

BEYOND WORDS: THE THEATRE OF GRISELDA GAMBARO

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## ABSTRACT

Griselda Gambaro is one of Argentina's most well known playwrights, whose dramatic work has made an important contribution to Latin American theatre. While she was a controversial figure of Argentina's avant garde movement of the 1960's, her dramatic work has since gained the respect of her contemporaries, the admiration of audiences and the interest of critics both at home and abroad. Her theatre, originally associated with the Theatre of the Absurd, tends to be anti-mimetic and experimental in style, while in thematic content Gambaro remains acutely aware of the changes in her country's recent socio-political climate.

The aim of this thesis is firstly to highlight the important contribution Gambaro has made to the Argentinean stage through her attempts to offer alternative forms of theatrical expression to realism; and, secondly, to analyse the evolution of her theatre from the dual perspective of dramatic style and thematic content. In order to better understand Gambaro and her theatre, in chapter one we will situate her in a clearly Argentinean context. In chapter two we will focus in more detail on Gambaro's particular dramatic style, the possible influences that have brought about its genesis and the changes it has undergone in the last three decades. These changes we will see are based upon continued experimentation and a heightening politicization of the playwright herself. The final section of the thesis will illustrate the ideas put forth in chapter two through an analysis of four of her plays. The four plays chosen, El desatino, El campo, Información para extranjeros and Del sol naciente, span the period 1965 to 1983, and can be regarded as representative works for showing the evolution of both stylistic and political concerns within Gambaro's theatre.

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## INTRODUCTION

Griselda Gambaro (1928 – ), playwright and novelist, was an integral member of Argentina's *neovanguardia* during the 1960's and has remained one of Latin America's leading dramatists to this day. Since 1965, when her second play El desatino was performed at the experimental studios of El Instituto Torcuato di Tella in Buenos Aires, she has gained increasing renown as well as rebuke for her experimental, controversial and highly original style of play writing. Always at the forefront of dramatic innovation at home, and aware of avant garde developments abroad, Gambaro's dramatic work has, for three decades, continued to evolve within the realms of non-realistic, anti-mimetic theatre. As a result, she has consistently exposed Argentinean audiences to the many varied alternatives of reproducing reality.

When she first began writing theatre, Gambaro was accused among her contemporaries of using dramatic styles alien to the Argentinean stage. As a result, she was quickly labelled an "Absurdist" and branded for being anti-Argentinean and apolitical. Controversy, however, only served to foment interest in her work. By the late '60's, a growing socio-political crisis in Argentina served as an impetus to bridge the gap between dissenting members of the theatre world. All of a sudden, the anti-realistic techniques established by playwrights such as Gambaro became useful tools for combating censorship. Likewise, growing concern with the increased human rights violations perpetrated by the State forced Gambaro, while still anti-realistic in tenet, to take a more overtly political standpoint in her work.

While Gambaro, as a playwright, can be seen to be continually searching for new stage languages and dramatic structures as a means of transforming reality, certain general characteristics can be noted to describe her work. The world Gambaro chooses to convey in her theatre is violent, strange, disturbing and often in itself highly theatrical. Irony, ambiguity and paradox are the outstanding features of her dramatic style, while

black humour is the tone she most favours for capturing the horrors of contemporary Argentinean reality. The use and abuse of power, and the dangers of passivity, denial and naivety are the dominant themes that span all her work.

The aim of this thesis is to, firstly, highlight the important contribution Gambaro has made to the Argentinean stage through her attempts to offer alternative forms of theatrical expression to realism; and, secondly, to analyse the evolution of her theatre from the dual perspective of dramatic style and thematic content.

In order to approach the theatre of Griselda Gambaro and understand her work as more than just an adaptation of avant garde theatrical trends established in Europe, in chapter one we will begin by situating her quite clearly in an Argentinean context. We will trace the stages in the development of Argentinean theatre this century, from its formative years, through maturity with the independent theatre movement, to the great explosion that took place at the beginning of the 1960's and the dark years of repression that were to follow. Innovation from abroad will be seen as no stranger to the Argentinean stage and socio-political turmoil a common catalyst for the creation of new and ever-changing dramatic texts. In this first chapter, as Gambaro is to be as just a small part of a vast and varied whole, only brief mention will be made of her and only when particularly pertinent.

In chapter two, Griselda Gambaro will be brought into the foreground and her life and work will be studied in greater detail. Mention will be made of the various dramatic styles upon which her work is founded, namely the Theatre of the Absurd, Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty and Armando Discépolo's *grotesco criollo*. Her dramatic oeuvre will be divided into three distinct periods — the plays of the '60's, the plays of the 70's and the plays of the '80's. The stylistic differences to be highlighted between each period will show Gambaro's continued emphasis on experimentation, whereas her varied treatment of original themes will provide ample evidence for tracing an evolution of Gambaro's concern with Argentina's changing socio-political climate.

Chapters three, four, five and six will illustrate the ideas introduced in chapter two through the analysis of four of her plays. El desatino (1965), El campo (1967), Información para extranjeros (1972) and Del sol naciente (1983) are the plays to be studied and have each been found to be representative works in Gambaro's political as well as dramatic evolution.

## CHAPTER ONE

The 1960's were the beginning of an exciting and controversial period in Argentinean theatre. It was a period marked by innovation and change, providing the impetus for the modernization and transformation of the Argentinean stage. The reasons for this are numerous.

A short interval of unrestricted democracy allowed for the development of a counter-culture youth movement, which was highly-politicized and desperate to find ways of acting against the status quo. Theatrical traditions established at the beginning of the century were being re-evaluated and modernized. The ideas of Konstantin Stanislavski were being readily circulated, the result of which was the formation of new type of realistic stage-acting. This, in turn, served as a stimulus for a new style of realistic play writing. The socially committed independent theatre movement begun in 1930 had reached maturity and was now in decline. Smaller, more experimental theatre companies were being formed and the idea of the workshop became popular, with local actors and authors working together in mutual search for a truly national theatre. Improved communications meant that ground-breaking new plays from Europe and North America were reaching Argentina almost as quickly as they appeared on domestic stages, providing a variety of rich new stage languages to be experimented with. What is more, the highly equipped experimental studios of El Instituto Torcuato di Tella were opened on Calle Florida in 1960, designed specifically for providing a space for talented new artists specializing in the visual arts. As it had been in the 1920's, the Calle Florida was again to become the centre of Argentina's second artistic vanguard movement, known as the *neovanguardia* and an area of hot debate. <sup>1</sup>

Griselda Gambaro was a prominent playwright and one of the more controversial figures in Argentina's theatrical vanguard of the 1960's. Yet before we attempt to analyse her work in more detail, it is important to situate her and the new avant garde

movement she came to represent in an Argentinean context. Only in this way, will we be able to understand the theatrical explosion that took place during the 1960's as an integral part of a theatrical tradition present in Argentina since the 1890's. A tradition that, since its inception, has been no stranger to polemic and one that has always been closely associated with artistic innovations abroad as well as inextricably linked to socio-political conditions at home.

### Stages in the Development of Argentinean Theatre

Argentina has perhaps the strongest theatrical tradition in Latin America. This is partly due to the fact that Argentina, more than any other Latin American country, has for nearly one hundred and fifty years been open to immigration from abroad.<sup>2</sup> The new immigrants have tended to come from those European countries with deep-rooted theatrical traditions themselves: namely, Britain, Italy, Spain, Russia, and later Germany. As a result, the new arrivals often brought with them not only a taste for theatre, but also the ideas and innovations of the contemporary stage in their respective countries. By the 1920's the number of theatres in Buenos Aires had doubled and the Calle Corrientes, where most of the commercial theatres are located, was comparable to Madrid's Gran Vía or London's West End. (Pellettieri, *Cien años*, 38) Commercial theatres were becoming a lucrative business and theatre-going had become a popular national pastime. (Pérez, 25-26)

Florencio Sánchez is often hailed as the father of Argentinean theatre. This is primarily because he was the first playwright to attempt a total synthesis of Argentinean reality on the stage —its language, its customs, its people and their unique socio-political struggles rooted in immigration and repressive bouts of legislation. Written at the turn of the century, his dramas tend to show a unique blend of realistic and naturalistic theatre.

The dramatic innovations of Sánchez were such that he has been credited with having formed his own highly influential dramatic school and also having created the base upon which Argentinean theatre is constructed. He combined the photographic eye for detail and verisimilitude favoured by the realists, with the deterministic view of life more characteristic of the naturalists, while never failing to add local colour and credibility by including carefully studied customs and linguistic nuances. Aristotelian in form, the structure of his plots is based on causality, with each step taken by the protagonist leading to irrevocable results and eventual tragedy. (Pellettieri, Obra dramática, 33) Yet it was in his ability to marry topical social criticism with an audience's love of melodrama where Sánchez's genius and continued popularity lay.

The plays of Sánchez and his followers were dramas of ideas and discussion and lay the foundations for what would become a powerful and ever popular tradition of realism/naturalism in Argentinean theatre. It will become apparent that this tradition, although periodically transformed or modernized by theories from abroad and made to serve different functions, remains very much alive in Argentinean theatre to this day and was one of the reasons, as we shall see, why the anti-realist work put out by the Instituto Torcuato di Tella met with such reaction and accusations of being anti-Argentinean.

Parallel to the melodramas enjoyed by the cultural elite, there also developed in Argentina a strong tradition of popular theatre or *género chico*, enjoyed by the lower classes — *sainete*, *vodevil*, *revista* and *zarzuela*. (Pérez, 25-26) Of the above forms of dramatic entertainment, the *sainete* was the most popular. The *sainete* was a theatrical genre of popular origins imported to Argentina from Spain towards the end of the nineteenth century. It was a short, one-act, comedic piece structured around a sentimental and neatly resolved plot. The action took place in an open space, where characters from all walks of life were likely to cross paths — a patio, a park or a plaza. The characters of the *sainete* were invariably types, whose linguistic expression localised their origins and revealed them to be from lower classes, some of whom were caricatured for humorous

effect. Often their customs were lightly criticised but rarely were they condemned. (Pellettieri, *Cien años*, 28)

Oswaldo Pellettieri, professor of Theatre at the Universidad de Buenos Aires, divides the development of Argentinean theatre after its initial inception into three phases: mid 1920's – 1949, 1949 – 1960, and 1960 – Present. (*Cien años*, 114) We will make use of these divisions for the purpose of this brief study.

The first transition point in Argentinean theatre came about in the 1920's when the two dramatic styles mentioned above entered into a period of crisis. This was partly due to the fact that with commercial theatre becoming a profitable business, theatre owners were putting playwrights and theatre companies under increasing pressure to produce new works. As a consequence, the quality of the productions began to decline. (*Cien años*, 114) Cinema and radio were also beginning to attract audiences away from the theatre. Irene Pérez points out that "las publicaciones especializadas y las críticas teatrales de este período repiten con distintas palabras la misma idea: agotamiento, crisis, decadencia, necesidad de cambio." (27) What is more, the socio-political climate of the country was beginning to change, democracy was in difficulty, the economy was in decline and the immigrant dream of making it rich in America was vanishing by the day.

The failure of Argentina's first experiment in democracy (Yrigoyen 1916 – 1930) brought with it worsening social conditions, economic crisis, resistance from the workers and ultimately brutal repression.<sup>3</sup> It was primarily this economic and political crisis that contributed to the transformation of the idealistic *sainete* into the darkly tragicomic *grotesco criollo*.

The light-hearted entertainment provided by the *sainete* suddenly seemed an inappropriate medium for addressing the growing working class dilemmas. A *sainetero* by trade, the young playwright Armando Discépolo believed that theatre, the most social of art forms, could and should address social issues. There was no reason why the

*sainete*, which was in crisis anyway and in need of rejuvenation, should not be adapted to address more serious social issues of topical interest to its working class public.

Discépolo, along with a number of other *saineteros*, therefore, started to search for a new theatrical form that would appeal to the changing reality of their audiences. These playwrights all felt that a more critical and committed approach was required. Financial hardship, hunger and defeat could no longer be blamed on the intransigence of the individual. Argentina had beckoned its immigrant class from far and wide with dreams of a wealthy new life, but instead had abandoned them to the *barrios* and left them geographically, economically and even linguistically isolated.

Muchos de ellos se ubicaron en los alrededores de la ciudad, amontonados en viejas casonas que se convirtieron en "conventillos." Dueños de muy escasos recursos y deseosos de revertir esa situación, se abocaron con afán a las tareas más diversas. Después de algunos años de permanencia en la Argentina, comenzaron a sentir la gravedad de su fracaso, un fracaso que invadió a grandes sectores de la población. (Armando, 17)

Rather than two separate movements, one high class and the other popular, the two began to influence each other and the realism/naturalism of the Sánchez school began to fuse with the *sainete*. By studying Sánchez's ability to combine a serious social discourse with audience-pleasing elements, Armando Discépolo and other *saineteros* saw the possibilities of combining the more successful elements of the *sainete* — visual comedy, caricature, recognizable types and linguistic confusion— with a more socially committed discourse. The crowd-pleasing components of the *sainete* were thus maintained to provide a light-hearted and palatable veneer to what was a very real and distressing subject matter. It was the beginning of tragicomedy on the Argentinean stage and it culminated in the birth of the *grotesco criollo*, a new and highly prized Argentinean theatrical genre still present in Argentinean theatre today. (Pellettieri, Teatro argentino, 80 – 81)

The *grotesco criollo*, in its simplest form, is a short theatrical piece modelled on the Italian *teatro del grottesco* made famous by Luigi Pirandello. The *teatro del grottesco*, as defined by Pellettieri, is a play of tragicomic appeal, structured around a sentimental plot but with special interest focused on the problems of one principal character. The protagonist, in order to avoid communicating his problem to others and thus confronting it himself, chooses instead to hide his true feelings behind a "voluntary" social mask.<sup>4</sup> The word *grottesco* comes from the Italian "*grotta*" which means cave or cavern, suggesting a deep, dark place hidden from view. In Italian theatre this idea is transferred to people and is used to define the unhappy and often pathetic other self that lies hidden behind the social mask.

When a playwright chooses to reveal this side of a character, devoid of social graces and polite pretense, that character appears painfully awkward and ridiculously incongruous with his surroundings. Such treatment gives rise to *il teatro del grottesco*. The result is ridiculous or grotesque precisely because of the discrepancy between how the protagonist thinks he appears to others and how the other characters and the audience actually see him. The aim is for the audience to laugh at the incongruities between appearances and reality, while still empathizing with the underlying tragedy of the protagonist.

The influence of the *grottesco* on the *sainete* was crucial for the formation of the *grotesco criollo*. The idea of a social mask that clashes with the inner self was theatrically adopted to show the individual at odds with his environment and pathetically attempting to hide his failure from those around him. In its initial phase, therefore, the protagonist of the *grotesco criollo*, like his Italian cousin, is also seen hiding his problems behind a voluntary social mask or masks.

In his later plays (1923 – 1934), by intensifying the grotesque (the tragicomic), Discépolo managed to deform the *sainete* completely, vividly capturing the total sense of isolation and abandonment experienced by the immigrant family. The *grotesco criollo*,

therefore, attempts to reveal the urban plight of the immigrant classes along with the existential plight of the individual, marginalized by the society that had previously given purpose to his life. This is achieved by means of a series of dark comedic episodes that centre around an isolated protagonist and that ultimately result in a tragic finale. The individual is lost, his mask is no longer voluntary (an important factor that differentiates the *grotesco criollo* from its Italian counterpart), he no longer knows himself or his problem and, as a consequence, can never effectively communicate with others or find a solution to his difficulties. Pellettieri clarifies that " Mientras que el personaje del grottesco italiano oculta un problema vital con un gesto, lo encubre con una máscara, el antihéroe del grotesco criollo no conoce su problema; es ridículo porque hay una distancia muy grande entre lo que él cree que es y lo que en realidad representa para los demás." ("Entre el grottesco..." 59)

For the protagonist of the *grotesco criollo*, the problem goes beyond the purely social and enters into the domain of existential anxiety. Divorced from society, estranged from the family and abandoned by friends, the individual suffers alone the doubts and uncertainties of life. <sup>5</sup>

The *grotesco criollo* is a far more critical genre than the *sainete*, more scathing than the *grottesco* and more disturbing than realism. It deals with the dehumanization and debasement of individuals by an uncaring society. If before one character had been ridiculed and others lightly caricatured, in the *grotesco criollo* all characters are grotesque. The characters tend to be divided into individuals and types. The individuals are the tragic figures, the ones that suffer, whereas the types are the representatives of society and, as such, caricatured to the extreme for critical effect. They are all, however, treated like puppets — half human, half object, awkward, clumsy, humorous and pathetic.

The *grotesco criollo* seeks to delve below the veneer of every-day life and reveal the true pain and suffering of society's losers. All characters appear deformed, often animal-like, their outward awkwardness a visual indication of either inner strife or social

affectation. Their movements are exaggerated to the extreme. Yet, in the case of the characters the audience is meant to sympathize with, rarely are they distorted to such a degree that the human beings they represent disintegrate into absurdity. From its privileged position, the audience may laugh at the on-stage errors of Discépolo's characters as they repeatedly strive and fail to find a solution for their problems. However, the realization that such suffering is based firmly in reality tinges all laughter with more than a touch of sadness and comprehension.<sup>6</sup> As contrast is one of the most effective forms of emphasis, comedy ultimately accentuates the underlying tragedy. Thus, the primary feature of the *grotesco criollo* is the inextricable linking of humour and drama throughout the play in tragicomic tension.

By transgressing national theatrical conventions and being open to innovative ideas from abroad, a successful new theatrical genre was created that exemplified the need for modernization within Argentinean theatre. In terms of theatrical innovation, the development of the *grotesco criollo* marked the first tentative break with realism and the beginning of a wave of theatrical experimentation. This partial break had not occurred unprovoked, but as a result of theatrical innovations taking place in Europe.

El drama de ideas de principios de siglo, con su peculiar punto de vista concretado en un desarrollo dramático destinado a probar una tesis realista que pusiera de manifiesto las fallas del sistema político-social, había evolucionado a principios de la década del veinte en un teatro comercial que en países como Argentina se había consolidado junto a formas teatrales populares. Este subsistema teatral tendía a fines de la década a automatizarse. Esto era advertible a partir de la aparición de un teatro meramente epigonal y el surgimiento de nuevas tendencias que pretendían terminar con el teatro comercial apelando a la textualidad europea. (Pellettieri, *Cien años*, 114)

As commercial theatres continued to expand and be dominated by businessmen more interested in box office successes than aesthetic achievement, a small group of

dissatisfied artists led by Leónidas Barletta broke away from the restrictive limitations of the commercial theatre and founded in 1929 the first independent theatre, Teatro Experimental de Arte (TEA), later to become in 1933 El Teatro Proletario. In 1930 some members of TEA broke away to create the Teatro del Pueblo. The members of these independent theatre companies were the pioneers of experimental theatre in Argentina and the promoters of European and North American theatre.

Their aim was to find a new type of theatre through the works of fashionable foreign authors, both classical and modern, and to free the artist from the tyranny of big business, out-moded conventions and audience expectations. "Al servicio del arte" was the motto of the Teatro del Pueblo and its work in training artists and educating audiences in alternatives provided a model for similar independent theatre collectives elsewhere in Latin America. (Ordaz, Introduction to Gorostiza, 6) The collective nature of the independent theatres, their rebellion against tradition, and their aims to experiment and educate, transformed them into one of the leading voices of dissidence against the status quo for nearly three decades.

As the trend in Europe and North America during the 1920's and 1930's was away from realism, the independent theatres followed suit in their efforts to establish "el nuevo teatro." By performing plays by Strindberg, Pirandello, Ibsen and O'Neill, and by studying the ideas of total reality put forth by the Expressionists, which included the theories of relativism and illusion proposed by Henri Bergson and practiced by Luigi Pirandello, and the basics of psychoanalysis made fashionable by Freud and his followers, a sector of the Argentinean stage embraced the avant-garde and inaugurated a new phase in Argentinean theatre. (Pellettieri, "El teatro Independiente ..." 230) Luis Ordaz, summarises:

A partir de Roberto Arlt, concretamente —y de otros escritores locales que lo acompañan con eficacia— la dramática nativa impone conceptos y modalidades distintos de los que se encontraban en vigencia. Puede

hablarse de acercamientos y hasta de influencias del simbolismo y del surrealismo franceses, del grotesco italiano, del expresionismo alemán, del teatro que se ofrece en los escenarios de vanguardia europeos.

(Gorostiza, 7)

Whereas in the commercial theatre the emphasis was placed on the wishes of the entrepreneur who owned the theatre, the emphasis in the independent theatres was on the collective. If the commercial theatres were only interested in repeatedly performing financially secure conventional plays, then the independent theatres provided opportunities for artists to practice their skills by working on bold new plays from abroad. They also began to provide space for the performance of innovative new works by national dramatists willing to break away from the stranglehold of realism. (Pellettieri, "El teatro independiente...", 230) Francisco Defilippis Novoa, Samuel Eichelbaum and especially Roberto Arlt all attempted, in their own particular way, to bring Argentinean theatre up to date with the most experimental of Western theatre.<sup>7</sup> At the time, this was a rejection of Aristotelian theatre and a movement away from its basic premises based on unity, causality and verisimilitude.

In very general terms, techniques touched upon in the *grotesco criollo* began to be seen with more frequency in Argentinean playwrights and were experimented with further. The anti-realist trends continued and plays were become less transparent, less verbal and more visual. Plots were being fragmented and left without resolution. External action gave way to internal monologue, dream or fantasy and character motivation and causality were down-played. What is more, sets started to become less representative and more symbolic and staging as a whole started to appear more theatrical and stylised.

With the success of the Teatro del Pueblo the Independent Theatre movement continued to expand, with new centres opening up wherever affordable space could be found. La Máscara, the Juan B. Justo, La Cortina, Espondeo, Tinglado Libre Teatro and

Íntimo de la Peña are some of the more famous independent theatres in Buenos Aires, not to mention others that sprang up in the suburbs and surrounding cities. The movement reached its peak in the mid 1940's. (Ordaz in Gorostiza, 8)

Traditional Argentinean theatre continued in decline until the advent of Peronism (1945 – 1955), which brought with it a re-evaluation of popular national drama. The policies of Juan Domingo Perón were populist and protectionist. His social programmes sought to elevate the status of the working classes and his propaganda aimed at stirring pride for the national persona. All that was seen as popular or uniquely national was re-evaluated and encouraged. The return to realism, more specifically *costumbrismo*, in this period is therefore no coincidence. This is the second transition point in Argentinean theatre. Dissatisfaction with Peronist ideology also brought about an increased politicization of the independent theatres. Pellettieri points out that "parte del público del Teatro Independiente iba al teatro como una forma de militancia más o menos pasiva o complaciente contra el peronismo." (Pellettieri, "El teatro independiente..." 234)

The date most often cited by critics as the beginning of this new dramatic period is 1949, which was brought about by the success of a play called El puente, written by the then little known playwright, Carlos Gorostiza, and performed at the independent theatre of La Máscara. After a short but successful run in the independent theatre, the play was picked up by a professional theatre group and directed by Armando Discépolo at a commercial theatre. El puente was important for two reasons. Firstly, it marked a return to realism, but realism that was once again up to date and now marked by two decades of experimentation. In order to attract a popular audience, Gorostiza made use once more of *costumbrismo*. His characters speak in popular dialect and behave according to recognizable local customs in much the same way as had occurred in both the *sainete* and the dramas of Florencio Sánchez. Nevertheless, as Lilian Tschudi points out, Gorostiza's main innovation was to return to the technique of situating a play in the "here

and now" of Argentina, addressing the particular political problems of the period, but with a new, more subtle form of verisimilitude. (Tschudi, 51)

The fact that Gorostiza agreed to a professional production of El puente at a mainstream theatre also marked the beginning of a dialogue between the independent and the commercial theatres. What before had been out right rebellion by the independent theatres against anything commercial or mainstream, started to become collaboration. This would eventually lead to the professionalisation of the independent theatres.

A casi dos décadas de la fundación del Teatro del Pueblo, que estableciera con su teoría y su empuje los cauces de nuestra escena libre, se están superando preconceptos sectarios que por momentos descarrían los juicios y provocan oposiciones terminantes inútiles. Luego de un áspera lucha "principista" —sin revisión posible, al parecer,— empieza a entenderse que no todos los intérpretes de nuestra escena son mercachifles y que, por el contrario, muchos de ellos poseen una conciencia y una responsabilidad moral que debe tenerse en cuenta para no caerse en generalizaciones injustas. Al aceptar que su obra sea animada, al mismo tiempo que en *La Máscara*, por un elenco profesional de jerarquía, Gorostiza tiende un "puente" de intercomunicación entre posiciones que parecían antagónicas e irreconciliables. (Ordaz in Gorostiza, 9-10)

During the 1950's, the independent theatres continued to produce the works of foreign playwrights and keep Argentinean artists in touch with further theatrical innovations abroad. However, Carlos Gorostiza indicates that now, in the light of socio-political changes, the search was on again for a new theatrical language —one that was Argentinean but not antiquated, fashionable but not foreign. (Tschudi, 29)

In Britain and North America illusionistic drama was on the rebound with the social realism and working class anti-heroes of Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams and

John Osborne. Arthur Miller was the playwright who was most popular in Argentina among the new generation of neorealists.<sup>8</sup>

To the other extreme in France, a number of playwrights of the avant garde, influenced by the ideas of existentialism, were outraging Paris audiences with bare stages and seemingly illogical and often violent anti-realist plays. These plays were later to be defined by Martin Esslin as Theatre of the Absurd. Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov and Jean Genet were the outstanding original members of this new theatrical trend and it was not long before their plays were introduced into Argentina through the independent theatres. Waiting for Godot the paradigmatic play of the Absurd, was produced in Argentina almost as soon as it came out in Europe (1951). (Armando, 9) It was directed by Jorge Petragalia, who twelve years later would direct Gambaro's first play, Las paredes and star in her second play El desatino.

The two main trends in modern Western theatre were thus given the opportunity to make an impact on the Argentinean stage and greatly influenced a new generation of playwrights in the making. For a country whose theatrical origins lay in realism and naturalism, the growing popularity of social realism abroad was favourably received by a group of committed young playwrights who believed theatre should critique society's shortcomings, and thus, serve a political end.

Another fundamental stimulus that brought about a revival in realism were the acting methods of the great Russian actor, director and theorist, Konstantin Stanislavski. He had revolutionised the theatre world with his ideas on how to train the actor and reproduce a character so that the audience would believe it were a real person. His emphasis, therefore, was not on directing but on acting — the ability of a highly trained actor to exactly reproduce the emotions of and identify with the character being interpreted, not according to a given theatrical convention, but in accordance with the actor's own affective reality. Only by passing through a series of strict exercises based on

emotion, voice and movement, could the actor hope to authentically incarnate the character being played.

Hedy Crilla, an Austrian actress who had emigrated to Argentina some thirty years previously, was discovered to be teaching Stanislavski's System. Actors from La Máscara were so impressed with her exercises that they invited her to teach, train and direct them in, what for Argentinean actors, was a revolutionary style of acting. A few years later Lee Strasberg, of the Actors' Studio, came to Argentina and reinforced the Stanislavski school of acting with lectures and workshops on "The Method." (Tirri, 69-70)

The melodramatic acting characteristic to the naturalistic dramas of Sánchez and the exaggerated comic acting seen in the *sainete* were thus seen to be out-moded and, with the influence of Crilla and Strasberg, both replaced with a more authentic, wholly realistic style of acting. It was this new style of acting that prompted a new style of realistic playwrighting. Pellettieri calls this form of playwrighting "deliberately trivial," in which the playwright wants to give the impression that what is being seen is really happening. ("El teatro independiente ..." 236) Nevertheless, the action will still be subtly selected and ordered to prove a political thesis and charged with emotion to engage the audience.

Peronist policies during the fifties had directly aided the rise of an educated and expectant middle class in Argentina. However, their hopes for a brighter future were dashed by a return to military rule in 1955. The focus of much of the neorealistic theatre of the early sixties was primarily on the frustrated expectations and indolence of the middle classes. By the early 1960's the influence of North American realism had, once again, been adapted to coincide with Argentina's socio-political reality. In 1961 with the premiere of Ricardo Halac's Soledad para cuatro, this new type of "trivial" realism was initiated. In Argentina it has become known as "reflexive realism."

It was also towards the end of the 1950's that the ideas of Bertolt Brecht and epic theatre began to filter into Argentina, primarily through the work of Osvaldo Dragún. It was not until the end of the 1960's, however, that a specifically Brechtian-style of theatre began to be seen on the Argentinean stage with regularity. (Tschudi, 62) The reasons for this will be discussed at a later point in this chapter.

The 1960's is the third and most recent period of modernization in Argentinean theatre. If the 1950's had been a period of absorption of foreign trends and reacceptation of realism, then the 1960's was the period of great creativity and the professionalization of the independent theatres. Schools and Institutes were set up for training actors, directors and playwrights. Magazines and journals were founded to circulate new ideas and publicize new performances. These magazines also began to offer prizes to promising young playwrights designed as a means of not only encouraging their work, but also of legitimizing it within the theatre world. "Todas estas revistas establecieron premios que fueron legitimadores de nuevas figuras dentro del panorama teatral porteño." (Pellettieri, Teatro argentino, 13)

Not only was realism taking off again but a new vanguard movement was beginning to stir, fuelled by the continuing success of avant garde experimentation abroad. Avant garde elements within the Independent Theatre movement were not just producing absurdist plays from abroad which were fast becoming canonised on the international circuit, but experimenting with their own forms of alternative theatre. What is more, through the absurdist and their endeavours to create a more visual and symbolic stage language, the essays on "total theatre" and a Theatre of Cruelty, written in the 1930's by the controversial French symbolist Antonin Artaud, were made known. His call for a highly stylised, gestural rather than verbal stage-acting is in direct opposition to the type of acting proposed by Stanislavski. In response to these innovations El Instituto Torcuato Di Tella was formed.

El Instituto Torcuato di Tella was established in 1960 independently by a handful of highly specialized individuals, trained and experienced in the visual arts. Their aim was twofold. On the one hand, they were eager to keep Argentina's artists abreast of innovations in the visual arts abroad. On the other hand, they wanted to encourage and provide resources for experimentation of their own. As realism (in its various forms) was a tradition already well-established in Argentina and once again on the increase, the objective of Di Tella was the search for new forms of artistic expression. For this reason, they looked to the anti-realist movements of Europe for inspiration. However, as the focus of Di Tella was on originality, their artists were encouraged to look and learn but not to copy. In that way, work produced at the Institute was to be not, as it was accused of being, a mere reflection of foreign trends, but a creative contribution to the Western avant garde movement as a whole. (Oteiza, 62)

The Institute was divided into three schools: the Centro de Experimentación Audiovisual (where the emphasis was on spectacle, film and theatre), the Centro de Artes Visuales (which was a museum of contemporary art) and the Centro de Altos Estudios Musicales (which concentrated on the training of young Latin American composers). All were in close proximity to each other and cross-fertilization between the schools was actively encouraged. (Oteiza, 64)

As a specialist in theatre, Gambaro would have worked in the Centro de Experimentación Audiovisual. Here the focus was on the search for a new type of stage language that would go beyond the purely verbal. As spectacle, theatre and film are art forms structured around images and sounds, so experimentation centred on the visual and audible elements of representation.<sup>9</sup> As Enrique Oteiza, ex-director of the Centro de Experimentación Audiovisual, stressed, "pasiones y palabras significan poco, son necesarias nuevas herramientas de representación." (Oteiza, 66)

The Centre therefore provided those artists willing to experiment, with the opportunities and resources to achieve the above. It provided a legitimizing base for the

anti-realist, avant garde movement in Argentina and tried to open audiences' minds to the different forms of artistic expression. Their aim, where theatre was concerned, was to raise fundamental questions about theatre as a medium, to push the limits of staging and, more importantly, to seek out and reveal the alternatives to illusionistic forms of representation. Oteiza continues:

Al recordar la experiencia del Di Tella aparece claramente que no era la institución la que producía los artistas. Ellos emergían numerosos, con potencia creadora, como resultado de procesos culturales complejos que se habían ido dando en Buenos Aires y en otras partes del país y naturalmente el contacto con el público y con la crítica, en un clima de libertad y apertura combinados con rigor y buena apoyatura técnica, tuvo un efecto dinamizador importante. Aparecían año tras año nuevos creadores jóvenes de gran talento, a los que se les abría espacio para demostrar su real capacidad. Ello, con el frecuente espanto de los viejos académicos y del antiguo público del arte tradicional que hasta los años 50 se sentían dueños de la cultura, sobre todo en las artes viuales. (Oteiza, 60)

Naturally the innovations at Di Tella were controversial and daringly modern, the result of which was to attract an ever inquisitive public into the Institute and fuel a debate into the nature of good art.

It is at this moment in Argentina's theatrical history that a division opened up within the Independent Theatre movement. Among members of the theatre-world, the spectacles performed at Di Tella sparked off an angry polemic between those playwrights and critics who believed that realism, and preferably social realism, was the only appropriate stage language; and those in favour of the so-called "absurdists" being made increasingly more public by the Institute. The most outstanding members of the "*Generación del 60*" are: Ricardo Halac, Roberto Cossa, Carlos Somigliana, Ricardo Talesnik and Germán Rozenmacher. In addition to their own works, they also began to

work together in collaboration on socially oriented projects for television and the stage.<sup>10</sup> Of the students at Di Tella heading the dramatic *neovanguardia*, Griselda Gambaro and Eduardo Pavlovsky are the more memorable. As we shall see, the early experimental plays of Griselda Gambaro were at the heart of this debate.

Where the first group sought to portray faithful images of a specifically Argentinean reality and, as such, raise awareness to and critique the problems created by that same reality, they and their audience members were living; the members of Di Tella were more concerned with formal theatrical innovation. Those at Di Tella were fascinated by the unique powers that theatre possessed for capturing the total essence of reality in concrete stage images —the various layers of reality in constant flux, its paradoxes, ironies and ambiguities, rather than its external appearances alone.

For half a century factions within the Argentinean theatre movement had waged a battle based upon innovation or tradition, foreign or national. In the 1960's this debate, that had nevertheless served as a motor for the modernization of the Argentinean stage, came to a head.

### The Polemic

The polemic that occurred between the playwrights of the so-called "*Generación del 60*" and those at Di Tella is comparable to the debate that occurred in Europe between the realists and the absurdists.<sup>11</sup> In both cases the focus of the dispute centred on the notion that there was a right and a wrong way to write theatre and that both the techniques and objectives of each style of theatre were irreconcilable.

The playwrights of the *Generación del 60* strongly believed that theatre should be socially committed and in order to be so should be realistic and contain a clearly transparent message. What is more, to adequately address national concerns it should be

theatre firmly rooted in Argentina's unique theatrical traditions. Ricardo Halac asserted in the introduction to the play Avión negro (1970), written in collaboration with Somigliana, Talesnik, Rozenmacher and Cossa:

Nosotros creemos que el teatro argentino está ligado a la historia argentina y los argentinos de hoy, y que difícilmente servía a su expresión algún istmo foráneo, incrustado a la fuerza con el aliento de algunos porteños demasiado cosmopolitas (Pérez, 53)

The accusation of pseudo-cosmopolitanism is obviously directed against those playwrights of the *neovanguardia* because their work has traditionally been associated with the European Theatre of the Absurd or the Theatre of Cruelty, which are both theatrical trends that, at the time, were considered alien and anti-theatrical in Argentina. In addition, due to the ambiguous and often opaque nature of much of the theatre produced by the *neovanguardia*, the students at Di Tella were often accused of writing a theatre that was narcissistic and completely hermetic, divorced from Argentinean reality, and hence, apolitical and serving no particular purpose whatsoever.

In 1965 when Gambaro's first full-length play El desatino won the magazine Teatro XX prize for best new play written by an Argentinean playwright, the polemic that had remained latent until then exploded into public, filling the pages of the theatre journals and provoking increased audience interest. Remembering those years, Gambaro concludes:

Yo estrené en di Tella, que era una institución muy resistida por los autores de mi generación, que ya formaban como un núcleo. Y se produjo el gran malentendido, creo, de las falsas opciones: de un teatro de vanguardia o de un teatro tradicional, un teatro que nos representaba o un teatro que no nos representaba, un teatro europeizante o ajeno a las preocupaciones del momento, sobre todo de tipo socio-político, o un teatro que sí se preocupaba. Y esto duró mucho tiempo. (Arancibia, Mirkin, 18)

Situated at aesthetic extremes, the real point of contention was an ideological one — whether theatre should be clearly didactic or daringly different, faithfully realistic or flagrantly theatrical. Ironically, both extremes had been influenced by foreign theatrical models, but whereas the social realists wanted to adapt the foreign model to the Argentinean stage, the members of *neovanguardia* wanted to transform the Argentinean stage. In general terms, both groups were striving to be transgressive, only in different ways — the social realists by means of content, and those of the *neovanguardia* through form.

Without any historical perspective, during the 1960's these two very different theatrical languages appeared to be permanently incompatible. However, by the end of the decade what had appeared a gulf between these two basic trends began to diminish and, as had already occurred in North America and Europe, they started to mutually influence each other. Martin Esslin comments that:

The form-smashers of the contemporary theatre, therefore, are anything but frivolous iconoclasts ... they may not destroy the traditional basis of theatre, only add a new dimension to it, widening, in fact, the range of its content and subject matter. (Esslin, Reflections, 8)

The young playwrights of Argentina's independent theatre began with time, if not to agree totally with, then at least to recognize, the merits of each others' style of theatre. As the playwright Roberto Cossa pointed out in retrospect, the disagreements and divisions among the young playwrights of the 1960's were to prove profoundly fruitful for subsequent Argentinean theatre.

Si algo uno tiene que recuperar de la década del 60 desde el punto de vista del autor teatral, es la vitalidad de la polémica. La bronca que nos teníamos con Griselda... Es decir, la bronca con el Di Tella... No creíamos en el Di Tella... ¡Y cuántas imágenes del Di Tella quedaron para nuestro posterior trabajo! Era una época muy vital, muy fuerte. Muy

confusa también. Porque creo que falta la claridad para analizar esta cosa, esta dicotomía que no era cierta, de absurdos extranjerizantes y naturalistas chatos y nacionales. No era así. (Pellettieri, Teatro argentino, 20)

It is interesting to note that in 1968 Augusto Fernandes, one of the pioneers of the Stanislavski system and a fervent follower of realism, chose to direct Gambaro's highly controversial play, El campo. (Tirri, 45) An exchange of ideas was imminent. This can be accounted for in three ways.

Firstly, the 1960's marked an increased politicization of Argentina's youth — a politicization that was occurring throughout the world as dreams of revolution and change rose up and were frustrated. As the decade drew to a close, Argentina's own political climate was cause for consternation and demanding to be addressed. The general trend, therefore, by the end of the 1960's in both sectors of the independent theatre was towards a more politically committed and declamatory content. Cossa explains that "la realidad nos sacudía tanto que todos empezamos a hablar de política, primero en forma metafórica y luego más directa en Teatro Abierto." (Arancibia, Mirkin, 234)

Secondly, by 1965 Brecht's ideas on epic theatre had been published into Spanish and were readily available in Buenos Aires. His call for a politically committed yet anti-illusionistic theatre revealed some possibilities for combining a political discourse with avant garde theatricality.<sup>12</sup> What is more, his insistence on the *Verfremdungseffekt* (the defamiliarizing and distancing of events on stage designed to make an audience view the action critically rather than emotionally), would prove a useful technique during the decade of censorship that was to follow, as would the more symbolic stage language favoured by the students at Di Tella.

Thirdly, a sharing of theatrical techniques can simply be put down to perspective. Those staging techniques that had initially appeared odd and anti-theatrical to a country accustomed to watching realism on its stage, with increased exposure, became less shocking and more acceptable, forming a theatrical convention of their own and adding,

as Esslin had commented of the European absurdists, a "new dimension" to the basis of Argentinean theatre.

### Beyond the Polemic — Politics and Theatre

Creo que las obras de los dramaturgos argentinos están muy vinculadas con lo social; parten, diría de hechos sociales, y no de angustias personales o metafísicas. Esos hechos se van modificando de acuerdo con la historia que vivimos, con las circunstancias diferenciadas por las que nos toca atravesar. El acusar recibo de esa dosis de realidad y llevarla a la escena, vincula a ciertas vertientes de nuestro teatro con puntos de partida que sirvieron para articular enfoques "realistas." Lo que distingue unas de otras es el encuadre estético, el lenguaje teatral; y la presencia de esos componentes, bien que en formas diversas, dinamiza efectivamente el teatro. (Armando, 16)

In the above quotation, Griselda Gambaro makes a fundamental point about Argentinean theatre. Whether overtly committed or ambivalent in its politics, stylised or "trivialised," the development of Argentinean theatre this century has always been closely associated with and affected by the socio-political reality of Argentina. Different generations boast different theatrical ways for communicating this reality and different playwrights within those generations, in turn, develop their own unique styles.

Immigration, economic crises and political instability have all played a major part in shaping Argentina's stage. When Peronism ended in 1955 and democracy was reinstated in 1958 with Arturo Frondizi and then again in 1963 with Arturo Illia, Argentineans could finally enjoy a brief period of constitutional freedom. The liberal governments of Frondizi and Illia thus afforded the freedom for Argentina to catch up

with the rest of the world. Blas Matamoro, Argentinean writer and editor, remembers the period 1959 – 1969 as "años impregnados de la esperanza revolucionaria." (36) Political revolution or the idea of it brought with it an artistic revolution, the result of which, as we have already seen, was the development of a new avant garde movement.

Los sesenta fueron una época de neovanguardia. La revuelta en las formas estéticas se intentaba ligar con la revolución, cercándose una zona sagrada de lo subversivo, en que cabía experiencias tan disímiles como la guerrilla, el op art, el pacifismo de los beatniks, las melancólicas baladas de Paul McCartney, el anarquismo agresivo de los *blousons noirs*, la revuelta estudiantil, la antipsiquiatría, la marihuana y el haschís, el nihilismo orientalista, Joan Baez y Juan Perón. Todo cabía en la fórmula mágica: estar contra el sistema. Eran tantas y tan poco compatibles entre sí las formas de estar contra el sistema que éste acababa siendo algo infinito en su variedad y su extensión. (Matamoro, 38)

As Matamoro underlines, the aim of the counterculture movement was to be different, to be against all that was traditional, established and predictable.

The euphoria began to dissipate in 1966 when the government of Illia was overthrown and replaced by the restrictive regime of the General Carlos Onganía. He is often referred to as the "Argentine Franco" for his allegiance to the ideals of Spain's long-time dictator General Francisco Franco, who wanted to establish a "bureaucratic authoritarian ideology." This meant a modernizing of the economy whilst maintaining traditional Catholic morality and stamping out subversion from the Left. Attempts to modernize Argentina's economy were supported by the financial community and the multinationals. However, because of the strident economic measures taken against the workers, the policies of Onganía were met with increased resistance from organised labour movements and left-wing revolutionaries.

Despite success in reducing inflation, the government's efforts to eliminate obstacles to a free market and to cut costs had an adverse effect on Argentine workers. Their standard of living deteriorated as price controls on essential commodities were lifted, wages frozen, social benefits canceled, and strikes discouraged because of compulsory arbitration in which the government habitually favoured management. Retirement age was raised from sixty to sixty-five years. Concurrently, the universities were purged of Marxist professors, a new law abolished university autonomy and student participation in decision making, and students were barred from all political activities. (Hodges, 40)

Hodges goes on to point out that the effect of such measures, instead of "neutralizing" student politics, only served to radicalize them. Increased resistance from angry sectors of the society brought with it increased force on behalf of the state. Repression increased to the point where it provoked an armed uprising and takeover in 1969 by students and workers of the industrial city of Córdoba. As had occurred in the 1919 *portaño* (see note 3), the army intervened and the rebellion was brutally quashed —this was the famous *Cordobazo* and the beginning of a "dirty war."

A series of governments followed Onganía and eventually, in an attempt to quell popular insurgency, Perón was brought back from exile and told to rectify the mayhem they thought he had started with his popular reforms back in the forties (1972). His return had little effect on the growing unrest, and acts of violence continued to increase. With his death in 1974 it was not long before the combined military forces stepped in to take control of the country. It was the beginning of the so-called Military Process of National Reorganization (1976–1983), "donde culmina el control estatal sobre las instituciones y el pueblo. En ese momento histórico, la dictadura dispone de un mecanismo estatal represivo bien organizado." (Arancibia, Mirkin, 15)

From 1969 to 1981, when the power of the dictatorship began to wane, Argentina lived in fear ruled by a military state and state organized violence against those even suspected of subversive activities was prevalent.

Although a state of siege had been imposed since November 1974, the generals in charge of repression felt hemmed in by constitutional restrictions that allegedly played into the hands of the guerrillas. To attack subversion at its roots, they believed, required a total war against not only the two principal guerrilla formations, the ERP and the Montoneros, but also their actual and potential sympathizers. Since the guerrillas refused to wage a conventional war, the military reasoned, the armed forces should use every conceivable means to eradicate them. In such a merciless confrontation, the entire nation had to be geared for battle. This signified the adoption of emergency measures and the suspension of politics as usual. (Hodges, 172)

Death squads were established to carry out the disappearance of thousands of "undesirable" Argentines during the "Dirty War" that preceded the Military Process, a procedure that continued through the Process to the early 1980's. Detention centres and concentration camps were equipped to deal with the growing number of political prisoners, torture was perfected so as to break the guilty and instil terror in the innocent. Uncertainty and fear prevailed.

For the members of the theatre world, repression initially meant censorship —restrictions on what could be written and how and where it could be performed. The military coup in 1966 put an end to the short period of democracy that had allowed the formation of such transgressive centres of learning as Di Tella. Varying degrees of resistance from different sectors of the Left brought increased repression and Di Tella found it more and more difficult to function. Attacks against the Institute increased, were sometimes violent, and prevented events from taking place. Then in 1970, suffering

financial difficulty, Di Tella was forced to close. (Oteiza, 71) By then, however, the Institute had established a number of playwrights thoroughly trained in avant-garde theatre techniques and well-known enough to continue their innovative work independently.

As the political climate continued to deteriorate, the playwrights of the independent theatre movement, regardless of their aesthetic orientation, began to find themselves on lists that restricted their use of mass communication for publicizing their work. Theatre still received the least censorship of all the forms of public representation because it was regarded as the least problematic as it possessed a relatively small field of reception compared to television, cinema or radio. (Arancibia, Mirkin, 233) Nevertheless, theatres were still closed down and productions closely watched. Often theatre companies were "banished" to small locals on the outskirts of the city where audiences would have difficulty in locating them or be afraid to try. More than ever, there was a need to be creative, more ingenious, to avoid being silenced completely by the censors. What is more, for dissenting members of the independent theatre movement, there was no longer any point in attacking each other on aesthetic issues when the true enemy of all artists lay in the military dictatorship. Roberto Cossa simply explains that when "nos echaron a todos del teatro y de la literatura, nos juntamos todos." (Teatro argentino, 20)

In general, the plays written and performed by these playwrights during the 1970's and early 1980's were more political. Yet to engage in overt criticism against the regime was dangerous. As a result, allegory, metaphor and symbolism, techniques once considered anti-realistic, were used with more frequency as an indirect way of communicating a politically charged message.

As the socio-political reality in Argentina during the 1970's became progressively more absurd, violent and nightmarish, the Theatre of the Absurd and the Theatre of Cruelty seemed more viable stage languages for capturing this reality. The absurd was no longer anti-realistic because reality was absurd. On the other hand, while still cloaked in

ambiguity, the field of reference of the plays of Gambaro and Pavlovsky became less universal, acquiring a more transparently Argentinean association. Traditional forms of theatre were also revived in an effort to circumvent the censors. The *grotesco criollo*, tragedy masked in comedy, was found to be a safe and useful style for capturing the essence of contemporary reality. However, when old genres are resurrected from the past it is usually for the purpose of a contemporary function.<sup>13</sup> In Roberto Cossa's play *La nona* (1977) the *grotesco criollo* is faithfully reproduced in its entirety — language, structure, characters and subject matter. However, the addition of the ominously grotesque figure of the one hundred year-old granny, who rapaciously devours and destroys anything and anyone within her reach, could be and probably was seen as a metaphor for the repressive military regime. Other playwrights adopted and adapted important elements of the *grotesco criollo*. Gambaro, for example, combines tragedy with comedy, exaggerates her characters to extremes and experiments with the ideas of shifting roles and social masks.

As the situation worsened, it became increasingly more difficult to write, publish or perform. Theatres were attacked or closed down and artists were pursued, disappeared or forced into exile. Gambaro moved to Spain. Yet whether the playwrights stayed or left, the political situation in Argentina continued to deteriorate, putting an end to the explosive creativity and experimentation that had characterized the 1960's.

In 1981, with the end of the dictatorship in sight, a group of playwrights, actors and directors got together and formed Teatro Abierto. Teatro Abierto was to be a mass artistic response to the decade of repression and censorship they had all been made to suffer and the reaffirmation of the existence of a still very vital contemporary theatre movement. Twenty-one short plays were performed in a variety of venues for a minimal price by the leading members of Argentina's contemporary theatre movement, mainly those who had been the protagonists of the 1960's polemic. Almost all the texts

performed, either openly or obliquely, address the issue of authoritarianism and repression.

The phenomenon of Teatro Abierto did not mark a transition point in Argentina's theatre history, nor did it create a new poetic, moreover it can be seen as the climax of the theatrical movement begun at the beginning of the 1960's.<sup>14</sup> The techniques and methods on show were those developed during the 1960's and 1970's and there was still a vast aesthetic range between the playwrights. The Teatro Abierto experience did, however, mark a great moment of solidarity for a group of artists once vehemently divided.

In 1983 the military Process came to an end and for eleven years Argentina has enjoyed an uninterrupted period of democracy. Teatro Abierto continued to gather on a yearly basis until 1986, but with the military banished to the wings, it had lost its primary opponent and, as such, its *raison d'être*. From 1983 onwards the movement diminished until its disappearance in 1986.

Most of the leading playwrights of the 1960's are still producing theatre today and a younger generation of playwrights is following in their footsteps. Thanks to their groundbreaking innovations, debates, discussions and courage, the Argentinean playwrights of today have at their disposal a rich variety of stage languages to be mixed and matched according to the personal tastes of each writer.

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER ONE

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed study of these topics see Rose Marie Armando. Teatro Argentino contemporáneo. (Buenos Aires: Revista Cultura, 1985); Osvaldo Pellettieri, Ed. Teatro argentino del '60. (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Corregidor, 1989) (Selection of essays by various authors); Nestor Tirri. Realismo y teatro argentino. (Buenos Aires: Ediciones La Bastilla, 1972)

<sup>2</sup> Irene Pérez, in her introduction to the Grotesco criollo: Discépolo–Cossa, cites the Preamble to Argentina's 1953 Constitución Nacional: "Nuestro país garantiza justicia, libertad, bienestar general para todos los hombres del mundo que quieran habitar el suelo argentino."

<sup>3</sup> In 1919, during the presidency of Argentina's first popularly elected leader, Yrigoyen, and in response to worsening economic conditions, a mass uprising took place at the port of Buenos Aires. Unable to quell the riots, the President asked the military to intervene. The protest was brutally quashed. The incident is remembered as "*el porteñazo*." Donald Hodges, in his book Argentina's Dirty War: An Intellectual Biography, points out that with *el porteñazo*, "[a]n example had been set for military intervention. Beginning with the coup that toppled Yrigoyen during his second term of office in 1930, the armed forces began intervening on their own." (20)

<sup>4</sup> For an excellent study of the differences between the Italian *grotesco* and the Argentinean *grotesco criollo*, see: O. Pellettieri. "Armando Discépolo: Entre el grotesco italiano y el grotesco criollo". (LATR. Fall 1988) Also, for more detailed information on Armando Discépolo and the development of the *grotesco criollo*, see Osvaldo Pellettieri. Obra dramática de Armando Discépolo. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Universitaria, 1987); David Viñas Introduction to Armando Discépolo. Obras escogidas. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Jorge Alvarez, 1969); Irene Pérez. El grotesco criollo: Discépolo–Cossa. (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Colihue, 1986)

<sup>5</sup> Martin Esslin, in his book The Theatre of the Absurd, cites Pirandello, Valle Inclán and the European grotesque as precursors to the theatre of the absurd. This being the case, it is not difficult to see the links between the *grotesco criollo*, the theatre of the absurd and Griselda Gambaro. All are tragicomic dramatic styles founded upon the premise of the grotesque.

<sup>6</sup> In a note to the actors who are to perform his plays, Discépolo reminds:

Estos personajes no quieren ser caricatura, quieren ser documento. Sus rasgos son fuertes, sí; sus perfiles agudos, sus presencias brillosas, pero nunca payasescas, nunca groseras, nunca lamentables. Ellos, vivos, ayudaron a componer esta patria nuestra maravillosa; agrandaron sus posibilidades llegando a sus costas desde todos los países del mundo para hacerla polifacética, diversa. Yo los respeto profundamente, son mi mayor respeto. Yo suplico a esos actores vociferantes que increíblemente aún subsisten, que se moderen o no los interpreten, porque ... estudiarlos sí, gracias, pero desfigurarlos, no. Reír es la más asombrosa conquista del hombre, pero si reír es comprender que se ríe sólo para aliviar el dolor. (Obras escogidas, 247)

<sup>7</sup> Some of the more innovative new Argentinean plays of this period are the following: Trescientos millones (1932), by Roberto Arlt; Rumba de muerte (1936), by Arturo Cambours Ocampo; Ida y Vuelta (1930), by Francisco Defilippis Novoa; and especially Saverio el cruel (1936) by Roberto Arlt.

<sup>8</sup> Arthur Miller's first play was performed in Buenos Aires in 1950 and then again in 1951, 1955 and 1956. (Pellettieri, "El teatro independiente ..." 240)

<sup>9</sup> The objectives of the Centro de Experimentación Audiovisual are listed by Oteiza as being the following:

Imagen y sonido son los medios. Son los del cine, los del teatro, los del espectáculo en general. Por eso los involucramos. Cuando el hombre

habla un gesto a sonido. Podríamos decir que la palabra hablada es el sonido de un gesto. Estamos en la actitud del hombre que se dispone a hablar. Las relaciones de lo visualizable y de lo audible constituyen nuestro punto de partida. Tendemos hacia una integración en una imagen audiovisual. (66)

It is interesting to note how similar these objectives sound in comparison to those outlined by Artaud in his book The Theatre and Its Double.

<sup>10</sup> Ricardo Talesnik, Roberto Cossa, Germán Rozenmacher and Carlos Somigliana, calling themselves the "Grupo de Autores," collaborated on the play Avión negro (1970) which dealt with the hypothetical return of Perón. (Pellettieri, Teatro argentino..., 84)

<sup>11</sup> This dispute is similar to the one that occurred in the London Observer, between the British theatre critic Kenneth Tynan and the Romanian absurdist, Eugene Ionesco. I quote from Esslin's Theatre of the Absurd:

In reviewing a revival of The Chairs and The Lesson at the Royal Court, Tynan warned his readers of the danger that Ionesco might become the messiah of the enemies of realism in the theatre. 'Here at last was a self-proclaimed advocate of *anti-théâtre*: explicitly anti-realist and by implication anti-reality as well. Here was a writer to declare that words were meaningless and that all communication between human beings was impossible.' Tynan conceded that Ionesco presented a valid personal vision, but 'the peril arises when it is held up for general emulation as the gateway to the theatre of the future, that bleak new world from which the humanist heresies of faith in logic and belief in man will forever be banished.'

<sup>12</sup> In 1966 Peter Weiss' Marat/Sade opened in Buenos Aires. His unique blend of Brecht's epic theatre and Artaud's total theatre reflected one possible way of harmonising the realist/anti-realist discourses.

13 The *grotesco criollo* has remained a constant in Argentinean theatre primarily because it is a genre of synthesis. Its creation was dependent upon a variety of theatrical trends: realism, naturalism, *sainete*, *grotesco*, committed, crowd-pleasing, tragic, comic, foreign and national. As a genre, the *grotesco criollo* has, with the odd exception, run its course. However, as a source of inspiration and technique, the *grotesco criollo* has remained very much alive in Argentinean theatre to this day in plays of the most diverse kind.

14 Osvaldo Pellettieri explains:

Teatro Abierto es uno de los pocos momentos en la vida del país en los cuales se instaura al teatro como una práctica social, pero no se crea una nueva poética, una nueva manera de hacerlo. Todo lo que ocurre es que se intensifican los caracteres, a nivel de los procedimientos y en el aspecto semántico, de la textualidad que comenzara en los sesenta.

("El sonido y la furia ..." 7)

## CHAPTER TWO

As we saw in chapter one, Griselda Gambaro was an integral member of Argentina's *neovanguardia* movement during the 1960's, gaining renown as well as rebuke for her experimental and highly original style of play writing. In this chapter, we will focus in more detail on Gambaro's life, work and artistic aims in an attempt to understand how and why after three decades of production she has become and remains one of Latin America's leading contemporary dramatists.

### Griselda Gambaro — A Short Biography

Gambaro was born in 1928 in Argentina, in a neighbourhood of Buenos Aires known as La Boca. She describes herself as coming from a "poor family" and remembers that she had few of the privileges other writers of her generation enjoyed —such as a university education or English classes.<sup>1</sup> She graduated from high school in 1943 and began working immediately, initially for a publishing company and later for a sports club. In 1955 she married Juan Carlos Distéfano, a sculptor. With financial security provided by her husband's work, Gambaro was able to focus her time and energy on raising a family and writing fiction.

Although she was not formally trained in creative writing or theatre, Gambaro admits that she was an avid reader and it was this reading, along with visits to the theatre, that provided the creative foundations on which she was to build her work<sup>2</sup>:

Tengo deuda con todo el mundo que hace teatro. Y en especial con los autores que leí cuando todavía no sabía que iba a escribir literatura dramática: Chejov, Shakespeare, Pirandello, O'Neill, Armando Discépolo, y los autores que fueron audaces en la Argentina para su época, como Defilippis Novoa and Roberto Arlt. (Hilde, Cramsie, 156)

Her talents were recognised in 1963, when she was awarded the Emecé Publishers' Prize for a collection of stories and short novels entitled El desatino. It was also in 1963 that she wrote her first play, Las paredes, based on one of the short stories in the collection. Explaining why she turned her attention to theatre, Gambaro says she felt that the story version of Las paredes was incomplete. She therefore decided to visualise the theme into a dramatic image and write down what she saw. (Picon Garfield, 60)

It was not until 1965, however, that she saw one of her plays performed. This was the controversial performance of El desatino at the Instituto Torcuato di Tella. The play was instantly voted best new Argentinian play for 1965 by Teatro XX magazine, an event which, as we saw in chapter one, only served to foment the existing polemic amongst playwrights, critics and theatre-goers in Buenos Aires. Gambaro's inception into the Argentinean theatre-world had begun. As she became a regular figure at Di Tella, her name quickly became synonymous to avant garde.<sup>3</sup>

In 1967 she gained an honorable mention in the novel contest of Sudamericana Publishers for Una felicidad con menos pena. Nevertheless, it was her dramatic work that attracted the most critical attention. In the same year, the play El campo won first prizes from the Municipality of Buenos Aires, Talía magazine and Theatrical Broadcast News (the Municipal Radio of Buenos Aires). A year later, El campo won the prestigious Argentores prize of the Society of Argentinean Authors. With increased recognition came invitations from abroad to participate in conferences, teach and oversee adaptations of her work for radio and the stage. From 1969 to 1970 she resided in Italy. In 1972 she took part in the First International Drama Festival in San Francisco and, in 1974, she travelled to the Second International Drama Festival in Caracas. In 1976 she was awarded her second Argentores prize for the play Sucede lo que pasa.

Gambaro's run of success in Argentina was briefly terminated in 1977 when her novel Ganarse la muerte was banned by special decree by the de facto president General Videla himself. Fearing repercussions, she sought exile in Barcelona, where she

remained until 1980. She continued to travel, nonetheless, to France, Italy, Canada and the U. S. In 1979, she was guest-lecturer at the universities of Yale, Cornell, Rice, Texas (Austin) and Arizona State.

After returning to Argentina, Gambaro immediately resumed writing for the stage, denouncing with renewed vigour her country's repressive reality. She participated in the first Teatro Abierto with a play she had written in 1975, Decir sí, and unsure of how tolerant the military was, tried her hand at writing a farce. It was intended as an oblique albeit scathing denunciation of the waning regime. The play, Real envido, was banned after one performance.<sup>4</sup> The second play Gambaro wrote after returning from exile fared much better. La malasangre, a love story, is now considered one of Gambaro's best plays and it was this popularity that prevented the play from being closed down by ultra-right wing demonstrators.

In 1982 she was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship and for the first time in her literary career she was able to support herself financially. In 1988 her outstanding contribution to Argentinean theatre was recognised with the Premio Instituto di Tella – Teatro Municipal General San Martín, for which she was commissioned to write her penultimate play to date, Morgan.

Gambaro's plays have been consistently performed throughout Latin America and further afield, gaining a variety of accolades, critical acclaim and increased academic interest. Her complete dramatic works to this date are as follows, (the date in brackets refers to the date first performed and an asterix denotes those plays that have yet to be premiered):

<u>Las paredes</u>	(1963)
<u>El desatino</u>	(1965)
<u>Viaje de invierno</u> or ( <u>Viejo matrimonio</u> )	(1966)
<u>Los siameses</u>	(1967)
<u>El campo</u>	(1968)

<u>Nada que ver</u>	(1972)
<u>Nosferatu</u>	(1985)
<u>Cuatro ejercicios para actrices</u>	(1980)
<u>Acuerdo para cambiar de casa</u>	*
<u>Sólo un aspecto</u>	(1974)
<u>La gracia</u>	*
<u>El miedo</u>	*
<u>Dar la vuelta</u>	*
<u>Información para extranjeros</u>	*
<u>Puesta en claro</u>	(1986)
<u>El nombre</u>	*
<u>El viaje a Bahía Blanca</u>	(1975)
<u>El despojamiento</u>	*
<u>Decir sí</u>	(1981)
<u>Sucede lo que pasa</u>	(1976)
<u>Real envido</u>	(1983)
<u>La malasangre</u>	(1982)
<u>Del sol naciente</u>	(1984)
<u>Antígona furiosa</u>	(1986)
<u>Efectos personales</u>	(1988)
<u>Morgan</u>	(1989)
<u>Desafiar el destino</u>	*
<u>Penas sin importancia</u>	(1990) <sup>5</sup>

Of the twenty-eight dramatic works listed above, fourteen are full-length plays and fourteen are one act pieces. To date, eight of her plays remained unperformed. Seven of the unperformed plays were written during the 1970's when a variety of forms of censorship were imposed on Argentinean artists by the various military regimes in

power.<sup>6</sup> The “dark” period from 1977 to 1980 corresponds to the three years that Gambaro lived in exile in Barcelona. During this time she stopped writing theatre and returned to, what she regards, as the more "introspective" literary genre —fiction. (Picon-Garfield, 60) In Spain, Gambaro felt divorced from the public she usually wrote for and detached from the shared reality that forms the basis of her theatre. Writing for an Argentinean audience she believes that she has no need to decode the signs or the images she uses, "our common history means that much can remain tacit." (Feitlowitz, 2)

Although Gambaro is known as a playwright, it must not be forgotten that she began her artistic career by writing fiction. In fact, a number of her early plays first appeared in narrative form — Las paredes, El desatino, El campo and Nada que ver. Nevertheless, her novels and short stories have, up until recently, received relatively little critical attention in comparison with her theatre. Her fiction includes:

Madrigal en ciudad (short stories)

El desatino (short stories)

Una felicidad con menos pena (novel)

Nada que ver con otra historia (novel)

La cola mágica (children's book)

Ganarse la muerte (the banned novel)

Dios no nos quiere contentos (novel)

Lo impenetrable (novel)<sup>7</sup>

### The Theatre of Griselda Gambaro — Content, Style and Evolution

In spite of the growing recognition that Gambaro's work has received in both Argentina and abroad, she maintains that she is not a "popular author." (Picon Garfield, 61) Her plays have attracted more academic interest than box office success and, when

they are performed in Argentina, tend rather to attract a small "cult" following. Gambaro points out:

Lo que sucede es que mi teatro se ha difundido más por razones de prestigio, por los numerosos estudios que se han hecho sobre mis piezas, por el interés que despierta en Europa y en América. Pero en la Argentina no es un teatro tan visto, no es un teatro que convoque 'a inmensas multitudes.' Es un teatro que tiene su público y sus adherentes apasionados, pero esto no abarca una franja demasiado extensa ... . Mi teatro no produjo un impacto masivo e inmediato; ese impacto se produjo a través de los años, unido a una difusión que se va ampliando, también muy lentamente, pero con seguridad. (Giella, Entrevista, 36-37)

The reason why Gambaro's plays have been greeted with both audience apprehension but academic curiosity is two-fold. On the one hand, it is because of the disturbing nature of her subject matter and her tendency to implicate audiences in her critique. On the other hand, she tends to communicate her message in highly experimental and unconventional styles.

In terms of subject matter, the vast majority of Gambaro's plays deal with the abuse of power and analyse the socio-political structures that sanction such behaviour. In the world of Gambaro's plays, violence forms the basis of human interaction and displays of physical and psychological cruelty abound. In her two-tiered society, victimizers are repeatedly seen to humiliate, degrade, torture, and ultimately destroy their victims, whether it be on the personal, familial, sexual, social or political level. Happy endings are few, although a degree of hope does filter into her later, post-exile plays.

One of the recurring themes in Gambarian theatre is passivity. Gambaro explains that "one often has a single theme, and I probably have mine, the problem of passivity ... and the nonassumption of individual responsibility." (Picon-Garfield, 64) In her early plays especially, there is always a sense that the victims are ultimately to blame for their

own destruction. Indolence breeds violence. Therefore, *given the chance*, those in power will maintain control by separating, silencing and annihilating the weak.<sup>8</sup>

By representing her victims as passive spectators, ironically unaware that they are actively starring in their own oppression, Gambaro implicates her audience as well. She often forces her public to confront their own passivity, to analyse the nature of their involvement in society and accept responsibility for the violence that is occurring around them. As a result, her plays tend to be self-consciously theatrical, a technique that also exposes the duplicity associated with authority. Power and theatricality go hand in hand as, in the social as well as the theatrical sphere, illusion often hides another less savoury reality. Those in power construct fictions in order to provide a framework which can justify their control and those without power create fictions to convince themselves that nothing is amiss. Diana Taylor observes that:

Not only is [Gambaro] singularly perceptive about the criminal machinations of the authoritarian government she has lived under in Argentina from the 1960's to the present, but she is also keenly aware of the role of representation (social and theatrical) in maintaining or dismantling the political structure. (Feitlowitz, 161)

Through theatre, Gambaro has for three decades captured the essence of Argentinean history. The word 'essence' seems appropriate here as Gambaro rarely situates her plays in an overtly Argentinean context, nor does she attempt a comprehensive portrayal of Argentinean society. Moreover, she concentrates on exploring a few troubling issues that she feels are indicative of her country's socio-political reality, namely the reasons why Argentina has a propensity for restrictive authoritarian power structures and the degrading states these structures originate.

While Gambaro's themes have remained constant, her dramatic style has tended to vary with each play. She emphasises that "[l]a clave no está en lo que se cuenta, sino en

cómo se cuenta, y entonces encuentro que cada obra requiere un lenguaje distinto ... [y] exige también su propia estructura." (Hilde, Cramsie, 156)

In the 1960's and 1970's it was common to liken the styles and forms being developed by Argentina's theatrical vanguard with avant garde theatrical trends popular in Europe. The result was a tendency among critics, especially foreign critics, to ignore the originality, diversity and particularity of Argentinean works. Gambaro's theatre was initially associated with the European Theatre of the Absurd and Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. More recent critical attention, however, has focused on Gambaro's dramatic style as one that is firmly rooted in Argentinian theatrical traditions.<sup>9</sup> The playwright herself insists that her primary inspiration came from the *grotesco criollo*, the style of theatre that, as we saw in chapter one, was adapted to the Argentinean stage by Armando Discépolo in the 1920's. She explains:

A mí, particularmente, el sainete y el grotesco es lo que más me interesa, y cuando yo escucho que hacen análisis de mis obras, y como parámetro usan el teatro del absurdo, siento una especie de retorcimiento. Porque pienso que no influye en mi obra ... . Es decir, la mezcla de lo patético, lo trágico y lo tragicómico que hay en muchas de mis piezas. Eso no sale del absurdo, eso sale del grotesco. (Giella, Roster, Urbina, 13)

Nevertheless, similarities between Gambaro's style of theatre and avant garde trends abroad can be found. As with much avant garde theatre of the twentieth century, Gambaro's plays are anti-realistic. As visual as they are verbal, her plays appeal to the senses and offer much more than dialogue alone. Like the Absurdists, the plots of her plays, especially the earlier ones, tend to be situational, circular and unresolved, a static event of metaphoric import replacing the coherent development of a realistic story, which is more characteristic of the traditional "well-made play." Gambaro, however, resists classification, especially the absurdist label. She says, "I despise neat little cubby

holes even though they may aid the critics ... I deal with real facts; it's just that my form of expression isn't realistic." (Picon Garfield, 63) <sup>10</sup>

This "form of expression" has consistently been associated with Artaud's theories on "total theatre" and a "theatre of cruelty." Gambaro does not deny that Artaud has influenced her work, but only in part. <sup>11</sup>

Yo, que soy autora, creo en la palabra como una invaluable necesidad, nunca palabra escrita (aunque lo sea en el texto, sino palabra-acción, palabra-gesto, lo que no cierra el camino a su valor significativo, ya que para mí forman una sola entidad. (Blüher, 121)

Artaud, in his quest for a more "total theatre," stressed that the stage should be seen as a "tangible physical place" requiring "a concrete language." (Artaud, 27) This language, he felt, lay "somewhere between gesture and thought." (Artaud, 68) Like Artaud, Gambaro creates a concrete stage language by, on the one hand, emphasising gesture or what she refers to as "palabra-acción." In this way, actions become as important as words for conveying meaning, as do sounds, smells, costumes and lighting. On the other hand, objects seen on stage, become not just functional, but likewise acquire a symbolic significance.

Another important idea generated by Artaud was his belief that cruelty was the basis of human interaction and that a theatrical performance should capture this idea through shows of violence and intimidation. Artaud asserts that "everything that acts is cruelty," and later clarifies that "there is no cruelty without consciousness, for the latter gives practicing any act in life a blood red tinge, its cruel overtones, since it is understood that being alive always means the death of someone else." (Artaud, 80) In presenting violent acts, the importance of a "theatre of cruelty" becomes its effect on the audience. Such a theatre should shake an audience from its comfortable complacency and show them that being alive means being exposed to a multitude of possible dangers. "We are not free and the sky can still fall on our heads. And above all else, theatre is made to

teach us this." (Artaud, 60) In accordance with Artaud, Gambaro has asserted a similar idea:

La gente ha perdido la sensibilidad para ver los datos de la realidad ... pero si eso lo vemos en el teatro, y somos capaces de ver lo que significa la muerte, la guerra, los chicos, los llantos, el dolor infinito, entonces eso nos moviliza de una manera muy distinta. (Taylor, "Paradigmas... ", 14-15)

It is, therefore, Gambaro's insistence on exposing the darker more disturbing side of Argentinean reality and the recurrence of physical and psychological violence in her plays that has understandably caused critics to associate her dramatic style and aims with those outlined by Artaud in The Theatre and Its Double.

Gambaro, throughout her career, has remained highly receptive to artistic innovation from abroad, continuing to experiment with new styles and forms. As a result, her theatre has continued to evolve in parallel to the Western avant garde movement as a whole. For example, when what was transgressive in the '60's became mainstream in the '70's, Gambaro tried her hand at a form of "environmental theatre." Other styles she has experimented with are Jerzy Grotowski's improvisational "poor theatre," aspects of Bertolt Brecht's politically transparent "epic theatre," metatheatre, sensationalism and soap opera.

Gambaro is a truly experimental dramatist and as such is constantly exploring new ways to communicate ideas to an audience. If the ideas of the Absurdists and Artaud have influenced her work, they have done so only in part, as have the other theatrical styles mentioned above. It is perhaps only those elements associated with the grotesque that can be seen to have remained an underlying constant in her dramatic work. Her use of the tragicomic, black humor, exaggeration, caricature, contrast and the idea of shifting personas and social masks are techniques that can clearly be traced to the Argentinean tradition of the grotesque and one of its inspiring fathers, Luigi Pirandello. A further

similarity that can be noted between Gambaro's theatre and Discépolo's *grotesco criollo* is a penchant for visually exposing the effects of socio-political crises unique to Argentina, which are then captured physically in a repertoire of victim-figures.

What this goes to show, is not that Gambaro adheres to any particular school, but that she is open to a variety of influences, adapting them and combining them with her own original style of playwrighting. What they all have in common, nevertheless, is a tendency away from realism and a predilection for experimentation. In an interview Gambaro explains:

There are many facets to reality. That is precisely where the realists err, in the belief that a single valid level of reality lies in photographic transcription. But there are multiple levels, some visible or invisible or subterranean. (Picon Garfield, 63)

In order to capture these "multiple realities," Gambaro delights in contradictions. By juxtaposing alternative realities — actual, perceived, suspected or desired— and maintaining the contradictions inherent therein, Gambaro effectively reveals how such realities may exist simultaneously.<sup>12</sup> In her dramatic world, appearances deceive, words contradict actions and characters present multiple and shifting personalities. The dualistic and darkly humorous tragicomic is the prevailing tone. In a similar fashion, paradox, irony and understatement are all exploited to create conflicting discourses whose effect is one of sustained ambiguity. Ambiguity can be seen to constitute the hallmark of Gambarian theatre and provides the audience with the opportunity, as de Toro proposes, to "see more" in each play than is actually written in the text. For Gambaro, therefore, the purpose of theatre is to uncover the ambiguities of every day life. She clarifies:

La función del teatro, como todo arte, es enfrentarnos a las variantes posibles de la realidad, los rostros inestables de la verdad, al esclarecimiento de las relaciones por la indagación en sus ambigüedades y ambivalencias, a la búsqueda incesante del sentido de la vida. A través del

juego, grave y ligero, "serio" y gozoso a la vez, del teatro, con grandes logros estéticos o balbuceos, su función es conectarnos, en última instancia, con la búsqueda de este sentido. (Andrade, Cramsie, 150-151)

Gambaro's plays resist closed readings or definitive interpretations. The result of this has been a tendency in non-Argentinean critics to decontextualise her work and consider her plays as more general metaphysical treatises on human nature. It is true that due to the broadly topical nature of the themes and vaguely defined settings that Gambaro's theatre is able to "transcend national boundaries." (Mendez-Faith, 833) The abuse of power is certainly pervasive enough to make Gambaro's theatre highly applicable elsewhere and it is most likely because of this, that her work has attracted such international attention. Nevertheless, while each play may be given a universalist reading, it is only by considering the work in its Argentinean context that a Gambarian play acquires its full potential.

In numerous interviews, Gambaro has reiterated that her theatre is and has always been inspired by Argentina's unique socio-political reality:

Theatre is a social, collective phenomenon. It is related to what is occurring in each country. If a country is experiencing a crisis, the theatre reflects that immediately. Unlike the novel that you can write at home and publish some years later, the theatre is public and presents other problems that are linked to a social or political domain. (Picon Garfield, 67)

As this reality has changed, so too has Gambaro's theatre. It was seen in chapter one that in 1966 Argentina entered a period of repressive military rule that was to linger until 1983 and shadow the years of democracy that have succeeded. Mainly through metaphor, allegory or parody, Gambaro has traced the various stages of socio-political crisis in Argentina, from confusion, through chaos to awareness and defiance.

Diana Taylor has divided Gambaro's plays into three distinct periods, with each period corresponding approximately to the three decades in which Gambaro has been writing. These divisions have been found to provide a useful point of departure for analysing Gambaro's dramatic oeuvre and will be utilised in this thesis. The plays of the '60's —Las paredes, El desatino, Los siameses and El campo— Taylor calls "theatre of crisis." In these plays Gambaro analyses the confusion, uncertainty and denial associated with the initial stages of social crisis. Her protagonists are unaware and unable to explain what is occurring around them. "Confusion and contradictions multiply throughout these plays." (Taylor, "Paradigmas de crisis...", 13) All that is familiar or expected becomes strange and threatening, violence is rife but its origins remain ambiguous. Its effects are shown but it is never rationalised. Those in control assure that nothing is wrong and, unwilling to think otherwise, their victims passively believe them, the result of which leaves them defenseless and becomes their downfall.

Taylor calls the plays of the '70's —Nada que ver, Información para extranjeros, Decir sí and El despojamiento— "drama of disappearance." The themes of violence and persecution are intensified and shown to be organized. Passivity and acquiescence in the face of violence is deeply criticized. Disappearance does not just refer to the idea of those people "disappeared" by the military regime but to the overall *lack* of any basic human, judicial or civil rights. The plays of this period tend to be more transparent and an attempt is made to expose the causes as well as the effects of a socio-political situation that is visibly deteriorating.

The plays of the '80's —Real envido, La malasangre, Del sol naciente and Morgan— Taylor refers to as "theatre of analysis." As well as showing the effects of organised violence, Gambaro analyses its origins and illustrates what can be done to combat it. The victims of these plays, all of whom are women, now recognize themselves as victims but refuse to accept this role passively. They learn to see how they are controlled and set about demystifying the myths constructed by those in power to

manipulate them. Solidarity among the weak is underlined as the path to overcoming oppression. Mirta Arlt has pointed to what she calls a "new didacticism" in these later plays (Arlt, 58) and Gambaro herself has asserted that in her more recent works (post 1982) she is searching for "an answer in which I, the author, am implicated; I allow myself to reflect with my own voice among my characters." (Picon Garfield, 71) This and a growing feminist awareness would explain the prevalence of strong female characters:

Si en mis primeras piezas teatrales yo contaba la historia como una mujer que observa el mundo de los hombres y lo descodifica para llegar a un efecto determinado, mi mirada estaba más comprometida con el mundo en general que mi propia condición de mujer. A medida que tuve mayor conciencia de esta condición particular necesité contar la historia, que involucra por igual a hombres y mujeres, a través de protagonistas femininas. (Andrade, Cramsie, 149)

In taking a broad look at Gambaro's theatre from the 1960's to the 1990's, a clear pattern emerges which reflects a growing political awareness in the playwright herself. In her early plays there are few answers to the many questions raised by the bizarre behaviour of her protagonists (both victims and victimizers). As much remained unexplained, she was considered an absurdist. By focusing on the same themes and dealing with them in various ways, Gambaro is able to meditate on a political thesis that she then gives voice to in her plays of the 1980's. In reflecting on how her theatre has evolved, Gambaro underlines how she has introduced new, more positive themes to counteract the old ones:

Considero que no se han producido grandes cambios temáticos en mi teatro ... lo que ha cambiado es la mirada, el punto de mira, o de ataque para tratar los mismos temas (el poder, el autoritismo, la sumisión, la injusticia) y el entramado que los liga, donde hay una evidente

valorización de temas que aparecían más esporádicamente en mi primera producción: La rebeldía, la dignidad, la ternura, la solidaridad. (Hilde, Cramsie, 156)

The theatre of Griselda Gambaro can be summarised as founded upon non-realistic theatrical trends (both national and foreign), experimental, stylistically diverse, thematically constant, darkly humorous, disturbingly graphic and politically inquisitive. What is more, Gambaro's theatre can be seen to have developed in parallel to recent socio-political changes in Argentina. In short, it is theatre that is persistently probing for new ways in which to reveal Argentina's common reality. When asked to define the purpose of her theatre, Gambaro asserts that her aim is to always present an alternative and ever-changing view of Argentinean reality, one that is not photographic but transformed for artistic effect:

El teatro es siempre un encuentro colectivo cuyo sentido es **producir una lectura transformadora de la realidad**, para ensanchar sus límites, alterarlos, imaginarlos de otra manera. (Arancibia, Mirken, 227. Emphasis added)

### Method of analysis

The object of the third and final section of this thesis will be to assess the dramatic work of Griselda Gambaro in the light of the above statement. Four plays will be analysed to show the different ways in which she sets about *transforming* reality. The four plays chosen cover the three periods highlighted in this chapter, spanning the years 1965 to 1983. In various ways they have been found representative of her work. They show the clear evolution of her main themes and represent four different styles of theatre. On the broader spectrum, they are representative of the changes that occurred in

Argentina's independent theatre movement during the three decades of repressive military rule — from explosive creativity in the 1960's, through a deeply political period in the 1970's, to the more recent period of aesthetic synthesis in the 1980's. The plays are: El desatino (1965), El campo (1968), Información para extranjeros (1974) and Del sol naciente (1984).

El desatino is Gambaro's first full length play. It was performed at the Instituto Torcuato di Tella and was the play that won her the Teatro XX prize for best new play written by an Argentinian. It was the judges' decision in this respect that sparked the polemic between the "social realists" and the "neovanguard." El desatino has often been cited as a play belonging to the absurdist tradition, as were many of Gambaro's early plays. Such assertions will be considered when analysing the play. In highlighting basic themes and theatrical techniques, El desatino will also be considered as a point of comparison for the following three plays. In this way, it will be possible to ascertain not only the changes that Gambaro's work has undergone, but also the constants that she has chosen to maintain within her dramatic oeuvre.

El campo is one of Gambaro's most well known plays and is also often regarded as one of the finest examples of Theatre of Cruelty in Latin America. Less abstract than El desatino, El campo marks a move towards a more politically transparent subject matter. It also marks the perfection and intensification of various styles and themes developed in her early plays and demonstrates how in tune Gambaro was with underlying socio-political developments in Argentina at the end of the 1960's.

Información para extranjeros is Gambaro's most transparent play and the first to deal with an overtly Argentinian subject matter. The play, a patchwork of theatrical genres, openly denounces the repressive reality of the various military regimes in Argentina during the early 1970's. It is Gambaro's most experimental play and one of her most violent. The innovative use of space shows Gambaro's dramatic style of this period to be in line with the most avant garde theatrical trends taking place in North America

and Europe. For the purpose of this study, Información has been chosen as it exemplifies Gambaro's continuing experimental quest and increased politicization.

Del sol naciente is one of Gambaro's most recent plays and marks the new, more optimistic as well as discursive phase in her writing. Four new plays written in the 1980's — Real envido, Del sol naciente, La malasangre and Morgan— are set in the distant past but deal with issues that have a clearly contemporary resonance, a technique that suggests a Brechtian influence. Suki, of Del sol naciente, is representative of Gambaro's growing interest in strong female protagonists, all of whom, in spite of still being victims, are figures who defiantly stand up for their rights, speak out on behalf of the oppressed and voice an alternative to silent acquiescence of the status quo.

Five criteria will be assessed in varying detail when analysing each of the four plays. These are: **space, structure, content, characters and language**. Possible stylistic influences (foreign and national) will be noted and the Argentinean context closely considered when interpreting each of the four pieces.

The dramatic space in Gambarian theatre is usually enclosed, ambiguous in its nature and of symbolic importance. The structures of Gambaro's plays will be seen to vary, although a general tendency can be noticed, from circularity in the early plays to open-endedness in her later dramatic work. In terms of content, recurring themes will be discussed and also related, where possible, to an Argentinean context. Relationships, class and gender will all be taken into account when assessing the interaction of the various characters. Gambaro's theatre tends to be one of few characters and those that do appear can, as we have seen, be classified as either victimizers or their respective victims. To evaluate the evolution of Gambaro's theatre, careful note will be taken as to whether this victimizer/victim dichotomy changes. Finally, language (both verbal and non-verbal) will be assessed in order to illustrate the ways in which Gambaro, through a composite of signs and symbols made up of action, gesture, sound, props, costume and illumination, transforms reality and communicates her message to an audience.

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER TWO

<sup>1</sup> For more information on Griselda Gambaro's life and work see the biography and interview in Women's Voices from Latin America by Evelyn Picon Garfield. (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1985)

<sup>2</sup> Gambaro explains: "Las bases de mi formación de dramaturga fueron la lectura de las grandes obras de la dramaturgia universal, la observación de algunas puestas en escena y la insistencia constante en la escritura teatral." (Mirken, 237)

<sup>3</sup> Gambaro describes Di Tella as "una fundación cultural que se hizo cargo de los gastos de producción y donde se pudo trabajar en las mejores condiciones, sin ningún tipo de presión empresarial ni ideología." (Andrade, Cramsie, 151)

<sup>4</sup> The play did reopen again but failed at the box office. Gambaro, in an interview with Miguel Angel Giella, explained that one of the main reasons for the failure was the genre: "creo que en ese momento la gente no necesitaba que se le hablara en farsa. Real envido fue realmente un buen fracaso." (Giella, Entrevista, 40)

<sup>5</sup> The complete plays of Griselda Gambaro have been collected into five volumes and published by Ediciones de La Flor, Buenos Aires.

<sup>6</sup> Remembering the 1970's, Gambaro explains:

A medida que la situación de la Argentina se agravaba en el doble camino de la convulsión social y la represión, sea con gobiernos militares de facto (Onganía, Levingston, Lanusse) o civiles sin autoridad (Cámpora, Perón, María Estela Martínez de Perón), estrené más espaciadamente: Nada que ver en 1972 y Sucede lo que pasa en 1976. Después de Sucede lo que pasa (estrenada un mes después del golpe militar del general Videla), dejé de hacerlo hasta 1981, con Decir Sí. (Andrade, Cramsie, 151)

<sup>7</sup> This list of Gambaro's narrative has been taken from Hortensia Morell. "La narrativa de Griselda Gambaro: Dios no nos quiere contentos". (Revista Iberoamericana. 155-156, Abril–Sept. 1991)

<sup>8</sup> It is interesting to note, that this passivity on the part of Gambaro's victims was originally likened to the paralysing metaphysical crisis associated with the European Theatre of the Absurd. This, however, is a mis-reading of her intentions, as in all her plays each character is given the opportunity to act but chooses not to.

<sup>9</sup> For a selected bibliography on Griselda Gambaro see appendix.

<sup>10</sup> When referring to Gambaro's dramatic style, the label "absurdist" has been lifted by most contemporary critics. Kirsten Nigro points out that the Theatre of the Absurd and the Theatre of Cruelty were "en el aire" when Gambaro first began writing and it is therefore not surprising to see a certain influence. (Nigro, Teatro argentino..., 175) David Foster clarifies that in the early '60's and '70's "absurdism" came to be used as a synonym for "non-realist." (Foster, "*La malasangre...*", 200) Even early articles by Tamara Holzapfel and Sandra Cypress see the absurdism in Gambaro's plays as a socio-political phenomenon rather than an existential one.

<sup>11</sup> Gambaro also says of Artaud:

En lo que a mí respecta, diría que Artaud ha alimentado, con otros, el impulso transgresor que debe tener toda obra. Lo que me interesa es su idea de la cultura en acción, su ampliar límites, ese deseo irreprimible de libertad, su inmersión en el sueño, su rechazo de la cotidianeidad empobrecida. Yo tomo de Artaud esa pasión de desestructuración de la cultura, ya que la cultura (el teatro) tiende a fijarse en sus resultados, y esto es precisamente lo que ocasiona su muerte. Otros criterios de Artaud los tomo selectivamente. (Blüher, 121)

<sup>12</sup> Gambaro feels that such a technique is appropriate for conveying Argentina because, as she explains:

This is a schizophrenic country, a country that lives two lives. The courteous and generous have their counterpart in the violent and the armed who move among the shadows —para-military police units that weren't dissolved at the end of the dirty war, secret services that still operate, all blatantly serving totalitarian interests. One never really knows what country one is living in, because the two co-exist. ... Argentina is seismic as well as schizophrenic. From night to day things can change drastically owing to causes below the surface, behind the screen that's offered up as reality. (Feitlowitz, 1-2)

## CHAPTER THREE

### El desatino

El desatino (The Blunder) is Griselda Gambaro's second full-length play. Written in 1965, it caused an unprecedented stir in the Argentinean theatre world when it was voted the year's best national drama by the magazine Teatro XX.<sup>1</sup> The same year, it was successfully performed by the Centro de Experimentación Audiovisual del Instituto Torcuato di Tella and, amid growing controversy, Gambaro was initiated into the Argentinean theatre world. The play, however, did not just win Gambaro recognition — it also resulted in her being labelled an absurdist and an unwelcome enemy of realism. (Pellettieri, Teatro argentino..., 80)

El desatino is a black comedy that traces the deterioration and demise of a young man who, with Kafkaesque overtones, is one day rendered bed-ridden by a large metal object that he accidentally traps to his foot. What appears to be a simple dilemma to solve grows more bizarre and ultimately life-threatening through the course of the play. This is not because the man, Alfonso, is alone or unable to obtain help; moreover, it is due to his own apathy and willingness to assume the role of victim. Greeting cruelty as though it were kindness, Alfonso naively clings to those who hurt him most as they repeatedly exploit the situation, and with similar irrationality shuns assistance from the only person who wants to see him well — a young workman from the street below.

In El desatino, Gambaro introduces the major themes of her dramatic oeuvre and by means of this simple plot, effectively demonstrates how denial and passivity are directly linked to violence and victimization. Likewise, in this early play, Gambaro can be seen to experiment with a variety of techniques which will occur regularly in her subsequent plays, such as visual and verbal irony, false appearances, sustained ambiguity,

contrast and role-playing, all of which are combined with a visually symbolic stage language and her characteristic black humour.

The reasons why El desatino has been linked to the Theatre of the Absurd soon become apparent. Like many absurdist plays, the plot is predominantly static — nothing really changes and the characters are not developed. What occurs instead is the slow and steady intensification of a singular situation of metaphoric import, which develops from minor mishap to nightmare before the audience's eyes. Characters behave in unexpected and inexplicable ways, words contrast with actions and ambiguities and contradictions abound. All are techniques that assure that the action of the play resists any simple, transparent or logical explanation. What is more, this bizarre and potentially terrifying tale is dealt with matter-of-factly and almost with indifference, as though it were an everyday occurrence. None of the characters is unduly surprised by Alfonso's fate and no one appears to react in accordance with the gravity of the situation.

The play is neatly structured into six scenes of varying length and the action alternates between Alfonso's bedroom and a country setting. Scenes one and two constitute the first act and take place in the bedroom, where Alfonso is visited by the other main characters of the play — his mother, Luis, Luis' little brother, a workman (the muchacho) and Alfonso's wife, Lily. Each visitor reacts to Alfonso and his predicament in a different and unexpected way. Alfonso's mother is totally unsympathetic to her son's problem, chiding him for his laziness and taking advantage of his present incapacity to help herself to Lily's wardrobe. Luis is cruel —teasing, taunting, even terrorizing the bed-ridden man. When he learns about the metal object, he responds by twisting Alfonso's trapped foot until it bleeds. In total contrast, the workman who appears one day from off the street, smothers Alfonso with affection and looks only for ways in which to help.

These initial reactions are then developed in act two. Scenes three and four take place in the country. Outside, as well as inside, the situation remains the same, which is

that Alfonso's foot is still trapped and that he is helpless without the intervention of others. There is, however, an intensification of people's behaviour: Alfonso's health deteriorates and his passivity increases; Luis ignores his friend progressively more and concentrates his efforts on the amorous pursuit of Alfonso's mother; the mother neglects her son to greater effect and flirts ferociously with Luis; and even the muchacho is seen to become increasingly more intimate with Alfonso, less subservient and more self-willed.

In the final two scenes, the action returns to the bedroom. Whereas Alfonso had tended to dominate the preceding scenes both visually and verbally, he now becomes increasingly more silent, emaciated and hidden in blankets. He speaks only with a stutter. The metal object, that had been little more than a mild inconvenience at the beginning of the play, has come to dominate him, poisoning his body and steadily destroying his mind. Likewise, he is seen to be completely dominated by those around him. Luis has taken his place in the family and is heard calling the mother "mamá." The mother has completely taken over Lily's wardrobe and the muchacho refuses to take no for answer, vigorously filing away at the metal contraption, despite the incongruous festivities that surround him. Even Lily's pregnancy, which comes as a total surprise to the father, is an indication that Alfonso is no longer in control of any aspect of his life.

The scenes are balanced so that the opening scenes tend to contrast directly with the closing scenes, with the two scenes in the country showing that a change of space transforms nothing if attitudes remain intransigent, which is the case with Alfonso. Scene two ends with Alfonso's first dream sequence of Lily, which is paralleled at the end of scene five with a second dream of Lily in which her character, like Alfonso's has deteriorated (Lily only ever appears in dreams). Alfonso's rising frustration at his inability to enjoy a sexual relationship with his absent wife, is contrasted with his mother's highly sexual relationship with Luis. Luis' idle talk of acquiring tools to free Alfonso's foot is contrasted to the actions of the muchacho, who talks less and actually acquires some tools.

The play can therefore be seen to be structured upon a series of contrasts and parallels, with the dramatic movement of the play provided by Alfonso's physical deterioration. The affectionate way in which Luis behaves with Alfonso's mother is in direct contrast to the cruelty with which he treats Alfonso or his own younger brother. Likewise, the mother's mistreatment of her son is highlighted by the way in which she spoils Luis. Their closeness heightens Alfonso's sense of abandonment and serves to visually accentuate his isolation. Such visual contrasts recur throughout the play and invariably serve as a point of comparison for people's behaviour, not only highlighting cruelty alongside kindness, but weakness against strength (Alfonso versus the muchacho), innocence opposed to iniquity (the child versus Luis), or health with decay (everyone versus Alfonso).

A further contrast to be noted in El desatino is the disparity between visual action and verbal dialogue. What a character says is so often seen to be in direct opposition to what they do. Luis, for example, tells Alfonso he is only playing when he pushes his lighted cigarette into the sick man's face. It does not look like a game to the audience. Later he tells Alfonso that he would like to put his scarf around his friend to keep him warm but is instead seen strangling him.

Luis: Juguemos a otra cosa, quiero distraerte. (Se saca la bufanda y se la anuda a Alfonso en el cuello) Te abrigo, te abrigo, Alfonso. (71) <sup>2</sup>

Moments later the stage direction indicates that Luis "tira fuertemente por los extremos de la bufanda, apoya el pie sobre la cama a modo de palanca. Ríe." (72) What the audience sees is a man being strangled, but instead what they hear is a game between two friends.

The mother says she finds Luis unattractive, a positive "esperpento," but she flirts unashamedly with him all the same. Alfonso reiterates that he wants the metal contraption removed from his foot, but resists all attempts to the effect. Luis tells the

muchacho that he will give some sweets to his brother, but is then seen eating them himself. The mother says she loves her son but her actions give no indication that this is true. There are many such examples throughout the course of the play.

The irony created by the disparity between words and actions serves a variety of purposes. It both illicitly laughter and exposes hypocrisy. What is more, it reveals the power of language to mask the truth and its inability to adequately capture the complexities and contradictions of human behaviour. This technique therefore underscores the idea that the written or spoken word is only a fraction of what is actually occurring around us. In the Theatre of Cruelty, as well as in much Theatre of the Absurd, language is devalued in favour of action, gesture or stylised movement, in order to capture the sense of a more total reality. Where Gambaro's theatre differs, however, is that she does not devalue the verbal aspect of theatre, only elevate the visual to a similar level. In this way, she is able to highlight the gulf that lies between the two. Visual and verbal irony is, perhaps, the most notable feature of El desatino and will continue to be in subsequent plays by Gambaro.

The world of El desatino is an inverted one, in which stereotypes are undermined and characters behave in unexpected ways. Therefore, there is a discordance between how an audience expects characters to behave and how they actually behave, which only serves to accent the gulf that lies between appearance and reality. The character of the mother, far from being sympathetic and nurturing, is seen to be selfish and uncaring. Luis, the friend, is cruel and unfriendly, whereas the brawny workman is all tenderness, politeness and understanding. Gambaro's characters are not predictable, which leads to unusual and surprising situations, situations that tend to be humorous on the surface and deeply disturbing beneath. The result is a general tone of black humour. Alfonso is consistently duped by appearances and false expectations. He has preconceived ideas about everyone around him — that Luis is his friend, that his mother loves him and that the muchacho is an uncouth youth from the street— and as a result when they behave

otherwise he refuses to acknowledge it. Like an ostrich, he buries his head under the bedsheets when something occurs that contradicts his comfortable assessment of reality.

False appearances and feigned realities are techniques common to the *grotesco criollo*. Like one of Armando Discépolo's unfortunate protagonists, Alfonso tries to hide his predicament from those around him behind a social mask, pretending that nothing is unduly amiss. In the opening scenes this behaviour results in humorous irony. For example, thinking that Luis cannot see the metal contraption bulging beneath the bedsheets and not knowing that his mother has already informed his friend of the situation, Alfonso calmly asks for some tools:

Alfonso: Las herramientas. Necesito las herramientas, Luis. Mi madre no las puede alcanzar. Pesan.

Luis: (Malamente sorprendido) ¿Quieres las herramientas? ¿Ahora?

Alfonso: Sí.

Luis: (ídem) ¿Ahora? ¿Y dónde están?

Alfonso: En el galpón.

Luis: ¿Quieres que vaya ahora al galpón, a ensuciarme?

Alfonso: No te ensuciarás. Sólo hay un poco de polvo.

Madre: (entra con un pedazo de pan y una taza de café con leche) No le haga caso. Desde ayer que insiste con las herramientas.  
¡Qué cargoso! (69)

By the end of the play, however, this same behaviour has rendered Alfonso ridiculous and grotesque in the eyes of the audience. He is seen to be sick and debilitated, but continues to mask his need for help from the muchacho with cavalier superiority and hollow humour.

Muchacho (natural) Huele mal. (Huele) El pie huele mal, señor  
Alfonso.

Alfonso: (agrio) No es el pie. Es el artefacto que se está pudriendo. El  
hierro se pudre, ¿Sabe usted? Vamos. Quiero higienizarme un  
poco antes de que llegue Lily. Imaginaré que las relaciones  
entre hombre y mujer exigen salud, limpieza, salvo casos de  
necrofilia, y no es nuestro caso evidentemente. (Concluye con  
una corta risa de superioridad)

Refusing to see or accept the truth of a situation or inventing alternative realities to avoid confronting a problem are themes continually explored in Gambaro's subsequent works. Lily is the result of a constructed reality. When she appears on stage at the end of the first act, a suggested lighting change and a stage direction that stresses that she should appear distorted as though seen through Alfonso's eyes, gives the impression that she is not real. Her feminine attributes, hips, breasts and thighs, are abnormally full and her movements are slow and contrived. What is more, whenever she is referred to elsewhere in the play, the other characters smirk, nod knowingly or comment suggestively on her absence. She is, it would appear, a figment of Alfonso's imagination, the distorted sexual fantasy of a lonely mind and an alternative reality he summons when he is unwilling to face the present one he is forced to suffer. However, as the quotation below illustrates, escaping into a false reality does little to protect Alfonso from the blows life intends to inflict upon him.

Alfonso: (Pausa. Bajo) Lily... ¡Cómo te extraño, Lily...! Y que me  
veas en este estado ... ¡Lily! ¡Lily! ¡Ven a mis brazos,  
Lily! (Los tiende y cae con gran estruendo fuera de la cama)  
(80)

The world depicted in El desatino is a cruel and illogical one, where personal gain seems to be the sole motivation of the characters that inhabit it. Even the muchacho,

whose help appears disinterested, turns out to have ulterior motives (he wants Alfonso well so that he will have someone to socialize with). An audience would be unwilling to find similarities between the stage and the real world outside the theatre. A closer analysis, however, reveals that the world created by Gambaro, although exaggerated and caricatured for theatrical or comedic effects, is not as far removed from the real world as it at first appears to be. By keeping the basic situation static and simply alternating the intervention of the characters, the audience witnesses a spectrum of human behaviour in a given situation. By contrasting and comparing the actions and attitudes of the various characters towards Alfonso and noting how they interact with each other, Gambaro is able to show the various and contradictory levels upon which human relationships function.

Each character speaks and behaves quite differently depending on who is being addressed. Alfonso is timid and apologetic with his mother, admiring and fearful of Luis, ungrateful and superior with the workman and insulting and bossy to Luis' little brother. Luis, on the other hand, is respectful and flattering with the mother, superior and menacing to Alfonso, scornful and irritated with the muchacho and authoritarian and cold with his brother. It is glaringly obvious that no character has a fixed personality, effectively showing how individuals, on a daily basis, play a variety of roles when interacting with different people. These roles are seen to be dependent upon a series of different factors, namely age, sex, class, relationship and mood. The idea of role playing is crucial to Gambaro's understanding of how human beings interact. By choosing to work with the medium of theatre, Gambaro is already highlighting the act of role-playing and within the Gambarian world, role-playing and power are often closely associated.

It is interesting to note that in El desatino all relationships are dependent upon power in order to function smoothly. Between every pair of characters one is always seen to dominate and control, while the other tends to passively obey or acquiesce to their wishes. Luis controls Alfonso with fear and his little brother with a firm hand. Alfonso

attempts to control the muchacho and the small boy, but because he poses no threat to either, he is unsuccessful in his attempts. The mother, on the other hand, controls Luis and Alfonso with food and affection or the lack of them. It is a fear of rejection, pain or punishment that forces some characters (namely Alfonso, the muchacho and the boy) to acquiesce to the demands of those who are stronger (namely the mother and Luis).

Yet not only do Gambaro's characters choose to play certain roles in certain situations, but they are seen conforming to roles created for them by others —something that is shown to be a powerful form of control. Luis, for example, uses intimidation to force his brother to play the role of the silent and obedient sibling. Alfonso passively conforms to the wishes of his mother and Luis, agreeing to play the dutiful son or faithful friend in spite of the pain and anguish it causes him. At first, the muchacho conforms to his role of worker, running errands and taking orders. Conversely, Alfonso resists playing the helpless invalid for the muchacho because he resents being controlled by a working class stranger.

For the most part, though, Alfonso prefers conformity to conflict and convinces himself that his family and friends are acting in his best interest. Friction and conflict occur when characters begin to resist the roles expected of them. As a workman, the muchacho is expected to take orders and run errands. However, he refuses to conform to this role and instead insists on staying beside Alfonso. Likewise, the ideal Alfonso has of Lily, as the voluptuous and virginal wife, visually disintegrates when she refuses to fulfil her sexual role with her husband. The more they argue about their sex-life, the more distorted and grotesque Lily becomes.

The idea of role-playing also highlights the notion of human expendability. The same role can be filled by any number of different people. If the actor playing Alfonso were to break his leg, an understudy would take his place. His interpretation of the role would be slightly different, but the overall effect would remain the same. It is often a fear of being replaced, of losing one's place in the world, that forces people to conform.

Alfonso's blunder is to trap his foot. As a result, he becomes a burden and, no matter how hard he tries, he is unable to fulfil his role effectively in the eyes of Luis or the mother. Their reaction is virtually to ignore him and eventually have Luis take his place. Where Alfonso had once looked after his mother and dated Lily, Luis is seen doing the same, calling the mother mamá and ostensibly taking Lily out to the cinema.

The lack of clear motivation for much of the action in El desatino means that the play is not easily transparent and therefore open to numerous interpretations. It is difficult to explain what the contraption on Alfonso's foot actually is, or why his family and friends choose to ignore him. It seems beyond belief that a mother would leave her sick son out all night in the country simply because she was running late or that a family friend would try to strangle a young man confined to bed. How often does a workman enter a house and end up staying three weeks emptying bed pans, and how conceivable is it that the neighbourhood would continue to drink and laugh beside the bed of a dying youth?

The key to understanding El desatino is found in the objects seen on stage. The play utilises a limited number of objects and those that are used often acquire a symbolic significance rather than a decorative or utilitarian one. At the beginning of the play an alarmclock rings incessantly. Restrained by the metal object Alfonso is unable to stop the noise.

Alfonso: (bajo, tibiamente) ¡Condenado!... (Trata de sentarse en la cama y después de varios esfuerzos en los que por poco no va a para al suelo, consigue sentarse en equilibrio sobre el borde. De pronto, suena al reloj despertador. Alfonso manotea para pararlo, pero lo único que consigue es arrojarlo al suelo, donde sigue sonando. Trata de patearlo con el pie libre, pero lesta fuera de su alcance. (Protesta) ¡Suena cuando se le ocurre!

(Al reloj) ¡Sigue sonando! ¡Por mí...! (Cesa la campanilla)

(62)

The incident immediately serves to underscore Alfonso's powerlessness and highlight the fact that he is controlled by his environment. Such concrete clues continue to accumulate, just like the growing number of bed pans under the bed and the rising stench of sickness. The pornographic magazine, which Alfonso constantly requests but can never reach, is symbolically a sign of his sexual impotency. Likewise, the wooden supports that the little boy pulls out of the plant pots whenever nobody is looking, can be seen to represent the lack of support Alfonso experiences. A dead tree and a few fake flowers serve to depict the change in location for scenes three and four. As with the dead plants in the plant pots seen lining the walls in Alfonso's bedroom, the withered tree can be seen as a symbol for Alfonso's deterioration. Neglected and undernourished, he too withers and dies like the greenery around him.

Lily's shoes are another recurring symbol. The mother can wear all the clothes that Alfonso buys for Lily except her shoes which are always too small. The mother would very much enjoy being in Lily's shoes, that is, being the beautiful, young recipient of a never-ending supply of gifts and affection. However, the fact that Alfonso refuses to acquiesce to his mother's wishes where the shoes are concerned reveals the futility of the mother's search for eternal youth and beauty.

As regards the metal contraption, the most visible object of all to the audience, it is rarely mentioned by the characters on stage and is often over-looked completely. Such behaviour suggests that the object, rather than being regarded literally, is meant to be a symbol, a concrete visual image representing an abstract idea. The metal contraption immobilises Alfonso. It forces him to be dependent upon others and, as a result, breeds passivity. He is, consequently, acted upon by others and exposed to exploitation and abuse. While not condoning this cruelty, by showing Alfonso reluctant to help himself, Gambaro subtly criticises the individual who passively adopts the role of victim. Alfonso

refuses to see Luis as anything but a good friend. He never criticises his mother in spite of her neglect and prefers to dismiss his potential saviour as a meddling intruder. The way in which Alfonso chooses to respond to his predicament is, therefore, more important than the “absurd” predicament itself.

Some critics, in comparing El desatino to the philosophically based Theatre of the Absurd, have chosen to interpret Alfonso's predicament as the existential dilemma of modern man.<sup>3</sup> This is a predicament which sees man paralysed by the uncertainty of life and the inevitability of death, alone in a hostile world and unable to effectively change the course of his fate. This interpretation, while valid, tends to ignore the fact that the *muchacho* is willing to release Alfonso. Yet time and time again, Alfonso prevents the *muchacho* from helping him. What is more, Alfonso also wittingly plays along with Luis' cruel games and insists on believing his mother's empty words of affection. Such an attitude implies that Alfonso has chosen to play the role of the victim, to accept passively the present situation, because it is far easier than exposing himself to an unknown alternative. The title, "The Blunder," which means "to make a foolish or stupid mistake,"<sup>4</sup> hints at this interpretation. "To make" implies active participation and "foolish or stupid mistake" suggests that what happens could have been avoided. Alfonso creates his dilemma by bringing the metal object home and placing it beside his bed. He then actively participates in his own destruction by conforming to the wishes of others and ignoring any possible alternative that may provide a solution to his problem.

### NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

- 1       When Teatro XX made the decision to vote El desatino the best contemporary Argentinean play of 1965, opposition ran so high that two of the judges resigned from the magazine. (Pellettieri. Teatro argentino..., 80)
- 2       All quotations, unless otherwise stated, are taken from "El desatino" in Griselda Gambaro: Teatro 4. (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de la Flor, 1990) 59–106
- 3       For more information on Griselda Gambaro and the Theatre of the Absurd see Tamara Holzapfel "Griselda Gambaro's Theatre of the Absurd". (LATR 4/1 Fall 1970, 5 - 11); David Foster "The Texture of Dramatic Action in the Plays of Griselda Gambaro". (Hispanic Journal 1:2 1979, 57 - 66); Angela Blanco Amores de Pagella "Manifestaciones del teatro del absurdo en Argentina." (LATR 8/1 Fall 1974, 21 -24); Daniel Zalacaín. Teatro absurdista hispanoamericano. (Valencia: Ediciones Albatros Hispanofila, 1985).
- 4       David B. Guralnik. Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982)

## CHAPTER FOUR

### El campo

El campo (The camp) is Gambaro's fourth full-length play and probably her most well-known outside Argentina. Written in 1967, it was first performed in 1968, at which time it was received coolly by critics and public alike. Once again, Gambaro was accused of turning to Europe for inspiration and creating a theatre thematically as well as stylistically alien to the Argentinean stage. <sup>1</sup> Still noted for anti-realistic, "absurdist" techniques, El campo is also considered to be one of the finest examples of theatre of cruelty in Latin America, something we will consider in this analysis. <sup>2</sup>

The proof that Gambaro never merely copied foreign trends but always adapted them to an Argentinean context, became apparent only later. In 1984 El campo was remounted in Buenos Aires and, what had appeared absurd and alien to previous audiences, no longer was. By studying Argentina's violent past and noting the rise of fascism, Gambaro had written a play that had ominously anticipated her country's "dirty war." After almost two decades of repressive military rule, disappearances and death squads, the concentration camp portrayed in Gambaro's play of the 1960's acquired a hauntingly realistic edge in the 1980's. Osvaldo Pellettieri explains:

A la luz de los nuevos acontecimientos políticos y sociales ocurridos en el país en los últimos años, la pieza había adquirido un realista carácter anticipatorio verdaderamente sobrecogedor. La débil resistencia de su protagonista ante el poder despótico, su posterior entrega y absoluta soledad frente a una realidad hostil son una metáfora de fácil lectura para el espectador de 1984. (Teatro argentino..., 80)

The word "campo" in Spanish has a number of different meanings —field, countryside, camp or area of study being the most common. In El campo this ambiguity

is exploited to the full, since what initially appears and on the surface maintains to be a children's camp set in the countryside, turns out to be a brutal concentration camp in the middle of nowhere. The title is simple but nevertheless neatly alludes to some of the main themes of the play — namely the ambiguity of language and how it may be exploited to contradict or conceal unwelcome aspects of reality, the arbitrary act of naming or labelling and the misconceptions it brings about, in addition to the contradictions that lie between appearance and reality.

El campo is a play about the abuse of power and the perpetration of cruelty. It illustrates methods of authoritarian control and once again highlights the dangers associated with submission and denial, only this time legitimised within the public sphere among strangers and put to political ends. If in El desatino, the idea of shifting roles was seen to be an important aspect of human interaction, in El campo the idea of role playing is developed further and lies at the heart of the action. Constructing roles for others to play is seen as a powerful form of control. Here, life is compared to theatre and audiences are alerted to the degree of representation and spectacle that surrounds those with authority. At the camp two realities exist simultaneously —one visible, the other invisible; one "real," the other feigned. The visible one reeks of a pre-rehearsed performance, while the other less savoury reality remains out of sight, behind the scenes and only hinted at. Acting, directing, spectating and the illusion that combines them are the recurring motifs of the play and the metaphors explored to expose the machinations of organised oppression.

Martin, a young professional from the city, goes to resume the position of administrator at a rural "camp." The pay is excellent and he has no reason to suspect that anything is out of the ordinary. Once there, however, he soon realises that all is not what it seems. Strange sounds and smells in the corridors and outside make him wonder. His new boss (Franco) is an intimidating prankster and the young female escort sent to entertain him (Emma) is equally disturbing in her appearance and strange behaviour.

Refusing to believe what his senses tell him, Martín seeks refuge in his work and security in the hollow explanations and excuses of those around him, who insist that nothing is amiss. However, it becomes increasingly more difficult for him to deny the horror of what is happening outside his office and, unable to leave, he soon finds himself forced to participate in the whole bizarre spectacle.

The play opens with Martín being shown into a sparsely furnished office and asked to wait for the arrival of his new boss. Left alone, he begins to hear a series of conflicting and confusing sounds — dogs barking, men shouting orders, children playing, someone moaning and functional office music— but he sees nothing to explain them. The sounds serve to disorientate him and set him wondering about what lies beyond the room that is the stage. The off-stage activity increases to become a central feature of El campo. Noises are heard, flashes of action are glimpsed, people are referred to but never seen and, at one point, when a hunt is heard outside, the action off-stage actually dominates and paralyses the action on stage. This world behind the scenes and out of view represents the unknown, the ominous, a part of the action denied not only to Martín, but to the audience too. It arouses curiosity and sparks and sets fire to the imagination, thus extending the semantic world of the play.

When Martín's new boss finally enters wearing a Nazi uniform and carrying a whip, the initial reaction is surprise. This initial surprise is then augmented by his behaviour, which totally contrasts with his appearance. Instead of behaving like the impeccable and intimidating military man he appears in his uniform, Franco comes across as good-humoured and desperately disorganised. However, before Martín or the audience can relate to and accept this anomaly, Franco's behaviour and appearance shift again. As he steadily strips himself of jacket, boots and socks, rolling up his sleeves for a more "relaxed" look, his behaviour ironically becomes increasingly more outrageous and aggressive:

Martín: (Señala los papeles) ¿Damos una ojeada?

Franco: ¡Cómo no! (Aprieta un botón del intercomunicador, el canto cesa bruscamente. Se levanta y empuja a Martín detrás del escritorio. Frío) Su puesto es ése. Quédese sentado ahí.  
(Muy cortés) Fui rudo.

Martín: (seco) No.

Franco: (le alcanza un pliego, comienza con voz comercial ): Estos son los impuestos pagados hace ... (no recuerda o no sabe)  
¡Qué calor! El aire quema. (Acusador) ¡Dejó la ventana abierta! (167)<sup>3</sup>

Similar to a character from a Pirandellian plot, Franco is seen to have a shifting personality like someone playing a variety of roles in swift succession. As he shouts, jokes and gesticulates about the stage it becomes increasingly obvious that Franco is acting. The effect is superficially funny, at times almost farcical, but the prominent presence of the uniform, Nazi insignia and whip, coupled with his unpredictability create a disturbing mix of humour and mounting horror. As was seen in El desatino, objects often carry symbolic weight, being the visual reminders of thematic undercurrents. It soon becomes clear that Franco personifies power, control and cruelty. The clothes he wears and the objects he carries, even his name, emphasise this.<sup>4</sup>

The result of what Franco is capable of appears on stage in scene two in the form of Emma. Franco tells Martín that he has arranged some female company for him so that he may relax after his first day on the job. "Una mujer, Venus, el elemento frívolo." (173) He then leaves and almost immediately Emma is thrown on to the stage. As in any performance, the exits and entrances are timed to coincide. She is wearing a dirty prison smock and is barefoot, her head is shaved and she bears a large, open wound on her right hand. After a few moments of stunned silence, she smiles affectedly, "como si empezara a actuar." She glides towards Martín, who stands stunned for the second time in one day.

As had occurred with Franco's first entrance, Emma's appearance initially shocks. Like Franco, her behaviour contradicts her appearance and also like Franco she seems to be acting a part. However, whereas Franco was seen in control and improvising with ease, Emma seems desperate to remember a pre-rehearsed piece. Ironically, she acts as though she were elegantly dressed, stroking her scalp as if she possessed a full head of long hair and speaking like a movie star. Like Franco, she dominates the dialogue while Martín stands aside and watches with growing unease this second performance; and just as Franco was seen to slip in and out of his role revealing a darker and more disturbing character behind his superficial exterior, so too does Emma. Periodically she stops acting and a person that corresponds more closely with her sad appearance is exposed — a person who has been abused and is lost, alone and desperately afraid. Martín almost vocalises that Emma looks like an escapee from a concentration camp, but he stops himself, unable and not wanting to admit what is fast becoming obvious.

Emma: (con una sonrisa) ¿Escapada? (Agría) ¿De dónde? No diga idioteces. (Ríe) Escapada de un baile. Llevo puesto el vestido. (Lo acaricia) Volví ayer, a la madrugada. Bailamos en ... (piensa) en el pasto. Y acá tiene la prueba, el escozor, los bichos. Perdí la cartera. (Se rasca) ¡Oh, me hice sangre! (176)

Emma is a character created on the notion of the grotesque. Her appearance is pitiful, tragic, yet she tries desperately to hide the reality of her situation behind a social mask so as to avoid communicating her distress to Martín. Her flirting, impersonating, scratching and exaggerated affectation evoke laughter precisely because she appears ridiculous, awkward and incongruous. Nevertheless, in perfect accord with the tradition of the grotesque, it is laughter filled with sadness and compassion.

In El campo, the audience is clearly aware that Franco and Emma are putting on a show for Martín, that it is all representation. Yet the crude and artificial nature of this representation only serves to highlight a darker reality beneath. A reality bent on vividly

illustrating the inhuman abuses of power and the shocking effects of violence. In these opening two scenes a jumble of ambiguous and contradictory information is presented. As though completing a jigsaw puzzle, Martín and the audience have to piece together this information in order to be able to separate the representation from the reality: Franco, his uniform and whip; Emma, her uniform and wound; the sound of dogs, an electric fence, orders; the smell of burning; the empty files and lack of accounts; Martín's confinement to one room. This reality is then thinly masked behind the layer of pure spectacle: the role-playing, the excuses, the sound of children playing, the recorded songs of happy peasants, the promises and lies. The clash of an innocuous and invented reality juxtaposed against the terrifying truth of being trapped inside a concentration camp is an ingenious technique for accentuating the horror. This apposing of the innocuous with the iniquitous is a trademark of Gambaro's theatre and can be interpreted as an attempt to disclose the paradoxical and contradictory nature of human experience. In purely aesthetic terms, the result of emphasising the element of artifice tends also to distance the audience from the action on stage and, therefore, render the play and its subject matter a touch more tolerable.

The idea of spectacle is taken to its extreme in the third and pivotal scene of the play and the techniques thus far introduced are now concentrated for greater effect. The stage is set for a piano recital, with institutional benches providing space for an on-stage audience. What ensues is a gem of visual theatre reminiscent of Artaud's theatre of cruelty. Artaud stressed that theatre should appeal less to the mind and more to the senses. It should be violent, shocking, verging on ritualistic and highly emotive.

We want to make theatre a believable reality inflicting this kind of tangible laceration, contained in all true feeling, on the heart and senses. In the same way our dreams react on us and reality reacts on our dreams, so we believe ourselves able to associate mental pictures with dreams, effective in so far as they are projected with the required violence. (Artaud, 65)

In keeping with Artaud's ideas for a more total theatre, Gambaro compounds non-verbal visual and aural effects in this scene to the point of paroxysm in order to create an experience of nightmarish dimensions. Action and gesture take the place of words, the prisoners chant obscenities and orders in incantatory fashion, Franco and the guards indulge in enthusiastic and expressive shows of physical and psychological cruelty, while the noise level reaches heights of discordant and disturbing dimensions. It is orchestrated chaos and Martín, an unwilling spectator, gets swept up and surrounded by its energy. <sup>5</sup>

The benches are filled with guards and prisoners, dressed respectively like Franco and Emma. Reflecting Franco, the guards direct the prisoners on how to behave and take part in the whole crude pretense themselves, feigning shock and surprise each time Martín interrupts the proceedings and protests. The prisoners in turn face Emma and grotesquely mock her every move. The Franco/Emma dichotomy is thus visually multiplied and amplified around Martín as though he were in a hall of distorting mirrors.

Parallel and in contrast to the play-acting is the visual violence that, by the end of the scene, leaves Martín a bloody and snivelling shadow of his former self. The more Martín tries to intervene to stop the abuse directed against Emma, the more violently he is returned to his seat. He is scratched, beaten and bullied into submission by the four guards who, ironically, never cease to smile and address him with the utmost politeness.

SS: (Junto con los otros, sujeta a Martín lo arrastra hacia el asiento, esta vez con una brutalidad feroz. Reprocha con una cortesía ofendida) Será expulsado de la sala. ¿Dónde cree estar? (Lo mantienen sujeto, tapándole la boca) (193)

Through a combination of physical and psychological cruelty Martín is broken, and from this point onwards begins to obediently take orders from and be directed by Franco.

Franco: (a Martín) ¿No saluda a nuestra concertista? Le alegraría mucho. Acérquese. (Martín se incorpora y se acerca a la

tarima. Franco) Felicítela. Dígale que ha estado soberbia. (A Emma) Y usted, tiéndale la mano. (A Martín) ¿O prefiere la mejilla? (Sonríe) Más íntimo. (Seco) Menos peligro de contaminación ... quizás. (Emma y Martín no se mueven) ¡Vamos! ¿No le gustó la interpretación? Demasiado exigente. (A Emma) ¡Y usted, déje de rascarse, querida! (Ríe) ¿Quiere que le pase otro poco de agua? (195)

Franco, the "director" of the camp, is comparable to a theatre director. He assigns roles to Emma and Martín, controls their performance throughout the play and, like a theatre director, has the power to cut their roles, recast or insist, and as becomes clear at the end of the play, that Martín and Emma repeat the whole show from beginning to end.

Martín finally learns that compliance is safer than confrontation and that it is a way of survival. So when Franco asks him again if he enjoyed the concert, gone is the Martín who disagrees, demands and defends. He merely stutters, "Me divertí ... mucho ...mucho, mucho." (196)

In scene four Martín and Emma are left alone to "work." Both are prisoners, both are scared, yet each deals with their fear in a different way. When machine guns, dogs and shouting are heard outside, Emma suppresses her fear and insists that it is only a fox hunt, while Martín wants to know what is really happening. Both try to imagine what is occurring and impose that view on the other:

Martín: Son ametralladoras. Dejaban las puertas abiertas... Se creían libres. Parecía mentira, pero la realidad estaba: las puertas abiertas, las sonrisas invitando a salir...

Emma: Claro, gozan much cazando... Escriba, debo terminar mi bordado. ¡Sujete la lapicera!

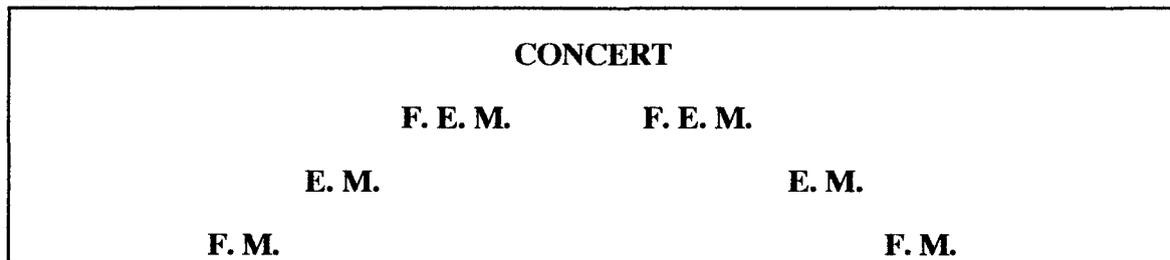
Martín: Salían y los otros acechaban, encendían los focos, el blanco abundante y perfecto.

Emma: No, no. Así se caza la liebre. Esta es una cacería de zorro, le digo. Más distinguida. (199)

No amount of denial, however fanciful, will make the truth disappear. Sure enough, when Franco returns, Emma is forced to go outside and admire what (or who) has been hunted. It is not necessary to send Martín or to show the audience, as the power of their imaginations provides a vivid and adequately terrifying substitute. Martín shouts "Se los comen ... Los apartan a garrotazos porque comen la carne fétida y miserable de los cadáveres ... " (199)

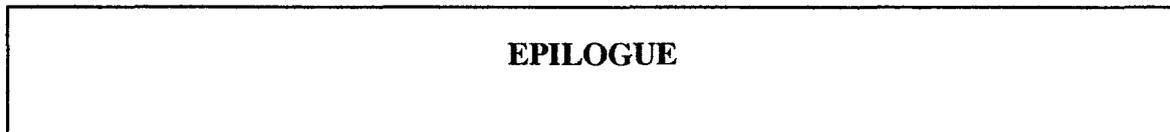
El campo is a meticulously structured play. Scenes one to four take place within the camp and deceptively build to a point of closure in scene four when Martín is told he may leave the camp and take Emma with him. The final scene, which occurs in Martín's own home, appears at first to be a kind of epilogue, a neatly resolved and happy finale to what has been up to this point an accumulative nightmare. Scenes one to four are subtly symmetrical, a technique which deceives the audience into believing that the world of the camp is a self-contained reality that has been left behind. Scene one and the very beginning of scene two involve Martín's arrival and show him discussing work with Franco. Martín is then left alone with Emma and their exchange represents the first realization about the nature of the camp. Franco returns to direct and he and Emma perform for Martín. The concert scene, reflective in itself, represents the pivotal point, and what follows reflects what has come before. Franco now directs Martín and Emma, instead of just Emma. The beginning of act two sees Martín and Emma alone again and represents a second realization about the nature of the camp. Finally, comes Martín's departure. He and Franco are once more alone on the stage as at the beginning, and again they discuss work. The symmetry, therefore, appears as the diagram indicates:

## THE CAMP



+

## MARTÍN'S HOME



Based on the simplified symmetry above, scene five at first appears to be free from the confines of the camp and set apart as an epilogue — Martín and Emma escape and go back to the city to start a new life and put the memory of the camp behind them.

Only in the final moments of the play does it become clear that this final scene is not separate, but an integral and concluding part of the main body. It is precisely this final scene that has been ominously foreshadowed throughout the entire play, especially in the opening scene. Martín arrives home and finds the house empty, just as he had arrived at the camp and been shown into an empty office. The sound effects heard in the initial moments of the play are heard again, — first the children, then the dogs and finally an indescribable groan. Martín sees his brothers half-finished homework and it reminds him immediately of the homework and drawings he had found among the jumbled papers at the camp. Emma insists on calling him Franco and confusing the two worlds. When Martín goes to the window, he initially sees no sign of life, reminding him and the audience of the time he had gone to the window in the opening scene to look for the peasants and could not see them. When Emma opens her suitcase to change, she finds a prison uniform which is exactly the same as the one she is wearing. It is a symbolic reminder that nothing has changed. Even Martín's home is reminiscent of the camp, with two doors, one leading to the exterior and the other to an interior, and with a window overlooking a street or path.

When a stranger appears in the doorway and begins to utter similar words to those used by Franco in the opening scene of the play, the audience realises that they will be denied a happy ending.

Funcionario: (Ríe. Con un interés amable) ¿Judío?

Martín: ¡No!

Funcionario: (ídem) ¿Comunista?

Martín: ¡No! ¡Le dije a Franco que no!

Funcionario: (como si lo consolara) Y bueno, será otra cosa... todos somos algo, es difícil elegir... (Ríe, mientras entran tres hombres con aspecto de vigorosos enfermeros. Arrastran una mesa portátil de hierro, con varios instrumentos que no se ven y un calentador encendido ... Uno de los hombres con extrema naturalidad, acerca un numerador de hierro a la mecha del calentador encendido. (212–213)

Martín once more denies that he is either a Communist or a Jew but, as the Funcionario points out, it does not matter. He has been arbitrarily selected and labelled by those in authority as dangerous and there is no escape.

The world of the camp, therefore, extends beyond its structural confines and invades the deceptively removed world of the home. Like the hunted fox Emma so vividly described in scene four, Martín is surrounded and only his terrified breathing can be heard. While they prepare him to be branded, Emma, ironically, recites the lines that she had spoken in scene two when Martín had first seen the branded numbers on her arm. Scene five is no epilogue, it is the tragic and terrifying continuation of the nightmare that, for Martín, began the moment the lights went up and he stepped into the camp and, it is suggested will continue after the lights go down. There is once again no resolution.

One of the basic ideas of El campo is an insistence in the power of truth to come to the surface no matter what steps are taken to suppress it. Whether masked behind

spectacle, gilded in lies, hidden from view, or denied, injustice, oppression and crimes against humanity will always be uncovered. This idea will acquire a very powerful significance in Gambaro's plays of the 1970's and 1980's, many of which deal specifically with breaking the silence, exposing the crimes, giving an identity to the disappeared and addressing the issue of denial. If authority assigns roles and constructs realities, and those that contradict it are punished, then it is often easier to accept one's role and deny the existence of a more disturbing alternative reality. Denial is a popular option, but it does little to alleviate the problem. Emma is constantly inventing and reinventing realities in order to be able to block out what she does not want to see or know, but it does not prevent her from being beaten and abused and Martín naively believes he can turn his back on the atrocities and go home. "Terminó le digo." (210) Martín ignores what is going on around him until it is too late and his mistake, like Alfonso's, is passivity.

In El campo the audience is denied their traditional privilege of knowing what is happening, as from the outset much remains unexplained or unmotivated. The audience, therefore, only sees, hears and understands as much as Martín, who remains on stage for the entire play. Martín, like the audience, is a spectator (an idea that is underlined in the concert scene) and, like them, is constantly being surprised and shocked by what he sees, hears and suspects is occurring around him. In casting Martín in the role of spectator, Gambaro is implicating her audience as well, as she is showing them an image of themselves and suggesting what may happen to the average person if he fails to respond to the crisis around him. What is more, El campo shows that one does not have to be a Jew or a Communist to experience persecution in a police state and that seeking safe spaces is a futile pastime in a time of crisis.

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER FOUR

1 Pellettieri explains:

En octubre de 1968, la crítica de Buenos Aires, recibió el estreno de la pieza con frialdad, y concretizó su sentido refiriéndola a los campos de concentración nazis, como si el tema del autoritarismo y la violencia no fuera, lamentablemente, muy argentino.

2 For more information on El campo and Artaud's theatre of cruelty see Sandra Cypress. "The Plays of Griselda Gambaro". Dramatists in Revolt: The New Latin American Theater. Eds. Leon F. Lyday & George W. Woodyard. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976) 95 – 109; Sandra Cypress. "Physical Imagery in the Works of Griselda Gambaro". (Modern Drama 18, 1975) 357 – 364; Teresa Mendez-Faith. "Sobre el uso y el abuso del poder en el teatro de Griselda Gambaro". (Revista Iberoamericana 132 – 133, (1985) 831 – 841; David W. Foster, "The Texture of dramatic Action in the Plays of Griselda Gambaro". (Hispanic Journal 1:2, 1979) 57 –66.

3 All quotations are taken from "El campo" in Griselda Gambaro: Teatro 4. (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de la Flor, 1990) 158 – 214.

4 For a Spanish speaking audience the name Franco would readily be associated with the Spanish dictator Francisco Franco. What is more, General Onganía, who ousted the democratically elected government of Arturo Illia in 1966, was nicknamed "Franco" for his allegiance to the economic and political ideals of the Spanish dictator. (Hodges, 16)

5 Up to this moment the audience has identified itself with Martín, the unwitting spectator. Therefore, faithful to Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, the audience finds itself, if not physically, then like Martín, emotionally enveloped by the theatrical experience they are witnessing. Artaud suggests:

And just as there are to be no empty spacial areas, there must be no let up, no vacuum in the audience's mind or sensibility. That is to say there will be no distinct divisions, no gap between life and theatre. (Artaud, 84)

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Información para extranjeros

Written in 1973, Información para extranjeros (Information for foreigners) remains one of Gambaro's most experimental and challenging plays. It is also her most politically transparent piece. Although it has been workshopped in Europe and the U. S., it has never yet been performed in its entirety. Gambaro wrote the play while living in Argentina but hid the manuscript in her house for fear of reprisals if the text were ever discovered by the military regime in power. She then took the play into exile with her when she left Argentina in 1977. Even abroad she did not want the play performed as she feared reprisals against family members who were still living in Argentina. Gambaro knew all too well that the horrors of abduction and acts of torture which she includes in her nightmarish piece might become a personal tragedy for anyone as critical of the military regime as herself. (Feitlowitz, 5–6) Due to the experimental nature of Información, and the fact that it has not yet been produced, this third analysis will comprise a description of the play and discuss the possible effects it may have on an audience.<sup>1</sup>

The subtitle of the play clarifies that Información is "una crónica en 20 escenas." The word "chronicle" implies historical veracity and so that there is no mistaking the transparent nature of the play, in the opening lines Gambaro makes sure that the piece is situated very precisely in time and space. A guide tells the audience that "La pieza responde a nuestro estilo de vida: argentino, occidental y cristiano. Estamos en 1971." (70)<sup>2</sup> Ironically, Información is actually a chronicle of case histories of those disappeared and the various methods of torture used during the military regime of General Levingston (1970-72). Deeply and openly critical, *Información* is an exposé of the horrors of state organised terrorism, repression and the increasing reign of fear of

Argentina's military. In El campo, this uncomfortable reality remained for the most part out of view, off stage and hidden behind spectacle, tending to be inferred by means of sounds, smells, costume and the reactions of the actors on-stage. In Información, Gambaro literally takes her audience "off-stage" so as to reveal the realities of persecution and confinement.

It is Gambaro's intended use of space that provides the central experimental base for Información. The text begins with a page-long description of how the space ideally should be arranged. Rather than a traditional stage or auditorium, the play has been written to be performed in a two-storey house with dark or crudely lit corridors and empty rooms, some of which should be interconnected. It is interesting to note that Gambaro calls the dramatic space the "ambiente teatral," or theatrical environment, which is a clear indication that what will transpire is a form of environmental theatre designed to envelope the audience the minute they walk in off the street.<sup>3</sup>

Upon arrival, the audience is divided into small groups and assigned a guide who will in turn lead his group through the maze of rooms, introducing the small private audience to each separate spectacle. In order that the groups do not converge again until the final scene, each guide will show the remaining scenes to his group in a different order. In the initial stage directions, Gambaro explains that the scenes may be presented in any order. The text as it is written is only one possible sequence for the scenes to be viewed.

In what can be seen as an ironic dig at actual state imposed censorship and restrictions, the guides tell their groups in the prologue that the play is prohibited to minors and anyone under thirty-five or over thirty-six. This would imply that all the spectators are prohibited from participating, however the guide is quick to add that since they have all paid the admission there is no turning back. This serves as an ominous reminder to the public that they will remain "trapped" for the duration of the performance.

This sense of confinement increases during the spectacle due to the experimental nature of the performance space.

The way in which the space is utilised is interesting to note. Much of the "house," or performance space, it is suggested, should be poorly lit and, to heighten their sense of danger, the audience is constantly being told to be careful of the stairs, to watch for pickpockets, to keep together and not to get lost. It is not meant to be a comfortable place, where an audience may invisibly sit back and passively watch the action. There are very often not enough or no seats to sit on, lights are turned off to leave the audience fumbling in the dark, the walls are bare and it is reiterated that human remains can be found in the basement of the building. Strange noises emanate from behind closed doors or dark corners, the corridors are cramped and the guides often get "lost." The physical nature of the space should be designed so that the audience experiences confinement, uncertainty and a sense of danger or impending doom. Gambaro calls for an environment which is part circus sideshow, part chamber of horrors, and part educational excursion.

A sense of unity is provided by theme, rather than plot. Diana Taylor points out in a study of Información that "gone are all recognisable frameworks or storylines, and by extension any basis, however tenuous, from which to explain or justify the crimes ... Gone is the characterisation, exposition, complication and "conflict" normally associated with drama. (Taylor in Feitlowitz, 167) The themes of disappearance, confinement, torture, fear and death are pervasive from the beginning to the end of the play, with each of the twenty scenes offering a different example or view of a similar subject matter. Led by the guides, the audience moves to and from the centres of action, a process which Gambaro has described as a "guided tour of the places of repression and indignity." (Feitlowitz, 6) The result is an accumulative effect of nightmarish dimensions.

Each scene, therefore, is stylistically different. The grotesque, the absurd, realism, farce, musical comedy, poetry, children's games, song and dance make up the repertoire of styles and discourses juxtaposed to communicate the information spoken of in the title. A

catchy song follows a suicide, a dance routine follows an assassination, poetry precedes murder and games give way to cruelty. Gambaro, explaining why she used so many different forms of representation in Información, says:

Everything in this play happens through theatricality, or artifice. That is to say, through a cover, or wrapping, that transcends the action itself, but nonetheless leaves the meaning intact. The work must be 'acted,' 'represented,' 'disguised.' Only this will make it tolerable; otherwise no one would have the strength to watch. (Feitlowitz, 7)

Although daringly diverse, the conclusion to be drawn from each scene or unit of action is invariably the same: that human rights violations in Argentina at the hands of the authorities are too numerous to be ignored.

Of the many different types of scenes which comprise the piece, some are quite clearly performances designed for audience viewing, others are not. The former scenes are usually self-consciously theatrical and highly stylised presentations. The actors wear a great deal of make-up, theatrical clothes and improvise most of the props. For these scenes, the audience is asked to spectate from the periphery and the guide often critiques the quality of the acting. In the text, such scenes provide the corpus of the play.

The second type of scene is the corridor, or transition, scene. As the audience members move from room to room, from spectacle to spectacle, they often find themselves, unexpectedly, at the centre of the action. At times, a character from one of the scenes will suddenly turn on the audience, forcing the group to make a hasty retreat into the corridor. At other times, the audience will find itself swept up by the action occurring in the corridor. At one point, the public collide with a group of workmen. Oblivious to the audience, the workmen block the corridor with what looks ominously like a torture table and, while they noisily set to work, the group, restricted from moving forward, is forced back into the room they had just left.

The third type of scene is the unexpected or surprise scene. There are moments within the spectacle when the guide appears to make a mistake and introduces the audience into a room that it is not supposed to see. This is usually made apparent by the looks of surprise or embarrassment on the part of the guide. Usually, the audience will catch a glimpse of an act of violence or cruelty before being ushered rapidly back into the corridor. Such behaviour gives the impression that much more is occurring than the audience is actually allowed to see. The glimpsed scenes are always disconcertingly realistic.

Interspersed with these three types of fragmented action is the story of a young female prisoner. Her drama is the only one that spans more than one scene and it shows in detail the physical and psychological effects of repeated torture. Scenes three, seven, eight, ten and the end of scene fourteen, present the confinement, torture, sexual abuse and eventual death of the young woman. From scene to scene her condition deteriorates until a gunshot is heard. Knowing that the girl has been given a gun, the audience can only assume that she has chosen to free herself from the mental and physical abuse she has been forced to suffer, and commit suicide.

On five occasions during the spectacle the guide either introduces or interrupts the action to explain what is taking place. Each explanation, we are told, is taken from actual newspaper accounts of the period and all refer to the abduction and subsequent murder or disappearance of individuals accused of being directly involved in resistance to the regime. The explanations are spoken with the detached matter-of-factness associated with newspaper reports. However, on each occasion, the information is then taken and reenacted in the form of a short sketch.

The cold newspaper reports are invariably taken to the other extreme, with the action of each ensuing sketch always exaggerated, grotesque and bordering on the humorous. For example, the guide relays the information given in the newspaper concerning the disappearance of Marcelo Verdt and his wife, Sara Palacio de Verdt:

Guía: (con tono profesional, seco y rápido) Explicación: para extranjeros. 2 de julio de 1971: Marcelo Verdt y su esposa, Sara Palacio de Verdt, fueron secuestrados por un grupo de ocho hombres. Desaparecidos. Ambos pertenecían al FAR, Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias. Según información de los diarios, la mujer antes de desaparecer, entregó sus hijos a la protección de una hermana... (92)

The action that ensues is grossly exaggerated. It shows the police invade a house and detain a family for supposedly subversive activities. The children, after answering correctly to a patriotic quiz, are freed. The parents, it is insinuated, are murdered. We are told that the actors are heavily made up and wearing ridiculous clothes. Their movements are schematic and puppet-like. The only props are some chairs, a child's hoop and the mother's sewing. The actors improvise with the chairs and the hoop to form the car in which the family is abducted. Each character is painfully over-acted. The mother swoons like the heroine from a silent movie and the police chief rumbles a sinister laugh like an old-fashioned vaudeville villain.

Yet, in spite of the histrionic nature of the action, the horrific content of the sketch remains clearly apparent. The mother is allowed to take her children home because the police chief enigmatically points out that they do not possess "bolsas chiquitas." (94) His comment acquires its full force when we see the other policemen measuring body bags against the father "como si fueran vestidos," he is then lead off to another room and never seen again. (94) When the mother returns and asks for her husband, the police chief coldly concludes, "¿Marido? ¿Qué marido? Desnúdate." The spectators are immediately hurried out. (95) An impersonal newspaper report, followed by a grotesque performance, therefore, concludes with disconcerting realism. This realistic subtext hints at the harsh reality that lies between the two extremes presented in the play, between the "official" facts and an artistic interpretation of those facts.

Coherence and unity are given to the twenty scenes by means of the guides and audience themselves, who are the only true constants throughout the course of the play. The guides, all men, are highly ambiguous characters. The spectators are completely dependent upon them yet they reiteratively reveal that they cannot be trusted. One moment they are charming and courteous, leading the way with confidence and providing insightful snippets of information; the next moment they are violent and aggressive, immune to the horrors being witnessed and greeting acts of cruelty with gross understatement. One guide, with uncontrollable rage, repeatedly kicks a man huddled in a bundle of rags and has to be replaced by another guide. Another participates in the psychological torture of the young woman from scene three, handing her the gun and showing her where to aim it to be assured of dying.

With recognisable Gambarian irony, the name given to a character's role contradicts the actions of that character. Like the unmotherly mother in El desatino, the guides of Información lead astray rather than lead the way. With increasing frequency they get lost or make mistakes, put their groups at risk and admit that they really have no idea where any worthwhile action is being staged or quite what is going on. Instead of clarifying information, they often interrupt so that ambiguities remain. When the young girl with the gun tries to explain why she is soaked, the guide interrupts and with affected ignorance asks "¿Quién te tiró agua? No estamos en Carnaval." (88) On being approached by a second guide and told that a spectacular performance is about to begin, instead of following, the guide decides to deny his group the privilege. Instead, he leads them in the opposite direction, apparently for no other reason other than the fact that he resents being ordered around.

The guides are the link between the spectators and the action as they lie somewhere in between. At times they stand aside and watch "como un espectador más," at other times they move forward and participate in the action. They effectively assure that the line separating spectacle from spectator, art from reality, remains permanently

vague. It is interesting to note that the guides also serve as the official censors. They decide what the public may or may not see, interrupt performances when they fear obscenities will be spoken and close doors on actual or suspected nudity. Ironically, they more often censor words rather than actions, and condemn crimes committed by others though not those committed by themselves. Their behaviour reflects the double standards of an authoritarian regime that will censor its artists and condemn acts of violence by its enemies, while perpetrating those same violations themselves.

Despite the veritable deluge of characters involved in presenting Información, the real protagonists of the play are the spectators, or the "extranjeros" referred to in the title. Dick Gerdes has highlighted that sometimes the involvement of the spectator is passive and other times active; for sometimes they watch the action from the sidelines, whereas at other times they *are* the action. The spectator, therefore, finds himself caught between "two opposing forces, as he is pulled from active participation to critical distancing." (Gerdes, 11)

The paying public is constantly being referred to and reminded of the role they are playing. The guides tell them to pay attention, to watch carefully and comment upon or critique the action. In scene two, the guide knocks at a door and tells the actor inside to let him in because he has a group of "spectators" with him. In scene three, the spectators are ushered into a room and asked to take their places around the wall. The action does not begin until they are all seated, at which point they watch as a man gently intimidates a terrified young girl with a loaded gun. She is soaking wet and visibly uncomfortable but the man, motioning to the audience, assures her that nothing will happen. "No te pasará nada. Hay mucha gente. Nos miran." (72) In a later scene with the same girl, the guide steps forward and begins to molest her, putting his hand up her skirt and making suggestive comments. However, realising that the audience is watching, he stops.

It is implied, therefore, that to witness is to prevent something from happening. In scene twelve a crowd of neighbours witness a group of plain clothes policemen trying to

abduct Dr. Quieto. Their intervention momentarily prevents the doctor from being disappeared. Nevertheless, it becomes apparent in the course of the spectacle that seeing or spectating is not sufficient. Each time the audience returns to the room of the young girl, they see that her condition has visibly deteriorated. This shows that in their absence she is still tortured. Likewise, Dr. Quieto, once taken to the police station, is forced to participate in an absurd closed trial and, without the neighbours there to prevent a grievance, is still ultimately disappeared. Being aware of violent injustices is not going to stop them from happening, although it is a positive step in the right direction. What is required nonetheless is active resistance.

In scene thirteen, without any warning, an audience member steps forward and suffocates a young girl that had moments before been reciting a beautiful poem. Neither the guide nor the audience prevent the murder from happening. Likewise in many other scenes, spectators stand aside and witness people being beaten, tortured, murdered or abducted in their presence and little if nothing is done to prevent it happening. The spectator is forced to critically rationalise his non-interference. After all there is no physical barrier preventing the audience from intervening. They command the acting space as much as the actors and very little distance, if any, lies between the action and the audience. The guide criticises the audience's passivity:

Guía: (asombrado) ¿Y éste? (Lo mira) ¡Y ahora se queda tan tranquilo! ¡Qué hazaña!, ¿eh? ¡Fenómeno! (Levanta la sábana. Banal) Está muerta. ¡Pobre criatura! Realmente, sin un gemido. Discreta. ¡Y en la flor de la edad! (Deja caer la sábana) Habló de hijos, de un marido. Tendremos que ir a buscarlos. ¡Linda noticia me toca darles! ¡Qué clavo! (Con esperanza) ¿Ninguno quiere ir? Para esto no hay voluntarios, ¿no? (Furioso) El hijo de la pavota. (106)

The reason can only be attributed to fear or denial — fear of being judged or of being punished, or denial that what they are witnessing is really happening. Información, therefore, demonstrates the paralysing effects of fear and the problems of denial, forcing the audience to take a critical look at their own behaviour.

The audience may passively accept what is occurring in many of the scenes, no matter how outrageous, because what they are seeing is being performed in such a way that reveals it is quite obviously an act. When the suffocated girl is placed into a body-bag by four men on rollerskates the stage directions assure that "es evidente que la muchacha 'actúa' de muerta, sostiene la cabeza, aunque inclinada." The guide even apologises that "el teatro moderno es así. ¡Ni respeto por las damas." (107)

Over half of the action that comprises Información is self-consciously theatrical. The other scenes are not so clear. They remain unexplained and ambiguous. In scene one the audience is directed into a darkened room and while the guide fumbles for his flashlight, unintelligible whispers fill the air. When the guide finally shines his flashlight around the bare room, a near-naked man is discovered sitting on a chair. Embarrassed, the guide hurries the audience out. No explanation is given. There are many other elements of the play that remain unexplained, such as: why are there people locked inside boxes in the corridors, why are so many characters being tortured, who is the person curled up and moaning in the bundle in scene six and why does the guide beat him? Moreover, why are the guides oblivious to the violence and inhumanity depicted in the play? In order to make sense out of the seemingly irrational and unacceptable behaviour that surrounds them, the spectators must make their own deductions. Gambaro's intention, it would seem, is to force the audience to take a critical stance before the action presented in the play, so that they might actively assess their own attitude — to act or not to act, to speak out or remain silent, to dismiss it all as "modern" theatre or recognise the parallels that lie between the performance and their own political reality. The title, therefore, is ironic. The information offered in the play is not intended

for foreigners from abroad but for those Argentinians who doubt or refuse to recognise the terrible occurrences which continue to take place in their own country.

At sporadic moments during the play, members of the audience are apparently attacked. Two are dragged screaming into the basement, one is hit over the head and placed in a coffin-like box. Others are arbitrarily beaten when a children's game turns sour. In a stage direction, we are told that they are all actors pretending to be spectators. An audience member would not know this. By turning the attacks on the audience, Gambaro is not only allowing her audience to experience the same sense of threat and danger that pervades the performance, but also testing their reaction when one of their "own" comes under attack.

Very few props are used in Información.<sup>4</sup> Aside from the coffin-like boxes in the corridors, other objects that fill the rambling space are few and far between. A few chairs and the odd table are the only pieces of furniture. By their very absence, any concrete objects that are present immediately attract the audience's attention.

There is the gun the girl uses to commit suicide in scene fourteen and the large clubs that the police often use to beat people unconscious. Sharp tools, a sword, a knife and two bombs are also employed in the drama. All of these props are used to cause pain, death and destruction and underscore the main themes of the play. There are also less clearly violent objects, such as the white coats the researchers put on to perform an experiment with electric shocks that leaves one researcher apparently dead. This is violence legitimized by science. So often in the play, those committing acts of violence are in uniform — the police, a judge, and the scientists. In contrast, those being tortured are very often naked or nearly naked.

Frequently, the props used in Gambaro's plays, aside from serving a purely functional purpose, acquire a symbolic significance as well. During the scene which shows the Milgram experiment taking place, attention is drawn to a cage of white mice.

This serves as a symbolic reminder to the audience of its own confinement within the house and the experimental nature of the play.

There are also those objects associated with the missing: the lone shoe of a woman who tried to escape kidnapping; the unfinished sewing project of a mother taken from her children; and the blood capsule left staining the floor after the exaggerated assassination of a political subversive. In two scenes players are seen with brushes, sweeping the streets. This can be seen as a symbolic act associated with the cleansing of the country of subversives that is carried out by the authorities.

There are a number of objects which are associated with children: a doll, a hoop, a sweet, rollerskates and gifts. These are particularly important as much of the action of the play revolves around children's games, such as: Antón Pirulero, Martín Pescador, Gallito Ciego. It is an uncomfortable juxtaposition of games with violence. Feitlowitz explains that the presence of games "provokes anxiety on the other level as well, though, for the games are an integral part of an Argentinean audience's shared culture and do contain threats (play along or suffer the blames) roughness, and scapegoating." (7) The audience is forced to ask themselves at what point do "roughness and scapegoating" become unsupportable. All of the children's games disintegrate into violence, which shows how children mimic the violence inherent in the adult world.

Five of the twenty scenes involve actors dressed up as children. A mother is heard repeatedly singing a lullaby. In another scene, a section of the Cinderella story is enacted. The effect of this is two-fold. On the one hand, it juxtaposes the innocence of the infant world with the iniquity and intolerance of the adult world — a contrast that highlights the cruelty of the latter. On the other hand, many of the other characters who are disappeared or seen imprisoned in the play are under thirty years of age. The vast majority of the casualties of the military crackdown in Argentina were still, in many ways, children themselves, loved and missed by their parents and friends.

The fragmented nature of the spectacle, the brevity of most of the scenes, coupled with the abrupt changes in location, action and style of performance, render Información a labyrinthine and complex puzzle. The audience is bombarded from all sides with violent and shocking material that attacks their sensibilities. In true Artaudian fashion, images of physical and psychological cruelty totally envelop the audience and demand an emotional reaction from them. Gambaro reveals a world where nudity, torture, sexual molestation, brutality and murder are the norm. The audience has no safe space to escape to, nowhere to hide from the infernal onslaught they are forced to witness, not even the comfort of childhood memories, as games, lullabys and fairy stories are all shown to mimic or evoke the impending world of grown men.

Much of the material within the play is rendered viewable through distancing techniques and the constant reminder that what is seen is only theatre. This in turn enables the audience to, at times, step back and observe the performance critically as well. At other times, attention is focused upon the audience's act of viewing, something that forces them to critically assess their own role as spectators. The audience may try to reject or laugh off the violence depicted in the play, but recurrent cultural, linguistic and political allusions make such a dismissal difficult to achieve.

Characteristic of Gambaro's style, the play concludes abruptly. One moment the audience is watching a prisoner be tortured to death while a group of prostitutes stand aside and watch, and the next moment the lights have come up and the actors, including the "dead" man, are clearing the stage and dispersing. Like the opening of the piece, the guide reminds the audience that what they have just seen has been a reflection of reality. If they found the material disturbing it is not the fault of theatre but of life itself, since this is from where theatre draws its inspiration.

Guía: El teatro imita la vida  
Si no aplauden  
es que la vida es jodida  
Vayamos a la salida. (128)

As the audience is leaving the building, police sirens are heard. It is a strategically placed sound effect designed to unnerve the audience one last time and to remind them that the line between theatre and reality is permanently vague. The reported facts of the newspapers are not to be accepted at face value and neither is theatre to be dismissed as mere artifice. The final lines of the play are interrogatives, reminding the audience not to deny their suspicions, but to continually question what goes on around them, both visibly and behind closed doors. "¿Quién dijo alguna vez: hasta aquí el hombre, hasta aquí, no?" (128)

Información was written at roughly the half way point between the plays of the 1960's and the plays of the 1980's. Technically varied and self-consciously theatrical, it can also be regarded as a useful piece of metatheatre. The play not only constantly draws attention to itself as representation, but the profession of theatre is also highlighted.<sup>5</sup> What is more, the guides acknowledge the controversial nature of play and underline its allegiance to the ideals of modern theatre, such as Jerzy Grotowski's "Poor Theatre."<sup>6</sup> For example, during a game of Martín Pescador the guide invites the audience to participate:

Guía: Señoras y señores, el que guste participar está invitado.  
Ninguna coacción, por simple gusto. Grotowsky decía: A  
mayor distanciamiento físico, mayor proximidad espiritual.  
¡Qué macana! ¡Participen sin miedo, señoras y señores. (115)

In Información, Gambaro wishes to lay bare not just the horrors of Argentina's socio-political reality of the 1970's, but also her own tools, techniques and preoccupations as a playwright —to be stylistically diverse, experimentally bold and politically

committed. Información combines the themes and techniques perfected in the plays of the 1960's (absurdism, cruelty, grotesque) with a more transparent subject matter, whilst also experimenting with new theatrical styles and stage languages. This suggests that at this point in her literary career Gambaro wished to break the mold established in the 1960's and to strive for something new. As such, Información can be considered a transitional piece, for Gambaro's subsequent plays reveal a marked change in style, even though her themes continue to remain constant.

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER FIVE

1 This can mainly be attributed to the tremendous difficulty in staging this multi-faceted production. The great challenge for a director of Información would be a logistic one — how to organise the groups so that they may witness every scene in some semblance of order without colliding or congesting the corridors of a large house or warehouse.

2 During the late 1960's and 1970's a number of theatre practitioners were experimenting with the traditional nature of the performance space and searching for ways to unite audience and actor in a theatrical experience that would blend life and art and test theatre's affective capabilities. These revolutionary aims can be found in Jerzy Grotowski's holy "Poor Theatre," Richard Schechner's enlightened "Environmental Theatre," Allan Kaprow's spontaneous "Happening's," Julian Beck and Judith Malina's communal "Living Theatre," Joseph Chaikin's therapeutic "Open Theater," and Peter Brook's evocative "Empty Space." In all of these experimental groups there is a belief that theatre's unique power lies in its immediacy, in its nonrepeatability, and in its improvisational possibilities. In 1970 Grotowski travelled to Buenos Aires to give workshops and it is known that the Living Theater worked extensively in Brazil. Always at the forefront of theatrical experimentation, it is logical that Gambaro's work of this period would reflect a certain influence.

3 All quotations are taken from "Información para extranjeros," in Griselda Gambaro: Teatro 2. (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de la Flor, 1987) 68–128.

4 There is a tendency in the experimental theatre of the 1970's towards minimalism, what Timothy Wiles calls "[a] striving after a minimum of the essential qualities of theatre." (Wiles, 114) Few props or scenic devices are utilized to give greater freedom to the actors as well as to maximize the "continuity between theater event and life event." (Wiles, 114)

5 In scene 17, the audience watches a group of actors rehearse Othello. Half way through, the rehearsal is interrupted by the police and the actors are arrested. The guide explains how the scene represents the arrest and subsequent detention without trial of the theatre group Teatro 67. Nine months later they were released. (119)

6 For an interesting study on the influence of Grotowski in Información para extranjeros, see Rosalea Postma, "Space and Spectator in the Theatre of Griselda Gambaro: *Información para extranjeros*". (Latin American Theatre Review 14/1 1980) 35-45.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Del sol naciente

Del sol naciente (From the Rising Sun) was written in 1983 and first performed in 1984. It is the third play Gambaro wrote after returning from exile and not only reflects her continued search for new stage languages and dramatic structures, but is also one of her most optimistic plays. Argentina was, at the time, experiencing the Falklands/Malvinas conflict and the military regime that had been in power since 1976 was in crisis. As she had done in her plays of the 1970's, Gambaro wanted to address this shared socio-political experience communally through theatre.

In Información para extranjeros we saw how Gambaro experimented with various distancing techniques for rendering contemporary issues more tolerable, primarily black humour, exaggeration and glaring artifice. In Del sol naciente, "estampa japonesa como la puede imaginar una argentina," (Andrade, Cramsie, 157) Gambaro adopts a Brechtian technique and distances the action of the play historically in both time and space for didactic purposes. In keeping with Brecht, she assures that the subject matter discussed, while strange, is nonetheless transparently contemporary and deals with such poignantly Argentinean themes as the abuse of power, political injustice, war and economic crisis. The Japanese context, Gambaro explains, was chosen quite arbitrarily and resulted from a dream. She remembers dreaming that she had written the perfect play, although in Japanese. When she awoke, she realised that although she would be unable to write the play, she could use the oriental images she had dreamed all the same:

¿Por qué no aprovechar lo que me brindaba el sueño, las imágenes, la posibilidad de inventar en otro espacio, en otro lugar, en una época cualquiera, que no era ésta, y sin embargo, iba a ser éste lugar, ésta época, ésta circunstancia. Como era el mes de abril y se recordaba la

guerra de Las Malvinas, yo me sentía muy presionada por todo lo que escuchaba y por mi propia memoria. Y de pronto, mi sueño "japonés" y la guerra se unieron y así surgió *Del sol naciente*. (Giella, Entrevista, 42)

The result is an allegory of Argentina's recent socio-political reality, the framework for which is provided by medieval Japan, with its unique customs, costumes and socio-cultural hierarchy of warlords, soldiers, geishas and beggars.

The action of *Del sol naciente* takes place in a typical house in Japan at an unspecified time in an unspecified place. Suki, a young prostitute, spends her days playing the "biwa," a Japanese stringed instrument, and waiting for clients. Her maidservant, the *Ama*, looks after her, but because of the sporadic nature of Suki's work, they are visibly poor. There is barely any furniture and they only have rice to eat. The monotony of their days seems likely to change with the unexpected arrival of Obán, a mighty warrior who comes to pay his respects to the lady of the house. He is seduced by Suki's beauty and, convinced that this apparently fragile and unprotected female needs him, elects himself to be her provider and sole saviour. Almost immediately, he starts to lay down rules and make demands. He prohibits anyone else from entering the home in his absence and demands Suki's absolute affection, threatening both women with violence if they disobey. The *Ama*, mesmerised by Obán's strength and good looks, has no problems acquiescing to all of his demands. Suki, on the other hand, is not seduced by appearances, and while she gives the impression of submission, she remains unmoved. While Obán is away organising military campaigns, Suki begins to feed the city's poor and minister to the country's dead. A sick beggar personifies the former and a young soldier, Oscar, the latter.

The action of the play, as with most of Gambaro's plays, takes place within an enclosed space. A translucent back wall is effective as it not only hints at the transparent nature of the play, but also allows the audience to make out the shadows of people and objects that belong to the outside world. Symbolically, the flimsy paper walls convey the

fragile nature of the home and visually reproduce the link that is made in the play between the private domain and the public one, as hunger and violence in the home are seen to reflect economic crisis and political tyranny outside. In preceding plays, the enclosed space of the stage was an imprisoning environment, a confined area where people were placed against their will and abused behind closed doors. In Del sol naciente the enclosed space has opened up and is seen to be ineffectual both as a prison or as a refuge to those who wish to deny or ignore what lies immediately outside.

The play is comprised of five characters all of whom have clearly defined social roles: Obán the warrior, Suki the prostitute, *Ama* the servant, the *Tísico* the beggar and Oscar the foot soldier. It is to be noticed that all of them, apart from Obán, represent, in isolation, the most powerless sectors of any society. Conversely, Obán epitomizes power in the way he dresses, the objects he carries and the words he speaks. It is seen, nonetheless, that to maintain this power Obán must consistently disempower those around him. His methods include dividing, silencing, threatening and murdering. The action of the play, therefore, centres upon Obán's various and varied efforts to maintain control. This he achieves as long as those around him acquiesce to his demands and remain fearful and in awe of him —the *Ama*, the *Tísico* and Oscar do. Suki is seen to be different. Unimpressed by mere appearances, she begins to question his role and ask that he justify his behaviour. With apparent naivety at first, and then with growing outrage, she sets about exposing the illegitimacy and criminality of Obán's existence. She demystifies the myths he creates and lays bare his lies in an attempt to show those around her that he is not as invincible as he would like to think. At first, she learns and eventually she teaches others that together they can combat him.

The allegory in this tale is clearly transparent and like many allegories its intention is clearly didactic. Each character can be seen to represent a clearly defined sector of contemporary Argentinean society. Obán, a military man, personifies the

authoritarian power of the generals and Suki, the *Ama*, Oscar and the *Tísico* represent the various victims of his brutal regime.

The *Ama* represents those people who prefer to deny rather than accept the truth of social and political atrocities. She would like to ignore the world outside the home and is constantly telling Suki to close the door, to board up the windows in order to protect them from the "hostile" environment outside, which she sees represented by sick beggars. Ironically, the *Ama* opens the door wide and welcomes in the true enemy, Obán, failing to see that he is violence cloaked in charity. Symbolically, she is blinded by his presence when she first sees him and seduced by his good looks.

Ama: ...¡Oh, señora, pasaban y todo el mundo con la cabeza al suelo!  
¡Las espaldas para abajo y las frentes sobre el polvo! ¡Pasaron  
ante una corte de ciegos! ¡Nadie se atrevía a mirarlos." (115)

This can explain why she turns a blind eye to his brutal behaviour. The *Ama* is passive, uncritical and obedient. Gambaro, however, is keen to show that her subservience gets her nowhere, for she is repeatedly trampled on and abused by Obán nonetheless. Each time Obán visits, the *Ama* hurries to the door and falls to her knees in anticipation, only to be, with humorous symbolism, repeatedly stepped on by the mighty warrior. Nevertheless, no matter what Obán does or says to her or others, the *Ama* chooses only to see as far as his external appearance and, in the hope of winning his favour, unquestioningly believes the lies and shallow excuses he offers to justify his violent behaviour. When Suki coldly reminds her that he killed the beggar in cold blood, the *Ama* dismisses the incident without a thought:

¡Oh señora, no lo recuerde! Ya está muerto. El tísico. Tuvo mala suerte,  
ni terminó de comer ni disfrutó. Se hubiera muerto igual. Estaba muy  
enfermo. ¿No vio cómo tosía? Arrojaba los pulmones. Olvídelo. (137)<sup>1</sup>

In an attempt to make the *Ama* see beyond pure appearances and teach her about the suffering others endure but she ignores, Suki takes out her comb and stabs her servant in

the hand. When the *Ama* screams out in pain and demands that Suki rationalise her behaviour, Suki simply smiles and says "Olvidá. ... ¡Que te duele! ¡Olvidá!" (137-138)

The *Ama* is afraid to disobey and is willing to do anything for Obán, including bury his dead and spy on her mistress. It is apparent that Obán needs people like the *Ama* to remain powerful. Her awe and servility legitimise his behaviour. Like Emma in El campo, the *Ama* invents an alternatively safe reality so as not to confront the truth. She takes Oban's money, believing it is honest money because, as she herself points out, "me conviene creerlo." (137) Like the protagonists of Gambaro's early plays, the *Ama* lives in a state of permanent denial and witting ignorance.

Suki is diametrically opposed to the *Ama*. Visually this is captured in their physical appearances. The *Ama* is old and plain, while Suki is young and beautiful. Suki is open-minded and unprejudiced and only she sees beyond physical appearances and superficial shells, such as Obán's shiny suit of arms, which she calls his "cáscara," Oscar's smell and the *Tísico's* sweat and filth. Rich, poor, dead or alive, Suki looks only at the person beneath the outer covering and she draws her conclusions from these deeper analyses. The *Ama*, on the other hand, despises the *Tísico* because he is poor and hates Oscar because he stinks. Likewise, she worships Obán because he is strong and envies Suki because she is beautiful.

In Obán's presence, Suki speaks in haikus, riddles and proverbs, all discourses with double meanings whose effect is to thinly mask her disdain for him.

Suki: (por decir algo) Fueron de paseo. ¿Estás de paso?  
Obán: Sí  
Suki: ¿Y adónde vas?  
Obán: (orgullosa) ¡"También" de paseo!  
Suki: ¿Así vestido?  
Obán: No tengo otra vestimenta. Desde que nací, llevo ésta.  
Suki: Qué triste

Obán:     ¿Por qué?  
 Suki:     (le toca la espada) Demasiado lata para pasear  
 Ama:     (advierte) ¡Fierro!  
 Obán:     (a Suki) ¿Te estás burlando?  
 Suki:     Jamás me atrevería, señor. (118)

The fact that Obán is rarely able to interpret these thinly disguised criticisms exposes how shallow he truly is. The audience, however, is well aware of Suki's irony and can enjoy the humour at his expense. In this way, Gambaro does not simply expose and criticize the authoritarian figure, but ridicules him as well. Moreover, when Suki is her most critical, Obán is his most blind, time and again responding to her questions in ways that expose his hypocrisy and the corrupt and twisted nature of political ideology — an ideology that believes only in taking, controlling and destroying.

As we saw in chapter two, Gambaro believes that each play requires a distinct "language." Nowhere is this more apparent than in Del sol naciente. Like the action of the play, the language used by the characters has been defamiliarized. Sentences are short and the typical word order of everyday speech has been altered, creating both a foreign as well as false-sounding dialogue. Gambaro also explains her use of the typically Bonarian "voseo." "En Del sol naciente ... usé el "voseo" argentino para la segunda persona como para una ambigua distancia ceremoniosa, lejanamente emparentada con el modo arcaico español." (Andrade, Cramsie, 156)

In total contrast to Suki's short and simple but loaded lines, Obán is ceremonious, verbose and obviously phony. He tries to sound noble and thinks himself witty, but the artificial nature of his speech renders him ridiculous. Everything surrounding Obán, —his language, costume, shows of gallantry and affection— is overtly artificial. The only aspect of his character that appears "real" is his brutality, something that he finds harder to hide during the course of the play, especially as he feels his power slipping from

him. As had occurred in El campo, this technique of exposing artifice highlights the degree of masquerade surrounding those in power.

Obán's arrival in six of the seven scenes is always announced by the sound of galloping hooves and an intense glow of light. For his first entrance, this light is so brilliant that it eclipses the sunlight. During the course of the play, the light becomes less bright each time and increasingly more dull, cold and dramatic. This visual effect underscores the disintegration of Obán's character. At the beginning he is all pomp and ceremony, bowing low and demanding great shows of attention and reverence from Suki and the *Ama*. Dressed in the ostentatious and aggressive purple and gold suit of armour of a medieval Japanese warlord, Obán seeks to intimidate and overpower with his physical presence. In his absence he relies on fear and threats, as well as obedient servants like the *Ama*, to maintain his power. As Suki begins to demystify Obán's power and strip away at his showy brilliance, the light around him symbolically fades. What is left when appearances are removed may be darker and more dangerous, but vincible nonetheless.

From the very beginning it is clear that Gambaro wishes to show that for authority to be effective it requires someone on whom to impose its demands. Power feeds off the weak, but if the weak unite then they will become a force to be reckoned with and be able to provide some opposition against tyranny. This is something that Suki learns during the course of the play. Her first lesson occurs with the tubercular beggar, the *Tísico*. He comes to Suki in search of food, she takes pity on him, invites him in and gives him a bowl of rice and some water. Although the *Tísico* has a highly contagious disease, Suki seems not to notice or even understand. She innocently asks him if that is the reason he is so *desvalido*. His reply is ambiguous, implying that his apparent frailty and destitution is caused more by the society which has pushed him to its fringes.

With the sudden arrival of Obán, it becomes clear that the authoritarian manipulators of society are to blame for the *Tísico's* ruin. Obán, ignoring how sick the man is, throws him outside and orders him to dry his horse. Suki, annoyed, refuses to

respond to Obán in the way he is accustomed. She offers him no attention and shows no enthusiasm in his presence and only mechanically obeys his orders. Feeling that he has no power over her, Obán's tactic is to frighten Suki into submission by making the *Tísico* kiss her. At first she is afraid, but when Obán threatens to kill the beggar, Suki reacts to defend him against further cruelty. In an encounter that resembles moments from El campo, when Franco tries to force Emma to seduce Martín, Suki is forced into kissing the sick man. But unlike Emma, Suki takes the situation into her own hands. She overcomes her initial repulsion and finds compassion and love for a fellow victim and "de pronto descende sobre ellos un aire apacible, como de encuentro más allá de lo que Obán ordena." (130) In mutual abuse, they overcome their differences, prejudices and fears and find strength in each other, managing, albeit momentarily, to obliterate Obán from their thoughts.

In the characteristic style of a dictatorial regime, Obán responds with violence to regain control of the situation, boasting that his power could be reaffirmed in moments by killing them both:

Con un sólo acto puedo enseñarles a los dos, como cuando atravieso a  
alguien con la espada, yo aprendo el poder y el otro la muerte. ¡Vamos!  
(a Suki) Te darás cuenta de lo que valgo. El infierno valoriza la gracia.  
(129)

"Hell gives value to heaven, " he shouts and the weak accentuate the strong. The contrasting of opposites was seen to be a recurring technique in Gambaro's early plays as a form of emphasis. In Del sol naciente it is revealed that the construction of binary oppositions is a favourite of those who aim to control. An opposite can be made to reaffirm the other's identity. Obán flaunts his strength against the weak to appear that much more convincing. It follows, therefore, that if the weak find their own source of power, Obán will sense his authority wane. Like any tyrant, if there remains no one left to kill, to force into submission, or to fear him, he can no longer feel omnipotent.

Obán can control people through physical intimidation but he can not control their minds. This becomes clear in Suki's actions. She obeys everything that Obán demands, but never willingly or with feeling. She feigns acquiescence, something that Obán is aware, which results in him being denied the pleasure of feeling in control. He orders her to love him, so she states unemotionally that she loves him, but it is clear to all that she does not and never will. Obán eventually realises that he has no true control over Suki regarding what she thinks. No matter how much he may abuse her body, her mind is seen to remain free.

The fifth and final character of the play is Oscar, a soldier killed in battle during one of Obán's campaigns. As Suki is to the *Ama*, Oscar appears in direct contrast to Obán. In total opposition to Obán, Oscar's entrances are preceded by an almost imperceptible scratching. Whereas Obán is all "sound and fury signifying nothing," Oscar is timid, desperate and helpless. Obán's presence and entrances are light and colourful in his samurai suit of armour, while the foot soldier is grey and dressed in rags, appearing from behind screens or in dark corners. He is first found huddled by the fire in Suki's kitchen, reeking of death and visibly afraid. When Obán discovers Oscar he impulsively kills him (off-stage). However, when Obán returns, Suki notices that there is no blood on his sword, providing the first indication that Oscar may be more difficult to erase than Obán thinks. As the paper walls anticipated, Oscar is unrestrained by physical boundaries. On two more occasions and with increased ferocity, Obán attempts to kill Oscar, but no matter how many times he tries and no matter how many times or how deep the *Ama* buries him, he continues to return and seek warmth by the fire and solace from Suki. Unable and unwilling to be silenced, he also returns to tell his story.

Oscar is one of the many victims of Obán's aggression and lust for power and he and the other lost souls who we are told wander the city, demand to be recognised, accounted for and laid to rest with dignity. Oscar was one of the many foot soldiers under Obán's command who went to fight his leader's war and died ignominiously in

battle. The theme of impending and perpetual war is a constant throughout the play. From the beginning it is apparent that when Obán is lost for words he talks of the war he will win. Suki is unaware that the country is at war or, in fact, needs one, to which Obán responds: "Siempre hay alguno que nos ofende, que nos quita lo nuestro. Lo resolví hoy: ¡tendremos guerra!" (119) This is war at a whim and Obán, like other dictatorial figures, declares war on whoever is not in favour, to distract attention from other issues; such as his waning power, economic crisis or rising popular dissent. In the play, this is seen in his failure to exert power over Suki, her continued exposure of his acts, and the hungry beggars' constant banging of their spoons on empty dishes, which opens every scene. Sandra Cypress points out that this noise represents the sound of a hungry nation — hungry for liberty as well as food. (En busca... 59)<sup>2</sup> Unable or unwilling to combat domestic ills, the great warrior is always ceating wars to give the impression that he is doing something worthwhile.

Later in the play, in contrast to the ragged and broken Oscar, Obán returns from the battle in his impeccably clean clothing, unscathed and unapologetic. Oscar, in comparison, has lost his life and is left in the snow and mud to rot on the battlefield. Oscar relates to Suki how pointless the war was and how many lost their lives or were mutilated in battle. It would be difficult for an Argentinian audience watching Del sol naciente in 1984 not to associate the war Oscar refers to with the invasion of the Malvinas/Falkland Islands.<sup>3</sup> When Suki asks Oscar who the land belonged to, he replies hesitantly:

- Oscar:     ¡Nu...nu...nu-es-tra! ¡No...la ganamos! ¡Pero  
                  es...nuestra!
- Suki:        Es bueno defender lo que es nuestro. ¿Estás contento?
- Oscar        ¿Con-ten-to? (Ríe con una risa áspera e insoportable) ¡Está!  
                  ¡En la fosa! ¿Qué-mentira-nos llevaron a defender-si la que ya-  
                  teníamos-la-vendieron-en-cada-¡hambriento! (Ríe) (146-147)

Yet the allegory does not stop at a denunciation of the Falklands War. It is far more complex and extends beyond this one specific example to include a second covert war, the "Dirty War." At one point Obán has the *Ama* bring a scalding hot bath onto the stage and, before both women and the audience, repeatedly submerges Oscar's head until he appears to drown. It was well known among Argentines that this was one of the most common methods of torture used by the authorities during the "Dirty War" and was called "el submarino." Emma had talked in terror of "baños fríos," and the young girl who commits suicide in Información para extranjeros had obviously suffered similar treatment. By reproducing this form of murder, Gambaro is assuring that the play is interpreted as more than just an allegory of the Falklands war, so that the frame of reference for the action of the play is seen as a commentary on the entire period of recent military repression. What is more, it is not only Oscar the soldier who returns from the grave and demands remembrance and justice. The *Tísico* also returns in the penultimate scene and his presence is known due to the uneasy stamping and whinnying of Obán's horse. The *Tísico* was not killed in battle, but brutally murdered for being an undesirable. Like Oscar he also refuses to disappear quietly into anonymity.

To complete the allegory, Oscar and the *Tísico* represent political victims. They symbolize but two of the many thousands of people who died or were disappeared in either one of Argentina's recent wars. The illegitimate and covert "Dirty War" of the 1970's, or the legitimized and overt Falklands War of the early 1980's. Gambaro implies that those who unjustly lost their lives, for whatever reason during the most recent reign of generals (1966 -1983), will not be forgotten and that they did not die in vain. Their memory and presence amongst the living, those who still feel the loss and pain, will urge a section of society to stand up for the fallen victims and speak out against the murderous and inhumane methods of the authorities. When Obán tries to convince Suki that those who died in battle were martyrs, Suki shouts: "¿Martír de qué, Obán? Quien no elige su martiro, no es martír, ¡es víctima!" (158) The character of Suki is smart and critical from

the beginning, unable to be bought or seduced by appearances because in spite of his charm, Obán is nonetheless violent and authoritarian with both her and the *Ama*. Suki's scorn only turns to outrage through increased contact with the outside world, in the form of Oscar and the *Tísico*. It is through them that she learns the extent of Obán's cruelty and what he stands for in the larger context.

Obán blindly believes his power will last forever and that he will always have the last word. He dismisses those around him because they are weak in his eyes. Suki is dismissed because she is a woman, the *Tísico* because he is poor and sick, and Oscar because he is dead and seemingly forgotten. What we see in the course of the play is that he underestimates them all. Like most totalitarian regimes, Obán divides and segregates those he fears in order to be able to control them. He wants Suki in her home, the *Ama* in the kitchen, the *Tísico* on the streets and Oscar in the grave. In isolation and oblivion they are weak, but together the living can find strength to fight back against tyranny.

As with all of Gambaro's plays, the formal structure of the play sheds light on the overall meaning — form and content are indivisible. Each of the seven scenes appears to start in the same way with Suki sitting on the floor playing her *biwa*, giving the impression of a static situation that never changes. However, a closer look reveals small changes. At first Suki seems almost oblivious to the outside world, wrapped up in her own insular world of music and make-up, and she does not notice the sound of beggars banging their spoons on empty bowls. Through the course of the play, Suki begins to pay closer attention to what is occurring beyond the walls that protect her from the world. She becomes concerned about the beggars, wanting to feed them. The light outside the paper walls becomes darker in each scene as Suki grows more sombre herself. By scene five she still has her instrument in her hands but she has stopped playing it. Instead she listens to the noises outside and becomes troubled, as simply feeding the beggars does not stop their banging. In scene seven, the only scene in which Obán does not appear, she is seen standing on the threshold with a bowl of rice in her hands, looking out expectantly

into the world for a way to help the disaffected. The *Ama*, Obán, Oscar and the *Tísico* are static characters and correspond with an apparently static and repetitive series of actions enclosing the victim/victimizer dichotomy representative of the early plays. Only Suki changes and develops, almost imperceptibly at first, and then to the point where she stands up against Obán on behalf of his other victims and names him for what he really is: "Oh, cobarde, bestia, asesino." (159)

Her intellectual transformation is captured visually in the last scene when she slowly strips before the *Ama*. Preparing to engage in an act of solidarity with those who have suffered and those who are still suffering, Suki removes her wig, her make-up, kimono and combs and stands transformed before the audience. The *Ama*, unchanged to the end, can still only see as far as external appearances, and is only able to see Suki's physical change and not the ideological one:

Ama:        Señora, ¡no parece la misma! ¿Dónde quedó su hermosura?  
                  ¿Vio a Obán? ¡Ese sí que no cambia! ¡Qué poquita cosa es  
                  así! Nunca me había dado cuenta... (161)

By keeping an open and critical mind, Suki learns to deconstruct the lies created by those in authority. Unlike the *Ama*, Alfonso in *El desatino*, or Emma and Martín in *El campo*, she neither denies nor shies away from unwelcome aspects of reality; instead she confronts them, kissing the *Tísico*, embracing Oscar, and even caressing Obán. She is not deceived by false appearances, nor does she pretend to be something she is not. She refuses to be blinded, paralysed or terrorised into submission. In exemplary fashion, she resists flattery, bribery, intimidation and threats against her life and tries to teach those around her to do the same. Suki may be physically weak, economically powerless and socially marginalized, but she nevertheless possesses an unsurpassed strength of integrity, compassion and brave determination.

The rising sun mentioned in the title is itself a metaphor. It captures the oriental theme of the play, whilst at the same time, refers to the dawn of Suki's awareness and the

rising solidarity between the marginalized. A rising sun is also symbolically associated with new life. In spite of Obán's constant boast of having the last word, it is Oscar who speaks last:

Oscar: (se separa. Quiere decir algo, no puede. Con gran trabajo lo consigue, en un largo, terrible y hermoso grito de reconocimiento) ¡Maaaaa-dre! ¡Maaaa-dre! (163)

Like a child, Oscar is reborn again, out of death comes life and like the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, Suki will nurture hope and lead the resistance against oppression. Gambaro affirms how during the darkest days of the military regime, "las madres" of the Plaza de Mayo were the only unsilenced voices of resistance. These last lines suggest that Del sol naciente is a tribute to their bravery:

El hecho que tuviera una protagonista femenina no sé si fue un reconocimiento inconsciente a la entereza de aquellas mujeres que, reclamando por sus hijos desaparecidos, fueron por un tiempo la única voz alzada en el silencio de esos años. ... De cualquier manera, ... la Suki de Del sol naciente ... no es cualquier mujer, es una mujer con una voz que nadie le presta sino su propia condición de mujer, su propia fuerza y la conciencia de su fuerza. (Andrade, Cramsie, 158)

## NOTES FOR CHAPTER SIX

1 All quotations, unless otherwise stated, are taken from "Del sol naciente" in Griselda Gambaro: Teatro 1. (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de la Flor, 1984)

2 For a detailed character study of Suki and Obán see Sandra Messinger Cypress "La dinámica del monstruo en las obras dramáticas de Griselda Gambaro". En busca de una imagen: ensayos críticos sobre Griselda Gambaro & José Triana. Ed. Diana Taylor. (Ottawa: Girol Books, 1989)

3 Although most Argentinians regard Las Malvinas as Argentinian territory, many were against the war itself, as it was seen to be initiated by the generals in power to divert public attention away from their failing power. In spite of national propaganda efforts to label the military involvement as a "good cause," many hundreds of young men, like Oscar, died as a result of the conflict.

## CONCLUSION

Like El desatino, El campo is a play about power and control, acquiescence and submission. Yet whereas El desatino had dealt humorously with the abuse of power within the family, El campo shows that same abuse magnified and legitimized within the public sphere and taken to its extremes of physical and psychological cruelty. In Información para extranjeros this situation is scrutinized further and intensified and extended to actively involve the audience. Unexplained and arbitrary acts of violence are seen to be all pervasive and "safe" spaces, both for characters and audience members alike, have completely disappeared.

From El desatino to Información, therefore, we can argue that there is a general accumulation and intensification of the basic themes and techniques introduced from the beginning: the number of characters involved consistently multiplies and there are steadily more victims, the performance space grows, the number of scenes increases, and the confusion and chaos mount. Role-playing in El desatino, becomes a sadistic spectacle in El campo and evolves into flagrant and grotesque theatricality in Información. All three plays take an apparently harmless situation and show how it develops into a nightmare: in the case of El desatino, waking up one morning to go to work; in El campo, a job interview; and in Información, a visit to the theatre. There is also a marked change in tone between these three plays and while humour is always present it becomes darker and more ominous. In El desatino the tragedy of Alfonso's death is ameliorated by the absurdity of the whole situation and the fact that each character appears caricatured and is motivated by selfishness. In contrast, in El campo and Información, superficial appearances, while humorous on the surface, are seen to be an integral part of the machinations of organized oppression. The action of El desatino is improbable and as such serves more as an elaborate symbol. Considered in the light of Argentina's recent

history, what occurs in El campo and Información, no matter how stylized, is too believable to be symbolic and, as a consequence, terrifying in its implications.

As Del sol naciente exemplifies, the plays that Gambaro wrote after returning from exile are more optimistic. With the end of organized oppression in sight, an attempt had to be made to educate audiences so that the years of dictatorship would not happen again. The themes of violence and passivity are still present, and the authoritarian power structure, so reminiscent of the early plays, remains. Nevertheless, whereas the three previous plays had tended to show the shocking effects of sustained violence and State terrorism rather than analyze its causes, in Del sol naciente an attempt is made to examine the methods of oppression and expose the lies that perpetuate tyranny. Humour, rather than a tool for easing the study of horror, is now a healthy weapon used to demystify the figure of the tyrant. In terms of structure, the action of the play, rather than being seen as a static, circular and self-perpetuating situation in which the victims are isolated and powerless, is now shown to be changeable, optimistic and open-ended. The early themes are thus counterbalanced by the idea that active resistance can bring about change.

Argentina's propensity for authoritarian power structures has remained a constant preoccupation of Gambaro's dramatic work and through theatre Gambaro has captured the essence of her country's socio-political reality. In El desatino the abuse of power was seen to be a part of human nature. In El campo Gambaro alerted audiences to the possible consequences of the rise of Fascism in Argentina. In Información para extranjeros audience members were invited to go "behind the scenes" of Argentina's "Dirty War." Finally, in Del sol naciente Gambaro juxtaposed the cowardice of the Generals who lead Argentina to defeat in the Falklands/Malvinas conflict with the courage of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo who lead the fight against injustice and oppression.

In her search for new ways to represent the changing reality of her country, Gambaro has continued to experiment with and alter her style of theatre. Thus, by

remaining consistently open to innovation, her dramatic work has tended to resist classification. She has, instead, revealed the varied ways a playwright may go beyond the external appearances and "rational" discourses of everyday life and convey a sense of total reality —complete with its contradictions, ambiguities and the disturbing discoveries some audiences and other less daring playwrights may prefer to do without..

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