

INTRODUCTION

Emilio Carballido is Mexico's most talented and successful contemporary playwright. His presence and influence in contemporary Mexican theater are enormous. Coincidentally, it is during the span of Carballido's career—1948 to the present—that Latin American theater in general explodes into the vital form it is today. One cannot claim, of course, that Carballido is responsible for the phenomenon of a new theater in Mexico, since one can note the same process of growth and development throughout Latin America during the last two decades. On the other hand, contemporary Mexican theater *without* the presence of Carballido would be perceptibly less original and exciting.

Generally, the evolution of theater has been the same in all of Latin America: what is true of Mexico is on the whole what is true of the rest of Latin America. Theater has existed in South and Central America as long as there has been civilization there: strong physical evidence exists of a type of ritual theater that pre-dates the Conquest. In the case of the geographical area that was Maya-Quiché, the *Rabinal Achi* is an authentic survival of that area's pre-Columbian theater. With the Conquest, the Spanish soldier priests very quickly resorted to the use of theater—in this case dramatized examples of church teachings—to instruct the indigenous populations and expedite their conversion to the salvation of the One True Faith. Soon, too, Western secular theater was introduced to the continent through plays presented usually on the occasion of state visits or in celebration of viceregal birthdays or of holidays. There has been, then, since the discovery of the continent by Western civilization, and even before, some kind of theater in Mexico. There has even been an occasional flash of

genius. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, the brilliant seventeenth-century baroque poet and dramatist, is undoubtedly the most outstanding example.

Generally, however, for three centuries theater in Mexico and throughout Latin America was a purely derivative and imitative form feeding upon the examples of its Spanish heritage. It is not until the present century that one may observe the stirrings of truly renovative and original Mexican theater. One of the first evidences of these stirrings was the Union of the Seven Authors, a group bent upon the creation of a truly Mexican (as opposed to Spanish New World) theater. One of its more important accomplishments was its insistence upon natural Mexican pronunciation. The influence of Spanish theater, Spanish plays, and Spanish actors had been so strong that it was not until 1923 that the first play was performed on a Mexican stage in which the actors spoke with a Mexican rather than a Castilian pronunciation.

The year 1928 is another important landmark in the evolution of an independent theater in Mexico. In that year the Teatro Ulises was founded by Xavier Villaurrutia and Salvador Novo. The members of this amateur group, reacting against the extreme nationalism of all art forms in the years following the Mexican Revolution, turned toward Europe and the United States for inspiration, translating and emulating authors writing in a more sophisticated theatrical tradition. But in spite of these important moments, it was only following the Second World War that Mexican (and Latin American) theater became a truly independent and vital movement. It is this generation to which Emilio Carballido belongs.

Carballido's most important single contribution has probably been the introduction of a vein of fantasy that lifts his plays from the extremely traditional-realistic strain that has been the predominant characteristic of Mexican theater. It is not that the realistic tradition has failed to produce examples of good theater. Rodolfo Usigli's *El gesticulador*, for example, is one of the better and more important Mexican plays, and it is specifically Mexican and absolutely realistic. This is, unfortunately, an isolated example. In general, Mexican theater before Carballido was bogged down

in a morass of overwhelmingly traditional-realistic plays: comedies of manners or investigations of bourgeois domestic and marital situations, strong social indictments that verged on the propagandistic, or popular reviews of the music hall variety.

On the other hand, an occasional Mexican author had used the liberating element of fantasy before the publication in 1948 of Carballido's "The Intermediate Zone." Francisco Monterde (one of the Union of Seven Authors) in *Proteo* and Alfonso Reyes in *Ifigenia cruel*, both reworkings of Greek myth, are notable examples. Neither author, however, wrote any other plays in this genre. It is Emilio Carballido who is the first Mexican author to employ consistently a kind of theater that may be called fantastic, poetic, surrealist—or simply nonrealistic. He is the first Mexican playwright who *consistently* creates plays that transcend the specifically realistic and restrictively Mexican to achieve a theater that can be called modern, contemporary, and universal.

It is this element of fantasy, or poetry if you will, that is the reason-for-being of this particular collection of Carballido plays. All, in some way, touch upon the nonreal. Each in some way is enriched by the element of fantasy. Each illustrates in its particular way the amazing variety of Carballido's imaginative creation. This collection is not a representation of *all* the Carballido fantasy-touched plays, but each of these eight illustrates an important moment in the overall trajectory of Carballido's writing, and a specific creative point of view.

For about nine years, Carballido seemed to swerve back and forth between a desire to do something new—introduce the fantasy element—and to do something good in the old strain (which produced a number of realistic provincial comedies). There is a noticeable dichotomy in his writing of those years that has been mentioned by such major commentators on Carballido's writing as Rosario Castellanos, Juan García Ponce, Frank Dauster, and Celestino Gorostiza. In Carballido's vision during those years the world is apparently divided into the real and the nonreal, and his plays during this period reflect this polarized perception of reality: they are either purely fantasy or they are purely realistic. Four of

the plays in this collection are representative of the purely fantastic: "The Intermediate Zone" and the trilogy "The Time and the Place," which is made up of "Dead Love," "The Glacier," and "The Wine Cellar."

"The Intermediate Zone" (1948) is the first published Carballido play and one of the first to be produced. As the title implies, its characters and setting lie in the area of pure fantasy, the proving ground for a group of once-humans of indeterminate destinies. The Nahual "hero" of the piece is drawn directly from Aztec mythology. The word that comes most easily to mind to describe this unusual character is "charming," a word equally applicable to the play itself. This would be a damning description if it were the only quality of "The Intermediate Zone," since charm alone is scarcely enough to justify a play's existence. But beneath the superficially entertaining qualities of the play lies the author's very serious concern about the question of man's role in the world, the extent of his responsibility, and the justification for his existence, a concern that may also be seen in the "Theseus" of this collection, for example.

"The Time and the Place," dedicated to Carballido's American artist friend, Henry Hagan, is a different matter. These three plays represent a different frame of mind, and fulfill a different creative purpose. They are unlike anything that had ever appeared in Mexican theater. In Carballido's own words (from a letter to me concerning the translation of the plays), "They are my only horror pieces." And he adds that they seem more natural to him in English than in Spanish, "perhaps because one's accustomed to reading the genre in your native language."

In addition to their historical interest as the most extreme examples of Carballido's interest in the fantastic, each of the plays is fascinating in its presentation of a distinct mythical-magical reality. They are amazing examples of what Antonin Artaud wanted theater to be, a theater "whose only value is in its excruciating, magical relation to reality and danger." They are cruel, chilling, and hypnotically compelling.

"Dead Love," the first of the trilogy, exists in its own kind of

intermediate zone, in another stage between life and death. Unlike "Intermediate Zone," however, there is no charm here, no humor, no hope. Claudia and the character called He are doomed, and damned, victims of their distintegrating bodies and the inevitable loss of their dissolving love.

The tone of "The Glacier" is principally mythic. In spite of its contemporary setting it would never be mistaken for a little slice-of-life piece about Mexico today. Its distortion of time, the spanning of fifty years of chronological time, its culminating magical rejuvenation, give it a flavor of "twice-told tales" or "once upon a time." It is significant that if these plays had been written in narrative prose they would invariably have been classified as tales rather than as short stories.

The last of the trilogy, "The Wine Cellar," is literally of the stuff that dreams are made of. Based on an actual dream of a friend of Carballido's, Jorge Wilmot, "The Wine Cellar" has the extra- or supra-real reality that we accept so unhesitatingly in our dreams. The disintegration of "the beautiful Zoé" recalls the disintegrating love of "Dead Love," and the unnatural attraction of the infected and noxious body of the once-beautiful Zoé is in a way similar to the necrophilism of "The Glacier." The plays constitute a whole, a unity, and they reflect a moment in Carballido's creativity, a state of mind, that he has never returned to.

"The Golden Thread" is the title play of the volume published in 1957 that included "The Time and the Place," but this three-act play reflects a different creative point of view, a consciously new one. As the author explains (again in a letter referring to the translation of the play), "The Thread' is quite important to me, it was the first time I attempted to join a realistic treatment with an imaginative one . . . Before, I wrote works of one genre or the other, but never mixed together."

The mingling of reality and fantasy that Carballido first attempted in "The Golden Thread" has produced a large proportion of his most successful plays, and the reinforcement of reality through the use of the non-real has become one of his most characteristic hallmarks. In addition to the interest of the play per se,

it is also important historically because it marks the creation of what is virtually a new dramatic form in Mexico.

In "The Golden Thread" the examination of the many facets of reality is more important than straight plot. Again the techniques used to achieve the desired emotional and theatrical effects remind one of Artaud and of his definition of an ideal theatrical language, a physical language that is "everything that occupies the stage, everything that can be manifested and expressed materially on a stage and that is addressed first of all to the senses instead of being addressed primarily to the mind as is the language of words."

The frame situation of "The Golden Thread," the arrival of two elderly ladies at their run-down provincial estate, is conventional and realistic. It is with the appearance of Man-Silvestre, who can only enter the arena of action upon the invisible beam of a radio, that the play "takes off" from the realistic plane to enter the much more important world of truth. Man-Silvestre and Mayala have the power to recall time and to reveal the real truth about that time. It is through their revelations in the interior play that we come to know and understand Leonor and Adela and all the events of the past that lead to the present. For a brief while two worlds—truth and reality—come together, but the super-reality fades as Silvestre is identified and the action inevitably moves toward the re-enactment of his death.

Silvestre and Mayala are in concept and action the materialization of the spirit of theater, of Dionysius. Mayala, the purest representation of the nonreal world, never speaks a line of dialogue. She is the spirit of pre-oral, pre-intellectualized theater. Her counterpart in the "real world" is Leonor, obviously the medium through which the participants in the dream world are summoned to reality. Her surname, Luna (moon), reinforces this role.

"The Golden Thread," through dance, drums, pantomime, special effects, poetry, and magic, explores the depths of perceivable reality, and initiates a new direction in Carballido's dramatic writing.

Two of the plays in this collection follow the technique of "The

Golden Thread": they exist on a realistic plane, but in some way transcend or subvert that realism to create a new reality. "The Mirror," which Carballido calls a "curtain raiser," is an example-in-miniature of this concept. Here, as opposed to "The Golden Thread," the questioning of what is real is more narrowly focused, involving one character's perception of another. The confusion lies within Rubén, who perceives a fictitious reality, a creation of his imagination. It is he who imposes an ideal Alda upon the "real" Alda. The emergence of truth, through the process of disillusionment, reveals the Alda that the rest of the world sees, as she is literally stripped of the qualities with which Rubén's imagination had endowed her. Truth in this play is an interior process resulting from the dissolution of illusion in the mind of one of the characters.

The achievement of truth in "The Clockmaker from Córdoba" is more external, resulting from the active direction of don Leandro, the comic-sophisticate judge. The setting is seventeenth-century Mexico, shortly following the founding of Córdoba, in that country. "The Clockmaker" was inspired by a Chinese short story. Its author, Pu Sung-ling, from the Shantung province of China, is introduced into the fiction of the play when don Leandro tells Elvira (incidentally giving us a hint about her) that he has a friend in China who would be interested in her story. In transferring the story to Mexico, Carballido adds a few Mexican mythic touches with his use of dreams about the locality and his allusion to the legendary mulatto girl who traced the outline of a ship upon the walls of her cell, then boarded the ship and sailed away. There is, too, as in "The Golden Thread," an almost Gothic implication that *place* may have a mystery and influence of its own, as illustrated by don Leandro's questioning the wisdom of having founded Córdoba in its present location.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of "The Clockmaker" is Martín's involvement in the fiction of his own creation. In the framework of "what actually happens" from the beginning to the end of the play, "The Clockmaker" also includes two plays-within-a-play. Don Leandro quite consciously sets one play in motion in

the second act. The wily judge does not know the exact ending of his play, but he is convinced that it will work out to its logical conclusion, the apprehension of the guilty party.

Martín's play is much more complex and one realizes that he (unlike don Leandro) does not foresee to what extent he will be involved. Martín invents a play—the fictitious story of an assault and a robbery—and then is enmeshed as a real participant in the very real series of events that parallel his invention. It is only by the resolution of don Leandro's "play" that Martín is freed from the web of circumstances created by his own "play." The resolution of the two overlapping interior plays is also the resolution of the frame play; so that the apprehension of the real criminal serves three levels of reality, the two fictional plays and the "what really happens" of "The Clockmaker from Córdoba."

At the same time that its Greek heritage makes it the "oldest" play in the collection, "Theseus" is also the most "modern." Although the framework of Theseus' actions is precisely the same as that of his Greek prototype—necessarily so, since his acts are limited by the prefigurations of the myth—Carballido's Theseus is a distinctly modern man, one who could belong only to the twentieth century. He is determined to direct his own actions. He wants to be the consequence of his own acts, not the result of a fate oriented and directed by the gods. This Theseus does not become king because the gods have so ordained; he does not *forget* to raise the sails of triumph. He purposely and consciously raises the black sails of defeat, knowing that his father will throw himself from his cliff vantage-point and that thereby he, Theseus, will become king. By making himself responsible for his actions, Theseus loses the possible redemption and forgiveness available to those who perform acts that fulfill a prophecy. He is truly free, perhaps, but immeasurably more cruel, and completely devoid of love. Is this the inevitable punishment of destroying the gods?

Throughout the varied and various plays of this collection, Carballido manifests two principal concerns: the questioning and exploration of "what is reality," and the problem of the extent of

man's responsibility in his world. Many of the protagonists in these plays question where their responsibilities lie. Theseus, as just discussed, believes that his responsibility is to direct his *own* fate, to be free in the twentieth-century concept of freedom. Martín, in "The Clockmaker from Córdoba," finds that his first responsibility is to himself, to rid himself of self-delusion, to be true to himself so that he may then fulfill his responsibility to Casilda. The Nahuatl in "The Intermediate Zone" finds that his *engagement*, his commitment on behalf of another person, endows him with the responsibility that forces him to become a participant in the world of reality—a responsibility that is also man's unique privilege. Man-Silvestre's responsibility in "The Golden Thread" is that of revealing truth, and it is at this point that Carballido's two concerns become fused, since the question of truth is also the question of what constitutes reality.

In one way or another, each of the plays in this collection explores the latter question, each exists on some level of reality that is not generally conceded to be "real." Alda is two people, one to Rubén and another to the rest of the world. Martín, the clockmaker, is disconcerted to find that invention and reality have become one in his life. The Nonhumans of "The Intermediate Zone" face the ultimate limits of reality—eternity or evaporation—and each of the plays of the grotesque trilogy "The Time and the Place" probes the limits of the reality of love and time.

These two concerns—reality and responsibility—may be the two most important concerns of man throughout the history of his civilized existence. Emilio Carballido, through his creative ability and the variety of his invention, has provided what we know to be the greatest gift of the arts—new views and insights into the eternally important questions.

Margaret Sayers Peden

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