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## Review of Teatro y vanguardia en Hispanoamérica, by Concepción Reverte Bernal

Leslie Bayers

St. Mary's College of Maryland, lbayers@pacific.edu

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**Reverte Bernal, Concepción. *Teatro y vanguardia en hispanoamérica*. Madrid: Iberoamericana/Vervuert, 2006. 192 p.**

The considerable amount of critical attention to the poetry and narrative of writers like Vicente Huidobro, César Vallejo and Miguel Ángel Asturias has eclipsed

their less investigated dramatic works. Concepción Reverte Bernal's study of plays by these and additional writers builds on a growing body of criticism on Spanish American vanguardist theatre. This book's strength lies in its comparative and interdisciplinary nature, as the critic is keenly attentive to considering each play within the framework of not only its author's life and larger body of work, but also international artistic tendencies. While offering astute commentaries, however, the chapters assembled in the book do not coalesce around an overarching critical position, and a guiding thesis is not clearly articulated from the start of some of them. At times, lengthy direct citations of previous critics also detract from Reverte Bernal's original insight; she diminishes her own critical voice, for example, by ending two chapters with prolonged excerpts from other scholars. These statements aside, the author's exhaustive research has generated perceptive readings of the plays and their contexts, and scholars will appreciate the extensive bibliographies that accompany each chapter.

The introduction lays the groundwork for the book's focus on dramatic texts written from the 1920s to the 1940s with a useful summary of general movements (*vis-à-vis* international avant-garde tendencies), key works and important critical assessments of Spanish American literary vanguardism. The chapter ends with an apt consideration of the relevance of vanguardist drama – and Reverte Bernal's study – to contemporary questions, such as how to create an intellectual and experimental theatre with wide appeal and the role of theatre amid increasingly mimetic technologies.

The second chapter examines what the critic calls the “Teatro de la crueldad de Vicente Huidobro,” focusing on two plays written in the early 1930s, *Gilles de Raiz* and *En la luna*, and emphasizing their debt to Antonin Artaud, Alfred Jarry and a range of European precedents. Huidobro recasts the notoriously sadistic protagonist of *Gilles de Raiz* as a victim of lovelorn madness, and the critic persuasively interprets this blurring of good and evil as symbolic of vanguardist heterodoxy in general and Huidobro's calculated affronts to bourgeois morality in particular. Her study of *En la luna* emphasizes the role of grotesque humor and metatheatricality in a political farce that, revealing a communist agenda, satirizes the descent of insubstantial democracies into absurd monarchies.

A shorter third chapter, “El drama-ballet *Cuculcán*, de Miguel Ángel Asturias,” underscores the cultural syncretism of Asturias's play. The critic meticulously describes an array of indigenous and Western influences – from Mayan performance and mythology to Baroque poetry, Surrealism and the Russian Ballet – fused in *Cuculcán* and cogently suggests that trying to impose narrative coherence on the play would counteract the alternative aesthetic crafted by Asturias.

The fourth chapter, “Releyendo a Vallejo: Vallejo como dramaturgo busca un camino personal,” begins with a detailed inventory of Vallejo's plays, all written in Europe between 1930 and his death in 1938 (but none staged during his lifetime).

The critic documents a range of artistic precedents, including the Russian theatre of the 1920s and 30s, the work of Luigi Pirandello and Romain Rolland, and Spanish American *indigenismo*, that prompted Vallejo's evolution from a writer of bourgeois to proletarian and finally socialist drama. She then analyzes Vallejo's negotiation of tensions between the individual, the family and the collective in three works, *Lock-out*, *Entre las dos orillas corre el río* and his final play, *La piedra cansada*.

The final chapter, "Sirenas acriolladas: Conrado Nalé Roxlo y Francisco Arriví," examines reinterpretations of the mermaid archetype in several vanguardist plays. The author first discusses figurative mermaids staged by Alejandro Casona and Jean Giraudoux in order to propose, by comparison, that those imagined by Nalé Roxlo and Arriví demonstrate a dramatic trajectory that rejects and then re-embraces realism. She characterizes Nalé Roxlo's *La cola de la sirena* as a distinctly Argentine manifestation of a fantastic theatre with proto-feminist undertones. Her examination of Arriví's *Sirena* focuses on the Puerto Rican writer's uncharacteristic adoption of social realism in a play that condemns the exploitation and destruction wrought by racism.

In omitting a general conclusion, Reverte Bernal misses a final opportunity to explicitly intertwine the distinct threads of each chapter. Nonetheless, this book offers richly contextualized readings of lesser-known plays and promotes further exploration of Spanish American vanguardist theatre.

*Leslie Bayers*  
*St. Mary's College of Maryland*