

## Theatre Notes from Chile

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One of the successful and most controversial works of the 1969-70 theatre season in Chile was *El Evangelio según San Jaime* by Jaime Silva.<sup>1</sup> *El Evangelio* is a three-act biblical allegory in verse depicting, as its subtitle indicates, "Los trabajos de Don Demonio y Don Jesucristo" from Genesis to the Death and Resurrection of Christ. Its similarity with the Bible ends, however, with the use of the Bible stories as a framework for burlesque. The target is the hypocrisy of the elite who, along with some members of the clergy, have used the institution of religion to anaesthetize the longing of the poor for a better life. In effect, *El Evangelio* is as close as the modern theatre is about to get to a true medieval *juego de escarnio*. The customarily sacred topic is presented in grotesque levity, including a *danza de la muerte* and allegorical figures with a typical Chilean touch. Dios-Padre, for example, is a "patrón de fundo" dressed in white. Don Demonio is a red "huaso"; Mary, Joseph, and Don Jesucristo wear the clothing of *campesinos*. These, along with other elements of Chilean folklore make the presentation more immediate to the audience: the Annunciation is a *tonada chilena* sung by El Gallo on a barnyard fence while Mary works in the garden; Jesus (Jesucristo Macanudo in the episode) engages in a *payada* with Don Demonio; and a good deal of the dialogue is in the dialect of the countryside.

The controversial aspect of *El Evangelio* centers around the conflict between Don Demonio and Don Jesucristo. Beyond the obvious battle of good against evil, it is the author's interpretation of who is good or evil and the presentation of the characters Dios-Padre and Don Jesucristo that caused an uproar in Chile. The good are the poor, represented by a Christ who is a modern day rebel. The evil are those who exploit the poor to keep them in submission: Don Demonio and Doña Muerte, the rich (modern day Pharisees), institutions such

as the Church and its clergy (who demand remuneration for their services), and even Dios-Padre himself, who demands that Christ lie to the people so that they will obey and will not think or question. This interpretation caused fights to break out interrupting the performance in Concepción, and a general controversy throughout Chile between proponents of freedom of expression and those whose religious sensibilities were offended. Those offended disagreed with the presentation of the character Dios-Padre as a blustering, tyrannical landowner against the freedom of the *peón* and in collusion with the Devil and the Pharisees to subjugate the poor. In addition, the figure of Christ was difficult for some Chileans to accept. Don Jesucristo is a popular Christ, called the "huacho del cielo,"<sup>2</sup> a young *campesino* whose speech reflects the Chilean country dialect. He is a very human figure who makes a pass at Mary Magdalene, who insults the tyrant Dios-Padre in the name of human rights, whose relationship with the Apostle John is suggested as somewhat homosexual, and who is not beyond calling Doña Muerte "vieja cabrona." Moreover, one of the most shocking scenes for the Chilean audience to witness was the carnal temptation of this human Christ by three Devils representing male and female genitalia.<sup>3</sup>

Played for effect, the work was very successful, no doubt aided by the controversy which paid it more attention than it might have received otherwise. Nevertheless, one aspect upon which both critic and non-critic agreed was the grotesque nature of the work ("un mero dibujo deforme"<sup>4</sup>) and its characterization of Dios-Padre ("una imagen desfigurada y ridiculizada hasta lo monstruoso"<sup>5</sup>). Add to this Doña Muerte in her skeleton costume, the Pharisees with extremely long noses speaking a "pig Spanish," and a bat out of Hell come to aid the Devil in his fight against Christ, and one begins to see another dimension of the work. *El Evangelio* is presented in such a blatantly ridiculous way that, perhaps, the author's only intention was to have some fun by shocking his fellow countrymen.

*Cuestionemos la cuestión*, presented by the theatre company ICTUS, is a series of episodes in two acts dealing with various aspects of modern man's alienation. ICTUS has staged works like this before and with better success, though this did not diminish the quality of the performance. Jaime Celedón was masterful as a drunkard and as a conservative member of the Senate. What is interesting about this work, however, is that it reflects an attitude about alienation commonly shared by the members of ICTUS: man a servant to the values he created (money, the State, religion), man dehumanized by assimilation into institutions, man whose laughter is a cry of anguish. *Cuestionemos la cuestión* is a potpourri of scenes on alienation that becomes original as the actors themselves endeavor to create their own drama. It was an attempt at a collective creation that would allow each actor the fullest opportunity to express himself. After four months of work that resembled group therapy more than rehearsal, the company presented what Claudio Di Girolamo expressed as "un punto de llegada y de partida . . . un nuevo camino para cada uno de nosotros que

necesitamos darnos en nuestra verdad de hombres y artistas."<sup>6</sup> *Cuestionemos la cuestión*, then, is an experiment in theatre that may develop into something original for ICTUS in the future.

*Los ángeles ladrones* is a two-act musical comedy for children by Jorge Díaz. The *ángeles ladrones* are three cats who steal a clockmaker's cuckoo birds and, in the process, manipulate time so that all the characters on stage regress to their childhood. The regression is an interlude played for relief because the features of the cats were so awesome that the children in the audience were frightened. In the end, the clockmaker saves the birds and the cats are carted off to jail.

This work was presented by ICTUS after the run of *Cuestionemos la cuestión* and before their next presentation which was to be Ionesco's *The Chairs*. The members of the cast were students of the ICTUS Drama School.<sup>7</sup> The direction was excellent and done by Monica Echeverría, famous in her own right as an author of children's plays.

Two of Chile's most popular actresses were given awards for their performances over the years. Silvia Piñeiro was awarded the Martillo de Oro by the members of the Teatro Municipal in Santiago for the best performance by an actress during the 1969 season for her role in *La pérgola de las flores*. It is a new award to be given annually to the best actor or actress and the best Chilean work of the preceding season. Silvia Piñeiro also received the ONDA award from the Spanish Government for her acting in the television series *Juani en sociedad*, written by Alejandro Sieveking.

Ana González, also a member of the cast of *La pérgola de las flores*, was the first woman to receive the Premio Nacional de Arte in the 26 years that the award has existed. She began modestly in 1934 as an actress in workers' theatre groups and turned professional soon after. Her success really began in 1939 when she created the character Desideria on the radio. From radio she went to the University Theatre in 1946 performing in various works staged by the Teatro de Ensayo de la Universidad Católica (TEUC) including *The Madwoman of Chailot* by Giraudoux and Shaw's *Pygmalion*. Her latest success has been her work on television in an updated version of her old radio series called *Desideria in*. Ana González's career has taken her through all phases of theatre in Chile. At each step she has excelled and further developed her talents until today she is recognized as one of her country's best actresses.

The Teatro de Ensayo de la Universidad Católica (TEUC) no longer exists as a separate theatre company. In December of 1969 it was integrated into a new school of communications arts at the Universidad Católica and renamed the Taller de Experimentación Teatral. Now it is one department which, along with the departments of Cinema and Television, forms the new Escuela de Artes de la Comunicación. The reorganization came about as the result of the academic reforms in the University which occurred during 1969. The purpose was to attempt to acquire a new public by reorienting the attention of the

theatre group to a broader base in society. University Theatre had been in the doldrums for some time because its middle-class audience was too satisfied. The renovation has as its purpose, therefore, the revivification of theatre in Chile, much the same motivation that began the original University movement of the 1940's. One difference, however, between this approach and the old University movement is that this is an attempt to enlist the cooperation of both University and society, to try to create a theatre that reflects the reality of modern Chile with the participation of the general public and not merely an elite. This movement, then, is linked with the resurgence of the *teatro popular* in Chile.

The University Theatre has expanded its horizons in an attempt to take advantage of the creative expression of the popular theatre. The purpose is to reflect the popular element in a professional theatre, to show the changes in modern society, and present the whole variety of Chilean life. It is not, however, a tendency toward the old *costumbrista* type of theatre. On the contrary, the new movement hopes to gain and educate a new theatre audience on a national scale, the audience that is now in the hands of melodrama on television or the radio. By providing a stimulus to the aficionado (from school child to worker) to participate in theatre, the new movement hopes to incorporate the people into the cultural mainstream of modern Chile. Hopefully, a process of exploration into the national identity will express universal values and channel the creative possibilities of the Chilean people through their own dramatic forms.

The impulse for the movement came from the Festival de Teatro Universitario-Obrero in 1968. This proved the possibility of interaction between the University and society at large and resulted in the Asociación Nacional de Teatro Aficionado de Chile, a mechanism making possible the development of non-professional theatre groups and the general diffusion of theatrical activities throughout the country. Later, in December of 1969, a convention was held in Santiago to provide the structure to coordinate the various theatre activities in the country. The program of activities for the convention expressed the hope of those in attendance, "que llegue a convertirse en un punto de partida de una nueva etapa en el quehacer teatral chileno." One of the results of the convention was the projection, for sometime during 1970, of a national festival of *teatro aficionado*.

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## Notes

1. Paid attendance for *El Evangelio* was 41,459. It was outdrawn only by the classic musical comedy *La Pérgola de las flores* with attendance figures of 76,234. Figures from *Ercilla*, No. 1804 (14 a 20 enero 1970), 73.

2. The heavenly bastard.

3. *El chanco*, the buttocks; *la zorra*, the vulva; and *la diuca*, the male organ.

4. Guillermo Blanco, "El Evangelio según San Jaime," *Mensaje* (Santiago), XVIII (septiembre de 1969), 391.

5. Ronaldo Muñoz, ss. cc., "El Evangelio según 'San Jaime,'" *Mensaje*, XVIII (agosto de 1969), 378.

6. From the theatre program of *Cuestionemos la cuestión*, n.d.

7. *Escuela de Arte Dramático ICTUS*.