



Teatro La FERIA's  
production of *Hojas  
de Parra*, 1977. Photo:  
Hans Ehrmann.

# THE GAME OF EXPRESSION UNDER PINOCHET

## *Four Theater Stories*

### INTRODUCTION

From 1973 to 1990, Chile was governed by a military dictatorship, which had overthrown the elected government of Salvador Allende Gossens three years into his six-year term. Many players participated in the movements for change that led Chile back to a civilian government in 1990—social scientists, lawyers, union leaders, grass-roots community leaders, politicians, and artists. Least recognized in accounts of Chile's redemocratization were the artists, who, almost immediately after the 1973 coup, began laying a groundwork for later strategies that eventually put an end to military rule.

The following accounts are excerpts from four of the more than one hundred interviews I made between 1994 and 1999 for a book I am writing, *Symbols of Resistance: A Chilean Legacy*, to tell the artists' story—a story reaffirming that, during times of fear, social inequity, and political conflict, artists can and do influence political process and public opinion.

—Joanne Pottlitzer

### RAÚL OSORIO, THEATER DIRECTOR

One morning, two men wearing berets and carrying a military pouch arrived at the Teatro Angel [the small theater where *Tres Marías y una Rosa* (Three Marys and a Rose) was playing] to deliver a summons for me to appear at the Ministry of Defense at 8:00 A.M. the following day. I was to present myself to the chief of state of the Emergency Zone (who wasn't there at the time; I saw one of his assistants or representatives). Rebeca and David [Rebeca Ghigliotto, Osorio's wife, a well-known television actress, and David Benavente, who co-authored the play] and I met and agreed on what to do. It

was terribly dangerous. You could enter that building and never come out—that was definitely a possibility. But I had to go. They knew where I lived, they knew where I worked. . . . The alternative would have been to ask for help directly. I decided to go. All I did was put on a tie, dress very elegantly, tuck the script of *Tres Marías y una Rosa* under my arm—and Rebeca and David and I left for the Ministry of Defense.

I was taken to the top floor of the Ministry. Rebeca and David remained below in a large room. Rebeca said there was a very noisy waxing machine outside that room and that they had commented that maybe it made a lot of noise to drown out the screams. Today the story is humorous, but at that moment . . .

When I got to the top floor, or one of the top floors, of the Ministry of Defense, I entered a hallway and walked past two or three doors—there were several offices on both sides. Two military men wearing berets took me inside the last door and said, “Wait here.” I stood against the door and saw that there were three or four offices on my right that said, “Anti-Guerrilla Group,” where meetings were held or something to do with the guerrillas, and another related to “Subversion.” I was standing there when suddenly a guy shot out one of the office doors. He was covered with blood, his shirttails out, his shirt open. You could see his chest, it was bleeding. He leaned up against the other wall and almost fell over the only chair in the hall. My first reaction was absolute terror. My legs began to tremble, and I steadied myself against the door. I felt that I could fall. And then I started to guess, started to understand where I was. This was no public office, it was a torture center.

Then two men dressed as civilians, in shirt sleeves, grabbed him and continued beating him in front of me. They kicked him, hit him on the mouth, on the head, he fell, he groaned, they picked him up again, the guy was practically dead. Air came out of his lungs only when the two guys hit him. Then they stopped. They looked at him, and they looked at me. For a couple of seconds. Then they took him again and continued beating him. At this point it was obvious that what they were doing was some kind of psychological torture on me, prior to the interview, as if saying, “This could happen to you.” Their attitude was, “Let’s understand each other.” To scare me.

Some time passed. I don’t know if it was a short time or a long time. For me it was a very long time. The guy was still on the floor, bleeding. The two military men dressed as civilians left. Before leaving they turned to look at me. I was still standing by the door with my legs trembling. I didn’t know what to do. The only thing that occurred to me was to go over to the guy and ask him his name. I approached him, scared to death, because someone could appear at any moment. But the morality of approaching him was stronger, and I lifted him up into the chair. He was like a rag doll, limp, bleeding, and I asked him, “What’s your name? What’s your name? Say something, say something.” And I slapped him a little on the cheeks to see if he would respond. I checked his pupils. But it was no use. He didn’t say a word. He couldn’t utter a word. He was half dead. I never knew who he was.

That's what I was doing when a military man entered from another office and said, "Raúl Osorio?" I stood up and said, "That's me," without letting go of the beaten man. And he said, "Come with me." And I found myself in a situation that if I let go of him, the man could fall. I stayed there for a few seconds not knowing what to do. I've never been in such a helpless situation in my life. And I was thinking that I was going to get what that man had gotten. But I dared to hold him in a way that let him slip off the chair and ease onto the floor, and I left him on the floor. I looked at him, I stood up, I took the script, which at this point seemed almost naive of me, stupid, and I tucked it under my arm, I straightened my tie, which seemed even more stupid of me. I entered the office, and there was a guy in a military jacket with no sleeves. You could see his arms—two enormous, hairy arms with enormous hands. The image obsessed me. At first I saw nothing more than those two arms and those two hands resting on the desk in front of me. His head was bare, he wasn't wearing a military cap, and without looking up he said, "Sit down." And he started to interrogate me.

Then something very surprising happened. I placed the script on the desk, without his ordering me to, for him to see, and I sat down. He took the script, almost as if we had a prior arrangement for him to do that. That wasn't the way it was. I had taken the play just in case. He opened it to the first page, where it says, "a song by Florcita Motuda is heard." Florcita Motuda is a popular Chilean singer. And this guy, this very stern guy, raised his head and with a broad smile said, "Is Florcita Motuda in it?" "Yes." His behavior had no consistency with what I had just experienced outside. I said, "Yes. No, no, it's her song . . . it's a recording." And I started to tell him about the beginning of the play. He gestured with his hand for me to be quiet. I kept quiet, and he continued reading. And as he read, he underlined things with a pencil—sentences, words, I don't know what he was underlining. Then he stopped underlining, he stopped reading. And for a long time he asked me some very trivial questions about the play, meaningless questions, such as "Are there only women?" "Yes." "Are they *arpilleristas* [the patchwork craft done by women who participated in workshops created in early 1974 by the Pro Peace Committee to relieve their tensions and anxieties. The women were usually from working-class neighborhoods; their husbands, partners, sons, or fathers had lost their jobs or had been detained and disappeared.]" "Yes." "Are they from the Vicarate of Solidarity?" "Yes." "Are they Communists?" "No." "What do you mean they're not Communists?" "No. They're four women who live in a *población* [working-class neighborhood]." "Then they're Communists." "No." "Do the priests work with them?" "Yes." "Do you work with them?" "Yes." "Are you a Communist?" "No." "And why do you do this kind of play?"

My explanation tried to explain the inexplicable. How to give him an explanation, first, that he could understand, second, that he believed, and finally, to remain true to myself? How was I going to explain to him that it was a play with a theme that had to do with the dictatorship and not tell him that it is a theme about the dictatorship? So I talked about solidarity, about women who cope with their husbands' unemployment. I



Loreto Valenzuela,  
Myriam Palacios,  
Soledad Alonso, and  
Luz Jiménez in *Tres  
Marías y una Rosa*,  
1979. Photo: Ramón  
López.

talked about the strength of the Chilean woman—those things are in the play as well. A long, long conversation.

He got to the last page after asking me many questions. He finished the play, closed the script, and said, “And the author is David Benavente?” “Yes.” And I explained that the play was based on research, that it wasn’t only David Benavente, that it was a collective work among the actors, the director, and that later a playwright like David Benavente comes and structures the material. And he says, “David Benavente Pinochet?” At that instant, a lightbulb went off in my head; and, with an exhilaration that came out of me from I don’t know where, I said, “Yes, Pinochet!” Then he said, “Is he one of the Pinochets from . . . ?” I didn’t know the name of the town where the Pinochets came from. I don’t know where David is from. I simply kept saying, “Yes!” “He must be related to Pinochet because all the Pinochets from that region are related.” So I said, “I’m sure that’s the case,” without having a clue. At that point the guy began a transformation. This severe, sleeveless, hairy man began to make gestures. . . . He stood up, took off his sleeveless jacket (he was now in his undershirt), lit a cigarette, offered me one (I didn’t smoke then), and said, “Do you smoke?” “Yes, of course.” He took out a cigarette and lit it for me. I smoked the cigarette and felt the situation become something that was more sociable, at least congenial—although I was always thinking that at

any moment . . . And he continued, "Of course, because all of My General's relatives are from that region. So, this gentleman must . . . but, don't you know?" "No, unfortunately we've never talked about it. But David Benavente Pinochet is downstairs," I told him. "He's downstairs with my wife, and they're waiting for me." Like saying, if something happens to me, there are people waiting for me downstairs.

And the guy says, "So, David Benavente Pinochet is downstairs?" "Yes, he's downstairs." "So . . ." And with a very gruff military voice, he calls an aide. The guy appears, and he says very loudly, "Go downstairs and tell David Benavente to come here immediately. He's downstairs." "Yes, sir." The guy leaves and the atmosphere from before continues between the two of us. He smokes, he smiles at me, I think he's planning something, that they'll nab us both. And I was feeling like a stupid coward for having said that David Benavente was downstairs. I almost felt like an informer. Many thoughts went through my mind, like, "They'll take us one at a time." I started to construct a horror story. I also thought that David's name being Pinochet could be something positive—because last names here mean everything.

Time passed, with me thinking all those things, when the door opened and David Benavente appeared at the door with a smile that was absolutely artificial, strained. He signaled me with his eyebrows like, "How's it going?" And I gave him a look as though saying, "I don't know." The military guy looks at him and says, "Sit down." He sat down. And he offered him a cigarette. David Benavente took the cigarette (I don't think he smoked, either), the guy lit it and said, "So you are David Benavente Pinochet." "Yes." "The author of the play . . ." Then he looked at me as though he were angry at me and said, "You. Outside!" He called one of his men, his assistants, and said, "This guy, outside!" referring to me in the third person. It was amazing. I went outside. I stood at the same door where the beaten man had been. . . . He was no longer there. And I waited. A long time. If it was an hour, that seems short. One or two hours. You can't tell. One of the men came out of the door and ushered me inside.

I entered, trying to see what stage of the drama they were in, and there was David. The two of them were smoking with their feet up on the desk, and David, who can be very charming and very nice and very intelligent, was talking to the military guy and looking very contented. When I entered, he gave me a look as though saying that everything was OK, not to worry. By the time we finished talking, the guy was on the verge of inviting us to lunch. I don't know if it was our fantasy or if it was true, but he said something like, "We could continue talking about paintings, but I have a luncheon date." And he told us that we should go talk to Hermógenes Pérez de Arce, the editor of *La Segunda*, because of what he had published in the "Top Secret" column.

From the Ministry of Defense we went to the *El Mercurio* building, to *La Segunda's* office, and there I saw Italo Pasalagua in the distance. I started toward him, he walked toward where I was standing. But he wasn't coming toward me. He had papers in

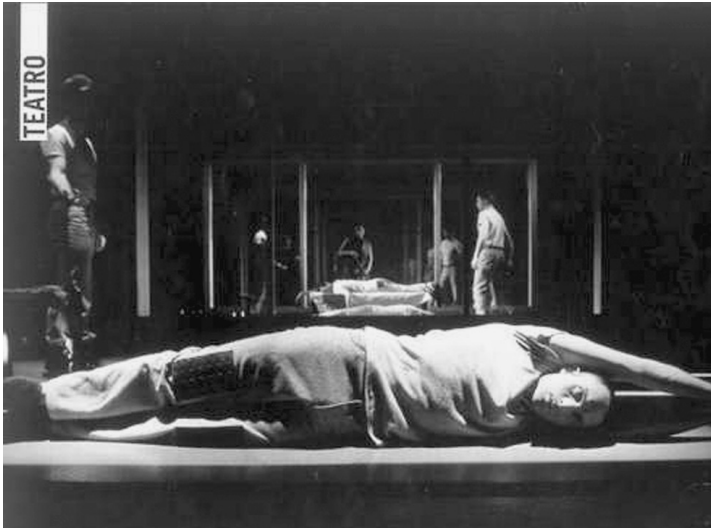
his hand and was headed toward some office. I stopped somewhere on the stairs where he had to pass me. He noticed me when he was about ten feet away, a tall blond man, he stopped for a moment, kept looking at me. We looked at each other, he passed by me, and I said, "You son of a bitch." He didn't answer me, just kept going. David was at Pérez de Arce's secretary's desk. I went over to them as the secretary told him that her boss wasn't in and she didn't know what time he'd be back. So David said to me, "We'll wait for him here. Let's sit down." And the door opens and Pérez de Arce appears, "Come in." At that meeting with Pérez de Arce, we told him that the article had hurt us and had put us in physical danger. It was two or three in the afternoon. We told him to retract the article. He said, "I can't, first because I can't give you the name of the journalist because nobody signs the 'Top Secret' column." I told him, "But we know who it is. It's Pasalagua." And he said, "I don't know. I can't say. I can't confirm it. And I can't retract it, either. But what I can do is try to give you some kind of publicity, publish things about the play in *La Segunda*, positive things."

RAMÓN GRIFERO, DIRECTOR, PLAYWRIGHT

I had to leave Chile within a week after the coup. I was a MIR [the Revolutionary Left Movement] sympathizer. I was in my first year at the University of Chile, studying sociology. The University . . . sociology . . . was demolished, and *compañeros* of the Party were arrested. Others left. I went to England and enrolled in sociology of culture at the University of Essex, where I studied culture from a political point of view. That's where I began to see that culture had much more power than politics, more underground power. It could talk about things, articulate things in a way that was much more imaginative than concrete.

From England I went to Brussels to study film for a year. And from there I went to the Theatre School of the University of Lovaine, in Belgium, where I wrote my first play, *Opera por un naufragio* [Opera for a shipwreck], which I directed in French at the university theater. Another was *Altazor equinoccio* [Altazor equinox]. Both plays were obviously imbued with all that was happening in Chile, the effect of the dictatorship, exile, etc. They got good reviews, but I saw them as a weapon of artistic resistance that should only be done in Chile. It was more like the need to have a voice, to say to the dictatorship, "Look, I don't think the same way you do. I don't talk the same way you talk." I realized that I wasn't interested in culture as a sociologist. I didn't want to analyze culture. I wanted to create it. And theater was the most possible, the most feasible art form to do in Chile as an act of dissidence. Film was impossible. And even if I'd made films, they couldn't have been projected in a screening room or movie house. But theater had that space.

I returned to Santiago in 1982 with a play I had brought with me called *Historias de un galpón abandonado* [Stories of an abandoned warehouse], the story of people who live in an abandoned warehouse, a tent, dominated by terrible sadists who abuse them, like a



Marcelo Alonso in Griffero's play *Brunch*, which opened at the National Theater in 1998. Photo: Ramón Griffero.

metaphor for the country. My first idea was not to direct it. So I took the play to [Teatro] Ictus, then to the Catholic University. I was totally naive. I went to the University of Chile, etc. Some said that my plays were not theater, others that they were very strong and couldn't be done in Chile. Mostly it was, "Why do you want to stay here? Go back! Go back! You've staged plays in Europe, you've directed in Belgium at the university theater. Why come to Chile? Go back, stupid!" Envy. Sure, if you're over there, that's great. You have so much there, you studied there, and you know the scene there, why are you coming to Chile?

It was impossible to interest any group of the official dissidence in my plays. Then, I met some people doing similar things, and we rented a space, a large warehouse/garage, from the Union of Ex-Trolley Drivers, which had been a state organization before the coup. So our activities were considered union activities. We named the space El Trolley. If someone came to question what we were doing, we'd tell them activities organized by the union.

To raise money we held parties, big parties, with political performances and events, very successful. There were discothèques in Chile at that time, but ours was the only space where parties were combined with political cabarets, where the people who came there felt they were of the same mind. Those parties financed our productions. So this autonomous cultural center, El Trolley, began to function in 1983.

*The Morgue* was the strongest piece we did. It opened in December 1986. The set was a morgue with bodies of the detained/disappeared, and the morgue's doctor, who represented the authorities, had sex with the corpses. He raped them. The morgue was also the country. None of the plays at that time had any publicity anywhere, obviously. They were never mentioned on television. Newspapers would review them, but they'd review the staging. They'd talk about the innovative theatrical language and everything else, but never about what the play said.



A small circuit of photocopied announcements, without the authors' names, was enough for the plays to run for two years and always to full houses. Theater was being done with urgency, like a necessity, and if your work reflected that necessity and that urgency, marketing wasn't necessary. A photocopied flyer in fifty places, and boom . . . people came.

El Trolley functioned until 1988, when there was no longer a need for it because the political situation was opening up—other spaces began to open, the media began to open up, everything, and it was no longer necessary to be in a “ghetto,” as they say. The place had fulfilled a political artistic function. The arts were very linked to politics at that time. So, when the political need lost its strength, artistic expression didn't have the same energy, there wasn't the same passion.

Let me describe the artistic panorama in Chile when the transition began in the 1980s: in theater, the visual artists, music, video. Until the beginning of the eighties, there were two poles: artistic/cultural dissidence and artistic/cultural institutions. The dissidence was defined by the Popular Unity model. Like popular theater, Ictus, folkloric music, Inti-Illimani, Quilapayún.

In the early eighties there was a cultural break, and another generation of creators—in all the genres—appeared that didn't correspond to either of those models and wasn't recognized by either one of them. It's what I call the dissidence of institutional dissidence. Essentially, the break was between the expression of cultural modernity and postmodernity. The postmodern aspect of the younger artists was incomprehensible to the official dissidence. For instance, they could not understand how a dissident group could be called “Pinochet's Boys.” It was incomprehensible. Incomprehensible that a group was called “Unemployment Index” or that groups were called “Power to the People!,” whatever. There was the cultural ideology of the seventies, the culture of the Left, whose image recovered the artistic scene against the dictatorship, and there were new images, also dissident, but with another vision. Artists participated in this new autonomous trend with great verve, creating imaginary spaces of change—not solely as political commentary; we also imagined new perceptions of creativity, supported by reformist techniques.

When people went to listen to music groups like “Unemployment Index,” “Pinochet's Boys,” etc., they obviously yelled out slogans like “He's going to fall! He's going to fall!” The military would arrive and surround El Trolley, but they didn't find people of the Left there, according to their image of what people of the Left looked like. No one wore beards or ponchos, nothing like that. They also discovered, later, that the young people who were there weren't afraid of them. They even invited some military draftees armed with pistols to come in, “Come listen to the music.” Something the older generation wouldn't have dared to do—because they were traumatized.

Once, a major arrived with two trucks to arrest us all. He said to me, “Let's go to the bathroom, I want to talk to you.” I said to myself, “He's going to kill me in the bath-

room like in the movies.” He said, “Who are you people?” I said, “What do you mean, who are we?” “I don’t understand. Who are you? Are you Communists?” “No,” I said to him. “No, it seems you’re not Communists,” he said. “No, no, no.”

In theater, a new generation emerged. People like Rodrigo Pérez and Alfredo Castro, who were members of my group *El Teatro de Fin de Siglo* [End-of-the-Century Theater], would later generate a change in theatrical language in Chile. Willy Semler presented his plays there, Vicente Ruiz, etc. They had a vision toward the dictatorship and toward the institutional dissidence that was completely different. Another way of speaking, another way of seeing, and not being afraid. I mean, we didn’t worry about getting permits, we didn’t worry about censorship or about paying taxes. . . . I may have been frightened when the guy wanted to talk to me in the bathroom. I was facing a machine gun. But there were other times when people would come and say, “We’re from the CNI [National Information Center, the intelligence agency that replaced the DINA (National Intelligence Headquarters) in 1977],” and the girls in the box office would say, “Alright, but pay for your ticket.” There was a totally different attitude. There was no fear. It was an artistic generation that had no fear because we had lived with this all our lives. We were twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three at that time, so we were around twelve when the coup happened.

The work of *Fin de Siglo* is thought to have marked the beginning of a Latin American theatrical postmodernity. In 1985 we wrote the “Manifesto for an Autonomous Theater,” accusing traditional theater of being no more than performed literature and playwrights of having forgotten that they were writing for a space and not for literature. Emerging playwrights and directors in Chile today no longer base their creativity on what happens in capitals of the global center; they have established their own artistic autonomous center. For me, that’s the most important strength and legacy of a cultural resistance.

I remember a performance where many people appeared on stage carrying TV sets, with a prerecorded tape of Pinochet’s image playing on the screen, and all the actors danced and sang, “Only youuuuuu can make the world go round. . . .” It was an image that the Left, the traditional culture, obviously didn’t understand. They didn’t find it funny, when it was total irony. . . .

Our dissidence functioned with young artistic groups in large venues, like the *Matucana Garage*, which had a capacity of 1,500 to 2,000, or *El Trolley*, which could seat 1,000 and always played to full houses. We became more powerful as a political mobilizing agent than the institutional dissident groups. We had another circuit, a more autonomous circuit and more disconnected, in a certain way, from political parties. The young people considered political parties to be overstated, like a slogan—without, of course, recognizing themselves in the slogan. It was more about generating their own way of being dissident.

For the NO campaign [to vote *no* in the 1988 plebiscite against Pinochet’s remain-

ing in office for eight more years] I did a play called *PORNO Photosynthesis*, that was POR NO [a play on words: PORNO, meaning pornography; and POR NO, meaning for the NO campaign], where a character is watching a porno video that's interrupted because Pinochet appears, wanting to announce that he was calling a plebiscite, and meanwhile they were bombing La Moneda and a child appears with oranges, etc. . . . Other people did similar things: Vicente Ruiz, who did agitprop pieces; Juan Andrés Peña, etc. Antidictatorial shows, but with another language, a language that corresponded more to the spirit of the time and which had its own following.

I do think art had an influence. When all the communications media were controlled, live performance was almost the only one that existed with its own voice, without censorship. Even though there was a certain level of self-censorship, and shows were closed now and then. Television was completely controlled, except for the spots for the NO campaign. Radio stations, too, except for Radio Cooperativa, which could do some things. When there is a lot of censorship in the media, people feel that there's no one else who thinks the way they do. They think they're the only ones. Those live performances were artistic shows, but they were not merely nonpolitical recitals. They were political meetings as well. The "Ad Hoc Prosecutor" group would begin their show by singing a deformed national anthem and burning the Chilean flag.

Did we contribute to the political opening in the eighties? Yes. I think that art contributed by being able to subsist and generate autonomous spaces during all that time. It brought together a youth that had not lived the Popular Unity experience, who didn't have that way of looking at things, and who perhaps had less ideology than the previous generation. They didn't identify with the Communist Party or with the Christian Democrats. They only felt a repression. Through all the years of the dictatorship, they found a way of knowing who they were and what they felt by being rebels against the dictatorship. They knew they were anti-Pinochet, and they became radicalized to contribute to the plebiscite and to history.

Griffero's *Cinema Utopia*, 1985. Photo: Ramón Griffero.



Until 1986 things were very repressive. In 1986 they slit the throats of those three people; and in Operation Albania fourteen students were killed one night. I'd say that this more autonomous movement coincided with the protests of 1983, '84, where twenty-three persons could die in one night. No, it was . . . there was a hard turn of hand on the part of the regime to repress everything that was protest. From 1983 to 1985 a state of siege was imposed and curfews were brought back. Pinochet put 30,000 military men on the streets of Santiago, etc. There was a reaction. An opening was produced. The opening leads to people marching in protest and then the regime attacks again. So, an opening was happening, but the regime saw it coming and retaliated. Later, when they saw it was a broad thing, in '86, they began to back off. But when the protests began, the objective was something else: it was to bring Pinochet down unconstitutionally. Even the Concertación [the coalition of opposition parties that nominated Patricio Aylwin as its presidential candidate in the 1990 election], then called Democratic Alliance, opted for that route. It encouraged the protests, it encouraged more extreme measures. And the military killed Father Jarlan. Later, after about five, six, seven, eight protests, when they saw that it was leading to a lot of killing and could lead to a civil war, the Democratic Alliance decided to take the legal route and called on people to register to vote, but before that, no. Before that, no. They didn't accept Pinochet's [1980] constitution until 1987. Very late, and that's when they said, "Go register to vote and let's see if the NO will win." Then another phase began. They accepted Pinochet's constitution, the plebiscite, and everything else.

Then, Aylwin's election in 1990 coincided with the fall of the Berlin Wall, and an ideology was nullified. All that strength that the Left thought it would reap came to nothing. And a political apathy ensued.

Entering the democratic transition was an artistic shock to everyone. In Chile art had always been linked to cultural life with political commitment. When the political commitment disappeared, many artists, including me, didn't know what to do. Ah? The photographer who photographed protests, *poblaciones*, realizes that no one is interested in his photos of a little poor boy. It's not that the poor ceased to exist; it's that they were no longer of interest, even to the photographer. Nobody was interested in what people wrote about the proletariat. All that had been of interest since the beginning of the century ceased to be of interest. And the artists who represented that collective unconscious realized that the collective unconscious no longer functioned in the same way. They had to renew themselves, adapt, or die. They had to find out where to look for passion. It was no longer outside them, and trying to invent what doesn't exist is impossible. They had to look for passion inside themselves, in what was intrinsically artistic, in how they wanted to reflect on what they are living, feeling, etc.

There are two fundamental things for the artist in the new democracy. One is to know where are we writing from. Before, I wrote from my opposition to Pinochet, from my ideological position. It was firm territory that others shared, so not only did I know

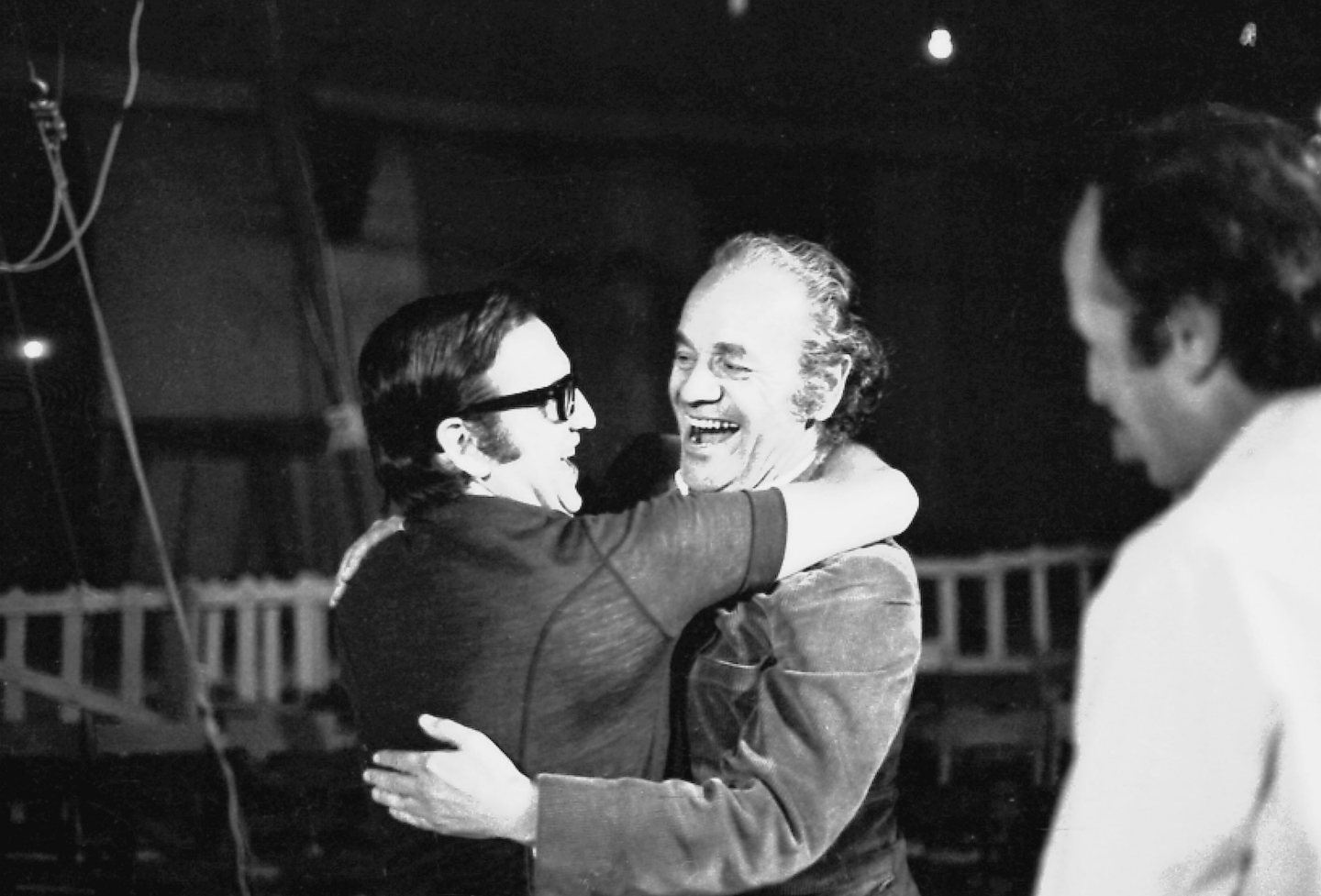
where I was writing from, but I also knew for whom I was writing. The two things came together. A popular singer knew he had an audience with a leftist ideology, whom he'd see in the *peña* [*peñas* are small music clubs, popular since the mid-1960s, which served as gathering places for students and workers]. And groups like Los Huasos Quincheros [a music group popular since the 1950s, whose folk music and garb appeal to politically conservative Chileans] knew they had the Right, whom they'd see in the Teatro Oriente. Where one wrote from and for whom one wrote was defined. Today, artists have to create those definitions, they have to look for a place to write from. . . . Our creative challenge is to reposition ourselves. Where I was no longer exists, where I talked from no longer exists. So you have to ask yourself again, "Where am I writing from? From what territory?" It's a test to see if you have an artistic sensibility when you're also the voice of others who are lost, who don't have the anchor they knew before. And when they see the play, they say, "Ah! I like that way of looking at things. This way of looking at things tells me something." I like Almodóvar's films because of the position from which he sees society. I see it from that vantage, too. Writing from someplace and for someone: that's our challenge.

I don't write for anyone. But you still have to write from someplace. Or maybe my view is to write from nowhere or for no one. That's how it is now. Before, in Chilean and in Latin American culture, you could see perfectly where you were writing from. It was a given that artists were of the Left, Center, and Right. Artists were like political parties. The good thing is that art is being given autonomy again. And the most difficult problem now is precisely that: The Chilean democracy of consensus isn't interested in autonomy. If today's policy is all consensual, whatever is autonomous is dissident.

#### JOSÉ MANUEL SALCEDO, PUBLICIST, FORMER ACTOR

I was part of an experience that I think was very relevant, perhaps because it was the first public and massive act of resistance to the dictatorship: when my associate at the time, Jaime Vadell, and I founded the Teatro La FERIA (which still exists), and we wrote and produced the play *Hojas de Parra* [Parra's pages, or Leaves of Parra] in February 1977. I don't remember if there was a similar act prior to that date. There were certainly many things on a smaller scale, but I don't know of a prior experience that had such public transcendence or had been planned with the objective of creating public transcendence. The play had enormous repercussions. I'm sure that's why it had the fate it had.

Jaime Vadell and I had been part of Teatro Ictus for six or seven years. Jaime was a known and esteemed actor with a long experience at numerous theaters. With Ictus we had acted in several very successful plays, long before the coup. Actually we sidestepped the coup and went on a very successful tour to Buenos Aires. A disagreement had been brewing for several months over the big question that theater people always ask: So what we do? . . . What do we do in these circumstances? We had deep disagreements that



became more and more serious. Now, looking back with the perspective of time, it seems to me that the substance of the dispute was that Jaime and I thought it was necessary to risk moving out to larger, more massive spaces based on the degree of success of *Ictus*'s last few plays, especially with *Tres noches de un sábado* [Three Saturday nights, which opened in 1972, was running at the time of the coup, and was not closed down]. Other members of the company preferred to conserve the security of a theater space that was more manageable in size, that was known, with a known audience and a more stable clientele. We left the company at the end of 1976, almost 1977, to see if our concepts were viable, real, and not just words. . . .

Our first impulse was the need to do a large-scale show, open, at a popular venue. Those were our theatrical aspirations. Second, the need to do it fast. We looked through plays, looking for what we could stage that would fulfill these requisites and be something with enough relevance to bring out a lot of people. We came up with an idea we had been thinking about for a long time: to work with Nicanor [Parra, perhaps Chile's most-known poet internationally after Neruda, particularly for his "anti-poetry"] and with his texts, something that Nicanor himself had suggested to us. He had offered to have us look over all his work, even the unpublished work.

José Manuel Salcedo (left) embraces Nicanor Parra. Jaime Vadell is in the foreground (1977). Photo: Hans Ehrmann.

In something like three weeks we wrote a text. Then we met with him again, to show him the script. I have always considered Parra to be a genius, but at that point in his life, he had done absolutely nothing in theater. Nevertheless, he read the first draft, or rather we read it to him, and analyzed it with such depth, with an assuredness of such magnitude that he completely destroyed it. Not because of its literary merit; it was a problem of structure. We rewrote the text in another two or three weeks, and then we were all in agreement, very much in agreement about those *Hojas de Parra*.

Almost. Parra said, “I agree with all of this, except for one detail: I would censor one of my verses, a poem that reads, I shall let a hundred flowers bloom. . . .” It referred to a phrase by Mao. Then he said, “I’d take it out because those people are scum, nobody knows how they could react.” That sentence, which incidentally was kept in the final script, could be about anything or about nothing. Yet he was very clear that “those men” were so bad and vengeful that something could happen . . . but we never knew exactly what or whom he was referring to. It was at that point when we began to suspect the extent of audience and political repercussion the play could have.

As that suspicion grew and we realized the potential it had for political mobilization, we consulted a few people, including politicians who would later belong to the Concertación. Everyone felt they had the right to add something to it. We didn’t pay attention to anyone, except one: Eduardo Frei Montalva [Christian Democrat, president of Chile from 1964 to 1970]. When Jaime and I went to his house and read the script to him, he howled with laughter. Then he became very serious and said, “If this passes, I’ll be president of the Republic.” In other words he told us, “Forget it.” He was telling us that this kind of thing could not pass. “And you know why? Because this is exactly what the Chilean people are waiting for.” I asked him what was that? “To stand up against the dictatorship . . . they’re not going to permit that.” Now, he didn’t tell us to stop the project, but he gave us his opinion. Unfortunately he was right. The others, who wanted to add more sauce to it, were wrong.

We’ve been urged innumerable times to reopen the play. But we’ve always thought that the play was what it was. It was consumed in the flames in its moment because that’s how it had to be, and what is relevant is to tell the story of how it happened.

The first thing we decided—even though we had a script—was that we were none too clear about how to stage it. At first we were going to produce the play in some kind of theater space. But the story takes place in a circus, so we rapidly realized that it would have to be done in a circus tent. It was the only logical way to do it. So we started to see where they rent or sell circus tents and where one could be installed. That was January 1977.

After looking at different sites, it seemed to us that the only important thing was that it be on the east-west axis, which allowed people to access it by subway. It didn’t matter whether it was near the Estación Central [downtown Santiago] or in Las Condes

[an upscale residential neighborhood]. We found that the only site available was a place in the commune of Providencia, on [Avenida] Providencia between Pedro de Valdivia and Marchant Pereira, exactly where Avenida 11 de Septiembre intersects now. At that time the site (which was enormous) existed because it had been expropriated by the municipality of Providencia to construct the Avenida 11 de Septiembre and was available for a few months, until around May. Our intention was to run the play until the end of March, so it was perfect for us, even though it was on the most conflictive corner of Chile, where several scuffles and disturbances had taken place every night during the Popular Unity period.

The play is about a circus on its way out, in bankruptcy, a sign of what was happening in the country at that time. A complete disaster. In order to survive, the impresario rents out the circus for different affairs, and he rents it in different ways. For example, the whole circus with the band, or just the band, or half the circus with some of the artists, or the whole circus with the artists but without the band. There is a constant play on words, depending on how the guy would rent the circus.

The first one to rent it is a man who wants to promote a presidential candidate. He says: "I want to rent it with everything . . . the American plan . . . everything, everything, the band, the artists, everything. . . I'll rent the whole thing." A guy right out of the times of Frank Sinatra, with the wide-brimmed hat and glittery suit. So, the impresario asks him, "Alright, what do you want it for?" "For the announcement of a candidate for president of the Republic." "I have no problem with that." And, while the guy is making his pitch, he enters with something like forty-five circus artists, real ones—the entire troupe, the girls, the clowns—and he hangs the famous backdrop that says: "The Left and the Right United Will Never Be Defeated," a takeoff of the popular slogan, "The People United Will Never Be Defeated." That's what's hanging above the candidate when he gives this speech. The piece continues with the different ways the circus manages to survive, how it continues to be rented out, with different situations, different predicaments that occur.

While the circus was in bankruptcy and total decadence, a cemetery next to it was flourishing. During the entire show, men are digging graves and placing crosses in the aisles. By the end of the play, the crosses cover everything, absolutely everything—small crosses, enormous crosses—an incredibly strong image. They were all white crosses with very blue lighting on them. It was very strong, very strong. This cemetery gradually encroaches on the space and dominates it.

The tent held a thousand people. And every night people were turned away.

The show ends with a poem that I think is the most beautiful Nicanor has written, called "The Last Toast," from Russian songs. Everyone, audience included, is now surrounded by the cemetery. The scene was very Fellini-esque, with trapeze artists hanging from the trapezes, almost sculptural. By that time we were out of costume, in street



clothes, with a glass of wine in our hand, standing in the middle of the cemetery, which was full, totally full, absolutely full. . . . And that's why the show ends: because there's no room to do anything. We recite the poem.

Whether we want it or not  
We have but three alternatives  
Yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

And not even three  
Because, as the philosopher says,  
Yesterday is yesterday  
It is ours only in memory:  
The rose that's dropped its petals  
Cannot give you another.

The cards to be played  
Are but two:  
Today and tomorrow.

And not even two  
Because it's an established fact  
That today does not exist  
in that it becomes the past  
And has passed . . .  
like youth.

When the bills are tallied  
We have only tomorrow:  
I raise my glass  
To that day that never comes  
But is the only thing  
we really have.

A wonderful poem, beautiful, with great metaphysical and poetic density.

As we investigated further, we began to see that everything belonged to Pinochet, absolutely everything . . . every venue, one way or another, is public or municipal or requires public or municipal permits. To get that site, we had to talk to the mayor of Providencia, who was obviously a Pinochet appointee. He had been a professor in the war academy, a lawyer who wasn't going to look too favorably on our request. So we said to ourselves, "Let's find someone who's a friend of this mayor and who's a friend of ours to help us." And we discovered that Jaime Celedón, a former actor and a friend of ours, had been a high school classmate of this mayor. So we asked him to go with us. We

didn't want to deceive the mayor; we wanted him to give us permission knowing what it was all about, and we asked Jaime to read the script. He read the text and said it was impossible, that the mayor would never authorize it. We asked him to give it a try. Well, the scene was beyond description. Celedón, who is very funny, enters the mayor's office, this huge fancy office, on his knees, almost imploring him, "Alfredo, Alfredo! I'm here with my actor friends who are starving to death and . . ." The mayor, who had the script but hadn't read it, said: "Stop that. Read me something to give me an idea." And Jaime said, "Look, here's a presidential candidate's announcement . . . read it because it's an especially conflictive passage." "What do you mean 'presidential candidate,'" the mayor said, "when elections have been suspended?" "Ah," said Celedón, "but this is an election in the United States, not here." "Ah!!!! Alright, alright, read it." The mayor started to read this poem called "Nobody for President." It's a structural analysis of a perfect political speech. First, there's the person who introduces the candidate, "And now I give you the standard bearer of the workers. 'Nobody' in person, 'Nobody' in body and soul . . . I give you the mortal enemy of the rich, the Savior [in Spanish, *Salvador*, alluding to Salvador Allende] we've all been waiting for. . . ." And then the candidate starts his speech. He is a very strange figure. The idea came from something someone said during a presidential campaign in the United States, something minor, one of those weird things you read on a wire service. He took that weird something, using the political scene there as a metaphor for the Chilean political scene, and magnified the idea of a candidate, an impossible candidate in an impossible country.

There are questions to the audience. For example, "Who will make our dreams come true? Who will solve our problems? Who will stand up for us?" That was the question that we went round and round with, and, when the moment came to perform the play in the tent, that was the question that most came to mind: "Who will stand up for us? . . . Who really says what they think?" And he goes on, "Who will paint the *copihues* [the Chilean national flower] red?" "So . . . everyone vote for 'Nobody,' 'Nobody' in power, 'Nobody' in the first office of the Republic." Jaime Vadell gave that speech.

The mayor gave us our permit. He laughed his head off at the North American declaration and asked us, "But does this happen in the United States?" "Yes, of course it does." "Fine, it's alright . . . there's no problem."

On the very day we sank the first poles of the tent, the Department of Health Services, from whom we also had a permit, closed us down. It seems that the head of the Department of Health Services of the Eastern Area of Santiago had passed by in his car at five in the afternoon and said, with a marvelous bourgeois expression of thought, "Impossible for a circus to perform there . . ." From his car phone on his way home, he called to have us closed down. He hadn't even made it to his house. When the notification arrived, I saw that the last names of that man (in this country we all know each other) were the same as those of someone I knew. They were evidently brothers because both last names were the same. And I found out that indeed they were brothers. I called

José Manuel Salcedo:  
 “The painter’s name is  
 Felipe Merino. Once  
 when he came by my  
 office to sell his  
 paintings, he saw a  
 newspaper clipping I  
 had hanging on the  
 wall. It was the front  
 page of *La Tercera* from  
 February 12, 1977, with  
 a color photo of the  
 burning tent. He asked  
 why I had the clipping  
 on the wall. I told him  
 the story. ‘What if I’d  
 like to paint it?’ he  
 asked. ‘Paint it,’ I said  
 to him. And he painted  
 it.” Photo: Luis Poirot.



him. I hadn’t seen him in years, and I told him the story. He told me: “Look, don’t worry about it,” knowing his brother and knowing his mentality, “I’m sure he thought it was really a circus. . . . He had no way of knowing it was you, that it was respectable people. Leave it to me. I’ll call him.” Within ten minutes the problem was solved.

The tent was up in two or three days, and we were able to present a kind of preview performance that produced a front-page headline in *La Segunda* saying, “Serious Attack on Government in Tent-Theater.” That unleashed a huge debate that was really not even a debate, because nobody from the other side [the opposition to the government] had access to the media. The only one that followed this was the centrist weekly magazine *Ercilla*, where Hans Ehrmann worked. Hans was an intelligent man. He saw that he would have no opportunity to give an opinion, so for three consecutive issues he made a kind of investigative report. He knew very well where all this was headed. He went everywhere with us as a reporter—here, there, when we talked to the mayor, everywhere. He chronicled everything.

We began our run, and harassment from the Health Service resumed. Every time we would do a performance, the Health Service would close us down, saying, for example, “To conform with health regulations, you cannot have 14 wash basins and 7 toilets. You need to have 25 wash basins and 48 toilets.” This health regulation was from the late twenties during the Ibáñez four-year dictatorship as a means of closing down theaters. It’s something draconian. No theater or cinema in this country complies with it—it’s

impossible. I called our friend Edmundo Pérez, who was a construction developer at the time and told him that the Health Department had demanded that we put in forty-eight toilets—and within half an hour a crane and a troupe of people arrived and installed them, immediately. So they were obliged to lift the closure. This close-down, open-up, close-down, open-up thing continued until it began to complicate things for the minister of health, General Matthei of the air force.

After we finally opened, Matthei transferred those Department of Health guys over to the Ministry of the Interior, and from there they summoned us for interrogations. It was horrible. The man in charge from the Health Service was a fascist from head to toe. His last name was Heurteuer, and the interrogation was pure Kafka. He accused us of things that had nothing to do with anything, but he kept adding accusations. For example, the most serious accusation he made was that we were operating through the MIR. That was very serious, serious, serious. All we could say was the truth, that we had nothing to do with MIR. “But I have here,” and he showed us piles of documents. We said to him, “You can have anything you want, but we have nothing to do, absolutely nothing to do with the MIR, and you will never be able to prove it because it isn’t true.” It was evidently meant to scare us. To be accused of being associated with the MIR in February 1977 was a very serious thing.

That’s when we realized that the whole group that dominated the Eastern Area of the Department of Health was a kind of *Patria y Libertad* [Fatherland and Freedom] enclave . . . all of them . . . from the director who closed us down to the director of the hospital, the director of another hospital, all of them, absolutely all of them. So they were already established as real enemies. And when Matthei pulled them and transferred them to the Ministry of the Interior, they are able to make one single municipal closure, without citing cause. And that’s where we were when, on the night of February 11, the fire bomb exploded and brought an end to the episode.

We had had a negative reaction from the theater community, who had accused us, in a more or less veiled way, of being provocateurs, of being irresponsible. They said that our incident would put the whole theater movement in jeopardy, that there would be retaliations toward the theater. This never happened, by the way.

The firebomb exploded at two in the morning. It was terrifying. We were very frightened, especially because *La Nación*, the government newspaper, made a little campaign saying it was attempted arson and that it had been self-inflicted. That complicated everything because it meant that they would arrest us. Arson carries a heavy penalty everywhere in the world. But the mechanisms of safety, the safety valves, of this country are inexplicable, they’re very strange.

One night we were at a party; we had received an invitation through a theater friend to go to a barbecue. We went. And it happened that in that house, on that patio, there was a group of important people. As they told us bits and pieces about themselves, we began to realize that they were members of the central committee of the Communist Party in hiding—they were anonymous people.

What was most unusual was that around midnight they took us to a living room, a small room where a door opened and a strange-looking older man entered. And he said to me, "I've come here exclusively to bring you a message from my son-in-law, Judge so-and-so." (His son-in-law was hearing our arson case.) "Knowing that you would be coming here tonight, he told me to assure you that you had absolutely nothing to do with it and he would not accept any kind of accusations or anything like that, so you can relax." It couldn't have been more opportune, because we were very frightened. This story is full of incredible things because a new world had been produced.

We know who was behind the attempted fire. The CNI had recently been created, recently, recently. It pulled the police from several blocks of that sector so it could operate on its own. (The police from the corresponding local precinct, though I don't know why, had taken our side. Every night at about ten after ten, just after the show had started, a police patrol would enter the tent with the actors, through the door. There was a lieutenant who became a friend of ours, two other policemen, and a dog. When the audience would see them enter, they were frightened, "There's going to be trouble. . . ." But no, they were there to take care of us.)

Eight or ten days after the fire had been set, Jaime and I were invited, through the police lieutenant who was our friend, to a dinner at the commissary, the strangest thing, the most surreal thing that could have happened. We arrived at the commissary, large rooms, and immediately, two or three lieutenants and captains approached us and told us to speak softly because some of them there were CNI, other policemen, the same as them. Then I imagined how it must have happened in the Gestapo, this division within the regular uniformed police force.

We were seated at a large table. The head of the commissary, a colonel, gave a very short speech, like Parra's. He says, "Officials, dear friends, I raise my glass because nothing bad lasts a hundred years. Cheers!" Right out of Parra. Stupidly, I don't know who that colonel was. He must still be alive, I suppose. It was very strange, very ambiguous, but they did it as a way of making amends or something like that.

I spent at least a year in a serious state of depression. Jaime, too. I was very, very, down. I don't really know why we went ahead with the project. With the negative reactions we had from the small world of theater—which I think were unwarranted. We hadn't deluded ourselves about its possible political repercussions. Still, we felt isolated. I think it was our personal situation that affected us most. If I try to make the most objective judgment possible, that show without a doubt was the best theater piece done during the entire period of the dictatorship. Of that I can assure you. And the few critics who saw it will tell you, it was an impressive show and, besides, a kind of theater that isn't done in Chile. Some of the younger directors, like Andrés Pérez, have captured something of what we did. It broke the style of naturalism right down the middle. It reached metaphysical and symbolic levels. But it was popular, too, in a way that's so very within the aesthetic of Parra, who, apart from his texts that we used, directly influenced

the way we staged the piece. It served the purpose for someone, or some people, I don't know how many, to have had the feeling of being alive, for showing that there was some way of opposing, of confronting the situation.

DAVID BENAVENTE, SOCIOLOGIST, PLAYWRIGHT,  
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When the coup came, theater was not considered dangerous. The state security agents were not worried about the theater. Most theater people kept functioning. If you look back, you'll see that there was still a little patch of green that remained where theater could be done. If you went out on the street with a camera in that period, you'd be arrested, literally. You couldn't go out on the street to film unless you had an authorization from the mayoralty of Santiago. There was very strong censorship on books. You couldn't publish a book without authorization. There was no prior censorship on theatrical presentations. There was a posteriori censorship and self-censorship, but you didn't have someone say to you, "This script—out!"

I think it's important to know that theater was not destroyed like other arts. Therefore it could be restored. After the coup, when military men replaced the civilian university presidents, the school of the art of communication at the Catholic University was closed—and, with it, film, television, and its social communications program. Only theater remained and theater was supported. At first, the attitude of the regime toward theater was not one that said, "This is dangerous." Theater for them was minor, insignificant. Then there was a cultural element. For example, people in theater at the Catholic University were connected, sometimes even through family, with the people who were in power. The politics of the Chilean aristocracy's family trees operated in that period and operate today. The Popular Unity government, on the other hand, had little to do with the people who ran the country. There were no family connections, important underground connections, of cultural roots and of last names and of families and of marriages, etc., with the exception of a few people who belonged to the upper class.

So, the strong persecution of the military did not reach the theater in the Catholic University as it did in the University of Chile. That university, thought to be a cavern of Marxist-Leninist thought, was completely leveled. Ictus was not touched, either. Actually, Ictus had a play running at the time of the coup, *Tres noches de un sábado*. And the only thing they had to do to continue running it was to change one of the characters: a member of the armed forces in a brothel became a railroad conductor, so they were able to keep the cap and everything. But they didn't have to change a single line of the text because the script had nothing to do with current political themes.

Then, in 1975, the Aleph Theatre was forced to close a play it had been able to open and run as there was no prior censorship. (I'm not defending the government with this;



Soledad Alonso,  
Myriam Palacios,  
Loreto Valenzuela,  
and Luz Jiménez in  
*Tres Marías y una  
Rosa*, 1979. Photo:  
Ramón López.

I'm simply trying to establish historically how things were. The facts. Because facts often get turned around and, in the end, you don't understand anything.) The Aleph had staged an allegorical play, *Y al principio existía la vida* [In the beginning there was life], where the captain of a sinking boat, an obvious metaphor for Allende, addresses the crew in words that were reminiscent of Allende's last address on the day of the coup. Many people had seen it by the time it was closed by the police (or by someone in authority). Now, did they close the play because of the play, or did they close it because the Aleph people were involved in something else more directly political? My theory is that they were involved in something else. The interpretation of the theater world, the theater group, and the theater itself is that the play was closed because of the nature of the play.

After that incident, no more plays of what would later be called critical or alternative theater opened until the following year, when *Pedro, Juan y Diego* [Tom, Dick, and Harry] was produced by Ictus. And it was discovered that it was possible to touch on certain current themes in a way that was not in direct opposition to the regime.

I was out of the country at the time of the coup. Shortly after returning from Europe, in December 1973, a friend of mine who was a member of Ictus, José Manuel Salcedo, called me and said, "Listen, we don't know what to do here. Why don't you come . . . as a playwright . . . and help us out." I went, and we started to toss around ideas with the company members. After a lot of back and forth, it occurred to me to do something with the popular [in the context of blue collar and low-level white collar] sector on the issue of unemployment—a nonpolitical, non-human rights theme, but in the context of political repression, of the dead—a theme we were all experiencing. We were all unemployed because of the change in the economic situation.

We argued a lot about who the protagonists of unemployment were. I insisted that we could not use doctors or artists, that the characters would have to be people from the popular sector. That was really at the heart of the thing. They had to be characters who were living this situation and living it in their own way, in their way of being—in a way that if you talked to this guy, you'd know immediately that he was a working-class Chilean. For one thing, right away there was his wit—any working-class person here has a certain wit, much more so than the bourgeoisie, much more grace and wit. And my intuition—that they had to be characters of a more or less lower- or lower-middle class origin who were in a visible situation, one where they didn't have to say a word, where they could be seen—was valid. The PEM [Minimal Employment Program, created by the military government to absorb the unemployed] was involved here, where a municipality would call unemployed workers and pay them a little to carry stones from one place to another. That's where the idea came from, from some guys who were making a wall.

We started to work. It took us a long time. We fought a lot among ourselves, a lot, real fights. What they say about unity in the face of a common enemy is true only up to a point. Because we fought like cats and dogs. The thing the play had going for it was taking working-class characters and referring allusively, through their language, without speeches, to things that were happening at the time. But it also had something deeper—an element of survival—something that is permanently inside the working class. Survival is a constitutive part of the genetics of their anthropology. In this play, instead of responding in a negative way, I wanted them to respond in a positive way.

We didn't have to pass the script by any censor, the way they had to in Spain or in Brazil. What did exist was a commission created in 1974 to enforce a tax law called the IVA [aggregate value tax] that subjected theater productions to a 22 percent tax on gross box office receipts unless the productions were approved as "highly cultural" and therefore exempt. This subtle form of censorship counted on the accurate assumption that the financial burden of such a tax would be prohibitive to most independent theaters, whose survival relied on ticket sales. Several places had authority to allow this tax exemption, such as universities and some of Santiago's municipalities. You'd find out who was on their governing committees and would send the play to the place or places where you had friends. And they'd pass on it, or not, as a cultural piece. That really was a euphemism for saying if this play is produced, the military won't come and kill a lot of people, which would mean killing that person, too, because he or she said it was OK. It had to do with that person's survival, too.

We called many people to see the play before it opened to give their opinion, because everyone was saying, "Hey, go to see it right away because it's sure to be closed down." We called journalists and people who had been part of the progressive movement, in the Popular Unity, also in Frei's government. There was one scene that made an allusion to the National Stadium. Someone said, "Take out the reference to the National Stadium. It's still full of political prisoners." That kind of thing. I don't remember now



if we took it out or not, or if we changed the meaning of it, more with a sports connotation than a political one. Of course everyone understood the other meaning, so it wasn't necessary to call things by their names. You could put an alias on everything, and people would understand it just the same. There was no need to be obvious. In fact, you had to be the least obvious possible, because at that time the audience was also an extraordinarily important participant in the performance.

The play was written in 1975 and opened in 1976. It immediately became an event. Audiences would go to the theater with an air of expectation that "something could happen here, something unusual, the police could come, or this thing could close tomorrow, or here something is being said that isn't said anywhere else." That was another very important aspect of theater: it was the only medium that was saying something that was not being said on television, in the newspapers, in film (because there was no film). Nobody was saying what could be said in theater, using theatrical language as a legitimate vehicle of artistic and aesthetic expression.

In my opinion, theater was never so theatrical, however realistic it was. It was never so realistic and so unrealistic at the same time. That was because it was in direct communion with an audience. It wasn't a theater of experimentation, but a theater of communion. It could be a little experimental, but it had no prior reference.

The audiences were exceptional. People went to the theater like going to something ritualistic, even though there was nothing experimental going on like the Living Theatre—which, by the way, never caught on here because the Chilean hates for people to come down the aisle and take off his watch and ask him when was the last time he made love. The Chilean is very conservative, very conservative. But the Chilean can participate in another way. He can support. And Chileans are great laughers—the complicity of laughter is something very important in theater—and they are sentimental.

I think theater gave its audiences several things. It reaffirmed that there was a place for them to go to have an experience that society wasn't giving them. It was like a church in a way, very similar to a church. It was a nonreligious space, but still a temple that for some mysterious reason was protected. There were no police outside. It was legitimized. It was possible to do *Pedro, Juan y Diego*, whatever its interpretations may have been. For example, many people of the Right who went to see the play didn't see many things that other people saw in it. But they died laughing, they loved the handyman, or they thought another character was funny. They would say, "Really, how can PEM have people doing this?" Which is what the Chilean Right always says: "How is that possible?" So, there was a space where people would go to be present, but not only to be present; they also went to participate in some way in a theatrical experience, with theatrical language, a community experience, somewhat prohibited, but not terribly prohibited. And they went to verify that there were other people watching the performance. In other words, not only did you watch what was happening on stage, but how this or that person was reacting to it. Many people took foreign visitors to see the play. "What's

happening in Santiago? Let's go see that play!" Later, it would serve to verify an identity.

Another point was that *Pedro, Juan y Diego* had to do with work, with losing jobs, not losing children, or a husband or a wife that you can say is missing. Here, what was missing was work—and not work only as a means of income to pay the bills, but something that has to do with a person's profound identity. The problem of employment is not simply a problem of statistics, of how many people are working. No. I was unemployed, and I lived through that unemployment; so I was relating to something that had happened to me as well. I was fired from the Catholic University where I had dedicated the best years of my youth, and with success, and suddenly, you're out, *ciao*. What they paid me as severance was very useful to me, but it wasn't the fundamental thing. And I was angry for a long time. I couldn't even pass by the building. For me, the Catholic University building was more stigmatic than La Moneda [the presidential palace, which was bombed on the day of the military coup]. They're very similar, the way they look physically. I couldn't go inside. I literally hated the people with whom I had sat on the same bench in high school.

Unemployment was something that touched a large percentage of the people who went to see the play, whether they were rich or poor. Because there was a grave political economic problem in the country, talking about unemployment was something serious. And keep in mind that we had to be in by eleven at night. There was a curfew at eleven. People were very afraid.

Another important element was that the play had a lot of charm, grace; it was very seductive, it was funny, it was tender, it was imaginative, it had many qualities. No one could say it was a pamphlet, no one could say it was poorly done. There weren't many reviews. Someone wrote something for *El Mercurio*, a page and a half, wonderful, and they didn't publish it. It was an important theatrical event, but they didn't publish it. Once the play was established, reviews and articles started coming out, but by then it wasn't necessary. Word of mouth is more important here than reviews anyway.

The international institutions that supported these plays were another important factor. People from CEPAL [Economic Commission for Latin America] or from foreign embassies, for example, would buy a block of tickets and pay more than the box office price as a way of supporting you. It also meant a kind of structural protection. I paid a lot of attention to that. I'm very organic, I don't have my head in the clouds. So, I made it my business to see that there were protections on several fronts, so that if there was a threat, you had recourse. There were contacts. We discovered that if you did a play and you stayed on track, you didn't change course, you could function here. That was my experience.

Things began to flourish after *Pedro, Juan y Diego*. I think that the protection of that play opened the way for others. Teatro Imagen, for example, did the play by Rivano. It didn't have the same characteristics as *Pedro, Juan y Diego*, but things related to the police were insinuated. Later, they did *El último tren* [The last train], which had another

theme. It wasn't derivative of *Pedro, Juan y Diego*, but it also dealt with the theme of work, about the prostitution of a young girl. So, a group of people doing theater of quality, with a lot of anger and a lot of energy, began to expand.

After *Pedro, Juan y Diego*, I went to the United States on a Fulbright scholarship to study at the American Film Institute—because I had no work in Chile and saw that none would be forthcoming. My work was at the university, and the university had fired me and nobody wanted to hire me. And, besides, a sociologist was very dangerous. It was difficult, worse than being a playwright, but playwriting wasn't something that was going to earn you a living. So, I went to Los Angeles at the end of 1976, and I asked where the American Film Institute was. They told me “on that hill,” and there on that hill was a palace. It was the house of an ex-oilman, an oil baron, who had left it to the institute in his will. It was an intense, interesting experience, but I was numb. Maybe under less depressive and less terrible circumstances, I could have gotten much more out of it, but those were my circumstances, and I got as much out of it as I could.

I returned to Chile in 1978 and worked with Raúl Osorio and the women in *Tres Marías y una Rosa*. There I took on the role of “CEO,” meaning I was the producer of the project as well as the writer. They had been working on the methodology that Raúl developed in the theater school of the Catholic University and had piles of material that they couldn't structure. They finally decided to call in a playwright and spoke to several people, one of whom was me. And I was interested. I started to work and in a short time was able to structure the piece, and in practically six months we opened a play. This was July 1979. I had given a reading of the play in June at the Theater in the Americas Festival at the O'Neill Theater Center in Connecticut. I remember that I saw to it that many, but *many* people knew that we were going to do this play in Chile. If something happened on our return to Chile, we could send a telegram and someone would take action, in the U.S., in Europe. It was very important to have that kind of “buffer.”

Chile sent a large delegation to that festival. The attitude of the Chileans who participated was different from the Uruguayans and the Argentines, who were scared to death. Of course, what happened in Uruguay and Argentina was different. The important theaters left the country because they could not function there, because of the Dirty War or for whatever reason. Besides, there was a tradition of terrorism there that didn't exist here. In Buenos Aires, they could put a bomb in your theater. That didn't exist here. The first act of terrorism, and the only one, was what happened to Jaime [Vadell], the [burning of Teatro La FERIA's] tent, which, by the way, did not kill anyone because it was at an hour when nobody was there.

Once *Tres Marías y una Rosa* was ready, we had to obtain the famous IVA exemption. We thought we would request it through the Catholic University, where Raúl worked. I was from the Catholic University, too, and two of the actresses were students there. We sent the play to Eugenio Dittborn, who had been my subalternate when I was



Nissim Sharim,  
Delfina Guzmán, José  
Manuel Salcedo, and  
Jaime Vadell in *Pedro,  
Juan y Diego*, 1976.  
Photo: Ramón López.

director of the School of the Art of Communication. I was his superior then, and he was very angry, I must say, that a young upstart was giving him orders. Eugenio started the paperwork, but he never sent us a piece of paper saying, “OK, we’ll do it, so you can get the exemption from the Internal Tax Office, stamp the tickets, etc.” We wanted to make it a professional, public production, in a regular theater, pay the required ordinary taxes, put ads in the paper. We wanted to publicize it. We didn’t want to give one or two performances here and there. Besides, we needed to earn money with this play.

I started to become annoyed with Eugenio, very annoyed, and finally I discovered that he was afraid to give it the go ahead, mainly because of the play’s wedding scene, a same-sex wedding, with two women. That was the problem. I saw that he had it noted in the script. He’s dead now, and he was a great man, but he was an old fart in a lot of ways. He had flagged the page and said that if we took out these pages, he’d give his consent, to which I said, “Go to hell!” That scene was very much mine, something I wanted to put into the play, and I didn’t think it was anything controversial. Picaresque, maybe. It’s very nice, a completely popular religious scene.

So, we went to the University of Chile to talk to Fernando Cuadra. He came to see the play and finally said OK. We opened the play. It was obviously a cousin of *Pedro, Juan y Diego*, so people started rushing to see it. The actresses weren’t well-known, which proved that that wasn’t necessary. What was necessary was a good show that was also good theater, attractive, well-done, and serious. And it was very serious, extraordi-

narily serious. Then it had its first setback, which was amusing: Within three days of its opening, a citation from the Ministry of Defense arrived.

The citation was directed to me and to Osorio, telling us that we had to appear on such and such day regarding the play. I began to mobilize immediately. At the time I was living with Delia Vergara, who was director of the journalism department of Radio Cooperativa, the opposition radio station. Patricia Politzer worked there, too. The owners of the station were the people who are running the government today: Frei, Figueroa, Edmundo Pérez, Arriagada—in other words, it was an excellent source of support.

I informed Delia of what was happening and told her to go looking for me if I didn't return from the military office. I also talked to people at Channel 13, the television channel of the Catholic University, and to *Hoy* magazine, an opposition weekly publication. Osorio and I arrived at the Military Intelligence Department of the Ministry of Defense, on the fifth floor, at a department called Military Intelligence. One of those typical public offices with dirty windows. It was very early in the morning, and there was this guy in a suit and tie waxing the floors. I was told that I had to wear a suit and tie. I had to borrow a tie because I had never worn ties. So, there we were, the three of us [Rebeca Ghigliotto, Osorio's wife, had also gone]—there was nobody else—in suits and ties and someone opened the door and a woman came out, a young military woman, and let Raúl inside. To me, she said, "You stay there and don't move until he comes out." Raúl was inside for a while. When he came out, they told me to go in. It was rough, because we knew that the guy who would be interrogating us was in the DINA and had been involved in torture.

He was a large man, and he smoked and talked on the telephone, a very theatrical character. His desk was like any other in public administration. At another desk, a woman noted down everything that was said. "You're a sociologist?" "Yes." "Your name?" "David Benavente Pinochet," I said. That's how I had written it, as "David Benavente Pinochet." So, they knew that the person who wrote that had the name of the talisman, for better or worse. "You're a sociologist. Do you work at the university?" "No, I don't work at the university." "Why not?" "Well, I don't work at the university. . . . They pay very little." Anything. "So, name four sociologists whom you know." He didn't let me sit down from then on. I had to stand. If you sit down, you establish a par-on-par relationship, but standing up, you're a little boy. Immediately I said to myself, "I'll give him four sociologists who work for the government."

Finally the guy tells me to sit down. He was reading the play and was marking some of the dialogue with a Bic pen. Then he closed the script and said, "Listen, I really don't know why this play has to be stopped. I think it's very good, I find it very funny, it's about something very real. This is what is happening, and I find it very strange that it's been brought to my attention." Just like that. After a few minutes of conversation, he offered me a cigarette and told me he was an art dealer. The guy bought paintings! It's like a play. I couldn't begin to write it down logically, but it was a play. This guy bought

paintings and sold them in England. He had been cultural attaché in England. So, he was of a certain level; if not cultural, at least he had been to another country, he had seen Big Ben, he knew Bond Street, etc.

I asked him why he had called us for such an early appointment. He said, "That's the way it is in the army. I think that's one of the reasons I'll never be a general. I hate getting up early." And he started talking. Suddenly the woman called him to the phone, and he started talking about his car that was in the garage, "You're going to pick up my car, no, you, I, . . ." and everything started to blur and another reality emerged.

Behind the brutality, suddenly people who knew other people began to appear. "So, you're a Pinochet?" "Yes." I thought he was going to ask me if I was related to General Pinochet. Then, he said, "Ah, Pinochet. You're from Cauquenes, aren't you?" "Yes, from Cauquenes." "And didn't you spend the summer of such and such year in Curanipe?" "Yes, I used to go there as a child. We had relatives there." "Right, because that year I was a lieutenant in the Cauquenes regiment, and some of your cousins, well, I was like their boyfriend. We used to visit them . . . and Rupín Pinochet. . ." "Ruperto Pinochet. He was older than me, but a first cousin, one of my mother's sisters' sons—my mother was sort of the head chieftain of the area." "Right, I'm Rupín's age, a very close friend of his." He never asked me if I was related to General Pinochet or not. By that time I was smoking a cigarette with my legs crossed—I said to him, "Listen, why don't we call Osorio. He's waiting outside. I've been in here for quite some time now, and who knows what he's thinking." "Of course, of course. Who is this Mr. Osorio?" "He's a theater director, he works at the Catholic University, and he just finished directing *Hamlet*." "Ah, I have a book written by Hamlet!" he said. He meant to say Shakespeare. So we called Osorio, and there I was smoking a cigarette, practically having a drink with this military guy. Osorio came in, and he didn't understand a thing.

Then the guy looked something up and said, "Listen, *La Segunda* published an article, something I have here, read what it says here." It said in the "Top Secret" column that in the "recently opened play about *arpilleristas*, there was a large canvas that depicted a summary execution of the military against the women"—something that had nothing to do with anything. We told him that it was absolutely false and that we would be idiots to include such an image in the play. Then we said, "OK, can we go?" "Of course, go ahead. When can I see the play?" "Whenever you like. There'll be tickets waiting for you."

I said to Osorio, "Let's go right over to the paper. I know the editor." At that time the editor of *La Segunda* was Hermógenes Pérez de Arce, who had been a little ahead of me in high school, but I knew him. I also knew him through our families, from Parral, [a small town in the southern valley region of Chile where there are many large privately owned tracts of land]. So I went to the paper as a landowner. My family had land around Parral and so did the Pérez de Arce family, so I arrived at the paper screaming, "I want to see Pérez de Arce . . . and you can't throw us out. No, I'm going in." And I opened the door to his office, went in and said to him, "Son-of-a-bitch, what the fuck did you do? Where is your responsibility? How could you publish such a thing in the paper? We're

here, but it could have been a disaster, not only closing a play because of a misunderstanding, but they could have sent us to god knows where. . . .” So, the guy says, “I don’t believe it, that can’t be. . . .” “I demand a disclaimer tomorrow. A correction has to be printed in the paper that says that what was published was false and that never does this play portray any act or display an *arpillera* that has anything to do with the military.”

They printed it the next day, naturally in their own way, saying, “Look at the openness there is in Chile. We made a mistake, we recognize it, and, like gentlemen, we admit it. Go see *Tres Marías y una Rosa*, it’s very good.” The implied irony was clear.

This whole incident was initiated by the Ministry of the Interior. The Minister at that time was very connected with the New Democracy group, which later became UDI [Unión Democrática Independiente, an ultraconservative political party]. And UDI was headed by [Jaime] Guzmán, who had helped many people. Guzmán was recognized by Christians and Moors alike. He saved many people from death here. In that aspect, he was a very, very humane person and a friend and supporter of people who were marked for execution.

My interpretation of the incident is one based on class. Other people who were less privileged didn’t have that protection in Chile, and they don’t have it today. I’m not saying that things are so horrible today, but there is a level of ontological injustice in society. A poor person who has no connections, unless he has a boss or sponsorship that supports him, is going to be in a weakened position. That’s what the Church talked and talked about and what the cardinal talked about: defenselessness. What institution was able to protect someone who really had no one to protect him? And that’s why the Church helped Christians and Moors, never questioning whether they were Communists or they were not Communists. The Vicarate of Solidarity, in that sense, was an institution whose origin is the Middle Ages, where churches were protectors of the persecuted and those who were going to be killed.

There had been an important change of policy in 1976. After the death of Letelier, the Carter administration brutally pressured Pinochet to kick [General Manuel] Contreras out of the DINA, which he headed. Many people from here, people of the Left, used to say that it made no difference whether Republicans or Democrats were in power [in the United States]. They were wrong. They were profoundly wrong. It makes a lot of difference, a lot. And I always argued, “If a Republican had been in power at that time, Contreras would not have been ousted.” Here the Right considers Carter an idiot like they consider Clinton an idiot. The Right is a very strange thing.

Then in 1979 there was another important policy change. An official decree was leaked and got to Patty Politzer at the newspaper of the Radio Cooperativa. This document had been requested from the CNI around the same time our interrogator had been associated with it. They had been asked [by the Ministry of the Interior] to provide information on critical, alternative theater, written up in the form of an official memorandum, using *Tres Marías y una Rosa* as the example. They said that it was intelligent

theater, very lively theater, that it was opposition theater, but of good quality, and they considered that closing it down would be highly inconvenient. Not only would it provoke international repercussions, but many who supported Pinochet's regime would think it was crazy to do it. Finally, they did not close the play.

During that period, theater in Chile surpassed television in ratings for the first time. Not because of the numbers of people who went to the theater, but because of the social commentary that took place in salons about the play. There was a lot of discussion about the play. The way they talk about *La Negra Ester* [Dark Esther] a musical play that transcended the theater world and is a little like a cultural legacy. [It opened in 1988 shortly before the national plebiscite that ousted Pinochet at the ballot box. The play was a huge success attracting audiences of every age and every social and economic class.] Or like *La pérgola de las flores* [The flower stall, another musical play that attracted large audiences from all sectors of Chilean society at the time of its initial run in 1960 and is still being produced, in Chile and abroad] in another category. These plays were something more than theater; they were theater phenomena that reached an audience who never goes to the theater and who doesn't know what theater is—they're not interested. So, it wasn't just the people who went to see *Tres Marías* at the small Teatro Angel, a modest 55,000. That number has to be multiplied by the people you meet today who have seen *Tres Marías y una Rosa*. There's nobody who hasn't seen it. Maybe they haven't seen it in a theater, but they've been told the story or been told about the play, someone in exile saw it, etc., etc.

After its run at the Teatro Angel, the play toured, first nationally and then outside Chile. I think it was the first tour of a Chilean play that communicated with a Chilean diaspora. One of the most interesting things that happened on our tours abroad was that the thing people celebrated most about the play was listening to the Chilean melody, their way of speaking, the mannerisms, a way of being, an identity. Beyond the story about the role of the Vicariate during the military years were the relationships, the mannerisms, the solutions, how to resolve things. That's how I think theater penetrated at a critical time in Chile. It took the temperature of something that was, and I hope is still, ours. It touched something of identity. Identity is not something rational, it's not just about a story, although there is a story. But it is a story that has more to do with the soul than with the head.

That's why I think agitprop theater didn't work in Chile. The same thing happened in many parts of the world. You didn't go to the theater to see culture. It was like going to a market, to see what was happening, how much does this cost, I'll eat a peach, I'll thank the merchant, these tomatoes are wonderful, suddenly there's someone playing music, someone is robbing someone, something to do with life, with people's lives, not the life of ideas. . . . I think that the theater of that time was a theater that was very closely linked to people, more than to ideas; it was linked to the soul and to identity. That was its attraction.