WINTER 2007 HONORABLE MENTION

Annalise Blum

Instructor’s Foreword

Theodor Adorno once called for thinkers to imagine the essay as “an arena for intellectual experience.” In “Hugo Chávez’s Debut: Rhetoric and Petro–Politics in the World Theater,” Annalise Blum does just that by coming to terms with the complexities of the controversial Chávez as he performs and strategizes on national, regional, and international rhetorical and political stages. What Annalise achieves so brilliantly in her essay is a fusion of content and form. While confessing that Chávez’s extreme contemporaneity makes him difficult to understand, Annalise’s dramatic structure enacts for readers what we can definitively say about him before the curtain of time gives us some historical distance on his performance: that Chávez is playing at petro–politics, that he is turning global oil struggles into a theater of power and a rhetoric of resistance positioned against the United States.

The subtleties of Annalise’s approach will be evident to any reader who spends a couple of hours with her essay. But what might further interest that reader is how Annalise’s approach emerged out of a truly recursive and revisionary process of writing and research; the form of “Hugo Chávez’s Debut” was the product of a writer’s devotion to her subject and to the labors of composition. The essay began as a traditional academic paper, a contextual analysis that sought to frame the various debates around Chávez. Following the contextual analysis, I presented the class with the challenge of inventing some “informal” strategies for organizing their research–based argument. Upon reflection, Annalise realized that dramatic rhetoric is central to Chávez’s strategy, and that dramatic rhetoric might therefore make sense as a structural principle for her RBA. This was no easy task. Annalise had to figure out the dramatic corollary to a transition between paragraphs; she had to spend time with political plays such as Tony Kushner’s unforgettable Angels in America in order to master dramatic form; she needed to sort out how to write a “play” and still construct a recognizably academic argument rooted in research. Annalise even internalizes this last problem in her essay, giving us a narrator who is also a researcher, one at times humorously surrounded by a clutter of sources, drafts, magazines, and books. Through considered choices such as these, Annalise actually shifts us away from the metaphor that Adorno offers for the essay. Annalise’s essay is finally not an arena for the intellect, but a theater of cognition that persuasively draws its audience into the dramatic intricacies of one of the most compelling actors in geopolitics today.

Joel Burges
Hugo Chávez’s Debut:  
Rhetoric and Petro–Politics in the World Theater  
A Dramatic Essay in Three Acts  

Annalise Blum  

PROGRAM:  

Playwright’s Notes  

ACT 1: The National Stage  
Scene 1: “El Libertador”  
Scene 2: Venezuela’s Second Liberator  
Scene 3: “El Presidente”  
Scene 4: Petroleum and Poverty  
Scene 5: Success?  
Scene 6: No Verdict on Venezuela  

ACT 2: The Regional Stage  
Scene 1: Buying Influence  
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ACT 3: The Global Stage  
Scene 1: Negotiating with the Axis of Evil  
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Scene 3: The Face–Off  
Scene 4: Two Rallies  
Scene 5: The Response  
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Playwright’s Afterword  

CAST:  
The Narrator: A frustrated researcher, attempting to portray Hugo Chávez in a balanced manner. The narrator always stands downstage left on a separate section of the stage.  
The Hero: Hugo Chávez, dressed in a black suit, with a bright red tie. Around his neck hangs a military medal and over his right shoulder he wears a sash of red, blue and yellow stripes—the Venezuelan flag.  
The Inspiration: Simón Bolívar, wearing the helmet of a Russian dragon and a blue tunic with red trim and gold buttons. He carries the black banner of a privateer with a skull and crossbones superimposed on a motto: “Liberty or Death.”

1 Adapted from a quote by Gabriel García Marquez in Tariq Ali, Pirates of the Caribbean (London: Verso, 2006), 125.
The Critics:
- Michael Shifter, vice president of the policy analysis center *The Inter–American Dialogue.*
- Alma Guillermoprieto, a Mexican journalist who writes for both the British and American press.
- Oscar Arias, president of Costa Rica.
- Eduardo Fernandez, the leader of the opposition party in Venezuela.
- Chorus of critics, a group of men ages 40–45, dressed in crisp, unwrinkled suits and carrying briefcases.


The Supporters:
- Bernardo Alvarez Herrera, Venezuela’s ambassador to the U.S.
- Jorge Rodriguez, the Vice President of Venezuela.

The Pollster: LatinoBarómetro, a well–respected independent Chilean polling firm.

The Villain: United States President George W. Bush, a cowboy hat rests at a casual angle atop his head.

PROPS:
Petroleum
Rhetoric
Politics

PLAYWRIGHT’S NOTES:

A Disclaimer:
This is a work of rhetorical drama. All the characters are based upon real figures, many of whom are still alive today. To avoid misrepresenting those portrayed in this play, words which belong to the speaker are in quotation marks, and I have cited the work where the quotation was reproduced. I have taken some liberty in imagining what each character would be likely to say in each scenario; if a character’s line is not quoted, you may assume that the words are the creation of the author.

A Brief Statement of Purpose:
United States President George W. Bush views him as “a threat [to] democracy” (Sweig). *Time* magazine chose him as one of the 100 most influential people in both 2005 and 2006. Last year, the Colombian magazine *Semana* named him “man of the year” for having “modified the political map of the subcontinent, distributed his oil wealth in every direction, challenged the United States, and gone from being perceived as a tropical clown to the Latin American leader with the greatest political influence” (Shifter). This controversial character is Hugo Chávez, the current president of Venezuela.

Who is he really? As the descriptions above reveal, Chávez is a complex and influential figure, yet many discussions of him fall prey to an extreme and polarized
view. In doing so, they fail to present him for who he truly is—an actor. Caught up in
a worldwide power play of oil and politics, Chávez is indeed so dramatic that he begs
to be portrayed theatrically. However, discounting Chávez as a manipulative, scheming
dictator set upon bringing down the U.S., or a pure and idealistic socialist liberator, will
not further our understanding of his nuanced character.

While I have structured this play as Chávez seems to see himself—a legendary
hero fighting to save the world from the imperialist “devil”—it is done with a sense of
irony. My aim is not only to expose the audience to Chávez’s world, but also to present
equally those arguments against him, in the voice of his critics. Through the rhetoric
of the theater, I hope to avoid a static view of Chávez’s character and instead provide
a balanced picture of the motivations and implications of his actions. Aiding in this
endeavor is the inherent theatrical nature of the three stages in Chávez’s progression to
power: Venezuela, Latin America, and the world at large.

ACT 1: The National Stage
Setting: “The tropical República Bolivariana de Venezuela, situated in the northern
portion of South America, is a country rich in history, natural resources, and culture”
(Tarver and Frederick 1). Venezuela has a land area of 352,143 square miles and a
population of 25,730,435 (CIA World Factbook). It is bordered on the south by Brazil,
on the west and southwest by Colombia, and on the east by Guyana. Dependencies
include Margarita Island, Tortuga Island, and many smaller island groups in the
Caribbean. The capital and largest city is Caracas. Venezuela is the world’s fifth largest
exporter of oil (Harman).

Scene 1: “El Libertador”
(The stage lights remain off as the voice of Hugo Chávez speaks passionately in the darkness.)

Hugo Chávez:

“Bolívar is not just a man, Bolívar is a concept. More than just a theory,
Bolívar is a complex set of ideas related to the national, South American,
Caribbean, and world arenas…. He spoke of what today we call a multipolar
world. He proposed the unification of South and Central America into what
he called Greater Colombia, to enable negotiations on an equal basis with the
other three quarters of the globe. This was his multipolar vision. Bolívar was also
anti–imperialist. He said, “The United States seems destined by providence to
infest America with misery in the name of liberty””’ (Guevara 11).
(The stage lights go up as Simón Bolívar enters from stage left. He takes a seat in a simple
wooden chair center stage, facing the audience.)

Simón Bolívar:

I was born on July 24, 1783 in Caracas, Venezuela. Orphaned at age nine, I
grew up in the home of wealthy relatives who paid for my private tutoring but later
sent me away to military school due to my stubborn nature (Tarver and Frederick
45). On a trip to Spain in 1799, I met my wife Maria Teresa Rodríguez del Toro
and we returned to Venezuela. Maria tragically died of fever shortly thereafter, and,
overcome with grief, I returned to live in Europe. “The death of my wife placed
me on the path of politics very early… it made me follow thereafter the carriage of Mars rather than the arrow of Cupid” (McCaughan 12). It was then I vowed to myself that I would liberate and unify the Americas.

I spent the next twenty-five years in South America calling and fighting for independence. In September 1815 I wrote my Carta de Jamaica, or Jamaica Letter, accusing Spain of being “an aged serpent who could not keep Spanish America subject any longer” (Tarver and Frederick 53). When a massive earthquake hit Venezuela, killing an entire regiment of 15,000 independence troops, those still loyal to Spain declared that the earthquake was a sign that nature was against our movement. I told them, “If nature is against us we will fight it and make it obey us” (McCaughan 13). With my independence troops, I conclusively defeated Spain in the battle of Carabobo and established Venezuelan independence on July 5, 1811 (McCaughan 13).

My dream was to liberate and unify the entire Spanish-speaking continent (Ali 127). In 1826, I held a meeting of Latin states in Panama, but internal divisions soon tore the continent apart. When at last my dreams died, my body soon followed—on December 1, 1830. As I once said: “He who serves a revolution ploughs the sea” (McCaughan 15).

Blackout

Scene 2: Venezuela’s Second Liberator

(A single light illuminates the narrator from above, standing in the downstage left corner of the stage.)

Narrator:

Following independence from Spain in 1911, Venezuela was plagued first by a succession of military dictators, and next by a number of ineffective and corrupt “democratic” governments. It was not for another two centuries that a second “Libertador” would arrive to save Venezuela—this time from the perceived threat of the imperialism of the United States of America.

(Light over the narrator is extinguished. Hugo Rafael Chávez Frias enters stage right. He stands center stage, his left hand casually resting in his pocket.)

Hugo Chávez:

I was born on July 28, 1954 to Hugo de los Reyes Chávez and Elena Frias (Gott 26). My parents were school teachers. While their salaries were insufficient to support our family, they gave me something perhaps more important: a love of politics. My brothers and I were brought up by our grandmother in the small town of Sabaneta (Herrera). My childhood dream was to be a professional baseball player, so I entered the military academy to play baseball (Guevara 14). Once there, I majored in communications, obtained a degree in army engineering, and created and hosted my own radio show (Herrera).

2 Hugo Chávez seems to have been inspired by Bolívar’s use of inflammatory rhetoric.

3 During catastrophic floods in Venezuela in 1999, Chávez chose this quotation for a giant mural in downtown Caracas (McCaughan 13).

4 “In 1930, to mark the centenary of the death of Bolívar, Venezuela paid off its entire foreign debt” (Ali 45).
After seventeen years as a lieutenant in the army, I began to organize the Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario, named for my hero Simón Bolívar (Gott 38). Years of greedy governments had devastated my country; Venezuelans were crying for change. A journalist once explained it well: “The 1970s had been the glory years… when Venezuelans were led to believe that they might soon inhabit a rich and developed Western country, but in the early 1980s, they were finally replaced by the harsh reality of devaluation and indebtedness, leading to a worsening spiral of poverty” (Gott 38).

In February 1992, the Movimiento led a coup against then–president Carlos Andres Perez. While the coup failed, I was given ninety seconds to speak on national TV to discourage the remaining rebels. While I was unaware of its effect at the time, this short statement launched my political career. I said; “Comrades: unfortunately, for the moment, the objectives that we had set ourselves have not been achieved in the capital…. Where you are you have performed well, but now is the time for a rethink; new possibilities will arise again and the country will be able to move definitively towards a better future” (Gott 67). Perez put my fellow rebels and me in jail for the next two years. When I was released, a “journalist asked me ‘Where are you going now comandante?’ I answered, ‘To power’” (Guevara 18).

Blackout

Scene 3: “El Presidente”
(The light over the narrator is illuminated.)

Narrator:
Chávez ascended to power rapidly due to huge support among the Venezuelan people, many of whom regarded him as a potential savior. With popularity ratings of over 80%, he won his first election in 1998 with an impressive 56% of the vote (Gunson). After entering office, he immediately called for a national referendum on a new constitution, which was written in 1999 and passed with 1% of the popular vote (Sylvia and Danopoulos 68). Venezuela’s elections appear to have been fairly conducted, but Chávez has since managed to fill the judicial and legislative branches with his supporters through questionable means (Gunson). It is therefore difficult to determine the depth and extent of his undemocratic manipulation of the Venezuelan political system.

(The narrator’s light goes out. Enter stage right the critics: Michael Shifter; Alma Guillermoprieto, the pollster; the Venezuelan Ambassador Bernardo Alvarez Herrera; the Venezuelan Vice President Jorge Rodriguez; and the leader of the opposition party, Eduardo Fernandez. They each take a chair, forming a semi–circle facing the audience. Once they are seated the press marches in, stands center stage in front of the people in the chairs and speaks out to the audience.)

The Press:
In May 2004, when Chávez’s party, the Fifth Republic Movement, had a majority in the National Assembly, they passed a bill to “increase the number of Supreme Court justices from twenty to thirty–two, thus allowing [Chávez] to pack the court with handpicked political loyalists” (Shifter).

(The press exits.)
Michael Shifter:

One thing is clear: “Behind democratic trappings and a fig leaf of legitimacy, Chávez has concentrated power to an astonishing degree” (Shifter). Chávez’s charm and persuasive rhetoric has so captured the adoration of Venezuelans that most are unaware of the power he has accumulated. Chávez has, in essence, entrenched himself immovably as president.

Alma Guillermoprieto:

(Guillermoprieto nods his head in vigorously.) I completely agree. In fact, “he governs not as if he were the president of a divided nation, but as if he had a national mandate to carry out his Bolivarian revolution, as if he had taken over the presidential chair for keeps” (Guillermoprieto).

Michael Shifter:

He may be trying to do exactly that—just look at the newspaper.

(The press enters stage right, and stands center stage, to report.)

The Press:

“On Jan. 31 [2007], Venezuela’s congress voted to grant Chávez’s request for extraordinary powers, allowing the President to pass laws by decree for 18 months…. The President has also indicated that he will seek to remove constitutional limits on presidential terms, so he can serve indefinitely” (“Venezuela’s Chávez Wins Lawmaking Powers”).

(The press exits.)

Michael Shifter:

This new development plainly reveals that Chávez is exploiting democratic means to gather power. Venezuela will soon be a repressive autocracy.

(Venezuelan Vice President Jorge Rodriguez fidgets as Shifter speaks, and, when he finishes, abruptly stands. He speaks passionately.)

Vice President Jorge Rodriguez:

“‘We want to install a dictatorship of real democracy’” (“Venezuela’s Chávez Wins Lawmaking Powers”).

Alma Guillermoprieto:

A “dictatorship of democracy”? Isn’t that an oxymoron?

Opposition Leader Eduardo Fernandez:

Yes, it is. (He too stands.) Venezuela is straying further and further from democracy—this new law will convert “the President into a dictator” (“Venezuela’s Chávez Wins Lawmaking Powers”). (He stamps his foot for emphasis.)

(A group of supporters in the audience jump to their feet, and storm the stage in indignation.)

The Supporters:

(Speaking hurriedly.) Do we get a chance to refute all of these lies? We, the Venezuelan people, are visible and vocal about our love for Chávez. Can’t you see? Is there better evidence than the tens of thousands of supporters who attend rallies to show their support for him? How about the fact that almost
60% of voters rejected a recall referendum on Chávez’s presidency in 2004 (Bulmer–Thomas)? We want Chávez to rule our country!

**Venezuelan Ambassador Bernardo Alvarez Herrera:**

*(Calling to back stage.)* Can you please bring us some more chairs? If we can’t have Chávez himself, we must at least hear the views of the Venezuelan people. *(Motions for the group to sit. Speaks to them.)* Yes, yes—you’re right. *(Turns to the critics.)* As I keep trying to explain to the government of the United States, “the changes occurring in Venezuela reflect the true spirit of the country’s people, and if these changes do not happen now, they will happen eventually. President Chávez’s emergence is not an accident, nor should it be taken as a surprise” (Herrera).

**LatinoBarómetro:**

“Of the populations of the eighteen Latin American countries studied, Venezuelans are the most likely to describe their government as ‘totally democratic.’ Similarly, Venezuela came in second in terms of citizens’ satisfaction with their system of democracy, ranking behind only Uruguay” (Herrera).

**The Supporters:**

Now, how can you deny that Venezuela overwhelmingly supports Chávez and his policies?

**The Critics:**

This proves nothing. We cannot take such a polling result seriously if we don’t know how those interviewed define “totally democratic.” *(The stage lights blackout. A spotlight illuminates the confused–looking narrator on the edge of the stage, holding a book in each hand.)*

**Narrator:**

The elections and polls illustrate that Chávez possesses an impressive amount of support among the Venezuelan people, however his recent actions reveal that he is hungry for power. His extensive control over the country makes it nearly impossible for other politicians to challenge him. If term limits are removed, then competitors may only get a chance at office if they can outlive Chávez. But after generations in poverty, perhaps this sort of “dictatorship of democracy” is what the Venezuelan people want. After all, only they can decide what is best for them. As Rafael Caldera, a previous president of Venezuela, said, “It is difficult to ask the people to burn for freedom and democracy while they think freedom and democracy are not able to feed them” (Ali 56).

For those outside Venezuela it is hard to know what to make of the situation. Are the elections really fair? Is Chávez repressing the opposition? How much is Chávez buying people’s support? A fair assessment of the controversy demands answers to these elusive questions. *(Light above the narrator extinguishes.)*

**Scene 4: Petroleum and Poverty**

*(Light again illuminates the narrator, who no longer is holding the books.)*
Narrator:

While Chávez’s increasingly undemocratic control of Venezuela is troubling, the dominant force establishing Chávez’s power is something even more powerful than democracy—oil.

(The light above the narrator goes out and the stage lights come on to reveal the press standing and lined up in a row across the stage. In the center of the line one member of the press has a sign hanging around his neck that reads “Business section,” and next to him is another member of the press designated “Archives.”)

The Press:

(The “Business Section” takes one large step forward and speaks.) Historically, Venezuela has had a love–hate relationship with oil. This is because “in Venezuela oil is everything” (“Using Oil to Spread Revolution”). At 2.2 billion barrels per day, oil is the country’s only significant export. And with recent prices at almost $70 per barrel, the Finance Director of Venezuela’s national oil company, Petroleos de Venezuela S.A., has reported that he expects revenue of over $85 billion this year (Harman). However, “oil has also been a curse. Its profitability has boosted the value of Venezuela’s currency, making imports cheap and exports uncompetitive, thus killing off much local industry” (Friedman). As a result of this “curse of oil,” the economy is hugely dependent upon Petroleos de Venezuela, which accounts for “80 percent of export income, 27 percent of the gross national product, and 40 percent of the government budget” (Guillermoprieto). Not surprisingly, Venezuela’s economy rises and falls with the unpredictable fluctuations of the world oil market. Chávez has been fortunate that oil prices have risen dramatically during his presidency: oil cost only $12 per barrel when he took office—today it is around five times that price (Shifter).

(As the “Business Section” steps back to the rejoin the line, “Archives” steps forward.)

To further his Bolivarian revolution, Chávez needed more control over this oil wealth. “In February 2002, he appointed a new board of directors for Petroleos de Venezuela in a move to gain greater control of the agency” (Tarver and Frederick 152). However, this move provided an excellent pretext for those who had been planning a coup since the day Chávez took power. A two–day strike was called, with the “explicit assumption that it would only be lifted after the resignation of the president” (Gott 224). More than a dozen people were killed on the first day of the strike, and the high command members of the military demanded that Chávez resign “in response to the uncontrolled violence” (Tarver and Frederick 152). In a confusing chain of events, Chávez did not resign and, after being imprisoned for a few days, regained control over the country.

6 There is still much controversy over which side bears responsibility for the deaths. In The History of Venezuela, H. Michael Tarver and Julia C. Frederick write, “Chávez thugs clashed with the protesters, killing more than 15 people and injuring over 100 more” (152). Meanwhile Richard Gott, in Hugo Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution, explains, “firing had apparently come from both sides, and the question of who bore the responsibility for these deaths became a matter of immediate and lasting controversy, but the majority of those killed were Chávez supporters” (225).

6 “All the evidence indicates that the plot in Caracas was known to the U.S. government, yet no effort was
The opposition tried to provoke Chávez’s resignation again in December of the same year with an economic coup: key industries, including the petroleum industry, went on strike. In January of 2003 Chávez finally crushed the strike, firing 18,000 of Petroleos de Venezuela’s employees.

(The press exits stage left. The crowd of supporters enters and assembles expectantly, facing a podium on stage right. Looking tough, Chávez strides in and stands at the podium.)

Hugo Chávez:

At the end of that ridiculous strike I told you: “We have reached the far-reaching decision to begin a thorough restructuring of our company, Petroleos de Venezuela, to make it stronger and more efficient, and more responsive to the interests of the nation—and not to those of a small group of privileged people” (Gott 253).

Our resources—your resources (Chávez points out to the supporters)—have been too long plundered by greedy politicians. It is time for us all to share in our country’s wealth.

“By 2021, whatever it costs, there will be zero poverty in Venezuela” (Gunson). This will be a momentous challenge—but don’t we deserve it? “There is no way the system can cure itself… 60 percent of Venezuelans live in a critical state of poverty” (Ali 55).

We have already accomplished much. “In just seven years of Bolivarian Revolution, the people of Venezuela can claim important social and economic advances. One million four hundred and six thousand Venezuelans learned to read and write. We are 25 million total. And the country [has been] declared illiteracy-free territory. And three million Venezuelans, who had always been excluded because of poverty, are now part of primary, secondary and higher studies. Seventeen million Venezuelans—almost 70% of the population—are receiving, for the first time, universal healthcare, including the medicine, and in a few years, all Venezuelans will have free access to an excellent healthcare service. More than one million seven hundred tons of food is channeled to over 12 million people at subsidized prices, almost half the population” (Ali 232).

(He punches the air.) I will eradicate poverty—everyone deserves to be freed from the unjust struggle for basic survival!

Blackout

Scene 5: Success?

(The stage lights come up to reveal the supporters, including Bernardo Alvarez Herrera, Venezuelan ambassador to the U.S., and the critics in their seats facing the audience. The press marches on stage and stands directly in front of the others.)

The Press:

Chávez’s strategy is not new to Venezuela. “In the 1970s, [Venezuelan president] Carlos Andres Perez nationalized the oil industry and other

made to inform the Venezuelan government of what was going on. Quite the reverse… since the opposition leaders had visited Washington on several occasions in the early months of 2002—and secured the go-ahead for their schemes” (Gott 224).
‘strategic’ sectors. He also used an oil windfall to improve the lot of the poor, an effort that fell apart when oil prices plunged in the 1980s” (Romero).

(\textbf{The press exits.})

\textbf{Alma Guillermoprieto:}

While Chávez’s idealistic rhetoric about eradicating poverty may be inspiring to Venezuela’s poor, Chávez is following the path of previous Venezuelan leaders by implementing unsustainable social policies. “The many ambitious social welfare and education programs launched by Chávez… suffer already from an essential flaw: as with everything else Chávez creates, their existence depends on him” (Guillermoprieto). By promoting policies that rely upon him, Chávez brings attention to himself, wins loyal supporters, and creates the conditions under which his continued presidency is “necessary” for the success of the country.

(\textbf{Venezuelan Ambassador Bernardo Alvarez Herrera, clearly distressed, interrupts.})

\textbf{Venezuelan Ambassador Bernardo Alvarez Herrera:}

What you are ignoring is that these social projects are long overdue. “The country’s ranking on the UN’s Human Development Index continues to rise…. The Venezuelan people are being provided with the basic tools to become productive and competitive” (Herrera). How can you declare literacy to be unsustainable?

\textbf{The Critics:}

Yet, you do admit—don’t you—that, despite the oil boom, 11% of Venezuelans remain unemployed (“Using Oil to Spread Revolution”)? (\textbf{The supporters nod unhappily.}) What could more clearly illustrate the superficial nature of Chávez’s policies? Rather than waste money on shortsighted social projects, Chávez should have invested it in improving the economy. Because of his mismanagement, the economy has only revived with the increase in oil prices, revealing Venezuela’s unhealthy dependence on a volatile international market.\footnote{“The early results were disastrous. The economy shrank by over 6 percent in 1999, failed to grow in per capita terms in 2000 and 2001, then shrank by 8.9 percent and 7.7 percent in 2002 and 2003…. Only the revival of 2004 (17 percent growth), fueled by a sudden jump in international oil prices, brought gross domestic product back to the level it had been when Chávez took power” (Gunson).} By not investing some money in programs to diversify Venezuela’s economy, Chávez lost an important opportunity to strengthen the country and provide Venezuela’s poor a more long–lasting escape from poverty. In fact, Chávez has actually damaged the economy with detrimental policies that reduce Venezuela’s oil production.

(\textbf{The press enters stage right, walks to center stage in front of the chairs, and announces...})

\textbf{The Press:}

“Since Chávez took over in 1999, production in the state–run oil fields has fallen almost 50 percent” (Harman).

(\textbf{The press exits.})
The Supporters:

Look, before addressing more long–term issues, Chávez must take care of the people’s immediate needs: food and medical attention. And without a literate and educated population, there is no way to improve the economy in a sustainable manner. In fact, the economy was most damaged by those traitors who were supported by the United States in the 2002 strike. It is inappropriate and imperialist for other countries to interfere in Venezuela. We won’t stand for it!

Blackout

Scene 6: No Verdict on Venezuela

(The narrator, looking extremely frustrated, and surrounded by piles of books, newspapers and magazines in disarray, is illuminated.)

Narrator:

With criticisms and counterarguments that appear equally valid, it is difficult to disentangle truth from fallacy. The pro– and anti–Chávez camps are so polarized that the debate has become an unproductive bickering over statistics and irreconcilable opinions. However, this discussion does illustrate that, while it is hard to know if Chávez has implemented the best policies, he cares about the welfare of poor Venezuelans, making him a significant improvement over previous Venezuelan leaders. However, his obsession with publicity and showy short–term projects suggests that he may be more motivated by the garnering of support than by reducing poverty in the long term.

Similarly confusing is the debate over Chávez’s impact on the economy. Following the lead of Venezuelan rulers before him, Chávez has neglected to strengthen the Venezuelan economy by reducing its reliance on oil, and instead, propped up his own regime on petroleum profits. Oil fuels a powerful cycle that increases Chávez’s power: with profits from oil sales, he can buy support for “democratic reforms” that allow him to take more control, helping him claim even more oil profits, and the cycle continues.

Further complicating the situation is the fact that the policies of previous leaders may still have an impact on the country: how much are statistics, such as the high unemployment rate, a result of previous leaders’ incompetence?

Without the benefit of a retrospective view, it is impossible to pronounce Chávez as good or bad for Venezuela. What is clear is that Chávez’s strategy of petro–politics has been successful in winning him support and control. The power Chávez now exerts over Venezuela gives him the freedom to move on to stage two: Latin America.

Blackout

8 “If the country is in low water today, the blame attaches not to the government’s performance, but overwhelmingly to the destructive venom of the opposition, whose eight–week blockade of the economy and oil industry this winter cost Venezuela $6 billion, guaranteeing an even more drastic fall in GDP in 2003 than the 8.7 percent registered in 2002” (Wilpert).
**ACT 2: The Regional Stage**

*Setting:* Latin America consists of the areas of North America and South America south of the United States where Romance languages are spoken. It has an area of 21,069,501 square kilometers, includes 20 countries and has a total population of more than 500,000,000. The total gross national income per person is $3,600 (World Bank). The largest cities in Latin America include Mexico City, São Paulo, Buenos Aires, Bogotá, Lima, Rio de Janeiro, Santiago and Caracas.

**Scene 1: Buying Influence**

*The light illuminates the narrator.*

**Narrator:**

Armed with oil resources and a successful strategy, Chávez strides confidently into the regional political theater. Now with Latin America as his audience, he again adroitly uses petro–politics to gain influence. As he did nationally, Chávez has taken inspiration from past leaders; some of Chávez’s policies actually build off of the work of previous Venezuelan governments. “Venezuelan oil diplomacy is not new, it goes back to 1984 when Mexico and Venezuela joined forces to provide assistance to countries in the Caribbean basin suffering from high oil prices” (Bulmer–Thomas). This time, Chávez can provide assistance, in exchange for support of his world vision.

*The light over the narrator goes out. Lights come up on the main stage to reveal the critics, Michael Shifter, the supporters, the Costa Rican President Oscar Arias and the LatinoBarómetro sitting in the chairs. Once they sit down, the press marches in and stands center stage.)*

**The Press:**

In May 2005, energy ministers from Argentina, Brazil and Venezuela agreed to develop a field in Venezuela’s heavy–oil belt in the Orinoco, a refinery in Brazil’s northeast, and an oil and gas venture in Argentina. In June, Venezuela set up Petrocaribe, an agreement that offers twelve Caribbean countries cheap credit for oil imports. On July 22, at a meeting of Andean presidents, Chávez proposed creating a program called Petroandina, which would promote cooperation among these oil–producing countries on pipelines and refining (“Using Oil to Spread Revolution”).

*The press exits.)*

**Michael Shifter:**

In fact, under Petrocaribe, Venezuela has agreed to provide these Caribbean countries “198,000 barrels of oil a day… with ‘soft’ financing for up to 40 percent of the bill” (Shifter).

**The Supporters:**

There’s nothing wrong with that! Latin American countries need to expand and strengthen their economies. Our region deserves to finally have a voice. In any case, Chávez is doing even more than promoting Latin American power. He is also furthering peace, justice and a Latin America unified around these noble ideals.
Michael Shifter:

*(Shifter nods knowingly.*) You’re right—Chávez is trying to spread leftist and populist ideologies. You all have clearly been swayed by his rhetoric. “Chávez’s supporters and opponents have both attributed to him considerable responsibility for the resurgence of Latin America’s left most recently with the election of Evo Morales in Bolivia” (Shifter). Chávez may also be financially backing political candidates within Latin America who adhere to his ideology. “Although no hard evidence has yet come to light, critics often charge that Chávez has helped fund the rise of like–minded political figures, such as Morales” (Shifter).

The Critics:

Furthermore, “Argentine President Nestor Kirchner is also embarking on a more radical route (fueled by Venezuelan oil and cash) than he would otherwise, no doubt, have dared” (Gunson).

By financing the rise of leftist leaders, Chávez can create a Latin America that is both indebted to him, unified around leftist beliefs, and opposed to the U.S. However, despite his persuasive generosity and grand rhetoric, Chávez has had mixed success in Latin America.

LatinoBarómetro:

“Hugo Chávez… may be no better liked by Latin Americans than Mr. Bush—both men got 39% ‘bad opinions’ in the latest poll” (“Buenos Aires, Mexico City and Sao Paulo”).

The Critics:

How interesting! President Arias, why do you think that is?

Costa Rican President Oscar Arias:

I’m not surprised. We value the ideals of democracy in Latin America—how can we support Chávez? The new special powers given to him by the Venezuelan Congress constitute “a negation of democracy. There is a simple difference between a dictator and a democrat: if the democrat has no opposition, it’s his job to create it, but the dream of the dictator is to eliminate all opposition” (Reel). Chávez’s actions are those of a dictator. He is working to eliminate democracy in Venezuela. He will not succeed in the rest of Latin America.

*(Chávez storms in, protesting.)*

Hugo Chávez:

How dare you discuss my dreams for Latin America without me! *(He motions angrily.)* And how can you listen to Arias, who is clearly in Bush’s pocket?! *(To Arias.* Are you hoping this might win you an invitation to visit Bush’s ranch?*

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9 While the exact conversation was not available, this exchange is based on a true event. See the Caracas Chronicles available at <http://caracaschronicles.blogspot.com/2007/02/oscar-worthy-performance_8327.html>.
Costa Rican President Oscar Arias:

(Calm and composed—a contrast to Chávez.) Just because I don’t support your policies does not mean I support Bush’s actions either. “Bush is too much of a warmonger for my taste” (Reel).

(The stage darkens and the narrator is illuminated.)

Narrator:

While Chávez’s actions in Latin America have been more straightforward than those in his own country, it is yet again too soon to determine the results. Just as he won the support of Venezuela’s poor through subsidized social services, Chávez has bought the support of his less–affluent neighbor countries through generous oil deals. While many Latin Americans may still dislike Hugo Chávez for his undemocratic tendencies, their governments nonetheless accept his offers to sell them oil at artificially low prices, which aids the growth of their economies.

In addition to gaining influence and power throughout Latin America, Chávez has personal incentives in helping these economies strengthen and expand. First, it is to his advantage to diversify the countries that buy Venezuela’s oil. Currently Venezuela exports over 50% of its oil to the U.S. (Shifter), and the economy will continue to be fed by “the enemy” unless Chávez can promote increased oil consumption and purchases among Latin American countries. Chávez’s other overarching interest in strengthening Latin American economies is to empower himself, and the region as a whole, to challenge the hegemony of the United States.

Blackout

Scene 2: Fighting Imperialism

(The narrator, holding a small Venezuelan flag in one hand and an American in the other, is illuminated again.)

Narrator:

Chávez’s world is black and white, where left fights right, and the hero fights the villain. This tactic is particularly successful against Bush, who famously declared: “You’re either with us or against us.”

In his stated goal to spread a “Bolivarian” revolution, Chávez has chosen the United States as an enemy comparable to the Spanish colonists of Bolívar’s time (“Using Oil to Spread Revolution”). By winning support and influence throughout Latin America, and by promoting left–leaning politicians, Chávez aims to create an anti–American block.

(Light over the narrator extinguishes. Michael Shifter, the critics and the press hurry onto the stage, looking over their shoulders as they come.)

10 Oil trade is a two–way street: the U.S. depends on Venezuela for 11% of its oil imports (“Energy Security”).

Michael Shifter:

Finally, a chance to talk without that circus of supporters jumping at our every word. It must be explained: “Chávez has taken full advantage of a confluence of favorable factors—lots of money, Latin America’s political disarray, U.S. disengagement from the region, widespread hostility to the Bush administration—to construct alliances throughout the Western Hemisphere and beyond. He has skillfully managed to establish himself as a global and regional leader, using oil money and brash anti–Americanism to attempt to construct a counterweight to U.S. power” (Shifter).

The Critics:

Unmatched in Latin America, the vast extent of Chávez’s oil wealth allows him to buy both support and anti–U.S. sentiment. Financially challenged Latin American countries that may not be wholeheartedly against the U.S. can hardly refuse Chávez’s generous offers. Further, by polarizing relations with the U.S., Chávez forces countries to choose a side, persuading more moderate countries to join his cause.

“(Governments are happy to pocket Venezuelan subsidies. His willingness to meddle in their internal affairs may cause some discomfort…. But if you break publicly with Chávez you’re playing Bush’s game.’ So South American governments have ignored American pleas to shun… Chávez” (“Using Oil to Spread Revolution”).

(Stage lights dim to black, and the narrator’s light illuminates.)

Narrator:

Chávez aims to create a more equal playing field—one in which he can challenge the United States. In gaining the support of other Latin American countries, he hopes to create a counterweight to the dominance of the U.S.

While the result of Chávez’s attempt to win the hearts and minds of Latin America is unclear, it is an ongoing process. Whether or not they adhere to his ideology, Latin American countries cannot reject his generous offers of oil, allowing Chávez to expand his economic influence and gain power. Meanwhile, Chávez is supporting the rise of politicians who do wholeheartedly support him.

For now, he has had sufficient success in Latin America to continue expanding his power—this time he enters the third and ultimate stage: the world.

Blackout

ACT 3: The Global Stage

Setting: The world has a total area 510,072 million square kilometers and, as of July 2006, a population of over 6,525,170,000 people (CIA World Factbook). There are 268 nations, 197 of which are part of the United Nations, an international organization created in 1945, that aims to promote cooperation in peace, security, international law, human rights, humanitarian affairs, and social and economic development. The most common religion is Christianity, which makes up 33.03% of the population; 20.12% of people are Muslim and 13.34% are Hindu. Based on an estimate for 2006, the Gross World Product is $65 trillion, and GDP per capita is $10,000 (CIA World Factbook).
Scene 1: Negotiating with the Axis of Evil

(The narrator is illuminated.)

Narrator:

With tactics that are suspiciously familiar to those who have followed his acts in Venezuela and Latin America, Chávez has now brought his strategy of inflammatory rhetoric and petro-politics to the international theater. While previous Venezuelan leaders have exploited their petroleum-based power both nationally and regionally, Chávez is the first to use Venezuela’s resources to influence world politics. His primary purpose in this endeavor is to promote a multipolar world through the construction a powerful anti-U.S. coalition.

(The narrator’s light goes out. The stage lights turn on as Venezuelan Ambassador Bernardo Alvarez Herrera walks onto the stage and sits in the center chair. The press marches in from stage right and stands center stage in front of him.)

The Press:

On February 20, 2007, Chávez signed an agreement with the mayor of London to provide cheap fuel to subsidize the bus fares of low-income Britons (Quinn). This generous agreement is part of Chávez’s proclaimed mission to combat world poverty.

When Chavez took a “world tour” in July 2006, “he used every opportunity to disparage the United States” (Hanson). On this tour, Chávez also signed economic agreements with Iran, Russia and Vietnam.

However, his most controversial action is being the only country “to vote against the decision by the International Atomic Energy Authority to refer Iran to the United Nations Security Council” for failing to halt its uranium enrichment program. Furthermore, “the support given by Chávez to Saddam Hussein in Iraq before his overthrow has not been forgotten in Washington. Coupled with Chávez’s preference to divert Venezuelan crude [oil] from U.S. to Chinese refineries, the Bush administration now sees him both as a threat to U.S. energy… and as a potential proliferator of weapons of mass destruction” (Bulmer–Thomas).

(The press exits.)

Venezuelan Ambassador Bernardo Alvarez Herrera:

(He stands to address the audience, pleading for their understanding.) “It is no secret that relations between the United States and Venezuela remain tense. But Venezuela is simply not a threat to the United States, much less an enemy…. Internally, Venezuela seeks to implement the measures needed to promote growth and secure social development; externally, it seeks regional political integration with which to ensure that Latin America can spur the growth of internal markets and more fairly negotiate with other global powers, the United States included. The Bush administration continues to view changes in Venezuela as a threat and has sought to use every political means at its disposal to isolate President Chávez. The people of Venezuela and the region know better” (Herrera).
Narrator:  
While there is probably some truth to Ambassador Herrera’s claims, his conciliatory rhetoric is a striking contrast to Chávez’s words. In addition to being very vocal about his hatred for President Bush, Chávez’s cooperation with international pariahs does give the United States legitimate cause for concern.

Blackout

Scene 2: Flashback—The UN, September 20, 2006

(The stage lights illuminate to reveal Hugo Chávez standing center stage at a podium.)

Hugo Chávez:

“Yesterday the devil came here. Right here. (Chávez crosses himself.) And it smells of sulfur still today. Yesterday, ladies and gentlemen, from this rostrum, the president of the United States, the gentleman to whom I refer as the devil, came here, talking as if he owned the world.

“As the spokesman of imperialism, he came to share his nostrums to try to preserve the current pattern of domination, exploitation and pillage of the peoples of the world. An Alfred Hitchcock movie could use it as a scenario. I would even propose a title: ‘The Devil’s Recipe’… the hegemonic pretensions of the American empire are placing at risk the very survival of the human species. We continue to warn you about this danger and we appeal to the people of the United States and the world to halt this threat, which is like a sword hanging over our heads.”

Blackout

Scene 3: The Face–Off

(The lights come up on the stage to reveal the press standing center stage.)

The Press:

Ever since Chávez’s explosive and accusatory speech at the UN, relations between he and George W. Bush have been extremely tense. Therefore, it came as a surprise when Bush announced plans to visit Latin America in March 2007. Bush spent a week visiting Brazil, Uruguay, Columbia, Guatemala and Mexico. However, Bush was unable to avoid Chávez, who carried out a parallel tour, holding confrontational rallies in neighboring countries in an attempt to “cast the two presidents’ dueling tours as an open battle for Latin America’s soul” (Reel).

Blackout

Scene 4: Two Rallies

(A split scene. On stage right Bush lectures a crowd in Bogotá, Colombia. Action is frozen on stage left where Chávez rallies a crowd in Nicaragua.)

George W. Bush:

“It’s very important for the people of South America and Central America to know that the United States cares deeply about the human condition, and that much of our aid is aimed at helping people realize their God–given potential” (Greene, “President Bush Defends U.S. Record”).

(Looking down at his notes.) “I’ve brought with me $75 million to help young Latin Americans improve their English and study in the U.S., $350 million to help families get mortgages and the deployment of a Navy medical ship to provide care to about 85,000 people” (Dodge and Runningen).

(Bush and the crowd in Nicaragua freeze. Chávez and those at his rally in Nicaragua unfreeze.)

Hugo Chávez:

(Gesturing grandly, with sweeping arm motions.) The Bolivarian Revolution is spreading. But “the American empire is the firefighter of the conflagration with their very well–known divisive antirevolutionary policy, reactionary policy, and with their agents infiltrating among all those countries” (Greene, “Bush Touts U.S. Aid to Guatemala”). The U.S. aid Bush is bringing is a “laughable sum”—he clearly has ulterior motives. “He’s trying to confuse, defraud and divide. We must break the chains of imperialism. There won’t be any more wolves dressed in sheep’s clothing, nor these manipulative discourses, nor these handouts like Bush is offering now that he has discovered there are poor people in Latin America” (Reel).

Unlike the imperialist power to the north, I care about the people of Nicaragua, and all of Latin America. In fact, your leaders have just agreed to accept my offer to supply Nicaragua with oil at a discounted price. Together we are strong! (He punches the air.) We will fight off George W. Bush and his imperialism!

(The crowd cheers wildly and waves little Nicaraguan and Venezuelan flags.)

Blackout

Scene 5: The Response

(The stage lights come up to show the critics and the supporters sitting and facing the audience, but as far apart from one another as possible. The press marches in and stands center stage, in the space between the groups. It announces to the audience...)

The Press:

“In remarks [before he left on his trip], Bush took a populist tone, using the phrase ‘social justice’ five times in decrying government corruption and the failure of some leaders to meet the basic needs of citizens” (Dodge and Runningen).

The Critics:

How ironic! Bush appears to be imitating Chávez’s strategy: in publicizing the financial assistance the U.S. is providing Latin America, he is using Chávez’s economic tactic of buying support; in making general statements about improving the condition of lives in Latin America, he is using Chávez’s rhetorical strategy of grand self–righteousness.

The Press:

On his trip, Bush has attempted to convince Latin America that the United States is a compassionate nation. However, some Latin Americans were not glad
to see him. Two thousand “demonstrators chanted ‘Down with Bush’ and burned
American flags in Bogotá on Sunday during the president’s seven–hour stop in
Colombia” (Greene and Elliott).13

The Supporters:

(Angry and indignant.) Who does he think he is? Bush has ignored Latin
America since he first took office! Now he comes here and tries to be our
ally—we will not be fooled by his pathetic attempt!

Blackout

Scene 6: Final Words
(The narrator is illuminated.)

Narrator:
Chávez has progressed through three stages in expanding his spheres of
influence: the national stage of Venezuela, the regional stage of Latin America,
and now the world stage. In each, he has had the dual goal of spreading his
Bolivarian revolution and promoting his vision for a multipolar world. As he
learns from his experiences, Chávez has adapted his techniques to best serve
distinct situations and audiences. However, his overarching strategy—to attack
Bush and build a coalition able to challenge the “imperialism” of the United
States—remains the same.

There are persuasive arguments both for and against Chávez. Perhaps it is most
effective to realize Chávez’s polarizing nature and avoid being taken in; refusing to
choose a side allows one to hold a more balanced and nuanced perspective.

Nonetheless, Chávez’s growing influence is apparent. His involvement in
international politics has profound implications for Venezuela, Latin America, the
United States and, ultimately, for the world. If oil prices keep rising, Chávez will
continue to have his dreams funded—perhaps by those who despise him most.
With his enormous wealth, his ever–expanding influence, and his experience and
skill manipulating petro–politics, Chávez is a force to be reckoned with.

(Light over the narrator goes out. Chávez stands alone on an empty stage, gesturing, his right
hand forming a strong fist.)

Hugo Chávez:

“We will fight for Venezuela, for Latin American integration and the
world. We reaffirm our infinite faith in humankind. We are thirsty for peace
and justice in order to survive as a species. Simón Bolívar, founding father of
our country and guide of our revolution swore to never allow his hands to be
idle or his soul to rest until he had broken the shackles which bound us to the
empire. Now is the time to not allow our hands to be idle or our souls to rest
until we save humanity.”14

Blackout

END OF PLAY

13 It was the first visit to the Colombian capital by a sitting U.S. president since Ronald Reagan visited in 1982 (Greene).
14 From Chávez’s speech at the UN on September 16, 2005. Full text available at <http://www.commondreams.
org/views06/0920-22.htm>.
Playwright’s Afterword:

I must confess—this was a work created amidst personal confusion over my own beliefs and opinions about Chávez. I am the narrator, trying to stay unbiased, yet inevitably swayed by the arguments I hear, frustrated that I never know how to respond to the question: Is Chávez good or bad? I still cannot say. A huge diversity of groups are affected by Chávez’s actions: is he good or bad for Venezuela? Latin America? The U.S.? George W. Bush? The world’s poor? And there is an equally diverse set of motivations behind Chávez’s actions: Latin American unity, fighting “imperialism,” world peace, countering Bush, Chávez’s hunger for power, Venezuelan power, Latin American power, reviving socialism and leftist politics, a multipolar world. We will never know if he is acting out of self-interest, or a real desire to promote equality and justice in the world.

To tackle the myriad problems I faced in fairly portraying Hugo Chávez, I sought a rhetorical medium that would reflect Chávez’s complex character. Most representations of Chávez set out to depict him as simply good or bad; but even children know that angelic heroes and evil villains are unrealistic—real people are more complicated.

So why do we ask such a simplistic question about a world leader? Because Chávez has provoked the question by forcing people to choose sides. As the narrator explains at the end of the play, rather than give in to Chávez’s polarizing nature and produce yet another biased view judging Chávez’s character, I wanted to probe deeper and explore the patterns emerging from Chávez’s actions and expanding power. His influence is clearly based on his oil wealth and his forceful rhetoric—but those factors do not explain the aura he now effectively possesses. Through drama, Chávez turns the world into a theater, and politics and petroleum become his props. Bush becomes the evil villain, and Chávez himself is the noble hero and underdog. It is a universal story; everyone can follow along. And when people get hooked on the drama, who does not secretly wish for the hero to prevail? In the end, Chávez derives his power over his audience through the creation of an emotional response. Taking seriously Shakespeare’s line—“All the world’s a stage”—Chávez builds a world theater for his success.
Works Cited


