



Parque por la Paz
at the Villa Grimaldi,
Santiago. Photo:
Razi Sol

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FORGETTING FILLED WITH MEMORY

Guillermo Calderón emerged as the bright new star of a new generation of post-dictatorship Chilean playwrights and directors in 2006, when *Neva*, the first of his four ensemble plays, opened at the Santiago a Mil International Theatre Festival. *Clase* and *Diciembre* followed two years later, and *Villa+Discurso* were presented in the 2011 festival. All four plays have enjoyed great public and critical reception, touring numerous international festivals and winning various awards.

Villa+Discurso is a two-pronged site-specific theater piece Calderón refers to as “Villa plus Speech,” which reflects on the nostalgia, healing power, and contradictions of memory. Twenty-two years after the end of Chile’s seventeen-year dictatorship (1973–1990), the memory of those brutal, terrifying years under General Augusto Pinochet remains fresh in the lives of many Chileans. In *Villa+Discurso* Calderón explores aspects of remembering those traumatic years and ways to commemorate them, focusing on women who were held prisoner and raped and tortured by the military.

Calderón began writing *Discurso* in 2009 at the Royal Court Theatre’s international playwriting residency program in London. (The title *Discurso* is used for Calderón’s second play throughout this article, because the word has a double meaning in Spanish: “speech” and “[ideological] discourse.”) A long and intricate poem, it is an imagined farewell address by Chilean president Michelle Bachelet at the end of her four-year presidency, in 2010: the speech that Calderón would have liked Bachelet to have made. “I wanted to write about Michelle Bachelet, who she is and who she was. I felt it was important that she was the first woman in Chile to be president and that she was also a direct victim of the dictatorship’s human rights violations. I wanted her to defend herself against the many political attacks she received while in office. In reality she never did so, but in my play she does. She never mentioned that she was tortured or spoke of her father, but in my play she does.”

Bachelet and her mother, Angela Jeria, were detained in January 1975 and taken to Villa Grimaldi, where they were tortured before their release later that year. Her father, Alberto Bachelet, a brigadier general of the Chilean Air Force, was arrested in 1973 for opposing the military coup and taken to the public jail in Santiago, where he died on March 12, 1974. That his death was a result of torture was confirmed on June 20, 2012, by the Chilean legal medical service, and on July 17 two military officers were charged with his torture.

I wrote *Discurso* to be performed in Chile, but it needed a context. The fact that Bachelet had been tortured was very important for me. I thought about Villa Grimaldi, where she and her mother were held. And I myself had a direct relationship with that place. So I decided to use it as a context for *Discurso*, to write about the women held there and the theme of rape—especially rape that produces pregnancy—and about how to remember them.

Sexual violence was used as a method of torture throughout dictatorship and was practiced systematically and indiscriminately by all three branches of the armed forces in almost all known detention centers, concentration camps, stadiums, and clandestine prisons. The military encouraged and justified it because of their profound patriarchal view of women and because of the significant role that women played in Chilean politics in the 1970s and 1980s.

According to the Valech Report (the report of the National Commission on Political Imprisonment and Torture, created by President Ricardo Lagos in 2003), of the 3,399 women who testified before the commission, almost all said they had been subjected to sexual violence, and 316 said they had been raped. However, the commission estimated that the number of women raped is much higher than those reported because of the difficulty many women have talking about the subject, often preferring not to, and because there were numerous testimonies from detainees who said they had witnessed rapes in many places of detention.

Born in 1971 in Santiago, the middle child of three of a middle-class family, Calderón grew up under the military dictatorship. Both experiences shape his work. His sensitivity to the racism and classism of Chilean society and his abhorrence of violence are always present. “I was marked by the traumas of growing up in the dictatorship. I only write political plays.” Calderón’s connection with the Villa Grimaldi is political, in his disgust for the atrocities that took place there and his questions about the way the site has been memorialized, and personal, as the name of one of his mother’s brothers appears on the list on a memorial wall at the villa as one of the “disappeared” who were detained there. Above the list of names is a line from a poem by the Uruguayan poet Mario Benedetti (1920–2009) commemorating them: *El olvido está lleno de memoria* (Forgetting is filled with memory).

Villa Grimaldi was the largest and best known of more than 1,200 centers of detention and torture throughout Chile that have been identified since the dictator-

ship, operating in that capacity from 1974 to 1978. Its pre-coup history is very different. For most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the three-acre estate, known as the Hacienda of Peñalolén, located in the foothills of the Andes on the outskirts of Santiago, was a gathering place for many of Chile's artists and intellectuals. An elegant mansion and several adobe houses graced the property, and over the years, meeting rooms, entertainment halls, and a swimming pool were added. Among its owners were the prominent nineteenth-century Chilean lawyer and humanist Juan Egaña and the Uruguayan consul general José Arrieta. During the Popular Unity years (1970–1973), the period of Salvador Allende's interrupted presidency, the villa was used as a meeting point for many leftist and progressive cultural and political figures.

Shortly after the military coup, the DINA (Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional), Chile's national intelligence agency, acquired the property from its then owner, Emilio Vasallo, who because of his Italian heritage had named it Villa Grimaldi. It was promptly renamed Terranova Barracks and prepared as a concentration camp. In 1974 the site began to receive its first occupants. The mansion was used by the DINA as a kind of clearinghouse to decide the fate of the prisoners, who were taken there blindfolded. It is estimated that nearly 4,500 people were detained in Villa Grimaldi. Of those detained, 18 were executed and 208 detainees remain disappeared. In 1989, several months before the inauguration of the first postdictatorship democratic government, military personnel bulldozed all the internal structures to the ground, leaving only the perimeter wall, in an attempt to destroy evidence of what happened there and to erase the memory of the site.

When the military abandoned Villa Grimaldi, they wanted to sell the land and build houses. Some of the survivors, and neighbors who lived in the Commune of Peñalolén, objected and initiated a public campaign to stop the eradication of the memory of the villa. As a result, in 1994 the land was expropriated by official decree of the administration of President Patricio Aylwin and was transformed three years later into a memorial park named the Villa Grimaldi Peace Park. In April 2004 the site was declared a national historic monument.



Michelle Bachelet,
Chilean
Independence Day,
Santiago, September 18,
2009. Photo:
Alex E. Proimos



Model of the Villa Grimaldi, Santiago.
Photo:
Joanne Pottlitzer

Whenever Calderón has visited the site, he has been jarred by its beauty, which to him seems incongruent with what happened there. “The park is beautiful in the springtime with all the flowers in bloom. How can such a horrible place be remembered as something so beautiful? It is a contradiction.” There is an area in the converted villa called the Rose Garden, a small, private space where the military would rape the women. Among the flowers are metal stakes, each topped with an oval “blossom” bearing the name of

a woman killed or disappeared during the dictatorship. For Calderón that garden, too, is contradictory. “One would also like to remember it as a place where a person was killed. Instead we see a flower, as though reborn into life. I don’t think anyone thought much about that when they were planning the memorial. They wanted to do something fast, but the theoretical problems remain, and those problems are still discussed and disputed.”

Some argue to reconstruct the old house, so that when people see it, they see the horror of what it was, not its sentimental beauty. Others have suggested building a museum on the grounds. Michelle Bachelet took a different course when she created a museum in another part of the city, far from the site: El Museo de la Memoria (Museum of Memory), where memory is placed inside a modern institution with all its aesthetic and political implications. The museum was inaugurated in 2010, Chile’s bicentenary year. “I wanted to construct a play where those positions are discussed. And that’s how I came to write *Villa*. Once it was ready, I presented the two plays together, but not as one play.”

Villa opened in January 2011 in Santiago at 38 Londres Street, the first notable secret torture center of the dictatorship. In the small space where the play was performed a permanent sign on the wall reads, “What has happened inside this house also happened outside it. State terrorism operated over the entire country.” It then moved, with *Discurso*, to another former torture center, José Domingo Cañas, and then to Villa

Grimaldi. After the performances at the villa, it was performed at El Museo de la Memoria and then in a former torture center of the port of Valparaíso.

In *Villa*, three young women sit around a table in a neutral space, defined only by the venue, discussing alternative ways of remodeling Villa Grimaldi. On the table, inside a plexiglass box, is a small architectural model of the main house that was demolished by the military, which becomes the set's focal point. (A large model of the house sits on its existing foundation in the Villa Grimaldi.) The three women have the same name, Alejandra. It is a reference to Marcia Merino, known as "La Flaca Alejandra." Merino, a member of the MIR (Movimiento de la Izquierda Revolucionaria), the ultra-left-wing Revolutionary Left Movement, was detained weeks after the coup and taken to the three torture centers where the piece played in Santiago. In time she began to collaborate with the DINA and denounced a number of fellow members of the MIR. Do the "Alejandras" represent one person with different stories to tell, different perspectives on what took place? Are they three women who have shared the same experiences? An air of mystery and concealment pervades the play.

The women have been asked to form a committee to decide what kind of memorial should be made, not knowing why. As they question each other about their past, the women learn that all three were born in the Villa Grimaldi and that their mothers were raped and tortured there. That is why they were chosen for this task. As the dialogue continues, one of them, then another, then the third, dons a white jacket, each with slightly different styled collars and buttons. By the end of the play they have become President Michelle Bachelet.

During a ten-minute intermission one of the actresses, her back to the audience, strums a guitar and sings Dan Fogelberg's tribute to his father, "The Leader of the Band," with its refrain, "I am the living legacy of the leader of the band." Calderón uses the song as a bridge between the two plays, alluding to Bachelet believing herself to be the legacy of her own dead father.

When lights come up on *Discurso*, the three women are standing side by side upstage, each in her white jacket, adorned with a presidential sash of a single color, one red, one blue, and one white. On the table, now stage left, sits the plexiglass box enclosing the model mansion. It will play a stunning role later in the piece. In her address to the Chilean people, as Calderón imagines it, Bachelet talks about her political and her personal lives. She defends her presidency, at times apologizes for things she did not accomplish during her term, or for what Calderón (and others) considers her mistakes, declaring:

Honestly, I did everything possible. I am not to blame for everything. Let's not forget about what occurred before. I boarded a train that was already in motion. Although I tried. [. . .] Forgive me. But if you remember, you did not elect me to change everything. You elected me for something else, to feel gratified, to be happy for a while.

She asks forgiveness for being able to afford a house on a lake, for continuing the neoliberal economic model initiated by Pinochet, though she also criticizes the current market economy. She recognizes some of her questionable positions, such as not supporting the Mapuche cause, a recurring theme in Calderón's plays: ". . . but there are things about which I'm deeply convinced. For example, that Chile is one, that the Mapuches are not a nation apart, in the sense of having their own Tree Republic [a reference to the sacred cinnamon tree of the Mapuches]."

Bachelet herself has not seen the play. Her mother saw it and commented to Calderón, "She would like it because it has humor." As in all of Calderón's work, relevant political subject matter, a search for new expression, and a healthy dose of Chilean humor resonate in *Villa+Discurso*. Agile and layered language, especially in *Villa*, facilitates the speed and staccato rhythms of the dialogue typical of Calderón's writing and directing style. His postmodern texts are rich with historical and cultural references, not all of which will be captured by everyone who sees it for the first time. For example, "the lion's a bloodthirsty . . .," a line in *Villa*, is a song lyric in "The Letter" by Violeta Parra, who was referring to Arturo Alessandri Palma, one of Chile's most important presidents of the first half of the twentieth century, known as El León (the Lion) de Tarapacá (the northern Chilean province that Alessandri represented as senator from 1915 to 1918). "She is a Lautara," references the Lautaro Youth Movement, active in Chile from 1983 until the early 1990s, carrying out subversive acts of protest, first against the dictatorship and then against the new democracy it found to be noninclusive and flawed. The movement was named for the national hero Lautaro, a Mapuche chieftain who led the first uprisings against the Spanish conquerors in the mid-sixteenth century.

Pedro Labra, a leading drama critic for the Santiago newspaper *El Mercurio*, hailed *Villa* as "the best piece to date written and directed by Calderón, where his remarkable and penetrating vision of reality is presented in full maturity. It is not difficult to foresee this text in the future as key for examining the open wounds, unresolved contradictions and pending moral tales of our nation in the last decades."¹ That same day *El Mercurio* published a blistering blog in response to the review, written by a right-wing journalist who has been associated with the newspaper since 1962, titled "History Is Being Written by . . . the Losers." While many Chileans remember the period of the dictatorship as dark years in their country's history, others, like that blogger, laud it as having saved Chile from economic chaos and a total communist takeover. So it was daring for Calderón to address the subject of torture in a play to be performed in Chile and for him to criticize, however tempered with affection and admiration, the presidency of Michelle Bachelet. He deftly covers himself by giving Bachelet the line, "This story could be written as a tragedy. But playwrights are not up to the level of this story."

For *Villa+Discurso*, Calderón has formed an excellent new ensemble he calls Teatro Playa (Beach Theater). El Teatro en el Blanco (Theater on Target), the extraordinary group with whom he collaborated for four years, continues to work on its own. Teatro Playa consists of three exceptional young actors, Francisca Lewin, Carla Romero, and

Macarena Zamudio, whose backgrounds include dance, video art, and television, along with the designer María Fernanda Videla and producer María Paz González.

Villa+Discurso has been performed around the world, mostly in spaces that were former torture centers, in Buenos Aires; in Montevideo; in São Paulo, Brasília, Rio Preto, and Belo Horizonte in Brazil; in Guadalajara, Mexico; in Madrid, San Sebastián, Cádiz, and Molina de Segura, Spain; in Gerona and Terni, Italy; in Edinburgh, Scotland; in Liege, Belgium; in Paris and Bayonne, France; and Lisbon, Vienna, Düsseldorf, and Sarajevo.

The response has been overwhelmingly positive. When it played in Buenos Aires in 2011, theater critic Nara Mansur commented in the Argentinean newspaper *Clarín*:

Villa+Discurso is always performed in areas associated with the play's subject, so the element of reality that the location adds is overwhelming. [The piece] talks about a museum that will give meaning to what happened, to what you cannot understand, and here we are in Memory Park, monument to the victims of state terrorism in Argentina. The show takes place in the middle of Graciela Sacco's exhibition, "Permissible Voltage"; the room is huge and brightly lit. Horror is with us, and so is life, the joy of theater, art that is never the point of closure, but a space for collective reflection and the deepest feelings.²

After *Discurso*, Calderón continued his venture into writing solo. A new work, *Beben* (German for "Quake"), completed in early 2012, two years after the 2010 earthquake in Chile, had its world premiere at the Düsseldorfer Schauspielhaus on April 23, 2012. Another new play, titled *B*, about a group of young people in Chile who have set out to make a bomb, is at the time of this writing under consideration for production at the Royal Court Theatre in London, where Calderón developed it last year. *Neva*, his award-winning first play, set in Russia during the revolution, was given its English-language premiere, which Calderón directed with New York actors, in March 2013 at the prestigious Public Theater in New York as part of its 2012–13 season.

In the words of Mark Russell, artistic director of the Under the Radar Festival, produced annually by the Public Theater, "I think that Guillermo Calderón is an artist of global standing, his work goes beyond the exoticism of being from Chile, to have something to say to the world. Guillermo's unique theatrical voice—political, humorous, outrageous—should be shared across all borders."³

NOTES

An earlier version of this article appeared in the 2012 Edinburgh International Festival program.

1. Pedro Labra, "Villa+Discurso: Excepcional," *El Mercurio*, April 23, 2011.

2. Nara Mansur, "Lo público y lo privado," *Clarín*, October 2, 2011.

3. Mark Russell, communication with the author, June 2012.