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Dorfman and Vidal: Some Insights on Political Theater and Human Rights

Carlos Vargas-Salgado
Briar Cliff University

La justicia poética incendia campos de oprobio:
no hay sitio para la nostalgia, el yo, el nombre propio.
Todo poema se cumple a expensas del poeta.
—Octavio Paz, *¿Águila o sol?*

(Poetic justice burns fields of shame:
there is no room for nostalgia, for the I, for proper nouns.
Every poem is fulfilled at the poet's expense. [*Selected Poems*])

A Political Writer

At the end of Scene One of Act III of *Death and the Maiden*, when Paulina and Roberto are still on stage and we do not yet know if she will finally kill him, suddenly music by Mozart fills the room and a giant mirror descends to hide the actors. The mirror, described in the stage directions as huge, reflects to the audience its own image: at this point, viewers are watching themselves while the music continues for a long while.

I do not know if this suggestive stage direction was actually performed in the original staging of the piece in Santiago de Chile or in the subsequent premieres in London and Broadway (1991). But in this paper I want to examine the image Ariel Dorfman himself wants to propose (in the script) as a means of transition between the end of the climactic scene and the final one.¹ In this final scene, Paulina and Gerardo will appear in a concert and then, very ambiguously, we will also again see Roberto, the sinister character in the play, having a phantasmagoric appearance in the present. Thus, the presence of the mirror is not just an impressive stage direction to help spectators to understand the passage of time in the plot. It is also a

powerfully compelling image for provoking a particular reaction in the audience. Having a mirror on stage that returns to the actual spectators their own image (the spectators becoming part of the spectacle), recalls some of those scenic devices of Brechtian theater, which is perhaps the paradigm for political theater today.

As known, Brecht's theater intended effects of *estrangement* that gave the audience the opportunity to circumvent the formal/escapist theater of European naturalism, while also giving the viewer the ability to understand the story as an invitation to social criticism, and even to social action. Thus, Brechtian techniques aim not only to change what spectators think but more interestingly *how* they think. In a Brechtian perspective, the mirror that faces the viewer in *Death and the Maiden* facilitates a "deconstruction" of the fictitious nature of the play, introducing also a questioning of naturalistic realism itself. It is the famous *breaking of the fourth wall*, which, in the case of the realistic play of Dorfman, helps us to understand the political complexion of his work, which might otherwise be overlooked. Breaking the largest convention of the theater of illusion, the scene is provided as a kind of *trap* for the audience. Those participating in it will have two choices: either to understand the story that they have seen as a part of their own, painful reality, or simply to choose to forget what they have seen. The challenge to the audience is thus an ideological one: nobody can avoid having some kind of response, yet these responses are not necessarily made known publicly.

I would like to discuss this issue because the proposed reading by Hernán Vidal, on the construction of the public persona of Ariel Dorfman, recognizes the political intention in the work of the Chilean writer, although Vidal argues it is not easy to know Dorfman's political beliefs through his fictional texts, for instance *Death and the Maiden*. However, it is highly productive to approach such political topics by referring precisely to the writing and the stage production of the play itself. That way, in the case of a renowned work like *Death and the Maiden*, it is perfectly possible to discuss the political intentions of the writer even though the play does not explicitly announce any political agenda.

In a preliminary statement, Dorfman expresses his desire to write according to a personal imperative of political participation, while avoiding the dogmatic assertions of the pamphlet: "*Death and the Maiden* is within a long aesthetic search in my own life to find how to write a literature that is political but not pamphlet, the attempt to tell stories that are popular, yet full of ambiguity, stories to access large numbers of spectators and simultaneously experimental in style" (Dorfman "Posfacio" 95).² Here is a clear statement on the political intention of the piece, and also on Dorfman's personal commitment to participate in a discussion of socio-historical issues in his country. But the question that may arise is that of effectiveness. In other words, it is the question of the writer's skills to communicate his political truth throughout a fiction work, ensuring a real social impact. Is it

possible for a writer to communicate a forceful political idea in an aesthetic work without destroying the work's aesthetic integrity? And, is it possible for a writer to create a politically engaging piece of theater that is effective in producing a response from its audience?

According to the writer, the desire to intervene actively in the discussion that emerged in the Chilean post-Pinochet (1989–1990) era led him to write a play that could allow him to be closer to the reality of viewers, in front of whom images could be proposed as a social and political discussion within an environment that is also, by nature, a political and social space. It is clear that there is a strong difference between publishing a novel about an acute social crisis, even in the midst of the crisis itself, and staging a production with similar characteristics. While a reader can camouflage his/her support or criticism for a work read privately, in an open and public space like a theater audiences can no longer be passive, and the mechanisms of social censure, impeachment, and power repression begin to round up all of the participants in the social ritual of theater. By 1991, for instance, with Pinochet still at the head of the Chilean armed forces, it is perfectly possible to imagine how every social gesture could be read as for or against the process in motion. An audience member in Chile during this period could hardly be accused of paranoia for believing his or her reactions to a staged work might be viewed as revealing political bias or beliefs.

Dorfman chooses this moment of re-democratization in Chile to propose a work that presented an account in images and words about torture and raised questions on the difficulties to finally find truth and justice. That way, the work will play the most recognizable and sensitive sides of the political spectrum of the Chilean transition off each other: the military and political accomplices involved in State repression, and the persecuted during the dictatorship times. As frequently mentioned, the piece was received in Chile with coldness and even contempt. Dorfman himself says that the play was a failure in Santiago and had to close within two months. The reasons for this reaction, Dorfman argues, involved the critiques of his own socialist comrades, who accused the work of doing nothing to help return the country to a complete democracy. As Dorfman himself describes this resistance, according to his fellow socialists, “*Death and the Maiden* came to break, uncomfortably, in a complex transition process that required of the citizenry, oblivion or at least delaying their pain, for the sake of a necessary social peace” (92).

A play that explores the painful recent history of Chile does not contribute to a climate of stability if it serves as a slap in the face of the ruling class (through the device of the mirror in front of the audience), whose collaboration with the Pinochet regime was clear. Nor if it demonstrates to the persecuted that a complete exposition of the truth and judgment of perpetrators of violations and disappearances are not realistically possible (we will never know, for example, if Roberto was actually guilty). Finally, such a play is not contributing to a democratization

agenda, it was believed, if written by a United States based academic and writer who, finally, had not experienced directly the times of repression that the dictatorship had been spreading since 1973. As Dorfman himself recognizes, “after all, (my comrades could find) it was easier for me to criticize the transition, because if it failed I could always leave for the United States while they would suffer in their own bodies any deterioration of the situation” (93).

So, while it is possible to establish that the intention to participate in local politics in Chile is evident from the mere fact of presenting *Death and the Maiden* in 1991, it does not seem so clear to establish its effectiveness as a tool for public discussion. By efficiency I mean here, following what was suggested by Brecht in his celebrated *Writing the Truth: Five Difficulties* (1966), is the ability to deliver a truth from the theater. For Brecht, those difficulties for the writer are: “He must have the *courage* to write the truth when truth is everywhere opposed; the *keenness* to recognize it, although it is everywhere concealed; the *skill* to manipulate it as a weapon; the *judgment* to select those in whose hands it will be effective; and the *cunning* to spread the truth among such persons” (133). In short, Brecht conceived the exercise of writing as a dialectical process that involves the writer in a series of tasks far beyond the purely scriptural (the action of writing to someone, rather than the simple act of writing itself). Writing is thus a part of a dynamic of social relations in which it is not only important what is said but also *to whom* and *how*, in what circumstances, and by what strategies. Brecht seems to conceive the political writer’s art as a correlate of warfare, as part of a discussion that needs to assure a victory for the author in the public arena. It is a game that has no place for naivety.

From this point of view, it seems that Dorfman undertakes a writing of political intervention, with a strong political agenda, but ignores two major difficulties as pointed out by Brecht: having a clear awareness of the recipient of the truth, and possessing the cunning to spread the writing between the future agents for social change. In reflecting two years later on the failed opening in Santiago, Dorfman exhibits his early awareness of the failure of his political writing project: “I knew that I would be criticized for disturbing the fragile peace of the Republic by reminding viewers the consequences of terror and violence, precisely at a time when we were asked to be particularly wary” (89).

This awareness of the political ineffectiveness of the piece, at least as an unwelcome social realization, however, serves in the author’s own rationale as an opening for considering political morality using categorical imperatives derived from individual freedom. It is with this freedom that he proceeds to justify the project: “I felt, however, that if as a citizen I should be responsible and reasonable, as an artist I had to respond to the wild call with which my characters demanded their full birth. The silence that hung over many of my compatriots who were self-censored, fearful of creating ‘problems’ for the new democracy should not be observed by the writers”

(90). My claim then is, while there is in Dorfman a clear commitment to political writing, that commitment was subject to the imperatives of individuality and to his particular vision of creative writing. Dorfman chooses to respond only to his *personal tribunal of justice*, giving greater attention to the internal demons that govern him as an author (“to answer the wild call”) rather than raising his writing in terms of a discursive strategy that would allow him a higher level of penetration into and impact on Chilean society at the beginning of the transition.

The Shaman and Human Rights

References to the original circumstances of the production of *Death and the Maiden*, as well as to Dorfman’s statements on his intention in writing and producing it, cannot deny that the play had great impact on contemporary literature, theater and film. The play has had a wide public life far beyond its initial circumstances in Chile, and has achieved an enormous popularity too complex to summarize here. Its great success in the English speaking theater, such as in its London and Broadway (1991) productions, as well as the critically acclaimed film version by Roman Polanski (1994), have made *Death and the Maiden* a truly global success. There are references to productions in more than thirty countries and translations into more than forty languages.³ In all the theatrical versions, as often happens with dramatic literature, it is possible to recognize variations of meaning, more or less conflicting readings, all on the basis of the original text by Dorfman. The author himself has made film versions and has rewritten parts of his own work. Weaver and Collieran have made a fascinating exploration of some of these proposals and versions based on *Death and the Maiden*, in particular comparing three productions (London, Broadway and South Africa) which had different production conditions and sharp ideological differences, as well as diverse sociopolitical contexts. It is also interesting how most of the “foreign” productions of the play have occurred in countries that have welcomed a social discussion on issues of human rights, including disappearances, torture, or transition processes after coups. In this sense, *Death and the Maiden* can be called a kind of *classic* in contemporary literature and film focused on human rights issues.

In Hernán Vidal’s essay, I see a suggestion that Dorfman’s work would be of dubious benefit in relation to the discussion of issues of human rights because of ambiguous or romanticized ideas that the writer has shown on politics and art. Dorfman’s conception of human rights would not be clear when reading his fictional work. For this reason, Vidal chooses to approach the topic by reviewing the construction of public persona in Dorfman, through interviews and an autobiography. As a result, the critic uses two metaphorical terms to understand Dorfman’s set of political ideas: the image of the Shaman, and the Lacan metaphor. In the first, Vidal discusses

Dorfman's beliefs which seem to be near to a deterministic and fatalistic view of History in front of which, according to Vidal, the writer desires to become a sort of shaman for the ills and pains of Chilean society. In the second metaphor, Vidal identifies the recurrence of signs of *dissociative fugue* and psychosis from the accounts Dorfman himself shares in his autobiography, while narrating events from his early childhood. That early psychosis would appear recurrently in Dorfman's work, and even in the way in which he decided to picture the transition for his compatriots, for instance in *Death and the Maiden*. Despite its productivity for critical speculation, I find psychoanalytic approaches in this case can place a trap when trying to judge the importance and content of the work of a literary author. Since it is not possible to psychoanalyze the person through his texts, texts produced by him can only serve as personal metaphors and new literary insights (even in the case of interviews and autobiographies) driven to build discourses on his own life. They can never be taken as symptoms.⁴

Regarding the metaphor of the shaman, Vidal points out that it operates in Dorfman as a way to elude historical evidences and even political responsibility. "Shamanism" in Dorfman, according to Vidal, appears when we see how "very raw emotions [are core] as literary material in periods of suspension of the rule of law" (6). Brought to the moral sphere, continues Vidal, this perception of the preeminence of emotions in Dorfman's literary work "re-introduces the issue that the emotional reaction to severe violations of human rights is more important than the events themselves" (8).

Apart from consistent analysis carried out by Vidal, the question of the importance of this analysis itself in terms of the promotion of a culture of human rights still remains latent. In my perception, this question precisely begins with the aforementioned real evidence that the fictional work of Dorfman—in spite of his philosophical flaws and neurotic/raw emotional images—is still seen as necessary and practical in contexts where local theater artists decide to discuss issues of human rights for their societies. In other words, political consistency in *Death and the Maiden* should not be the main issue when taking into consideration its practical and social function as a play designed to question cases of human rights violations and the interruption of democratic systems. Despite whatever inconsistency there might be in its political message, there is no doubt that *Death and the Maiden* continues to be an impressive mirror set in front of such audiences.

Secondly, regarding the feelings and emotions aroused in the process of reconstruction of traumatic historical events in societies such as transitional Chile, Vidal emphasizes the irrationality of these feelings, and thus would deny their power in addressing issues such as defining human dignity, expressing respect for human beings and stopping unnecessary suffering during a war. However, evidence shows that it is precisely the proper education of the feelings, and not rationality, that is the most effective way to build the moral character of citizens and finally to construct a wider human rights culture. In a well-known article, Rorty emphasizes the

importance of the manipulation of feelings as a way of promoting a human rights culture among citizens. Rorty supports a pedagogical strategy to settle the moral universalism of human rights culture that promotes discussion and implementation of the basic notions of dignity, welfare and freedom, through imagination and critical thinking. This process clearly speaks of a human empathy that can bring us to discover the life circumstances of the other, and allow us to approach the subject of the poor and the marginalized. In Rorty, this “pragmatist” view of the promotion of human rights avoids the perennial discussion about the rationality of the foundations of human rights, or, the discussion of the correct and rational perception of them. Returning to ideas by Annette Baier, Rorty suggests that

to get rid of both the Platonic idea that we have a true self, and the Kantian idea that it is rational to be moral [. . .] we [must] think of ‘trust’ rather than ‘obligation’ as the fundamental moral notion. This substitution would mean thinking of the spread of the human rights culture not as a matter of our becoming more aware of the requirements of the moral law, but rather as what Baier calls ‘a progress of sentiments.’ This progress consists in an increasing ability to see the similarities between ourselves and people very unlike us as outweighing the differences. It is the result of what I have been calling ‘sentimental education.’ (129)

Much of this process of the education of the feelings operates under a form of recognition of and empathy for the other’s life circumstances, rather than the mere fact of an underlying rationale based on the common terms that define us as human beings: “The relevant similarities are not a matter of sharing a deep true self which instantiates true humanity, but are such little, superficial, similarities as cherishing our parents and our children—similarities that do not interestingly distinguish us from many nonhuman animals” (129).

Much of the foundationalism in human rights is based on the idea that progress in moral matters, or the promotion of a human rights culture, is better supported on a project of rationality which establishes unconditional moral action clauses. But in terms of practical life, there are probably more possibilities for the spread and actual accomplishments of a human rights culture if it is based on projects of progressive sensitization.

To return to the issue of Dorfman’s work, we necessarily need to consider that the ambiguities and empty areas, as clearly exposed by Vidal, in Dorfman’s political ideology and human rights issues, do not prevent us at all from returning to his work to discuss matters of human rights and politics. The power of the characters in the play to question notions of justice, reconciliation, and truth, through a “real game” of plausible dramatic action, can operate as a sentimental and aesthetical way of encouraging audiences to consider the complexity of these social and political points,

particularly because it takes place in the public sphere in which all of them must be resolved. Such an approach/appeal to action does not operate independently of literary resources, but it occurs precisely because the elements of fiction work through raw feelings and emotional images that impress the audience more fully and permanently than would their recognition of the rightness of sociopolitical statements. The constitution of a moral progress in a culture of human rights needs to comprehend not only ideas, but especially emotions and feelings. Even the difficulty of finding a clear and resounding end for *Death and the Maiden* (which is, without a doubt, born from the “imperfect perception” that Dorfman had of the facts at the time of the play’s writing) does not deny the expressive power of showing a victim meting out justice by her own hand, or displaying an ambiguously sinister character like Roberto being tortured though not actually evidencing that he is guilty of the crime. The search for “poetic justice” that a work like *Death and the Maiden* is capable of creating is true even outside the author’s personal beliefs, especially because the work itself becomes autonomous in the readings drama and film producers will do in the future, and the free interpretations that spectators will complete according to their own moral world. That way, paraphrasing Octavio Paz, one can say this play will satisfy the desire for justice even at the expense of the writer himself.

Notes

1. I am using the version in Spanish (originally published in 1992), reprinted in 2001.
2. This text is a “Posfacio” and was originally written in Spanish for the version of *Death and the Maiden* published in 1992. I am using the 2001 re-edition of that text. All the quotations referring to it are my translations.
3. According to Sophia McClennen it has been staged in more than thirty countries, and, in 1993, there were fifty simultaneous productions of the play in Germany alone.
4. I also understand that the reference to a constituent *psychosis* in the life experience of Dorfman also needs to be aligned with such kinds of metaphors. The tendency to attribute mental illness to humans with high creativity has been made a part of a romantic tradition, and is widely popular (Waddell). Nevertheless, scientific evidence we have today indicates an open contradiction to that belief. While there is some match between the neuronal bases that give rise to creativity and those that cause psychosis (a lower Latent Inhibition), the central difference between the two experiences (psychosis and creativity) is mediated by the frequently high IQ of those doing creative work of value (see Carson, Peterson, and Higgins).

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