

Masks and Tribulations in the Theater of Tomás González

Víctor Manuel Domínguez
Writer and journalist
Havana, Cuba

The mask is a secular shield for camouflaging images and challenging numerous assaults issued by those in power to afflict the collectivity or individuals. It is part of the ritual by which many artists, writers, and the people, in general, experience catharsis, and publicize signs for help or denunciation against those who prevent them from expressing themselves freely.

In Cuba, since the first days of 1959, the incorrectly called revolutionary period, and till now, this masking has become a strategy for revealing discrimination due to race or political reasons in art, written works or staged plays.

The political, professional and human price these creators have had to pay for more than fifty years of revolution are still covered up within Cuban political culture's ideological framework. These are the people who faced down those in power and denounced their repressive acts and the marginalization endured on account of skin color, sexual preference and ideology.

Even if in recent years and through the so-called "email war"¹ certain spaces and figures have been rescued from ostracism, there still remain tough characters and revealing

works that contribute to the building of a bridge between the truncated memory and fragmented facts that censors have excised from the nation's cultural heritage.

Actor, director, playwright, educator, poet, narrator, scriptwriter, painter and musician Tomás González Pérez (Santa Clara 1938-Havana 2008), is one of the essential figures of Cuban culture that has not yet received the institutional and public acknowledgment he deserves, given the magnitude and quality of this *oeuvre*.

The small dossiers lost within the hidden pages of specialized magazines; some mention or another in a fleeting program devoted to Cuban theater and various objective and scholarly studies lack mention of the important of his life and work for the national stage. These are not enough to do him justice and resituate him upon the artistic pedestal where he belongs. He was model of ethical behavior and creativity.

González Pérez was marginalized for zealously promoting the incorporation of the contributions and presence of African Diasporic elements in our cultural milieu, and denouncing the low percentage of blacks appearing on television and in Cuba's National

Ballet. He protested the exclusion of folkloric works, among other things, and was also accused, along with other artists, of wanting to promote black power.

Yet, one of the principal things that brought about his exclusion from the nation's states between the end of the 1960s and the mid 1970s was the fact that he used popular speech in his works that, paradoxically, some wanted to impose, to go against the grain of a speech style that was considered a bourgeois legacy.

According to essayist Albert Abreu, the prejudices and limitations affecting the modern intellectual in his or her role as cultural interpreter, and the disdain and fear experienced by many of our lettered city's social agents and actors, situate this type of expression within an imaginary of filth, baseness, vulgarity and dispersion. The reason? Because of the fragmentation that the use of popular language implies.²

Another reason that no doubt influenced his marginalization was the creation of the important acting method that creatively recycled the theories and practices of Stanislavsky, Lamba, Grotowski, Brecht and other famous theatrical innovators.

This method was considered an important contribution to Cuban theater due to its goal of training dancers and actors to be able to deal rigorously with the Teatro Ritual Caribeño's different presentations.³ Its plays included elements of an understanding of a Dionysian lifestyle that was, of course, distant from that of the revolution's purity.

A government that pronounced itself to be materialistic and during that period prohibited African religious practices, declaring them "obscurantist" and "tribal," could not accept an artistic method that "dealt with the body, its training; delving into the conscious-

ness' most complex regions, interacting with the telluric, masks, mirrors, Santería's divining systems, songs, percussion and the representation of the ephemeral."⁴

That is how an acclaimed actor, playwright and director ended up being a cabaret singer during that "bad time" of Cuban culture. For this and other reasons, the writer of memorable films like *De cierta manera* [Up to a Certain Point], by Sara Gómez, and *La última cena* [The Last Supper], by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, became a painter, musician and poet. His artistic talent abounded.

Despite the cultural ostracism to which he was condemned, his theatrical work and educational work continued, although "conflictive" theatrical pieces like *Yago tiene feeling* (1962), *El bello arte de ser* (1978) and *Delirios y visiones de José Jacinto Milanés* (José Antonio Ramos Theater Award, 1987) camouflaged his message behind masks.

According to Alberto Abreu, the publication of *El bello arte de ser y otras obras*⁵ "ends up being a provocation for Cuban directors and dramaturges. It revealed to us one of Cuban theater's most complex and interesting playwrights." I would say that this is not only due to the dramatic structure of his works, but also because of their semantic and revealing depth of his masked actors' lines. Their content must be masked so that their message can penetrate the distorting censorship emanating from the island's cultural institution and those in power.

By decontextualizing theater and appropriating elements of Greco-Latin mythology, from figures like Dionysius and Apollo, and also employing aspects of Shakespeare and Cervantes to mask staging, Tomás González Pérez's plays emerged as some of the Cuban works that most questioned the regime. Of course, this was not unique, as Virgilio Pi-

ñera's *Electra Garrigó* and Antón Arrufat's *Los siete contra Tebas* did the same.

El bello arte de la ser y otras obras includes five works written between 1978 and 1982. Alberto Abreu's reading of these dramatic works begins with analyzing the diverse faces of exclusion and dogmatism. He writes about the 'parametration' (the confinement and internal exile) also endured by this playwright, whose scars directly or indirectly reveal themselves in his texts: "It is the wound that his characters mask; what they make fun of and run away from, because they still inflict pain."⁶

In these works, fear not only takes over the social context, the space that was closed to criticism, confrontation, and personally experienced repression and marginalization, but also aggressively tackles that grey decade on Cuban culture (between the end of the 60s and mid-70s), and reveal the abysses in reality's symbolic spaces where the bitter margins of difference were diluted.

As an example of the transfigurations, clues and devices with which playwrights masked and issued their denunciation amidst the chaos and fear that the period's repression generated, *El bello arte de la ser's* principal character (the director-author) evokes an event in which he is accused of being an idealist, metaphysical and expelled from the school at which he taught:

"Then I raised my eyes up towards the sky. A great sky free of gods and fear. That is what another island's sky is like. There was no moon, just stars, planets, bodies, mysteries. It all seemed to be within arm's reach, playing music for all times. There, where our small and limited concept of space does not fit..."⁷

As the saying goes, a word to the wise is sufficient. The expressive masking to which they resort as a safeguard in their daily lives

is at the core of a spoken line that takes us beyond the intolerance sown by Cuba's authorities since 1959 till now.

Another example of historical appropriate as masking, in order to have someone else utter what the author really wants to say, without being chastised, is the demand that Yago makes in *El camino del medio*: "I want things now, now when I can enjoy them. Tomorrow! The future...! I want what's coming to me now, here and now."

González Pérez always poked his finger into the wound. More specifically, in a context that was repressive and manipulative, his plays—works that reflected artistic situations and deeds distant from the current time due to their topics and characters—could often challenge the doubts and questionings of those in power.

In *El viaje en círculo*, "an open and closed, dysphoric set made of uneven fragments, false clues and illusory paths that condemn the protagonist to constantly (mentally or spatially) wandering in search of something not well defined—perhaps himself—and via a pilgrimage marked by anguish, the erratic, highs and lows. An allegory of a personal life" [in which] Oedipus asks his daughter Antigone: "[Somewhat agitated by panic and effort]) Daughter of this ancient blind man, Antigone, where is it that the winds of heights whip so hard and life is obligated to consider the presence of the abyss? [Pause] Why are you silent? Why don't you answer?"⁸

It is no secret to any Cuban spectator that the place where the wind of the high forces of those in power whips and condemns those who are "erratic, rebellious, not adapted and contestatory" to the abyss of repression and marginalization is Cuba. Beyond this scene of masking of characters and context, it has become commonplace for all to ask: "What's

going on? Why so much intolerance? What causes all this repression? Who will denounce this violence? Why so much complicity? Will no one finally dare to speak out?”

The answer to these and other still very current questions can be found in the silence of Antigone, who represents the Cuban intelligentsia as an allegory and message for those who still silence and bury the life and work of Tomás González Pérez, and the dignity and indelible nature of his contribution to our national culture—be they censors or comrades during the repression.

Notes:

- 1-“La guerrita de los email” (January 2006) is a term describing an exchange of email messages among Cuban intellectuals who were victims of repression when censors like Luis Pavón and Armando Quesada appeared on the scene on Cuban national television.
- 2-Abreu, Alberto. “Tomás González y las políticas de la memoria,” *Tablas* (julio-diciembre 2008): 167.
- 3-Martiatu, Inés María. “Transculturación e interculturalidad. Algunos aspectos teóricos,” *Tablas* 4, (1996): 8,13.
- 4-Abreu, Alberto. “Tomás González: La realidad trascendida por el misterio,” *La Gaceta de Cuba* (enero-febrero 2008): 52.
- 5-Martiatu, Inés María. *Tomás González, El bello arte de ser y otras obras*. La Habana: Letras Cubanas, 2005.
- 6-Abreu, Alberto. “Tomás González: La realidad trascendida por el misterio,” *loc. cit.*
- 7-*Ibid.*
- 8-*Ibid.*