

Conversation with Juan Mayorga

Ruth Vilar and Salva Artesero

QUESTION: What place does theatre occupy for you within literature?

ANSWER: I see myself as a writer rather than a playwright, and I feel I'm a playwright in the sense that if I was forbidden to do theatre I would suffocate. Theatre is a marvellous space to live in and a privileged place for a writer, [...] because playwrights, like novelists or storywriters, can tell stories – and for me that narrative function is fascinating. They can explore the limits of language, like poets; but also, they are privileged in the sense that their words travel to unexpected places thanks to the directors, set designers, lighting technicians and above all, the actors. Right now I do not experience my vocation as a writer and my vocation as a playwright as dissociated: my role in the theatre is the writing of texts. Theatre completely fulfils me; I feel no urge to write poetry or novels, not even essays, because I believe that theatre is sufficiently complex and open as a form to include the different manifestations of literature. [...]

P: You were talking about the fascination of the narrative function [...].

R: I believe that the basic objective of a theatre show is not to tell a story but to construct a poetic experience for the spectators. But I believe that the best instrument for this purpose is precisely the telling of a good story [...] there is nothing more interesting than a good story, nothing more fascinating than the fact that a human being wants something and we start to wonder if they will obtain it or not, and what strategies they will deploy to fulfil their desire. Human beings are constitutively incomplete. [...] Presenting this onstage is fascinating from the outset. Moreover, a story seems to me to be the best framework invented for fitting in everything that we want to fit in. Of course it is true that all stories have been told, but this was also the case in Shakespeare's era (Shakespeare himself had to face the fact that the Greeks had already told all stories) and the problem is to discover how an old story can be updated and take on new meaning, and how our current situation interacts with the tradition constituted by the great myths, the great stories from the past.

P: You write theatre as a poetical experience for the audience, but you also publish it. What's more, you rewrite your works constantly.

R: The theatre text is a sign of contradiction. One writes theatre thinking that its definitive target is not the readers but the spectators, and that leads you to take important decisions. When I write I try to make my texts as open as possible, so that the different performers (the director and, above all, the actors) find not only parts that are non-negotiable, but also broad spaces of freedom for their own imagination and their own fantasy. And so the staging is to some extent unpredictable for me. If I were only writing for readers, I would probably establish the limits of the texts more clearly, close them in, but I open them up as much as possible precisely because I want to distance them from those that are "ready-to-assemble". When I write, using the idea of the aesthetic of reception that Sanchis has introduced to us, my implicit readers are not the solitary readers who are going to read the work like a novel, a book of poetry or an essay, but theatre people (first and foremost the director and the actors) who are going to construct a poetic experience in space and time, in some place and at some time that I am unaware of. But I also work for the people who read theatre with the intention of reading it. [...] It is very important for me that my texts are published, and I am delighted to find out what reading them has meant for some people. It is true that I constantly rewrite, I am permanently fighting with my own texts [...]. Rehearsal processes and stagings frequently make me reflect on the texts, and that prompts me to rewrite them. On occasions it is the actors who reveal things to you. And on occasions it is the reaction of the audience, or even the comments of the critics, that destabilise my vision of the text. With the audience and those privileged spectators, the critics, I try to establish precisely a critical relationship, which entails the following: first of all, respect, because if somebody has taken the time to see your show and comment upon it, you should be grateful to that person; and secondly, you have to reflect on what that person says or the way he or she reacts, in writing or during the show, because it may well be that that spectator's or critic's judgement is fruit of a distinct vision of theatre. They may consider that theatre should avoid the political or moral dimensions, or, contrariwise, that it has a function that you have not assigned to it. There is no obligation to obey either the spectators or the critics, but I think it is foolish not to listen to them. In conclusion, I believe that theatre is an essentially dialectic art. [...] I am permanently re-writing my texts, I am not sure if it is always for the best. Time reads; time re-writes, underlines, crosses out. And play publishing in Spain is in a patently improvable situation. In particular, I've published with Ñaque, a small publisher

based in Ciudad Real, and now I am also publishing with KRK, in Gijón; I am very grateful to both companies. But it's a pity we do not have, right now in Spain, collections of plays that find a place in bookstores all around the country, as happens in other countries. [...] Publishing is very important for texts to reach the stage.

P: You talk about leaving the text as open as possible for its staging. [...]

R: A theatrical text should be full of holes waiting to be filled and mines waiting to be exploded by the actors and directors. A word that is insignificant when reading may take on a fundamental value in the staging. When you read a sentence you don't understand it in the same way as if you listen to it coming from the mouth of an actor who is looking you in the eye. [...] When we read a narrative text we can abandon it at any moment, discard it, push it aside, comment upon it with somebody... whereas in theatre that text is developed within a very specific experience in which the mere fact of abandoning it, of saying "I don't accept the experience being proposed to me and I am leaving" is already a part of that same experience and very different from the solitary gesture of closing a book. When one appreciates this, one becomes aware that the writing of a theatrical text has to involve a different approach to that employed for narrative or poetic text. I try to exploit the weapons, the strategies, of the poets and the narrators, and put them at the service of playwriting.

[...]

P: What is theatre's function in your opinion?

R: I believe that theatre, like art in general, is an extraordinary reservoir of experience, a marvellous medium through which some human beings gather experience and share it with others, from their own time and from other times. Art allows us to present the universal and also the particular and unrepeatable. [...] My dream as a playwright is that the shows produced using my works enrich the public's experience. [...] I am thinking of Walter Benjamin's conception of experience, a philosopher whose works were part of my education; Benjamin underlined that the soldiers of the First World War, the first major technological war, having lived through enormous events, came back lost for words because they were incapable of making what they had lived through into an experience. That radical diagnosis of Benjamin is useful to me when remembering that there are shows from which the spectators emerge speechless, and others from which they emerge enriched by the experience. And this helps me to think about the need to contain the theatrical machinery. When theatre is capable of presenting a passion, a great conflict, a paradoxical situation, it is wonderful. I would go a little further: for me the mission of theatre in particular and art in general is to present an anomaly, a singularity, and this is its way of representing what is universal. For the purposes of the average, the normal we have sociology. I try to keep this in mind and observe what Primo Levi called "the grey zone", which separates and at the same time unites victims and executioners. [...] Theatre is a political art and it is so at least in a triple sense. Firstly, it is a political art because it calls together the *polis*, it creates an assembly. Right now, there are not many reasons for people to meet up and theatre is still one of the best. The show is given a collective reception. What an extraordinary invention the Greeks passed down to us: an art in which some citizens build fictions that allow others to reflect on their own lives, on what they are experiencing or what they would like to experience. Secondly, theatre is a political art because it is an art with collective authorship. This implies that the hopes and disappointments that it represents are shared, and I also find that wonderful. And thirdly: it is a political art because it is, par excellence, the art of criticism and of utopia, the art par excellence for portraying what is and what could be. I defend the political character of theatre in the face of a partisan character. The latter does not interest me because I believe that partisanship tends towards seeing things in black and white, simplification, and our mission is precisely to present what is complex as complex.

[...]

P: Rather than establishing theoretical, moral and philosophical parameters telling receivers how they should lead their lives, your texts invite the spectators or readers to reflection.

R: I hope so. That's my aim. I see a type of "leftist" theatre that is absolutely ineffective, from which the spectator emerges feeling more innocent. It is very comfortable to see an evil person on stage in front of whom you see yourself as innocent. But there is another less comfortable kind of show, which is the one in which the spectators emerge feeling more responsible. [...] Then things start getting a little more complex. [...] As a playwright I have to defend my characters; not justify them, but try to take care of their wounds. [...] My obligation is not to make caricatures of them, but to try and put myself into the best version possible, where they are not perceived as distant monsters but as characters in whom I recognise my own monster. If the spectators feel those people have powerful arguments, they

will generate their own counter-arguments, and these are always more interesting than the ones the author may propose.

[...]

P: Your works vary greatly in length.

R: In the prologue of *Teatro para minutos* (Theatre for Minutes), my collection of short texts, I defend non-standardisation in that sense too. Theatre is a very conservative art. [...] The less provided for an art is, the more independent it is, because it actually needs less and can be more challenging. As the poet knows he is not going to earn money with that, he can allow himself a book with fifteen thousand verses and another containing three verses with two drawings. We have to learn from this arrogance and this courage. But it is true that the theatrical system, i.e., the circuits where we usually show our work, tends to adulterate things. There is an implicit law according to which we must write works of approximately ten thousand words for four or five actors. Many of my works have an extension close to that, and I hope that it is not because I am obeying the market. In any event, I think it is necessary to write both very short works and very long works with a large number of characters. I don't think the writer is the leader of the theatrical fact, I think theatre is the art of the actors, but the authors do have to take on a very special responsibility, that of someone who can mature alone, because they are able say to themselves: "I don't need to sell my products immediately, that work can spend years in a drawer. I can scrape a living some other way and continue growing as a writer." The authors have to challenge the theatrical system. If Valle-Inclán had written at the service of the mediocre theatrical system of his time, he would never have created the theatre for the future that he created. One must challenge the mainstream, the standard formats, and this also has much to do with the length of the texts. One has to give the text the length the work needs, as required by the internal rules of the play. However, the more complex a play is with regard to the subject matter, number of characters and length, the greater the faith in that material demanded by the author, and his or her talent must be on a par with the faith he or she expects. [...]

[...]

P: How would you define theatre as a genre?

Genres must be challenged. I believe it is very important, and we have talked about this a lot of times with Sanchis, to search for theatre where it seems that there isn't any. If they say to you: "This isn't theatre", you have to find strategies to contradict that affirmation. If there is no theatre there, it is a space to be conquered and where something may be gained that fuels theatre. The works that Sanchis produces on the dramaturgy of narrative texts seem very interesting to me, because in theory it seems the drama and narrative are disassociated. [...] I believe it is necessary to challenge the categories and seek out theatre in poetry, in mysticism, in memorial literature... Moreover, the character of theatre allows it to introduce the complexity of the world in a very effective way. The dialectic art par excellence. And in contrast to the essayist, who inevitably sticks to a standpoint and from that standpoint discusses others, the playwright can construct characters who sustain visions of the world and, furthermore, generate experience out of those visions of the world, presenting the complex as complex and the paradoxical as paradoxical without resolving the paradox. As a contradictory situation that demands a decision, the paradox (and not the certainty) is the place par excellence of philosophy, and theatre may make the contradiction visible. There is a type of philosophical theatre that does not interest me, where the characters are the voice of the author and the discourse is reduced to a series of philosophemes, but there is another type of philosophical theatre, with *Antigone* being the primary example, whose importance lies not in what is being said but in how the words enfold a paradoxical situation that is irreducible to words and that finally can only be resolved by a decision, in other words, by a leap into the void. For this reason, the most powerful versions of *Antigone* are not those that hallow the heroine in contrast to Creon – let's remember that Hegel positioned himself in favour of Creon, defender of modern rational law, in opposition to an Antigone who he sees as reactionary. [...] I try to construct complex characters in complex situations, not around one of my convictions, but around a doubt that I want to share with others.

Ruth Vilar is an actress and writer and Salva Artesero is an actor.