

**Acting Women: Gender Roles in Ana Istarú's *Hombres en escabeche*, Elena Garro's *La señora en su balcón*, and Carmen Boullosa's *Cocinar hombres***

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As in her earlier plays, *El vuelo de la grulla* (1984), *Madre nuestra que estás en la tierra* (1988), and *Baby boom en el paraíso* (1996), Ana Istarú's *Hombres en escabeche* demonstrates her dramaturgy's universal appeal as well as her feminist perspectives on contemporary Costa Rican society.<sup>1</sup> Since its August 2000 debut, *Hombres en escabeche* has achieved commercial and critical success in Costa Rica, at festivals in the United States and Venezuela, as well as in Bogotá when staged by Colombia's Teatro Nacional in 2005. The enthusiastic audience response and favorable media reviews stem in large part from the play's clever combination of humor and serious commentary, which allow for the breaking down of gender stereotypes and the binary division of gender roles. In this way, the play is relevant to Costa Rica and beyond.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, far from being an isolated examination of the options available to women who transgress patriarchal norms, *Hombres en escabeche* continues the search for feminist alternatives embarked upon by Mexican playwrights Elena Garro in *La señora en su balcón* (1963) and Carmen Boullosa in *Cocinar hombres* (1987). Although all three playwrights present feminist perspectives in a different style — Istarú opting for comedy, Garro for drama, and Boullosa for fantasy — each develops a female protagonist who ultimately rejects the traditional roles assigned to her. In these three plays, we follow the protagonists from childhood to adulthood as they interact with a parade of archetypal male characters, including family members, teachers, boyfriends, lovers, and husbands — real and imaginary. In addition to a feminist perspective, another commonality is the use of food metaphors to express traditional roles, which include performing the domestic chore of cooking for men — a chore that eventually transforms woman's

role into one of creative independence in all aspects of life. The decisive actions taken by the protagonists vary greatly: Clara commits suicide in *La señora en su balcón*; Wine and Ufe become witches in *Cocinar hombres*; and Alicia forms a romantic relationship with a male stranger in *Hombres en escabeche*. Despite these different endings, all of the plays conclude with the protagonists' empowerment, though they diverge in the manner in which characters' actions call for broad social changes.

In *La señora en su balcón*, Clara's monologues as a fifty-year-old woman, her dialogues with male characters when she is 40, 20, and eight years old, and the milkman's comments upon finding her lifeless body in the street, delineate her identity as a woman. Her monologues occur while she is on a balcony, an architectural element that Gabriela Mora has described as the "expresión de su soledad y aislamiento, y del papel de espectadora a que ha sido condenada" (128). Not content with life as an onlooker, the younger Clara rejects the teachings of Profesor García, who repeatedly lectures about the world's roundness, and her boyfriend Andrés's marriage proposal, viewing the wedding ring that he offers her as a *compás*, an instrument that draws the circular shape of the world. Clara instead desires to move beyond this horizon set by García and Andrés; that is, she desire to escape the domestic sphere — traditionally viewed as the space in which women should remain — in order to enter the public sphere, portrayed as the male domain. By looking for the ancient city of Nineveh, Clara seeks out "la belleza, el amor, la inmortalidad" (Mora 123). Given that her goals are completely at odds with those of Andrés, she ends their relationship.

When the forty-year-old Clara appears on stage, we learn that she has married Julio, a man who had shared her same outlook about life. Julio protests the tedium of the daily routines of domesticity, stating, "todos los días repetimos el mismo gesto, la misma frase, la misma oficina, la misma sopa" (43). Clara shares his perspective, having earlier rejected Andrés's wedding ring because she felt that it represented the same reality: "buscar un departamento para comer sopa" (37). Building upon these thoughts, Clara prefers not to be the one who makes the soup, telling Julio: "Yo quisiera ser tú, para ir a trabajar en la mañana y cruzar la ciudad a la hora en que la cruzan ustedes que son los que hacen mundo. Porque yo la cruzo a la hora en que la cruzan las que hacemos la comida" (42). While the verb *hacer* indicates that both women and men have the ability to create, Clara wants the ability to create the *world*, seeking Nineveh with complete freedom, as men can do, instead of limiting her creative abilities to the traditional sphere

of the kitchen, something often desired in Mexican society. Unfortunately for Clara, her husband has changed and, worrying about what others might think, tells her that she is too old to search for Nineveh: “Esas eran chiquilladas. Ya no eres joven. ¡Mírate en el espejo! Resulta ridículo que una mujer a tu edad hable en esos términos” (48). From this dialogue it becomes apparent that Julio and Clara have failed to liberate themselves from the confines of the world. Despite Julio’s criticism of some aspects of society, he ultimately repeats gender stereotypes governing what younger and older women should do. Clearly seeing her incompatibility with Julio, Clara leaves him.

After a lifetime of fleeing from the men in her life, fifty-year-old Clara, sitting on a balcony speaking to younger versions of herself, concludes that “ahora sé que sólo me falta huir de mí misma” in order to find Nineveh (54). Deciding that she needs to make the *gran salto* to reach the ancient city, Clara jumps from the balcony to her death at the end of the play. While Clara’s suicide might at first appear to be a tragic escape from her reality, critical readings of this work remind us that the suicide, a conscious decision to no longer live in a world governed by rules with which she disagrees, is an empowering act.<sup>3</sup> As Stacy Southerland points out, “[w]ith Clara’s *gran salto*, Garro shows that women do have a choice as to whether or not they will passively accept the roles predetermined for them in patriarchal societies, and further suggests that they *must* act or be forever entrapped” (259). Clara’s final action at the end of the play, when viewed from this perspective, is an assertion of her independence. No longer a spectator on the balcony, her act demonstrates a refusal to accept or follow the rules governing male and female behavior in Mexican society. Her declaration of the need to escape from her “self,” the roles of the obedient schoolgirl and wife conforming to the societal norms imposed upon her, suggests that she considers her decision to be the active rejection of these roles and the beginning of a journey of self-discovery en route to Nineveh.

The journey of self-discovery is also an important focus of Boullosa’s *Cocinar hombres*, a play that, originally billed for only six weeks, completed a nine-month run in Mexico City in 1991 (Costantino 199). Although the Boullosa play takes an entirely different, fantastical approach to confront social myths that construct gender identity in a patriarchal society, it employs metaphors similar to those in the Garro play. In *Cocinar hombres*, two women, who have matured from age ten to 23 overnight, debate whether they should proceed with a ceremony that will make them witches — with the nightly mission of tempting men with desire — or return to society, marry, and

become mothers. Wine favors the first option, stating: “Yo nunca quise tener un hijo. No entró nunca en el mundo de mis deseos” (61). Since she strongly rejects the reproductive role assigned to women in Mexican society, the new alternative to become a witch is appealing, particularly because, as Cristina Santos has noted, witches in this play are empowered and not represented as “the old and ugly crone, but as two young and sexually virulent women” (48). Wine’s friend Ufe, however, does not feel quite as certain about becoming a witch. Ufe has always wished to get married and have a child, conforming to the social expectations regarding gender, something that she will have to abandon in order to be a witch. The play consists of dialogue between Wine and Ufe, as the latter chooses what to do. The decision is not easy, Santos explains, because “ironically, in acquiring liberty they must also suffer an effect of depersonalization in which they sacrifice their abilities to love and hate — in essence they sacrifice their humanity” (47).

To help make up her mind, Ufe “cooks up” two men in a role play with Wine. First, she creates Israel, a man who can be her husband and the father of her child. Her second creation is the romantic lover Julián. Interestingly, the “cooking up” of men that Ufe does here to envision life should she not become a witch is not the typical cooking of family meals done by women in a society governed by patriarchal norms. Instead of being *la que hace la comida*, consisting of *la misma sopa*, Ufe becomes one of *los que hacen el mundo*, thus challenging the gendered division of roles also questioned in Garro’s *La señora en su balcón*. The notion of women cooking men in Boulosa’s work, Susan Wehling has pointed out, “rather than cooking *for* men takes on a definite anti-patriarchal stance suggesting nothing less than revolution” (52). It truly is a heretical disobedience to that society because “it suggests women as capable of creation and production without the help or consent of man” (Wehling 59). As Ufe emphasizes during this independent, creative process, she is making “un hombre para desearlo; a mi gusto, a mi medida, hecho para lo que yo quiera” (68). This represents a significant step in the journey of self-discovery for Ufe, according to Rosa Campos-Brito: “here Boulosa subverts the traditional patriarchal construct of woman that reflects male desire; instead, she presents the powerful image of a witch concocting, creating and cooking a man that will represent her needs and desire” (81).

During the role play the “cooked up” men never materialize on the stage. Doubting that these men can truly love her, given the inequalities between romantic partners in the society in which she had been living, Ufe destroys her creations. She decides to join Wine as a witch after dismissing

the ties to the patriarchal structures underlying her relationships. No longer relying on a man or anyone else to bring her personal fulfillment, Ufe realizes that she herself is capable of realizing that potential. Wine and Ufe exit the play with a desire to form a new society where they will select for themselves a different name everyday and create a new language, which appears in the playscript as words spelled backwards. Commenting upon this linguistic fragmentation, Juli A. Kroll identifies a culmination that “strives toward opening space in which anyone may speak freely, incoherently, beyond the bounds of normative gender and syntactical rules” (111). Wine and Ufe reject the oppressive reality in which they had lived and choose an alternative reality as witches. Critical readings of the play emphasize the liberating socio-cultural options that it presents, such as “the possibility of creating safe female spaces apart from phallogocentrally-defined arenas” (Campos-Brito 75). However, in order to reach this freedom, Kroll reminds us that the play “shows that some men — along with the likelihood of living in a traditional, nuclear family — must be sacrificed on the road to alternative subjectivities, female homosociality and sisterhood” (112).

The matter of sacrificing men, as well as the possibility of life in a traditional family, also appears in Istarú’s *Hombres en escabeche*, as the protagonist explores different male-female relationships and discovers her own independent identity. This comedy features one actress and one actor. The actress plays the role of The Bride, whom we discover is named Alicia, as an adult and a younger girl; while the actor plays the seven different roles of the men in Alicia’s life: The Father, her brother Andrés, The First Boyfriend, The Philosopher, The Yuppie, The Musician, and A Stranger. The use of the definite article *the* in the playscript and in the theatre program encourages the reader or spectator to recognize these characters as archetypal figures whom we would encounter in patriarchal societies.

The first important man in Alicia’s life is her father. Refusing to pay attention to her and calling her Beatriz, The Father ignores Alicia’s reality to such an extent that he does not even remember her name. This makes her want to find a man who not only will remember her name, but also fall head over heels in love with her to compensate for her father’s lack of attention. Alicia’s quest turns out to be not so simple, however, as she soon encounters the double standard by which society governs the behavior of men and women. Her experiences with men disillusion her, causing her to give up any hope of finding a man who would love her and want to form a relationship as equal partners.

*Hombres en escabeche* confronts socially transmitted beliefs about gender in Costa Rica, a country “where even a mild expression of opinion, disagreement, or opposition... carries more weight than the same expression would in another culture” (Abshagen Leitinger xii). The tendency instead is for Costa Ricans to avoid confrontation, “to get along *sin hacer olas* (without making waves)” (Abshagen Leitinger xii). This cultural tendency also permeates the theatre scene in San José, where, as Carolyn Bell has noted, in the last fifteen or twenty years purely commercial performances predominate. Bell, however, points out that the picture is not entirely bleak. In this same time frame a generation that Bell calls the Costa Rican New Wave Theatre has emerged, which “engages audiences in social realities instead of escapism and fantasies by addressing [...] myriad [...] socio-political and economic issues and conditions evident in Costa Rica and the world today” (876). Ana Istarú is part of this New Wave Theatre that is not afraid to address volatile national issues. Thus *Hombres en escabeche*’s commercial success is unusual, given the local theatre environment. The New Wave Theatre, for the most part, exists as an alternative to mainstream productions, appealing to a small audience (Bell 879).

In the hopes of seeing her theatre staged and attracting a larger audience, Istarú has written her most recent plays as comedies, explaining her decision in an interview for *La Nación*:

El humor, de alguna manera es casi el impuesto para mí. No puedo optar, por el momento, por otra cosa, si mi objetivo es vivir y trabajar el teatro en una sociedad tan pequeña como la nuestra en la que los teatros independientes se mantienen a base de comedias; tengo que alcanzar el difícil equilibrio de hacer una obra de pretensión artística con una posición ideológica pero que, también, tenga éxito comercial. (Schumacher)

Rather than fight against the commercial theatre in San José, she has opted to “invadirlo con textos en los que la gente pueda identificarse y reflexionar sin dejar de llenar las salas” (Schumacher). Humor, in fact, can be a powerful weapon of social and cultural critique. As Istarú commented to me in an interview: “A través de la risa... la gente está dispuesta a aceptar este tipo de posición crítica.” Laughter can cross the gap separating the audience members from the stage, making it easier for them to accept different points of view and to relate them to their own lives.

The larger audience that Istarú envisioned has extended beyond Costa Rica's national borders. Certainly the archetypal figures enable audience members familiar with patriarchal societies to understand the play's themes. At first it seems unbelievable that a father could not recall his daughter's name, as he alternatively calls her Beatriz, Débora, María, and Penélope. His use of these names of biblical and classical origin, however, suggests that he functions as a symbol of the patriarchy that attempts to regulate Costa Rican society. One of the ways that this system of power tries to assert control is by maintaining a binary division between genders, which *Hombres en escabeche*, *Cocinar hombres*, and *La señora en su balcón* question. Judith Butler, in her oft-quoted book *Gender Trouble*, reminds us that

[b]Because there is neither an "essence" that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires, and because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions — and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them; the construction "compels" our belief in its necessity and naturalness. (190)

In evoking Beatriz, Débora, María, and Penélope and applying these signs to his daughter, the father is categorizing this young female according to stereotyped notions of female behavior, with the expectation that she fulfill a certain social role. Not remembering her name, he tells her, "María, vení a hacerme algo de comer" (146). Besides referring to the Virgin, María is identified as a domestic servant in the play. Alicia responds: "¡María ¿María la criada o María la Santa Madre? ¡O mejor ambas! ¡Dame de comer! ¡Ahora me llamo mamá.... ¡Me llamo Alicia! (146). It clearly angers Alicia that The Father expects her to obey him and serve his needs by being either a servant, sexually subservient to men, or the Virgin, subservient to their needs as a mother might be. It is also possible that Alicia is referring to her mother, who acts like a servant. Alicia mentions that her mother is always doing household chores, such as ironing The Father's shirt, when Alicia wants to talk with her (75). The name Deborah is also ambiguous in the play, since The Father could be referring to the biblical figure or to his mistress with the same name. What is clear is that The Father views women as having narrowly defined

roles, that of a mother or lover submissive to the man, and that he expects his daughter to conform to the acts associated with the female gender in a patriarchal society, much like the men in Clara's life in Garro's play and like the "cooked up" men would seek to control Ufe's life in Boullosa's play.

By ignoring her name *Alicia*, The Father implies that he is also ignoring the original Greek meaning of her name, which Alicia tells us is "noble, sincere." At one point, Alicia gets very angry about The Father's inability to remember her name. She yells at him: "¡Para que te enterés: Me llamo Lucrecia Borgia, Circe, Morgana! ¡Dalila! ¡Medea!" (146). The gamut of names deployed by The Father and Alicia form two poles, one ruled by the Patriarch, the other denoting figures from history and myth that represent the monstrous version of woman, also from the patriarchal viewpoint. The selection of these names not only reminds us of the history of images and models for female identity and behavior and the consequent vision of femininity they offer, but also suggests that Alicia joins in rebellion with others against patriarchal society, asserting her own identity by shouting: "¡Me llamo Alicia! ¡Me llamo Alicia! ¡Me llamo Alicia!" (146). With this outburst, she declares her independence, that she is who she is, and that she does not want to be categorized or confined to playing the roles for women that, as Butler theorizes, are scripted by society.

We observe Alicia's refusal to perform the acts constituting the submissive nature of female gender identity in the dramatizations of her relationships with The Philosopher, The Yuppie, and The Musician. The rebellion, however, does not happen until Alicia sees the double standard that each man applies to her relationship with him and their fundamental incompatibility as equal romantic partners. She begins each relationship eager to please the man, conforming to his expectations. However, when she realizes the imbalance of power, she ends each relationship. As we view the outcome of this series of romantic relationships, we also follow Alicia's personal evolution as an artist, a profession that allows her the freedom to create, much like that practiced by Ufe in *Cocinar hombres* and that yearned for by Clara in *La señora en su balcón*. This creative freedom is akin to the theories of power discussed by Nancy Hartsock, who points out that "power should not necessarily only be defined as *domination*, or 'power over,' associated with patriarchal rule but also as the 'power to' linked to energy, capacity, and potential" (210, 224). In Istarú's play, Alicia embarks upon her career by studying the philosophy of art at the university, where she publishes an article. Her first creation is with words. After she ends her relationship

with *The Philosopher*, she tells *The Yuppie* that she has transferred to the School of Fine Arts at the university, where she specializes in the plastic arts. When she meets *The Musician*, she remains determined to be an artist. Although at the end of the play she is in a state of emotional despair, she does not lose her identity after her romantic relationships fail; nor does she abandon her desire to be an artist. In confronting her romantic partners' ideas, Alicia makes important discoveries about her own identity as she asserts her creative independence.

With *The Philosopher* and *The Yuppie*, who present themselves as virile lovers, Alicia's rebellious behavior causes a shift in the balance of power between the characters leading to the men's sexual and emotional impotency. When Alicia first visits *The Philosopher* in his apartment, he seduces her, claiming to have a liberated point of view in terms of male-female relationships. Echoing Marxist theories, he suggests having an open relationship with Alicia:

Creo en relaciones libres y adultas, sin ataduras, sin engaños. La institución de la pareja no es más que una antigualla obsoleta y absurda, cimentada en el egoísmo burgués y en la necesidad de convertir al ser humano en una adquisición, en un bien de consumo. Me niego a restringir mis posibilidades de intercambio sexual sólo para complacer una demanda social anquilosada e injusta. (113)

This idea of personal freedom, as expressed by *The Philosopher*, might sound attractive. After all, it moves beyond the limits established by patriarchal society. However, it soon becomes clear that he is unable to practice what he preaches. After having sex with Alicia for the first time, he reclines on the sofa, smoking a pipe, while she sits on the floor at his feet. Alicia, disillusioned because *The Philosopher* ended the sexual act after his climax, without caring if she also reached orgasm, admits that she found the experience less than pleasurable.

Realizing the contradictions between *The Philosopher's* ideas and actions, Alicia asserts her own identity and independence. He stresses repeatedly the importance of an article that he is writing. Alicia tells him that she is studying with his friend Ernesto and that she is also writing an article. *The Philosopher* barely expresses any interest in her news and refuses to read her writing. They start to have sex, but this time Alicia intervenes and changes the expected outcome:

ALICIA. ¿Es cierto que tu mamá te paga el apartamento?  
FILOSOFO. ¡Por el mismísimo demonio! ¡Alicia!

ALICIA. Lo siento. (*Pausa*). Tengo hambre. (*Se ilumina el escenario. Ella está tendida en el sofá fumando pipa. El está sentado a sus pies*).

FILOSOFO. (*Enfurrñado*). ¿Así que te publican el artículo?  
(116-17)

Alicia's interruption before The Philosopher climaxes calls into question his proclamations of independence and defying established conventions. This immediately deflates his desire, rendering him temporarily impotent and unable to continue with the sexual act.

Not only does Alicia halt what had become a previously established pattern of behavior for them but she also completely reverses the balance of power previously favoring The Philosopher's desires. Now it is Alicia who reclines on the sofa, smoking a pipe, while The Philosopher sits at her feet. The news that her article will be published in the Department's journal, and that his will not, is simply unthinkable to The Philosopher. She then infuriates him by claiming that she is dating his friend, Ernesto. The Philosopher curses his friend for going out with his girlfriend, thus exposing his own hypocrisy. With the damage to their relationship irreparable, Alicia leaves him.

After her disastrous affair with The Philosopher, Alicia goes on a date to an elegant restaurant with The Yuppie, a man from the opposite end of the political spectrum in Costa Rica. At first, he appears to be a promising partner for Alicia. However, his behavior and conversation with Alicia reveal that, unlike his views supporting the liberalization of economic regulations, he maintains rather conservative opinions about male-female relationships. She tells him that she has had a few relationships before meeting him, which appears to be fine with him. He replies that "un par de historias no son muchas historias" (136). Despite his open-minded comment, Alicia soon discovers how he really feels. After telling him that she had sex with The Philosopher, she notices a change in how he treats her. He had mentioned previously wanting to introduce her to his parents. Now, he tells Alicia that it would not be a good idea for her to meet them: "No se si te van a gustar. Son muy convencionales, you know. Hay cosas que no entienden" (138). He angers Alicia when he instead proposes that she go away with him for the weekend. She understands that he is willing to accept her as his mistress, but that he will not marry her because society would not view her as an acceptable wife.

Realizing how important external appearances are to The Yuppie, Alicia makes him look ridiculous when he sees a former Costa Rican president

at the restaurant and wants to impress him favorably. Alicia hits sore spots in the powerful, macho image that The Yuppie presents to others:

YUPI. (*Con intención*). Yo no lo parezco, pero puedo ser una fiera, un animal.

ALICIA. (*Fría*). Estoy segura.

YUPI. Y he tenido muchas, muchas historias. Las que llegan a conocerme saben que debajo de esta apariencia formal se esconde un casanova.

ALICIA. Tené cuidado. Dicen que los casanovas en el fondo son bisexuales.

YUPI. (*Grita*). ¡Un momento, yo no soy un maricón! (138)

The Yuppie's outburst attracts attention throughout the restaurant. The suggestion that he could be anything but heterosexual would damage the image he presents to society. He worries that the former president heard what he said. Having discovered how to make The Yuppie lose control, Alicia continues baiting him. When she has had enough, she leaves The Yuppie, sinking his cellular telephone in a glass of water. Although she had previously challenged his heterosexual, macho image during their conversation, her final act of non-verbal communication also has sexual implications. By sinking his phone in the glass, she sends him and the audience the visual message that, to her, he lacks the virility to keep up a fulfilling relationship with her.

It seems that Alicia has finally found the man she has been waiting for when she meets The Musician. He professes love for her, and she loves him. He celebrates this union of two artists, dancing with her as he describes her: "Veó a una mujer estupenda, pero invisible. Sólo pueden verla los niños, los inocentes y los pájaros moribundos" (149). To The Musician, Alicia is a goddess, playing the role of a muse. However, when reality intrudes in the form of Alicia's unplanned pregnancy, it forces the couple to confront their level of commitment and ultimately results in the relationship's dissolution.

The Musician asks Alicia what she plans to do about the pregnancy, and she speaks for the unborn baby, saying that it wants to keep growing. He tells her that a child is incompatible with his lifestyle. The stage directions indicate that he is genuinely concerned as he makes her an offer: "Pensalo bien. Si te decidís, puedo vender el saxo" (153). This proposal is rather ambiguous; it is not clear if he is offering to sell his saxophone to pay for an abortion or to embark on a different lifestyle compatible with fatherhood. Alicia decides not to ask him to sell the instrument, and their relationship ends. She continues with the pregnancy but later has a miscarriage, attributing it to

the child's decision to not enter the world under such circumstances, stating, "no le interesaba un mundo tan mal diseñado. Y a pesar de mis súplicas apagó la luz, cerró la puerta, me dijo adiós con la mano, llevándose no sé adónde ese cuerpecito inconcluso" (153). This statement could also reflect Alicia's own despair at living in a world with gender roles so narrowly and rigidly defined.

Alicia's costume, the bridal gown worn by her throughout the play, reflects her state of mind as her relationships with men fail. After The First Boyfriend leaves her for another woman, Alicia removes her gown's skirt to reveal a provocative mini-skirt. After her sexual relationships with The Philosopher and The Musician end, the gown's sleeves appear torn. The stage directions indicate that, by the time Alicia encounters A Stranger at the play's end, it is difficult to tell she is wearing the white, demure bridal attire that would be considered appropriate in patriarchal societies. Although she is in a state of despair, her encounter with A Stranger gives her hope. Instead of the definite article, we see the indefinite *a* before the character's name in the playscript and program. Could this signal a move away from archetypal figures? The dialogue between the two characters confirms this suspicion. At one point in the play, Alicia had said: "Habría dado cualquier cosa por un hombre en escabeche" (101). What does she mean by "a man in marinade"? A marinade, in cooking, tenderizes a tough cut of meat, imparting flavor. "A man in marinade," to Alicia, would be a man who is not afraid to express his emotions for her, and, contrary to views held by a patriarchal society, will not lose his identity by loving her. This type of man might not conform to a pre-conceived "ideal."

While Clara and her husband in *La señora en su balcón* are imprisoned by society's identity constraints, and Wine and Ufe become witches in order to escape this confinement, Alicia and A Stranger do not appear to be bound by them. Echoing Garro's portrayal of the way Clara's husband feels about societal expectations for men, Istarú shows that both men and women can be victims and victimizers in patriarchal societies. The Costa Rican playwright expresses a conscious desire not only to criticize but also to vindicate men in *Hombres en escabeche*, commenting: "La idea no es hacer un panfleto feminista ni condenar a nadie, sino más bien hablar de cómo nos afecta la mentalidad machista de esta sociedad patriarcal y de cómo puede aniquilar hasta al hombre" (Díaz). A Stranger tells Alicia about how his marriage failed after he wed his wife because of social expectations when she got pregnant. A glimmer of hope comes at the end of the play, when A Stranger reveals

to Alicia that his ex-wife only wanted “una casa, dos carros y un sueldo en dólares” (158). Alicia, disillusioned after the failure of many relationships, treats him harshly. However, after expressing frustration with being unable to meet the societal expectation of the male as the family’s economic provider, he asks Alicia not to blame him for the way other men treated her and to recognize that a woman has treated him poorly. In the end, Alicia responds gently to his story and they join together as a couple facing a positive future. His biggest regret is not having contact with his daughter, who also happens to be named Alicia. He is also completely aware of her name’s symbolism. Both characters have realized the absurdity of the binary division of gender roles and want to move forward with their lives. A Stranger tells Alicia he is looking for a woman in a bridal gown, and Alicia, in the final lines of the play, tells him: “Yo soy la novia.... Hola. Me llamo Alicia” (164-65). Alicia has maintained her identity. She has learned that it is impossible to confine her behavior by society’s rules and instead presents herself as she is to A Stranger, who accepts her with a kiss.

Alicia, at the end of the play, appears to have found her “hombre en escabeche.” This is just one metaphor involving food in the play, and it invites comparison with *Cocinar hombres* and *La señora en su balcón*. Alicia, in *Hombres en escabeche*, much like Clara, starts out cooking for men. Her first boyfriend asks her to bake cookies because he loves “las cosas dulces” (89). She complies but, after he leaves her for another woman, becomes frustrated with society’s division of women into two classes: “la una era yo, la noviecita pulcra, digna de ser presentada a mamita y la otra era ‘la otra,’ la que podía comerse al novio entero, sin cubiertos y con mostaza” (94). She then vows to become “la otra” and openly expresses a desire to “consumir hombres” (93). The other woman can also be consumed by men, as Alicia explains: “La otra mujer es la versión humana del spaghetti alla puttanesca” (100). Besides the play on the word *puta* in Spanish, meaning a sexually promiscuous woman, spaghetti alla puttanesca is an Italian dish prepared with spicy peppers. In other words, it is something flavorful. Alicia recognizes she has a long way to go, saying that she “no llegaba ni a lasaña de espinacas,” a more blandly flavored food (101). However, her sexual relationships with The Philosopher and The Musician ultimately do not bring her happiness. The narrowly-defined gender roles impede the establishment of an emotionally fulfilling relationship. It is only after the stereotypes have been broken down and she sees how she can create beyond the boundaries restricting women

to the kitchen that Alicia sees hopeful possibilities for a relationship with A Stranger.

The decisive actions taken by Clara in *La señora en su balcón*, Wine and Ufe in *Cocinar hombres*, and Alicia and A Stranger in *Hombres de escabeche* are different approaches to rejecting gender binarism, as theorized by Judith Butler:

That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender's performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality. (192-93)

In all of these plays, we note the female protagonists' consciousness of this performative nature of gender in their refusal to play the roles assigned to women in patriarchal culture and its implications for transforming the societies where they live. Clara refuses to repeat Professor's García's lessons and follow the routine detested by Julio. Rebelling by taking her own life, she thus escapes and calls attention in a shocking manner to the limited domestic sphere occupied by women. The ending of *Cocinar hombres* rejects the narrow patriarchal social roles categorizing women as mothers or lovers and proposes instead a female-centered world. Wine and Ufe resist fixed identities, emphasizing that they will create new ones, continually changing their names. They no longer will have to follow the scripted role with a man that Ufe describes as "hacer mujer junto a él y jugar el juego de tener un hijo con él" (75). Although all three plays examine male-female relationships, in the Istarú play both a male and a female character take definite steps toward reconfiguring gender roles as they explore a new life as equal partners. Alicia and A Stranger reject binarism by refusing to conform to rules governing men's and women's behavior in many parts of the world. As Alicia tells us in the play, after remarking that men are unable to accept a combination of *la santa y la zorra* in a woman: "Por supuesto, me refiero únicamente a los hombres de América Latina...Y de unos cinco continentes más" (50). Unmasking social problems in Mexico and Costa Rica, these three plays portray the different ways that women can actively confront attempts to subjugate them and propose instead alternative ways of creating their own identities.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For more critical readings of the feminist perspectives in Istarú's plays, see Acón Chan, Cramsie, Milleret, Rojas and Ovaes, and Guillén. Noting that she addresses primarily Costa Rican and also Latin American audiences, Istarú speculated about her theatre's universal appeal before its performance abroad: "Me pregunto si la problemática que presento podría interesar a algún otro tipo de espectador, de otras latitudes, donde puede tener manifestaciones y matices muy distintos" (Andrade y Cramsie 229).

<sup>2</sup> See reviews of the play written by Andrés Sáenz, the theatre critic of the Costa Rican newspaper *La Nación*, the report by Murillo Castro, and the interview "Lanzada: Palabras de mujer" in *La Nación*.

<sup>3</sup> See Mora, Larson, and Southerland for analysis of the rebellious and liberating nature of Clara's suicide.

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