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978-0-521-10634-4 - Theatre in Latin America: Religion, Politics, and Culture from Cortes to the 1980s

Adam Versenyi

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Adam Versényi explores the history of Latin American theatre from pre-Columbian days to contemporary drama. Theatre in Latin America has historically been a powerful force for social change and has frequently combined religious and political concerns with performance practice to create a style of drama unique to the region. Versényi investigates this special inter-connection of religion, politics, and theatre, and finds this relationship present from the earliest contacts between Cortés and the Aztecs through Spanish-influenced theatre to the politically charged contemporary drama of Cuba, Argentina, Chile, and elsewhere. Versényi concludes his study with an analysis of liberation theology and its secularly derived theatrical counterpart, liberation theatre. Yet this study does not simply provide a theatrical history of Latin America. Rather, the volume offers a detailed understanding of how theatrical, political, and theological elements have consistently intertwined in Latin American history and why that has been the case.

All quotations are translated into English and the book contains an appendix of playwrights. It will be of interest to scholars and students of theatre history, Latin American and Spanish studies, and theology.

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Religion, politics, and culture from Cortés to the 1980s

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*For Laszlo G. Versényi, who should have seen it, and for
Sue L. Versényi, without whom it would not have been possible.*

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Preface

One of the most exciting areas of theatrical activity in the world today is Latin America. Whatever its form: collective creation, formal dramaturgy, or cultural celebration, theatre in Latin America is presently a powerful force for social change. The emergence of Christian base communities that have used Bible study as a means of confronting and converting social reality into something more akin to what is promised in scripture, has been paralleled by the emergence throughout the region of theatre groups that use performance as a means of objectifying a community's problems. Such performances are often the result of an extensive, in-depth investigation by the community's inhabitants themselves. These performances, as well as those that are the result of the more traditionally accepted form of a play written by an individual, frequently combine political and religious concerns. Such a combination is secularly derived but it mirrors the concerns of the region's liberation theology movement. The result of this creation is a form of artistic activity I choose to call liberation theatre.

This book addresses the roots of liberation theatre by investigating the interconnections of religion, politics, and theatre in selected regions and time-frames from pre-Columbian days to the twentieth century. Although a great deal has been done recently to rectify the situation, North Americans, especially the inhabitants of the United States, remain woefully ignorant of the history of our neighbors to the south. With the possible exception of Mesoamerican architecture, such ignorance is apparent in our dearth of knowledge concerning Latin American arts. Consequently, a certain amount of historical background (which Latin Americanists may find superfluous) is inevitable. It is not my intention, however, to supply simply a theatrical history of the region, as fascinating as that in itself can be. Rather, I hope to present the reader with a detailed understanding of

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how religion, politics, and theatre have been consistently intertwined in Latin American history, and *why* that has been the case.

To that end I have eschewed attempting to provide the reader with a global rendition of these trends in Latin America. Such a rendition founders under the sheer weight of detail it would be necessary to include, and would become an encyclopedic rather than a critical investigation of the specific aspects of Latin American theatre identified. What I have attempted, then, is to focus upon certain countries that at given times have exhibited the interconnection of religion, politics, and theatre more forcefully than others. For this reason the reader will encounter a certain amount of geographical hopscotching. As I think the following pages will make clear, however, what is described as occurring within a specific locality can also be extended to a statement about Latin American theatre in general. Even recognizing the cultural distinctions that exist between the countries in the region, it is possible to speak of a Latin American sensibility in the theatre. There is one final point to be made about the countries I deal with here, namely the absence of Brazil. While the convergence of religion, politics, and theatre certainly exists in contemporary Brazilian theatre and society, as well as in Brazilian theatre history, Brazil presents certain factors unique to the region that deserve to be treated separately. This work covers only the Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America.

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Finally my unflagging gratitude goes to my parents, Laszlo G. and Diana A. Versényi, for giving me the opportunity to explore other cultures and languages from an early age, and to my wife, Sue L. Versényi, always and forever my first reader.