

## Recent Argentine Vanguard Theatre: Gambaro's *Información para extranjeros*

DICK GERDES

Griselda Gambaro is a well-known Latin American playwright whose two principal works, *Los siameses* (1967) and *El campo* (1967) have been presented not only in her native Argentina but also abroad. Both these plays contain elements of the theatre of the absurd: the use of non-rhetorical language, with a special focus on sensorial orientation through grotesque gestures and movements. Other characteristics cited by critics include the use of the Artaudian concept of psychological cruelty and physical violence, fragmented dramatic structures, de-personalization and exaggeration of the characters. The sum of these elements creates for the audience a feeling of metaphysical anguish which is derived from the absurdity inherent in the condition of modern man.<sup>1</sup>

One of Gambaro's recent yet unpublished plays, *Información para extranjeros*, presents an extension, amplification and at the same time a concentration of the author's ideas found in her previous plays. *Información para extranjeros* goes beyond the conventions established by the theatre of the absurd to include characteristics of vanguard theatre in the United States, such as Julian Beck's Living Theatre and Richard Schechner's Environment Theatre.<sup>2</sup> Theories concerning the use of space, the relationship between actor and spectator, and nudity underlie not only Beck's and Schechner's innovative theatre, but also Gambaro's play.

Fundamental to the dynamism of Gambaro's play is its use of space. Although the possibilities are numerous, principally the audience and the actors on or off the stage combine to form living space, "literally spheres of spaces, spaces within the spaces, spaces which contain or envelop, or relate, or touch all the areas where the audience is and/or the performers perform."<sup>3</sup> The actors and the audience intermingle and, as in the case of *Paradise Now* and Gambaro's play, the actors become guides; hence, the spectator enters into a special relationship with the participants of the play—both actors and the rest of the audience—and experiences two opposing forces, as he is pulled from active participation to critical distancing.

*Información para extranjeros*, structured around simultaneous action, breaks down the barriers between stage and audience, which helps to eliminate differences between actor and spectator. Audience participation, if only passive as in the case of Gambaro's play, converts the play into social statement rather than an artistic manifestation which in turn creates an illusion of reality. It is similar to a "happening" where fragmented action and discontinuous time create a collage of seemingly unrelated events. Nudity—not eroticism—communicates society's vulnerability and impenetrability. Gambaro aims so to touch the audience that the play will not be forgotten.<sup>4</sup> This study will assess, therefore, the extent to which the thematic and technical aspects of *Información para extranjeros* not only communicate tones of absurdity, terror and helplessness, but also see human violence in a new perspective.

The sub-title to Gambaro's work is "Chronicle in 21 scenes." The play takes place preferably in a converted house, or a theatre that offers the possibility of being converted into numerous rooms connected by passageways. A different scene or several scenes are enacted in each of the rooms. The audience, divided into small groups led by a narrator-guide, participates in the development of the play. Escorted by their guide, each group moves about from room to room, observing the 21 scenes. Moreover, the artful manipulation of light and dark create desired effects of special distortion, making it difficult to recognize other groups of spectators who are en route to other rooms. The proximity of the actors and the audience almost literally assaults the spectators' sensitivities, preparing them for numerous scares and surprises.

It is important to point out here that this structural premise is based on the concept of simultaneous space and time; that is, the 21 scenes are followed in a chronological order or sequence. However, the stage directions in the manuscript offer only one possible route through this maze of rooms and scenes. In essence, we are given one sequence of many possibilities in which one of the unspecified number of groups might view the random events. It would seem, then, that a limitless number of possibilities to view the play exist. Obviously, many scenes are presented simultaneously. However, the effect of this creation does not suggest the type of improvisation used in a "happening," but rather a carefully-planned structure upon which the addition of improvisation leads to a conscious effort to create a random order, not free form. As we consider the numerous possibilities from which the spectator can view the play, it becomes apparent that although the scenes are experienced in a different sequence for each group, the total effect of the scenes is the same.

These theoretical considerations concerning a structure of random order certainly place Gambaro's play among the more innovative attempts at modern playwrighting, giving it perhaps that one vital ingredient that makes it more than just a "happening." Since Gambaro chooses the word "chronicle" in the sub-title, we can suggest even wider implications of this randomly ordered structure. In a contemporary sense, "chronicle" implies present-day history, newspaper records and nightly news accounts on the television. Again, the bombardment of repeated references in world news (Viet Nam, for example) may vary in its day-to-day account, but the sum total—regardless of order or content—always leads to

the same conclusion, a conclusion whose meaning is much more profound—although more obscure—than the news itself.

Other elements of *Información para extranjeros* serve to bring the audience and the presentation by the actors together, which further provokes a strong reaction in the spectator. Through the use of violence on the stage, black humor, taboo expressions, nudity, abusive language, satire, children's games, and a structure whose fragmented action is unified through the narrator-guide, the spectator approaches a state of shock. Once his sensitivity is abused, he becomes incensed and is horrified.<sup>5</sup> The subtle use of light, music and sound creates more tension, facilitates the communication of the themes and gives an organic sense to the play.<sup>6</sup>

The effect of the play is based on the juxtaposition of acts of human violence and references to children's games. The impact of this strange parallelism can be explained through Antonin Artaud's theory of cruelty, composed of surprise (with physical violence) and assaults on human sensitivity, making the sensation of fear more acute.<sup>7</sup> However, the resulting "cruelty" is psychological in nature because to juxtapose violence and the playful world of children touches the very primitive and archetypal roots of man; it is a situation which defies human reason. Contemporary man, seeing himself deprived of opportunity to use his reason, has no other recourse than to abandon himself to a state of distress, sorrow, anguish and, finally, solitude.

The violence presented in *Información para extranjeros* manifests itself in different ways; abruptly, for example, when a character receives strong blows from a club; or when, with anticipated and increasing strength, a young man tied to an electric chair receives an electric current to the point of killing him each time he forgets certain combinations of words. During the play, other persons die or are violently wounded by gunshot, strangulation, suicide, beatings, or bombs. The violence connected to these acts creates tension which should be also stimulated by parallel and reiterative scenes, a technique that Gambaro employs in her other plays.<sup>8</sup> In one scene, a young girl appears and is offered a pistol but refuses to take it—an invitation to suicide. This scene is repeated for the group of spectators who follow the particular path that Gambaro chooses to describe in the manuscript: they are led back to this room four times. When this group hears a gunshot, a relationship between the shot and the girl is established, a possibility that the narrator-guide has suggested in the previous scene. Or, in another part of the play, several kidnappings occur to suggest daily experiences in Argentina and other parts of the world, a fact whose accompanying violence serves to alienate the spectator.

A parallel line of action to these violent acts is developed throughout the play. Repeated references are made to well-known children's games, pastimes and songs. The group of spectators indicated in the manuscript hears a feminine voice singing a cradle song with symbolic overtones several times. They see actors wearing excessive make-up to look like dolls and distorting their physical movements in puppet-like fashion. In another scene, after the spectators have learned of a kidnapping through facts presented in newspaper style, an actor plays the role of a typical father who relates the same incident to his children by imitation of the age-old "once upon a time" storybook tone. Finally, several children's games are reenacted in the play.

It should be pointed out that each one of these manifestations of a child's world most likely serves a specific function within the particular scene in which it appears; however, we are concerned in a more general way with the effect of its relationship as a parallel line of action to the reiterated acts of violence. The juxtaposition of these parallel elements serves to alter the spectators' concept of violence and the infantile world of children. This combination ultimately provides new perspectives on man's condition as a human being in contemporary society. Scene 18, especially, works to provide a synthesis of these two parallel lines of action when a hunchback child-monster appears dressed in a long, white nightshirt, wearing excessive make-up. Other actors, appearing as children, sit down in a circle around the child-monster. One character, carrying a club, remains outside the circle. As the music begins, the child-monster gyrates like an airplane propeller and singles out one character, at which point the club-carrying actor beats him over the head. This person falls and the game is repeated. At another time, the club is exchanged for other methods: beatings, strangulation, gunshots (he points his finger like a pistol). This scene, cited from the original Spanish text, unfolds as follows:

(Entra una especie de Niño-monstruo, con joroba y vestido con una suerte de camisión largo, blanco, con moños. Está muy maquillado. Lo siguen otros personajes disfrazados de niños. Se sienten formando una rueda alrededor del Niño-monstruo, menos uno que permanece fuera de la rueda, empuñando un garrote)

NIÑO-MONSTRUO: ¡Ya empiezo!

LOS OTROS: ¡Dale! ¡Dale!

(Juegan al Antón Pirulero. Tocan la guitarra, el piano, el violín, etc.)

NIÑO-MONSTRUO (como Antón Pirulero, girando los brazos):

Antón, Antón Pirulero  
cada cual, cada cual  
atienda su juego  
y el que no,  
el que no  
¡una prenda tendrá!

(Cambia a guitarra. El del garrote, se encamina hacia el niño que cambió y lo golpea. El niño cae. Sigue el juego. Cada vez que uno de los niños cambia, el personaje del garrote lo saca del juego. En un momento, abandona el garrote y utiliza otros medios, golpea, asfixia, dispara un balazo con la mano).

The next scene presents a young Greek girl, Marina, who recites poetic lines about fear, torture and death; hence, this scene explicitly underscores the play's major themes:

y quebraré el sueño con fuegos de artificio horribles, indecentes, con fusilamientos incontables caeré sobre la indiferencia de los que pasan hasta que empiecen a preguntar, a preguntarse

(Los hombres siguen en tono muy llano mientras avanzan todos juntos hacia el Niño-monstruo)

- ¿por qué el miedo?  
 —¿por qué la tortura?  
 —¿por qué las muertes?

The ghostly aura of the mysterious girl is felt when she asks, "Why do fear, torture and death have to exist?" All the while we see in the same scene the different characters moving slowly toward the child-monster, squeezing him into an ever-tightening circle, at which point he cries out and the scene abruptly ends.

By creating a parallelism between two disparate elements—human violence and children's games—an Argentine, indeed an international social problem, is given a new interpretation; that is to say, unbridled violence is an expression or result of contemporary man's alienation from others and himself in a hostile world for which no solutions seem possible. The terrorism that rocked the world at the last Olympic Games, not to mention the outbreak of kidnappings around the world, gives the themes of Gambaro's play a contemporary interpretation. The parallel reference to children's games, which point to primitive and archetypal meanings of man's primordial condition as man, puts Antonin Artaud's theory of cruelty into effect. While the use of physical violence hounds the spectator's senses, he feels obliged—as he becomes aware of how easy it is to associate violence with innocence—to recognize a pattern of psychological cruelty. There is a thin line separating premeditated violence of mature man (torture) and the impulsiveness of a child, whose motives are not always political, but stem rather from man's primitive nature in general.

The preceding comments on *Información para extranjeros* may well lend themselves to a wider anthropological discussion. Our purpose has been to underscore the principal effect of a consciously-developed parallelism between violence and children's games in the play. Certainly the spectator-participant comes away terrified. As the play reaches its conclusion, the spectator fears for his life, realizing fully the potential danger that exists for all persons today who find themselves in states of distress and isolation.<sup>9</sup> Leaving the theatre, the spectator nervously asks himself if what he experienced as he participated in the play was not more representative of reality than the everyday reality he finds outside the theatre. By means of juxtaposing the two parallel lines of action, in addition to the technical elements of the play, the spectator sensorially experiences that which he is desperately thrust into considering intellectually: the immediate ramifications (danger, fear and panic) and the metaphysical implications (grief, solitude and eternal damnation). The parallelism creates a tone of fear which then cruelly alters man's basic perception of his own existence.

In conclusion, Griselda Gambaro's play, *Información para extranjeros*, draws upon vanguard ideas concerning the use of space, novel relationships between actor and audience, searing language, black humor, grotesque gestures and movements by the actors, nudity and strategically-evoked sound (for example, as the audience prepares to leave after the performance, police sirens, whose volume continues to increase, are heard). Finally, the parallelism between violence and children's games and songs that strike at man's sensitivity creates a situation of psychological cruelty. Through these and other aspects of the Living and Environ-

ment Theatre, Griselda Gambaro takes another giant step toward a better understanding of the metaphysical riddle with which contemporary man struggles.

*University of New Mexico*

## Notes

1. See, for example: Tamara Holzapfel, "Griselda Gambaro's Theatre of the Absurd," *Latin American Theatre Review*, 4/1 (Fall 1970), 5-11; Sandra Messinger Cypess, "Physical Imagery in the Works of Griselda Gambaro," *Modern Drama*, 18, No. 4 (December 1975), 357-363; Cypess, "The Plays of Griselda Gambaro," *Dramatists in Revolt: The New Latin American Theatre*, edited by Leon F. Lyday and George W. Woodyard (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976), pp. 95-109.

2. See Judith Malina and Julian Beck, *Paradise Now, Collective Creation of the Living Theatre* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971); and Richard Schechner, *Environment Theatre* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1973).

3. Schechner, p. 2.

4. Lionel Abel, *Metatheatre* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1963), p. 132.

5. According to Antonin Artaud, man "cannot resist effects of physical surprise, the dynamism of cries and violent moments, visual explosions, the aggregate of tetanizing ('tétanisante') effects called up on stage and used to act in a direct manner on the physical sensitivity of the spectator," in Eric Sellen, *The Drama Concepts of Antonin Artaud* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 33.

6. Cypess' article, "Physical Imagery in the Works of Griselda Gambaro," cites the importance of these elements in Gambaro's plays, showing that their use coincides with the importance Artaud gives them: "With the purpose of attracting the audience's attention from the start, Artaud proposed that the sonorization in the theatre be constant: sounds, noises, cries, music be utilized as elements in a new language of sound not based on dialogue." (p. 361)

7. Artaud feels that the value of the theatre of cruelty is its "excruciating, magical relation to reality and danger," in *The Theatre and Its Double*, trans. by Mary C. Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958), p. 87. A logical manifestation of the "excruciating magical" quality of Artaud's theatre would be the use of the world of children.

8. Cypess indicates in her article, "The Plays of Griselda Gambaro," that one common dramatic technique found in all of her plays is the repetition of certain events with small variations. (p. 95)

9. Citing Gambaro's other plays, Cypess says in her article, "The Plays of Griselda Gambaro," that the playwright constantly "depicts the individual cowed into a state of submission by social and political pressures that deprive him of dignity and self-determination." (p. 95)