

THE DISCOVERY OF THE NEW WORLD AND NATIONAL
IDENTITY: THEATRICAL PERSPECTIVES
OF GALA AND SALOM

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In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Spanish historical dramas relating to the Discovery and Conquest served as vehicles for exalting national identity. Far different is the perspective taken in theatrical works inspired by the Quincentennial: these tend to present the New World and its indigenous peoples in a favorable light; they take a critical stance on the impact of the Conquest not only on the New World but also on Spain. Moreover, texts like Antonio Gala's opera libretto *Cristóbal Colón* and Jaime Salom's *Las Casas: Una hoguera al amanecer* call into question the concept of national identity itself¹.

Gala's officially-subsidized opera, which starred José Carreras, opened in 1989 and toured internationally. Salom's *Bartolomé de las Casas* play premiered in 1990 in Mexico, where it was made into a movie, and has also been performed in the United States and France-but not in Spain. By focusing on the marginalized status of their protagonists, both texts tend to destabilize boundaries and cultural borders. In analyzing Salom's historical drama, María Asunción Gómez has applied Brian MacHale's definition of postmodern revisionism: «apocryphal history contradicts the official ver-

¹ While this note narrowly focuses on only two contemporary Spanish playwrights, there are dozens of related historical dramas that might be considered. On the figure of Christopher Columbus alone, Asela Rodríguez de Laguna has identified some twenty Hispanic plays.

sion in one or two ways: either it *supplements* the historical record, claiming to restore what has been lost or suppressed; or it *displaces* official history altogether» (14). The same concept can be applied equally well to Gala's demythologizing version of Colón.

Romero Castilla points out that European opera, especially that of Italy, has often been used to promote nationalism; Gala's Columbus opera is far removed from such a stance: «Gala no dibuja el personaje de Cristóbal Colón desde una óptica de exaltación nacional por dos razones: una, porque no le van los nacionalismos de vía estrecha; y otra, por los problemas que tiene el intrépido navegante con el lugar de nacimiento» (37). Gala's Colón is an exile, the Other; he is a *converso* whose Jewish family was forced to flee from Aragón to what is now Italy and who therefore identifies with the Jews who are being expelled from Spain at the time of his first voyage of discovery.

As Arie Vicente observes, various aspects of Colón's «yo» collide with the «'nosotros' de la historia transmitido por la ideología del Poder» (31). Gala, like other contemporary Spanish playwrights, «adopta así la alteridad de Colón como medio de destruir o modificar el espacio mítico reservado a un 'nosotros'» (Vicente 33). Gala makes no reference to Colón's commonly accepted Italian ancestry; instead he foregrounds Colón's Jewish identity. Simultaneously he emphasizes the long-overlooked contribution to the Discovery by the Andalusian Pinzón. The Spain that discovers the New World is thus revealed to be a problematic Sephardic-Andalusian collaboration.

As an exile, Colón further disrupts «the concept of a unified nationalism». His experiences exemplify an idea expressed in Mae Henderson's *Borders, Boundaries, and Frames*: «strategic border crossings... —the transgression of a frontier separating the dominant culture from what Edward Said has called 'the perilous territory of not-belonging'— give rise to recognizable differences or oppositional identities within culture» (Henderson 10).

Gala's Colón is a marginalized figure: as a *converso*, he is related to both past and future exiles. Salom's equally marginalized Las Casas, too, is keenly aware of being a *converso*, in this case, one of Andalusian origin; gradually he is also revealed to be a latent homosexual. While from a traditional point of view, the playwrights' interpretations of their respective historical figures may be controversial, Gala and Salom are not alone in their theories. Simon

Wiesenthal, for example, has found historical evidence for a link between the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and Columbus's first expedition (qtd. Cazorla 30). Fernando Savater cites scholars who believe that the youthful Las Casas was involved in a passionate relationship with the Indian slave that his father brought back to Spain; after their forced separation, when the freed slaves were returned to the New World, Las Casas apparently searched tirelessly for his lost companion (Savater).

Unaware of any such historical studies, Salom intuitively decided that Las Casas's ardent defense of the indigenous people had to have deep personal roots. In his drama it is thus a personal attachment that stimulates the conversion of the arrogant and ambitious Las Casas; ultimately he humbly associates himself with what an American commentator has disparagingly called «an extreme left-wing group of ecclesiastics who became more Indian than the Indian» (Innes 322).

While Salom's *Las Casas* play stands alone in his total theatre, Gala has written frequently of the historical and economic relationship between Spain and the New World. He deals with the subject in *Las cítaras colgadas de los árboles* (1974) and *La Truhana* (1992), as well as in an earlier Columbus script written for television.

In the preface to his biting satirical tragedy, *Las cítaras colgadas de los árboles*, Gala informs us that the action takes place «en un momento en que, más tajantes que nunca, había dos Españas» (33). Lázaro, who has returned from the New World, ironically declares to the *conversa* whom he had loved, dishonored and abandoned: «Vengo del Paraíso, Olalla... Allí no existe el miedo, ni el honor, ni el poder...» (67). Spain itself is divided between *cristianos viejos* and *conversos*, between powerful exploiters and their powerless victims. Religious fanatics are convinced that God is Spanish, but the country is also divided between *iluminados* and the Inquisition. Nor is the New World a paradise in comparison. Of the Indians, Lázaro says: «Ahora, esclavos; antes, felices» (86) And he asks: «¿Por qué todo lo que es español ha de serlo contra alguien? Denostando, contradiciendo, persiguiendo a otros seres...?» (90). Lázaro dreams of starting a new kind of society in the New World, based on tolerance and love, but his dream is doomed to failure. He is defeated by one of the *dos Españas* in Spain, but the *dos Españas* have also been exported to the Americas.

The rollicking *La Truhana*, a parody of Golden Age farce, has a

far more optimistic end: the protagonist and her troupe of performers set sail from Spain, happily declaring the New World to be paradise. As Moisés Pérez Coterillo observes, however, the author is merely obeying the rules of the genre (20). Taking advantage of the overt metatheatricalism of *La Truhana*, Gala lightheartedly deconstructs gender, religion and nationality. These are defined as constructs that can readily be assumed through the appropriate use of theatrical signs. Oliva reminds La Truhana in what guise she entered the acting company: «Eras tan muchachuela que te tuvimos que disfrazar de muchacho para que te dejaran entrar en la compañía. Y así, siendo muchacho, te disfrazaban de muchacha para hacer los papeles de las damas más jóvenes...» (28). La Truhana refuses to identify herself with any particular religion. Soy cristiana y morisca y judía; todo junto y en la misma pieza» (103). A gypsy performer can be cast as a black slave or as a *morisco*. Through voice and gesture, an actor can readily become German or French or Portuguese or any other nationality. Gala's perspective in the Columbus texts, where he confronts the problems of anti-semitism and exile, is far less cheerful.

Robert Sheehan suggests that we read Gala's two Columbus texts together in that the short play deals with events leading up to the departure in 1492 while the opera deals with the voyage (19). The texts differ significantly in another way as well. The television play, but not the opera, foregrounds the economic benefit for those expelling the Jews from Spain. Colón notes in one of his television monologues:

y converso era casi todo lo que valía la pena en la corte [...] Todos eran conversos. Y, no obstante, cinco años hacía que funcionaba ya la Inquisición: cinco años que se sacaba de sus hogares a los que no se hallaba limpios, se los cubría de oprobio, se los quemaba, se les arrebatában honra y bienes (22-23).

In his mind, the expulsion and his own voyage of exploration are linked: his triumph will humble those who took away the freedom and property of his people: «Durante mi viaje he tropezado con quienes llevaban dos mil años en España: vendiendo sus haciendas, malbaratando su fortuna, abandonando con tristeza lo que ya no era suyo» (25). Was the religious fervor of the dominant society, the desire for «sangre pura», enhanced by the prospect of materialistic gain?

It is tempting to conjecture that such a critical view of the much revered Queen Isabella and her courtly advisers would have dismayed the sponsors of Gala's opera. Intentionally or not, the libreto places less stress on the 1492 expulsion and more on Colón's memories of the earlier exile that led his family to leave Aragón. The Jews' farewell to their land is visually juxtaposed to the Andalusian women's farewell to their men who are sailing with Pinzón. Separation of families—with sympathetic emphasis on the situation of the women left behind in Spain—is also a recurring theme in Salom's *Las Casas* play.

With respect to *Una hoguera al amanecer*, Gómez has pointed out theatrical strategies used to achieve Salom's stated goal of creating a «retablo histórico». These include «la fluidez espacio-temporal, la condensación mediante la acción simultánea, la repetición, los paralelismos y los contrapuntos y la reducción de personajes y de actores» (15). Action takes place simultaneously on different planes of reality, thus splintering the characters' images; in the Salom text, a ninety-year old *Las Casas* evokes memories of the past as he confronts his death. The stage is divided between upper and lower levels to facilitate temporal fluidity. Not surprisingly, these same strategies are found in Gala's opera libreto.

Aside from forming «retablos históricos», both works might be considered examples of an «interrogative text»—defined by Catherine Belsey as one that «disrupts the unity of the reader by discouraging identification with a unified subject» (91). Such episodic, Brechtian texts are likewise examples of dialectical propaganda—and accordingly facilitate the demystification of national identity under discussion here.

Gala, in his «Palabras previas», clarifies that the Colón opera incorporates three levels of reality: «una, actual, que relata la representación; otra, pasada, que irrumpe en ello incontenible, reclamada por el gozo o la pena o la necesidad de los protagonistas; y otra, ideal o mágica» (70). During the voyage, memories and desires are evoked expressionistically through the consciousness of the historical figures, Columbus and Pinzón. It is through such juxtaposition of planes of reality that Gala foregrounds the tensions between them: Pinzón's anti-semitism («Desde que supe que erais converso / me temí la traición», 196) and Colón's sorrow for his people:

veo a mi raza expulsada,
embarcando entre lágrimas.

Abandonando una vez más
 su hogar y sus ciudades.
 Como mi propia familia, hace sesenta años,
 saliendo de su casa aragonesa (113).

It is also through this method that Gala hints at the future sorrow of the indigenous peoples of the Americas. Colón dreams of what his voyage will mean to Spain, but the chorus's response is far less optimistic:

COLÓN: para España, la generosa,
 Dios ha entregado por mis manos
 nuevos amaneceres, nuevos árboles,
 pájaros nuevos, flores nuevas,
 un mundo nuevo immaculado.

INDIOS: Sobre mares de sangre (139).

Salóm's Las Casas, during his first voyage, emulates Colón's idealism: «Doy gracias todos los días a nuestro señor el Almirante Colón por haber devuelto a los españoles la capacidad de soñar» (17)². But the suffering of the Indians is a powerful theme in *Una hoguera al amanecer*. The slaughter of the indigenous people is presented expressionistically on stage, and the excerpt from Fray Antón Montesinos's denunciatory sermon of 1511 represents a dramatic turning point in the action: «Mientras no cambie vuestra conducta con nuestros hermanos indios, los frailes de este convento no os admitiremos en confesión, como si fuerais salteadores de caminos» (63). Las Casas realizes that Fray Antón is right. Even if there were no massacres, the system of *encomiendas* is based on social injustice: the indigenous people have lost their land and their freedom, under the orders of a foreign king and pope. The men have been turned into «carne de trabajo» and the women into «carne de burdel» (66). Las Casas renounces his own privileges as *encomendero*.

Salom establishes clearly that there are at least *dos Españas* functioning in the New World: the one that would enslave and destroy the indigenous people, ostensibly in the name of Christianity, and the one that defends the Indians and their rights. Victims of the «bad Spain» include not only all Indians but also all women.

² Citations are to the original, Mexican edition. *Las Casas. Una hoguera al amanecer* is also available in a Spanish edition, published by Fundamentos.

Like Gala, who highlighted in *Las cítaras colgadas por los árboles* the unconscionable mistreatment to which Olalla is subjected, Salom foregrounds the powerless position of Petrilla, a free-spirited Andalusian woman who has emigrated to the New World as the wife of Bartolome's despicable uncle Gabriel. Petrilla is an exile not so much because she is a Spaniard in the New world but as a woman in a male-dominated society³. Henderson alerts us that each vision of exile presents possibilities of radical opposition to the dominant culture (6). Petrilla's adoption of another race is her way of protesting her subservient situation as a woman. Our sympathies are so against the lecherous and materialistic Gabriel and so much with Petrilla that we can applaud her heroism at giving birth to and protecting her *mestizo* son. At the play's end, Petrilla's son, representative of a new race that will emerge from the best of both worlds, visits the dying Bartolomé. The old man confuses his visitor with his longlost Indian companion —the two roles are played by the same actor— but clearly recognizes the *mestizo* as the hope for the future.

Neither Gala's nor Salom's characters have found paradise, but perhaps through border crossings and the erasure of rigid national and racial identities, someday the ideal can be achieved.

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³ I have dealt with certain aspects of *Una hoguera al amanecer* at greater length in a study appearing in Encinar's anthology, *España y América en sus literaturas* (pp. 17-39). A somewhat abbreviated version of that study was reprinted in the Fundamentos edition of the play (pp. 11-26).

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