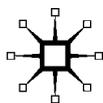


POLITICS AND VIOLENCE IN CUBAN AND
ARGENTINE THEATER

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AND ARGENTINE THEATER

Katherine Ford

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For Rufino

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Preface: Understanding the Place of Theater in Spanish America

Spectacle and performance are defining elements of human existence and no geographical or historical context is free of theater and its characteristics. Spanish America enjoys a rich tradition of theater written and produced from the days of the colony up until the present. While this theater has often been in dialogue with European traditions, it is a mistake to dismiss it as simply a copy of theater from other regions. By introducing here some of the tendencies that have defined Spanish American theater up to the middle of the twentieth century, this preface introduces the reader to what was happening onstage and around the theater of this region.

While not much is known of the theatrical texts that may have existed before the arrival of the Spanish to the Americas, we can speak of the role of spectacle and performance in some indigenous cultures. Spectacle formed a central role in these early encounters and helped the Spanish gain control over the indigenous people that they subjugated. Adam Versényi in *Theatre in Latin America: Religion, Politics, and Culture* discusses the importance that spectacle played in Hernán Cortés' actions as he arrived to the New World, both with the indigenous groups he conquered and the Franciscan friars sent by the Spanish crown to evangelize, underlining the role that spectacle played in gaining control in the Spanish colonies.¹ For Cortés, conquering New Spain was not simply a military feat but a political one as well that would be won by manipulating images and performances. Indeed, as Diana Taylor outlines in *Theatre of Crisis*, for indigenous cultures such as the Aztec, the Maya, and the Inca, "Spectacle was power."² This meant that the creation of spectacle—both political and theatrical—took center stage in the unfolding drama of the creation of a colony. In the religious realm, intertwined with the political in the early days of the colony, the Church took advantage of the existing use of spectacle and theatricality of the Aztec world to Christianize the indigenous peoples. Dating to before the arrival of the Europeans, Aztec warfare was composed of ritualized activities whose object was to capture prisoners who would be

sacrificed in another regulated ritual. These ritualized activities allowed the Church, another proponent of ritual, to come in and evangelize through the use of religious representations in which the vanquished indigenous would participate. Spectacle and theater, then, defined the past and laid out the future of the people and the land of the Americas.

Later on during the days of the colony, the majority of theater was often that of the Spanish baroque masters, such as Lope de Vega, Calderón de la Barca, and Tirso de Molina. This was not the only theater since Spanish America did produce its own playwrights who often blended European traditions with elements of the indigenous cultures that surrounded them. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651–1695) is, without a doubt, the foremost Spanish American playwright of the colonial time, though she is equally well-known for her poetry and her essays. Born in Mexico, she entered the convent early in her writing career in order to ensure her right to study. The breadth of her theatrical work is large and her work is among the best. Sor Juana's theater is both within the Spanish baroque tradition and a challenge from the periphery to the dominance of the center, because she is a woman writing when men controlled cultural production and for the fact that she wrote within the Spanish tradition from a convent in Mexico City.

Sor Juana, however, is not the only colonial to penetrate the center of Baroque theater. Juan Ruiz de Alarcón (1581–1639) is considered one of the major dramatists of the Golden Age in Spain, the country to which he emigrated from Mexico as a young man. Though he wrote in and set his plays in Spain rather than the New World and is often for that reason included in the names of peninsular playwrights, he was born in the New World. He is most known for *La verdad sospechosa*, published in 1634. Ruiz de Alarcón's inclusion in the canon of the Spanish Golden Age is often not questioned. However, some critics also include him within the list of Colonial writers, an issue that Alberto Sandoval Sánchez argues in his essay on Ruiz de Alarcón.

Whereas seventeenth-century theater mostly continued a peninsular tradition (though with New World innovation) the eighteenth century, marked by neoclassicism in the literary realm, began to see independence movements throughout Latin America, most especially towards the end of the century. In theater, this can be seen in the increased use of indigenous elements on the Spanish American stage. There is one particularly important example of this from Peru. The play *Ollantay* was originally written in Quechua and early manuscripts date from the eighteenth century. It was performed in 1780 for the indigenous leader Condorcanqui and recounts a love story between a warrior and an Incan princess, the warrior's punishment and his consequent rebellion. After his defeat ten years later, the warrior and the princess are pardoned and reunited with their daughter.

There are links between this play and an indigenous rebellion against the Crown that suggest growing social tensions. In the realm of theater, the play integrates elements from the Spanish and the indigenous worlds.

In a more officially sanctioned move, in the second half of the eighteenth century, numerous large theaters were built in the important cities throughout Spanish America, such as Buenos Aires' Teatro de la Ranchería or Casa de Comedias (which opened in 1789 but was destroyed by fire in 1792). This gave both traveling theater groups and local playwrights a new professional space that was dedicated to theater production, though this was not necessarily available to all, both in terms of financial access and political connections. Nevertheless, these new spaces legitimated these destinations and the theater within them. This can be seen as a move towards independence and national definition that would mark the nineteenth century.

Theater of the nineteenth century continued the tendency that connected European traditions with elements that were distinctly American. Theater and performance were extremely popular and not limited to the traditional idea of the stage. Instead, we also see spectacle centered around spaces such as the circus and more popular places, such as the *chingana* in Chile, an inn, restaurant or café with singing and dancing that was often a site that promoted new republican sentiments.³ In addition, the theater of many of the countries of Spanish America began to distinguish itself and take on specific national characteristics. In Cuba, this can be seen in the *teatro bufó*, a definitively Cuban genre of theater which emerged in the late 1860s. It used the figure of the *negrito* and was influenced in part by the traveling minstrel shows from the United States. The *negrito* was a white performer in black face who became a beloved figure on the stage and came to represent Cuba and Cubanness. Jill Lane's *Blackface Cuba, 1840–1895* details how the *negrito*, blackface, and *teatro bufó* contributed to the evolution of the Cuban stage in the nineteenth century and beyond. She asserts that this humor functioned at two levels: that of controlling blackness and of negotiating whiteness within the colonial hierarchy.⁴

In the middle of the nineteenth century in Cuba, José Jacinto Milanés (1814–1863) (whose work will be discussed in chapter two) premiered his *El conde Alarcos* (1838) in the Teatro Tacón in Havana, considered by many to be the beginning of the Cuban stage. This play, as we will see, like much of the theater written at the time, had strong nationalistic characteristics. Along these same patriotic calls for independence, José Martí also wrote and published the one-act play *Abdala* in 1869, with a black soldier in the role of hero. Both the themes and the hero of Martí's play make it distinctly Cuban and show the innovation that marked the theater and how theater aimed to change the societies from which it came.

In the Río de la Plata area, during this same period, immigration and the tension between the metropolis and the country were some of the topics that defined the area and its art. In the second half of the nineteenth century the representations of the gaucho and his troubles dominated the stages. *Juan Moreira*, originally a novel (1884/1886) by Eduardo Gutiérrez (1853–1890), was adapted for the circus. Its immense popularity led to its introduction onto the stage, arriving in Montevideo in 1889 and Buenos Aires in 1891. As Versényi points out, this marked the beginning of the end of the *teatro gaucho* but signaled an important contribution to Spanish American theater.⁵

The Uruguayan Florencio Sánchez (1875–1910), on the other hand, turned his attention to the complexities of the changing world and the shift to modernity in plays such as *Barranca abajo* (1905), another common topic in the theater of the *rioplatense* area. In *Barranca abajo*, Sánchez highlighted the ending of a lifestyle and a shift from the rural to an increased focus on an urban world. The play is a Latin American tragedy where don Zoilo loses his land through the courts and his family to death and changing morals, all leading to his suicide.

Innovations continued to occupy an important space in the theatrical production of the 1920s and 30s in Spanish America, and highlighted the role of political thought and artistic innovation through theater.⁶ Popular theater groups and playwrights played a pivotal role in bridging traditional paradigms with new forms of theatrical production and political debate, like their predecessors. The tension between the old and the new is defined even more sharply in the work of Armando Discépolo of Argentina (1887–1971) and the *grotesco criollo*. His play *Stefano* (1928) is a particularly pertinent example of the innovations of theater found in Argentina in the 1920 and 30s. The *grotesco criollo* focused on the new immigrants that were forming a part of Buenos Aires and on the social hardships and economic poverty that they suffered. It is closely identified with the lower classes, often comprised of immigrant communities. *Stefano* portrays a family of Italian immigrants in Buenos Aires who come looking for a better life but are unable to find it due to economic and social conditions. Discépolo's work focused on the contribution of immigration to national identity and the ways that the city and the nation fail these people, factors that would define Argentina in the years to come.

These questions and crises of identity and the self were not limited to South America. *El gesticulador* (1938) from Rodolfo Usigli of Mexico (1905–1979) questions the roles of men within the new ideal created by the Mexican Revolution. This play about a supposed imposter of a revolutionary hero highlights the struggles of the new society and reveals the fissures of where reality falls below the ideals. This canonical example shows how

theater entered into the public debates about this new Mexico and what it meant to be Mexican and how far the country had deviated from its revolutionary goals.

Xavier Villaurrutia (1903–1950) of Mexico is another central contributor to a theater that was exerting its own new, national definitions. Villaurrutia is an important figure in the formation of theater groups, having founded the group *Ulises* (with Celestino Gorostiza (1904–1967)) in 1928 and then *Teatro Orientación* in 1932. Both of these groups wanted to transform the idea of theater by breaking its connection to earlier, outside models. In both his work with these groups and in his own dramatic writing, Villaurrutia contributed to an innovation in the idea and definition of Mexican theater. Both he and Usigli would have a profound effect on the work of the future playwrights of their country, such as can be seen in the work of Emilio Carballido (1925–2008), whose extensive work defies simple classification.

While these examples of theater considered topics specifically focused on their respective countries, their and others' innovation on and around the stage continued as the century progressed and the theater of these years can be characterized as diverse and wide-reaching. This diversity can be seen in the influence of the Theater of the Absurd, a movement that originated in Paris in the 1940s and 1950s. The Theater of the Absurd was born from a desire to reform theater in the wake of the destruction of World War II and its aftermath. The notion of the absurd as a way to understand the post-war situation of humankind originates out of Albert Camus (1913–1960) and Jean Paul Sartre (1905–1980), who believed that Man should accept the ultimate lack of meaning to the world. Antonin Artaud (1896–1948) and Martin Esslin (1918–2002) shed light on what they saw as the absurdity of the world. Artaud, whose Theater of Cruelty exchanged many ideas with the Theater of the Absurd, and Esslin share the belief that theater should provoke the spectator beyond his/her expectations and to innovate what happens both onstage and offstage.⁷ Theater of Cruelty is a concept from Artaud that describes a type of theater where traditional authority vanishes. The cruelty to which the name refers, "is not the cruelty we can exercise upon each other by hacking at each other's bodies [...] but the much more terrible and necessary cruelty which things can exercise against us."⁸

Theater, for Artaud and the absurdists, was not to be an escapist experience that took one away from daily concerns, but had as its mission to awaken the spectator to the world and its realities. This disillusionment with theater was manifested in opposition to the classics such as Shakespearean and Romantic theater and attempted to uncover the ultimate absurd nature of a world rendered inexplicable by contemporary life.

Eugene Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* (1950) and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953) are classic examples of how the Absurd portrayed the anxiety towards life and death and the ultimate irrationality that these writers believed characterized the world.

The ideas that the playwrights and theorists of the Theater of the Absurd in Europe put forth were quickly adapted by many dramatists in Latin America, as will be explored in Chapter one in reference to Virgilio Piñera. George Woodyard, in his 1969 essay "The Theatre of the Absurd in Spanish America," explores the employment of ideas from the European Theater of the Absurd in the context of 1960s Spanish America. For Woodyard, the use of the Absurd and the number of absurd plays in the Americas differs given the change of context, though the focus on irrationality and fragmentation remains central. He identifies the most important elements of the Spanish American Theater of the Absurd as the following: plays with two characters, anti-heroes, physical violence stemming from feelings of contempt and hatred, and an insistence on fragmentation.⁹

While there is a rich history of the Absurd influencing Spanish American theater, it is unquestionable that the theater artists in Latin America have innovated the Absurd to make it their own and tailor it to their unique circumstances. Woodyard details many of the important voices that were writing at the time who were influenced by the Absurd. These names are also ones that would remain in the forefront of theater in subsequent years and some that will be studied in more detail later in this book, such as Virgilio Piñera of Cuba and Griselda Gambaro of Argentina. In addition to these two, Woodyard highlights the particularly Absurd identifications in the theater of Elena Garro (1920–1998) of Mexico, Cuba's Antón Arrufat (b. 1935), and Jorge Díaz (1930–2007) of Chile. Díaz is considered, without a doubt, one of the central names of the Absurd in Spanish America, particularly with his *El cepillo de dientes*, first produced in 1961. In this play we see various characteristics of the Absurd, such as a cyclical structure, irrational dialogue, generic characters, and a gratuitous violence.

While Woodyard uses the term Absurd to talk about this theater, some critics have preferred to call this theater Absurdist in order to mark the differences between the European examples and those of Spanish America. The main difference between these two that has been identified by such critics as Daniel Zalacaín and Raquel Aguilú de Murphy is in the political-social topics, though the same alienation is explored on both sides of the Atlantic.¹⁰ Woodyard and others, such as Terry Palls and Eleanor Jean Martin, have not seen the need to differentiate between the two manifestations, though they do recognize the strong social-political aspect of the Spanish American plays.¹¹

While this difference of terminology is not, in my opinion, a strong point of contention in interpretation, it does underline the importance of the Absurd and its influences in Spanish American theater, an importance that goes beyond those playwrights that are strictly identified as Absurd. Woodyard identifies five other playwrights that, though perhaps not strictly Absurd, were unquestionably influenced by the avant-garde movements of the time, the Absurd one of them. These playwrights include the names of Osvaldo Dragún (1929–1999) of Argentina, Puerto Rico's René Marqués (1919–1979), Carlos Solórzano (b. 1922) of Guatemala, Agustín Cuzzani (1924–1987) of Argentina, and Mexico's Emilio Carballido. The Absurd can be seen to permeate the work of countless playwrights, including many of those studied here and will be examined further in the chapter on Virgilio Piñera.

Bertolt Brecht's innovative theories on theater similarly helped to revitalize theater and influence dramatic production in Spanish America, as Fernando de Toro details in his *Brecht en el teatro hispanoamericano*.¹² Perhaps the two most important concepts from Brecht that informed Latin American playwrights at this time are *Verfremdung* (known as alienation or distancing) and *episches Theater* (epic theater). Brecht's goals were to awaken the spectators to the situation before them and to motivate them to rationally consider what was happening. He saw theater as the means to inspire the spectator to new thoughts that would in turn renovate theater itself as well as the outside world: "We need a type of theatre which not only releases the feelings, insights and impulses possible within the particular historical field of human relations in which the action takes place, but employs and encourages those thoughts and feelings which help transform the field itself."¹³ This transformation of the field and the community in which it interacts was brought across through the use of alienation. Brecht considered that when the spectators are discouraged from identifying with the main characters they would be able to reflect more freely on the material before them: "A representation that alienates is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar."¹⁴

Both influenced by and shaping German and international theater in the 1920s and beyond, Brecht's epic theater is concerned, in the words of John Fuegi, "with rawness, with facts, with bringing the whole world into theater in order to give the public lessons on political and economic questions of the day."¹⁵ Three of the central initiatives of epic theater were the use of new and different materials, a production style that underscored reason over emotion, and the creation of a new type of spectator who would be able to coolly appreciate this theater.¹⁶ Brecht advocates with these ideas a renovation of theater that calls for a stronger and more engaged spectator,

one who will carefully consider the represented material in the light of historical and political events.

In the 1950s and especially the 1960s, the increased production of these types of experimental theater highlighted the connection between popular theater groups and the political and social context in which they operated. Nora Eidelberg explores the manifestations of experimental theater in her *Teatro experimental hispanoamericano, 1960–1980: La realidad social como manipulación*.¹⁷ Along this same time period, Nuevo Teatro Popular (New Popular Theatre) was starting to consolidate its definition into one that could be connected across various countries of Latin America. Its peak can be seen around 1965–1975, according to *Latin American Popular Theatre: The First Five Centuries* from Judith A Weiss, et al. While theater that can in retrospect be defined as popular has existed throughout the modern history of Spanish America, the emergence of what is referred to as Nuevo Teatro Popular materialized in connection with other social and political developments of the 1960s and 1970s, a time of tumultuous change and innovation that contributed to this New Popular Theatre. Both grass-roots initiatives and more professionally trained, New Popular Theatre tended to be organized around groups or collectives more than exclusively individuals that came together and apart based on the event. Nevertheless, these groups were often closely identified with a founder or director, such as Enrique Buenaventura (1925–2003) and the Teatro Experimental de Cali (TEC) of Colombia, perhaps the most well-known experimental theater group from Spanish America. The topics tended to be wide-ranging and tied to class and cultural identity, themes that would empower their audiences. These groups connected with one another through festivals dedicated to popular theater and helped to create this genre into a movement that spanned national and cultural borders. Buenaventura, best known for his play *A la diestra de Dios Padre* (1960), turned his attention to collective creations and formed the TEC around the time the Absurd was gaining popularity.

Utopian projects, such as those seen in the New Popular Theatre movements, attempted to renovate social and cultural production and its objectives. The Cuban Revolution has been seen as the potential spark of many revolutionary projects across Latin America—both in the arts and outside—throughout the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁸ One example of this utopian model is Augusto Boal and his *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1974), perhaps the most pertinent theorization on theater in Latin America of its time. Boal aimed to transform the role of the spectator into one that is actively involved in the spectacle. For Boal, all theater is political.¹⁹ The theater, the physical as well as its theoretical space, is where the community can debate fundamental topics for social change. Theater is the revolutionary site, the

place from which activist movements engage in dialogue with the community. Even more, as Boal noted, although theater had been used as a tool for the dominant classes, “theater is a weapon. A very efficient weapon.”²⁰ Boal proposed that the liberating future of theater lay in the total collaboration between both sides of the stage: “First, the barrier between actors and spectators is destroyed: all must act, all must be protagonists in the necessary transformations of society.”²¹

The implications of Boal’s and others’ theories on theater and the community were enormous in both the 1960s and 1970s given the influence that Boal had on Latin American theater even before his writings were published. Attending a play assumed a level of complicity where the spectator directly participated in a play’s representation. For Boal, the differences in roles between actor and spectator are erased in order to be transformed into a new model: one where a theater is in direct communication with the surrounding community through its topics and messages. This idea of collaboration with the audience had been previously elaborated by Antonin Artaud. In “No more masterpieces” (1938), Artaud focuses on the importance of the spectator for a dramatic representation: “the spectator is in the center and the spectacle surrounds him.”²² In *Theater of Cruelty*, the spectator leaves behind the role of *voyeur* and becomes the center—and therefore, an essential part—of the spectacle. This step opens new possibilities, given that its reach can be multiplied by the number of people in the audience that participate and are engaged in the action—in fact, for Artaud, every spectator becomes another actor and educator. This level of involvement in the theatrical representation is what will influence the spectator’s later actions. The theatrical representation, for Artaud, has the power to influence the spectator, to educate her/him to a new way of thinking and being. These concepts are fundamental to understanding the theater of the 1960s and 1970s because they reveal the power that was seen to reside in the theatrical spectacle.

In this same second half of the twentieth century, Latin American theater saw an increased emergence of women writing and publishing. Because of the inherent difficulties of writing and producing theater, women had not formed a strong part of the play writing community in the nineteenth century and the early twentieth. Writing itself, as we know from Virginia Woolf and others, is a taxing task that was not always within women’s reach. Add to that, the need to have access to money to stage plays and an entry into the theater community as playwrights and the numbers can be understandably low, a similar phenomenon to cinema and women directors and screenwriters. Nevertheless, this is not to say that there were no women writing in the twentieth century and before. Perhaps the most successful and well-known among women playwrights of Latin America is

Griselda Gambaro, who entered the theater community in the 1960s, writing her first play *El campo* in 1965. Her play *Información para extranjeros* (1973) will be analyzed here in the fourth chapter.

Gambaro's is not the first or the only name that forms a part of the pantheon of women playwrights, though she is often the only woman included in anthologies of Latin American theater. Elena Garro of Mexico, in addition to narrative, was also a well-known playwright, producing and writing plays for the theater group *Poesía en Voz Alta*. Many of her plays appeared in the late 1950s and 1960s and a number can be found in the anthology *Un hogar sólido* (1958). Earlier still, Aflonsina Storni (1892–1938) of Argentina was writing theatrical farces in the 1920s and 1930s. And, undoubtedly there are many other women who were writing and contributing to the stage whose names have been lost or are unknown at this time.

Though there were not high numbers of women contributing to the play writing aspect of Spanish American theater in the early twentieth century, this has rectified itself somewhat in the following years. Perhaps one of the most recognized names is that of Rosario Castellanos (1925–1974). Her *El eterno femenino* (1973) explored the definitions of what it meant to be a Mexican woman. This play portrays a woman getting her hair done on her wedding day and looks at the various traditional roles open to women at the time. In the second act, she examines the depiction of central women in global and Mexican history, such as Eve and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, and how these characterizations have been damaging to women.

Myrna Casas (b. 1934) of Puerto Rico is another woman who had been able to successfully contribute to the theater of her country and region despite the stated difficulties. She began writing for the theater group *Areyto*, founded by Emilio Belaval (1903–1972), where her plays were produced but not published. Her first play *Cristal roto en el tiempo* (1960) was published as part of the Festival de Teatro of the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueño. Her work shows a diversity of form and topic, but she brings a perspective of women's roles to the theater.

The richness and diversity of the contributions of Latin American women to theater can be further seen in *Holy Terrors*, edited by Diana Taylor and Roselyn Costantino. This book is a collection of essays and plays written by or about the contributions of Latin American women to theater within the last thirty to forty years. Here, the editors highlight the multiple ways in which women have been able to insert themselves onto the stage, both by writing and acting and by forming theater collectives apart from some of the men in the theater.²³ As Taylor and Costantino point out in “Unimagined Communities” in *Holy Terrors*, these women, often activists, had to fight not just the outside world for a space within the

theatrical communities, but also the chauvinism of men alongside whom they worked.²⁴ However, Taylor and Costantino suggest that women born in the 1950s and 1960s were able to enter more and more into the theater world given the increased political mobilization of women that characterized the 1970s and beyond. In this way, we see an increased number of women playwrights associated with Latin American and international stages. While Gambaro continues to write and be produced, she has been joined in the theaters and in other less traditional spaces by other names, such as Diana Raznovich in Argentina, Sabina Berman and Jesusa Rodríguez both of Mexico, Diamela Eltit of Chile, Tania Bruguera of Cuba, among many others. Nevertheless, these women and others still attest to a certain amount of resistance from different sides that make it difficult to do their work.²⁵

Though the influencing factors on and of Spanish American theater may be seen to stop at the Río Grande, it is important to look farther north in the United States where Luis Valdez created Teatro Campesino in 1965. Valdez, known for such theater hits as *Zoot Suit* and *La Bamba*, asked for support from César Chávez's developing labor union to form a theater collective that would entertain and educate, as Jorge Huerta states in *Chicano Theater: Themes and Forms*.²⁶ This group became the beginning of a network of Chicano theaters that formed across the United States and whose influence reached beyond these national borders. Both Teatro Campesino and the network of theaters that it generated dedicated themselves to portraying issues important to the communities in which and for whom they performed, messages that were sometimes more important than the style in which they were portrayed. As Huerta affirms, "Chicano theater was born of and remains a people's theater."²⁷ This can be seen in the theaters' use of language, often not exclusively English or Spanish, but both, highlighting the complexities of the communities' history and the combination of recent arrivals and those who had been in the United States for centuries. While the political borders that separate the United States from Mexico may seem to eliminate discussion of Teatro Campesino and other Chicano theaters from a book dedicated to Spanish American theater, there is much more that is shared and facilitates a discussion of these collectives here, including their themes. Furthermore, Teatro Campesino both influenced and was influenced by the theater that was being written and produced on the other side of the border.

As we have seen, the theater of Spanish America has often been influenced by indigenous American factors and by European traditions to form a new theater. This theater has been connected and has contributed to the communities from which it emerged. This connection will be analyzed in the chapters to follow where this book will examine how theater aimed to

create a dialogue on the change and violence that was taking place *off* stage through the use of violence *on* stage. The theater, both what was produced and written, highlighted the role of spectacle and theatricality in the political and social realms in order to urge its communities to end the use of violence.

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