

The Trial of Theatre: *Fiat iustitia, et pereat mundus*

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Es que la misión sagrada y fundamental, legal y específica, única podría decirse, de las instituciones armadas es la de custodiar y salvaguardar aquello que nuestros reglamentos militares denominan ‘los más altos intereses de la Nación’: su honor, su soberanía, sus tradiciones y sus leyes fundamentales.

For us, respect for human rights is not only born out of the rule of law and of international declarations, but also it is the result of our profound and Christian belief in the preeminent dignity of man as a fundamental value.

Suddenly it becomes evident that things which for thousands of years the human imagination had banished to a realm beyond human competence can be manufactured right here on earth, that Hell and Purgatory, and even a shadow of their perpetual duration, can be established by the most modern methods of destruction and therapy.

Who is speaking here through these three citations, and what are they speaking about? My guess is that unless you recently read the sources from which these words come, you will not be able to pin down – at least not yet – who said/wrote them. Now the “good academic” will probably be searching for some footnote or endnote in order to place an author with a text. But not so fast. Of course, the authors of these words are important,

but take a minute to think about the possible voices the words above may represent; that is, who *may* be speaking here?

The first quote is probably the most obvious of the three: someone speaking about the “sacred” mission of the armed forces. Given that it is in Spanish and that this article deals with Latin America, it is safe to assume that this someone is speaking about armed forces in a Spanish American country. The second quote is less evident, especially in geographical terms. Are we listening to a lawyer here or an advocate for human rights? Someone engaged in resisting military rule or a religious figure? Lastly, the third passage is noticeably different from the first two. Even if it is not possible to connect the words to a place, the quote deals with the horror that may be associated with or created by human action, especially in the “modern world.” The twentieth century saw numerous periods in which this horror became manifest – from the depths of human imagination it rose in opposition to humanity; it appeared to destroy, to eradicate, and then to disappear back into a sort of collective imagination. The voice we hear in this third citation is that of those who have experienced this horror in one way or another.

The first quote comes from an article the little-known Argentine colonel Rómulo Menéndez wrote and published in 1961 (13-14), three years before the military took over the state in Brazil, twelve years before bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes replaced civilian governments in Chile and Uruguay, and fifteen years before the official declaration of the Argentine military to “assume the direction of the state.” The point is that by 1961 the armed forces in Argentina were well on their way to defining what Menéndez calls a “terrible enemy.” “[Este] terrible enemigo... desarrolla dentro de las fronteras nacionales del denominado ‘mundo libre’ una moderna forma de guerra destinada a la conquista de las naciones mediante el derrumbamiento de su frente interno” (Menéndez 14). This “terrible enemy” was the “marxist cancer” (17), on the verge of sowing chaos in the “civilized world,” an idea that was at the heart of the U.S. Alliance for Progress developed in the 1960s. Twelve years later (and in contrast to the dire predictions of the 1960s), the marxist cancer had yet to solidify its control in South America, but according to the general-turned-dictator Augusto Pinochet, the danger was too grave to ignore. Using the same rhetoric and rationale, Pinochet wrote in his “Cuenta del estado del país al 11 de septiembre de 1973” the following: “Asumimos [las fuerzas armadas] este deber [apoderarse del estado] con absoluta responsabilidad y con la certeza de estar cumpliendo cabalmente con la misión que el Estado nos asigna, como fuerzas de su seguridad interna y custodia de

los más altos valores morales, intelectuales, sociales, políticos y económicos” (159). Pinochet continues, claiming that the armed forces had no other option – his justification for action – and that the armed forces will bring peace and the hope of a better future to the Chilean people (160).

The second passage comes from a speech given by General Jorge Rafael Videla, commander in chief of the Argentine army, on April 5, 1976, addressing the “reorganization of the nation” (qtd. in Loveman and Davies 160-63). Videla speaks about the task of the military “to ensure the just protection of the natural rights of man... not to infringe upon liberty but to reaffirm it; not to twist justice but to impose it” (162). Again, Videla justifies the military’s decision with rhetoric about the chaotic situation (economic, political, social) the state faces. He ends the speech with words that mix propaganda with an ominous hint about the military’s course of action: “our decision [is] to complete the process [of restoring “civilization” in Argentina and ridding the nation of *subversivos / antisociales*] with a profound love of nation and without concessions to anyone...” (163).

The last of the three quotes is vastly different from the other two, not only in regard to emotive content but also in relation to positions/articulations of power. Both Menéndez and Videla are, despite the hierarchy in the military, at one end of what we can call the power spectrum, and the victims of military regimes whose existence the military seeks to erase are at the other end. In essence, the philosopher Hannah Arendt is speaking about victims here, victims of horrendous human actions, victims of totalitarianism (*Origins* 446).¹ Though she is referring to holocaust victims of World War II, her words nonetheless speak to the suffering inflicted by military regimes in Latin America. “The difficult thing to understand,” she writes, “is that... these gruesome crimes [of and in the concentration camps] took place in a phantom world, which, however, has materialized, as it were, into a world which is complete with all sensual data of reality but lacks that structure of consequence and responsibility without which reality remains for us a mass of incomprehensible data” (*Origins* 445). As in the concentration camps, in the prisons, warehouses and other places where torture took place, torturers manufactured an unreal world for their victims. It was unreal insofar as it was some other-worldly hell, and unreal in that one of the goals behind torture was, in some cases, to end reality for the victims without ending life.

At the beginning of this essay the authors and contexts of the three passages were unknown. Now, after a brief description, we know that the

words deal with grave experiences, though from opposite political positions: members and authors of a totalitarian movement, and victims of a totalitarian movement. If, as Arendt writes, the future “drives us back into the past” (*Between Past and Future* 10-11), how do we reconcile the two in order to exist in the present? How do victims of torture come to terms with the hell of their past, toward which the future pushes them, so that they may live again in the present? Is the answer in “Fiat iustitia, et pereat mundus” – doing justice although the world may perish?² As Arendt points out, one answer to the question is absurd since it places the existence of humanity second to doing justice (*Between Past and Future* 228). And if there is no more humanity, then what is justice worth? In sum, how to carry out justice without threatening existence is complex and complicated.

My argument is that theatre can function as purveyor of justice, as a space where trials take place, and as a means to come to terms with experiences of torture societies in Latin America. How theatre, the act of reading (and studying) drama, and, in broader terms, performance fulfill these demanding roles constitutes *the trial of theatre*. That is, while the legal systems in Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil and other countries that endured military rule, work to investigate crimes of torture societies, bumping up against resistance from some social sectors and certain laws that have until now prohibited total disclosure of the truth, theatre and performance can serve to *put on trial* the criminals of torture regimes (Lawrence Weschler’s term). These dramatic trials can help heal the pain of the past for those who suffered from such regimes. The *trial of theatre* also refers to the challenge faced by performance and theatre to engage experiences of torture regimes in ways that help reconcile the past with the present and the future. A look at two plays that present torture in Latin America – Ariel Dorfman’s *La muerte y la doncella* and Griselda Gambaro’s *Información para extranjeros* – along with a discussion of recent political performances related to the search for truth about torture during military rule in Uruguay and Argentina, will provide examples of theatre serving as a form of trial. It is first necessary, though, to establish some connections between political life, human actions, and theatre.

Antipolitics... Action... Theatre...

Brian Loveman and Thomas Davies treat the Latin American military or bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s as antipolitical, for resorting to violence as a means to rule is diametrically opposed

to what it means to be political (Arendt, *Human Condition* 26). From its origins in ancient Greece, remarks Arendt, political life “meant that everything was decided through words and persuasion and not through force and violence” (26). Antipolitics is a politics that functions outside of the political sphere, for it substitutes force for action in order to arrive at a determined end – an idea that will hopefully become clearer in a moment. According to Loveman and Davies, the antipolitics of the bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes depended on three practices: “1) systematic persecution of opposition elements, including the press; 2) programmatic repression of the regime’s opponents expressing overt resistance to official policy or programs; and 3) non-recognition of legitimacy of active opposition or of political bargaining, negotiation, or compromise” (6). Despite their opposition to political life, these regimes attempted to present their programs as the only means available to save political life from chaos (recall Menéndez’s words), and their actions as lawful and respectful of human rights (illustrated in Videla’s statement cited above).

Political life, or the political realm or sphere, consists of two fundamental human activities: action and speech (Arendt, *Human Condition* 175-85). Arendt understands action not as a means to an end but rather as a beginning or initiation that enables one to live in a community with others and participate in human affairs (177, 183). Speech goes hand in hand with action in the sense that language organizes our world from birth (some may argue even before birth, *in utero*); action always has speech, and speech always has or is action, at least in political life. “With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world . . .” (176, 179). This idea is key: action and speech reveal who and what someone is. Furthermore, Arendt clarifies, “this revelatory quality of speech and action comes to the fore where people are *with* others and neither for nor against them – that is, in sheer human togetherness” (180). The space of this human togetherness is the political sphere, where actions and speech become enmeshed in a web of stories about who and what we are. In addition to the revelatory quality of speech and action, a second quality of action is that it is without end (233). Once an action exists, there are doers and sufferers, and their stories generate or connect to other stories, other actions, other doers and sufferers. “That deeds possess such an enormous capacity for endurance, superior to every other man-made product,” she continues, “could be a matter of pride if men were able to bear its burden, the burden of irreversibility and unpredictability, from which the action process draws its very strength” (233). It is this never

ending quality of action that constitutes a crucial reason for the theatre to present stories / actions / doing and suffering. Why?

Aristotle understood theatre, in comparison to other “arts,” to have a special relationship to action, for it is only in drama (whose root means to act) that “play-acting is an imitation of acting [relating to political life]” (Arendt, *Human Condition* 187). Arendt elaborates on the relation between theatre and political life, claiming that “the theatre is the political art par excellence; only there is the political sphere of human life transposed into art. By the same token, it is the only art whose sole subject is man in his relationship to others” (188). Both inside and outside the theatre or written play (spectacle or print), the political sphere – action, speech, other people – shapes reality and is shaped. “Action, moreover, no matter what its specific context, always establishes relationships and therefore has an inherent tendency to force open all limitations and cut across all boundaries” (190). *All boundaries* includes that which separates mimesis of the theatre from realities we live.

These links between political life and theatre were targeted under dictatorships, in part because military regimes aimed to maintain a monopoly on symbolic representation, and in part because such links were deemed dangerous to national security if not kept tightly under control.³ Theatrical performers and performances also suffered from the larger crack-down on the arts and forms of cultural expression. In Uruguay, for example, there was an “apagón cultural” from 1973-1978 that affected the newspaper press, literary activity, political expression and, among other fields, the theatre. During these years, the number and types of performances were drastically reduced; performance spaces were closed; theatre groups dissolved; and actors, directors and playwrights fled the country, while others were imprisoned (Mirza 122-23). At the end of the 1970s theatrical performances regained some of their ability to provide a forum for resistance, but the connections between theatre and political life would remain under close scrutiny up to the transition to democracy in 1985. Works of theatre that appeared following the transition renewed a free-flowing dialogue between the political sphere and theatre, challenging spectators to engage the stories of the past in order to reflect on action in the present and the future (Mirza 123-31).

In short, political life at once constitutes reality and allows for new actions and, consequently, new beginnings. Theatre imitates the unpredictability and irreversibility of the action process, yet the very process of mimesis makes theatrical action participate in political life, entangling itself

in the web of actions and resulting in new actions and stories. How is it possible to sort out or deal with these qualities of the action process? *Fiat iustitia, et pereat mundus*? This is where the trial of theatre comes into play.

The Trial of Theatre

When considering whether the theatre may function as a source of justice or whether the public spectacle of theatre or the private reading of a play can serve as a form of trial, there are two opposing truths in political life, identified by Arendt, that must be taken into account, in particular with regard to the torture regimes in Latin America. First, remarks Arendt, "Freedom of opinion is a farce unless factual information is guaranteed and the facts themselves are not in dispute" (*Between Past and Future* 238).⁴ Freedom of opinion not only affects the ways we think or understand the world, but also has the capacity to enable or prohibit action, thus influencing the make-up of political life and, ultimately, our reality. Second, she notes, "Truthfulness has never been counted among the political virtues, because it has little indeed to contribute to that change of the world and of circumstances which is among the most legitimate political activities" (251). However, Arendt goes on to say, "where a community has embarked upon organized lying on principle, and not only with respect to particulars, can truthfulness as such, unsupported by the distorting forces of power and interest, become a political factor of the first order" (251). While one may question if the current Bush administration, for example, encourages the formation of a community of liars, there is no doubt that military leaders like Videla in Argentina and Pinochet in Chile aimed to conceal the truth at all costs. Sometimes cloaked in patriotic rhetoric, other times wrapped up in night operations to remove *subversivos* from city streets or homes, and sometimes disappeared with disappeared victims, the survival of the torture regimes was dependent on preventing the truth from being known. Replace it with empty rhetoric or with false information (lies), but anything to keep it in the prisons with torturers and victims.

During the transitions to democracy that occurred in Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay at different moments throughout the 1980s, political life was confronted with the opposition between the necessity to guarantee facts and the unimportance of truthfulness as a "political virtue." This opposition did not exist because citizens were necessarily afraid to seek the truth – though this was certainly a legitimate concern – but rather because of the

difficulty of discovering what the “facts” were in a time when military leaders and the new civilian politicians sought to strike deals that would permit the military to go back to the barracks without having to face too much “justice.” Arendt sums up this type of precarious state of truth vis-à-vis articulations of power: “The chances of factual truth surviving the onslaught of power are very slim indeed; it is always in danger of being maneuvered out of the world not only for a time but, potentially, forever” (231). On the one hand, then, we are dealing with problems of finding truth or facts in the wake of a war on truth waged by torture regimes. She continues, writing:

Facts and events are infinitely more fragile things than axioms, discoveries, theories –even the most wildly speculative ones – produced by the human mind; they occur in the field of the ever-changing affairs of men [political life], in whose flux there is nothing more permanent than the admittedly relative permanence of the human mind’s structure. (231)

Ironically, human action, more durable than any material product humans can make, generates facts and records of action that are of the most fragile things in the world. The question that arises from this discussion is this: if discovering truth, a necessary part of “doing” justice, is such a difficult undertaking in the political sphere, and if the opposition between the guarantee of facts and the lack of political importance of truthfulness is so strong in political life, then how can theatre reconcile them so that justice may be done? In short, what has theatre got to do with “truth” and “facts” as they relate to Latin American torture regimes?

The trial of theatre begins with the search for truth, for what happened. It is born out of the act of telling or performing the truth without having to run after uttering the words, something that has plagued truth-tellers and that the vigorous journalist George Seldes so aptly expressed in his book titled *Tell the Truth and Run*. The search for truth is explicitly presented, for example, in Ariel Dorfman’s play *La muerte y la doncella* (1990), where Paulina and Gerardo literally put Roberto, Paulina’s torturer, on trial. As Dorfman recounts in the “Afterward” to the play, it was the creation in April 1990 of the Rettig commission, charged to investigate crimes of the Pinochet regime that had ended in death or presumed death, that became key to telling the story of the play and allowed Dorfman to craft it in the short period of three weeks.⁵ The commission’s charge was a limited one: they could not name those responsible for the crimes, but it was the beginning of a search for truth. The play would address questions that went beyond the scope of

the commission and that many Chileans, as well as other victims of torture regimes, were grappling with, “but that hardly anyone seemed interested in posing in public” (Dorfman, “Afterward” 73).⁶

La muerte y la doncella covers one long night in the lives of Paulina and Gerardo. Gerardo, a prominent lawyer, ends up getting a flat tire one evening on his way home. Of the many people who pass Gerardo on the side of the road, Roberto stops to offer him a ride. When the two arrive, Gerardo invites Roberto in, but he refuses. Shortly thereafter, Gerardo and Paulina hear a knock on the door. It is Roberto, returning to congratulate Gerardo on having been appointed to the Commission to investigate acts of torture carried out by the dictatorship in the unnamed country where the play’s action takes place.⁷ Without seeing the visitor, Paulina immediately recognizes the voice of Roberto as that of the doctor who tortured her. The tension builds when Gerardo offers to let the doctor spend the night, not knowing who he is or was. Paulina confronts Gerardo, but he expresses doubt about the certainty of her claims and her memory. Infuriated, she decides to take matters into her own hands and proceeds to tie up the doctor. When Gerardo asks Paulina what she intends to do by tying up Roberto, she replies, “We’re going to put him on trial, Gerardo, this doctor. Right here. Today. You and me. Or is your famous Investigating Commission going to do it?” (26). Paulina’s words speak to both the play’s trial of the torturer and to the possible though not probable trials held by the so-called Investigating Commission in the political sphere. It is significant that the trial in the play takes place in the dark, at night, in the confines of Paulina and Gerardo’s home, far from the city, not unlike some of the places where torture was carried out under military rule. Furthermore, Paulina’s search for truth is not without fear – fear of her past rather than a fear of the future – yet she nevertheless pursues truth in order to be at peace with her world and, significantly, to do justice.

The treatment of searching for truth is vastly different in Griselda Gambaro’s *Información para extranjeros* (1973), a second work of drama that serves as an example of the trial of theatre. In this play spectators and readers are guided through rooms where they see or experience torture taking place, hear explanations of military officials and security forces, listen to screams of torture victims from adjacent rooms and so on. The guides ushering spectators through the different scenes occasionally offer an “explicación: para extranjeros.” These “explicaciones” were extracted from contemporary newspapers and related episodes of political prisoners being captured, news of people who had been disappeared and indictments of “subversive” behavior.

With the theatre goers sharing the same space as the actors, *Información para extranjeros* presents “what happened” in ways that directly affect the audience attending the play and have a shocking effect on the reader.

On trial in this play, then, are the characters/performers who torture and the spectators/readers who are complicit in the acts being carried out by those on stage or in print. How do the spectators/readers “judge” what they experience? Put differently, how does what happened enable the spectator/reader to understand reality and be at peace with the past? The idea is that the play presents a handful of episodes that provide a glimpse of truth in order to put the torture regime on trial. That what happens in the play is only imitation does not make the argument weaker, for we must recall the close relation between action in political life and its theatrical representation and imitation. Roger Mirza comments on the importance of this symbolic representation of the past in the case of Uruguayan theatre, equally applicable to the case of Argentina: “Esa necesaria recuperación no mecánica de la memoria a través de una elaboración simbólica colectiva, significa... una respuesta frente a las formas de supervivencia de la dictadura y de sus amenazas en el presente...” (131).

This is precisely the point made at the end of the play. The guides anticipate little, if any applause, by the shocked audience. One tells spectators and readers that even if they clap enthusiastically they will not hurt their hands. Another sums up the link between what the audience has just experienced in the theatre and life outside as it relates to the passages from newspapers read throughout the play: “El teatro imita la vida / Si no aplauden / es que la vida es jodida / Vayamos a la salida” (128). And like *La muerte y la doncella*, Gambaro’s play is full of performative aspects that lend to the notion of theatre as a site where criminals of torture regimes can be put on trial. There is no midnight trial in *Información para extranjeros*, but spectators and readers come face to face with perpetrators of torture (not to mention those who are complicit in the acts) and are forced to contemplate situations that represent the political reality of Argentina under military rule. What they must judge, then, is how to deal with the truth of this reality.

The precarious state of truth in the political sphere, caught in between the necessity of guaranteeing facts and the lack of political importance of truthfulness, started the discussion on the trial of theatre. But what about the truth-tellers who face the perils of making facts known? What is their position in political life? “Throughout history,” writes Arendt,

the truth-seekers and truth-tellers have been aware of the risks of their business; as long as they did not interfere with the course of the world, they were covered with ridicule, but he who forced his fellow-citizens to take him seriously by trying to set them free from falsehood and illusion was in danger of his life. (*Between Past and Future* 229)

It comes as no surprise that truth-seekers under the torture regimes were engaged in an extremely dangerous undertaking, and even after the transitions to democracy, truth-seekers did not become the heroes some expected they would be. This fact seems strange, almost fictional, to us who have not experienced wars on truth the likes of which took place under military rule in Latin America or in Hitler's concentration camps. Yet according to Arendt, "the task of the mind [the mind of those of us who lack this experience as much as that of those who lived through the torture regimes] is to understand what happened, and this understanding... is man's way of reconciling himself with reality; its actual end is to be at peace with the world" (8). Understanding what happened requires the work of the truth-seekers and truth-tellers.

In his powerful book *A Miracle, A Universe: Settling Accounts with Torturers*, Lawrence Weschler deals with the problem of understanding what happened under torture regimes in Brazil and Uruguay.⁸ Speaking about the rehabilitation of societies that have suffered torture, Weschler remarks that a "primordial moment" must be addressed by both the torture society and the torture victim: "Who was there? Who was screaming? Who were those people standing by the screamer's side? Who, even now, will dare to hear? Who will care to know? Who will be held accountable? And who will hold them to account?" (242). All of these questions require serious reflection, and they are all connected to the need to discover truths of what happened, as Arendt wrote, to be at peace with the world. Truth does not necessarily bring peace, yet it is a necessary stepping-stone to being able to live with a past in the present without fearing the future.

Once truth-seekers have discovered what happened, the dilemma of what to do with truth arises. For Paulina, the truth from the lips of her torturer is what she is after:

I want him to confess. I want him to sit in front of that cassette recorder and tell me what he did – not just to me, everything, to everybody – and then have him write it out in his own handwriting and sign it and I would keep a copy forever – with all the information,

the names and data, all the details. That's what I want. (Dorfman 41)

Idelber Avelar is highly critical of this scene in *La muerte y la doncella*, arguing that it reduces the truth of what happened to a moment of confession or, in the case of Paulina, to “a crude rape” (262-66).⁹ Avelar’s point about conflating confession with truth or simplifying the truth to a confession is a strong one and hints at the danger of overlooking the complexity of truth once a confession is given. However, Paulina’s fight for the truth is about much more than having her torturer admit to what he did to her. She is asking for details about all crimes committed by him and others; she is searching for truth not just for herself but on behalf of all victims of torture in order to begin the process of healing.

What happens with truth in *Información para extranjeros* is left to the spectator/reader to reflect on or determine. There is no ending that speaks to being at peace with what has happened, as one may understand the ending of *La muerte y la doncella*. On the contrary, the last lines of the play recall the hell that Arendt speaks of in the opening quote to this essay: “¿Quién dijo alguna vez: hasta aquí el hombre, hasta aquí, no?” (Gambaro 128). To one level humans will go, yet not to another, for this another is otherworldly, existing in the darkness of imagination. This is one way to understand these last words. Another refers to the way torture regimes attempted to erase the existences of their victims. Whatever interpretation we settle on, truth is at the heart of these words: what happened? – perhaps not in factual terms but in representative terms, in terms of imitation.

The trial of theatre also questions how to use truth once it is discovered. The Chilean activist José Zalaquett claims that “the truth itself is both reparation and prevention” (qtd. in Weschler 245). Such an idea is not easy to swallow, perhaps especially for people who have suffered in torture societies.¹⁰ To put the point differently, how could Hannah Arendt write about the act of forgiving as reparation in *The Human Condition*, published in 1958, not far removed from the evils imagined into reality during World War II? After Paulina hears the truth from Roberto, she is prepared to let him go, essentially forgiving him. So in the trial of theatre, once truth is discovered, can justice be done through the discovery of truth and by forgiving? And if justice is done in ways that do not involve forgiving but its alternative, punishment by violence, should this justice be done at the expense of the world?

Action in the political sphere is irreversible, yet “the possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility... is the faculty of forgiving” (Arendt, *Human Condition* 237). Forgiving, Arendt argues, is the opposite of vengeance and is a personal affair “in which *what* was done is forgiven for the sake of *who* did it” (240-41). The act of forgiving is possible only after truth has been discovered: “men are unable to forgive what they cannot punish...” (241). That humans are capable of forgiving makes political life possible, for the capability releases us from being permanently bound to our actions, enabling us to engage in new actions. More importantly, being able to forgive once truth is known allows for humans to put ends to consequences of “misdeeds,” which in turn permits one to be at peace with the world in the present (240). Paulina’s alternative to forgiving Roberto is punishing him for an indefinite period or killing him. In either case, she will be bound to her past by not forgiving him and putting an end to the consequences of her torture, to her suffering.

That said, forgiving by no means excuses or dismisses actions, nor does it imply any sense of forgetting what took place. Neither is the act of forgiving as Arendt contemplates it similar to the act of pardoning or dismissal called for by the political right and many military figures in Latin America. Truth must be known in order to forgive; this is quintessential to Arendt’s argument. Those who have suggested pardoning the military for their crimes do not seek truth; they would like to bury it in order for it not to be known. Arendt is not claiming that all suffering ends the moment one decides to forgive, but rather that forgiving is the next step toward reconciling past with future in the present, toward reconciling irreversibility of action, toward doing justice without jeopardizing the existence of the world.

To put the problem into the context of torture regimes, Julio Sanguinetti, the first Uruguayan president after the transition to democracy, asked, “what is more just – to consolidate the peace of a country where human rights are guaranteed today or to seek retroactive justice that could compromise that peace?” (qtd. in Weschler 168-69). Uruguayans achieved the ability to punish the military, but in the end the population voted not to overturn the law that prohibited putting the military on trial (La Ley de Caducidad). Perhaps most people agreed with Sanguinetti. What is important is that they *could* punish. Whether the spectator/reader of *Información para extranjeros* decides to serve justice by forgiving or punishing by violence is up to debate every time the play is read or attended.

Justice, like political life, is made of and for human communities. It is clear that the possibility to punish by force or violence must exist for justice to exist. Yet this possibility is also the possibility to forgive. In the context of torture regimes, punishment of all military who participated in the wars to rid the nations of *subversivos*, *antisociales* and the supposed communist threat boggles the mind. Before torture societies could contemplate punishing the military, laws would have to be changed in order to allow the prosecution of military members, and then questions of who to put on trial would have to be addressed. Are the commanding officers more responsible than the lower-ranking ones who carried out orders? Is it possible to locate all or the majority of those who participated in the torture regimes? What would constitute satisfactory legal punishment for these criminals? These are just a few of the questions surrounding “punishment.” The symbolic representation of punishment – theatrically staging trials of the crimes of the past, be it through approaches like Dorfman’s, Gambaro’s, or others, in order to explore truth – is one way to begin this complex process. Punishing or forgiving those who are responsible for creating the hell of the torture regimes first requires truth, that all be known about what happened. In reference to victims of World War II, the poet Zbigniew Herbert wrote, “Ignorance about those who have disappeared undermines the reality of the world” (qtd. in Weschler 173). This is no less true for the victims of torture regimes. Truth is, as Zalaquett’s words above suggest, a form of justice, and perhaps punishment, too.

The authors of the *Uruguay Nunca Más* report stress this notion in their preface: “Lo primero es conocer a fondo, en toda su magnitud la catástrofe padecida. Y ello porque durante ese período la sociedad uruguaya estuvo sometida a la desinformación más total, al aislamiento, la incomunicación y el miedo” (5-6). Justice, punishment, and reconciliation depend on recovering the truth of the past. To treat the open wounds, they note, and to start learning from the past as well as punishing those responsible for inflicting pain begins with tearing down barriers – legal, personal, social, or other – to information (7). This is in large part what motivated the group Servicio Paz y Justicia to undertake the report. “Para que lo vivido no se olvidara y aún más... para que no se perdieran sus enseñanzas. Y naturalmente, la primera enseñanza es aproximarse a la comprensión de las causas que condujeron a tal grado de brutal sometimiento del hombre por el hombre, a fin de evitar su repetición” (12). Commenting on the Argentine general Martín Balza’s reference to the process of reconciliation taking various generations, Hugo Achugar highlighted what is perhaps an obvious condition of

reconciliation, but something that makes doing justice so complex and is thus important to emphasize: “la negociación entre olvido y memoria no parece ser realizable de una vez para todas sino que implica un proceso” (26).

The quest to know what happened and to reveal the truths behind torture regimes is ongoing and a central task of human rights organizations, historians, political scientists, scholars of literature, and, of course, the family and friends of those lost to the violence committed under these regimes during the 1960s, 70s and 80s. Presenting, representing and performing these truths and the memories of violence are fueling current public debates and, in some instances, policy decisions, in both Uruguay and Argentina. In June 2003 Uruguayans recognized the 30th anniversary of the *golpe de estado* in special news programs on television, reports in print media, and an exposition at the historic *Cabildo* in Montevideo. On display at the exposition were censored documents from military commanders, newspaper articles from the days surrounding the *golpe de estado*, lists of suspicious activities police were supposed to investigate (and stop), *murga* lyrics critical of the dictatorship, and a handful of publications of groups opposed to the military regime.¹¹ There were no graphic photographs of torture victims from inside the *Libertad* prison, but some truths were on display, and citizens were visiting the exposition. The entrance to the exposition room overlooked a low wall and the staircase that led downstairs. A sign on the wall, which read “Abajo la dic...,” illustrated words that were painted on buildings during military rule.¹²

One looking at these words could not help but see in the same field of vision an enormous statue of José Artigas (the “founding father” of Uruguay) on a landing in the staircase that took visitors to and from the display of truth.

In contrast to this presentation of memories was another exposition across town at the Punta Carretas shopping center, one of Montevideo’s most upscale malls. The building used to be a prison, the Penal de Punta Carretas. While its walls held *tupamaros* and other persons deemed “dangerous” to society during the dictatorship, what went on inside the prison is still waiting to be told. The exposition, on the history of the building, did not mention its past as a prison in order not to leave shoppers disheartened. If Punta Carretas Shopping is an attempt to cover over the past so that it will no longer surface, the current debate in Uruguay is taking the opposite route. The death of general Liber Seregni in July 2004, one of the founders and leaders of the leftist conglomerate of parties known as Frente Amplio, saw a tremendous display of public support for the search for truth, championed by

Seregni. Tens of thousands of citizens accompanied political leaders at his burial ceremony. The recently inaugurated Frente Amplista government, led by president Tabaré Vázquez, has also pledged to work with the Argentine government to continue the search for truth regarding victims of dictatorship.

Since early 2004, the discussions on the search for and presentation of truth in Argentina have followed a similar path, revolving around how to literally build on the past as a way to preserve memories of violence and make the truths of military rule there known to all. On February 9, 2004, after human rights organizations had restated to President Néstor Kirchner their hopes to establish a public museum that would maintain actions of “state terrorism” present in the collective memory of Argentines, his secretary of human rights announced that the government would create a “Museum of Memory” in the space occupied by the Escuela de Suboficiales de Mecánica de la Armada (ESMA), today known by the slightly shorter name of Escuela de Suboficiales de la Armada. The ESMA was more than a location for training military officers. Situated on 42 acres off a main boulevard in Buenos Aires, it served as a principal detention center during the dictatorship led by Videla, as well as place where torture and assassinations were carried out, and where truths were buried. So on March 24, the anniversary of the *golpe de estado* that installed the military junta in 1976, the Kirchner government went ahead with its plan and inaugurated the Museum.

The inaugural ceremony, like all public events with presidents, was not lacking in theatrical qualities. In the morning, Kirchner, his cabinet members, and high ranking military officers took part in the removal of portraits of Reynaldo Benito Bignone and Jorge Rafael Videla (whose words were discussed above) from the Patio de Honor del Colegio Militar de la Nación.¹³ The act was highly symbolic, with the *jefe del ejército* climbing the ladder to take down the portraits of two of the junta’s principal leaders, looming like dark shadows in the Colegio Militar. The president then went to the ESMA complex. After the solemn signing of the document creating the Museum, Kirchner, the governor of Buenos Aires, children born in the ESMA and to victims, and others, moved to the stage that was set up for speeches and the continuation of the ceremony. The president’s speech to the thousands gathered there (estimates range between twenty-five to fifty thousand) highlighted the question of justice. “Hablemos claro: no es rencor ni odio lo que nos guía, me guía la justicia y lucha contra la impunidad” (qtd. in Ginzberg). Representatives of human rights groups spoke, followed by poetry readings,

and then the ceremony was topped off with performances by the well-known singers León Gieco, Víctor Heredia and Joan Manuel Serrat (Míguez).

All in all, the inaugural ceremony of the Museum of Memory was well-orchestrated and understandably dramatic. From the act of removing the portraits of ex-dictators in the Colegio Militar to Kirchner's speech and the songs of Gieco, justice was on stage and performances issued a strong call for the search for and presentation of truth. The events created a theatrical forum or a performance space where the public was a sort of jury of victims that tried and condemned not just the two whose portraits were removed, but all who were responsible for torture. In a very real sense, the performances of the day highlighted the nation at large as a victim of military rule and a group of citizens facing the opportunity to engage in a critical dialogue with the past to uncover the truth. This process is by nature one that implies trial, both in terms of judging acts of torture as well as the challenges of confronting questions of victims of dictatorship, and such questions have resonated in public debate since March 24. More than passing judgment (an issue still being debated in legal circles), the goal is to recover truth for the sake of the present and the future.

A spokesperson for the Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo touched on this notion by describing the government's decision as an important step to transform what was a "clandestine center that is the image of perversion" into a monument to human rights and democratic culture (Gallo). While her words are largely representative of the diverse groups and organizations who supported the initiative to establish a museum of this type, the discussion surrounding the Museum of Memory is not over. Questions of how to organize the museum, how much of the ESMA it should cover, what should be displayed there, and how to use truth once it is discovered have given rise to divisions among human rights organizations and ignited a heated debate among intellectuals, human rights advocates, politicians, and others.¹⁴ Yet if there was ever a work of drama that clearly illustrated the role of theatre and, in broader terms, performance as a form of public trial and inspired more discussion of how to do justice to memory of torture regimes, it was staged by events at the ESMA on March 24.¹⁵

The trial of theatre is about theatre as a source of justice as much as it is about the possibility and potential of the theatre to function in this way. It by no means substitutes a knowledge of the "facts," of what happened in concrete detail, nor does it take the place of legal trials of those who made the torture

regimes realities. Yet the trial of theatre *can* contribute to discovering the truth, both through performance of actions that constitute part of political life and through the exploration and representation of factual truth; that is, mimesis and fact are both present in the search for truth that is the trial of theatre. Theatre as purveyor of justice and as a form of staging trial also provides other ways for truth to be known when political life does not permit the discovery of truth, and while legal forms of punishment are not yet in place. This was seen with the examples from *La muerte y la doncella* and *Información para extranjeros*. In Dorfman's play, Paulina succeeds in discovering and exposing the truth of what happened to her – and many, many others – by subjecting her torturer to an unofficial trial on stage, something that she may have never found if she waited for her case to be taken up by the Commission led by Gerardo. The trial of theatre in Gambaro's play is of a different sort, challenging the reader/spectator to confront the horrible truth of torture while sharing the same space as those directly and indirectly responsible for it. At the exposition held in Montevideo in 2003, and in the recent performances inaugurating the Museum of Memory in Buenos Aires, the truths told by the trial of theatre rub even closer against political actors and the legal system. In short, theatre as trial, insofar as it partakes in the search for knowing and understanding what happened, and presents these in ways that affect political life, offers one way for justice to be done without risking the existence of the world.

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Notes

¹ My arguments in this article have been greatly influenced by the work of the political philosopher Hannah Arendt. Though the texts of hers that I refer to were written in the 1950s and 1960s, Arendt provides some of the most incisive insights ever written regarding the workings of authoritarian power, the pain suffered by victims of this power, and how to heal wounds so one can live in the present and the future without being continually haunted by the past. For these reasons they are particularly helpful when trying to understand the consequences of military rule in Latin America and how victims may reconcile the past with the present and the future.

² In her *Between Past and Future*, Hannah Arendt interprets this Latin phrase as "Let justice be done though the world may perish" (228). I will refer to it according to this interpretation.

³ Avelar briefly explores the attempts of military regimes to control representation through the system of signs associated with repression and torture (256-58).

⁴ Arendt stresses the importance of opinion, writing in *Between Past and Future* that “‘All governments rest on opinion,’ James Madison said, and not even the most autocratic ruler or tyrant could ever rise to power, let alone keep it, without the support of those who are like-minded [i.e., of the same opinion]” (233).

⁵ This afterward appears in both the special program edition of the play, published in 1992, and in the Penguin edition. All quotations of *La muerte y la doncella* come from the Penguin edition.

⁶ Originally written in Spanish in 1990 and then translated into English by Dorfman, the play’s first public performance was a staged reading followed by a discussion with the author at the London-based Institute of Contemporary Arts in November 1990. This proved to be the beginning of the success story of the work. To the dismay of the author, the play’s debut in Santiago in March 1991, when the Rettig report was published, was not well-received. Back in London in July, the play was part of the 1991 London International Festival of Theatre that included, among others, a work by Griselda Gambaro. From there it became a sold-out show across Europe and then in the U.S. For a look at the performance history of the play, see Robert A. Morace.

⁷ The play’s Cast of Characters page tells us that this unnamed country is “probably Chile.”

⁸ It is significant to note that on the back cover of the book Pinochet is one of the five people quoted who review the book: “Lies – all lies,” states Pinochet in May 1992. “The author is a liar and a hypocrite!” This comes two years after the transition to democracy in Chile, yet Pinochet is still adamant about concealing the truth.

⁹ Avelar’s criticism is based on analysis of the movie version of the play, released in 1994, though he makes the same criticism of the text. See note 12 on 270.

¹⁰ In an obviously different context, I highly doubt that knowing the truth behind the attacks of September 11, without “using” it to some end, would satisfy the majority of U.S. citizens. People wanted and continue to want “punishment.” According to George W. Bush, the “evildoers” had and have “to pay” for their actions; they must be “brought to justice” or “justice will be brought to them.” Even with the recent 9/11 Commission attempting to shed some light on the truth of what was known before that day, and despite images of U.S. soldiers torturing prisoners in Iraq having circled the world in 2004, punishment through devastating force still seems to be what orients public debate, rather than actions within the political sphere that involve forgiveness as a form of reparation.

¹¹ Murgas, or the theatrical choral groups that perform primarily during Uruguay’s month-long carnival festivities of February, consistently wrote lyrics with double meanings, one of which often criticized members of the army or the police, and political figures during the twelve years of military rule (1973-85). Performances of murgas today still incorporate references that blast *milicos* and others connected to the years of dictatorship. Such performances are not public trials in the way of theatrical works like *La muerte y la doncella*, but they nonetheless engage the public in a type of judgment of those who are the subject of the critical lyrics. For more on murgas and their performances during carnival, see Gustavo Remedi.

¹² *Dictadura*, as the reader can imagine, was a prohibited word, subject to being painted over soon after it appeared. It was safer to go with the insinuating *dic...* and leave it at that.

¹³ The removal of these portraits generated some resistance within the military, most evident in the decision of three generals to retire from service as a way of protesting the act. See Guido Braslavsky.

¹⁴ See, for example, Horacio Verbitsky, Beatriz Sarlo and Larry Rohter.

¹⁵ More recently, the Argentine telenovela *Montecristo* has reinvigorated public debate about many of these issues, highlighting the power of performance as a form of trial. This is the

first TV show to place problems of children born to *desaparecidos*, torturers and their accomplices who have not been tried, and other aspects of the dictatorship, at the heart of the story. Since April 2006 the Abuelas have experienced a 30% increase in the number of inquiries about identity. See *La Nación* (6 agosto 2006) <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/Archivo/nota.asp?nota_id=829341>

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