

Windows of Wonder in the Theater of Antonio Buero Vallejo

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Antonio Buero Vallejo (1916-2000) is indisputably Spain's foremost dramatist of the second half of the twentieth century. With ever-evolving technical devices and great diversity of plot, his theater has been a fifty-year quest founded on hope and in search of truth. In an article called "La tragedia," Buero describes hope as twofold; "la esperanza en la justificación metafísica del mundo y la esperanza en la solución terrenal de los dolores humanos" (76). This profound investigation into the human condition has been described as the school of *buerismo* which the critic Sergio Nerva in his "Crítica" has defined as: "Ni doctrina, ni tesis, ni consigna. En todo caso, una manera de ser y de entender los problemas de nuestro tiempo. En fin de cuentas, una manera de combatir en favor de un mundo mejor, donde no sea posible la injusticia y donde el hombre, liberado de su angustia vital, de su inconformismo, avance, confiado y seguro, en busca de la perfección común" (3). Similarly, Victor Dixon explains: "His plays stress the significance of the human individual, the need to assume individual responsibility, the possibility, through individual determination and commitment – although not without collective action – of fulfilling a universal urge to overcome Man's limitations, both socio-political and ontological" (163). Even before Buero began to write theater, he envisioned the need for collective social progress without ever sacrificing the importance of the individual. As Luis Iglesias Feijoo puts it in his article "Buero Vallejo en la guerra civil," "si tiene muy presente la necesidad colectiva del progreso social, no olvida nunca el valor de cada ser humano" (236).

Although the tenets of *buerismo* are constants in his theater, Buero's use of theatrical devices becomes increasingly complex as he explores techniques of "total immersion" which cause the spectator to experience more fully the reality of the protagonists. As early as *En la ardiente oscuridad*, written in 1947, Buero immerses the audience in the sightless world of the blind for a brief but disquieting moment by plunging the theater into darkness. Similarly, in *El sueño de la razón* (1970), whenever the deaf Goya is on stage, the other characters silently mouth their words to simulate the protagonist's soundless reality.

In other plays, Buero attempts to portray the inner reality, conscience and dream world of his characters through a number of interesting resources. For instance, a child plays the *duende* of the main character's imagination in *Irene o el tesoro* (1954) and masks are used to convey the protagonists' perception of a grotesque reality in *Llegada de los dioses* (1971) and *La detonación* (1977). Special lighting and sound effects separate concrete reality from the inner world in works such as *Jueces en la noche* (1979), *Diálogo secreto* (1984), *Lázaro en el laberinto* (1986), and *Las trampas del azar* (1994). In four of his works, Buero uses windows of varying types and sizes through which he portrays an enhanced personal world that we share with the characters. These

plays include *El tragaluz* of 1967, *La fundación* of 1974, *Caimán* of 1981 and *Música cercana* of 1989.

El tragaluz is often considered one of Buero's masterpieces and is perhaps the culmination of a series of works including *Historia de una escalera* and *Hoy es fiesta* that depicts the travails of middle-class Spanish society during the long, grueling years of the Franco dictatorship. These plays all achieve the difficult balance of portraying the truth while, at the same time, mollifying the censors. *El tragaluz* is the story of a family, two sons and their parents, who lived through the wrenching experience of the Spanish Civil War. As John Kronik puts it in his article "Buero Vallejo's *El tragaluz* and Man's Existence in History," the play poses the question "is man's circumstance the fruit of historical determinism or of individual choice?" (372). One of the sons, Vicente, is a forerunner of a type of character that Buero develops in a number of post-Franco works – an individual of material success and wealth whose achievements have been reached through unethical means. Vicente caught the train, both literally and figuratively, betraying his family and leaving behind a wake of victims. His first victim was his little sister who died of hunger after he boarded a train at the end of the war and carried off the family's provisions. His second victim was his father who lost his mind shortly after his son's betrayal. As Ana Isabel Carballal observes, "Insanity is for the father the only place to escape in the face of a reality that is too cruel to endure" (5). Although Vicente claims he tried in vain to get off the crowded train when he saw that the rest of his family could not join him, his brother Mario has a different recollection. Vicente continued on the fast track to success, easing his conscience by giving his parents gifts such as a television and washing machine, typical examples of bourgeois materialism.

The parents and Mario live in a shabby basement apartment. As the title of the play suggests, the skylight in the apartment has special significance. The window itself is not seen, but its presence is indicated by the shadows that are projected on the opposite wall, creating, in the words of José Monleón in "Crítica," a type of "cueva de Platón" (159). Another critic, Sainz de Robles in "Breve historia de una temporada teatral," calls it an "ojo mágico abierto a lo maravilloso" (xiii). It is a screen that reflects pieces of exterior reality – incomplete beings, bits of existence and fragments of conversation – that seem totally unidentifiable. This procession of unknown figures is accompanied by the obsessive question of the father, "¿Quién es ése"? As children, Mario and Vicente used to peer out the skylight in an effort to identify passers-by. Vicente has long since lost any existential curiosity and, with it, his innocence. Mario, on the other hand, is intrigued by his father's renewed interest in this game. The seemingly irrational connection that the father makes between the skylight and a train becomes increasingly meaningful to him. Even Vicente cannot resist the attraction of the skylight which projects some hint of his guilt each time he visits. Vicente finally admits the truth to his senile father, concluding "Y ahora habré de volver a ese tren que nunca para" (99). In a moment of absolute lucidity, the father dramatically carries out the roles of judge and executioner, stabbing Vicente with the same scissors he used for his child-like cutouts.

El tragaluz acts as a test of the spectator's conscience. Just as the father reconstructs the traumatic memories that caused his dementia, the audience is likewise

induced to revisit the past. With the father's repetition of "¿Quién es ése?", the spectators must turn inward to identify themselves before they can ask this question of others. Thus, this experiment in total reality, both objective and subjective, ultimately places us face to face with our individual and collective responsibility. The skylight allows us not only to look outward in contemplation of others, but also to gaze inward and explore our own conscience.

La fundación is Buero's last play to be produced during the dictatorship. The action begins in what seems to be a comfortable dormitory room in a well funded research foundation that supports the intellectuals and artists who reside there. At the back of the setting is a large window that looks out on what Buero describes as "un maravilloso paisaje: límpido cielo, majestuosas montañas, la fulgurante plata de un lago, remotos edificios que semejan extrañas catedrales, el dulce verdor de praderas y bosquecillos" (45). To further accentuate this idyllic Turner-like view, the Pastoral from Rossini's Overture to *William Tell* is playing softly in the background when the first act begins. Eventually, we learn that we have been seeing a distorted reality through the eyes of Tomás, a condemned prisoner who has created the illusion of the foundation to protect himself from the terrible truth of his situation. His roommates are not mathematicians or doctors, but cellmates who are also condemned to death and who were arrested after he confessed under torture. They are all political prisoners of "un país desconocido," but Buero's own experience in the jails of Franco's regime after the Civil War and the repression that characterized the dictatorship up to its end leave no doubt that we are witnessing a disturbing reality that could be Spain. The fact that Tomás was tortured seems to mitigate his having informed on his companions who are trying to bring him back to reality. Asel, the oldest, wisest and most compassionate of the dissidents, tries to console him after he recovers his memory, telling him "Eres un ser humano. Fuerte a veces, débil otras. Como casi todos" (141).

Once Tomás has come to terms with his true situation, the picture window disappears revealing a grimy, exposed toilet in its place. Although Asel was instrumental in bringing Tomás out of his fantasy, he tells him, nonetheless, that "El paisaje sí era verdadero" (156). The now absent window with its bucolic landscape no longer represents an escape from reality, but a truth that offers an ambiguous hope. We are all in jails of one sort or another, but must keep struggling to move on to the next one, always active in our quest for freedom and a better world. To reinforce this message, at the end of the play when new prisoners are led into the cell, it has been restored to its earlier appearance and the picture window once again beckons with its scene of tranquility and natural beauty. But far from appeasing us, we are confronted with the truth of Asel's observation and realize that we are all prisoners of our own situations and personal weaknesses although our jails may not be barred. In her book on Buero *From Dictatorship to Democracy*, Martha Halsey describes this work as challenging the spectators "to open their eyes in order to avoid being deceived in the future" (89). Similarly, the playwright himself in an interview with José Monleón explains his message to the spectator as "la esperanza – incluso el optimismo – de salir para comprender, y advertir a los demás, que la 'Fundación' es otra cárcel. Cuando eso se

advierte, cuando se logra comunicar, las rejas se corren, la humana liberación empieza a ser realmente posible” (6).

Caimán was written some five years after the close of the Franco regime, but the plight of the poor, the unemployed and the lower middle class is portrayed as strikingly unchanged. The milieu of the play returns to the hardscrabble life of people not unlike those of *Historia de una escalera* who have been overlooked once again, this time by the new democratic Spain. Somewhat like the narrators from a distant future, *El* and *Ella*, in *El tragaluz*, this play too has a narrator, *La Dama*, who addresses the audience of 1980 as if they were living her reality some thirty years later, allowing the spectators to reflect upon themselves as if from afar.

The action occurs in a small, run-down house in a neighborhood outside Madrid. The living room, though humble, shows signs of some cultural touches and above an inexpensive but well used bookcase is “una ventana enrejada más bien pequeña, sin otra función al parecer que la de mejorar la iluminación interior” (12). Rosa and Néstor, two of the main characters, are affectionately referred to as “*Los Profesores*” in the *barrio* for their efforts to better the lives of their neighbors. Rosa, a retired schoolteacher, has organized and works with a local theater group of young people, while Néstor clings to a job he might lose at any time and is also a social activist. Several years have passed since the tragic loss of their nine-year-old daughter who fell into a pit at an abandoned construction site where she and her friends were playing. Rescue efforts were futile and her body was never recovered. Always referring to her daughter in present tense, Rosa refuses to accept the most logical truth that Carmela is dead and imagines her living in some sort of subterranean garden, even believing that she hears her voice calling to her. When Rosa’s thoughts are of her daughter, the gray light coming through the grated window changes to a vivid blue, symbolizing her fervent though unfounded belief in her daughter’s survival.

Besides the lighting effects that shine through the window, another symbolic or allegorical aspect of the play has its roots in the work Rosa is directing with her theater group. She became fascinated by an American Indian folktale of a father who was saved by his son from the jaws of a cayman and decided to bring the story to the stage. But like the jail cell in *La fundación* that represents our own incarceration by social conventions and material comforts, entrapment in the jaws of the cayman also symbolizes our lack of freedom and need to escape, not as Rosa envisions with the miraculous intervention of her daughter, but with collective effort and solidarity on the part of many. Néstor is the character who best incarnates Buero’s ideal. Although deeply touched by his daughter’s tragic disappearance, he accepts her death and tries to convince Rosa to abandon her fantasies and improbable hope. Néstor is a man of action, willing to struggle and commit himself to the cause of a better life for the people. He sees this effort as the only escape from destruction in the jaws of the monster, a metaphor for a system based on exploitation and injustice. In a vain attempt to make Rosa see the futility of her extravagant delusions, he tells her “¡Te quiero a ti!! ¡Y quiero que vivas, y que los dos vivamos en el dolor de nuestra niña perdida, pero en la alegría de las tareas que nos llaman!” (99)

Toward the end of the play when Rosa succumbs completely to her delusion and meets her death in the search for her daughter, the bright blue light, “la fría magia luminosa” (105), streams through the window even in her absence, signifying, in this case, the triumph of fantasy and illusion over truth and reality. In the final scene, the identity of *La Dama* is revealed – she is Charito, portrayed as a rather frivolous and promiscuous teenager during the action of the play. She is now, however, a successful writer and has married Néstor whom she describes as “un hombre oscuro, pero a los que son como él debemos nuestra fuerza. Sin ellos, el caimán nos habría devorado hace tiempo. . . . Son la salud y el ánimo frente a la desesperanza y el suicidio” (107-108). Thus, Néstor represents genuine hope and the possibility of progress through his dedication to action and ability to confront the truth, extinguishing the beguiling light of fantasy.

Música cercana, translated by Marion P. Holt as *The Music Window*, was first presented in 1989. Buero calls the play a “fábula” and includes, perhaps somewhat sardonically, a disclaimer stating “Los personajes y el argumento de esta obra son ficticios. Cualquier posible semejanza con personas y acontecimientos reales será casual” (54). The play begins in a rather small, well appointed sitting room whose main feature is a large window opening onto a patio and whose appearance is described as “algo más cercana . . . de la que presentaría a la distancia normal, como si la aproximase alguna subjetiva obsesión” (57).

The window’s exaggerated prominence is a manifestation of the character Alfredo’s quest to turn back time and regain his youth. He has made a video of himself using clips from different years which he runs backwards to recapture the past. Although now some fifty six years old, he still dreams of a girl in an adjacent apartment whom he used to watch through the window when he was only twenty. Despite the fact that they never spoke, he believes there was an undeniable attraction between them and fantasizes about the past and even the possibility of rediscovering each other in the present. His memories of this girl are accompanied by both real and imagined music that enters through the window, symbolizing his thoughts of the past and her continued presence in real time. Besides the sound of music, the window also offers views of the past that are dramatizations of Alfredo’s reveries. At one point, the window opens to reveal “una linda jovencita de unos diecisiete años” who sits by her window sewing “después de lanzar una recatada mirada a la ventana de Alfredo” (87).

Alfredo is related to characters dating back to Vicente of *El tragaluz*. His material wealth is extreme and he is brutal in his relationships. He tries to control his own daughter Sandra by threatening to remove his financial support and attempts to pay off her boyfriend René to get him out of her life. His wealth comes from dealings with multinational organizations that are fueled by crime and illegal drugs while maintaining a façade of integrity through careful money laundering. The contrast between his elegant outward appearance and the corruption and deceit that underlie it brings to mind other protagonists of Buero’s post-Franco theater like Juan Luis of *Jueces en la noche*, Fabio of *Diálogo secreto* and Gabriel of *Las trampas del azar*. All of these characters are

eventually unmasked of their hypocrisy and condemned for their own shortcomings and/or role in maintaining a system based on injustice.

René is at the opposite pole from Alfredo. A true defender of social justice, he is devoted to his unnamed South American country and refuses Alfredo's money as a bribe, even though it could further the political cause to which he ascribes. After Sandra's murder, a random crime ironically at the hands of a drug addict, René confronts Alfredo with a powerful denunciation: "Quisiera aplastarle como a un alacrán . . . También yo estoy muerto desde que murió Sandra. Viviré, sin embargo, para la lucha más necesaria. En ella es donde lucharé contra usted, no aquí y a puñetazos" (143).

At the very end of the play, Alfredo's defeat is absolute. He is drawn to the window by the allure of the classical music he identifies with his undeclared love of long ago. The girl's window opens and there he sees the same person of his memories, but "avejentada" and with "bolsas del cansancio bajo los ojos, el rictus endurecido por los años de su boca, el cabello casi blanco y peinado con desaliño" (147). As he utters her name for the first time, she sees him and slams her window shut. The music continues to play, but the lighting goes down until only her closed window is illuminated.

In all four plays, the technical device of a window creates effects of total immersion so that the audience can more directly experience the inner world of the characters. The skylight of *El tragaluz* with its projections of memories, sounds and bits of existence eventually completes the father's slow reconstruction of a painful past. The imaginary window in *La fundación* is, paradoxically, the one great truth – the need for mankind to continue the struggle from prison to prison towards a more perfect reality. The small grated window in *Caimán* and the disproportionately large one in *Música cercana* both reflect unrealistic hopes on the part of the characters – Rosa's fantasy that her daughter still lives and Alfredo's belief that the love he betrayed long ago can be recovered. Buero's theater proposes an authentic hope and optimism that only can be justified through dedication and action to achieve true freedom.

Upon Buero's death, a fellow dramatist, Adolfo Marsillach, said in praise, "He opened the window of Spanish theater and made us see that we had been blinded by Francoism." Buero's windows invite us not only to look through them to understand others and reconstruct the past, but more importantly they allow us to reflect upon ourselves. While the transition period after Franco and the new democracy were dominated by a kind of national amnesia or *pacto de olvido* regarding Spain's troubled past, Buero's theater has always stressed the need to acknowledge and examine past events and errors so that the individual and society can move ahead with authentic hope for the future based on accountability and responsibility. In the words of Catherine O'Leary, for Buero, as well as for the artists and intellectuals of his theater, their role has been "to defend the truth in the face of a comfortable myth and to be the conscience of a society that has been lulled into a false, guilt-free complacency by the official version of events" (191). A window cannot bring in fresh air until the stale air is detected and removed, not merely recycled. Buero's windows of wonder provide a mechanism for such personal and collective renewal. A comment made by Patricia O'Connor regarding

the message of *El tragaluz* can apply to all the plays included in this study: “. . . if people paused in their hurried pursuit of material gain, turned off the numbing fantasies of television, and looked out of the various ‘windows’ of the heart to see real people empathetically, the world would be a better place” (26). Buero’s windows, be they small, large or imaginary, are at the fragile border between the outside and inner world of the protagonists. While they beckon with intriguing bits of real or fantasized reality, they also act as a catalyst for self knowledge and reflection.

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