CULTURAL ENACTMENTS:
Recent Books on Latin American Theatre

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VIOLENT ACTS: A STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY LATIN AMERICAN THEATRE. By Severino João Albuquerque. (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 1991. Pp. 297. $39.95.)

THE NEW DRAMATISTS OF MEXICO, 1967–1985. By Ronald D. Burgess. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1991. Pp. 166. $22.00.)

LA DRAMATURGIA HISPANOAMERICANA CONTEMPORANEA: TEATRALIDAD Y AUTOCONCIENCIA. By Priscilla Meléndez. (Madrid: Editorial Pliegos, 1990. Pp 189.)

THEATRE OF CRISIS: DRAMA AND POLITICS IN LATIN AMERICA. By Diana Taylor. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1991. Pp. 277. $29.00.)

As a cultural practice, theatre encompasses and manifests contradictory social forces and individual desires. Throughout Western history, those in power have used theatrical display for ideological affirmation, while those subjected to arbitrary power have sought through theatre a public forum for resistance. In modern history, theatre has been the literary form simultaneously most vulnerable and most resistant to censorship and structural impediments. Recognizing theatre's communicative impact, authoritarian governments frequently outlaw or disrupt theatrical activities. Even if the political environment is more propitious, adverse economic conditions or difficult access to an appropriate audience can present obstacles. Yet even when plays cannot be performed with ease, bursts of theatrical productivity sometimes accompany periods of censorship and economic stress.

Theatre's contradictory substance goes beyond its historical ties. Operating on the boundaries of high art and traditional culture, theatre is both highly social and intensely personal. Although its connections with ritual and religion underscore theatre's communal qualities, these links also accentuate its involvement with the intricacies of human psychodynamics. Theatre is the most concrete and the most abstract literary activity. Performed theatre takes place in the palpable world, providing a way to reflect, Brechtian style, on problems of everyday life. At the same time, because of theatre's tangible relationship to the process of represen-

tation and its "liminal" impulse to act out what is no longer or not yet present,[1] theatre has also provided a means for modern practitioners like Antonin Artaud to examine theoretical or metaphysical concerns.[2]

Modern Latin American theatre in particular has manifested these contradictory qualities as individuals and groups have engaged in theatrical activity to affirm as well as to resist authority, to provoke audiences to examine social conditions, to plumb the depths of human desires, and to theorize about art and life. During the 1950s and 1960s, Latin American theatre reached unprecedented levels of productivity and creative achievement, a trend comparable to more widely known narrative and poetic accomplishments in the region. Notwithstanding the political, economic, and linguistic barriers to its performance, Latin American theatrical experience gives testimony to the fact that, even with minimal resources, where there are human bodies and voices, there will also be theatre. During the past twenty-five years, theatrical activity has spread via the work of playwrights and theatre groups as well as through gatherings and festivals operating in multiple social contexts. In addition, academic journals, conferences, major play anthologies, and book-length critical studies have firmly established Latin American theatre as a thriving field of scholarly endeavor in the Americas and Europe.

Although theatre scholars initially sought to provide fundamental documentation and comprehensive analyses of the works of major playwrights, Latin American theatre study has gradually become more diversified. Structuralist and poststructuralist currents and the interaction of literary investigation with other disciplines have created the broader framework of cultural studies. Four recent books on Latin American theatre attest to the field's richness but also suggest that theatre study can provide substantive materials for Latin Americanists with interdisciplinary concerns. Three of these books, Severino João Albuquerque's *Violent Acts: A Study of Contemporary Latin American Theatre,* Priscilla Meléndez's *La dramaturgia hispanoamericana contemporánea: teatralidad y autoconciencia,* and Diana Taylor's *Theatre of Crisis: Drama and Politics in Latin America,* employ recent developments in literary theory and cultural studies to reread canonical

1. For detailed discussions of theatrical "liminality," see Victor Turner's "Frame, Flow, and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality" in *Performance in Postmodern Culture,* edited by Michel Benamou and Charles Caramello (Milwaukee, Wis.: Center for Twentieth-Century Studies, 1977), 33–55; *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982); and *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1986).

2. Contemporary theorists who have used Artaud's ideas on theatre as a point of departure include Jacques Derrida and Herbert Blau. See Derrida, "The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation," *Writing and Difference,* edited by Alan Bass (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 232–50; Blau, *Blooded Thought: Occasions of Theatre* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982); and Blau, *The Eye of Prey: Subversions of the Postmodern* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

as well as less-known works of Latin American theatre. While Taylor's book deals with plays from 1965 to 1970, Meléndez examines works from 1943 to 1981. Albuquerque, the only one who includes Brazil, bases his study on more than one hundred plays from the three decades following the Cuban Revolution. The fourth book, Ronald Burgess's *The New Dramatists of Mexico, 1967–1985,* examines the work of a new generation of Mexican playwrights who began to emerge in 1967.

All four studies address at some level theatre's theoretical implications. But Meléndez's *La dramaturgia hispanoamericana contemporánea* demonstrates how Latin American dramatists have used what she terms *self-conscious theatre* for theorizing about the artistic process, the recipient's role, and theatre's complex relationship to lived experience. Meléndez brings fresh insights to six widely studied plays: Rodolfo Usigli's *Corona de sombra* (Mexico, 1943); Osvaldo Dragún's *Historias para ser contadas* (Argentina, 1953); *Farsa del amor compradito* by Luis Rafael Sánchez (Puerto Rico, 1960); José Triana's *La noche de los asesinos* (Cuba, 1965); *Yo también hablo de la rosa* by Emilio Carballido (Mexico, 1965); and novelist Mario Vargas Llosa's *La señorita de Tacna* (Peru, 1981). Meléndez explains initially that although each play interacts thematically with an extraliterary context, she will focus on the works' self-reflexive strategies. This kind of theatre, she suggests, shifts its recipient's attention from the artistic product to the process and thus alters traditional schemes for creating and interpreting art.

A brief introductory chapter defines the concept of *self-conscious theatre* (a term Meléndez employs somewhat interchangeably with *self-reflexive theatre* and *metatheatrical theatre*) and situates the approach within contemporary theatre semiotics and narrative theories of metafiction. Meléndez also refers briefly to the self-conscious tradition in Western literature already evident in *Hamlet, Don Quixote,* and Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy,* but she goes on to explain that in modern self-conscious drama, theatricality dominates at the anecdotal level. The first chapter reviews connections between self-conscious theatre and the ideas of Bertolt Brecht and Luigi Pirandello. Meléndez asserts that self-reflexive theatre, more akin to Pirandellian drama, conceives of the role of the "recipient" as creative rather than simply reflective.[3]

Going beyond each work's extraliterary theme, Meléndez demonstrates how the self-reflexive strategies serve to construct an implicit poetics of asking questions rather than answering them (pp. 31–32). She concludes that Usigli's widely known *Corona de sombra* on the role of the Haps-

3. Drawing on Keir Elam's distinction in *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* between the "written text" and the "performance text," Meléndez employs the Spanish term *receptor* (recipient or receiver in English) to embrace two categories: that of "reader" as well as that of "spectator."

burg rulers in Mexican history poses a "generic polemic" on the conflict between historical writing and dramaturgy. Although Dragún's *Historias para ser contadas* critiques Argentine social conditions, Meléndez asserts that it also forces its recipient to think about how theatre communicates. In Meléndez's analysis, Sánchez's love anecdote, *Farsa del amor compradito*, constructs a theatrical poetics that seeks to dissolve boundaries between art and life. Similarly, Triana's *La noche de los asesinos*, a play in which three young people enact ritual murders of their oppressor-parents, also exposes the closed and repetitive quality of theatrical space and forces the recipient to recognize his or her own willing immersion in theatre. Examining Carballido's *Yo también hablo de la rosa*, a play about two street children's unintentionally destructive act, Meléndez concludes that the work underscores the recipient's role in multiple interpretative acts. In her scheme, Vargas Llosa's *La señorita de Tacna*, which presents an author-character in the act of writing a story, demonstrates the fictitious nature of human truth (p. 171).

Meléndez's theoretically intricate analyses are addressed primarily to the literary specialist. But an introductory comment points to a broader cultural issue. The philosophical, ideological, and social vision of a people, Meléndez explains, becomes evident not only through dramatic themes but also through theoretical problems posed by self-conscious theatre. In this statement, she appears to suggest that the tensions generated by theatricality between fiction and reality and between performance and audience can reveal something about how individuals or groups conceptualize and "act out" their personal and collective experience. Although Meléndez never explicitly develops this provocative idea, it weaves through her entire study, and her original readings suggest that it will also provide fertile ground for future work.

Although Albuquerque and Taylor also address theatre's theoretical substance, both demonstrate more directly how Latin American theatre interacts with specific cultural experiences. Albuquerque's *Violent Acts: A Study of Contemporary Latin American Theatre* investigates how the violence that has consistently marked contemporary Latin American life is acted out through multiple dramatic languages of Spanish American and Brazilian plays from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. In a compact introduction, Albuquerque notes the global increase in institutional and spontaneous violence. Turning to violence in Latin America, he observes that playwrights committed to change have openly supported redefined social structures. Albuquerque distinguishes between violence's "implementality" (its reliance on implements) and its "instrumentality" for other ends. The implements of violence in Latin American theatre, he explains, are not always endowed with "hardware-ness" but are instead constituted by verbal and nonverbal dramatic languages. Drawing from multiple sources that include Brecht, Artaud, the absurdists, and Jerzy Gro-

towski's poor theatre, Albuquerque explains, "playwrights in search of a language found in violence both a pertinent theme and a mode of expression remarkably suited to the artistic manifestation of their often intense commitments to sociopolitical change" (p. 23).

The first two chapters identify the specific "implements" by which violence is communicated on the Latin American stage, laying the critical grounds for in-depth analyses to follow. Drawing on speech-act theory, David Bell's work on language and power, and Sherman Stanage's concept of linguistic "violatives," Albuquerque identifies forms of violent utterance found in theatre. These include abusives, provocatives, threatives, reportives, nonsensives, bombardives, distortives, and torturives as well as stage directions for tone, volume, pitch, voice distortions, and speech pace. He illustrates each concept carefully with examples from Latin American plays. Albuquerque also draws on theories of nonverbal communication and body language and on theatre semiotics to illustrate nonverbal languages of theatrical violence: silences and pauses; facial expression and makeup; masks and costumes; hand and arm gestures; body movement and posture; physical aggression; stage props; lighting; voice, sound, and musical effects; and decor.

Albuquerque then applies these concepts to full-length plays. The third chapter examines languages of violence in plays that represent political repression and resistance. The playwrights discussed include Mexicans Emilio Carballido and Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda, Chilean Egon Wolff, Cuban José Triana, Colombian Esteban Navajas, Brazilians Roberto Athayde and Oduvaldo Vianna Filho, and Argentines Griselda Gambaro, Eduardo Pavlovsky, Ricardo Monti, and Guillermo Gentile. Chapter Four, entitled "Representing the Unrepresentable," analyzes dramatic depictions of torture by such playwrights as Eduardo Pavlovsky, Roberto Cossa, and Andrés Lizárraga of Argentina, Colombian Enrique Buenaventura, and Brazilians Plínio Marcos, Vianna Filho, João Ribeiro Chaves Neto, Jorge Andrade, Alfredo Dias Gomes, and Augusto Boal. Chapter Five examines theatrical representations of the "violent double" in plays that depict degenerating relationships between characters who are unable to exist outside of the pair. Here Albuquerque addresses works by Chileans Jorge Díaz and Egon Wolff, Mexican Maruxa Vilalta, Panamanian José de Jesús Martínez, Argentine Griselda Gambaro, Brazilians Leilah Asunção, José Vicente, and Plínio Marcos, Cuban Virgilio Piñera, and Venezuelan Mariela Romero.

Albuquerque's work constitutes a valuable source for the initiate and the specialist alike. His documentation of secondary sources is superior, and all play citations appear in the original Spanish or Portuguese as well as in English translation. Although the analyses are consistently strong, the chapter on torture is particularly impressive and breaks valuable new ground. Elaine Scarry's seminal work on the subject has identi-

fied the dramatic quality of torture.[4] By focusing on this phenomenon in theatre, Albuquerque demonstrates how Latin American dramatists have investigated the societal and institutional complicities and psychodynamic undercurrents surrounding torture. He notes that the playwrights he studies do not create violence through their theatre but rather try to understand the complexities of its presence in everyday life. His book demonstrates that through innovative staging techniques, Latin American dramatists have sought to radicalize our perceptions of contemporary violence and to complicate the ways in which we may attempt to explain it.

Diana Taylor's *Theatre of Crisis: Drama and Politics in Latin America* also addresses the rigorous interaction of Spanish American theatre with the contradictions and upheavals in contemporary cultural images. Taylor, too, focuses on violence, specifically the violence surrounding moments of individual and collective crisis. In contrast to Albuquerque's work, however, Taylor focuses on a small number of plays written primarily between 1965 and 1970 by five Spanish American dramatists: José Triana (Cuba), Griselda Gambaro (Argentina), Emilio Carballido (Mexico), Enrique Buenaventura (Colombia), and Egon Wolff (Chile). Appearing during the most creative period in the history of Latin American theatre, most of the plays that Taylor analyzes represent outstanding theatrical innovations that have already been widely performed, read, and studied.

The introduction and the first chapter, "The Making of Latin American Drama," serve two purposes: to define and situate historically the concept of crisis on which the study rests; and to trace briefly the role of theatre and theatricality in Latin American cultural history and in attempts to construct an integrated "Latin American self." Drawing on the theories of Jürgen Habermas, René Girard, Antonin Artaud, Michel Foucault, and others, Taylor builds a definition of crisis as objective breakdowns in social systems and institutions combined with subjective decomposition of personal experience. Moments of crisis, she explains, are "in-between times" when established modes of personal and social organization have begun to unravel but new ones have not yet replaced them. Taylor's notion of a "theatre of crisis" makes explicit the "boundary" quality of theatrical experience intimated by Meléndez's work on self-reflective drama. Because it emerges from disintegrating boundaries, Taylor explains, crisis theatre is fragmented and open-ended, offering "no resolution, no restorative harmony, no cathartic relief" (p. 57).

According to Taylor, the period between 1965 and 1970 (when the plays she studies were written) was a point of major repositioning in Latin America between the hopes embodied in the Cuban Revolution and the

4. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

"grim reality" of growing totalitarian regimes (p. 20). The ensuing crisis exposed the fragility characterizing emergent concepts of a Latin American self, unleashed violence as a defense against crisis, and provoked reactive scapegoating of groups or individuals. As a product of this historical situation, the theatre of crisis focuses directly on violence, and the plays examined obsessively attack physical, moral, legal, or discursive boundaries that "previously maintained social hierarchies, family and personal integrity, law and order" (p. 60).

The highly original and provocative play analyses that build on this introductory material incorporate a valuable range of sociological, political, anthropological, and literary-theoretical thought. In "Theatre and Revolution: José Triana," Taylor argues that *La noche de los asesinos* (1965) and *Ceremonial de guerra* (1968–1973) are "revolutionary texts" unfolding between the end of one world and the beginning of another. Here theatre functions as a process that seeks to imagine a better world and is thus a "generator of new images" (p. 95). "Theatre and Terror: Griselda Gambaro" presents analyses of *Los siameses* (1965), *El campo* (1967), and *Información para extranjeros* (1972). Taylor observes that Gambaro's earlier work addresses human irrationality and violence while her later plays examine the multiple causes of violence found in society, individuals, and (in the case of theatrical violence) even spectator complicity.

In "Theatre and Transculturation: Emilio Carballido," Taylor demonstrates that his theatre explores the boundaries between Western and non-Western cultures in Mexican worldviews. The crisis here is a "counterhegemonic" shift in the dramatist's cultural stance, as Carballido intimates in *El día que soltaron los leones* (1957) and reveals in *Yo también hablo de la rosa* (1965) the non-Western epistemologies constituting Mexican experience. In "Destroying the Evidence: Enrique Buenaventura," Taylor examines the cycle of one-act plays entitled *Los papeles del infierno* (1968). Here she focuses on Buenaventura's portrayal of Colombian history as a series of erasures culminating in a void that challenges even revolutionary myths of liberation. Taylor concludes that Buenaventura's theatre promises no end to the crisis. "Conflation and Crisis: Egon Wolff" is perhaps her most compelling rereading. Taylor is the first to trace convincingly the antifeminist undercurrents in Wolff's most acclaimed play, *Flores de papel* (1968). She suggests that this play, in contrast to the other works examined, fails to examine its own ideological blind spots and thus enacts a "miniaturized ritual of subjugation" in which a woman becomes the scapegoat for a crisis of class conflict.

Taylor's work is superbly documented and her bibliographies include lists of available editions of works by each playwright. Play citations appear in English translation. In closing, Taylor suggests that the theatre of crisis anticipated subsequent political crises in Latin America, an idea with interesting connections to John Brushwood's thesis in *Narrative Inno-*

vation and Political Change in Mexico (1989). Taylor concludes that despite this kind of theatre's focus on violence and the grotesque, it is not a negative theatre. Although it dismantles and questions all realities (including its own structures) and does not offer new "remantlings," the theatre of crisis consistently betrays a longing for answers.

Ronald Burgess focuses exclusively on Mexico in *The New Dramatists of Mexico, 1967–1985,* but he studies the generation that followed the period of Taylor's theatre of crisis. Burgess suggests that this prolific group of dramatists constitutes a lost generation because of initial obstacles to performance or publication and early public indifference to the dramatists' work. The playwrights under study were born between 1939 and 1954, and many of them began to write or stage plays around 1967. Burgess applies literary generational theories to define this group and identifies specific generational links, such as a common group of teachers, including Emilio Carballido, Luisa Josefina Hernández, Hugo Argüelles, Héctor Azar, and Vicente Leñero, and the indirect impact of events in 1968, particularly the violent clash of students and police at Tlatelolco.

Burgess's study surveys more than two hundred plays by forty dramatists and also provides in-depth analyses of selected plays by major figures. He subdivides the larger generation into three specific stages: plays by an original group that produced major work between 1967 and 1973; a temporary drop in production between 1974 and 1978, when only a few writers continued to produce; and a burst of activity between 1979 and 1985 by new writers and some from the early group. Burgess underscores Emilio Carballido's contribution to the entire generation, particularly in publishing the anthologies entitled *Teatro joven de México* in 1973, 1979, and 1982.

Within the first period, Burgess credits major writers Oscar Villegas and Willebaldo López with innovations that took firmer hold years later, and he briefly reviews work by eleven younger dramatists. According to Burgess, Villegas's theatre forecast future linguistic experimentation and fragmented style, while López anticipated later playwrights' focus on Mexican history and culture. The eleven younger dramatists generally address social and personal aspects of the generation gap and prefer realistic language and situations. When considered as a whole, these plays provide a younger generation's view of Mexican society at the close of the 1960s.

From the period of the five-year "lull," Burgess examines the work of its most productive playwright, Gerardo Velásquez, as well as plays by Reynaldo Carballido and Héctor Berthier. The lull also encompassed a small "storm": the prolific work of Jesús González Dávila, who experimented with a broad range of theatrical styles, and that of Carlos Olmos, whose work enacted a profoundly pessimistic worldview. In general, theatre of this period began to focus more consistently on Mexico's past, and fragmented techniques encouraged greater spectator involvement.

According to Burgess, during the highly productive third phase (1978–1985), Mexican theatre improved in overall quality and received greater audience support. He notes this theatre's affinity with John Brushwood's characterization of Mexican narrative of the period in *La novela mexicana (1967–1982).* These plays focus on the condition of Mexico, are more self-reflexive or "metatheatrical," manifest the impact of Tlatelolco (even if indirectly), and gradually construct an unstable conception of reality. Here Burgess presents in-depth readings of plays by Sabina Berman, Tomás Espinosa, Oscar Liera, and Victor Hugo Rascón Banda. He also reviews briefly work by twenty other young dramatists of the period.

Readers will find particularly useful the appendices on all the studied playwrights' published and performed works. Burgess's critical approach is eclectic, incorporating elements from myth criticism, structuralism, and semiotics. He suggests that in general, Mexican theatre has not been as politically confrontational as Latin American theatre as a whole. Yet his comprehensive focus on this generation of Mexican dramatists suggests an intensified questioning of Mexican history and contemporary realities, an increase in self-reflective dramatic fragmentation, and more direct moves to incorporate audiences into the impulse for change that shapes many of these plays.

In the conclusion to *Violent Acts,* Albuquerque points to an "explosion of highly eloquent drama" in Latin America during the decades since the Cuban Revolution (p. 269). These four new books by Albuquerque, Burgess, Meléndez, and Taylor suggest a comparable growth in eloquent Latin American theatre criticism that is also rigorous, inventive, and productively informed by contact with literary theory and nonliterary disciplines. Notwithstanding these books' differences in scope and approach, they all explore common ground through their singularly insistent attention to theatre's "theatre-ness." Thus these critics approach theatre as a complex activity that is not simply one of several literary genres, and they examine the specific qualities of theatre itself that intersect with other features of cultural life: its complex connections with "reality," its multiple languages and communicative means, its intricate ties with power and oppression, and its palpable interaction with audiences. Most important, these critical works reveal Latin American dramatists' obsession with theatre's transformational promise, with the subjunctive substance of theatrical performance that permits individuals and cultures to reveal how they view themselves but also to imagine and act out what they might yet hope to be.