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Review Of "Muerte Y Resurrección Del Teatro Chileno, 1973-1983" By G. Rojo

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Review
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Rojo’s excellent study of recent Chilean theater is composed of four principal essays. “Muerte y resurrección del teatro chileno,” the first, is a well-documented panorama of the development of both pre- and post-coup theater in Chile. The second, entitled “Cuatro piezas de la segunda mitad de los años setenta,” is a detailed study of four dramatic works that Rojo considers extremely important in the revival of Chilean theater that began in 1976. These plays include Pedro, Juan y Diego (ICTUS and David Benavente); ¿Cuántos años tiene un día? (ICTUS and Sergio Vodanovic); Los payasos de la esperanza (Taller de Investigación Teatral, Raúl Osorio and Mauricio Presutic) and Tres Marias y una Rosa (Taller de Investigación Teatral and David Benavente). “Agosto y septiembre de 1982,” the third essay, contains a review of the 1982 winter theater season in Chile. This section, in fact, constitutes a critical parody, for the author’s intention is to communicate to his reader the shortsightedness of such reviews, which too often comment on only a very small part of what is happening theatrically, particularly under dictatorships. “La obra dramática y la obra teatral,” the book’s final essay, is, from a theoretical standpoint, an insightful commentary on the differences between theater and other genres in general, and between the dramatic text and the staged work in particular.

For Rojo the period of Chile’s modern theater begins in the latter part of the nineteenth century and coincides with the emergence of modern capitalism. He perceives three distinct stages in the evolution of Chile’s theater during the twentieth century: 1) commercial theater or what he calls “el teatro de digestión” and which includes works as diverse as the sainete, the alta comedia, melodrama and even vaudeville. This type reached its peak in the thirties and forties and today some vestiges can still be found in Chile. 2) University theater emerges in the fifties precisely when commercial theater begins to decline, and ceases to exist with the military coup of 1973. 3) Around the beginning of 1976 a new independent theater makes its presence felt and it is this theater which constitutes the principal focus of Rojo’s book.

Throughout the pages of his study Rojo underscores the antagonistic relationship that exists between theater and dictatorship. Theater, he contends, is always perceived by dictatorial regimes as a dangerous adversary because of the impact of its voice upon a nation and its people. This was particularly the case in Chile after the 1973 coup and he cites as evidence the violence unleashed by the military regime specifically upon theater companies, actors, directors and producers. He stresses that these individuals were detained, arrested, and even tortured not for taking part in illegal protests or clandestine meetings but for exercising their craft. Theater represents a threat to dictatorship because it is always one of the
first of the arts to respond to society's need to address its immediate reality. Rojo believes that such a phenomenon occurred in Chile around the beginning of 1976 and that it coincided with the first signs of a theater that sought to portray the nation within a socio-political framework. He cites the following plays as the first manifestations of this tendency: ICTUS’ Pedro, Juan y Diego, Teatro Imagen's and Luis Rivano's Te llamabas Rosicler, the Grupo Feria's Hojas de Parra, and Taller de Investigación Teatral's Los payasos de la esperanza. In other words, a theater that had been virtually silent since the coup, except for an occasional production of the classics, began to reassert itself and express what was happening within the country. Rojo believes that this theater, which develops in the second half of the seventies, embodies a third and distinctive stage in the history of modern Chilean theater.

One of the principal distinguishing features of this “new” theater is economic in nature. Unlike the university theater of the sixties and seventies Rojo shows how it has moved from being a subsidized theater to one that is independently financed. In addition to its financial independence, it has also produced a collective collaboration between professional actors and writers in the composition of a play. ¿Cuántos años tiene un día? by ICTUS and Sergio Vodanovic, Tres Marías y una Rosa by Taller de Investigación Teatral and David Benavente, and Sueños de Mala Muerte by ICTUS and José Donoso are just a few of the examples cited by Rojo. From his point of view, such joint ventures have blurred the boundary between dramatic literature and theatrical representation to such an extent that they have produced the least literary and most theatrical of any theater to have developed in Chile. Rojo underscores that its theatricality is in no way to be equated with what has come to be known in recent years as “living theater.” On the contrary, Chile’s new directors speak to their public not as an abstract entity but as a public that is concrete and identifiable within a socio-political context. For Rojo the public has become the personal interlocutor of the cast of characters. To understand theater in Chile today is to understand, then, the unique interplay between its public and its actors. In such a repressive society the theater offers Chileans a voice and a place to express their yearning for freedom. According to Rojo, it has granted Chileans the opportunity to regain their collective voice as a people and as a nation.

Although Rojo's study of Chilean independent theater makes up the greatest part of his book, he does comment briefly and insightfully on university and secondary-school theater, the theater of the slums, campesino theater and workers’ theater. The one area that he does not address, and which he proposes for future study, is that of Chilean theater written in exile.

Muerte y resurrección del teatro chileno, 1973–1983 is a superbly written contribution to the study of contemporary Chilean theater. Ambitious in
its coverage, it offers its reader not only a clear and concise overview of twentieth-century Chilean theater but also a detailed analysis of specific plays, a theoretical framework from which to understand theater as a genre, and an evaluation of the unique role played by theater in Chile today.

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Esteban Echeverría pertenece a ese paradójico contingente de escritores hispanoamericanos cuyo renombre está cifrado principalmente en un texto. Jorge Isaacs (María, 1867), Mariano Azuela (Los de abajo, 1915) y José E. Rivera (La Vorágine, 1924) entre otros, figuran de manera prominente en esa amplia cofradía un tanto desfigurada por los caprichos de la historia-grafía literaria y por otros intereses coyunturales. Pero el caso de Echeverría nos parecerá aún más desconcertante. Cabe recordar que casi todo su prestigio literario se afirma en “El matadero,” relato que él escribió al margen de otros empeños y que Echeverría, al parecer, consideró como una secuencia de apuntes ocasionales no destinados a la imprenta. Fue su amigo Juan María Gutiérrez quien rescató, póstumamente, el relato que en 1821 publicaría la Revista del Río de la Plata. Desde otra perspectiva, no menos paradójica, la obra de Echeverría anticipará, en las letras hispanoamericanas, esa desbordada vocación proselitista que tantas veces asfixia al texto literario. Como bien lo documenta el profesor Knowlton, la obra de Echeverría fluctuó desasosegadamente entre la vocación creativa y los escritos de consignas, derivados estos últimos de un obvio afán de protagonismo político.

Concretamente el estudio de Knowlton está centrado en la proyección autobiográfica de Echeverría y en el contexto social e histórico que sirve de marco a su producción literaria. El libro está diseñado primordialmente para lectores de habla inglesa no familiarizados con el devenir de la literatura hispanoamericana. Pero me parece oportuno señalar que los textos de Echeverría se comentan, en este estudio, desde una perspectiva amplia y documentada que repetidamente los vincula a las manifestaciones diversas del romanticismo europeo. En una nota dedicatoria a su poema “Elvira o la novia del Plata,” Echeverría confesaría a su amigo José María Fonseca: “Excuso hablarme de las novedades introducidas en mi poema y de que no hallara modelo ninguno en la poesía castellana, siendo su origen la poesía del siglo, la poesía romántica inglesa, francesa, alemana, por que