

COLECCIÓN **TRACES** **1**



THE PLAYWRIGHT AS HISTORIAN

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Translated from Spanish by Claire Montgomery



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Here I understand historical theatre to mean those dramatic pieces that, in their moment of creation, offer a representation of a period in the past, a period that for the author has also passed—whether it is a writer (for example, Buero [Vallejo]) or a playwright-director of theatre (for example, [Tadeusz] Kantor). While, theoretically, theatre is just one among the many different ways we can represent the past, historical theatre has, in my opinion, an especially unique value in the way it represents historical time.

To begin with, theatre was probably the first ever form of doing history. Long before there was the written word, and even word, men and women used theatre as a way of relating their experiences. It is quite likely that on their first sight of fire, for example, men and women had to mime their discovery in order to communicate to others what they saw. In this sense, theatre was the first means that women and men used to relate and thus represent the past.

Moreover, from the very beginning theatre has constitutively gathered people into assemblies—thus being political from its inception—and in this sense has contributed to those images of the past that nourish and foster what we call “collective memories”—to use a polemical expression today, and one that I deliberately use in the plural. In fact, this was one of the aims of what was called national theatre in the period known as Spain’s Golden Age—we need only to think of how Lope [de Vega] represented the victory of the modern, absolutist State over the residuals of feudalism in his classic *Fuente Ovejuna*. Understood in this way, theatre must be brought into discussions about such collective memories—and whose role, for the learned connoisseur in the history of theatre, is difficult to deny, or to reduce to an organic vision of society.

And finally, there is no other medium that carries the past into the present with the same intensity as theatre, given that characters brought to life in the present are incarnations —or reincarnations— of lives from that past. Perhaps abusing Ortega y Gasset's terminology, it is enough to say that in historical theatre the phantasmagorical is exponential. As it is well known, in his *Idea of Theatre* Ortega astonishes us —through the wonder of philosophy— with the disappearance of the actor —which he makes transparent— in order to bring the reality of the character into light. Such a transfiguration, which is the base of theatre itself, is immeasurable in historical theatre wherein that which is represented is not a creature of imagination but rather a person from another historical time. The actor disappears in order to let us, the spectators, see only the man or the woman from the past and who comes to life again through the performance.

In my opinion, this annihilation of time and of death represents an extreme idea: that all men and women are contemporaneous. Beyond the historical condition there is the human condition, Humanity. Historical theatre —including the more historicist calling— is a victory (paradoxically) over the historicist vision of the human being, according to which the human being is contained within its particular historical period and, in turn, of which it is the product. It is a victory because the condition of possibility of historical theatre is not that which differentiates between historical times but that which traverses time, allowing us to feel contemporaneous with women and men from another period. Even pieces such as *Mother Courage and Her Children* or *A Life of Galileo*, in which Brecht sought to make the spectators reflect on the historical conditions in which human life takes place and to make them conscious of their own humanity, were read or put on stage only because some women and men in their present recognized themselves in the historical characters he represented.

Given that, as it has been said, theatre was the first means by which men and women could collect and share their experiences it is not surprising that there should be historical theatre. In fact, in the oldest piece of dramatic literature we have conserved, *The Persians*, Aeschylus brings his spectators face to face with an event from the past: the war between the Greeks and the Persians. A war which, by the way, Aeschylus chose to tell from the perspective of the vanquished. *The Persians* is about a specific space and time but it is no less universal than the works in which Aeschylus deals with mythical matters. His theme is the burden that we as human beings suffer as a result of our

arrogance —which blinds us from seeing and accepting our own limits. That theme goes beyond the concrete event of that one war. Thus, it is in *The Persians* that one finds the major feature of historical theatre — the discovery of the universal in the particular.

As it is known, Aristotle already distinguished, in his ninth section of his *Poetics*, between the poet and the historian, considering that if the historian occupied him or herself with the particular (with what happened), the poet dealt with the universal (with what could happen). In the opinion of Aristotle, the treatment of the universal leads the poet closer to the philosopher and further away from the historian. Aristotle did not address historical theatre per se, but he provides us with a useful dichotomy through which we can reflect on what historical theatre offers. It should also be said, however, that the task of historical theatre is to surpass this opposition between the particular and the universal by seeking the universal in the particular.

That search for the universal might demand that the poet renounce his or her fidelity to the document to which the historian is bound. The poet does not have to be true to the document, but to Humanity. To all of Humanity: to the men and the women of the past, the present and the future. The writer of historical theatre is responsible to them all. Just as it was for Aeschylus writing *The Persians*.

In an unforgettable moment in *The Persians*, the Shadow of the deceased King Darius appears on stage in order to explain to the Persian people the cause of their misfortune: “For presumptuous pride, when it has matured, bears as its fruit a crop of calamity, from which it reaps an abundant harvest of tears”. Darius warns his people, but also his spectators, to never again let unbridled pride offend the gods. So, it is from this concrete event —the defeat of the army led by his son Xerxes in the battle of Salamis— that a universal moral lesson can be drawn. Here, Darius makes explicit the very essence of historical theatre, a genre in which *The Persians* stands as its first example. Implicitly, Darius affirms the fact that from the representation of the past, a universal moral lesson can be drawn, and one that can be usefully applied to life in the present.

Likewise, this same self-reflection in historical theatre can be found in the first scene of the third act of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*. In this scene, Cassius says: “How many ages hence / shall this our lofty scene be acted over / on states unborn and accents yet unknown!”. To which Brutus responds: “How many times shall Caesar bleed in sport / that now on Pompey’s basis lies along / no worthier than the dust!”.

Cassius closes the dialogue by foretelling the moral that can be drawn from the Shakespearean tragedy and that will be passed on to the many spectators to come: “So oft as that shall be / So often shall the knot of us be call’d / The men that gave their country liberty”.

There is also a reflection on the timeless usefulness of theatrical representations of the past that underlies the testimony of Witness 3 in Peter Weiss’s *The Investigation*. After informing the viewers and readers about the horrors witnessed in a concentration camp, this witness makes very clear the fact that the cultural foundations which made possible the Holocaust have not disappeared, “We / who still live with these images / know / that once again millions may be / waiting in full view of their destruction / and that this destruction / exceeds the old arrangements / many times in its effectiveness”.

Through Darius in *The Persians*, Cassius in *Julius Caesar*, and Witness 3 of *The Investigation*, historical theatre gives thought to itself, consciously mediating on itself, making historical theatre aware of its own consciousness. Through such characters, historical theatre confirms the belief that the dramatist’s representation of another historical era is valuable, even necessary, to the men and women of a later era. This conviction is implicit, in diverse ways, in Claudel’s *The Satin Slipper*, in Camus’s *Caligula*, in Sanchís [Sinisterra]’s *Ay, Carmela*, and in many other plays —greater and lesser— that have chosen the past as the material to be performed on stage.

Furthermore, each one of these plays, in constructing a certain image of the past, offers a representation of an era in which the play itself was written. And this is because historical theatre always tells us more about the age in which it was produced than it does about the age which it seeks to dramatise. Above all, historical theatre relates the desires and the fears of the era that is played out on stage. These fears and desires are what determine that a given present opened up from a particular past, and not another; that a past is seen from one perspective and not from another. It relates intrinsically the past and the present as if it were a specific past that had awaited a corresponding present —as though the past had sent it, and the present collected it. And this is why questions to do with historical theatre go beyond the interests of just theatre lovers: historical theatre raises the question of why one historical period should feel that a particular past is of its concern. Why should one historical period feel itself questioned by another, or even referred to in that past? What images of the past get offered on the contemporary stage, and what, by extension, have been

excluded? What do these images of the past tell us about our present moment? The history of historical theatre is a history of Humanity, and the historical theatre that produces our age is a dramatisation of our age.

Sometimes, a work of historical theatre survives the moment in which it was created and, representing a particular time and space, is capable of transcending not only that time and space but also the time and space of the playwright. When this happens, historical theatre knots together three different historical periods: the past that is being represented, the present that produces that representation, and every future that re-enacts it.

In effect, in every staging of *The Persians*, the time that Aeschylus represented, the time in which Aeschylus wrote, and the time when it is performed on stage are intertwined –they cross over. It is not surprising then that *The Persians* would make a comeback precisely in those moments when the drums of war were beating, giving new voice to Darius’s warning against the arrogant generals. So it was with Peter Sellars’s modern staging of *The Persians*, adapted with an eye on the First Gulf War.

Fuente Ovejuna, dramatizing several days in 15th-century Spain, written in the 17th century in praise of the absolutist Monarchy, returned to the stage to reiterate the paradigmatic expression of popular rebellion against the tyrannical abuse of authority. As far as we can know, this was the nature of [García] Lorca’s adaptation, which he wrote for his theatre group –La Barraca– during Spain’s Second Republic. In the Soviet Union –from the first revolutionary days– the play was invariably understood as a piece about social unrest. In short, it seems significant that the 20th century would stage as revolutionary a play that, in keeping in line with the socio-political orthodoxy of the 1700s, championed a system in which monarchical power was believed to be divine, and upheld as the guarantor of justice and social harmony in the face of chaos and injustice.

It is also from this perspective that Calderón [de la Barca] wrote *El Tuzaní de la Alpujarra*, in which he put forward a rendering of the war of the Alpujarras. It gives pause for thought that the conservative Calderón, half a century after that bloody and uneven conflict, would present it as a civil war between the Spanish –a civil war in which the minority of converted Moors (moriscos) were forced to rise up in defence of their honour in what can only be seen as nothing less than a suicidal mutiny. One is struck by the fact that Calderón would give

the lead role of the play to a heroic morisco, and that this dramaturge should show such obvious sympathy for almost all those of African descent. It is thought-provoking that, regardless of what the intention of the playwright was, his piece would provoke a critical gaze, through war and expulsion, towards such a homogenized Spain. Finally, it is intriguing that this play, forgotten for so long, would return to the stage more recently —with the title *Amar después de la muerte*— when certain parallels can be drawn with those much earlier wars of religion.

Shakespeare, on the other hand, tends to be less transparent than Lope and Calderón when it comes to making explicit the particular views he held towards his own era. Much has been speculated about the relationships between *Julius Caesar* and the political conflicts of the Elizabethan era. More easily identifiable are the themes that have interested different societies, leading them to dialogue with that play, and through it, to examine their own politics: mechanisms of conspiracy, the debate around political violence, the legitimacy of tyrannicide, the degeneration of democracy into demagogy... When we read Shakespeare it is difficult to argue with Harold Bloom's appraisal of him as the invention of the human.

Nathan the Wise is a dramatisation of the Jerusalem of the Crusades, but also and implicitly of Europe's age of Enlightenment. Lessing, who saw theatre as the pulpit from which to educate, constructed a play that reflects like no other the optimism of the Enlightenment, as well as its naivety. Because of this, every staging of *Nathan the Wise* is a commentary —apologetic or critical— on the Enlightenment project. In Lessing's *Jerusalem*, one encounters men and women of the three great monotheistic religions, who if at first looked on one another with distrust and suspicion, end up recognizing each other as members of the same human family. And in this way, the spectators are made to feel —or, as Lessing had hoped they would feel— a human bond that united them beyond any religious or cultural tradition to which they might belong.

Danton's Death, characterised by Szondi as the tragedy of revolution, is inseparable from the convulsive political conjuncture in which Büchner was involved. But the survival of this piece, written by a young revolutionary, is ensured by the precision with which he shows how to identify and eliminate counter-revolutionaries, becoming the revolutionary act par excellence. The Revolution described by Büchner is a trial in the Kafkaian sense, with the accused unable to prove their innocence before the law —the law identified with the powers that be—

thus turning powerlessness into guilt. The public execution, to make an example out of the enemies of the people —the enemies of Humanity— is the apotheosis of a movement that could not be stopped and that had necessarily to reach the people who set it in motion.

The hunting of counterrevolutionaries in *Danton's Death* corresponds closely with the witch hunts in Miller's *The Crucible*. Miller's play is set in Salem in 1692, but it also represents the United States of the Cold War. In *The Crucible*, Miller uses a historical period in the past to represent his own time, gaining in this way a temporal distancing that allowed him to underline the major features of his own era, in a way comparable to what Corneille does in *Le Cid* or Buero in *A dreamer for the people* [Un soñador para un pueblo]. Miller, as he has explained, in seeking to give theatrical form to the atmosphere of a time dominated by Senator McCarthy and his House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), opted to dramatize the witch hunt that took place in Salem two and a half centuries earlier, rather than put on stage one of the persecution cases of his own time. Beyond Miller's own stated intentions, his play has been put on stage in societies all around the world wherein, for diverse reasons, human beings have been marked as witches.

Weiss's *The Investigation* or Tabori's *The Cannibals*, like other theatre pieces on the Holocaust, offer a representation of it but also a reflection on theatre's own capacity to represent the Holocaust itself. In general, the theatre of the Shoah —since Brecht's *The Jewish Wife*— deserves a chapter of its own within the larger study of historical theatre. Firstly, because the theatre of the Shoah has given us a view of the Lager as a microcosm of society. And secondly, because the Shoah has generated the most profound debate around the limits —both in terms of aesthetics and morality— of the representation of the past. This debate must be borne in mind when any attempt is made to turn theatre into a kind of Noah's Arch that sets out to save that which has been sacrificed by History, and against any pretension that seeks to speak in the name of the victims.

Each of the plays mentioned above, just as every piece of historical theatre, proposes a date with the past. This date could be bitter or sweet, comfortable or uncomfortable, risky or safe.

In order to live, individuals and societies need to sew their presents to the great cloth we call History. But also to live, societies and individuals need forgetting, given that —in the way that Nietzsche believed— an excess of memory can be as dangerous as its contrary.

Before being a matter of knowledge, History is a matter of living. Before responding to a problem of pure reason, History responds to a problem of practical reason. The pretension of writing a History disconnected from the prevailing interests of the day, a History capable of exposing the past “just as it was”, is a dangerous naivety. Just as it is naïve and dangerous to aspire to a disinterested historical theatre. Historical theatre is always political theatre. In opening the stage to a past, and not to another past, observing it from one perspective and not from another, theatre intervenes in the present. This is because theatre gives shape to the self-understanding of an era and thus pushes in a certain direction the future of that era.

There is, though, a consoling kind of historical theatre that presents the past as though it led in ascending steps to the present. This theatre serves an historical account that organises itself around the idea of progress. Conforming to that historical account, each past, just like our present, appears as a moment of irreversible ascent. According to this evolutionist discourse, the promise of a happy future justifies the pain and suffering of the past, just as it justifies the pain and suffering of the present. This kind of theatre would like to convince us that those living in the present are living in the best of all possible worlds.

There is also what we might call a historical theatre of discontent in which the past is presented as a kind of lost paradise, like that bygone patria unspoiled by the call of progress —a call that carried us too far away from this supposedly pristine past. However, more than a nostalgic longing for yesterday, what this theatre expresses is an aversion to the culture of today.

There is a stupefying historical theatre in which the past is offered up as an alternative to, or an evasion of, the harsh realities of the present. Becoming lost in an imaginary distant past, the spectator escapes from his or her own present.

There is as well a narcissistic historical theatre that relates the present to an imagined radiant past. In this light, the present is seen, for example, as a kind of restored Rome. The failures of the present are indiscernible in the auratic light that is cast by this magnificent past. Here the ugly is no longer ugly, glossed over as it is in its reflection of beauty.

And there is, of course, a naïve historical theatre that presumes itself to be beyond and unaffected by the particular interests of the day —a theatre that claims to be the mirror of history. The dramatist of this supposedly objective theatre governs him or herself by the same

principles as the academic historian: strict fidelity to documentary evidence. The accumulation of documented references creates a certain illusion of objectivity. The play seems as though it reconstructs the past as it was. The spectators are able to feel as though they have been carried back to that historical period—they can believe that they are in direct contact with that past, contemplating that era.

However, the best historical theatre does not put the spectator in the position of eyewitness. What is important is not what any given historical period knows about itself, but rather what a period is not able to know and which can only be revealed with time.

Moreover, this theatre that believes itself to be impartial and neutral is always driven by a particular interest, which is what leads it to select one past over another, and one perspective over another. Based on its own interests and, thus, its own selections, this theatre reconstructs manners of speaking, gestures, mentalities, etc. It dedicates the better part of its energies to the revitalisation of dead material. In its worst versions, it is the staged equivalent of a wax museum. But not even in its best accounts can this type of theatre reveal anything more than what was not already evident in the documents upon which it was based. It is nothing more than a dramatised illustration of the documents themselves. A theatre of information.

The informational content is always the least important part of any artistic form, and the same is true for historical theatre. A well-written and well-executed work of theatre is not that which manages to transmit information to the spectator, but instead that which makes the spectator experience the performed representation.

This does not mean that we cannot ask the dramatist to tell stories. The playwright cannot feel bound by the same restrictions that constrain the academic historian. She or he may decide to include events that never actually happened, bring together people who never really knew one another, fuse together distant spaces, alter the order in which events occurred, etc. The playwright does have a responsibility, however, in how he or she participates in the construction of the past, and through that, in the construction of the present. It is out of this sense of responsibility that certain decisions must be taken; namely, how their work will relate to the dominant images of the past prevalent in the playwright's present.

On one level, this decision is of a technical nature. The characters, the actions, the spaces and historical times require specific strategies of construction given that they are already, in certain measure,

pre-constructed in the imaginary of the spectator, albeit differently by each spectator. For the dramatist, this poses the basic question of what can be taken for granted as known, and what should be constructed and played out on stage. There are theatre productions that are difficult to comprehend for the spectator who is unfamiliar with the historical period in question. Others, on the other hand, dedicate a lot of their resources to presenting what practically everyone already knows. Each approach, for their different reasons, could, in effect, engender disinterest among their audiences.

Of greater importance, however, are the moral questions that surround the decision the dramatist takes in engaging with and representing a period from the past. Fundamentally, such questions have to do with whether a work seeks to consolidate the dominant image of the past, or whether it seeks to debunk it. If it confirms the spectators pre-established convictions, or if it unsettles them —throwing their convictions into crisis. If it adheres to their viewers' own prejudices or if it dismantles them. If it chooses the hegemonic perspective, or the perspective of that which is visible but hitherto forgotten. If the play is directed at the indolent spectator or to the one with the greater capacity for wonder. If it manages, without falling into arbitrariness, to offer a representation of the past that goes against the current, inciting doubt in even the most confident spectators, thus putting the assumptions they upheld at risk.

There is historical theatre that, like a museum, showcases the past in glass display cases: locked away, caged, unable to jump out at us, permanently conquered and closed off. And there is other theatre that presents the past as savage, untamed and a threat to the security of the present.

There is critical historical theatre that makes visible the wounds of the past that the present has not yet been able to heal. Through this theatre, the silences of the vanquished resonate —the silences of those who have been marginalised by all traditions. Rather than bringing to stage a past that comforts the present, that confirms its clichés, this theatre invokes a past that poses uncomfortable questions for its spectators.

The past is not stable ground upon which we advance towards the future. We are making the past in every moment. At every hour it is possible to look back to the past in new ways —to give importance to things done that once seemed insignificant, or to contemplate them from a perspective that up until then we could have never done. In

every minute we decide the happenings and occurrences that concern us, and the traditions through which we recognise ourselves. The past is unforeseeable. It is as open and before us as the future.

New dramatisations of the death of Caesar will always be possible. New experiences from that re-enacted death will always be possible. It will always be possible to contemplate that death in and with astonishment —as if we had never seen it before. This, in my opinion, is the task of historical theatre: that one sees with amazement what one has already seen, that we look to the old with new eyes.

The best historical theatre opens the past. And in opening the past, it opens the present.

Above all, historical theatre relates the desires and the fears of the era that is played out on stage. These fears and desires are what determine that a given present opened up from a particular past, and not another; that a past is seen from one perspective and not from another. It relates intrinsically the past and the present as if it were a specific past that had awaited a corresponding present –as though the past had sent it, and the present collected it.

And this is why questions to do with historical theatre go beyond the interests of just theatre lovers: historical theatre raises the question of why one historical period should feel that a particular past is of its concern. Why should one historical period feel itself questioned by another, or even referred to in that past? What images of the past get offered on the contemporary stage, and what, by extension, have been excluded? What do these images of the past tell us about our present moment? The history of historical theatre is a history of Humanity, and the historical theatre that produces our age is a dramatisation of our age.

Juan Mayorga (Madrid, 1965) is one of the most important Spanish playwrights of his generation. He has won a series of national awards, the most prominent of which is Spain's National Theatre Prize, which he was awarded in 2007. His works, translated into many languages and performed widely throughout the world, include *Women on the Ledge*, *Love Letters to Stalin* and *Way to Heaven (Himmelweg)*. He has also adapted versions of classical dramas for the Spanish stage, such as Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* and Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Teacher of Dramaturgy, History of Thought and Sociology at the Real Escuela Superior de Arte Dramático in Madrid, Mayorga has written a doctoral thesis on the philosophical thought of Walter Benjamin, whose philosophy has had a huge influence on his definition, reflection and practice of "political theatre", within which this brief, illuminating essay is framed.