

## Sofía Ospina's Plays

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When Sofía Ospina de Navarro died in Medellín, Colombia, at the age of 81, in June 1974, front page articles in Colombian newspapers and magazines described and celebrated her extraordinary career as a journalist, short story writer, poet, dramatist, cooking expert, etiquette advisor and organizer of charitable enterprises. Sofía Ospina was renowned for her extraordinary vitality, energy, good humor and boundless curiosity, all apparent in her prolific publications. During five decades of frequent editorial essays in such major newspapers as *El Espectador*, *El Tiempo* and *El Colombiano*, she shared her insights and common sense with thousands of daily readers. Hundreds of her essays and stories were collected into best-selling volumes which remain a delight to read: *Cuentos y crónicas* (1926), *La abuela cuenta* (1964), *Menos redes* (n.d.), *Crónicas* (1983) and others. Her basic cookbook, *La buena mesa: sencillo y práctico libro de cocina*, has remained a staple of Colombian domestic life throughout the better part of this century, selling many hundreds of thousands of copies in its dozens of editions. Her other cookbook, *La cartilla del hogar*, and her etiquette manual, *Don de gentes: compridos de cultura social*, which provides sensible advice for every likely occasion, were also extraordinarily popular books, and remain fascinating as detailed social history.

In person, Sofía Ospina was a formidable powerhouse of organizational energy, intense compassion and emotional warmth. She was dedicated to raising funds for charitable causes, and throughout her life she promoted causes which furthered the education and health of women. As well as dominating traditional areas of women's literary expression, with her cookbooks, etiquette handbooks, lively memoirs of turn-of-the-century Medellín, plays and poetry, Sofía Ospina also wrote extensive social commentary and sharp critical analysis of current events, and she was famous for her dynamic public speeches. She was the first woman to lecture at the prestigious Colón theater in Bogotá, the first woman Council member in Antioquia, one of the creators of an important educational task force in Medellín, and a founding member of a literary circle which met regularly and included many outstanding writers, including Tomás Carrasquilla. She was also a painter of some distinction. Sofía Ospina's achievements were widely recognized: she won dozens of awards for public service, culminating with the national Great Cross of Boyacá in 1973, and including the Star of Antioquia awarded by her home state of Antioquia, as well as designation as the Matróna Emblemática de Antioquia in 1961.

Sofía Ospina was born on April 15, 1893 in Medellín, Colombia, where she lived throughout her life<sup>1</sup>. Her family was a prominent one: she was a

<sup>1</sup> The biographical data included here is based upon a collection of newspaper articles which appeared around the time of Sofía Ospina's death in 1974. These articles, as well as a collection of books written by Sofía Ospina, were sent from Colombia by Clara Inés Navarro de Uribe to Bertha Olga Ospina, now living in the U.S., who remembers her great aunt with deep affection and has

granddaughter of Colombian President Mariano Ospina Rodríguez, a niece of President Pedro Nel Ospina, and the sister of President Mariano Ospina Pérez. She grew up in a lively household of privilege, high expectations, and insistence upon social responsibility and active participation in public affairs. She was well-educated and crusaded throughout her life for effective education for women. Her interest in the possibilities of public roles for women is apparent in her plays. Ospina was married for fifty five years to Salvador Navarro Misas, a Medellín businessman. They had seven children, and eventually twenty seven grandchildren, and dozens of great grandchildren, many of whom gathered at the Navarro home every Sunday for decades. The stability and warmth of her home life were often reflected in Ospina's writing; early on in her career she created a grandmotherly, wise voice which she sustained as she proffered advice, analysis and solace through a half century of essays. The same tone of kindly but sharp criticism may be found in her dramatic works.

At least six of Sofía Ospina's plays were performed in theaters in Medellín and Bogotá on a number of occasions, and they have circulated in manuscript, but they have not yet been published. This essay will discuss *Ascendiendo*, *Un luto pasajero*, *La familia Morales* and *Una junta benéfica*, all set in Medellín and probably written in the 1930's and 40's. They are comedies of manners which reveal social tensions inherent in changing times. They are very similar to Ospina's costumbrista *Cuentos y crónicas* (1926) and describe that same small-city traditional social world which is experiencing recent and startling transformations from both within and without. The four plays dramatize women's lives, their new freedoms and the tensions these new possibilities bring with them. There are many other aspects of these plays which are of great interest, but this essay will focus upon the interplay between the old and the new.

The first act of *Ascendiendo* portrays a family's excitement when the two daughters receive an invitation

to a Gran Baile de Gala. They are a country family, two daughters and a mother, recently settled in Medellín, still dazzled by the turbulence of city life, innocently unaware of how excluded they are from well-to-do Medellín social circles. They are trying hard to figure out how to dress and behave, getting it wrong most of the time, in ways which show up how arbitrary fashion is. When the girls open their dance invitation, from the Junta Directiva del Club Unión, they are breathless with amazement and pleasure, and can't wait to tell their neighbors, who have not failed to let them know that they are outsiders, rough-mannered country girls from Ituango. Rosa says immediately "voy a pasar donde los Jaramillo, para prestar unos figurines, y sobre todo, por mostrar la tarjeta..." (p. 3). This opens a discussion of ball gowns. The Fernández girls want the fanciest possible silk gowns, but the Jaramillos advise cotton in order to "proteger la industria nacional". But can they trust the Jaramillos? Doña Mariana does not think so, and she snarls "lo que no entra conmigo es proteger la Industria Nacional; ya la protegí muchos años en Ituango y, ahorita, apenas hace seis meses que protejo la seda". If the Jaramillos recommend walking, that decides Doña Mariana to hire a car, "el mejor auto que haya en el garaje", to transport them a few blocks in style. The hard part is drafting an answer to the invitation: Lola hunts through the dictionary for elegant-sounding words, and the mother, too, hovers over the dictionary: "yo sí necesito separar algunas expresiones de las que esas señoras de la alta aristocracia pretenderán lanzarme en el tal baile" (p. 3). This is conventional slapstick comedy, but the Fernández women are not ridiculous: they are genuinely trying to figure out the rules. The unspoken consensus about what defines good taste baffles them. Yellow flowers are fashionable, but purple orchids are considered tacky. They have to trust that the dressmaker is not making fools of them, and they anguish over details. They bungle the rhetorical level of expressed support of charitable causes; the mother in despair cries out "A mí me ofus-

(Continuación Nota 1)

been most generous in sharing memories as well as the printed materials and copies of play manuscripts which have made this essay possible. Longer articles (also by Mary Berg) which describe all of Sofía Ospina's books are forthcoming in *Escritura y diferencias: autoras colombianas del siglo XX*, edited by María Mercedes Jaramillo, Betty Ososrio and Angela Robledo, Universidad de Antioquia press; and in *Witnessing a Life, Portraits of Latin American Women Writers*, ed. Marjorie Agosin, University of New Mexico Press.

can esas filantropías como dicen aquí... Eso se está volviendo una epidemia..." (p. 7). Their house of cards collapses in the play's last scene, where the mailman comes to retrieve the invitation, which was supposed to have been delivered to another Fernández family, not to them. They cannot give back the invitation. They have been bragging about this precious evidence of their social success and, wails the mother, "si ya está [la tarjeta] en Ituango, la mandamos pa que la viera la familia. Ay, ¡Dios mío! ¡Y nosotras burladas! Ayy, ¡qué horror! ¡Qué infamia! ¡Qué crueles las gentes de la ciudad!" (p. 7). In *Un luto pasajero*, the schism between old and new ways, traditional vs. currently fashionable behavior is a generational rather than a class struggle. Again, the central characters are two daughters and their mother. One daughter is more rebellious than the other, but neither can believe that their mother will actually make them stay home from the dance they plan to attend just because their mother's uncle in Buenos Aires has died. Arguments are stacked up on each side. For the girls, the dance represents a rare freedom of choice (of clothing, of men, of conversation topics); for their mother, it represents their evasion of traditional morality and respect. As in all of Sofía Ospina's plays, clothing decisions are symbolic of larger social issues. The mother insists upon tradition: "¡La gente de hoy no tiene sentimientos! Sería el colmo que, porque las González se bailaron al cuñado y porque las Montoyas dicen que el luto ya pasó a la historia, fuera yo a permitir que estas muchachas hicieran otro tanto con mi tío Antonio" (p. 6). But the mother is willing to compromise: they will wear black for three months, but the dresses will be fashionably cut. The two girls and their cousin jeer at tradition, but they have not defined what they do want clearly enough to make a case for it. They are self-indulgent and self-centered in ways which are deeply disturbing to their elders. There are several very interesting discussions in the play, one about inequities between men and women—the girls really resent the fact that different rules govern the public appearances of men and women, that men in mourning can go to parties but women cannot—and one which analyzes whether a young doctor will or will not make a good husband. He is the mother's choice, but the two daughters argue strenuously about the traditional doctor's commitment to his science and to his patients. The more rebellious daughter cannot bear the thought that her doctor suitor is at the mercy

of his patient's unpredictable illnesses, childbirths and deaths; she also resents her mother's approval, even though Dr. Ricardo is clearly the most glamorous suitor in town: he comes in by airplane; he drives a car—a resplendent *roster*; his *consultorio* is sure to be a success. Repeatedly in Sofía Ospina's plays, young women refuse to make the obvious right choice for themselves simply because they resent being pushed by their mothers and what their mothers represent.

The two longer Ospina's plays (three-act) considered here are also about women's lives. "La familia Morales", which was staged with great success by the Compañía de Comedias Virginia Fábregas, is about a family which has moved from the country to Medellín because of the social aspirations of the Medellín-born wife who wants her daughter to have "más horizontes" (p. 2). It is a comedy of counterpoint between the old and the new. Don Agapito cannot adapt: he is distressed that his wife is not keeping a closer eye on their rebellious daughter, and he is desperately nostalgic about their farm in Palmas, wondering whatever possessed him to "dar mi finca, con tan buenas aguas, con ganados y casa, por un corral de tapias, con cinco cuartos y cuatro ventanas... onde la luz se paga a precio dioro, onde lagua se compra por medidas, onde no hay modo diordenar una vaca... ¡Solamente a las mujeres se les puede ocurrir esa barbaridá!" (p. 2). His wife jeers at what she used to consider luxuries, in her ignorant country days: "una máquina Singer... una victrola... marca Víctor... las vacas normandas..." (p. 4) all of which she was delighted to leave behind when they came to Medellín to live like "gente de verdad". But don Agapito is suffering; he is *hungry*. His womenfolk keep insisting that he try "coliflores, nabos, habichuelas y mil enredos más, que ni aún ustedes mismas han podido aprender a comer, y que yo no las trago tampoco... Solamente por estar a la moda..." (pp. 3-4). Don Agapito is constantly nagged by his wife—he doesn't wear the right clothes, he speaks to people using "vos" instead of "tú", and his manners are hopelessly crude. His wife and daughter clamor for a refrigerator, for a hot water heater, and for other city luxuries that seem ridiculous to him. Aurita is swept off her feet by a weak young man who drives "un *roster* finísimo" (p. 6). The women try to get don Agapito to ride in the car and he is furious: "¿Y es que piensan ustedes, que después de andar toda la vida en mi mula, manejándola como me da la gana, voy a meterme en-

tre una caja de esas, y a dejarme llevar como un bulto? Están equivocadas, ¡yo soy independiente"! (p. 7).

As in other plays, physical objects, possessions, symbolize wealth, modernization and increased connection to a wider capitalistic world. Travel to Europe is the ultimate status symbol.

Don Agapito represents a generation of tradition, solid connection with the land, rejection of the new-fangled and frivolous. His wife and daughter are infatuated with the new, but they are less sure of their values. Rules that used to be clear are now questioned, subverted and ignored; when Aurita wants to go out dancing late at night, she lies to her father. But her mother is complicit in her daughter's dubious behavior; Luis Carlos comments that Aurita can evade all restrictions: "ya sabes que tienes una mamá muy discreta" (p. 11).

When act II opens, don Agapito has just died. Mother and daughter are now free to spend their money as they like and make the trip to Europe that Agapito has refused to consider. But they flounder without moral guidelines. They are wealthy and free, but essentially without a goal. Nothing in their lives has prepared them to make their own choices. Luis Carlos moves in on them like a vulture and although Aurita sees that he is a fortune hunter, she does not know what to do about it.

Act III, where they have just returned from Europe, shows them even more culturally displaced. Their European affectations seem ridiculous and even pathetic in Medellín, but they no longer even notice this. Julia and Aurita praise everything French and disparage Colombian customs. Aurita has married Luis Carlos and has a baby, and she shocks her Medellín friends by carrying on about how "[él] será hijo único. En Francia es ridícula una familia al estilo antioqueño" (p. 21). There is a good deal of discussion about how even in Medellín, women's roles have changed, how "el feminismo está en toda su fina. Se acabó aquello de entregar al marido: Cuerpo, Alma y Plata" (p. 23). Although Luis Carlos married Aurita for her money, and has gotten her to pay for the European trip and lots of fancy clothes, he has no real power; the women have kept total control over their money, and back in Medellín, Luis Carlos, "sin poder lograr ni el derecho a la firma" (p. 23) is an object of either pity or ridicule. Aurita feels entitled to carry on conspicuously with other men, but her self-indulgence

does not make her happy. Stepping into the twentieth century is complex, and the issues are not simplified or resolved in Sofía Ospina's plays.

The fourth play to be mentioned here briefly is "Una junta benéfica", a three-act comedy about everything going wrong that possibly can with a variety-show fundraiser organized by the main character, Maruja Sáenz. It is a subject with which Sofía Ospina may ruefully have felt she was all too familiar. Like the others, "Una junta benéfica" is set just after World War I, when Medellín women such as Sofía Ospina are just beginning to organize charity associations. Maruja, the "Presidenta de la Institución 'Protección de la Infancia'", wants to raise money to feed hungry orphans. Her friends envy her because her husband, unlike most, allows her "libertad para ayudar a todas las obras benéficas" (p. 2). But from beginning to end, the play chronicles the domestic mishaps that are occasioned by her determination to give priority to her public rather than her private life. Her three children clamor for attention and her daughter especially is getting into real trouble because no one cares. The water is cut off because she forgot to pay the bill, a problem compounded by the fact that in their upwardly mobile impress-the-Joneses lifestyle, the housemaid is from Bogotá and does not feel that carrying water is part of her up-scale job description. Maruja's husband complains bitterly throughout the play of late or inedible meals because his wife is not home to supervise the cook, and he is very clear about how "yo era feliz cuando mi mujercita no figuraba en nada, cuando solo presidía su hogar" (p. 7). The play includes a whole series of incidents where husbands and *novios* and fathers refuse to let their women participate in events outside of their homes. Particularly when it comes to singing and dancing on stage, for the fundraising benefit, "los hombres sí son la embarrada" (p. 10), complain the women. Even for a good cause, men do not want their women to participate, and Padre Basilio is the most conservative of all, even though it is his charity that will benefit. When the priest attends an organizational meeting at her house, Maruja has to remove and hide all the artwork in her living room. But the women persevere and do hold their fundraiser after all. It is a success in that the theater is packed—all the men come to see who did let his wife dance on stage—and a point is made about women actually being capable of organizing a public event, but every aspect of the production has been fraught with disaster

and it is a financial loss. Her husband refused to attend, and Maruja clearly has a lot of peacemaking to do. The play ends with Sofia Ospina's usual message: the world is changing fast and people must adapt. While some, like the traditional ultra-Catholic Carmen, are appalled by "todas estas modernuras" (p. 16) which question gender lines, class lines and all the traditional modes and customs of behavior, Sofia Ospina makes it clear that it is an exciting time to live.

Reading these plays some seventy years after they were written and performed is like having a conversation with an ideal grandmother or great-grandmother who has total recall of how life was in the 20's. Sofia Ospina's plays are well-written and they are fascinating social history; it seems a shame to lose them, as we surely will if they are not published. Her short stories and chronicles may be more to modern taste, although few of them have been reprinted since the 20's. Her two cookbooks, particularly *La buena mesa*, remain staples of the Colombian kitchen, and continue to appear in new editions. Her plays and short stories should also merit preservation as an accessible aspect of 20th century Colombian culture.

#### Works by Sofía Ospina de Navarro:

*Crónicas*. Medellín: Susaeta, 1983.

*La cartilla del hogar*. 4th ed. Medellín: Editorial Granamérica, 1972.

*La abuela cuenta*. Medellín: Ediciones La Tertulia Editorial Granamérica, 1964. 2nd ed. Medellín: Imprenta Departamental de Antioquia, 1975.

*Don de gentes: Comprimidos de cultura social*. Medellín: Granamérica, 1958. 1969 ed. [printing of 60,000]: Medellín: Editorial Colima.

*La buena mesa: sencillo y práctico libro de cocina*. 4th ed. Medellín: Tip. Sansón, 1942. 16th ed. Medellín: Editorial Granamérica, 1974. 18th ed. Medellín: Editorial Argemiro Salazar, 1980. 19th ed. Medellín: Promotora de Ediciones y Comunicaciones Ltda., 1982.

*Cuentos y crónicas*. Prologue by Tomás Carrasquilla. Medellín: Tipografía Industrial, 1926.

*Menos redes* [5 stories]. Prologue by Alfonso Castro. Medellín.

Plays [circulated in manuscript:]

Ascendiendo: Comedia en dos actos

El favor de San Antonio

La familia Morales: Comedia en tres actos

Milagro

Una junta benéfica: Comedia en tres actos

Un luto pasajero: Comedia en un acto