

## The Political and Economic Causes of the Demise of the Teatro Nacional Popular of Peru

Richard J. Slawson

Perú's Teatro Nacional Popular (TNP) organized its first permanent repertory company in 1973<sup>1</sup> with considerable national and international notice. Its director, Peruvian playwright Alonso Alegría, boasted that the TNP would produce a "revolutionary" theatre (Podestá 34) that would mirror the political and economic "revolution" of the radical military government that had seized power in 1968. During the next six years, the TNP produced some of the most critically acclaimed productions in Perú (such as *Hamlet*, 1975; *La tragedia del fin de Atau Wallpa*, 1976, and *Edipo rey*, 1977). The TNP also initiated or championed several innovations in Peruvian theatre including maintaining a permanent repertory company, taking productions to the masses, and selling season tickets. The TNP's influence on Peruvian theatre spread beyond its own productions. The TNP's successful productions of plays by Shakespeare and Sophocles influenced some commercial companies to expand their repertoires beyond imported hits and light theatre to more challenging productions.<sup>2</sup> Yet despite these achievements, the TNP quietly disappeared as an active theatre company in the early months of 1979. Changes in Perú's economic and political climate precipitated the end of Perú "revolutionary" national theatre.

In 1971, the military government created the Instituto Nacional de Cultura (INC) to fund and oversee state supported cultural organizations such as the TNP. Since its budget was largely dependent on funding from the INC, the TNP was often influenced by changes in government policy. Teresa Cajiao Salas, in her review of Lima's 1972 season, states that the TNP was unable to produce any works that year because it lacked government funding (70). The removal of the more radical leaders of the military government in 1975 influenced Alegría's choice of plays (Slawson "Peruvian" 74-77). Consequently, it is not surprising that Perú's worsening economic crisis in 1977 started the decline of the TNP. The effects of this economic down turn were most noticeable in the TNP's final production, *Trotsky debe morir* by Peruvian author José Adolph.

In 1976 the Peruvian government borrowed \$500 million from private banks in the United States to keep the Peruvian economy going. By February 1977, the government needed more money. This time, in an attempt to safeguard their loans, the banks insisted that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) participate in the loans and that Perú follow the IMF's austerity program. In October 1977 the military government finally agreed to the program, which included a 20% cut in public expenditures (FitzGerald 230).

Despite the agreement with the IMF and the new loans, economic conditions in Perú continued to worsen in 1977 and began to affect the TNP. Between May, when the TNP's season was announced, and November, when *Trotsky* was produced, the official value of Perú's currency, the *sol*, dropped thirty percent (Webb 859). This meant that in terms of spending power, the TNP had a smaller budget to work with for *Trotsky* than it had for the season's other productions. Evidently this budgetary problem was manifest in the production. For example, Adolph complained about the "exaggerated austerity" of the TNP's production of his play (Chiarella "José"). Also, the scenic elements of some scenes were extremely spartan. For example, in the first act, a bedroom was indicated simply by a bed and the office of the Soviet secret police by a desk (Apuntador "'Trotsky'"). While these scenic devices could be explained as an artistic choice, most of Alegría's other TNP productions had large, impressive sets—what Wolfgang Luchting calls Alegría's "Fellinesque vein" ("Proliferation" 72). It seems likely that the simple nature of the scenery for *Trotsky* was influenced at least partially by economic concerns.

The TNP's budgetary problems at the end of the 1977 season grew even more severe in the 1978 season. Perú's economic crisis continued to deepen and the INC's budget continued to shrink. While the military government never fully complied with the 20% cut in public expenditures mandated by the IMF austerity program (FitzGerald 231), Perú's rapidly increasing inflation meant that in real terms the INC's budget declined more than 7% in 1978. This was a total drop in spending power of almost 17% from 1976, the year of the INC's largest budget (Ansión 112).

The decrease in the INC's 1978 budget and the increasing inflation in Perú forced Alegría to choose a season that was much more modest than the offerings of the previous year. The TNP planned to present only four productions: Alegría's adaptation of Peruvian author Mario Vargas Llosa's novella *Los cachorros*, a presentation of poems and songs by Mario Benedetti entitled *Hombres que miran*, Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* and Federico García Lorca's *El amor de Don Perlimplín con Belisa en su jardín* ("TNP iniciará"). These productions were more modest in scale than previous TNP productions. All the chosen plays required small casts and most had modest

scenic demands.<sup>3</sup> However, even this modest season was too costly for the TNP. Two of the announced productions—*The Glass Menagerie* and *Don Perlimplín*—were cancelled, and *Hombres que miran* was replaced by Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, another play with a small cast and modest scenic requirements. The Lima daily *La Prensa* attributed the changes in the announced season to "budgetary causes" ("Estrenarán").

Another sign of the TNP's deteriorating financial situation was Alegría's activities outside the company. During most of his directorship, Alegría concentrated his energies on the operation of the TNP and rarely ventured into the commercial theatre of Lima. In fact, Alegría was so occupied with the TNP, he took over ten years to complete his play *El terno blanco*<sup>4</sup> which he began in the late 1960s. However, in 1978, Alegría directed at least two productions and wrote a third for theatre groups outside the TNP. In April, Alegría directed Alan Ayckbourn's *Bedroom Farce* for the Hebraica theatre group ("Próximo estreno"). In October, Alegría directed another Hebraica production, *Adáptese . . . y gane*, a compilation of three one act plays by Neil Simon, Elaine May and Mike Nichols<sup>5</sup> ("Estreno teatral"). At the same time, he wrote *Ahora sabemos que pito tocamos* for actors Elvira and Orlando Sacha (Chiarella "Dos"). Possibly the cuts in the TNP's budget and Perú's economic problems forced Alegría to seek employment outside the TNP to supplement his salary.

*Godot*, which premiered in December 1978, was the final production of the TNP under the directorship of Alegría. Late in the same month, the Director General of the INC, Jorge Cornejo Polar, officially resigned from his position. In reality, Cornejo Polar's resignation was little more than a formality since he and three other high INC officials had been suspended from their duties since October 1978. While the government claimed it suspended Cornejo Polar and his associates because the INC had not fulfilled its mandate, this change was probably more motivated by the changing political climate in Perú. Cornejo Polar held the same view. In an article in Lima daily *El Comercio*, Cornejo Polar claimed that he had addressed the problems the government found in the INC even before to his suspension ("Director").

According to Juan Ansión in his study of Peruvian cultural policy, the real reason for the change in directors was the growing influence of the APRA (Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana) party in the government. In 1977 the military government, facing increased public unrest, decreed a timetable for the return of civilian power. The government's plan called elections for a Constitutional Assembly in 1978 and presidential elections in 1980 (Ansión 49). Since ousted president Fernando Belaúnde's Acción Popular party refused to participate in the Constitutional Assembly elections, the APRA won the largest number of seats. Consequently, the APRA dominated the writing of the new

constitution and became the apparent successor to the military government. The military began to appoint APRA members to government positions, including the new director general of the INC, painter Francisco Abril de Vivero. According to Ansión, during Abril de Vivero's directorship, which lasted until civilian rule was restored in July 1980, the INC did not go through a major change in ideology, but rather "an administrative reorganization whose major preoccupation seemed to be centered on preventing any 'deviation' toward the left" (51). Alegría, who had originally sought to implant leftist principals in the TNP (Podestá 37), was one of the first to fall victim to this reorganization.

Abril de Vivero officially took office on January 2, 1979. Within two weeks, Alegría was no longer the director of the TNP and rumors abounded of who would be appointed to replace him. At least two prominent Peruvian directors were approached about the position. In an interview with *La Prensa* published on January 17, 1979, César Urueta, director of the Teatro de la Universidad Federico Villarreal, confirmed that he had been approached to become the new director of the TNP. Urueta was clearly interested in the post, but had asked for considerable freedom to change the organization of the TNP ("Carta Blanca").

The INC either felt that Urueta demanded too much autonomy or that he would be more useful in another position. The directorship of the TNP was ultimately offered to Carlos Gassols, a prominent actor and director in Perú's commercial theatre. In the meantime, Urueta had assumed the post of Director of Cultural Activities at the INC. While Gassols would not discuss in detail his plans for the TNP until after his appointment was officially announced, he mentioned that he would study the possibility of changing the name of the company to the Compañía Nacional de Comedias ("Estudian"), the name of a Peruvian state sponsored theatre company in the 1940s and 50s. This suggests Gassols would have moved the TNP even further from its original aspirations of popular "revolutionary" theatre and toward a much more traditional national theatre.

However, Gassols's "ambitious general plan" ("Estudian") never materialized. On February 27, 1979, Abril de Vivero announced that the TNP would cease to be a theatrical company and would become an agency to promote theatrical activity in Perú. In its new role the TNP would "seek to offer a greater support for the theatrical groups, putting at their disposal a greater number of auditoriums, equipment, and other installations" ("Teatro"). In the end, budgetary problems may have been the ultimate reason the TNP stopped being an active theatre company. After adjusting for inflation, the INC's budget dropped more than 10% from 1978 to 1979. This budget was more than 25% less than the annual budget during the heyday of 1975-1976 and less than any budget since

1972 (Ansión 112). Evidently there was no room in the reduced budget for an active theatre company.

In June 1979 the INC decided to replace the TNP's productions with a season of works by Peruvian playwrights. A panel of critics and theatre artists chose seven Peruvian theatre groups who would each produce one work by a Peruvian author. The groups would be allowed to draw on the resources of the TNP. Despite the prestigious nature of the committee, the Peruvian news magazine *Oiga* was not impressed by the selections:

The TNP's proposal has the advantage of producing national works, which is always stimulating, although it is obviously a question of a face-saving and simple formula, with more than one selected group that can barely surpass the level of a high school production. ("Salvando" 17)

The TNP's 1979 "Season of National Authors" was fraught with difficulties from the beginning. Only four of the seven selected productions made it on stage. The opening of the season's first production, César Vega Herrera's *¿Qué sucedió en Pazos?*, a play which Alegría previously had rejected for the TNP ("Utilizarán"), was delayed when, according to rumor, the lead actor left the cast (Adrianzén). *Oiga* proclaimed the second production, José Adolph's *Asedio y liberación de ciego y la parturiente*, a disaster. Some performances of this production were cancelled because of lack of audience ("No hay teatro"). Filiberto Ramírez's *¡Culpable!*, the third play in the season was criticized for having stereotyped characters and Seymour, the theatre critic of *El Comercio*, gave the production a grade of zero ("Grado cero"). The final production, *¿Qué tierra heredarán los mansos?* by Estela Luna, was plagued with so many financial problems that the group was unable to advertise or even print programs ("2010").

The final production to come under the TNP banner was an ambitious production of Maeterlinck's *The Blue Bird*, produced in December 1979 to honor the International Year of the Child. The production reportedly cost nearly eight million soles<sup>6</sup> (\$33,000), employed 140 actors and 30 technicians along with elements of the national ballet, orchestra and chorus, and was staged at the Plaza de Acho, a bull fighting ring in Lima (Martín; Seymour "'Superproducción'").

Jorge Chiarella Krüger, director of the children's theatre group Telba and theatre reporter for *El Comercio*, was asked by the INC to translate and direct the play. Chiarella justified the size of the production with two reasons. First, the large cast provided employment for "a great part of the [Peruvian] theatrical family and numerous technicians." Second, the large arena would permit a large

audience (as many as 70,000 for the eight scheduled performances) to view the production at "really comfortable and popular prices" (Seymour "'Superproducción). However, Chiarella's goal of "theatre for the masses" was not without flaw. Technical problems delayed the opening until December 21 ("El pájaro") and difficulties with the microphone system made some passages inaudible (Seymour "Un vuelo").

On July 28, 1980, the 159th anniversary of Perú's independence, the military government turned the reins of power over to the civilian government. The Peruvian Revolution was officially over. For the Teatro Nacional Popular the revolution had ended seven months earlier with the close of *The Blue Bird*. According to Jean Rottmann, that production had exhausted the TNP's resources and during 1980 the TNP "practically ceased to exist" ("El teatro").

While many of the TNP's early decisions came from a political desire to create a new "revolutionary" Peruvian theatre, by the late 1970s Perú's severe economic crisis became the overriding influence on the TNP. Starting as early as the TNP's austere production of *Trotsky debe morir* in 1977, the TNP faced increasingly difficult financial problems, which eventually led to the abandonment of a permanent repertory company. Even after the TNP stopped being an active company in 1979, it continued to encounter financial difficulties that ultimately led to its disappearance as an influential force in Peruvian theatre.

### Provo

The author wishes to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada for its support during the initial research and writing of this paper.

### Notes

1. The TNP produced Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* in 1971, but did not form a permanent company at that time (Slawson "Peruvian" 49-57).
2. For a more detailed account of the TNP's accomplishments, please see the author's "The Peruvian Revolution on Stage: The Rise and Fall of the Teatro Nacional Popular of Perú (1971-1979)," and "The Teatro Nacional and Peruvian Cultural Policy (1973-1979)."
3. For example, *The Glass Menagerie* requires a cast of four and a single set. *Los cachorros* and *Don Perlimplín* both require casts of five.
4. *El terno blanco* had its Peruvian premier in March 1979 (Freire "Terno"). According to Robert J. Morris, the play was rewritten and retitled *El color de Chambalén, una novela fantaseosa para teatro* and premiered on September 20, 1982 in Potsdam, Germany (25).
5. This production was an expansion of a similar production that Alegría directed for Hebraica in 1977 ("El Grupo").
6. The INC contributed 1.5 million soles and the rest was raised from corporate donations (Martin).

## Works Cited

- Adrianzén, Samuel. "El mundo del espectáculo." *La Imagen* (sup. to *La Prensa*) [Lima]. July 15, 1979: 14.
- Ansión, Juan. *Anhelos y sinsabores: Dos décadas de políticas culturales de Estado Peruano*. Lima: GREDES, 1986.
- Apuntador [pseud.]. "'Trotsky debe morir.'" *La Prensa* [Lima]. Nov. 29, 1977: 21.
- Cajiao Salas, Teresa. "Balance del año teatral 1972 en Lima." *Latin American Theatre Review*. 8:1 (Fall 1974): 67-73.
- Chiarella Krüger, Jorge. "Dos experiencias de Teatro-Bar." *El Comercio Dominical* [Lima]. Nov. 5, 1978: 15.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "José B. Adolph: 'Creo en el arte por sus propias finalidades.'" *El Comercio Dominical* [Lima]. Feb. 18, 1979: 17.
- "Director del Instituto Nacional de Cultura anuncia su decisión de retirarse del citado cargo." *El Comercio* [Lima]. Dec. 29, 1978: 10.
- "2010 [dos mil diez]: '¿Qué tierra heredarán los mansos?'" *El Comercio* [Lima]. Dec. 21, 1979: 15.
- "Estrenarán obra 'Los cachorros' de Vargas Ll." *La Prensa* [Lima]. Aug. 4, 1978: 14.
- "Estreno teatral a beneficio." *El Comercio* [Lima]. Oct. 25, 1978: 23.
- "Estudian llamarlo Cía. Nacional de Comedias: TNP cambiaría de nombre, C. Gassols nuevo Director." *La Prensa* [Lima]. Feb. 15, 1979: 20.
- Freire Sarria, Luis. "Carta Blanca para asumir el TNP ha solicitado César Urueta al INC." *La Prensa* [Lima]. Jan. 17, 1979: 17.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "'El terno blanco' estrena Teatro de la U. C. en Marzo: Y después 'Los cuernos de Don Friolera' y 'Antígona.'" *La Prensa* [Lima]. Jan. 18, 1979: 22.
- Fitzgerald, E. V. K. *The Political Economy of Peru, 1956-78: Economic Development and the Restructuring of Capital*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979.
- "El grupo 'Hebraica' pondrá 'Teatro Bar.'" *La Prensa* [Lima]. Sept. 19, 1977: 18.
- Luchting, Wolfgang A. "Proliferation." *Latin American Theatre Review*. 11:2 (Spring 1978): 69-80.
- Martín, Oscar. "Fuera de Programa." *El Comercio* [Lima]. Oct. 7, 1979: 43.
- Morris, Robert J. "Alonso Alegría since *The Crossing*. . . ." *Latin American Theatre Review*. 17:2 (Spring 1984): 25-30.
- "'El pájaro azul' estrenan el 21." *El Comercio* [Lima]. Dec. 18, 1979: 23.
- Podestá A., Bruno. "Teatro Nacional Popular: Un teatro popular o la popularización del teatro?" *Latin American Theatre Review*. 7:1 (Fall 1973): 33-41.
- "Próximo estreno de 'Hebraica.'" *El Comercio* [Lima]. Apr. 14, 1978: 23.

- Rottmann, Jean. "Teatro en el año 1980: Balance." *La Prensa* [Lima]. Dec. 14, 1980: 30.
- "No hay teatro." *Oiga* Oct. 15-22, 1979: 19.
- "Salvando la temporada." *Oiga* June 4-11, 1979: 11.
- Slawson, Richard J. "The Peruvian Revolution on Stage: The Rise and Fall of the Teatro Nacional Popular of Perú (1971-1979)." Diss. Univ. of Texas at Austin. 1991.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Teatro Nacional Popular and Peruvian Cultural Policy (1971-1978)." *Latin American Theatre Review*. 25/1 (Fall 1991): 89-95.
- Seymour [pseud.]. "Grado cero en la teatralidad: '¡Culpable!' en La Cabaña." *El Comercio* [Lima]. Oct. 24, 1979: 23.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "La 'superproducción' del TNP: 'El pájaro azul.'" *El Comercio Dominical* [Lima]. Oct. 21, 1979: 13.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Un vuelo en picada: 'El pájaro azul.'" *El Comercio* [Lima]. Dec. 26, 1979: 19.
- "El TNP iniciará con obra de Vargas Llosa temporada teatral 78." *El Comercio* [Lima]. Apr. 18, 1978: 23.
- "Teatro Nacional Popular pasará a ser una entidad promotora de la actividad teatral en el país." *El Comercio* [Lima]. Feb. 28, 1979: 9.
- "Utilizarán un auto casero en ¿Qué sucedió en Pazos?" *La Prensa* [Lima]. July 11, 1979: 11.
- Webb, Richard and Graciela Fernández Baca de Valdez. *Perú en números: 1990*. Lima: Cuántos, S.A., 1990.