

## Willebaldo López: Mexico on Stage

Ronald D. Burgess

Mexico's theatrical community, after focusing its attention on international drama for the past several years, has recently begun to show signs of interest in national works. If this interest is maintained, it may bring to light a group of plays by dramatists who have labored in relative obscurity for over a decade. Of these dramatists, one of the most active is Willebaldo López. López writes realistic plays that are critical of current Mexican society and its treatment of the individual. He presents his criticism by taking members of that society off the street and putting them on stage, where they live an episode of their lives in front of an audience. It is this element of realism and the attempt to transfer Mexican reality to the stage that best characterize López's theatre.

Rather than trying to recreate reality for the theatre audience, López tries to take real life itself from the street and place it on stage, narrowing the field of vision so that the viewer must pay closer attention to what he can see and ignore in his everyday life. The characters in the plays—*campesinos*, the poor, the Indian, the young—continue their normal lives, but now with a more attentive group of onlookers. Since the characters are real people, their past and their cultural heritage determine their actions and their fate. As the determinism becomes more oppressive, the characters take on other roles, as if they were attempting to escape their own hopeless situation. The characters are aware of being watched, but for the most part they are not conscious of creating their new roles.

If these characters are real people, then their play is only one aspect of a larger play—the one that includes the audience, since it is subject to the same set of circumstances as the “characters.” This metatheatrical process, whose logical conclusion is that life is a play and the world is a stage, develops through López's first three major plays.<sup>1</sup> They are essentially dramas of social criticism, but when the metatheatrical element grows so prevalent that it makes the criticism less effective, López changes the course of his writing and turns to more historical themes.

López's dramatic techniques remain essentially the same in all of his

plays—realism in language, character, and situation, an element of spectacle associated with metatheatre, and humor. He uses most of them in his first play, *Los arrieros con sus burros por la hermosa capital* (1967). The play deals with the problems of a family of *campesinos* whose only hope for improving their lot seems to lie in the city, the “hermosa capital.” Their efforts lead to complete failure, but even with their hopes destroyed, they blindly keep struggling, and succeed only in perpetuating a frustrating cycle in which one generation follows another to the same defeat. The play begins by taking life from outside the theatre and putting it on stage. A boy appears and says, “Perdóneme . . . , yo no sé cantar . . . ; pero . . . el señor que se encarga de esto . . . , pues . . . , de esto que ustedes van a ver . . . , me traje ahorita de allá afuera . . . , y . . . yo quiero decirles que . . . no sé cantar . . . , pues . . . tengo miedo . . . Yo . . . canto en los camiones.”<sup>2</sup>

After the boy has established that the play is an absolute reproduction of life, the principal characters enter. Two woodcutters, a father and his son, pause for lunch and invite their friends to join them. The son yells, “¡Lucioooo . . . ! ¡Joseeeeé . . . ! ¡Que dice mi apá que si no se vienen a echar un tacooo . . . !” One of the neighbors answers, “¡Ahí voy orita . . . !” (p. 107) The colloquial language and the simplicity of the *campesinos* add a note of humor that soon turns into farce. Between the boy’s song and the outdoor scene, a group of tourists and their guides appear and marvel at the beauty and wonder of the city. They are completely exaggerated, and their presence creates a sharp contrast with that of the realistic characters. The tourists serve two other functions as well: they add humor to the play, and they help to characterize the city where the *campesinos* hope to improve their economic situation.

In the first act, the *campesinos* contribute to the humor. They borrow several burros and go to the city, where they meet a loud German lady, an empty-headed politician, a *gringo*, a *gachupín*, and a policeman. All are caricatures, a part of the farce already established by the tourists and the invisible burros. The humor fades, though, as the city begins to take its toll. Through a series of accidents, all the burros are killed, and the hopes of the *campesinos* lead to disaster.

The second act begins with a blind beggar singing a song about “chínguer,” a cheap, strong whisky that becomes a part of the lives of the *campesinos*. The father, ashamed of his failure, has gotten drunk, and his son has to drag him home. The boy then returns to the city, manages to accumulate enough money to pay for the burros, but he comes back home “vistiendo ropas agringadas y denotando borrachera” (p. 133). To make matters worse, the humiliated father has hanged himself, and the mother insists that the rest of the family—mother, son, the son’s wife, and their little boy—go to the city. Once there, they sell fruit and junk jewelry, and shine the tourists’ shoes. The drunken son, vowing to teach his own son law or medicine, is arrested for murder, and in the last scene, the tourists eagerly snap pictures of the little boy, who has a bottle of whisky sticking out of his pocket.

The basic theme of the play concerns the struggle of the poor against the social structure, but they also must struggle against themselves and the frustrations that cause one generation after another to give up. The past

determines the present, and the characters are unable to escape the inevitable results. The caricatures at first seem out of place because of the play's realism, but they are actually a part of the process of destruction, because as the *campesinos* attempt to survive in the city, they lose their original personalities and become caricatures of themselves.

As the characters take on new roles, the play moves toward a more meta-theatrical presentation. Its importance grows with each new play, but it is always developed through the same basic techniques: realistic characters, language, and social situations, a constant undercurrent of humor, and the two act form. López's next play, *Cosas de muchachos* (1968), includes all of these elements. It also continues the criticism of contemporary society, but now from the point of view of the two young people who must contend with its demands and pressures.

Act I deals with the sexual awakening of a pair of teen-agers in the face of their own ignorance and of the influences and pressures exerted by friends, parents, mass media, and societal expectations. The *jóvenes* make the expected mistakes and, as a result, they are obliged to get married. The second act follows the boy's attempts to find work and become a functioning member of society, but his attempts are thwarted by the circular dilemma of not being able to get a job without references, and not having references without first getting a job. His failures lead him, like the *campesinos* in *Los arrieros*, to drunkenness and finally to death. In the final scene, the sexual failures of the first act and the economic failures of the second are combined when the girl has to sell herself to a funeral parlor director in order to get a coffin for her husband.

*Cosas de muchachos* opens in a school detention hall, and the two *muchachos*, *El* and *Ella*, begin to take on secondary roles in the first scene. As they discuss the reasons for their detention, *El* imitates the teacher: "Se levanta y tomando la actitud del profesor lo ridiculiza."<sup>3</sup> *Ella* joins in the game: "Se levanta e imita ridículamente al profesor" (p. 42). They decide to slip away to Chapultepec park, where *El* immediately attempts to seduce her. As he forces her to the ground, the stage directions indicate these actions: "Ella grita y forcejea, mientras que cualquier efecto de luz o sonido apoya la presencia del recuerdo. El muchacho adopta rápidamente la personalidad que ella, en ese momento, recuerda de su padre: un hombre puritano en exceso, extremista en sus acciones y que predica lo que no practica" (p. 45). This is the first in a series of scenes that recreate thoughts visually. The common element in all of these scenes is that in each case, the secondary character represents some obstacle to the fulfillment of the desires of the two young people—her father, his mother, a prostitute. Despite her misgivings, *Ella* gives in to *El*, but the encounter leaves both of them feeling guilty and unsatisfied.

Their unhappiness with their personal situation continues in the second act, where the problem is compounded by their economic difficulties. *El* goes from place to place looking for a job, and *Ella* plays a secretary, a store owner, and a passer-by, all of whom reject him. The scenes create tension and, at the same time, allow López to express his criticism of the economic system. *El*, a shoeshine boy, reacts against a man who refuses to pay because the price is too high:

Pero si en todas partes suben los precios . . . (Enojándose) ¿Por qué yo no? ¿Por qué no va a gritarles a las tiendas, a los camiones, a los mercados, a las farmacias porque suben los precios? ¡Mire! (Le dice miedo con una seña.) ¡Puro miedo! Pero, conmigo sí es león, ¿verdad? ¡Páguemel!”

(p. 57)

Society does not allow the boy to progress, or even to begin. *Ella* appropriately plays the role of society's representative, which is really just an extension of her own role, since *El* sees her as a hindrance and a burden. Like the *campesinos*, they find themselves frustrated by the society that fails to help. Their contact with society causes them to take on new roles that are foreign to them. The second role is as destructive as society itself, because it is born out of past cultural expectations that continue to exert an inordinate influence over the present. The criticism is harsh, but López makes it more palatable through the doubling of characters, the humor, the physical movement, and the use of tape recordings. The problem that arises is that reality (the criticism) is much less interesting than invention (the theatrics). The audience is able to ignore the criticism to a great extent, and when the critical and theatrical elements are separated, the play becomes overly didactic. Emilio Carballido notes, “. . . al rematar su trama (casi al principio del segundo acto) cambia de golpe a obra didáctica y continúa directamente en un epílogo que acumula incidentes generales, en forma más histórica que dramática, para llegar a un brillante y sorpresivo, emocionante remate.”<sup>4</sup> The effectiveness of combining social criticism and theatre becomes a major question for López, and he unites that theme with the growing importance of metatheatre—the theme of the world as a stage—in his next major play.

*Vine, vi y mejor me fui* (1971) is López's most intricate play structurally because of the various forms he uses to achieve metatheatre. One of the characters, a playwright, tries to create a drama from the action taking place around him. Although he does not succeed, the attempt suggests a play-within-a-play. Since the action, location, characters, and language are all reality itself transferred to the stage, López is also able to reverse the direction of the play-within-a-play by suggesting that *Vine, vi y mejor me fui* is the interior play, and that the audience comprises the exterior play. The play also takes into account Lionel Abel's concept of life already theatricalized. López's play assumes that the life it portrays is worth staging exactly as it exists, but the dramatist-character rejects that notion. Instead he tries to theatricalize the lives he portrays, but finally gives up in defeat when he decides that his theatricalization will neither function as drama nor help to alleviate any problems.

The play takes place in a tenement apartment, at a wake for one of the family's eleven children. Before this actions begins, however, the dramatist emerges from the audience and puts a few final touches to the stage setting. His function, like that of the boy with the guitar in López's first play, is to make the action on stage literally an extension of real life. As the lights dim, the dramatist presents a short series of narrations and enactments that explain the baby's death. When the wake begins, the characters—the Writer, the *Comadre* (the baby's mother), the *Compadre*, and a neighbor—discuss

religion, education, *machismo*, living conditions in the tenement, and their various neighbors, all lower class and all at least mildly peculiar. The conversation is punctuated with enactments similar to those in *Cosas de muchachos*. The past is recreated in the present, for example, when the father relates the episode of a neighbor boy who overdosed on drugs. As the father speaks, the characters and the audience hear the boy's voice and the sound of the ambulance.

Eventually the mother and father begin to argue, they upset the furniture and the baby, and the Writer steps in, assesses the situation, and decides to end the first act arbitrarily at this point. He calls toward the control booth, "¡Sí! ¡Pueden dar la primera llamada! . . ."<sup>5</sup> During the intermission, the characters pause in this episode of their lives and chat about other things. Although the Writer tells the parents they may go to their dressing rooms, they decline, preferring to stay with their baby. They do, however, advise the audience to take advantage of the break. At one point, the *Compadre* decides to make some money by selling *tortas* to the members of the audience, and throughout the sequence, all of the actors direct questions and comments to the viewers. The characters, then, are apparently real people in the process of living their lives. They are simply conscious that others are watching them.

Although *Vine, vi y mejor me fui* is not a play-within-a-play in a literal sense—the characters do not actually put on their own, interior play—Susan Wittig's comments on interior duplication are pertinent: "The reduction of the dramatic situation to a framed, refracted miniature of itself calls the audience's attention immediately to the stage, the *medium* of the dramatic presentation; to the theatricality, rather than to the reality of the play, and ultimately, as Abel asserts, to the artifice of life. . . ."<sup>6</sup> In the same way, the intermission calls attention to its own theatricality and creates a semblance of a play-within-a-play that expands outward to include the audience. Instead of reducing one drama and playing it in miniature within the frame of the basic work, López reverses the process and makes his play, the basic work—*Vine, vi y mejor me fui*—the miniature within the frame of the larger reality of life outside the play? The interior play within López's work, and the basic play that frames it is that of the audience and their world. The effect, as Wittig suggests, is to make us consider our own communication as a system of signs. She asserts that metatheatrical works "require us to view all of our activities in the frame of an art form."<sup>7</sup> Once López has called attention to art and our relationship to it, he again changes his tactics.

At the end of the intermission, the actors begin to collect and replace the fallen objects. The question of blame for the original fight arises, develops into another fight, the table is upset again, and the second act begins where the first ended. Act II deals essentially with the creation of reality. After the discovery that the *Escritor* is a dramatist, the *Compadre* and the *Vecina* suggest that he use their lives or episodes from it as the basis for a play. He takes out a small book and begins to take notes. The audience sees what the Writer did in the past to produce the present events. In other words, the audience sees the past and the present simultaneously.

Suddenly the characters hear shouts, and the *Escritor* begins to write. He explains that Don Raul, one of the neighbors, is beating his wife. The parents

and their neighbor rush out to help, leaving the Writer alone to narrate the unseen actions, the most important of which is the death of Raul's wife. When the others return and explain that she is indeed dead, the Writer reacts: "(Mirándolos con extrañeza) ¿De veras la mató?" (p. 63). His surprise is only momentary, however, and he soon decides that the events are of little consequence. "Necesito encontrar algo que sea muy doloroso. Algo que sea capaz de estremecer a las conciencias dormidas. . . . Esto que pasa aquí ya no es noticia . . . (Al público) ¿Verdad que no es noticia?" (p. 65) To dramatize the situation, he creates more deaths. Then he explains that the police have arrived and are shooting. Although there are never any sound effects to verify the violence, the wife breaks down and begins to cry. "¿Por qué llora?" asks the Writer, and the Compadre answers, "Se me hace que se cansó" (p. 73), and suddenly there are no police. The creation has ended.

One by one the characters fall asleep. The Writer puts a hundred pesos on the table and starts to leave, but he has second thoughts and decides that it is all futile. He takes back the money, burns the notes he has taken, and departs. The real situation was not theatrical enough, and the attempt to theatricalize it only produced a false, melodramatic situation, so he discards both. The simultaneity noted previously cannot have been created by the Writer, since he destroyed his notes and gave up on the play. That situation suggests another, unseen dramatist for the inner play (*Vine, vi*) as well as for the play that contains it: life. The implication, one that is never developed, is that we are all actors.

The effect of a metaplay, according to Wittig, is that "such a framing device invites us to see our sign systems, our communicative acts, *as signs, as a way of framing the world to fit our understanding of it; they deny us the comfort of forgetting that our languages are a construct, and not a reality.*"<sup>8</sup> López suggests that notion, but his theme is primarily a comment on drama and its creation. If the life presented is not theatricalized, then the theatricalization must be supplied, as in previous plays. Here, however, he questions that process. He seems to suggest that theatre cannot function as an element of social change, and that raises doubts about the effectiveness of his two previous plays and causes *Vine, vi y mejor me fui*, by its very presence, to question its own right to exist.

This kind of presentation has some inherent drawbacks. The first act of the play functions as a realistic vignette, with a certain implied conflict between the poor and society. The real conflict, however, is much broader, and does not begin to develop until the intermission. An overall tension in the play is maintained by raising questions with which the audience must contend. In the first act, although the situation is sad, there is a certain amount of humor created by the colloquial language, the characters, and the descriptions of some of the neighbors. The presence of those two poles and the very lack of a dramatic conflict present the audience with a problem, the initial source of tension.

The circumstances created by the intermission force the audience to consider the stage reality and their relation to it. This tension is developed throughout the rest of the play. Although *Vine, vi* shares with previous plays elements of social criticism, its primary focus is not the condition of the poor,

but the condition of the theatre, of theatricality and *its* purpose in society. This is the difficulty that the *Escritor* faces: a non-theatricalized life (the poor family of Act I) is difficult to bring to the stage; but to theatricalize it diverts attention to the theatricality. Caught in this same paradox himself, López changes the direction of his theatre and the point of view of his criticism, and begins to use life that, as Abel defines it, is already theatrical.

Beginning with *Yo soy Juárez* (1972), López turns to historical and cultural plays, now with a central character who is theatricalized. The first play in this series investigates the myth of Benito Juárez and attempts to make him more human. López uses all of his basic techniques: realism, humor, the two act form, and in this case, a "real" play-within-a-play. A group of students is planning and rehearsing a play for a school competition. The more the students work with their drama, the more involved they become with the historical characters, until, for one short scene, they finally become their characters.

The first act of *Yo soy Juárez* introduces the setting and provides biographical information about Juárez. Besides supplying this general information, the act serves three primary purposes. First, it establishes the characters and their project. Nacho, the teacher and director, proposes doing a play about Juárez, the man, instead of Juárez, the legend. Conveniently Ramón is anti-Juarist, which allows for the development of both positive and negative facets of the hero, defended by Mono, who will play the role. Various other students serve primarily to provide movement and humor as the play progresses.

The second purpose of the first act is to introduce one of the competing companies, the *porros*, a group of "toughs" who never appear on stage, but who exert pressure through their threats and offstage actions. In the end, they are the ones who are responsible for preventing Nacho's group from performing.

Finally, one episode in the first act foreshadows the eventual transformation of the students into historical characters. As the cast plans and discusses the play, they are interrupted by *la Loca*, an ex-teacher who returns to the school periodically from force of habit. The custodian is the only one who can convince her to leave, and Nacho goes to get him. Meanwhile, the others pacify her by pretending to be her students. She falls asleep during her lecture on history, and the students use the opportunity to try to convince her that she is Carlota at Miramar. They succeed, but she becomes terrified at the mention of Napoleon's name, and the game gets out of hand. She tries to escape Napoleon, and not even the custodian can calm her. This episode and the presence of the *porros* provide two negative elements that contrast with the positive intentions of Nacho and the students and help to create tension in the work.

Act II takes place one month later. The competition has begun, and Nacho's group is occupied with a dress rehearsal. They discuss the *porro* play, presented the night before. This conversation reveals that it was a complete disaster and also serves as a reminder of the threat they pose. In addition, Nacho has received permission to use a statue of Juárez in his group's production. Symbolically, they have taken the statue down from its pedestal.

In the course of the act, the students rehearse five scenes from their play, each time moving further away from playing a role and closer to becoming their historical characters. In the first step they rehearse a scene until an error interrupts them. This structure—a scene and an interruption—continues throughout the act. During the next scene, Juárez (played by Mono) and Melchor Ocampo (Nacho) recall an earlier incident, so that the past—the students' historical play—contains a more distant past. The third step is similar, but Juárez recreates the past scene instead of merely relating it. Next, an earlier event is played on stage with other characters. Juárez becomes a dramatist and adds a third level to the original play: now there is López' play, the students' play, and finally, that of Juárez.

In the fifth step, Ramón asks to present another accusation against Juárez. Nacho agrees, and the students take on their historical roles in order to improvise the scene. Since there is no script, the actors must assume the personalities of their characters if they are to respond correctly. The play as a play effectively disappears because the characters are not repeating dialogue; they are creating it as Juárez, Ocampo, and the others would have. They have managed to transform themselves into historical figures, just as *la Loca* did in the first act, and the play actually eliminates present time, the final and most complete step into the past. The previous transformation led to an unhappy conclusion, however, and so does this one. The final interruption of a scene comes from the Director of the school. The *porros* had complained that lowering the statue defamed Juárez, and because of that the Director refuses to let Nacho's group present their play. The *porros* finally succeed in disrupting Nacho's group completely.

The students break up, leaving Nacho and Mono alone. Mono affirms, as he has before, that he is Juárez, and Nacho takes him over to the statue: "Entonces vas a tener que cargar con ella por los siglos de los siglos . . . amén."<sup>9</sup> Mono begins to drag the statue around behind him, followed by the *Maestro* (Nacho). At that moment *la Loca* appears and, seeing the statue, starts to cry.

**Mono**—(Sin detener su marcha.) Llegó la loca. ¿Por qué llora?

**Maestro**—(Sin voltear ni detener su marcha.) ¡Quien sabe!

**Mono**—¿Quién creará que es ahora?

**Maestro**—Tal vez Carlota, la patria o . . . ¡Sepal

(p. 96)

With *Yo soy Juárez*, López attempts to make Juárez more accessible and more human than he is usually portrayed. Nacho tries to explain to the Director:

**Director**—¿Por qué se te ocurrió bajar la estatua?

**Maestro**—Porque en el tercer acto queríamos conducir a Juárez como un hombre que comparte con todos nosotros, desde abajo, cara a cara . . . Queríamos derrumbar al Juárez de la demagogia y ponerlo al alcance de cualquiera que quiera estudiarlo, conocerlo sin tapujos gloriosos, de monumentos que falsean su efigie y sirven de provecho a los que más traicionan y encubren su memoria . . .

(p. 94)



The students' intent, which runs contrary to the general opposition to a work that treats Juárez as anything less than a god, makes it impossible for them to stage their play. If López had attempted to present the students' play instead of *Yo soy Juárez*, it is likely that he would have failed also.

In *Yo soy Juárez*, López finds a new way to present Mexico and its reality. He still employs realistic settings, colloquial language, humor, metatheater, and characters who are young or from a poorer social class, but now the reality is more specifically Mexican, there is a central figure, and the presentation of information begins to occupy a preeminent position. *Yo soy Juárez* is a dramatized biography of Benito Juárez. In his next play, López continues to concentrate on figures from Mexico's culture, focusing on an aspect of Cora Indian folklore.

*Pilo Tamirano Luca* (1973) traces the rise and fall of Pilo, a Cora healer or medicine man, in a series of flashbacks that gradually move toward the present, then culminate in Pilo's death. This play is also metatheatrical, and Pilo, in his position as medicine man, is at its center. He is aided by a large group of actors who sit onstage throughout the play. As the flashbacks take place appropriate characters participate, then return to their places to become a part of the chorus again.

In addition to Pilo, other important characters are the ethnologist who is doing research for a book on Cora folklore, and the teacher who introduces the two. Various Indian and white leaders help form the basis of the play's theme: the conflict between white and Indian cultures, between progress, civilization, and materialism on the one hand, and tradition, superstition, and folklore on the other.

The ethnologist goes to the village to record Pilo's history. As the Indian narrates, the various episodes are acted out. Pilo joins in the action from time to time, which is appropriate since he is fundamentally a showman. Before beginning, he prepares his listeners: "Se encucillita y adquiere una voz ronca, persuasiva y misteriosa."<sup>10</sup> The flashbacks follow Pilo's progress toward becoming a healer, establish him as a dramatist within the play, provide a great deal of information about Cora folklore, and mix temporal periods. This last function is important because it decreases the importance of time and suggests that the Indians' situation and problems have not changed substantially since they came in contact with the white man.

In the last flashback, whites and Indians meet to decide if they will build an airfield and a clinic for the village. Although the teacher points out that the planes could bring modern farm equipment, Pilo objects: "¿Y qué ganamos con que vengan? No las podemos comprar. Ahí van a estar muy chulas, namás para estarlas viendo" (p. 24). He also objects to the clinic, but in this case his grounds are more materialistic, since a clinic would threaten his livelihood.

The second act takes place entirely in the present. Pilo's importance has continued to increase and his future looks bright, until a series of incidents reverses his fortunes. The Indian leaders learn that the ethnologist has recorded Pilo's voice; when they ask to hear the tape, the machine malfunctions—a bad omen. Then they learn that Pilo has accepted money for recording sacred prayers and strip him of his position. This rapid downfall causes Pilo to

become extremely fatalistic, and after a surrealistic scene in which a group of "Judeos" attack and injure him, he refuses medical attention and soon dies. Meanwhile, the white leaders watch and applaud the whole process.

The Indians are represented by Pilo, who really occupies the spotlight here, and the whites are presented as types. The structure of the play is based on Pilo's rise and fall, seen in three aspects: physical, spiritual, and material. The first flashback is his birth (physical), followed by the discovery of his healing powers and his desire to perfect them (spiritual), finally reaching his function as a healer. The materialistic aspect enters here, since Pilo earns his living as a healer, but it is materialism that starts his downfall and brings about the repetition of the sequence, this time in reverse, and in the present time of the play. Selling the sacred chants to the ethnologist is an extension of Pilo's materialism and causes his fall from power. His ensuing fatalism signals his spiritual death, which is followed closely by his physical death at the end of the play.

The three aspects that form the play's structure correspond to the three groups of Pilo's (and the Indians') antagonists. The whites (the government and the church) have a great deal of power over the Indians, a power that they take advantage of for their own material gain (the airfield and the clinic). The spiritual enemy is the teacher, who has essentially sold himself to the whites. It is his treachery that initiates much of the resentment against Pilo. The physical opponent is technology, symbolized by the ethnologist and his tape recorder, the machine that literally begins the process of Pilo's death.

The fourth opponent is Pilo, who may be his own worst enemy. As a healer, he represents tradition, but in his work he employs deceit and fraud. He fakes fainting spells, produces scorpions and bones using sleight of hand, and employs ventriloquism to produce voices of the spirits. The ethnologist questions his tactics twice, but both times Pilo seems to believe that his powers are real. The question of his authenticity cloaks Pilo in mystery, and the questions continue unanswered until the very end. Does he die because he refuses to see a doctor, or is his death the ultimate performance in his continuous "show"? Does his superstition assure his death, or is it intentional martyrdom? After all, he has been completely defeated, and he has no future to look forward to, so why not take advantage of the situation? Since Pilo never reveals his thoughts or feelings, there is no way to tell, and the mystery remains. So much the better, because it simply corroborates his function as a healer, which is not only mysterious but theatrical.

In its didactic function, the play presents a broad view of Cora culture. The ethnologist realizes that his book will do nothing for the Indian, that it will do no more good than the airfield: "Los que venimos aquí, ya sea por carretera o avión, buscamos nuestro progreso, pero no el tuyo. Traemos progreso, progreso . . . Pero el progreso, ¿de quién?" (p. 40) López presents the criticism and didacticism theatrically, through Pilo, through the mixing of time, and through dance, music, and language which contains vocabulary and speech rhythms that suggest the Cora language. As for the metatheatrical element, López now focuses it on one central figure. Although the play still has a realistic basis, Pilo's dramas add more spectacle and keep the audience's attention on the stage proper instead of on their relationship to it. López does

not have to theatricalize a reality of which the audience is a part. The criticism becomes more a part of the play, is more distanced from the viewer, does not attack him directly, and is therefore less difficult for him to accept.

With his next major play, however, López returns to a more direct criticism. *Malinche* (1976), like *Yo soy Juárez* and *Pilo Tamirano Luca*, provides a historical background on Malinche and Cortés, and the effects of the conquest on current society. The play revolves around the *malinchistas* who are still actively selling out Mexico to foreign interests. Through an elaborate mechanism, those interests keep Malinche alive to do her daily "Malinche Show," a propaganda program whose intent is to keep that mentality functioning. Here López returns to the question of the efficacy of theatrical didacticism dealt with in *Vine, vi y mejor me fui*.

The *Prestanombres* are in charge of keeping Malinche as content as possible. Their designation refers to those who lend their names and efforts to foreign interests in Mexico. Their bosses, who only appear in emergencies, are a *gringo*, a German, and a nun. The other principal character is Cortés, kept around to dominate Malinche when other methods fail. Dramatic tension arises from two unified sources: the historical relationship between Cortés and Malinche, and her desire to escape from the *Prestanombres* or die, so she will not be forced to continue doing her show. The "Malinche Show" introduces metatheatricality into the play and touches the audience much more directly than the other historical plays, since *malinchismo* is a fact of contemporary Mexican life.

The element of spectacle also forms a major part of the play's presentation. First, there is the physical mechanism itself: "Una especie de telaraña maquinaria con partes muy viejas y otras muy nuevas llena gran parte del escenario. Toda esta maquinaria parece converger en dos brazos mecánicos que sostienen a una mujer viejísima, que con vestuario y rasgos indígenas, cuelga y trabajosamente se sostiene en pie."<sup>11</sup> The three *Prestanombres*, basically buffoons, add an element that approaches slapstick. Their bosses make melodramatic appearances atop the mechanism and are complete caricatures in action, appearance, and language. In addition, a great deal of physical movement, primarily by the *Prestanombres*, helps to balance the lengthy dialogue devoted to presenting historical information.

In *Malinche* there is no mixing or shifting of time periods as before, since the past is simply brought to the present. In this case, the play progresses on the basis of Malinche's emotional fluctuations. When she is calm, she and Cortés talk about their past and impart historical facts. When she becomes rebellious and excited, the physical movement increases, and the *Prestanombres*, their bosses, and Cuauhtémoc make their entrances and exits. Malinche is finally overcome by exertion because she insists on clinging to her desire to escape. In a final effort to prevent her death, the bosses agree to let her see her son, Martín: "Martín Cortés tiene una edad de treinta años y viste ropa de época actual. Entra actuando y gesticulando con toda la exageración melodramática del mestizo latinoamericano" (Act II, p. 13). As the description suggests, Martín introduces a humorous and an extremely critical element to the play. His personality is largely shaped by his sense of shame at not having pure blood and his attempts to counter that shame by his actions:

**Malinche**—¿Te avergüenzas de tu mexicanidad?

**Martín**—¿De ser mexicano? . . . Estás equivocada, mamá. Me siento muy orgulloso. ¡Fíjate! A cada rato nos vamos de parranda con los cuates y nos emborrachamos con puro tequila y conquistamos cuanta vieja se nos ponga enfrente para dar pruebas de nuestra mexicanidad. No hay quien nos mire feo sin que le choquemos el carro . . . ¡Y pobre de él donde se le ocurra protestar! Lo madreamos. Estoy agarrando un puesto en la política . . . o de perdis en la judicial, para que se me quiten de plano los complejos y me sienta más seguro de todo y capaz de dominar. Y cuando voy con mi placa y mi pistola, orgulloso de todo, me dan muchas ganas de gritar. . . .

(Act II, pp. 16-17)

The play's visual elements and language tend to create humor, but like Martín's self-description, it is a bitter humor. The play, as are all of López's works, is deeply pessimistic. In the end Malinche dies, but the foreign bosses manage to buy off Martín, and he becomes the new star: "La sienta [a Malinche] sobre sus piernas y empieza a manipularla como si se tratara de un muñeco de ventrílocuo" (Act II, p. 23). The "Malinche Show" goes on, and López suggests that there *is* a way to effect change theatrically. But the change is negative, not positive, and simply confirms the original pessimism of *Vine vi*, a pessimism that sent López in search of other ways to bring his criticism to the stage.

In his three historical plays, López takes a broader view of the influence of the past. Instead of presenting the individual trapped by self-imposed cycles, he looks at Mexico, at once trapped by its history and still clinging to it. Despite the change in focus, the result is just as pessimistic as it was in *Vine vi* because López still transfers Mexican reality to the stage. The transfer is less self-conscious than the boy with his guitar or the Writer, but the result is just as effective, and the outcome is still predetermined. Since López cannot alter the pessimistic outcome—he chooses not to alter reality—he must content himself with a criticism made more acceptable by theatrical devices.

One of those devices is humor, created by stereotyped characters and their colloquial language and exaggerated actions. All of the plays rely strongly on visual effects, from the invisible burros in *Los arrieros* and the machinery and slapstick of *Malinche*, to the color and ritual of *Pilo Tamirano Luca* and the doubling of characters in *Cosas de muchachos* and *Yo soy Juárez*.

The stress on visual elements is one of the reasons for the clarity in López's theatre, and the clarity is related to the didactic nature of the plays.<sup>12</sup> López is interested in informing his audience not only about Mexico's culture, but about Mexico's problems. His criticism grows out of a desire to bring about social change by focusing attention on Mexican society and making the society aware of its shortcomings. As a dramatist, Willebaldo López attempts to create that awareness by putting Mexico on stage.

Gettysburg College

## Notes

1. For a discussion of the various aspects of metatheatre mentioned here, see: Lionel Abel, *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1963).

2. Willebaldo López, "Los arrieros con sus burros por la hermosa capital," in *Teatro joven de México*, ed. Emilio Carballido (Mexico: Organización Editorial Novaro, 1976), p. 105. All further references to this work appear in the text.

3. Willebaldo López, "Cosas de muchachos," in *Tramoya*, No. 1-2 (Jan-Feb, Mar-Apr 1975) 42. Further references appear in the text.

4. Emilio Carballido, "Cosas de muchachos de octubre," *Tramoya*, No. 1-2 (Jan-Feb, Mar-Apr 1975) 11.

5. Willebaldo López, *Vine, vi y mejor me fui*, unpublished manuscript, p. 34. Further references appear in the text.

6. Susan Wittig, "Toward a Semiotic Theory of the Drama," *Educational Theatre Journal*, 26, No. 4 (Dec. 1974) 451.

7. Wittig, 451-452.

8. Wittig, 451.

9. Willebaldo López, "Yo soy Juárez," in *Teatro mexicano*, 1972 (Mexico: Editorial Aguilar, 1975), 96. Further references appear in the text.

10. Willebaldo López, "Pilo Tamirano Luca," in *Segundo Concurso Nacional de Obras de Teatro: Hombres de Mexico y del Mundo (México, sus raíces y su folklore)* (Mexico: IMSS, 1973), p. 10. Further references appear in the text.

11. Willebaldo López, *Malinche*, unpublished manuscript, Act I, p. 1. Further references appear in the text.

12. The desire to communicate information is obvious even on the basic level of act length. In almost every case, the first act establishes the situation or historical background and is substantially longer than the second act, where the plot action develops toward a conclusion.