Laughing it Out: Strategies of Affectively Remembering Dictatorship in Griselda Gambaro's *Antígona furiosa*

Marin Laufenberg

Throughout Griselda Gambaro's *Antígona furiosa*, the protagonist laments the death of her brother, wailing and pleading for justice as she suffers immense psychological trauma. All the while, two onlookers (Antinoo and Corifeo), sitting casually on stage and observing the "mad" woman, refuse to take Antígona seriously, poking fun at her suffering, joking about her plight, and sometimes even involving the audience in merriment that revolves around a woman's trauma. This moment plays with the audience's emotional response, causing laughter and at the same time begging for reflection, ultimately showing how the complex blend of humor and trauma can shed new light on the legacy of the Argentine dictatorship. Susana Tarantuviez identifies as a key theme in Gambaro's theatre the "juegos perversos de poder" that illuminate perverse *games* of power on stage (114). This frequent combination of humor and darkness interacts with and communicates with the spectators, creating poignant dissonance and informing a part of the recovery and reconsideration of identity after the dictatorship in Argentina. I contend that the processing of recovery through troubled humor in the theatre can make a difference in the national reality outside of the theatre. Beyond proving the social functions of humor, I also analyze how humor can have a unique epistemological function, allowing the theatre audience to approach ways of creating knowledge about traumatic histories through an emotional lens.

Antígona furiosa was written by Griselda Gambaro in 1985-86 and was performed in Argentina for the first time in 1986, just a few years after Argentina's return to democracy.[1] Though democracy had been reestablished, the Argentine populace was by no means done dealing with what had come to pass during the dictatorship years. As Elizabeth Jelin observes, "El pasado dictatorial reciente es, sin embargo, una parte central del presente" (4). Jelin

goes on to point out that a multiplicity of memories coexist after a period of social trauma and to elevate the role that emotions play in preserving and passing on memories of trauma and violence, stating "Abordar la memoria involucra referirse a recuerdos y olvidos, narrativas y actos, silencios y gestos. Hay en juego saberes, pero también hay emociones" (17). In *Antígona furiosa,* Gambaro approaches the new and tenuous post-dictatorial period in Argentina by using humor to treat the normally somber and dark in a sometimes lightened and playful atmosphere as she remembers and dialogues with trauma on stage. The humor is dark, ironic, and biting, however, and makes the trauma that the audience observes difficult to wrestle with. Throughout *Antígona furiosa*, the potential for humor is cultivated; laughter peals on stage between characters and occasionally bursts out in the audience. It becomes apparent that humor in this theatre piece cannot be independent of an audience, but rather is born in this in-between space, involving and requiring the interaction of multiple people.[2]

Antígona furiosa is uniquely Argentine and at the same time an obvious contemporary adaptation of a classic. The influence of the Argentine *grotesco criollo* genre is of particular relevance to the comic element that ebbs and flows. The Argentine grotesque in both its older manifestations and in more contemporary interpretations has become thought of as a balance between the monstrous and the laughable, or "una relación de discrepancia entre lo risible y lo horroroso" (Roster 60). Frequently identified as an integral marker of cultural identity, the Argentine *grotesco* uses "los recursos cómicos como forma de cuestionamiento y acusación de todo un sistema cultural, social y político" (Kaiser-Lenoir 21), challenging and resisting the status quo or systems of power through a twisted poking of fun at current socio-political dilemmas. Juan Carlos Ghiano even goes so far as to state that "la tragicomedia [es] la forma más adecuada de visión porteña" (5). More than a mere manifestation of that which is *porteño*, the *grotesco criollo* speaks to an even deeper realm of identity, one of both constant construction and reevaluation of *argentinidad*.[3] It not only reflects identity, but is "una manera nuestra [. . .] de procesar la crisis, de hablar de nosotros, de reflexionar la identidad" (Mazziotti 94). Gambaro recycles and brings to the stage the *grotesco criollo* in her tragicomic work. She does so to dialogue through a recognized and familiar mode of theatrical *porteño* communication with her intended Argentine audience and also to both root and scaffold a sense of local identity.

Antígona furiosa addresses an Argentine audience and creates an emotionally engaging experience that alternately jumps on and off stage, ultimately

asking for reflection and questioning from those who participate in the theatre moment. Directed at an Argentine populace that has all too willingly turned a blind eye to the horror that occurred habitually during the dictatorship (the purposeful self-blinding described by Diana Taylor as "percepticide"), Gambaro selects a distinct route to call attention to a moment of the past that does not deserve to be nor relinquishes itself to be left in the past.[4] While employing a variety of techniques with the same end in mind of rousing spectating interest and investment, Gambaro's ultimate motive is to awaken a forgetful or passive citizenry enough to leave them pondering their role as a part of a community that has suffered a deep and unfinished trauma and to spur on their re-envisioning of how the trauma of dictatorship shall be remembered. Gambaro foments these mental changes in her audience by embedding this piece with metatheatricality and layers of interaction between those who watch and those who are watched. The live presentation of the piece creates an intimate relationship between the presentation and those who are watching and who thereby participate, playing a necessary role as watchers, in the production of the play. I propose a nuanced version of Augusto Boal's spect-actor: in this new iteration, a spect-actor is one who interacts affectively with the stage as a reality instead of one who undertakes physical intervention and interaction with the stage space. Gambaro plays with her audience, drawing them in close only to startle them into awareness, incorporating humor that depends on both the spectators and those who are observed. That is to say, this interaction intimately involves the audience and the characters on stage. To understand why Gambaro mixes trauma and humor and the ultimate success of this strategy in engaging meaningfully with spectators, I will explore the audience's affective processing of the humorous moments on stage, the role of the buffoon in Argentine tradition and as interpreted here, the use of metatheatrical moments, and the creation of humor through parody.

Referring to the shocks of World War I, Susan Sontag observes that this conflict "seemed to many to have exceeded the capacity for words to describe" (25). She notes that a journalist for *The New York Times* even commented that "[t]he war has used up words" (25). This feeling of incomprehensibility, indescribability, or inability to be artistically represented haunts nearly every attempt to convey trauma.[5] Perhaps even the most accurate and productive representation of trauma demonstrates "not only the immeasurability of the loss, but the imperfect structure of memory itself" (Patraka 127). Some might argue for the primacy of one genre of representation, championing one form of art as more capable of encompassing and transmitting the experience of

trauma. Although these are hard claims to make and prove, it is important to simply acknowledge the *difficulty* of communicating trauma, both for firsthand sufferers and for those trying to artistically communicate their own stories or the stories of others.[6] Theatre's advantage is that it takes a multidirectional approach to representation. Through a combination of dialogue, sound effects, musicality, corporality, lighting, and other strategies of communication, theatre has advantages over more uniform or one-dimensional forms of art that may try to depict or communicate trauma. Here for example, theatre has the potential to achieve affective responses from the audience by portraying humor on stage and setting up the possibility for the audience to react to that same humor.

In the case of Gambaro's *Antígona furiosa*, humor is created through the interaction between the watchers and the watched, or layers of what I deem the "outer spectators," "inner spectators," and the "object of spectacle." Two groups constitute watchers: the audience that gathers to watch this theatrical production and, inside the piece itself, the two characters Antinoo and Corifeo, who look on towards the character of Antígona. These two "inner spectators" capture an affective state that fills what would otherwise be a void, a space of nothing more than incomprehensibility and indescribability. Gambaro constructs layers of spectatorship through a continuous metatheatrical tactic that places Antinoo and Corifeo in the position of constantly watching and commentating on the actions of the innermost "object of spectacle," Antígona.[7] This play includes metatheatre that allows the "outer spectators," or the traditional, gathered theatre audience, to reflect on the action that they are taking part in: observing others who in turn are observing the suffering of another. The audience becomes more conscious of their role in the performance and thus more conscious of the general state of watching. A cortazaresque trick seems to be played on the audience by the playwright, as she disallows observers to feel comfortable or in control of the situation. Meanwhile, the audience is constantly aware of playing a part, or of forming another layer in the drama unfolding.[8]

The characters that I deem the "inner spectators" in this play—those in the middle layer, sandwiched between "outer spectators" (audience) and "object of spectacle" (Antígona)—are Antinoo and Corifeo. In this work, however, there are two sets of watchers. The outer audience surrounds the stage in a circular fashion and forms the final layer of observing all on stage, while Antinoo and Corifeo form the inner layer of watchers that observe Antígona throughout the work. As commentators and spectators, Antinoo and Corifeo

are a principle alteration that Gambaro incorporates in her new telling of the ancient Greek tale. They add the possibility for commentary and audience identification (or rejection of identification) with characters that represent the passive Argentine populace during the years of military dictatorship. These commentators both engage in laughter, which the audience then observes and interprets, and ultimately allow humor to unfold and do its work within the theatre space. These typical *porteños* are having coffee in an outdoor café when they are interrupted by Antígona, who unhangs herself, literally becoming undead, in order to tell her story posthumously. In other words, Corifeo and Antinoo represent the audience members themselves, distilled into two individual men.

While Corifeo and Antinoo play several roles during the work—for example, Corifeo sometimes uses a sort of shell that functions like armor to portray the despotic king Creonte—, their primary role is that of two everyday citizens, commenting on the plight of the suffering Antígona, who has been deprived of the right to bury the body of her dead brother Polinices. While she wails, they sip their coffee; while she wrestles with the heart-wrenching and prohibited duty of burying her brother, they mock and torment her and call out to the absent waiter to bring them another drink so they can continue with their day of leisure. They portray a sense of being *porteño* in those everyday activities that form an integral part of life in the city of Buenos Aires while also playing the role of watcher of fellow humans. After all, the café-goer is a watcher by nature.

Nearly every depiction of Antinoo and Corifeo enjoying themselves in mundane activities is juxtaposed with the traumatic suffering of Antígona on the same stage. Sometimes they deliberately mock her, while other times they seem not to notice her at all, choosing to ignore her while they enjoy themselves. The incongruity of their behavior, which might result in a disbelieving guffaw from the audience, reflects a community of Argentines that is portrayed as disinterested, uninvolved, or unwilling to participate throughout the dictatorship.[9] It perhaps even suggests an unwillingness to deal with mourning in the post-dictatorship, which the Ley de Punto Final exemplifies. The contrast between those who are purposefully ignorant of horror (Antinoo and Corifeo) and the reality of suffering and horror (depicted viscerally by the corporal acts of mourning undertaken by Antígona throughout the piece) also provokes moments of humor that highlight the incongruity of carrying on with daily life in the midst of trauma.

One theory of humor that may help us to understand the moments that elicit laughter in the audience of *Antígona furiosa* is often dubbed the Theory of Incongruity. While many philosophers and academics have reworded and approached this idea from slightly differing angles—for example, Søren Kierkegaard, Immanuel Kant, Thomas Hobbes, and, very recently, Peter McGraw—, the general theory can be summed up in the following way: Humor is born when the unexpected and the expected collide, or as John Morreall explains, "Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing" (*The Philosophy* 323). Many of the moments that cause laughter do so precisely because they interrupt the somber mood of (theatrical) tragedy (*Antigone*) and trauma (military dictatorship) with unexpected and incongruous elements. Additionally, because the audience is familiar with both Sophocles' original text and the most recent Argentine dictatorship, it experiences another kind of incongruity. This kind of incongruity, which places together unexpected planes of referentiality, is better known as parody or, as Linda Hutcheon refers to it, "repetition with critical distance which marks difference rather than similarity" (6). Parody is naturally linked to humor as well, or as Margaret Rose says, parody is, "a comic dislocation, through its contrast with the new and foreign context" (21), which brings about a new form of understanding through playful reinterpretation.

One incongruous component of this piece can be seen in the double role played by Antinoo and Corifeo. They passively and easily watch the torment that Antígona undergoes, yet their watching is actually an antagonizing act. Watching can be violent, depending on the words or actions that accompany it and the passive or active nature that one adopts.[10] Passivity here is an extension of the violence done to Antígona, and in a way, the audience's passive "outer spectating" can be seen as violent, too. Though Antinoo and Corifeo certainly play the role of Antígona's victimizers, prolonging her suffering, this frequently vacillates and at times blends with the light-hearted role of buffoons. The two buffoon-victimizers psychologically deepen her pain by belittling, ignoring, and making light of it, or even by embodying the aggressor; Corifeo takes on the role of Creonte when donning the shell-like covering. Antígona is able to perceive and hear her tormentors throughout the piece, though she exhibits a disconnectedness and often does not engage with them, but rather carries on mourning and maintaining a degree of self-defense after all that she has suffered.

Regardless of their perpetuation of inflicted violence, many of Antinoo's and Corifeo's spoken lines place them in dialogue with the traditional role

of the *bufón*, or jokester.[11] Here, Corifeo not only mocks Antígona, belittling her wails and refusing to acknowledge her pain, but also acts the role of the slightly dim-witted, light-hearted buffoon who exaggerates and ridicules for easy laughs: "¡No oí nada! ¡No oí nada! (*Canta tartamudeando, pero con un fondo de burla.*) No hay . . . lamentos ba-ba-ba-jo el cielo, ¡ta-ta-tán sereno!" (201). However, this sort of *bufón* is not innocent nor does he provide a lighthearted slapstick sort of humor. Instead, he exhibits the qualities of the "excessive buffoon," or pain-inflicting, dark jokester.[12]

Between the stage directions, which indicate their mockery through smiles, laughter, word play, and exaggerated mimicry of Antígona, Antinoo and Corifeo are recognizable as the fools, albeit cruel, unlikable ones. They scatter throughout the play a humor that ranges from truly dark to light and off the cuff, which nearly always results in awkward, out-of-place laughter from one of them. The audience is meant to laugh, and to join in with Antinoo and Corifeo, when the stage notes indicate laughter between the two *porteños*, who also represent the chorus members of the Greek tragedy. They model behavior for the audience. And while for the audience much of the humor they perceive stems from incongruity, the laughter of the characters Corifeo and Antinoo as they mock and ridicule Antígona can be explained by the Superiority Theory.

Perhaps the oldest theory on how laughter commences, the Superiority Theory proposes that "laughter is an expression of a person's feelings of superiority over other people" (Morreall, *Taking Laughter* 4). Plato claimed that as we enjoy laughing at others, "our laughter involves a certain malice toward them, and malice is a harmful thing" (Morreall 4). Thus, for Plato, laughter is not a positive response to the experience of emotional pleasure, but rather an experience to be avoided, because "in humor we lose control of our rational faculties, and become silly, irresponsible, and less truly human" (Morreall, *Taking Laughter* 99). In *Antígona furiosa*, the audience may momentarily lose control of themselves and react instinctively to the affective atmosphere by smiling or laughing along with the buffoons' jokes at the expense of Antígona. However, *unlike* the two buffoons on stage, as the outer spectators, audience members also reflect on their own laughter and experience another emotional layer, a questioning of having indulged in this humor. Here, laughter serves as a great point for contemplation and allows for an opening. Though it is not likely to be processed to such a degree in the moment of the performance, this crack in what might be dubbed "the official story" (in other words, the most well-known or widely accepted version,

which is the version that was carefully crafted by the Junta) of the years of dictatorship allows the audience to consider the following steps: preserving the memory of those tortured or disappeared, re-assessing national identity, and assuring that perpetrators of crimes do not go unpunished in the real world. As Annette Wannamaker asserts, this play "subvert[s] the goal of the military government to permanently erase 'subversive elements' from the collective memory of the social body" (81).[13] One of the many ways in which this piece is subversive is through its use of humor and laughter, which causes a rupture in the assumption of "the truth" of the years of dictatorship and allows for further questioning, reevaluation, and growth as an Argentine community.

Antígona furiosa orchestrates subversion by re-inserting possibly forgotten or ignored elements of torture and violence into the collective consciousness with affectively entangled scenes. The audience is unlikely to soon forget the performance moment. Gambaro's works often ask a lot of the audience and disallow its passivity. Fernando de Toro contends that "el espectador tiene, en este tipo de teatro, una actividad productiva enfatizada, constantemente confrontada a la denegación" and continues to describe the spectator involvement, saying, "en el caso del teatro de Gambaro, las estrategias pragmáticas no van destinadas a guiar o a orientar la percepción y la actividad receptiva, sino a desorientarlas." That is to say, there is no single way that Gambaro would like her work interpreted. Rather, she hopes that the audience will become so active in processing the work that the outcome will lead to further reflection and, ideally, action outside of the theatre space. De Toro furthermore observes that "Gambaro con su teatro produce un espejo espectatorial, pero un espejo grotesco, deformado, donde el mirarse produce horror." Involving humor in the transmission of these scenes plays an integral role in delivering moments that require audience reaction, evaluation, and judgment of not simply information, but emotionally charged information. As Peter McDougall states, "It is well recognized that almost any emotional excitement increases the suggestibility of the individual" (59). Thus, heightened emotions allow for a greater impact of the material linked to those emotions. Here, Gambaro opens her audience up to the suggestibility of real crimes perpetrated and not brought to justice in the period of military dictatorship. Rather than telling viewers what to think or feel in a didactic way, Gambaro allows them to process and feel for themselves. Perhaps more striking to the audience is her suggestion that the citizenry of Argentina may still have a responsibility and an active role to fill in the healing of a nation and the reevaluation of national identity. Or, as Jill Lane astutely notes, "The power of a corrupt state, Gambaro implies,

always relies on some measure of public complicity or acquiescence" (521). After the performance, it is up to each member of the audience to decide how to fulfill those feelings of being summoned to act.

While Antinoo and Corifeo take on a role as instigators of an affective transmission with an audience dealing with the trauma set before it, the two *bufones* are not the focus of the piece. The audience's interaction with them allows for emotional development and permits it to play a principal role as emotional spect-actors, taking its place as the real Argentine citizenry. Marguerite Feitlowitz proposes that by including these two characters for the audience to watch and understand as a theatrical representation of themselves, Gambaro "avoids the torturer-as-most-fascinating-character pitfall through demystification, buffoonery, and ridicule" (4). Gambaro sidesteps blind, passive identification with the tormentors, while allowing for an evaluative interaction with them. That is to say, the audience does not merely accept these cruelly comic onlookers, even if they do cause audience laughter. The spectators might laugh or smile and then distance themselves to evaluate. Built-in and intended moments of reflection in the form of laughter followed by discomfort are prompted by pauses after humorous lines. At other times, the text indicates laughter by Corifeo and Antinoo with stage directions that interpret the emotional delivery of lines. In one such moment, Antígona attempts to explain the source of her suffering to Corifeo, Antinoo, and the general audience. As she states somberly that she will not marry Hemón, Corifeo responds cheekily, "¿Y para cuándo el casorio?" This is followed by the stage notes "(*Ríe, muy divertido, y Antinoo lo acompaña después de un segundo. Se pegan codazos y palmadas*)" (199). After Antígona's serious reflection, the two inner spectators jokingly lament the absence of a wedding night instead of trying to understand what tragedy could have come to pass to inhibit Antígona and Hemón's wedding. In essence, a primary role of Antinoo and Corifeo is to illustrate the passivity of the everyday Argentinian citizen during the military dictatorship, a passivity that is exaggerated to the point of seeming violent or cruel. They also illustrate the feeling of looking away, of refusing to recognize the pain of the families that continue to search for their disappeared family members, while at the same time illustrating a sense of putting the past behind us, a sort of "it's over and done with, so what?" attitude. For instance, one episode in the café plays out:

> CORIFEO *(vuelve a la mesa)*. Siempre las riñas, los combates y la sangre. Y la loca esa que debiera estar ahorcada. Recordar muertes es como batir agua en el mortero: no aprovecha. Mozo, ¡otro café!

ANTINOO *(tímido)*. No hace mucho que pasó.
CORIFEO *(feroz)*. Pasó. ¡Y a otra cosa!
ANTINOO. ¿Por qué no celebramos?
CORIFEO *(oscuro)*. ¿Qué hay para celebrar?
ANTINOO *(se ilumina, tonto)*. ¡Que la paz haya vuelto! (200)

This scene references in an indirect way a parodic version of an attitude held by society after the dictatorship ended: "Let's move on." Although some members of Argentine society may have been calling for justice, crying out to be heard and to find some peace by locating the bodies or something tangible left from their disappeared loved ones, others may have simply turned away, calling those seeking closure "locas," like many called the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo. An audience member might not so radically identify with Antígona's plight, or be drawn into her suffering, if not for the extreme juxtaposition with her fellow citizens, Antinoo and Corifeo. The truly cruel buffoons laugh at her agony, and according to Jill Lane, even "engage and taunt the enraged Antigone," a technique directly linked to the *grotesco criollo* tradition (521).[14] This "comedic torture" engages the audience in empathy and leads it to feel even more appalled than if it had simply witnessed again the telling of the story of Sophocles. In this extreme juxtaposition, the audience sometimes voices its disapproval in the form of "unlaughter," a term coined by Michael Billig to describe "a display of not laughing when laughter might otherwise be expected, hoped for or demanded" (192). In this way, the addition of Corifeo and Antinoo is paramount to both the "Argentinization" of the play and to the revised way of focusing on spectatorship in Gambaro's work.

Antinoo and Corifeo also at times simply ignore or turn away from Antígona's emotional pain and seemingly meaningless actions. This attitude of "if it can't be seen, it must not exist" is discernible when Antígona scrapes dirt over the corpse of Polinices, represented by a shroud or cloth on stage, covers him with her own body, and rhythmically pounds two stones together, as if carrying out funerary rites. In response, Corifeo remarks, "Mejor no ver actos que no deben hacerse" (202). This refusal to be a spectator or a witness is depicted as Corifeo chooses actively *not* to see, bear witness to, or intervene in a situation while still having some awareness that it is occurring. The audience in turn is unavoidably involved, just as the Argentine citizens living under dictatorship were. Moreover, the audience must also unknowingly access affective, instinctual responses to the scenes on stage. The audience's laughter, observance of laughter, or utter lack of laughter

(unlaughter) helps them to locate their own position in response to the trauma experienced by Antígona.

The "bystander effect" is a term coined in the field of psychology to describe the violence exacerbated by non-intervention of potential witnesses. It can be meaningfully applied to the context of the Argentine dictatorship in this play, showing the audience that individual perpetrators of violent acts (the military, generals, soldiers, police, etc.) are not the sole forces responsible for traumas inflicted upon the country.[15] In general, fissures, crises, or pressures that entirely permeate a society seem to be the underlying causes for passively watching suffering or violent acts . As previously mentioned, Diana Taylor's term "percepticide" captures the specific hue of non-interventional bystanding that occurred habitually and pervasively throughout the Argentine dictatorship. In *Disappearing Acts*, Taylor describes this passive form of violence, acknowledging "The triumph of the atrocity was that it forced people to look away—a gesture that undid their sense of personal and communal cohesion even as it seemed to bracket them from their volatile surroundings [. . .] the self-blinding of the general population" (123). By representing this feeling on stage, the two passive watchers display a disintegration of the collective national fabric during the years of dictatorship that Gambaro critiques, a fabric that she urges the audience to reconsider and take steps towards reconstructing.

Sometimes when witnesses or spectators to the violence during the years of the military dictatorship chose to look away, even though violence was happening under their very noses, a common-held belief was that the victims "must have done something wrong if they're being detained or taken away," or in Spanish, "Por algo será." This attitude is reflected by the two inner spectators/buffoons as well, as Corifeo and Antinoo dialogue with Antígona about her punishment. The emotional atmosphere created between the buffoons is too lighthearted, exaggeratedly mocking what Antígona obviously must have done wrong. Because the buffoons blame her, in an over-the-top display of condemnation, the audience scrutinizes the buffoons' behavior. Ultimately and in kind, the audience is led to question their own behavior when they similarly thought their fellow citizens must obviously be guilty if they were being punished. Here one can also witness Gambaro's adept use of stage notes in parentheses, which are indispensable as clues to the emotional delivery of lines and often indicate laughter, mockery, irony, and other tones of amusement and playfulness:

> CORIFEO *(bondadosamente)*. El castigo siempre supone la falta, hija mía. No hay inocentes.

> ANTINOO *(bajo)*. ¿Nunca? *(Se recompone)* Lo apruebo: ¡muy bien dicho!
>
> CORIFEO. Y si el castigo te cayó encima, algo hiciste que no debías hacer. (211)

At times it seems as if there is a dissonance between Antígona and the two inner spectators. They appear to be having one experience, and she, disconnectedly, another. She does not always realize when they make fun of her. Instead, she carries on with her monologues, endlessly lamenting the absence of burial for her brother, while they watch and comment. Taylor notices this distancing, commenting that:

> Antígona seems to exist on a separate, distant, "tragic" plane, a dislocation made immediately evident in the play by the fact she does not know what coffee is, and which was highlighted in Laura Yusem's 1986 production by the fact that Antígona was in a pyramidal cage throughout. The other two characters occupy the roles of contemporary spectators watching Antígona's ordeal and enablers who contribute to the current tragic dénouement. (*Disappearing Acts* 212)

Dissonance highlights incongruence and opens the possibility for humor in an audience that is surprised by two such different planes of experience.

The use of the theatre space both on and around the stage is paramount to highlighting the distance and interaction between the watchers and the watched. As it was shown in Yusem's production (which was the first and one of the most prominent productions of this piece), the layout of the theatre space very literally "sets the scene," establishing a predetermined hierarchy of positions that facilitates watching and being watched, even before the audience fills its seats. The stage is completely open and consists of a center square, slightly raised to about eye level. The audience surrounds this square, filling the entire 360 degrees, all facing center. Corifeo and Antinoo are nearly blended into the seating arrangement of the audience. The table and chairs that form the outdoor café space from which they watch are hardly distinguishable from the other spectators' chairs, save the fact that their chairs are elevated. Antígona, while located in the center gaze of everyone, is eternally trapped within a cage and therefore separated from the crowd of watchers.

Humor teaches while delighting in many contexts of our lives, yet the fact that this process takes place in the theatre space makes the reflection that much more likely to occur and more vividly makes the audience aware of the experience of humor. A play (or any piece of art) naturally calls for more reflection or interpretation on the part of the viewer than other, everyday mo-

ments in life. That is to say, "contextualizing the object for the purposes of engaging with it as art" heightens our attention (McMahon 193). Spectators are left with a more impactful reaction to Antígona's story that lingers as they work out the dilemmas they have faced on stage and with which they have begun to contend affectively.

Emotional communication and affective transmissions do continuous work in Gambaro's play. Through engaged spectating, emotions play a primary and productive role in the transmission of the memory of trauma. The Argentine community maintains, reevaluates, refreshes, or adjusts these memories of trauma by engaging with them through different cultural mediums such as theatre. Within art in general and theatre more specifically, this is not a new idea. Artistic cultural production is ripe with emotional transference. Daphna Ben Chaim believes that theatre and film offer a powerful emotional connection available uniquely to such interactive and vociferous art forms. In *Distance in the Theatre*, she explains how emotions work differently through artwork than in our everyday lives, claiming, "Though emotion is by nature unreflective, a reflective consciousness can always direct itself upon emotion, but this reflection requires special motivations. This is, of course, precisely the condition created by art, especially as understood in terms of its basis in distance" (71-72). By being confronted with a work of art, we are already placed in a frame of reflection. The theatre piece then naturally asks us to consider our interaction with it.

Moreover, distance plays a key role in allowing for reflection. When we feel genuine emotions caused by an "artificial" or "constructed" environment—understood here as the theatre, as compared to the "real," outside world outside the theatre—, these emotions function initially in the same way as they would in any setting, as they are instinctive human reactions. The unique artistic moment, however, is apparent in the distance that art and theatre provide us with for reflecting. When Corifeo and Antinoo make the audience laugh or smile, that moment is genuine. When the audience then reflects on that pleasure from humor and contemplates why they experienced that feeling, that moment is inspired by the artistic setting. Ben Chaim identifies the usefulness of being drawn into a theatre production and then distancing oneself, stating that "a sudden increase in distance may produce an increased awareness of fiction [. . .] an increased awareness of the 'larger perspective' [. . .] an increased consciousness of emotion (reflection on one's previous emotion) and perhaps even a critical examination of that emotion" (77). In essence, theatre inspires intense emotions and helps us work through this af-

fective access point, allowing us to examine through a new filter, a different perspective. In the case of Gambaro's *Antígona*, the audience reexamines the residual trauma and memory of contemporary Argentinian society through the unlikely yet meaningful lens of humor, rather than a factual recounting of the atrocities and inhumane treatment of bodies that lead to a communal feeling of trauma.

The trauma felt and experienced by the Argentine population escapes words. As Susan Sontag has observed, it is only natural when words fail in the face of atrocity that a translation of that trauma is then attempted through art and through the emotions that art gives us special access to analyze. Antinoo and Corifeo provide spectators with a unique identification and rejection of identification. These two characters represent passive watchers (average citizens), antagonists (more active participants in the dictatorship, such as those in the military), and victimizers (the institutional involvement in traumatizing its people) to varying degrees throughout the play. Argentines in the audience come to recognize themselves in the two buffoons, and as Ben Chaim states, "[T]he emotions are literally 'owned' by the spectator and therefore so are the qualities that are conferred upon the object. The spectators come to realize, at least tacitly, that the characters they are imagining embody aspects of themselves" (71). This self-recognition is moving and meaningful, in spite of the fact that Antinoo and Corifeo do not conspicuously represent the members in the audience; these characters come from Greek tradition, and at times the play borders on the abstract. The audience must come to understand and recognize its similarity with Antinoo and Corifeo, something that develops and manifests itself affectively. This gradual realization is a powerful tool that Gambaro successfully implements. The spectators to this play turn out to be directly involved with the action onstage. As Feitlowitz inquires, "Now where are the boundaries between onstage and off? Who, really, is providing the spectacle? Those performing or those who lend their eyes?" (10).

In the end, Gambaro's work is successful if the audience is uncomfortable in its comfortable seats. She does this by turning the spectators' attention to themselves as watchers. It seems to Taylor that "[Gambaro's] main response in plays like *Información* [*para extranjeros*] is to focus not only on the acts of violence themselves but also [. . .] on the act of watching" (*Disappearing* 170). So, repeatedly in Gambaro's works, the witnesses are some of the most important characters in the performance. While watching a play that deals with residual, lingering trauma and suffering, it is possible that the audience members might remain passive, safe, and unmoved, because, after all, it's

just fiction. As Taylor observes, "The theatricality of torture, then, tries to make violence 'safe' for the audience. The audience may feel that they can remain on the sidelines. We can pretend we are neither directly involved nor responsible" (*Disappearing* 169). But if the spectators of *Antígona furiosa* remain passive, Gambaro makes sure that passivity will be ironic, because that is precisely what they see Antinoo and Corifeo do while watching Antígona during the entire performance. After the play is over, remaining unchanged and NOT questioning the current reality must be a conscious act. As Taylor suggests regarding the role of the spectator to Gambaro's plays:

> In referring to we, the spectators, I do so consciously in order to emphasize that Gambaro forces us to relinquish our comforting assumptions about violence, our claims to deniability, innocence, and quietism. Instead, she urges us to analyze what prompts it, what makes it politically expedient, what makes it possible. (*Disappearing* 170)

Moreover, as Brenda Werth has commented, in *Antigona furiosa*, Gambaro works on "drawing attention to embodied forms of testimony, and [. . .] recovering bodies onstage to envision a kind of witnessing, through art, that in many cases remained impossible offstage" (50).[16] An imperative to engage is established, especially by the corporal engagement that the audience undergoes through observing laughter and responding in laughter. Audience members leave the theatre space with work yet to do in evaluating and taking action based on the way the work engages them through the affective uses of humor and laughter.

Just because spectators are at the theatre doesn't mean that they should be shown a violence that is comfortable and therefore easy to watch. Through watching the watchers (Antinoo and Corifeo) passively and cruelly watch Antígona deal with pain, the inner spectators inform the outer spectators (the audience) and heighten the importance of the audience's active role in this courageous re-working of a classic theatre piece that dares to undertake a wound so fresh with its contemporary audience via a lens so questionable as humor.

University of Wisconsin-Madison

Notes

[1] 1986 also represents the year that the Ley de Punto Final, or 'full stop' law was passed in Argentina, putting an end to prosecutions of military personnel for the atrocities committed during the dictatorship. This essentially declared impunity for those accused of political violence and attempted to put a forcible end to the 'lingeringness' of the crimes committed by the military government during the Proceso de Reorganización Nacional (1976-1983), and symbolically, national trauma and mourning.

[2] Teresa Brennan explores a similar idea: that of affects being passed between bodies and lingering in potentiality in an in-between space in her work *The Transmission of Affect*.

[3] "Argentinidad" can be understood as the quality of being Argentine, as defined by the RAE, "1. f. Carácter o condición de argentino."

[4] Percepticide is a term coined by Diana Taylor in *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's 'Dirty War'* and that she uses to reference the self-blinding of a population. "But seeing, without even admitting that one is seeing, further turns the violence on oneself. Percepticide blinds, maims, kills through the senses" (124).

[5] I work under the assumption that trauma is, in part, as Cathy Caruth defines it: "a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or set of events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event." She further notes that "the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it" (4-5). Additionally, Judith Herman's definition of trauma maintains, "Traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life. Unlike commonplace misfortunes, traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death. They confront human beings with the extremities of helplessness and terror, and evoke the responses to catastrophe" (33).

[6] For further theory establishing the difficulty of communicating trauma, see the following works: Dori Laub's, "September 11, 2001—An Event without a Voice," Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, especially pages 4-6, Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*, page 26, and Gabriela Stoicea's "The Difficulties of Verbalizing Trauma: Translation and the Economy of Loss in Claude Lanzmann's 'Shoah'."

[7] I use this term innermost "object of spectacle" to denote the directionality of the watching that occurs in this piece. Antígona is watched by all—both by the audience members, and by the characters Antinoo and Corifeo who are inside the theatrical piece.

[8] Julio Cortázar's short story "Continuidad de los parques" similarly keeps readers uneasy of their position of readership and makes us uncertain as to our implication or role in the story.

[9] See chapter 3 in John Morreall's *Taking Laughter Seriously* for a more in-depth reading on this theory.

[10] Susan Sontag supports this idea that watching or witnessing can be construed as acts of violence in her work *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

[11] Like the *grotesco*, clowning is a tradition that was inherited from immigrant Europeans, which was then adapted to fit the *porteño* environment. Clowning and the character of the *payaso* have played an established role in Argentine theatre since the turn of the century as well. Historically, the *circo criollo* and characters like Pepino el 88 are jumping off points for the contemporary vision of clowns in both Argentine theatre and society. The contemporary clown in Argentina is not limited to the theatre, but has established a presence in the public life. For example, the work of *payamédicos* (a neologism that has its roots in the words 'clown' and 'doctors') are a frequent part of medical recovery that concentrate on psychological recovery for hospital patients. The Argentine vision of 'clowning' works to present serious topics under the guise of an entertaining show, to lighten weighty issues, or to deal with pain through humor.

[12] Cruelty and buffooning are sometimes found alongside one another, as Chris Holcomb describes, "A final class of jests associated with the excessive buffoon are those that are inordinately cruel, bitter, or severe" (135).

[13] In her study, Anneette Wannamaker continues to illuminate connections between the use of the physical body on stage, and especially that of the female body to resist and subvert the forms of power representing the military dictatorship. The body as a form of resistance is directly implicated in laughter, emitted from a body, which exerts itself and resists the status quo.

[14] In Jill Lane's work on the Peruvian theatrical *Antígona* by troupe Yuyachkani, she ties the tradition together with other productions such as Gambaro's to show the universal and timeless power of Antigone.

[15] A complete definition of the bystander effect reads: "The bystander effect occurs when the presence of others hinder an individual from intervening in an emergency situation. Social psychologists Bibb Latané and John Darley popularized the concept following the infamous 1964 Kitty Genovese murder in Kew Gardens, New York." (http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/bystander-effect)

[16] Brenda Werth treats the legacy of Antigone in Argentine performance and cultural production from Leopoldo Marechal's 1951 *Antígona Vélez* onward, even reading echoes of the story of Antigone in movies and plays not conspicuously reworking Antigone.

Works Cited

Ben Chaim, Daphna. *Distance in the Theatre: The Aesthetics of Audience Response.* UMI Research Press, 1984.

Billig, Michael. *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour*. SAGE Publications, 2005.

Brennan, Teresa. *The Transmission of Affect.* Cornell UP, 2004.

Caruth, Cathy. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory.* Johns Hopkins UP, 1995.

de Toro, Fernando. *La articulación del discurso en los textos de Griselda Gambaro.* Teatro del Pueblo, April 1990. Accessed 11 Feb. 2018.

Feitlowitz, Marguerite. "Crisis, Terror, Disappearance: The Theater of Griselda Gambaro." *Information for Foreigners: Three Plays*. Edited, translated, and with an introduction by Marguerite Feitlowitz, Northwestern UP, 1992, pp. 1-12.

Gambaro, Griselda. *Information for Foreigners: Three Plays*. Edited, translated, and with an introduction by Marguerite Feitlowitz. Northwestern UP, 1992.

---. *Teatro*. Tomo 3. Ediciones de la flor, 1984.

Ghiano, Juan Carlos. *Antiyer: Corazón De Tango*. Talía, 1966.

Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. Basic Books, 1992.

Holcomb, Chris. *Mirth Making: The Rhetorical Discourse on Jesting in Early Modern England.* U South Carolina P, 2001.

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms.* Methuen, 1985.

Jelin, Elizabeth. *Los trabajos de la memoria*. Siglo XXI de España Editores: Social Science Research Council, 2002.

Kaiser-Lenoir, Claudia. "La particularidad de lo cómico en el grotesco criollo." *Latin American Theatre Review*, vol. 12, no. 1, Fall 1978, pp. 21-32.

Lane, Jill. "Antígona and the Modernity of the Dead." *Modern Drama*, vol. 50, no. 4, 2007, pp. 517-31.

Laub, Dori. "September 11, 2001—An Event without a Voice." *Trauma at Home: After 9/11*. Edited by Judith Greenberg, U Nebraska P, 2003.

Levi, Primo. *Survival in Auschwitz: the Nazi Assault on Humanity.* Simon & Schuster, 1996.

Mazziotti, Nora. "Identidad, confusión y marginalidad: Griselda Gambaro y el grotesco criollo." *Poder, deseo y marginación: aproximaciones a la obra de Griselda Gambaro*. Edited by Mazziotti and Alberto Ure. Puntosur Editores, 1989.

McDougall, William. *The Group Mind: A Sketch of the Principles of Collective Psychology, with Some Attempt to Apply Them to the Interpretation of National Life and Character*. G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1920.

McGraw, Peter. *The Humor Code: A Global Search for What Makes Things Funny.* Simon & Schuster, 2014.

McMahon, Jennifer. *Aesthetics and Material Beauty: Aesthetics Naturalized*. Routledge, 2007.

Morreall, John. *Taking Laughter Seriously.* SUNY Press, 1983.

---. *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*. SUNY Press. 1987.

Patraka, Vivian. *Spectacular Suffering: Theatre, Fascism, and the Holocaust.* Indiana UP, 1999.

Rose, Margaret. *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-Modern.* Cambridge UP, 1993.

Roster, Peter. "'Lo grotesco', 'el grotesco criollo' y la obra dramática de Griselda Gambaro." *Poder, deseo y marginación: aproximaciones a la obra de Griselda Gambaro*. Edited by Nora Mazziotti and Alberto Ure. Puntosur Editores, 1989.

Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World.* Oxford UP, 1987.

Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others.* Picador, 2003.

Stoicea, Gabriela. "The Difficulties of Verbalizing Trauma: Translation and the Economy of Loss in Claude Lanzmann's 'Shoah.'" *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, vol. 39, no. 2, Special Convention Issue: History, Memory, Exile, 2006, pp. 43-53.

Tarantuviez, Susana. *La escena del poder: El teatro de Griselda Gambaro.* Corregidor, 2007.

Taylor, Diana. *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's "Dirty War."* Duke UP, 1997.

---. "Rewriting the Classics: *Antígona furiosa* and the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo."*Bucknell Review*, vol. 40, no. 2, 1996, pp. 77-93.

Wannamaker, Annette. "'Memory Also Makes a Chain': The Performance of Absence in Griselda Gambaro's *Antigona furiosa*." *Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association,* vol. 33, no. 3, 2000, pp. 73-85.

Werth, Brenda. *Theatre, Performance, and Memory Politics in Argentina*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.