“What is a piano that does not sound?”:
The Women Playwrights of Teatro Abierto

by

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INTRODUCTION

[We created Teatro Abierto] because we want to demonstrate the existence and the vitality of Argentine theater, which has many times been denied; […] because we feel that together we are greater than the sum of our parts; because we hope to exercise in a mature and responsible manner our right to the freedom of opinion; […] because it is with great pain that we love our country and this is the only homage we know how to make to it; and because, above all other reasons, we feel happy to be together.

-Carlos Somigliana, Declaration of Principles of Teatro Abierto (cited in Dubatti, 195)

On July 28, 1981, a short play festival called Teatro Abierto, or The Open Theater, premiered at the Picadero Theater in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Teatro Abierto featured new works by theater artists who were censored by the dictatorship that had come to power in 1976 and would last until 1983. The festival brought together 21 playwrights, 21 directors, and 150 actors, along with many composers, musicians, designers and technicians (Taylor, Disappearing Acts, 234). There were performances seven nights a week, with three short plays performed each night. After five years of state terrorism, preceded by decades of domestic chaos, Teatro Abierto stood out as a voice of artistic and political expression, and would become a model for similar festivals around Latin America.

The prevailing atmosphere surrounding Teatro Abierto was that of feeling “happy to be together” (Dubatti, 195). People lined up for blocks to buy tickets, and every performance sold out. However, its success did not make it a perfect spectacle of resistance, for although it claimed to be an “opening” of the Argentine theater, it was made up of artists who were already famous before the military coup. The theater scene in Buenos Aires had historically excluded women from leadership positions, 

1 Unless otherwise stated, translations from Spanish-language texts are my own.
and Teatro Abierto continued this trend by maintaining the theatrical status quo. At first, Griselda Gambaro was the only female playwright included on the program, until Diana Raznovich complained and she and Aída Bortnik were added, bringing the total to 3 women out of 21 playwrights. There were no female directors, although Raznovich requested one, and the roles available to female actors fell into the categories of family figure or sexual object. In the context of a festival that claimed openness in opposition to the masculine dictatorship, it is important to examine if and how the only three female playwrights used their texts to combat the “Open Theater’s” lack of diversity. To understand the unique perspectives of Bortnik, Gambaro, and Raznovich, however, requires a return to the historical struggles of Argentina and of its women.

**Historical Context**

The 20th century in Argentina was a time of rapid change and wild instability. Between 1930 and 1983, the country underwent five military dictatorships, interspersed with periods of democracy. All five authoritarian governments began with civic-military coups d’état, meaning that they were brought on through collaboration between the military and the small upper class, who ever since the establishment of universal male suffrage in 1912 had been unable to gain power through Argentina’s American-style democratic process. The land-owning oligarchy struggled against the power in numbers held by the working classes, first embodied by the vast number of immigrants in the early 20th century, against whom the first military coup was enacted in 1930. Starting in the 1930s, the children of immigrants became members of a new middle class, and the working class came to consist of the
migrants who moved from rural Argentina into the cities to look for work. These migrants formed the support base of the leader Juan Domingo Perón, whose political style—combining fascism, populism, and democracy—defines Argentine politics into the present day. Perón rose to prominence as the Secretary of War and the head of the Department of Labor under the second military government and was the first leader elected after the return of democracy in 1946. He combined the fascist aesthetic of a strong, charismatic leader with democratic populism. Perón was backed by the overwhelming majority of the population, especially the working classes, and he gained their admiration through his emphasis on workers’ rights and through the image he cultivated of himself as the father-provider and of his young wife, Eva Duarte de Perón, as the benevolent mother of the population. However, it is important to note that despite the fascist-populist qualities of his politics, peronism has always functioned within democratic capitalism. The worker’s right according to Perón was the right to work: the right to earn one’s pay and form a part of the economic system. Between his election in 1946 and his deposition in 1955, Perón and his government built an elaborate welfare system and put into place economic protections that encouraged domestic industry and job creation.

As the support for Perón and his welfare state grew along with fears that Perón would not leave the presidency voluntarily, the oligarchy put into action the third coup d’état. This military government, like the others, was conceived as a brief interruption of democracy in which the military would eliminate what it saw as a national sickness—in this case, peronism—and then call for elections. Peronism was prohibited, and its vast movement went underground through the following
democratic governments and the fourth military dictatorship, which held power from 1966 to 1973. In the absence of Perón, peronism fractured into populist-socialist and fascist elements that grew further and further apart ideologically, while both worked with Perón in exile to bring about his return. After Perón’s return and subsequent election in 1973, it became clear that in his old age Perón’s sympathies lay with the fascist element in his party; the leftist peronists, embodied by the guerrilla organization the “Montoneros,” were excluded from his new administration.

The peronist government only moved further to the right after Perón’s death in 1974 and the assumption of the presidency by Isabel Martínez de Perón, his third wife and vice president. Under “Isabelita,” a paramilitary group called the Alianza Anticomunista Argentina (Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance), commonly referred to as the Triple A, began sequestering, torturing, and murdering those whom they perceived to be threats, usually members of guerrilla organizations such as the Montoneros and the communist group ERP—the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (the Peoples’ Revolutionary Army). By 1976, the country was in complete chaos, and many people wished that the military would step in and establish some order.

On March 24, 1976, the military took power, naming Army Commander Jorge Rafael Videla the de facto president and beginning what they called the Proceso de Reorganización Nacional, or the Process of National Reorganization. The dictatorship would last until 1983, when it was brought to a close by the failure of the War of the Malvinas. As its name suggests, the Proceso sought to reorganize the Argentine nation, and their means of doing so was violence and terror. The Proceso continued and amplified the project of the Triple A, disappearing, torturing, and murdering
those people in society whom it deemed to be “subversive.” In order to justify the disappearances, the military junta constructed the figure of the “subversivo” as a guerrilla with no moral compass fighting for foreign and communist interests. However, the two largest guerrilla groups, Montoneros and ERP, were dismantled early in the dictatorship; the junta was fighting against a ghost. Most of the disappeared were members of the workers’ movement or the labor unions, high school and college students, and intellectuals. Thirty percent of the disappeared were women, and three percent of the whole were pregnant women (Argentine National Commission on the Disappeared, 285). Simultaneously with the system of terror, the Proceso instituted neoliberal economic policy that dismantled the Peronist welfare state, raised unemployment, and caused hyperinflation. While the majority of the disappearances occurred under the Triple A and in the first few years of the dictatorship, those who had not already been killed remained in confinement until the arrival of democracy, and the brutal economic policy and the War of the Malvinas continued to persecute the population.

**Teatro Abierto**

One element of this persecution was artistic censorship: artists whose work defied the dictatorship were blacklisted and forced to flee the country. In the 1980s, as violent oppression abated and exiles began to return to the country, various artistic resistance movements arose. One of these movements was Teatro Abierto, a short play festival put together in 1981 by censored theater artists. The artists of Teatro Abierto had come of age in the previous decades, and many of the playwrights had been part of the “Generación del ’60” credited for revitalizing Argentine theater in the
1960s. In this mid-century period, the theatrical scene was divided into three main circuits, all of them centered in Buenos Aires: the official circuit, which received government funding on either the national or municipal level; the commercial circuit; and the independent circuit. While the circuits did begin to overlap in the 1960s, the independent theater continued to generate the most new Argentine work and almost all of the artists who would go on to participate in Teatro Abierto received their theatrical initiation in the independent circuit (Pellettieri, Cien años de teatro argentino, 139). Faced with the worldwide political unrest of the 1960s in addition to growing domestic chaos, the “Generación de ’60” pushed the independent theater towards the left, using art as a way of expressing their political orientation (Pellettieri, Cien años de teatro argentino, 139).

However, the terrorism of the 1970s, beginning in 1973 with the Triple A and continuing through the end of the dictatorship, would interrupt the theater’s artistic and political progress. Many playwrights, directors, and actors were among those labeled as “subversive,” and those who managed to avoid sequestration were forced to go into exile or to suspend their artistic activities. During the worst years of the dictatorship, the audience also feared going to the theater, because, explains theater scholar Jorge Dubatti, “the theatrical event, the act of being together, be it inside the theater group at a rehearsal or at a performance with spectators, [was] considered subversive” (172). The official theaters were taken over by the junta, and the key figures of the independent theater went into hiding during the violent early years of the Proceso. Yet, as artists began to return in the early 1980s, the independent theater “transformed into a space of resistance, and, in many cases, of preservation and
reelaboration of political identity in face of the impossibility, due to violent repression, of working on a macropolitical level in service of the left” (Dubatti, 192).

Teatro Abierto was the most visible example of theater as a space of resistance. It was formed by a group of artists who had been censored by the dictatorship, led by playwright Osvaldo Dragún. Every performance sold out, and a total of 25,000 spectators attended across its two-month long run (Taylor, *Disappearing Acts*, 234). Given that the festival centered around artists who had developed their artistic styles before the dictatorship, Teatro Abierto was not aesthetically revolutionary, but their act of performance was politically provocative. The plays were a veiled expression of resistance; under the still-present threat of the junta, the artists could not be as explicitly radical as they were in the pre-dictatorship years, and they depended on metaphor and staging to get across their message of defiance.

However, the use of metaphor was not enough to protect Teatro Abierto from repercussions. Before dawn on August 6, 1981, one week after opening night, the Picadero Theater was burned down by paramilitary forces. Contrary to the desires of the junta, this act transformed Teatro Abierto into the cause of Argentina’s intellectual world (Pellettieri, *Teatro argentino contemporáneo*, 46). The much larger Tabaris Theater on Corrientes, the main theater avenue in Buenos Aires, offered Teatro Abierto its space, and performances continued through September. According to theater scholar Osvaldo Pellettieri, Teatro Abierto “became the most useful instrument of culture for confronting the Proceso” (*Teatro argentino contemporáneo*, 46).
Diana Taylor’s *Disappearing Acts*

Despite its artistic and political success, Teatro Abierto failed to combat one of the dictatorship’s forms of oppression: that of sexism. According to performance theorist Diana Taylor, “Teatro Abierto, from its inception, was envisioned as an all-male show” (*Disappearing Acts*, 238). By excluding women from discourse and using the festival to perform male strength and resistance, Teatro Abierto mimicked the macho posturing of the Proceso. In her book *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina’s Dirty War*, Diana Taylor analyzes both the ways that actual women were affected by the Proceso as well as the use of gendered language and imagery by the various historical players. The first official statement issued by the military after taking power declared itself the “‘supreme organ of the nation’ ready to ‘fill the void of power’ embodied by ‘Isabelita’” (Taylor, *Disappearing Acts*, 78). The military depicted itself as the phallic penetrator, and, according to Taylor, it did not only portray itself as penetrating women. Says Taylor: “The gender divide in Argentina has historically been less of a matter of male/female sexual organs than of insertive/receptive sexual positions” (*Disappearing Acts*, 155). That is to say, for a man to penetrate another man is not considered homosexual; only the penetrated plays the “feminine” role, and to be penetrated is to be feminized. Taylor centers her argument around the idea that, in penetrating the private sphere of the family by breaking into peoples’ homes and kidnapping “subversives,” in penetrating the physical bodies of the disappeared through torture devices like the electric cattle prod and through rape, and in penetrating the minds of citizens through the aura of terror that forced them to remain silent, the military junta feminized the
population and positioned itself as the sole masculine ruler. Taylor proposes that “individual and collective fantasies of control and domination, played out against castrated, feminized, and penetrable bodies (literally and/or metaphorically), meshed into a highly organized system of terror in which hatred of the feminine was not only the consequence but, simultaneously, its very reason for being” (Disappearing Acts, 89). Men were feminized in order to remove them from masculine competition with the junta; those victims who were women were tortured for their femininity through rape and other forms of sexual battery.

However, as Teatro Abierto makes clear, it was not only the military junta that expressed hatred for and attacked the feminine. The adulation of masculinity and of machismo was and is a pervasive element of Argentine culture, expressed by the left as well as the right. Taylor gives the examples of remembrances of female victims that create “mythified images of self-sacrificing, pure, and ethereal womanhood,” and of works of theater like Eduardo Pavlovsky’s post-dictatorship play Paso de dos that, in representing the torture of women on stage, eroticized violence against women.

By excluding female directors, limiting the number of female playwrights, and relegating female actors to stereotypical roles, Teatro Abierto 1981 allowed men to continue to define and defame the feminine. The three female playwrights of Teatro Abierto—Aída Bortnik, Griselda Gambaro, and Diana Raznovich—stand out amongst the men, and their readings of the dictatorship reflect a distinct point of view from that of the male playwrights. The three women write in different styles and each confronts a different theme of Diana Taylor’s Disappearing Acts: Bortnik’s Papá querido centers around family, Gambaro’s Decir sí around power and victimization,
and Raznovich’s *Desconcierto* around spectatorship. By analyzing the three female-authored plays against the work of the men, it is clear that there is another level of resistance active in Teatro Abierto. The plays of Bortnik, Gambaro, and Raznovich argue not only against the Proceso, but also against the sexism employed by their own colleagues in attempting to combat state oppression.

**Papá querido by Aída Bortnik**

The most common theme across the plays of Teatro Abierto is family: six of the twenty-one plays center around a family with children, and even more take place in homes of childless couples. This is unsurprising given that Argentine history has been marked by a series of male leaders who have sought to position themselves as the patriarch of a national family. However, the assertive men who defined Argentina throughout its history had different beliefs about what it meant to be masculine. Diana Taylor proposes that there are two central models of masculinity in Argentina that arose from the nineteenth century standoff between Domingo Faustino Sarmiento and Juan Manuel de Rosas. Rosas, who ruled the Argentine Confederation as an authoritarian leader for over twenty years, for Taylor embodies the militaristic, macho model of masculinity, which works to create a “homonuclear” society where what matters is the power relationships between men and where women only exist as “obstacles to be tamed” (*Disappearing Acts*, 33). Sarmiento, an intellectual who spoke out against Rosas from exile and later became Argentina’s president, represents the “liberal” model of masculinity, which honors women who remain within the bounds of the role assigned to them by the “civilized” patriarchy (*Disappearing Acts*, 33). However, though the standoff between these models of masculinity, between
what Sarmiento called “civilization and barbarism,” has been a common thread throughout Argentine history, both work towards the continued subordination of women. Says Taylor: “Male authenticity in both models rests on the careful positioning and control of women—whether under one’s boot or under one’s wing” (*Disappearing Acts*, 34).

In the twentieth century, Juan Domingo Perón combined elements of both of these models into his image as the masculine “Líder.” Perón recuperated the figure of Rosas, who had been vilified by history, and condemned the intellectual, oligarchic Sarmiento as being elitist. Still, Perón echoed Sarmiento’s model of patriarchy in envisioning Argentina as one overarching family, with him as the patriarch and his wife “Evita” as the compassionate, generous mother. Eva Perón served as the figurehead for women’s suffrage, which was granted in 1947, and afterwards gathered these newly politicized women together in the Partido Peronista Femenino, or the Female Peronist Party. Yet Eva was not a feminist, and strongly discouraged women from working outside the home. Rather, she reframed motherhood as a political job, and encouraged women to work for the betterment of Argentina by running the household and raising upstanding children.

This double politicization of the home and familiarization of politics gained new meaning under the Proceso government as it infiltrated Argentine homes by force. The junta sought to erase the private family and to bring the population under the obligation of one national family, with the symbolic Patria as mother and the military junta as father (Taylor, *Disappearing Acts*, 88). Mothers were charged with raising children loyal to this national family and therefore to the dictatorship.
Conversely, the dictatorship encouraged individual families to reproduce the model of the national family in miniature. Says Taylor: “There had to be a clear system of command: fathers had to occupy their place of authority; mothers were responsible for household affairs; children had to respect and obey their parents. Parents were designated military proxies and asked to police their children” (*Disappearing Acts*, 104).

Given the junta’s attack on private family life coupled with the historical use of familial metaphor to define the nation, it follows that the theme of family remained resonant for the artists of Teatro Abierto. And yet, although the political metaphor of family existed to reinforce the superiority of the nation’s patriarch, only the female playwright Aída Bortnik centered her family play, entitled *Papa querido*, or *Dear Father*, around a father; all five of the family plays written by male playwrights focus on the mother of the family. One of the plays, *El 16 de octubre* (The 16th of October) by Elio Gallipoli, does not mention a father. Three of the other plays have characters who are fathers, and one, like *Papá Querido*, mentions a father who never appears on stage, yet not one of these plays centers around a patriarch in the way that Perón and later the junta attempted to paint themselves. The play *El que me toca es un chancho* (*Whoever touches me is a pig*) by Alberto Drago is about the New Year’s celebration of a family right after the oldest brother, who chooses not to attend the festivities, is released from sequestration. While all four siblings are men, and three are fathers, the play is about their brotherly relationship, and the figure who ties the family together is their mother, Maruca. Their father is never mentioned: this is a family without a patriarch. *Lejana tierra prometida* (*The Distant Promised Land*) by Ricardo Halac
centers on a pregnant woman, Ana, and her two lovers: Gerardo, who is nineteen, and Osvaldo, who is over forty. Either of them could be the father of her child. Ana is the locus of desire and of parental feeling, and the appearance of three old women looking for their dead sons’ bones affirms the play’s focus on motherhood. Roberto Perinelli’s play Coronación (Coronation) is the play with an offstage father: the three characters who appear on stage are Olga, Carmen, and Carmen’s daughter Lily, who meet when Carmen and Lily run across Olga’s house while trying to escape a flood in the town below. Over the course of the play the women discover that Carmen’s husband Rafael has been cheating on her with Olga, and the play is not about Rafael as a father but rather him as a shared love interest of the two adult women.

The play that comes closest to analyzing a man’s role as head of the family is Gris de ausencia (Grey of Absence) by Roberto Cossa, which is about an ethnically Italian Argentine family that had to leave Argentina and move back to Rome for political reasons after the fall of Perón; they now run an Argentine restaurant and speak a mixture of Italian and Spanish. The play begins when Lucía’s and Dante’s adult daughter Frida comes to Rome from her home in Madrid for a visit. Dante barely appears on stage and by far the more emotional relationship is that between Frida and her mother. However, her grandfather, the family patriarch who was the one to make the initial immigration to Argentina, is on stage for most of the play and is clearly starting to suffer from dementia; he is not sure which country he is in or what year it is. He appears as a relic of history, a symbol of a generation who moved to Argentina for a new life and then had to escape back to Europe. And yet, although he is the patriarch and although his past decisions shaped the family history, no one
seems to pay him any attention. The character who affects the emotional journey of the play more than any other is the mother, Lucia, who despairs over her absent children with whom she cannot communicate.

The fact that *Gris de ausencia*, the one male-authored family play with a defined patriarch, depicts this patriarch as a decaying antique and his daughter Lucia as the focus of the play reinforces the idea that the patriarch-less plays of the other men establish: that the mother, not the father, is the center of the Argentine family. The importance given to motherhood follows Diana Taylor’s assertion that “among the few roles available to Argentine women, the suffering mother is the most popular and certainly the most socially rewarding” (*Disappearing Acts*, 195). The male playwrights have explored the relationship between dictatorship and family by writing about how the women who hold families together are affected by societal imbalance. And yet, curiously, the single family play authored by a female playwright—Aída Bortnik’s *Papá querido*—centers around a strong patriarchal father figure in the style of Sarmiento or Perón.

*Papá querido* takes place after an unnamed aging revolutionary journalist, adored by the working class in his small town, has committed suicide. Following instructions he left, his four adult children gather together to receive their inheritance. His children, two daughters and two sons, all have different mothers and until the day the play is set did not know of each others’ existence. The father was for the most part physically absent from his children’s lives; only his daughter Clara remembers him carrying her as a baby. He made himself present through letters, which he wrote each of his children once a week until they were eighteen and once a month when they
became adults. His letters related his revolutionary ideology and asked his children to follow in his footsteps. His ideological fervor is evident in the odd names he gave his children. Only one, Electra, uses that name publicly; his other daughter, Minerva, goes by Clara, while his two sons, whom he called Germinal and Ateo (Atheist) prefer the names Carlos and José respectively.

The play opens on three of his children—Clara, Electra, and Carlos—going through his things while José is elsewhere making funeral arrangements. It is immediately clear that each of his children, who are only now getting to know each other, feels differently about their father and his legacy. Carlos, a doctor, has not responded to his father’s letters in ten years and at various moments in the play interjects the conversation with a scream of “¡Viejo ‘e mierda!” (“Shitty old man”) (13). Carlos angrily counteracts every argument in favor of his father; he dominates the conversation by interrupting his siblings, especially his sister Clara. Clara is a soft-hearted housewife, and nothing her brother can say will sway her from her unadulterated admiration of her father; she gets upset when Carlos insults him and asks her brother to refrain from saying such things. Their sister Electra has followed in her father’s footsteps and become a journalist, and she meets her siblings in the middle, imagining her father not as an angel nor as a devil but as a human being with both positive and negative qualities. She argues back to Carlos and accuses him of being upset at discovering he is neither an only child nor the only son. The other son, José, who jokes that he has become a “bourgeois pig,” initially seems much more mellow than Carlos, gently appreciative of his father and kind to his sisters (18). However, towards the end of the play, when Electra asks Carlos to stop attacking his
brother, José snaps at Electra: “If you’re defending me from something, I thank you for it…but our father taught me that it was I who had to defend women” (19).

José’s attitude reveals that their father’s ideology, which is implied to be socialist in nature, is also highly patriarchal and authoritative. Carlos accuses his father of “programming” his children, of using his letters to turn them into tools for his own benefit. What he left his children in his will supports Carlos’ claim. José brings back a box that contains their inheritance; the rest of the meager estate is to be left to the people of the town. The children hesitate at first to open the box because they do not know whether or not there are any more children who might be upset if its contents are distributed before they arrive. They eventually decide to open it and find five folders, one for each of those present and an extra labeled “Amanecer” (“Sunrise”): a fifth child who, according to the name, could be either male or female (17). When they open the folders, they find all the letters that they wrote him, beginning when they were young children. The letters show the siblings, now in their forties, the people they wanted to be when they were young, the dreams they had of living up to their fathers’ expectations. None of the siblings, not even Electra the journalist, has taken up the father’s revolutionary mantle. While José insists that their father left his children their letters to show how important they were to him, how much he loved them, there is something to be said for Carlos’ insistence that the letters are meant to show his children how much they have failed him and to remind them of their ultimate purpose. The play ends with the four children reading an effusively dogmatic excerpt from their letters in concert. The letter reads:

Dear Father: Yesterday I received your letter and I spent all night thinking about what you wrote to me. And I want to tell you that I am
so proud to have you as my father, and that I will never forget the promises I have made to you, the promises I made about my own life: I learned from you that each individual is responsible for all liberty, for all solidarity, for all dignity, for all justice, and for all love in the world. And I learned that this responsibility can never be renounced, not for even one minute of our lives, and that no one can take that responsibility from us if we want to be free...And I promise you, Dad, that I will be able to remember all this until I die and that I will never, ever betray you or betray myself...The only thing I want is to grow, to grow quickly, so that I can become the human being you taught me to be, someone free, supportive, and proud, someone who defends their ideas and won’t bow before anybody, someone like you, dear Father. (20)

As the text shows, their father the politician mixed his private and public selves, using the letters he wrote to his children to indoctrinate them in his politics: the “human being [he] taught [them] to be” is someone who stands by the father’s political ideals. To him, fatherhood was political, mirroring the historical trend of familial politics. And yet, by making it clear that none of the children have led the lives their father planned for them, Aída Bortnik shows that his model of fatherhood was ultimately unsuccessful.

Bortnik, a screenwriter and playwright who had been blacklisted by the authorities before the coup d’état and exiled herself in Spain from 1976 to 1979, described Papá querido as the “ideological and aesthetic synthesis of everything she had written until then” (Witte, 78). But why is it that this female playwright, who would go on to write the screenplay for the Oscar-winning movie La historia oficial, which centers around a mother, wrote the only play in Teatro Abierto to ignore motherhood and focus on a strong father figure? Moreover, why does she describe this play of patriarchy as her artistic synthesis? The problem with the prominence of the suffering mother characters and the absence of strong father characters in the
other family plays is that the plays fail to depict the source of power in the Argentine political family, and the overuse of this power is what Teatro Abierto sought to criticize. If the dictatorship and Perón before it used the idea of a patriarch as a symbol for their power over the nation, then Bortnik’s play is the only one to address that power and the language used to describe it. While the father’s politics clearly were socialist or Marxist in nature, his local political popularity and the lofty doctrine of justice echoed back to him in the letters of his children mimic in miniature the role Perón played in the Argentine imagination. The four children deified their father in the same way that the Argentine working and middle classes deified Perón—and the children, like the working class after Perón’s long-awaited return, are ultimately disappointed. Theater scholar Jean Graham-Jones posits that, in reading and rereading his letters, “the children fused the father and his ideals, the Phallus and the Word; that is to say, they have created a phallogocentric system” (93). The father’s presence in their lives has manifested itself through words and ideology, of which he was the source, the creator. When he commits suicide and leads his children to discover that they were one among many, they are faced with reconciling their belief in his divinity with the clear evidence of his faulty humanity. Electra is more successful at this than the others; when Carlos complains that in leaving him his letters his father was criticizing him for not being the man he promised to be at seventeen, Electra replies: “No one is that man” (19).

In fact, what Bortnik does over the course of *Papá Querido* is to show that no one, not even the patriarch who created the standard for what a man should be, “is that man.” Ann Witte proposes that “while Bortnik leaves no doubt that she
sympathizes with the ideas of the father, she also emphasizes that the teaching of revolution, without an awareness that human beings are more than just tools, is wrong and ultimately leads to failure” (80-81). The father’s mode of leadership, reflected in the promises he gleaned from his children, was a top-down approach. He did not give them the self-sufficiency and confidence that would have allowed them to become leaders after him; rather, he begged them to puppet his own ideology and to seek his approval. This overbearing patriarchal attitude extended to his attitude towards women. He showed by writing his daughters complicated letters and by sending Electra books that he was in favor of the education of women, but José’s words that “our father taught me that it was I who had to defend women” show that the revolution proposed by the father does not revolutionize the world for women; it rather continues to propagate the patriarchy (19). As long as the father is upheld as the man whom all must aspire to be, no real revolution will happen.

Graham-Jones postulates that Bortnik plants the promise of a different model of revolution in the figure of the absent fifth child, Amanecer. Graham-Jones provides two interpretations of this ungendered “sunrise:” one hopeful and one less so. In the midst of the fallout of this powerful revolutionary’s suicide, she says, “the promise is Amanecer, the sunrise, the possibility of tomorrow. Intentionally androgynous, the future is not phallocentric” (194). While none of the present children have gone on to fight “for all liberty, for all solidarity, for all dignity, for all justice, and for all love in the world,” the absent Amanecer could have, and the fact that a gender is not given implies that the promised tomorrow may not necessarily continue the patriarchal elements of the father’s revolution (20). However, Amanecer is not there. Perhaps the
fifth child felt no affection for the father, but perhaps he or she could not come.

Perhaps, suggests Graham-Jones, Amanecer was not there to receive the summons in the first place. Graham-Jones writes: “Maybe Amanecer has ‘disappeared,’ and with this disappearance all of tomorrow’s hope: the past has died and so has the future. All that remains is the disconcerting present, lost, lacking a system of beliefs in action” (194). Whichever it is, Bortnik does not say. For now, the four siblings, split evenly along gender lines, are left to wrestle with the remains of a suicidal patriarchy.

The suffering of mothers in the five male-authored family plays of Teatro Abierto show the audience the effect of authoritarianism on the family. But Bortnik’s play shows that the family can be a source of that same authoritarianism—both in public and in private. The fact that Bortnik portrays the father not as a fascist, but as a champion of the working class, shows that this patriarchal model is oppressive even when it seeks the freedom from oppression. To reject the junta’s attempt to position itself as the patriarch of the nation while continuing to imagine Perón as the national father will not succeed as a model of revolution. To choose one patriarch over another does not alter the structure of society. It merely leaves room for a succession of fathers—some benevolent, some corrupt, and some, like Perón, a mixture of the two—all of whom by the nature of their position are endowed with authoritarian power over the nation, as opposed to being charged with the obligation of serving the electorate. By focusing on the father instead of the mother, Bortnik hones in on the source of society’s problems. Even a father admired by his children—for Carlos’ rage emerges from his own sense of insufficiency in the face of what he sees as his father’s unadulterated success—and adored by his townspeople, even a father whose life’s
work was to fight for freedom and justice, cannot succeed through the authoritarian model of leadership in making his vision last past his lifetime. His work to indoctrinate his children in his beliefs was futile because, having been prepared to believe in their father as the source of all authority, they cannot take up the mantle when he is gone. When one patriarch leaves, another, who cannot worship the previous as his followers did, will step in to take his place, and he may not share the same beliefs and goals. The continuation of patriarchal leadership is not a successful model for the future; the nation and the family are both in need of a new “Amanecer.”

**Decir sí by Griselda Gambaro**

Griselda Gambaro is the oldest and by far the most prolific of the three women: by the time of Teatro Abierto, she was already considered one of Argentina’s most important contemporary playwrights, having formed part of the “Generación del ’60.” Whereas Bortnik is better known for her screenplays and Raznovich for her cartoons, since the 1960s Gambaro’s primary artistic home has been the theater. Today, she is arguably Argentina’s most celebrated living playwright. Although her work spans fifty years of history, there are certain common threads that weave her plays together. In a 1986 interview, Gambaro said of her writing: “Eventually we realize that all we’ve done is variations on the same theme. Some themes have always concerned me; I just handle them in different ways: the abuse of power, the relationship between victim and victimizer, fear. I think these are common themes in my work” (Roster, 43).

Gambaro views herself as a “specifically Argentine” playwright, and her themes of power, victimization, and fear are reactions to Argentine history during
Gambaro’s three most productive decades: the 1960s, the 1970s, and the 1980s (Doggart, 97). The way in which these themes develop across her work reflects the transformation of contemporary Argentina. The change is perhaps most notable in the relationship between the powerful and the weak, between the victimizer and his victim. As Ann Witte says, in Gambaro’s plays “the victimized character never ceases to believe in the good will of the victimizer who hides behind a mixture of incoherent and conflicting messages…Even during the bleakest moments we know that the characters could overcome their frightening circumstance if they fought their own passivity” (109). When reading Gambaro’s plays in the context of state terrorism in which they were written, this guilty victim cannot be understood as one of the disappeared, since the majority of those who were tortured were fully aware of the ill will their torturers held toward them. The passive Argentineans were those who were not disappeared precisely because they watched and did nothing. According to Taylor, the military created a narrative in which “the population was either supportive of their mission, or their next target” (Disappearing Acts, 124). Taylor asserts in an earlier essay that the transformation of Gambaro’s victims across her works reflects the transformation of the Argentina’s population: “The perspective from which her characters view their predicament develops from a passive acceptance of catastrophe in the 1960s to the acute awareness in the 1980s that their passivity had disempowered them, that they had contributed to their own annihilation” (“Theatre and Terror,” 97). What begins as an accusation against the passive population turns into an acknowledgment of what everyone in the post-dictatorship world knew: that
by accepting and encouraging military takeovers for the past fifty years, Argentina’s politics had brought violence upon itself.

In her book *La escena del poder: El teatro de Griselda Gambaro* (*The Scene of Power: The Theater of Griselda Gambaro*), Susana Tarantuviez positions the beginning of the transformation of Gambaro’s victims in 1973, one year before *Decir sí* was written in 1974, and eight years before it was first performed in Teatro Abierto 1981 (126). In this story of manipulation, the victim remains passive—or in Tarantuviez’s model of victimhood, “obedient”—but he begins to notice that he is being manipulated and complains verbally, although he does not act (132). *Decir sí* opens on an unnamed barber sitting alone in his filthy barbershop. The stage directions describe him as “a big, taciturn man who moves slowly. His gaze is heavy but inscrutable. What is disconcerting about him is that it is impossible to know what lies behind his gaze. He never raises his voice, which is sad and servile” (95). As he sits reading a magazine, a man enters. The man’s energy contrasts that of the barber; he is “timid and insecure” (96). From the first moment of the play, when the man enters and says “good afternoon,” the barber takes control over the situation by keeping the man uneasy (95). He refuses to behave according to the normal rules of customer-service interactions; he waits a long moment to return the man’s greeting and then returns to being silent. The man then begins to chatter incessantly, making guesses at what the barber is thinking. The barber uses his “inscrutable gaze” to direct the man’s chatter, and he speaks only in terse statements, such as when he says only “beard” to ask if the man wants a shave (95). Using these strategies, the barber gets the eager-to-please man to agree to a shave as well as a haircut, to clean off the dirty
chair, sweep the floor, clean the mirror, shave the barber, apply pungent cologne to
the barber’s neck, cut the barber’s hair, and sing opera. The barber’s power lies in his
cool assertion that the option he suggests is the only option, and in his refusal to
acknowledge the man until he agrees to follow through with that option. The barber’s
disinterest and silence make the man uneasy, and he looks desperately for hints of
what the barber is thinking. Thus, the barber is able to control the man not just
through words but also through his gaze. After wiping off the seat, the man asks if he
can sit down. The barber shakes his head and the man wonders aloud if the barber
will cut his hair standing up. In the stage directions, it reads: “The barber pays him no
attention. He looks fixedly at the floor. The man follows his gaze. The barber looks at
him, as if waiting for a certain action. The man quickly picks up on the barber’s
meaning. He gets the broom and sweeps” (96).

The barber continues to use the strategy of suggestive gaze and short
commands to make the man serve him until, towards the end of the play, the man
agrees that they have switched roles. The man has been cutting the barber’s hair and
singing “Figaro,” but he sings terribly and the barber asks him to “shut up” (99). The
man replies: “You’re in charge. The customer is always in charge! Although the
customer is m—(a look from the barber)…is you” (99). However, it is important to
note that although the roles of barber and client change, the power dynamic remains
constant throughout. The barber begins the play with his inscrutable gaze, and the
man enters nervous and timid. This same power gap merely widens until the man has
a breakdown after he mangles the barber’s hair. He pleads desperately with the barber
to let him join his practice, offering to work for free, even though at first he did not
want to cut the barber’s hair. He assures the barber that “Hair grows! In a week, you, poof! Down to the ground!” (99). At the end of this collapse, the barber makes one last suggestion: he gestures to the client seat. The man has finally gotten what he wanted: he is going to get his hair cut. He sits down in the chair and says to the barber “Cut well. Nice and even” (99). The barber spins the chair around and stabs the man with the rusty razor, killing him. He then sits, lifts his hand to his poorly cut hair, takes off a wig, throws it onto the body of the man, and starts whistling. In this last moment, Gambaro reveals that the barber had planned every move even before the man walked in the door: he thought to put on an unkempt wig so that he could ask for a haircut. Each of the barber’s actions is premeditated to lead the interaction towards a cruel end.

With this choreographed exchange between the passive man and the conniving barber, *Decir sí* fits neatly into the model of power plays described by Taylor, Witte, and Tarantuviez. Like in Gambaro’s other plays, the man-as-victim is ultimately the cause of his own destruction. The barber does not lock the door; the man has the option to walk out at any point in the play. And unlike in some of Gambaro’s other plays, in which she does depict torture on stage, there is no physical force exerted in *Decir sí* until the very end, when the barber stabs the man. The barber only succeeds at exerting power over the man because the man nervously agrees to follow along with the guessing game. According to Tarantuviez, power in Gambaro’s plays works because “it wins the other’s submission by means of making the other abandon his or her preferences in favor of the imposition of a disagreeable or painful action” (116). In this case, the way the barber “makes” the man abandon his
preferences is by taking his timidity and his need for the barber’s services and using them to control him. The man has begun the slow transformation of Gambaro’s victims: he is aware that he is being manipulated, and at moments he does contradict the barber. When the barber asserts that the rusty razor is “Impeccable,” the man replies: “Old, rusted, and blunt, but impeccable!” (97). And yet, a moment later the man agrees to call it impeccable to appease the barber and goes on to shave him with it. In these brief instances of complaint, the man may react verbally against the barber, but his actions are always passive, and despite the fact that he grows uneasy and even frightened, he does not move to protect himself. When the barber agrees to cut his hair, he thinks the game is over and puts himself in the barber’s hands. His blindness mirrors that of Argentina’s passive bystanders, who as Taylor says were “forced to blind themselves to the violence of the Proceso government” (Disappearing Acts, 72).

Gambaro is not the only Argentine playwright to write about power, nor is she the only one to depict the victim of power as passive or obedient. Among the many plays in Teatro Abierto that explore the theme of power, there are three that feature a passive, overwhelmed victim: Mi obelisco y yo (Me and my Obelisk) by Osvaldo Dragún, Lobo...¿estás? (Wolf, Are You There?) by Pacho O’Donnell, and La cortina de abalorios (The Glass-Beaded Curtain) by Ricardo Monti. Mi obelisco y yo most closely mirrors the structure of Decir sí in that it features a confused protagonist who does not want or understand the task he has been burdened with. The play begins with the character of Actor 1 entering flamboyantly, behaving almost like a master of ceremonies, carrying a small obelisk and declaring “An obelisk! Nothing here!
Nothing there! Nothing more than an obelisk!” (51). The obelisk is meant to mimic the giant obelisk in the middle of Buenos Aires, and the protagonist, a young man referred to as “El,” or “He,” is a tourist from elsewhere in Argentina who has come to see the obelisk. “He” is nervous like Gambaro’s man is, and confusedly accepts when Actor 1 asks him to guard the obelisk diligently for a short period of time. However, Actor 1’s strategy is to make the boy feel at ease, in contrast to the barber’s tactic of keeping the man uneasy. “He” also dies in the course of the play, but there is no violence; the female figure of Death comes to meet him for a date at the movies. This is a much less sinister play and, moreover, it also has a less clear source of power. In the last moment of the play, Actor 1, who so far has been the manipulator of the play, is left alone on stage. He looks around desperately, waiting for someone to enter, but no one does. He repeats “No one wants to help me care for the obelisk? No one wants to help me care for the obelisk? No one wants to help me care for the obelisk?” (61). Therefore, there is another entity that holds power over Actor 1: the obelisk. Whereas in Decir sí, the barber is a clear source of power in a human body, in Mi obelisco y yo, power is a symbol that must be cared for.

In Lobo...¿estás?, power does come from human sources, but in contrast to Decir sí, there are a multitude of powerful figures who surround the victim in a confusing whirlwind. O’Donnell’s play is a carnival of power, in which the main character Mario is attacked from all sides for a proclamation he makes to his double in the mirror at the beginning of the play: “It pisses me off when they impose upon me what I should do, say, or think” (181). As his double says back to him “It’s not prudent to declare something like that” (181). Mario spends the rest of the play
suffering for his brief moment of courage and denying his initial declaration. Imposing what to “do, say, or think” is precisely what the barber does to the man in *Decir sí*, but in O’Donnell’s play the imposition comes from a sequence of power figures: his teacher, a platoon leader, his mother, a hunter, and a magician. The play is like a circus, and in fact featured members of a circus group as part of its cast. The acrobatics and carnival tricks that pervade *Lobo...¿estás?* serve to confuse the audience as to the source of power. In this play, power is hectic, surprising, and everywhere, coming down over Mario from all parts of society, distinguishing O’Donnell’s narrative from Gambaro’s story of the singular and calm barber.

Ricardo Monti’s play *La cortina de abalorios* is the most provocative play of the three and by far the most violent. It takes place in the nineteenth century plains of Argentina in a brothel owned by “Mamá.” It is about the struggle for power between two men: Pezuela, an army officer in the war against the natives, and Popham, a British official. Unlike Gambaro’s man, Dragún’s “He,” or O’Donnell’s Mario, both Pezuela and Popham are vying for power. The passive victims are the waiters, who are killed one after another by both Pezuela and Popham. The first waiter is described as “a small, sad, and tense figure,” and the rest are identical; in fact, in the original production, they were all played by the same actor (Monti, 161). The waiters do not talk, and they are killed in spontaneous acts of violence that emerge out of nowhere and disappear immediately after. Violence and power are wild, emotional, and woven through by sex in the figure of Mamá, who as Taylor says, is “the site of deviance, the commodity for economic exchange” (*Disappearing Acts*, 242).
Thus, amongst the four plays of power that feature passive victims, Gambaro’s is the only one with a clear, human source of rational power. In *Mi obelisco y yo*, power is a symbol that does not execute its will by itself; in *Lobo...¿estás?*, power is nebulous and comes from all sides, and in *La cortina de abalorios*, the other violent play, power does have human sources that fight with each other, but Popham’s and Pezuela’s emotional and sexual uses of power show that they do not rule with power, but rather are ruled by it. In contrast, the barber in *Decir sí* is in complete control of himself and of his victim and at every moment of the play makes conscious, strategic decisions to further dominate the man. In the model of power proposed by Gambaro, he who exercises that power does it consciously. He is rational, efficient, and unemotional.

The way Gambaro writes about power is mirrored in Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman’s 1989 book, *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Bauman traces the origins of modern genocide, using the Holocaust as an example, and finds its source at “the modern, rational society” of the twentieth century (90). In modern genocide, which functions, like the Proceso did in Argentina, through a bureaucratic system of terror, “violence has been turned into a technique,” and, “like all techniques, it is free from emotions and purely rational” (98). Power in *La cortina de abalorios* and in *Lobo...¿estás?* is not rational; in the former, it is emotional and irrational; in the latter, it is a wild circus. In *Mi obelisco y yo*, Actor 1 takes the strategic action of accosting the young protagonist and convincing him to guard the obelisk, but he himself is not the source of power, and moreover, his showmanship obscures his thought process from the audience. Only Gambaro’s play meticulously outlines each
step of the victimizer’s strategy in torturing the victim, and demonstrates how unemotional and rational that process is. If violent power is understood as a strategic act with a clear source, it can be eliminated, whereas if it is seen as an emotional explosion from nowhere, it cannot be stymied. In 1989, Diana Taylor described this function of Gambaro’s theater thusly: “Theater can also make the invisible visible by concentrating, as Gambaro’s work does, on the holes and discrepancies that neither social rhetoric nor masks can fully obscure” (“Paradigmas de crisis,” 17).

However, there is one invisible element of the function of power in 1970s Argentina that Decir sí does not attempt to make visible. This play is one of two in the festival with no female characters, and it is the only play that does not mention the onstage existence of women. One of three female playwrights of Teatro Abierto has completely absented women from her story of power. Gambaro has said of her plays that include no female characters: “The situation of women is made evident by a transparent omission. In the plays in question, the world of men is a world marked by incomprehension, egoism, and injustice. This is the world in which women ‘live’” (Graham-Jones, 185). However, in a society that promotes the “backgrouding or disappearance of women in the name of national order,” does the absence of women in a play really read as a comment on their existence? (Taylor, Disappearing Acts, 31). Although Gambaro spent decades as the main representative of women writing for the Argentine stage, of the three female playwrights of Teatro Abierto she is the one who does not use her play to make any comments on gender.

In fact, part of the reason that Gambaro was successful despite her femininity in the male-dominated “Generación del ’60” is because her work was not assertively
feminist. Starting around the time that Decir sí was written and coming to a culmination after the end of the dictatorship, her work eventually gained a more feminist lens. Tarantuviez describes the way Gambaro’s changing point of view changed her female characters: “The female characters appear completely abused and defeated in the first plays, only to become in her later work the bringers of the rebellion that each victim hopes to bring to fruition” (136-7). That is to say, they start out as the passive victims that Taylor describes and eventually become the characters who fight against passivity. This is most clearly exemplified in Gambaro’s 1986 adaptation of Antigone, Antígona furiosa, in which Gambaro uses the frame of the Antigone myth to tell the story of feminine resistance to torture and disappearance.

However, in Decir sí, which outlines Gambaro’s philosophy of power in five short pages, women are not included in the narrative. It is certain that Decir sí is not a feminist play, for whatever Gambaro says about “transparent omission[s],” the absenting of women from a dramatic world cannot further their position in the real one. But is Gambaro’s contribution to Teatro Abierto misogynist? Compared to other depictions of conflict on the Argentine stage, the way power functions in Gambaro’s womanless world is not as sexist. Taylor criticizes the numerous Argentinean plays from the 1970s and 1980s in which a struggle between men takes place over a woman’s body. She provides the example of Eduardo Pavlovsky’s 1973 play El señor Galindez, in which the playwright “presents the brutality as sex, kinky sex perhaps, but not violence” (Disappearing Acts, 179). The women who are tortured in that play are accessories to a power conflict between men whose political actions Pavlovsky criticizes, but within the play the intervening sexualized torture of women “seemingly
belongs to the realm of the ‘normal’ rather than the world of aberrant political
behavior he has chosen to focus on” (179). Within Teatro Abierto, *La cortina de
abalorios* recreates this model; in the opening sequence, Mamá forces the first waiter
to stare at her genitals, which she describes as:

> A museum…here you can flip through the most brilliant pages of the
history of the universe…Another comparison: a stage. The folds of the
curtain separate, the protagonists jump onto the floorboards, a
pirouette, they hide in the shadows, curtain, the folds open again, and
on and on into infinity. (161)

Mamá is a museum, a stage, the site of action between men. In the midst of the
conflict between Pezuela and Popham, Pezuela asks Mamá to kneel on all fours and
represent the cow whose beef he hopes to export to England once he has won the
plains from the natives. He asks Popham to massage her breasts as if his desire for
Mamá will translate to desire for trade with Argentina. The objectification of Mamá is
not the violence that the play criticizes: it is the accepted assumption upon which the
conflict of the play occurs. Though neither *Lobo…¿estás?* nor *Mi obelisco y yo*
replicate the model of female objectification to that extent, the roles afforded to
women in those plays do make them mere tools in the central and problematized story
of the victimization of male protagonists.

*Decir sí* is in no way a feminist play; the absence of female characters
propagates the primacy of male protagonists on stage and furthers the invisibility of
women in games of power. However, unlike other contemporary narratives of
manipulation, the exercise of power is not mediated by sex or by violence
masquerading as sex: power is cold, rational, and completely unsexualized. In *Decir
sí*, the audience sees the source of power on stage, they see him strategizing to
maximize his power, they see the way the victim fails to fight against that power, and they see the rational, clear-headed act of gratuitous violence that ends the play. This violence and this power parallels the “highly organized system of terror” that ruled in Argentina during the 1970s and into the 1980s (Taylor, *Disappearing Acts*, 89). In time, Gambaro would come to discuss the way women were affected by that system; *Antígona furiosa* dramatizes the way an oppressive state entraps and silences women and problematizes their insertion into the middle of conflict between men. Ironically, Gambaro’s contribution to Teatro Abierto silences women by ignoring their role in this conflict. However, the way in which she outlines male conflict in the womanless world of *Decir sí* reveals the strategic and rational manipulation behind modern terrorism and the play thus establishes a narrative of power which can be understood and therefore combated without the interference of irrational emotion or sexualized violence.

**DECONCIERTO BY DIANA RAZNOVICH**

Though Gambaro’s and Bortnik’s plays combat some of the dominant gender narratives of the male authors, only one out of the twenty-one plays of Teatro Abierto is explicitly feminist: *Desconcierto*, or *Disconcerted*, by Diana Raznovich. The youngest of the three playwrights, Raznovich was born in 1945 to a Russian Jewish family and began working as a playwright and cartoonist in her late adolescence (Taylor and Constantino, 1). She escaped to exile in Spain in 1975 after the disappearance of her first husband, and returned to Argentina in 1981 to participate in Teatro Abierto, having previously complained about the exclusion of female playwrights (Taylor, “What is Diana Raznovich Laughing At?,” 74). The play she
submitted, which is about a female pianist who gives silent concerts, was considered “inappropriate” by some of the other playwrights (Taylor, “What is Diana Raznovich Laughing At?,” 74). She was asked to submit another play, but she refused.

What exactly was inappropriate about Disconcierto? According to Raznovich, the other playwrights called it “frivolous” for framing the conflict as an artistic crisis as opposed to a political one, but seeing as the entire festival was predicated upon the use of metaphor that does not seem like a justifiable complaint (Taylor, “The Theater of Diana Raznovich and Percepticide in El desconcierto,” 114). After all, Teatro Abierto was both a political and an artistic space, and the themes of the play therefore touch on the lives of many artists working under authoritarianism. The play’s sole character is a woman named Irene della Porta, a famous pianist. It is the only play in the festival that directly addresses the audience throughout: the play is set in the theater, and the audience of Desconcierto plays the character of the audience who has come to see Irene della Porta perform. The stage is empty but for a piano, and Irene della Porta enters dressed as a star: she wears “a very tight long red dress” and plenty of jewelry (Raznovich, 243). She sits down and begins to play, but the piano makes no sound. Her first words acknowledge the audience as her audience: “Ladies and gentlemen: a new episode of sabotage in the long line of episodes of sabotage that have besieged me ever since you and I first intended to find some way to give this concert” (243). The audience she spoke to in 1981—the real audience of Teatro Abierto—was an audience that had come to see works by censored artists who “tried to find some way” out of the silence of the dictatorship, and so Irene’s artistic
predicament was instantly recognizable as a parallel to the real situation of the moment.

However, as the play progresses it soon becomes clear that despite her anguish, Irene volunteered for this silence. “And yes! I made a pact,” she admits (243). “Mediocrity offered me its warm protection. Interminable years of comfort in exchange for accepting the role of Irene della Porta who plays in silence” (243). Now she regrets having to perform this “humiliating act,” but she has signed a contract and she cannot escape (243). She looks back to the moment in which she agreed to silence herself, wondering what and who had blinded her. She laughs ironically and says: “But how important are the reasons when I am tied in front of you and you celebrate by coming to see me? This is a success. Irene della Porta makes a lot of money from all this. My manager celebrates the triumph night after night” (243). By referring to herself in the third person, she makes it clear that the woman who stands on stage does not feel that same success. The woman who is present is the one who feels trapped, the one who says “I am tied in front of you” (243) She is the humiliated woman of so many other plays of the dictatorship: the tortured prostitutes from Pavlovsky’s *El señor Galindez* and, in Teatro Abierto itself, the character of Mamá on all fours in Monti’s *La cortina de abalorios*. However, now the humiliated woman is the only person on stage and the audience is asked to focus on her despair. In the words of Diana Taylor, “Raznovich illuminates what plays like Monti’s and Pavlovsky’s attempt to hide: that the audience desires and will pay to see the woman’s degradation” (*Disappearing Acts*, 247). Irene feels the eyes of the audience
on her in her tight red dress and knows that there is a reason why she is more
successful as a silent pianist than she was when she was allowed to play.

A few minutes into this spectacle of degradation, Irene stands up and
addresses the audience’s desires:

What do you want from me? *(All of a sudden, she opens her dress and
begins to strip)* Do you want to uncover hidden truths? Do you want to
see me without disguises? *(She removes her clothing until only her
underwear remains)* Do you know more about Irene della Porta than
you did before? Now that you see me like this, stripped down to my
breath, do you know more about me than before? What is a person?
Who am I? Who are you? What is success? Does my nudity bring
success? What is a naked woman? A skeleton exposed to the air, with
only a fragile, vital membrane? What is a piano that does not sound?
(244)

Like the women in Pavlovsky’s and Monti’s plays, Irene is a trapped woman whose
humiliation is sold as desirable. But Irene questions this archetype, asking what it
means that she is naked and why it is that her audience comes again and again to see
her shamed. Irene strips, but her frank questions about the nature of her nudity makes
her less of a sexual object than she was while clothed. The audience comes to see her
defeated, to see her exposed, but Irene exposes herself and shows that they have not
learned anything from her disrobing. What is left standing on stage, what is left
“exposed,” is a “skeleton,” not an object of desire.

And yet, by indicating that her nakedness does not teach the audience
anything new about her, Irene shows the audience that she still has further to fall.
Now naked, she continues the spectacle of her own denouement. As she does every
night, she takes out a revolver, points it at the audience, points it at herself to threaten
her own suicide, and then puts the revolver away. She then claims to be happy to give
a silent concert, but her pent-up artistic impulse builds until she breaks out: “Oh, right
now, how I would like to play the Pathetique! Ludwig van Beethoven, how I would like to find myself in the storms of your generous soul!” (245). She asks herself: “Am I a tormented soul or a wandering body? Oh, how I would like to break out of these circular and empty days and peek out into real life!” (245). She sits down at the piano, but this time it makes a sound. This is not part of the protocol. She is paralyzed. She laughs and cries: “It has been so…it has been centuries of unlived life since I last heard these sounds” (245). She begins to play. But it is here, here at this last glimmer of hope, where her true fall comes. It has been so long since she last played that Irene della Porta, the virtuoso pianist, no longer knows how to play the piano. The sounds that emerge from the piano are “horrendous” and “deformed” (246). Finally, the piano becomes silent once again, and Irene della Porta is relieved. She composes herself and begins to play once again in silence. The lights go down as the audience watches her silent performance, the weight of her ultimate humiliation hanging over the room.

However, the audience watching the woman at the piano had not come to see Irene della Porta; it had come to see Teatro Abierto. This is why Raznovich’s play was “inappropriate:” it called into question not only the role of women on stage, but also the nature of spectatorship. Because in Desconcierto the walls of the house and the people in the seats are as much a part of the play as the woman on stage, the specific audience of Teatro Abierto was implicated in the demise of the pianist. This accusation was dangerous because, although all theater relies on spectators, Teatro Abierto relied on them more than most. Teatro Abierto was protected by the its popularity; the fact that people lined up for blocks to get tickets and that every show
sold out made the festival the center of attention. The Picadero was burned down when no one was inside because the festival was so widely attended. The subsequent increased focus on Teatro Abierto after the fire is the reason why it was allowed to resume playing in the Tabaris Theater without further intervention. In exchange for this security, Teatro Abierto gave its spectators the feeling that they were also doing something to protest the dictatorship after five long years; as Taylor writes, “the idea that public presence at a theatrical event was an act of resistance underlay the entire Teatro project” (“What is Diana Raznovich Laughing At?,” 75). Being a spectator was sold as a noble act, as a mobilization against the oppressor. Desconcierto questioned that proposal. Ironically, by placing a half-naked woman in despair on stage, Raznovich did not turn the audience’s desiring eyes onto the actress; she rather turned the audience’s gaze inward, and forced them to ask what it meant to watch.

In the context of Argentina in the 1970s and into the 1980s, this question did not just apply to what it meant to watch a theatrical performance. Watching was all the population was allowed to do; according to Diana Taylor, “Argentineans were assigned to spectatorship—watching themselves, looking up to (or out for) the military, scrutinizing others” (Disappearing Acts, 94). In a world in which the smallest of actions was considered subversive, those who wanted to protect themselves could not act. They could only watch, but watching also had its dangers, for the military was putting on an immense spectacle of terror. Taylor analyzes this spectacle as follows:

Terror draws on the theatrical propensity simultaneously to bind the audience and to paralyze it. Theatrical convention allows for splitting of mind from body, enabling the audience to respond either emotionally or intellectually to the action it sees on stage without
responding physically. Terrorism in Argentina pushed this convention further, to atomize the victimized population and to preclude the possibility of solidarity and mobilization. (*Disappearing Acts*, 125)

The military wanted the population to watch. The goal of the Proceso was to eliminate subversion, and they disappeared people from their homes in the middle of the night not so that no one would notice—for who could not notice—but rather to create the sense that nowhere was safe. The goal was to force the population to watch and through the terror of watching force them into silence as to what they had seen. Taylor uses the word “percepticide” to describe the phenomenon of being “forced to focus on the given-to-be-seen and ignore the atrocities given-to-be-invisible” (*Disappearing Acts*, 119). The spectators of Argentina’s reign of terror were prevented not only from interfering in the show of power but also from discussing the show after the fact.

What Diana Raznovich’s play makes clear is that, though the spectators cannot act, their role is also an active one. If Irene’s performance did not sell tickets, her repeated humiliation would end. As Irene says to the audience, “You are killing me. You have already killed me” (244). The audience is not the only guilty party—after all, it is Irene and her managers who arranged the silent performance and it is they who make money off of it—but the presence of the audience is the reason why Irene is humiliated, and their love for her spectacle of humiliation is the reason why she continues to repeat it. By using the metaphor of a performance that the audience can choose whether or not to attend, Raznovich shows that to watch is a choice. In the words of Jean Graham-Jones, “Towards the end we realize that the spectators are accomplices to mediocrity, to the hidden forces that manipulate Irene’s
spectacle…They are the assassins of her creativity” (189). This is true not only of concertgoers but also of Argentina’s population during the years of disappearances. While to do otherwise would have been dangerous, the fact that Argentina’s population remained silent and blinded itself to the terror around it made the paramilitary’s actions possible. The ultimate culprits are obviously those who ordered the disappearances and those who executed them, but the importance of the passive bystander in the execution of oppression cannot be ignored. In the context of a festival glorifying spectatorship as resistance, Raznovich pointed out that the tendency of the population to watch contributed to the situation that the festival opposed.

Of all the plays of Teatro Abierto, Desconcierto is the only one that wrestles with the issue of spectatorship. There is another female solo performance entitled Criatura (Creature) by Eugenio Griffero, and the half-bird, half-human protagonist of that play also suffers before her audience, but she does not address them. At the end of Osvaldo Dragún’s Mi obelisco y yo, Actor 1 asks the audience for help caring for the obelisk, but the capacity in which he does so is that of an emcee, and the play is set on the streets of Buenos Aires, away from the spectators that Actor 1 addresses. Desconcierto is the only play that takes place in the entire physical space of the theater, and it is the only play that is about an interaction between a performer and her spectators. Among all of the twenty-one playwrights who through Teatro Abierto were able to return to their home on the Argentinean stage, Raznovich is the only one who asked what it meant to be on that stage. What she says questions the foundational
idea of Teatro Abierto that spectatorship is resistance, and that is why Desconcierto was deemed “inappropriate.”

By writing a play in which the audience watches a woman suffer, Diana Raznovich does not say that performance in and of itself produces humiliation. What she does is show that spectators play an active role and that it is not always the best role to play. Watching, says Raznovich, is a choice. It is an attractive one; Irene della Porta herself says that “I would also come, I would also pay to see the spectacle I offer every night” (245). But it is a choice, and that choice can sometimes destroy a life. In the context of the dictatorship, Raznovich questions those who stood by for the past eight years and watched their fellow citizens suffer. In the context of Teatro Abierto, Raznovich asks the audience sitting in the room in front of the actress playing Irene della Porta to examine what their spectatorship really means. How are they implicated when they watch a play like La cortina de abalorios that attempts to protest the violence of military men by staging their conflict over a denigrated prostitute? What role do they play in what they see on stage? And what effect does seeing a performance produce? Is going to the theater really resistance? Are they doing anything else? In the words of Irene della Porta, “Will you be my first witnesses, my last judges, or my prisoners?” (246).

CONCLUSION

The plays of Aída Bortnik, Griselda Gambaro, and Diana Raznovich vary widely in style, subject, and political stance. If the three playwrights were not all women within the context of a male-dominated festival, it is unlikely that Papá querido, Decir sí, and Desconcierto would ever be compared to each other. And yet
the plays are not just notable because of the gender of their authors. All three are well written, and all provide an interpretation of their subject that contrasts the way that theme is handled in the rest of the festival. It is clear from the variation between the three plays that Bortnik, Gambaro, and Raznovich do not only speak as women: the plays would be different and important even if the playwrights did not have to represent their sex against the work of 18 male colleagues.

And yet, it is important that they are women. In a festival that “hope[s] to exercise in a mature and responsible manner our right to the freedom of opinion,” that opinion must not exclude half of the population (Dubatti, 195). As Raznovich shows in Desconcierto, silence destroys souls past the point of redemption, until the only comfortable way out is continued silence. In a world that excludes women left and right, women are the “piano that does not sound” (Raznovich, 244). The only way to escape silence is to fight against it: to argue, as Raznovich and Bortnik did, for the right to speak, and to stand alone for as long as it takes for others to emerge out of silence, as Gambaro did for the first 20 years of her career.

All acts of silencing harm not only the victims but also the bystanders who do not hear the oppressed voices; the people who cannot hear Irene della Porta play the Pathetique. Diversity is important in all conversations that seek to “open” a space for dialogue. However, in the context of Argentina in 1981, sexual diversity was particularly necessary because both the military and their opponents thought of the conflict as a fight to “define and occupy the masculine position” (Taylor, Disappearing Acts, 9). During the Proceso machismo was proved deadly, but men who sought to defy the military’s terrorism continued to speak the same gendered
language of domination that had been used to Argentina’s detriment throughout its national history. The women who opposed the dictatorship had no masculinity to protect, and therefore had no need to replicate the sexual discrimination of the state. The voices of women are therefore essential for combating the junta’s façade of strength. As Bortnik shows in Papá querido, as long as leadership relies on patriarchy, it will never succeed in establishing liberal ideals.

In fact, despite their differences, the three female-authored plays of Teatro Abierto together outline an otherwise unrepresented perspective on the state of their country. Bortnik asks: what is the historical cycle that brought us to this moment of crisis? Gambaro asks: how does power function? And Raznovich asks: what are you doing about it? All three women prompt the audience to reexamine the narrative sold to them by the male figures of both power and resistance, but only Raznovich asks the audience to examine itself. Only Raznovich asks a question that she and her audience have the immediate power to answer and to change: what does it mean to be a spectator? And what does it mean to make art in a time of violence?

For, ultimately, what did Teatro Abierto do? It accomplished its goals as stated in the opening night remarks of Carlos Somigliana: to “demonstrate the existence and the vitality of the Argentine theater,” to exercise a right “to the freedom of opinion,” to make homage to their country, and to be together (Dubatti, 195). But as one of the most visible performances of resistance in a silenced country, its responsibilities were greater than that. Teatro Abierto was charged with representing its nation on stage, with making sense of contemporary conflict through performance, and with bringing artists, audience, former exiles, and survivors together not only in
the same room but in communication for the first time in years. What the festival chose to present on stage was important. All three women improved the narrative of Teatro Abierto through their voices; all three moved the festival away from Irene della Porta’s spectacle of silence. But in an era of watching, only Raznovich asked the audience and the artists to remember why they had come to the theater, and made both actors and spectators responsible for the opinion expressed freely and openly on the Argentine stage.
WORKS CITED


