

“NEW THEATRICALITIES AND THEATRE CRITICISM IN CHILE”

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In this presentation I will be dealing with theatre criticism published in Chilean newspapers. I will not refer to academic criticism which belongs to another field.

Chilean Background on Theatre Criticism

Chile became an independent country in 1810, so its theatre tradition is not a long one. In its origin theatre criticism was more of a social commentary; much more attention was given to the kind of people who attended the play than the actual production (who they were, or what sort of clothes or hats some ladies wore for the occasion). Theatre critic columns appeared on a couple of leading newspapers in order to give just a short view of the play which was mainly a reference to its story line. In most cases the evaluation depended on the intensity of the audience applauses. No specificity of theatrical elements was considered at all and if any this was to say a word about the main actor or actress' performance which was usually defined in quite stereotyped terms. These characteristics remained until the middle of the XX century and in many ways they were a reflection of the basic forms theatre practice had.

This was the general situation until the 1940's when a great movement of theatre renovation took place in Chile led by the most important Chilean universities: Universidad de Chile and Catholic University of Chile. Two main theatre schools and companies were created and they definitely established the new conditions for the so called "art theatre" in the country. This meant a new approach to the role of the theatre director, professional acting techniques and theatre design. As a consequence, theatre criticism had to respond to the many changes produced on the stage and critics slowly began to deal with the new material of theatre practice as well as theatre writing, a fundamental part in the renovation process. Thus, critics became the voice that had to get acquainted with the new stuff and transmit it to the theatre goers.

Specially important for this purpose was the weekly art magazine **ProArte**, the only media that gave a full page to theatre news, theatre articles and theatre reviews between the end of the of the 40's and the next decade. This publication was not only a means to spread out the innovations of the theatre and the coming Chilean authors but also an excellent agent for the knowledge of new authors from abroad. Its commitment with the dramatic art has been a very valuable source for the study and understanding of the process that Chilean theatre underwent during the 40's and its coming development in the 1950's and 60's.

I have referred to this particular publication because it is where I have found some of the best theatre reviewers. They made their best to be up dated with theatre practice novelties and coming authors in order to process the material and provide the readers with more specialized knowledge. **ProArte** theatre critics were very successful. In fact, they formed a whole generation of audiences, what should be the expected results of a good theatre critic.

The evolution of theatre practice and theatre criticism has not always coincided as in the example given above. There have been times when critics would not respond as quick and adequately with the new explorations in the theatre.

Even when theatre critics were absolutely fascinated with the vigorous theatricalities that came during the late 1980`s together with the end of dictatorship in Chile, it was not easy to adapt to a language capable of expressing into words the highly visual and physical characteristics that a number of Chilean companies had discovered. Critics mainly dealt with them by describing the phenomena and it took some time to develop a new critical approach. It is also true that the coming theoretical material provided by Pavis, Ubersfeld, De Marinis, to mention only a few names, was unknown due to translation and other obstacles. Dictatorship cultural isolation is responsible for this.

Interesting moments for the theatre critics` development in our mass media were the late 80`s and the whole decade of the 90`s. There is a series of new companies and directors such as “Fin de siglo” run by Ramon Griffero a cinema theatre tendency; “Gran Circo Teatro” directed by Andrés Perez, trained by Arianne Mnouchkine; “Teatro del Silencio”, a mime collective whose work involved intensive physicality, music and poetic images; “La Troppa”, another group specialized in puppetry and object work; and “La Memoria” led by Alfredo Castro, a group that experimented with marginal and criminal world transformed into a highly aesthetic material on the stage. All of these companies became a great stimulus for critics to apprehend new conceptions of texts and *mis en scene*.

Theatre Criticism Now

After this wonderful revival of theatre and theatre criticism by the end of the XX century, theatre criticism turned to be repetitive and *cliché*, a kind of exhausted practice. This is why in the abstract of this paper I propose that theatre criticism in most of our leading mass media has become an old fashion way of dealing with new theatre materials. I will attempt to explain why and in order to do this I will point out its main weaknesses:

The telling of the story: the recurrent temptation to give a complete account of the story. This usually occupies an exaggerated space within the column given for the theatre review.

The introduction of the author and the subject matter. This general and necessary background occupies in most cases, more than a half of the space thus leaving poor attention to the performance itself.

Descriptive nature of visual, spatial and sound elements: in many reviews the description replaces analysis. This has become more than common, so when I happen to read long descriptions without any particular view, I already know that the critic is by-passing personal opinion or probably dislikes the piece. Perhaps this is the most common strategy but it is not what theatre goers expect to find when reading a theatre review.

Poor acting evaluation: the performance analysis has a secondary place. If any, this would be too general and with no clear support. Ambiguity will be also a common way to refer to the work of actors and actresses. As for the role of the director this is also poorly touched.

The question of the original text: fidelity or infidelity regarding the text is a constant worry among critics. What is the model behind every play? This seems to be a crucial point that many critics feel they have to defend or attack.

Lack of technical concepts: more than technical concepts what is necessary for the practice of theatre criticism is to know how to deal with the specificity of theatre elements. In this respect, critics avoid this and in the end the difference between the reviews of a film, a novel or a play is rather hard to tell.

In order to illustrate what I have pointed out as the main flaws of our present theatre critics I am going to refer to a recent production of **A Doll's House** by Ibsen, directed by one of the most talented Chilean directors, Alfredo Castro. (Teatro Nacional, October, 2006).

I am afraid I am going to be too didactic. I will examine one review published a few days after the opening. Since you all know the play, I thought it was going to be clear enough to observe the points already indicated. I chose the one most read within our medium. (Diario *El Mercurio*, October 9th, 2006).

Here we are in front of a column of approximately 300 words. Its title announces "Outstanding tribute to Ibsen" (I wish you could read Spanish, but I have translated some of its parts for you). Within the first introductory paragraph one can read "this is a contemporary, most attractive and stimulating version of *A Doll's House*", and "it has a great emotional density". Such an opening anticipates an appealing review. However the next two

paragraphs deal with Ibsen`s obvious background and also with an ambiguous idea about the director`s choice. The third paragraph speaks about the scenography, “there is an urgent and dense atmosphere of unsatisfied and threatening violence”. It is not at all clear why we may feel that. In fact the scenography in this version constitutes one of its main attractions. The fourth, final and longest paragraph outstands the acting of the main role, Nora, by Amparo Noguera. It emphasizes the actress` ambiguity to play the many traits of the character, without saying how she conveys such multiple personality. Then the review ends up saying “for reasons –difficult to determine- the outcome of the play is wrong and the director`s idea to add a frustrated suicide of Nora doesn`t work at all and the play ends very badly”. There is no justification for this negative statement, except for the added suicide scene.

For this version of *A Doll`s House* which I liked very much I would suggest the following points to be considered, taking into account the new theatricalities:

-Scenography and its effects: the large stage of the theatre (Universidad de Chile) was reduced to its half, concentrating the scene in just the middle of the stage. Far from being realistic, the limited space, the few elements used and its particular perspective it actually represents a doll`s house which allows the threat of the outer world to be perceived more intensively as the many

entrances and exits go along the play. This is a fundamental change compared to the many productions seen of this play where most of the times the scenography displays a whole collection of furniture and objects in order to recreate Ibsen's time and social conventions.

-Acting: physical. If the main role has been defined as remarkable in the above indicated review, it is because this director wanted a sensuous character with visible changes in mood and with a varied and rhythmical body language. Although in formal costumes the type of costumes used for the actress dresses helped to emphasize her body movements.

-Text work: It is well known that most of Ibsen's plays translations have been done in Spain. So, this director had to work hard upon the text in order to make it more accessible.

-Rhythm. If we consider the high number of entrances and exits of this play, then it is a major work the way the director coordinates them in order to have a fluent change. Rhythm was a fundamental factor for the play to succeed.

-Closing: If anyone is expecting Nora's slamming of the door at the end of the play, director Alfredo Castro repeated the door noise three times with an opaque metal sound that stayed for a long time in the head of the audience. Thus Torvald's last words were hardly heard. I considered this as a very good ending. I think the final scene of plays are the most difficult to solve.

I would like to finish quoting Michael Billington, theatre critic from **The Guardian** when referring to the role of the critic, “the talent to organize and articulate the different and contradictory sensations that the performance of a play produces”¹. This allows me to insist upon what should be the critic’s main concern:

- To deal with the vitality of the performance: visual, spatial, body, sound, emotional signs and their effect
- To give an account of the real and material existence of the life on the stage.
- To come to terms with the actual theatricality being displayed on the stage

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¹ Michael Billington visited Chile in August 2005.