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JOSE YGLESIAS, 1919-1995: A EULOGY
DELIVERED AT HIS BURIAL
by Robert P. Ingalls

We’re here because Jose planned it that way. A true activist, he always tried to influence events – as much as he could. Through sheer will, he even continued to work until the end. In his last days in a hospice, his son found him working with the night nurses to help them with their writing. He was always active, never passive. So we should not be surprised that he left specific instructions about the arrangements he wanted following his death. He asked that I speak here, and I feel honored to do so.

I can’t speak for him, but I know he would be pleased that so many of you are here today – family and friends meant everything to him. He would also appreciate the recognition of his accomplishments that came this week in articles in the New York Times, the Tampa Tribune and the St. Pete Times. But he would be quick to point out the errors: In its headline the New York Times put an accent mark on the “e” in Jose and misspelled Dalia’s name; the Tribune reported he has two books coming out next year, but the number is actually three. He would have written the stories differently. In fact he did.

In a recent novel (Tristan and the Hispanics), he imagined the events following the death of a Tampa-born writer of Cuban-Spanish heritage who wrote about Ybor City and lived in New York. When the body is returned to Tampa for burial, Jose has a University of South Florida professor say to the press: “He was the best Hispanic writer in America, and he left an account of Ybor City that is not likely to be surpassed.” The professor then has to explain to relatives why they are being hounded by the media, and he says: “I called the TV station because I thought they should carry some notice of the death of the most important writer Tampa has produced.” A cousin of the writer puts it more bluntly: “He was the greatest man ever to come outa Ybor City! Out of Tampa too. The greatest. Everybody wants to get outa Ybor City and forget it. Not him.... He didn’t forget us. He wrote books, big books – you oughta read them – all about this place. About us Latins. He knew, he was brought up on this street and he played ball on the corner and ... he read every book that was ever written. They’re never gonna make them any smarter than him.” The writer’s son adds that his father was “An essentially sweet man who loved people.” A woman cousin says, “he was a real gentleman. Especially with the ladies. He never said an objectionable word in front of a lady.... He never fought with anyone. He was always so agreeable.... Never a mean word, never.” But then “In a tone more concerned with truth than reverence,” another cousin protests, “I wouldn’t go so far.... The bourgeoisie. He hated them. And the capitalists. And a few others.... Fools, ... [He hated] all fools. And he was right, right?”

At another point in the book, Jose has a grandson say that the writer was “vinegary.” Jose himself once wrote: “I’m not a Romantic-poet type, not me. I look for the worm in the apple.” A book reviewer once called Jose “a kind skeptic.”

That skepticism meant no funeral for him. However, he has a character in a 1989 book suggest burial in the Centro Asturiano Cemetery, noting “There doesn’t have to be a funeral. He could
just be buried there without any fuss...no religion either... At the Centro Asturiano [Cemetery he’ll be] with lots of family and people he knew and that knew him.”

Jose is already missed by those who knew him. There will be no more of his postcards, letters, phone calls, visits to Tampa. But he left us so much – his books, short stories, articles, essays, plays, reviews. And more is to come with two novels and a book of short stories to be published next year. (He recently said he had never been more in demand.) As important as his books, Jose left us wonderful memories. Like his books, our memories will keep him alive in images and words.

My own memories go back to 1979, when I first met him. I had arrived at the University of South Florida five years earlier, ignorant of Ybor City and its history. But I learned quickly about it and about him. We were first brought together by family and Cuba – two of the things that mattered most to him. On a 1978 trip to Cuba, I met one of his cousins and his wife – Florencio and Alfonsina Alfonso – who were on the same tour. Several months after our return, the Alfonsoos invited my wife and me to a dinner party, where I met Jose, his mother Georgia, his sister Dalia and her husband Jose. That first meeting slowly blossomed into a friendship that helped me understand that his writing does in fact reveal “the truth about them” – his family and his community. He preserved your history and your memories with remarkable accuracy, eloquence, humor, and love. As a reminder of his legacy, I would like to read some short excerpts from his writings. All the words that follow are his, drawn from various works.

“A typical Ybor City Tampan of my generation . . . has, like me, a mother of Cuban parentage and a father from Galicia, uncles from Asturias and Cuba, and at least one cousin or sister or [brother] married to a Sicilian.”

“The moment I wrote and published my first story – immediately after the [World] War ...Ybor City, the Latin island in Tampa,...was my subject.”

“These cigarmakers never thought of America as a place they had come to for freedom and democracy. Indeed, they were the civilized; the Americans, as an aunt used to say, were barbarians with hair on their teeth.... [Ybor City’s cigarmakers] provided me with an inexhaustible source of material. In my case, I had to write about them, for I feared that this community, which of necessity had to die out, would be forgotten, a part of America no one would get to know.”

“[I have a clipping about me] from Who’s Who.... It lists the most important people in the United States. Every couple of years they revise it.... It’s a lot of foolishness. [But] at least I didn’t buy the book. I cut [this clipping] out of the one in the library – when no one was looking. You’d think I was a kid, not an old man.... But it’s not really simply vanity. I am deeply gratified that [my mother] and father appear in Who’s Who. Even in such tiny print. It’s a symbol of what I wanted to do with my writing. I set out to memorialize Ybor City. My little country, as the Spaniards say.... You know that when I was a young man and at least as leftwing as you that this was what I wanted to do. Put Ybor City on the map. Next to Dickens’ Whitechapel and Victor Hugo’s Paris.... I would make sure that Ybor City wouldn’t be forgotten in American history.
That these radical cigarmakers would be known for what they were...the best organized group of workers in America.”

“If you look [today] at Ybor City or West Tampa, where those unfashionable anarchists and communists lived, you see mostly mugging and decay. If you look at me, you see a battered old has-been, visited now and then by cousins and their children, none of whom has read a single book of mine. I admit I enjoy these visits. I sit on the porch and sometimes think that I was wrong to believe that literature was my grand irreplaceable vocation, inseparable from my life, my aorta. I tell myself that it is not now and probably never could have been. What a liberating discovery to make on my old porch where all my interest in stories began!... I believe literature is the grand repository of our best feelings and ideas. I believe the working class will yet liberate us all, I live in hope and die here and mix my bones with theirs. Human goodness supervenes.”

Finally, on the last page of his last book, Jose wrote the following lines to conclude a eulogy for a not-so-fictional writer we knew and loved:

“the son of a cigarmaker, [he] went out into the world and became famous. Isn’t it right that having done his work he came home?”