

Narrative Foregrounding in the Plays of Osvaldo Dragún

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In plays such as *Historias para ser contadas* (1956), *El amasijo* (1972), and *¡Arriba Corazón!* (1987), Osvaldo Dragún employs a variety of narrative strategies, including commentary by individual characters, the enactment of alternate scenarios, and the recreation of past events through flashback. Covering a span of over thirty years, these three plays are representative of Dragún's work and are particularly apt examples of narrative foregrounding, which can be seen in his other plays as well. There is also among these plays a distinct continuity in the development of narrative motifs. These elements foreground what Stanton Garner has suggested is the narrative quality of all theatre, that is, the "imaginative transformation of theatrical space into dramatic space, of a physical here and now into an imaginative here and now" (7). In these plays, as well as in *Y nos dijeron que éramos inmortales* (1963), narrative appears and reappears in strikingly similar ways. Frequently invoking the audience directly, Dragún's narrative strategies call attention to both the theatricality of the representation and to the narrative processes at work. I propose not so much to examine how such strategies make the familiar seem unfamiliar as to demonstrate the way in which, through foregrounding, narrative strategies themselves become unfamiliar. Dragún's plays continuously highlight narrative as an artificial (and unreliable) construction, even as they insist on the centrality of storytelling to both individual identity and theatrical representation.

Borrowed from linguistics, the concept of foregrounding is particularly useful in the analysis of Dragún's works. Keir Elam writes that "linguistic foregrounding in language occurs when an unexpected usage suddenly forces the listener or reader to take note of the utterance itself, rather than continue his automatic concern with its 'content'" (17). Here, foregrounding is a linguistic version of the alienation effect, which, according to Bertolt Brecht, "consists in turning the object of which one is to be made aware, to which one's attention is to be drawn, from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected" (143). Elam goes on to argue that

"foregrounding is essentially a spatial metaphor, and thus well adapted to the theatrical text" (18). Transposed from its origins in linguistics, the concept of foregrounding becomes a means of analyzing the narrative elements of Dragún's plays, for his use of narrative forces the audience to observe the narrative process itself and with it the conditions of possibility—or impossibility—inherent in that process. The foregrounding of narrative contributes both formally and thematically to his exploration of contemporary society and of the ways in which individuals seek to find a place for themselves in a largely dehumanized and insensitive world.

Narrative in drama can be viewed as one of the playwright's many available techniques or as an inherent quality of the medium. Marvin Carlson's survey of dramatic theory suggests that classical theorists tended to give narrative a specific role.¹ From this perspective, narrative is but one tool the dramatist might employ. By contrast, in *The Absent Voice: Narrative Comprehension in the Theater*, Stanton Garner discusses narrative in much broader terms, as one of the inescapable constitutive elements of both theatre and drama. Nevertheless, the storytelling aspect of drama remains distinct from other narrative forms. As Garner argues, "one of drama's central features as a narrative form [is] the unique absence of the dramatist from the play in performance" (xii). It may be impossible to locate a single narrative voice or to identify that voice with the author. Garner goes on to define narrative as "the temporal dimension of drama's fictional world" (1). This temporal dimension is then dependent on the efforts of an audience to make sense of it: "a man walks across this empty space [the stage] for someone who watches him, and it is in this watching—guided (of course) by the arts of acting, directing, and playwriting—that narrative arises in the theater" (xvi). With its emphasis on the "essentially constructive nature of dramatic narrative" (7), Garner's broadly defined understanding of narrative is firmly rooted in the cognitive activity of the audience.

More specifically, narrative enters Dragún's plays at those interstices where the gap left by the absence of authorial voice is filled either by an individual taking the place of that voice, as in the case of the character turned narrator, or through a process of narrative reenactment, as in the case of flashbacks or alternate scenarios. Narrative is not only the temporally ordered whole the audience struggles to make of the plot, but the process through which that information is conveyed. At its most basic, to narrate is to tell a story; this model in turn requires both a narrative voice and an audience to whom the story is told. In the theatre, one must also distinguish between stories that are simply represented in front of an audience, as if they were not being told but only shown, and those plays in which the narrative process is self-consciously highlighted. In Dragún's work, the dramatic presentation of a scene is frequently

couched within a narrative framework. Though the author's voice may remain largely absent in the theatre, Dragún insists on filling the gap left by that absence. There is always a teller in these plays, and the processes whereby the tales are told are continually underscored.

Garner contends that "in its independence from authorial mediation, the stage offers resistance to audience comprehension, undermining the construction of narrative outline in often insistent ways" (16). This argument raises the issue of the self-subverting nature of dramatic narrative. Not only is drama characterized by an absent narrative voice, but this absence in turn subverts attempts to construct such a voice out of either the performance or the reading of a play. Garner implies that this unreliability inheres in the theatrical medium itself, for "as an autonomously forward-moving medium, [. . .] performance renders provisional the narrative outlines that an audience seeks to impose upon it, subjecting these conceptual frameworks to continual modification and revision" (19). Garner goes on to point out that "cognitive frameworks risk subversion whenever dramatists draw upon the stage's innate theatricality, heightening the dramatic and theatrical moment and giving it temporary predominance over its narrative contexts" (40). Garner's emphasis on the absent authorial voice, while valid, is perhaps too strong, for although the absence of such a voice obscures the source of narrative, it is not the sole cause of narrative undermining. As many novelists have demonstrated, even a clearly identifiable narrative voice may be highly unreliable, negating at every turn the reader's provisional conclusions. Antinarrative effects, such as the withholding of information, the presentation of contradictions, the reversal of apparent relationships, or the undermining of temporal order are all foregrounding effects, directing attention to the utterance rather than its narrative content. The utterance, in this case, is the narrative process itself. Paradoxically, while attention is focused on the means of narration, this focused attention is the direct result of the subversion of the presumed goal of narrative, the assembly of a coherent understanding of the story being told. Dramatic narrative in itself contains the seeds of the "antinarrative" process and of the self-consciousness that so characterize contemporary theatre and the work of Osvaldo Dragún.

Just as the dramatic text presupposes an eventual performance, so this performance presupposes an audience. The audience is that observing presence outside the immediate confines of the play, which may or may not be explicitly invoked by the actors.² What seems most important in Garner's argument is the notion of an active audience, unavoidably involved in the formation of meaning. Garner argues that, "in the absence of authorial voice, the audience bears an increased burden for drawing conclusions and establishing outlines" (xvi). This active audience is crucial to an analysis of Dragún's plays, in which the

foregrounding of narrative necessarily implies a receiver of that narration. Nevertheless, the definition of "active" remains problematic. While an audience may be forced to stretch—cognitively—for the meaning of a work, its success or failure to do so does not materially affect the outcome of the play itself, which proceeds along its established course whether or not the audience understands the plot. Some plays may demand more concentration than others, yet this demand is removed from the concrete reality of the audience, which may or may not fully "participate," and whose participation is largely invisible and internal.

The audience's awareness of the artificiality of the theatrical space forces it to seek actively the narrative comprehensibility of that reality, while this same awareness continually subverts that search. This process of subversion also highlights the metatheatrical elements at work in Dragún's plays. Lionel Abel argues that "metatheatres give by far the stronger sense that the world is a projection of human consciousness" (113). While the political content of Dragún's plays hardly accords with such a conclusion, the realities of his characters are made up in large part of individual perceptions. *¡Arriba Corazón!*, described by Dragún as "una carta a mí mismo" (21), traces the efforts of Corazón, a middle-aged architect, to understand and control his childhood memories. Moreover, according to Abel, in metatheatres "order is something improvised by men" (113). This is certainly the case in plays such as *El amasijo* and *Historias*. By relying on a sense of reality as a "projection of human consciousness," metatheatres at once make possible and undermine the representation of this reality. Like the concept of foregrounding, self-consciousness both plays into the alienation effect and subverts it.

The role of the audience is also important to the consideration of stage directions. Unlike that conveyed through the characters' speech, the information contained in stage directions appears to represent the author's unmediated voice. To the extent that stage directions help to constitute individual characters, the authorial voice may be muted, the character's actions seeming an extension of his or her spoken words. A direction calling for a given gesture becomes, in performance, part of the character's overall demeanor rather than an overt description. To the *reader* of the dramatic text, stage directions represent a clear authorial intervention, one in which the dramatist does not speak through a character but rather requires certain actions, lighting, or set arrangements, shaping the play as a whole. One must emphasize the distinction between reader and theatre audience. Absent the script, the audience has no way of knowing whether an action was mandated by the playwright, suggested by the director, or improvised by the actor. The "voice" of this narration is necessarily silent. However, this distinction does not eliminate the narrative importance of stage directions. As we will see in *Historias para ser contadas*, both reader and

spectator receive the narrative information offered by the actors. While only the reader has direct access to the author's words, through the contrast between past tense description (character's voice) and present reenactment (as given in the stage directions), the audience receives essentially the same information. Individual characters frequently describe the actions they are about to perform, so that the physical movement becomes an illustration of the verbal description. This strategy is particularly evident in *Historias*. In this case, stage directions approximate, for the reader, the audience's experience of the narrative conveyed through the contrast between the characters' actions and their words.

Drawing on reader-response criticism, Jacqueline Bixler argues that "all who experience drama, either on stage or on the page, are in one sense or another readers of a text" (1). The reader of the dramatic text "perceives the drama as a potential or hypothetical performance" and is "obliged to fill the blank created by the absence of a performance" (2). Bixler's argument provides an interesting parallel with that of Garner. Replacing the audience with the reader, she nevertheless emphasizes the role of the receiver in the production of meaning or, as in Garner's argument, in the establishment of narrative. In light of these similarities, I treat the theatre audience and the reader of the dramatic text as alike, though not identical, in the ways in which both are confronted with the narrative foregrounding of Dragún's work.

In several of Dragún's plays, individual characters take on the role of narrator. This narrator's commentary is frequently directed explicitly toward the audience, which is to say, toward an observer external to the play's action. *Historias* begins with a prologue in which the actors openly greet an audience: "¡Público de la Plaza, buenas noches!" (55). This greeting is central to the structure of the play, which consists of the self-conscious acting-out of three separate stories by a group of actors always fully aware of their audience. In *Y nos dijeron*, El Viejo, "mirando al público," informs the audience of Berto's crime: "esta noche, a las veinticuatro horas, entré en una tienda un joven de veintiún años, rengo" (120). *Y nos dijeron* describes the return of Jorge and Berto after a traumatic military service during which their friend Arón was killed. Jorge's family is eager to take him in as though nothing had happened; Berto is left alone. Berto subsequently attempts a robbery and is taken into police custody. He calls Jorge for help, a call to which Jorge, dissuaded by his family and caught in a world now separate from Berto's, does not respond.

The narrator need not invoke the audience as clearly as do the players of *Historias* or the stage directions of *Y nos dijeron*. Corazón Hombre's narration in *¡Arriba Corazón!* frequently takes the form of an internal monologue. Nevertheless, it is significant that in the works under discussion the narrator plays a role in the action while also stepping back to comment. This dual role

underscores the narrator's function as a bridge between the audience and the other characters in a way the use of a narrator unconnected with the play's action would not. The theatricality of the performance is emphasized. This emphasis diminishes the possibility that the audience will see the play as a simple mirror of reality rather than as a staged representation. Knowing that what it observes is not objectively "real," the audience is necessarily distanced from the action and characters of the play and more able, in Brecht's terms, to reach its own intellectual conclusions.

The commentary of the narrator provides an interpretive frame around the action to be presented, thus setting the stage. By providing this framework, the narrator may also undermine the authority of other characters, offering an alternative version of events or openly contradicting others' affirmations. In *El amasijo*, Ricardo's relationship with María varies considerably between María's recollection and Ricardo's telling of the story to José. Ricardo assures José that he seduced María; in another scene, she insists, "te enojaste porque la noche de la despedida no te dejé entrar en mi casa" (225). The narrator both provides information and subverts the certainty his or her commentary invites. Like the audience's construction of the narrative, the narrator's interpretive frameworks are always provisional.

The role of characters as narrators can be seen most explicitly in *Historias para ser contadas*, where from the title onward the audience is prepared for an experience of storytelling, that is, of narration. Robyn Lutz notes that "the consciousness of audience is always present, with the result that the tale never becomes a you-were-there reliving of past events" (31). David Foster points out that the audience of *Historias* "proporciona tanto la sustancia semántica de la obra como su validación lingüística en la medida en que el receptor justifica la presencia del mensaje" (134). The first story, "Historia de un flemón, una mujer y dos hombres," fulfills the promise of the title with the First Actor's introductory announcement, "vamos a contarles la historia . . ." (58). In all three stories the actors direct themselves toward the audience rather than speaking to one another as though the audience were not there, and they go so far as to call the audience by name ("público de la Plaza," "ustedes"), inviting participation. Instead of "becoming" the people they represent, the actors emphasize that they are in fact actors.

The narrative strategies of the three *Historias* vary. The first is presented through a combination of narrative and representation, so that the actors, in narrative mode, describe their actions, then proceed to carry them out. La Esposa's line "yo estaba cocinando" is followed by the stage direction "lo hace" (59). El Vendedor moves in and out of narrative, one moment establishing the setting, "esta historia comenzó el día 2 de noviembre de 1956. Yo estaba

trabajando . . . (*lo hace*)," and the next instant, well within the present tense, announcing "el día es hermoso. Yo estoy trabajando" (59). Whereas the reader receives the information of the stage direction knowing it represents a case of authorial narration, the effect for both reader and audience is much the same: the reader must imagine La Esposa carrying out the action she has just described, while the spectator sees the same process. These shifts between narration and representation are thematically important because of the centrality of narrative processes to a play in which each individual's story becomes potential dramatic material.

In the second story, "Historia de cómo nuestro amigo Panchito González se sintió responsable de la epidemia de peste bubónica en Africa del Sur," the actors do not recreate Panchito's story. Instead, as Lutz points out, "the actors play themselves, interacting with each other and framing Panchito's tale by their conversations with him. They listen to the story as the audience does, becoming its proxies on stage" (33). The actors do take on the roles of various characters in Panchito's tale. La Actriz, for instance, assumes the role of Panchito's wife, from whose perspective she criticizes Panchito's transformation. The actors also provide the narrative function of commentary, intoning the wedding march in progressively funeral cadences as Panchito describes his acquisition of the responsibilities that eventually led to his sale of rat meat to Africa. The narrated quality of Panchito's story and its dramatic representation are intertwined, as the actor-listeners are drawn into the process of dramatization.

The third of the *Historias* emphasizes the devaluation of language, an important element of the absurd. "Historia del hombre que se convirtió en perro" is again presented through a combination of narrative and representation. The First Actor begins by explaining to the audience, "todo empezó de la manera más corriente. Fui a una fábrica a buscar trabajo," but is quickly involved in a representation of the scene with the Third Actor (78-79). According to Martin Esslin, language, when put in contrast to the action of a scene, is reduced to "meaningless patter" (357). The contrast between human speech and the barking required of the man in his job as watchdog could hardly be more stark, and at the end of the story he has entirely lost the ability to speak. The devaluation of language itself is not overly pronounced in Dragún's work, for the linguistic patterns remain largely coherent. Nevertheless, the use of language as a mechanism of both deceit and understanding is in keeping with the basic suspiciousness toward language's surface appearance that characterizes the absurd.

In *¡Arriba Corazón!*, Corazón Hombre frequently opens a scene with a few words directed outward, setting in motion sequences that the characters of his memory reenact. This introductory narration may be more or less accurate,

demonstrating either the incomplete and tentative movements of memory or the controlling impulse Corazón Hombre seeks to impose. On one occasion, he recalls short bursts of a scene, as if he were talking to himself or to the already present memory of his father, and his narration consists of isolated words: "vos . . . mamá . . . el puerto . . . el barco . . . y allá arriba, por encima de todos . . . ¡Juan! Por encima de todos . . ." (33). At this point Juan takes up the story, picking up the thread of Corazón's apparent musings. Similarly, when Mara asks Corazón Joven what his friend El Negro does, Corazón Hombre responds confidently: "trabaja en una fábrica. Se casó. Compró una casa. Tiene un hijo. Plantó lechuga, tomate . . . Pronto va a tener nietos . . ." Here, Corazón Hombre is simply repeating the dreams El Negro told him during their shared military service. Yet, when El Negro actually appears, Corazón Hombre asks anxiously, "¿Te casaste, Negro . . . plantaste tomates . . . tuviste nietos? . . ." (69). Corazón Hombre's narration is as much a demonstration of his imperfect grasp of events as it is an imposition of authorial control. To the extent that Corazón, as narrator, takes the place of the absent author, it is an uncertain author, one who does not hold all the answers. The audience's task is thus complicated, as Corazón Hombre introduces additional information without clearly privileging one version.

In addition to providing an interpretive frame, the narrator's role serves to establish, at least provisionally, the play's temporal boundaries. Corazón Hombre often sums up a scene with a refrain-like comment that underscores the placement of the incident in his family's history or ties the moment to historical events. During the reenactment of his birthday celebration, Corazón Hombre announces: "el 18 de julio de 1936, mientras en España las tropas franquistas del general Queipo del Llano [sic] se sublevaban contra el gobierno republicano, aquí, mi padre me regaló su zapato" (27-28). Other times the information is purely external, as when he states: "Franco estaba a cincuenta kilómetros de Madrid. Los diarios publicaron la noticia mezclada con los resultados de fútbol" (34). The Spanish Civil War, all-important to Corazón's mythologized memory of Juan, is situated among the ordinary news with which many receive it, evoking Corazón's ongoing isolation.

A similar historical placement appears in *Y nos dijeron*, though the presentation has more of the absurd, and the historical referent is remote from the action of the play. El Viejo declaims important dates in world history, announcing that "en 1789 la Revolución francesa terminó con la aristocracia," while Jorge fires into the audience with an arcade gun (115). The inclusion of El Viejo's historical information partakes of the illogical order of the absurd and at the same time draws the audience's attention to its strangeness. The temporal boundaries that El Viejo's information suggests are entirely irrelevant and can

only interfere with the audience's cognitive ordering. Given the aim of the gun, the direction toward the audience is far more belligerent than in other instances; the audience is pulled in by force. This aggressive approach contrasts with the prologue to *Historias*, in which the players attempt to forge a solidarity between actors and audience, inviting the latter to come forward if they have stories to be told and shared (56). In *Y nos dijeron*, the audience is confronted both physically and cognitively, forcibly drawn into the play's action while being excluded from its narrative rationalization.

This tangled relationship of establishment and undermining reflects both the work of Bertolt Brecht and the theatre of the absurd. Though Brecht asserts that "narrative is the soul of drama" (183), the role of narrative in his own plays is far from simple. Garner underscores the complicated nature of Brecht's use of narrative and notes that "on one hand, so pronounced was Brecht's interest in narrative comprehension and the possibilities of its command over the unmediated stage moment, so strong his insistence that performance must be kept 'subordinate to the story' [. . .] that his dramaturgy constitutes a catalogue of devices used to heighten cognitive formulation." At the same time, Garner contends, "Brecht's 'epic theater' cannot be adequately understood unless one recognizes that Brechtian dramaturgy depends equally on efforts to subvert the processes of narrative comprehension, to undercut the spectator's attempts to integrate stage events into [a] coherent temporal pattern" (183-84). Yet, to some degree, the contradiction in Brecht's treatment of narrative is only apparent: Brecht's efforts to subvert narrative comprehension are intended precisely to further the narrative aims embodied in his dramaturgy by drawing attention to those components.

A similar conflict arises in the theatre of the absurd. In the twentieth-century avant-garde, Garner argues, "vigorous anti-narrative dramaturgy is combined with a rejection of psychological action within the dramatic world" (55). This analysis accords with Esslin's argument that "the modern movement in painting and the theatre of the absurd meet in their rejection of the discursive and narrative elements" (343). Esslin argues that whereas the alienation effect in Brecht "is intended to activate the audience's critical, intellectual attitude," the Theatre of the Absurd appeals to the audience on a deeper level and "activates psychological forces, releases and liberates hidden fears and repressed aggressions and, above all, by confronting the audience with a picture of disintegration, it sets in motion an active process of integrative forces in the mind of each individual spectator" (362). This integrative process, however, is precisely what Garner sees as the basis of dramatic narrative, the cognitive processes whereby the audience makes sense of the theatrical world with which it is presented, somehow meshing

even contradictory or unexpressed past, present, and future events into a temporal matrix.

In *El amasijo*, the enactment of alternate scenarios presents yet another instance of the storytelling so central to Dragún's work. The plot, it might be argued, consists entirely of a succession of possible scenarios for a date between María and José which never takes place. In this case, the projected scenarios are stories the characters tell to themselves and to each other, seeking to find an acceptable alternative to their present situation or to play out the possible results of a given course of action. As Donald Schmidt suggests, "while there is a sketchy plot in the conventional sense, flashbacks and illusory projections into the future are the principal means through which the characters define themselves" (91). Bixler further points out that, "rather than a number of different events, the reader witnesses the repetition, with slight variations, of one incident" (3). The temporal ordering of the play is explicitly disrupted. Candyce Leonard argues that "dialogue is presented in such a manner that it is impossible to know the time sequences to which each part belongs" and suggests that "*El amasijo* is the play that defines Esslin's statement [that] the absurd drama is a theatre of situation, not of consequential happenings" (40). From the start, the audience's efforts to interpret the narrative are stymied, as the degree of fantasy and reality in the recalled and projected experiences of María and José is never clearly revealed. The narrative is not a plot moving unmistakably from one event to the next but instead an examination of the storytelling process itself.

At the end of the first act, Ricardo sings a wedding march as José and María "se toman del brazo y de frente al público simulan caminar como si estuviesen realmente en un cortejo nupcial" (235). Ricardo interrupts the march, however, and the two return to their respective bedrooms, taking up "la misma posición de la escena anterior en que decidieron salir ese sábado" (235). The circularity of this scene suggests that they have in fact never left their rooms, though this initial suggestion is perhaps stronger for the reader than the spectator, as the reader is explicitly reminded that their positions are identical, whereas the audience must remember the resemblance. In keeping with this possibility, José laments, "no entiendo para qué la llamé," while María complains, "¿por qué acepté?" (235-36). What the audience at first perceived as an event occurring in the present turns out to have been no more than a figment of the characters' imaginations. The fictional nature of the characters' lives is emphasized repeatedly, through Ricardo's assumption of a variety of roles, for example, and through José's fantasies about Ricardo's more successful social life with the "rubia telefonista." When Ricardo greets him in the plaza, José responds: "¡ya sé que no estás aquí! . . . todavía estás con la telefonista . . . ¡Pero ya me acostumbré a inventarte en cualquier parte, sabés!" (215). The creation of

fictional situations is not only a means of exploring the possible results of a relationship with María but is José's only way of connecting with the world around him. It is, at the same time, a highly unstable and self-subverting link.

In the scenarios created by both José and María, fantasy is transformed into the metatheatrical play-within-the-play. This transformation also represents a foregrounding of narrative. The difficulty the audience encounters as it attempts to establish a temporal pattern reflects the antinarrative quality of a play in which the audience's painstakingly constructed "cognitive frameworks" are subverted through the work's emphasis on its own theatricality. The enactment of these scenarios becomes the "unexpected usage" Elam describes, and the reader is forced to attend to the utterance itself, in this case, the narrative paradigm of the alternate scenarios. By foregrounding the narrative processes of José and María, Dragún is able to represent the bleakness of their lives while holding the audience distant, continually frustrated in its efforts to understand. In many ways José and María are stereotypes—they are largely male and female versions of the same persona—yet we do see hints of their inner demons. These characterizations are narrative in the sense that José and María's very identities are stories they tell themselves within the confines of their identical bedrooms. Though it is difficult to follow the narrative line, to determine when or whether a date has taken place and to slot each act into a temporal order, it is possible to sympathize with María and José. This is particularly true given their all too human tendency to dwell on the possible negative outcomes of their actions. Ultimately, what is foregrounded in *El amasijo* is precisely this endless process of making connections, embodied here in the hopelessly tentative connection between José and María.

Connections may also be forged through flashbacks, a narrative element that occurs in all of the plays under discussion. I use the term flashback here not to describe an entirely internal process of recall but rather in the sense of a reenactment of past events. Analyzing the "Flemón" story of *Historias*, Lutz suggests that "the distinction between narration and acting" is "identifiable by the shifts from past to present tenses" (31). Although the stories are told to the audience, they also represent instances of flashback, as the actors become the characters they describe and act out the situations they have begun to relate. It is perhaps not the absence of narrative that Lutz describes so much as a different level of narration. The characters' reenactment of various episodes, as in "Flemón" or "El hombre que se convirtió en perro," is essentially a dramatized narrative. That it is meant as narrative is suggested first by its placement within a work specifically entitled "stories to be told." Secondly, the reenactment occurs within the narrative of characters who initially introduced the tale through a past

tense summary. The reenactment of past occurrences, explicitly in order to inform the audience, clearly belongs to the realm of narrative.

Flashbacks may arise in a variety of contexts. In *Y nos dijeron*, El Viejo repeats the orders that led to the incident in which Arón was killed and Jorge and Berto wounded. With the last shouted "march!" Arón, who had appeared ghost-like to read his poem, "se cae hacia el foso como si hubiese sido fusilado, desapareciendo de la vista del público" (119). Arón appears in an earlier scene as well, when he and Berto meet Jorge. Seeing Arón resurrected, Jorge asks Berto: "¿entonces, Rengo, esto no es verdad?" to which Berto replies: "no, 'Jorgita.' No es verdad" (109). The three begin to sing and dance, "como siempre" (109), until finally Jorge is left alone, holding a crumpled paper El Viejo has given him on which is written "el futuro es tuyo" (111). This scene is neither entirely flashback nor entirely narrative. Its fantastic tone contrasts with the more strictly realistic mode of the play, calling into question the easy reality of proper appearances in which Jorge's family struggles to live. An interchange between Ricardo and José in *El amasijo* demonstrates the potential complexity of flashback. When José and Ricardo compare their successes with María, Ricardo maintains that he easily seduced her at the farewell party of another office worker, Leonor, and goes on to dramatize his conversation with María at that party (218-20). Ricardo's flashback is in effect an illustration of the story he is telling José. Yet even this conclusion is too simple, for there is the suggestion that José imagines the entire conversation. When his mother interjects, off stage, "José, traéme las gotas, querés" (219), one suspects that José is still in his own home and that Ricardo's flashback is merely a segment of one of José's imaginary projections.

The flashbacks of *El amasijo* are recreated with the help of Ricardo, who, as in the projections, fulfills the roles necessary to complete the story. For instance, María recalls Felipe, a married man whose "proposición sería" she long ago rejected. While María explains, "no puedo aceptar . . . ¡Quiero vivir! No puedo casarme ahora con vos," Ricardo, in the role of Felipe, ignores her, rolling down his sleeves and explaining that Saturdays he must visit his in-laws (223). Moments later, Ricardo is transformed into Esteban by María's howl-like call. The stage direction reads: "ella está tratando de recordar. Y ahora cambia totalmente su tono. Vuelve a mentirse, con gran dignidad. Una penosísima dignidad" (224). More than in many instances, the authorial voice of these stage directions would appear to provide far more information to the reader than to the spectator, as the audience is dependent on the actor's ability to convey her self-deception visually. Nevertheless, it bears emphasis that all of María's action occurs within a narrative context, that is, a story she is telling herself. From the beginning of this second flashback, María's demand that the relationship with

Esteban be broken off "con dignidad" appears as a self-delusion, a recoloring of memory to save her ego.

As María struggles first to remember the past and then to control her memories as they are redramatized for her observation, *El amasijo* begins to treat the problems of memory developed more fully in *¡Arriba Corazón!* Many of the flashbacks of *¡Arriba Corazón!* are introduced by Corazón Hombre in the role of narrator. The action he describes is then picked up by the other actors, who complete the representation. Corazón Hombre recalls that "esa noche, cuando mi padre volvió borracho y enfermo y se acercó a mi cama para acariciarme, descubrí en sus manos, por primera vez, el olor de los ríos . . . (Pausa.) El olor de los ríos . . . El olor de los ríos . . ." At this point El Padre and El Negro pick up the action suggested by Corazón's memory. The stage direction reads: "el Padre acaricia el agua. El Negro lo mira" (37). The audience is no longer listening to Corazón Hombre's narration but rather watching the source of his recollection unfold. The flashbacks of this play are frequently complicated by the presence of Corazón Hombre as an observer who also seeks to intervene in the represented action. Corazón Hombre is involved in the situation, yet he remains apart, seemingly unheard by the figures who represent his memories. Early in the play, La Madre tries to comb Corazón Niño's hair; "mientras ella lo va peinando Corazón Hombre juega despeinando al Niño" (28). This scene seems to illustrate the role of memory, as the present self is inserted into a remembered situation. In a similar manner, when Corazón Joven and Mara reenact the scene in which he teaches her to swim, Corazón Hombre is both part of the scene, answering Mara's questions, and removed, assuring the absent Juan that nothing really happened: "fue nada más que eso, tío Juan: aire, olores, libertad . . ." (70). In *¡Arriba Corazón!*, memory and narrative are foregrounded together.

Memory is obviously a key element in flashback, as well as an ideal ground for the subversion of narrative. Even before the dramatist begins to work with it as theatrical material, the temporality of memory is unreliable. For this reason, the narrative foregrounding of *¡Arriba Corazón!* cannot be viewed simply as an illustration of the alienation effect. Memory is presented as an internal narrative, and, as such, its difficulties are revealed. The operations Corazón Hombre goes through with his memory directly parallel those of the audience assembling a coherent narrative, so that Corazón becomes the audience of his own internal dramatization. Like the theatrical audience, he is unable to control either the events represented or his understanding of them. He is uncertain of what to believe and asks his father, "¿fuiste domador, papá?" confessing, "no estoy seguro de que este recuerdo tenga que ver con vos . . . y no con un deseo mío . . . un deseo de tener historia" (38). When Corazón Hombre is confronted with a vision of his father hitting himself in frustration rather than lash out at the world, the

stage directions require that Corazón "trata de no ver la escena" (51). A later stage direction describes Corazón Hombre "buscando la memoria de Juan" (61). Corazón Hombre interrupts a confrontation between his uncles Manuel and Juan but remains trapped: "avanza hacia su escritorio pero los recuerdos continúan" (74). Ultimately, because the play's many temporal, spatial, and thematic leaps are visibly effects of memory, the audience's connection with the work is facilitated. Much as saying "it's only a dream" allows logical continuity to slide, saying "it's only his memory" gives a certain latitude to the narrative construction. Because Corazón Hombre is the audience of the "dramas" that are his memories, it is he, rather than the theatrical audience of Dragún's play, who is forced to look more closely at the remembered shapes and smells.

Among several techniques of traditional dramaturgy designed to achieve control over the stage action, Garner lists "the heightening of a play's 'storiness'—and, thereby, an audience's awareness of narrative patterning—through metafictional, metahistorical and metadramatic reference" (32-33). The emphasis on "storiness" or storytelling in Dragún's plays is striking. Leonard concludes that "Dragún's dramatic technique is one form which serves as a cogent and effective reminder that man is not a being to be exploited, but a person whose story is to be told" (42). The importance of "storiness" in *Historias* is unmistakable, but the storytelling motif also appears at the end of *Y nos dijeron*, when Jorge urges Joaquín, "contate uno de tus cuentos," and the family takes turns relating jokes (131-35). Here the stories begin as the escapist dirty jokes of Jorge's middle-class family and in-laws; when Jorge speaks, however, the story becomes that of his traumatic experience in the military. The complexity and self-consciousness of Dragún's narrative strategies avoid a simplistic equation of storytelling with liberation.

Yet the focus on storytelling is not limited to these clearly defined episodes. Both the alternate scenarios of *El amasijo* and the flashbacks of *Arriba Corazón!* become stories the characters tell themselves. For Corazón, memory is a way of trying to find something outside himself. Early in the play, Corazón's father informs his friend El Negro, "yo ya estoy en Corazón. Todo yo. Eso le voy a dejar" (39). In a literal sense, this is already true, for El Padre is present on stage only as a projection of Corazón's memory. Yet the presence of El Padre within his son also provides the basis for one of Corazón's greatest difficulties. At the end of the play, when Corazón Hombre returns to Buenos Aires and his ailing father, he insists: "¡vine a buscarte a vos, papá! ¡No a las partes tuyas que están dentro mío! ¡Debe haber algo tuyo, algo que yo no lleve arrastrando por el mundo . . . algo tuyo, desconocido!" (95). Memory, emblematic of the foregrounding of narrative, becomes the internal reflection of the struggle that all

of Dragún's characters share, that of finding a place for themselves in the world. For Corazón, the struggle is to find the place of the world in himself.

For Dragún's characters, the importance of telling individual histories is clear. However, telling those stories is no simple matter, and understanding the means whereby histories are told is equally important. Through a combination of straight narration, imaginative projection, and flashback, all of these plays foreground their narrative structures. Frank Dauster emphasizes the similarities between *El amasijo*, *Historias*, and *Hijos del terremoto* (an earlier version of *¡Arriba Corazón!*) when he describes "el rechazo de todo lo que sea cronología normal, la concepción de la obra como una serie de imágenes que reflejan estados interiores de los personajes en vez de un hilo consecutivo que nos permita ver el desarrollo de la situación, el empleo de un elenco relativamente pequeño en el cual algunos actores adoptan diversas identidades para subrayar la estructura paralelística de situaciones separadas en el tiempo" (8). All of these shared qualities contribute to the foregrounding of narrative, repeatedly calling the audience's attention to what was previously overlooked, to the experiences of marginalized individuals, but also to the ways in which those experiences might be represented. The narrative of *Historias* becomes flashback as representation and explanation are woven together. Temporal ordering is generally clear in *Y nos dijeron*, in which the plot line runs from Jorge's return home through his engagement to Ada and his confrontation with Berto's cry for help. The flashback narrative of *El Viejo* presents the only fantastic or inexplicable element of the play, so that narrative is foregrounded through inversion. Because the play's narrative is generally so clear, the semi-fantastic scenes in which Arón appears draw the audience's attention as the only abnormal occurrences. It is in these scenes that the events of the night on which Arón died and Jorge and Berto were wounded are (partially) revealed. *El amasijo*, by contrast, adds flashback as yet one more disruption of temporal coherence, eliminating the possibility that the audience might make of the play a unified whole in which each episode is neatly joined to the next through a network of cause and effect. Finally, the flashbacks of *¡Arriba Corazón!* become part of Corazón Hombre's struggle to call up those memories he wishes to retain while turning away from those too painful to view.

The most explicit foregrounding of narrative, the use of characters as narrators, is particularly important in the transmission of Dragún's view of the value of individual stories and of the plight of the individuals whose stories are to be told. Yet it also underscores the narrative nature of the theatre in more general terms and highlights both the theatricality of the presentation of these stories and the centrality of narrative to the play's effect. Often, as in *¡Arriba Corazón!*, the action of the narrator provides the audience's sole reference point

in its attempt to establish temporal coherence. José and María, endlessly practicing for their date, demonstrate the contingency of any narrative strategy, the possibility of selecting a different means of representation, and thus of reaching a different conclusion. In this they represent the dramatist, both within the context of their own lives, which they metadramatically enact, and by making present the absent authorial voice of dramatic narrative. When this voice is made present, narrative is foregrounded on two levels. The absence is revealed as artificial to the extent that it can be circumvented, and one of the principal "givens" of the medium is undermined. At the same time, when the dramatist is made physically present, attention is inescapably drawn to the processes through which a dramatic situation is conceived. By foregrounding narrative, Dragún underscores the constructed, artificial nature of theatre and drama while subverting the means of its construction. In all of these plays, narrative, memory, and self-dramatization are connected in such a way as to heighten the theatricality of the works while also demonstrating the inadequacy of a purely dramatic—in the sense of nonnarrative—medium to represent characters for whom "storiness" and storytelling are intimately associated with identity.

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Notes

1. Horace, as quoted by Carlson, advised that "the marvelous and the offensive should be kept offstage and handled by the narrative" (24). Likewise, Lodovico Castelvetro, sixteenth-century interpreter of Aristotle, "generally preferred action to narration on stage" yet "suggested that deeds of 'cruelty and horror' be narrated, not on grounds of decorum but because they could not be expected to be done with verisimilitude" (50).

2. I leave aside questions of audience competence, the ways in which an audience might learn to respond to theatrical conventions, and the composition of the audience itself as beyond the scope of this study.

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