TRAGEDY AND POLITICS IN JUECES EN LA NOCHE

Jueces en la noche (1979) may not be one of Buero Vallejo's best plays, but it is the one which most directly engages with the issues of the day, namely, the political dangers besetting the Spanish state in the immediate post-Franco era. On one level, then, it is an overtly political play, dealing with the transition from the old to the new order and with the difficult accommodations which established politicians have to make in order to survive. This fundamental theme is set in the context of the rise of the Left, the continued power of the Right and, above all, the threat of terrorist violence to the stability of the new democratic institutions. This engagement with actuality on Buero's part has attracted both criticism and praise; criticism, because it is felt that the theatre is not the place for political statements, praise, because it is an act of moral courage to deal with such issues on the contemporary stage. At the same time it is important to recognise that, as in all of Buero's work, the play's exploration of problems confronting the collectivity is firmly rooted in the portrayal of the individual and his tragic dilemma. In Jueces en la noche private and public interact in conformity with the dramatist's assertion, in a phrase with unmistakeable Unamunian resonances, that in all his artistic endeavour "lo social nos interesa por cómo repercute en seres concretos de carne y hueso".

Jueces en la noche was written in 1978 and 1979 and received its first performance in the Teatro Lara in Madrid on 2nd October 1979. The immediate reaction was not favourable. Alberto Fernandez Torres and Moisés Pérez Coterillo described the play as "una incrédula y patética confesión de impotencia teatral", and Fernández Torres, writing alone, claims that Buero has put himself into "un claro callejón sin salida" and that the play is flawed technically. For this critic the language is careless, the staging conventional, the use of dream sequences excessive and clumsy, and all the characters save the protagonist are portrayed with a rigidity and coldness which deprive them of all authenticity and vitality. Fernández Torres' real concern, however, is that Jueces en la noche aims to be a political play but has no statement to make on politics. The issue is rather "la de un conflicto ético entre un hombre agobiado por sus muchas contradicciones y su mala conciencia", with the result that we are faced with "un texto agarrotado, que intenta impotentemente decir algo sobre la política, cuando lo único que puede decir es algo sobre la moral". Moreover, the play says precisely the opposite of what it intends to say: a political reading will lay the blame for the failure of democracy on the centre, whereas the theatrical reading shows an individual struggling with his conscience and being justified, indeed being absolved, "ante la Historia". This is a curious commentary upon the play, to say the least. For one thing, it is difficult to see how a political and a theatrical reading can be
separated, or even defined, and, for another, how a man’s conscience and
the “presente histórico-politico” can be conflated. One might be forgiven
for thinking that Fernández Torres is attempting to be over-subtle.
Nevertheless, one has no difficulty in accepting the notion of the play’s
moral dimension, although one would want to argue that this is a
strength, not a weakness. Buero Vallejo is not making an original political
statement in the sense of a commentary on contemporary events – major
writers rarely do – but he is drawing on an immediate set of political
circumstances in order to dramatise a clash of values and to explore the
interrelated questions of guilt, responsibility and punishment. What one
might concede is that the political references are a little too intrusive in a
play which purports to be the artistic representation of an acute personal
dilemma. At the same time, questions of guilt and responsibility lie at the
heart of Buero’s analysis of post-Franco society, and the crucial point of
convergence between the theatre and politics is their mutual concern with
role-playing, with the mask. In Buero’s previous play, La detonación, the
protagonist Larra, as he puts the pistol to his head, looks at his own image
and asks himself who he is: “Ahora comprendo que también es una
máscara. Dentro de un minuto la arrancaré... y moriré sin conocer el
rostro que esconde..., si es que hay algún rostro. Quizá no hay ninguno.
Quizá sólo hay máscaras”. The role that one is called upon to play in life
is, of course, corrosive of authenticity and it is the falseness at the root of
human affairs, and hence their fundamental unreality, which forms the
theme of Jueces en la noche, and nowhere is it more clearly seen than in the
political sphere.

While Jueces en la noche is far from being a political tract, the political
positions portrayed in it are relatively straightforward. Juan Luis Palacio,
a former minister under the Régimen, is now a centrist deputy whose
main aim is to hold on to his political position, but is unable to free
himself from the phantoms of his past, a past in which his private life and
public role, as a result of an unscrupulous, though hidden, deceit, are
inextricably intertwined. The main action of the play concerns the slow
and painful revelation of this secret, namely, that Juan Luis had used his
dubious right-wing associations to trick his wife into marrying him by
alienating her from her boyfriend, a left-wing activist. This act of decep-
tion returns to destroy his present life, although it is clear that his mar-
rriage, conceived in falsehood, was vitiated from the outset. Here we find a
classic Buerian theme, that in the moral order acts of wrong-doing will
inevitably haunt their perpetrator and that relationships can only prosper
if they are genuine and authentic. The return of the agent of his deception,
Ginés Pardo, apparently planning an act of political assassination, offers
Juan Luis the opportunity to act honourably and restore the moral order,
but he is prevented by the fear that his wife will leave him if the truth of
their marriage is revealed. This dilemma is thus explored in the context of
a very real political situation, the early years of Spain’s tentative emer-