

## RECENT WORKS ON LATIN AMERICAN THEATER

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*O TEATRO NO BRASIL SOB DOM PEDRO II. Part 1.* By LOTHAR HESSEL AND GEORGES RAEDERS. (Porto Alegre: Instituto Estadual do Livro, 1979. Pp. 351.)

*POESÍA EN VOZ ALTA IN THE THEATER OF MEXICO.* By RONI UNGER. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1981. Pp. 182. \$18.00.)

*POPULAR THEATER FOR SOCIAL CHANGE IN LATIN AMERICA: ESSAYS IN SPANISH AND ENGLISH.* Edited by GERARDO LUZURIAGA. (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center, 1978. Pp. 432. \$16.50.)

These three books on Latin American theater discuss diverse subjects: Brazilian theater during the reign of Dom Pedro II, a short-lived experimental Mexican theater group active during the 1950s and early 1960s, and the so-called popular theater movement in contemporary Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking America. Each volume provides useful information for those interested in the development and nature of drama in Latin America.

*O Teatro no Brasil sob Dom Pedro II* is the third volume in a series of studies on Brazilian theater (the first volume was *O Teatro Jesuítico no Brasil* and the second was *O teatro no Brasil da Colônia à Regência*). The volume under review is the first of a two-part history of Brazilian theater from 1831 to the 1880s. The authors have set themselves a large task, and judging from their method in this particular volume, they mean to cover every inch of the territory as minutely as possible. Lothar Hessel and Georges Raeders have amassed an almost overwhelming amount of data concerning the important actors, playwrights, directors, designers, theater companies, and actual performances of plays of the period. This material is organized within the two major categories of individual contributors and theater activities in different cities and regions of post-Independence Brazil. A third, much briefer section summarizes the development of opera and popular theater, such as the *bumba-meu-boi* (traditional dances with a cast of characters) and the *congadas* (dramatic dances of African origins depicting the crowning of a king in the Congo).

Most interesting is the first part of the book, which paints a vivid, if heavily detailed, picture of a young country's efforts to establish a national theatrical tradition. The figure of João Caetano looms large here, in his almost single-handed struggle to build a wholly autochthonous theatrical troupe. His nationalization of theater arts, however, did not include the choice of plays that he staged, which were mostly continental and almost exclusively of the Romantic mode then in vogue. This absence of native works was due more to a lack of texts than to a bias against them, and as Hessel and Raeders note, one of the most urgent tasks of the time was to build a tradition of national playwriting. In some cases, the term *national* refers to the playwright's origins, rather than to the plays themselves. For example, Gonçalves Dias's most notable work, *Leonor de Mendonça*, deals with events in sixteenth-century Portugal. In contrast, Martins Pena and José de Alencar tapped national sources, the former in plays that poked lighthearted fun at contemporary social mores, and the latter in works highly critical of Brazilian socioeconomic structures, particularly institutionalized slavery.

The early development of theater in Brazil is similar to that in much of post-Independence Latin America, being characterized by the influence of Romanticism (which was especially suited to the liberal and nationalistic temper of the times), the gradual appearance of homegrown playwrights, and debates concerning what actually constitutes a national theater (content versus authorship). That Brazil enjoyed a longer period of relative political stability than other Latin American republics might explain why its theater was then so vigorous. Or so it appears to have been, judging by Hessel and Raeders's whistle-stop tour of nineteen major and not-so-major theatrical centers of the period. This undertaking is the weakest part of the study, and the excessive accumulation of names, dates, and titles makes reading it straight through rather rough going. Unfortunately, it takes up nearly half of the book and leaves one wishing that the authors had been slightly less enthusiastic and exhaustive in their task as theater historians.

If Hessel and Raeders are inclusive, Roni Unger is exclusive in her choice of subject matter in *Poesía en Voz Alta in the Theater of Mexico*. After giving a brief introduction to theater in Mexico City during the 1950s, she concentrates on one particular ensemble, Poesía en Voz Alta. Juan José Arreola and Octavio Paz, the primary forces behind the group's formation, were joined by such talents as the painters Juan Soriano and Leonora Carrington in a venture whose expressed purpose was to experiment with language and poetry on stage; hence the group's name, Poetry Out Loud, as Unger translates it. United in their disdain of the dramatic realism then prevalent in the Mexico City theater, these avant-garde artists experimented with all facets of theater arts, and between 1956 and 1962, their collaboration resulted in eight theater programs. These in-

cluded the staging of classical and modern Spanish works, original plays (Paz's *La hija de Rappaccini* and Elena Garro's early one-act plays), as well as the Mexican première of Jean Genet's *The Maids*, T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, and Sophocles' *Electra*. With the exception of *Murder in the Cathedral*, these productions were controversial, dividing critics and the public into two opposite camps—one that saw Poesía en Voz Alta as an elitist and effete group of snobs catering to its own kind, and the other camp that, while not always unanimous in its approval of the ensemble's work, hailed it as an important contributor to theatrical renovation.

In documenting the short history of Poesía en Voz Alta, Unger makes extensive use of a variety of sources: newspaper and periodical reviews and articles, playbills and programs, photographs, and interviews (some as secondary sources and many others conducted by Unger herself). At times Unger gets bogged down in details and is not able to view her subject matter as critically as she might have. Nonetheless, she provides interesting insights into the inner workings of the theatrical process as she describes how and why certain plays were chosen for staging, the directorial method, the kinds of sets, costumes, lighting, music, and choreography that were used, and the critical and audience responses to the group's work. She also offers glimpses of the human dynamics at play within the ensemble (for example, the parting of the ways between Paz and Arreola) as well as the economic difficulties that ultimately led to the early demise of Poesía en Voz Alta.

According to Unger, Poesía en Voz Alta had its major impact on the fields of directing and stage design. Some of Mexico's leading directors (Héctor Mendoza, Juan José Gurrola, and José Luis Ibañez) were influenced by their association with the ensemble. Also, the experiments with environmental theater, the creative use of the cyclorama and other plastic and scenographical elements, so evident in Juan Soriano's highly innovative stagings, set an example for subsequent designers. Soriano himself has said that the greatest legacy of Poesía en Voz Alta was an attitude, a way of viewing and of making theater. Although this kind of influence is hard to measure, Unger's retelling of the group's story makes a convincing case for its catalytic role in awakening theater practitioners and audiences to new and, in the Mexico City of the 1950s, as yet untested modes of theater production.

A similar kind of awakening took place throughout much of Latin America during the 1960s and 1970s, resulting in a veritable theatrical boom. *Popular Theater for Social Change in Latin America*, edited by Gerardo Luzuriaga, is concerned with one manifestation of this activity. The book is divided into five sections titled *Teorías y métodos*, *Panoramas nacionales*, *Teatro folklórico y teatro para niños*, *Festivales*, and *Grupos y experiencias*. A rather extensive bibliography is also included. Most of the twenty-six contributions are from noted Latin American theater prac-

titioners (like Augusto Boal, Enrique Buenaventura, Sergio Vodánovic, and Sergio Corrieri), and from established critics (like José Monleón, Nicolás Kanellos, and Carlos Miguel Suárez Radillo). Little of this material was written specifically for Luzuriaga's volume, and in being reprinted here, makes available otherwise widely dispersed writings.

In his introduction, Luzuriaga speaks of educational and political theater as being two sides of an equilateral triangle, with popular theater as the complementary base. In other words, these three elements are so closely related as to be indivisible, or at least, extremely difficult to separate. The triangle metaphor allows Luzuriaga to avoid precise definitions, and perhaps rightly so, as the essays, reports, and interviews that he has collected reflect often differing points of view.

This diversity might not be immediately apparent, given the generally leftist ideological bent of the contributors, and their universal condemnation of commercial, bourgeois theater. There likewise is a consensus that popular theater is somehow related to the "pueblo" ("the people" in English, although the term does not have quite the same connotations as in Spanish). It is the nature of this relationship that proves problematical and that ultimately is unresolved. If theater is popular by virtue of being traditionally of, by, and for the people, then very little of what is discussed here qualifies as such. Indeed, only one essay, Paulo de Carvalho-Neto's "Concepto y realidad del teatro folklórico latinoamericano," views it in these terms. Although some of the contributors define popular theater according to its subject matter, audience, or both, others consider it vital that the people themselves share in the creative process. This belief has resulted in some of the most worthwhile experiments in recent Latin American drama, in which theater artists work collectively with peasants, workers, neighborhoods, and even entire towns in the scripting and staging of plays. Nine of the essays included here describe such experiments, the most notable being those by Augusto Boal ("Teatro del Oprimido: una experiencia de teatro popular educativo en el Perú,") and by the Cuban Teatro Escambray ("El Grupo Teatro Escambray: una experiencia de la Revolución," by Sergio Corrieri).

The thinking behind such collaborations is that if the people are both producers and consumers, the final product will more genuinely express and speak to their concerns; the theatrical process therefore becomes a politicizing and liberating one. But the same process can be manipulated for other ends. For example, in "Teatro Popular do SESI: A Theater for Workers," Michael Wilson describes the work of a theater group sponsored by the Serviço Social da Indústria in São Paulo. Professional actors, originally from the workers' ranks, stage free performances in the work environment, thus making theater available to audiences who otherwise would not be able to afford it. So far, so good, but when

one reads the philosophy behind this project, it becomes an altogether different matter. As stated, the Teatro Popular do SESI benefits the workers by educating them socially. After attending these performances, they will practice better hygiene, dress more elegantly, meet people, and learn how to behave in society. Lest they be disturbed by everyday problems, the plays they see should be morally uplifting, instructive, and unrelated to the work place. Wilson notes that because the Teatro Popular is subsidized by the government and industry, it can ill afford to include politically questionable plays in its repertoire. The idea that this whole project can be viewed cynically as a way of keeping the workers in line does not occur to Wilson. Yet it sounds suspiciously like it is just that, which should alert the careful observer to the fact that involving and playing to the people does not of itself make for popular theater of the liberating kind.

The most lucid comments concerning popular theater are given by the Brazilian Augusto Boal ("Sobre teatro popular y teatro antipopular"). Boal's definitions are not limiting, and he therefore finds that there can be many types of popular theater: theater that is about, for, and by the people (with a little help from theater experts like Boal); theater that presents social conflict from the people's perspective in order to educate a bourgeois audience (as Boal notes, one cannot always preach to the already converted); theater with an implicit popular content (a good way to outfox the censors); and theater with an explicit content (possible only in periods of liberalization). Boal divides these types of theater into subcategories, which are defined primarily by subject matter, intent, and point of view. While he is quite specific about what he considers "popular" and "antipopular," his criteria are broad enough to accommodate a wide variety of theatrical modes. They are also selective enough to weed out theater that merely masquerades as popular, an exercise in discrimination that not all the contributors to Luzuriaga's volume have achieved.

At first glance, these three books would not seem to have much in common, yet while they do differ greatly in content, they share a focus on theater as a performance art, rather than as a written artifact. That is to say, these works are less interested in analyzing playtexts than in viewing theater production within specific artistic, cultural, and sociopolitical contexts. This emphasis on extratextual considerations sets these studies apart from much of the present research on Latin American theater, or at least from that being produced by many North American scholars. In truth, the field is still relatively young, and only in the last ten to fifteen years' time have academics begun to view it seriously. During this period, a great deal of research has been text-oriented, with very good reasons and results. Obviously, dramatic texts in published form endure, while their actual performances are ephemeral. Also, it has been traditional for scholars of literature to study texts and for those in

theater arts to be concerned with performance. This academic boundary fortunately has begun to crumble in recent years, with a consequent interest in both aspects and in how they overlap. Yet for scholars of Latin American theater who are geographically isolated from their field of interest, it is easier to acknowledge this overlap than to study it. Access to performances is the major stumbling block, and so one rarely, if ever, sees stagings of the playtexts one analyzes. Reconstruction of part performances, such as those done by Roni Unger, are not always easy to accomplish because not that many Latin American theater companies keep useful records of their work. The recent trend toward videotaping performances certainly will help alleviate some of these problems, if and when the videotapes are made readily available. Yet even videotapes are substitutes for the real event and are thus removed from the everyday social, cultural, and artistic reality to which the performance belongs. Ultimately, there probably is no one way to overcome the hurdles in the way of gaining a more intimate knowledge and experience of Latin American theater. In fact, this goal well may be a rather naïve one, especially when one considers that within Latin America, even neighboring countries can be relatively ignorant of each others' theater activities. Still, North American scholars work in an even greater vacuum; and because of our close attention to playtexts, we can and often do forget that they are but one component of a complex art form. This view does not underestimate the importance of careful textual analyses; rather, it underscores the value of studies such as those reviewed here because in conjunction with text-oriented research, they can help provide as full and rich a composite picture of Latin American theater as possible.