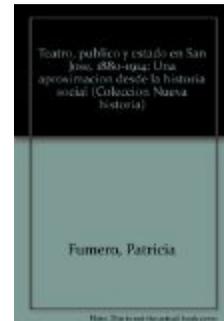


Patricia Fumero. *Teatro, público y estado en San Jose, 1880-1914: Una aproximación desde la historia social*. San Jose: Editorial de la Universidad de Costa Rica, 1996. 245 pp. No price listed (paper), ISBN 978-9977-67-311-0.

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The Theater as School in Costa Rica

Cultural policy is a challenging and worthy subject which in the last twenty years has begun to interest Costa Rican historians. Building on an accumulating literature on cultural institutions and social policy, the present work is one of the best of the recent cultural histories. It focuses sharply on the promotion of theater and operatic performances in San Jose, Costa Rica, from 1880, when emergent cultural policy is discernible, to 1914, when World War I seriously interrupted the ability of European troupes to travel in the Americas. The ending point of 1914 is further justified as the early years of the twentieth century also marked the decline of theater-going in Costa Rica in favor of the cinema, which proved to have a broader appeal than the theater.

Teatro, público y estado is soundly based on extensive data on theater establishments in San Jose, theater companies, local pro-theater associations, newspaper criticism, and specific performances. Three principal theaters are featured: the Teatro Municipal, which was opened in 1859 and destroyed in an earthquake in 1888, the Teatro Variedades, a private theater that opened in 1891, and the Teatro Nacional, which was completed in 1897 and is now a prominent cultural monument and tourist attraction. Archival sources from municipal government, including police reports, and from various national ministries provide detail on most drama and operatic companies that performed in San Jose. Government records and newspapers provide material for judgment of the reactions of segments of San Jose society to the performances.

Fumero's thesis is that the Liberal rulers of Costa Rica deliberately used the theater to promote their Liberal political philosophy in general and secularism in particular. According to Fumero, Liberals saw the theater as the venue for mixing social classes and age groups, and for assistance in educating the masses. With official encouragement, some performances were aimed to appeal to children and youth and some to artisans and workers. To a lesser extent, building a consensus of national identity was apparently a goal of the Liberals. Their political outlook and their views of morality determined, in large measure, which theater groups visited Costa Rica. Through ticket subsidies and transportation grants the government was able to select particular groups and discourage others. Laws and regulations provided for subsidization of selected performers and for censorship. The municipal police were empowered to censure offending material and to keep order. Newspaper publishers and critics, usually in accord with the Liberal worldview, cooperated.

Traditionally, writers have emphasized the commitment of late nineteenth-century Liberals in Costa Rica to education as a means of building the nation. Fumero's point is that cultural policy was an additional arm of the Liberal establishment. Unfortunately, the absence of a full explanation of the Liberal agenda and the failure to correlate cultural policy with formal educational policy weaken the case. No corroborative evidence about the goals of the educational establishment is provided, and curiously, Fumero fails to mention the absence of a uni-

versity in Costa Rica in this period (the original Universidad de Santo Tomas was abolished in 1888), although it would seem to strengthen her argument about the importance of theater as an educational replacement. She also presents few statements of Liberal leaders to support her thesis. Consequently, the thesis rests primarily on the performances themselves. As for national identity, if it is true that national identity was a goal of the Liberal elite, little evidence is presented in this study that leaders thought of using the theater for this purpose beyond the Central Valley.

Although additional positive evidence concerning the educational and cultural goals of Liberal leaders would have been helpful, negative evidence from the Church establishment illuminates and strengthens Fumero's argument. In the last chapter, entitled, "Teatro, el Estado, y la Iglesia," Fumero demonstrates that the Costa Rican Catholic Church considered the theater as a school of vice rather than a school of civic virtue. Pastoral let-

ters and Church publications during the period covered consistently opposed government cultural policy. Bishop Bernardo Augusto Thiel, in his pastoral letter of 1883, for example, maintained that the theater was "not a school of good customs, as it ought to be, but is a mirror of the most perverse customs of society, adultery, corruption, infidelity, irreligion, ridicule of the holy ... which are presented clothed in seductive attractions and immoral excuses" (p. 186; reviewer's translation).

The Fumero book is an important contribution but undoubtedly not the last word on cultural policy in Costa Rica in the period covered. Her work will likely stimulate further research on this important topic.

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