

## Staging the Revolution: The Nosotros Theatre Group and the *teatro proletario* of the Second Republic

### Abstract:

This article explores the importance of the **agit-prop proletarian theatre** and, in particular, the **Nosotros group** (1932-1934) in the attempt to define a new national identity during the **Second Republic**; it brings into the public domain fresh information, garnered from the **censorship** archives, and reveals the group's objectives and methods in the creation of a new type of theatre for a new Spain. The play, *La peste fascista* (1933), by **César Falcón** is included in an appendix as an example of the group's practice.

*It is no longer the private, personal fate of the individual, but the times and the fate of the masses that are the heroic factors in the new drama.*

Erwin Piscator.<sup>1</sup>

The so-called memory boom in Spain has led to an increased interest in the cultural output of the Second Republic (1931 – 1936). This article contributes to this process and argues that the short-lived and largely forgotten proletarian drama of the period deserves a more prominent place in Spain's theatre history. Circumstances have undoubtedly improved since Miguel Bilbatúa lamented the difficulties associated with a comprehensive study of the theatre of the Republican period; although most of those involved are no longer with us and many of the playtexts have been lost, it is now

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<sup>1</sup> *The Political Theatre*, trans. by Hugh Rorrison (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980), p.187.

possible to consult previously inaccessible state archival material, and many newspapers and journals of the period have been digitized and made available online.<sup>2</sup> The censorship archives at Alcalá de Henares, important for what they reveal about the interactions of state and culture, have also proven significant for the preservation of several original works, which were submitted to the offices of the censors and which have long been considered lost. This article argues that archival work focused on the pre-Franco period is crucial to our understanding of Spanish theatre history, particularly given the ideological nature of canon formation under the dictatorship.

Building on research completed by Christopher Cobb in the 1980s and 1990s, this article explores the importance of the agit-prop proletarian theatre of the Second Republic and, in particular, the Nosotros group (1932-1934), to the formation of an emerging cultural and political identity. Moreover, it brings into the public domain new information about their work, uncovered in the censorship archives, including the play, *La peste fascista* (1933) by César Falcón, which is included here in an appendix.<sup>3</sup> The article also explores the reasons why this group was forgotten and why it ought to be remembered.

### **From Crisis to Renewal**

Despite radical political developments and the often problematic attempts to

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<sup>2</sup> Miguel Bilbatúa, 'Presentación. Intentos de renovación teatral durante la II República y la Guerra Civil (Notas para un estudio)', in *Teatro de agitación política 1933-1939* (Madrid: Edicusa, 1976), 9-54 (pp. 9-11). The censorship files consulted are held at the Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte (MECD), Archivo General de la Administración (AGA). All further references to censorship materials are from this archive. In the case of censorship files on specific plays, the full reference will be given when first mentioned. Subsequent references are to the same files and will not be repeated.

<sup>3</sup> *La peste fascista*. MECD. AGA, [21/05800].

modernize Spanish society, most theatre in the early decades of the twentieth century reflected the largely unchanged value system and conservative views of a narrow section of the population. The mainstream theatre at the time was still dominated by the ‘well-made play’ and such names as Pemán, Arniches, the Quintero brothers, Muñoz Seca, Poncela and Benavente, and their often highly-accomplished, commercially-successful, entertaining fare.<sup>4</sup> In this context, most Spanish theatre-goers remained oblivious to the avant-garde developments in European theatre, although some ‘racy’ themes related to social and political modernization were staged – often in a mocking or flippant way – on the commercial stage.

There were, however, some notable attempts at reform and innovation, including those of Valle-Inclán, Gregorio Martínez Serra, and Margarita Xirgu with Cipriano Rivas Cherif at the Teatro Español.<sup>5</sup> A more avant-garde minority theatre flourished in the cities, and the work of some of those involved would later influence the mainstream theatre, to some extent at least.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Michael D. McGaha, *The Theatre in Madrid during the Second Republic* (London: Grant and Cutler, 1979) for a comprehensive listing, offering an enlightening overview. See also Dru Dougherty and Andrew A. Anderson, ‘Continuity and innovation in Spanish theatre, 1900-1936’, in Maria Delgado and David T. Gies (eds), *A History of Theatre in Spain* (Cambridge: CUP, 2012), 282-309 (p. 282). This essay is a useful analysis and less damning in its commentary on the mainstream theatre than many other critics.

<sup>5</sup> Although beyond the scope of this article, information about key figures and attempts to reform the Spanish stage can be found in Ana María Arias de Cossío, *Dos siglos de escenografía en Madrid* (Madrid: Mondadori, 1991), especially pp. 254-56; and María Carmen Gil Fombellida, *Rivas Cherif, Margarita Xirgu y el teatro de la II República* (Madrid: Fundamentos, 2003), pp. 21-93.

<sup>6</sup> For more information about these avant-garde groups, see Enrique Díez-Canedo, *Artículos de crítica teatral*, 5 vols (México, Joaquín Mortiz, 1968), IV: *El teatro español de 1914 a 1936. Elementos de renovación*, pp. 149-70. This tradition was continued during the Second Republic with the Club Teatral

Despite such developments and alternative theatre initiatives, the commercial scene remained largely unaffected by social and cultural change, and a theatre crisis was diagnosed. Much of the discussion around it was political and concerned with different perspectives on how not only the theatre, but also Spanish society, should be organized. This crisis was the topic of much debate among intellectuals and theatre practitioners, who were generally united in their disparagement of mainstream theatre, but did not agree on a solution. Looking back at this period, José Carlos Mainer summarized the situation thus: ‘la convicción de que el teatro español era un reflejo de una clase media sin preocupaciones ni deseosa de novedades de ningún tipo, era un tópico de la crítica más sagaz y también una realidad incuestionable.’<sup>7</sup>

By the early 1930s, several ways of addressing the problem had emerged. Journalist, author and later politician, Luis Araquistain, wrote at length about the crisis, diagnosing the problems and suggesting ways forward. In *La batalla teatral* (1930), he complained that:

el señorío del teatro contemporáneo corresponde a la burguesía. Ella paga, ella manda, ella impone sus gustos y preside la mutación de los géneros. Y en España como en el resto del mundo. Y, sin embargo, el teatro español actual se parece

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Anfístora, a collaboration between Federico García Lorca and Pura Maórtua de Ucelay. See Margarita Ucelay, ‘El Club Teatral Anfístora’ in Dru Dougherty and María Francisca Vilches de Frutos (eds), *El teatro en España entre la tradición y la vanguardia, 1918-1939* (Madrid: CSIC; Fundación García Lorca; Tabacalera, 1992), pp. 453-67.

<sup>7</sup> *Historia de la literatura española*, 9 vols (Madrid: Crítica, 2010 -), VI: *Modernidad y nacionalismo 1900-1939* (2010), p.199. Vance Holloway documents the crisis as described in the theatre pages of *ABC* and notes that most critics, with a few exceptions, did not argue for the creation of a politicized theatre and instead focused on the case for a more limited reform of form and style. *La crítica teatral en ABC, 1918-1936* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991).

poco o nada al del resto de Europa. ¿Por qué? Por una diferencia de evolución social. La burguesía española es aún una burguesía niña.<sup>8</sup>

While scathing in his criticism of the contemporary mainstream theatre, he saw the salvation of the Spanish stage not in its replacement with an alternative, non-bourgeois theatre, but rather in its reformation and in the creation of an intellectual art-house theatre to complement it (73-74). Rejecting social and political theatre, which he argued amounted to poor propaganda, Araquistain insisted that the role of the theatre was a creative and poetic, rather than a sociological, one (27, 72).

Others disagreed. José Díaz Fernández, for example, signaled an important new development in the Spanish theatre in his influential essay, *El nuevo romanticismo, polémica de arte, política y literatura*, also of 1930. Although equally critical of bourgeois audiences, he argued that ‘el arte escénico, por ser precisamente el más directo, podría influir en el cambio del espíritu público y preparar los nuevos cuadros de lucha social.’ He ended his essay with a call to students, workers and intellectuals of the left to initiate ‘un fuerte movimiento para llegar a un auténtico teatro del pueblo.’<sup>9</sup>

While the variety of responses to this theatrical crisis was wide ranging, this article focuses on one in particular: the emergence of a politicized theatre aimed at a non-bourgeois audience. This development was part of a cultural renaissance that attempted to redefine Spain’s national identity. In the 1930s in particular, the theatre was to become a platform for new political ideas and was perceived as an ideal way to

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<sup>8</sup> Luis Araquistain, *La batalla teatral* (Madrid: Mundo Latino, 1930), p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> José Díaz Fernández, *El nuevo romanticismo, polémica de arte, política y literatura* (Madrid: Zeus, 1930). Repr. with intro. by Nigel Dennis (Madrid: Fundación Santander Central Hispano, 2006), pp. 417, 424.

convey them to a largely uneducated audience.

The declaration of the Second Republic in April 1931 lent a new urgency to the creation of an alternative theatre that would address the new political circumstances. Some Republican politicians realized the importance of culture to their political goals. By controlling or influencing what Althusser termed the 'ideological state apparatuses', they could shape the values, choices and lived reality of the populace.<sup>10</sup> Cultural-political alliances were formed with a common goal of disseminating Republican values and creating a new Republican identity. The centrality of this objective can be seen in the establishment of the Misiones Pedagógicas within six weeks of the formation of the government.<sup>11</sup> As Manuel Aznar Soler notes:

En efecto, el gobierno republicano intentó desde el principio una aproximación de la cultura al pueblo y la extensión teatral se convirtió en uno de los fundamentos de su política cultural. Así, el 30 de mayo de 1931 se crearon las Misiones Pedagógicas, que contaron con un Teatro del Pueblo y con un Teatro Guiñol, dirigidos por Alejandro Casona y Rafael Dieste, respectivamente.<sup>12</sup>

The Misiones Pedagógicas's Teatro del Pueblo was an ambulatory group, with simple props and sets, easy to transport and to stage in non-traditional venues in small towns.

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<sup>10</sup> Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards an Investigation', in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. by Ben Brewster (London: NLB, 1971), pp. 121-73.

<sup>11</sup> The new government's interest in theatre reform is not surprising when one considers that two of its ministers were dramatists themselves: Manuel Azaña, Ministro de la Guerra and Marcelino Domingo, Ministro de Instrucción Pública y Bellas Artes.

<sup>12</sup> 'El teatro español durante la II República (1931-1939)', *Monteagudo*, 2 (1997), 45-58, pp. 46, 47. Casona ran it under his real name, Alejandro Rodríguez Álvarez. For further information about the theatrical activities of Misiones Pedagógicas, see Gloria Rey Faraldos, 'El teatro de las Misiones Pedagógicas', in *El teatro en España*, ed by Dougherty and Vilches de Frutos, pp. 153-64.

The plays were Spanish ‘popular’ classics, chosen for the simplicity of their message, and interaction with the audience was welcomed; works were introduced by someone who explained their aim; and popular songs were often incorporated in the programme.<sup>13</sup> Also operating under the umbrella of Misiones Pedagógicas from 1932 was the university theatre group La Barraca (established in 1931). It was based in Madrid and led by Federico García Lorca and Eduardo Ugarte.<sup>14</sup> La Barraca, which also staged classical theatre, was more focused on artistic representation than Teatro del Pueblo.

As David Rodríguez-Solás has argued, these government-supported theatre initiatives with their focus on the revival and repopularization of Golden age drama, were part of a concerted effort at nation building, despite the insistence of those involved that their work was apolitical. After all, as he points out, ‘los patronos de Misiones Pedagógicas fueron los agentes sociales que diseñaron la política cultural y educativa del nuevo régimen’ (29). Both the Teatro del Pueblo and La Barraca harnessed an existing cultural tradition and stressed the popular nature of the theatre in order to build acceptance for a new political identity based on a shared past. In towns and villages throughout Spain they disseminated Republican values and democratic ideas and signalled even in the act of bringing theatre and culture to the masses that the leaders of the Republic would bring about positive, practical change.

Yet Bilbatúa, in his important study of the drama of the period, classed these

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<sup>13</sup> David Rodríguez-Solás, *Teatros Nacionales Republicanos: la Segunda República y el teatro clásico español* (Iberoamericana-Vervuert, 2014), pp. 70-76.

<sup>14</sup> Another university theatre group, El Búho, based in Valencia and led initially by Luis Llana Moret and Eduardo Muñoz Orts, began to collaborate with the Misiones in 1934. Later, after the outbreak of war, Max Aub led the group. Manuel Aznar Soler, “‘El Búho’: Teatro de la F.U.E. de la Universidad de Valencia, in *El teatro en España*, ed by Dougherty and Vilches de Frutos, pp. 415-27 (pp. 416, 419).

government-supported endeavours as ‘teatro *para* el pueblo’; in his view, they encapsulated the bourgeois elite’s well-intentioned but rather romanticized views of both culture and the pueblo, and were in effect ‘obras de caridad cultural’ (33-34). In any case, it was not just the intellectuals and reformers of the Misiones Pedagógicas who wished to harness the power of the stage as educational tool; other groups with a more revolutionary mission emerged. Their goal was to raise consciousness of class struggle. This was what Bilbatúa termed ‘teatro *del* pueblo’ (28) and an example of this, the Nosotros group, is the focus of this article. While sharing many of the practices of the Misiones Pedagógicas, they differed in terms of repertoire and in their determination to employ the theatre as a tool of ideological inculcation. Yet both teatro *para* el pueblo and teatro *del* pueblo reflected the identity formation intentions of the new Republic and both focused on ways of engaging with – and changing – the material and cultural poverty of large sections of the population.

### **The Proletarian Theatre: Staging Politics**

*Nuestro tiempo reclama una escena acorde con sus inquietudes  
de tipo económico y social, preferentemente.*

Rafael Alberti<sup>15</sup>

Like the Misiones Pedagógicas, what Bilbatúa termed the ‘teatro *del* pueblo’ was based on a set of values and aimed at an audience far removed from the bourgeois consumer of commercial drama; but it had a more overtly political agenda. This

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<sup>15</sup> Interview with José Pérez-Doménech, ‘Hablan los jóvenes autores. Rafael Alberti dice que la burguesía tiene el teatro que se merece’, *El imparcial*, 23 April 1933, p. 6.



proletarian theatre was international in outlook, anti-capitalist, and consciousness-raising, and aimed to harness the power of the stage as a tool of ideological inculcation. It was unashamedly propagandistic, prioritizing the social and political message over artistic value, and its purpose was agitation. While their goals and methods were somewhat different from those of the Misiones Pedagógicas, they can be considered part of the same wave of cultural nationalism.

Drawing on models such as Soviet agit-prop and Piscator's Proletarian Theatre, the aim of this new initiative was to educate the audience about the means of losing its chains. Indeed, many of those involved in bringing this style of theatre to Spain had traveled abroad to see the politicized work of radical theatre groups elsewhere.<sup>16</sup> Information about this type of drama was also spread in Spain through the publication of Romain Rolland's *Teatro de la Revolución* and Erwin Piscator's *El teatro político* by Cenit in 1929 and 1930 respectively. These proved influential in left-wing literary circles.<sup>17</sup> Piscator wrote of the need for 'trivial forms which have the merit of being clear and easily understood by all' and argued for:

simplicity of expression, lucidity of structure, and a clear effect on the feelings of a working-class audience. Subordination of all artistic aims to the revolutionary goal: conscious emphasis on and cultivation of the idea of the class struggle (47, 45).

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<sup>16</sup> See Víctor Fuentes, *La marcha al pueblo en las letras españolas, 1917-1936* (Madrid: Ediciones de la Torre, 2006) p. 57 for details of the Spanish intellectuals' international political and cultural connections.

<sup>17</sup> See Christopher Cobb, *El teatro de agitación y propaganda en España: El Grupo "Nosotros" (1932-1934)*; César Falcón, *Intérprete de la Inglaterra de los años veinte en la prensa española* (Lima: Hora del hombre, 1985), p.16.

This was the genre that attracted writers such as Rafael Alberti, María Teresa León, Ramón J. Sender, as well as the Peruvian journalist and political activist César Falcón, co-founder of *Nosotros*.

Sender's *Teatro de masas* (1931) reflects a new class-consciousness and radical political focus. In addition to dismissing bourgeois theatre, Sender presented the case for an alternative, proletarian theatre:

el teatro al uso es terriblemente conservador y burgués. El 'teatro puro' – poético – es embriagador y se agarra a los resortes más blandos de la vieja tradición estética, al concepto inerte y mortecino de lo 'artístico'. A espaldas de todo esto queda la verdad dramática y dramaturgica, el teatro teatral, activo, dinámico, que exalta y estimula la realidad de nuestra vida, siempre en marcha, siempre avanzando, que recoge sus mejores vibraciones y las proyecta valientemente hacia las sombras de mañana para desentrañarlas si puede y si no para darles una forma emocional. Este teatro – teatro por antonomasia – es el teatro político.

He then went on to discuss the need for 'un nuevo espectador': the proletariat.<sup>18</sup>

Alberti also wrote against the mainstream theatre and in favour of an activist alternative. In an interview with José Pérez-Doménech in 1933, he said: 'la burguesía tiene el teatro que se merece.' Rejecting the art-house avant garde theatre ('no creo en eso que llaman teatro experimental y de minorías. El mal está hasta las raíces. La podredumbre que advierto en la escena española es podredumbre de espíritu'), he argued instead for a theatre of agitation propaganda with groups of eleven actors (he likened them to football teams) drawn from students, workers and intellectuals, who would take their crusade all over Spain. They would stage a theatre aimed at the workers and representing their concerns: 'sus luchas por las reivindicaciones, su

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<sup>18</sup> *Teatro de masas* (Valencia: Orto, 1931) pp. 47, 114.

protesta contra la Guerra imperialista y contra el fascismo, etcétera. El teatro, aunque crea lo contrario, tiene que ser tendencioso y volver a su fuente natural: el pueblo' (6).

María Teresa León, who had been critical of the Misiones Pedagógicas for their failure to use the theatre for ideological inculcation and for promoting religious values by staging Calderón, tried with Alberti to create a more radical alternative (Rodríguez-Solás, 85-86; 117). They established *Octubre* magazine in 1933, and from its pages they announced a competition for one-act revolutionary plays: 'de acción rápida y contenido ideológico de clase. El tema tendrá que ser español: sucesos revolucionarios o problemas que interesen a los trabajadores'.<sup>19</sup>

Several other groups also emerged at the time and with varying success. The most important among them included Miguel Prietos's puppet theatre, Guiñol Octubre (also called la Tarumba), which worked in collaboration with *Octubre* magazine, and the Teatre del Proletariat, established by the Bloc Obrer i Camperol in Catalonia.<sup>20</sup> One of the problems, as Cobb has shown, is that these groups generally worked in isolation and did not share their experiences or become a cohesive movement.

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<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Manel Aznar Soler, 'María Teresa León y el teatro español durante la Guerra Civil', in *Anthropos*, 148 (1993), pp. 25-34.

<sup>20</sup> See Miguel Cabañas Bravo, 'Miguel Prieto y la escenografía en la España de los años treinta', *Archivo Español de Arte*, 84:336 (2011), 355-78.

<<http://archivospañoldearte.revistas.csic.es/index.php/aea/article/view/483/480>> [Accessed 22 October 2015]. See also Christopher Cobb's analyses of other groups (1985: 16-17); 'Teatro Proletario – Teatro de Masas. Barcelona 1931-1934' in F. García Tortosa and others, *Literatura popular y proletaria* (Seville: University of Seville, 1986), pp. 247-66; 'El agit-prop cultural en la guerra civil', *Studia Historica-historia contemporánea*, 10-11 (1992-93), 237-49 (pp. 243-44) <<http://hdl.handle.net/10366/80048>>

Yet all are examples of theatre employed to attack class enemies and to project a future paradise in the form of an international brotherhood of man. Such proposals were clearly a step further than those of Misiones Pedagógicas and other reformers such as Luis Araquistain; the objective of this new theatre was neither pedagogical nor artistic, but rather revolutionary. As Jim McCarthy notes:

the examples of Irene and César Falcón, Aub and Alberti clearly suggest that their theatrical work during the 1930s was impelled, above all, by a desire to reach audiences which it was felt must be reached since in them lay the prospect of the revolutionary transformation of society.<sup>21</sup>

One of the most radical and successful groups to emerge at this time was one that is today almost forgotten: The Nosotros Theatre Group.

### **The Nosotros Theatre Group (1932-1934)**

This article argues that it is within a framework of cultural nationalism and identity formation that both the rise and fall of the Nosotros group, co-founded by César Falcón Garfías and his wife Irene (née Lewy Rodríguez), can best be understood. It formed part of a generational attempt to define a new Spanish identity and used contemporary plays and an international outlook shaped by socialism to do so.

In their choice of plays and themes, their cooperative and collaborative *modus operandi*, their ability to respond to political situations as they arose and their political nous, the Nosotros group were arguably the most important – although despite the claims made by its founders not the first – agit-prop collective of the Second

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<sup>21</sup> *Political Theatre During the Spanish Civil War* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), pp. 30-31.

Republic.<sup>22</sup> In common with others involved in shaping identity through culture, César and Irene realised that in order to best employ the theatre as a tool of indoctrination and revolution, they would also need to find non-traditional ways of reaching their audience.

César Falcón (1892-1970) was a provocative, charismatic and mercurial character who had come to Spain from his native Perú as part of the wave of exiles who left following Augusto B. Leguía's successful coup in 1919. Before leaving he was an autor and dramatist, who had helped to establish the Sociedad de Autores Nacionales in 1917.<sup>23</sup> In addition, as a journalist and political activist, he was one of the founders of the journals *El tiempo* (1916-30) and *La razón* (1919), and co-founder of the Peruvian Socialist Party.<sup>24</sup> When he left Peru, he traveled first to Italy with his friends and co-exiles, José Carlos Mariátegui and Félix del Valle, before settling in

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<sup>22</sup> César and Irene were dismissive of other groups and claimed that theirs was the first such group in Spanish history: 'En España sólo se han hecho, antes que esta Compañía, unas cuantas obras imbéciles, llamadas de teatro social'. César Falcón, 'El teatro proletario en Asturias', *La lucha*, no. 19, 30 January 1934. (Repr. in José Esteban and Gonzalo Santonja (eds), *Los novelistas sociales españoles (1928-1936). Antología* (Barcelona: Anthropos, 1988), pp.104-107 (p. 105). He claimed that the Nosotros theatre group had international origins and had been formed 'bajo los auspicios de la Central de Teatro y Cine Revolucionario, Sección Española de la Union Internacional de Teatro Revolucionario' (104).

<sup>23</sup> His brother, Jorge Falcón, lists several plays written by him and staged in Lima between 1914 and 1918 in addition to his journalism and other writing. He also mentions his continued involvement in the theatre in Mexico following his departure from Spain. 'Para comenzar', in Christopher Cobb (1985: 5-14).

<sup>24</sup> Juan Antonio Hormigón, 'Un velero blanco en la bahía. Derrotero de Carlota O'Neill', in Carlota O'Neill, *Circe y los cerdos; cómo fue la España encadenada*, ed by Juan Antonio Hormigón (Madrid: Asociación de Directores de Escena de España, 1997), pp. 7-298, (pp. 41-54).

Spain in 1922.

In Spain Falcón established himself as a journalist for *La Vanguardia*, *España* and *El Liberal* and was the London correspondent for *El Sol* from 1923 until 1929. He would later write for the PCE's *Mundo Obrero* (Cobb 1985: 31-51). Furthermore, Civantos Urrutia signals his role in 'la más importante revolución editorial del pasado siglo en nuestro país'.<sup>25</sup> He was the director of *Historia Nueva* (1928-1931), a sister company of the influential *Ediciones Oriente* (1927-1932), which focused on Spanish and Latin American political writing.<sup>26</sup> His involvement in other publishing ventures included the series *La novela roja*, published by the *Biblioteca de los Sin Dios* in 1931, and the establishment of a left-wing journal called *Nosotros* (1928-1931).<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Alejandro Civantos Urrutia, 'La revolución editorial de El Nuevo Romanticismo', in Vicente Hernando (ed.), César de, *Una generación perdida. El tiempo de la literatura de avanzada (1925-1935)* (Doral: Stockcero, 2013), pp.125-41 (p. 141).

<sup>26</sup> See Civantos Urrutia for further information about the significance of this moment in Spain's publishing history. One of the successes of *Historia Nueva*, for example, was the publication of José Díaz Fernández's *El blocao* in 1928. Falcón's own successful novel, *El pueblo sin dios*, was also published in the company's 'La novela social' collection. *Historia Nueva*'s collections included 'La novela social' and 'Ediciones Avance', the latter notable for its feminist remit. See also José-Carlos Mainer, *La edad de plata (1902-1939): Ensayo de interpretación de un proceso cultural* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1981), pp. 267-69, 273-74.

<sup>27</sup> César continued to write for the journal when exiled in 1930, while Ramón J. Sender came to the journal's offices every day in his absence in order to help and to write articles. See Christopher Cobb, 'El Grupo Teatral "Nosotros". Entrevista de Christopher Cobb con Irene Falcón', in F. García Tortosa and others, *Literatura popular y proletaria* (Seville: University of Seville, 1986), pp. 267-77 (p. 268). For further information about his various publishing ventures, see Cobb, *La cultura y el pueblo. España, 1930-1939* (Barcelona: Laia, 1980), pp. 28-29. See also Mainer (1981: 273-74); Hormigón, (41), and Lidia Falcón, 'Prologue' in César Falcón, *Madrid* (Barcelona: Hacer, 2010), pp. ix-xxxiii (xii). Described by Jorge Falcón as 'Semanao político de *Historia Nueva*', *Nosotros* was not without

Irene Falcón was born in Madrid in 1907. She married César, whom she met when he was a lodger in her mother's house and went to England with him in 1924. She began her career in journalism, writing for *La Voz*, a sister newspaper of *El Sol*. A women's rights activist, Irene was on the editorial committee of the feminist magazine, *Cultura integral y femenina* and was one of the founders in 1932 of the Asociación de Mujeres Antifascistas, working with Margarita Nelken and Dolores Ibárruri, among others.<sup>28</sup> Her – and indeed César's – interest in feminist issues was reflected in the choice of plays for the Nosotros theatre group, as we shall see.

For both César and Irene, political allegiance to the workers' cause was a lifelong commitment. Expelled from Spain in November 1930 for organizing a protest against the government's attacks on the left-wing press, César was briefly based in France before returning to Spain a few months later.<sup>29</sup> In 1931 the couple established the radical party, la Izquierda Revolucionaria Anti-imperialista, which later merged

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its troubles. He quotes César: 'el periódico de un grupo de políticos, intelectuales y estudiantes que sostuvo el choque con los primeros fascistas, una banda de aventureros y foragidos que se llamaban Legionarios de España'. *El hombre y su acción: César Falcón. Cuatro episodios*, (Lima: Hora del hombre, 1982), episodio 3, p.101. Irene names the group as the Legionarios de Albiñana, a fascist group that attacked the premises following a negative commentary about them within the pages of the journal (Cobb, 1986: 268).

<sup>28</sup> This magazine lasted from 15/01/1933 until 25/02/1934 and its subtitle was 'la revista de unión social para una obra común de cultura integral femenina'. Its goal was 'la emancipación de la mujer a través de la cultura y el conocimiento.'  
<<http://hemerotecadigital.bne.es/details.vm?lang=es&q=id:0003733914>>

<sup>29</sup> According to his brother, Jorge, he only went as far as Hendaye before returning on 15 April 1931 (1982: 105). See also Irene Falcón, *Asalto a los cielos. Mi vida junto a la Pasionaria* (Madrid: Temas de Hoy, 1996), p. 268.

with the PCE.<sup>30</sup> They were both active members of that party for many years. In fact, according to Irene, César ran unsuccessfully as a Communist candidate in Málaga in the 1933 elections (114-15). According to his daughter, Lidia, César went on to become a member of the Central Committee of the PCE (2010: ix).

When they turned to the theatre, their connections in the worlds of literature, journalism and politics would serve them well. The Nosotros Theatre Group, which they established in 1932, sought to reform the Spanish stage, both in terms of structure and repertoire. As César Falcón made clear, this was to be a new type of theatre in Spain, one influenced by Soviet agit-prop:

el Teatro Proletario no puede interpretarse con las maneras, prejuicios y convencionalismos ramplones del teatro burgués. Exige de los actores una técnica nueva, que abarca desde la inflexión de voz hasta la actitud corporal (...) han tenido que hacer un trabajo de reeducación artística' (107).

Rejecting, like Alberti, Sender and others, the decay of the contemporary Spanish stage, Nosotros proposed a technical revolution as well as a political one and embodied the message of Piscator ('por el que teníamos una gran admiración') (Cobb 1986: 272). Their organizational model was one of collaboration and shared creative responsibility, with many members fulfilling more than one role within the company.

Many of those involved with the group were active members of the Communist Party or had collaborated with César or Irene before, and some were quite

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<sup>30</sup> Asunción Martínez Riaza, *¡Por la República! La apuesta política y cultural del peruano César Falcón en España, 1919-1939* (Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 2004), p. 94. César joined the PCE in 1933 and, according to Hormigón, that was when he and Irene created the Nosotros theatre group (41-42). Irene is vague about the dates in her memoir, though states that the two things coincided 'mas o menos' (103). The group was in fact founded in 1932 – works were staged in that year and AGA files show that they were active.



well-known figures. The theatre critic Santiago Masferrer Canto was, according to Irene, ‘un asiduo colaborador del Teatro Proletario’, who gave talks about the works they staged (109-110). He used his international connections to orchestrate the group’s involvement in the International Workers’ Theatre Olympiad in Moscow in 1933. Although by then there was a shift away from agitprop in the Soviet theatre, the event was attended by many of the great figures working in political theatre at the time, including Piscator. This exposure to similar groups proved inspirational, as Irene noted: ‘me parece que este viaje tuvo una gran influencia para Nosotros, tanto artística como también desde el punto de vista de aprovechar elementos que nunca habíamos pensado en el trabajo del teatro proletario’ (Cobb 1986: 273).<sup>31</sup>

The artist and illustrator, Ramón Puyol, who also travelled to Moscow for the Olympiad with Irene and Masferrer, collaborated with César Falcón over many years, firstly designing the covers for the ‘novela social’ series of the Historia Nueva and from 1932, according to Antonio Plaza Plaza, becoming ‘escenógrafo principal de las compañías de teatro proletario que dirige César Falcón’.<sup>32</sup> Joaquín García Hidalgo, one of the authors to work with the group, was better known as a journalist and political activist. Elected as a representative of Córdoba for the PSOE in June 1931, he was later expelled from the party and went on to join the Communist Party in 1933

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<sup>31</sup>See also Hormigón, p. 54. In her memoir Irene mentions the importance of the visit, though acknowledges that they were exposed to a type of theatre there that they were in no position to stage in Spain (110).

<sup>32</sup>‘El teatro y compromiso en la obra de Luisa Carnés’, *Acotaciones*, 25 (2010), 95-122 (p.107) <[http://www.resad.es/acotaciones/acotaciones25/compromiso\\_a\\_plaza\\_p.pdf](http://www.resad.es/acotaciones/acotaciones25/compromiso_a_plaza_p.pdf)> [Accessed 10 April 2015].

although, like César, he failed to gain a seat in the elections that year.<sup>33</sup> He had already dabbled in theatre before working with Nosotros, and his play, *Tolín, Tolón*, was staged at the Zarzuela on 27 November 1931.<sup>34</sup> The AGA records show that he wrote the political farce, *Me engaña mi mujer y no me importa*, for Nosotros and this was staged in 1933.<sup>35</sup>

There were also several women attached to the group. Luisa Carnés was a feminist and journalist (like Irene, she worked for *La Voz*), a biographer and novelist. Her plays, *Natacha* (1932) and *Tea Rooms* (1934), although not staged by Nosotros, were clear indications of her dual interest in class politics and feminist issues. She was for many years the partner of Ramón Puyol and it was through his work with César that she first came into contact with the group. Another interesting figure was author and journalist Carlota O'Neill. In 1931 she established *Nosotras*, a magazine that described itself as 'la primera revista femenina de vanguardia social'.<sup>36</sup> Her sister,

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<sup>33</sup> Both García Hidalgo, described as an independent socialist, and César Falcón, described as a communist, are listed as speakers at a monster meeting against Fascism in Cordoba. 'Un mitin monstruo contra el fascismo', *El sur* (Cordoba) 22 May, 1933, p. 1.

<sup>34</sup> McGaha, p. 19. See also reviews of the play in González, Luis M., *El teatro español durante la II República y la crítica de su tiempo (1931-1936)*, prologue by Angel Berenguer Castellary (Madrid: Fundación Universitaria Española, 2007), pp. 195-6.

<sup>35</sup> MECD. AGA, [21/5800].

<sup>36</sup> Danièle Bussy Genevois, 'Del otoño del 33 al verano del 34: ¿los meses claves de la condición social femenina?', in *Las mujeres y la Guerra Civil Española. III Jornadas de Estudios Monográficos. Salamanca, Octubre 1989* (Madrid: Ministerio de Cultura; Instituto de la Mujer, 1991), 15-22 (p. 16). Catherine Davies refers to this magazine as *Nosotros*, but a copy of the letterhead for this 'Revista femenina' held in the family archive (ACLO) clearly shows that it is *Nosotras*, and that it was published from Carlota's home at Guzmán el Bueno, 31. See Davies, *Spanish Women's Writing. 1849-*

Enriqueta (Ada) O'Neill, acted with the group; she too was a feminist, journalist and writer. She would later have a daughter with César.<sup>37</sup>

In addition to the active participants listed above, there was a group of 'socios protectores', whose financial support allowed *Nosotros* to acquire an old coal yard at 193 Calle Alcalá to convert to a theatre. These subscribers made a one-off payment of 25 pesetas, which entitled them to free entry to all of the group's productions.<sup>38</sup> Although nowhere stated, this idea seems to have been directly inspired by Piscator, who created a club of subscribers to help to fund the Proletarian Theatre (40). The list of names of associate members mentioned in an article in *La libertad*, dated 9 December 1932 is impressive and proves that although largely forgotten now, this group was backed by several leading intellectual and political figures.<sup>39</sup> While rejecting existing privileged structures, the group nonetheless enlisted elites for their

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1996 (London: The Athlone Press, 1998), 107. Juan Antonio Hormigón observes in his detailed essay about Carlota that the name of the journal was probably inspired by César Falcón's *Nosotros* (42).

<sup>37</sup> Lidia Falcón (b. 1935), lawyer, political activist, dramatist and author would become a key figure in Spain's feminist movement under Franco and beyond. She was imprisoned for her politics during the dictatorship.

<sup>38</sup> The details of how to become a 'socio protector' are described in *La Libertad*, 20 October 1932, p. 10. At a time when the average theatre ticket cost between 2.5 and 5 pesetas (Gil Fombellida, 96) and given that the group did not charge much to its target audience, the high cost of becoming a 'socio protector' suggests a strategic decision to seek support from members of Spain's cultural elite who were known to the group's founders.

<sup>39</sup> 'Entre las personas que se han inscripto como socios protectores figuran D. Fernando de los Ríos, D. Jacinto Benavente, Margarita Xirgu, Enrique Borrás, D. Cipriano Rivas Cherif, D. Álvaro de Albornoz, D. Ángel Segovia, don Hipólito González Rebollar, D. Ángel Pastor, D. Ricardo Segura, Marqués de Dosfuentes, D. Augusto Vivero, D. Leoncio Meneses, don Ignacio Ejido, Everay, etc.' *La Libertad*, 9 December 1932, p. 8.

financial support and cultural capital, a collaboration that suggests a shared political goal.

Most of the actors involved, on the other hand, were ordinary working class people from the ranks of the unemployed. This led to problems if they then got jobs, as it meant that they would leave the theatre group. Cobb described *Nosotros* as ‘casi como una escuela que formaba sus propios actores’ (1986: 274).<sup>40</sup> Later it attracted some professional actors, many of whom were unemployed, and their incorporation improved the quality of the offerings, although it also brought a new set of problems, as César Falcón complained:

El Teatro Proletario exigía no solo el abandono de los hábitos externos, de los métodos podridos del teatro burgués, sino, lo que es más difícil de arrancar: los vicios profesionales, la mentalidad infestada de convencionalismos estúpidos. El arte proletario es un arte rudo, potente, henchido de esencias vitales. Los actores que no pudieron resistir la prueba, fueron eliminados’ (105).

For the directors of this group, their goal was political action: ‘antes que una Compañía de teatro, antes que artistas, se ha sentido en todo momento un grupo de agitadores revolucionarios’ bringing to the masses ‘la voz encendida de la revolución’ (105, 106).

Irene’s description of their financial and organizational model shows that it, like everything else, was dictated by their political goals: ‘Vendíamos la entrada a

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<sup>40</sup> See also *Asalto*, p. 104. There is an interesting note published by ‘el comité directivo’ of the Grupo Teatro *Nosotros* in *La libertad* on 21 September 1932 (p. 8), directing those interested in joining the group (both non-professionals and experienced actors) to ‘el local social, Calle de la Cruz, números 24 y 26, de siete a ocho de la noche’. The reason given is that the numbers wishing to join are so great that they are unable to respond to them individually. Professional actors are advised to show up at the same time as everybody else and are not given special treatment. The note is signed by the collective.

precios muy bajos para que aquello fuera realmente popular y viniera la gente que a nosotros nos interesaba concienciar. Lo que se recaudaba se repartía por igual entre todos los que habían participado en el montaje' (106). The public she refers to was made up of the working classes and the plays they staged aimed both to reflect the experiences of the proletariat and to direct their political actions. César Falcón argued that the public realized that this theatre could be used as a weapon in a political revolution:

que en ese teatro latía lo más profundo de ellos mismos, y que de él recibían un nuevo campo de luz revolucionaria, una orientación segura, una directiva exacta (...) los trabajadores comprendieron que ése era su teatro, su arte propio: el arte que se emplea como un arma de lucha, en la que todos los trabajadores estamos comprometidos (105).

We do not have any evidence from the workers themselves that they thought this, and one might speculate that such statements from César were simply another form of propaganda. Moreover, such a romantic notion of the proletarian public contrasts with the views of the state officials who monitored and censored the plays. They were often dismissive of this public, as the report on the play *¡Guerra!* (1933) shows; it describes the spectators - probably accurately - as 'personas, sin duda, de no muy completa preparación cultural'.<sup>41</sup>

Like the Misiones Pedagógicas, and with the same goal of reaching as wide an audience as possible, Nosotros initially functioned as an ambulatory theatre in the towns and villages of the sierra of Madrid. Following the funding drive, many of their works were staged in their base in Calle Alcalá, although they also continued to tour, performing their plays in Casas del pueblo and Ateneos (Cobb 1985: 25). They called

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<sup>41</sup> MECD. AGA, [21/05799] Report on *¡Guerra!*, 24 Feb 1933.

their base the Teatro Proletario, a name surely inspired by Piscator and his Proletarisches Theater.<sup>42</sup> The first work staged there was Gorki's *Albergue de noche*, on 4 February 1933, and the AGA files show that there were several other productions in the months that followed.

These were exciting and disturbing times politically: the Confederación Española de Derechas Autónomas (CEDA) was formed in February 1933 and by the time the Falange was established in October the same year, the left-wing government coalition led by Manuel Azaña had collapsed and new elections loomed. Such circumstances demanded a response and the group took their revolutionary drama out on the road again to those who could not come to them. In the Autumn, following their return from the Moscow Olympiad and against a backdrop of a media-conscious election campaign, the group embarked on a tour of Asturias that lasted over two months; they took a repertoire of agit-prop classics and their own works. They then extended this by visiting Santander and Vizcaya. Many of the group's members were members of the PCE and the tour was used for consciousness-raising and electioneering during a political campaign that would continue to a second round of elections on 3 December. According to Irene, 'en la gira por Asturias tuvimos mucho éxito. Colaboró todo el mundo: los socialistas y los camaradas del partido, que nos daban de comer y nos alojaban' (113, 114).<sup>43</sup> César, in his description of the tour for *La lucha*, writes of its success:

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<sup>42</sup> Cobb mentions the creation of a permanent home for the group in early 1933 and marks it as the formalization of the group itself (1985: 19). In fact it had been acquired by the end of 1932 and the company was trying to make the space adequate for theatre, as mentioned in *La Libertad*, 9 December, 1932, p. 8. It seems that it was not ready until February 1933.

<sup>43</sup> As César was an election candidate for Malaga, Irene was in charge of the tour.

en todas partes su paso ha enardecido e intensificado el ansia revolucionaria de los trabajadores, de los oprimidos, de todos los que, al contrastar su existencia con las transcripciones teatrales que les ofrecían, han sentido encenderse en su alma la noción exacta de sus vidas explotadas, y el afán ardoroso de incluirse en las filas de los que luchan justamente por la emancipación de los trabajadores. (106)

Again, these comments can be read as an extension of the group's propagandistic work, signaling revolutionary change and encouraging active participation. After all, César was not even on this tour, so his description is not an eye-witness account. Irene also describes a tour of Toledo in the summer of 1934 and she writes how the group's work responded to the political events taking place around them. Actors and public collaborated in the productions:

llegábamos, hablábamos con la gente, porque entonces se estaba viviendo un momento revolucionario y había huelgas tremendas, nos contaban lo que pasaba en el pueblo y por las noches escribíamos un sketch. Los personajes reales que iban a aparecer en la obra nos dejaban su ropa, sus cosas, el atrezzo, y hacíamos la obra. Aquello era una cosa explosiva. La gente se quería venir con Nosotros, no había la división de escenario y público (115-16).<sup>44</sup>

### **The Plays**

Writing about Civil War theatre, McCarthy comments: 'rather than any interest in posterity, current political circumstances were the writers' sole concern' and this, obviously, had an impact on the survival of these works, many of which were never

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<sup>44</sup> Cobb documents a tour of Toledo in Autumn 1933, prior to the November elections, which is described in similar terms (1985: 23-24). It is unclear if there were two tours, or if dates have been confused.

published (1999: 18). This also applied to many of the works created by Nosotros, although some plays submitted to the censors and preserved in the AGA show what the group was trying to achieve.<sup>45</sup> This newly uncovered material also sheds light on the official response to the work of the group and helps us to understand their impact and the role they played in the cultural nationalism of the time.

While the Misiones Pedagógicas focused on Spain's existing cultural traditions, Nosotros employed mostly foreign revolutionary works and ideas to help to define a Spanish Republican identity within a more global socialist context. The plays that Nosotros staged clearly demonstrate the group's political agenda, and were often works that its founders had come across as foreign correspondents, or examples of Soviet literature that they had read, and which they translated and adapted for a largely uneducated, though often politicized, Spanish audience. They were drawn to theatre that had been used elsewhere to attack traditional values and conservative politics. Irene remembers: 'las traducíamos sobre la marcha, por la noche, trabajando, escribiendo a máquina, repartiendo los papeles, también a máquina, y las obritas que nosotros mismos escribíamos pues también las hacíamos así' (Cobb 1986: 271).

According to Irene, the group's debut in the salon Atocha in Madrid was on 15 September 1932 with Ernst Toller's *Hinkemann*, a fatalistic play demonstrating the futility of war and the degradation of the proletarian protagonist at the hands of bourgeois society. Other foreign works staged by them included Gorki's *Albergue de noche* (4 February 1933), which they had seen at the Moscow Art Theatre in Madrid

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<sup>45</sup> There is, however, a reference in *La lucha*, 23 January 1934, p. 3, to the publication of Carlota O'Neill's *Al rojo* with a prologue by César Falcón and priced at 0,25 ptas. Interested buyers were directed to Gúzman el Bueno, 31, in Madrid. This was Carlota's home, which may suggest that it was self-published. No copies of the published play have been located. The existing copy is the typed manuscript that was submitted to the censors.



in 1932<sup>46</sup> and versions and translations of other European and Russian works such as *Cyankali* by Friedrich Wolf<sup>47</sup>; *Los siete ahorcados* by Leonid Andreiev<sup>48</sup>; *Asia* by Paul Vaillant-Couturier (translated by Irene Falcón)<sup>49</sup>; *El invento* by Tom Thomas<sup>50</sup>; *La chinche* by Maiakovski (also in 1933), and *La fuga de Kerensky* by Hans Hauss. According to an article published in *La Lucha* on 23 January 1934, other works they planned to stage that year included *Lenin*, *Los tres reclutas*, *Una muchacha china* and

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<sup>46</sup> McGaha, p. 36. Both Irene and Hormigón give the date as 27 January 1933 (104; 51), though the latter mentions that it was adapted by Irene and restaged on 2 Feb 1933 as *Los bajos fondos*, following a prohibition (51-52). This might explain the date given by McGaha, which is closer to the second one, and we know from Irene's comments that the play ran for more than one night. In fact, it had an even earlier outing: *Albergue de noche* is mentioned in *La libertad* on 6 November 1932, as a play to be staged by Nosotros on the 10<sup>th</sup> as part of the thirtieth anniversary celebrations of the Asociación General de Dependientes de comercio y empleados de oficinas, in the Teatro Chueca in Chamberí (11).

<sup>47</sup> McGaha refers to the staging of *Cyankali* by Nosotros at Teatro Proletario on 1 May 1933 (40). See also *Cyankali*. MECD. AGA, [21/05821].

<sup>48</sup> Irene names the version that Nosotros used as that of José María Navas, and this is confirmed by the archive's copy (111). MECD. AGA, [21/05793].

<sup>49</sup> The Vaillant Couturier play was one of the first staged by the Nosotros group, and Irene talked of staging it during their earliest attempts at agitprop theatre among the young unemployed who gathered at the Glorieta de Cuatro Caminos and during the socialist and communist gatherings along the banks of the Manzanares river: 'era una cosa muy interesante y de gran efecto, porque aparecía un enorme capitalista con chistera, con una barriga enorme, un yanqui desde luego. Una puerta de abría de pronto y salía un soldado con fusil, un soldado rojo, y la gente irrumpía en unos aplausos extraordinarios porque veía que el futuro era que ese soldadito, hijo del pueblo, iba a triunfar como así ha sido' (1986: 269-70). In her memoir Irene refers to the author, who at the time was well-known as the editor in chief of the French communist publication, *L'Humanité* (112). *Asia* MECD, AGA [21/05793].

<sup>50</sup> McGaha, p. 36. This was premiered on 11 February in the Teatro Proletario and was part of same bill as Carlota O'Neill's *Al rojo* and some poems by Pla y Beltrán.

*Los banquetes*.<sup>51</sup> Bilbatúa mentions in his book that Nosotros staged Mauro Bajatierra's *¡Rescatada!* on 1 May 1934 in Madrid (48). There are no records for many of these in the archives, suggesting that they may not have been staged, or that the group did not always follow correct procedure and submit the scripts to the censors when deciding to stage a play. We know from the censorship files, for example, that the group intended to stage *La fuga de Kerensky* on their tour of Santander, but correspondence between the Jefe de Investigación y Vigilancia and the Madrid authorities dated January 1934 reveal that it was not authorized, as it had never been submitted to the office of the censors.<sup>52</sup>

In addition to classical agit-prop offerings from abroad, the group created its own plays to advance its political goals. The first original play staged by Nosotros was Carlota O'Neill's *Al rojo* (1933), which was premiered on 11 February at the Teatro Proletario, in Calle Alcalá.<sup>53</sup> Other original works included *¡Guerra!* (1933), which according to Irene was written by Manuel Ovejero and Ricardo Gómez; *El tren del escaparate*, a work for children written by Irene (staged on 19 February 1933 in the Teatro Proletario, with her son Mayo in the starring role), and *La conquista de la prensa* (1933) also by Irene Falcón (106, 108).<sup>54</sup> We know that *La peste fascista*

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<sup>51</sup> 'Teatro: El Grupo Teatral Nosotros', *La Lucha*, Tuesday, 23 January 1934, p. 3. There is no reference to these plays in McGaha's study of the period. We can speculate that perhaps they were staged on a tour, rather than in Madrid, or in non-theatrical venues, or indeed not staged at all.

<sup>52</sup> MECD. AGA, [21/05793].

<sup>53</sup> *Al rojo*. MECD. AGA, [21/05797]. McGaha lists on p. 36 a play, *Al pozo*, by Carlota O'Neill, premiered on 11 February 1933 at the Teatro Proletario by Nosotros. This is clearly a mistaken reference to *Al rojo*, which we know was premiered there on that night. The February 9 edition of *La libertad* also refers to *Al rojo*, to be staged on Saturday and Sunday and half past ten in the evening.

<sup>54</sup> Nigel Dennis and Emilio Peral Vega attribute the play *¡Guerra!* to César Garfías (Falcón). See

(1933), *Asturias* (1933) and *La raya y la luz* were written by César Falcón.<sup>55</sup> Other original works included Joaquín García Hidalgo's *Me engaña mi mujer y no me importa* (1933) and *Casas viejas* by Pascual Pla y Beltrán.<sup>56</sup>

An analysis of their repertoire, and their original works in particular, reveals much about the group's knowledge of agit-prop techniques and, more importantly, gives a clear picture of the group's political interests and objectives. The plays articulate the need for revolutionary change in Spanish society and for workers to take

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*Teatro de la Guerra Civil. El bando republicano* (Madrid: Fundamentos, 2009), p. 21. So too does Cobb (1985: 21). The censorship documents in the archive, however, name Ricardo Sáenz and Manuel Ruyan as the authors. Dennis and Peral Vega lament the loss of the originals of *Al rojo, La conquista de la prensa* and *El tren del escaparate* (21, 26), but I have located copies of *Al rojo* and *El tren del escaparate* (MECD. AGA, [21/05797]) in the AGA and intend to publish them. Unfortunately no file for *La conquista de la prensa* was found.

<sup>55</sup> Although Irene's signature appears on the handwritten playscript in the archive, perhaps suggesting a collaborative piece, her husband's name - César Garfias - is on the cover. Irene also attributes it to César in her memoirs, and claims that she herself only wrote two plays (108). Of his other plays, *La raya y la luz* was staged in Valencia in 1934, according to Cobb, but there is no record of it in the AGA (1985: 26). The case of *Asturias* is less clear: according to Hormigón, *Asturias* was probably staged in 1934 (51), while Dennis and Peral Vega write that it was premiered in the Teatro Rosales in April 1936 (22). The information in the archives supports the latter date. MECD. AGA, [21/05815].

<sup>56</sup> The AGA file lists *Casas Viejas* by 'Pla y Beltrán, César Falcón' as staged with *Los siete ahorcados* and *Asia* on 14 October 1933 in the 'domicilio social del Grupo Teatral Nosotros, Calle de la Encomienda, 3'. MECD. AGA, [21/05793]. The title, *Casas Viejas*, and the attribution of the play to César Falcón as well as Pla y Beltrán suggests that this 1933 production is a Nosotros adaptation of the latter's poem on the subject from the collection *Epopeyas de sangre: poemas revolucionarios* (1933), rather than his own poetic play on the subject of the massacre, which is called *Seisdedos* (Valencia: Ediciones de la Union de Escritores y artistas proletarios UEAP, 1934). Irene also refers to the fact that the group adapted his poem (112).

an active role in achieving this. Many of them contain a denunciation of bourgeois capitalist society and those who support it. They represent on stage the exploitation and mistreatment of workers and they reflect revolutionary politics, both local (Pla y Beltrán's *Casas viejas*) and international (Andreiev's *Los siete ahorcados*). The importance of the inculcation of their radical message at an early age is indicated by the inclusion in their repertoire of the children's play, *El tren del escaparate*.

Several of the works that they staged reveal feminist themes, in particular Wolf's *Cyankali*, and O'Neill's *Al rojo*. Wolf, who was a medical doctor, a member of the Communist Party of Germany and of the Association of Proletarian Revolutionary Authors, wrote *Cyankali* in 1929 as part of a campaign against the restrictive abortion legislation in Germany.<sup>57</sup> The play, which focuses on the avoidable death of Hete, a working class and politically aware young woman, whose personal dilemma centres on an unwanted pregnancy compounded by dire economic circumstances and the hypocritical moral judgement of others, fits well with the agenda of *Nosotros*. The staging of this play in Republican Spain was both a criticism of traditional state and church interference in female reproduction and a demand for fundamental social change.

According to both Irene and César Falcón, one of the group's most successful dramas was *Al rojo*, a one-act play by Carlota O'Neill (106; 107). It is a socialist critique of bourgeois capitalist society with the added interest of a feminist

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<sup>57</sup> He was arrested in February 1932 and charged with performing illegal abortions. Following public protest, which included the staging of the play (and the screening of the film based on it), he was soon released. See Kerstin Barndt, 'Aesthetics of Crisis: Motherhood, Abortion, and Melodrama in Irmard Keun and Friedrich Wolf', *Women in German Yearbook*, 24 (2008), 71-95 (p. 79).

perspective.<sup>58</sup> In keeping with a theatre allied to international workers' movements, *Al rojo* is set in an anonymous European city. The action takes place in an airless basement workshop where impoverished seamstresses are exploited to create the expensive garments bought by the upper classes. Madame, who runs the business, also contracts models to show the clothes, in what is a thinly-veiled prostitution operation. As the censor notes in his report, the play suggests that 'la mujer se prostituye en la clase baja por necesidad, y en la clase alta por vicio'. The play, like other works staged by the group, ends on a triumphalist note with the rising up of the workers from the basement, brandishing a red rag as a banner that unites them with the workers outside, and the simultaneous destruction of Madame's sordid domain as it is attacked and set on fire by the workers. The play thus functions both to awaken and to represent political commitment to the workers' cause.

The archives show that a typical session of the Nosotros group contained a combination of pieces, such as a one-act didactic play, a short farce or comedy sketch, a musical number or a children's play. We know, for example, that the night *Al rojo* was premiered, García Hidalgo's farce and some poems by Pla y Beltrán were also part of the programme, and the archives often reveal different combinations of plays in the applications for authorization to stage them.<sup>59</sup> This had an obvious purpose: the

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<sup>58</sup> See Catherine O'Leary, 'Carlota O'Neill de Lamo: Una Dramaturga Comprometida', in *Mujer, Literatura y Esfera Pública. España 1900-1940*, ed by Pilar Nieva de la Paz and Sarah Wright (Philadelphia: Society of Spanish and Spanish-American Studies, Temple University, 2009), pp. 205-16.

<sup>59</sup> On 25 March 1933, for example, the works *¡Guerra!*, *La peste fascista* and *Me engaña mi mujer y no me importa* were staged at the Teatro Proletario in Calle Alcalá. The programme lasted from half past ten until a quarter to one in the morning. *La peste fascista*, described as 'entremes proletario de César Garfías' (who was employing his mother's surname in this instance, perhaps due to his own notoriety)

group could convey and reinforce a political message in a variety of ways and the incorporation of popular songs and poems allowed for audience participation. The message was straightforward and in keeping with agit-prop tradition elsewhere: the world organized by capitalists is one of suffering and injustice, maintained by the threat of violence; the workers' republic, in contrast, is portrayed as a type of paradise.<sup>60</sup>

The group's political message was reinforced in other ways also, such as in a lecture series they organized in 1933. For example, *La Libertad* of 7 February announces a talk to be given the following day by Carlota O'Neill on 'teatro revolucionario'. The Friday 10 February edition contains a photograph of her delivering her 'notable conferencia', and advertises the premiere of her play, *Al rojo*, described as 'drama social en un acto' on Saturday, 11 February. A note also refers to some of the other speakers in the lecture series, including Sras. Hernández Cata, García del Real and Miguel de Unamuno.<sup>61</sup> Cobb and Irene also mention the lecture series and list as participants Santiago Masferrer, Francisco Pino and Victorino Tamayo (1985: 21; 108). In short, the group used their not insignificant skills and

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was staged with Irene's translation of Friedrich Wolf's *Cyankali* at the Teatro de la Casa del Pueblo on 30 April, 1933.

<sup>60</sup> This can be seen clearly in the children's play, *El tren de escaparate*, for example, which argues for a rejection of religious faith in favour of a brotherhood of man. One could therefore extend McCarthy's analysis of the parallels between the 'propagation of faith' in medieval church drama and in the civil war *teatro de urgencia* to the pre-Civil War proletarian theatre. As he shows, these plays represent a faith in secular Republicanism rather than in a one true God and demonstrate lessons for a political rather than a spiritual salvation. James McCarthy, 'Drama, Religion and Republicanism: Theatrical Propaganda in the Spanish Civil War', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 1998, 7:2, 49-62 (pp. 51, 58).

<sup>61</sup> *La libertad*, 7 February, 1933, p. 9; 9 February 1933, p. 6; 10 February 1933, pp. 6, 8.

their political and artistic contacts to bring their message to as wide an audience as possible.

### ***La peste fascista* (1933)**

Written by César Falcón in 1933, and staged in March the same year, it is published here for the first time.<sup>62</sup> The play is an important illustration of the group's work, not only because it was written by one of its leaders, but also because it is exemplary in terms of agit-prop style and in its attempt to give urgency and shape to real and current problems. It contains an explicit ideological message; ridicule of the class enemy and elevation of the proletariat; and a dénouement that functions both as a representation of the triumph of the working classes over the fascists and the corrupt and corrupting bourgeoisie, and a call to the audience to unite against the enemy in the struggle for social change.

*La peste fascista* is a one-act play with three short scenes and is simple in structure, setting out a political problem and its solution within a basic stage setting. The binary opposition between the forces of good (the proletariat and ordinary citizens) and of evil (Capitalists and fascists) is typical of the Soviet and German agit-prop that influenced the group. It is worth noting that it also draws on familiar popular traditions and contains echoes of ritualistic medieval morality plays, although it replaces a religious creed with a political one.

The first scene pits a contented and productive Worker against Capitalism. The former is seen in the act of constructing a new society, symbolically represented on stage by his layering of brick upon brick. The latter wishes to preserve social

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<sup>62</sup> The play was believed to be lost, but a copy was preserved in the censorship archives. I am grateful to both the archive and to Lidia Falcón for permission to publish this work.

hierarchies which he argues are God-given: ‘Hijo mío, cada uno cumple su misión histórica. Yo la mía, tú la tuya. Dios lo quiere así.’ The worker claims ‘¡tengo hambre y sed de justicia! Yo mismo estoy construyéndome una sociedad justa en la que haya pan para todos.’ At the end of the scene, he is joined by four more workers, who are whistling the familiar anthem, the *Internationale*, suggesting solidarity and identification with a common cause among workers everywhere.

The second scene sees Capitalism recruiting fascists to his cause and calling on them to take action against the workers in the name of ‘nuestra patria, nuestra raza, nuestra religión’. The rising panic of Capitalism is shown in his repeated cries about God, the race and the Fatherland and finally his use of money to bribe the unthinking Fascists, who respond ‘¡A la orden!’ Unlike the workers, therefore, the fascists are depicted as motivated by greed rather than worthy values, although they will parrot the language of Capitalism. Capitalism’s calls of ‘¡Arrasarlos, destruirlos, aniquilarles!’ demonstrates the threat posed to the workers of a fearful elite willing to do anything to hold on to power. The scene ends with fascists marching off stage shouting ‘¡Viva la patria! ¡Viva la raza! ¡Viva la religión! ¡Abajo el socialismo! ¡Abajo el comunismo! ¡Abajo el proletariado!’, neatly juxtaposing old values and new.

The final scene presents a clash of these values represented in the sparring of fascists and the worker on stage and the attempts of each to win over a group of citizens to their side. The language of the fascists is violent as they seek to persuade the citizens to destroy the ‘movimiento marxista’: ‘¡Fuego con ellos! ¡Fuego! ¡Fuego! ¡Fuego!’ The worker describes his adversaries as ‘microbios’ and ‘la peste fascista’ and calls on the citizens to unite against this common enemy: ‘¡Camaradas, si nos unimos todos, ni armas, ni dinero, ni nada podrán vencernos. Seremos un frente de



hierro. ¡Frente único, camaradas!’ The citizens move to the side of the worker and disarm the fascists, who then fall to the ground. The play ends in a call for unity around the ‘proletariado’ and ‘el frente único’ and a rousing chorus of ‘¡vivas!’, which aims to break down the fourth wall and invite audience participation. The final stage direction sees Capitalism enter the stage and faint, his weakness exposed once his henchmen have been neutralized.

Almost no detail is given regarding set design but a blank stage with some building blocks would suffice. The play could easily be staged in a wide range of unconventional performance spaces. Costume is not specified, but the fact that the characters are emblematic of capitalism, fascism and the proletariat suggests the use of certain stylized costumes, such as the business suit, the blue shirt and yoke and arrows symbol of the fascists, and the blue overalls of the worker. The language used is uncomplicated, but incendiary, and signifies the violent threat posed by the alliance of fascism and capitalism in Spain and beyond. Repetition is employed throughout to reinforce both the threat, and the central political message of the workers. The movement of characters on stage is minimal, again lending itself to non-traditional stagings, although it demonstrates an awareness of the importance of non-verbal theatrical elements, both in the physical confrontation of the characters on stage and the specific stage directions indicating the fall of fascism and capitalism.

### **Reception and Censorship**

The work of *Nosotros* was described by César and Irene in exciting terms as revolutionary, game-changing theatre, although in fact we have little evidence beyond their own testimony that was the case. While the group’s own statements boast of great success, the reality, as Cobb pointed out, is that their work was rarely reviewed

in the mainstream press. Cobb wrote, ‘en cuanto a las reacciones de la prensa madrileña, era inevitable cierta incomprensión por parte de críticos que buscaban enjuiciar este trabajo de agitación según normas puramente teatrales.’ This was, after all, a theatre that prioritized the political over the artistic. Yet we know that when mainstream critics did address their work, they tended to disdain it. Cobb cites Irene’s response, published as a letter in *Mundo obrero*, 20 April 1933, to criticism of their work and dismissal of it as pure propaganda:

quería también decir a los críticos que han manifestado temor de que el Teatro Proletario se dedique a la propaganda, que todo el teatro, absolutamente todo, es propaganda. Propaganda religiosa, propaganda inmoral, propaganda libertina, propaganda pacifista, propaganda nacionalista; en fin, propaganda siempre. Política presentada artísticamente (1985: 21-22).

Hence, this type of drama remained a minority interest within theatre circles, isolated for ideological reasons from the mainstream and for artistic reasons from other developments. Of course their success should not simply be measured against the commercial and artistic successes of others: their goal was different.

Within leftist and political circles, the group was well known and there was substantial coverage of their activities in the left-wing press. The reception of O’Neill’s *Al rojo* is a good example. It received positive reviews in the *Heraldo*, *La Voz* and *La libertad*, but was not reviewed in *Época*, *ABC*, *Debate*, *El Sol* or *El Liberal*.<sup>63</sup> While the evidence for attendance at their plays and other events is scarce,

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<sup>63</sup> Pilar Nieva de la Paz, *Autoras dramáticas españolas entre 1918 y 1936* (Madrid: CSIC, 1993), p. 372.

Irene claims that three hundred people attended the premiere of *Hinkemann*, (104).<sup>64</sup> Given the fame of Toller and his work, this was probably not representative of attendance at their productions; we know from the AGA files, for example, that the premiere of *La peste fascista* on 25 March 1933 (with *Guerra* and *Me engaña mi mujer y no me importa* also on the programme) attracted a mere fifty spectators. Nosotros's *Hinkemann* was reviewed in a short article in *Hoja oficial del lunes* on 12 September, in which the group was praised for bringing this type of political theatre to Madrid for the first time.<sup>65</sup> *La Libertad* reported on it also on 16 September, noting that while it was well-supported by the public, very few intellectuals of the Left were in attendance at the premiere. The article is quite critical of the choice of play and the quality of the production, if positive overall about the group's intentions. It also mentions the fact that the play was introduced by César Falcón, who explained the group's goals.<sup>66</sup> Of particular interest, as it gives us some indication of the official reception of the group itself, is the news that *Hinkemann* had been suspended the previous Tuesday, when it was due to be premiered:

Con verdadero asombro de la gente que acudía al teatro se supo que la representación había sido suspendida por orden de la autoridad. Se trata, como es sabido, de un drama que se representa con éxito en todo el mundo civilizado. La persecución de ideas y de la obra literaria y artística es inadmisibles siempre, y mucho más en una que llama República de trabajadores. En los alrededores del

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<sup>64</sup> This is corroborated by the official report, signed by the El Comisario-Jefe, in the censorship files:

'Terminando sin novedad con asistencia de unas trescientas personas'. MECD. AGA, [21/05837].

<sup>65</sup> 'Hinkemann, por Ernesto Toller', *Hoja oficial del lunes*, 12 September 1932, p. 6. The article also mentions Toller's visit to Madrid a few months previously, when he gave a talk about *Hinkemann* at the Ateneo.

<sup>66</sup> 'Teatro Proletario. "Hinkemann"', *La Libertad*, 16 September, 1932, p. 3.

salón Atocha se advertía un excesivo alarde de fuerzas policiales y de guardias, que aplicado, por ejemplo a la busca y captura del general Barrera, habría constituido un verdadero triunfo.<sup>67</sup>

The ban was lifted and the play was staged two nights later, on Thursday 15 September. It was praised in a review in *El luchador*, dated 17 September and signed by J. F. T., in which the bourgeois tradition is denounced and the need for this type of drama is stressed - 'hacía falta en el mundo y, en España más'.<sup>68</sup>

The group claimed support from political leaders who were eager to include culture within their political armoury and it seems to have functioned as a sort of rallying point for workers. Indeed, according to Irene, la Pasionaria attended the occasional representation and Valentín González (El Campesino) brought a truckload of workers from Toledo to see a show one night (105-107). She further claimed that the theatre on Calle Alcalá 'estaba siempre llena y venían incluso de los pueblos de los alrededores, venían en autobuses, en camiones' (Cobb 1986: 271).

Given the loss of so many of their plays, the scarcity of reviews and the group's own propaganda, it is difficult to build an accurate picture of their impact at the time. This is why the material in the state archives at Alcalá is an important resource for our understanding of both the group and the context in which it operated, as it allows us to flesh out what we already know and to build a fuller picture of their significance and to measure their success against their goals. We can gain a reasonably accurate view of the official reception of these plays and trace how the

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<sup>67</sup> 'Suspensión de un estreno', *La Libertad*, 14 September, 1932, p. 4. One of the co-conspirators of the failed military coup in August 1932, termed *La Sanjurjada*, General Barrera was arrested in 1932, was later exiled before returning to Spain in 1934.

<sup>68</sup> 'El teatro proletario. Hinkemann', p.2.

reaction to, and censorship of, their work shifted over time in accordance with political circumstances.

Throughout the Republican period, two copies of plays to be staged had to be sent to the Dirección General de Seguridad for prior censorship, at first in accordance with the existing 1913 Real Orden and later, the more conservative 1935 legislation.<sup>69</sup> The authorities' initial reaction to the work of Nosotros reflected its minority status on the one hand, and its acceptance as part of a wider Republican goal on the other. While slight cuts were sometimes made to their plays by the state censors, this theatre and its audience were not generally seen as a threat to the status quo. Such tolerance would change during the conservative *bienio negro* (1934-1935) and the onset of war in 1936. For most of its existence, it was the 1913 legislation, and interpretations of it, that Nosotros had to contend with. By the time the later legislation was introduced, Nosotros was already in decline.

Even in the earlier period, we can see from the files that the censors, like the mainstream press, had little time for this type of political theatre and were generally dismissive of both plays and public. The censorship process involved a report summarizing the play and its political and moral content. Emeterio Diez notes that the censors were quite lenient when it came to matters relating to sexual morality and the family, and generally concerned themselves more with political matters, such as

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<sup>69</sup> Ministerio de la Gobernación. Real Orden del 19 de octubre de 1913. Reglamento de Policía de Espectáculos, de construcción, reforma y condiciones de los locales destinados a los mismos, *Gaceta de Madrid*, no. 304, 31 October 1913, pp. 347-55. In 1935 new censorship legislation was introduced: Ministerio de la Gobernación. Orden del 3 de mayo de 1935. Reglamento de Policía de Espectáculos públicos, *Gaceta de Madrid*, no. 125, 5 May 1935, pp. 1055-1070 (p. 1056-57).

attacks on the Republic and the class struggle.<sup>70</sup> In the sociopolitical climate of the day, this is unsurprising.

This was usually followed by a report from the Sección de Vigilancia, containing an eye-witness account of the staging of the play and the reception of the work by the public, as well as a commentary on issues of public order.<sup>71</sup> Article 12 of the 1913 legislation stated: ‘El Director general de Seguridad en Madrid, el Gobernador en las capitales de provincias o el Alcalde en las demás poblaciones, podrán impedir que se ponga en caricatura o en otra forma indiscreta en escena a cualquiera institución del Estado o a personas determinadas.’<sup>72</sup> Moreover, it specified in Article 70 that the actors were not to address the audience directly regarding the action on the stage. It is clear that aspects of the legislation were guaranteed to cause some problems for *Nosotros*, given the characteristics of the agitprop theatre they staged.

The censor’s 1932 report on Toller’s *Hinkemann*, for example, contains a brief description of the play and the following conclusion:

se desarrollan escenas en una taberna y una barraca de feria las cuales tienden a demostrar las vicisitudes porque tiene que pasar un proletario con las intransigencias de la sociedad tal como hoy esta constituida, sin que en ningún momento tenga ofensa alguna para el régimen constituido.

This is quite typical of the reports, which generally raise no objections to the political content of the plays. In the case of the group’s original works, however, the censors

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<sup>70</sup> ‘La censura teatral en Madrid durante la Segunda República (1931-1936)’, *ALEC*, 32:2 (2007), 83-106 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/27742496>>.

<sup>71</sup> This was also a feature of the 1935 legislation, although not all of the files contain such accounts.

<sup>72</sup> Reglamento de policía de espectáculos, 1913, pp. 347-8.

are damning with regard to artistic merit. The censorship report on *Al rojo*, dated 11 February 1933 is a case in point. It accurately describes the work as an anti-bourgeois and pro-proletarian play, but asserted that ‘como pieza del llamado teatro proletario, esta obra es de lo peor que se ha escrito y su tema ya anticuado’, before going on to state, ‘pero en orden gubernativo... me parece que no merece reproche.’ Having criticized theme and characterization, as well as the use of exaggeration and ‘tópicos revolucionarios’, the censor went on to suggest that the play was not a threat to public order and not worth banning due to the nature of the public it was aimed at:

Creo que la representación de esta obra no constituye un peligro para el orden público, a pesar de su procacidad, porque el público para quien la obra se va a representar, o cree y tiene conciencia de que lo que en la obra se dice es cierto (en las más bajas extracciones sociales; y el tema ya no constituye una novedad), o sabe que es mentira, y, a pesar de ella lo propaga, con fines de prosetismo demoleedor, al cual – en pura doctrina jurídica de derecho social republicano – no se le puede poner coto con prohibiciones gubernativas, que exacerban, sino con escuelas y con ejemplos prácticos.

The files also contain a report on *El tren de escarapate*, dated 17 February 1933, which gives a summary of the plot and describes the conclusion thus: ‘allí quedan los protagonistas, seguros de haber encontrado al fin el verdadero y único Paraíso: la igualdad de todos.’ The verdict, given in a report addressed to the Jefe de la Asesoría Jurídica, Dirección General de Seguridad states:

la obra, de tesis comunista, no tiene excesos de leguaje [sic] ni ataques al Régimen constituido. Escrita para niños, pone en boca de ellos palabras y conceptos impropios de la infancia, que difícilmente podrán ser comprendidos por aquellos

que la representan o sean meros espectadores. Para lo demás, la obra, por la forma correcta de su desarrollo, es inofensiva.

Once again, the censor seems unimpressed by the quality of the work, but finds nothing objectionable from a political standpoint.

The censor of *¡Guerra!* notes in his summary (dated 24 February 1933) that the protagonist realizes at the end: ‘que no existe más patria que la universal, ni más campo de batalla que el trabajo, ni más lucha que la dirigida contra el enemigo común: el capitalismo y la burguesía’. His is one of the more interesting reports, as it reveals the importance of censorship in protecting an image of the new patria: the Republic. The censor took issue with the ending of the play for its ‘negación completa de la idea de la propia Patria, cuya concepción noble y lealmente sentida no puede ser incompatible con el supremo ideal de la Patria y la Fraternidad universal’ and concluded that the last two paragraphs of the work should be cut. Here the international perspective of *Nosotros* clashes directly with the identity-building goals of the Republican authorities, and the censor expresses concern that the uneducated public might be turned from identification with the Spanish Republic.

A report on *La peste fascista*, from 25 March 1933 notes simply that it is a call to destroy fascism and ends with ‘vivas al proletariado’. The verdict, once again, is that there is nothing objectionable in the play:

en ‘LA PESTE FASCISTA’, obra teatral de tendencia comunista y escrita expresamente contra el movimiento fascista, no se observa ataque violento alguno contra el Régimen establecido ni concepto de ninguna clase que pueda considerarse punible. La tesis se limita a advertir a los obreros que, en lugar de unirse al fascismo, creación capitalista, desarmen a los que califica de ‘peste fascista’.



It is interesting that the report on *Me engaña mi mujer y no me importa*, also from March 1933, not only finds it apolitical – ‘no contiene concepto alguno contrario al Régimen establecido ni a las leyes en vigor’ – but goes on to neutralize any moral qualms that the authorities might have:

desde el punto de vista moral, no puede hacérsele objeción alguna de verdadera importancia. Toda la trama se reduce a la explicación de cómo un hombre unido a una mujer hermosa sin vínculo legal alguno, a pesar de su fealdad física, es envidiado por todos los que le rodean y procura evitar la maledicencia con un cartel donde aparecen las palabras que sirven de título a la obra.’

Despite the censor’s conclusion, the play is of course political – like all of Nosotros’s works – in its humorous commentary on progressive social mores.

*Cyankali* is described in a report as ‘una obra teatral de carácter comunista’, the censor concludes with the usual: ‘no contiene concepto alguno contra el Régimen ni leyes vigentes.’ This may be explained by the fact that the sensitive political issue of abortion was simply ignored in the censor’s report.<sup>73</sup> The copies of the typescript in the file are marked, however, and violent passages, bad language and references to the dire economic situation are all highlighted. Despite this, there is nothing to indicate that it was cut.

Overall the political ideology represented in Nosotros’s plays was in line with the values of the first Republican governments. The censors at the time had a clear

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<sup>73</sup> Legislation for restricted abortion was eventually introduced in 1937 in Catalonia. DECRETO DE REGULACIÓN DE LA INTERRUPCIÓN ARTIFICIAL DEL EMBARAZO (*Diari Oficial de la Generalitat de Catalunya*, 9, 9 January 1937). Reproduced at <http://www.cgtburgos.org/accion-sindical-social/social/nosotras-decidimos/699-1937-la-ley-del-aborto-mas-progresista-de-europa.html>

[Accessed 12 December 2016].

political agenda and plays that did not clash with – or indeed complemented – the politics of the governing parties were generally authorized without cuts. While Mata Induráin argues that the authorities wished to control the impact of works of this type and were thus more likely to authorize them for small venues such as Casas del pueblo ‘al que asistirían los propios miembros del grupo o partido’ than for larger, more conventional venues such as theatres, there is no evidence to suggest that Nosotros tried to stage their work in more mainstream theatre.<sup>74</sup> In fact their commentaries suggest that they deliberately eschewed conventional venues.

During the so-called *bienio negro* the group began to experience some problems. This backlash is not surprising given the group’s overt political stance. After all, even the less overtly political Misiones Pedagógicas suffered under the CEDA governments, which cut their budget (Rodríguez-Solás: 15). Nosotros’s difficulties took on a variety of forms. Irene mentions in her memoir the arrest and detention of members of the group on suspicion of involvement in the killing of a police officer (106).<sup>75</sup> Cobb too, mentions that they had some run-ins with the authorities during their 1933 tour:

típico fue el episodio evocado por Irene Falcón, que ocurrió en un pueblo minero de la sierra, donde un cabo de la Guardia Civil quiso prohibir la representación de Hinkemann ‘por inmoral’, cediendo solamente ante la amenaza de los trabajadores de quemar el local (1985: 25).

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<sup>74</sup> Carlos Mata Induráin, ‘Notas sobre el teatro proletario Español de la preguerra: *Guerra a la Guerra y Miserias*’, *RILCE*, 11:1, 1995, 68-87, p.86. < <http://hdl.handle.net/10171/4482>> [accessed 25 March 2010] Indeed, this was a form of cultural control that would be repeated under Franco with the authorization of some politically challenging works for *teatros de cámara* only.

<sup>75</sup> She claims that it was thanks to the influence of her friend and Communist Member of Parliament, José Antonio Balbontín, that she was freed several days later.

Irene put it simply in her interview with Alex Niño: ‘en 1934 fue la última [excursión] porque después nos prohibieron actuar’.<sup>76</sup> Thereafter *Nosotros* disappears from view and even from the left-wing press until the end of the *bienio negro*. Their brand of political theatre was out of favour and then policed by new, stricter censorship legislation from 1935. As well as controlling politically-motivated attacks on the new ruling elite, the 1935 legislation also attempted to control sexual morality, to eliminate offences against the family and good taste and, interestingly, to regulate works that might incite class division (Diez: 90). This legislation would clearly cause problems for companies such as *Nosotros*, whose very goal was to stir up class conflict, although by the time it was introduced, the group had already begun to fall apart.

The demise of *Nosotros* was hastened by a combination of factors: problems with the new authorities, its rather ad-hoc structure, financial difficulties and the extra-theatrical political activities of its founders. While we should not overlook their elite connections and the support that existed for their goals, their often precarious finances meant that the reality of their activities was probably closer to Lidia Falcón’s description of a rather shambolic, if passionate, troupe than a smooth political machine: ‘El Teatro Proletario, formado por un equipo de aficionados y algunos profesionales de segundo orden, con escasísimos recursos, recorrió varias veces el país representando las obras más conocidas del teatro de vanguardia.’<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> ‘Perfil: Va de retro. ¡Qué historia! Irene Falcón fue la primera madrileña corresponsal de prensa hace 70 años y colaboró con *Pasionaria*’, *El País*, 11 December 1996 <[http://elpais.com/diario/1996/12/11/madrid/850307065\\_850215.html](http://elpais.com/diario/1996/12/11/madrid/850307065_850215.html)> [accessed 10 April 2015].

<sup>77</sup> Lidia Falcón, *Los hijos de los vencidos: 1939-1949* (Barcelona: Pomaire, 1979), p. 40.

Yet while direct references to the Nosotros Group in the press disappear in 1934, it seems that there were some attempts to continue their work under a series of different monikers.<sup>78</sup> Irene wrote that the group operated as the Teatro Proletario for a while after the Toledo tour of summer 1934, but later adopted an apolitical name: Cine Teatro Club (116). Dennis and Peral Vega also comment on this pragmatic change in name for the theatre group coinciding with the change in government. They further note that some members were later crucial in the creation of the umbrella group, ‘Cultura Popular’ (22). The *Heraldo de Madrid* too refers to ‘Misiones de Cultura Popular’, as a group established in June 1936 and associated with the Communist Party.<sup>79</sup> Cobb also mentions them in his commentary on the rise of agit-prop groups in 1936 (1992-93: 237-49). So while it is clear that Nosotros did not remain a cohesive unit, we can trace the spread of its influence among newly-created agit-prop groups at the time. Indeed towards the end of the *bienio negro* and prior to the Frente Popular victory, there is some reference in *Mundo obrero* to the re-emergence of the group with theatre productions of *La chinche* and *Asturias*, although by now Irene is in Moscow (Cobb 1985: 26). In fact we know from the archives that

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<sup>78</sup> Cobb mentions discussion of the creation of ‘la central de Teatro y Cine Proletario’ in 1934 (1980: 66-67). In her memoir, Irene refers to her call for the Central de Teatros Proletarios in April 1933 (p. 109). In her interview with Cobb, she claims that it was a response to requests for copies of their plays: ‘y empezamos a repartir estas obras, todo ello desde un punto de vista cooperativo, fraternal, sin cobrar nada, nos mandaban lo que podían para papel, para máquinas. Así lo hicimos. Y si esta central no tuvo mayor desarrollo fue por causas políticas...’, (1986: 271).

<sup>79</sup> *El Heraldo de Madrid*, 13 June 1936, p. 8. See also Plaza Plaza for further details about the emergence of these groups.

these works were staged by *Cine Teatro Club* in 1936, the former in the cine-teatro Rosales on 13 March and the latter in the same location on 10 April.<sup>80</sup>

### **Denouément**

The Civil War brought about the final dispersal of the group, although many of those who had been involved continued to work in the cultural sphere, both during and after the war, and several of them are now best remembered for their war-time work, rather than what preceded it. *Nosotros* itself is all but forgotten and has remained little more than a footnote to Spanish theatre history. What seems undeniable, however, is that the group served as a model for Civil War *teatro de urgencia*.<sup>81</sup> César went on to have significant involvement in civil war propagandistic theatre and he established one of the best known groups of the period – *Altavoz del frente* – in August 1936.<sup>82</sup> This group was linked to the Comisión Nacional de Agitación y Propaganda of the PCE and those involved, some of whom had also been part of *Nosotros*, were drawn from the staff of the Party's mouthpiece, *Mundo obrero*. The connections to *Nosotros* went beyond this and in 1936 *Altavoz del Frente* staged Irene Falcón's *La conquista de la*

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<sup>80</sup> Plaza Plaza, (108). Dougherty and Anderson mention this group as a separate, but similar, entity to *Nosotros* (306), though it is probably more accurate to consider it a version of *Nosotros* under another name.

<sup>81</sup> Bilbatúa's description of Rafael Dieste's *Nueva Escena*, for example, which was established in October 1936, suggests a structural model and style of theatre similar to that of *Nosotros* (51-52). For further information about such groups, see Jim McCarthy, 'Theatrical activities during the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939', in *A History of Theatre in Spain*, ed by Delgado and Gies, pp. 310-22 (p. 317); Cobb (1992-93); and Dennis and Peral.

<sup>82</sup> See 'El *Altavoz del Frente*. Para los escritores, artistas, profesores, actores, periodistas de la causa popular', *Mundo Obrero* (Madrid), 13 de agosto de 1936, p. 2. For further information on this group, see Jorge Falcón (1982: 139) and Irene Falcón (116).

*prensa*, which she had written and staged with Nosotros in 1933. Both Ramón Puyol and Luisa Carnés were also involved with *Altavoz del Frente*, the former as an artist, and the latter as a playwright, and she wrote the play *Así empezó...* (1936) for it.

By 10 October 1936, we can place César among the members of the Comisión Central del Patronato de Misiones Pedagógicas, along with figures such as Alberti, Sender and Casona.<sup>83</sup> He was clearly a well-known and influential person and, moreover, one with a clear focus on the political potential of the stage, a fact that makes his absence from theatre histories all the more striking and suggests the ideological nature of the selection of those to be included or excluded.

César was editor-in-chief of *Mundo Obrero* in 1936, and during the war worked for *Frente Rojo*, which, like the former, was an organ of the PCE. Hormigón asserts that during the conflict César was part of the Republic's representation at the Sociedad de Naciones, a claim also made by Lidia Falcón.<sup>84</sup> He published his important chronicle of the war, *Madrid*, in 1938.<sup>85</sup> It was, like its author, forgotten for many years before being republished in 2010.

Irene too played a significant role during the war, although she abandoned the theatre for a return to journalism. She left Nosotros following the 1934 Toledo tour, and was sent to Russia in November that year as Moscow correspondent for *Mundo*

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<sup>83</sup> Eugenio Otero Urtaza and Maria Garcia Alonso, 'Cronologia', in *Las Misiones Pedagógicas 1931-1936* (Madrid: Sociedad Estatal de Conmemoraciones Culturales/ Amigos de la Residencia de Estudiantes, 2006), pp. 33-59 (pp. 53-55)

<sup>84</sup> Hormigón ( 42); Falcón, 'Prologue' (xii).

<sup>85</sup> Published originally by Nuestro Pueblo, it was republished by Hacer Editorial in 2010. In her prologue, Lidia Falcón comments on his later publishing activities in Mexico in the 1940s and 1950s (xii-xiii, xxviii)

*obrero*. She worked as a translator both during and after the Civil War.<sup>86</sup> She returned to Spain in 1937 and thereafter collaborated with Dolores Ibarruri, with whom she had earlier worked in 1932 in *Mujeres Antifascistas*.<sup>87</sup>

After the war, according to Irene, many members of the group who had remained politically engaged were persecuted and imprisoned (116). César himself returned to Peru in 1939, but failed to make his mark there again after such a long absence. He moved to Mexico in the 1940s and remained there until shortly before his death. He died in Peru in 1970. Irene established the press agency, *Agencia de Información Mundial Antifascista (AIMA)* in 1937 upon her return from the USSR; it lasted until the end of the war.<sup>88</sup> In May 1939, she left Spain again with other members of the PCE destined for Russia. She worked as a translator and for state publishers and broadcasters during her time there, though was also a victim of a Stalinist purge.<sup>89</sup> She remained a lifelong communist. Irene did not return to Spain until 1977 and died in Segovia in 1999. Her death, like César's, went almost unnoticed in Spain. The years of dictatorship had ensured that many of those on the losing side, like their works, were not remembered later. They had been written out of theatre history by the victors. As Monedero put it: 'Cuando murió la secretaria de

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<sup>86</sup> See Marcos Rodríguez-Espinosa, '“¡No Pasarán!”: Translators under siege and ideological control in the Spanish Civil War', *Perspectives*, 24:1 (2016), 22-35. DOI: 10.1080/0907676X.2015.1073765. [accessed 2 February 2016].

<sup>87</sup> Pedro Montoliú, 'Irene Falcón', in *Madrid en la Guerra Civil*, 2 vols (Madrid: Silex, 1999), II: *Los protagonistas*, pp. 452-61 (p. 454). Irene denied that she was her secretary, but was, rather her close collaborator (96).

<sup>88</sup> Montoliú (457). She worked closely with Margarita Nelken in this venture.

<sup>89</sup> See Rodríguez-Espinosa, and Irene Falcón Obituary, *El país*, 20 August 1999. <[http://elpais.com/diario/1999/08/20/agenda/935100001\\_850215.html](http://elpais.com/diario/1999/08/20/agenda/935100001_850215.html)> [accessed 5 January 2016].

Dolores Ibárruri, Irene Falcón - combatiente por la República, perseguida, presa, torturada, exiliada -, los medios callaron?<sup>90</sup>

Carlota O'Neill, actress and author of one of the group's most successful plays, was incarcerated without trial at the outbreak of war. She later went into exile, settling first in Venezuela and later in Mexico. Carlota took Mexican nationality in 1953, and died in Venezuela in 2000. Enriqueta O'Neill remained in Spain and initially disguised her leftist past, enabling her to survive by writing for women's magazines and for radio. She committed suicide in 1972. Joaquín García Hidalgo died in prison in Cordoba shortly after the outbreak of the war. Ramón Puyol, though a leading artist of the Republican and Civil War periods, was never to regain such fame after the end of the war. He died in his home town of Algeciras, Cadiz, in 1981. Luisa Carnés left Spain in 1939 and died in exile in Mexico in 1964.

The fate of those involved with the group might go some way to explaining its forgotten status. Although mentioned by some critics, such as Dru Dougherty and Jim Mc Carthy, Christopher Cobb is the only one to have analysed the group in any depth, and his analysis did not appear until the 1980s and 1990s. Furthermore, Cobb's detailed work does not contain any reference to the playtexts and other materials held in the censorship archives, so the opening of these files has allowed for a revision of the group's importance both at the time and in terms of Spain's broader theatre history.

Their prioritization of the political over the artistic also helps explain why this theatre group has been forgotten. The centrality of the playtext to our valuation of drama has meant that works considered more partisan than poetic often do not survive

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<sup>90</sup> Juan Carlos Monedero, *La Transición contada a nuestros padres: nocturno de la democracia española* (Madrid: La Catarata, 2011), p. 244.



their political moment. Added to this, many of the works staged by Nosotros were not original, but were translations of German or Russian plays and therefore not an obvious part of Spanish theatre history. Even the group's original plays were in general agitprop works that presented an international perspective on political circumstances and therefore not perceived as examples of a lost Spanish Republican identity. Yet in the context of recent scholarship on both historical memory and the use of the theatre in identity formation during the Second Republic, this article argues that the Nosotros theatre group should in fact be considered an example of Republican cultural nation-building, albeit a different strand from the better known Misiones Pedagógicas.

Araquistain's argument, that 'el llamado teatro social, el teatro de cuestiones y masas sociales, generalmente interesa poco, incluso a los obreros', was proven wrong in the political moment of the Second Republic and the Civil War and although forgotten for many decades, is again shown to be wrong in our current drive to revisit and understand the past (27). In our efforts to revise and enhance our understanding of the cultural history of the Second Republic, the importance of unpicking established theatre histories (both Spanish and European) and of mining archives is difficult to overstate. The state archive at Alcalá has preserved within its censorship files the historical footprint of this short-lived company and several of their works focusing on the international class struggle, women's rights and the fight against fascism. As a result, despite its absence from most histories and the loss of many of their playtexts, we can establish a link between this revolutionary group and the Republican search for a political identity. Nosotros, with their international perspective and focus on class and gender, should be considered part of the cultural renaissance that attempted to shape the Republic at a time when it was still being defined. Indeed, despite their

relative lack of success in persuading others of the need for a workers' Republic, their work allows us to demonstrate that, in addition to the mainstream offerings, the much lauded avant-garde theatre, and the return to roots of the Misiones Pedagógicas, the Second Republic also saw the emergence of a radical political theatre that sits within a wider, European tradition.

University of St Andrews

Catherine O'Leary

Catherine O'Leary,

Department of Spanish,

School of Modern Languages,

University of St Andrews,

KY16 9PH

Fife,

Scotland

[cmo4@st-andrews.ac.uk](mailto:cmo4@st-andrews.ac.uk)