

ABSTRACT

THE AVANT-GARDE THEATER  
OF MIGUEL MIHURA

by Douglas Rich McKay

The early plays of Miguel Mihura, revolutionary in their scope and configuration, contain a provocative humor founded upon a sound literary base. Eminent critics and literary historians have suggested that Mihura's first stage productions represent a new articulation of dramatic humor in Spain, inaugurating a special sense of the absurd in which playful nonsense is fused with a profound sense of humanity and poetic tenderness. This study considers Mihura's four plays written before 1950 as works containing specific elements of an avant-garde expression. Viewed as totally new and incomparable creations, the four comedies are examined critically in an attempt to evaluate the early period of Mihura's theater in terms of its literary significance and as dramatic art.

Part One treats the author's literary formation. Mihura's forerunners and their influence upon him constitute the subject matter of Chapter One, while Chapter Two deals with the early life and career of Mihura himself. The dramatists Carlos Arniches, Enrique García Álvarez, Carlos Muñoz Seca, and Enrique Jardiel Poncela are discussed in connection with both chapters of Part One. Likewise the dramatic genres

known as the tragedia grotesca and the astracán, as well as the phenomena of stage comedy called jardielismo and humor codornicesco, are defined or alluded to in this section.

In Part Two the following plays are analyzed with respect to theme, structure, characterization, and dramatic content: ¡Viva lo imposible! o El contable de estrellas, written in collaboration with Joaquín Calvo Sotelo; Ni pobre ni rico, sino todo lo contrario, co-authored by Antonio de Lara (Tono); El caso de la mujer asesinadita, produced with the aid of Alvaro de Laiglesia; and Tres sombreros de copa, Mihura's first and most celebrated work as an independent playwright. The affinities or contrasts that exist among these comedies, as well as the stated or apparent intent of the author, are considered. The overall intention is to bring into a clearer perspective the importance of Miguel Mihura in the contemporary theater of Spain.

The study concludes that Mihura fostered a new aesthetic posture in playwriting. His avant-garde theater testifies to the effectiveness of applying a sophisticated and intellectually-oriented humor to dramatic art. Mihura's dialogue, though deliberately disorbited and absurd on occasion, embodies an internal logic designed to combat artificiality in human discourse and action. Central to the plot and design of each comedy is the author's insistence that a life of spiritless resignation to routine is wholly intolerable. Mihura stresses the merits to be gained through a

personal emancipation from the constricting forces of habit, social convention, and selfish pursuits. He makes clear this moral attitude by contrasting the narrow-minded reality of an orthodox middle-class society to the free-thinking expressions of an unconventional world. The conflicts which result from this confrontation of two opposing milieux and their corresponding characters represent the essence of Mihura's theater.

The primary source material is Mihura's published plays. A number of the playwright's contributions to La Ametralladora, a weekly humor magazine he founded during the Spanish Civil War, and to La Codorniz, a still active periodical he founded in 1941 and relinquished in 1944, have also proved useful as documents of the author's early dramatic tendencies. Two personal interviews with Mihura and subsequent communication with several drama critics in Madrid have provided access to materials otherwise unobtainable. Over 180 reviews of Mihura's plays have been consulted to provide a representation of journalistic criticism to accompany the more studied critiques appearing in formal articles.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION. . . . .	I
PART ONE: THE LITERARY FORMATION OF MIGUEL MIHURA	
Chapter	
I. MIHURA'S PRECURSORS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY . . . . .	9
II. EARLY LIFE AND CAREER . . . . .	33
PART TWO: A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF MIGUEL MIHURA'S AVANT- GARDE PLAYS	
III. A CIRCULAR TREATMENT OF BOREDOM: <u>¡VIVA LO IMPOSIBLE! O EL CONTABLE</u> <u>DE LAS ESTRELLAS.</u> . . . . .	58
IV. A VENTURE INTO THE ABSURD: <u>NI POBRE NI RICO, SINO TODO LO</u> <u>CONTRARIO</u> . . . . .	91
V. TOWARD A CONSERVATIVE POSTURE: <u>EL CASO DE LA MUJER ASESINADITA</u> . . . .	124
VI. TWO WORLDS IN VITAL CONFRONTATION: <u>TRES SOMBREROS DE COPA.</u> . . . . .	142
CONCLUSION. . . . .	179
APPENDIX. . . . .	183
BIBLIOGRAPHY. . . . .	185

## INTRODUCTION

Miguel Mihura Santos (born in Madrid, 1905) is recognized as one of the most eminent playwrights in the Spanish contemporary theater. He is the author of over twenty full-length plays, numerous dramatic sketches, and several lengthy essays -- both imaginative and factual -- dealing with his life and career.

Mihura's reputation as a pioneer in the development of a new articulation of dramatic humor was firmly established between November of 1939 and February of 1946. During this period he coauthored three plays of a startling avant-garde flavor, namely ¡Viva lo imposible!, o el contable de estrellas, in collaboration with Joaquín Calvo Sotelo; Ni pobre ni rico, sino todo lo contrario, in collaboration with Antonio de Lara ("Tono"); and El caso de la mujer asesinadita, in collaboration with Alvaro de Laiglesia. He also promoted the exciting and provocative humor of La Codorniz, the popular weekly magazine which he founded in 1941 and managed until 1944. Then, in the year 1952, Mihura reassured the theater world of his right to the title Spanish critics were disposed to confer upon him as Spain's leading exponent of humoristic invention. He premiered his first and most celebrated

production as an independent playwright, Tres sombreros de copa, a comedy he had written as a young man twenty years before.

The staging of Tres sombreros de copa climaxed an era of carefree exploration with technique and subject matter. Though one may say with full propriety that Mihura's entire theater indicates a spirit of calculated versatility, owing to the author's own insistence upon a constant alteration of theme and variety of treatment with each new play, it is also apparent that his early dramas differ from his later comedies in one significant respect: aside from their versatile design, the avant-garde writings are characterized by their spontaneity, unfettered by concessions to public demands.

In this beginning stage of his professional career, Mihura inaugurates a revolutionary concept of humor which borders on the absurd and crusades intrepidly against the fatuous commonplaces of conventional drama. While unsuccessful in securing a respectable financial remuneration for his efforts, -- the reason Mihura gives for later abandoning his avant-garde posture, -- he nonetheless effects a valid artistic gain in the literary world. His four early plays are totally new and incomparable creations. They represent a unique and original departure from the common existing forms of modern Spanish drama.

The four plays we will deal with embody a distinctly intellectual humor that is at once tender, poetic, enigmatic, and satirical. They reveal above all a singular attention to subjects of absorbing human interest. They exemplify the author's exceptional artistry in the construction of the kind of dialogue that grows out of an authentic, personal technique. The genuine goodness of his leading characters within a society of degrading or unjustly established values suggests the playwright's serious moral concern for some of the basic human problems of our time.

Revolutionary in their scope and configuration, Mihura's early writings have only in recent years been acclaimed superior in literary excellence to the more serene and conservative comedies he wrote after 1946. While his later writings have earned him considerable commercial success and will continue, no doubt, to find favor with the theatergoing public, the lively plays of his youth appear to be attracting greater critical approval, owing to their bold, spontaneous originality and their sound artistic merits.

It is the purpose of the present study to examine critically Miguel Mihura's avant-garde theater. An attempt will be made to evaluate this early stage of the author's dramatic work in terms of its literary significance and as dramatic art. This objective requires an

analysis of the structure and themes of the four above-mentioned plays and the affinities or contrasts that exist among them. Our overall intention is to define and bring into a clearer perspective the importance of Miguel Mihura in the contemporary theater of Spain.

Considering the lack of a comprehensive monograph dealing with this period of Mihura's theater, the present study assumes no pre-existing criteria or set of values that can be applied objectively to the plays under consideration. It is therefore necessary to examine each work with respect to theme, characterization, and dramatic content, as well as the stated or apparent intent of the author.

Part One of this study treats the literary formation of Miguel Mihura. In this section two important aspects of Mihura's background will be examined, in order to enhance the reader's total appreciation for his early theater. These are first, a consideration of his immediate forerunners, their influence upon him, and the literary legacy they have bequeathed his generation. The playwrights who comprise this treatment in Chapter One are Carlos Arniches, Enrique García Álvarez, Pedro Muñoz Seca, and Enrique Jardiel Poncela. Among the concepts discussed in relation to their respective theaters are the tragedia grotesca, the astracán, and jardielismo. Second, a glimpse into the early life and career of the author himself will constitute the subject

matter of Chapter Two. This will include observations about Mihura's working habits and the creative process behind the gestation and realization of his plays. Because Mihura's connection with La Codorniz represents an important facet of his theatrical career, special attention will attend the matter in this chapter.

Mihura's dramatic works of the avant-garde phase will be discussed in Part Two. The plays will be treated in chronological order according to the date of their respective premieres in Madrid. Those elements most commonly associated with the questing nature of Mihura's avant-garde expression will command our primary attention throughout the four chapters of this second division of our study. The notion of the absurd, for instance, is one of several facets correlated with the novel and bizarre humor and the disorbited nature of language which characterize the author's early plays. Owing to the interest accorded the idea of the absurd in contemporary dramatic literature and the question of Mihura's role or direction in the pre-Ionesco period of this phenomenon, the subject will be discussed in connection with our analysis of two plays, Ni pobre ni rico... and Tres sombreros de copa.

The primary source material has been Mihura's published plays. A number of the playwright's contributions to La Ametralladora, a weekly humor magazine he founded during the Spanish Civil War, and to the

aforenamed La Codorniz, a still active periodical he relinquished in 1944, have also proved useful as documents of the author's early dramatic tendencies. I have been greatly aided by the personal assistance of Mr. Mihura, who has kindly provided access to materials otherwise unobtainable. In addition, direct communication and later correspondence with several drama critics in Madrid have supplied ideas for this study. Numerous reviews of Mihura's plays have been consulted to provide a representation of journalistic criticism, a more spontaneous type of reaction which offers a different perspective from that inherent in the more studied critiques appearing in formal articles. Other publications used less extensively are also noted in the Bibliography.

It will be of interest to note the existence of three unpublished theses on various aspects of Mihura's theater. Their titles are also listed in the Bibliography following the names of their respective authors, i.e. Barbara Ann Deuser, Ingeborg Muur, and Patricio Pérez Cobas. Deuser's thematic study (in English), made available through Pennsylvania State University, deals with five plays, namely: Tres sombreros de copa, A media luz los tres, Mi adorado Juan, Carlota, and Maribel y la extraña familia. The authoress discusses each comedy from the standpoint of satire. Her treatment is very general and consists in the main of explanatory plot summaries.



Pérez Cobas' inordinately prolix work (in Spanish) was acquired through the personal kindness of Mr. Mihura. The thesis bears the name of no institution or location of writing. It is surprisingly void of sound critical substance despite its 200+ pages.

Muur's treatment of humor, situation, and characterization (in Norwegian), available through the courtesy of the authoress, attempts to examine all of Mihura's published plays through La tetera. The project is far too ambitious, forcing the writer to generalize unduly and to write plot résumés for each comedy.

Existent monographs, studies, and articles on Mihura are far from exhaustive. Because the playwright's avant-garde phase has not been approached heretofore, it is strongly felt that this present effort is justified.

PART ONE

THE LITERARY FORMATION OF MIGUEL MIHURA

## CHAPTER ONE

### MIHURA'S PRECURSORS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Miguel Mihura's literary line of descent passes varyingly through Carlos Arniches (1866-1943), Enrique García Álvarez (1873-1931), Pedro Muñoz Seca (1881-1936), and Enrique Jardiel Poncela (1901-1952). These writers are frequently mentioned as the principal dramatists in the theater of humor of twentieth-century Spain.<sup>1</sup>

Their legacy to Mihura represents an aesthetic conditioning more than the conferral of a functional inventory of technical resources. For a period of almost fifty years they excited a new artistic response to the validity of humor in the legitimate theater; they seasoned both playgoer and critic for the digestion of novelty within the framework of a traditional form.

These playwrights, however, do not represent a clearly defined movement of literary intention. Despite their mutual collaborations, they evince no apparent disposition to formulate a school. Collectively they

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<sup>1</sup>See, for instance, the importance accorded them in J. Rof Carballo et al., El teatro de humor en España (Madrid: Editora Nacional, 1966), pp. 35-44, 67-81, 49-61, 87-104, 109-119, 221, 242, 256-258, 267-268.

generate a climate conducive to the formation of Miguel Mihura's theater, though individually no single writer mentioned above qualifies as a consummate precursor of his style and technique. Indeed, Mihura's early plays, while similar in scope to the humoristic innovations of his predecessors, are uniquely original. They represent an all too radical departure from the recognized theater forms of his day to be considered the logical outgrowth of a unified, linear evolvement.

Because they have relevance to the early life of Miguel Mihura, the respective theaters of the aforementioned playwrights warrant our serious consideration. While in truth they may not betray a measured or concerted effort to establish a new current of dramatic humor by conscious design, there is nonetheless sufficient evidence to support the idea that without their antecedence, Mihura's theater would have been impossible. It is the purpose of this chapter to underscore the rationale behind this premise.

When Mihura was still a young boy, not over eleven years of age, yet thoroughly exposed even then to the life and concerns of the theater, Don Carlos Arniches y Barrera was already in his fiftieth year, in the prime of his creative work. He was the indisputable master of the contemporary sainete and had begun to cultivate a startling new genre in his repertory of dramatic forms,

the tragedia grotesca.<sup>2</sup> Mihura admired this latter phase over and above Arniches' previous productions, particularly its stress on the subjective involvement of the protagonist in a struggle for positive heroism, as illustrated by the play Es mi hombre.

In his mature years Arniches developed a more complete and delicate sense of construction in his plays, transforming and transfiguring the popular themes of the sainete into what Pedro Salinas has called "un juego de comicidad externa y gravedad profunda."<sup>3</sup> Salinas correctly views the tragedia grotesca as a fundamentally serious form of drama. It resembles the serious intentions of Mihura's theater in its emphasis on the value of the human personality, stressing the validity of constant, guileless ties with one's fellow beings. Like Mihura's theater, it is also tinged with occasional concessions to obtain comic effects, yet these are governed withal by a natural spontaneity that furnishes us with what González Ruiz has called "una creación de auténtico humor bajo la forma de un juguete cómico."<sup>4</sup> This is to

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<sup>2</sup>This concept is ably defined by Vicente Ramos in Chapter Nineteen of his biographical study, Vida y teatro de Carlos Arniches (Madrid: Alfaguara, 1966), pp. 157-166.

<sup>3</sup>Literatura Española Siglo XX (México: Editorial Séneca, 1941), p. 196.

<sup>4</sup>Nicolás González Ruiz, "El teatro de humor del siglo XX hasta Jardiel Poncela," in Rof Carballo et al., op. cit. (above, note 1), p. 38.

say that in the theaters of both Arniches and Mihura we are not exposed to artificial and shallow comedy; instead, the humor is controlled by an underlying literary substance that avoids falsification or pure frivolity. The authors disengage themselves from their respective characters and from the plot line to permit their creations a clear autonomy of expression.

The moral and human dimension that characterizes the tragedia grotesca is sustained by yet another element common to Mihura's early productions. This is the ever-increasing importance prescribed to a language that is original, expressive, and often nonsensical, intentionally sprinkled with word plays and figures of speech, especially hyperbole. It is this aspect that prompted the critic Díez-Canedo to judge the tragedia grotesca as an authentic expression of the modern world and of human life, out of which the comic types, absurd actions, and verbal dislocations of Muñoz Seca's theater were to evolve.<sup>5</sup>

The names of other major critics might likewise be cited to corroborate the notion that Arniches' theater is solidly and fundamentally one of language, that it thereby occupies a lasting and significant place in the

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<sup>5</sup>Enrique Díez-Canedo, "Panorama del teatro español desde 1914 hasta 1936," Hora de España, XVI (April, 1938), p. 28.

development of contemporary Spanish drama.<sup>6</sup> Alfredo Marqueríe, for example, designates the cornerstone of Arniches' theater as being "el poderío de la frase," through which "lo que los tipos dicen está muy por encima de lo que hacen."<sup>7</sup> The same may be said for the theater of Miguel Mihura.

The principal merit attributed to Carlos Arniches is the same virtue Mihura values most in his own writings -- the ability to manipulate dialogue to fit a particular situation. Perhaps as a youngster Mihura was forcibly impressed by this feature in the aging playwright's theater; of assurance, Arniches' comically deformed words made an impact on Mihura's entire generation. The incredibly funny disparates and the ingenious but absurd reasonings of his dialogues were Arniches' foremost contributions to the present-day theater. From the old master, Mihura found a superlative example of "la grandísima eficacia teatral del diálogo."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>See, for instance, Ramón Pérez de Ayala, Las máscaras; ensayos de crítica teatral (Madrid: Imprenta clásica española, 1917), II; Arturo Berenguer Carisomo, El teatro de Carlos Arniches (Buenos Aires: Ateneo ibero-americano, 1937); Gonzalo Torrente Ballester, Teatro español contemporáneo (Madrid: Guadarrama, 1957); and the aforecited work by Vicente Ramos (above, note 2).

<sup>7</sup>Veinte años de teatro en España (Madrid: Editora Nacional, 1959), p. 56.

<sup>8</sup>Rafael Vázquez Zamora, "Tipos y escenas de Arniches," Insula, No. 81 (1952), p. 12.

Enrique García Álvarez also occupies a unique position in the development of dramatic humor before Mihura. On the one hand, his name is always paired with that of another among several playwrights, for he was an indefatigable collaborator who rarely produced plays on his own.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, he is the acknowledged creator of a new "genre" in the Spanish theater, a comic prescription that bears the name astracán. He himself promoted the popularity of the astracán by virtue of his role in the dual authorship of over one hundred comedias.

As an innovator, however, García Álvarez is frequently overshadowed by the more influential personality of Muñoz Seca who, after coauthoring eight plays with Don Enrique between 1914 and 1916, continued to write innumerable plays of his own in the same astracán tradition.<sup>10</sup> Thus Muñoz Seca reaped the benefit of his partner's original ideas and has since been associated almost exclusively with the literary notion of the astracán.

Despite being relegated to an occasional footnote by most critics, García Álvarez has had a profound

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<sup>9</sup>With the exception of El pollo Tejada, La carne flaca, and La Escala de Milán, which he wrote unaided, García Álvarez shared over 100 titles with some twelve other playwrights. E. C. Sainz de Robles lists his principal collaborators as Antonio Paso, Joaquín Abati, Carlos Arniches, and Muñoz Seca. His professional link with both Arniches and Muñoz Seca might suggest that their mutual affinities of ideas and aesthetic precepts are perhaps more deliberate than coincidental.

<sup>10</sup>Obras completas de Don Pedro Muñoz Seca, ed. José María Bernáldez (Madrid: Ediciones FAX, 1954) Vol. I.



influence on his generation. Alfredo Marqueríe refers to him as "aquel fecundo ingenio, verdadero monstruo de la gracia popular."<sup>11</sup> Mihura mentions him first and foremost among the authors whose talent determined the ultimate appearance of a new kind of dramatic humor in Spain.<sup>12</sup> Jardiel Poncela also extols his importance, as illustrated by the following quotation:

García Álvarez influyó, transformó y aguzó a quienes ya poseían una manera propia y condujo, orientó y creó a quienes no tenían todavía un estilo absolutamente personal.... Ha dado a luz un teatro cómico violento, grotesco, fantástico, maravillosamente disparatado, sin antecedentes en nuestro país ni en los ajenos.<sup>13</sup>

Jardiel's tribute singles out García Álvarez as having inaugurated a direction so entirely new that it established its own precedent, although some critics, it must be remembered, insist that an astracán in embryo may be found in the tragedias grotescas of Arniches.

The astracán formula has a significant connection with the early plays of Mihura, whose avant-garde theater represents a refinement and consummation of

<sup>11</sup>"Sobre la vida y la obra de don Carlos Arniches," Cuadernos de Literatura Contemporánea, Nos. 9-10 (Madrid: 1943), 249; reprinted in Primer Acto, No. 14 (May-June, 1960), p. 11.

<sup>12</sup>Miguel Mihura, Obras completas (1st ed.; Barcelona: Editorial AHR, 1962), p. 25. Thirteen plays, three essays, and an autobiographical prologue are contained in this volume. All subsequent references to this text throughout the present study will cite the author's name and the title Obras.

<sup>13</sup>Enrique Jardiel Poncela, Tres comedias con un solo ensayo (Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, 1934), p. 25.

the genre. It thus behooves us to define the term according to its original conception, in order that we might better appreciate its evolution in the theater of Muñoz Seca and its later manifestation in Mihura's writings.

The astracán is a farcical composition in which dialogue is central to the comic situation. Its singular feature is the deliberate reduction of verisimilitude. Puns, jests, and plays on words are constantly used, contrived solely to evoke laughter. The original astracán is devoid of serious intention. It depends entirely on repartee and dislocated speech for its effect, rather than character involvement or a clever plot line. In the hands of García Álvarez it is totally innocuous, bearing no hint of political or social parody. It is likewise far removed from recognizable topics of the day, excepting an obvious exploitation of the comic possibilities in everyday speech. It endeavors to untypify the normal pose and the conventional expressions of ordinary conversation by means of a travesty on clichés and platitudes.

Alfredo Marqueríe alludes briefly to astracán humor as being most winsome and facetious in its early development, a time corresponding to the years of World War I.<sup>14</sup> This historical connection is perhaps a

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<sup>14</sup>"Novedad en el teatro de Jardiel Poncela," in J. Rof Carballo et al., El teatro de humor en España, p. 73.

significant point, for it is during the period of extreme conflagration and turmoil on Northern European soil, and social disturbance within neutral Spain, that the tendency to escape into a realm of absurd mirth and merriment makes its first appearance on stage by way of the astracán. Indeed, the Argentine critic and dramatist José María Monner Sans designates the year 1918 as the general beginning of the process of dehumanization in art.<sup>15</sup> Yet one cannot insist too strongly upon this notion of post-war antirrealism, for we note that only one decade after the end of World War I, as will be seen when we refer to the theater of Muñoz Seca, the astracán takes root in reality. The same language distortion and verbal nonsense found in the writings of García Álvarez are then employed to satirize present-day concerns. To many critics this represents a kind of subversive corruption of the original astracán concept.

García Álvarez' primary contribution to the theater of his day is not alone the "juguete cómico sostenido a fuerza del equívoco," to which González Ruiz refers;<sup>16</sup> his importance must also be assessed by dint of the weight and value he gives to dialogue as the dominant feature of dramatic humor, the same formula

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<sup>15</sup>Introducción al teatro del siglo XX (Buenos Aires: Columba, 1954), pp. 20-21.

<sup>16</sup>Nicolás González Ruiz, "El teatro de humor del siglo XX hasta Jardiel Poncela," in J. Rof Carballo et al., El teatro de humor en España, p. 39.

which Arniches recognized in proper perspective and which Muñoz Seca will make use of in a multitude of plays. Moreover, it is this same property that Jardiel Poncela will enhance by adding greater rapidity of speech to fast-moving comic situations, and that Mihura will polish and perfect by bringing into focus the tenderness, vigor, and drama of the human personality.

García Álvarez' work was concluded in 1931, thus ending what Miguel Mihura has called "el caso más extraordinario de la vagancia en el teatro moderno," referring to the author's assiduous collaboration and boundless energy.<sup>17</sup> His role in the development of the contemporary theater of humor has been grossly underrated and merits a serious reevaluation.

While García Álvarez is the recognized initiator of the astracán, its chief architect and producer is Pedro Muñoz Seca. Under his prolific authorship the astracán develops from a moderate exorbitance in dialogue into the most lavish exhibition of vocalized inverisimilitude and absurdity to be witnessed on the Spanish stage. The drama critic González Ruiz terms the quarter-century of the astracán's currency a time of "frenesí de la

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<sup>17</sup>Information conveyed in a personal interview with Miguel Mihura, June 9, 1967.

exageración y de disparate."<sup>18</sup> It is during this period that Muñoz Seca reigns supreme as its foremost advocate, producing with notable technical skill what Valbuena Prat labels "un teatro de puro disparate, de puro chiste."<sup>19</sup>

Except for enlarging upon the astracán, restating its design and composition with increased verbal drollery, Muñoz Seca adds no new dimensions to the original concept as we have already defined it. Its basic formulas of dislocated speech and comic jests, its illogical characterizations and implausible happenings, he fully exploits without noticeable deviation or mutation until late in his career. He perpetuates an established trend, merely intensifying the impact of its humor with a heavy stress on colloquial wit and an occasional pronouncement of gibes and sneers, conceived in a tone described by one of his most successful admirers as being "un poco mordaz, restallante, explosiva, rápida, inesperada."<sup>20</sup> These characteristics contribute to heighten the hilarity of his plays and to distinguish his theater from the more subdued humor disparatado of his predecessors.

<sup>18</sup>Nicolás González Ruiz, loc. cit. This writer designates the years 1912 to 1936 as the "lifetime" of the astracán. The year 1912 represents the estreno of Trampa y carbón, Muñoz Seca's first conscious effort to foster the genre. He thereafter cultivated the astracán without cessation until his assassination in 1936.

<sup>19</sup>Angel Valbuena Prat, Historia del teatro español (Barcelona: Noguer, 1956), p. 63.

<sup>20</sup>Alfonso Paso, "Muñoz Seca: El astracán, género de abrigo," La Estafeta Literaria, Nos. 282-283 (Madrid, January 4-18, 1964), 54.

In further contrast to the plays of García Álvarez, we find in the theater of Muñoz Seca an increased concentration on exaggerated situations and a deliberate effort to caricature the society and events of his own day. This is particularly true in the final phase of his writing career, when he employs the astracán as a fierce political weapon, its jokes and barbs intended to parody, satirize, and burlesque the contemporary scene. Yet even in his combative and satirical period, Muñoz Seca attempts no radical departure from the basic resources and devices of the astracán which he inherited from his close friend and fellow collaborator. His farce, unlike that of García Álvarez, is incisive and dominantly germane to current problems, but by no means acrimonious or pessimistic. It is more likely that the strong tinge of cynicism underlying Mihura's early theater is an outgrowth of Jardiel's drama rather than a reflection of Muñoz Seca's lightly corrosive but basically optimistic satire.

Muñoz Seca's importance with regard to later developments in the theater also lies in the attention he devotes to dialogue as the primary vehicle for humor, a dialogue independent of the stylized inventions of Arniches and free from the costumbrista leanings of García Álvarez. It is this special sense of dialogue, this insistence on the vitality of the comic utterance that, when later tempered and shorn of its rough and

often unbenevolent properties, becomes the hallmark of Miguel Mihura's theater.

Muñoz Seca generated plays as rapidly as he appropriated new notions. To a large extent his success and reputation as the leading promoter of the astracán was based on his amazingly rich productivity. His name was constantly before the public. At the age of forty he was premiering on an average of ten plays a year. Mihura was then fifteen years old and informs us that he never missed an estreno from the pen of this renowned humorist.<sup>21</sup>

Those who assess the importance of twentieth-century Spanish drama are seemingly divided in their evaluation of Muñoz Seca. The widest disagreement concerning his literary merit exists between the stated opinions of literary artists, who value his legacy of unrestrained humor and theatrical inventiveness over his socio-political posture, and those of the drama critics, who accuse him of removing the astracán out of the domain of literature and prostituting its inherently atemporal formulas by confinement within the arena of politics and social criticism.

Azorín, for example, is one of Muñoz Seca's most ardent defenders. He lauds the rigorous construction of

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<sup>21</sup>Mihura, Obras, p. 25.

his plays, suggesting in passing that had he been a Frenchman his statue would have been crowned with laurel and placed on the Elysian Fields, but as a Spaniard he was lucky to have had a street named after him.<sup>22</sup> Jardiel Poncela also praises the definitive literary accomplishments of the playwright, ranking him second only to García Álvarez as the most important dramatic writer of his time.<sup>23</sup> Alfonso Paso pays him high tribute in a serious essay regarding his artistic skills.<sup>24</sup> Mihura likewise affirms a life-long admiration for the energy, optimism, creativity, and imagination of Muñoz Seca; indeed, Mihura relates that as a young man he often defended the older playwright's reputation, "a gritos en los vestíbulos de los teatros, cuando algún viejo estúpido y malintencionado intentaba atacarle."<sup>25</sup>

As for these attacks Mihura speaks of, they too have been legion, not alone from "stupid and indiscreet old men," but as well from responsible critics and writers of sound judgment. A favorable biography, published as early as 1939, did little to invalidate Muñoz Seca's

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<sup>22</sup>Quoted in Alfonso Paso, "Muñoz Seca: el astracán...", loc. cit. (above, note 20).

<sup>23</sup>"Lectura de cuartillas," Tres comedias..., op. cit. (above, note 13), p. 25.

<sup>24</sup>"Muñoz Seca: el astracán...", op. cit., pp. 54-56.

<sup>25</sup>Mihura, Obras, p. 25.



growing disrepute as a writer of mere marginal literary significance.<sup>26</sup> Such is the position of Gonzalo Torrente Ballester, who finds his theater confused and contradictory, "sin gran importancia literaria, pero de enorme importancia social."<sup>27</sup> In an earlier article Torrente discredits the astracán altogether as a literary genre, pointing to the negative and destructive elements of its unfolding in the later plays of Muñoz Seca.<sup>28</sup> Juan Chabás is explicitly condemnatory in his consideration of the astracán, stating that "el género debiera excluirse de los capítulos dedicados a la historia del teatro."<sup>29</sup> This negative sentiment is echoed in the writings of several other major critics and literary historians, most of whom base their unfavorable comments upon the dramatist's plays after 1930.<sup>30</sup> Yet virtually all of his critics -- the detractors as well as the apologists -- are in unanimous accord over the historical importance of

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<sup>26</sup> José Montero Alonso, Pedro Muñoz Seca: Vida, ingenio y asesinato de un comediógrafo español (Madrid: Ediciones españolas, 1939).

<sup>27</sup> Op. cit. (above, note 6), p. 36.

<sup>28</sup> "Cincuenta años de teatro español y algunas cosas más," Escorial: Revista de cultura y letras, No. 10 (August, 1941), pp. 275-277.

<sup>29</sup> Literatura española contemporánea (La Habana: Editorial Cultural, 1952), p. 641.

<sup>30</sup> Among the writers who represent this view are Enrique de Mesa, Melchor Fernández Almagro, Alfredo Marqueríe, Cristóbal de Castro, Ángel Valbuena Prat, and Emiliano Diez-Echarri.

the comic factor in his theater. His novel astracanas represent, as Nicolás González Ruiz writes, "el germen de un teatro posterior."<sup>31</sup> In a general sense their revolutionary flavor inaugurates a distinctive phase of the theater of the absurd in Spanish literature, insofar as language is concerned. The critic Francisco García Pavón has Muñoz Seca's astracán in mind when he writes that "el teatro de humor ha supuesto el único vanguardismo auténtico del arte dramático español."<sup>32</sup>

The theater of Muñoz Seca thus represents an essential link in the chain of dramatic satire, connecting a pre-war theater of farcical humor, designed largely to amuse and to entertain, with post-war social satire of a somewhat more corrosive and serious intent. His major endowment to Miguel Mihura is the proven formula, verified in his best plays, that dialogue constitutes the most authentic medium for conveying a humor that, when devoid of topical imprecations, is pregnant with human meaning and literary substance. Muñoz Seca's tendency to satirize the current scene is sparingly reflected in Mihura's theater, but while Muñoz disowns his epoch with obvious exasperation, Mihura, as we shall see, accepts his world

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<sup>31</sup>La cultura española en los últimos veinte años: El teatro (Madrid: Instituto de Cultura Hispánica, 1949), p. 27.

<sup>32</sup>Francisco García Pavón, "Inventiva en el teatro de Jardiel Poncela," in J. Rof Carballo et al., El teatro de humor en España, p. 89.

as he finds it, adding a new dimension of human compassion and poetic tenderness to soften its most negative features.

Of the four dramatists under discussion, Enrique Jardiel Poncela is Mihura's most immediate contemporary. Only four years separate their respective ages, Jardiel being the elder. Yet his first major success, Una noche de primavera sin sueño (1927), precedes Mihura's initial production by a full twelve years, and Jardiel had already produced eleven unsuccessful plays before that date. His theater begins chronologically at a time corresponding to the advent of Muñoz Seca's socio-political satires; it represents, in point of fact, a combative effort to oppose "el astracán de baja extracción" which Pérez Minik calls "el popularismo grosero de Muñoz Seca."<sup>33</sup>

It would be superfluous to recount Jardiel's theatrical innovations. Creditable biographies and monographs have treated this subject since the year 1945, providing evidence that a large segment of critical opinion declares for Jardiel's decisive influence on the Spanish comic theater.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, that which is

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<sup>33</sup>Domingo Pérez Minik, Teatro europeo contemporáneo; su libertad y compromisos (Madrid: Guadarrama, 1961), p. 298.

<sup>34</sup>Among those studies consulted, the following three works appear to be of most critical value: Alfredo Marqueríe, El teatro de Jardiel Poncela (Bilbao: Ediciones de Conferencias y Ensayos, 1945); Robert Edward Hammarstrand, "The Comic Spirit in the Plays of Enrique Jardiel Poncela" (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of

uppermost to our present concern is Jardiel's direct connection with Miguel Mihura and the extent to which the younger playwright was affected by his predecessor's "teatro deliberadamente desorbitado y caricatural."<sup>35</sup> To this end we will direct our attention in the concluding portion of the present chapter.

During the years 1927-1934 Jardiel and Mihura collaborated frequently on articles for the magazines Buen Humor and Gutiérrez. Together they espoused the same aesthetic posture which Tono, Neville, López Rubio, and others shared in common with them, that is, a desire to renew and rejuvenate Spanish comedy. Their individual efforts fomented a startling new direction in humor, wherein parody, caricature, irony, and satire were combined in a struggle against the banality and dullness of everyday communication. When Jardiel detached himself from journalistic endeavors to further this trend in the theater, his independent inventiveness tended more and more toward extravagance of comic situation, a withdrawal from explicable plot lines, and a penchant for elaborating upon abstraction and incongruency, all of which resulted in the perpetuation of the absurdist spirit in Spanish

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California, Berkeley, 1966); Rafael Flórez, Mío Jardiel; biografía de un hombre que está debajo de un almendro en flor: Enrique Jardiel Poncela (Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, 1966).

<sup>35</sup>Marqueríe, El teatro de Jardiel Poncela (above, note 34), p. 27.

drama, a movement tagged by Marqueríe as "el Jardielismo" in contemporary literature.<sup>36</sup>

Mihura, on the other hand, inclined toward a more natural, simple, and humanized world, never losing sight of the relevance of a sound character portrayal to the circumstances of a recognizable milieu. Mihura's theater was to reflect greater judgment and introspection into the profundities of human nature, while Jardiel's plays were to display an uninhibited exuberance of farce, in which a highly histrionic and artificial comicity would be maintained by means of visual effects, slapstick, and rapidity of stage action.

Both Jardiel and Mihura have sufficient in common, however, to be classified as humorists of the same basic stock. An identical striving to avoid worn and tired forms in comedy is apparent in each writer. The same search for the unusual and the imaginative characterizes their respective theaters. Their aims coincide in regard to a flight from verisimilitude as an expressed scorn for the realistic comedy. They equally share the spirit of the early astracán with its humor disparatado and its fondness for parody and punning. Their similarities in

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid. Marqueríe stood virtually alone in his praise for Jardiel. His first brief study (1945) was published at a time of extreme critical furor against the playwright. Marqueríe's constant devotion to the writer did most to sway public and critical opinion in his favor. The term "Jardielismo" is used today to designate the entire absurdist trend we have been discussing in this chapter.

this regard are so close, in fact, that Jardiel once angrily accused Mihura of plagiarism, in reference to some of the latter's writings for La Codorniz. Alfredo Marqueríe invalidates this charge by stating that Jardiel was hounded by jealousy; that upon learning of Mihura's expanding popularity, Jardiel presaged the rank and notoriety Mihura was to attain in the annals of the modern Spanish drama. Jardiel was piqued, reports Marqueríe, to have discovered an able competitor rather than a mere disciple, and thus he reverted to sarcasm and disdain.<sup>37</sup> The feud was not long-lived and Mihura speaks today with high regard concerning Jardiel, whose theater, he remarked, "contribuyó a preparar el ambiente para nuestra manera de entender el humor."<sup>38</sup> Mihura, incidentally, views his own theater as a totally distinct phenomenon from that of Jardiel's:

Lo que cultivo yo es un teatro intimista. Lo Jardielesco es un teatro de embrollo. Pero lo que sí tenemos en común es el hecho de ser miembros de la misma generación.<sup>39</sup>

Mihura agrees with Marqueríe in estimating Jardiel's overall importance. The author's revivifying energy gave rise to a new respect for the whole area of

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<sup>37</sup>"Jardiel y el Jardielismo," La Estafeta Literaria, No. 312 (February 27, 1965), 19.

<sup>38</sup>Quoted from a personal interview with Miguel Mihura, June 9, 1967.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

popular comedy in Spain. Professor Juan R. Castellano remarks that of all Spanish playwrights who have written since this man, only Tono and Mihura have achieved greater success in the Jardielesque tradition; the latter represent, through their play Ni pobre ni rico, sino todo lo contrario, the consummation of an epoch. "El humor jardielesco," Dr. Castellano writes, "marca la transición entre la parodia de Muñoz Seca y el teatro de humor de la postguerra."<sup>40</sup>

Jardiel transmitted to Mihura an example of skilled technical versatility. He illustrated the performability of unrestraint in the complex structure of a play. He demonstrated the popular acceptance of the detective or mystery play, a comedy of intrigue and entanglement that Mihura, among others, has since essayed with great success. He bequeathed as well an object lesson in the titling of his plays, which feature contrast and inverisimilitude in the choice of bizarre and unusual wording, geared to attract, shock, or startle the playgoer.<sup>41</sup>

Above all, Jardiel preserved for Mihura's improved handling the salient trait that his forerunners

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<sup>40</sup> Juan R. Castellano, "El teatro español desde 1939," Hispania, XXXIV (August, 1951), 242.

<sup>41</sup> Examples of Jardiel's repertory: El amor sólo dura 2000 metros (1941); Los ladrones somos gente honrada (1941); Los habitantes de la casa deshabitada (1942); Tú y yo somos tres (1945); Como mejor están las rubias es con patatas (1947).

had fostered with great aptitude: the conversational form of humor, wherein dialogue carries a considerable burden of meaning and takes precedence over stage action; wherein the language by itself approximates the formulas of the Theater of the Absurd. Mihura was to become the central and most consummate artist of his generation in this single regard, though clearly his way had been prepared through the verbe, the exuberance, the inventive word-play, and the hyperbolic playfulness with language that characterized the comic dialogues of Jardiel Poncela.

We have attempted to underscore the significance of influence in Miguel Mihura's theater, citing some general affinities he shares in common with his most distinguished precursors. The nature of this study has limited our consideration to the aforementioned writers alone. A complete list of those responsible for the formulation of a new framework of theatrical aesthetics in this century would include such names as Joaquín Calvo Sotelo, Alejandro Casona, Antonio Lara, Alvaro de Laiglesia, José López Rubio, Edgar Neville, José María Pemán, Víctor Ruiz Iriarte, and Alfonso Paso, not to mention the vital sway and motivation exerted upon this generation from the pens of Ramón del Valle-Inclán (1866-1936) and Ramón Gómez de la Serna (1888-1963), whose respective connections with the absurdist trend in Spanish drama is fundamental but as yet only superficially studied.



Mihura, then, is a member of a unique generation of comic playwrights, all responding to the incitement and inspiration of a common ambiente, yet disengaged from promoting a conscious, collective effort to constitute a school. The problem in ascribing direct influences on Mihura is therefore primarily speculative; indeed, Mihura himself is disinclined to admit having sought ideas or inspiration from any single forerunner, notwithstanding the exemplary patterns from which he could well have molded his theater had he been less original.<sup>42</sup> Mihura, in his modesty, prefers to be considered a part of those who partook of a similar vocation, who shared a strong bond of conviviality, and who individually fostered a new and provocative type of humor, owing to the stimulus of a given historical moment.

The famous Italian humorist Pitigrilli, whose Cuentos dialogados have been compared to Mihura's bizarre playlets and sketches of La Codorniz, has taken a similar position with respect to the idea of a coincidental rapport among members of the same generation. In a letter directed to Mihura from Paris, dated May 19, 1965,

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<sup>42</sup>In an interview with Manuel Diez Crespo, recorded in Primer Acto, Nos. 29-30 (December 1961 - January 1962), 9, Mihura stated: "Aunque uno no se dé cuenta de aquellos autores que nos gustan, siempre nos queda algo. Sin embargo, no creo que ninguno de ellos, en particular, haya influido en mí."

Pitigrilli states: "Tú y yo estábamos en el aire. Es una coincidencia debida a los tiempos, a la evolución."<sup>43</sup>

To point out the uniqueness and the significance of Mihura's own contributions to the theater of humor will be the objective of the ensuing chapters.

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<sup>43</sup>Information obtained from Mihura's personal correspondence, through an interview of June 9, 1967.

## CHAPTER TWO

### EARLY LIFE AND CAREER

Miguel Mihura was twenty-seven years of age when, on the tenth day of November, 1932, he completed writing Tres sombreros de copa. While the play was not published until 1943 nor premiered until 1952, the date of its writing marks the advent of Mihura's dramatic career. It represents the point of departure for his subsequent immersion in playwriting following many years of zealous interest in diverse aspects of the theater. The year 1932 is thus a pivotal year toward which the incidents of his youth tended and from which an active involvement in dramaturgy for the sake of writing plays was evolved. It is the purpose of this chapter to answer two major questions in connection with the years antedating 1932 and the two decades following: First, what were the salient events and circumstances in Mihura's early life that influenced his choice of career? And second, which events and circumstances have had a direct bearing on the nature of his theater work? In addition to our concern with basic facts pertaining to his life and career, it will be of interest to a later evaluation of his plays that we discuss also in this chapter the author's

aesthetic precepts, the characteristic manner of his creativity, and the human nature or disposition of Mihura himself.

# I

Two important circumstances in Mihura's boyhood contributed to formulate a propitious climate for the incubation and development of his talents. The first of these was the influence of his father, the actor, author, and theater manager Miguel Mihura Álvarez. The second was Mihura's personal acquaintance with other theater people, notably several reputable playwrights. We will first discuss the impact upon Mihura from each of these two factors.

When Miguel was born (July 21, 1905), his father, then twenty-eight years old, was a highly esteemed comic actor and an enterprising writer of zarzuelas, sainetes, and comedias. In the year 1905, for instance, he was playing the lead in La mala sombra by the brothers Quintero and in El pobre Valbuena by Carlos Arniches and García Álvarez. At the same time he was writing plays with Ricardo González del Toro, whom Miguel has since praised as his father's "entrañable, leal y estupendo colaborador."<sup>1</sup> Inasmuch as his father remained in the acting profession until Miguel was sixteen, we are not

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<sup>1</sup>Mihura, Obras, p. 20.

surprised to encounter a statement such as this from Mihura's own pen:

En mi casa yo sólo oía hablar de teatro, de aplausos, de cantables, de mutis, de situaciones cómicas, de éxitos y de fracasos.<sup>2</sup>

Mihura relates that one of his greatest pleasures was that of hiding behind an armchair in his father's study, a room teeming with autographed pictures of famous writers, actors, and actresses, from whence he would listen to his father and González del Toro discuss the intricacies of stage effects, humor, titles, and denouements, while they planned a scene for their new play. He recalls the fascination of frequent visits, beginning at the age of five, to his father's dressing room, and being privileged a few years later to occupy an orchestra seat in the theater hall, to watch over and over again the same plays, "sin perder un detalle."<sup>3</sup>

Mihura learned at an early age what he calls "los terribles nervios del teatro," that is, onstage timing, backstage control, and the concern, insecurity, and vanity of performers. Owing primarily to the immediate example of his father, he acquired above all a great sympathy for actors and a lasting admiration for the acting profession. This is clearly demonstrated in the intimate and kind

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<sup>2</sup>Mihura, Obras, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

regard he holds for performers as he directs his own plays, and it is likewise borne out in his preference to write a work that will display the talents of a specific Thespian rather than oblige the specifications of a promoter.<sup>4</sup>

During his years of apprenticeship with his father, observing and admiring the complexities of theatercraft, Mihura completed his bachillerato at the Colegio de San Isidro. He then decided to study music, particularly the piano, imbued with a desire to become a musician. The effort, however, utterly bored him, and he turned instead to a study of drawing and of languages, principally French. These fields were likewise unfulfilling, though he did profit sufficiently from his French studies to be able to read the majority of plays in the contemporary French theater. Miguel abandoned his formal education in 1921, the year in which his father retired as an actor to become theater manager for both the Teatro Cómico and the Teatro de Rey Alfonso (now the Arniches) in Madrid. His father employed the young boy, who was now sixteen years old, in the box office of the Rey Alfonso, a position Miguel relished with infinite delight. It brought him within close proximity of both the stage performance and the performing artists. He attended rehearsals daily and never missed an estreno. Thus acquainted early with the miseries and jubilations of the

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<sup>4</sup>Information conveyed in a personal interview with Mihura in December of 1964.

acting profession, Mihura learned everything first hand about the theater:

Aprendí apasionadamente, por verdadera vocación, todo lo que se puede aprender en el teatro. Lo único que no aprendí, porque no me interesaba aprenderlo, fue a escribir comedias.<sup>5</sup>

Despite his professed disinterest in writing for the theater at this time, Mihura had already begun to write short article and stories for humor magazines. He drew sketches and cartoons for the newspapers La Voz, El Sol, and Ya. These occasional contributions led to later assignments to write for the pre-war periodicals Buen Humor, Gutiérrez, Cosquillas, and Muchas Gracias, under the pseudonyms Miguel Santos and El Conde de Pepe. Not infrequently did he compose farcical, single-column, one-act sketches in play form, the kind of writing activity he later excelled in under various pseudonyms for the magazine La Codorniz.

The year 1921 was decisive in Mihura's formative theater training. At this juncture his interest shifted from actors to authors, a fact coinciding with his father's change in professional status. In like manner as he had perceived with sensitive awareness the joys or sorrows of stage artists, he now identified himself on a personal level with the writers who came to his father's

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<sup>5</sup>Mihura, Obras, p. 27.

theater to read or to rehearse their plays. He noted particularly their brooding melancholy and cynicism in the face of failure, or their vaulting elation in anticipation of a triumph.

His father introduced him to such prominent figures as Pedro Muñoz Seca, Carlos Arniches, and Enrique García Álvarez, three playwrights who exercised a paramount role in the development of the kind of humor in which Mihura was to distinguish himself a decade later.<sup>6</sup>

Mihura recalls having witnessed the dreadful fear of Arniches who, despite having premiered well over one hundred works and being perhaps the most acclaimed author of the time, would come down to the box office during an estreno and remain at Mihura's side, "pálido, silencioso, descompuesto, esperando el fallo del público."<sup>7</sup>

The young Mihura had great esteem for the playwright Muñoz Seca, whom he remembers as a most ingenious, cordial, and optimistic gentleman whose talents and inventiveness left him in constant wonder.<sup>8</sup> During the years that Miguel was engaged in the business end of theater life (1921-1928), attending with interest all current productions in Madrid, Muñoz Seca premiered some

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<sup>6</sup>See Chapter One for a discussion of the respective theaters and aesthetic precepts of these authors.

<sup>7</sup>Mihura, Obras, p. 25.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.



fifty-five plays in the Spanish capital.<sup>9</sup> This fact alone indicates the tremendous amount of exposure young Miguel had to the theater of the venerated playwright whose twenty-nine year career produced over 170 plays.

Among all of his dramatist friends, Mihura's most cherished acquaintance was that with Enrique García Álvarez (1873-1931) who, at the age of fifty, was still actively responding to the demands of theater managers and the public. Mihura valued the importance of this extraordinary personality to such an extent as to assign to him a kind of patriarchal role in the development of his own and other's dramatic efforts. In 1943 he wrote of García Álvarez as "el autor que yo más he admirado en mi juventud, el más desorbitado, el menos burgués, quizás el maestro de los que después empezamos a cultivar lo disparatado."<sup>10</sup>

His personal contacts with the aforementioned dramatists afforded Mihura the experience of open conviviality with dynamic individuals. Their lives and artistic labors contributed to actuate Mihura's choice of career; they facilitated his gaining an insight into the formulation of a work of dramatic art from its creation to

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<sup>9</sup>Pedro Muñoz Seca, *Obras Completas*, ed. José María Bernáldez (Madrid: Ediciones FAX, 1954), II-VII. Nearly half of the above-mentioned plays were written in collaboration with Pedro Pérez Fernández.

<sup>10</sup>Mihura, *Obras*, p. 25.

its realization. While not prompted to write a play at this time, Mihura acquired an aesthetic stimulation and a practical understanding of dramaturgy through his boyhood acquaintance with established playwrights. From his actor and actress friends he learned the great importance of a triumph or a failure. From his father Mihura discovered the complexities and compensations of theatercraft. In no small way is the evaluation of Joaquín Aguirre Bellver unerring when he states that "el teatro de Mihura es, primero, una vocación juvenil irrefrenable, nacida de la compenetración con su padre y de la compenetración con su ambiente."<sup>11</sup>

A few years following the death of his father (1925), an event occurred which had a direct bearing on the writing of Tres sombreros de copa. The full particulars of this episode, together with an account of the problems involved in the production of his best play, are colorfully chronicled in the aforecited prologue to Tres sombreros de copa and need no repetition here. However, we should recall in passing the single event that inspired the famous comedy, inasmuch as the occasion suggests a curious pattern which will manifest itself in other of Mihura's writings.

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<sup>11</sup>"Miguel Mihura, o el grillo en el hogar," Madrid, November 25, 1961, p. 9.

According to Mihura's own report, he once toured the Spanish provinces for twenty days as director of a strange troupe of actors. The troupe consisted of six blonde Viennese dancers, a French dancing instructor, a Negro dancer from Canada, another Negro dancer from Cuba, and a fat German snake charmer accompanied by his two snakes. The play Tres sombreros de copa clearly had its inception in this tour, and we have Mihura's testimony to that effect.<sup>12</sup> The fact that the negro Buby, the vivacious dancers, their suitors, and the other extraordinary characters who invade Dionisio's hotel room were directly inspired from this incident of real life, indicates Mihura's penchant for converting some unexpected and seemingly unbelievable details from actual circumstances into an equally incongruous but meaningful context of drama.

A further example of this tendency can be noted in the chain of events that gave rise to Melocotón en almíbar.<sup>13</sup> Early in 1958 Mihura attended the American movie "Rififi" in San Sebastián. He then returned to his hotel, bothered by a headcold, and sat in the lobby to order a coñac. At that moment a group of nuns arriving from Lourdes pulled up in a car. Mihura observed one of them sit down near him to write a postcard. Suddenly the

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<sup>12</sup>Mihura, Obras, p. 30.

<sup>13</sup>See Primer Acto, No. 9 (July-August, 1959), 4-5.

subject matter for a new play burst upon him. The strange admixture of gangsters from "Rififi", a bad cold, and a returning expedition of nuns suggested to Mihura's imagination all of the amusing contrasts and possibilities we find realized in his comedy, Melocotón en almíbar.<sup>14</sup>

This same affinity between casual occurrences from life and the gestation of a creative work is typified in the nascent stage of other specific plays. El caso de la señora estupenda, for example, was inspired by wartime events in Rome during the year 1941. "Aquel ambiente influyó en el arranque de la comedia," Mihura tells us.<sup>15</sup>

Maribel y la extraña familia is an example of a play whose inception was borne from the merest of trifles, in this case a simple statement Mihura had frequently heard addressed to prostitutes: 'Supongo que vivirás solo, ¿no?'. "De esa sola frase," Mihura declares, "nació una comedia."<sup>16</sup>

The conclusion is obvious that Mihura's personal experiences have prevailed upon his works. His plays are not the result of a total imaginative effort. "Me salen más fácilmente las comedias de aventura, las que he vivido

<sup>14</sup>According to Mihura, the attempt by some critics to ascribe the inspiration for this play to Chesterton's Father Brown is wholly erroneous.

<sup>15</sup>"Autocrítica," ABC (Madrid), February 6, 1953, p. 32.

<sup>16</sup>Primer Acto, No. 9 (July-August, 1959), 5.

un poco," he remarked in a personal interview.<sup>17</sup> On an earlier occasion he confessed that "todas mis comedias están inspiradas en algo real, en alguna pequeña observación personal."<sup>18</sup>

Following the twenty day excursion with "Alady," Mihura returned to Madrid to collaborate intensely on newspaper articles and to write dialogues for three movie scripts. He was not long in discovering the financial advantages of writing scripts and adapting dialogues for the Spanish film industry. Between the years 1934 and 1952 he worked as guionista and dialogist on twenty-five motion pictures.<sup>19</sup> His plays Mi adorado Juan and Una mujer cualquiera were first written as movie scripts (both in 1949), then later adapted to the stage.<sup>20</sup> Mihura's film activity became more and more intensified over these eighteen years because of his progressive disillusionment with the legitimate stage, which prior to the popular triumph of Tres sombreros de copa had

<sup>17</sup> June 9, 1967.

<sup>18</sup> Primer Acto, No. 9 (July-August, 1959), 5.

<sup>19</sup> José Monleón, "Ficha de Miguel Mihura," Miguel Mihura: Teatro, ed. José Monleón (Madrid: Taurus, 1965), pp. 31-33.

<sup>20</sup> Six of Mihura's other plays have also been filmed, namely, ¡Viva lo imposible!, Ni pobre ni rico..., Sublime decisión (Under the title Sólo para hombres), Carlota, Melocotón en almíbar, and Maribel... However, unlike Mi adorado Juan and Una mujer cualquiera, these were adapted for the cinema after their earlier stage productions.

proportioned him meager economic returns. El caso de la mujer asesinadita, for instance, drew a profit of only twelve thousand pesetas, or two-hundred dollars.<sup>21</sup>

Mihura was comfortable as a guionista, preferring the almost anonymous labor, free from publicity, which the vocation allowed him. He habitually shunned public notoriety during the period of his movie career, but was instantly catapulted into national and international prominence with the tremendous stage success of Tres sombreros de copa, a fact which determined once and for all the course and future career to which he would devote the rest of his life.

Aside from giving rise to two major plays, Mihura's film work contributed meaningfully to his playwriting skills in a professional and technical way. The flashback technique in Carlota is an example of his perceptive manipulation of time and action, learned in the studies of the movie industry.

An additional activity conducive to success in playwriting was Mihura's journalistic inventiveness in the founding of La Ametralladora (1936-1939) and the management of La Codorniz (1941-1944). In the former publication, circulated weekly from San Sebastián during the war years, Mihura collaborated with Edgar Neville and

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<sup>21</sup>A.D. Olano, reported in his review of Mihura's Una mujer cualquiera, in El Alcázar (Madrid), April 4, 1953, p. 5.

Antonio de Lara ("Tono"), both of whom had begun writing independently "un humor abstracto y desorbitado" as early as 1928.<sup>22</sup> La Ametralladora was a miscellany of surface humor taken mainly from borrowed sources, principally Italian, and designed to entertain trench soldiers. It brought in an enormous revenue, some three million pesetas.

Mihura's contributions to La Ametralladora consisted largely of recasted articles previously published in Gutiérrez and other slick, urban magazines. Of interest to students of his theater are the occasional dialogue sketches appearing on the magazine's enormous pages, containing the kind of absurd humor characteristic of his first four plays.

The enterprise which proved especially lucrative and provided Mihura with abundant opportunities to experiment further with dialogued playlets was the editorship of the engaging weekly magazine of twenty-four pages, La Codorniz. Mihura founded the publication in 1941, directed it until 1944, then relinquished his post to Alvaro de Laiglesia, having become "cansado de tanta tontería."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Evaristo Acevedo, Teoría e interpretación del humor español (Madrid: Editora Nacional, 1966), p. 250.

<sup>23</sup>Juan Guerrero Zamora, Historia del teatro contemporáneo (Barcelona: Juan Flors, 1962), III, 178.

La Codorniz acquired social importance under Mihura's direction. With apparent but innocuous cynicism, the magazine became, in the words of Pedro Laín Entralgo, "el signo y espejo de una generación."<sup>24</sup> It ignored characteristic lines of humor to cultivate an intemporal and abstract satire destined, according to López Rubio, one of its later contributors, to destroy "lo endeble, lo caduco, lo polvoriento, lo corrompido."<sup>25</sup> This destructive intention, however, was directed at lampooning the trite and stale commonplaces in human expressions, attitudes, and reactions. It was definitely not a combative, caustic, vituperative type of humor. Spain was convalescing from a grievous civil war and Mihura's journal would have gained nothing by openly exploiting moral or political issues.<sup>26</sup> Mihura concentrated on nineteenth century settings and an occasional satire of the 1920's, but couched his treatment in a hazy intemporality which could situate his humorous dialogues in our own day as well as in the time they were written. The following complete playlet

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<sup>24</sup>"El humor de La Codorniz," La aventura de leer (Madrid: Espasa-Calpa-Austral, 1946), p. 129.

<sup>25</sup>Cited in Acevedo, Teoría e interpretación..., p. 251.

<sup>26</sup>José Monleón writes that he encountered "muchos elementos positivos y hasta revolucionarios" in La Codorniz of Mihura's epoch, but by "revolutionary" he is referring to a systematic skepticism and prevailing doubt, analogous to Jardiel's sophisticated humor, rather than to any hint of political undertones. See "La crítica ante la obra de Miguel Mihura," Miguel Mihura: Teatro (above, note 19), p. 53.



is an extreme example of Mihura's absurdist style in La Codorniz, a highly developed intellectual humor that achieves a sustained effect of incongruity by presenting a series of unexpected replies in place of the anticipated clichés of everyday conversation. It is particularly interesting to note the date of this sketch (1942). It anticipates by several years the French theater of the absurd.

- Ella      Baila usted muy bien. ¿Se llama usted por casualidad Vicente?
- El          Yo, no. ¿Y usted?
- Ella      Yo, tampoco.
- El          ¡Qué casualidad! ¡Encontrarse dos seres en el mundo y que ninguno de los dos se llame Vicente!
- Ella      Sí que es casualidad.
- El          A mí es la primera vez que me pasa esto; pero para cuatro días que vive uno...
- Ella      ¿Usted no vive más que cuatro días?
- El          Según; algunas veces, cinco.
- Ella      ¿Entonces no sabrá usted lo que es un domingo?
- El          Sí, lo sé; pero nunca lo he visto. ¿Es muy grande?
- Ella      Aproximadamente como el lunes, pero más alto.
- El          ¡Vaya con don Vicente!
- Ella      ¿Pero qué don Vicente?
- El          ¿No me ha dicho usted que se llama Vicente?

Ella        Sí, pero muy poco.

El            Cuando usted quiera dejamos de bailar,  
              porque hace ya más de una semana que  
              no toca la música.<sup>27</sup>

Many readers were outraged by dialogues of this nature. Some objected to a definite spirit of iconoclasm in the nonsensical retorts, though the only true debunking was limited to an exploitation of the tiresome platitudes of common discourse. All in all, Mihura's articles had a legion of enthusiastic and impassioned detractors who harrassed him constantly. He finally became exasperated over the fierce polemics his administration incited and eventually resigned in disgust, commenting that "la lucha, la controversia y la popularidad no van bien con mi carácter apacible, retraído y tímido."<sup>28</sup>

La Codorniz resisted foreclosure by never inviting the disdain of Franco's regime. Perhaps its abstract formulas and disorbited humor, characterized above all by a distancing from reality, accounts for the magazine's uninterrupted longevity.<sup>29</sup> A good summation of its intended inoffensive format under Mihura's

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<sup>27</sup>La Codorniz, No. 45 (April 12, 1942), 1.

<sup>28</sup>Mihura, Obras, p. 36.

<sup>29</sup>The magazine nearly folded in 1952 due to excessive polemics, quarrels, and fines. Under Laiglesia's direction (since 1944) La Codorniz gradually adopted a posture of contemporary social criticism. It focused its humorous barbs on a world in decomposition, a fact which irritated Mihura to the point of his writing two published "Cartas polémicas" to Laiglesia to express his discomfort and renounce his collaboration once and

editorship is found in the following statement its founder wrote to define the purpose of La Codorniz. This statement also provides a clear insight into Mihura's philosophy of life and will serve useful as we undertake to analyze and understand his plays:

La Codorniz nació para tener una actitud sonriente ante la vida; para quitarle importancia a las cosas; para tomarle el pelo a la gente que veía la vida demasiado en serio; para acabar con los cascarrabias; para reírse del tópico y del lugar común; para inventar un mundo nuevo, irreal y fantástico y hacer que la gente olvidase el mundo incómodo y desagradable en que vivía.<sup>30</sup>

La Codorniz is also relevant to Mihura's later theater in that it contains a source in embryo for one of his major plays. Mihura calls it a "cuento escenificado." He first had it published in the pre-war magazine Gutiérrez, then rewrote it as "Una corrida intrascendente" for La Codorniz, finally expanding the ten-minute playlet into a three-act play for the legitimate theater under the title El caso del señor vestido de violeta. This is another indication of the profound influence Mihura's early writings were to have on his

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for all. Laiglesia's realist tendency, explicitly sustained at the present time, is a definite departure from the so-called "humor codornicesco" of Mihura's tenure, a humor best defined as one of "evasión de la realidad." See Acevedo, Teoría e interpretación..., pp. 247-256 and Laín Entralgo, La aventura de leer, pp. 120-133.

<sup>30</sup>Miguel Mihura, "Primera carta a Alvaro de Laiglesia," reproduced in Mihura: Teatro, ed. José Monleón (above, note 19), pp. 117-119.

later creative activity for the theater. La Codorniz provided a beneficial proving ground for the kind of outlandishly bizarre humor Mihura later employed in the avant-garde phase of his dramatic work.

We may conclude from the foregoing account of Mihura's early involvement in show business and journalism that his choice of career was a logical outgrowth of his upbringing and was conditioned by his immediate environment. No single aspect of his vocational interests in the field of histrionics, viewed in isolation, produced Mihura the playwright. A complex of numerous activities molded and motivated the poet within him to respond in proportion to the opportunities he seized in his zealous ambition to succeed.

## II

An effort to define Mihura's aesthetic principles will enhance the reader's appreciation for certain aspects peculiar to the playwright's theater. Mihura, for instance, since the production of Tres sombreros de copa, has consistently maintained that he writes each play geared to please the public's taste and designed to suit the acting talents of a given actress.<sup>31</sup> Knowing this

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<sup>31</sup> See Ricardo Domenech, "Reflexiones sobre la situación del teatro," Primer Acto, No. 42, 1963, 7.

readily explains his occasional adoption of conservative precepts and answers as well for the obvious strength of his leading feminine characters.

Mihura wrote his first four plays with a somewhat carefree unconcern for public gusto, but after 1952 he adopted a different attitude. He thereafter willingly made concessions to his audience, accomodating theme and treatment for easy digestion. This posture has provoked adverse criticism from those who would have Mihura remain in the absurdist tradition of his earlier productions. Domingo Pérez Minik, for example, has charged Mihura with having deliberately prostituted dramatic art by a retrogression to formulas of a reactionary theater.<sup>32</sup> Evaristo Acevedo is likewise censorious of Mihura's change in attitude towards his art, objecting to what he considers to be the author's aesthetic desertion from pure humor ("lo humorístico") into common comedy ("lo cómico").<sup>33</sup>

The foregoing statements point out the fact that Mihura's position does not enjoy a unanimous endorsement from the critics. Yet despite some objections to his work, the author continues to insist upon writing only "para complacer los deseos del público y procurar que pasen bien

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<sup>32</sup>"Itinerario patético de una generación de dramaturgos españoles," Insula, Nos. 224-225 (July-August, 1965), 3.

<sup>33</sup>"Miguel Mihura, el apóstata," Teoría e interpretación..., pp. 107-110.

el rato, siempre que sea con dignidad y con decencia."<sup>34</sup>

Perhaps his most incisive remark in defense of this attitude is the following statement Mihura made in 1957 for an article about himself, published in Primer Acto:

Creo que el teatro es un espectáculo de mayorías y que, de un modo o de otro, hay que llegar a la mentalidad de todos los públicos.... Escribo así porque soy así y pienso así. Y que no puedo escribir de otra manera.<sup>35</sup>

The creditable aspect of his position, aside from arguing for the excellent literary quality of Mihura's works, is his conscious effort to vary constantly the technique and treatment of each play. The idea of prescribing his style to mechanized guidelines terrifies him: his greatest desire is to avoid being categorized as a functionary of the theater.<sup>36</sup>

Lo que me gustaría era no tener ningún estilo, y que cada obra mía fuese distinta a las demás.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup>Manuel Diez Crespo, Primer Acto, Nos. 29-30, December 1961-January 1962, p. 9.

<sup>35</sup>"El teatro de Mihura visto por Mihura," Primer Acto, No. 3, 1957, 12.

<sup>36</sup>Mihura's concept of dramatic humor indicates his aversion to conforming to a stereotyped format. Humor, he says, is not a literary formula, but rather a way of being, a way of expressing oneself, a way of responding to life. See Primer Acto, No. 9 (July-August, 1959), 4-5.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

He premieres his plays infrequently, although he spends no more than two to three months in writing them.<sup>38</sup> His estrenos may best be described as erratic and unpredictable. Several seasons may go by without his name appearing on the billboards. There are also times when he will feature three plays simultaneously. Mihura generally shuns a constant productivity, however, for, as he admitted to the critic Angel Laborda, a too frequent appearance invites "muchos disgustos, muchas desilusiones y muchos desencantos."<sup>39</sup> This was the case with his unusually prolific staging of three productions during the 1964-65 season, which left him satiated with fatigue.<sup>40</sup>

Mihura has found that his ideal program is to begin writing a play in May, to rehearse the first act in June, and to conclude the comedia by mid-summer, in time to have it premiered by September.<sup>41</sup> He believes it essential that he be the only person responsible for its production; he therefore directs all of his own plays.

<sup>38</sup>Rafael Cotta Pinto, review of Mihura's *Mari-bel...*, in La Estafeta Literaria, No. 178 (October 1, 1959), 24.

<sup>39</sup>Informaciones (Madrid), September 29, 1959, p. 8.

<sup>40</sup>Information conveyed in personal interview, June 9, 1967.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

Creo que las obras las tiene que montar el mismo autor. No debe haber interferencias. De seguir estrenando, siempre montaré y dirigiré yo personalmente las obras.<sup>42</sup>

Miguel Mihura has delighted in cultivating the image of a literary vagrant. He boasts of being perennially lazy, obliged to regulate his life from one siesta to the next.<sup>43</sup> During an occasional burst of energy, often occurring between five and eight in the evening, he writes, corrects, and types his plays in the comfort of his study. This labor, Mihura says, is often accompanied by a great yearning to go back to bed. "Yo sería feliz si pudiera estar toda la vida acostado y leyendo en la cama."<sup>44</sup> Sheer boredom produced the three plays he premiered during the 1965-66 season.<sup>45</sup>

Mihura recalls with pleasure the days when with a group of friends he would write his plays in tertulias, but he admits that his present-day habits require a torturous labor of solitude. He attempts to enliven the

<sup>42</sup>'Córdoba', "Córdoba interroga a Miguel Mihura," Pueblo (Madrid), April 4, 1953, p. 15.

<sup>43</sup>In Brussels, the traditional rehearsal schedule of ten in the morning had to be changed to one of late afternoon in deference to Mihura's mid-morning and noon-day siestas. See J. Aguirre Bellver, Madrid, Nov. 25, 1961, p. 9.

<sup>44</sup>Rafael Cotta Pinto, loc. cit. (above, note 38).

<sup>45</sup>Angel Laborda, loc. cit. (above, note 39).



painful sessions of creativity by writing with multiple colors on gigantic blocks of heavy folio paper that he buys in Paris.<sup>46</sup>

Don Miguel is a confirmed bachelor. He lives a quiet, sedate life, preferring ingrained habits over a busy social climate that would disturb his personal routine.<sup>47</sup> Convinced that he himself cannot resolve the problems and conflicts of the world, Mihura utilizes his few waking hours each day in generating through drama the laughter and smiles of human enjoyment.

Perhaps the best portrait of the man is the one he himself wrote in the personality of Juan for his tenth published play, Mi adorado Juan. Juan is more than a mere literary representation of the author; he is the spiritual incorporation of his creator as well. He embodies those attributes of demeanor, dress, and sentiment that have characterized the author's public image and self concept for many years. By quoting a few select passages from Act One, we might approximate a fairly accurate description of the dramatist Miguel Mihura:

El vive de cualquiera manera. No tiene ambiciones ni necesidades. Su manjar preferido es el queso y duerme mucho.

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<sup>46</sup>See José Montero Alonso, review of Mihura's Milagro... and La tetera, in Madrid, January 6, 1965, p. 10.

<sup>47</sup>J. d'Etchevers remarks that Mihura even "commande tous les jours les mêmes plats, depuis des années." See "Mihura ou le triomphe de l'humour," La Côte Libre (Paris), November 23, 1960.

A él le gusta trabajar para los demás, pero sin sacar provecho de ello, sin que se le note que trabaja. El dice que trabajar mucho, como comer mucho, es una falta de educación.

Le fastidian las ceremonias y la formalidad.

El dinero y la fama le importan un pimiento.

En todos sus movimientos y hasta en su manera de hablar se ve que es esa clase de personas que han nacido ya un poco cansadas.<sup>48</sup>

Having reviewed the early life and career of Mihura, with a brief glance at his personal disposition and the precepts he works by, we are prepared to undertake an analysis and evaluation of his avant-garde plays.

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<sup>48</sup>Mihura, Obras, pp. 629, 630, 633.

PART TWO

A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF MIGUEL MIHURA'S  
AVANT-GARDE PLAYS

### CHAPTER THREE

#### A CIRCULAR TREATMENT OF BOREDOM: ¡VIVA LO IMPOSIBLE! O EL CONTABLE DE LAS ESTRELLAS

While residing in San Sebastián during the summer of 1939, Miguel Mihura befriended a number of aspiring artists with whom he shared a fondness for the theater and a special flair for humoristic invention. Among his fellow contertulianos of the Café Raga were Antonio de Lara, nicknamed Tono, and Joaquín Calvo Sotelo. Collaborating with each, Mihura launched his career in dramaturgy by writing two plays concurrently, ¡Viva lo imposible! with Calvo Sotelo and Ni pobre ni rico, sino todo lo contrario with Tono.<sup>1</sup> Seven years later Mihura was to collaborate with a third member of the original tertulia group, Alvaro de Laiglesia, in the writing of his final play of joint authorship, El caso de la mujer asesinadita.

Joaquín Calvo Sotelo's theatrical career did not begin with the estreno of ¡Viva lo imposible!. He had produced his first play seven years earlier, a three

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<sup>1</sup>Mihura informs us that he wrote a large portion of both plays within the Café Raga, where he literally passed from table to table "colaborando en una con Joaquín y en otra con Tono." See Obras, p. 25.

act comedy entitled A la tierra, 500.000 kilómetros (Barcelona, 1932), premiered the same year in which Mihura completed his writing of Tres sombreros de copa.

Calvo Sotelo was a lawyer by training, but found his practice tedious and unfulfilling. Like Mihura, his venture into literature began with journalism, writing humorous articles and short stories for major Spanish newspapers. Before the outbreak of the Civil War, he had premiered his second play, El rebelde (1934), in Madrid. Five years later he staged La vida inmóvil (1939) in Valladolid, followed that same year by the more important ¡Viva lo imposible! in Madrid's Teatro Cómico. When the latter play appeared, Calvo Sotelo was thirty-five years old, Mihura ten years younger.

¡Viva lo imposible! was written within one month's time and enjoyed a successful opening on the night of November 24, 1939. However, the late fall premiere was ill-timed. Extreme cold weather combined with extensive street construction on Preciados to militate against a commercial success. The comedy folded after only thirty performances, netting each writer 1500 pesetas.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Mihura decided then and there to abandon the theater. For the next four years he busied himself with more lucrative projects. Calvo Sotelo also turned elsewhere for remunerative employment; he did not stage another play until 1945.

¡Viva lo imposible! is a much better play than the records and revenues may suggest. Due to its brief engagement, the work has often been dismissed as a youthful experiment unworthy of serious consideration. Some critics are seemingly unaware of its very existence.<sup>3</sup> In an article written for Hispania in 1960, for instance, Dr. Samuel A. Wolsy overlooks the play altogether in his summary of Mihura's early works.<sup>4</sup> Gonzalo Torrente Ballester likewise begins his discussion of Mihura's theater without reference to the author's first play.<sup>5</sup> The same critic omits mention of the title in his bibliographical listing of works by Mihura and by Calvo Sotelo.<sup>6</sup>

An analysis of the play's internal structure and content will make apparent that neither rejection nor exclusion of the work would be justified in this study. We will attempt to show wherein its literary substance vindicates the commercial failure of 1939.

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<sup>3</sup>Perhaps the play has been unintentionally ignored due to its exclusion from Mihura's Obras completas (1962). It was published in a separate authors' edition (Madrid, 1951), now out of print. All page references to this play are based on the original authors' edition.

<sup>4</sup>Samuel A. Wolsy, "La calidad literaria del teatro de Miguel Mihura," Hispania, XLIII (May, 1960), 214-218.

<sup>5</sup>Gonzalo Torrente Ballester, "El teatro serio de un humorista," in Miguel Mihura: Teatro, ed. José Monleón (Madrid: Taurus, 1965), pp. 67-80.

<sup>6</sup>Panorama de la literatura española contemporánea (2nd ed., Madrid: Guadarrama, 1961), II, 1053-1054.

The play's symmetrical construction prompts our designating its overall structure by the term circular. The work ends where it begins, in the midst of the boredom, monotony, and frustration of a middle class Madri- lenian apartment. The first act is itself built upon a symmetrical pattern, a construction formulated to inti- mate the parting from ennui and the return to humdrumness which culminates in Act Three.

The initial dialogue between two unseen neighbors, chatting in an adjacent apartment flat, is repeated at the close of the act. Likewise a trite popular tune, whistled by another neighbor early in the play and re- peated later by Eusebio, is reiterated with identical banality as the curtain falls.

This device of unifying different episodes -- primarily the opening and closing scenes of a given act -- by the recurrence of familiar motifs, is found in several of Mihura's later plays. It is not a characteristic of Calvo Sotelo's theater.

In his subsequent plays, Mihura tends to favor a circular repetition of instrumental music or song over the reduplication of dialogue. As in ¡Viva lo imposible!, we find that the whistling of a particular tune ties to- gether two separate incidents in Una mujer cualquiera, wherein the same melody Antonio has whistled in Act One, is repeated by the maid in Act Two. A medley of foghorns

and dance tunes, combined with classical music from a distant violin open and close Act Two of Mi adorado Juan. Through the technical use of flashback in Carlota, Mihura utilizes the actual piano playing on stage of a waltz tune, which calls to the spectator's mind the same melody heard earlier in the first act. The waltz serves to link a present affective state to the emotion which the music evoked previously.

The bolero tune, "Bésame mucho," connects the opening scene of Act One with the beginning of Act Two in Melocotón en almíbar. Act One of Maribel y la extraña familia commences with recorded rock-and-roll music and ends with Beethoven, while a French song, "Je suis seule ce soir," is repeated in the first and last scenes of Act One in El chalet de Madame Reynard. The same accordion music which ushers in the action of the two Ninette plays is likewise heard as the curtain falls to conclude their respective epilogues. In La tetera each act begins with the peeling of church bells and ends with piano music.

To a lesser degree Mihura employs physical objects to enhance a balance between related stage actions. The recurring appearance of top hats in all three acts of Tres sombreros de copa offers one example. The gong in Act One of Las entretenidas and the stuffed donkey in A media luz los tres serve as additional illustrations of Mihura's management of stage properties to achieve a



sense of dramatic parallelism between different episodes or scenes.

The repeated dialogue and whistling in ¡Viva lo imposible! lend an equilibrium of tone to the seriousness of purpose in this play, while binding the opening and closing scenes of Act One with cyclical, balanced structure, typical of Mihura's style. By extension, Act Three of ¡Viva lo imposible! resembles Act One; its emphatic and compelling mood of sobriety reaffirms the thoughtful spirit of the first act, in contrast to the intended lightness and frivolity of Act Two.

The prosaic whistled tune is more than a mere melodic appendage intended to unify action. It also provides a kind of common cosmetic base to underscore the portrayal of distressing social conditions. Penetrating through the thin walls, the whistling disturbs Eusebio, who cynically observes that "los pisos tan baratos tienen los tabiques de papel,"<sup>7</sup> an overt criticism of Madri-  
lenian apartment living. Eusebio then whistles the same melody, only to do so slightly off tune, an action which provides a thematic parallel to the sullen complaints that common household fixtures are in disrepair and the economy is unstable. Once he learns to whistle the tune correctly, Eusebio's attitude changes; he is more cheerful, more hopeful. Indeed, this is the first hint of a

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<sup>7</sup>¡Viva lo imposible!..., p. 9.

wistful yearning to be free from the monotony of changelessness, a desire later symbolized by his strange fancy for an exotic gong.

Through Eusebio's actions and dialogue, we become aware that the first act of this play emphasizes with little humor the rigidity and the inanity of a particular social milieu, namely a middle class existence in the Spanish capital. Eusebio, discontented, irritable, and indecisive, is the focal point of this treatment. Oppressed with financial and vocational concerns, he voices complaints common to his generation. He is troubled above all by the senseless requirements of his studies, requirements which cause him to be delineated as "fatigado," "sombrio," "melancólico," and "entristecido,"<sup>8</sup> resulting ultimately in the destruction of his health and sanity.

The portrayal of Eusebio seems more indicative of Calvo Sotelo's authorship than Mihura's. As we mentioned previously, Calvo Sotelo had been a state lawyer for many years. After passing the bar examinations, he pursued his profession with interest and success, but gradually grew disenchanted with the career and sought novelty and excitement in the entertainment world. In Eusebio we see reflected a negative attitude toward the law

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., pp. 7, 8, 14, 18.

profession; he voices an indictment against the problems of entering such a career in present-day Spain: the lengthy struggle, the keen competition, burdensome lucubration, bureaucratic exigencies. His anxieties represent the common plight of all law students of his generation:

Vecino. Yo preparo también oposiciones, amigo mío. Como usted; como los dos hermanos del piso bajo; como los tres primos del entre-suelo. Toda la casa entera prepara oposiciones, señor.

Eusebio. ¡Más aún! Como los cuatro amigos de la casa de al lado; como los cinco condiscípulos de la esquina; como los seis paisanos de enfrente. ¡Toda la calle prepara oposiciones, señor mío...!

Vecino. (Ya en el paroxismo) ¡¡Más aún!!  
 ¡Todo el barrio! ¡Toda la ciudad! ¡Madrid entero prepara oposiciones...!<sup>9</sup>

The meaninglessness of his studies is made apparent as he listlessly attempts to memorize an involved municipal law dealing with state finances while the reality of acute urban taxation afflicts the household with concern and unrest. We have herein an illustration of dramatic irony which, while it reinforces the impact of a marked social tendency in the play, also takes precedence over secondary comic meaning in dialogue or situation.

An additional example of irony in the first act is Eusebio's patching up a broken window pane with the cover of one of his law books. This action suggests a disparity between the promises of municipal law,

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

explicitly noted in the passage Eusebio reads aloud from one of his texts, and urban fulfillment, typified by frequent allusions to material privation, physical indoor cold, mouse traps, and a meal consisting of beans.

In a brief exchange between Eusebio and another law student, we encounter a striking reference to socialistic dependency upon the state and its dulling effect on personal independence:

Vecino. ...¿No servimos para otra cosa los españoles?

Eusebio. Es verdad. ¿No sabemos sino depender del Estado? ¿Del sueldo fijo?

Vecino. (Enfebrecido). ¡Yo tengo novia! Pero mis padres no permiten que me case si no dispongo de lo que ellos llaman "una cosa segura".

Eusebio. (Con sarcasmo.) ¡Setenta duros cada mes!

Vecino. (Epiléptico.) ¿De qué sirve "una cosa segura?" Acorcha, insensibiliza, nos cría callos en los codos y el cerebro; nos hace rutinarios, nos acorta las alas...

Eusebio. ...nos mutila todos los sueños, toda la sed de aventuras y nos deja el alma exhausta, hipotecada....<sup>10</sup>

This passage foreshadows the tone and substance of many of Calvo Sotelo's later plays. It parallels the impassioned expression, the spirit of allegation, and the sense of displeasure toward vexing situations of the present day world, all typical features of his future productions. The content of Eusebio's discoursing seems to adhere closely to the settled convictions and social polemics of the older playwright's posture. Yet the

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 14.

foregoing passage is by no means removed in spirit from the earnest but genial affirmations of Miguel Mihura's position; his own future writings will repeatedly stress the importance of securing a personal liberation from a life of habit or artificial living.

Financial deprivation is the theme of Act One. Many hints of economic problems and all that they lead to, such as the necessity of carrying two jobs, the struggle for promotion, and individual desperation ending in suicide are made evident in its opening scenes. This sustained preoccupation over material gain, together with the aforementioned focus on the personal despair of Eusebio, is strongly suggestive of Calvo Sotelo's dominant role in the writing of Act One of ¡Viva lo imposible!

A blend of tenderness and humor prevents the play from becoming a social documentary. Comic exaggeration is employed to point out the absurdity of conforming to the dehumanizing values of communal routine. The insurance agent, for example, appeals to Eusebio's desire to emulate the same habit patterns which his neighbors manifest in paying a higher premium each month for the privilege of having two extra horses pull his funeral wagon. Such fanciful and extravagant touches of humor, visible as well in the brief dance around Eusebio's gong, "con un aire de profunda alegría," have all the earmarks of a Mihurian ambit of influence.

Palmira, Eusebio's sister, represents a further clue to Mihura's role in coauthoring the work. Like the majority of Mihura's heroines, Palmira transcends a domain of subservience and restraint by dint of personal verve and the assertion of a lively will. Though she eventually gives in to the prevailing system of values of which she is a product, through her marriage to Vicente, nevertheless she overcomes in spirit a crass material conformity, evidenced by her consciousness of having once experienced a marvelous sense of immunity from social and moral duress.

Palmira's marital resignation conforms to the image which the Spanish woman of her day was expected to maintain. Only in a much later play of another generation does Mihura emancipate his heroine from the security and conformity of a male-dominated world, through the person of Florita of ¡Sublime decisión! (1955). In Palmira we find Florita's forerunner, however, a woman unwilling to judge an individual's worth by his income. In repudiating her suitor in Act One, she rejects temporarily a society of stifling conventionality. Her escape from that monotony into the fervid activity of Act Two enlivens her sensitivity for love and deepens her compassion for human failings. Finally, her marriage to Vicente in Act Three, thus completing her cycle of evasion from boredom to her return to the same shallow existence, signifies an acquiescence to the kind of world which cannot sustain her dream for adventure and freedom. This willing

compliance to the dictates of a harsh and exacting society betokens the moral import of the play. Mihura repeats this message time and time again through the actions and reactions of his female protagonists.

Vicente is the arch-villain of the play. He is portrayed as a hateful individual, present only in Acts One and Three. He is foreign in character to the typical gallery of *dramatis personae* in Mihura's plays, who even at their worst are capable of human compassion and tenderness. Vicente's total absence from Act Two, that portion of the play which offers substantial evidence of Mihura's most direct and prevailing influence as coauthor, suggests that this disreputable and calloused individual foretokens more closely the typical malefactor of Calvo Sotelo's later plays, rather than the more benign perpetrators of evil in Mihura's theater. Indeed, Vicente totally lacks the capacity to dream. His values, couched in routine and regulated labor, reveal a most uninspiring example of secure mediocrity. In bearing and attitude, he resembles the kind of selfish, materialistic forces which oppose Jorge Hontanar in Calvo Sotelo's stage masterpiece, La muralla (1954), or the rancor of Dalmiro Quintana in the same author's Historia de un resentido (1956).

While money and security represent the substance of Vicente's life, the antipodal position -- fantasy and

idealism -- is maintained by Don Sabino, the only character capable of making a complete break from the oppressive dictates of a traditional milieu. His revolt is instantaneous and alarming, motivated by a profound odium for the arid monotony of his existence, the common existence of the average middle class Spaniard:

Que rompamos con todo. Que abandonemos nuestros puestos....¡Y que nos echemos a volar!....¡Abajo la norma, la medida, lo previsto!....¡Viva lo imposible, lo soñado, lo utópico!

Don Sabino's new creed is a declaration of emancipation from drudgery. It is sufficiently insurgent in spirit to have caused this play to be deleted from Mihura's published works.<sup>12</sup>

The presentation of Don Sabino is a typical example of Mihura's benign character portrayals. Moreover, Sabino's first appearance on stage corresponds to a dramatic manner which is undeniably Mihurian. When Sabino enters the apartment in Act One, his mien and language are the complete opposite of that which the audience and the other characters anticipated. This device of surprise is frequently employed by Mihura in several of his most successful plays. It functions to startle the spectator momentarily and, more important, it contributes to the complex of ironic contrasts which

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., pp. 26-27.

<sup>12</sup>Information conveyed by the playwright in a personal interview, December, 1964.



underlie dramatic action and constitute a fundamental aspect of plot development in his theater.

Among the salient examples of unlooked-for traits in the emergence of important characters, one might cite the presentation of Abelardo and his lover Margarita in Ni pobre ni rico, sino todo lo contrario and the first appearance of Maribel in Maribel y la extraña familia, whom we expect to see as a sweet, demure, innocent creature, but whose appearance, language, and dress leave no doubt about her profession.

In connection with Mihura's tendency to divert the spectator's attention from discovering the true nature of a protagonist's character, we also find unanticipated reversals in the plot line. The most significant reversal in ¡Viva lo imposible! is the revelation in Act Two that futility climaxes an act of carefree liberation. The outcome we expect to witness -- life renewed and values reinstated -- is totally reversed. The upshot of the change in milieux, from sordid triviality in Madrid to an exciting circus life in the province, is that the family members have merely embraced a romanticized form of the same kind of life they had abandoned, just as meaningless and absurd as their Madrilenian existence. Beneath the apparent gaiety of Act Two we sense the gradual emergence of this bitter truth: the assumption of a new role in life cannot change the basic configuration of a man's life. Mihura and Calvo Sotelo convey

the idea that man, being a social creature, is thoroughly a product of the mores and dictates of his society.

Don Sabino's theme -- the revolt against material and spiritual impoverishment -- is represented symbolically by occasional allusions to heavenly stars and by more frequent references to the sea. The play's subtitle, for instance, is based on an element of sustained stellar imagery. Stars attract Palmira, symbolizing her sought-after freedom. The firmament, endless and immeasurable, likewise represents "lo imposible, lo soñado" in the spirited imagination of Don Sabino. To the unimaginative eyes of Vicente, however, Sabino becomes "el contador de las estrellas, ... un contable de lo que no se puede contabilizar: de las gotas del agua del mar, de las estrellas del cielo."<sup>13</sup> The charge is unwarranted, for Sabino learns to temper the impossible ideal (i.e. to become a renowned performing artist) by incorporating his know-how of accounting, that is, the experience of his former business acumen, within the framework of an emancipated life (i.e. the circus). He cannot count the stars, but he insists upon being able to see them. The retention of the ideal, meaningfully integrated with an endeavor to live realistically, is fundamental to the philosophy of Miguel Mihura's major dramatic works.

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<sup>13</sup>¡Viva lo imposible!..., p. 93.

Concerning a more obvious and thematically more important use of imagery in the play, we turn now to examine Palmira and Sabino's special sensitivity towards the distant sea, a symbol of their coveted freedom and happiness. Palmira yearns for a view of the ocean, an unfulfilled dream she has cherished all of her life: "¿Cuánto tiempo hace que soñamos con ver el mar? Ya verás: envejeceremos sin ver el mar."<sup>14</sup> Don Sabino sympathizes with her desire: "Me inspiras pena, Palmira, soñando con ver el mar."<sup>15</sup> His sudden decision for liberation is accompanied by a promise to fulfill her dream: "Mañana, al despertaros, abriréis los ojos y veréis una pradera de un azul movible, salpicado de espumas blancas...Será el mar, Palmira, será el mar...."<sup>16</sup>

In breaking her engagement with Vicente, Palmira renounces the kind of petty and pitiful life he promises her. "Yo voy hacia el mar," she declares,<sup>17</sup> a notion which Vicente, in his stubborn concern for materialistic comfort, cannot fathom. Nor can Eusebio fully understand the nature of this revolt, though he himself yearns to own a large, exotic gong, a further symbolic representation of hunger for personal liberation from prosaic routine.

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 34.

The difference between the sea and the gong as parallel images is apparent when we note the future fulfillment of each respective quest. When Eusebio obtains his gong, he strikes it with one fierce blow, prompting Sabino to remark:

¡Este gong está estropeado!... Lo haces sonar, y no vienen bayaderas, ni soldados con lanzas, ni esclavos con turbantes, ni negros de ébano. Todo el mundo fantástico que despiertan los gongs, cuando funcionan bien.<sup>18</sup>

The gong thus symbolizes an incomplete and purposeless dream leading, even upon attainment, to confusion and frustration. Such is the result as well of Eusebio's pursuit for success in the law profession.

In contrast, long after Palmira's one-day view of the sea has passed, her own fulfilled dream continues to provide a meaningful sense of exhilaration, as typified in her statement: "¡Cuando nos fuimos de Madrid, lo primero...a ver el mar! ¡Qué alegría!"<sup>19</sup> She is likewise capable of nostalgically reliving her circus adventure ten years after its conclusion -- "No era feo vivir tan locamente"<sup>20</sup> -- at a time when Eusebio has already been committed to an asylum for having allowed his professional ambitions to impair his sanity. Eusebio's preference for a chromolithograph of the sea over a view of the real

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 84.

ocean suggests his incapacity for converting mere chimerical escapism into a promising ideal. The sea for Eusebio is nothing more than its depiction on the living room wall, while for Palmira it signifies dynamic action, the possibility of gaining the social redemption Sabino has promised her.

In several of his later plays, Mihura again repeats sea imagery as a motif relevant to dramatic action and meaning. In Tres sombreros de copa, for instance, it symbolizes happiness in varying degrees. With seraphic innocence, Don Rosario views the sea as a decorative object, its adorning features more visible to the old man's imagination than to his weak vision. For Don Rosario the sea represents a tourist attraction, an item worth mentioning to enhance the merits of his hotel for prospective tenants. For fifteen years he has lauded the sea and the port as appendages to the balcony room, thus imbuing his tenants with a sense of oneness with nature and the immediacy of physical comfort:

El balcón da al mar. Y la vista es hermosa. Ahora no se ve bien porque es de noche. Pero, sin embargo, mire usted allí las lucecitas de las farolas del puerto. Hace un efecto muy lindo. Todo el mundo lo dice."<sup>21</sup>

For Rosario the sea exists as a vision of hope, its reality governed by the pleasure it communicates, its value sustained by the power of the viewer's

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<sup>21</sup> Mihura, Obras, pp. 47-48.

imagination. Mihura utilizes this nocturnal vision of the sea, apprehended primarily within the world of Rosario's unsophisticated mind, as a means of transfiguring the spectator into a dimension bordering on magic and fantasy. This effect is fostered through the dialogues between Dionisio and Paula, for whom the sea and its landscape constitute an extension of their own poetic dimension of happiness, in a world they have fashioned together within the hotel room, animated by light, color, music, dancing, and farce.

Rosario's appreciation for the sea as a mere adornment is first adopted by the impressionable Dionisio, for whom the "tres lucecitas" of the port constitute "una vista magnífica."<sup>22</sup> He gradually disregards this borrowed notion, replacing it in time with the cheerful and optimistic meaning which the sea represents for Paula, enunciated on two occasions in Act Two:

Iremos a la playa...junto al mar....Compraremos cangrejos....Los comeremos allí,  
sobre la arena...con el mar enfrente.

¡Mañana iremos a la playa a comer cangrejos! Y pasado mañana tú te levantarás temprano y yo también... Nos citaremos abajo y nos iremos en seguida al puerto y alquilaremos una barca... ¡Una barca sin barquero! Y nos llevamos el bañador y nos bañamos lejos de la playa, donde no haya pie...<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., pp. 88, 90.

The sea means for Paula what in ¡Viva lo imposible! it represents for Palmira -- a dream, a fancy, an escape. But with the coming of dawn and the gradual extinguishing of the port lights, illusion is replaced by an awareness of reality, indicated by Paula's crestfallen attitude as she stands at the balcony facing the sea and says, "Y hace frío."<sup>24</sup>

For the protagonist of Tres sombreros de copa, the sea is a promise unrealized. Upon leaving his hotel room to comply perfunctorily with his commitment to marry Margarita, Dionisio forfeits the happiness the sea represents. Dionisio gives in to an existence of melancholy, intolerance, stupidity, and heartlessness. His decision parallels that of Palmira's marriage to Vicente, or her return to monotony, in Act Three of ¡Viva lo imposible! She too renounces the promise of adventure which the sea had symbolized for her. In contrast, the optimistic vaudeville characters of Tres sombreros de copa, namely Sagra, El Guapo Muchacho, El Romántico Enamorado, and El Alegre Explorador, go out at daybreak to encounter the sea, signifying a perpetuation of their authentic well-being. Their choice parallels Don Sabino's final return to circus management, yearning to see new lands beyond the seas.

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 101.

Sea imagery also appears throughout a great part of Mi adorado Juan, but unlike Tres sombreros de copa, wherein the sea is evoked imaginatively, in Mihura's eleventh play the ocean symbolism invigorates the plot with the clamor and din of vital proximity to stage action. Juan's apartment, for example, faces the port; fog horns, crane work, and sundry dock noises pour into his living room constantly, a room replete with nautical objects and paintings.

For Juan the sea is a source of serenity; he compares its goodness to sunlight and a piece of cheese. Fishing on the high seas is his favorite pasttime. The constant tumult from the dock is equated with security and contentment in Juan's neighborhood. In contrast, the easy comforts of Irene's milieu are for Juan a source of despair. He eventually persuades her to repudiate the debilitating world of ease and pretense in order to adopt his way of life: "...¿No te parece que es bonito pensar alguna vez cosas fantásticas, y hacer proyectos raros, y echarle a la vida un poquito de imaginación?"<sup>25</sup>

One of Mihura's most graphic images concerning the sea is found in Mi adorado Juan; he here emphasizes the need to incorporate the traits of human kindness within a society which subsists on chronic routine:

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 695.



¿Usted ha sido naufrago en alguna ocasión?... Porque si usted hubiera sido un naufrago, y se hubiese encontrado solo, en una balsa, en medio del mar, hubiera dado la vida entera por tropezar con un amigo... Y me levanto todas las mañanas pensando que soy un naufrago... Y busco amigos y los encuentro... Casi todos, en esta ciudad, son amigos míos.<sup>26</sup>

Both of the above quotations disclose the same theme dramatized in ¡Viva lo imposible! and Tres sombreros de copa; the three plays we have mentioned in connection with sea imagery present a confrontation between two different environments, a conflict based on individual love and social allegiance, and the eventual resignation or triumph of the featured protagonist in a struggle to resist the devitalizing influence of a prosaic and commonplace world.

Whereas the sea in Tres sombreros de copa, Mi adorado Juan, and ¡Viva lo imposible! symbolizes varying facets of happiness, representing a poetic image in juxtaposition to the notion of orthodox addiction to habit (or the alternative of happiness), the imagery recurs in La bella Dorotea to represent solitude. First mentioned in connection with Dorotea's loneliness, the sea becomes a reflexion of the protagonist's emotional situation. In the reality of the solitary boat disappearing on the horizon, Dorotea sees the symbolic portrayal of her profound loneliness. The sea thus underscores the enormity of a human feeling.

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 637.

When Dorotea's isolation is surmounted, the sea no longer functions to intensify her affective state, but rather becomes the symbol of her prospective happiness, thus corresponding to the same meaning behind this metaphor commonly evoked in the earlier plays. Even the abrupt downpour from a northern sea tempest cannot diminish Dorotea's euphoric joy in the final scene, wherein is represented the kind of denouement reminiscent of the reconciliation scene in Mi adorado Juan and typical of Mihurian drama in general.

We conclude from the foregoing illustrations that Mihura's use of sea imagery, related to characterization through metaphor and integrated with plot action by its presence as a part of the stage setting, is a conscious thematic motif. It has relevance to his theater beyond its symbolic function in ¡Viva lo imposible!

One of the most interesting similarities to be found in Mihura's writings is the thematic parallel between the second act of ¡Viva lo imposible! and Act Two of Tres sombreros de copa. These similarities will be best appreciated if we keep in mind the historical relationship between the two plays.

Insofar as chronology of composition is concerned, ¡Viva lo imposible! follows by seven years the writing of Tres sombreros de copa; we may thus say it is reminiscent of the former play. However, Tres sombreros

de copa had been shelved away, unstaged, unpublished, and totally unknown to anyone outside of a few of Mihura's intimate acquaintances and a handful of skeptical promoters, unwilling to risk their money and reputation on such a bizarre work of art.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, it might also be stated, considering the chronological sequence of premieres, that ¡Viva lo imposible! offers a lively intimation of what the general public would see in the 1952 estreno of Tres sombreros de copa. Adhering to this second chronology, inasmuch as the play which is first staged becomes the public's domain and all ensuing productions are compared to the earlier one, we will proceed to enumerate the similarities between the two comedias.

A colorful circus atmosphere in ¡Viva lo imposible!, involving the unusual appearance in dress and conduct of a curious group of performers, is a foretaste and parallel to the second act of Mihura's most famous play. Indeed, a good part of the charm of both plays may be attributed to the Mihurian circus flavor contained therein. Like Benavente before him, Mihura also discovered the dramatic possibilities inherent in the spectacle of the circus or the music hall. The choice was most appropriate, for

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<sup>27</sup>Obras, pp. 30-33.

Spain was reputedly the circus capital of Europe from 1920 to 1956.<sup>28</sup>

Another parallel is the unrealized love affair between Palmira and Fede as a presage to a comparable involvement between Paula y Dionisio. Fede's preoccupation over financial security, while serving as a thematic parallel to Vicente's own concern for material comfort in the same play, also tokens the kind of life and attitudes Don Sacramento and his family represent in Tres sombreros de copa. Eusebio's weak and contradictory nature, which surprisingly assumes in Act Two the appearance of solid resolution, only to degenerate in Act Three to a regrettable state of renunciation and defeat, resembles the vacillating, weak-willed Dionisio, who voluntarily submits to a life of inevitable vulgarity in leaving Paula to marry Margarita. The focal point of the two plays is identical at this juncture; a confrontation between two contrasting milieux dominates both plots and constitutes the basic idea behind each comedia. On the one side we have a narrow-minded, habituary existence (Vicente = Don Sacramento); on the other, a free, artistic way of life (Sabino = Paula).

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<sup>28</sup>J. Lozano, "¡El circo! Historia, andanzas y aventuras," Teatro, XIX (May-August, 1956), 29-33, 73. See also Alfredo Marquerie, "El circo y su festival mundial en España," Teatro, XXI (January-March, 1957), 26-27.

Just as Palmira and Fede represent two entirely different worlds in ¡Viva lo imposible!, so Paula and Dionisio are contrasted by their respective backgrounds. Virtually all the characters on ¡Viva lo imposible! are trying to flee from an enfeebling ennui; they enter a brief but falsified replica of their dreams, analogous to Dionisio's attempt to gain freedom from a life without color or promise. Palmira is torn between two men,, Dionisio between two women. Vicente accuses Don Sabino of being a bohemian, as does Don Sacramento accuse Dionisio.

Perhaps the most impressive similarity is found in Palmira's symbolic releasing of the dove at the close of Act Two of ¡Viva lo imposible!, a gesture which signifies her personal resolve to forsake the quest, abandon the circus, and return to a life of domestic monotony. This action can be compared to the dramatic toss of three top hats at the end of Tres sombreros de copa, a symbol of Paula's resistance to self-pity and her resolve to return to her former way of life, unfettered by sentimental, emotional ties.

The fact that multiple similarities between the two plays can be cited lends credence to two suppositions. First, Mihura's collaboration with Calvo Sotelo was more than incidental. Mihura's influence -- through style, subject matter, treatment, and humor -- predominates

virtually all of Act Two. Second, the fact that Mihura had written but had not been able to produce Tres sombreros de copa may have tempted him to incorporate parallel elements from the manuscript of his 1932 composition into the later production, assured a professional staging owing to Calvo Sotelo's established reputation in playwriting. Mihura was in fact sorely disenchanted by the extreme wariness shown by various promoters concerning Tres sombreros de copa; his personal writings convey a sense of apprehension over the ultimate destiny of his silenced work.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps he took advantage in collaborating with Calvo Sotelo to salvage some of the outstanding features of his former play, allowing the circus episode of Chapter Two of ¡Viva lo imposible! to become a literary counterpart to the music hall proceedings of Tres sombreros de copa.

Above all, the underlying message of the play, echoed and re-echoed in each of the three acts, but dramatized most poignantly by the elements of contrast, humor, and surprise in Act Two, is typically Mihurian; it inaugurates the kind of philosophical posture he will assume in his subsequent productions, namely, that life is incomplete without a capacity for adventure and an individual exertion to realize one's dreams. This thought is expressly developed through the discourse and

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<sup>29</sup>Obras, pp. 30-31.

actions of Don Sabino, who states on two occasions the unmistakable moral lesson of ¡Viva lo imposible!: "No llegar no es pecado. No partir, sí.... La felicidad está únicamente en ser lo que se ha querido ser."<sup>30</sup>

An interesting stylistic phenomenon appears throughout ¡Viva lo imposible! and often reappears in subsequent plays by both Mihura and Calvo Sotelo, most notably and to a greater degree in Mihura's writings. This is the tendency to construct dialogue and stage directions by a syntactical arrangement by threes of either nouns, adjectives, or verbs. For example, a triplicity of nouns or adjectives is most apparent in ¡Viva lo imposible!:

Me harta su bondad, su equilibrio, su seriedad.

Luce un gabán, bastón, y bombín.

Esta existencia de monótona, de árida, de triste.

Odio mis manguitos, mi mesa de trabajo, mis fórmulas de siempre.

Le falta capacidad de ilusión, arranque, juventud.

Me llenabas de alegría, de confianza, de seguridad en mí mismo.<sup>31</sup>

Trinomial expressions are occasionally used in the play as well. Echoed by several persons, they are faintly reminiscent of a choral repetition in ancient drama:

<sup>30</sup> ¡Viva lo imposible!...., pp. 93, 95.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp. 21-22, 26, 31-32.

Sabino. ¡Abajo la norma, la medida, lo previsto!

Palmira y Eusebio. ¡Abajo la norma, la medida, lo previsto!

Sabino. ¡Viva lo imposible, lo soñado, lo utópico!

Los dos. ¡Viva lo imposible, lo soñado, lo utópico!

Sabino. ¡Distraeros queremos!

Todos. ¡Distraeros queremos!

Sabino. ¡Y si no lo logramos...!

Todos. ¡Y si no lo logramos...!

Sabino. ¡Lo lamentaremos...!

Todos. ¡Lo lamentaremos...!

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In addition to its tripartite phraseology, the play is also replete with trios of material objects and references to the number three. For example, Sabino deliberately breaks three glasses and smashes three window panes as a sign of his revolt. Mention is made to three newspapers, three tickets, and Vicente's anticipated promotion within three years. Moreover, the three main characters -- Sabino, Palmira, and Eusebio -- are involved in constant interaction and share a kind of combined role as protagonist.

This frequency of accumulation or series of three words appearing in key passages is noteworthy because the same pattern recurs in the majority of Mihura's later plays. Whether or not this is a conscious rhetorical device is inconsequential; we can affirm, however, that the formula of trinal accumulation tends to heighten

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., pp. 27, 49.



and dignify the tone of a dramatic situation. Simple discourse gains an oratorical vigor. Prosaic speech is garnished with poetic flavor. Occasionally the accumulation has an ascendent intensity; most often it is a simple combination of synonyms or related terms, more common to serious rather than humorous scenes.

Several striking examples of Mihura's stylistic penchant for adjectival assemblage can be found in the play El caso de la señora estupenda, wherein Carlos is described as "elegante, simpático y correcto;" Alejandro as "tierno, heroico, generoso;" and Susana depicted in three sets of descriptions as "monilla, tímida y un poco tonta;" "lista, inteligente y bondadosa;" and "dulce, apasionada y honesta."<sup>33</sup> There are five other groupings of trinomial modifiers in the same play.

Mi adorado Juan, which contains some twenty-eight different sets of three-parted expressions, specializes in the accumulation of nouns and verbs, as illustrated by these selected quotations:

Ni tengo radio, ni tengo alfombras, ni tengo nada.

No compraré ninguna nevera, ni ninguna plancha eléctrica, ni ninguna vajilla a plazos.

Juan puede ser un estafador, un evadido de presidio, un peligroso criminal.

Si yo trabajase y fuera ambicioso y llegara a ser algo, no tendría apenas amigos.

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., pp. 61, 77, 266, 277.

Siento la satisfacción enorme de quedarme,  
de no moverme, de estar quieto en donde nací.  
¿...no te parece que es bonito pensar al-  
guna vez cosas fantásticas, y hacer proyectos  
raros, y echarle a la vida un poquito de ima-  
ginación?<sup>34</sup>

A good part of what the critics refer to as "atmósfera poética"<sup>35</sup> and "cargado lirismo"<sup>36</sup> in this and other Mihurian plays might to a large extent be the result of the author's rhetorical concern with triplication, a phenomenon which also appears more than twelve times in each of the following works: Melocotón en almíbar, Una mujer cualquiera, and A media luz los tres.

While not wholly immune to this device, Calvo Sotelo does not utilize it to the same degree nor with the same stylized elegance as does Mihura. He appears to favor triplication in his early comedias (e.g. Criminal de guerra, 1951); it is less apparent in his later dramas (e.g. La herencia, 1957).

We have attempted to demonstrate in the foregoing analysis of ¡Viva lo imposible! that Mihura's first play was intellectual and literary in scope and spirit. The gaiety of tone and the winsome humor in Act Two are particularly ascribable to him, while the more somber

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<sup>34</sup>Mihura, Obras, pp. 637, 642, 657, 660-661, 695.

<sup>35</sup>Adolfo Prego, review of Mi adorado Juan in Informaciones (Madrid), January 12, 1956, p. 10.

<sup>36</sup>Alfredo Marqueríe, review of Mi adorado Juan in ABC (Madrid), January 12, 1956, p. 45.

social undertones of Acts One and Three resemble the moral pronouncements of Calvo Sotelo's theater. The play expresses the spiritual constriction of man in a society that disapproves of the human necessity for change, in this case an old man's spontaneous rebellion against stagnation and his difficulty in communicating to others their need to spurn the dulling effects of perpetual boredom. By returning the spectator in Act Three to the same inanity portrayed ten years earlier in Act One, the playwrights make manifest the sad results of blind conformity to the tedium of everyday activities. Devoid of the sustaining force of imagination and decisive action, this conformity produces unremitting frustration and triteness in the lives of many human beings.<sup>37</sup> Sabino alone transcends the debilitating forces of habit; significantly he does so on a New Year's Eve, taking his grandson (el Niño) with him, thus signifying that the individual struggle of a former generation bestows the hope and promise for emancipation upon a future age. The problem is treated seriously. The dialogue is consistent with characterization. The plot line is clear and logical. The play conveys a pertinent message which, while applying no doubt to post-war Spain, is nonetheless free from topical or

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<sup>37</sup>This same circular treatment, broadened to encompass thirty years and several family units, is forcibly drawn by Antonio Buero Vallejo in his well-known Historia de una escalera (1949).

regionalistic expressions; it has a vitality and universality typically Mihurian. ¡Viva lo imposible! warrants serious respect as the first play of a young, promising dramatist.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### A VENTURE INTO THE ABSURD: NI POBRE NI RICO, SINO TODO LO CONTRARIO

Mihura was keenly sensitive to the failure of his first stage production. When ¡Viva lo imposible! closed in mid-December of 1939, he was disposed to quit the theater. He turned to the writing of short stories and humorous articles and drew sketches for Spanish periodicals. Moreover, he was gratified to obtain a good income as a script writer for Spanish films.

Meanwhile, it was with no small reluctance that he completed writing the third act to a play which he and Antonio de Lara (Tono) had begun in the summer of 1939, during the same months, it will be remembered, in which he wrote ¡Viva lo imposible! with Calvo Sotelo. Upon the play's completion, the authors decided to sell it to an international film producer by the name of Benito Perojo, who intended to convert Ni pobre ni rico, sino todo lo contrario into a movie in Argentina.<sup>1</sup> When, after four years of waiting, the movie had not yet appeared, Tono insisted that the new play be recalled, inasmuch as its

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<sup>1</sup>Mihura, Obras, p. 34.

humor seemed all the more current and promised to bring about an enormous commercial success. The popular magazine, La Codorniz, had appeared in 1941, creating a propitious climate for the disorbited humor of the unproduced play.

Mihura cared nothing for the work. He feared that its revival might damage his and Tono's reputation in their journalistic career. To some extent he was right. While the repurchasing of the play ultimately brought fame to both playwrights, the immediate consequences of this action were most unpleasant.

In the first place, Mihura's reluctance to stage the play engendered a breach with Tono. Their mutual enmity, exploited and exaggerated by the press, lasted throughout the play's rehearsals, its subsequent performances, and for several ensuing years.<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, the play itself fomented a controversy of unusual magnitude. On the one hand spectators either stamped their feet indignantly or gave the disquieting comedia a standing ovation. On the other hand, critical acclaim was either laudatory to the extreme, or of damning rejection. One critic, for example, extolled the production in the beatific words: "Pude apreciar como la voz puede subir pluma a pluma desde las cuerdas

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<sup>2</sup>Mihura, Obras, pp. 35-36.

del arpa hasta el cielo...."<sup>3</sup> In contrast, Emilio Morales de Acevedo was quoted as having disdained the work with a shrug and the comment: "No he vivido bastante para comprender esto."<sup>4</sup>

Mihura explains in his lengthy Introducción a Tres sombreros de copa that the polemics became distressingly vehement and divided public sentiment into two camps: those who favored the humorous absurdities of La Codorniz, of which Mihura was then editor, and those who repudiated the magazine as the project of a madman.<sup>5</sup> Both schools of thought troubled Mihura, who disliked seeing the play linked to the familiar humor codornicesco, which in reality had appeared two full years after the writing of his and Tono's comedy.

The notoriety which the play received did not prevent its being a smashing box-office failure. It failed both in Madrid and in Barcelona. The drama critic Torrente Ballester points out that during the time in which Ni pobre ni rico and El caso de la mujer asesinadita were premiered, the Teatro María Guerrero, where the two plays were first staged, was a theater which catered to authors whose plays had been rejected by

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<sup>3</sup>Manuel Diez Crespo, review in Arriba (Madrid), December 18, 1943, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup>M. Sánchez Camargo, review in El Alcázar (Madrid), December 18, 1943, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup>Mihura, Obras, pp. 36-38.

promoters, and therefore a price of admission was infrequently exacted from the public. Torrente states:

Aquellas comedias excepcionales no fueron del todo comprendidas. La gente no se fijaba más que en el extraño humor con que estaban escritas, y lo mismo que se irritaban con La Codorniz, se irritaban con el diálogo... de esas dos comedias.<sup>6</sup>

Evaristo Acevedo agrees with this viewpoint and adds that the abstract humor of Mihura and Tono's writings did not gain entry into the psychology of their spectators, "quienes preferían el humor concreto y crítico que practicaban otros humoristas."<sup>7</sup>

Mihura, chagrined by the publicity given to his quarrel with Tono, distressed over the hapless commercial fiasco of their play, and perturbed at the apparent lack of objectivity and understanding accorded his novel and revolutionary brand of humor, abandoned the theater for a second time. In Barcelona, where Ni pobre ni rico was poorly received, Mihura was asked the following questions in a newspaper interview. The playwright's replies are most significant, for they represent his first declaration of divorce from an avant-garde posture in the theater:

---¿Está usted satisfecho de Ni pobre ni rico?

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<sup>6</sup>Gonzalo Torrente Ballester, "El teatro serio de un humorista," in J. Rof Carballo et al., El teatro de humor en España (Madrid: Editora Nacional, 1966), p. 220.

<sup>7</sup>Teoría e interpretación del humor español (Madrid: Editora Nacional, 1966) p. 250.



---No. Considero que esta obra ha sido sólo un experimento, y que esta clase de teatro ha terminado con este ensayo. Yo, por lo menos, no pienso escribir otra obra de este tipo.

---Pero ¿seguirá usted escribiendo comedias?

---De momento, no. Esperaré a que pase la popularidad y la moda de este humor, y la controversia que Ni pobre ni rico ha promovido, para que así la gente pueda ir a ver mi otra comedia sin ninguna pasión y sin prejuicios de ninguna clase. Además, tanto los que combaten como los que defienden La Codorniz esperarían de mí otra obra de este estilo, y yo pienso escribir una cosa completamente diferente, para que el público se quede aún más despiestado de lo que se ha quedado ahora.<sup>8</sup>

Mihura's disappointment was due largely to the financial setback resulting from the rejection of his first two plays. A mild note of cynicism, coupled with an apparent sense of insecurity and defensiveness, attend other comments he made in interviews recorded prior to the estreno of his first successful play, Tres sombreros de copa. His prose writings of this early period, particularly the aforecited Introducción a Tres sombreros de copa (1943) and Mis memorias (1943-44), are also flavored with a cynical wit that does not conceal a defensive attitude toward unfavorable criticism from critics, promoters, and the general public. The underlying source for Mihura's tempered pessimism may likely be attributed to the unprosperous returns for his efforts. He frankly admits that the financial remuneration he

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<sup>8</sup>Mihura, Obras, p. 37.

later obtained, following the extraordinary success of Tres sombreros de copa, prompted his decision to remain in dramaturgy.

Mihura came to realize that his financial security as a professional playwright in Spain would be a tenuous commodity unless he made concessions to the tastes and demands of his promoters and public. In the opinion of many reputable drama critics, who have declared Mihura's avant-garde period to be his best theater, this was an unfortunate decision, for it compromised a unique form of dramatic art for the opportunistic attainment of commercial profit.

What is unique and artistically estimable about Ni pobre ni rico? The originality and historical importance of the play have merely been hinted at in recent years. Formerly the work was erroneously associated with La Codorniz, since its delayed premiere happened to coincide with the apex of this magazine's fame. Both the play and the periodical were thus labeled under the same banner: "una cruzada contra la cursilería."<sup>9</sup> While in truth the dialogue of Ni pobre ni rico clearly anticipates the Teatrillos humorísticos in La Codorniz, the value of the play does not terminate with its kinship to the periodical.

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<sup>9</sup>Cristóbal de Castro, review in Madrid, December 18, 1943, p. 6.

The play's uniqueness inheres in its extravagant, absurd, and startling humor, a humor which bears no resemblance to the conventional lines of comic farce found in such playwrights as Carlos Arniches and Muñoz Seca. The total inverisimilitude of the work and its lacerating satire against timeworn situations and tired clichés, have endeared it as an inimitable masterwork of the modern Spanish theater to such critics as Alfredo Marquerie, Domingo Pérez Minik, and Emilio Clocchiatti.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, this play, the composition of which antedates by ten years the premiere of La Cantatrice Chauve (1950), bears the remarkable resemblance to certain characteristics which have in more recent years been ascribed to the theater of Eugène Ionesco. Like the French-Romanian playwright, Mihura and Tono also deal with "the tragic spectacle of human life reduced to passionless

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<sup>10</sup>Marquerie states that Ni pobre ni rico "es como un descanso de gracia descoyuntada y absurda en medio de un panorama encenizado por la vulgaridad." See En la jaula de los leones: Memorias y crítica teatral (Madrid: Ediciones Españolas, 1944), p. 156. Pérez Minik claims that the play is "la mejor obra humorística del escenario español de postguerra.... Su tejido vivo y su estilo es ajeno a toda influencia foránea, a toda herencia tradicional ... y a cualquier voluntad comprometida." See Teatro europeo contemporáneo (Madrid: Guadarrama, 1961), p. 423. Clocchiatti treats the play as a document of class struggle and lauds it as "una sátira contemporánea de la mayor desenvoltura." See "España y su teatro contemporáneo," Suplemento de Insula, No. 26 (January, 1964), 2.

automatism through bourgeois convention and the fossilization of language."<sup>11</sup> Ni pobre ni rico is an overt satire on the use of clichés; in attacking the absurdity and falseness of the commonplace in language, it makes use of the same resources which Esslin attributes to Ionesco's La Cantatrice Chauve, La Leçon, and Les Chaises, namely, the abandonment of discursive logic and the reduction of verbal communication to meaningless patter.<sup>12</sup>

In our ensuing discussion about Ni pobre ni rico we will indicate those elements which admit some similarity to the engaging aspects of Ionesco's later contributions to the Theater of the Absurd. It will be seen that the admixture of triviality, platitudes, and dislocated dialogue in Mihura and Tono's work approximates Ionesco's exploitation of the syllogistic structure of language, as evidenced in his early plays. In this respect, Ni pobre ni rico might well be considered a prelude in embryo to some elements of the absurd in western European literature. However, we must stress that its similarities to subsequent productions within the absurdist tradition can only be considered coincidental. While the possibility exists that Ionesco could have been influenced by Mihura's avant-garde expressions, the evidence for

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<sup>11</sup>Martin Esslin, The Theater of the Absurd (New York: Anchor, 1961), p. 90.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp. 90-95, 100, and 297.

asserting such a claim beyond the realm of mere hypothesis is thus far unsubstantial. It is safe to conclude that Mihura belongs to that generation of precursors who incited revolutionary changes in the articulation of twentieth-century drama, and who, as Professor Adolph H. Wegener suggests, brought about "a vast, universal, esoteric avant-garde movement ... felt in all the mains of the human mind."<sup>13</sup>

The writings of Martin Esslin and Adolph Wegener, among others, have eloquently developed the notion that it is in its attitude toward language that the theater of the absurd is most revolutionary. The early plays of Eugène Ionesco and Samuel Beckett, two of the dramatists most commonly associated with the modern absurdist tradition, yield ample evidence to confirm the accuracy of this concept. Their best known works reflect a profound concern over the breakdown of language in society, a language consisting of nothing but clichés, empty formulas, and slogans. Ionesco deplores the acceptance of banal utterances and ready-made notions which have ceased to be the expression of anything alive or vital and have been degraded "into a mere conventional token of human intercourse, a mask for genuine meaning and emotion."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>"Observations on the Theatre of the Absurd," An unpublished paper presented at the East-West Center, University of Hawaii, December, 1967.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

The mechanical exchange of platitudes between the old man and his wife in Les Chaises and the nonsensical prattle between the Smiths and the Martins in La Cantatrice Chauve illustrate this concern. Samuel Beckett likewise expresses the disintegration of everyday conversation into facile formulas and prefabricated meanings. The dialogue of his plays often becomes divorced not only from happenings depicted through stage action, but is even put into direct contradiction with the action. The absurd bavarage in En Attendant Godot (1952) and Fin de Partie (1957), wherein, as Martin Esslin observes, "no truly dialectical exchange of thought occurs," are striking examples of Beckett's awareness that language has been devalued as a vehicle of conceptual thought.<sup>15</sup>

Mihura and Tono anticipate these features of the shift in style and taste which ultimately leads to the recognition of a new aesthetic toward language. As early as 1928 they were each writing, individually, an abstract and disorbited humor which employed clichés, repetitions, incongruity, irony, and absurd monologue for purposes of badinage. Their later collaborations in the film industry evoked high praise for their art at dubbing. They popularized a new kind of dialogue, bereft of internal logic and calculated to elicit laughter by the intentional deformation of the trite and mechanical formulas in

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<sup>15</sup>Esslin, op. cit., p. 45.

everyday speech. One mediocre German film was hailed "un ensayo de primer orden" following Mihura and Tono's work at dubbing: "Le colocan un diálogo absurdo, delicioso de incongruencias, ... de un espíritu inventivo y satírico."<sup>16</sup>

The bizarre nature of the language they cultivated was labeled "el humor codornicesco" with the appearance of the weekly humor magazine they founded in 1941. La Codorniz, as we observed in Chapter Two, followed in the tradition of their war-time publication, La Ametralladora, and conditioned the Spanish public so well to colloquial nonsense that, by the time La Cantatrice Chauve was disseminated in Spain, as Ignacio Soldevila Durante note, Ionesco's humorous absurdities were already "una cosa conocida."<sup>17</sup>

In reading Ionesco's well-known "anti-play" of 1950, we are reminded of the tone, the spirit, and sometimes even the content of Mihura's former contributions to La Codorniz. The fourth scene of La Cantatrice Chauve, for instance, offers an interesting parallel to one of Mihura's Teatrillos humorísticos of 1942, entitled De viaje. A part of Mihura's text may be quoted as follows:

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<sup>16</sup>Ángel Zúñiga, Una historia del cine (Barcelona: Ediciones Destino, 1948), II, 365.

<sup>17</sup>"Sobre el teatro español de los últimos veinticinco años," Cuadernos Americanos, CXXVI, No. 1 (January-February, 1963), 276.

El señor Sánchez se sentó en su compartimento y empezó a leer el periódico.

El señor Suárez, que iba sentado enfrente del señor Sánchez, guardó el suyo, que acababa de leer, y se dedicó a admirar el paisaje por la ventanilla.

---Buen tiempo --- dijo el señor Suárez.

El señor Sánchez contestó distraídamente y dijo que, en efecto, hacía un hermoso tiempo.

---Quizá haga también buen tiempo en Soria. dijo el señor Sánchez.

---¿Conoce usted Soria?

---¡Ya lo creo! He vivido tres años allí.

---¿Tres años --- dijo el señor Suárez ---, Entonces, conocerá usted a un tal Soto.

---¿Amadeo Soto? ¡Claro que lo conozco! Tiene una droguería en la plaza que hay enfrente de la estación.

---No, no. El Soto que yo digo es farmacéutico.

---¡Ah, sí! Pero no se llama Amadeo; se llama Gustavo.

---Justamente. ¿Lo conoce usted?

---Muchísimo. Iba siempre a la tertulia de un tal Echave.

---¿Conoce usted a Echave? --- exclamó el señor Suárez ---. ¡Lorenzo! ¡Si es pariente mío!

---Lorenzo Echave es mi tío --- dijo el señor Sánchez.

---¿Tío suyo?

---Sí; está casado con una tal Barnarda, que es hermana de mi madre.

---¿Lo dice en serio; Entonces su madre se llama Adelaida.

---¿La conoce?

---Claro que la conozco. Es mi mujer.

---¡Su mujer! --- exclamó el señor Suárez, balanceando un pie ---. ¿Su mujer? Pero esto es extraordinario. Usted, entonces, es mi padre.

To this point Mihura's dialogue resembles the classic recognition scene between Ionesco's husband and wife team, the Martins. They too engage in a series of interrogations and replies, of considerably greater length and with heightened grotesquerie. Unlike Ionesco,



Mihura brings complete strangers together in private conversation, and consequently allows the episode a semi-plausible base from which an absurd disclosure of blood relationship evolves. Nevertheless, the resemblance between the two versions is quite remarkable.

Mihura continues his episode beyond the humorous moment of recognition, as we perceive in the following conclusion to the aforesaid dialogue:

---¡Quien iba a imaginárselo! --- dijo,  
emocionado, el señor Suárez ---. Si no  
llegamos a hablar de Soria, no nos hubiéramos  
reconocido nunca.  
---¿Soria? --- preguntó el señor Sánchez,  
estupefacto ---. No hemos hablado de Soria,  
sino de Segovia.  
---¿De Segovia? Estás equivocado. Yo hablaba  
de Soria. Evidentemente, ha habido entre  
nosotros una confusión. Yo creía que tú  
hablabas de Soria y tú creías que yo hablaba  
de Segovia. ¿Entonces, todo lo que hemos  
dicho no vale? Y desde el momento que no vale,  
yo no soy su hijo.  
---¡Claramente! Y yo no soy su padre de usted.  
Perdóneme.  
---Está usted perdonado.  
Y el señor Sánchez cogió de nuevo su periódico  
y el señor Suárez volvió a mirar por la  
ventanilla.<sup>18</sup>

Mihura reverses the fortuitous discovery and returns the encounter between the two strangers to the same point where it began. In contrast to the circular structure of Mihura's sketch, Ionesco's scene progresses by a growing intensification of the initial situation, ending with Mr. Martin's revelation: "Alors,

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<sup>18</sup>Mihura, "De viaje," La Codorniz (March 15, 1942).

chère Madame, je crois qu'il n'y a pas de doute, nous nous sommes déjà vus et vous êtes ma propre épouse... Élisabeth, je t'ai retrouvée!"<sup>19</sup>

The difference between the two renderings are minimal. Their basic features, in terms of meaning and intention, are identical. Nevertheless, despite these affinities, there is no evidence to conclude that Ionesco engaged in a conscious literary appropriation of Mihura's text.<sup>20</sup>

Mihura, incidentally, favored the recognition theme so well that he repeated it with a new focus in the April 5, 1942 issue of La Codorniz, reversing the former procedure of a gradual revelation leading to discovery, by permitting the happy encounter of two old friends to dissolve suddenly into a realization that they had never before seen each other. Even here Mihura's intention remains the same: he parodies a common scene

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<sup>19</sup>Eugène Ionesco, Théâtre (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1954), I, 30.

<sup>20</sup>Mihura denies that the two writings have a common source. During certain periods of his administration of La Ametralladora and La Codorniz, he did utilize materials from Italian sources, but not as a part of his signed articles or playlets. His authored teatrillos, he claims, are entirely original. (Interview with the playwright, June, 1967). Ionesco, for his part, denies that the fourth scene of La Cantatrice Chauve had a previous literary source. He states that the recognition scene is based on an actual surprise encounter with his wife on the Metro in Paris. See The Observer (London), July 14, 1958, quoted by Martin Esslin, Theater of the Absurd, p. 92. We must therefore conclude that whatever resemblance exists between the two writings is an unintended coincidence.

of reunion by the deliberate inversion of a familiar pattern. His use of commonplace discourse, juxtaposed with unusual and absurd actions, heightens the reader's apprehension of the foolishness of a universally recognized situation.

This same attention to the trite and ordinary, framed within the context of a well-known setting, then deformed by the use of reversal, contradiction, antithesis, and inversion, is what distinguishes the play Ni pobre ni rico as an early example of absurdist literature in Spain.

The unexpected impact of the absurd with the familiar and logical is the principal resource of humor in Ni pobre ni rico. Its absurdity lies primarily within the exercise of language. Identities are never confused, distorted, or lost, as in some works of Ionesco and Beckett, yet the characters themselves do become dehumanized to the degree by which they allow the rhetorical nature of dead language to render them incapable of intelligent action. The personalities of Abelardo, Margarita, the Baronness, and Julio, for instance, are neither destroyed nor sacrificed before a surprising concatenation of absurd utterances, yet their authenticity as human beings suffers devaluation as a consequence of their adopting a fossilized debris of clichés. That their basic unity and consistency as characters remain

intact, is a credit to Mihura and Tono's craftsmanship. Eduardo Tacglen has observed this feature with regard to Mihurian characters in general, that they are all endowed with "una cohesión y una interdependencia con el que les hace criaturas de un mismo mundo, alejado del nuestro y, sin embargo, admisible por nosotros."<sup>21</sup>

In this play Mihura and Tono have deliberately applied the mechanics of language to nullify full credibility of character. The storehouse of ready-made expressions which the main characters use are intended not merely to typify by means of dialogue, but designed to convey the essential disintegration of human communication into the empty platitudes of everyday discourse. In this connection, the following words of José Monleón are applicable to the comedia:

La palabra (es) un discurso dudoso y pedante, del que es necesario escapar. La palabra divide. La palabra es un tópico. La reflexión, cuando se encauza racionalmente y quiere proyectarse sobre las estructuras, está radicalmente frenada por la acumulación de clichés. La palabra en lugar de ser un instrumento de profundización y comunicación se nos convierte en un término repetido, vacío, y peligroso. Hay que librarse de las palabras. La palabra es, desde esta perspectiva, una expresión del automatismo, de la irracionalidad, de la exclavitud.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Eduardo Haro Tecglen, review of Mihura's El caso de la señora estupenda in Informaciones (Madrid), February 7, 1953, p. 7.

<sup>22</sup>"La libertad de Miguel Mihura." Miguel Mihura, ed. José Monleón (Madrid: Taurus, 1965), pp. 47-48.

As Monleón affirms, automatism and irrationality arise from an excess of impoverished language. In Mihura's play Carlota, this same idea is suggested. One of the characters defines the attitude by the remark, "parecía que hablábamos como empleando un manual de conversación," a statement which also calls to mind the intended parody in Ionesco's first play and describes as well the impression one gains in reading Ni pobre ni rico.<sup>23</sup>

The incurable stupidity of Margarita illustrates what will result in allowing senseless words to dehumanize and dull the spirit. Margarita represents a stubborn middle class resistance to original thought. She is prejudiced, fickle, infantile, and basically materialistic. Through Abelardo's romantic tributes paid to her early in Act One, we anticipate meeting a woman of principle, but in a manner typical of Mihurian plays, her appearance and behavior invalidate our former expectations. Her principles are merely phrases that she learned by heart. She is illogical, unpredictable, and contradictory, a product of a world of shallow thinking and self-interest. Her absurd utterances are like those of Don Sacramento in Tres sombreros de copa and fall into three major categories.

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<sup>23</sup>Mihura, Obras, p. 721.

First, she adopts a discourse founded upon trivia. This she accentuates during serious moments, thereby rendering her language nonsensical. For example, she is more concerned about a kilo of coffee, a visit to see her seamstress, or the procurement of olive oil than she is over a marriage proposal. She engages in a kind of spiral conversation with Abelardo: from a seemingly trivial argument she amplifies details into matters of great importance, then tends to refer again and again to the same topics.

Second, Margarita inverts meanings and confuses idioms, accepting their literal significance over their metaphorical sense:

Abelardo --- No tengo dónde caerme muerto.  
Margarita --- ¿Y para qué quieres caerte  
muerto?<sup>24</sup>

Third, to questions that elicit choice, she gives a third alternative; and to questions that can only be answered with an unqualified yes or no, she gives relative answers:

Abelardo --- ¿Qué prefieres, un niño o una  
niña?  
Margarita --- Las tres cosas.<sup>25</sup>

Her replies to Abelardo become progressively more absurd as the play advances. Her fiance becomes so exasperated over her verbal nonsense that despite

<sup>24</sup>Mihura, Obras, p. 159.

<sup>25</sup>Minura, Obras, p. 136.

his blind love for her, he renounces all further interest in her, a repudiation which underscores the surface meaning of the play:

Me deprime tu carácter.... Me ahogo con tus frases estúpidas y sin sentido.... ¡Vete de una vez... vete a vivir tu vida, hecha de pequeñeces, de tópicos, de lugares comunes. Deja que te olvide y que pueda rehacer más tarde mi existencia. Vete, te lo ruego.... ¡Eres la contradicción misma!<sup>26</sup>

Abelardo, the dreamy, idealistic protagonist, does remake his life, but not until he has learned that his love is an obstruction in his way to the realization of his own personality. He has to break with Margarita in order to become free. Like Sabino in ¡Viva lo imposible!, Abelardo must succeed on his own merits. His rejection of Margarita and her self-satisfied world puts him on a kinship with the same spirit that motivates Juan in Mi adorado Juan:

Sí, Margarita, márchate con tu tía, con la baronesa, con tu modista y con tu torta de manzana. Yo me voy con Gurripato a vivir en la orilla del río, a coger peces y a tomar el sol.<sup>27</sup>

Abelardo is not without his own repertory of absurdities, however. Before his liberation he is somewhat like the weak-willed Dionisio of Tres sombreros de copa, all too prone to adopt the contagious conventions and ideas of his own surroundings. His actions, motivated

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 176.

by a frantic infatuation, generate a chain reaction of absurd happenings. At the outset he willfully brings about his own financial ruination in deference to Margarita's illogical affirmation: "Nunca toleraré unirme a un hombre cuya posición económica es infinitamente superior a la mía."<sup>28</sup> His subsequent efforts to regain his lost fortune are triggered again by Margarita's contradicting threat: "Mientras sea pobre, yo no me casaré contigo."<sup>29</sup> Thus, the basic conflict, from which all ensuing problems stem, originates from a sustained antithesis between wealth and impoverishment. Even Abelardo's discourse is replete with antithetical notions, as exemplified by the following selections:

El amor es una alegría triste y desde  
que te amo sólo estoy alegre cuando estoy  
triste.

El ser pobre es el mayor lujo que me he  
permitido en la vida.

No hay nada que acentúe tanto la tristeza  
como la alegría.<sup>30</sup>

Abelardo embodies a complex of contrary actions and reactions. Until he emancipates himself from a world of incongruity, he is constantly frustrated in his struggle against contradiction and paradox. As the pivotal character of the play, he is affected by the absurd

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 135.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 161.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., pp. 134, 150, 156.



behavior of everyone else. They contribute to the fomenting of "el disparate, lo inútil, lo arbitrario, lo que no sirve para nada," which he eventually accepts as the one true reality of life.<sup>31</sup>

The equally dreamy and distracted Baroness is one of the characters who disarms Abelardo the most. She does so by her contrary logic, her criticism of Abelardo's own use of cliché, and her personal use of common expressions in an absurd context. In her opening speech she disapproves of commonplace greetings as "frases interminables, comentarios estúpidos."<sup>32</sup> She then proceeds to deform customary usage by way of dislocated utterances in her own replies:

Baronesa --- ¿Cómo está usted?  
 Abelardo --- No sé. ¿Y usted?  
 Baronesa --- Yo menos.

Baronesa --- ¿Cómo se llama ella?  
 Abelardo --- Margarita.  
 Baronesa --- No me gusta. Tiene nombre de pájaro.  
 Abelardo --- Dirá usted que tiene nombre de flor.  
 Baronesa --- No. Digo que tiene nombre de pájaro.  
 Abelardo --- Bien. Diga usted lo que quiera.  
 Baronesa --- Eso hago.<sup>33</sup>

Julio, Abelardo's stuffy, conventional servant, whose propriety renders him void of human sympathy, serves a comic function as a contrast to the madness of his master. Although Abelardo tries to persuade Julio to

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 148, 124.

smell a bouquet of flowers, hoping the experience will enervate his priggish attitude and make him more humane, the servant is unwilling. "No las huelo. Yo soy un hombre honrado."<sup>34</sup> At this point, Julio is very much like the conformable Vicente in ¡Viva lo imposible! and the orthodox Don Sacramento in Tres sombreros de copa. However, in the end Julio transfers his own identity to that of Abelardo's; he too adopts eccentricity in an effort to be rid of ritualistic conformity. The final scene finds him walking across the stage, dressed as a beggar, carrying bread crumbs in a cone.

This conversion of the former snob into a vagabond unveils the basic meaning behind Mihura and Tono's play. By upholding and favoring a bohemian posture, supported by the arbitrary and absurd in human action the playwrights imply the meaninglessness of the reality which we accept as a reasonable and organized pattern of human existence, and thus they subscribe to the validity of a liberating departure into the gratuitous realm of inconsistency, nonconformity, and utter nonsense, in order to enhance the joy of living.

Consequently, *Ni pobre ni rico* enjoys a close affinity with the purport and spirit of ¡Viva lo imposible! and Tres sombreros de copa. The three comedies may be said to form a trilogy in which the stylized and

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 121.

stereotyped comportment of the upper and middle classes in society are placed in confrontation with a free-thinking and unconventional world, resulting in a satire on the former way of life and an endorsement for the latter.

The play also employs elements of the absurd other than those already mentioned. Among them is a category of unusual objects and their surprising appearance on stage. In ¡Viva lo imposible! this exhibition of curious articles included an oriental gong, a clown playing a violin, and numerous trappings connected with the circus environment. Though striking for their novelty and exciting as stage props, none of the uncommon objects in the Calvo Sotelo -- Mihura production appeared without logical verbal or thematic preparation. In contrast, the strange things which spring forth in both Ni pobre ni rico and Tres sombreros de copa are entirely unexpected and bear little or no resemblance to stage action or dialogue. Such items are manifested with a regularity just short of the kind of proliferation usually associated with Ionesco's theater.

In Act One of Ni pobre ni rico, for instance, three inventors are engaged with Abelardo in the longest sustained dialogue of the absurd to be found in Mihura's theater. The scene is as fantastic as anything in Ionesco. One inventor carries a harp and a large automobile klaxon, but neither instrument is capable of

making any noise. The second has a saw that sounds a bell when its work is finished; he tests his invention by sawing the legs off a table in the room, but the bell does not work. The third reveals an electric apparatus for peeling potatoes, though it can peel but one solitary potato before breaking down, never to work again.

In a later scene the Baroness enters, carrying a portable gramophone and records which never leave her side. On one occasion she pulls a loaf of bread out of her pocket, an act similar to the sudden and surprising appearance of foreign articles in Act Two of Tres sombreros de copa.

Other examples of this category include the flowers that Abelardo frequently carries in either or both hands; the arrival of three thieves in a car with a mule; the appearance of trumpets, hatchets, ladders, and hoses with four firemen; the emergence of the Baroness' chauffeur displaying a flag; and the silent stroll across the stage by Julio, wearing a derby and carrying a paper cornucopia teeming with bread crumbs.

Even normal objects are either misidentified, misused, or given an absurd dimension. Abelardo moves time ahead by turning forward the hands on his clock; the Baroness starts to exit by the window; Margarita attempts to relocate the natural setting of a city park as though she were rearranging house furniture; her stupid aunt

mistakes a typewriter for a piano, then remarks upon typing how woefully out of tune it is!

These examples of the humor of incongruity suggest a rapport with the comedy of vaudeville and the slapstick farces of the Marx Brothers. Indeed, one of the chief characteristics of the absurd theater of the post-war period is that it borrows some objects for scenic effect from the circus, from the *commedia dell'arte* and from the comedy of the music hall.

Mihura obviously has a penchant for this tradition, for we encounter the appearance of unfamiliar phenomena in many of his plays. It is most common in Tres sombreros de copa, as we will observe in Chapter Six. The tendency is likewise noted in Carlota, where the detective Harris pulls out a steaming cup of tea from his coat pocket.<sup>35</sup> The final act of Milagro en casa de los López includes the unwarranted and somewhat preposterous appearance of a girl in a bikini followed by the materialization of a transparent angel, both emerging from behind the living room draperies.

Ni pobre ni rico also contains a variety of linguistic absurdities, a feature which came to be very much in vogue in the absurdist writings of the early 1950's. Among these elements in Mihura and Tono's work,

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<sup>35</sup>Mihura, Obras, p. 703.

we find a breakdown of plausible associations and a loss of precise terms and attributes. Ruptures in phraseology invite incongruity and elicit laughter. The word pobra is used in reference to a female pauper. Agua dura is employed in the same context with pan duro. Thus, properties that normally correspond to one thing or can only apply to a particular linguistic mold, are transferred to a totally unlike object or are improperly rendered, admitting a disconfiguration to hamper natural understanding and to further the playful banter of the comedy's purpose. Francisco de Cossío correctly observed on the night of its estreno that this play represents the surrealism of humor on the Spanish stage.<sup>36</sup>

Some expressions readily fall into a category of complete nonsense. Some of these border on forced, contrived, and topical jokes, reminiscent of the low comedy of vaudeville:

Mis padres, que eran tres....

Soy un pobre pajarito.  
Y usted dos.

---Si no recuerdo mal, tenemos dos hijos.

---Tres.

---¿Tres? Yo no he visto más que dos.

---Bueno, es que el mayor es sordo.

---Tiene usted cara de raquítico.

---Es que he tenido una enfermedad muy grave.

---¿Y cómo salió usted de ella?

---Pues me morí.

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<sup>36</sup>Quoted in M. Sánchez Camargo, review in El Alcázar (Madrid), December 8, 1943, p. 2.

---Pues no encuentro los cinco céntimos.  
 ---Se los habrá gastado en un tranvía.  
 ---No, porque, en ese caso, tendría el tranvía.

---Esa cara la he visto yo en otra parte.  
 ---Pues la he tenido siempre aquí.<sup>37</sup>

The last four quips are typical examples of the kind of chiste mihuriano most commonly associated with La Codorniz. The last joke, in fact, appeared in an early edition of the periodical with this variation:

---Yo he visto su cara en otra parte.  
 ---Me extraña porque siempre la llevo puesta.<sup>38</sup>

We have here an example of Mihura imitating Mihura.

These farcical jests seem to be characteristic of Mihura's early form of humor. Fortunately, they represent but a small portion of his humoristic resources for the stage and become less and less frequent as the author shifts his direction from verbal humor to situation comedy following the estreno of Tres sombreros de copa.

With regard to absurd reversals of anticipated behavior, the following summarized situations should suffice to further delineate the absurdist spirit of Ni pobre ni rico:

Abelardo schedules three thieves to rob his home. He insists they do so rapidly or he will phone

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<sup>37</sup>Mihura, Obras, pp. 145-147, 151, 175.

<sup>38</sup>Quoted in Evaristo Acevedo, op. cit. (above, note 7), p. 253.

the police. He asks them not to make any noise and to leave carefully so they will not be apprehended. They are, as he says, "unos ladrones de bien."<sup>39</sup>

A group of firemen beckon to another of Abelardo's appointments. They casually sit down, take a drink, and ask ridiculous questions while the house is blazing. They aid the progress of the fire by throwing math books and furniture into the flames. Their domestic nonchalance foreshadows -- if only by coincidence -- the unusual appearance of the firemen in Ionesco's La Cantatrice Chauve.

Reversals in physical attire are also common. Some of the characters dressed as aristocrats appear later as vagabonds. Incongruous behavior accompanies their change. Abelardo, a beggar in Act Two, gives a five-cent limosna to the wealthy Don Cristino. An authentic pauper whistles a difficult operatic air. Three noble ladies have a picnic on the park lawn with Abelardo and his beggar friends. Finally, the vagabonds themselves organize a syndicate and undertake to draft the city's vagrants into a prosperous union.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>Mihura, Obras, p. 130.

<sup>40</sup>Emilio Clocchiatti cites this episode as evidence of the play's socio-economic intent. See Insula, No. 206 (January, 1964), I. Juan Guerrero Zamora likewise mentions this element in his consideration of the play's philosophic implications. He views it as revealing the transition in Spain from a bourgeois society to a bureaucratic reality. See his Historia del teatro contemporáneo, (Barcelona: Juan Flors, 1962), III, 175.



One final observation, difficult to ignore, concerns one facet of style, namely the ever-present triplification of which we spoke in Chapter Three. In Ni pobre ni rico, Mihura and Tono employ over twelve sets of units-by-three, involving nouns, verbs, and adjectives. Three typical examples are as follows:

Los inventos ... representan un esfuerzo y una ilusión y una esperanza.

La recibiré, perdonaré lo que me ha hecho sufrir y me echaré a sus brazos.

Soy un hombre derrotado, exhausto y sin voluntad.<sup>41</sup>

In this chapter we have attempted to view Ni pobre ni rico as a play of verbal nonsense that uses elements of the absurd to combat mental laziness and to point out the insufficiency of a language that no longer corresponds fully to reality. Like other successful satires that depend upon deviation, incoherence, and incongruity to elucidate the human condition, Mihura and Tono's work offers insights analogous to life. By following its own laws of logic, the play has a coherent

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Each of these viewpoints impresses the present writer as being overstated. The socio-economic factors in the plot are mere devices, it would seem, contributing to the furtherance of the authors' intention to satirize the ridiculous nature of a sterile language. That they function as parody is not denied, but they do not constitute the paramount focal point of the comedy.

<sup>41</sup>Mihura, Obras, pp. 118, 149.

purpose. Favoring the arbitrary over the contingent, its authors achieve the kind of liberating effect that Martin Esslin refers to when he says that an absurd play should expand the limits of sense and open up vistas of freedom from logic and cramping convention.<sup>42</sup>

It is understandable why this play and La Codorniz ignited public furor. Both writings -- the one dramatic, the other journalistic -- anticipated by ten years the spirit of the absurd in contemporary literature. Their impact has added a new direction to Spanish humoristic literature.

Though a commercial failure in 1943, the play has gained prestige over the years. We would agree with Alfonso Prego's observation that "una comedia que ha fracasado puede contener ... más y mayores verdades del espíritu que otra que triunfó."<sup>43</sup>

Alfredo Marqueríe was one of the first to recognize the play's avant-garde character. As early as 1944 he wrote:

Los que pretendan imitar a Tono y a Mihura, están perdidos, porque el secreto de la risa en estos humoristas se halla absolutamente identificado a su doble y conjunta personalidad. Les sigue como la sombra al cuerpo. Y es inútil que

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<sup>42</sup>Martin Esslin, Theatre of the Absurd, p. 247.

<sup>43</sup>"El teatro de Miguel Mihura," Primer Acto, No. 10 (October, 1959), 19.

nadie trate de arrebatárles esa buena sombra, porque la sombra es lo único que no se puede quitar ni plagiar.<sup>44</sup>

Twelve years later and several years after the appearance of Ionesco and Beckett on the European stage, this eminent critic once again hailed Ni pobre ni rico as a prodigy of the absurdist theater, labeling it "una trepidación destructiva, revolucionaria, contra el tópico y la frase hecha."<sup>45</sup>

However, to designate this play as a legitimate member of absurdist literature requires one basic qualification. Ni pobre ni rico is not a philosophic expression of the absurdity of human existence. It is not a play of ideas whose subject matter is somber, violent, or bitter. We have seen that its dialogue discloses no evidence of an all-prevailing sense of anguish at the disintegration of man in a world of decomposition. Man's isolation and spiritual dereliction, so frequently encountered in the French absurdist writers of the 1950's, is nowhere hinted at in Mihura and Tono's play. Nihilism, existential despair, and the psychic annihilation of the individual are totally absent. Consequently, inasmuch as the Spanish playwrights are not concerned with the enigmatic aspects of being, their work should not be weighed

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<sup>44</sup>En la jaula de los leones: Memorias y crítica teatral (above, note 10), pp. 156-157.

<sup>45</sup>"Nuestros autores de post-guerra," Teatro, No. 19 (May-August, 1956), 12.

In the same balance with La Cantatrice Chauve, Les Chaises, and Fin de Partie, plays in which man is depicted as truly divorced from his transcendental roots.

Ni pobre ni rico is simply a humorous farce that satirizes an existing state of affairs, namely, the fact that communication between human beings is in a process of gradual breakdown and that the senseless conventions of inconsequential speech are producing a yawning gulf between language and reality.

One must admit a diversity of method and form within the tradition of the absurd, for the theater of the absurd itself is, after all, merely a term applied by critics, editors, and historians of literature, in labeling a group of authors who rarely, if ever, apply the term "absurdist" to themselves.<sup>46</sup> "What is sometimes labeled the absurd," writes Eugène Ionesco, "is only the denunciation of the ridiculous nature of a language which is empty of substance, sterile, made up of clichés and slogans."<sup>47</sup> In this respect, Mihura and Tono play a significant role in the tradition of the absurd. Indeed, by virtue of their avant-garde venture of 1939 into this

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<sup>46</sup>See Adolph H. Wegener, "The Absurd in Modern Literature," Books Abroad (Spring, 1967), pp. 150-156; also, Esslin, The Theater of the Absurd, preface xviii.

<sup>47</sup>"The Avant-garde Theater," World Theater, VIII, No. 3 (Autumn, 1959), 188.

phenomenon, they stand among the precursors of a rich and variegated trend in twentieth-century literature and they have claim to the undisputed honor of having inaugurated a special sense of the absurd on the Spanish stage.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### TOWARD A CONSERVATIVE POSTURE:

#### EL CASO DE LA MUJER ASESINADITA

Two years following the staging of Ni pobre ni rico, Mihura found himself obliged by financial necessity to write a new play.<sup>1</sup> The basic idea for its plot was already clear in his mind when, one morning in the fall of 1945, he encountered his young friend Alvaro de Laiglesia in Madrid's Cervecería de Correos. Laiglesia, now twenty-three years of age, had assumed managership of La Codorniz only one year before. He was so enthusiastic over Mihura's idea that he immediately accepted a casual invitation to collaborate with Don Miguel in writing the play. Mihura relates the events which ensued from this fortuitous chat in the following laconic manner:

Alvaro ha trabajo conmigo desde niño. Conoce todos mis defectos, pero también todas mis virtudes. Y, sobre todo, trabaja como un bárbaro. A las diez de la mañana ya estaba en mi casa, hacía que me levantase de la cama y que nos pusiéramos a trabajar. Y así, en veinte días escasos, terminamos de escribir la comedia.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Joaquín Aguirre Bellver, "Miguel Mihura, o el Grillo en el hogar," Madrid, November 25, 1961, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup>Mihura, Obras, pp. 39-40.

To what extent Alvaro de Laiglesia contributed to the play's formulation is not clearly established. It appears he provided more moral support than actual writing, judging from Medardo Fraile's assertion that his influence "is nowhere to be seen" in the work.<sup>3</sup>

Upon its completion, the play was read to several friends in Barcelona -- actors, directors, and other playwrights, -- all of whom advised the authors to reduce the jokes in number and to eliminate clever word-play "porque los chistes desvirtúan la trama, y porque la trama es demasiado seria y complicada."<sup>4</sup>

Mihura was appalled. He had deliberately set out to divert, to amuse, to fill the strange and puzzling action of his comedy with "frases graciosas" that would please the public's taste for an entertainment supercharged with humor. Nevertheless, he and Laiglesia complied with their friends' request. They purged their play again and again of its surface pleasantries, then prepared it for a February estreno in Madrid's Teatro María Guerrero.

The public reaction and the critical response to this new production, entitled El caso de la mujer asesinadita, disconcerted Mihura, not because adverse

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<sup>3</sup>"Twenty Years of Theater in Spain," trans. Mildred Boyer, *Texas Quarterly*, IV, No. 1 (Spring, 1961), 99.

<sup>4</sup>Mihura, Obras, p. 40.

reviews followed its premiere, (as a matter of fact, the play was accorded very favorable reviews), but rather because this work, like his former plays, was also labeled "extraña e imponente," "codornicesca," and "vanguardista" by those who celebrated its artistic merits.<sup>5</sup> And this response was occasioned despite the authors' efforts to alert their audience that the play had nothing to do with La Codorniz.<sup>6</sup>

The public was apparently conditioned to anticipate a style of humor known by the absurd and disorbited nature of its language. The mere fact that the first editor of La Codorniz and his successor had collaborated on the same play was sufficient evidence to persuade the vast majority of theatergoers that the work was intimately and irrevocably linked with the popular humor magazine. Many thus entered the theater with a preconceived notion, and interpreted everything they saw as the obvious confirmation of their expectations.

<sup>5</sup>Mihura, Obras, pp. 40, 41.

<sup>6</sup>Mihura and Laiglesia wrote the following cautionary reminder as part of their "Autocrítica" that was published in the major Madrilenian newspapers the day before the play's premiere:

"Es muy interesante que ustedes sepan que El caso de la mujer asesinada es una estupenda comedia que no tiene nada que ver con La Codorniz.... No solo es una comedia seria, atrevida y emocionante, sino que muy bien hubiera podido ser una comedia melodramática si nosotros no lo hubiésemos impedido tomando las cosas un poco a broma." See Mihura and Laiglesia, "Autocrítica, Marca (Madrid), February 21, 1946, p. 4.



Mihura recorded his dismay as follows:

Lo que yo creía que era una obra de público resultaba casi una obra de vanguardia.... Yo me hice un lío tremendo y dejé de pensar definitivamente en el teatro.<sup>7</sup>

His disillusionment concerning what he considered an unwarranted classification of his play as a staged extension of La Codorniz was particularly aggravated when the entire production netted him the trifling sum of 12,000 pesetas.<sup>8</sup>

Mihura forsook the theater for six years. In the interim, as we discussed earlier, he earned a small fortune in the film industry. Upon his return to playwriting with the success of Tres sombreros de copa, he firmly repudiated the codornicesco tradition of his avant-garde humor; hereafter we would affirm over and again the formula that since 1952 has characterized his commercial triumphs and personal prosperity: "Solamente hay una orientación que puede seguirse en el teatro. Estrenar comedias que gusten, representadas por actores que interesen."<sup>9</sup>

In the present chapter, El caso de la mujer asesinadita will be examined as a work of transition in

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<sup>7</sup>Mihura, Obras, p. 41.

<sup>8</sup>A. D. Olano, El Alcázar (Madrid), April 4, 1953, 5.

<sup>9</sup>Ricardo Domenech, "Reflexiones sobre la situación del teatro," Primer Acto, No. 42 (1963), 7.

the evolution of Mihura's theater. The play represents a mid-way point in the author's voluntary effort to shift his stage aesthetics from one of an appeal to the cultured, sophisticated minority, to a plan designed to engage the interests of a sizeable middle class audience. In other words, the play reflects the conversion from spontaneity to the adoption of a conventional and compromising attitude.

Ironically, however, Mujer asesinadita was written and produced with the expressed intention of pleasing the general public; it was meant to be "un mero pasatiempo entretenido," according to a correspondent for La Estafeta Literaria.<sup>10</sup> However, the given historical moment had earmarked Mihura as "un rebelde de la gracia nueva," and as such the play was received and has generally been esteemed as a product of the author's revolutionary harvest.<sup>11</sup>

There are, of course, several elements within the context of the play to justify considering the comedy an avant-garde work. Mihura's familiar hand is very apparent. It is consequently our primary concern to point out these aspects of an avant-garde tone, yet

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<sup>10</sup>Luis Molero Manglano, "El teatro español desde 1939 hasta nuestros días," La Estafeta Literaria, No. 163 (February 15, 1959), 10.

<sup>11</sup>M. Sánchez Camargo, review of "El caso de la mujer asesinadita," in El Alcázar (Madrid), February 21, 1946, p. 8.

at the same time we will also call attention to those components which distinguish Mujer asasinadita from the formulas more common to Mihura's three earlier writings.

In general terms, this three-act comedy differs from Mihura's former productions by its technical superiority and its perfectly structured intrigue. Despite its having been written in only twenty days, the play reveals an extraordinary ingenuity of construction. The frequent shifting of its action from fantasy to reality and back again to the world of dreams is managed with the ease of sound intelligence and with an air of polished sophistication.

José Monleón designates the work "una pirueta de gran preciosismo formal," observing with emphasis that in his opinion "hay muy pocas obras en el teatro español que estén construídas con tanta habilidad."<sup>12</sup> Torrente Ballester has likewise extolled the play for its "perfección constructiva."<sup>13</sup> This statement also calls to mind the high rating accorded the play in González Ruiz' dated study on the Spanish contemporary theater, wherein he remarks that it is "la más importante, tal vez, de las comedias del nuevo teatro español hasta la fecha en

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<sup>12</sup>"La libertad de Miguel Mihura," Miguel Mihura, ed. José Monleón (Madrid: Taurus, 1965), p. 55.

<sup>13</sup>Gonzalo Torrente Ballester, "El teatro serio de un humorista," Ibid., p. 69.

que escribimos."<sup>14</sup> He too makes specific reference to the work's "armazón del interés," that is, its highly structured intrigue which, at its best, wields with singular efficiency "el ambiente misterioso y denso, el clima de la inquietud, el miedo a algo ignorado e inevitable."<sup>15</sup>

These are perhaps the very merits that earned the comedy considerable recognition on an international billing. It broke a record in Mexico City, for example, when it reached its 415th performance in 1964.<sup>16</sup>

Mujer asesinadita contains none of the strange verbal dislocations or logical distortions common to the three other plays features in this study. Its language is simple, sober, and natural, though irrelevant on occasion. There are a number of episodes clearly shorn

<sup>14</sup>Nicolás González Ruis, La cultura española en los últimos veinte años: El teatro (Madrid: Instituto de Cultura Hispánica, 1949), p. 40.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>16</sup>Other foreign presentations or adaptations of this play have appeared in Argentina, Chile, Italy, Portugal, England, Belgium, and the United States. See José Monleón, "Obras de Miguel Mihura traducidas o adaptadas a otros idiomas," op. cit. (above, note 12), p. 153.

One even finds a warped adaptation of the comedy in Philadelphia's Walnut Street Theater for a short run in 1964. The play was entitled Rich Little Rich Girl and involved a wealthy female capitalist in a murder plot with a South American dictator. The play folded after two weeks. See Otis L. Guernsey, Jr., The Best Plays of 1964-75 (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1965), p. 371.

of humor; their inconsequential dialogue, though elegant and credible, appears to be the vestige of Mihura and Laiglesia's endeavor to divest the work of excessive drollery. This is particularly noticeable in Lorenzo's lengthy flirtation scene with Raquel in Act Two and the Christmas Eve small talk through most of Act Three.

This is one of the few plays in Mihura's total production to achieve its effectiveness through means other than dialogue. A predominance of spiritualistic elements comprises its most cogent appeal. In an atmosphere already rarefied with puzzling and mysterious tones, owing to constant reminders about a murder and the intricate fusion of dreams with reality, these elements seem to wrest our interest from the cleverness and fluidity of the characters' speech to concentrate our attention more on the surface action.

Alfredo Marqueríe lists the various themes concerning occultism in this unique work as follows:

... temas del terror y de la metapsíquica, la telepatía, la premonición, las adivinaciones del inframundo de los sueños, el espiritismo, las apariciones fantasmales y la quiromancia.<sup>17</sup>

Add to this list the attendant theme of adultery, incorporated within the context of the murder episode, and one can readily understand why the play was labeled by one Italian reporter as "una obra cuyo aspecto moral es

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<sup>17</sup>Veinte años de teatro en España (Madrid: Editora Nacional, 1959), p. 147.

desdichadísimo,... peligroso para todos."<sup>18</sup> This same critic however, concurred with the majority of noted Spanish reviewers in admitting that these distrusted recondite elements exemplify, in a literary sense, "un notable esfuerzo por llevar el teatro por derroteros de arte y novedad."<sup>19</sup>

The novelty spoken of here is the very attribute which motivated González Ruiz to declare that the play contains a definite avant-garde feature in that it manifests itself "libre de las trabas convencionales y los costumbrismos mediocres que casi ahogan nuestro teatro."<sup>20</sup> This uniqueness is evident in the recurring parallelism which the authors sustain in all three acts of their play. They juxtapose a serious and precise reality with a whimsical taste of the supernatural. The real world of romance and intrigue shifts indistinguishably into an unreal world characterized by seances, ghosts, and divination.

Most of Act One, for example, is pervaded by the enigmatic incidents of a single dream superimposing its own reality upon the reality of life. This dream sequence is reiterated in Act Two, as the gradual

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<sup>18</sup>Mateo Enríquez, review of "Mujer asesinadita," in Ecclesia (Rome), August 6, 1946.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Nicolás González Ruiz, op. cit. (above, note 14), p. 42.

realization of its fatalistic tidings is made more and more apparent. A second dream (Norton's) confirms the former (Mercedes'), and reality consists once again of the concurrence of normal fact and supernatural events. Realistic action is further complicated by the appearance of two old people dressed in mourning who have been dead for five years. In Act Three the previous dreams merge into a meaningful context of factual existence. Prophecy is fulfilled with the deaths of Mercedes and Norton, and their spiritual union restores the supernatural theme. Just as fantasy appears to replace reality in the terminal scene, the action shifts again to disclose the real-life boredom of Raquel and Lorenzo, two of the principal characters whose role is exempt from the excitement and exhilaration of transcendental occurrences.

Guerrero Zamora maintains that it is this fusion between humor and mystery -- the same notion we prefer to call the reciprocal exchange between reality and fantasy -- that gives to the comedy its distinctive quality.<sup>21</sup> This quality reaches its maximum force in the dramatized encounter -- effected only by the use of etherial voices off stage -- between the recently assassinated Mercedes and the spirit of Norton.

Mihura and Laiglesia's comedy clearly partakes of the same atmosphere that characterizes Noel Coward's

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<sup>21</sup> Juan Guerrero Zamora, Historia del teatro contemporáneo, III (Barcelona: Juan Flors, 1962), 177.

Blithe Spirit (1941), a play that was breaking all records in London at the same time Mujer asesinadita was performed in Madrid. Coward's work, as Fernández de Asís points out, differs considerably in terms of the plot line; the correspondence is merely one of "una misma modalidad ... de la época."<sup>22</sup>

While we are on the subject of literary similarities, it may be of interest to mention that Jorge de la Cueva finds a resemblance in the appearance of the old deceased couple in Act Two of Mujer asesinadita to the entrance of the Heavenly Policemen in Ferenc Molnar's Liliom (1909).<sup>23</sup> Alfredo Marqueríe observes a likeness between the carefree chatter in Joseph Kesselring's Arsenic and Old Lace (1941) in the scene concerning the preparation of a deadly poison, and the corresponding incident in Act Two of Mihura's play.<sup>24</sup> Díez Crespo finds an echo of Cocteau with regard to the soft accent of mystery lying beneath the course of a clear plot.<sup>25</sup> These are all peripheral resemblances, of course, and in no way do they suggest direct literary influence.

<sup>22</sup>Review of "Mujer asesinadita," in Pueblo (Madrid), February 21, 1946, p. 4.

<sup>23</sup>Review of "Mujer asesinadita," in Ya (Madrid), February 21, 1946, p. 5.

<sup>24</sup>Review of "Mujer asesinadita," in ABC (Madrid), February 21, 1946, p. 21.

<sup>25</sup>Review of "Mujer asesinadita," in Arriba (Madrid), February 21, 1946, p. 4.



Marqueríe is quick to point out that while Mihura responds to a theme in vogue in Western films and literature, El caso de la mujer asesinadita "es de una total y absoluta originalidad... que busca su inspiración en la zona de lo raro y de lo inquietante."<sup>26</sup>

Only once since this play has Mihura introduced an aspect of the supernatural in his writings. Milagro en casa de los López (Barcelona, 1964) presents a burlesque notion of otherworldliness, but it differs from Mujer asesinadita by relegating the supernatural to the background, while in his play written with Laiglesia, Mihura permits fantastic happenings to take a decisive role in the development of the plot.

Perhaps one reason why critics and literary historians mention this well-constructed play in connection with Mihura's avant-garde productions is because its first act contains certain elements reminiscent of the kind of absurdity that is associated with the author's early period. The appearance of Norton as an American Indian, for example, lends credence to the view that the play evinces a sign of surface nonsense. Professor Theodore S. Beardsley objects to Mihura's Indian as "a loose, disturbing, untied thread" in a play that is "otherwise too tidy to allow us to assume that this is

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<sup>26</sup>Marqueríe, op. cit. (above, note 24).

not a calculated technique."<sup>27</sup> The Indian, however, is simply an expressionistic element existing in the dream world of Mercedes, who conjures up many unusual details to accompany the true omen of her impending murder. The Indian functions to reduce the lucidity of her dream and to graft a fabricated element of illogic and distortion upon the course of an otherwise normal world. This is a procedure typical of Mihura in his early theater and it does contribute to the linking of this play with other comedies of that epoch.

Another unusual figment of Mercedes' imagination, reproduced as though it were a realistic happening, is the maid's first-scene exit carrying a bird cage with a canary in it, followed by her immediate entrance carrying the same cage that now contains a cat. Mercedes also dreams that her servants are haughty and insubordinate to her, a notion which provides an amusing contrast after the dream when we note how obsequious and gentle in their manner in real life.

The title of the play suggests one additional reason to justify the tendency of critics to include Mujer asesinadita in Mihura's avant-garde period. The diminutive appended to asesinada catches us off guard; we are amused at the thought of a woman being "a little

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<sup>27</sup>Medardo Fraile, "Twenty Years of Theater in Spain," trans. Mildred Boyer, op. cit. (above, note 3), p. 99.

bit murdered," or we chuckle with Mildred Boyer's less effective translation, "The Case of the Woman's Nice Little Murder."<sup>28</sup> In titling their play in this manner, Mihura and Laiglesia are merely responding to a popular trend of their day. A surprisingly large number of plays of the post-Civil War era are distinguished by a humor of incongruity in their titles. Jardiel Poncela engages in this practice often, as illustrated by the comedy Como mejor están las rubias con patatas. Mihura and Tono incorporated absurd incongruity in the title of their play, Ni pobre ni rico, sino todo lo contrario. Tono continued this practice in several of his plays, such as Guillermo Hotel and Crimen pluscuamperfecto. Laiglesia also indulged in titular antics with such captions as En el cielo no hay almejas and Tú también naciste desnudito.

Another popular trend that gained impetus during the 1940's and blossomed enormously during the next decade, was the writing of mystery plays, or dramatized detective novels. Mihura's three "Case" plays are not all comedies of intrigue, as their titles might suggest, but they do exemplify the author's propensity to cultivate plays of this familiar genre.<sup>29</sup> Carlota is perhaps

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<sup>28</sup>Medardo Fraile, "Twenty Years of Theater in Spain," trans. Mildred Boyer, op. cit. (above, note 3), p. 99.

<sup>29</sup>The comedies that best represent Mihura's repertory of mystery dramas include Una mujer cualquiera (1953), Carlota (1957), Melocotón en almíbar (1958), and La decente (1967).

his best-known contribution to the provocative class of theater known in Spain as "el género policíaco."

Mujer asesinadita also partakes of this climate. Throughout the play new notes of mystery and suspense are constantly interjected. Because a criminal act is imminent from the beginning, the element of time becomes important to the action; the position or location of physical objects takes on an added significance; the entrances and exits of all major characters become essential to our interest in the development of the plot. Overall, there is a light-hearted feeling of impending doom. But instead of pity and fear, we experience a sense of amusement at the action, and astonishment before the many supernatural resources Mihura and Laiglesia evoke to flavor their satire.

Through the magic of humor, upheld in this work in the roles of Raquel and Norton, the authors control the intrigue within an atmosphere of subdued jocularly. Thus it is that comic elements often lie in contrast between the theme of suspense and the light, sometimes frivolous, tone in which people are talking. And thus it is that the play can make a spoof of the tediousness of a dull marriage and can lampoon occult practices within the framework of a clever and stirring mystery drama that introduces the serious themes of infidelity and homicide.

Finally, the play offers a thematic parallel to previous and forthcoming Mihurian productions. As in

the plays we treat in other chapters, behind all major resolves in the action of Mujer asenadita lies an incitement produced by boredom. Nearly everyone is bored to death in this play. Mercedes, the protagonist, is presented to us with an "aire ausente y romántico, que, para no aburrirse demasiado en su matrimonio, se entretiene en leer novelas de aventuras y en dar la lata a las criadas."<sup>30</sup> Her friendless and indifferent relationship with her husband grows increasingly colorless, until, a victim of his hand, she finds in death a welcomed relief from her tedium.

Rosaura, the fat cook, gives utterance to her delusions of grandeur. She prefers to live in a world of make-believe as an escape from monotony, fearing the dullness of her life will drive her insane:

¡Me divierte decir mentiras! ¡Llevo toda mi vida metida en la cocina, haciendo croquetas para la señora y haciendo besugo al horno para el señor, y necesito decir mentiras para divertirme y no volverme loca! ¿Tú sabes lo que es pasarse un año, y otro año, en pie ante un fogón, viendo cómo hierve el agua de una olla? ¡Hay veces que parece que son tus mismos sesos los que hierven, y entonces!....<sup>31</sup>

Renato, the gardener, expresses the galling ennui he too suffers from the dreary tasks he daily performs:

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<sup>30</sup>Mihura, Obras, p. 183.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 184.

Estoy reventado de podar los árboles,  
de regar el jardín, de mirar al cielo sin  
saber por qué...<sup>32</sup>

Lorenzo, the husband, is terribly bored with his listless wife. He is characterized as an unimaginative, dull, stupid human being. Though he murders Mercedes in a carefree, prosaic manner, hoping thereby to find freedom and felicity with Raquel, he discovers nothing but absolute boredom in her presence. For now that the adventure of a secret adultery has ended, his life is dreary and dull! The final stage directions bring the action to a fitting close with two lazy yawns:

En una butaca, haciendo labor, está  
Raquel con la bata de Mercedes. En otra  
butaca, leyendo un periódico, está  
Lorenzo.... Los dos tienen aspecto de  
aburrirse como caballos. Raquel bosteza.  
Lorenzo bosteza. Cae el telón.<sup>33</sup>

We have seen wherein El caso de la mujer asesina-  
dita represents a partial departure from Mihura's revo-  
lutionary theater of humor. Consciously aware of their  
craft, Mihura and Laiglesia have endeavored to weave a  
humor of situation within the framework of a serious  
theme. A spontaneity of dialogue, so characteristic of  
the language and the construction of Mihura's former  
writings, is not apparent in the thoughtful, though  
playful, technical achievement of Mujer asesinadita.

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 250.

This comedy contains echoes of the sincerity and boldness of Mihura's former plays, but reveals as well a willful gravitation toward the formulation of a conservative posture. Quite simply, Mihura desires to please the public. V. Fernández Asís states the problem well when he observes that "su teatro no ha empeorado, sino que se ha ajustado a maneras y moldes más usuales. No por eso es menos interesante su teatro; es, sencillamente, menos original."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Review of Mihura's "Sublime decisión," in Pueblo (Madrid), April 11, 1955, p. 8.

## CHAPTER SIX

### TWO WORLDS IN VITAL CONFRONTATION:

#### TRES SOMBREROS DE COPA

Tres sombreros de copa is the play that first and foremost has earned Miguel Mihura distinction in the contemporary European theater. Its first staging in 1952 created a sensation in the Spanish theater world and, as one translation followed upon another, Mihura was swiftly catapulted into the international renown he currently enjoys as one of Spain's most outstanding humorists.

This play alone, according to José Monleón, the former editor of Primer Acto, would have sufficed to establish Mihura as an important author of contemporary drama.<sup>1</sup> Ricardo Domenech values the comedy on a plane equal in importance to the esperpentos of Valle-Inclán, the greguerías of Ramón Gómez de la Serna, and the entire theater of Jardiel Poncela, as representing "la aportación española a las más brillantes vanguardias europeas de este siglo."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>"La libertad de Miguel Mihura," Miguel Mihura, ed. José Monleón (Madrid: Taurus, 1965), p. 45.

<sup>2</sup>"Tres sombreros de copa, o un esperpento cordial," Ibid., p. 98.



Drama critics first called the play a work of the avant-garde in the tradition of ¡Viva lo imposible! and Ni pobre ni rico. They expressed astonishment upon learning that a comedy of such neoteric freshness could have been written a full twenty years and fourteen days before its premiere. Surprisingly, many of them declared the play was still before its time. Even as late as 1959, Jorge Collar, writing for the elite literary periodical, La estafeta literaria, averred that the play's only defect lay in the fact that it was still too modern.<sup>3</sup>

Immediately following the play's estreno in Paris, some six years after its appearance on the Spanish stage, French reviewers accorded the work a similar recognition as an avant-garde production, noting that in its manuscript form, Mihura's play was a forerunner in spirit to the provocative absurdist theater of Ionesco. Writing for Dimanche-Presse, one critic extolled the terrible melancholy lying beneath its surface humor, and concluded that the play was an extraordinary comedy, a masterpiece of the modern theater.<sup>4</sup> Eugène Ionesco himself, often abrasive in his judgment of contemporary writers, recognized the literary and intellectual excellence of the work and maintained that its irrational

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<sup>3</sup>"Los tres sombreros de copa de Miguel Mihura," La Estafeta Literaria, No. 164 (March 1, 1959), 17.

<sup>4</sup>J.S. (sic.), "Buenos Días, M. Labiche!", Dimanche-Presse (Paris), January 29, 1959.

style could invigorate the contradictions, the stupidity, and the absurdity of the human spirit far better than any argument of formal rationalism or mechanical dialectics.<sup>5</sup>

The history of the gestation of Tres sombreros de copa, alluded to earlier in Chapter Two, and documented in detail by Mihura in his introduction to the 1943 edition of the play, needs no further elucidation here. It should suffice to say that for twenty years following its composition, the play was "aquella comedia que nadie entendía," a work so inimitable, so surprisingly original, that, as Mihura states, it "no sólo desconcertaba a la gente sino que sembraba el terror en los que la leían."<sup>6</sup>

The commercial theaters would not touch the play. Promoters dared not risk their money on its outlandish content. Many of Mihura's close friends viewed the work with suspicion and advised him to shelve it away for a more opportune moment..

It was generally conceded that public taste was to blame for the play's long suppression. Yet even with the mellowing of public resistance -- refined, perhaps, by the impact and aesthetics of Mihura's previous plays

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<sup>5</sup>Eugène Ionesco, "El humor negro contra la mixtificación," Primer Acto, No. 7 (March-April, 1959), pp. 63-64; see also Ionesco's prologue to Les trois chapeaux claque, trans. Hélène Duc and José Estrada (Paris: L'Avant-scène; femina théâtre, No. 191).

<sup>6</sup>Mihura, Obras, p. 31.

and the disarming humor of La Codorniz -- the unproduced play was still rejected by professional promoters and might never have been staged were it not for the work of a director named Gustavo Pérez Puig and two dozen university students. The play was premiered by the Teatro Español Universitario in the state-subsidized Teatro Español on the night of November 24, 1952. There was only one presentation, yet that single production was enough to bring about an immediate repercussion. It opened to Mihura the doors of the commercial theaters. As Juan Emilio Aragonés wrote in 1963:

Por fin comprendieron los avispados empresarios algo que ni ellos ni los grupos vocacionales habían entendido antes de 1936: que el humor de Mihura y los intereses del negocio no son elementos antagónicos."<sup>7</sup>

Within a few months' time, Tres sombreros de copa was awarded the Premio Nacional de Teatro as the outstanding play of the 1953 season. Public and critical favor was unanimous; the play's acceptance was universal. "Tres sombreros de copa," exclaimed José Monleón, "quedará en la historia del teatro español como una de las mejores obras de nuestro tiempo."<sup>8</sup>

Wherein lies the greatness of this unusual play? The most common approach to an understanding of the

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<sup>7</sup>"Tres sombreros de copa," La Estafeta Literaria, No. 281 (December 21, 1963).

<sup>8</sup>José Monleón, op. cit. (above, note 1), p. 45.

comedy's literary value has been to point out its avant-garde features of language and stage action. Eminent drama critics and literary historians have frequently mentioned the dislocated dialogue, the irrational rupture of logical replies, and the elements of the absurd in human behavior contained within the play. While this approach, soundly supported by able scholarship, enables the student of modern Spanish theater to become acquainted with the general tone and tenor of the work, it does not fully explain the poignant charm in the design and substance of the play. Were it to be judged only on the content of its absurdist elements, Tres sombreros de copa might well be classified, by comparison, as second in importance to Mihura and Tono's outstanding farce, Ni pobre ni rico, or at best on a par with the equally absurd and compelling drama by Mihura and Calvo Sotelo, ¡Viva lo imposible!

However, the play's superiority to the former productions is attested to by a dimension of meaning that lies beyond the factors most commonly cited in connection with its avant-garde character. It is the purpose of this final chapter to probe into the essence of this dimension, to examine the implications inherent in the play's conflict and to consider Mihura's notable achievement in giving valid characterization to uncommon personalities.

Adolfo Prego wisely observed that in this play are contained "todos los elementos que Mihura irá desarrollando en las comedias siguientes."<sup>9</sup> We will return often to this thought in our ensuing discussion, believing with Adolfo Prego that in Tres sombreros de copa one may find a compressed intimation of the author's later writings. Indeed, our appreciation for Mihura's first and perhaps best play is greatly enhanced due to the discovery that in its conception a personal style is born, a style that will gain in meaning and eloquence in the realization of his future works.

Tres sombreros de copa is unlike any other Spanish play of its time. It combines an intellectual humor with a warm and convincing sense of humanity. The humor is sustained by inverisimilar dialogue and by absurd action, while the vigorous sparkle of human tenderness in the substructure of the play is born of superb characterization and upheld by an indefinable element of poetic genius that generates credible spontaneity in an incredible atmosphere.

The sophisticated form of humor centered in the dialogue of the play may in the course of time become dated and stale. Mihura believes it already has. "El tipo de humor que representa Tres sombreros de copa ya

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<sup>9</sup>"El teatro de Miguel Mihura," Primer Acto, No. 10 (October, 1959), 18.

no tiene interés," he stated in a recent interview.<sup>10</sup> Clearly, the author values his later plays over Tres sombreros de copa; he considers the famous production of his youth to have been a mere experiment. Yet despite Mihura's personal opinion, the play continues to be acclaimed his greatest endeavor, and its dialogue is upheld as an example of living, natural, and expressive language.

A new and ridiculous use of familiar tópicos is paramount to the humorous impact of this language. Common expressions undergo a process of dislocation in the service of revealing human needs and evoking charitable laughter over human follies. This characteristic has been referred to as the happy blend of piruetas, or the hilarious absurdities of dehumanization, with punzadas tristes, "known by the catch in the throat and the tear in the eye."<sup>11</sup> This may be what Francisco Sitjá has in mind when he writes that "Mihura consigue pasar su mercancía siempre de contrabando entre risas y bobadas."<sup>12</sup> Ionesco has expressed this idea in situating Tres sombreros de copa between the world of Charlie Chaplin and

<sup>10</sup>Personal interview with Mihura, June 9, 1967.

<sup>11</sup>Doris K. Arjona, "Beyond Humor: The Theater of Miguel Mihura," Kentucky Foreign Language Quarterly, VI, No. 2 (1959), 5.

<sup>12</sup>"Cincuenta años de teatro proscrito," Insula, No. 157 (December, 1959), 16.

the world of the Marx Brothers.<sup>13</sup> In his critical review of the play, Ionesco explains his comment as follows:

En esta obra se mezclan familiarmente lo trágico a lo cómico, el dolor a la bufonería, lo leve a lo grave. Es una excelente gimnasia intelectual. Exige un pequeño esfuerzo, una cierta agilidad de espíritu por parte del lector o espectador: aprehender lo racional a través de lo irracional: pasar de un concepto de la realidad a otro; de la vida al sueño, del sueño a la vida.<sup>14</sup>

Judging from the above quotations, one may conclude that the humor of Tres sombreros de copa occupies a unique intermediate stage between tragedy and comedy, borrowing equally from sensations of heartbreak and gracia, suffering and playfulness, derision and veneration, as the pendulum of authentic human experience shifts in constant motion from one pole to the other.

Fernández Cuenca compares this oscillating medium of humor to the blurring action of a camera lens; deliberately placed before the true shape of things, it distorts the vision of reality, thus forcing the imagination to juxtapose the most dissimilar objects in search for an apparent logic.<sup>15</sup> The sum and substance

<sup>13</sup>Commented in Enrique Llovet, "El honor en el teatro de Mihura," Miguel Mihura (above, note 1), p. 89.

<sup>14</sup>Ionesco, op. cit. (above, note 5), p. 64.

<sup>15</sup>Carlos Fernández Cuenca, review of Mihura's "El caso de la señora estupenda," in Teatro (Madrid), No. 5 (March, 1933), p. 6.

of this explanation suggests that Tres sombreros de copa approximates in general the concept of surrealism.

It is in this connection that Juan Guerrero Zamora identifies Mihura as the inaugurator of a new style of humor in Spanish dramatic literature, a style based upon the systematic rupture of commonplace notions in both form and content, designed to reveal "la subyacencia fatua, ridícula, aparential, pueril y, al mismo tiempo, tierna de nuestra existencia."<sup>16</sup>

The following characteristic traits of the play will serve to illustrate the surrealist climate of the dialogue.

Verbal distortions of logic are first noticeable in the speech of the saintly Don Rosario, whose very name connotes a spirit of beatific kindliness and adoration, in keeping with his personality.<sup>17</sup> Rosario's dialogue

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<sup>16</sup>Historia del teatro contemporáneo, III (Barcelona: Juan Flors, 1962), p. 173.

<sup>17</sup>While Mihura's thieves, street walkers, and other lower class people are frequently given names indicative of their profession or type, the author is in general not prone to tag his characters with suggestive appellations. However, Tres sombreros de copa is atypical in this respect. Most of the leading characters of the play have an ironical naming, particularly Don Sacramento, the puritanical formalist, and Fanny, a common prostitute. Dionisio's name is wholly ironic; he is anything but bacchic in his conduct until he meets Paula, of whom he becomes literally inebriated as well as spiritually intoxicated with the joy of unrestrained permissiveness. Paula, for her part, may be aptly named for her aversion to marriage.



tends to transgress the laws of proportion and employs what Guerrero Zamora terms visionary hyperbole.<sup>18</sup>

Se ve la montaña, con una vaca encima muy gorda, que, poquito a poco, se está comiendo toda la montaña.<sup>19</sup>

Dionisio continues this direction with a dialogue that places greater stress on a distortion of logical causality. In conversing with Buby, the colored impresario, Dionisio asks:

- ¡Y hace mucho tiempo que es usted negro?
- No sé. Yo siempre me he visto así en la luna de los espejitos.
- ¡Vaya por Dios! ¡Cuando viene una desgracia nunca viene sola! ¿Y de qué se quedó usted así? ¿De alguna caída?<sup>20</sup>

Occasionally the conversation contains a lack of logic approaching the absurd, as exemplified by Madame Olga, the bearded lady, in her explanation as to why she does not shave:

Mi marido, monsieur Durand, no me lo hubiese consentido nunca. Mi marido era un hombre muy bueno, pero de ideas antiguas. ¡El no pudo resistir nunca a esas mujeres que se depilan las cejas y se afeitan el cogote! Siempre lo decía el pobre: "¡Esas mujeres que se afeitan me parecen hombres!"<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Juan Guerrero Zamora, op. cit. (above, note 16), p. 173.

<sup>19</sup>Mihura, Obras, p. 48.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 73.

The height of absurdity is reached when Don Sacramento pronounces his many dictums concerning decent conduct, among them the following:

Las personas decentes deben llevar siempre patatas en los bolsillos, caballero... Y también deben llevar tafetán para las heridas....<sup>22</sup>

Oftentimes the humor resulting from such strange distortions approximates the kind of sick joke or black humor that gained popularity in the western world about a decade after the premiere of the play. It is similar, in fact, to Mihura's former writings for La Codorniz, in which verbal sallies represent an attempt to attain a superior, sophisticated attitude toward serious matters. Two examples from the play are as follows:

- ¿Entonces, toda su familia han sido artistas de circo?
- Sí. Todos. Menos la abuelita. Como estaba tan vieja, no servía. Se caía siempre del caballo.<sup>23</sup>
- ¿Y cuántos dientes tiene su señora?
- ¡Oh, ella no tiene ninguno! Los perdió todos cuando se cayó por aquella escalera, y quedó paralítica para toda su vida, sin poderse levantar de su silla de ruedas. ¡Usted pasará grandes ratos charlando con este matrimonio encantador!<sup>24</sup>

A common form of dislocated dialogue is the inverisimilar response to a simple question, or a follow-up comment that thoroughly disarms the listener by its

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., pp. 96-97.

absolute irrelevance to the subject. This is the same practice we noted in our discussion of the absurd in Mihura and Tono's Ni pobre ni rico. Evaristo Acevedo characterizes this kind of humor as "preferentemente intemporal y abstracto, cuya temática parece ir dirigida contra la frase hecha; contra el tópico lingüístico; ... obedece a una postura preconcebida de 'evasión de realidad'." <sup>25</sup> Six examples illustrate its use in Tres sombreros de copa:

- ¿Es usted también artista?
- Mucho.
  
- ¿Era militar?
- Sí. Era militar. Pero muy poco.  
Casi nada.
  
- Es un pobre.
- ¿Un pobre? ¿Y cómo se llama?
- Nada. Los pobres no se llaman nada.
  
- ¡Es usted un chico maravilloso!
- ¡Pues usted tampoco es manca, señorita!
- ¡Qué cosas tan especiales dice usted!
- ¡Pues usted tampoco se chupa el dedo!
  
- ¿Usted también se baña con frecuencia, señorita?
- Sí. Pero claro está que no tanto como su tía de usted.
  
- ¡Te casas, Dionisio!
- Sí. Me caso, pero poco. <sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Teoría e interpretación del humor español  
(Madrid: Editora Nacional, 1966), p. 248.

<sup>26</sup> Mihura, Obras, pp. 57, 58, 66, 74, 82, and 99.

In addition to the projection of absurd notions through dialogue, Mihura also introduces elements in the action to advance the absurd vein of humor. Dionisio's struggle with a flea and his antics with the telephone in Act One are the two most notable examples.

Finally, the strange on-stage proliferation of diverse physical objects contributes to formulate an absurd climate. Act One prepares the spectator for the gradual increase of unusual things, beginning with Dionisio's black satin pajamas with a white bird embroidered on the chest, and Don Rosario's discovery of a man's boot under the bed.

As the peculiar objects make their appearance, none is forgotten or discarded; they remain on stage and are utilized by various characters throughout the course of action. The man's boot, for instance, is used by Dionisio to strike a match by later in Act One. Unlike the rapid multiplication of articles in Ionesco's theater, these objects do not overwhelm the characters, nor do they become predominant to the action, but their progressive accumulation does offer us a taste of the type of proliferation that will characterize such plays as Les Chaises and Le Nouveau Locataire.

Briefly mentioned, the curious items in Tres sombreros de copa include packages, bottles, coats, hats, musical instruments, tin cans, paper, medals, four dead rabbits, and four live dogs (concerning which Mihura adds

"sería encantador que fueran ladrando."<sup>27</sup> Add to this El Odioso Señor's gesture in removing from his pockets such articles as garters, stockings, a bouquet of flowers, a box of candy, two sandwiches, and a baby rattle, and one senses a clear resemblance of the action in this play to the spirit of a vaudeville act. This music hall climate is also furthered by the presence of El Coro de los Viejos Extraños, who sing three popular songs in Act Two. To this atmosphere might be added the sound of music from a gramophone, the frequent dancing about the stage, the sudden entrances and the hurried exits, the abrupt appearance of El Alegre Explorador from beneath Dionisio's bed, and the equally surprising entrance of the Romántico Enamorado from inside Dionisio's wardrobe.

It is no wonder that this play shocked the sensibilities of many of Mihura's most liberal professional friends. Had it been permitted a premiere in 1932, it is possible that an audience of conservative Spanish theatergoers would have been brought to its feet, flustered, indignant, shouting. One promoter of that time, José Juan Cadenas, rejected the play on these very grounds:

...es tan extraordinariamente nueva en su forma y en su procedimiento que si la estrenase en mi teatro podrían ocurrir dos cosas: o que tuviese gran éxito, o que el público quemase las butacas.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

Manolo Collado's admonition to Mihura was perhaps very wise, if not inspired: "Es una comedia de humor tan fino y tan nuevo que hay que preparar al público para que sepa lo que va a ver."<sup>29</sup>

Yet we should not forget that when this same play was finally staged, it impressed Eugène Ionesco so greatly that he recommended it to all audiences saying:

Esta desarticulación aparente es, en el fondo, un excelente ejercicio para enriquecer la expresión teatral, multiplicar, variar los dominios de la 'realidad', sometidos a la exploración del autor dramático.<sup>30</sup>

Ionesco joined many drama critics in lamenting that a work of such fine artistic value could have been refused a hearing by the wary Spanish impresarios of the 1930's and 1940's.

Turning now from matters dealing with humor, dialogue, and stage action, let us examine the subject of character delineation, which in turn will lead us to consider the essential meaning of the play.

A warm and humane undercurrent, visible in all Mihura's comedies, is especially apparent in Tres sombreros de copa. Here the author shows an unusual feeling and compassion for his fellow human beings. Though he deplores intolerance and stupidity, his portrayal of intolerant and stupid people is never personal or bitter.

<sup>29</sup>Mihura, Obras, p. 31.

<sup>30</sup>Eugène Ionesco, op. cit. (above, note 5), p. 64.

Even the reprehensible natures of Don Sacramento and El Odioso Señor, as we shall shortly see, are sympathetically drawn.

This typically humane side of the author is a quality that in Spanish is called ternura, the word most frequently used by critics when writing about Mihura's plays. Other epithets flavored by critics and spectators alike include poesía, gracia, encanto, originalidad, emoción, and espontaneidad. These terms suggest the fact that soft emotions and poetical tones give to Mihura's comedies a value beyond that of sheer entertainment.

One unusual feature of Tres sombreros de copa is that none of the dramatis personae, excepting Paula, conveys the impression of being an ordinary, typical, average human being. Yet all of them, including Paula, have a common naturalness. They are all accurately drawn, without being portrayed as having profound psychological depth. They are logically built up, despite a deliberate exaggeration for the sake of burlesque and caricature in connection with the secondary figures. And they are wholly believable within the context of their intended roles. Enrique Llovet observed that "en Mihura no hay jamás una falta de lógica en los caracteres," an accurate statement especially when applied to Tres sombreros de copa.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Review of Mihura's "Ninette y un señor de Murcia," in ABC (Madrid), September 4, 1964.

We will treat separately the five most important personalities in the play, namely Dionisio, Paula, Don Sacramento, El Odioso Señor, and Don Rosario, followed by a brief comment on the function of the music hall characters as a collective group.

Dionisio, the young protagonist of the play, is masterfully characterized through dialogue and action. Central to the plot and to the significance of the play is the stress Mihura places on his natural timidity and his excessive malleability. Though unsettled and shifting in his convictions, Dionisio is not depreciated as an abulic soul. He possesses, in fact, a profound will to emancipate himself from the bondage of social conformity. He is a nonconformist in spirit, and thus elicits an indulgent sympathy from the spectator who can identify himself with Dionisio's suppressed desire for improvised adventure and lasting freedom, but senses as well his debilitating allegiance to the degrading presumptions of the world.

Dionisio is committed to marry Margarita, a girl whose nature is "tan cursi, que el autor, avergonzado, no se atreve a presentarla en escena en toda la obra."<sup>32</sup> His courtship has followed a standard pattern -- seven years of solicitation, the gradual obtainment of false

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<sup>32</sup>Miguel Mihura, "Autocrítica," quoted in Federico Carlos Sainz de Robles, Teatro Español 1952-53 (Madrid: Aguilar, 1954), p. 92.



illusions about happiness, and a romance inspired by material considerations over love. His imminent wedding represents the final and inevitable consignment of his mortal life to the dull, pedestrian order of habit and boredom.

Mihura point up the human weakness of his protagonist by presenting him in the sad and constant process of adopting the ideas of others to form a part of his own susceptible personality. When Dionisio shows his room to Paula, for instance, he acts toward her just as Don Rosario had acted earlier toward him in showing him the room. Paula expresses that she thinks it is stupid to get married and Dionisio agrees, thus contradicting his former belief. In the same way, he accepts Don Sacramento's judgment about him, namely that he is a bohemian. This same personality trait in Dionisio is also made clear in the episode of the broken carraca. In Act Two he plays with the toy while talking with Paula. It breaks and she *repairs* it for him. In Act Three this incident is repeated. But this time it is Don Sacramento who breaks the toy, and Dionisio who repairs it.

Overall, Dionisio is so easily convinced, so readily influenced by the opinions of others, that he is unable to master any situation. His frantic fumbling with the telephone while Paula lies unconscious on the floor is hilarious, but illustrates also the tragic

helplessness and confusion of Dionisio and how his weak character is torn between many allegiances. His struggle to seize an alternative that could change his life for the better results in a negative choice. He rejects the personal liberation Paula represents for him in favor of the puerile inertia that has thus far characterized his vapid existence.

Dionisio enters the swift action of this play as an utterly bored and boring individual. His life is suddenly infused with interest, vitality, and charm, only to be drained out as he voluntarily opts for the continuation of insipid boredom. This is a common motif in Mihura's plays. We have seen the theme of boredom operative in ¡Viva lo imposible!, wherein Palmira's shift from the stuffiness of a static Madrilenian existence to the glamour of the circus milieu, then back again to spiritual squalor, is similar to Dionisio's escape from his true dull nature into the magic of the music hall world.

The same theme is also present in El caso de la mujer asesinadita, which concludes with the total and absolute boredom of Lorenzo and Raquel after their stimulating and successful murder of Mercedes. Boredom is the key message in El caso de la señora estupenda, a play in which a woman engages in the dangerous game of espionage in an effort to escape from humdrumness, only to abandon the spy ring as a goading sense of ennui again overtakes her. Boredom as a motivating force weighs heavy upon

A media luz los tres, accounting for Sebastian's conduct and his basic failure with women. Boredom actuates Florita to enter a competitive man's world in Sublime decisión; it impels Juan to forsake a formal medical career for the spontaneous pleasures of a simple life in Mi adorado Juan. Extreme boredom lies at the base of the frivolous and stupid lives of the adulterous couples in La canasta, Mihura's only fracaso rotundo in every respect and his only unedited play. Because of boredom Andrés visits Paris in Ninette y un señor de Murcia, and the delightful and hilarious satire surrounding Jerónimo and Mercedes in Milagro en casa de los López is precisely at the expense of their complete domestic boredom. To a lesser degree this same theme is apparent in most of Mihura's other productions; it represents what Torrente Ballester calls his abiding "fastidio y disgusto por todo lo que ahoga la espontaneidad."<sup>33</sup>

Let us return to the character of Dionisio in Tres sombreros de copa. The melancholy that underlies the play is partially due to his incapability to respond to the world of love and adventure, despite his enlightened view that such a world offers him his only true freedom:

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<sup>33</sup>Gonzalo Torrente Ballester, "El teatro serio de un humorista," Miguel Mihura (above, note 1), p. 79.

¡Yo no me quiero casar! ¡Es una tontería! ¡Ya nunca sería feliz! Unas horas solamente, todo me lo han cambiado... Pensé salir de aquí hacia el camino de la felicidad y voy a salir hacia el camino de la noñería, y de la hiperclorhidria...<sup>34</sup>

In terms of Dionisio's role, this is a play about the initiation of a young man into self-realization, and his resulting frustration in finding himself inveterately bound to a social mold and to the mediocrity of his own sorry existence.

The other aspect of a sad undercurrent in Tres sombreros de copa is suggested by the character of Paula. Paula also incarnates a profound human search for happiness. In contrast to Dionisio's passivity, her life is characterized by motion. While Mihura offers no physical description of the girl, other than to mention that she is "una maravillosa muchacha rubia, de dieciocho años," we know by her energetic pace, her quick replies, and her carefree candor that she represents a young person filled with the boundless joy of living. As Torrente Ballester observes, Paula "es una mujer que vive, que concede a la espontaneidad, a la imaginación, a la alegría y a la melancolía un papel en su vida."<sup>35</sup>

Paula cares nothing for social rank, marriage, or responsibility. Her pleasures are the innocent joys

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<sup>34</sup>Mihura, Obras, p. 103.

<sup>35</sup>Gonzalo Torrente Ballester, op. cit. (above, note 33), p. 74.

of infancy, like eating crabs at the beach and building castles in the sand. She openly rebels against any domineering force imposed on her life, as exemplified by her unwillingness to heed the dictates of her colored manager and obvious lover, Buby Barton. She is a woman who allows her emotions free rein and her vitality full expression. A product of the music hall, Paula is the complete opposite of the stable and sterile world of Dionisio's fiancée. She is, in point of fact, a show girl prostitute who, under the direction of her unscrupulous manager, exploits with her wiles and feigned affections the wealthy strangers she meets.

Yet in her encounter with Dionisio, Paula suddenly wavers in her self-sufficiency and designed intent, approaching for a fleeting moment the extraordinary sensation of genuine love. The remarkable thing about her contact with this unaffected emotion is that Mihura permits her to enter the experience without caprice and to depart from the same without sentimentality. Her final toss of the three top hats at the close of the play signifies that she too will return to the norms and conventions of her own world, and life will go on just as before.

Paula's appearance, incidentally, like Maribel's in Maribel y la extraña familia, is funny and surprising because the author has been preparing our imagination to visualize a chaste Margarita; early

allusions to Margarita's saintliness, purity, and virtue make Paula seem all the more interesting to the spectator, as her professional interests are made manifest. The contrast between Paula and Margarita remains implicit throughout the play, for although Margarita never appears in person, the kind of life she represents for Dionisio is very clearly defined, a fact which makes more keen our regard for the charming Paula.

Paula is the first in an impressive company of Mihurian prostitutes. While a detailed account of others of the author's female characters who live on the edge of society is most tempting, it must remain outside of the context of this study. Suffice it to say, Paula is a prototype for a number of street girls who make their appearance in various plays of a later period. Most of them, like Paula, are happy and uncomplicated. Only one of them -- Nieves, the protagonist of Una mujer cualquiera -- is miserable and lonesome. Mihura's wayward ladies are typically glad and undoubtedly provide a special kind of thematic fascination for their creator. His gallery of prostitutes includes, in addition to Paula and Fanny of Tres sombreros de copa and the aforementioned Nieves; Maribel, Rufi, Pili, and Nini of Maribel y la extraña familia; and Fany, Cloti, Pili, and Juli of Las entretenidas. Ninette, a genuine representative of a popular Parisean

milieu, might also be included. She appears in two plays, namely Ninette y un señor de Murcia and its sequel, Ninette, Modas de París.

As was indicated earlier in our discussion of the humor of this play, the freedom that Dionisio and Paula discover is promptly annihilated by the repressions and tabus of conventionalism. The inuring forces brought to bear against their rebellion emerge from the stratified and dogmatic codes for human conduct symbolized in the appearance of Don Sacramento, Dionisio's future father-in-law.

As his very name suggests, Don Sacramento represents the strict and binding covenant that governs an obedient professor of decency. He opposes improvisation of any kind and censures the mere appearance of deviation from the prescribed pattern. Ricardo Domenech calls him the symbol of unflinching puritanism, "la rigidez de unas costumbres preestablecidas, implacables, de las que es esclavo y defensor."<sup>36</sup> His inflexible system is one of morality based on appearances and "buenas costumbres". Whatever runs counter to these frozen standards is declared "bohemio," the same criterion endorsed by Don Vicente in ¡Viva lo imposible! and by the antagonist Manríquez in Mi adorado Juan.

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<sup>36</sup>Ricardo Domenech, op. cit., (above, note 2), p. 99.

Because Don Sacramento stands for the ridiculous mechanization of habit in human relations, Mihura depicts him with burlesque exaggeration. Don Sacramento is a complete caricature of mortal inanity, a smug and pompous individual whose ludicrous, even absurd ideas leave no doubt concerning the facet of life he typifies. His brief appearance on stage in Act Three is unforgettable. Sputtering confused and excited exclamations about his daughter, he proceeds to define the norms of propriety that must govern the actions of all "personas decentes." These include, among other things, hanging family portraits and chromolithographs on the walls, awakening every morning at six-fifteen, eating fried eggs for breakfast, chatting and playing dominoes with a semi-toothless old man on Sunday nights, and, when in the proper mood, taking two nights out a week for a wild spree on the town, "porque también el espíritu necesita expansionarse."<sup>37</sup>

This is the same kind of humdrum, familiar existence that Don Sabino rebels against in ¡Viva lo imposible!, the only difference being that in Tres sombreros de copa banality is associated with the aristocracy, while the tedium of Sabino's world centers around the middle class. This difference in class distinction

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<sup>37</sup>Mihura, Obras, p. 96.



is significant, for, as we see reiterated in Mihura's later plays, the author's critical attitude toward intolerance and heartlessness is not confined to a particular social level, but is directed at the stupidity of the human condition in any rank or station.

Don Sacramento's advice to Dionisio contains a delightful admixture of topical and poetic expressions. One of his utterances recalls Rubén Darío's Sonatina:

La niña está triste. La niña está  
triste y la niña llora. La niña está  
pálida. ¡Por qué martiriza usted a mi  
pobre niña?<sup>38</sup>

These words he repeats several times. His short, exclamatory sentences produce the effect of a broken phonograph record or the prefabricated speech of a mechanical man. The intentional rephrasing of a familiar verse contributes to the overall depiction of Don Sacramento as a thoroughly unoriginal person, one who, like Margarita in Ni pobre ni rico, must depend upon the commonplace as the only avenue for forging a prescribed pattern of existence.

Guerrero Zamora calls attention to the fact that Mihura's external symbol for fatuity in this play -- Don Sacramento's fried eggs -- foreshadows Ionesco's emblem for the dullness of the unimaginative intellect --

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 93.

fried potatoes with bacon.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, one might perceive in the caricature of Don Sacramento a resemblance to the grotesque mannikins who later make their appearance in the exciting and original theater of the absurd.

A great deal like Don Sacramento is the hateful old man whose lustful eye and financial eminence qualify him as another type to be caricatured with relish. El Odioso Señor incarnates the incurable presumptuousness born of material wealth. Torrente, touching briefly on his importance to the play, makes the following valid comment:

El señor más rico de la provincia es un perfecto imbécil, cuya vida ha cristalizado en formas fijas e invariables; es un señor a quien la circunstancia de ser tan rico permite echar al aire ciertas canitas, pero de modo tal, que dichas canas parecen de cartón piedra. La palabra exacta es ésta: el señor más rico de la provincia, como el future e inevitable suegro de Dionisio, se ha acartonado, y no concibe otro modo decente de vivir que no sea el acartonamiento.<sup>40</sup>

El Odioso Señor's raison d'être depends upon money and sex. Domenech calls him "un capitalista erótico."<sup>41</sup> He determines to use his money for new conquests, paying no heed to his sullied reputation.

<sup>39</sup>Juan Guerrero Zamora, op. cit. (above, note 16), p. 172.

<sup>40</sup>Gonzalo Torrente Ballester, op. cit. (above, note 33), p. 73.

<sup>41</sup>Ricardo Domenech, op. cit. (above, note 2), p. 99.

Mihura brings out the fact that he is a married man, a point that makes him all the more reprehensible. With regard to his libertinism, he is the antithesis of Don Sacramento, for whom morality is a question of appearances and the pundonor element is paramount. Yet both men represent aspects of the same infected society; on the one hand the leaden conventions that canker the mind, on the other the graceless turpitude that debases the spirit.

Mihura's characteristic pose is one of detachment from ethical questions, but in this play he reveals himself to be a moralist. Through his deliberate caricature of Don Sacramento and El Odioso Señor, he becomes a spokesman for individual freedom tempered with good judgment and kindness as opposed to conformity to habits that shackle the spontaneous spirit of man. He wisely contrasts the wanton license of El Odioso Señor with the childlike candor of Paula, thus establishing a firm moral position that rebellion and nonconformity become odious when defiled by anarchy, but are worthy of emulation when refined by seraphic joy.

It is this seraphic element in the heart of the play that lends to the work its particular charm and dignity. And no character functions more to establish this tone of chaste innocence than the angelic Don Rosario, the kindly and eccentric proprietor of the

hotel in which all of the nonsense and the enchantment of one night occur.

Don Rosario lends symmetry to a night of apparent chaos. He has the first and the last lines in the play, the one a greeting, the other a farewell. His solicitous care for Dionisio throughout the long opening scene of Act One establishes an atmosphere of delicate tone and provides a visible demonstration of his generous affection and tenderness. His kindly speech infuses the scene with a magical dimension, preparing the reader or spectator for the dream-like transition into the surrealistic world of Act Two. This transition is softly and subtly realized toward the end of the first act when Don Rosario reappears to play a romance on his cornet in an effort to lull Dionisio to sleep. While he plays, absorbed in his art, a current of activity takes place on stage, as Fanny, El Odioso Señor, and Madame Olga enter and speak and exit without the old man detecting their presence. This aura of ternura is reaffirmed at the close of the play with Don Rosario's third and final appearance. He now transports us back to the inevitable reality of Dionisio's commitment, effected in a beatific climate of love and flowers.

Don Rosario's speech and manners betoken a disposition of untroubled innocence. Yet his is a nature anachronous to the times. His generation -- that of

unselfish service and consideration for others -- is contrasted to the rising generation of exploiters like Buby Barton and his carnival troupe, whom Don Rosario disparages with the words, "son muy malos y todo lo revuelven," and whom Don Sacramento censures for their being part of an age of "grandes estafadores europeos y vampiresas internacionales."<sup>42</sup> Dionisio reminds Don Rosario that his generosity is overdone and that his guests take undue advantage of him. Rosario's continual improvements to the hotel without imposing an increase in rates will bring him to financial ruin, Dionisio observes. But Don Rosario is only concerned about the physical comfort of his guests, whom he treats with inordinate paternal love, as though they were his own children:

Yo quiero ser un padre para todos, ya  
que no lo pude ser para mi pobre niño.  
¡Aquel niño mío que se ahogó en un pozo!  
Hizo 'pin!', y acabó todo....<sup>43</sup>

The old man's charm is also conveyed through his frequent use of romantic, botanical epithets for Dionisio, such as "carita de nardo," "capullito de alhelí," "rosa de pitiminí," and "carita de madre selva," as well as his sentimental interest in Dionisio's impending marriage. His faulty vision, long white beard, rotundity, and

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<sup>42</sup>Mihura, Obras, pp. 68 and 94.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 51.

nostalgic attachment for his old hotel contribute to the endearment he imparts. Rosario is very much a fore-token of Doña Vicenta and Doña Matilde, the sweet, eccentric, and winsome old ladies in Mihura's later stage success, Maribel y la extraña familia.

The exceptional group of people who comprise "el raro ambiente de juerga" in Act Two warrants special mention. They include dancers and actors, members of a theatrical troupe on tour through the Spanish provinces; members of the seaside resort town where the play's action takes place; and miscellaneous bearded revelers of international stock. According to Mihura's statement, they form "un coro absurdo y extraordinario."<sup>44</sup> Their actions are characterized by unrestraint, pretense, and foppery. Instant joy is first on their agenda, and in their eagerness to magnify an unbridled vitality, they imbue the amoral atmosphere of Dionisio's bedroom with exotic and erotic tones.

Thematically they function as a radical contrast to the placid monotony of Dionisio's world, and as such they sever his blind devotion to a false ideal. For it is through Dionisio's brief contact with this bohemian element that he comes to detest the notion of stringent uniformity in thought and in conduct;

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. 71.

through his brief acquaintance with Paula he comes to realize how sad and ugly his fiancée really is, with her genial manners, her elegant dress, and her twelve facial moles. The magnetism of a permissive climate has shattered his orthodox faith in the supremacy of conventionalism.

Yet at the same time this informal world of Paula and her friends is a sham. Its singular allure-ment is merely the carefree veneer that it flourishes, the shallow coat of diversion and gladness it wears. Buby reminds Paula that scruples and emotions must be throttled, for the only reality of the music hall pro-fession is hard work, deception, and exploitation. The schematic and underdrawn personalities of those who represent secondary roles in the action suggest the vague and superficial value that really lies beneath the plating of this free and indulgent milieu.

With the exception of Paula, the members of the music hall retinue appear to be mad. Each one is a cari-cature, displaying some facet of frivolity and irres-ponsibility. Their demeanor and gestures betray the hidden emptiness of their lives, the same kind of vacuity and senselessness that Palmira discovers in the circus world of ¡Viva lo imposible!

In a manner similar to the play written in col-laboration with Calvo Sotelo, the systematic skepticism

of Miguel Mihura once again establishes a position of intended ambiguity. Neither Dionisio's world nor Paula's society offers the proper solution. Rational clarifications are still wanting with the final toss of the three top hats, and the spectator is obliged to choose the order he most prefers. This kind of ambiguity, observes José Monleón, is important in the poetics of Mihura's theater, for by it the author reveals "la ausencia de un orden lógico, mostrando así que los hechos no son unívocamente explicables."<sup>45</sup> Monleón points out that ambiguity becomes a positive value in Mihura's productions, for with it the author replaces the sentimental concept of the happy ending with a sense of true perspective, "señalando la relatividad de ciertas apreciaciones y la necesidad de afrontar con libertad la interpretación de las situaciones."<sup>46</sup>

The two worlds of Tres sombreros de copa are, in reality, "estamentos constitutivos de una misma sociedad."<sup>47</sup> In this sense their inevitable coexistence is justified, but when love issues forth from the interrelation of these two diametrically opposed concepts of life, the relationship, as Ricardo Domenech states,

<sup>45</sup>José Monleón, op. cit. (above, note 1), p. 47.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>47</sup>Ricardo Domenech, op. cit. (above, note 2), p. 100.





is "proscrito de antemano; un amor condenado por ese engranaje," which is superior to both Dionisio and Paula.<sup>48</sup> Mihura symbolizes this fact in the transfer of the dance hat from Paula to Dionisio, a hat too large and unbecoming for him; and Paula's playful tossing of Dionisio's three formal top hats in Acts One and Three. The dichotomy between the two worlds the hats represent is also expressed by Buby as he says to Paula, "los caballeros os quieren a vosotras, pero se casan con las demás."<sup>49</sup>

Throughout Mihura's theater there is an implicit critique and satire on the self-satisfied citizenry and their materialistic attitude. In Tres sombreros de copa, as we have observed, the criticism is somewhat strong, directed largely at Don Sacramento. Yet even Don Sacramento, as a caricature of a mechanized mind, is not denied some saving qualities as a human being; in his love for Margarita and his devotion to routine, we perceive a sympathetic side to his nature. While Mihura defends the free and unconventional life, he is unwilling to paint the world in terms of black and white. Subtle areas of gray line both camps, as we have noted in Dionisio's struggle to compromise with Paula's environment and Paula's attempts to bridge her world with his.

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<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>Mihura, Obras, p. 79.

For, after all, the basis of Mihura's world is not moral concern, but rather humanity. It would be unfair to designate the author's disesteem for artificial living without pointing to his interest in the positive worth of his charming characters and their personal struggle to gain freedom from artificiality.

Fundamental to Tres sombreros de copa is a theme that Mihura has carried in many of his subsequent plays, namely that everyone must find his own role in life. In Mihura's conception, this idea has no religious or philosophical background; he simply presents a problem central to the welfare of the individual himself. Dionisio's awakening reveals the high premium Mihura places on the value of a human being's choice. Dionisio may have made the wrong choice, but even in defeat his decision reaffirms the authentic meaning in Don Sabino's utterance from Act Three of ¡Viva lo imposible!, that "la felicidad está únicamente en ser lo que se ha querido ser."

Significantly, Tres sombreros de copa, like the two former plays in Mihura's avant-garde production, lacks the optimistic view that love alone is a liberating force. Dionisio's desire to flee with Paula to London, La Habana, or Chicago is the result of his long-suppressed determination to break away from a narrow-minded reality in order to reach a larger freedom. Paula represents the catalyst that accelerates his doubts concerning the value of his novia as a future

wife and companion. Yet love itself serves no real purpose in effecting a new direction. Dionisio fails, just as in ¡Viva lo imposible! Palmira failed in giving up Fede to have economic security by marrying Vicente, and just as in Ni pobre ni rico Abelardo failed in his relationship with Margarita.

Love leads not to fulfillment, but to fiasco in ¡Viva lo imposible!, Ni pobre ni rico, and Tres sombreros de copa. Thematically, the importance of love sets these three plays apart as comprising a unique category in the playwriting of Miguel Mihura. Indeed, it is interesting to note that following his first productions, Mihura adopts an entirely different point of view; he portrays love as a positive attribute leading to freedom and happiness. El caso de la mujer asesinadita is the first example of this new posture. It not only exalts love as a positive value, but includes as well the more fashionable "happy ending" that becomes from this play forward a typical formula in almost all of Mihura's productions. The author's later optimistic view could well be a gesture to his audience, for Mihura was instantly willing to compromise a great deal to public tastes in an effort to increase his personal revenues.

Despite Mihura's enormous popularity and corresponding commercial success since the year 1952, not at any later date in his writings has he created a play

so full of poetic meaning, so full of life, as we find in Dionisio's confrontation with one of the most important moments of his life. The world of play and fun and shining happiness that he finds demonstrated in Paula's bohemian society occasions a human conflict that is both touching and unforgettable. And it affords Mihura the opportunity to be a spokesman for the compassion and tolerance that is most fundamental in his personality and in his plays.

## CONCLUSION

The avant-garde theater of Miguel Mihura testifies to the effectiveness of applying sophisticated humor to dramatic art. In his early contributions to Spanish journals and to the Spanish stage, Mihura fostered a new aesthetic posture in playwriting. Departing from the traditional lines of farce cultivated by his immediate forerunners, he combined playful satire and parody with a principle vital to the strength and charm of all his subsequent writings; believing that dialogue and stage action could be infused with the magic of poetic tenderness and enlivened by a profound sense of humanity, he produced four exciting plays founded upon a sound literary base.

We have seen how Mihura's early dramatic writings merit high regard for a living and dynamic dialogue which on occasion appears disorbited and absurd, but embodies an internal logic designed to combat artificiality in human discourse and action. We have attempted to show that, central to the plot and design of each comedy written between 1932 and 1945, is the author's insistence that a life of regulated conformity or spiritless resignation to routine is wholly intolerable. Mihura

stresses the merits to be gained through a personal emancipation from the constricting forces of habit, social convention, and selfish pursuits. He makes clear this moral attitude by contrasting the narrow-minded reality of an orthodox middle-class society to the free-thinking expressions of an unconventional world. The conflicts which result from this confrontation of two opposing milieux and their corresponding characters represent the essence of Miguel Mihura's provocative theater.

Our examination has revealed that Mihura favors rebellion against the dehumanizing effects of intolerance and self-satisfaction. While exhibiting a skeptical view toward pretense and mental laziness, he likewise affirms with positive force the importance of imbuing the commonplace with a spirit of carefree imagination and creative adventure.

We have observed, however, that not all his major characters achieve a coveted independence from the inhibiting forces of conformity; they succumb either to the pressures of social living or to the weaknesses inherent in their own tractable natures. Boredom and monotony prevail when they resist working out the freedom within their grasp. The few characters who attain success in their quest for freedom do so, according to Mihura's position, at the sacrifice of fond allegiances

and commitments, and the repudiation of established values. Even the attribute of love is not a significant factor in the personal struggle for self-mastery.

Mihura's message is basically existential in meaning; his protagonists must expand their freedom untrammelled by codes or influences beyond the confines of their own dispositions.

We have endeavored to point out that the underlying literary substance of Mihura's avant-garde theater is further sustained by the author's deliberate use of incongruous verbal nonsense, a humorous resource he utilizes to elucidate a serious problem in human commerce, namely, the gradual disintegration of language into empty formulas and senseless clichés.

As a result of his penchant for promoting a bizarre form of dialogue, Spanish critics have been wont to label Mihura a precursor of the absurd in European drama. In our own analysis of the playwright's avant-garde phase, we have indicated that this early theater demonstrates the possibility of offering the spectator or the reader a valid social or moral critique while using the same techniques later ascribed to the absurdist writers; Mihura's plays thus inaugurate a special appearance of the sense of the absurd on the Spanish stage, the expression of which is derived solely from language and humor rather than from the philosophical posture



that life itself is meaningless and the human condition absurd.

We have accredited the playwright with well-deserved praise for the artistry, the originality, and the spontaneity of his early productions. For one familiar with Mihura's later writings, it is apparent that the theater we have been discussing constitutes a unique stage in the development of the author's dramaturgy. The later comedies display much the same talent and versatility, but they differ in their adoption of a conservative pose that is notably absent in the first four dramas.

Mihura began his career well. He achieved international recognition with an intellectually-oriented avant-garde theater. Without the dignity and the repute of his early plays, it is doubtful that Mihura would rank uppermost as Spain's leading dramatic humorist. Indeed, that period of his life with which the present study has been concerned becomes increasingly more significant in the total evaluation of his literary career. In the words of Don Antonio Valencia, Mihura created therein "un rico mundo -- extraño y vanguardista -- que la maestría del autor nos ha hecho normal y admirable."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Review of Mihura's play La bella Dorotea in Marca (Madrid), October 27, 1963, p. 11.

## APPENDIX

### PLAYS BY MIGUEL MIHURA AND DATES OF THEIR PREMIERES

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|--|--------------------|
| 1. ¡Viva lo imposible! o el contable de las estrellas<br>(Collaboration with Calvo Sotelo) | November 24, 1939  |
| 2. Ni pobre ni rico, sino todo lo contrario<br>(Collaboration with Tono)                   | December 17, 1943  |
| 3. El caso de la mujer asesinadita<br>(Collaboration with Alvaro de Laiglesia)             | February 20, 1946  |
| 4. Tres sombreros de copa<br>(Written in 1932)   | November 24, 1952  |
| 5. El caso de la señora estupenda  | February 6, 1953   |
| 6. Una mujer cualquiera  | April 4, 1953      |
| 7. A media luz los tres  | November 25, 1953  |
| 8. El caso del señor vestido de violeta  | April 17, 1954     |
| 9. Sublime decisión  | April 9, 1955      |
| 10. La canasta (unpublished)   | December 1, 1955   |
| 11. Miradorado Juan  | January 11, 1956   |
| 12. Carlota  | April 12, 1957     |
| 13. Melocotón en almíbar   | November 20, 1958  |
| 14. Maribel y la extraña familia   | September 29, 1959 |
| 15. El chalet de Madame Renard   | November 23, 1961  |
| 16. Las entretenidas   | September 12, 1962 |

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|----------------------------------|---|
| 17. La bella Dorotea             | October 25, 1963  |
| 18. Ninette y un señor de Murcia | September 3, 1964   |
| 19. Milagro en casa de los López | September 24, 1964<br>(Barcelona)<br>February 5, 1965<br>(Madrid) |
| 20. La titera                    | March 15, 1965  |
| 21. Ninette, "Modas de Paris"    | September 7, 1966   |
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1. The first part of the document is a letter from the President of the United States to the Congress, dated January 3, 1862. It is a very important document, as it contains the President's annual message to Congress, which is a key part of the executive branch's communication with the legislative branch.

2. The second part of the document is a report from the Secretary of the Interior, dated January 10, 1862. It is a very important document, as it contains the Secretary's annual report to the President, which is a key part of the executive branch's communication with the President.

3. The third part of the document is a report from the Secretary of the Treasury, dated January 15, 1862. It is a very important document, as it contains the Secretary's annual report to the President, which is a key part of the executive branch's communication with the President.

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6. The sixth part of the document is a report from the Secretary of the State, dated February 1, 1862. It is a very important document, as it contains the Secretary's annual report to the President, which is a key part of the executive branch's communication with the President.

7. The seventh part of the document is a report from the Secretary of the War, dated February 5, 1862. It is a very important document, as it contains the Secretary's annual report to the President, which is a key part of the executive branch's communication with the President.

8. The eighth part of the document is a report from the Secretary of the Navy, dated February 10, 1862. It is a very important document, as it contains the Secretary's annual report to the President, which is a key part of the executive branch's communication with the President.

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10. The tenth part of the document is a report from the Secretary of the War, dated February 20, 1862. It is a very important document, as it contains the Secretary's annual report to the President, which is a key part of the executive branch's communication with the President.

11. The eleventh part of the document is a report from the Secretary of the Navy, dated February 25, 1862. It is a very important document, as it contains the Secretary's annual report to the President, which is a key part of the executive branch's communication with the President.

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1. The first step in the process of the scientific method is to make an observation or ask a question.

2. The second step is to do background research.

3. The third step is to form a hypothesis.

4. The fourth step is to test the hypothesis by conducting an experiment.

5. The fifth step is to analyze the data and draw a conclusion.

6. The sixth step is to communicate the results.

7. The seventh step is to repeat the experiment to verify the results.

8. The eighth step is to make a final conclusion.

9. The ninth step is to publish the results.

10. The tenth step is to use the results to make a new hypothesis.

11. The eleventh step is to test the new hypothesis.

12. The twelfth step is to draw a final conclusion.

13. The thirteenth step is to communicate the results.

14. The fourteenth step is to repeat the experiment.

15. The fifteenth step is to make a final conclusion.

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(The numbers in parentheses correspond to the titles of Mihura's plays listed in the Appendix.)

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