
**FROM REPÚBLICA INMORAL TO LA PESTE FASCISTA:
AGIT-PROP THEATRE OF THE SECOND REPUBLIC**

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This article considers the relationship between culture, specifically the theatre, and the state during the Second Republic and analyses some of the work of certain writers who employed propagandistic theatre to further their political aims. It examines the purpose, both political and artistic, of this theatre before going on to demonstrate how its reception by the state's censors during the Second Republic and the early Civil War years mirrored the political changes and confusion of the period. Finally, some conclusions are drawn about the worth of this theatre, both as art and as social document.

Tomando como punto de partida la relación entre el teatro y el estado, este artículo examina el teatro reformista de los años treinta y luego la evolución de un teatro propagandístico, inspirado en las obras de autores extranjeros como Piscator, y aliado a un movimiento político revolucionario. Se considera la recepción oficial de este teatro por un análisis de los informes de los censores, y concluye que los juicios de los censores reflejan la confusión política de la época.

Con respeto al valor literario de este teatro se puede decir que muchas veces no es un teatro muy logrado, pero no deja de ser así un importante documento histórico-social de la II República.

1. Theatre and the State

The role of culture in the political education of the populace is important, though not necessarily always recognized. David Lloyd and Paul Thomas have argued in their book, *Culture and the State*, that

“cultural (or aesthetic) formation comes gradually to play the role of forming citizens for the modern state”¹. They contend that “culture is not a mere supplement to the state but the formative principle of its efficacy. It is, in other terms, a principal instrument of hegemony”². This is something clearly grasped by the politicians of the early period of the Second Republic. The first Republican government endorsed radical social policies and a cultural policy that sought to bring culture to the masses. One of the first acts of the new government, a mere six weeks into office, was to create the Misiones Pedagógicas (29 May 1931). It was set up under Marcelino Domingo at the Ministerio de Instrucción Pública y Bellas Artes, with the following aims:

Se trata de llevar a las gentes, con preferencia a las que habitan en localidades rurales, el aliento del progreso y los medios de participar en él, en sus estímulos morales y en los ejemplos del avance universal, de modo que los pueblos todos de España, aun los apartados, participen en las ventajas y goces nobles hoy reservados a los centros urbanos. (...) La República estima que es llegada la hora de que el pueblo se sienta participe en los bienes que el estado tiene en sus manos y deben llegar a todos por igual, cesando aquel abandono injusto y procurando suscitar los estímulos más elevados. De esta suerte podrá abreviarse la obra siempre lenta que la educación pública va logrando mediante la aplicación de recursos conocidos, cuyo influjo se irá acrecentando cada día³.

Theatre, it would seem, was an important element in this cultural policy. It is worth remembering Schiller’s essay on the stage as moral institution, which maintains that: “Sight is always more powerful to man than description; hence the stage acts more powerfully than morality or law”⁴. Schiller then took this further, claiming that; “The stage does even more than this. It cultivates the ground where religion and law do not think it dignified to stop”⁵. In

¹ David Lloyd and Paul Thomas, *Culture and the State*, New York, Routledge, 1998, p. 1.

² *Culture and the State*, p. 118.

³ José Ramón Fernández, “Años de primavera”, in *ADE Teatro: Revista de la Asociación de Directores de Escena de España*, no. 77 (oct. 1999), pp. 127-32, quote in p. 127.

⁴ “The Stage as a Moral Institution”, in Friedrich Schiller, *Essays, Aesthetical and Philosophical*, London, George Bell and Sons, 1900, pp. 333-339, quote in p. 334.

⁵ “The Stage as a Moral Institution”, p. 335. Schiller wrote: “Both laws and religion are strengthened by a union with the stage, where virtue and vice, joy and sorrow,

reality it was not just the intellectuals and reformers of the Misiones Pedagógicas that wished to harness the power of the stage as educational tool, as the growth in politicised and revolutionary theatre during the period of the Second Republic confirms.

The Second Republic was a period of political turmoil in which new ideas were being put into practice for the first time in Spain. The theatre was seen by many as an ideal way to communicate these ideas to the masses. Theatre then, is the ideal forum for a political education, and indeed politicians have long been aware of the power of drama, perhaps because they harness so much of it in their own endeavours. The enactment of a conflict or the elucidation of an idea on stage can both clarify and simplify, just as it can also oversimplify and falsify, and those with a message to propagate have a captive audience in the theatre. In fact, they do not even have to be in the theatre; one of the advantages of drama is that it is so versatile and can be staged almost anywhere, as César de Vicente Hernando pointed out:

El teatro, para el anarquismo español, era el medio más adecuado de comunicación en tanto que a) podía hacer llegar las ideas hasta un amplio número de analfabetos que existía en el movimiento obrero, b) podía convertirse en un modo de concentración social, y transformarse, en un momento dado, en reunión para preparar una huelga o iniciar una manifestación, c) era el medio idóneo para recaudar fondos, sin apenas costes, y ayudar así a los presos, mantener cajas de resistencia para poder sobrevivir durante las huelgas, etc., d) con los ensayos se podía analizar mejor; y más cercanamente a la experiencia vital de los participantes, la situación social que se tratara en la obra, e) algunas obras apuntaban resoluciones de conflictos sociales que quedaban lejanas de la realidad, pero ayudaban a preparar estrategias y a buscar tácticas, f) el teatro unía por la manera en que era visto: se podía hacer en tabernas, locales sindicales, barracas de fábricas, etc. mientras se descansaba, g) el teatro introducía, gracias a las obras de Ibsen sobre todo, modos de vida y costumbres ajenas a las tradiciones locales encaminando a los asistentes a imaginarios colectivos lejanos. Las sesiones solían constar de un programa doble, un

are thoroughly displayed in a truthful and popular way; where a variety of providential problems are solved; where all secrets are unmasked, all artifice ends, and Truth alone is the judge, as incorruptible as Rhadamanthus", p. 333.

drama y una comedia (generalmente en un acto), acompañadas por un concierto de música, canciones revolucionarias y recitales de poesía⁶.

José Monleón maintained that all theatre, even the most existential, is at base political, “porque la atención a estas cuestiones se da dentro de un contexto concreto y, por tanto, alcanza un determinado valor sociocultural”.⁷ Martin Esslin too, noted the political nature of theatre, commenting that “it either reasserts or undermines the code of conduct of a given society”⁸. Theatre, in other words, has an ideological role, and usually either advocates integration or dissent. The theatre that I will look at in this paper is the latter type: it is drama of agitation propaganda.

2. The context for agit-prop theatre of the second Republic

In the aftermath of the so-called Desastre of 1898 and the political disarray that followed, it is hardly surprising that the disenchanted Spanish intellectuals of the early part of the twentieth century looked beyond Spain’s borders for inspiration, both political and cultural. It was during this period of ideological and political upheaval in Spain that a theatre of agitation propaganda emerged. This was a politicised theatre that presented itself as allied to political and social change. The attraction of such theatre for the propagandist of a new ideology is manifest. As Szanto comments: “Agitation propaganda, presented theatrically, participated in raising its audiences’ consciousnesses to a point where social and political problems took on shape and immediacy”⁹. The agit-prop offerings of the Second Republic formed a challenge and an alternative to the integration propaganda of the commercially successful theatre of the

⁶ César de Vicente Hernando, “Concepto y tendencias del teatro revolucionario y de agitación social entre 1900 y 1939”, in *ADE Teatro: Revista de la Asociación de Directores de Escena de España*, no. 77 (oct. 1999), pp. 133-43; quote in pp. 136-37.

⁷ José Monleón, “Llegada de los dioses de Antonio Buero Vallejo”, *Primer Acto*, no. 137 (1971), pp. 57-59; quote in p. 57.

⁸ Quoted in Hilde F. Cramsie, *Teatro y censura en la España franquista: Sastre, Muñiz y Ruibal*, American University Studies Series II, Romance Languages and Literature, 9, New York, Peter Lang, 1984, p. 2.

⁹ George H. Szanto, *Theater and Propaganda*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1978, p. 73.

day, both the bourgeois drama and the *género chico*, which so incensed Unamuno for its falsification of popular culture¹⁰. Agit-prop theatre was also, significantly, aimed at an entirely different audience; in fact it was part of an attempt to create and educate a new, non-bourgeois, audience. A theatrical revolution was proposed that would bring an end to the bourgeois domination of the stalls and give the theatre to the proletariat: "Se trata pues de transformar la escena mostrando la liquidación de la familia, la religion, la moral, la justicia y el Estado con que se sostiene el régimen de la Restauración"¹¹.

Many of the revolutionary dramatists, like Sender and Alberti, believed that the bourgeoisie had the theatre that it deserved and resolved to create a new theatre for a different public. As Monleón comments:

La izquierda quería otra España y quería otro teatro"¹²; one of the problems, of course, was that the new public was not always aware of its role or even a willing participant in this experiment. Dru Dougherty wrote: "No cabe duda de que este 'público posible', tanto más creíble cuanto más abstracto, crecía en importancia a medida que los autores, críticos e intelectuales se desesperaban de educar el gusto burgués mediante teatros de arte, homenajes públicos y campañas periodísticas"¹³.

Lorca, while not a revolutionary, was outspoken in his criticism of the bourgeois theatre and the need for progress on the Spanish stage. In his *Charla sobre teatro*, he wrote: "El teatro se debe

¹⁰ "Miguel de Unamuno denounced the genre in 1896 for its falsification of genuinely popular culture (...). The sainetes of Enrique García Álvarez, Carlos Arniches and the Álvarez Quintero brothers provide examples of fictional worlds that hid Spain's pressing problems beneath a seductive, festive mask". Dru Dougherty, "Theater and Culture, 1868-1936", in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Spanish Culture*, David T. Gies, ed., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 211-221; quote in pp. 213-14.

¹¹ "Concepto y tendencias del teatro revolucionario y de agitación social entre 1900 y 1939", p. 138.

¹² José Monleón, *"El mono azul": Teatro de urgencia y romancero de la guerra civil*, Endimión, Madrid, Ayuso, 1979, p. 176.

¹³ Dru Dougherty, "Talia Convulsa: La crisis teatral de los años 20", in Robert Lima and Dru Dougherty, *Dos ensayos sobre teatro español de los 20*, Murcia, Murcia University Press, 1984, p. 117.

imponer al público, y no el público al teatro”¹⁴. Valle-Inclán too, criticised the escapist nature of much of what was on offer. Indeed, he advocated reform of the stage, suggesting that “toda reforma en el teatro (había de comenzar) por el fusilamiento de los Quintero”, the authors of many of the most popular and commercially successful theatre of the day¹⁵.

Yet it would be naïve to suppose that this desire for reform was widespread. According to Hormigón, comparing the Spanish theatre offering of the late nineteenth century to 1936 with that of many other European countries was a lamentable exercise: “Las corrientes literario dramáticas que se van sucediendo, naturalismo, realismo, simbolismo, realismo impresionista, expresionismo, futurismo, grotesco constructivista, dadaísmo, epicidad, tienen en nuestro país un pálido parangón por lo que se refiere al repertorio dominante en los teatros”¹⁶. The theatre crisis that had been diagnosed in the 1920s continued into the next decade, but there was little agreement on how it could be resolved. Some believed that state aid would save the Spanish theatre, while others asserted that this would lead to further disruption, and merely replace an incompetent or interfering businessman with an incompetent or interfering unionman.

Yet various groups did attempt to create a new type of theatre to address the crisis. Smaller art-house theatres were established to serve minority interests. Early attempts at change such as Adriá Grau’s *Teatre Intim* (1898-1928) and Rivas Cherif’s *El Caracol*, while they rejected the stale bourgeois theatre failed to create anything radically different to replace it; from 1928 until 1935, Margarita Xirgu’s theatre company staged social and political plays in the *Teatro Español*. Others involved in attempts at reform included Gregorio Martínez Sierra, Ignasi Iglesias, María Teresa León, Miguel Hernández, Rafael Alberti, Carlota O’Neill, César Garfias (C. Falcón) and Lluís Masriera. Some progress was made, including the

¹⁴ Federico García Lorca, “Textos y palabras de Federico: charla sobre teatro (1935)”, in *Seis dramaturgos españoles del siglo XX*, 2 vols, Madrid, Edición Primer Acto-Girol Books, 1988, I, pp. 139-42 (qu. p. 141).

¹⁵ Quoted in Carlos Jerez Farrán, “Decadencia y revitalización en el teatro español de los años 20”, *Estreno*, 17 (no. 2, 1991), pp.25-33 (p. 25).

¹⁶ Juan Antonio Hormigón, “Los teatros íntimos y experimentales en Barcelona y Madrid (1900-1936)”, in *ADE Teatro: Revista de la Asociación de Directores de Escena de España*, no. 77 (oct 1999), pp. 117-26, qu. p.117.

development of some proletarian theatres in Barcelona and Madrid. However, commenting on the theatre scene in Madrid, Hormigón noted: "Por todas partes había un rasgamiento general de vestiduras pidiendo transformaciones urgentes, pero nada cambió, en lo substantivo ni tan siquiera con la llegada de la República. No había auténticos proyectos y planes de reforma, ni un enunciado de medidas imprescindibles, solo ideas, propósitos y buenas voluntades"¹⁷.

Nonetheless, certain ideas were put into practice with some success. Most significantly, perhaps, the 1930s saw the growth of two associated movements within the theatre. These were *teatro para el pueblo* and *teatro del pueblo*. The former included such groups as Teatro de Misiones Pedagógicas, La Barraca and El Buho. Although Rafael Marquina was the official head of the Teatro de las Misiones Pedagógicas, Alejandro Casona soon emerged as the real force behind the effort. It was an ambulatory theatre group, largely made up of university students, that brought mostly classical theatre to the towns and villages of Spain: "El repertorio clásico era el modo de recuperar ese lazo de unión entre el pueblo y la cultura, entre los dueños de las palabras y éstas mismas"¹⁸. Despite some justifiable criticism of its paternalism, it must be acknowledged that Misiones Pedagógicas was part of a government policy of bringing culture out of the elitist theatres and to the masses in the pueblos of Spain.

La Barraca (1932-36), a similar, but not associated, theatre group, established by the Unión Federal de Estudiantes Hispánicos in 1931 and with Federico García Lorca and Eduardo Ugarte at its helm, mirrored the work of the Teatro de Misiones and indeed received a grant from the Ministerio de Instrucción Pública. Both groups had as their aim to bring theatre to the masses; in addition, La Barraca considered the recuperation of the classics, long associated with an elite group in society, as part of its greater mission. Occasionally they included the works of living artists in their repertoire, including those of Antonio Machado and of Lorca himself. Fernández quotes Lorca from an article published in *El Sol* in December 1931: "Los estudiantes van a lanzarse por todos los caminos de España a educar al pueblo. Sí, a educar al pueblo, con el instrumento hecho para el

¹⁷ "Los teatros íntimos y experimentales en Barcelona y Madrid (1900-1936)", p. 120.

¹⁸ "Años de primavera", p. 128.

pueblo, que es el teatro y que se le ha hurtado vergonzosamente”¹⁹. Max Aub too, made his mark with the short-lived, but influential, El Buho (1934-36).

While not concerned with theatre of a political nature, the very existence of such groups was a political statement about the ownership of culture. Unfortunately when the conservative government won the 1934 elections, the impact on the Misiones and La Barraca was immediate: the first year the grant was halved and the following year, withdrawn. The future of the Spanish stage was beginning to look better in the months preceding the civil war, when Max Aub led the call for a National Theatre, for which the new government promised support. Due to the war, these plans were never fulfilled. Yet many of those involved in the Teatro de las Misiones, La Barraca, El Buho and the TEA went on to bring a more politicised and propagandistic theatre to the people during the civil war.

The *teatro del pueblo* movement perhaps came closer to a proletarian theatre than any previous organisation, and they staged plays, many of which were political or agit-prop pieces, in factories and in *Casas del Pueblo*. The influence of Erwin Piscator, among others, on such Spanish theatre is evident, particularly in the determination to present the workings and implications of political, social and economic forces on stage. In *The Political Theatre* Piscator wrote: “It is no longer the private, personal fate of the individual, but the times and the fate of the masses that are the heroic factors in the new drama” (p. 243). Founder with Herman Schuller of the Proletarian Theatre (oct. 1920-Apr. 1921), Piscator set about putting the theory into practice. The Proletarian theatre, using amateur actors drawn from the working classes, toured working man’s clubs with their agit-prop works and situational pieces relevant to the political circumstances of the day, using types to represent political and social groups in society. Writing on, “The Proletarian Theatre: Its Fundamental Principles and its Tasks” (1920), Piscator stated: “The Proletarian Theatre must be run on these lines: simplicity of expression and construction; it must have a clear and unambiguous impact on the emotions of the working class audience; any artistic intention must be subordinated to the revolutionary purpose of the

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 130.

whole; the conscious emphasis and propagation of the concept of the class struggle” (p. 41)²⁰. Reacting against the prevailing commercial theatrical climate, the Spanish dramatists who attempted to bring a similar proletarian theatre to the Spanish people were generally not well received outside the ranks of their fellow reformers. Those who attempted innovation, if they managed to avoid trouble with the censors, were often ignored or rejected by the wider public, and essentially were left preaching to the converted.

Nonetheless, the ideas of Piscator and others were taken up by theatre groups, such as César and Irene Falcón’s *Nosotros* (1932-34) and the *Teatro del proletariado* in Barcelona, which sought to reform, not only the content of dramas produced, but also the structure of the theatre. As César Falcón made clear, this was to be a new type of theatre: “el Teatro Proletario no puede interpretarse con las maneras, prejuicios y convencionalismos ramplones del teatro burgués. Exige de los actores una técnica nueva, que abarca desde la inflexion de voz hasta la actitud corporal” (Falcón, p. 107)²¹. It was to be a technical revolution as well as a political one. The Unión de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios, formed in the early 1930s, published a statement in *Octubre* in 1933 that goes some way to explaining the intention of, and for some, perceived menace posed by, such revolutionary artists. Their declaration read: “Queremos iniciar un teatro nuevo: el teatro de los trabajadores, el teatro que exprese en sus múltiples formas todas las modalidades de la vida, de las clases que luchan por redimirse de la miseria”²². This was clearly a step further than the proposals of Misiones Pedagógicas.

Rafael Alberti is perhaps the best known of these revolutionary dramatists, and from *Fermin Galán* (1931), a “romance de ciego (...) destinado a exaltar la sublevación de Jaca”, to his founding, with María Teresa León, of the magazine *Octubre*, to his active collaboration with the Popular Front campaign for government, his commitment to his political and theatrical revolution was total. In 1931 he caused controversy with his play *El hombre deshabitado*,

²⁰ Terence Smith, <http://homepages.tesco.net/~theatre/tezzaland/webstuff/piscator.html>

²¹ “Concepto y tendencias del teatro revolucionario y de agitación social entre 1900 y 1939”, p. 142.

²² Robert Marrast, “El teatro durante la guerra civil española”, *Cuadernos el público*, no. 15 (1986), pp. 19-31 (qu. p. 20).

staged in the Teatro de la Zarzuela in Madrid on 26 February, shortly before the declaration of the Republic. The play itself is critical of the apathy of Spaniards. Moreover, the author took the opportunity afforded by its production to denounce bourgeois theatre and to make political statements. When the audience applauded the play, Alberti rose and shouted: “¡Viva el exterminio! ¡Muera la podredumbre de la actual escena española!”²³. Traditional theatregoers condemned the author, but he found support among the growing numbers of young radicals. It appeared to some that the revolution had begun when a riot took place after the final show.

Yet, despite the best efforts of the reformers and the propagandistic offerings of others, the theatre world was still dominated by more conservative and frivolous works. Other trends to emerge during the Second Republic are a nationalist theatre, with its emphasis on tradition and folklore, which, although populist, was generally escapist in nature, and a strong cabaret and music hall scene, dismissed by many of those who wished to see a more politicised theatrical reform, but nonetheless popular²⁴. The problem, as diagnosed by Azorín in 1927 remained largely unchanged. He wrote in ABC, “Existen unas cincuenta compañías dedicadas a la representación de comedias (...) Y esas cincuenta compañías, todas, absolutamente todas, tienen el mismo repertorio”²⁵.

3. Official Reception of Agit-prop Theatre

The revolutionary dramatists were determined to use the theatre to urge the working classes towards political and social revolution. As their number and ambition grew, it is interesting to look at how their theatre was viewed by the authorities. An examination of the records held in the Archivo General de la Administración relating to censorship of the agit-prop theatre of the

²³ Rafael Alberti, “El autor recuerda el estreno”, in *Seis dramaturgos*, pp. 47-50 (p. 48).

²⁴ The *Teatro Nacional de la Falange*, under the direction of Luis Escobar, concentrated on staging dramas from Spain’s Golden Age, or those that emulated such theatre, in keeping with the nationalist ideology it reflected.

²⁵ ABC (28 julio 1927), quoted in Dru Dougherty, “Talia Convulsa: La crisis teatral de los años 20”, p. 99.

Second Republic reveals this. The authors of these plays are at times unidentified and the records merely show that the play was submitted to the Director General de Seguridad by the Teatro Progreso, the Teatro Proletario or a Casa del Pueblo. On other occasions the authors are identified, but are generally not names familiar to us now, with some exceptions. (Falcón and Mussot, and of course Sender, Alberti and Dieste). This might imply that these were authors by expediency rather than vocation; their agenda is clearly more political than artistic and they do not hide this fact. Many would later be the authors of the wartime *teatro de urgencia*.

The aims of these works is, like the aims of the later *teatro de urgencia*, to agitate and stir up emotion among the audience, to encourage action on the part of the spectator and to educate the spectator about his political state and the means of losing his chains. Like all good examples of agit-prop, these plays deal with emotion, rather than reason, and in many of the plays the world is neatly divided into the noble downtrodden workers and the cruel and perverted capitalists. Stereotypes, archetypes and emblematic figures were employed, sometimes very cleverly, and some, but by no means the majority, of these dramas were stylistically innovative.

Even a cursory glance at the titles of some of the plays submitted for censorship to the Director General de Seguridad gives an indication of the topics dealt with in these dramas. Many of the titles logically reflect the political views of the authors and others denounce the politics of others. The strident tone of the titles is reflected in the texts themselves, often one-act dramas. From 1932 to 1934, for example, alongside documents relating to Unamuno's *El otro* (1932) Alejandro Casona's *La sirena varada* (1934), García Lorca's *Yerma* (1934) and Valle-Inclán's *Divinas Palabras* (1933), are found records for plays such as the Teatro Proletario's *La Peste Fascista* (1933), M. Gongora's *El mundo rojo*, J. Romillo Fernández's *El triunfo final* (1934), the Teatro Proletario's *Guerra* (1933), Carlota O'Neill's *Al rojo* (1933), Izquierdo Sanz's *Olas de sangre* (1932) and José Martín Villapececlín's *República Inmoral* (1933).

At this time, as the censorship documents held in the Archivo General de la Administración reveal, plays were assessed by the Dirección General de Seguridad for "frases o expresiones que

supongan alusiones intolerables a Instituciones oficiales, idearios o personas determinadas”²⁶. Of course, what was deemed tolerable depended on one’s political perspective. New legislation was introduced in 1935: the *Orden 3 mayo 1935 (Mº Gobernación. G. 5, rect. 8). Reglamento de Policia de Espectáculos Públicos*²⁷.

Interesting for what they reveal about what was acceptable and unacceptable on stage are articles 6, 8 and 21. The first of these states:

(...) Se prohibirá por las Autoridades, en cada lugar en que los anteriores recreos funcionen, sean expuestos objetos ofensivos a la moral o que puedan causar espanto o terror, procurando quede excluída toda posibilidad de peligro para los espectadores, especialmente en la exposición de animales feroces.

Article 8 contains the following instruction: “Quedan prohibidos los espectáculos o diversiones públicas que puedan turbar el orden o que sean contrarios a la moral o a las buenas costumbres (...)” Article 21 is more concerned with political and criminal issues:

El Director general de Seguridad en Madrid, el Gobernador civil en las capitales de las provincias o el Alcalde en las demás poblaciones podrá impedir que se pongan en caricatura o en otra forma indiscreta, en escena, a cualquiera institución del Estado o a persona determinada.

También podrá prohibir toda representación en que se haga la apologia de un vicio o de un delito, o que tienda a excitar el odio o la aversión entre las clases sociales, que ofenda al decoro o prestigio de la Autoridad o sus Agentes o de la fuerza armada, así como la vida privada de las personas o los principios constitutivos de la familia.

Article 95 stipulates that “Los actores que tomen parte en el espectáculo no podrán dirigirse al público en ningún caso”, an instruction that was clearly and repeatedly ignored by those involved in agit-prop theatre.

What is clear from the documents relating to plays from the Second Republic, excepting the *bienio negro*, is that there was a clear

²⁶ AGA/IDD 36 Topogr. 21-47 Dirección General de Seguridad. Censura de teatro de la II República. 1931-36. All further references to censorship documents from this period are from the same section and will be given after quotations in the text.

²⁷ Aranzadi, Tomo VII, (Siglo XX, Año 1951), *Espectáculos Públicos* (Años 1935-41). 8064, pp. 174-94.

official bias towards left-wing theatre, and a certain tolerance of anti-clericalism and anti-conservatism. An example of this is Carlota O'Neill's *Al rojo* for the Grupo Teatral *Nosotros*, described as an anti-bourgeois and pro-proletarian play. In condemning capitalist society, the author concludes that, "la mujer se prostituye en la clase baja por necesidad, y en la clase alta por vicio". The reader charged with deciding whether or not this play breached the legislation was unimpressed by its artistic merit, writing: "Como pieza del llamado teatro proletario, esta obra es de lo peor que se ha escrito", before going on to state, "pero en orden gubernativo... me parece que no merece reproche". A letter to the Jefe de la Asesora dated 11 February 1933 explains how such a work, which contains such anti-bourgeois propaganda, could be accepted:

Creo que la representación de esta obra no constituye un peligro para el orden público, a pesar de su procacidad, porque el público para quien la obra se va a representar, o cree y tiene conciencia de que lo que en la obra se dice es cierto (...), o sabe que es mentira, y, a pesar de élla lo propaga, con fines de prosetismo demoledor, al cual – en pura doctrina jurídica de derecho social republicano – no se le puede poner coto con prohibiciones gubernativas, que exacerban, sino con escuelas y con ejemplos prácticos²⁸.

There is a certain naivete reflected here in the notion that Carlota and her friends are going to be gently educated into a new way of thinking.

While Carlota O'Neill's fanatical anti-capitalism was acceptable, a month previously another play, Manuel de Jesús Moreno's, *De muy buen barro*, received quite different treatment at the hands of the authorities. They took issue with two things in the play. The first, in Act II, was a criticism of how the clergy was being treated; objection was raised to the following sentence in the text: "Al pobre cura le van a quitar la paga y tendrá que pedir limosna". The alleged anti-clericalism of the government could not be discussed on stage. The second objection was to "unas frases de crítica contra la Escuela laica"²⁹, in Act III. This project, close to the heart of the reformers within the government, was beyond criticism and debate; the play was prohibited. José Martín Villapececellin's play, *República*

²⁸ Ca.AGA 5797, No.IDD 36, Topogr. 21/47.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, No Expd. 6011, Topogr. 21/47.

Inmoral, from the same year, and whose title leaves one in no doubt about the politics of its author, was also prohibited. Described as a “drama política social”, the fact that it was set in an imaginary country was not enough to save it³⁰.

La peste fascista by Irene de Falcón, for the Teatro Proletario, is a Communist and anti-fascist drama, which shows how some obreros are seduced into wearing the fascist uniform by the representative of capitalism. In this short, stylized piece, the Capitalist figure is finally killed by rows of obreros who, significantly, have united to oppose him. The play ends with “vivas al proletariado”. There was nothing objectionable about the play according to the left-wing censors. The report reads:

En *La Peste Fascista*, obra teatral de tendencia comunista y escrita expresamente contra el movimiento fascista, no se observa ataque violento alguno contra el Régimen establecido ni concepto de ninguna clase que pueda considerarse punible. La tesis se limita a advertir a los obreros que, en lugar de unirse al fascismo, creación capitalista, desarmen a los que califica de ‘peste fascista’.

This rather benign interpretation of the play is signed by the Sr. Jefe de la Asesoría Jurídica on 3 March 1933³¹.

Of course, as governments changed, so too did the question of what was acceptable or not. Hence, in December 1935 the play, *Guerra a la Guerra* by Manuel García, to be staged in the Teatro Rosales by the Agrupación Cultural Deportivo de Artes Blancas, was prohibited; it surely would have been passed a couple of years earlier. The report on the play, signed by the Abogado del Estado comments:

Guerra a la Guerra, poesía dialogada en un cuadro (...) constituye un diálogo entre abuelo y nieto en el cual, a pretexto de combatir la guerra, idea respetable en el aspecto puramente especulativo y aun admisible desde el punto de vista legal, se ataca en realidad, en términos de gran crudeza, la idea de la patria y el sentimiento patrio. La obra es de un marcado y declarado sabor comunista, incompatible con las actuales instituciones, considerada en su aspecto de pública representación”.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, No Expd. 6078, Topogr. 21/47.

³¹ Ca.AGA 5800, No.IDD 36, No Expd. 6123, Topogr. 21/47.

He goes on to state: "En virtud de lo expuesto, el Abogado del Estado que suscribe estima que procede desautorizar la representación solicitada". The document is also signed by the Director General de Seguridad the following day, 8 December 1935, with the words, "Prohibida su representación"³².

Moving on to two works from 1936, one from May and the other September, which show again how political circumstances affected the decisions made by the appointed Director General de Seguridad. The first of these is Arturo González Verdú's *¡Comunista!*, which was to be staged in a Casa del pueblo on 9 May 1936, but which was prohibited the previous day. The reasons given for the prohibition were nothing to do with the pro-Communist nature of the play, but rather the lack of respect demonstrated for the police and prison services, the former portrayed as puppets of the Jesuits and the latter simply made up of brutes. The report is quite insistent that the authorities have no problem with the ideology of the piece: "la que siempre será respetada en el concepto de consiguiente libertad". The problem was the following:

En sí la obra es una constante excitación a la rebelión que queda coronada con uno de los últimos párrafos en prosa de la misma, donde incita a imitar el movimiento de Asturias, dedicándose a continuación unos versos en recuerdo a los que denomina 'bravos asturianos', invitando por último a los comunistas de acción porque luchan todos por la revolución.

So clearly, while sympathetic towards the Communist ideology, the representatives of the state are understandably nervous about incitement to revolution, and so to protect "el orden público" the play, *¡Comunista!* is banned by the representatives of the Popular Front government³³.

An even more nervous Director General de Seguridad, on advice from the Attorney General, proposed serious cuts to the pro-Republican agit-prop play *¡No pasarán!* by Luis Mussot on 22 September 1936. While praising the play for its "propósito muy laudable de exaltar la soberanía del pueblo y el triunfo de la

³² Ca.AGA 8502, No.IDD 36, No Expd. 6467, Topogr. 21/47.

³³ Ca.AGA 5831, No.IDD 36, No Expd. 6633, Topogr. 21/47.

República, del Gobierno legítimo y de la Democracia”, the negative portrait of the military, not all of which had come out against the government, was cause for concern:

en los actuales momentos, en que es indispensable para el triunfo de la República y del Gobierno legítimo mantener muy elevada la moral y la disciplina del Ejército, un quebramiento de estos resortes y un escarnio de la organización de los defensores de la República, que, de representarse en un escenario, produciría una excitación a la indisciplina de los soldados y las milicias contra sus jefes, con el grave quebranto para los intereses de la República democrática y del porvenir de la Patria que de esto habría de derivar”.

The report concludes that what’s needed are more works that can “contribuir a elevar el espíritu público”³⁴. The report on the wonderfully titled, *Ya están de pie los esclavos sin pan* by Aurelio González Rendón betrays a similar wariness of offending the members of the military still loyal to the Republic and strongly recommends the elimination of the comment by one of the characters that, “Todas las lumias, compañeras de una noche, eran hijas de militares”³⁵.

Clearly then, this revolutionary and agit-prop theatre was becoming ever more contentious as political tensions increased. For its authors, it must have seemed as though their time had come; for the authorities, it was an agitation too dangerous to permit. Unsurprisingly, when the civil war erupted, many of the authors of agit-prop theatre of the Second Republic moved seamlessly on to produce propagandistic *teatro de circunstancias* or *teatro de urgencia*.

4. Agit-prop Drama in the Civil War

The Republican propagandistic theatre that emerged during the Civil conflict was a natural successor to the agit-prop theatre of the Second Republic, the difference being that the *teatro de urgencia* of the Civil war period was written as a direct response to the conflict. This natural progression can be seen in Monleón’s

³⁴ Ca.AGA 5805, No.IDD 36, No Expd. 6678, Topogr. 21/47.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, No Expd. 6613. Topogr. 21/47.

description of *teatro de urgencia*, which differs little from descriptions of *teatro de agitación* of the preceding period:

- a) Teatro exigido por la Guerra civil.
- b) Arma ideológica para la formación del combatiente y de la retaguardia.
- c) Respuesta contra la tradición conservadora de la mayor parte de nuestros dramaturgos.
- d) Intento de aproximar la conciencia política del obrero y su comportamiento cultural. Lucha contra los subgéneros y los populismos destinados al consumo y a la enajenación populares.
- e) Convocatoria abierta. Arte colectivo, derivado de una experiencia histórica colectiva, aunque lo expresen sensibilidades individualizadas.
- f) Formas sencillas, adaptables a la economía de medios, dictadas por la eficacia y la utilidad³⁶.

The Civil War *teatro de agitación*, which embraced many politicised theatre groups, was organised in Madrid by the *Alianza de los Intelectuales Antifascistas*. Their stated aim was to write and stage drama based on the current political situation, and their mouthpiece was *El mono azul*³⁷. Apart from these, there were many other groups, with similar aims and practices, such as the *Teatro de arte y propaganda*, based in the Teatro de la Zarzuela in Madrid, and an organisation calling itself *Teatro en la calle*, which staged Alberti's adaptation of Cervantes's *El cerco de Numancia* in 1937. The *Guerrillas del teatro* and *Teatro para el frente* brought this political theatre to those fighting for the Republican cause. The authors of this movement included Max Aub with his political *teatro de circunstancias*, José Herrera Petreire, Germán Bleiberg and Pablo de la Fuente. Other writers who involved themselves in the dramatic process, such as Manuel Altolaguirre, César M. Arconada and José Bergamín, had not been associated with the theatre previously. Miguel Hernández was also very involved in Republican theatre during the Civil War and in 1937, he published four plays under the collective title *Teatro en la guerra*, in which he stated:

Creo que el teatro es un arma magnífica de guerra contra el enemigo de

³⁶ José Monleón, *El mono azul*, p. 102.

³⁷ Occasionally they allowed themselves to be carried away by their revolutionary fervour, such as when they secured García Lorca's signature for a manifesto a month and a half after his death. José Monleón, *El mono azul*, pp. 35-36.

enfrente y contra el enemigo de casa. Entiendo que todo teatro, toda poesía, todo arte, ha de ser, hoy más que nunca, un arma de guerra. [...] Yo me digo: hay que sepultar las ruinas del obsceno y mentiroso teatro de la burguesía, de todas las burguesías y comodidades del alma, que todavía andan moviendo polvo y ruina en nuestro pueblo³⁸.

Nueva Escena was a theatrical co-operative led by Rafael Dieste, which in 1936 began to stage political dramas, including short works by Alberti, Sender and by Dieste himself. An interesting censorship report from October of 1936 once again highlights the difficult political situation of the besieged authority. An application from the Cooperativa Nueva Escena, dirigida por la *Alianza de Intelectuales Antifascistas* for staging in the Teatro Español the same day was the subject of a report dated 20 October 1936. The application is unusual in that it refers to plays by three well-known authors, Rafael Dieste's *Al Amenecer*, Ramón J. Sender's *La llave* and Rafael Alberti's *Los salvadores de España*. The first of these is authorised without any difficulty. Sender has not signed the application for his own play as he is fighting at the Front, but it too is authorised. Perhaps surprisingly, Alberti's work is rejected, at least until certain changes are made. The report by the Abogado del Estado explains the reasoning behind the decision:

(...) se contienen alusiones a varios Jefes de Estados extranjeros, con cuyas Naciones no ha roto oficialmente sus relaciones diplomáticas España, y por ls posibles alteraciones de orden público que pudieran derivarse de la interpretación de los dos himnos que al final de la obra deben ser ejecutados, estima que no debe autorizarse su representación en tanto que no se suprima la ejecución de estas dos últimas piezas musicales y se omitan o sustituyan las alusiones que se han indicado³⁹.

³⁸ "Una de las maneras mías de luchar es haber comenzado a cultivar un teatro hiriente y breve: un teatro de guerra. [...] Creo que el teatro es un arma magnífica de guerra contra el enemigo de enfrente y contra el enemigo de casa. Entiendo que todo teatro, toda poesía, todo arte, ha de ser, hoy más que nunca, un arma de guerra. [...] Yo me digo: hay que sepultar las ruinas del obsceno y mentiroso teatro de la burguesía, de todas las burguesías y comodidades del alma, que todavía andan moviendo polvo y ruina en nuestro pueblo". Miguel Hernández, Foreword to *Teatro en la guerra*. Quoted in Carlos Blanco Aguinaga, Julio Rodríguez Puertolas and Iris M. Zavala, *Historia social de la literatura española*, 3 vols, Madrid, Castalia, 1983, III, pp. 43-44.

³⁹ Ca.AGA 5804, No.IDD 36, No Expd. 6681, Topogr. 21/47.

By 1937, however, there is little hesitation in authorising the most radical of propagandistic works, in which the military is not just derrided, but depicted as a puppet of the Nazis, although in true *teatro de urgencia* style, the ordinary foot-soldier is seen as one duped or forced into fighting against the Republic by a foreign invader. Theatre then, no longer considered mere entertainment, or even a tool for the empowerment of the working classes, is now a weapon of war. The outcome of the Civil War ensured that the revolutionary tradition in the theatre would be cut short. Integration propaganda replaced agitation propaganda on stage as the nascent regime set about forming a new mythical culture to reeducate the citizens of a new Nationalist, Catholic State.

Conclusion

Often dismissed as mere propaganda, these dramas perhaps deserve more attention. Jim McCarthy in his book, *Political Theatre during the Spanish Civil War*, argues for the recuperation of the *teatro de urgencia*, which he describes as “a strikingly significant experiment”⁴⁰. He makes the point that *teatro de urgencia* has been dismissed, undeservedly, for its lack of literary merit and he argues for its inclusion in the European tradition of political theatre of the 1920s and 1930s:

In its search for new, non-traditional audiences, its revolutionary zeal and the variety and flexibility of its form, teatro de urgencia frequently recalled similar theatrical developments elsewhere on the Continent. The Proletarian Theatre in Berlin, Brecht’s *Lehrstücke*, the Living Newspaper in Russia, the Red Megaphones and Unity Theatre in Great Britain share much in common with teatro de urgencia⁴¹.

I would suggest that the argument he makes can be extended to incorporate its antecedent, the agit-prop theatre of the Second Republic. Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that, for all its experimentation and innovation on the technical and political front, and its challenge to the staid offerings of the Spanish stage of the day,

⁴⁰ Jim McCarthy, *Political Theatre during the Spanish Civil War*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1999, p. 213.

⁴¹ *Political Theatre during the Spanish Civil War*, p. xii.

some of this agit-prop theatre is just not good theatre; inspired by ideological fervour rather than any artistic muse, it was melodramatic or dogmatic theatre, peopled by caricatures spouting political diatribes. It is of interest, however, as a social document reflecting the ideals of a generation of politicised writers and a history not written by historians, but by the artists and activists of the day.