

The Censors' Confusion: (Mis)Interpretations of the Works of Alfonso Sastre

In a survey of theatre censorship in Spain carried out in 1974, Alfonso Sastre stated: 'No existo. He sido borrado de todas las listas... Salvo de las listas negras, por supuesto: por lo que se refiere a éstas, estoy en todas.'¹ While by then he was perceived by the censors to be an enemy of the regime, it was not always so, as the documents held in the *Archivo General de la Administración* in Alcalá de Henares show. Alfonso Sastre was certainly more heavily censored than some during his writing career, but not always as much as some of his statements might lead one to believe. Yet there is no denying his position as one of the most committed dramatists in Francoist Spain; in fact that is why it is so surprising to discover that he was perceived by some of the censors of his early realist works to be a friend of the regime.² The confusion is all the more remarkable when one considers both the censorship legislation in operation at the time, and Sastre's public statements about theatre and society.

The Franco Regime and Censorship

Forging a new state in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War included the task of creating a new culture to reflect and reinforce the dominant ideology, yet the Spanish culture promoted by the nationalist regime was noteworthy for what it chose to ignore or

¹ Amador Rivera, and Santiago de las Heras, 'Encuesta sobre la censura. 25 autores cuentan sus experiencias con la censura', *Primer Acto*, no. 165 (1974), 4-14 (p. 5).

² José Monleón, commenting on Sastre's commitment, said: 'En la crítica de la realidad teatral española y en la aportación a esta última de una actitud intelectual, Sastre ha representado generalmente al inconformismo dramático – revolucionario o simplemente rebelde – más consistente de nuestro país'. Quoted in Luciano García Lorenzo, *El teatro español hoy* (Barcelona: Planeta, 1975), p. 133.

editor, as much as for what it promoted.³ A determination to protect and legitimate the political rulers governed censorship legislation. It was legislation that stressed unity and nationalisation and reinforced the ruling ideology while denying the opposition spokespersons the opportunity to challenge it. At times censorship seemed to represent an ideological battle over the possible interpretations of words and ideas. This was an emotional rather than a logical battle, concerned with the propagation of myth and the denial of history and reality.

By identifying all things Nationalist and Catholic with patriotism, the nation and the mythical Spanishness of a long-lost Empire, the Franco-led regime was not only able to harness a certain amount of goodwill towards these positive values, but also to discredit all things Republican and secular as anti-Spanish. An analysis of the use and distortions of language by the Nationalist regime in Spain demonstrates that the administration believed in the power of language to influence people's lives, or at least to give expression to the values and ideas that could do so. In 1938 Franco stated:

La guerra de España no es una cosa artificial: es la coronación de un proceso histórico, es la lucha de la Patria con la antipatria, de la unidad con la secesión, de la moral con el crimen, del espíritu contra el materialismo, y no tiene otra solución que el triunfo de los principios puros y eternos sobre los bastardos y antiespañoles. ⁴

It is hardly surprising therefore that a regime so concerned with the language it employed, should also concern itself with controlling the language used by others. The

³ See Carlos Rodríguez Sanz, 'Teatro y subvención', *Cuadernos para el diálogo*, Monograph 3 (June 1966), 23-25 (p. 23). José María De Quinto, 'Radiografía breve de los últimos 30 años de teatro', *Cuadernos para el diálogo*, Monograph 3, 26-27 (p. 26).

⁴ Franco, 27 August 1938. Quoted in Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, *Los demonios familiares de Franco. (Los tics obsesivos que configuraron la 'ideología' franquista)*, Colección Documento (Barcelona: Planeta, 1987), p. 91.

regime perceived a threat to its hegemony from the press and the arts, and set about eliminating this threat. In the introduction to the 1938 *Ley de Prensa*, the regime recognised the press as a powerful instrument in the formation of popular culture and conscience.⁵ A later piece of legislation, the *Orden 30 noviembre 1954 (MIT) Espectáculos Públicos*, stresses the influence that the theatre and cinema exercise on the ideas and education of the youth, and the resulting need to monitor them carefully.⁶ The same idea is emphasised in the introduction to the 1966 *Ley de Prensa e Imprenta*. The regime clearly perceived a threat in the ability of the arts and the media to influence public opinion, and therefore sought to harness its influence to serve and to secure the survival of its own ideology.⁷ It was logical therefore, that the Franco regime should have introduced measures to impose silence by proscribing the voice of dissent.

The resulting censorship was described by the one-time Ministro de Información, Gabriel Arias Salgado, as: ‘Toda la libertad para la verdad; ninguna libertad para el error.’⁸ José María García Escudero, a high-ranking censor in Spain during the 1950s and 1960s, claimed that if the state were to abandon its role as opinion leader, other forces would step in to fill the gap and they would deform opinion to suit their own purposes.

⁵ The press is described as: ‘órgano decisivo en la formación de la cultura popular y, sobre todo, en la creación de la conciencia colectiva’. Ley 22 abril 1938 (M^o. del Interior). PERIÓDICOS. Ley de Prensa, *Boletín Oficial del Estado* (hereafter *BOE*), no. 549 (23 April 1938), pp. 6915-6917 (p. 6915).

⁶ ‘La importancia que en el orden moral, cultural y político tienen los espectáculos públicos en general y la decidida influencia que ejercen en las costumbres, ideas y formación de la juventud, han inducido a su tutela y vigilancia, dictándose diversas disposiciones que regulen la asistencia de los menores a los espectáculos públicos.’ Orden 30 noviembre 1954 (MIT). ESPECTÁCULOS PÚBLICOS. Clasificación a efectos de asistencia de los menores, *BOE*, no. 348 (ref. 1842, 14 December 1954), pp. 1422-23 (p. 1422).

⁷ ‘[...] la importancia, cada vez mayor, de los medios informativos poseen en relación con la formación de la opinión pública, y, finalmente, la conveniencia indudable de proporcionar a dicha opinión cauces idóneos a través de los cuales sea posible canalizar debidamente las aspiraciones de todos los grupos sociales, alrededor de los cuales gira la conveniencia nacional’. Ley 18 marzo 1966, no. 14/66 (Jefatura del Estado). PRENSA. Ley de Prensa e Imprenta, *BOE*, no. 67 (ref. 519, 19 March 1966), pp. 479-86 (p. 479).

⁸ Gabriel Arias Salgado, *Textos de doctrina y política española de la información*, 6th edn, 3 vols (Madrid: MIT, 1960), I, p. 35.

Therefore, the state that seeks to influence the opinions of the people is in fact protecting them from a greater danger. He claimed that censorship, correctly applied, does not interfere with the liberty of citizens, and maintained that, 'censura es quitar el peligro'.⁹ Clearly then, the Spanish regime assigned itself the role of holder of the truth, and defender of the common good which, in true dictatorial style, it identified with its own personal good. The refusal to separate government and nation led the regime to represent its own interests as public interest, for it created and sustained the myth that they were one and the same.

This use of censorship as a protector of ideology is evident from the questions posed on an early censor's report on publications:

1. ¿Ataca al dogma?
2. ¿A la moral?
3. ¿A la Iglesia o a sus ministros?
4. ¿Al Régimen y a sus instituciones?
5. ¿A las personas que colaboran o han colaborado con el Régimen?
6. Los pasajes censurables, ¿califican el contenido total de la obra?

The problem, of course, was the interpretation of such vague questions and hence the censorship of a work of literature tended to depend upon who read it. While censorship under Franco was not wholly effective, it did cause great difficulties, particularly for the committed dramatist like Sastre, who wished to give testament to a reality other than that propagated by the officials of the regime.

The Franco regime was fortunate to have the support of the Roman Catholic

⁹ José María García Escudero, 'Censura y Libertad', *Arbor*, 23 (no. 83, 1952), 177-97 (p. 189).

Church, which had seen its role diminished in Republican Spain. The ideology of the Roman Catholic Church coincided with the Francoist ideology in many respects and both the Church and the regime took full advantage of this fact. By lending its not inconsequential goodwill to the Nationalist cause, it provided the regime with support and legitimacy it might otherwise have lacked, having overthrown a democratically elected government. Once some of the traditions and rituals of the Church had been incorporated into the culture of the regime, the dominant ideology could then claim to reflect the values of a Spain united in its Catholicism. The Church played a significant role in the censorship of the theatre. Not only was its clergy employed on the state censorship boards, but also the legislation is clearly influenced by Catholic teaching on morals.¹⁰

While in the early days what could be classed as obscene or politically mischievous was heavily censored as the nascent regime attempted to secure itself, in later years this varied with the political climate, with periods of relatively light censorship followed by severe clamp-downs and suspension of civil liberties.

Theatre Censorship

The regime sought to legitimate and normalise theatre censorship by legislating for it and thus making it a naturalised part of staging a play. Drama was subject to two forms of censorship: a play had to be censored both as a stage production and as a book for

¹⁰ In addition to its presence on state boards, the Roman Catholic Church also retained its own watchdog body called the *Oficina Nacional Permanente de Vigilancia de Espectáculos*, which employed a system of classification of dramas from 1 to 4. The former were judged to be acceptable to a wide audience and the latter, a serious threat to its moral well being. This was seen as necessary, because the Church guidelines for censorship were more severe in some respects than those of the regime, which were occasionally influenced more by political expediency than by Catholic moral teaching.

publication. The legislation governing theatre censorship (for productions) had been set out in the *Orden de 15 de julio de 1939 (M^o. Gobernación)*, which defended the state's intervention in the name of 'la educación política y moral de los españoles'.¹¹

From 1939 to 1964, the procedure to be followed was based on the stipulations of this *Orden*. Initially a formal application had to be made to the censorship office by the director of the company wishing to stage the play. The applicant had to supply a number of typed copies of the work subject to review and, if the work was a revue or variety performance, the designs for the sets and costumes had to be submitted for scrutiny. The censor's report was the document on which the final decision was based. This document gave a brief plot outline and evaluated the literary, political, religious and theatrical merits of the play. At this stage the verdict was based on the decision of at least one censor, but rarely more than three. Recommendations for cuts and modifications were made and the censor decided whether audience age restrictions should be imposed or not. Finally a copy of the *guía de censura* was sent back to the applicant. On it were the verdict and any specific conditions for performance of the work. The applicant was obliged to show this document to the local authorities where the play was to be staged as proof that the censorship procedure had been adhered to.

An expanded censorship board, specifically for the theatre was established in 1963 and censorship legislation specifically for the theatre was introduced in 1964. Article one of the *Normas de Censura Teatral* merely adopted the previous year's *Normas de Censura*

¹¹ Orden 15 julio 1939 (M^o. Gobernación). CENSURA. Crea una Sección de Censura encargada de llevarla a cabo, *BOE*, no. 211 (ref. 916, 30 July 1939), p. 553.

Cinematográfica.¹² The all-encompassing legislation referred to, drew heavily upon Roman Catholic values and was prudish in the extreme. As Manuel Abellán pointed out: ‘Las convicciones morales, conceptos de catolicidad y tradición se convirtieron en criterios estéticos.’¹³ The general and subjective terms employed in the legislation remained undefined and thus their interpretation was at the discretion of the censors.

An examination of this legislation demonstrates just how closely linked were Francoist and Catholic ideologies. In the name of the common good, all justifications of suicide, mercy killings, revenge, duelling, divorce, adultery, illicit sexual relations and prostitution were prohibited. Article eight also declared that any attack on the family or marriage, institutions dear both to Franco and to the Roman Catholic Church, was prohibited. The moral consequences of evil were to be portrayed, and where the film or play was directed at an audience of minors, the legislation stipulated that the wrongdoer must either be punished or be repentant at the end. Brutality, sexual perversions, blasphemy, pornography, subversion and attractive portrayals of alcoholism were taboo. Any language which might offend against good taste, and any images or suggestive allusions which might provoke base passions, were prohibited, as were any detailed accounts of offences which could be used as guides to committing them. Article seventeen might serve as a summary of the spirit of the law. Protective of the twin pillars

¹² Orden 6 febrero 1964 (MIT), por la que se aprueba el Reglamento de Régimen Interior de la Junta de Censura de Obras Teatrales y las Normas de Censura, *BOE*, no. 48 (25 February 1964), pp. 2504-06 (p. 2506). Article one of the Normas de Censura Teatral stated: La Junta de Censura Teatral aplicará, en el ejercicio de su función, las normas de censura cinematográfica aprobadas por Orden ministerial de 9 de febrero de 1963, en cuanto lo permitan las características de los diversos géneros teatrales y con las adaptaciones impuestas por las diferencias entre el teatro y el cinematógrafo.

¹³ In ‘Problemas historiográficos en el estudio de la censura literaria del último medio siglo’, *Revista canadiense de estudios hispánicos*, 13 (no. 3, 1989), 319-29 (p. 323).

of Roman Catholicism and Francoism, it prohibited anything that attacked:

- 1° La Iglesia católica, su dogma, su moral y su culto.
- 2° Los principios fundamentales del Estado, la dignidad nacional y la seguridad interior o exterior del país.
- 3° La persona del Jefe de Estado.¹⁴

Analysing this legislation, it is unsurprising that Alfonso Sastre later found himself at odds with the censors; what is more surprising is that they could ever have considered his work supportive of the regime.

Alfonso Sastre, Committed Dramatist

Alfonso Sastre emerged as one of the dominant figures among the post-war dramatists and is usually classed as a member of the so-called Realist Generation. Unlike many of the theatre professionals working in Francoist Spain, the Realists considered their work to have been more than entertainment; they emphasised instead its social dimension.¹⁵

Overall then, the Realist Generation believed that the role of art, and in particular that of drama, was to reflect and react to society, and hopefully to inspire social change. Some, like Sastre with his theatre 'cargado de compromisos' perhaps naïvely maintained that revolutionary drama could inspire revolution in society, while others believed in less radical transformation.¹⁶ One thing that emerges is their determination to bear testament

¹⁴ Orden 9 febrero 1963 (MIT), por la que se aprueban las «Normas de censura cinematográfica», *BOE*, no. 58 (8 March 1963), pp. 3929-30 (p. 3930).

¹⁵ Angel Berenguer wrote of European realism: 'Es mucho más que un estilo literario. Es, sobre todo, un modo de entender la vida, un modo de acercarse a la realidad, un proyecto que, de alguna manera, pretende controlar la relación del individuo con su entorno y con la historia política que se está desarrollando en la Europa del momento.' 'Lauro Olmo', in *Teatro breve contemporáneo*, I, *Primer Acto*, Separata del no. 239 [1991 (?)], 25-28 (p. 26). The Spanish variety was a more insular, but just as serious, project.

¹⁶ *El teatro español hoy*, p. 134.

to the problem of Spain and expose the distortions and falsifications of the nationalist ideology. Commenting on Sastre's dramatic output, with the exception of some early and some later experimental works, García Lorenzo writes: 'Dolor, violencia, muerte, angustia, sangre y frustraciones, serán los fundamentos de su exposición dramática, todo expuesto con un diálogo discursivo y teniendo como fin la denuncia de un mundo injusto al que se intenta transformar metajurídicamente.'¹⁷ Again, what is striking is that an author who could be described thus, an author at the forefront of the Realist movement, could ever have been considered ideologically innocent, and much less, pro-regime.

Sastre claims that it was in the late 1940s that he began his 'enfrentamiento con la censura al compás del descubrimiento paulatino de lo que realmente había sucedido durante la guerra española'.¹⁸ He had, from the start of his career, demonstrated a real interest in reforming the theatre structure and attracting a new audience and he was openly critical of both the theatre culture and the society of the day. With a group of like-minded fellow university students, he had set about transforming the Spanish stage with the establishment of *Arte Nuevo* (1945-48), a theatre group with nationalist leanings.¹⁹ In 1948 he also began writing for the Sindicato Español Universitario (SEU) publication, *La Hora*. After the failure of *Arte Nuevo* the disillusioned Sastre moved further left ideologically and embraced a theatre of social realism. In 1950 he was one of the founders of the ill-fated *Teatro de Agitación Social* (TAS), which, according to Mariano de Paco, 'intentaba hacer llegar hasta la sociedad española la revolución que Arte Nuevo quería

¹⁷ *El teatro español hoy*, pp. 136-37.

¹⁸ *Alfonso Sastre o la ilusión trágica: Cincuenta años de teatro*, coord. by Eva Forest (Hondarribia, Hiru, 1997), p. 23.

¹⁹ 'Los fundadores de Arte Nuevo querían crear un teatro interesante español...', Farris Anderson, 'Introducción', in Alfonso Sastre, *Escuadra hacia la muerte; La mordaza*, ed. by Farris Anderson (Madrid: Castalia, 1987), pp. 7-52 (p. 13).

para el teatro'.²⁰ It was also a group that aimed to bring international committed drama to the Spanish stage. The manifesto of the *TAS*, which states in article seven that, 'lo social, en nuestro tiempo, es una categoría superior a lo artístico', also contains the following statement:

Nosotros no somos políticos, sino hombres de teatro; pero como hombres – es decir, como lo que somos primariamente – creemos en la urgencia de una agitación de la vida española. Por eso, en nuestro dominio propio (el teatro), realizaremos ese movimiento, y desde el teatro, aprovechando sus posibilidades de proyección social, trataremos de llevar la agitación a todas las esferas de la vida española.²¹

These statements were echoed in an article titled, 'Arte como construcción', published in *Acento Cultural* in 1958. Included in the 'once notas sobre arte y su función' are the following: 'Entre las distintas provincias de la realidad hay una cuya representación o denuncia consideramos urgente: la injusticia social en sus distintas formas', and further: 'Lo social es una categoría superior a lo artístico. Preferiríamos vivir en un mundo justamente organizado y en el que no hubiera obras de arte, a vivir en otro injusto y florecido de excelentes obras artísticas.'²²

In 1960 he formed the equally ambitious and also short-lived *Grupo de Teatro Realista* (GTR) with José María de Quinto. It featured as part of its agenda, 'una reclamación de teatro popular' and to this end organised low-priced shows in accessible venues, which were aimed at a public comprising students and workers.²³ In addition, the GTR was outspoken on censorship, and issued the following statement in its manifesto:

²⁰ Mariano de Paco, 'El teatro de Alfonso Sastre', in *Alfonso Sastre o la ilusión trágica*, pp. 119-38 (p. 123).

²¹ 'El teatro de Alfonso Sastre', p. 124.

²² Notas 3 y 9. Alfonso Sastre, *Anatomía del realismo* (Hondarribia: Hiru, 1998), pp. 38-39.

²³ *Anatomía del realismo*, p. 240.

La existencia de la censura de teatro y especialmente en la forma en que viene ejerciéndose entre nosotros (se trata de una actividad conceptualmente arbitraria, administrativamente irregular, éticamente irresponsable y legalmente amorfa, sin que ni siquiera tenga autoridad para mantener sus propios dictámenes) es una vergüenza pública y privada. Públicamente (objetivamente) lo es porque tiene el carácter de una calamidad cultural. Privadamente (subjektivamente) porque es el signo de nuestro conformismo – el de los autores, directores, actores, empresarios... - y de nuestra propia corrupción. Es urgente la absoluta liquidación [...] de este mecanismo.²⁴

It should have been clear to the censors that this was a dramatist with revolution in mind; the problem perhaps was a confusion of their crusade with his.

Sastre and the Censors' Confusion

Having seen the repressive context in which he wrote and the political stance adopted in his theatre, it is difficult to comprehend the censors' interpretations of some of his early social realist plays.

The initial confusion among the censors regarding Sastre's ideology is exemplified in the documents relating to the realist tragedies of the early 1950s: *Escuadra hacia la muerte* (1952), *Prólogo patético* (1953) and *El pan de todos* (1953). These works were, according to Sastre, part of a strategy against, 'el optimismo oficial y el falseamiento – la ocultación, en fin, de la realidad miserable y sangrienta en que vivíamos –de la vida.'²⁵ Prior to *Escuadra hacia la muerte*, the three plays that Sastre had submitted to the censors (as sole author) had been authorised without cuts. It is clear that, at this stage, Sastre was not considered a writer of the opposition, perhaps surprisingly, when one considers that

²⁴ Paula Martínez Michel, *Censura y represión intelectual en la España Franquista: el caso de Alfonso Sastre*, (Hondarribia: Hiru, 2003), p. 58.

²⁵ *Alfonso Sastre o la ilusión trágica*, p. 37.

one of these plays, *El cubo de la basura* (1951), was a work easily interpretable as anti-regime, dealing as it did with the determination of the civil war vanquished to overthrow a dictator. It is a play in which, according to Mariano de Paco, ‘se plantea la cuestión de la justicia personal y de la justicia social’, and one which Sastre himself termed ‘testimonio y denuncia’ of society in the aftermath of civil war.²⁶ No company applied to stage the play, but it did pass through the censorship offices unscathed before its publication by Aguilar.

While Antonio Buero Vallejo’s play *Historia de una escalera* (1949) may have been an innovation in the post-Civil War theatre, Sastre’s play, *Escuadra hacia la muerte* (1953), took this challenge to the status quo even further. *Escuadra hacia la muerte* is a play about the tragic fate of a squadron of soldiers that contains a scene in which they murder their cruel Captain, Goban. Furthermore, as London observes: ‘The extreme violence of Sastre’s play and the suicide it contains were [...] a torrent in a desert of blandness.’²⁷ While acknowledging that there is more to the play than this, Anderson points out in his analysis: ‘Difícilmente podrá dejarse de ver al Cabo Goban como personificación de la tiranía militarista, y su asesinato como la sublevación de una comunidad oprimida.’²⁸ Yet it was viewed by the censors in 1953 and was authorised without cuts. Significantly, the application to stage the play had come from a branch of

²⁶ ‘El teatro de Alfonso Sastre’, p. 127.

²⁷ Jack London, *Reception and Renewal in Modern Spanish Theatre: 1939-1963*, MHRA Texts and Dissertations, 45 (London: W.S. Maney & Son, 1997), p. 189.

²⁸ ‘Introducción’ in *Escuadra hacia la muerte*, p. 29.

the SEU.²⁹

The censor Bartolomé Mostaza considered the play to be pessimistic, but morally sound. Sastre's connections with the SEU and his perceived Nationalist leanings at the time seem to have helped him. The report of the *Sección de Teatro* stipulated that the play was only suitable for *teatros de cámara y ensayo*, and 'siempre que su puesta en escena se lleve a cabo por organizaciones u organismos de significación política perfectamente definida y encuadrada en la línea doctrinal de nuestro Estado'. Thus the fact that the application came from the SEU allowed for a non-threatening interpretation of the play, which in other hands might have been given an anti-regime slant. Another censor, Gumersindo Montes Agudo, recognising the possible danger, opted to blame the public, not the dramatist, stipulating in his report: 'No debe darse ante públicos propuestos a dudas y extrañas ideologías.' In March 1953, the play was staged by the *Teatro Popular Universitario* in the María Guerrero theatre in Madrid. It was to move to the normal programme of the María Guerrero, but was withdrawn after the third show, due to pressure on the censorship body from the military, which saw in it a blatant anti-militarism. Sastre later claimed:

A la tercera representación había asistido el general Moscardó, el héroe del Alcázar, que había montado en cólera porque en un teatro nacional se ofreciese una obra antimilitarista y antipatriótica, y la prohibieron. Nunca pudo volver a hacerse legalmente, aunque ilegalmente se haría en mil parroquias, barrios y colegios.³⁰

²⁹ AGA/IDD 52.22 Topogr. 83-51 Ca. 71.680 Exp. 94-53. All further references to the censors' comments on this play are taken from these documents unless otherwise indicated.

³⁰ José Luis Vicente Mosquete, 'Alfonso Sastre: un largo viaje desde Madrid a Euskadi', *Cuadernos El Público*, no. 38 (1988), 5-27 (p. 10). This last claim is untrue. In fact, in 1954, the staging of the final scene was authorised by the Ministry, for one performance only, in homage to the author on the occasion of the staging of *La mordaza*. As the documents in the archive show, by 1962 this play was being authorised again, albeit with certain restrictions on the style of uniforms to be used.

Nonetheless, in typically arbitrary fashion, the censors saw fit to authorise publication of the play by Escélicer the same year.

When asked to read the play again five months later, in August 1953, upon an application from the Salvador Soler-Mari theatre company, Montes Agudo seems to have considered it to be an expressly pro-Nationalist text. However, he noted that, while it could be interpreted as a play about the beauty of a soldier's destiny, it could also be interpreted by others as a Marxist play. Because of this dangerous ambiguity, he again recommended that the play be authorised only for *teatros de cámara*. However, it was later prohibited. Staging of the play remained officially banned until 1962, when the Comandante Asesor Técnico del Alto Estado Mayor gave it a positive report, noting: 'La localización geográfica e histórica de la acción dramática es imaginaria y no identificable con otras conocidas', and going on to state: 'No existe acción militar ni un ejercicio de mando definibles, por lo que desde nuestro punto de vista su puesta en escena, en atención a las razones antecedentes, es factible.'³¹ Despite the prohibition, the play had been staged a few times without authorisation in the intervening years, a fact cited by Sastre in his correspondence with the Ministry in his vain attempts to have the prohibition lifted.

Three other plays by Sastre were considered by the censors in 1953. These were *Cargamento de sueños*, *El pan de todos* and *Prólogo patético*.³² The first of these was authorised without cuts for *teatros de cámara*. There was no application made for a

³¹ *Censura y represión intelectual*, p.80.

³² AGA/IDD 52.22 Topogr. 83-51 Ca. 71.681 Exp. 377-53; Ca. 71.678 Exp. 401-53; Ca. 71.678 Exp. 438-53. All further references to the censors' comments on these plays are taken from these documents unless otherwise indicated.

commercial staging of the play. The other two plays met with more difficulty. On the question of the dramatist's ideology, there was again some confusion. *El pan de todos* is a play about a moral and political dilemma, in which the protagonist, David Harko, denounces his mother to the authorities for the sake of the revolution; she is killed by the authorities and he later commits suicide. Montes Agudo read *El pan de todos* as 'una diatriba del régimen comunista con sus crueles métodos policíacos' and thus commented, 'políticamente considerado, es una obra perfectamente tolerable'. Bartolomé Mostaza was a little less certain of the author's intention, commenting that, '...no está clara la tesis del autor, pero parece desprenderse de ella un pesimismo absoluto sobre la naturaleza de los hombres, incapaces de mantener su pureza revolucionaria ante el halago de las comodidades y el dinero.' Nonetheless, he concluded: 'No ofrece peligros de tipo político.' However, despite the fact that both censors recommended authorisation, the play was prohibited by the Director General on 14 January 1954. According to Martínez Michel, the play was sent to the Ministro Secretario General del Movimiento, Raimundo Fernández Cuesta, for his views.³³ As a result it was viewed by another group of censors, all but one of whom considered it a dangerous work with possible references to the regime and recommended its prohibition. Also held in the files is a letter from Sastre, dated 30 April 1955, in which the author requests a revision of the verdict. He makes the point that the play was published in its entirety in the officially sanctioned journal, *Ateneo*. The play was subjected to review and a report recommended the lifting of the ban, as the play was once again judged to be a criticism of Communism. A moral report, signed by Padre

³³ *Censura y represión intelectual*, p.102. This information is not contained in AGA/IDD 52.22 Topogr. 83-51 Ca. 71.678 Exp. 401-53.

Mauricio de Begoña, makes similar comments about the play's criticism of Communism and thus its implicit support for 'los principios de nuestra religión y de nuestra moral'. The Ministro Secretario General del Movimiento was consulted again, as were other censors. After much lengthy deliberation, the play was authorised in 1956, firstly with a few cuts and later (in 1961) without. It seems, however, that the censors were not alone in their confusion regarding this play, as Sastre later noted: '...la obra produjo, cuando se estrenó, escándalo y ambigüedad; lo que me hizo adoptar la decisión de no autorizar en lo sucesivo su representación.'³⁴

There was uncertainty among the censors regarding *Prólogo patético*, a play dealing with the moral dilemmas facing revolutionaries plotting to overthrow a dictator and featuring enactments of police violence and cruelty.³⁵ It was deemed by Emilio Morales de Acevedo to be an 'obra peligrosísima', as the terrorist protagonist is not sufficiently repentant, and because of the representation of police brutality on stage. Montes Agudo, on the other hand, again found an anti-Communist flavour to the play that in no way offended against the Nationalist orthodoxy. Padre Mauricio de Begoña was more cautious. While he found the play acceptable from the perspective of Catholic ideology and morals, he recognised that he was not the competent authority to judge the play politically. Díez Crespo considered it a dangerous play for its justification of terrorism and its portrayal of police brutality, and advocated its prohibition. He saw in it

³⁴ 'Nota del autor', in *El pan de todos* (Hondarribia: Hiru, 1992), pp. 7-10 (p. 7). Sastre had earlier asked the PCE for its views on the play: 'El dictamen del Partido fue muy severo contra la obra...', 'Nota para esta edición', in *El pan de todos*, pp. 5-6 (p. 5). Given the PCE 's reaction, it is perhaps not so surprising that some of the censors read the play as an anti-Communist work.

³⁵ According to Sastre, it was to be the first play in a 'trilogía sobre el terrorismo'. Alfonso Sastre, *Teatro de Vanguardia* (Hondarribia: Hiru, 1992), p. 14.

no possible support for the Nationalist Falangist revolution. Martínez Michel notes that Virgilio Hernández Rivadulla correctly read it as a play about ‘la justificación de los medios violentos para lograr la revolución social que mejore el nivel humano del pueblo’, but saw it as a play exclusively about France in the Second World War.³⁶ Unable to come to a decision, the Director General de Cinematografía y Teatro (Joaquín Argamasilla) asked for the opinion of Raimundo Fernández Cuesta, Secretaria General del Movimiento. *Prólogo patético* was prohibited when rehearsals were already underway, on foot of his negative interpretation of the play. Of course it was no shock when the ban was upheld after a much later review in July 1971, given Sastre’s notoriety by this stage. The play was to have been performed in the *Festival de Teatro de Sitges*, but the censors considered that the play’s justification of violence and terrorism and its denial of an afterlife could lead to public disturbances. Yet it seems that *Prólogo patético* was authorized for publication in 1963, once again highlighting the inconsistency in the implementation of censorship.

The files also show evidence of further confusion among the censors with regard to *La mordaza* (1954), *Guillermo Tell tiene los ojos tristes* (1955) and *En la red* (1960). Regarding *La mordaza*, a play about nothing if not censorship itself, it is difficult to comprehend why the censors chose to read it as a simple ‘drama rural’. *Guillermo Tell tiene los ojos tristes* is a version of the traditional story in which a despotic leader is overthrown by a representative of the downtrodden people. Sastre was clear that this was a play about revolution: ‘No sólo es Guillermo Tell sino que muchos hombres y mujeres pueden seguramente reconocer en tal personaje otras personas conocidas y admirables y

³⁶ *Censura y represión intelectual*, p.92. The document referred to here is not contained in AGA/IDD 52.22 Topogr. 83-51 Ca. 71.678 Exp. 438-53.

también algo o mucho de los propios sentimientos ante las situaciones de opresión de los pueblos y de las gentes.’³⁷

En la red is interesting for, among other things, what might be interpreted as its *posibilismo*. That the play was set in Algeria seems to have aided its initial authorisation. What is surprising is that it was so readily authorised, given not only its subject matter – a group of freedom fighters struggling to liberate Algeria – with its obvious parallels with the Spanish situation, but also because the application to stage the play came from the GTR, which had made its political agenda and opposition to the Franco regime clear from the outset. Yet the censors were taken aback by the public reaction to the play, a fact that again shows up their error regarding its interpretation. A note from the Jefe de la Sección de Teatro to the Jefe de Sección de Libros, dated 15 November 1961, states:

La comedia *En la red* de Alfonso Sastre, ha sido autorizada por la Dirección General de Cinematografía y Teatro, considerando incluso para ello el informe del Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, a causa del tema, insurrección argelina, que dicha obra desarrolla. No obstante después de su estreno en el Teatro Recoletos de Madrid, surgieron dificultades determinadas por la equívoca interpretación de evidente y negativo significado político con que la comedia fue acogida. Por esta causa se ha optado a posteriori medidas restrictivas en cuanto a su reposición. ³⁸

Bizarrely, and rather naïvely at this stage, it appears that the censors considered Sastre’s intention to have been other than critical, and instead blamed audience misinterpretation of

³⁷ ‘Una nota actual: No sólo es Guillermo Tell’, in *Guillermo Tell tiene los ojos tristes* (Hondarribia: Hiru, 1990), pp. 4-5 (p. 5).

³⁸ AGA/IDD 52.22 Topogr. 83-51 Ca. 71.714 Exp. 260-60. Sastre notes what these restrictions were: ‘Cuando la obra dejó de representarse en Madrid, su representación fue prohibida para las provincias.’ Alfonso Sastre, *En la red*, 2nd edn (Hondarribia: Hiru, 2001), p. 18.

the play. This was despite the fact that the programme notes contained the following declaration:

Por lo demás, no me extrañaría que este drama resultara, en algunos aspectos, intolerable; pero también espero y deseo que despierte en los espectadores esa toma de conciencia que, más allá del inmediato efecto catártico, es el fin último del teatro concebido como forma de lucha y de investigación de lo real.³⁹

There should have been no confusion either, when it came to Sastre's adaptations of other writers' work. Clearly chosen for their ideological as well as their artistic worth, the plays adapted by Sastre also encountered some difficulties with the censors, although to a lesser degree than the author's own work. This seems to support the complaint of many Spanish dramatists that home-produced drama of protest was less acceptable in Spain than that written by foreign authors. Sastre was interested in overtly political works of polemical dramatists, and in the politics of the dramatists themselves. For example, in the programme notes to his adaptation of O'Casey's *Red Roses for Me*, Sastre stresses the Irish dramatist's politics, calling him 'el gran ejemplo de un escritor combatiente'.⁴⁰ Between the years 1967 and 1970 when Sastre was officially out of favour and by now notoriously anti-regime, he was responsible for eight adaptations of plays by Jean Paul Sartre, a writer held in contempt by the regime. Yet even these were authorised, albeit with cuts, by the regime's censors.

³⁹ *En la red*, p. 16.

⁴⁰ AGA/IDD 52.22 Topogr. 83-55 Ca. 85.254 Exp. 258-69.

Reasons for the Confusion

All of this misunderstanding seems to point to an astounding ignorance on the part of the censors of Sastre's stated socio-cultural and political agenda. Despite the dramatist's involvement in theatre groups critical of the Spanish situation, both theatrical and social, and his publication of these views, the censors seem unsure of his stance and willing to see in his work support for the status quo. Unsurprisingly then, this confusion on the part of the censors lessened as the dramatist's opposition to the regime became ever more militant and his dealings with the censors themselves ever more confrontational.

The confusion regarding his early work is so striking because he was generally viewed as the most radical of the committed dramatists. This was, after all, an author who declared in *Primer Acto* in 1957: 'Queda claro en estos dramas que si toda revolución es un hecho trágico, todo orden social injusto es una tragedia sorda inaceptable. Trato de poner al espectador ante el dilemma de elegir entre las dos tragedias.'⁴¹

In an attempt to explain the censors' confusion, several factors must be considered. The nature of censorship, both its vague laws and their often arbitrary implementation, cannot be overlooked, yet this is not sufficient to explain the censors' reports on Sastre's early works. Many of the censors seemed to be very sure of Sastre's ideological position, which they took to be the same as their own. In short, initially Sastre's plays seem to have been authorised because of what were perceived to be the

⁴¹ Quoted in *El pan de todos*, p. 11.

dramatist's Nationalist leanings. This appears to have been due largely to his Nationalist background and his links with the SEU, which was recognised officially in the *Ley de Ordenación Universitaria* (1943) and which had replaced the outlawed Federación Universitaria Escolar. Barry Jordan made the point that some of the committed writers who were the offspring of Nationalists were not as harshly treated as those whose background was Republican.⁴² Sastre's family was Nationalist. Writing about his 'political awakening' in the late 1940s, Sastre mentioned the 'falseamiento ideológico que se vivía en mi casa (mi madre pensaba de otra manera pero tenía poca voz ante la autoridad de mi padre.'⁴³

Another factor was that Sastre was relatively unknown at a time when the censors were more focused on red-tinged writers whose civil war stance made them the subject of serious scrutiny. This changed, however, and Sastre later adopted a very public anti-regime stance, and became antagonistic in his dealings with the censors, so his subsequent problems with them are predictable.

It should also be acknowledged that many of the censors were writers themselves and some of them at least were concerned with the literary merit as well as with the political content of the plays that they read. Therefore it could be argued that on occasion Sastre may have simply been given the benefit of the doubt for the sake of a work that appealed to a censor.

It is also the case that while heavily censored later, Sastre was not quite 'borrado

⁴² *Writing and Politics in Franco's Spain* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 53. Mangini, on the other hand, asserts that writers of the opposition were viewed as minor delinquents and in general, not taken very seriously. Shirley Mangini, *Rojos y rebeldes: la cultura de la disidencia durante el franquismo* (Barcelona: Anthropos, 1987), p. 59. Her analysis seems not to acknowledge the regime's efforts to silence them.

⁴³ *Alfonso Sastre o la ilusión trágica*, pp. 23-24.

de todas las listas', as many of his adaptations of the works of other dramatists were successfully staged even in the late 1960s. Moreover, contrary to common opinion, most of the works of Alfonso Sastre that were the subject of applications *were* authorised by the censors. Of the forty-seven applications from the Franco period listed in the archive, only five are listed as prohibited (AGA/IDD 46). It must be granted, however, that the initial listing is sometimes betrayed by the censorship documents themselves, as is the case with *Escuadra hacia la muerte*, listed as authorised, but which was later refused authorisation for almost a decade. Other plays were authorised for *teatros de cámara* only, and some were later prohibited. A further ten were listed as authorised with cuts. There was little consistency in the application of the censorship norms, however, and a play authorised without cuts at one time, could be cut later.

Nonetheless, Sastre was certainly a victim of environmental censorship. The successful establishment of a new state and the development and inculcation of a supporting ideology meant that censorship was not a labour confined to those who worked in the ministries in charge of culture and information, although this was the most direct form of cultural ideological control. Censorship was in fact much more widespread and insidious. In the state system established by the Civil War victors, other apparatuses were also used to threaten or punish the author who failed to toe the official ideological line. State influence reached the commercial theatres and publishing companies who in turn established limits and demanded certain compromise from authors.

Una entidad editora – periódico, revista, editorial o emisora – escoge y difunde el producto o el mensaje que más le interesa comercial e ideológicamente, a un mismo

tiempo, de acuerdo con su propia visión de las cosas, siguiendo su interpretación del pasado y su prospectiva del futuro.⁴⁴

Dramatists also had to contend with the theatres themselves. According to Mangini: ‘En general, el teatro seguía muy controlado por el régimen, y fuera de los Teatros Nacionales, hubo escasos espectáculos.’⁴⁵ The commercial theatre, both under Franco and before, was a business that was run for profit. It was logical therefore that the owners should target as their ideal market the largest group in society with the time and the disposable income to make their theatrical enterprise a viable one: the bourgeoisie. Theatre was expensive to produce and the commercial-minded managers were loath to stage anything other than the safest productions. This resulted in a reluctance to produce the works of new authors or those whose work had previously been censored, and a continuation of the whimsical, bourgeois-orientated drama that had been so popular in the pre-war period. As profit was the main motivator, theatre producers were unlikely to gamble on any production that could not be guaranteed a substantial run. Documents from the Archive in Alcalá show that from 1968 to 1976 only one of Sastre’s plays was authorised. Yet this low figure reflects the lack of applications to stage his work, rather than new prohibitions, as Abellán observed: ‘Aproximadamente, desde finales de 1968 hasta 1977 las empresas teatrales renunciaron por completo a representar sus obras.’⁴⁶ Essentially, this was risk management on the part of some producers who tended to

⁴⁴ Manuel Abellán, ‘Literatura, censura y moral en el primer franquismo’, *Papers: Revista de Sociología*, no. 21 (1984), 153-72 (p. 154). Abellán has also written about the form of censorship employed by publishing companies in *Censura y creación literaria en España (1939 - 1976)* (Barcelona: Península, 1980), pp. 97-104.

⁴⁵ *Rojos y rebeldes*, p. 77.

⁴⁶ Manuel Abellán, ‘La censura teatral durante el franquismo’, *Estreno*, 15 (no. 2, 1989), 20-23 (p. 22). It must be noted that this statement fails to take into account his adaptations of the works of other dramatists, many of which were successfully staged during this period.

choose a safe option and avoid plays that could not be guaranteed a trouble-free run. This meant that an author like Sastre, who by then had a history of censorship troubles, was just too great a risk.

The changing attitude of the censors towards the theatre of Alfonso Sastre supports a claim made by Abellán based on the results of his survey of Spanish authors affected by censorship under Franco. He found that almost eighty five percent of those surveyed believed political opinion to be the reason for which they were most censored, followed by their portrayal of religion and sexual morality.⁴⁷ The fourth criterion, the author's use of language, was not considered to be the cause of much censorship, compared with the other three criteria. The authors surveyed also believed that censorship was not uniformly applied to all writers, but rather depended on one's past notoriety or political stance. That this was indeed the case is evident from an examination of Sastre's dealings with the censors; it was clearly his politics (once the censors had figured out what they were) that they found fault with.

Sastre's theatrical and political commitment is irrefutable and his relationship with censorship, both official and environmental, was difficult and it is exactly for this reason that it is so remarkable that he once was taken for an anti-Communist, right-thinking ally of the regime.

⁴⁷ *Censura y creación*, p. 89.

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