

## Performance Reviews

### *Gemelos* (The Twins) by Agota Kristof

#### Loren Ringer

In what was one of the most critically acclaimed theatre pieces at the Avignon festival (July 12-19, 1999), the Chilean group La Troppa (Santiago de Chile) presented *Gemelos*, a production based on Agota Kristof's 1986 *Le grand cahier*. In this novel, the story takes place somewhere in Eastern Europe during World War II. Twin brothers are sent to live with their estranged maternal grandmother – a mean, miserly woman who leads an excessively austere life in a small village. The twins invent exercises to toughen each other up and survive this cruel setting. That a Latin American troupe would present this tale as a play at the century's close seems only too fitting: Kristof's worldly text would be at home in any setting. (The writer herself is Hungarian, living in exile in Switzerland and writing in the French language.) It is also significant that La Troppa has become known in Chile as a children's theatre, relying heavily on puppet-like objects, mime, contemporary music and street slang. They are thus expert storytellers and equipped to translate theatrically through a variety of storytelling devices the complicated meanings of *Le grand cahier*.

*Gemelos* boasts a set that resembles a puppet theatre with a bright red velvet curtain framed by an elegant wooden stage-front. Located above the frame is an open level that serves as the grandmother's bedroom. The set functions immediately as a storytelling device by welcoming the audience into a warm and intimate space, projecting the magical quality of theatre in which a story will be told. An eerie, cinematographic lighting functions essentially to transform the mood. Colorful backlighting frequently produce scene changes. In one instance, light constitutes an emotionally charged moment all by itself when the village is ensconced in a brilliant red as the

battle draws near. Light creates another stage substance when a cool, vibrant blue produces the site of two actors treading water while suspended behind an opaque backdrop. The costumes also participate in building the storytelling mode. Partial masks are used to create the archetypal “wicked” grandmother (Laura Pizarro) as well as the self-effacing, innocuous twins (Jaime Lorca, Juan Carlos Zagal). While having a practical function in dehumanizing the grandmother’s face (see photo) and disguising the two non-related male actors in order for them to pass as twins, the masks also reinforce the universal, non-specific culture of Kristof’s tale. The props serve as yet another storytelling device and at the same time they are used in such a clever way as to function as a sort of reader’s guide for the entire performance. Props are employed primarily as a doubling technique for the characters. For example, when the grandmother is quite ill, she is represented first as a doll. Later on in her convalescence, the actress playing the grandmother reappears on stage. Other characters are only represented as dolls and a character that lies somewhat in-between is the war deserter who, in fact, is a ventriloquist’s puppet brought to life by the two brothers (see photo). Objects are also doubled by toys which complement the use of dolls and contribute to the emotional tenor of this highly imaginative world. A rubber chicken dropped in a pot on a stove provides a moment of child-like or naive humor. A remarkable toy fish attached to two sticks and animated by an actor creates a joyous sensation of make-believe. Other objects serve as emotional screens, such as one might use in order to relate sensitive subject matter to a child. For example, the spectator sees a convoy leading to a concentration camp, but the train is represented on a revolving track where a string of cars roll on and off. The resulting distancing effect, something akin to Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt*, reminds the spectator that this is “only theatre,” while at the same time, creating a chilling emotional climate in which one is obliged to think about the consequences.

The acting in *Gemelos* is of consistently high quality. Only three actors master multiple roles so as to relate a tale that finds coherence in metaphors, description, and pace. The Chilean actors disappear into storytellers using an array of dramatic art forms that suggest such far-ranging influences as medieval troubadours, commedia dell’arte, 19th Century melodrama, and recent fantastic films. In *Gemelos*, the technical wizardry raises the exotic piece to the status of metaphor for the human fragility and suffering of a post-industrial world at war.