

LATIN AMERICAN THEATER

ASPECTOS DEL TEATRO MODERNO HISPANOAMERICANO. By ERMINIO G. NEGLIA. (Bogotá: Editorial Stella, 1975. Pp. 87.)

DRAMATISTS IN REVOLT: THE NEW LATIN AMERICAN THEATER. Edited by LEON F. LYDAY and GEORGE W. WOODYARD. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976. Pp. 275. \$16.50.)

These two works, one, a panoramic study, the other, a critical anthology, complement each other and together serve as a valuable introduction to twentieth-century Latin American theater. Taken separately, it is Neglia who provides the most coherent, unified understanding of the topic. Neglia's first three chapters establish a general framework from which we understand that it was not Spanish theater but the Italian *teatro grottesco* that inspired early dramatists of our century, not only in the River Plate region, but in Mexico as well. The result was the Creole Grotesque—a mixture of tragedy and farce dramatizing themes of jealousy and domestic strife with comic irony and volatile passion.

With Italian theater as part of their dramatic heritage, Latin American dramatists moved easily from traditional to experimental forms led by another Italian. The consummate manipulator of dramatic illusion, Pirandello, inspired their first departures from realism. While the years between the World Wars produced almost no important plays in Latin America, playwrights such as Villaurrutia and Usigli in Mexico and Nalé Roxlo and Roberto Arlt in Argentina made experiments during the 1950s that prepared the stage for the flowering of creativity that we find today.

In the next three chapters, the author describes some fundamental characteristics of twentieth-century drama including breakdown of dramatic language, social protest, and dramatic innovations. Pirandello's philosophical word-play led inevitably to more ambiguous language and began to undermine realism and rational dialogue. Playwrights including Ecuador's Francisco Tobar-García and Chile's Jorge Díaz explored the limits of logical dramatic dialogue. Pirandello also opened up new relationships between audience and actors, between comedy and pathos, between reality and illusion. There is a succinct discussion of these and other dramatic innovations with special mention of the play-within-a-play, as in Mario Benedetti's *Ida y vuelta*, and the treatment of the public as a dramatic character in *El copillo de dientes* by Jorge Díaz.

Characteristic of our industrial-technological century is the rise of the Teatro Rural, with its themes of alienation from nature and exploitation of rural folk. Its peasant heroes are often fatalistic and superstitious, but live in harmony with their environment. They are inevitably deprived of their land by urban villains such as landowners and lawyers who snare them in intricate lawsuits. Love of the land and social injustice are the central preoccupations of this realistic form of theater which seems less open to innovation in style and content than other dramatic genres.

Other developments in drama are less well-defined. What Neglia calls "teatro de evasión"—such as Nalé Roxlo's *La cola de la sirena* and Renée Marqués' *Los soles truncos*, which treat themes of nostalgia and escape from reality—is not clearly differentiated from what he calls "teatro de introspección." Surely Sergio Vodanovic's *Las exiladas*, designated as "teatro de evasión," is no more concerned with a vanished past and evasion of reality than Elena Garro's *La señora en su balcón*, cited as an example of "teatro de introspección." Only the latter play's fragmented style distinguishes it from the former, a difference not reflected in the critical terminology used to describe the two kinds of theater. Other examples given of "teatro de introspección" are Franciso Tobar-García's dramatic monologue, *Las sobras para el gusano*, and a stream-of-consciousness dramatization of a prostitute's suicide, *El último instante*, by the Dominican, Franklin Domínguez.

The dramatic innovations of these last two plays, in which logical time sequence is broken up and the characters' psychological space is redefined, remind Neglia of parallel techniques in prose fiction. Use of cinematic devices, inner monologue, and redefinition of psychological space indicate to him that theater did not develop apart from narrative prose in Latin America, as some critics claim, but along similar lines of stylistic innovation.

Neglia concludes by admitting that the question that most tormented him while compiling the work was, "Is it possible to write a panoramic study of such a vast and varied genre as Latin American theater?" His book represents his answer, which is affirmative, provided only the most representative plays are mentioned. The book clearly establishes the background of knowledge required for full appreciation of a more detailed analysis such as *Dramatists in Revolt*.

The special contribution of this anthology of critical essays is to provide a store of information not easily found elsewhere on some less well-known Latin American plays and playwrights. It is enhanced by a select list of bibliographies, critical studies, and anthologies of plays that includes works in Spanish, Portuguese, and English. The comprehensive index is an especially appreciated and useful section of the book.

The reader's ability to absorb and reflect upon the enormous amount of knowledge compiled in this volume is considerably hampered by the random presentation of the essays. The editors explain in the preface that they discarded the country-by-country approach to their topic because they "consider virtually all major themes and dramatic currents in recent Latin American theater to be present in one or the other of these writers." The unexplained exception is Brazil, to which part two of the book is devoted. So it is the theater and playwrights of Brazil that, because of the coherent grouping of the three essays about them, appear most clearly defined and best understood among the fifteen playwrights represented in *Dramatists in Revolt*. For the rest, the reader must skip throughout the book to pick up the scattered four essays on Argentinians, the three on Chileans, the two on Cubans, and the two on Mexicans. The only country represented by a single dramatist is Puerto Rico, whose Renée Marqués is discussed by Tamara Holzapfel. Had the essays been presented in a less fragmented order, a clearer understanding not only of the variety but of the

national character and, perhaps, some of the common problems of Latin American theater might have been achieved.

Because of its confusing organization, however, *Dramatists in Revolt* does not quite equal the sum of its parts. Several of the individual essays are impressive—Peter J. Schoenbach's thoroughly engrossing account of Brazil's "angry young man," Plinio Marcos; Merlin H. Forster's clear and comprehensive presentation of the themes, structure, characters, language, and style of the Argentinian, Carlos Gorostiza; and Frank Dauster's two articles that offer the specialist's insight but not at the expense of wider-ranging thoughts relating two Cuban dramatists to European theater—these are the essays that survive the disorder of the anthology.

Others quickly sink to the bottom of its rich reservoir of knowledge. Eugene B. Skinner's repetitive series of plot summaries lives up to its tiresome prognosis that "emphasis will be given to five plays" in an attempt to define Emilio Carballido's image of man. Richard Mazzara does not sufficiently explain why Jorge Andrade, often considered difficult and overly cerebral, has become "In every sense the first completely successful modern Brazilian playwright" nor why the autobiographical *Raso Atrás*, concerned with problems of intellectuals, has become a "landmark in Brazilian theater." While translating and expanding his previously published "The Theater of Osvaldo Dragún," Donald L. Schmidt might have altered his conclusion that the *Historias para ser contadas* are "virtually a new dramatic genre" had he taken into account some of the works of Brecht, Pirandello, and Genet. These playwrights have also experimented with the techniques Schmidt finds constituting a new genre invented by Dragún, including multiple role-playing by a limited cast, mime, direct communication with the audience, and a barren set. The simultaneous use of these devices creates a new intensity, but hardly, as Schmidt claims, a new dramatic genre.

Dramatists in Revolt does, however, raise some important questions for students of contemporary drama. Why, for example, has absurdist theater, an ironic, oblique genre, been so widely cultivated by dramatists whose commitment to social protest would seem to inspire them to reach the populace? How can the highly stylized theater of the absurd rather than realism be the form chosen for experiment by an activist such as Jorge Díaz who, while asserting that "the important thing is . . . to communicate with the community," concerns himself with the impossibility of communicating and the decay of language in *La orgástula* and *Liturgia para cornudos*? Frank Dauster explains that Cuban dramatists such as José Triana have adapted absurdist techniques to the purposes of social criticism, yet he adds that Triana's voice, not primarily one of dissent, has not been heard since *La noche de los asesinos* (1966). It would appear that dramatists in revolt might, in an effort to reach the masses, write for the twentieth-century playwright's largest audience, that of television and film. Unlike other absurdist elsewhere, including Albee and Arrabal, only Plinio Marcos, of those represented in this collection, has seriously attempted to write plays for a genuinely mass public. That *Dramatists in Revolt* raises questions central to the development of contemporary theater indicates that it fulfills its function as a

provocative, if somewhat haphazard, volume that will inspire further inquiry into a theater seething with vitality.

VIRGINIA HIGGINBOTHAM
University of Texas, Austin