

ARTS



Marquez's military maze

by Chris Wodskou

The General In His Labyrinth
by Gabriel Garcia Marquez
Random House
285pp \$26.00

The life and exploits of Simon Bolivar seem like a natural and long overdue theme for Gabriel Garcia Marquez to tackle. Bolivar, one of the greatest political figures and most mythical of heroes of South American history has been brought to the attention of the global literati by arguably the most influential South American writer of the past quarter century.

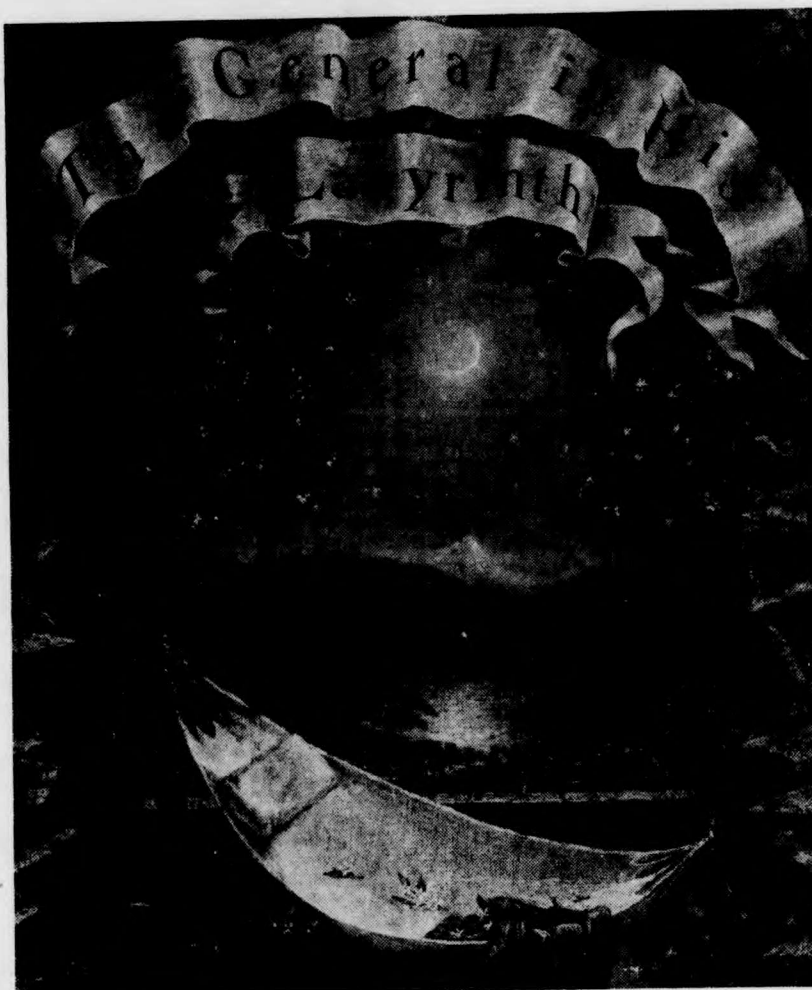
This book is overdue because the achievements of Bolivar — acclaimed in the early 19th century as the liberator of South America from Spanish colonial rule — have been written over by the events of the past 150 years or so, which have all but negated what Bolivar sought to accomplish. An interminable line of despots and comprador dictatorships and their ties with U.S.-centered neo-colonialism have made a mockery of Bolivar's goal of unconditional self-determination for South Americans.

Furthermore, the political analogies between *The General In His Labyrinth* and the contemporary political climate are timely if not exactly obvious: the critique of colonialism, a downplayed but important element of Garcia Marquez's fiction as early as *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, continues to be a turbulent undercurrent, always informing the story, but never quite subordinating the story to the function of a soapbox for anti-colonial didacticism.

il of which prompts Garcia Marquez to follow the wasted, emaciated General Bolivar, a 47-year-old man inhabiting the overburdened body of a withered, old man beset with a plethora of the physical indignities reserved for the aged — as he drifts down the Magdalena River from Bogota toward his exile. The erstwhile most powerful man in South America put to pasture by intriguers, malcontents, and his own dreams is in a simultaneously crochety, reflective, rueful, and indignant frame of mind as he dodges death at several turns, relives lusty adventures, and reevaluates his military campaigns, political machinations, and failed achievements.

Bolivar, Garcia Marquez is continually at pains to remind us, was a libertine, a brilliant soldier, a passionate dreamer, and a masterful strategist, which leads to the most pertinent question raised by the novel if Bolivar lived such a fabulously rich, exciting life, seemingly tailor-made for an epic bit of magic realist fancy, why is this fictionalized biography so un compelling and un fascinating? True, *The General In His Labyrinth* is rarely less than interesting and has no shortage of passages which stoke the imagination, but the reader hoping for the entrancing sweep of something like *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is likely to be disappointed.

A curious ambivalence pervades the tone of the novel, which I suspect is a result of an unsuccessful attempt to hybridize genres. Garcia Marquez's stock in trade has long been magic realism, large, cluttered, and



densely and eccentrically peopled

Perhaps more importantly, Garcia Marquez focuses on Bolivar's quixotic and ultimately unattainable dream of a united South America. The insoluble problems with which federalism is fraught agonize Bolivar throughout the novel. He is unable

to make sense of his people's indifference toward independence, their fickle, even treacherous, ingratitude toward their Liberator, and their seemingly self-destructive abandonment of the ideals he has put himself into an early grave fighting for.

tableaux of strange, yet earthy timelessness and other-worldliness.

Historical fiction doesn't necessarily make for good magic realism. Throughout the novel, Garcia Marquez seems straitened by attempts to maintain some sense of historical fidelity: to lionize an underacknowledged hero and to transcend reverential biography.

The apotheosis of Bolivar tends to negate whatever Garcia Marquez does to turn him into a captivatingly odd, idiosyncratic character. Rather, he becomes the stock romantic military hero of thousands of literary works about revolutions: always the one liners and pithy aphorisms at the ready; quick, wildly impulsive, and always valorous, self-endangering actions; lustiness beyond compare and an extraordinary capacity to keep his bed well-stuffed as haughtily beautiful and worldly-wise women flop into his arms at the drop of a well-turned, chivalrous phrase. This is just the sort of thing that might have seemed quaint decades ago, but now seems awfully anachronistic at best, and embarrassingly hokum at worst.

I think that what may be the most vital missing ingredient here is irony, which, it seems to me, is essential to Garcia Marquez's best writing, allowing a certain distance from the most outlandish of events and characters so as to not make them appear silly and contrived. But the myth of Bolivar cries out for reverence, which leaves us and Garcia Marquez hopelessly caught between the demystification of a myth and an obliging sense of faithfulness to that same myth.

Director of *Untouchables* is a better teacher



by Andrew Sun
On Directing Film
by David Mamet
Viking Press

It's hard to imagine the audience for which this book is intended.

David Mamet, film director, is not exactly a household name. He's been a hired gun for the screenplays of a few films — some were hits others stunk like bad cheese.

Mamet doesn't carry much *auteur* with film students. With only two films to his credit, his expertise is writing plays.

By his own admission, Mamet is not an experienced enough director "to realize the extent of his ignorance on filmmaking." Yet, this series of lectures conducted at Columbia University in 1987 could hardly be dismissed as the vanity of a successful playwright.

The Chicago-born director has penned such films as *The Untouchables*, *The Verdict* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. He has also directed two very respectable flops, *The House of Games* and *Things Change*.

However, Mamet began in the theatre, and his strength is understanding the structure of drama. As an authority on film direction, he is a better teacher (that's a compliment for the book) than a director. It's not that Mamet can't direct films, but his ability to convey images does not surpass his ability to convey words.

His book, *On Directing Film*, is theoretical in its approach and more critical than practical. Mamet claims that the only thing he knows about directing is Einstein's theory of montage, a perfectly good place to start since most of the Hollywood hacks don't understand it. He provides an excellent service for budding directors, explaining the development of drama through the use of montage. Through the discussion of this very novel idea, Mamet concludes that most of film direction is done in pre-production.

"The work of the director is the work of constructing the shots at studio executives, Hollywood producers, hysteric actors and even performance artists. I'm sure they all

deserve it, but would he be so bitter if his films made more money," writes Mamet.

Several passages are basically transcripts of workshops. While they read well and exemplify Mamet's teaching method clearly, they also reveal him as the self-possessed knight of integrity in an industry of sleaze. He sees himself as a kind of cinematic Yoda helping his students persevere against the dark forces of the studio executive. Between the lines, Mamet not only seems filled with resentment just underneath his intellectual surface, but also reveals a turned-up-nosed lofty righteousness very unbecoming someone with his talent.

One of these days, Mamet will manage to make a film to his satisfaction without the interference of studio executives. Certainly his ideas and approach are undisputable.

Woody Allen once said, "those who can't do, teach." But in the case of David Mamet the film director, "those who can do but couldn't because of the system — teach and bitch!"