HISTORICAL DISCOURSE AS COLLECTIVE REMEMBRANCE IN ENRIQUE BUENAVENTURA'S *LOS PAPELES DEL INFIERNO:* THE SOCIO-HISTORICAL ROLE OF THE ARTIST

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Memory and forgetting, rupture, continuity and change have been preoccupations of Latin American theatre since the 1960s. And so the dramatist's task often encompasses a giving of testimony, as Eduardo Galeano points out, because "our collective identity stems from the past and is nurtured by it." Within this context, theatre is often used to transmit the daily events that make a significant impact in the lives of a people to future generations. This capacity of theatre to adapt and its resilience as an art of immediate communication with a public anxious for a means, even only symbolic, of expressing some form of dissent, has been a constant theme in the Colombian Enrique Buenaventura's work. On one level, the short vignettes which comprise the *Los papeles del infierno* cycle take the form of social realism set within the context of the possibility of social reform through political consciousness-raising. They deliver both a political message and a warning aimed at directing the collected audience toward a transforming future. The dramatist records "testimonial" accounts in order to shed light on a historical period of the recent past, Colombia's *la violencia.*[1] Nevertheless, despite the title of "documents," the works are literary in character. It is the role of the reader or spectator to unravel the "documents," a series of disconnected bits of information without beginning or closure, and to assess their validity on the basis of questionable facts and nondefinitive texts. Buenaventura offers the dramatic recipient what History does not include--texts, scripts, documents of an unseen and unknown reality different from the manufactured or suppressed facts and evidence sanctioned by the perpetrators of the violence described therein. In the process of recreating the past, these individual "slices of life" offer a disorienting view of the present, as each dramatic piece is left without testimonial resolution. Events which would not be officially documented thus emerge as an unresolved crisis for the real-life audience witnesses of the performance or dramatic text. The play's voicing of the past essentially merges into the present. And the notion of a theatre of context and of commitment comes to life as Buenaventura allows his dramatic vignettes to relate theatre to the polis.

Indeed, each of Buenaventura's dramatic sketches offers a poignant statement of what he perceives as a close-knit relationship between society and theatre, forcing his audience to confront a "realidad desmitificada" and, it is hoped, to act upon it. Buenaventura admonishes that artists, too, must be constantly aware of their dual station as artists and victims of oppression, witnesses as well as participants in the events to which they give testimonial assertion in their texts, for "si no [lo] tenemos en cuenta, constantemente . . . entonces nuestro trabajo puede servir a los opresores" ("Teatro y política" 92). Within the context of the relationship that exists among the production, reception, and social context of a dramatic text, Buenaventura's strain of "committed theatre" might be described not merely as a series of repereussive events in an overarching action, but as a form of mediated narrative. As such, episodes represent not so much actions as *refractions* of action, through a sort of kaleidoscope of expository means--report, rumor, conjecture, memory, self-justification, self-deception--that distance the historical moment by the very retelling of it. This process of reflective distancing from history is further complicated by the mediating presence and conflicting perceptions of the audience. It is this absorption of (remembered) distance into discourse that screens the historical past and suspends it in the performance of an interrogation which is also a form of instruction--the historical *present*. By suspending the action in the mode of reflection by an unresolved *open* dramatic text before proceeding with another vignette of violence, Buenaventura obliges the dramatic recipient to reflect upon the action and its consequences both as an episode in and of itself as well as in relation to the other vignettes related to the overriding theme of man's inhumanity to man and socially-sanctioned terrorism. As a consequence, each dramatized version of violence represents a partial knowledge of the event recounted, a mere depiction of the acts of violence without providing an in-depth and definitive response to the *why* of the violent deeds alluded to. It is left to Buenaventura's audience, descendants of the past and weavers of the future, to analyze each of the texts for root causes and socio-personal meaning. How the dramatist frames each of his dramatic texts to allow for this process of reflection and renewal of the fictionalized historical moment offers us insights into Buenaventura the dramatic theorist and practitioner and his concept of *teatro comprometido* aimed at social change.

In *La maestra* the victim who has, in effect, committed suicide by not accepting sustenance given to her by the townspeople due to the murder of her father and her own rape at the hands of the military, represents a stage presence *in absentia*. The audience alone is aware of her presence on stage. It is to these dramatic recipients to whom this voice from the grave directs her responses to the inquiries made by the townspeople who tried to keep her alive after the soldiers left. This dialogue between victim and audience extends the piece from its historical confines into the wide expanse of the present moment and locale of the dramatic text. The victim views life as more than mere physical existence, for life presupposes an acceptable moral and ethical atmosphere. The victimizers are also allowed to voice their belief that they are excused from responsibility since they, as soldiers, were bound to obedience to a higher authority. But the historical voice extends beyond opposing views of a specific event recorded in time, according to Buenaventura, and enters into the realm of the ultimate voice of judgment--those who are the inheritors of History. And the play's haunting impressions of the protagonist remain with us: "El aire huele a miedo, las voces se disuelven en la saliva amarga del miedo y las gentes se las tragan" (18).

In *La orgía* the point of reference shifts from *la violencia* to the devastating effects this span of time has on the society that emerges from it. Society in its entirety is represented herein--the aristocrats, the impoverished, the military and the Church as well as those designated as the "silent majority" or the masses (the mute) who stand by idly watching but do nothing except to ponder *why* as the play ends: "... pregunta por qué, por qué ocurrió todo eso ... ¿Por qué?" (141). It is the audience once again to whom this interrogation is directed, even within the text, as La Vieja and Jacobo peer at the dramatic recipients with binoculars proclaiming that they are merely actors presenting the lives of their public. They even interrupt the action to observe the public in order to gather more information to represent the dramatic vignette. Similarly, the companion piece *El menú*, places us within a ritual setting wherein one day a year is dedicated to beggars simply to alleviate the conscience of the more fortunate in society, but the "círculo de miseria" still remains: "Así la gente puede olvidar esas cosas el resto del año y sabe que hay un día, un día especial consagrado a eso" (160). Entrances and exits made by numerous characters in the sequence draw the audience into the performance text

as Buenaventura breaks down the barriers between theatrical representation and reality. The ceremonial ritual is both a public and private affair, since the characters are continually mindful of our presence (*fotos del público, el público está mirando, ¡Que aprendan!, Todos son testigos, grandes saludos y sonrisas al público, Que se entere el público, miran desde el público como si éstos les fueran a quitar la comida*).

The theatre critic David George once commented that theatre "is in many ways a more authentic representation [or reality] because it recognizes and enforces a conception of reality as plural and parallel, indeterminate and hypothetical, the co-creation of spectators-players--in a word, potential" (174). In Enrique Buenaventura's "testimony of Twenty years of violent undeclared civil war" (prologue), collective memory is created by inflicting pain repetitively in theatrical format. History is inextricably linked to *how* memory is created: "If something is to stay in the memory it must be burned in: only that which never ceases to *hurt* stays in the memory" (Nietzsche 61). Pain, in other words, loses its impact when, through history, it becomes anecdotal or relegated to historical fact without a human dimension. And so it is that history should not serve as a model or a lesson for the present but as another way in which man can reflect on his own reality, "la conciencia que un pueblo tiene de ser dueño de su destino" (Buenaventura, "Teatro y cultura" 37). In the fictionalized "documentary" dramas that are presented in Buenaventura's social vignettes there are a combination of what the Mexican dramatist Vicente Leñero calls "vivencias personales . . . que se convierten en teatro." These texts merely offer the reader or audience an alternative to the real-world events that transpired during this period in Colombia's history. But, due to their short, open-ended structure, the public is also invited to reflect on the implications of each seemingly unconnected incident or the actions of a particular character representing a social class or type. Guided by the effective dramatic techniques and structures of these theatrical miscellanea the dramatic recipient is afforded the opportunity to *collaborate* in a re-evaluation of historical events. Buenaventura is acutely aware that "creating is not inventing" ("Theatre and Culture 156). Within the context of official versions or even testimonial accounts, the real-world interpretation of this cycle of violence (whether in defense or criticism) might have been accepted without question. What Enrique Buenaventura has

accomplished by his sketches of violence and terror has been to place these historical events within a human context with all the related elements of confusion, fear, passivity, acceptance, and compliance to authority. The "faceless" institutions of oppression and repression have been unmasked in these plays, not by any specific names but, more importantly, by a countless mass of individuals spanning every social class, a subversive indictment against all of Colombian society for the single-minded purpose of what Buenaventura states in his own words "poner en tela de juicio, minar en lo esencial--en la conciencia y en la conducta de las víctimas del sistema--el sistema mismo" ("Teatro y cultura" 37).

Enrique Buenaventura claims that to know the historical is to mediate and to narrate it with the voice of a subject in the present who is also positioned in History. Ultimately, the dramatic text and the strategies that it requires of its recipients allow both Buenaventura and his audience, as conscious social actors, to remember and to grapple with a painful history without allowing it to be transformed into the safe zone of myth. As the author himself asserts:

> Aun cuando la obra sea del pasado o aun cuando se refiera a un tiempo lejano, continúa cuestionando la ideología y en caso de referirse al pasado lo hace para distanciarse del presente, para verlo mejor, para verlo como algo tan cambiante como el pasado y tan sometido a las leyes del cambio social como el pasado. ("Teatro y política" 94)

This theatre of conscious remembrance eventually makes the transition from the abstractions of character types[2] to the discourse of threat and coercion that continually seeks access to real bodies and their pain, the audience. In order to link past events with present responsibility, the interrogating discourse directed to the public via comments, insults, gestures, or even plaintive glances and inquiries is a dramatic technique used throughout the series. The dramatic recipients, clearly have been assigned the role of *historical collaborators*, for it is they who must ultimately respond to the haunting questions posed in each of the plays and then forge a present (which will ultimately become a historical past, a moment in history remembered) that charts a different course from the events reenacted in these pieces. And, in their role of *historical custodians* Buenaventura's audiences are

forced to contemplate and, in the end, respond to the unanswered questions set in the open-ended texts of *La maestra, La tortura, La autopsia, La audiencia, La requisa, La orgía,* and *El menú.*[3]

Enrique Buenaventura's "documents" represent neither literature in its traditional sense nor reality but a written *re-creation* of the real. The discourse is representative of the verbal testimonies of victims, victimizers and their complicitors. Both collective and personal action or failure to act are condemned as perpetrators of injustice. Therein lies the very purpose of historical remembrance and the socio-historical role of the artist through which the dramatic vignettes find their ability to convey meaning to a diversity of audiences: *responsibility.* The individual is still responsible for the social ills that surround him either through conscious and willful aets or, by default, through the toleration of what should be recognized as intolerant. And, further, it is history, the mistakes of the past, which must serve as a warning to the present as well as the future, so that history will not repeat itself--*Never again! ¡No pasará nunca más!*

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NOTES

[1] *La violencia* is the common name for the virtual civil war that racked the rural areas of Colombia in the period 1948-1953. The violence began on a small scale in 1946, was intensified by the April 1948 riots in Bogotá (the *bogotazo*), and continued sporadically until 1958 when the government ended the state of siege for most of the country.

[2] Addressing the historian's tendency to depict the oppressed masses as abstractions, Carr notes that anonymity is often confused with impersonality: "People do not cease to be people, or individuals individuals, because we do not know their names." Edward Hallett Carr, *What is History?* (New York: Random House, 1961), 63-64.

[3] Although some of these plays may be disputed as being part of the cycle by some critics, this list includes the plays in the 1990 collection of Buenaventura's work entitled *Los papeles del infierno y otros textos* (Bogotá: Siglo XXI). All page references in the text are from this edition.

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