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PIRANDELLO, PROUST, AND *EL CHINO*, BY CARLOS FELIPE

El chino, by the Cuban Carlos Felipe is, in my view, one of the most remarkable examples, although perhaps not the best,¹ of Pirandello's influence on the Latin American theater. Practically all of the theatrical devices of *Sei personaggi*. . . are present in the Cuban drama, which, on the other hand, makes a use of the play-within-the-play technique radically different from that of Pirandello's. Actually, it would be accurate to say that only Pirandello's «virtuosity» shows in the overall construction of *El chino*. (One must not overlook the fact, though, that scenic virtuosity is an integral part of *Six Characters in Search of an Author*— something essential to make the idea of the play sensible to the audience.)

In effect, what Felipe has done is to adopt the frame of Pirandello's play for his own artistic needs and objectives. In Felipe's drama, Palma, a middle-aged *cocotte*—whose whimsical personality, bordering on hysteria, would mystify Hedda Gabler herself—organizes a performance to be held in the living room of her elegant home. The actors will play themselves, for they will be merely reenacting a «slice» of their own preterit life. Their task will be to actually, or in flesh and blood, give shape to a «flashback» in Palma's stream of existence. The leading actress will be Palma; the other characters will help recreate the circumstances in which Palma's experience came to be, and, thus, through the reinforcement of concrete details, to convey the particular «mood» of the situation—key to the channeling of her own «emotional memory.» «*El fin es despertar la memoria por la sugerencia*» says Robert, the director hired by Palma to put on the «show.»² Only one of these true «personajes» will not be able to participate in Palma's playlet, El violinista, who had committed suicide during the course of the «real life» action now being «staged.» This forces Palma to assign the role of El violinista to an «outsider.» In the absence of an apt amateur actor the part goes to a professional, Santizo, whose temperamental tantrums add a new «theatrical» touch—I will dwell on this aspect further on—to the already grotesque world which it is a question of bringing forth: in fact, the main setting of the play-within is a cheap hotel in the section of the port of Havana, a place presided over by the caricatural El chino, its manager-in-residence.

The final product is original despite the obvious similarities with *Six*

Characters. . . , which extend even to a secondary trait like that of Madame Pace's and El chino's disreputable establishments. For while Pirandello points to the fateful repetition of the «tragedy» of his characters, a never ending cycle of suffering,¹ Felipe uses the performance within the drama as the means through which Palma attempts not more and not less than to re-live that singular moment of her past.

As with Proust, Palma is in search of a «lost» personal time, in her case, that brief period which she dreams vital to her fulfillment. By recovering that past which involved a shortlived, albeit meaningful, relationship with the sailor José, Palma expects to recapture a sense of happiness and hope. At the beginning of the first act Palma says to Sergio, her present «protector»: «Aquella noche conocí la felicidad. . . sé lo que es. No he vuelto a sentirla . . . Estoy cansada de esta mentira. Por otra parte tengo derecho a ser feliz: me siento incompleta; estoy obligada a esa búsqueda que tanto odias . . . » (p. 19) The truth is that Palma's present is as materially rewarding as it is spiritually sordid, just the opposite of what her life was on that night of her youth she now longs to resurrect. Now, contrary to Proust's ideal, Palma is not interested in the «creative» power of evocation—a way to make the past alive forever in the eternity of art—even when she resorts to the «machinery» or the «trappings» of theater art. Her aspiration falls short of this—Palma wishes simply to bring back the elusive *reality* of her past (the living José included) into the *reality* of her present. The «performance» that she and her friends stage becomes, thus, both psychodrama and magic; it is basically a ritual aimed at effecting an influence on events (or persons, i.e., José, whose «apparition,» like that of Pirandello's Madame Pace, seems like an emanation of the recreated scenery, action, words).

We witness in that manner the tragic failure of Palma, for we know from the beginning that her enterprise is doomed; she, like all human beings, will be unable to experience emotions long disappeared, whose only possibility of existence resides in the store of memory. This is underlined in the play by the recurrent contrast between how Palma believes things to have been and how they probably were. In the first act one apparently minor detail forcefully reveals the conflict of enhanced perception against raw fact in reference to the color of the shirt worn by El chino on the night of Palma's remembrance:

- Robert (A Palma) —Mira, ésta es la camisa.
 Palma —Es exactamente el tono que quería.
 Sergio —El chino ha dicho que jamás se ha puesto camisas de ese color.
 Palma —Te he dicho que no importa: yo lo vi así.
 Sergio —A fin de cuentas, va a tratarse de lo que tú viste, y no de lo que vio el chino. Yo opino . . .

Robert —Se le ha explicado, Sergio, que somos sensibles al color y forma de las prendas que usamos según la impresión que producimos en las personas que nos miran. Si Palma «ve» roja la camisa, el rojo es el color que «sentirá» el chino . . . (p. 23)

(El chino, by the way, will protest emphatically during the second act: «¡Mi blusa! Esto no es mi blusa! Capitán no se pone esto» [p. 55].)

Such Pirandellian (in the end, Cervantesque) perspectivism adds a deeper, ironic dimension to the overly sentimental, *folletín*-like quality of Palma's relationship with José. The situation lends itself naturally to melodramatic overtones. It is not surprising, therefore, that its expression, its language, be distinguished by pathetic flourishes or by a certain «poetic» verbosity. (True that Felipe's plays generally show this tendency toward rhetorical excess, which Matías Montes Huidobro has termed—rather harshly perhaps—*cursilería*, but the same critic also suggests that it fits, nevertheless, perfectly well the essence of *El chino*.)⁴ That Felipe is, to a great extent, aware of this irony is evident in the first place in his characterization of Palma as a neurotic dreamer whose sensibility seems to have been fed, in the absence of a refined education, by romantic stories and radio soap operas. («En Palma se ha producido una exaltación novelesca, indigna de atención,» says Sergio at one point [p. 53].)⁵ If José's speeches, on the other hand, look inadequate for a typical sailor, one should bear in mind that José, as already indicated, is a figment of Palma's imagination as much as a separate living entity, an ambiguity that constitutes, in my view, one of the most interesting features of the play. Felipe increases the above-mentioned ironic distance not only by having the actor Santizo—a paradigm of theatrical affectation—play the character of El violinista, but also by having him exchange humorous remarks with Robert about the overacting needed to interpret the part:

Robert (A Santizo)— Tu momento ha llegado, Santizo . . . Mucha naturalidad. Nada de énfasis, nada de teatro.
 Santizo —Sé lo que tengo que hacer sin que tengas que indicármelo. ¿Cuándo he sido enfático yo?
 Robert —Siempre.
 Santizo —No esperarás que haga el violinista con sobriedad. Este es un personaje de melodrama y exige el gesto amplio, el acento destacado. Grita. Lloro. ¡Se ve uno en cada compromiso!
 Robert —Es cierto. Quise cambiar esa parte, pero Palma se opuso. Ponle la mayor medida que puedas. Sávalo del ridículo. (p. 67).

Felipe appears to imply, in sum, that the kernel of *El chino* is Palma's «invention»—hers are the idea, the setting, the situation, and the dialogue.

Only hers, too, is the absurdity of it all. The latter feature is stressed by her dependence, in order to bring back her memory, on the figure of El chino who, thus in a way, assumes the role of a chance divinity. The allusion is to the mythical icon of el chino in Cuban folklore [*el médico chino, el chino de la charada*] is clear, for El chino represents precisely incoherence and oblivion as Renata la Silenciosa, his assistant, epitomizes lack of purpose and madness. (Felipe characterizes El chino as suffering from a «lesión mental, que se manifiesta en algunas situaciones por la idiotez» [p. 36], adding that Renata «en cierto modo es el alter-ego del chino» [p. 37].) Taken as a whole, the play becomes a comment on failure, on the defeat of dream and illusion versus imperfect everyday reality, and the «stories» of El violinista and Renata—the former kills himself, the latter becomes insane out of love disappointments—serve to underline this theme. Behind Palma's contrivance lies Felipe's artful manipulation—his theatrical (in the best sense) embodiment of this age-old truth—to achieve a kind of uniqueness. The weaknesses that one could point out in the text are definitely overcome by its success as a totality.

El chino is certainly rich in levels of significance. Matías Montes Huidobro, for example, has interpreted the play from the perspective of the «collective unconscious.» He reads it, without excluding other possibilities, as the reflection of a deep national identity conflict. Palma's individual disturbance is seen, in this view, as an emblem of what Huidobro terms the «schizophrenia» of Cuban society.

Felipe's play has undeservedly remained in relative obscurity for over three decades. It has never been produced, to my knowledge, since its one-night performance in 1947, after having been awarded first prize in the Drama Contest sponsored by Havana's Teatro Adad that year. Other plays with a comparable sense of theatricality—namely, *Electra Garrigó* by Virgilio Piñera, and *La noche de los asesinos* by José Triana—won over the imagination of Cuban stage directors for the many years that have followed. I feel partly responsible for this omission, since it was once in my power to do something about it. This note is intended as a sort of «revival» of *El chino*, as well as a homage to a true man of the theater.

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NOTES

¹ It has been an almost impossible task in the Latin American theater to match Xavier Villaurrutia's accomplishments in the Pirandellina mode.

² Carlos Felipe, *Teatro* (Universidad Central de las Villas, 1959, p. 39). All quotations of the play are taken from this edition. From this point on I will simply note the page number

within the text of this study.

³ «Always on opening the book (Dante's *Inferno*) we shall find the living Francesca confessing her sweet sin to Dante, and if we return a hundred thousand times in succession to reread that passage, a hundred thousand times in succession Francesca will utter words, never repeating them mechanically, but speaking them every time for the first time with such a living and unforeseen passion that Dante, each time, will swoon when he hears them», writes Pirandello. I take the quote from Francis Fergusson, *The Idea of a Theater* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949), p. 189.

⁴ See M. Montes Huidobro's *Vida, persona y máscara en el teatro cubano* (Miami: ed. Universal, 1973), pp. 113-25.

⁵ Sergio comments in the same scene: «La situación crea la palabra. En cuanto a las que hemos oído, nunca pudieron ser dichas. Dos jóvenes de quince y veinte años, respectivamente, al encontrarse en un parque, se producen en formas menos enfática y especiosa» (pp. 52-53); «Por supuesto que han estado muy desacertados en la expresión verbal. Aquello de 'ave de alas enormes' fue inadmisibile. Nada menos apropiado aquí que una reminiscencia mitológica» (p. 52).