

## Keynote Address

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It is both an honor and a particular pleasure for me to be speaking to you here this afternoon. It is perhaps not visible to all of you—certainly not to some of the younger generation of scholars present—that we are participating in an event of truly startling professional importance. In light of the number of conferences on Latin American letters which have proliferated in the last decade, this symposium may seem simply another offshoot of the burgeoning interest in Latin American culture in all its aspects. I do not believe that this is so. Rather, it must be emphasized that this is the third major symposium on Latin American theatre in three years, to my certain knowledge; there may have been others. Latin American dramatists are frequently in residence at North American educational institutions; their works are frequently presented, and there are resident companies in larger cities whose repertoire consists exclusively of outstanding Hispanic plays. Such a flourishing is little short of marvelous; there is something truly Macondian about it. I fully expect someone to levitate at any moment. Miraculously, Latin American theatre is no longer the somewhat esoteric research of a few people; it is a full-fledged discipline within the general area of Latin American literature.

Perhaps my delight and astonishment at this happy phenomenon will be more comprehensible to you if I point out that during the early years of my career it was my then chairman's pleasure to refer to me as the departmental anthropologist. The cause of this witticism was my interest, which continues undaunted by such humor, in the ritual origins of pre-Hispanic poetry and drama, an interest which only such a short time ago—or so, at least, it seems—was simply incomprehensible to the majority of my colleagues. It is a measure of how far we have come that it no longer strikes our colleagues in other disciplines, or even, indeed, our own, that we should study seriously the ritual component of Sor Juana's theatre or the verbal textures of Eduardo Pavlovsky. There is

even a frequent measure of barely-hidden jealousy in their comments. We are, in fact, and to the barely concealed glee of some of the more senior members of the field, objects of envy. We are envied the richness, the exuberance, the oddly original flavor of our field of study. (Parenthetically, sure proof is the fact that members of departments of English and Comparative Literature are now writing learnedly of Latin American literature, including the theatre. Sometimes they have even read it in the original.)

Even so, the sheer mass of what has happened is visible only to those of us who have some special perspective, who have had the opportunity to survey the field overall. In my own case, it was for twenty-five years the joyous obligation to prepare the section on modern drama for the *Handbook of Latin American Studies*. This meant that I received on automatic interlibrary loan every item relating to drama in Spanish America received by the Library of Congress; original plays, critical editions, critical books and articles, journals. I assure you that in simple quantitative terms the total output must have quadrupled. Much more important, the quality of what we study has improved spectacularly. Incontestably, both the amount and the caliber of Latin American drama available for study and performance have increased almost geometrically. There are more and better plays, more and better playwrights, than ever before.

There are, I think, three ways in which Latin American theatre today has changed most visibly. The first is the sheer technical virtuosity of the playwrights, their ability to work within drastically differing forms. Artaud, Brecht, Grotowski, the absurd and so many more are read, seen, studied, and absorbed. More important, they are assimilated. For example, George Woodyard has made clear that the theatre of the absurd does indeed exist in Latin America, but in an altered form and at the service, in most cases, of ideals which would startle most of the developers of the form in Europe. In another context, I have tried to show my conviction that Osvaldo Dragún has used Brechtian effects for essentially anti-Brechtian purposes. He is hardly alone.

This kind of innovation has become common in Latin America. No longer is the dramatist's approach to the problem of dealing with dramatic form merely adaptive. Theatre as game, as ritual and as role-playing is rooted in European drama, but I know of no European work which uses these concepts as effectively or in such an original fashion as does José Triana in *La noche de los asesinos*. In a somewhat different form, they are at the core of much of the best work of Carlos Gorostiza, Isaac Chocrón and Griselda Gambaro, to mention only three. This preoccupation with identity, with human relationships and the playing of roles, is certainly one of the most important aspects of Latin American theatre today, including younger playwrights. In Guillermo Gentile's *Hablemos a calzón quitado*, the ambiguous sexual identity of the protagonist's father becomes a metaphor for a capitalist society gone mad. It would have been easy and tempting for the characters to become heavy-handed political symbols, but Gentile resisted the simplistic and gave his characters human dimension. Ricardo Monti works within a complicated blend of ritual, game and theatre-within-theatre, while Eduardo Pavlovsky uses the insights of psychoanalysis to create a theatre of terrifying dimensions. Pavlovsky is remote indeed from the traditional

“psychological” theatre. He is, instead, a dramatist deeply concerned with the nature of the human animal and our relations with the others of our species. As these few I have mentioned, so there are many, many more, each dealing with their craft in ways which are innovative and original. In the passionate search for an epiphanic vision of what we truly are, which seems the driving force of our time, Latin American authors are in the vanguard.

The second direction that I see is an intense commitment to the profound alteration of political and social realities which the dramatists perceive as repressive and morally unjustifiable. There are, of course, playwrights whose work, in whole or in part, does not reflect this preoccupation, but they are relatively few, and there are hardly any whose works reveal an intent to justify the status quo. Obviously, there was a political commitment visible in the Latin American theatre of forty years ago—indeed these two periods seem to reflect high points in such activity—but there is a profound difference, which lies in the heightened sophistication, in the awareness of the fundamental difference between a theatre of propaganda and a theatre which presents, in dramatic terms, the terrible manner in which humankind is prone to afflict humankind.

In fact, one of the most intriguing aspects of Latin American theatre today is the manner in which this human commitment is explored in works which are technically innovative. Emilio Carballido is a prime example; many of his works deftly dissect the hypocrisy and corruption of much of the public sector of Mexican life, but within forms which are profoundly theatrical and which never confuse the theatre with the pulpit. Carballido is as much the experimenter with dramatic form in an overtly political work such as *Silencio, pollos pelones* . . . as in an apparently non-political comedy like *Te juro, Juana, que tengo ganas*. This is equally true of Osvaldo Dragún, whose *Historias para ser contadas* must have set some sort of record for number of unauthorized performances, if not for author's royalties paid; the *Historias* have taught untold numbers of students how to deal with complex problems. The same might be said of Griselda Gambaro, whose stripping of our hypocrisy and our evil sears our souls while we marvel at her technical perfection. The list is very long.

One of the developments in theatre directly related to this commitment is, of course, collective creation. Rooted not in Europe but in the chaotic and tragic events of the 1960s, it attempts to create a theatre esthetic out of an all-encompassing political ethic: creation, like responsibility, becomes a public rather than a private matter. As with any breakthrough, its practitioners cover a broad spectrum of capabilities. There is much collective creation which is hardly theatre at all; there is much which is stimulating and exciting. As with any new idea, it has had a profound impact on some established dramatists; Augusto Boal had recently moved into an area which is no longer definable as theatre by any normal criteria, Enrique Buenaventura has undergone a profound and, I believe, a beneficial transformation.

The third, and for me the most important characteristic of the new Latin American drama, is, unquestionably, a result of the other two. For lack of a better term, I will call it a profound awareness of the nature of reality. By this I do not mean that the characters still wear huaraches or sombreros tejanos or

dance the tango. Nothing could be more remote from the truth; we are fortunately well removed from the day when a dramatist was classified as "national" because his creations were identifiable by their dress or food or dialect. I mean that the most obvious weakness of the previous Latin American theatre, its seeming abstraction from the process of life, has all but vanished, at least in playwrights such as those we have gathered to honor this week. Their plays breathe life and fire; they give no sense of having been conceived in the comfort of the study or the debate of the political study group or the box office, remote all three from the reality of that illusion which somehow transcends reality.

It must be obvious to you that I am not condemning out-of-hand political theatre or experimental groups; much less is this a criticism of those dedicated figures who have created the theatre in Latin America as we know it today. Without *Orientación* and *Areyto* and the founders of the *teatro independiente*, among others, the pattern would undoubtedly be different, and certainly it would not possibly have its present vitality. By the same token, a theatre without the author's attitudes and beliefs would be a totally sterile and vacuous theatre. But not all those who reacted against the false theatre of low-level commercialism were of the caliber of those I have mentioned. Many of those who sought a new way themselves created false theatre, by mistaking the nature of what they sought to do. One group consisted of those for whom theatre was a diversion or an art to be practiced in the tranquility of the private library. Their works are often charming, usually lyrical or clever, and almost always unredeemably hopeless as theatre. Should it ever occur to anyone to give them a professional production, as opposed to the customary mode of presentation, by a group of amateurs—read "friends of the author"—in an Ateneo or private salon, they would not last past the first serious rehearsal. The second group were those who saw in the theatre a means of political indoctrination, and stopped there, without ever realizing that theatre must be more than that or it is nothing. I suggest that you look back to some of these diatribes and preciosities to see just how far we have come.

What I am speaking of here, I suppose, is really the difference between a living theatre and an ossified memory which is occasionally trotted out to be admired in suitable fashion. I am speaking of the sense of life, of being involved with people and what happens to them, as distinct from abstract commitments to an esthetic or a creed. I am speaking, in short, of the sense of theatre. I recently had occasion to reread several plays which were published to considerable acclaim about twenty-five years ago. I was astonished to see how literary and unalive they seem to me now. I don't believe that my criteria have changed that drastically. What has happened is that plays which were noteworthy then are sometimes merely average now.

Let us not confuse what I am talking about with the techniques or forms of realism. The authors who are here with us use realism just as effectively as they manipulate any other dramatic convention. I am talking about the sense of life, of participating in the process of human existence, the vital force we feel in those dramatists of other traditions and other languages who are most with us today, whether they be Aeschylus or Pinter. It is just as visible in the

most stylized of dramas, such as some of the medieval mystery plays or in that unlikeliest of playwrights, the nun Hrosvitha. Her works may strike us now as simple, innocent or unsophisticated, as indeed they are. And yet, over and over again, in these simple exercises written for the improvement of her sister nuns, there is a flash of human identity which resounds across the centuries since her death and tells us that she too knew of the nature of anguish and love. This is the sense of life, of understanding of our reality and our being, of commitment to the process of being human, which I believe to be the principle and unquestioned characteristic of Latin American theatre today. There are still political lectures read off by actors, and there are still even verse historical dramas worthy of an Echeagaray, but they now, praise be, occupy an infinitesimal portion of our field.

I have been speaking thus far of the object of our study, but there is a fortunate corollary which may temporarily have escaped notice, although I rather suspect that it was discovered by the first teacher, and which I herewith propose that we refer to henceforth as the First Law of Academic Dynamics: that a new field of scholarship will inevitably attract large numbers of bright and eager young scholars, anxious to immerse themselves in a discipline which they perceive to be dynamic, and to put to rights all the errors and lacunae left by an older generation which they perceive to be less dynamic. This is as it should be. It is the very nature of our profession, and I am happy to note the presence, both in the discipline at large and physically here today, of so many promising younger scholars who are already broadening the parameters of our field. When I began working in theatre, keeping up with the critical material was the simplest part of my chores. There were, as nearly as I could determine, four Americans actively engaged in studying Latin American theatre, and not many more Latins. Critical studies were rare, and if anyone had suggested that we would one day have symposia and even our own journal, *LATR*, even the most enthusiastic devotee would have been skeptical.

It is increasingly clear that some of the best critical writing about Latin American theatre is being done by junior scholars, many of them barely out of graduate school. They are to be congratulated for their accomplishments, and it is a mark of our discipline's maturity that they have been so well prepared.

Having cast bouquets in several directions, I would now like to temper them with some cautionary words. Although it does not seem to be a present danger, we do run the risk of falling into the Boom psychology, the indiscriminate exaltation of all that is new or even modestly different. Only one who has had access to the almost infinite resources of the Library of Congress knows how much exists that is inferior by any criteria of artistic value. Most of it passes without notice, as it should, but not, unfortunately, all. It is not uncommon to find a critical piece extolling the virtues of a bad play because it was written by some giant of the past, or by some promising newcomer, or because it uses the latest version of the latest notion of the avantgarde, or because the critic likes the politics of the piece. These are all valid reasons for giving a work serious consideration, but the only valid category for critical judgment is a simple one: the quality of the play as a play. In the effervescence of the

moment, let us not lose sight of that basic fact. Sophocles, Shakespeare and Racine have lasted because they look more deeply into our hearts than anyone else and they do so in dazzling theatrical fashion. All else is irrelevant.

The mentality which says that we must not study the art of our time because historical perspective has not yet established its value is abhorrent to me, as an abdication of our responsibility to our students and to our profession. We are the first step in that historical perspective; if judgments are to be made, it is we who must begin to make them. But that does not mean that novelty is a sufficient cause; not every new play is to be admired, nor is everything written before 1900 or 1928 or 1950 to be discarded. There is much which badly needs reexamination and reevaluation; most of the 20th century and virtually all the 19th need to be restudied in the light of new critical approaches and a newer understanding of the nature of theatre. Too much of what I read is on shaky theoretical underpinnings; too little uses the sophisticated analytical tools designed by Fergusson, Frye and others. Their potential for better understanding the theatre of the past and the present is almost unlimited.

I would like to suggest here another parallel with the novel. The Boom produced, along with its many other effects, both positive and negative, a curious, if understandable, cult of a few writers. It is in no sense a denigration of Cortázar, Borges, García Márquez or Vargas Llosa to suggest that we do not really need any more doctoral dissertations on them at this point in time. The same is beginning to be true in theatre, although to a much lesser degree; we do not—fortunately, I believe—have to deal with the sheer numbers of candidates wishing to write on prose fiction. In any case, only recently has a whole new group of novelists been discovered as potential research subjects. I suggest that this is valid for us. There are important authors virtually unstudied, and some nearly forgotten. We all know of Triana, but who is working on Arrufat or Reguera Saumell? There is a desperate need for scholarly studies of nearly all the regional theatre movements. Our field is broad, and growing broader at every moment. We owe it to ourselves and to our students to keep up to date. It is, of course, not easy; we are dealing with works published in absurdly short press runs, if at all. Much of what we do must rely on manuscripts, on personal contacts, on the legwork in the library and the trip to remote cities. But we are, after all, scholars, and we must search out the theatre wherever it is.

And above all, let us not forget the nature of what we are studying. They are neither novels nor poems, to be dismembered in the laboratory of linguistics, nor much less essays or philosophical tracts to be subsumed, summarized or reduced to a message. They belong to that liveliest of arts, the theatre. They happen on a stage, which is the world, and before an audience, which believes in the world. Such is the miracle of the theatre, and so must we study it.

And now, the preliminaries are over, the houselights dim. Let us proceed to the reason we are here assembled. Let the play begin.

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