent sporting events. (Hoffer 16-18)

The fact is that, with or without the fight commentator or media reporter, the prize fight is inherently dramatic; but, notwithstanding, it is vicious reality, and the words of Archibald MacLeish's Nickles ("Old Nick"?) come to mind. The existentialist metatheatrics of *J.B.* mirror the human struggle of life in a dazzlingly nightmarish circus—all costumes and masks, distorted brilliance and gloom, success and defeat, depicting all of life's vicious circles and rings. Humanity is seen in the reflection of the parts played in life's drama, whether on or off the stage. As Mr. Zuss (Zeus?) explains to Nickles about the man Job; the latter, in so many ways, represents the Everyman boxer standing on his quadrangular stage . . . or coffin:

| | |
|-----------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Mr. Zuss: | Leave him a' Lone! He can't act and you know it. |
| Nickles: | He doesn't have to act. He suffers. It's an old role—played like a mouth-organ. Any idiot on earth Given breath enough can breathe it— Given tears enough can weep. |

All he needs is help to see. (75)

.....

Mr. Zuss: Why won't he play the part he's playing?

Nickles: Because he isn't.

Mr. Zuss: Isn't what?

Nickles: Isn't playing. He's not playing.

He isn't in the play at all.

He's where we all are—in our suffering (84)

The same may be said for the prize fighter. The vicious reality of the enterprise itself tends to hide the dramatics but, in an inverted metatheatrical sense, the play becomes part of the reality of the boxing event (of the *suffering*). Just as Nickles states that it is not a play at all, we, the spectators, know that in many ways it is. It could be argued that the dramatic elements surrounding the contest, the theatrical nature of the performance, have dominated certain aspects of the sporting event. The bout's theatricalism has freed itself and become independent of the fight. The fact that major fights are viewed on television, seen by closed-circuit broadcast in movie theatres, held in the most luxurious surroundings in Las Vegas, Monte Carlo, or African and Far Eastern capitals, enhances, as well, the illusory nature and the dramatic, metatheatrical qualities of these occasions. Title fights have become spectacles to which only the upper crust, the nobility of society, are privileged to attend—government figures, sports heroes, entertainment stars, industrial magnates, the rich and the powerful—and they come to see and to be seen by each other. The metatheatrics of the spectacle become multiplied one hundred fold. Actors and actresses (both professional and novice), *aficionados*, dressed in their finest, come as spectators of the boxing drama, but they soon create their own independent plays as they parade and wave to admiring fans, and the plays-within-the-plays unfold under the lights and before thousands, perhaps millions, of admiring enthusiasts. The spectators to these scenes must be aware that the psychological struggle for position outside the ring is just as important as the dodging of blows and fancy footwork taking place inside the ropes.

Someone might argue, though, that this is a purely "anglo" phenomenon; that the Latin American public has little interest in the boxing world or that the glamour and glitter never reaches Hispanic fighters, but nothing could be farther from the truth. The world contenders for the Flyweight, Bantamweight and Lightweight divisions have been dominated primarily by Latins (until very recently when Asians entered the arena—Koreans, Japanese, and Southeast Asians primarily, with a smattering of North Americans and

Europeans)—Cubans, Venezuelans, Panamanians, Mexicans, Argentines. In their countries they become national heroes who, like their bull fighting cousins, live very well indeed—while they live. Even the most calloused or prejudiced American fight fans recognize the famous names of the following fighters:

- | | |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Roberto Durán - | Lightweight champion of the world from 1972 to 1979, Welterweight champion, beating Sugar Ray Leonard for the crown, and a contender for the title well into the '80's. |
| Betulio González - | Flyweight champion, regaining the crown on three different occasions in the '70's. |
| Alexis Argüello - | world champion in three different divisions: Featherweight (1974-76), Junior-Lightweight and Lightweight (late '70's-early '80's). |
| Wilfredo Gómez - | the Super-Bantamweight title holder from 1977-82, who made 15 successful title defenses during his career. |
| Kid Chocolate - | twice champion of the Junior-Lightweight division in the '30's. ³ (Odd 153-56) |

Of one of these incredibly talented fighters, Roberto Durán, fans may remember his now famous words "no más," when he decided not to come out for the next round while fighting Leonard in their last televised bout. Unequivocally, all contemporary fighters are aware of their own theatricalism and their T.V. presence. Dramatic self-consciousness assumes a position of enormous importance in fight promotion and in maintaining their image and mystique. To capture this concept on stage, Esteban Navajas in *Canto triste* has his protagonist, Kid Anchoa, monologue with the audience concerning the dramatics of his role. He is aware of his part as presentation and theatre in a literarily self-conscious manner. He begins by conversing with the other characters of the play but, as his mind wanders and they exit, Kid talks more and more to himself and metatheatrically to his audience in the mental ramblings and confused impressions of an old ex-fighter:

Por eso, cada nada saco mis fantasmas de paseo. Hablo con ellos. Ellos me hablan familiarmente. Para ustedes, será extraño; pero para los ancianos y para el teatro no lo es. Vivimos de esos

fantasmas, o ensoñaciones, o sombras. Llámenlos como quieran. Ahora mismo invoco algunos de mis fantasmas favoritos (*Comienzo a introducirse en escena una melodía delatadora de la nostalgia del Kid*). Les traigo a este cuarto sombras de hace cincuenta años para que vean cómo me inicié en esto de los puños y cómo me gané el remoquete de Kid Anchoa. . . . (13)

Fighters are aware that they imitate and dramatize the stark realities of the action of the ring. The dramatics of the champ and contender during the sparring and workout sessions staged for camp visitors and the media also show the attention given to a dramatic self-consciousness. The fighters know, as do the spectators, that a performance is taking place which only obliquely approximates the realities of the fight itself. These characters are on their stage, acting out the parts which they have been assigned by the fight world and, indirectly, by the Fates in life's *Gran teatro del mundo*. The training camp often demonstrates dramatic self-consciousness with press, wives, girlfriends, ex-fighters and has-beens posturing to be included in the aura and glow that surrounds the king, the champ:

If the allure of boxing is hazy, the awe of the champion is clear. Regional vainglories like the World Cup or the World Series only aspire to the global importance of the heavyweight champion. Sullivan, Jack Dempsey, Joe Louis and Ali truly possessed the world—countries that couldn't have picked Jimmy Carter out of a lineup recognized Ali at a distance—. . . . (Callahan 67)

The maimed, scarred, cauliflower eared and benumbed remnants of boxing's glorious past stumble around the new champ's ring hoping for a T.V. interview; or, better yet, for renewed vitality which might give them "just one more shot at the title"—these eternal Robinsons, Lewises, Alis, Fraisers, Duráns and Formans of boxing provide additional spectacle: "In training-camp workouts and at ringside on fight night, the cauliflower reunions fill in another piece of the picture. They are bittersweet delights" (Callahan 70).

Every champ seems blind to his own poverty-stricken and punchdrunk mirror image which wanders aimlessly around the old gym that was once the center of his world:

He was cloaked in black. Black street shoes, black socks, black pants, black short-sleeved shirt. He threw a punch, and in the small town's abandoned boxing gym, the rusting chain between the heavy

bag and the ceiling rocked and creaked . . . black street shoes scuffed faster and faster across the black moldering tiles: *Yeah, Lawd, champ can still float, champ can still sting!* He whirled, jabbed, feinted, let his feet fly into a shuffle. "How's that for a sick man?" he shouted.

He did it for a second three-minute round, then a third. "Time!" I shouted at the end of each one as the second hand swept past the 12 on the wristwatch he had handed me. And, then, gradually, his shoulders began to slump, his hands to drop. The tap and thud of leather soles and leather gloves began to miss a quarter-beat . . . half-beat . . . whole. Ali stopped and sucked air. The dance was over. (Smith 48)

Eduardo Pavlovsky's plays capture graphically this process of disintegration. It is common for the public to forget the champion as fast as they acclaimed him in the beginning. The adulation of the hero who is forgotten as soon as he loses begins in *Ultimo Match*, but it is the entire focus of *Cámara lenta: Historia de una cara*. Pavlovsky and Herme synthesize the essence of the tragedy near the end of *Ultimo Match*:

(El rumor de la multitud temerosa que busca un Campeón precede a los personajes. Entran los mismos que comenzaron la escena rumoreando: "¿Dónde está el Campeón?" Pasan frente al Campeón, lo rozan, lo apartan sin reconocerlo. . . .) (44)

Cámara lenta treats the aftermath of a life of boxing and the future that awaits the career boxer who has had the sense knocked out of him from repeated beatings in the ring. This ex-champ was retired by the contender to the crown after his last disastrous title defense. Dagomar suffers from mental lapses, violent shifts of personality, nightmares, convulsions, severe headaches, and an attention span of only a few minutes at a time. Within boxing circles, he would be called "punch drunk." His mind spins, and he repeats what he says two or three times as if he were wandering in a daze:

Dagomar: *(Queda solo. Cuchicheando. Escupe. Se rasca. Parece que llora. Se ríe. De improviso se queda mirando fijo un lugar. Agarra un frasco con pastillas y saca tres, se las pone en la boca y*

cuando va a agarrar el vaso con agua se le cae. . . .)
(30)

By the end of the play, he can no longer control his bodily functions and Amílcar, his friend and ex-manager, is unable to take care of him anymore. These two battle-worn veterans of the ring retreat to the imaginary, fantasy world when they were winners, but even when they listen to tapes of Dagomar's last fight or pretend to be working out, it is all a fantasy. They remain in their apartment staring with fixed, stupefied expressions at the wall or at the floor:

Luz sobre Amílcar que aparece de pie y con una toalla en la mano mirando un punto imaginario. Dagomar está sentado mirando al frente sin escucharlo.

Amílcar: Izquierda adelante, izquierda adelante. (*Pausa.*)
Boxee . . . boxee . . . muévase . . . bailotee
. . . (*Pausa.*). Cúbrase la mejilla con el
guante. . . ¡No, no! ¡no vaya a las cuerdas
. . . ocupe el centro . . . izquierda adelante. . . vaya
preparando la derecha! . . . (27)

The description of nearly every fighter's end is graphically and brutally rendered, and Pavlovsky shows what happens to fighters who, ultimately, have to live out their broken lives and broken dreams. The irony is that this is life as well as drama and Muhammad Ali, at the moment of this writing, cannot distinguish between the two:

Every movement he made now was infinitely patient and slow.
Feeling . . . in . . . his . . . pocket . . . for . . . his . . . key
Slipping . . . it . . . into . . . the . . . car . . . lock Bending . . .
and . . . sliding . . . behind . . . the . . . wheel. . . . Turning . . . on
. . . the . . . ignition . . . and . . . shifting . . . into . . . gear. . . .

The gods also appear to laugh sardonically at the paradoxes that seem to hound their erstwhile heroes:

He led me into the barn. On the floor, leaning against the walls,
were paintings and photographs of him in his prime, eyes keen,

arms thrust up in triumph, surrounded by the cluster of people he took around the world with him.

He looked closer and noticed it. Across his face in every picture, streaks of bird dung. He glanced up toward the pigeons in the rafters. . . . (Smith 48)

Every has-been boxer fantasizes about his comeback and how he is going to return in glory one day to the ring. In *Camara lenta* Pavlovsky creates an episode, a scene called "Escena La vuelta," in which he captures these hopes and feelings on the stage. Amílcar knows Dagomar could never return, but he loves his childlike ex-fighter and does not want to have to hurt his feelings so, without malice, he humors him along by agreeing in a passive manner:

Dagomar: Quiero volver . . . yo estoy seguro que puedo volver . . . quiero empezar.

Amílcar: (*Dicho rápido.*) Claro . . . por qué no.

Dagomar: Siempre hice vida higiénica . . . nunca fumé . . . nunca chupé . . . (*Pausa.*) tengo unos diez kilos de más . . . pero eso lo bajo en el gimnasio en un mes. (*Pausa.*)

Amílcar: (*Rápido.*) Claro . . . por qué no. (33)

There is only one way out of their dilemma, and Dagomar has already dreamt about it in one of his nightmares. He has told his manager what he must do to save them both from starvation and total degradation:

Amílcar va al cajón de la cocina y saca el cuchillo bruscamente. Dagomar no lo ve. Amílcar queda con el cuchillo en la mano detrás de él.

Dagomar: (*Mirando al frente.*) Ayer tuve una pesadilla. . . . (*Amílcar da un paso hacia adelante muy lentamente con cuchillo en la mano.*) (*Bajan las luces lentamente.*) (53)

In spite of its antisocial ferocity, in much of the world, boxing, along with its disguised forms and its dramatic phantoms, is not on the verge of extinction as some would like to believe. This particular theatre of cruelty bewitches its ringside audience and, then, turns in upon itself metadramatically, multiplying its savagery in participant, staged spectators, acting public, and passive viewers.

The roles being performed are as numerous as the several layers of action that are played before its vast public. One would have to question, however, if the great majority of the players involved in the dramas of boxing, both inside and outside the ring, are not also participants acting out their own frenzied neuroses and fantasies. There may well exist another level of metatheatrical psychodrama. The actors in these plays may be more in need of attention than any patient or criminal who might sublimate his or her primal instincts or antisocial tendencies by viewing or performing these parts. And these characters, on all levels, act out what they would like their reality to be rather than what it actually is, trying to convince themselves that what they are engaged in is real life, when so often it is merely another masked role they play to add to the metafiction of the moment.

We have come full circle from Bobby, to the Kid, to Dagomar, and on to the metadramatic participation of real-life boxers and of their public and, then, back again to enclose individuals and governments within the ring. We have seen the rise and fall of fighters and, metaphorically, of nations. In a cathartic sense, we have even seen reflected in these bouts images of our own triumphs and failures. We have acted out our fantasies both on and off the stage, and we have paraded our metadramas before the bright lights of life's paltry aggressions. Our childish dreams of splendor and triumph, our infinite duplication of violence and brutality in all its bloody variety, have spawned a scarred, weak-minded, and broken Frankenstein—an ex-fighter who stares back at us from the mirror of life's many bouts in the theatrical ring.

Brigham Young University

Notes

1. For the purposes of this paper, I will concentrate on Mexico, Colombia, and Argentina. It should be noted, however, that the play *iKid Peña contra Alarcón por el título europeo!* by the Spanish playwright Fermín Cabal appeared in 1983 (Madrid: Editorial Fundamentos); and, although it treats wrestling and not boxing, Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda published the work *Máscara vs. Cabellera* in *Teatro del delito* (México: Editores Mexicanos Unidos, 1985).
2. This, of course, was before James (Buster) Douglas did the incomprehensible to Tyson.
3. World Champions from Latin America (listed by country):

| <u>Name</u> | <u>Country</u> | <u>Division</u> | <u>Dates</u> |
|----------------|----------------|-----------------|--------------|
| Monzón, Carlos | Argentina | Middleweight | 1970, 1977 |
| Pérez, Pascual | Argentina | Flyweight | 1954 |

| | | | |
|---------------------|----------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Kid Chocolate | Cuba | Jr.-Lightweight | 1931 (Two Eligio Sardinias Titles) |
| <u>Name</u> | <u>Country</u> | <u>Division</u> | <u>Dates</u> |
| González, Gerardo | Cuba | Welterweight | |
| Guzmán, Juan | Dom. Rep. | Jr.-Flyweight | 1976 |
| Arrendondo, Ricardo | Mexico | Jr.-Lightweight | 1971-74 |
| Herrera, Rafael | Mexico | Bantamweight | 1972-1973 |
| Saldívar, Vicente | Mexico | Featherweight | 1964, 1970 |
| Sánchez, Salvador | Mexico | Featherweight | 1980-82 |
| Argüello, Alexis | Nicaragua | Fthr., Jr.Lght., Lght. | 1974-76, 80-82 (three world titles) |
| Durán, Roberto | Panamá | Lightweight | 1972-1979 |
| Ibarra, Luis | Panamá | Flyweight | 1979, 1981 |
| Gómez, Wilfredo | Puerto Rico | Super Bantam | 1977-82 |
| Estaba, Luis | Venezuela | Jr.-Flyweight | 1975-78 |
| González, Betulio | Venezuela | Flyweight | 1971, 1973, 1978 |

Although the Heavyweight division receives most of the publicity in the fight world, these Latin boxers (and many others not mentioned here) were great athletes and champions of the world in their own right. Even in the Heavyweight division, however, paramount boxing talent has been evident in Latin America. One need only consider Cuba's two-time Olympic Heavyweight Champion, Teófilo Stevenson, who easily could have been a heavyweight contender, but who was not permitted to fight professionally. He gave Castro one more propaganda tool to demonstrate the decadence and physical weakness of the soft Yankee imperialists in the 1972 and 1976 Olympics. Stevenson coached the Cuban team which dominated the boxing events of the 1991 Pan American Games held recently in Havana.

Works Cited

- Artaud, Antonin. *The Theatre and Its Double*. Trans. Mary Caroline Richards. New York: Grove Press, 1958.
- Callahan, Tom. "Boxing's Allure." *Time* (27 June 1988): 66-71.

- Dällenbach, Lucien. *Le Récit spéculaire. Essai sur la mise en abyme*. Paris: Editions Du Seuil, 1977.
- Giella, Miguel Angel. "Entrevistas con Eduardo Pavlovsky." *LATR* 19.1 (1985): 57-64.
- Hoffer, Richard. "He Got Up and. . . ." *Sports Illustrated* (19 Feb. 1990): 12-24.
- Leñero, Vicente. *¡Pelearán! Diez Rounds*. México: Editores Mexicanos Unidos, 1985.
- MacLeish, Archibald. *J. B.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1956.
- Navajas, Esteban. *Canto triste a una sombra de boxeo*. Medellín: Editorial Lealón, 1983.
- Odd, Gilbert. *Encyclopedia of Boxing*. New York: Crescent Books, 1983.
- Pavlovsky, Eduardo. *Cámara lenta: Historia de una cara*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Talía, 1979.
- Pavlovsky, Eduardo and Carlos Herme. *Ultimo Match*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Talía, 1970.
- Smith, Gary. "Muhammad Ali, the Man and His Entourage Today." *Sports Illustrated* (25 April 1988): 47-70.