

Why Latin American Theatre Struggles to Reach Beyond Its Borders: How the Postdramatic Theatre Movement Happened in Latin America in the 1970s But No One Noticed

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Abstract This essay argues that the experimental theatrical innovations that emerged in Latin America during the 1960s and 1970s paralleled, and in some cases anticipated, what Hans-Thies Lehmann later termed postdramatic theatre. While both movements sought to dismantle traditional dramatic structures and reimagine theatre's relationship to politics and performance, only the European postdramatic movement has been canonized within global theatre discourse. By contrast, Latin America's "theatre of crisis"—born out of dictatorship, repression, and anti-colonial resistance—has been marginalized, its contributions obscured by Eurocentric hierarchies that continue to define what is considered legitimate theatrical innovation. Through a comparative analysis of these two movements, this essay exposes the colonial biases embedded in global theatre history and theory. It argues that while postdramatic theatre represented an aesthetic rebellion from within the cultural center, Latin American theatre embodied a decolonial insurgency from the margins—one that fused politics, ritual, and community-based creation as a means of survival and transformation. Recognizing this lineage demands a re-evaluation of the global theatrical canon and an acknowledgment of Latin American theatre's central role in shaping modern performance practice.

Keywords: postdramatic theatre, latin american theatre, political theatre

Por qué el Teatro Latinoamericano Lucha por Trascender sus Fronteras: Cómo surgió el Movimiento del Teatro Posdramático en América Latina en la Década de 1970 pero Nadie se dio cuenta

Resumen Este ensayo sostiene que las innovaciones teatrales experimentales que surgieron en América Latina durante las décadas de 1960 y 1970 fueron paralelas, y en algunos casos anticiparon, lo que Hans-Thies Lehmann denominaría más tarde teatro posdramático. Si bien ambos movimientos buscaban dismantelar las estructuras dramáticas tradicionales y replantear la relación del teatro con la política y la actuación, solo el movimiento posdramático europeo ha sido canonizado dentro del discurso teatral global. En contraste, el "teatro de la crisis" de América Latina —nacido de la dictadura, la represión y la resistencia anticolonial— ha sido marginado, y sus aportes han quedado oscurecidos por jerarquías eurocéntricas que continúan definiendo qué se considera una innovación teatral legítima. A través de un análisis comparativo de estos dos movimientos, este ensayo revela los sesgos coloniales incrustados en la historia y la teoría teatral global. Sostiene que mientras el teatro posdramático representó una rebelión estética desde el centro cultural, el teatro latinoamericano encarnó una insurgencia decolonial desde los

márgenes, — una que fusionó política, ritual y creación comunitaria como medios de supervivencia y transformación. Reconocer esta genealogía exige una reevaluación del canon teatral global y un reconocimiento del papel central del teatro latinoamericano en la configuración de las prácticas modernas de actuación.

Palabras Clave: teatro posdramático; teatro latinoamericano; teatro político

Por que o Teatro Latino-americano Luta para Ir Além de suas Fronteiras: Como o Movimento do Teatro Pós-Dramático Ocorreu na América Latina na Década de 1970, mas Ninguém Notou

Resumo Este artigo argumenta que as inovações experimentais que surgiram na América Latina durante as décadas de 1960 e 1970 ocorreram em paralelo e, em alguns casos, anteciparam o que Hans-Thies Lehmann mais tarde denominou de teatro pós-dramático. Embora ambos os movimentos buscassem dismantlar as estruturas dramáticas tradicionais e reimaginar a relação do teatro com a política e a performance, apenas o movimento pós-dramático europeu foi canonizado no discurso teatral global. Em contrapartida, o “teatro de crise” latino-americano—nascido de ditaduras, repressão e resistência anticolonial—foi marginalizado, tendo suas contribuições obscurecidas por hierarquias eurocêntricas que continuam a definir o que é considerado uma inovação teatral legítima. Por meio de uma análise comparativa desses dois movimentos, este artigo expõe os vieses coloniais enraizados na história e na teoria do teatro global. O texto sustenta que, enquanto o teatro pós-dramático representou uma rebelião estética a partir do centro cultural, o teatro latino-americano personificou uma insurgência decolonial a partir das margens—uma insurgência que fundiu política, ritual e criação comunitária como um meio de sobrevivência e transformação. Reconhecer essa linhagem exige uma reavaliação do cânone teatral global e um reconhecimento do papel central do teatro latino-americano na formação das práticas modernas de performance.

Palavras-chave: teatro pós-dramático, teatro latino-americano, teatro político

During the mid-twentieth century (mid-1940s to late 1960s), a transformational movement emerged within theatre and performance in Europe and the Western world. This movement challenged traditional theatre aesthetics and language by shifting focus away from the text, breaking with conventional storytelling, and rethinking theatre's role in society and politics. This shift known as "postdramatic theatre," a term formalized by Hans-Thies Lehmann, German scholar and theatre analyst, was "a dissolution and distancing between drama and theatre that creates a new theatre no longer based on drama" (Lehmann 2006, 30). This new movement focused on a narrative structure that placed performance at the centre by breaking traditional theatrical conventions which incorporate experimental and non-linear narratives and challenging the conventional separation between performer and spectator (Sharma 2024). It embraced a deliberate move away from the Aristotelian model and created a "rupture of the dramatic structure of classical texts" (Lehmann 2006, 2). Postdramatic theatre did not simply imply "after drama" but deconstructed what was there while maintaining its relationship to what came before (Lehmann 2006, 2). Simultaneously, a similar movement of experimental avant-garde theatre emerged in Latin America at around the same time (between 1969 and the 1980s), one defined by political aesthetics, revolutionary ideologies, and a response to repression and the trauma of dictatorships. In the same vein as the postdramatic movement, the Latin American movement repositioned the text and the context of creation and moved away from traditional structures. Although these movements coincided with similar aesthetics and theatrical innovations and emerged around similar time frames, it is the Latin American avant-garde theatre movement which remains excluded from international recognition and critical discourse in the way that Lehmann's postdramatic theatre movement does not. While both challenged conventional theatrical forms through experimentation and socio-political critique, it was Latin America's theatrical innovations—rooted in regional struggles, Indigenous aesthetics and collective activism—that have been historically under-recognized in the global context, revealing a critical gap in the historical body of modern theatre that demands re-evaluation.

Interestingly, this new postdramatic theatre appeared precisely when socio-political events were exploding worldwide. The Vietnam War, the Civil Rights movement, the Bay of Pigs invasion, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the fall of the Berlin Wall, were moments of rupture, violence, and growing socio-political upheaval which influenced the artistic milieu of the 20th century but were not necessarily the cause of what Lehmann came to describe as the "crisis of theatre." This crisis was a more personal one, as it came from within. Theatre practitioners were evaluating form and structure on an intellectual, personal, and emotional level; there was no *actual* threat of political violence, persecution or exclusion by an oppressive dominant culture. Instead, there was a contemplative reassessment of what theatre could do and the forms it could take. As such, as current scholar on post dramatic theory, Michale Boyle states, the postdramatic theory did not open its gaze out to the rest of the world but rather would "risk[s] privileging certain issues, experiences, and perspectives, in ways that can be specially charged racially" (Boyle et al. 2019, 21).

Diana Taylor called what was happening at this pivotal time in Latin America's theatre ecology a "theatre of crisis" because it existed to process and re-emerge from the ashes of

violence, dictatorships, and political upheaval. It was a deliberate reaction to the impacts of colonialism, imperialism, Neo-liberalism and capitalism. The “theatre of crisis” carried a political impetus because of its connection to mestizaje (the blending of Indigenous and European within the same body). In Latin America, when “the first incursions of neoliberal capital in the Americas,” (Ybarra 2017, 3) started occurring and the Cuban revolution posed a threat to the United States counterinsurgency, a pivotal turning point was happening for the people and the politics of the region. And it was through theatre, where one could witness most prominently, the reflections of this tumultuous period exposed. This new theatre exploded in Latin America, especially amongst universities and student groups, with a palpable excitement and energy for this new work. It was politically motivated theatre-making which came with a new theatrical vision, a new audience, and a new artist that had not yet existed. This crisis served as more than an aesthetic change with a move towards societal and political awareness and change.

The comparison between Latin America’s “theatre of crisis” and the postdramatic “crisis of theatre” is demonstrated best by examining the fundamental elements within each movement, by narrowing in on what lies at the centre of the change. There are five core principles which bring the two movements into a parallel juxtaposition. The first is the political context, as stated earlier in this piece, where Latin American theatre was created against the backdrop of dictatorships and revolutionary movements as a way to explore a new world order, while the postdramatic theatre, even though there were political events occurring during this time period globally, this practitioner was dealing more with post-1968 disillusionment and late stage capitalism; Lehmann extrapolates on his beliefs around political discourse within theatre by saying, “That politically oppressed people are shown on stage does not make theatre political. And if the political in its sensational aspects merely procures entertainment value, then theatre may well be political—but only in the bad sense of an (at least unconscious) affirmation of existing political conditions. It is not through the direct thematization of the political that theatre becomes political but through the implicit substance and critical value of its *mode of representation*” (Lehmann 2006, 243). In both movements, theatre was a way to create new realities and new theories of practice while positioning the self against the backdrop of socio-political realities; but one obviously had more at stake than the other. In the second element, aesthetic influence, Latin American theatre was infused with Indigenous/folk representation, agitprop, and realism, while in the postdramatic, its influences were deconstruction, philosophy, and Eurocentric visual arts. In describing the audience for these movements, this third element, audience, shows how in Latin America the audience is active and participatory, while in the postdramatic space, the audience is often more reflective and observational. What can this difference be attributed to? Taylor describes how in “theatre of crisis” there is inclusion of the voices systematically left out of the cultural history of the continent; therefore, the audience participates because it sees itself represented (Taylor 1991, 7). Whereas with the postdramatic audience member, there seems to be more distance. Finally, in terms of recognition and influence, Latin American theatre is limited by geopolitical and language barriers, while the postdramatic theatre tends to have strong academic and critical engagement. These comparisons highlight a fundamental difference in approach and style, and one cannot ignore the “first world” versus the “third world” reality of these two movements coming from two

distinct areas of the globe at that time. These terms are no longer in use, for obvious reasons, but they do determine an invisible ideology about privilege and status within the global order. In other words, Latin America “exists” because Europe made it so. Latin American theatre comes from what has been known for many years as the “third world,” (now called the global south). It is a term coined during the Cold War to differentiate between countries that were neither part of the West (NATO) nor the East (Communist bloc). Because of this distinction, the “third world” has always been seen as inferior. And even though postdramatic theatre and Latin American theatre question traditional forms and aesthetics equally, Western practitioners from Europe and the United States are not fighting colonization and imperial domination in the way that the “third world” is. There is a fundamental power imbalance within the structures of societal and political realities.

The decolonial process in Latin American theatre, especially as seen within anti-colonial and anti-Western alternatives of creation (such as through collective creation, orality and embodied storytelling), performed as a veritable protest to power and became a theatrical platform for socio-political awareness which incorporated community renewal and change. It was this distinction where on the one hand, postdramatic theatre highlighted an innate privilege of elitism and historical theatrical relevance over the rest of the world; while on the other hand in Latin American theatre, it was a survival tool in response to a political reality steeped in coloniality and subjugation. The postdramatic was seen as avant-garde, innovative and a valuable expression of experimentation and evolution because of where it originated. The Latin American theatre neither received the accolades nor the same recognition, also because of where it originated. Mignolo, in his examination of Latin America’s origins, describes how, “the Americas exist today only as a consequence of European colonial expansion and the narrative of that expansion from the European perspective of modernity” (Mignolo 2005).

Kirsten Nigro, a United States scholar, writes in her paper *On the Visibility of Latin American Theatre*, “The dominance of Eurocentric theories often muffles or completely silences the theoretical discourses that come from Latin America itself . . . [and] Latin American playwrights and theatre artists remain relatively unknown in the larger academic and theatre world . . . the truth is that, in the English-speaking world, Latin American theatre is located at the outer boundaries of consciousness; or, even worse, it is invisible” (Nigro 2004, 447). This invisibility is the result of historical domination and oppression, which creates a continent so marked by colonial rule that what emerges, culturally, is not seen as equal to its Western counterpart because of the creation of an “other” (Taylor 2003, 13–14). Imperialism and colonialism expose the foundation of Latin America’s relationship to “otherness,” a condition which begins to take form during the early years of colonization. Latin American playwrights pose questions of positionality, definition, and identity (political and cultural), not simply to experiment with form, but to examine the oppression and colonization. These questions come out of a need to question the history of domination which Latin America has been subjected to since the first colonizers stepped on its soil (Taylor 1998, 22). Western theatre has seen itself (and perhaps continues to think of itself) as the centre of the universe for centuries, especially when it comes to art and culture. The dominant countries within the Western world, Great Britain, France, and Spain, have enacted historical acts of domination, colonization, and imperial rule. These countries are the ones with the power to control the narrative

(literally and figuratively) since the colonization of the New World began in the 15th century (Said 2014, 14). Postdramatic theory and practice comes from this epicentre, a cultural dominator, therefore it embodies this superiority complex.

Many scholars who examine the effects of the conquest on Latin America highlight how a perpetual sense of “other” has been created through a consistent and integrative approach of systemic violence and devaluing of the core belief systems of the indigenous cultures they conquered. The Conquistadores created the narrative that the civilized human, the European, was superior to the primitive indigenous or “native” in every way, alluding to “them” (the “other”) as “barbarian” and thus a less superior specimen. In *The Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*, Matthew Restall describes how the Spaniards gave the “natives” their humanity (Restall 2004, 165) through violence and subjugation. “The Spanish jurist and philosopher openly stated that ‘natives’ hardly deserve the name of human beings.” Even complete conversion and subjection to the Spanish empire could only partially turn these ‘barbarians’ into ‘civilized’ men.”¹ Even today, Latin America in the 21st century lives with the continual psychological, ecological, and political effects(s) of colonialism and neo-colonialism. As Taylor outlines in *Theatre of Crisis*, colonial oppression creates and defines a perpetual “other” because of its economic, cultural, and emotional ties to the empire. Displacement, fragmentation, and a twisted sense of self are all themes/realities across Latin America. The use of theatre and spectacle, a tool used by the conquistadores to subjugate the indigenous populations, was instrumental in creating this ingrained belief system (Taylor 1998, 2). Theatricality and religious ceremonies were tools to Christianize and colonize the Americas by utilizing the same native rituals these civilizations used to empower and survive—the conquistadores used to reverse (or invert) pre-Colombian patterns to dominate. Where once the religious ceremony was a vital link between social and cosmic orders, it was now a tool for political power and hierarchies for the conquistadores. Theatre was a tool to inspire terror (Ibid, 2). Conquest was a process of breaking down the spirit of the indigenous population, thus creating an internalization of colonialism. This “othering” creates self-hatred and an acceptance of the self as “other.” The sense of inferiority prevails and infuses every aspect of society. This self-hatred is then further reflected in work (Ibid, 2). It is Latin American theatre’s foundation of internalized colonialism and “otherness” that pervades this exclusion from academic and Western dialogue in theatre and performance. Latin American theatre is not taken seriously because of this preconceived bias based on far-reaching colonial impacts and the creation of a mestizo nation (a hybrid) that continues to be an “other.”

In *The Archive and the Repertoire*, the documentation of knowledge in written form and the archiving of Western knowledge allows the dominant culture to survive and subjugate while the more embodied, ephemeral knowing, at the core of Indigenous cosmology, disappears. “What changed with the conquest was not that writing displaced embodied practice . . . but the degree of legitimization of writing over other epistemic and mnemonic systems. Writing now ensured that power could be developed and enforced without the input of the great majority of the population, the Indigenous and marginal populations of the colonial period without access to

¹ Restall, Matthew. *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*. Oxford University Press, 2004

systemic writing” (Taylor 2003, 18). A key difference between Latin American theatre and postdramatic theatre is between the known and the unknown, the seen and the unseen, best looked at through the examination of two writers, one from the West, the other from Latin America, as they navigate the creation of text and character within their works. For example, the German playwright Heiner Goebell, when writing his text for *Roman Dogs*, “[he creates] a collage made up of spiritual texts by Heiner Müller in German and by William Faulkner in English (The Sanctuary), and French Alexandrine verses from Corneille’s Horace (performed by the actress Catherine Jaumiaux)” (Lehmann 2006, 187). Alternately in *La Profesora* (The Teacher) by Latin American playwright Enrique Buenaventura, “he situates us in the lacuna, the dead space created by the violent . . . confrontation *between*, rather than *within*, changing sociopolitical orders . . . the teacher, let herself die by refusing to eat and drink after her father . . . was shot by incoming military soldiers, who later raped her” (Taylor 1998, 193). While one playwright mashes and creates a collage of other texts to highlight a new form of text, the other uses political metaphor within the work to demonstrate the reality of what violence and life under the military mean to the characters and, thus, the audience. In Buenaventura’s work, the protagonist is always the marginal and the oppressed, and it is a place where the subjugated finally take centre stage. His play focuses on the self-struggling to free itself from the grotesque “other” (Taylor 2003, 51). Latin American theatre signals a commitment to social inquiry and change on the part of the playwrights (Ibid, 40), while Western playwrights do not focus on this exploration as much. The postdramatic theatre writer questions the dominant cultural aesthetics (such as the Aristotelian three-act structure) and deconstructs drama and performance. While this is also important for the Latin American theatre practitioner, the importance of politics and colonial history are instrumental in developing the Latin American “theatre of crisis,” which breaks with bourgeois models and commits itself to social inquiry and change (Taylor 1991, 40). It has a clearly defined ideological position and a specific proletariat audience (Ibid, 40). Both *Roman Dogs* and *La Profesora* fall directly in line with the tenets of postdramatic theatre because they break the conventions of the well-made play; they deconstruct narrative structure, break the fourth wall through moments of direct address, and they make the audience complicit in the storytelling.

While both postdramatic and Latin American theatre emerged and developed significantly during the 20th century, Latin American work did not and does not receive equal recognition within the global discourse on theatrical innovation because of its coloniality and political positioning within global aesthetics. In *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture*, Patrice Pavis argues that Eurocentrism in theatre is not necessarily a rejection of non-Western forms but rather a narrow, limited view that fails to understand or value conceptual tools outside European frameworks. He writes, “Eurocentrism is not so much a rejection of eastern forms as a myopic view of other forms and especially conceptual tools different from those in Europe, an inability to conceptualize cultural modelling, western and eastern, theoretically and globally” (Pavis 2003, 16). This critical lens is seen in recent discourse, which challenges how European and Western theatre often position themselves as the sole bearers of knowledge and authority in theatrical practice and theory (Davis et al. 2003, 16). This superiority complex contributes to the marginalization of Latin American theatre, despite its simultaneous and equally radical development alongside movements such as

postdramatic theatre. The issue lies not in a lack of innovation within Latin American theatre, but in the colonial legacy that continues to shape it and asks which forms of theatre have legitimacy and value. Taylor writes, “The questions of position (political and cultural centrality versus marginality), definition, and identity, and the concerns with oppression, colonization, self-hatred . . . arise as a consequence of the cultural, economic, and political history of domination” (Taylor 1991, 22). As current global theatre conversations begin to reckon with the field’s colonial, patriarchal, and white supremacist roots—especially in the wake of movements like Black Lives Matter—there is growing recognition of the need to decolonize theatrical discourse and practice. However, the exclusion of Latin American theatre from academic canons and theoretical discussions remains a symptom of deep-seated Eurocentric hierarchies and a white supremacist worldview. The West’s claim to theatre as originating solely from Ancient Greece—and its positioning of Eurocentric texts and theories as the standard of excellence—reinforces this imbalance. When Hans-Thies Lehmann describes the postdramatic as “drama after drama,” he fails to consider that Western artists engage in these aesthetic shifts within their lineage. In contrast, Latin American practitioners who challenge form simultaneously challenge colonial authority and cultural domination. This fundamental difference reveals a profound asymmetry: one questions tradition, the other confronts imposed systems of oppression.

If theatre is, at its core, a space for mimesis and interrogation, then we must collectively deconstruct these colonial foundations and reconstruct a theatre in dialogue with those historically excluded. Forging in struggle and resistance, Latin American theatre stands as a beacon of integrity and innovation. Despite a legacy of violence and upheaval, it has always been decolonial at its core—its commitment to questioning authority and redefining form should serve as a model for theatre’s future. As Taylor (1991) notes, even during the colonial destruction of Indigenous cultures, theatrical traditions like *Rabinal Achi* and *El Güegüense* embodied subtle but powerful resistance. Though not strictly Indigenous, these performances used oral traditions, narrative, song, and mimesis to sustain cultural memory and subvert colonial authority over time. Latin American theatre continues this legacy of resistance, and its contributions deserve recognition and centrality in conversations around global theatrical practice.

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