

## Framing the *Proceso*: Two Productions of *Telarañas* by Eduardo Pavlovsky

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Eduardo Pavlovsky (Buenos Aires, 1933) completed writing *Telarañas* on the eve of Argentina's 1976 military coup. After an initial postponement, *Telarañas* had a brief national première<sup>1</sup> in mid-1977, at the height of the Junta's repression. It was immediately banned. The play would not be given a full-run re-première until 1985, two years after the country's return to democracy. The 1977 and 1985 stagings of *Telarañas* frame a critical period in Argentine history, from the early years of the military Junta's *Proceso de reorganización nacional* to the first years of the country's return to democracy. An examination of these two productions reveals some of the changes that took place in Buenos Aires theatre during those difficult years.

Unlike film or television, whose scripts were approved by the censor before filming,<sup>2</sup> Argentine theatre under *Proceso* was subject to censorship after going into production, usually subsequent to the première or, at the very earliest, during the rehearsal period. The case of Eduardo Pavlovsky's *Telarañas* is both typical and unique: typical of the pressures under which theatre was produced during the early, most repressive, years of the dictatorship; unique in its public, official prohibition. The play had already gone into rehearsal in 1976, but, because of Pavlovsky's continuing concerns about possible repercussions, the national première was postponed until the following year. At that time, it was scheduled for low-profile performances during the Teatro Payró's noon-time experimental theatre series. There were two performances.<sup>3</sup> When Pavlovsky chose not to respond to the Municipal Secretary of Culture's request that the play be voluntarily withdrawn,<sup>4</sup> *Telarañas* was prohibited by official written decree ("Decreto 5695 de la Municipalidad de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires") for its distortion of Junta-supported traditional "spiritual, moral, and social" values, as the following excerpt attests:

CONSIDERANDO: Que [la pieza] plantea una línea de pensamiento directamente encaminada a conmover los fundamentos de la institución

familiar tal como ésta resulta de la concepción espiritual, moral y social de nuestro medio. Que si bien dicha postura se manifiesta, en su mayor parte, a través de un conjunto de actitudes simbólicas, éstas adquieren la transparencia necesaria para distorsionar de un modo ostensible la esencia y la imagen tradicional de aquella institución [. . .] A ello debe sumarse el empleo de un lenguaje procaz y la sucesión de escenas aberrantes, expuestas con crudeza y realismo extremos. (quoted in Avellaneda, *Censura* 2, 161)<sup>5</sup>

From the published text's opening "Obertura/Escena Fascista" to the final "Era un héroe . . .," we observe the attempted indoctrination of a child by his parents through the following socially-acceptable rituals: the family meal, the father-son boxing matches and trips to soccer games, reminiscences over the family photo album, and a birthday celebration. We also witness other, more overtly sinister, techniques of instruction: The Pibe plays roulette *croupier* to his father's compulsive gambler, and he later plays sadistic client to his mother's masochistic prostitute. These are not, however, simply the opposed worlds of good and evil, for even the seemingly innocent quotidian routines acquire a perverted and perverting aura. In *Telarañas* the Pibe is force-fed a mono-diet of mashed potatoes; his father, a supporter of the Lanús soccer club, becomes Hitler, and his son is transformed into a Hitler Youth; and the Pibe's birthday party ends in a torture rite: his parents throw wooden balls at his face, which is covered by a black metal mask, and then they masturbate each other to orgasm.

With the central familial trinity established, the outside world intrudes, in the persons of two men who enter the house while the family is eating. Carrying machine-guns, Beto and Pepe (their names immediately recognized by anyone familiar with Pavlovsky's *El señor Galíndez* as those of the 1973 play's technocrats of torture) are clearly middle-men in a repressive order. As they set about their expected activity of harassing the family, another inversion (and perversion) of anticipated roles occurs when the Father enthusiastically joins in, beating and stabbing his own son. He does so with such violence that Beto is compelled to stop him. The transformations continue when the two torturers are drawn into the oneiric world of the family's role-playing, as Beto and Pepe put on women's clothing and examine themselves in the mirror in what the text calls a "metamorfosis fetichista" (153). They then enter into a game of roulette with the Father and the Pibe while the Mother serves sandwiches to everyone. The game is interrupted when Beto receives a message on his walkie-talkie from a certain *señor*. The two men discard their feminine drag and return to their roles as torturers, insulting their hosts as they leave.

Over the course of the play, the Pibe spends more and more time in front of the wardrobe mirror, looking at himself and playing alone. His Father becomes increasingly upset with this self-absorption and with what he interprets to be his son's growing effeminacy. The Pibe makes a final and fatal error when his Father takes him to a soccer match and, during the incident's re-creation for his mother, the Pibe cheers for the opposing side. The Pibe has become both more anti-social, by withdrawing into his mirror, and more rebellious, by refusing to eat the potatoes or support his Father's soccer team. The parents respond in the next-to-the-last scene ("El Paquete") by giving the Pibe his birthday present: a rope with a noose. As the Mother reads the instructions, the Father suspends the rope from the ceiling. The Mother has the Pibe climb onto the chair, and in a last desperate attempt at rebellion, the Pibe tries to keep his Father from putting the noose around his neck. The Father eventually succeeds, the two parents pull the chair out from under the Pibe, and his convulsing body bounces around the room, shattering the mirror and all vestiges of the Pibe's self-created world.

The final scene is the post-climactic creation of the dead son's memory: beside the hanging corpse is placed the Pibe's framed photograph, symbolic of the parents' now-absolute control over their son's image, his mirror having been destroyed. The parents argue over their own culpability and the possibilities of social change. The play ends in a final inversion when the Father, contradicting the Mother's pessimistic "No," affirms that "sí, el mundo va a cambiar" (178). This "Yes" itself is transformed into a "No" (by way of a "Sí-No-Sí-No-Sí-Sí-No" game)—a cynical negation that perhaps masks a subversive affirmation of change.

The written text of *Telarañas* comprises eighteen scenes of varying lengths: Some are developed dramatic scenes, others modified variations of previous scenes, and still others silent snapshots. Daniel Altamiranda has pointed out that, characteristic of many Pavlovsky texts, as a "[re]presentación fragmentaria de la realidad" (32),<sup>6</sup> these scenes are not given a realistic treatment. Rather, they are scattered about, with only rare interconnections. Thus the reader is forced to extrapolate any plot that may be present. The varied structure also serves to accelerate the text's rhythm and create a tension that is not released until the play's penultimate scene when the Pibe ("Kid") is hanged, his swinging body shattering the wardrobe mirror and creating one of the cobwebs of the play's title.

The aesthetic, and sociopolitical, distance between the 1977 and 1985 stagings of *Telarañas* affords us an opportunity to measure some of the transformations that took place in Buenos Aires theatre produced during that period. Pavlovsky, a practicing psychoanalyst as well as actor and playwright, characterized the difference between *Telarañas*'s two productions as "theoretical," with the 1985 version playing satirical anti-Oedipus to 1977's Freudian tragedy. Indeed, there can be noted a switch in focus: Alberto Ure's 1977 necessarily self-

censored *mise en scène* emphasized the trinity of the Father, the Mother, and the Son in a ritualized filicide. On the other hand, in the 1985 of a "redemocratized" Argentina, already disillusioned with its two-year-old government, Ricardo Bartís set into on-stage motion the various social forces at work. If, in 1977, *Telarañas* was staged as a brutal family tragedy,<sup>7</sup> by 1985, it had become a satirical exposé of the totalitarian state.

The 1977 staging was intimately affected by the repressive forces surrounding it, as witnessed in the re-working of several scenes. Of particular concern to the playwright, director, and cast was the controversial "Invasión" scene, which originally had two paramilitary agents breaking into the home and torturing the family members. The resulting self-censored 1977 representation of the two torturers as gas meter-readers (*gasistas*) would lead to another inversion three months after the play's opening/closing, when Pavlovsky's office was invaded by men dressed like the two gas meter-readers/torturers of the 1977 production:

La gente que entra a buscarme dicen que son gasistas [como lo eran] en *Telarañas* la original, no la que esté escrita, sino la que nosotros intentábamos trucar para no hacer torturadores.<sup>8</sup>

Aside from the self-censoring strategies undertaken in order to allow the play to be staged in 1977 Argentina, of interest also are the sociopolitical and aesthetic differences between the two versions. Alberto Ure (who, by 1977, was already well-known in Buenos Aires for his direction of, among other plays, Griselda Gambaro's *Sucede lo que pasa* in 1976 and is still very active today in Argentine theatre and television) is noted for his use of psychodramatic techniques and a theatrical emphasis on perversion and cruelty. Francisco Javier writes that, in Ure's stagings, "las situaciones dramáticas se recortan siempre con una violenta precisión" (56).

In contrast, the 1985 *Telarañas*<sup>9</sup> was Ricardo Bartís's directorial debut, with the young director having already proven himself to be a fine actor.<sup>10</sup> He would appear the following year in Pavlovsky's *Pablo* and continue to work throughout the 1980s and 1990s as an actor and director, staging the immensely popular *Postales argentinas* in 1988, the controversial 1992 Shakespearean adaptation, *Hamlet, la guerra de los teatros*, and a very free version of Discépolo's *Muñeca* in 1994. Bartís has been frequently identified with Buenos Aires's "underground theatre,"<sup>11</sup> a movement born during the country's return to democracy and known for its eclectic performance techniques, use of unconventional spaces, and postmodern tendencies. Bartís's productions are typified by the purposeful deformation of the realistic character and the use of parody as a way to, in his

words, "superar el naturalismo y el realismo en la interpretación" (Zayas de Lima 37). In a 1991 interview he stated, "La ironía es mucho más cuestionadora que la tragedia" (Seoane 113).

The playwright Pavlovsky contrasted the two directors' approaches in the following manner:

Ure buscó más la expresión sicoanalítica del Edipo, en términos de la madre, el padre y el hijo, [en cambio Bartis] no llegaba a hacer dislumbrar una triangularización ni conflicto demasiado marcado con el incesto porque todo era una especie de máquina . . . de guerra. Era como uniones y desuniones bruscas sin que tuviera un individuo sujeto, hijo, padre, madre, sino que parecían deseos que pasaban a grande y los interceptaron estas personas, mucho más al anti-Edipo de Deleuze y Guattari que al Edipo de Freud de Ure.<sup>12</sup>

Pavlovsky's description aptly contrasts the two stagings, 1977 Oedipal family tragedy versus 1985 anti-Oedipal social satire, and points to the thematic and structural transformations taking place in post-*Proceso* Buenos Aires theatre.

The 1977 production can easily be read as an example of family violence as a metaphor for the larger repression of the early *Proceso* years. Many plays of the period, such as Roberto Mario Cossa's *La nona* and Ricardo Monti's *Visita* employed the family unit as a microcosmic substitute for the nation. Playful amusements were transformed on-stage into a ritualized violence that almost always resulted in parricide or filicide.<sup>13</sup> *Telarañas* portrays the legitimizing of ritualized filicide as the parents destroy the child in the name of family values and, by extension, national and cultural values. According to Pavlovsky's 1976 prologue, the play seeks to "explorar dramáticamente la violencia en las relaciones familiares [para] hacer visible la estructura ideológica invisible que subyace en toda relación familiar" (125). Ure's confrontational direction pushed family relations to a visceral extreme, and the actors' performances went to the limits (and obviously, for the military government, exceeded them) of physical, emotional and verbal savagery. The production exploded family dynamics with such violence and brutality that, in the words of one spectator, "no dejaba títore con cabeza y constituía un saludable puntapié en la boca del estómago del espectador" (Fernández, "Veinte" 162).

In *Telarañas*'s relationship of familial triangulation, the Pibe is, as Charles Driskell notes, "the evasive, alienated axis of the dramatic action" (575). Although never explicitly referred to as *hijo* (and portrayed in both productions by adult male actors), the Pibe is clearly the child of the other two nameless characters, defined by their functions within the nuclear family: *Madre* and

*Padre*. The Pibe is constantly manipulated by his parents; not even the words he speaks are his, for he either recites texts given to him by his father or speaks the lines of the characters he portrays in the family role-playing sessions (such as the roulette scenes).

This behavior would appear to be consistent with traditional psychoanalysis's explanation of the Father as stand-in for the authority figure. Nonetheless, even in the self-censored *Proceso Telarañas*, this asymmetric relationship of power transcends the usual Freudian explanation. For example, in the initial scene of the play, the Pibe follows his Father around the room while the Mother controls the taped applause and cheers as the two men celebrate a 1932 defeat of Boca Juniors by the Father's preferred soccer team, Lanús. As the two march around the room, they are transformed into Adolph Hitler and a Hitler Youth, and their march becomes a goose-step. Suddenly, without warning or apparent justification, the Father interrupts the celebration and runs the Pibe off-stage, yelling: "No aprendés nunca, imbécil. Rajá de acá, ¿querés?" (129).

René Girard, in his study of violence and ritual, inverts the Freudian justification and explains what in the above-described scene appears to be a completely irrational act in terms of the model-disciple relationship:

The disciple's position is like that of a worshiper before his god; he imitates the other's desires but is incapable of recognizing any connection between them and his own desires. In short, the disciple fails to grasp that he can indeed enter into competition with his model and even become a menace to him. (174)

Thus the Pibe becomes a victim of a double bind<sup>14</sup> when he is expected to model himself after the Father, only to be punished for doing it too well when he becomes a threat to the Father's ego. It is therefore the Father's own insecurities that are projected onto the Pibe, and not any mistake that the Pibe has committed. This follows Girard's general critique of Oedipalism, when he notes that the oracle put the ideas of incest and patricide into the father Laius's head, not Oedipus the son's. Hence, the tragic flaw resides within the parent, who projects it onto the child during the latter's apprenticeship to the parental model.<sup>15</sup> As a result, the child is sacrificed to purge the parent of his own error. This is exactly the principal inversion undertaken in the written text and in the 1977 production: repositioning the blame onto the parents for having turned the child into a helpless scapegoat, victimized and punished for his parents' sins.

The playwright's program notes for the 1985 production exhibit a modified goal:

*Telarañas* no pretende ser una pieza que opina sobre la familia, ni intenta explorar las tradicionales situaciones triangulares incestuosas. . . . Más bien se refiere al descentramiento de la familia por los agentes del poder. (quoted in Fernández, "El centro")

*Telarañas's* family-as-social-entity, its Oedipalization already having been repositioned onto the parent by the 1977 staging, underwent another transformation in the 1985 production when its closed, triangular formation was opened up. In the early 1970s, French theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari proposed an anti-Oedipal project of "schizoanalysis" as a means of moving away from the Western anthropomorphizing tradition of explaining all social events from the perspective of the individual ego. Schizoanalysis deterritorializes and focuses on the flows and forces that create the larger *socius*, or social reality and production.<sup>16</sup>

It the *socius* that Bartis's staging of *Telarañas* foregrounded when, for example, Beto and Pepe, who were on-stage only in the "Invasión" scene of the dramatic text and 1977 staging, remained present throughout the entire play, observing the family from a special, raised performance area. The two men, now openly dressed as paramilitary agents, commented on the family's actions. The two actors improvised dialogues and experimented with a self-parodic distancing by speaking and then being frightened by the sound of their own voices. In this way, Bartis returned to the text an element overlooked in the municipal prohibition of the 1977 production for its betrayal of "family values": what the Argentinean theatre critic Luis Mazas termed the "tristes tentáculos del poder," the institutions present in social (re)production (Deleuze/Guattari 173). The 1985 staging contributed an expanded reading of the play's title: In addition to symbolizing family relations and the child's destruction at the hands of the parent (captured in the final image of the shattered mirror), the *telarañas* extended all the way to the *socius*, thus exposing the network of power relations that control the individual within an authoritarian society. Bartis's staging therefore constituted a critique not only of the earlier military *Proceso* but also of the continuing presence of repressive structures in "redemocratized" Argentina.

Additionally, the 1985 production attempted to demonstrate this social network to be operating within the Teatro del Viejo Palermo itself. Bartis stated, at the time of the première, that he wanted to express the reality of a younger generation living in a fractured reality ("Otra imagen"). In contrast to the 1977 staging's attempts at confronting, even offending, its public, Bartis's fragmented staging sought to create a certain complicity in a younger, post-*Proceso* audience: The *chiaroscuro* lighting forced the spectator to enter further into the action. An engaging suspense was attained when the actors executed "gestos fantasmales que

omiten la realidad para luego confesarse lo que les duele interiormente" (Mazas). The result was an atmosphere at once hypnotic and ominous.

To conclude: the tragic structure of the 1976 written text was exploded by the 1985 theatrical text, with the addition of distancing, fragmenting, self-parodying techniques that would become basic elements of Buenos Aires's post-*Proceso* theatre. In 1985, Pavlovsky summed up the shift in focus, away from the individual toward the collective: "el enemigo no es cada uno de los personajes, sino el tipo de relaciones humanas que se producen dentro de un determinado sistema" (Fontana). Thus, after eight years, the 1977 self-censored, heavily-metaphorical theatrical sign could finally be opened up, affording a move away from a totalizing, static, and hermetic triangulation of the nuclear family toward a post-*Proceso* critique of the movements of, and complicity in, social production and continuing repression.

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## Notes

1. *Telarañas* had its world première in 1976 in Rome (Schanzer 93).

2. In his discussion of the Argentine film industry of the early 1970s, Steven Kovacs notes that, technically, it was not obligatory that the script or screenplay be submitted to the *interventor* (the official censor). Nevertheless, it was advisable in order to "minimize the risk of the final product being turned down" (20). The effects of censorship and prohibition (in addition to those of a floundering economy) were disastrous to the film industry: "dropping from forty features a year in the early seventies to thirty-three in 1975 and twenty-one in 1976" (Kovacs 20).

3. With Pavlovsky himself playing the role of the Padre and Tina Serrano playing the Madre. Other cast members included Juan Naso, Arturo Maly, and Héctor Calori.

4. Pavlovsky, quoted in Albuquerque (143).

5. Critics have often asserted that *Telarañas* was banned for its political content. A careful reading of the decree shows that, once again, the State was objecting to the way in which "traditional values" were presented on stage. The *Proceso's* project was much broader than a mere political restructuring; the Junta wanted to reshape the country politically and morally. (The reader will note how, in the last lines, the Censor moved into the area of theater criticism!) Even as late as August of 1983 (that is, on the eve of the return to democracy), the ban had not been lifted on the play (Giella 62).

6. Altamiranda studies the dramatic aesthetic elements of expressionism, absurdism, and realism present in Pavlovsky's "realismo exasperante" and as exemplified in *Telarañas*.

7. Gerardo Fernández, in his review of the 1985 production, said the 1977 staging possessed "un riguroso esquema de tragedia griega distorsionada" ("El centro"). Ure has noted in himself a preference for the tragic in the classical theater, writing (in a critical essay on the rehearsal process):

. . . me aliento más en la trágica. Creo que es mi compañía personal, los restos de una educación religiosa y de una familia psicótica, en las que nunca he dejado de creer y de las que nunca he dejado de burlarme. (182)

8. Personal conversation with the author (Buenos Aires, 15 September 1992). Pavlovsky left the country shortly thereafter. See Albuquerque (143) for Pavlovsky's 1985 account of the same incident.

9. *Telarañas* re-premiered in the Teatro del Viejo Palermo on April 29, 1985. It was directed by Ricardo Barts, with set design by Cristina Moix, costume design by Moix and Marlen Kipperband, make-up by Hugo Grandi, lighting by Andrés Barragán and Sebastián Acosta, and music by Juan Del Barrio. The cast was as follows: Luis Campos (Padre), Marga Grajer (Madre), Jorge Luis Rivera (Pibe), Alfredo Ramos (Beto), and Pompeyo Audivert (Pepe).

10. In such plays as *Leoncio y Lena*, *Fando y Lis*, and *Memorias del subsuelo* (all directed by David Amitín).

11. See Pellettieri for a description of this *teatro de ruptura*.

12. Personal conversation with the author (Buenos Aires, 15 September 1992).

13. See Trastoy for a discussion of this phenomenon.

14. This is Gregory Bateson's term "to describe the simultaneous transmission of two kinds of messages, one of which contradicts the other" (Deleuze/Guattari 79).

15. As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari put it, "The paranoiac father Oedipalizes the son. Guilt is an idea projected by the father before it is an inner feeling experienced by the son" (275).

16. Their analysis of Oedipus as the "figurehead of imperialism" (Seem xx) and proposed anti-Oedipal approach of "schizoanalysis" are introduced in *Anti-Oedipus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.

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