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Peruvian Political Theatre and its Connections to Human Rights Movements

Luis A. Ramos-Garcia

This essay describes and theorizes the work of contemporary Peruvian theatre as defined by the political atmosphere that reigned from 1970s to the early 21st century. From the beginning, this type of political theatre served different masters and was produced for different consumers. For example, Shining Path Guerrilla used theatre (1978-1983) in order to recruit soldiers for its war against the government; on the other hand Peruvian groups used theatre to protest against human rights abuses by the government and communist guerrillas alike; and even the government itself used performance to convince the public that it was defeating leftist guerrillas. At the end of the armed conflict, the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (2001-2003) worked side by side with Peruvian theatre groups to provide a voice to those silenced by the terrible actions and consequences of a civil war.

This essay reveals the close connection between Peruvian theatre and human rights movements, providing hermeneutical analysis of changes within Peruvian theatre, its live performance, and its dramatic critical theories and texts. Its body of argumentation foregrounds the political contexts of its objects of study, and highlights their artistic status as cultural artifacts that define and deconstruct inequality and difference while proposing a reordered Peruvian society. At first glance the Peruvian theatre corpus may seem to be based on a random collection of topics and artistic postures touching on aesthetics and the history of ideas, political theory, cultural displacement, dissent, and art before it gradually shifts its tone toward a more visceral critical response to everyday realities. A careful reading, however, should quickly dispel this first impression. Analyzing briefly the social and political history of independent theatre in Peru, we realize that its main objective has been to provide a grounded historical context for concepts such as cultural pluralism, multiculturalism, cultural diversity, and the interlocking issue of identity construction: this is what Mario Delgado and Cuatrotablas named as “the recovery of memory,” and others call “resisting/fighting amnesia.” From on-site field research, deep in the Andes as well as in Lima’s shantytowns, to

1 Founder of the prestigious theatre group Cuatrotablas from Lima, Peru, Mario Delgado and his group celebrated 40 years of hard work on behalf of the independent Peruvian theatre in 2011. In July 2012, Delgado was presented with Peru’s Survival Award for his role in the creation of eight different generations of Cuatrotablas artists since 1971.

more distanced theoretical inquiry, and in an atmosphere of intensified global interrelations, these imaginative groups have shown the legitimacy and potential of multiple discursive strategies to reveal the nurturing relationships between people, theatre, and culture. Politically committed, disciplined, rigorous, and learned, these artists turned into atypical researchers, confronting five centuries of stereotypes and critically deconstructing commonly accepted images concerning race, class, immigration, social status, gender, and ethnicity.³

As Peruvian theatres have always been loci of political expression, the voices represented in their playhouses addressed questions as to why theatre writ large had been previously perceived as a principal disseminator of dominant ideologies and why it had become a commonplace for intellectual scorn, collective response, and even societal upheaval. Only now we come to realize that for the past 40 years, Victor Zavala Cataño’s Teatro campesino (1979)⁴ as well as Cuatrotablas and Yuyachkani—two of the most highly respected and impressive Peruvian theatre collectives—have been relentlessly documenting and staging counter-cultured theatrical versions of indigenous migration patterns toward the centers of creole political domination. Furthermore, it was Mario Delgado, who was the first one to realize that these new city arrivals not only benefited from the political gains of the 70s and 80s, but that they also coincided with the appearance of large groups of previously disconnected citizens such as urban impoverished and displaced city dwellers.⁵ Together with Quechua speakers from the Andes, these internal migrants soon demanded recognition of civil and individual rights encouraged by street and staged theatre representations of a hybrid culture that overwhelmed an otherwise “only-Spanish speaking” population. Benefiting from José María Arguedas’ newly discovered “Andean Spanish language,” and influenced by a sociological process of cholification (shifting in racial patterns), many groups began exploring the impact of live performances and bicultural theatre for bicultural and culturally mixed audiences. Their performances served as powerful conduits for crucial lessons on social gains and cultural pride, while rejecting negative images concerning tradition, political power, race, language issues, and ethnicity.⁶

³ See MOTIN-PERU (Movimiento de teatro independiente del Perú), an association of more than 250 theatre groups across Peru. It was founded in 1985, and launched a new era in 1990.

⁴ See Teatro campesino, by V. Zavala Cataño, 1969, La Cantuta, Peru: Ediciones Universidad Nacional de Educación. The volume features seven plays: El gallo/The rooster, La gallina/The hen, La yunta/The yoke, El turno/The turn, El arpista/The harpist, and El cargador/The loader. He is associated with Teatro de los penales/Prison Theatre, an artistic and political movement created by and for the Movimiento de artistas populares/Popular Artist Movement, which failed to infiltrate MOTIN-PERU groups. Zavala Cataño’s plays were used to recruit combatants for the upcoming wars (1980-1992). He was captured by the military first in 1987 and then in 1991; he was sentenced to 25 years in jail.

⁵ A large percentage of Lima’s inhabitants were renters who faced eviction during the 50s and mid-60s. Some of them were forced to move into “urbanizaciones/new settlements,” but many others invaded Lima’s surroundings creating a number of shantytowns. Used to the advantages of well-established Lima’s districts, many people felt a sense of displacement and uprooting when they moved to places without water, sewage, or electricity.

Zavala Cataño’s dramaturgy shows that the complex interplay between reality and performance produces an unstable reality that perfectly suits the writing and rewriting of a new history, interrupted only by verbal and non-verbal expressions of violence and power, essential elements to the dramatic portrayal of victims and victimizers in contemporary Peruvian theatre. Driven by an unbridled aggression only abusive power can sanction, their interaction evokes an image of pain, oppression, and inhumanity, whose powerful effects demonstrate the multiple functions of a committed theatre with an undeniable symbolic power. Zavala Cataño’s dramatic treatment of such subjects reveals a deep ethical concern with the essence of power and its most elemental ways of exercising it. This is articulated philosophically and socially in the relation between dominator/dominated and can be found in the seven pieces of Zavala’s Teatro campesino/Peasant Theatre. The problematic relation of subordination and domination established by verbal and physical abuse are not produced in isolation, but they appear to be inserted in and/or related to social groups, family, marriage, and even natural forces. The exercise of power is usually seen in marginal theatre as a concretization of practices subjected to restrictions, prohibitions, censorship, and violent sanctions emanating from the institutionalized power as well as from daily interpersonal relations. In this manner, the dramatic discourse involves a critical view of the relations, mechanisms, complicity, and the ambivalent pleasure of power that is found broadly spread across the social milieu. Zavala Cataño’s work reveals a meaningful approach to internal problems that are developed within the patriarchal system, at home and at the state level, suggesting in the process symbols that are the reflection of a larger authoritarian political model. Under this patriarchal structure, it becomes clear why military or civilian dictators found it necessary to exercise their domination/subordination scheme beyond gendered spaces, for it was in the feminine zone where their power was amplified and applied with extreme cruelty.7

With the general decline of the political right, the intensification of guerrilla warfare, and the collapse of dictatorship, the new Peruvian independent theatre moved its attention from the center to the periphery, articulating problems and needs of groups traditionally ostracized by entrenched cultural elites. Independent collective theatre groups with recognizable connections to the cultures they represented—powerful cultural discourses replacing Eurocentric ideologies—continued to explore a rich range of works in almost every field, having a significant impact inside and outside of their “imagined” communities. Following in the path of Augusto Boal (Brasil), Santiago García (Colombia), and Enrique Buenaventura (Colombia), Miguel Rubio and Mario Delgado’s new objectives were to bypass the traditional Eurocentric cultural analysis of Latin American literatures and theatres, concentrated now on a variety of theoretical works produced by and for Peruvians, coming from both the social sciences and the

7 Cruelty against feminine figures in Argentina, Chile, and Peru are cases at hand. And yet, even when the dramatic texts reveal the arbitrariness of masculine power, Zavala Cataño’s plays as well as many other independent plays are highly critical of the complicity of feminine figures, reinforcing a submissive attitude towards authoritarian/patriarchal values. In fact, by supporting and reproducing the myth of the “macho,” female characters not only deny their own identity, but they also accelerate their fragmentation and exclusion by tolerating passively the use and abuse of power.
humanities. The immediate objective was to emphasize the true meaning of pluralism in our societies by studying the dramatic production of every group on its own terms following their own logic, and their own historical conditions as analyzed by themselves. And yet, to gain universal recognition, these new interpretations needed to be highly competitive by bringing out the true context of a Peruvian heterogeneous culture where “the other” was encouraged to abandon its alienated stance to break with a silence of 500 years, as we can see in Yuyachkani’s Músicos ambulantes/The Traveling Musicians, Cuatrotablas’s La nave de la memoria/The Ship of Memory, in Ana Correa’s Rosa Cuchillo/Rosa Knife, and once again in Cuatrotablas’s Los ríos profundos/Deep Rivers. Many Peruvians were astounded when Arguedas’ pongos (Indian silent servants) came out of their shells to tell their stories on the stage or when Correa’s Rosa Cuchillo, an Indian woman returning from the afterlife, walked among the living encouraging silenced Andean communities inhabitants to testify before Peru’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission about the catastrophic civil war that resulted in 70,000 deaths between 1980 and 1992.⁸

At a much different level, the theatrical nature of the taking of hostages by Peru’s Movimiento Revolucionario Tupac Amaru (December 17, 1996) signaled the potential impact certain aspects of performance may have upon politics especially when televised and broadcast widely. Fourteen MRTA guerrillas, as the world was watching (via CNN), lost their lives to Peruvian forces that massacred them, proving the existence of a whole system geared to brutalize the dissenter and the marginal, and very often the innocent or the bystander. Drawing again on the country’s realities, Peruvian playwrights found and created artistic links between political actors, such as MRTA leader Serpa Cartolini, and fictional urban characters who molded their lives according to their own perceptions of justice and civil disobedience. Not to be left behind, the brutal script of President Fujimori’s political agenda, rehearsed on the earlier capture of Shining Path’s leader Abimael Guzman in 1992, called for a street performance that addressed the lives and concerns of a Peruvian and international audience in a way few theatre pieces had. Emerging from an imaginary battlefield, Fujimori not only wore a bullet-proof vest (an hour after his army had stormed the Japanese compound, as shown by CNN subtitles), but he also addressed Peruvians and the rest of the world (via CNN) from the roof of a car stationed right in the center of a street, cleverly staging a rehearsed speech—including crocodile tears—not only to celebrate his triumph over the evil leftist guerrillas, but to warn the population about his determination to

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⁸ Peru’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established in June 2001 to examine abuses committed during the 1980s and 1990s, when Peru experienced the worst political crisis in the history of the Republic. On August 28, 2003, the Commission—formed by members of many sectors of civil society, including scholars, journalists, sociologists, priests, and artists—presented its final report to President Alejandro Toledo. For a description of Peru’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, check its official website at http://www.cverdad.org.pe. Also see Truth Commissions: A Comparative Assessment, by H. J. Steiner, 1997, Cambridge, MA: World Peace Foundation. Another casualty during those years was a resilient Peruvian independent theatre that closely registered a cultural clash that in 1982 brought from life to the stage, a naive desire for a permanent peace and national harmony as depicted by Yuyachkani’s The Traveling Musicians.
repress any type of civil disobedience. \(^9\) Weeks later, a puppet Congress approved for the third time the modification of the Peruvian Constitution which allowed Fujimori to seek his third reelection as president.

Thirty years later, current Peruvian theatre still generates a situation that presents a cultural agenda affected by social and historical circumstances that some critics find external but crucial to the production of theatre. For instance, if we agree that theatre is a cultural and social instrument of first magnitude, to favor the production and dissemination of certain theatrical texts means to privilege and openly validate certain cultural models, thus effectively devaluing or ignoring others in the process. Recent Peruvian critical theories are working to re-frame the study of drama in its historical, theoretical, performance, and practical contexts. Each of those areas are undergoing conceptual and methodological shifts in the move towards a new theorized field of theatre study, e.g. Peruvian thinkers reflecting on theatre history, theory, and performance have made considerable contributions incorporating street, popular, and community theatre practices. Moreover, in recent years, “new or independent” popular theatre has proved a vital and energizing challenge to the Spanish-only, male-oriented bias in writing, teaching, and research. For these theatre groups and playwrights, trying to disqualify or obstruct the current and abundant, alternative and dissonant theatrical discourses is a war fought and lost, for in such a dispute—canonical hegemony versus marginality—underlies the new aesthetic conception of a generation of Peruvian dramatists that emerged from the 70s to the first years of the 21st century: Mario Deldago, Willy Pinto, Fernando Zevallos, and Bruno Ortiz as well as Miguel Rubio\(^10\) continue to be at the forefront of this transformation.

The socio-historical development of a diverse, alternative, and independent theatre, infused with a critical balance of a postmodern Western outlook, came to renew the production of experimental popular, ritualistic, and marginal theatre sub-genres at the expense of an already obsolete and antiquated artistic approach. This was not accidental, for an in-depth study of what is known as “street and shantytown theatres,” i.e. artistic representations performed in economically depressed outlying areas of Lima such as the Northern and Southern theatrical cones\(^11\) reveals in its own way a connec-

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\(^9\) As MRTA’s hostages declared for the international media, Fujimori’s theatrical antics were outdone by Opus Dei Catholic Cardinal (Juan Luis Cipriani) and by a Red Cross representative who, taking advantage of their “neutrality,” introduced spying microphones into the compound inside of a Bible and a guitar. The microphones allowed the military to locate the specific places and whereabouts of the guerrillas.

\(^10\) Bruno Ortiz—an avant garde and experimental theatre director—has turned into a provocative film director whose work aims to provide meaning to a barbaric period of Peruvian history (1980-1992). Miguel Rubio is the director of Lima’s theatre collective Grupo Cultural Yuyachkani. Committed to political and cultural change in Peru since 1971, he has worked with different theatrical modes and narrative structures to stage the effects of social fragmentation and political violence on the day-to-day Peruvian subject. Willy Pinto is the director of Maguey founded in 1982 and Fernando Zevallos is the director of La Tarumba founded in 1984. Both groups are in Lima.

\(^11\) The Northern and Southern cones are geographical points of reference within the city of Lima. The cones hold more than 3 million inhabitants. They increased their population after General
tion with Cuba’s conscientization process (political self-awareness), with Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed and Teatro Arena in Brasil, as well as with other urban marginal theatres whose practitioners decided to rewrite their own historical paradigms. Further studies on these sub-genres and on shantytown audience responses made clear that a coherent method of theatre performance had emerged from the incorporation of cathartic features, from an attempt to create an authentic national theatre—versus a theatre dictated by Spanish-European standards—and from a desire to satisfy the educational and cultural needs of an expectant but alienated and marginalized Indian/mixed community. Reflecting not only on the needs of its audiences, but also modifying the foundations of theatrical exploration and writing, this new approach went beyond the stage, embracing the participation of educators, political activists, therapists, social workers, government officials, and grassroots leaders whose devotion to critical thought and action facilitated the understanding and inclusion of issues ranging from national identity, racism, gender relations, feminist pedagogy, loneliness, and political impotence.

True to its indigenous ritualistic ways and to its popular culture, the majority of the outcast population of Lima viewed street theatre not only as means of entertainment and education, but as a way to acquire a socio-political and a critical understanding of its own precarious reality. Predominantly of mestizo origin, many of those shantytowns contain in themselves microcosms of sectors of the highlands and coastal provinces, each one of them self-contained and with cultural expressions and ties that differ from those of the neighboring towns. This cultural richness has brought about new forms of social resistance and has nourished a number of independent theatre groups that at the same time are subject matter for and participants in these performances. By divorcing themselves from mainstream and commercial theatre—overlooking adverse economic conditions and defying authoritarian governments that define theatre as a subversive tool for political awareness—these associations have created an unorthodox but effective instrument of social reconstruction. And yet, Presidents Alan Garcia and Alberto Fujimori targeted street theatre performers by at best accusing them of vagrancy and encouraging disobedience, and at worst, by sympathizing with the “Shining Path,” a bloody guerrilla group at war with Peru. As several theatre groups disbanded, were jailed, or disappeared, many others moved their performances to shantytown plazas and schools, places avoided by the police because of high crime or simply because some towns were declared liberated territory by guerrilla insurgents. In those areas, the (new) independent theatre questioned issues that the national theatre was incapable of handling before, e.g. the way ethnic groups perceived each other and the ruling “other,” the

Juan Velasco Alvarado (1970s) allowed the creation of numerous shantytowns. Several MOTINPERU major theatre groups reside and work there.

heterogeneous character of their iconic cultural manifestations, how they expressed their conflicting reality, and after long periods of military dictatorship, the search for the very essence of a true national collectivity or national identity.

During the 80s and 90s, the uneven implementation of modernization (privatization) forced shantytown dwellers to rely more than ever on informal/illegal ways of fighting the exasperating recession that hounded most of them. The expected wealth of modernization, and the consumer-free market society only benefited those who could pay for it: the rich and upper-middle classes. Although this is not so much the case nowadays, there are still other factors that need to be reckoned with, such as economic dependency, internal structural violence, migration, and a competition for public legitimacy by the traditional other, all factors that should be explored before conducting a real assessment of the contemporary situation of Peruvian performing arts. The democratic demands of these diverse social groups, as expressed through their artistic productions, is what the independent theatre is interested in staging. While these groups stage a series of living-statements closely related to what “the Postmodern Condition” means for human beings living in Peru: for them, Postmodernism is just another way to impose an artificial cultural colonialism. In this respect, Peru is a place where Postmodernism finds cultures considered “high” and “low” coexisting side by side, along with traditional values associated with the elite and interwoven with popular folklore. It is in Peru where the meddling of the Spanish cultural paradigm prevails along with indigenous and African rituals and mythologies, leaving an indelible mark on its visual and performing arts. Thus, Peru’s culture is truly an imposition of layers of historical segments that share diverse modes of cultural and artistic production and knowledge—archaic, folkloric, modern, and postmodern—without one clearly taking over the other. This unresolved simultaneity may be precisely why a feeling of crisis seems to permeate most of the scientific, or pseudo-scientific, approaches to Peruvian culture.

Recent Peruvian plays openly explore the formation of the heterogeneous character of its people and culture, defining new forms of resistance to both old-native “criollo” and new-foreign cultural influences. The recent appearance of Protestant religious groups (50 million plus in the continent), the activism of the Catholic Church (Theology of Liberation/Opus Dei), the adherence to ecological movements, and the inclusion of marginal voices who had never had a saying in previous discourses, dramatic or otherwise, are cultural artifacts which somehow are finding their way into the new theatrical discourse. In addition, the construction of a feminist dramatic discourse in Peru and its theatrical production allows a fresh approach to a series of themes associated with gender issues such as the deconstruction of patriarchal societies, the unsettling of behavioral and biological reproductive patterns, the articulation of gendered roles and institutions, the irruption into the public sphere traditionally dominated by men, the acquisition of a new public identity beyond traditional family values, and the emergence of “mixed-race” women in the bourgeois world. Challenging social class differences, Peruvian women playwrights stage, not only within shantytown boundaries but also in Lima’s traditional wealthy districts, a consciousness-raising theatre which openly denounces “old and perverted habits” of the petit-bourgeoisie, among them the sexual abuse (impregnation and abandonment) of female servants by the male household head and his male relatives. As many shantytown women work as servants for the
privileged classes, these plays transform the stage into a living space for discussion, freedom of expression, and catharsis.\(^{13}\)

The move from rural settings to urban centers has created a mixed society and new cultural parameters. There are now apocalyptic scenarios where most of the daily life dramas are rehearsed and played to a numbed population already saturated with violence and despair, unemployment, homelessness, poverty, and domestic and public corruption. As a result, migration, whether national or international, forced or voluntary, has become a major factor in the life of many Peruvians. With the apparent recovery of tradition and its connecting ties, Peru is also experiencing an ill-directed resurfacing of utopias, demanding radical understandings of old problems, as in the case of newly-formed guerrilla groups composed mainly by unsettled rural and urban indigenous people.\(^{14}\) Largely as a result of its closeness to and immediate impact on its public, the theatre has stood at the forefront of Peru's liberation efforts to such violence. Regardless of differences in language, generation, gender, and national origin, Peruvian theatre depicts violence by means of a successful fusion of socio-political commitment and creative stagecraft with forms of expression adequate to convey a reaction to the harsh social, economic, and political realities of the country. The new plays mounted their attack on reality primarily by undermining the foundation of history (national or regional) and by suggesting that if people cannot trust historical reality, then their current reality may also be in doubt. Reality may only be a figment of someone’s imagination, and it can be created quite easily by almost anyone. Based on such an understanding, the independent theatre went through Peru’s history, culture, folklore, and myths, searching out new explanations for the current state of affairs in the country.

Although real persons end up neutralized by an organized system that has little respect for the human and civil rights of its citizens, plays such as La nave de la memoria (Cuatrotablas), Adios Ayacucho (Yuyachkani), Jacinto Ichma (Fernando Ramos), or Antigona (Teresa Ralli) somehow subverted the traditional order by diminishing and prevailing over the fear inspired by the almighty father-state. If we see it this way, the protagonists could only be represented as oppressed individuals but never as defeated ones; thus, they are presented in constant struggle with the official order on all fronts. The reality of the fiction in the above mentioned plays is recognizable and could be preserved by the collective memory, becoming a political metaphor that reflects the reality of the traumatized Peruvian state in the 90s and by proxy, the omnipresent dictatorial worlds of several Latin American countries.\(^{15}\)


\(^{14}\) Periodically and across 2012, Peru's newspapers and TV political programs informed the public about the return of small militarized Shining Path guerrilla groups as well as the increase of subversive activism at the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos in Lima.

\(^{15}\) National responses to a country’s traumatic past range from amnesty to prosecution and jail sentences for the perpetrators, and from public acknowledgment of trespasses to partial financial
The current Peruvian independent theatre underlines the crisis of a timid realist theatre, aiming to discard conventional themes expressed through conformist language. The current emphasis on new techniques, the rupture as means of search, the reevaluation of formal aspects, the struggle against “good conscience,” the politicization of themes and situations, and freedom as an ethical and artistic value, form a vigorous theatrical movement that challenges utopias over reality. While the initial impetus behind traditional Peruvian playwrights has been the incorporation of marginalized sectors of the population into the social fabric in a way that would not threaten state hegemony, the new theatrical process has instead created a space for social transformation and political empowerment. When these new playwrights introduce themes such as lack of adequate resources, the fight against venality, political corruption, sexual harassment, racism, and other social aberrations, it is then that the theatre becomes a tool in people’s hands: a tool against exploitative mechanisms and practices, and a tool to help transform the prevailing oppressive structures in the urban environment. In each case, instead of glorifying victimization, the aim is to create theatre that truthfully depicts the audience’s own experiences of injustice and oppression, and more importantly, to provide a catalyst for action aimed at solving the problems faced by the community as a whole.

References


