Introduction

The decade of the sixties witnessed a surge in popularity in Latin American prose unparalleled in the literary history of that area. The novel, which into the 1950s was considered, albeit wrongly, to be largely regionalist in scope and of relatively little universal consequence, by 1970 had emerged as a major force in world literature, and writers such as Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortázar, and João Guimarães Rosa were both highly acclaimed and widely translated. An equally significant, though less spectacular, metamorphosis from the regionalist to the universal occurred in Latin American drama during the same period, and the playwrights discussed in the present volume rank among the leaders in effecting this change.

Drama, of course, has long been a viable art form in Latin America. There is ample evidence, including a few extant plays, of some type of the theater among the pre-Columbian Indian civilizations, and for much of the colonial period religious orders in Spanish America and Brazil found the theater an effective medium for Christian indoctrination. Profane drama also began to take hold in the sixteenth century and came to the fore with such playwrights as the Mexicans Juan Ruiz de Alarcón (1580?–1639) and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648–1695), and the Peruvians Juan del Valle y Caviedes (1645–1697?) and Pedro de Peralta Barnuevo (1664–1743).

With the nineteenth century came Romanticism and *costumbrismo*, movements during which a great many plays were written in Mexico, Argentina, Colombia, and Brazil, but from which only a few significant playwrights emerged. Prominent among these were the Brazilians Luis Carlos Martins Pena (1815–1848) and Antônio Gonçalves Dias (1823–1864), the Peruvian Manuel Ascensio Segura (1805–1871), and the Mexican José Peón y Contreras (1843–1907).

Around the turn of the century a distinct movement sprang up and flourished, both in Brazil and in many parts of Spanish America. Much like Spain's *género chico*, this movement was characterized chiefly by a new kind of *costumbrista* theater and by other light forms, such as revues and operettas. The leader in Brazil was Artur Azevedo (1855–1908), while in the River Plate area, where the tradition was especially strong, Florencio Sánchez (1875–1910) was the acknowledged master. Several plays by these two dramatists, particularly Azevedo's *A Capital Federal* and Sánchez's *Barranca abajo*, have borne the test of time and are still quite playable today.

For most of the second and third decades of the twentieth century the theater

in Latin America was relatively moribund. A few playwrights from this period, almost all of them creators of social or thesis dramas, are worthy of note, none-theless. Among these are the Chileans Armando Moock (1894–1942) and Acevedo Hernández (1886–1962), the Uruguayan Ernesto Herrera (1886–1917), the Cuban José Antonio Ramos (1885–1946), and the Colombians Antonio Alvarez Lleras (1892–1956) and Luis Enrique Osorio (1886–1966).

The period between 1928 and 1943 is extremely important to Latin American drama, for it was during those years that a new consciousness of and concern for theater developed in almost all the countries with a significant literary tradition. Theatrical groups sprang up in many of the capitals, and there was renewed interest in so-called serious drama, with emphasis on trends and techniques of the contemporary European and American stages. In Mexico, for example, the Grupo de los Siete (1923) set Pirandello, Chekhov, O'Neill, and others as their models. Two subsequent organizations, the Grupo de Ulises (1928) and the Teatro Orientación (1932–1934 and 1938–1939), also followed universalist tendencies but, with the leadership of Celestino Gorostiza (1904–1967) and Xavier Villaurrutia (1903–1950), did much to foment the new Mexican theater as well.

In Cuba the Teatro de la Cueva group was founded in the early 1930s, as was the Teatro del Pueblo in Argentina. The Brazilian theater, which had lain virtually dormant since just after the turn of the century, came awake with a start in 1932 with the production of Joracy Camargo's (1898–1973) then highly controversial *Deus lhe Pague*. This and other works by Camargo, along with plays by Nelson Rodrigues (1912) and the technical advances introduced by the exiled Polish director Zbigniew Ziembinsky, served to revitalize Brazil's theater, which since the 1940s has been one of the best in Latin America.

In 1940, under the leadership of the playwright Emilio Belaval (1903), the Areyto group was founded in Puerto Rico to further theatrical activity, while in Chile the now famous ITUCH (Instituto de Teatro de la Universidad de Chile) and TEUC (Teatro Experimental de la Universidad de Chile) were established in 1941 and 1943 respectively.

These various groups and organizations, some of them short-lived and others of longer tenure, all served to encourage young dramatists and to promote theater in general, and, largely because of this stimulation, the 1940s and early 1950s witnessed a substantial upswing in dramatic activity. Of the playwrights who held sway during this period, several must be ranked among the foremost in the history of Latin American dramaturgy. Among them are Rodolfo Usigli (1905), the Mexican psychological and historical dramatist whose career spans the past four decades but whose best works remain *El gesticulador* (1937) and *Corona de sombra* (1943); Xavier Villaurrutia, the Mexican intellectual playwright whose *Invitación a la muerte* (1940) is considered one of the masterpieces of the theater in Spanish America; Samuel Eichelbaum (1894–1967), the Ar-

gentine psychological dramatist particularly noted for works such as *Un guapo de novecientos* (1940) and *Un tal Servando Gómez* (1942); Conrado Nalé Roxlo (1898–1970), the Uruguayan humorist best known for his fantasy *La cola de la sirena* (1941) and the farcical *Una viuda difícil* (1943); and Nelson Rodrigues (1912), the Brazilian naturalistic playwright whose *Vestido de Noiva* (1943), because of its daring theme and scenographic originality, marked a major turning point in that country's theater.

The five playwrights just mentioned, along with others, such as Mexico's Celestino Gorostiza and Salvador Novo (1904–1974), and Puerto Rico's Manuel Méndez Ballester (1909), very effectively ushered Latin America's theater into an unparalleled two decades of dramatic production and excellence and an accompanying swell in critical interest. These two decades, extending from the early 1950s to the present, constitute what may be termed the contemporary movement in Latin American theater. This movement began with the maturation of Brazil's Jorge Andrade, Mexico's Emilio Carballido, Argentina's Carlos Gorostiza, and several others, all of whom have continued to produce over the past twenty years.

While contemporary drama in Latin America is perhaps best characterized by its diversity—in type and in theme—the playwrights who have created this drama are united by a spirit of revolution, both in terms of aesthetics and often of sociopolitical values as well. Out of this revolutionary spirit has come a new order of message plays, incorporating such major European trends as existentialism, the theater of the absurd, and the theater of cruelty and of ritual. Surrealistic drama and the farce also continue to be found, but even here a new level of artistry is discernible.

The thesis play has a long and often uninspiring tradition in Latin America. This new generation of dramatists, however, has incorporated expressionistic devices and techniques in order to break the bonds of straightforward realism. The thematic variety possible within the category of thesis drama is virtually endless. Puerto Rico's René Marqués, in La carreta and La muerte no entrará en palacio, is extremely nationalistic, for example, while Chile's Egon Wolff, in Los invasores and Flores de papel, and Argentina's Osvaldo Dragún, in Y nos dijeron que éramos inmortales and other plays, pit new social and moral values against the old. Brazil's Alfredo Dias Gomes, meanwhile, has concerned himself with the conflict between individual liberty and structured society in such plays as O Pagador de Promessas and O Santo Inquérito, whereas Plínio Marcos, also from Brazil, has depicted the life of society's marginalia—prostitutes, pimps, petty thieves—in Dois Perdidos numa Noite Suja, Navalha na Carne, and several additional works.

Existentialism, through Sartre and Camus, has had strong influence in Latin American literature and has found its dramatic expression in such works as *La zona intermedia* by Carballido, *Las manos de Dios* by Carlos Solórzano (Guate-

mala and Mexico), *Juicio final* by José de Jesús Martínez (Panama), and *Funeral Home* by Walter Béneke (El Salvador).

Following the lead of Ionesco, Beckett, Adamov, and others, various Latin Americans have also written plays in the absurdist vein. The most successful of these has been the Chilean Jorge Díaz, whose early works, such as *Requiem por un girasol*, *El cepillo de dientes*, and *El velero en la botella*, reveal a close kinship with the writings of Ionesco. Antón Arrufat (Cuba), René Marqués, and Elena Garro (Mexico) have also employed in their works comparable techniques of fragmentation, distortion, and linguistic play.

The theater of cruelty and of ritual, inspired by Artaud and Genet, has also left its mark. Los siameses and El campo by Griselda Gambaro (Argentina) and Cuban José Triana's masterpiece La noche de los asesinos are brutal pieces designed to shock and at times sicken the audience into an awareness of the savagery and barbarity existing in modern society.

Several writers have found farce to be an appropriate vehicle for criticizing the maladies of the societies in which they live and work. Agustín Cuzzani is a leader in this tradition, with *Una libra de carne*, *El centroforward murió al amanecer*, and *Sempronio*, although various other playwrights have also experimented in this form, among them Emilio Carballido with his *Silencio*, *pollos pelones* and Dias Gomes with *Odorico*, *o Bem Amado*. These two writers are also known for their occasional experimentation with surrealistic forms, as in *La hebra de oro* and *O Santo Inquérito*.

One cannot, of course, speak solely in terms of playwrights and literary movements, for the production on stage, involving interpreters and directors, is the essence of theater. And herein lies the major problem for most Latin American dramatists, past and present. Only a relatively few major cities—Rio, São Paulo, Buenos Aires, Santiago, Lima, Mexico City, and possibly two or three others—have legitimate theatrical seasons, and even in these it is and has been commercially expedient to present a fare weighted with European and American hits. Thus, even playwrights from countries represented by these few cities have difficulty in getting their works staged, while those from other countries only rarely see true commercial productions of their plays. Additionally, dramatists and entrepreneurs in several countries are faced with severe political censorship. Many playwrights also find it difficult to encounter publishers for their works, and almost nowhere does there appear to be ample market to warrant large printings of plays that do manage to reach press.

In spite of these many problems, there has been encouraging progress on several fronts in recent years. A major advance has been the initiation of annual national or international theater festivals in at least a dozen Spanish American cities. Although in these festivals works by major European and American playwrights are occasionally staged, a large majority of the presentations are works by Latin Americans, and the participating dramatic companies, many of them

university groups, are almost without exception from Latin America. Thus, these festivals function as a much-needed forum for dramatists and acting companies alike.

Critical interest in Latin America's theater has also increased markedly over the past two decades. There are by now a goodly number of journals devoted exclusively to this theater. Yet another favorable sign has been the translation of plays into English as well as other Eastern and Western European languages. This, in turn, has facilitated the presentation, within the past few years, of works by José Triana, Alfredo Dias Gomes, Jorge Díaz, and several other top-ranked playwrights in the international theater capitals—New York, London, Paris, or Madrid. These and other dramatists are also being staged, in increasing numbers, by amateur and university groups in the United States and in certain European countries as well.

The theater in Latin America has, in summary, made great strides over the past twenty years. The playwrights represented in this volume continue to be active, while new talent is constantly being added. Vicente Leñero, Mexico's novelist turned dramatist, has developed very effectively the documentary drama, following the tradition of Brecht and Peter Weiss, in such plays as Pueblo rechazado and El juicio. Others who have used a similar form are Julio Ortega (Peru) in Mesa Pelada, a highly poetic and diversified account of the death of the guerrilla leader Luis de la Puente Uceda, and Fernando González Cajiao (Colombia) in Huellas de un rebelde, a medieval mystery-style documentary about the young Latin American rebel priests following Camilo Torres's example. Much of the theater continues to have a committed viewpoint; political and social injustices predominate in many parts of the Latin world. The multiple forms of repression are a part of this reality, which induces writers and creative artists to deal with these problems in whatever ways they can. Where some self-censorship is not operational, the government often takes explicit steps to impede the production of "subversive" plays. The promoters of the Third World movement many times have abandoned the commercial theater in favor of productions in the streets and barrios in order to bring a message to the people for whom even the minimal cost of a theater ticket is prohibitive. Many writers have adopted a radical stance in exposing these problems, in which the spectacular or shocking aspects of form reflect the theme. Manuel J. Arce (Guatemala) has captured the public's attention with Delito, condena y ejecución de una gallina. Julio Mauricio (Argentina) in Un despido corriente and Antonio Larreta (Uruguay) in Juan Palmieri have posed similar problems in slightly more conventional format. As a part of this movement, the development of the creación colectiva has become common; where texts have not been available or suitable, groups of dedicated people have developed their own. El asesinato de X is a creative effort by eight young Argentines that exposes brutality and repression in a very direct manner. The danger, of course, is

that a radical work will have little transcendent value if its agitprop aspects outweigh considerations of aesthetics or if it is too closely tied to a particular incident or point in time. A case in point is *El avión negro*, a collaborative work by four Argentines (Roberto Cossa, Germán Rozenmacher, Carlos Somigliani, and Ricardo Talesnik) predicated on Perón's future return to Argentina; in passing from the realm of myth to reality, the play loses some of its appeal.

In any event, from this vantage point, the future of the theater in Latin America looks promising, a condition that has been helped by the international attention it has both sought and received and that has brought about new levels of sophistication in playwrighting and in production.

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