

Evolutionary Tendencies in Spanish American Absurd Theatre

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The complexity of contemporary theatre and the lack of a unified methodological approach to its study make it difficult to give a systematic account of any one trend in Spanish American theatre. Thus it is with the "absurd," a term that from the beginning was applied loosely and to a wide spectrum of plays. Now that it has long been assimilated into the general esthetic of the theatre and has been recognized as defining not a notion of "pure" absurdity, but simply a diverse and unprogrammable movement, we can attempt to provide an overview of its manifestations in Spanish America, from an early stage in plays concerned with existential themes to the direction it is taking today. The absurd movement together with Brecht's theories of the theatre are perhaps the most salient innovative tendencies that have contributed to the revitalization of the stage and to the creation of a flourishing theatre throughout Spanish America.

There are many dramatic authors today in Spanish America, many of them quite famous, who have seen their works performed abroad in Spanish and in translation. It is true, however, that Spanish American drama has not yet achieved the degree of originality attained by the novel. But like the novel, the theatre has grown in professionalism and sophistication and many of the old problems of distinction are beginning to vanish. For instance, it is increasingly meaningless to distinguish between socially committed and avant-garde dramatists. Before, that is before 1950, the two groups denoted differences in mentality. But in the 1950's, the decade that witnessed the emergence of absurd drama and the rediscovery of Brecht's political theatre, a new dramaturgy came into being in Spanish America. Such important authors as René Marqués, Carlos Solórzano, Osvaldo Dragún, and Emilio Carballido were fusing socio-political concerns with universal themes and experimental forms. Marqués, using existentially anguished characters, deplors the colonial condition of Puerto Rico in poetic dramas that draw on a variety of formal techniques taken principally

from North American Naturalism. Solórzano's plays, indebted to Camus and Ghelderode, combine regional and national concerns with existential themes and plastic images inspired by popular art. Distancing effects, the kind we associate with Brecht's theatre, and a clownesque style characterize Dragún's *Historias para ser contadas*, a series of one-acts that criticize the inhumanity of modern society in true stories from contemporary Buenos Aires. Contemporary Mexico is the scenario in the majority of Carballido's fantastic plays imbued with existential ideas and inspired by the theatre of Cocteau and Giraudoux or the medieval mortality play. The importance of existentialism in these authors cannot be underestimated. Existential ideas were fundamental in the creation of a theatre that could be called modern, contemporary and universal. Moreover, the sporadic instances of existential absurdity in these and other Spanish American dramatists helped to prepare the way for the acceptance of absurd theatre by Spanish American audiences.

Absurd theatre, as it is well known, adopted existential philosophy but developed a new expression of the theatre that became the dominant mode in Europe and the Americas in the sixties. The label "Theatre of the Absurd" came into universal usage upon the appearance, in 1961, of Martin Esslin's book with that title. Esslin, who borrowed the word "absurd" from Camus, who in turn had taken it from Kierkegaard, stripped it of its religious and metaphysical implications and used it to define the new dramaturgy. However, he applied the label rather broadly to a variety of avant-garde plays, thereby creating many misunderstandings about what the theatre of the absurd was all about. Today, "theatre of the absurd" has come to denote, in much the same way as the word "kafkaesque," segments of "real" life, disjointed or impenetrable experiences and, more specifically, plays that are self-contained, that do not comment on our experience or seek to heighten and rearrange it, but create rich new patterns of experience itself.¹

The absurdist revolution was initially, like all such movements of cultural change, a bewildering experience for many spectators. But as Beckett and Ionesco, along with other innovative French authors, began earning respect and admiration in scholarly and intellectual circles, audiences became more enthusiastic about the new theatrical mode, and in the 1960's the pull toward absurdity became widespread and all powerful.

In Spanish America the beginnings of absurd theatre can be traced back to as early as 1949, the publication date of Virgilio Piñera's *Falsa alarma*. But it is only in the decade of the sixties that a significant number of playwrights working in this vein emerges. George Woodyard, writing in 1969, identifies only five absurd dramatists: Elena Garro, Griselda Gambaro, Virgilio Piñera, Antón Arrufat and Jorge Díaz. This list can be easily augmented, however: Isaac Chocrón, Román Chalbaud, José Triana, Maruxa Vilalta, José de Jesús Martínez, Carlos Fuentes, Julio Ortega, and Eduardo Pavlovsky are among the better known authors who have written at least a couple of plays in the absurdist mode. Recent criticism and anthologies of Spanish American plays also attest to the preeminence of this genre.

Unfortunately, because of the initial misunderstanding created by Esslin

himself about absurd theatre, many dramatists have denied their affiliation with the movement, and some critics have followed suit choosing vaguer labels, such as “nonrealistic” or “avant-garde,” labels that could also be used to refer to the experimental theatre of protest or to plays that are fantastic, poetic, surrealist, or what-have-you. “Absurd theatre” on the other hand, is a more precise descriptive phrase when it refers to plays lacking an obvious plot and story-telling, and which are characterized by a radical devaluation of language. Absurdist language tends to be banal and illogical. The poetry emerges instead from concrete and objectified images of the stage itself. In renouncing rational argument about the absurdity of the human condition—as existential playwrights had done—the theatre of the absurd presents it in terms of concrete stage images. These may be violent and grotesque, for the theoretical writings and staging experiments of Antonin Artaud, the exponent of the theatre of cruelty, prepared the way for the absurd theatre in France. This theatre does not have a message and is open to many levels of interpretation.

It is important then to keep in mind that when speaking of absurd theatre the reference is not to some notion of “pure” absurdity but to a movement in the theatre that definitely broke with the conventions of the past. Strindberg, Pirandello, Brecht, Ghelderode, the Surrealists, and Artaud had in their own way sought alternatives to a theatre that insisted on being “lifelike” and that tended to propose moral, psychological, or social solutions. Absurdist writers, generally as different from one another as Beckett and Ionesco, differed from their predecessors in that they were, in Richard Gilman’s words, “structurally more extreme, they dispensed more completely with considerations of orderly plot, character development, progress toward a dramatic climax and so on. Beyond that they seemed to lack even minimal points of reference to the outside world.”²

Spanish American absurdist plays, like their European and North American counterparts, are a diverse lot and generally do not attempt to present pure absurdity. Sometimes this is especially obvious, as in René Marqués’ *El apartamiento*, his only play cast in the absurd mode. In form the play is a Beckettian monodrama and communicates an almost overwhelming sense of anguish through isolation. But the presence of the Indian, representing the primitive man of Ibero-America with his original creative powers intact, symbolizes the ultimate possibility of liberation of Puerto Rico and Ibero-America. Other playwrights are more subtle in their allegorizing. The Argentine critic Lilian Tschudi explains the presence of the “personaje testigo” or outsider and the emphasis on evil and cruelty in Gambaro’s theatre as “procedimientos bastante sutiles que introducen la denuncia en el aquí y el ahora, y acercan a la obra de Gambaro al teatro moral y descriptivo a la vez que lo alejan de su esencia de vanguardismo, su muy visible fuente de inspiración.”³ This critic, it must be noted, defines absurd theatre—“teatro de vanguardia,” as she calls it—in the purist sense: “está fundado en la creación absoluta de otra realidad, un universo escénico totalmente cerrado y opaco.”⁴ But I think that it is indisputable that in the plays Gambaro wrote during the 1960’s, *Las paredes*, *El desatino*, *Viejo matrimonio*, *Los siameses*, and *El campo*, she developed a personal idiom within the convention

of the theatre of the absurd. Characters lacking individuality, sparse action subordinated to the spirit of the play, a sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition, the use of non-rhetorical language integrated with gestures, the importance of the *mise-en-scène*, all these elements present in her plays are the properties of the theatre of the absurd.

In a recent study of the theatre of the absurd in Cuba, Terry L. Palls applies absurdity in the broader sense that I am using here. Her study defines the theatre of Piñera, Arrufat and Triana as revolutionary theatre concerned with the individual rather than the group, and that it interprets “una realidad nacional (la de la búsqueda del individuo por un orden y una estabilidad personal en una sociedad en transición) en términos universales.”⁵ The dramatic action of Triana’s complex play, *La noche de los asesinos*, for example, consists of a demonic game played by three children obsessed with the need to murder their parents. As is typical of absurd theatre, this play is presentational in nature and open to many interpretations. Montes Huidobro and Kirsten Nigro suggest that the forbidden games may have at least two different meanings. In one instance and on a more universal level they are the proem to a holy and necessary shedding of blood; in another, they imply a cyclical nature of history, particularly that of Cuba.⁶

This tendency to allegorize national as well as universal reality seems to me to be the distinctive mark of absurd drama in Spanish America. A strong critical sense toward an unjust social order has traditionally permeated Spanish American literature, and given the present-day socio-economic situation and political conditions, it is not surprising to encounter the “denuncia en el aquí y el ahora” even in form-conscious literature such as the new novel and the theatre of the absurd.

Recent criticism has noted that a shifting away from the absurd mood in theatre is occurring in European and North American drama. In Spanish America the direct mode of absurdity also seems to have run its course. Modified forms of the absurd continue to appear. However, no major absurdist playwright has emerged in recent years, while some of the better known dramatists of the absurd are turning toward a more representational theatre. In Cuba the production of absurdist plays stopped altogether after 1969. Since what became known as the “first” Padilla affair (1968-69), new restrictions on the arts have been instituted that demand a more concrete reflection of the author’s political commitment. In Chile, too, the political situation has had strong repercussions on the arts. The most significant plays produced since the coup combine an obvious historical and political commitment. Thus Jorge Díaz, whose previous work was characterized by an absurdist orientation, has written a documentary play, *Mear contra el viento*. Based on Jack Anderson’s ITT memoranda, it is an intensely political indictment of foreign involvement in Chilean affairs.⁷

But elsewhere in Spanish America manifestations of the absurd continue to appear. The Argentine Julio Ardiles Gray produced his first absurdist play, *Vecinos y parientes*, in 1973, and has continued writing in this vein. Another Argentine, Eduardo Pavlovsky, has been active in the theatre since 1961 and, together with Griselda Gambaro, is an important contributor to a theatre that,

as he puts it, "se expresa en un lenguaje distinto buscando la síntesis a través de la imagen y no de la palabra."⁸ A practicing psychoanalyst, this author employs abundant psychological material, especially the language of psychodrama. His plays are all conceived in the absurdist mode, although the analytic element, which of necessity is logical, tends to contradict the essentially illogical nature of absurdity. Also, his later plays may be more properly categorized in the subgenre of the theatre of cruelty.

On the whole, however, the trend seems to be away from the conventional standards of absurdity, away from strictly presentational form. Argentina's Griselda Gambaro has, in the present decade, branched out in other directions. Her initial departure from absurd theatre came with *Información para extranjeros*, a play that goes beyond absurdity to incorporate characteristics of Julian Beck's Living Theatre and Richard Schechner's Environmental Theatre. Her play of 1976, *Sucede lo que pasa*, structured along the lines of soap opera, is closer to representational theatre. According to Martha Martínez, who has described this play, "el lenguaje no es hermético como en algunas obras anteriores de la autora, sino directo. Los símbolos que en las anteriores obras había que desentrañar para llegar a su temática, no abundan. La realidad aparece en datos muy precisos . . . Sin duda . . . , la autora entra en otro camino, podríamos decir en una atmósfera más fresca."⁹ A similar case in point is the theatre of Mexico's Maruxa Vilalta. While in her previous work she relied entirely on the allegorical and expressionistic symbols characteristic of absurd theatre, her double-prize-winning play of 1975, *Nada como el piso 16*, is reminiscent of the kind of play developed by Harold Pinter. Pinter, who can hardly be labeled an absurdist, however, is not likely to have written as he has without the example set for him by a Beckett and an Ionesco. Similarly, Vilalta has benefited from her assimilation of absurdist techniques so brilliantly displayed in her previous work. In *Nada como el piso 16* she succeeds in developing the idea of game playing as an action metaphor. The situation is absurd but the form is representational since she uses individualized characters and emphasizes action. The play won two prizes that year because of the excellence of its overall quality and because it was perceived by Mexican critics as a play that brought something new and fresh to the theatre.

Finally, I want to mention the young Mexican writer José Agustín, who has never been directly affiliated with the theatre of the absurd but whose dramatic works *Abolición de la propiedad* and *Círculo vicioso* are perhaps symptomatic of how a younger generation of dramatists will benefit from the lessons of absurdity. These writers will no longer be called absurdists, but they are not likely to write as well without the example of those who were. On first impression, the two plays by Agustín seem to be very different from one another. They certainly are different in theme and stageability. The first is heavily encumbered with the gadgetry of the modern sight and sound industry but develops the conflict between only two characters. The second is more conventional in form but uses a larger number of characters and the conflicts are more complex. There are however some important elements that these plays have in common: the specialized idiom of "la onda" and an absurd situation that

perpetuates itself in circularity. The language is especially noteworthy. The hip slang and a constantly flowing play on words serve as a kind of logic-destroying device. It is a truly "absurd" idiom since an uninitiated audience would find it partly incomprehensible and would have to rely to a greater extent on the stage events to clarify the situation. Still, both these plays are conceived as representational drama, and, as I have said before, they may simply be indicative of the eventual fate of absurdity in Spanish American theatre.

It may well be that absurdity is on its way out, to be replaced by a theatre that refuses to distort reality to the same extent. But, as Gilman has noted, "the kind of distortion that absurdity brought into being was necessary, healing in a profound way."¹⁰ Absurdity brought into sharper focus a world that had been obscured by our conventional way of looking at it. And whatever comes next will undoubtedly benefit from its having forced us to look at the known, unexamined world in a new way.

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Notes

1. Richard Gilman, "Out Goes Absurdism—In Comes the New Naturalism," *The New York Times* (March 18, 1978).
2. Gilman, *The New York Times*.
3. *Teatro argentino actual: 1960-1970* (Buenos Aires: Fernando García Gambeiro, 1974), p. 90.
4. *Teatro argentino actual*, p. 90.
5. "El teatro del absurdo en Cuba: El compromiso artístico frente al compromiso político," *Latin American Theatre Review*, 11/2 (Spring 1978), 30.
6. *Persona, vida y máscara en el teatro cubano* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1973), pp. 413-427; "La noche de los asesinos: Playscript and Stage Enactment," *Latin American Theatre Review*, 11/1 (Fall 1977), 46-47.
7. Ramón Layera, "After the Coup: Four Dramatic Versions of Allende's Chile," *Latin American Theatre Review*, 12/1 (Fall 1978), 41.
8. Tschudi, p. 95.
9. "Seis estrenos del teatro argentino en 1976," *Latin American Theatre Review*, 11/2 (Spring 1978), 96.
10. Gilman, *The New York Times*.