

## *El avión negro*: The Political and Structural Context

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In 1970, a political drama of remarkable prescience was staged in Buenos Aires. Its unusual collective authorship by four established contemporary playwrights, Roberto Cossa, Germán Rosenmacher, Carlos Somigliana and Ricardo Talesnik, instantly placed *El avión negro* in the limelight. Written around the time of the 1969 Cordobazo and predicated upon the then hypothetical return from exile of General Juan Perón, *El avión negro* captured the fragmented character of Argentine society. It accurately predicted two scenarios which were to unfold in the next decade: (1) the demythification of the working class belief that Perón's return would restore their political voice and galvanize both the Peronist movement and the fragmented nation, and (2) the outbreak of urban proletarian violence that followed the bourgeois and military sectors' failure to extend political voice to the workers.

The myth of Peronist unification and the warnings of violence anchor the thematic and structural dialectic developed throughout *El avión negro* between the urban proletariat and the military and bourgeois sectors. Perón's purported return provides the background for the play's twelve scenes which culminate in a warning of impending violence. Its five songs deal with the myth and punctuate the scenes of negative bourgeois and military reaction to Perón's return. While the workers rally enthusiastically in the streets off-stage, the opposing forces react negatively and retrench on stage.

The play's proletarian chorus is free of the hopeful but false promises of the 1960's myths. Its songs assert a strong consciousness of identity and class, a readiness and desire to resort to violence to obtain a voice and to realize revenge, and—contrary to the 1960's myth—a lack of faith that Perón's return would make a difference. The playwrights suggest that underlying divisions are so strong between classes and sectors that real unification under Perón is impossible. Scene by scene the play argues that the upper and middle classes will continue to patronize the working classes, the upwardly mobile union bureaucracy will betray its members for personal advancement and materialism, the bourgeois professionals and entrepreneurs will disassociate with the proletariat through assimilation of foreign culture and promotion of

foreign economic alliances, the political parties will posture and offer only rhetoric and vacuous acts, and the military will manipulate the proletariat through both rhetoric and brute force under the guise of protection and shared values. The playwrights further indicate that apparent sector cooperation is hypocritical and superficial at best.

*El avión negro* is political, therefore, by context, by structure and by content. To enable a greater appreciation of the playwrights' dramatic accomplishment and political insight and to provide an understanding of the political myth and axis of the play, this study attempts to integrate these three elements which contour the drama.

The political frame of the play spans twenty-five years (1945-1970) with direct reference to the Peronist Presidency (1946-1955) and to the Onganía military regime in power at the time the play was written. During the decades after Perón departed Argentina for exile in Spain, millions of Argentines remained convinced that Perón was their political messiah whose return on a black plane would bring unity. This myth was only partially realized in Perón's actual return in 1973. The expectation that he could unite the workers and the nation was not realized, although his nationalistic drive for industrialization and world prestige had given a sense of participation and identity to a broad range of Argentine society, an image more cosmetic than real.<sup>1</sup>

Among the play's principal achievements is its portrayal of post-Peronist fragmentation and antagonism on both structural and substantive levels. The authors dramatize this fragmentation and antagonism by dividing the play into twelve segments. They maintain internal unity through the songs of the passing marchers and through thematic and scenic parallelism. For example, there are five pairs of scenes corresponding to five sectors: union workers, politicians, families, the professional and business bourgeoisie, and the military. Common themes to these pairings include keeping the workers in their place, co-optation of one interest group by another, hypocrisy, materialism, communication breakdown, rhetorical formulae and violence. Each of the first five sector scenes has a corresponding counterpart in the second half of the play and each pair of sectors shares a unifying concept. Hence, both labor union scenes dramatize betrayal, the scene of the political left and that of the right each expose the lack of ideological cohesion and direction, the two families exhibit class prejudice and compromise of personal integrity, the professional and business sectors display crass materialism and empty gestures of national identity, and each military scene demonstrates brutal techniques of interrogation and enforced public compliance. The first scene of each pair stresses a verbal threat and warning and the second an act of violence.

#### THE RETURN OF PERÓN: "EL FANTASMA"

In the opening tenement room scene, "El fantasma," the first protagonist of *El avión negro* introduces the workers. Peronist Lucho plays the drum once used to call the workers into the streets, his drumsticks now covered by boxing gloves symbolizing the workers' muffled voices and their potential aggression. As Lucho evokes the "ghost" (Perón) of the political past, a group of players and singers (the *murga*) herald Perón's return. Recalling 1952 demonstration

chants (based on familiar soccer team slogans and rhythms) that reflected Perón's political stances, Lucho sets in motion the drama's premise.

The first chant, "Ni yanquis, ni marxistas, peronistas," directly refers to the nationalist "third" position claimed by Perón between capitalism and communism. The second chant, "Los curas al convento," conveys the eventual antagonism between Perón and the Catholic Church. In his play for power in 1945, Perón originally promoted the Church's role in public education. After the Church became critical of his political positions, however, he ended this Church involvement. The final chant, "Mañana es San Perón, que trabaje el patrón," refers to the 1945 attempt to depose Juan Perón from his three government posts. His brief jailing at that time brought on the first major pro-Perón mass demonstration by labor on October 17, 1945. As Labor Minister, he had declared October 17 a national holiday with full pay. After his release, the paid holiday was upheld and the date became known popularly as El Día de San Juan. The drum and chants in this first scene create a ritual air evoking the popular mass rites once rendered in grateful homage to "San Perón."

Lucho discusses fifteen years of Peronist isolation and notes the growing restlessness of the young. He alludes here to the militant groups of the late 1960s and 1970 who incited riots, organized demonstrations and strikes, and engaged in acts of subversion and terrorism which culminated in the nationwide strikes and violence of the 1969 Cordobazo protesting Onganía's repression.<sup>2</sup>

The stage suddenly darkens, leaving a single spotlight on Lucho as workers emerge from the shadows to join him, symbolically escaping their marginal place in society as they leave the tenements and move into the streets. There they will pass by the windows of the nonproletarian sectors in the following scenes, remaining off-stage, however, until the play's end. Thus, the workers of the current historical moment join those of the former Peronist movement as the lights symbolically destroy the separating walls between them. The voiceless workers must rely on the former Peronist movement's syndicalist structures (i.e., the Confederación General de Trabajadores, CGT) to have a recognized political voice, but it is posited that such an alliance will be an abortive solution.

What is begun in this opening scene as a three-level temporal weaving between the actual present, the imagined present (Lucho and Perón), and the recollected historical past, ends in a synthesis of past, present and future, of the real and the imagined. The playwrights project present historical fantasy on past historical reality and question the viability of imposing past socio-political structures (Peronism) on the present.

Within this political context of past and present, the playwrights further structure the scene's political content. The separation between the present proletarian masses (the neighbors) and the romanticized former Peronists (Lucho) is introduced implicitly, both in the thematic antagonism between them as the workers initially bang on the walls to protest Lucho's drum and in their structural separation by the tenement walls. The allusion, subtle and somewhat vague at first, later becomes clearer and explicit. The opening scene, then, introduces the oppositional or dialectical theme and structure

between “el pueblo” and “los otros,” between the Peronists and Perón, and between the old guard and the contemporary Peronists.

#### THE WORKERS’ FIVE SONGS

The collective song that separates the initial scene from the rest of the play, and at the same time provides thematic and structural unity is the “Canción del nuevo 17,” a declaration of intent to celebrate San Perón’s return in “orderly” procession to the Plaza de Mayo, to bathe in its fountains. Tomorrow the oligarchy—the bosses—will work: “trabajaré el patrón.” The song suggests a cleansing ceremony of renewal, a common man’s eucharist.

The second song, “Esta marcha se formó,” implicitly warns the upper classes that the Argentine people’s past silence reflects neither stupidity nor apathy. Whereas the first song declares a celebratory intent over Perón’s return, affirms the workers’ identity, and conveys the light farcical humor of the first three scenes, the second song explains their motives for demonstrating: hunger, suffering, broken promises, resentment, quarrels, and physical abuse. Their limits have been reached.

The overtly defiant third song, “Éste es el pueblo,” reasserts the workers’ identity and insistence on being heard and directly threatens the oligarchy. The song’s strident tone highlights the important political point briefly alluded to the opening scene: “Hemos salido por el regreso,/ pero con eso, no va alcanzar.”<sup>3</sup> Uniting in march for the return of Perón will not be enough to meet the needs and demands of the workers. Two points of interest emerge. Perón is not directly mentioned in this or the other songs. These singers know that Perón’s return will not resolve the plight of the contemporary Peronists. The playwrights reject the viability of such a solution and amplify the point in the fourth song. Hence, it is not by chance that the workers appear in *El avión negro* primarily through song and voice. It is their suppressed voice which is the ultimate focus of the drama. Additionally, the total absence of humor or satire in any of the songs underscores the serious nature of their dramatic message.

The fourth song, “Aquí están, éstos son,” reemphasizes worker solidarity but defines the true *descamisado* as having nothing to hope for and, so, nothing to lose. They separate their movement from non-proletarian sectors and reject coalition:

No queremos a los otros  
Ni nos quieren a nosotros.  
.....  
Aquí están, éstos son,  
los que vienen del montón. (94)

The separation between the marginalized workers off-stage and the sectors on stage becomes absolute. Further separation, this time between the former and contemporary Peronists, crystallizes Perón’s absence and exclusion from the workers’ march: “Aunque muchos dicen ser/ sólo son los que aquí ven.” (94)

The songs, like the scenes, build toward violence. The fifth song, “Canción del Chupe-Chupe,” foretells the *descamisados*’ coming revenge:

Los palos que nos pegan  
 los tienen que pagar.  
 . . . . .  
 Las balas que nos tiran  
 las van a lamentar.  
 . . . . .  
 Los muertos que nos matan  
 los tienen que pagar.  
 . . . . .  
 El odio que cultivan  
 Lo van a cosechar. (110-111)

The difference in tone between the first song sung on a lighted stage with a festive air and “Canción del Chupe-Chupe” sung on a darkened stage with a pulsing threat dramatically measures the emotional distance traveled by the workers passing the many windows outside and conveys the increasing tension.

UNIONS: “COMPAÑERO” AND “COMPAÑERO 2”

Representative workers appear on the stage once in the initial scene of *El avión negro* with Lucho and again in “Compañero” and “Compañero 2.” In each case, they are shown cut off from all avenues of political voice, even from that of their leadership. “Compañero” exposes a corrupted union leadership. The union boss adjusts his behavior according to the class of those who enter his office. He hypocritically doffs his jacket for his *descamisado* role when a member of the rank and file appears to request he lead the members to the Plaza de Mayo in the pro-Perón demonstration. The leader is incredulous and frightened by the report of Perón’s return, but feigns support.

The paired scene, “Compañero 2,” again satirizes the union bureaucracy’s alienation and betrayal of its membership. A group of workers awaits its representative, *el compañero*, to lead their march to the Plaza de Mayo. He detains them, however, with rhetoric designed to persuade them to return home and to let him deal with the oligarchy. The group hesitates until the *murga* enters led by Lucho. The marchers surge over *el compañero*, ignoring his false rhetoric and feigned enthusiasm.

Both union leaders pretend worker support when in fact they fear being called into account and relinquishing political power to the old Peronist order. Each causes communication breakdowns. The “Compañero” boss initially misinterprets and glosses over the union member’s explanation of his visit. Similarly, in “Compañero 2,” rhetoric drives a wedge of distrust between the second leader and the rank and file. Verbal deception results when Perón’s unexpected and unwanted return threatens the union bureaucracy’s new status quo.

Following the Peronist Party’s proscription, Argentina’s union bureaucracy had two functional roles: professional negotiation of wages and working conditions and political representation of the working class.<sup>4</sup> The roles frequently conflicted due to political compromises necessary to achieve coalitions that would maintain union participation in national political power.

Additionally, by 1970, the CGT bureaucracy had divided over the military's appointment of Kreiger Vasena as Labor Minister. Vasena was accused of being anti-labor since he had proscribed the CGT's traditional bargaining and negotiating powers in 1967.

The dual role of the union bureaucracy as professional negotiator and politician, the internal fragmentation within the CGT, and the alienation between union leadership and membership are the targets of satire in both *compañero* scenes. The playwrights argue that Peronism's organizational and leadership base has changed over the years. Now corrupted and alienated from its constituency, it will not hasten to embrace the returned leader. Betrayed from within, the workers will rally despite their corrupt union and will reject coalition with others. The workers in both "Compañero" scenes symbolically separate from their leaders to join the workers singing off-stage in the streets.

#### BOURGEOIS PROFESSIONALS: "EL INVERSOR" AND "EL DENTISTA"

"El inversor" and "El dentista" dramatize the bourgeois professionals' problems of cultural identity and excessive materialism. In both scenes the humor centers on communication breakdowns. "El inversor" depends primarily on verbal farce, "El dentista" on both verbal and physical farce. The entrepreneur's strategy involves economic alliance with North American business. The dentist's involves cultural alliance with North American class and material values. The linguistic breakdown and stereotyped cultural myths, taken seriously, provide structural and thematic vehicles of the verbal satire. The political context derives from isolation (national and cultural), capitalist dependency, and the Argentine bourgeoisie's betrayal of nationalism.

Entrepreneur González awaits a potential investor in "El inversor" while listening to a tape designed to teach business English. The tape transmits incorrect and exaggerated information. The humor arises from a plausible lack of linguistic and cultural understanding. Physical and verbal farce ensue to such a degree that when Porter, the investor, enters, González' ridiculous anglicized Spanish and his Hollywood self-portrayal convince Porter of Argentine instability and an unsafe business climate.

The scene reacts to the growth of foreign investment initiated by Perón in the 1950s as a stop-gap economic measure but later institutionalized as a major pillar of economic policy under both military and civilian regimes. Perón had insisted on a state-run economy and nationalist economic independence. As Argentina's economic situation worsened in the 1950s, however, he cast aside his imperialist aspirations for Latin American hegemony. In addition to encouraging foreign investment, he granted controversial oil drilling rights to United States firms. This act ultimately contributed to the alienation of both the business community and the military and provoked the fatal 1955 coup. The parodic scene of the desperate and hypocritical González parallels Perón's opportunistic policy reversal and betrayal of his nationalistic rhetoric.

The initial humor of the corresponding "El dentista" scene results from the vain gestures and muffled protests of the female patient as she is subjected

to a combination of novocaine and the dentist's refusal to heed her obvious pain and protest. When workers mass outside his window, the dentist reacts with alarm and incredulity, whereas the patient's gestures of enthusiasm show her desire to join in. A litany of the dentist's accumulated and now threatened material goods follows. When the patient dies, the horrified dentist blames the marchers. As his brutal actions reduce him to an emotional bestiality, his claim to be civilized and cultured becomes acutely ironic.

This scene introduces violence and the grotesque into the play, not only violence between characters but social violence implicit in material dependency.<sup>5</sup> The latter, if excessive, dehumanizes and bestializes the individual, as evidenced by the dentist. The verbal communication failure, exaggerated by the patient's physical inability to articulate her needs, is symptomatic of social breakdown rooted in fear of loss of material goods and comforts.

#### POLITICIANS: "COMITÉ CENTRAL" AND "LOS GORILAS"

The playwrights's satire of political parties lampoons the extremes of the political spectrum. "Comité central" attacks the Communist left, and "Los gorilas" the military right. Both extremes are characterized as anachronistic and lacking ideological direction.

"Comité central" humor rests in the verbal farce engaged in by its three aged immigrant Communists, Ruso, Tano and Gallego, each representing a distinct ethnic, linguistic and ideological group. The trio aspires to issue a political statement in response to the street demonstration. Their ethnic and ideological diversity inhibits the task at hand and emphasizes their lack of cooperation. The three, hopelessly out of touch with their historical moment, wander off into a polemic on the proletariat's relationship to the rural peasantry, all of which causes a round of good Marxist self-criticism. They condemn Nazis (Ruso's position), fascism (Tano's position), and Francoism (Gallego's position). Ultimately, their call for unity includes all sectors and lacks any ideological basis whatsoever.

Thus the authors dramatize a micro-history of Argentina's ineffective Communist Party. The Party had attempted to superimpose European socio-economic development on a non-analogous Argentine class structure. It had fragmented over whether to work through its own organization or to follow the Third International's guidelines to align and work through bourgeois coalitions and political fronts. It further isolated itself by its emphasis on urban over rural sectors. Additionally, because anarchist, socialist and Marxist ideologies were associated with immigrants, there was a tendency for second generation Argentine families to reject them as "foreign" and therefore incompatible with aspirations toward a nationalist Argentine identity. Thus beleaguered by regional and ideological fragmentation and a "foreign" image, the Communist Party grew little in size or influence over the years. Consequently, by 1969, young Marxist extremists were organizing wings independent of the main party and dedicated to subversion and strike provocation in frequent cooperation with extremist Peronist movements. The "nonrevolutionary" and directionless image of the Argentine Communist Party's old guard is captured here through the ponderous and absurd

deliberations of the old men with their lack of unity, foreign ideologies, and anachronistic references.

“Los gorilas” similarly satirizes the extreme military right. Again, the protagonists are caricatures. There are two incapacitated old men and Rosato, who goosesteps and shadow boxes in the background. A young respectable and well-dressed immigrant, Rosato has been trained by one of the old men to fear for his job and to respond at command to “defender el lugar que ocupa” (84). He brutishly punches a life-size manikin of a typical *descamisado*, undergoing a self-bestialization reminiscent of the dentist’s.

The approaching sounds of the drum and the crowds send the three into battle readiness to protect traditions, industry, homes, credit, stocks, workers, servants, prostitutes, and all that is “lo nuestro.” In reality, the Argentine *gorilas* were commonly associated with an ultraconservative economic policy designed to protect their monopolistic business and banking interests.<sup>6</sup> A *gorila* or *colorado* is one who believes in “the forcible institution of Liberalism, who is extremely anti-Peronist, and is willing to see the military enforce political measures on the nation. . . .”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, “lo nuestro” has direct historical reference.

“Los gorilas” synthesizes all forms of the play’s humor: farce, caricature, black humor, the grotesque, and the absurd. It brings to a climax the gradual build-up to violence as a political response to the demonstrators and to Perón’s return. Violence used to maintain order and national values later characterizes both interrogation scenes as well.

#### RHETORIC: “LAS PERCHAS”

“Las perchas” stands alone unpaired and culminates all verbal deception so far exposed by the play. It serves as a transition between the verbal scenes and the two explicit violent action scenes that end *El avión negro*. This scene satirizes sector rhetoric and verbal hypocrisy by the Church, the Armed Forces, business and the bureaucracy, and the man-on-the-street, as each makes public statements in response to the demonstrators. The same actor plays all five parts, peeling off identifying uniforms in turn, and stereotyping each sector through a satire of the rhetoric with which it is commonly associated. The bishop questions and posits, manipulating through brotherly suggestions to look beyond earthly factionalism to life after death. In contrast, the general asserts, directs and warns authoritatively, demanding worker order, responsibility and trust to realize a national moral and material greatness. The businessman formulates long sentences of parenthetical and serialized clauses that assert the economic pie must be enlarged before it can be redistributed. The bureaucratic technocrat confuses through one long, convoluted, conditioned, jargonized sentence about production costs. The man-on-the-street, naked literally in his ignorance, queries in lower-class *porteño* slang why everyone is complaining since cars and T.V.s abound.

The worker is thus asked to hope, obey, wait, believe, and ignore through each sector’s rhetorical formula. In none of the five statements is a direct solution and response made to the workers’ demands. Words serve only to placate (Church), to admonish (Military), to deceive (Business), to confuse (Bureaucracy), and to avoid (Man-on-the-street), but they do not solve or

resolve. Out of the despair of this cumulative failure of the whole range of rhetoric come the final scenes of violence.

BOURGEOIS FAMILIES: "LA SIRVIENTA" AND "LA FAMILIA"

The play's last two scenes are the second halves of the pairs dedicated to the family and military sectors. "La sirvienta" and "La familia" present two upper middle-class families crippled by class antagonism and hypocrisy. Each feels alarmed and repulsed by the presence of the workers yet initially ingratiates itself before them despite feelings of superiority and disdain. Each ends, however, behind doors and windows shut against the masses. The husbands sacrifice personal and family integrity to protect material wealth.

The first couple, fearful their maid will condemn them as anti-Peronist and thus jeopardize the husband's government career, curry her friendship. The husband's incredulity over his wife's reports of the demonstration and his exaggerated reactions add to the humorous tone of the scene.

In contrast, the eleventh scene, "La familia," is deadly serious. It opens with the theme of threatened violence as the parents refuse to define the meaning of the marchers' refrain, "cinco por uno," which their curious daughter repeats and questions. The phrase refers to a threat issued by Perón in 1955 while fomenting crowd violence in an effort to organize labor militias to counter his military critics:

Hemos de restablecer la tranquilidad, entre el gobierno, sus instituciones y el pueblo, por la acción del gobierno, de las instituciones y del pueblo mismo. La consigna para todo peronista . . . es contestar a una acción violenta con otra más violenta. ¡Y cuando uno de los nuestros caiga, caerán cinco de los de ellos!<sup>8</sup>

This statement followed a failed military coup against Perón which caused several hundred civilian deaths in the Plaza de Mayo.<sup>9</sup> The "cinco por uno" speech alarmed the military and the anti-Perón liberal and Catholic bourgeoisie and helped to galvanize the non-committed in the final coup against Perón.

The violence becomes overt as the impotent father allows his screaming daughter to be dragged off, his nervously compliant wife to be led upstairs, and his homosexual son to be pulled outside by derisive demonstrators. Effective only in defense of his material possessions, the father rushes to lock up the house. His total compromise with the physical and moral safety of his family to appease the demonstrators and his lack of action are more dehumanized and brutal than is the suggested violence of the demonstrators.

The scene presents the bourgeoisie in dialogue with the workers, thematically through conversations and structurally through the workers' first physical appearance on the stage as a group in direct contact with the oligarchy. The "cooperation" between the two classes is based on the threat of potential violence. (Egón Wolff's *Los invasores* instantly comes to mind.) One recalls how Perón pitted workers and oligarchy against each other from 1943 to 1955; any Peronist "dialogue" of the past between the sectors had produced only limited benefits for the workers. The implication is that the same result will hold in the contemporary moment. Thus, "La familia"

depicts what the third and fourth songs before it implied: although the workers may appear to support Perón and cooperate in Peronism's dialogue with the oligarchy, separation between the workers, Peronism and its bedfellows is fundamental to the political reality of Argentina in the 1970s.

THE MILITARY: "EL ORDEN" AND "LAS TORTURAS"

In the play's two interrogation scenes, the non-uniformed interrogators Funcionario, Bueno and Malo work for the central state authority. Since most of the governments between 1955 and 1970 were military, it seems appropriate to assume the three belong to the latter.

The first interrogation scene, "El orden," explores ideological commitment. The interrogator distorts the accused's explanation of his presence among the marchers, which, apparently, happened by chance. Lack of logic in the order of the questions and accusations, contradictions and absurd leaps to false conclusions provide a source of humor, highlight the irony of the scene's title, and drive the accused to a confused desperation. Unwittingly, the man finds himself defending violence against repression, which the interrogator twists into support for the workers' violence. The interrogator's official clarification of current government policy is so qualified, it is rendered ideologically ambiguous: the government is "deeply" Christian but without "exaggeration," a proponent of international cooperation but within "limits," and a supporter of self-determination but in "certain cases" only. The final irony is that the accused is condemned for his "doubts."

The satiric reference in this scene emerges from the distorted logic and word games of entrapment. What was "imperialism" in one era became "cooperation" in the next, depending on the needs of the moment. For example, Perón's military had avowed staunch nationalism and anti-imperialism. In contrast, the Onganía military dictatorship considered law and order requisite for a stable investment climate and welcomed international investment "cooperation" to promote growth necessary for its own maintenance. The common worker was continuously required to reorient his political vocabulary.

"El orden" deals not only with verbal distortion but with psychological violence. Martin Esslin's analysis of the frequent use of psychological violence in modern theatre defines it as the manipulation of someone to make that individual go in a direction counter to his choice.<sup>10</sup> This definition describes the accused's dilemma in "El orden."

The second interrogation and final scene of *El avión negro*, "Las torturas," combines the absurd and the grotesque in a finale of violent psychological and physical abuse. The underlying and powerful seriousness of the dramatic action marks a sharp contrast with the first lightly comical scenes of the drama. Two men, Bueno and Malo, dressed accordingly in white and black, develop the theme of role-playing as each decides his part as either good or bad guy in the next "patient's" examination. This "patient" is the *descamisado* manikin from "Los gorilas," present here to be interrogated about his participation in the demonstration. Bueno treats him intimately and confidentially, using verbal pressure to solicit a voluntary confession. Malo treats him

harshly and physically to solicit a forced confession. Both approaches are psychologically manipulative and violent, according to Esslin's definition.

Echoing the themes of "La familia" and the fifth song, Bueno accuses the manikin of damaging and burning property, breaking into homes and violating women. With comic irony Bueno demands the manikin speak and warns it that "la fuerza bruta no conduce a nada . . ." (118) Of course, a manikin (the *descamisado*) deprived by definition of voice is powerless to respond to verbal or physical intimidation and force.

Class distinctions and fragmentation, only alluded to so far in this scene when Bueno addresses the manikin as "negro," are now physically symbolized and portrayed with the piece by piece dismemberment of the puppet figure.<sup>11</sup> With rhetorical frenzy, Bueno dismembers the "body" and rips out the heart. He speaks of one community where each stays in his assigned place executing his assigned function (like Rosato in "Los gorilas"). In the background, the drum swells in volume beating in concert with the heart held by Bueno, who avows that chaos, perversion, immortality, subversion, factionalism, insolence and violence will not be tolerated. The government will ensure peace, law, charity, love, faith and dialogue. Thematic threads of rhetoric, verbal breakdown, psychological manipulation, and physical brutality reach a grotesque level through Bueno's exaggeration and distortion as he loses control of his benign verbal role and becomes increasingly physical and violent. The scene combines the verbal manipulation of "El orden" and the physical brutalization of "Los gorilas." A blackout ends the play with the drumbeat at a deafening pitch, symbolizing the suppressed *descamisado* voice.

The satire of "Las torturas" depends on the audience's knowledge of the growing role of military regimes in Argentina and their concomitant progressive brutality and violence. Where verbal persuasion and deception through empty rhetoric ceased to have credibility, violence took over. Therefore, the final lines of "Las torturas" state the military's conception of its role as guardian of both material and spiritual order.

In 1964, General Onganía had outlined in the "Doctrina de West Point" the functions appropriate to the Armed Forces. They included the preservation of Christian spiritual and moral values, the guarantee of public order and internal peace, and the economic and social development of the nation in cooperation with civil authorities.<sup>12</sup> These doctrines were effected during his Presidency from 1966 to 1970, but the increasingly repressive nature of his government and worsening economic conditions so combined to exacerbate tensions between the military and the people, that in 1968 Onganía responded with a new policy, *comunitarismo solidarista*. It sought to establish public participation and unity through syndicalism and "dialogue" between the populace and the government.<sup>13</sup> The rightist nationalism characterizing his government rejected parliamentary and party systems and accepted functional or corporatist structures under an authoritarian State directing national life in the absence of the people's ability to self govern.<sup>14</sup>

The government as caretaker of the people's spiritual and moral welfare, as the sole organ of order and peace, and as a cooperative participant in government through dialogue with the nation's sectors are aspects of the Onganía regime clearly satirized in Bueno's "conversation" with the dis-

membered *descamisado*, symbol of the dehumanized and politically voiceless laboring masses. The cooperative dialogue opening the way for Perón's return is ferociously mocked in the final lines of the play: "no habrá otra salida que el diálogo. ¡Hay que hablar, hay que hablar!" (122)

Thus, by the play's end, the political and social fragmentation of Peronism and Argentina are laid bare, and the workers are shown to be undecieved by the Peronist myths and the promise of "dialogue." Denied true political voice and participation by existing labor unions, political parties, the military government, business, and the professions, the workers begin to mass, to march, to act, to emerge as a political voice put into action. After words have failed them and rhetoric betrayed them (shown in the first of each pair of scenes), they resort to violence (shown in the second of each pair.) The heartbeat of the worker-manikin survives the most extreme manipulation and torture as the play's final statement.

The dramatists were inspired by the events of the late 1960s, the spawning of many radical and militant factions, the wildfire spread of the Cordobazo, the strikes and terrorist acts. Unfortunately for Argentina's workers and for most of the rest of the population, the return of "el avión negro" in 1973 did not bring unity. History proved the dramatists right.

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## Notes

1. "Aclaraciones necesarias," *Tres obras de teatro* (Habana: Casa de las Américas, 1970) 11.
2. These groups included the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias, the Montaneros, the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo, and the Tercermundistas.
3. Roberto Cossa, et al., *El avión negro*, in *Tres obras de teatro* (Habana: Casa de las Américas, 1970) 40. Hereafter all quotations will be cited from this edition within the text in form (00).
4. Juan C. Portantiero, "Dominant Classes and Political Crisis in Argentina Today," *Latin American Perspectives* 1.3 (1974): 112.
5. For an enlightening analysis of the grotesque as a technique of humor and tension, see the Claudia Kaiser-Lenoir article, "El avión negro: de la realidad a la caricatura grotesca," *Latin American Theatre Review* 15.1 (1981): 5-11.
6. Kalman H. Silvert, *The Conflict Society: Reaction and Revolution in Latin America* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1968) 102.
8. Julio Godio, *La caída de Perón: de junio a septiembre de 1955* (Buenos Aires: Gránica Editor, 1973) 156.
9. Pedro Santos Martínez, *La nueva Argentina, 1946-1955* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones La Bastilla, 1976) 2: 243-264.
10. Martin Esslin, "Violence in Modern Drama," *Reflections: Essays on Modern Theatre* (New York: Doubleday, 1971) 171.
11. The derogatory term "negro" was used to refer to the immigrants who had populated the Argentine interior during the turn of the century and whose families then returned as unskilled laborers to Buenos Aires and other urban centers in the 1930s and 1940s. They exhibit racial and ethnic mixes with Indian and creole elements. See Marvin Goldwert, p. 98.
12. Carlos S. Fayt, *El político armado: dinámica del proceso político argentino (1960/1971)* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Pannedille, 1971) 26.
13. Fayt 159.
14. Fayt 55-61.