# Violent Displays

*Griselda Gambaro and Argentina's Drama of Disappearance*

> First we will kill all the subversives; then we will kill their collaborators; then . . . their sympathizers, then . . . those who remain indifferent; and finally we will kill the timid.
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> —*General Iberico Saint Jean, governor of Buenos Aires, May 1976*

Griselda Gambaro is one of the most important and innovative playwrights in the world today. Not only is she singularly perceptive about the criminal machinations of the authoritarian governments she has lived under in Argentina from the 1960s to the present, but she is also keenly aware of the role of representation (social and theatrical) in maintaining or dismantling the political structure. Theater, as one system of representation, both reflects and constitutes society, a wider system of representation. Throughout her dramatic production from 1963 to the late 1980s, Gambaro's own violent brand of theater has exposed the theatricality of Argentina's political violence. Her first plays from the 1960s already foreshadow the abductions, "disappearances," and concentration camps, signaling the direction that Argentina's internal conflicts would take, culminating in the military coup and the infamous Dirty War (1976–83). Moreover, Gambaro is one of the very few Latin American playwrights who look at gender as a socially overdetermined representation and who call our attention

to how easily violence in the political "body" is directed at the female body both literally and metaphorically.

The political use of public spectacle to control the population's attention was perhaps best exploited in Argentina's recent history by Juan Perón (president, 1946–55, 1973–74)—the massive rallies, slogans, posters, propaganda of national unity under El Líder (the Leader), the mythification of Evita as the Lady of Hope and Standard-Bearer of the Poor, and Perón's monumental staging of national mourning and solidarity upon her death. All of these served to cover Argentina's growing economic and political crisis. The competing displays of power, however, became increasingly evident after Juan Carlos Onganía's exceptionally repressive coup and his "ostentatious parade of its power" in 1966, which was opposed by riots and strikes staged by students and workers in Córdoba. For two days in 1969 Córdoba turned into "a theatre for pitched battles between rioters and police."[1] The prevalent political violence of the 1960s developed into the orchestrated state terrorism of the 1970s. During the last of Argentina's numerous dictatorships (1976–83), the military junta waged its Dirty War against its civilian population. The military men also relied heavily on spectacle to signal and consolidate power. They were aggressively visible, on parade, in uniform, wielding their weapons for all the world to see. The tactics they employed to disrupt and paralyze the population were also highly dramatic. Men and women were abducted in broad daylight; they "disappeared" as if by magic. As in Elizabethan drama, corpses reappeared out of nowhere at strategic moments. The theatricality of terrorism endowed the national frame with a strange spectacularity. A tragic aura enveloped the country; the tension mounted; the atomized population was frozen in suspense. The weekly march of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo was a physical reminder of those who had simply disappeared off the face of the earth.

Gambaro's theater over the past three decades has captured the constants associated with sociopolitical crisis as well as the changes in perspective that lead to an understanding of what crisis means and whose interests it serves. The perspective from which her characters view the crisis develops from the passive acceptance of catastrophe in the 1960s to the acute awareness in the 1980s that their passivity has contributed to their own annihilation. This awareness permits the characters to oppose those in



power and fight back. Unlike those in most Latin American drama, Gambaro's characters who start to fight back against authority in the 1980s are women. As her work progresses, the tone of Gambaro's questioning becomes more urgent, and her theatrical formulation becomes more pointed, disruptive, and direct. Although many of the themes, constructions, and technical devices remain recognizable throughout Gambaro's dramaturgy, it is possible to divide her work into three stages.

Gambaro's plays from the 1960s, as I discuss at length in my recent book, are a theater of crisis.[2] The victims find themselves suddenly placed in a world that they cannot recognize or understand. Although they find their lives threatened for no apparent reason, their victimizers assure them that nothing unusual is happening; everything is normal. The victims grasp at this reassurance and refuse to see their predicament even as they face death. During the early 1970s, Gambaro's theater becomes a drama of disappearance obsessed with the "missing." And not just people are missing. Everything that has previously made sense—from life-sustaining values to reason itself—has disappeared. During the 1980s, Gambaro's plays reveal a critical awareness of the causes and effects of sociopolitical crisis and the very real benefits of permanent crisis to military leaders who needed to destabilize their population in order to maintain power. These plays continue to portray the victimizer-victim relationship that dominates Gambaro's work, but now the victims refuse to deceive themselves and will no longer play along passively in the drama of their own annihilation.

Gambaro's early plays, *The Walls* (*Las paredes,* 1963), *The Blunder* (*El desatino,* 1965), *The Siamese Twins* (*Los siameses,* 1965), and *The Camp* (*El campo,* 1967), dramatize the progressive decomposition of social and judicial structures designed to keep violence contained and thus under control. *The Blunder* and *Siamese Twins* demonstrate that violence within family circles is inextricable from rampant social violence. They feed each other and transform all relationships, even the closest ones, into that of victimizer-victim. *The Camp* depicts a neo-Nazi concentration camp of the kind that was in fact to appear in Argentina a decade later; there is evidence of some 340 such camps operating during the Dirty War. *The Camp,* one of Gambaro's finest plays, portrays a world of complete ambiguity that disorients outsiders. Martin,

who stumbles into the place thinking he has a legitimate job as an accountant at a "school," is misled by the highly theatrical and artificial sounds, explanations, and costumes that have been devised to put him (and all other observers) off guard. This play is also interesting in that it presents gender as a socially overdetermined construct. Emma, an emaciated, flea-ridden victim in the camp, is forced to pretend that she is an elegant woman, an artist, a star. She is made to wear a grotesque blond wig over her shaved head and a dirty dish towel as a "train" pinned onto her prisoner's gown. Now, as this supposedly glamorous figure, she is made to mince seductively onstage and perform for the male prisoners, who of course are encouraged to jeer at her and utter sexist remarks. Everyone suffers during repressive regimes, Gambaro tells us, but women are abused and humiliated because they are women, in addition to all the other politically "necessary" reasons. Not only are they systematically raped, but they are also humiliated for assuming the sexual identity that has been foisted on them.

Throughout these plays contradictions and confusion multiply. The known universe becomes unknowable. The familiar becomes strange and threatening as the world melts into a terrifying void whose parameters recede and contract. The recurring images in these plays include the collapse of boundaries separating inner from outer, private from public, self from other. The seemingly private room in *The Walls* becomes a prison cell. The walls physically move in to crush the Young Man. Nor is the Young Man's identity perceived as stable or individuated. He is abducted because someone mistakes him for Ruperto de Hentzau or Hentcau, the fictitious villain of *The Prisoner of Zenda.* The causes of the collapse, both physical and metaphoric, remain unexamined and unexplained.

Gambaro's characters of this period respond to crisis in two distinguishable ways. The victimizers create or manipulate the crisis. As Gambaro makes emphatically clear here, victimizers and torturers are made, not born. In some plays, *The Walls* for example, the victimizers, like theater directors, set the drama in motion. Those victimizers who do not personally devise the catastrophic situation readily adapt to it. Both kinds of victimizers are highly theatrical: the former because they have to deceive potential victims and onlookers and control their perceptions; the latter because in adapting to atrocity they have to repress or "split off" a part of their personalities. They become either one-dimensional, like traditional stock characters in drama, or split into two, of which the victims (and we as audience) see only one part. The victims, on the other hand, are incapacitated by crisis. They cannot orient themselves. Their immediate response is to deny the extent or even the existence of danger. This denial, consequently, allows for the displacement of responsibility. Because the Young Man has done nothing *wrong,* he assumes that things will eventually be put *right*—by someone else. All he has to do is wait. Innocence "normally" guarantees freedom. After all, he comforts himself, "we're not in a country full of madmen." The cell-room set, however, functions as a transformer of norms. Nothing comes out "normal." The very concept of normality dies in that room. Soon he cannot trust his own senses; the lights go on and off, undermining all notions of night and day. He hears screams from the next room, but the Usher convinces him not to trust his own ears. The Young Man, faced with the chaotic situation, renounces his own critical capacity to assess and address the situation.

One of the characteristics of Gambaro's early plays is that her victims star in dramas of persecution that they fail to recognize as their own. They make up explanations that seem to be borrowed from other scripts, given that they are flagrantly out of keeping with the reality we see with our own eyes. Unable to fathom the causes of the violence that threatens to exterminate them, they expend most of their energy convincing themselves that it does not really exist, that a reasonable solution will be found. This passive and unrealistic response to danger leaves the protagonists dead—just as it would leave thirty thousand Argentines dead in the next decade.

During this first period, the inchoate and "unreal" nature of Gambaro's onstage world led commentators (erroneously, though perhaps understandably) to compare Gambaro's early work with the theater of the absurd. From her first play onward, however, Gambaro rejects the absurdist separation of "art" (as an autonomous universe with its own laws and logic as conceived by Ionesco) and "reality." On the contrary, she calls attention to the interconnectedness of the two realms. They are by no means separate. While she does not explicitly refer to a concrete sociohistoric

context in this stage of her career, she demonstrates how art reflects and constitutes reality. In turn, she emphasizes, art is often manipulated by those in power for real political aims. In *The Walls,* she juxtaposes her Young Man to an elegant painting of a young man. The painting of the young man vanishes as the room moves in on its inmate. Then the Young Man vanishes. During the next years thousands and thousands of Argentines would vanish. The painting reappears to lull the next victim into complacency. Art not only gives us insight into reality, but it can also be manipulated, and it plays a role in ongoing power struggles regardless of the artist's intent. Art is neither immune nor separate. It is precisely because the seemingly autonomous frames between the aesthetic and political are intricately connected that theaters in Argentina are bombed and theater practitioners are attacked or silenced. Yet the artificial "frame" (be it the ornate frame of the painting or the proscenium stage of the play) draws our attention away from this vital connection; it dissociates us from everything surrounding it. The separation proves not only untenable but also dangerous. By concealing the relation between the various systems of representation, the frame creates a perceptual blind spot that incapacitates the spectator from dealing with the larger picture. Framing does not protect the victims from harm; it does not keep serenity in and violence out. Gambaro urges the spectators to see beyond the seeming comfort and safety of the "magnificent carved frame" and the curtained room so that we can recognize the dangers that the frame apparently keeps out—the screams from the neighboring rooms/cells, the violent deaths, the facts of abduction and torture. We ignore them, as Argentines were soon to learn, at our peril.

Rather than place Gambaro's early dramatic production at the end of a literary tradition (the theater of the absurd), we must recognize that it is the beginning of a new discourse on fascism and atrocity. Gambaro, throughout her career, incessantly calls attention to the fascistic elements in Argentine government and discourse. Fascism has a long history in Argentina. In 1930 General Uriburu came to office with an agenda modeled on European fascism. Gambaro's portrayal of fascism, however, is also directed toward the present, explicitly expressing her alarm at the new wave of authoritarianism in Argentina and the country's ongoing, and intensifying, fascination with fascism.



In the early 1970s Gambaro pushes the "drama of disappearance" further. Her plays of this period, notably *Saying Yes* (*Decir sí,* 1972), *Strip* (*El despojamiento,* 1972) and *Information for Foreigners* (*Información para extranjeros,* 1973) eliminate any remaining vestiges of rationality or coherence from the onstage world. The Man in *Saying Yes* walks into the barbershop for a haircut, and the "inscrutable" Barber slits his throat. In the devastating play *Strip,* the Woman goes for an audition and spends the entire play in the waiting room, where she is gradually stripped of everything she has, down to and including her sense of self. She, like Emma before her, is deprecated for trying to cultivate what her sexist society promotes as an acceptable image for women. *Information* brings us even closer to the process of annihilation by guiding a real audience through a house in which acts of torture and murder are taking place in the halls and behind half-closed doors. The audience members, like Gambaro's protagonists before, are now the ones who see themselves stumbling into the wrong play. Gone are all recognizable frameworks or story lines, and by extension any basis, however tenuous, from which to explain or justify the crimes. There is no mistaken identity, no home to fight over (*Siamese Twins*), no jewelry or clothes left to steal (*The Blunder*). Gone is the characterization, exposition, complication, and "conflict" normally associated with drama. Instead of the two-act plays of the 1960s, Gambaro's plays of the 1970s are fragmented, very short one-acts like *Saying Yes* and *Strip,* or the episodic *Information,* "A Chronicle in Twenty Scenes." Precisely by not explaining, by not filling in the gaps, this is the drama of the "missing." Gambaro places the spectators in the naked contradiction of her historic moment, which now she makes perfectly explicit: "No one under eighteen will be admitted. Or under thirty-five or over thirty-six. . . . The play speaks to our way of life: Argentine, Western, and Christian. We are in 1971." Her pieces, like the historic moment producing them, challenge us to adapt to, ignore, or make sense of crazed contradiction.

In *Information,* the general audience becomes the focal point of the spectacle. Gambaro concentrates on a question she has posited, but only indirectly, in her theater of the 1960s: How can people deny what they know to be true? The audience is split up into groups upon arrival, each led through the house by a Guide introducing the various scenes with short excerpts about abduc-

tions and murders taken from actual contemporary newspapers. Again, and more explicitly, Gambaro challenges us to draw that fine line between the aesthetic and the political. The audience follows the Guide down long, dark passageways cluttered with corpses and prisoners, up and down steep, dangerous staircases, in and out of small rooms in which isolated acts of torture or theatrical rehearsals are forever being played out. The highlight of the tour is the visit to the catacombs in the basement, the tombs of martyred Christians. Although a member of the group (actually an actor) is attacked and abducted by unidentified men, the Guide encourages his group to overlook the violent intrusions. He dispels the rampant outbursts of violence as peripheral to the audience's right to entertainment. As screams and shouts resound through the corridors, he clamors for amusement and "a little gaiety, dammit!" and grumbles about the bad scripts and the unsavory subject matter. Complaining that "modern theater is like this! No respect for the ladies," he nonetheless encourages the spectators to enjoy the show. After all, he reminds us, we've paid for it.

As opposed to earlier plays in which Gambaro shows us that violence has erased the boundaries between the private and the public, between the inner and the outer, in *Information* she places the spectator in the very center of the collapsed and terrifying universe. *Information* actually stages that conflation by setting the violence in a house rather than a theater. Society as a whole, Gambaro stresses, has been transformed into a terrifying theatrical set, giving new meaning to the term *environmental theater.* Scenes of political violence are not limited to prisons and torture chambers but are played out on public streets, in private houses, on human bodies. The lines of demarcation between public and private having been wiped out, violence blurs all physical, moral, and judicial frameworks. Again, the takeover of the house, which is concurrently a social structure, the family home, and the body's protective shell, indicates that the three spaces—body, family, society—are all interconnected and all under attack. Terrorism in the home "gets us where we live," nullifying the existence of any safe space. No one is safe, and the Guide reminds his group to watch their step and their pocketbooks. The house reflects the invasive tactics of terrorism and torture. Terror deterritorializes; we are all foreigners in this house.

As spectators, we make our way through the dark passages,



peering through half-open doors, inadvertently entering the wrong room, and we see what we do not want to see, the non-aestheticized, nonerotic ized infliction of pain and violence on defenseless victims. Yet how can we distance ourselves from the reality we see with our own eyes? By turning it into theater. Gambaro's scenarios of torture demonstrate that theatrical inversion, distancing, and role-playing are essential for the continued functioning of torture. A young woman, totally despondent, dripping wet, and shivering in a chair, has just been submitted to the *submarino,* the prolonged submersion of the victim's head in water, an Argentine specialty. The visual image of the tortured, semiconscious woman is incongruent with the apparent benevolence of the scene, for the Guard acts as if he were her friend or lover trying to protect her. He molests her sexually even as he generously leaves his loaded pistol behind as a "favor" to her, just in case she wants to end it all. This may be hell, but the Guide is no Virgil; he too wants to molest the woman when he judges that no one is looking. In another room, the Milgram experiment is under way. The "pupil" is strapped to a chair and given electric shocks by the "teacher." Though the Pupil suffers from a weak heart, the experimenter urges the Teacher to increase the voltage. The experimenter posits the traditional arguments supporting torture: the experiment is necessary; it's for the greater social good; the man dialing up the lethal voltage is not responsible for the victim's death.

How can we deny what we know to be true? By listening to an expert telling us it's necessary, it's for our good, violence is not violence, it's really something else; by participating in a drama that inverts roles and changes names to create the illusion of innocence. The theatricality of the proceedings, on a practical level, admirably fulfills its real function. It makes us participate, either directly or indirectly, in annihiliating acts from which we would rather distance ourselves.

The theatricality of torture, then, tries to makes violence "safe" for the audience. The audience feels it can remain on the sidelines. We can pretend we are neither directly involved nor responsible. One of the functions of theater, as articulated by theorists from Aristotle to Artaud, has always been to make violence safe for the audience. But it also converts people into a "safe" audience, one that will not interfere or disrupt the show. Terrorism atomizes and

immobilizes the population; it transforms us from active players into a passive audience, content with sitting in our seats and "just watching." As the tour through this house illustrates, terrorism plays with potent images of darkness and the unknown. It capitalizes on infantile fantasies, fears of destruction, dismemberment, and suffocation. It works through amplification: a few displays of highly dramatic violence can hold hostage an entire society. The hideous intrusion of children's songs and games in the play illustrates how terrorism pushes the population to regress to those early areas of experience that prove most disempowering and hardest to decode. One approaches as an adult and turns away as a frightened child incapable of action. Moreover, the "fictions" offered by those in power allow spectators deniability. We didn't know what was happening. Thus, passivity can also be rationalized by means of the nightmarish mechanism of grotesque and dangerous inversion; the regime must be right. Maybe those victims were subversives; people don't disappear for no reason. The rationalization of the irrational brutality in turn becomes a tacit complicity, producing guilt. This group guilt ties the population to the criminal process, making it difficult for people to extricate themselves and condemn the proceedings.

Given that theater's illusionistic qualities can be used to incapacitate a population and preclude constructive participation, how can Gambaro hope to communicate the atrocious reality of terrorism and torture through theater? Her main response in plays like *Information* is to focus not only on the acts of violence themselves but also on the spectators watching them, on the act of watching. We turn our heads when we hear footsteps, crane our necks to catch a glimpse. The Guide's comments and suggestions constantly call attention to the fact that the spectators are "looking." The looking, not the violence, is central. The emphasis on our actions and reactions places us in the position of "seen object," normally reserved for the actors. This reversal implicates us in the action and calls attention to our role in violence. It strips us of our traditional invisibility as spectators.

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



these questions are inextricable from an understanding of our role in it, either as voyeurs, disinterested bystanders, or victims. Whether we are physically involved in the performance or reading about the atrocities in the newspaper, whether we are Argentines trying to survive in an authoritarian system or foreign investors who want to ensure economic "stability," we participate in the brutality depicted here. As the title of *Information for Foreigners* makes clear, we are the spectators. This is our show. If we are not enjoying it (a possibility Gambaro foresees in the play itself), we might decide to pay attention to this information.

Gambaro's plays of the 1980s, among them *Royal Gambit* (*Real envido,* 1980), *Bitter Blood* (*La malasangre,* 1981), *From the Rising Sun* (*Del sol naciente,* 1983), and *Antígona Furiosa* (1986), continue to examine the victimizer-victim relationship, but with important differences that reflect Argentina's changing sociopolitical climate. The victims have finally differentiated themselves from their oppressors. While they remain powerless in the face of the absolute brutality and stupidity of authority figures, they no longer deceive themselves about what is happening to them. The victims have moved from the passive acceptance of catastrophe in the early plays to an acute awareness that their passivity has contributed to their own annihilation. Now the victims, especially the women like Dolores, Suki, Ama, and Antígona, denounce authority for all the world to hear; they scream out against atrocity during their victimizations and after their deaths. Much as in the case of the "disappeared," the dead voices of these victims cannot be silenced. They are felt not as absence but as presence.

Though the victims no longer participate in the fictionalization of reality, the fictions themselves keep proliferating, suggesting the elaborate process of legitimation necessary to keep the criminal authorities in power. The authority figures behind the crumbling sociopolitical realms portrayed in these plays (personified by the King in *Royal Gambit,* the Father in *Bitter Blood,* Oban in *From the Rising Sun,* and Creon in *Antígona Furiosa*) attempt to mask the economic and moral bankruptcy of their regimes. They try to inscribe the vacuum left by the multiple disappearances with some socially acceptable meaning.

While the theater of this period continues to depict the effects of social crisis, Gambaro's main concern lies in dismantling the fictions of power devised to justify and normalize the abusiveness of

those in control. The problem, as Dolores makes clear in *Bitter Blood,* is that the interests of the rulers blatantly go against the general good. In order to maintain and consolidate power, as the four successive military juntas between 1976 and 1983 indicate, rulers have to come up with new arguments to justify their crimes. Failing to justify their position on the rhetorical grounds of "national security" and "economic stability"—both suspect now that the authorities can ensure neither—the question becomes how to divert public attention from the pitiful, dead-end situation in which people (on- and offstage) find themselves. Terror and crisis, leaders know, can disorient and, for a time, immobilize a population. War, of course, has often functioned as a national diversion. Engaging in war proves a successful strategy, or gambit, at least temporarily, for the military men in *Royal Gambit* and *From the Rising Sun,* much as it did for the Argentine generals in the Falklands, or Malvinas. But in Gambaro's plays, much as in Argentina in 1983, the victimized population has disengaged from the fictions of potency and grandeur. Now it recognizes the price it has paid, and has yet to pay, for going along with the party line. As Suki laments in *From the Rising Sun,* the military "told us it was necessary. Those things happen in war. People . . . die. They . . . want us to keep quiet." Ama, in the same play, reproaches herself and her countrymen that no one dared face the reality of the warrior caste: "They marched before a congregation of blind men! No one dared look at them!"

*Antígona Furiosa,* written after the end of the Dirty War, illustrates Gambaro's technique of being politically pertinent, even urgent, while maintaining the semblance of so-called universal appeal. *Antígona* is both a retelling of the Sophoclean tragedy and, on another level, a dramatization of the struggle by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo to recover their children's corpses—which at least in the early period of the Mothers' activity was one of the principal goals. Estela de Carlotto, one of the Mothers, recounts how in 1977 she pleaded with General Bignone (who became junta leader in 1982) to release her daughter Laura: "He said they didn't want to have prisons full of 'subversives,' as he called them . . . that they had to do what was necessary, by which it was clear he meant to kill them. I was now certain that Laura was dead so I asked please, would he at least return the body because I didn't want to search cemeteries amongst the anonymous graves for the body of my daughter."[3]



Gambaro's *Antígona* begins where Sophocles's play ends, with Antígona hanging with a noose around her neck. After a moment, however, she takes the noose off, arranges her dress, and begins the play. The image of Antígona hanging both ties the play directly into the Sophoclean model and marks its departure from it, signaling the direction that Gambaro will take. Antígona, like the Mothers, is intent on burying her dead, even though Creon has forbidden it. Antígona, like the Mothers, renounces the traditional sphere of home and married life (represented by Haemon) and takes to the streets, even though it is forbidden to protest or associate with others: "Antígona walks among her dead, in a strange gait in which she falls and recovers, falls and recovers." Polynices, like the disappeared, remains unmourned and unburied. Creon, the voice of authority emanating from an empty shell, orders that he remain so. His command "Let no one come near—dare—to come near, like the mad girl circling, circling the unburied unburied unburied corpse" recalls the Mothers' weekly march around the Plaza de Mayo, demanding justice for their children. They too were called madwomen, "las locas de la Plaza de Mayo." Antígona, like the Mothers, carries her dead *with* her and *on* her in her own flesh. The Mothers used placards with the names and photographs of their missing children, speaking in their names. In like fashion Antígona promises her brother that she will be his breath, his mouth, his legs, his feet: "The living are the great sepulchre of the dead."

The Chorus, depicted as two *porteños* (i.e., from Buenos Aires) drinking coffee in a café, are complicit with Creon's criminal abuse of power. They accept Creon's prohibitions as normative, and thus, they deem it logical that citizens will comply with them: "No fool is fool as far as loving death." They, like other Gambaro characters before, participate in the official silencing and the negation of reality. They echo the values handed down by the junta: "Who holds a loved one dearer than his country is despicable." Or: "Anarchy is the worst blow . . . I trust only those who are obedient." Or: "Punishment always presupposes crime, my girl. There are no innocents. . . . if punishment comes down on you, you did something you shouldn't have done."

Antígona, unlike Gambaro's characters of the 1960s and 1970s, refuses to be silenced by the voice of authority. She explicitly challenges the authoritarian decrees and denies them legitimacy: Creon, she observes, "thinks the law is law because it comes out of

his mouth." If she is pronounced a madwoman for demanding justice for her dead, then those who denounce her are crazy. What values or attributes could possibly legitimate such a regime? Like many others who contradicted or opposed the military's monolithic monologue in Argentina, however, Antígona also disappears. She, like many Argentine victims, is a "future corpse," the name given by the military to victims who were destroyed alive, either flung out of airplanes or buried: "Let the laws, these vile laws! drag me to a cave that will be my tomb. No one will hear my weeping; no one will be aware of my suffering. They will live in the light as though nothing were happening. . . . I will be . . . uncounted among the living and among the dead. I will disappear from the world, alive." And as in the original Sophoclean tragedy, Antígona hangs herself rather than endure this end.

The last image of *Antígona* is the same as the first: Antígona hangs herself. The act temporarily closes the circle of violence, a circle that bespeaks not only the Mothers' endless quest for justice but also the circular, repetitive, seemingly endless manifestations of violence itself. Antígona's death at the end of the play, echoing the first scene, suggests that this "end" is only a pause. The disappeared are not dead and buried. Order and harmony have not been restored. In spite of President Alfonsin's and President Menem's desire to put Argentina's tragedy behind them, there is no *Punto Final* or final closing point. The drama of oppression and defiance is not over.

During thirty years, in which Gambaro has written as many plays, her onstage worlds reflect the evolving consciousness of crisis, from the initial experience of social collapse to the critical understanding of how and why crisis becomes cemented into the disintegrating social fabric. Continual crisis in Argentina has justified the existence of an active military; it has made necessary ever-escalating acts of social control. Even now in the early 1990s, the military forces loom just behind the scene. As one of the outgoing generals warned a journalist in 1983: "Don't do anything silly, because this is a country where history changes back and forth like a pendulum. And it always repeats itself."[4] As Gambaro's plays make clear, Argentina's tragedy is far from over. As always with Griselda Gambaro's work, it behooves us to listen.

Diana Taylor



## *Notes*

1. David Rock, *Argentina, 1516–1987* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 347, 349.

2. Diana Taylor, *Theatre of Crisis: Drama and Politics in Latin America* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1991).

3. Jo Fisher, *Mothers of the Disappeared* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 20.

4. John Simpson and Jana Bennett, *The Disappeared and the Mothers of the Plaza* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 30.