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The Short, Short Life of Citizen Juan

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questionable, as is the implicit belief that change should come from the top to avoid a revolution. But then this is really the playwright's own business, and as far as her play is concerned, it warns about revolution and warns well. What could, however, distract from the warning are the little "human-interest" details in the characters, such as the sweetish dialogue at the start of Act I, scene iii, and the flashback scene in the same act, but this is really a moot point till viewed in production. (This reviewer had not seen the premiere production of *Short, Short Life of Citizen Juan*.) Otherwise, the play is well constructed.

Act III, scene ix, is a particularly deft piece of playwriting. Two groups are presented on stage: four ladies playing mahjong and four gentlemen discussing the elections. The lines of one group intersperse the lines of the other, and as they talk on a variety of topics, delineating more and more clearly the decadence of the ruling elite, their lines comment, reinforce, and contrast with each other, resulting in a rich textural effect which stands out because of the simplicity of the preceding scenes. The final scene of the play which follows is also resultantly emphasized, being even more stark than any before it.

Unfortunately, Lapeña-Bonifacio chose to attack the Establishment in English, which effectively limits her audience to the upper classes and faces any cast with the very heavy burden of creating believable English-speaking rural characters. *Short, Short Life of Citizen Juan* belongs to the moribund tradition of Filipino theatre in English, and its language deflates it into an innocuous piece of socially committed theatre despite the competence of the writing. A translation into any of the native languages would and should more than double its force and, doubtless, turn it into a theatre piece worthy of apprehension from the Establishment.

PAUL A. DUMOL

III

In the last scene of *The Short, Short Life of Citizen Juan*, the hero comes home after having killed a man. He takes a last look at his dead wife, tucks a gun into his belt and flees into the night.

It is a properly dramatic but ambiguous ending. It is ambiguous because we do not know what Juan will do when he steps off the stage. Will he come back another day to overthrow his oppressors? Or has despair driven him to a life of banditry and violence directed at his own kind? The ending does not tell us.

Juan is the unsubtle symbol for the Filipino common man—the *tao*. *The Short, Short Life of Citizen Juan* is the story of his impotence to

liberate himself from exploitation and oppression by legal means. With her ambiguous ending playwright Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio is actually asking us a rhetorical question: What would you do in Juan's place?

A simple farmer with very little education, the reluctant Juan is persuaded by his townmates to run for mayor against Don Mundo, the corrupt incumbent who is also the town's biggest landowner. When it becomes increasingly clear during the campaign that Juan is going to win, Don Mundo tries to bribe him out of the race.

But Juan refuses to withdraw his candidacy; the Don resorts to subtler means. A few days before the election, Juan's followers—the very men who persuaded him to run—begin deserting him. Juan forces the truth out of one of them. The whole town, it seems, has been buzzing with rumors that Juan's pregnant wife Sima is actually carrying Don Mundo's child, and that Juan has accepted money from the Don to keep quiet about the whole thing.

Juan believes the story, at least as far as it concerns his wife's relationship with the Don. In a drunken rage, he confronts and then rejects Sima. Then he goes to Don Mundo's house and stabs him to death. Sobering, he returns to his hut to find his wife dead from childbirth. Overwhelmed, he takes his gun and disappears.

Citizen Juan is a didactic play, but not in the same sense that a Kamanyang play, for example, is didactic. *Citizen Juan* shows how violence has become institutionalized in our society. It presents a specific, particularized picture of oppression, and then forces us to make our own conclusions. Its message is a very radical, even inflammatory, message. Yet it is a message that is only implied and never explicitated onstage.

The play begins deceptively with a calculated cliché. It opens with the old *albulario* paying Juan's pregnant wife a professional visit. From the start, the conversation has the ambience of a rustic scene. The half-deaf *albulario* discusses his quaint methods of foretelling the embryo's sex. There is some bantering about the *albulario's* deafness; and there are folk sayings and quaint rural metaphors aplenty. All in all, the first scene conveys an atmosphere of comforting, bucolic serenity.

But this charming beginning swiftly leads up to a story of corruption, disloyalty, greed and violence. The cliché, it becomes very clear later on, merely serves to deepen our sense of irony at what unfolds in the later scenes. Playwright Bonifacio started off her play with a comforting stereotype—the better to show the brutal realities that comforting stereotypes usually disguise.

What *Citizen Juan* is saying is that it is next to impossible for the tao to improve his lot by working through the established system. He

will always be thwarted by those who wield political power. Corruption pervades the whole political structure, so that no poor man can change anything by working within that structure. Faced with this impotence to decide his destiny, what course of action is left to the tao? What will Juan do after he takes his gun and disappears into the night?

Mrs. Bonifacio does not answer this explicitly, but she might as well have done so. Although she leaves Juan's fate unclear, the audience is certain by the last act what Juan should do. The conclusion is inescapable: having discovered the futility of working within the system, Juan will now resort to armed revolution. When Juan steps off the stage, he ceases to be an individual and begins to represent all men who are victims of oppression. The audience realizes that Juan's resort to violence is the inevitable result of injustice in the country.

Citizen Juan differs from other activist plays in one important respect. It is more "Brechtian" than most activist plays. The play appeals to the intellect, not to the emotions. Where an activist play would try to sweep up the audience in a wave of feeling, *Citizen Juan* makes its point by keeping the audience objective and detached.

One criticism that can be brought against much of the activist theatre we have today is that they appeal too much to the emotions. While they profess to present a scientific analysis of society—and in written form, they do—these plays are usually staged with a sweeping fervor that can only result in firing the emotions of audiences. This may be good for morale, but it is a poor mode of persuasion. There is a difference, therefore, between the activist play as written and the activist play as staged.

Brecht tried to drain his plays as much as possible of all traces of emotional appeal. He wanted them to make their point by appealing to reason: for he correctly saw that the reason stays convinced longer than the emotions.

This is what *Citizen Juan* attempts to do. It makes its point not by trying to stir the audience into indignation and rage, but by telling a story in several layers of irony. For example, at the start of the campaign, Juan's townmates look to him as a Savior; in the end, they make fun of him as a cuckold. The motives that the people invoke to persuade Juan to run are noble and admirable; the gossip that these same people use to destroy Juan is mean and sordid. The play opens with a charming portrait of travel-poster peasants; it ends with a mute call for revolution.

From the Marxist viewpoint, *Citizen Juan* is on a very low level of politicization. That is true. In fact, it does not really "politicize"; it merely paints a specific, isolated portrait of *la violencia blanca*. From

the standpoint of ideology, it is still a long way behind *Pulang Tala*, which quite openly celebrated the successes of the New People's Army onstage.

But a play like *Citizen Juan* is nonetheless vital to the national democratic movement at this time. The problem of theater today is not to lay bare the injustice in our society; everybody is at least aware of that. The trick is to show that such injustices are already part of the system of relationships in the society, that they are not mere aberrations that can be blamed on man's concupiscence.

Because it has the power to lay bare the injustices in our society, and because it forces the audience to make their own conclusions (rather than force conclusions and solutions on them), *Citizen Juan* is more likely to succeed in winning over the uncommitted elements of the bourgeoisie. Most activist plays we have today are redundant; they are preaching to the already converted. *Citizen Juan* is one play that addresses itself to the uncommitted. And this is what we need right now.

ROYCE S. REYES

HUK: Philippine Agrarian Society in Revolt. By Eduardo Lachica. Manila: Solidaridad Publishing House, 1971. viii, 331 pp.

It is not an easy task for me to review and comment on this book by Eduardo Lachica because in his work I appear as one of the principal characters and have been depicted as playing a key role in the shaping of contemporary developments. I have indeed played a not insignificant role in the drama of the nation, a drama continuing into the present and which still awaits a happy conclusion. Yet without the wherewithal to befriend the representatives of the mass media, the columnist, the politician, or the commentator who moulds public opinion, my own place and image in Philippine society has faded with the passage of time. A man in my position feels little consolation, for a lifetime thirst for justice is not readily slaked. Such are the thoughts which came to mind after reading Lachica's work *Huk: Philippine Agrarian Society in Revolt*.

If the accounts of past happenings are to provide elements of solution for present-day problems, such accounts must be accurate and objective. For this reason my own reflections, interpretations, and explanation of past events must be as objective and unslanted as possible.

Only in this way can the younger generation avoid repeating the mistakes of those who have gone before them. If we can avoid past mistakes while furthering the present accomplishments, then we may perhaps, say that some progress has been made.