

Susana Freire

Voice of Silence

This is the first time that I have reflected on my role as an author and playwright, and in wanting to speak about this I realise that it is impossible for me to do so without making reference to the political, economic and social circumstances of my country. I have lived through four military coups which overthrew democratic governments. This determines a very special relationship between a society's stability and potential and the characteristics of the individuals who make up that society.

Historically Argentina, with its policy of open borders, has been very guest-friendly, receiving with open arms all those who wanted to live on its land. Thousands of foreigners arrived, some searching for a better quality of life, others for a refuge. This re-making of Argentine society has been recorded in the dramatic texts of various authors. Victims of the Second World War and of racial persecution were included in the last great contingent of immigrants.

It was difficult to convey the extent of the horror experienced by these exiled people through oral narration. Words were not enough, because behind them was *that* which could not be communicated. That moment transformed itself into something individual (even if the experience had been a collective one), into something non-transferable, and most of all non representable.

In the 1950s it was difficult for the Argentine people to understand the horror that *others* had lived through. But only a few more years were necessary before the criminal dictatorship crudely demonstrated that horror on our own flesh. The freedom and rights that had cost blood and tears to attain (Argentina had been a Spanish colony), are values that can disappear from one day to the next depending on the whims of those in power. This latent but palpable threat also taught us that silence or exile is a form of survival.

THE TIME OF DARKNESS

With military dictatorship came darkness, the kind that blindfolds the eyes, mutes the tongue and closes the ears. To

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save our lives, we learnt not to see, not to speak and not to listen for a period of seven years, an attitude we paid for dearly later, because we also lost speech, trust, knowledge and the capacity to translate these times of terror into drama. It was difficult to produce art then; intolerance was hidden everywhere and justice demonstrated its blindness clearly.

With the return to democracy, those amongst us authors who tried to dispel this experience by dramatising and writing about what pained us, had to overcome some problems. First of all we met intimidation from intolerant people, which continued even when human rights were re-established. We were confronted with the denial of those who had suffered, because they did not want to re-live what had happened, and with the indifference of the younger generations who were not then old enough to take upon themselves the scars and consequently preferred not to listen. This empire of oblivion started to alleviate the wounds and it became very difficult to reach a catharsis. We wrote, but what we wrote did not interest anyone.

When the moment came to regain the time that had been lost, the task was not easy. We all wanted to speak about the same subject, but we could not find the way to express it. So much needed to be said that we forgot theatrical structure.

The fact that the events were so recent, the scars still so fresh, and that there was a need not to omit anything burdened the proposals with discursive chronicles that displaced the dramatic action. In particular I notice that in my plays there is a thematic insistence on what happened in the period 1976-1983 that I find hard to get rid of.

The only possible continuity was to look back to the 1970s and take the avant-garde writers of those years as models: Griselda Gambaro, Ricardo Monti, Eduardo Pavlosky.

Many others found their language in the writings of Roberto Cossa and Carlos Gorostiza (popes of the 1950s and 1960s), just to give some examples.

I should emphasise that the majority of these plays had been written by men, apart from a few honourable exceptions that did not always manage to make interesting productions. Only Griselda Gambaro was able to assert herself in this male domain and she became a model for other women authors, myself included.

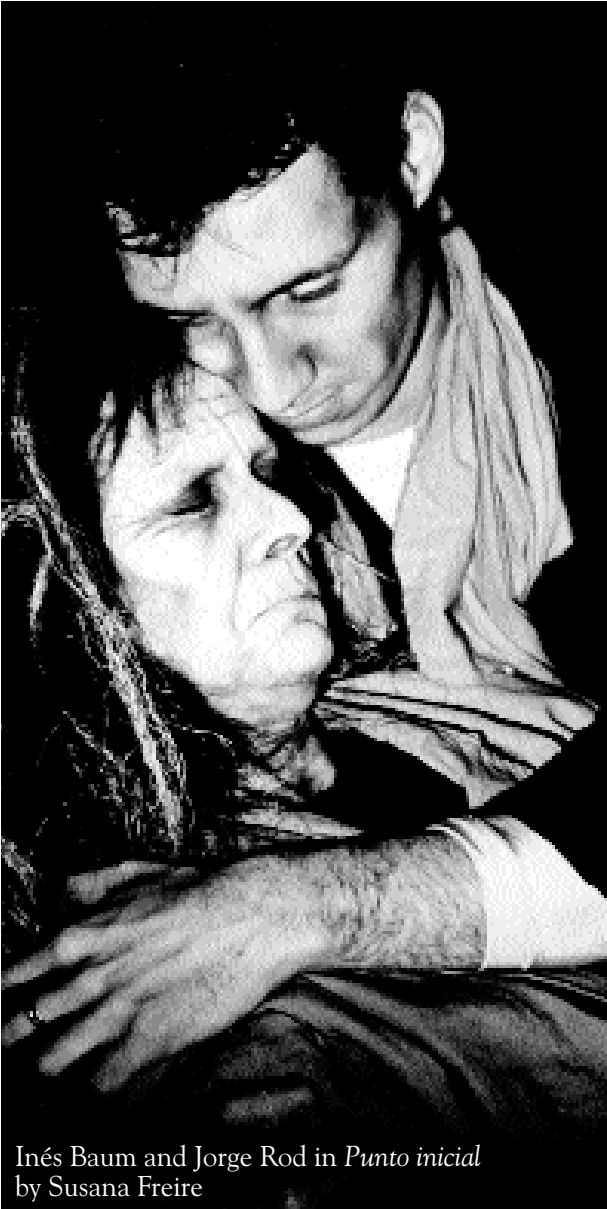
A BREAK IN THE CHAIN OF PRODUCTION

The indiscriminate military process of extermination broke the chain of artistic production and, when this got moving again, valuable links were missing. In those years of terror a void had been created: on the one hand, the writers' dramaturgy had become empty and could no longer be filled, on the other the productions were anodyne, distant from our reality. I was a desolate witness to all of this.

To understand the sensation of loss that this enforced muteness represented culturally, it is necessary to understand the roots of these people who had inter-married with foreigners across many generations, losing their original native blood.

From the time of the colony - the vice-kingdom of the Río de la Plata, later to become Argentina - simultaneous with the arrival of the colonisers, the native population received valuable cultural contributions, amongst which was theatre. One could say that Argentine people developed an early taste for theatre art. This allowed us to count on a dramaturgy of our own from the end of the 18th century, a dramaturgy that was passed down from generation to generation. The dictatorship broke this continuum and, for seven years all kinds of artistic initiative were suppressed by fear.

A lot of time passed before new poten-



Inés Baum and Jorge Rod in *Punto inicial*
by Susana Freire

tial in playwriting began to appear. Meanwhile, those amongst us who write must resort to producing our own work in order to reach a stage, because State resources are directed towards primary necessities and no government ever worried about establishing a cultural policy. Artists have to be the producers of their creations and take upon themselves all the production costs. Another possibility is to form a co-operative with the actors to put together the money that enables the group to rent a theatre space and pay the stage design and

lighting expenses. The task is not easy. Now there are more and more small theatre spaces, but the economic question continues to be the great obstacle for scenic production, even if this obstacle does not stop the process of creation, which we call a lung in my country.

On a personal level, I continue to try to write about the funeral experience, because it is still latent in me and I cannot forget it, but I pay attention to the form in which I narrate it; that is to say finding the language that corresponds to the experience and the era in which we are living now. This is the aim of the impulse that makes me write. I would like to paint my village in the way I experienced it. I do this because, I repeat, I was a witness, and because it is a form of compensation for the years of silence and a way of giving value to the disappearance of so many people. In practice, I believe that it is the obligation of a generation: to recreate aesthetically that period of pain and hate, from which we still cannot recover.

Translated from Spanish by Julia Varley

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