

THE NO VOTE: ARTISTS ASSESS THE FUTURE

In the tumultuous days following the Oct. 5 plebiscite—in which Gen. Augusto Pinochet was defeated by a clear margin in his bid to extend his term as President of Chile by eight years—American director and translator Joanne Pottlitzer, in Santiago, asked several Chilean theatre artists about the “no” vote and what it may mean for the future of their country. These are excerpts from their comments.

JULIO JUNG, artistic director of El Nuevo Grupo: I received funeral flowers for my birthday last year. Nobody knew about my birthday. There was no party, no announcement, nothing. But they knew. The flowers had a card signed by the Comando Yeverez, named for an ultra rightwing leader and supported by the government. There have been threats which we continue to receive on a daily basis. The triumph of the “No” in the plebiscite does not mean that these things never happened.

MARIA ELENA DUVAUCHELLE, member of El Nuevo Grupo and president of SIDARTE, Chile’s actors union: Nissam Sharim [Teatro Ictus Co-director] and Julio had received five death threats when a group of actors decided to form a human rights commission within the actors union. We are very proud of this because in all of Latin America, ours is the only actors union with such a commission. When that commission was formed, the massive threat was issued threatening 82 actors with death if they didn’t leave the country within a month. It was meant to dissolve the strength we were gaining. Instead, it had a reverse effect. We united and joined forces. Almost every actor participated in the “No” campaign. Even those who knew they would have problems with their jobs on television and in theatres. It was impressive. This government always says that today’s theatre is political. Theatre has always been political; it has always been criticized.

JUNG: We have always searched for truth on stage. The truth of feelings at a moment when the country needs feelings is important. The “No” slogan was “Joy is on its way.” And joy is on the way. *Frankie and Johnny and the Clair de Lune*, the Terrence McNally play we are rehearsing now, almost seems like a metaphor for this joy. Because people with scars, not only on their hands, but in their hearts, who come together at a certain moment in a real, human way on the stage is very opportune for the country, for the Chilean theatre, for us to rethink the future in a positive, hopeful way.

I put fear aside before the plebiscite. Because the bigger fear, for me, was the thought of having that man in power for another eight years. That fear erased the fear of anything that could happen to me physically. I’m not brave. I’ve never been brave. I’m the biggest coward in the world. They can’t draw blood from me because I faint. But in this case, I didn’t feel fear because there was the greater fear: the destruction of this country in eight more years of cruelty, revenge, rancor.

We are in a special situation now with regard to the future. A defeated man is going to remain in power for more than a year.

Joanne Pottlitzer, director and translator, was the director of Theatre of Latin America, Inc. from 1966–80.

His Minister of the Interior calls on supporters to go to the streets to aggress supporters of the “No.” I see no possibility of dialogue or agreement as long as a Minister of the Interior does such things. I see no great future for this country until it returns to democracy. That is not democracy. This is a step we have managed to achieve. We have said “no” to a man who intended to stay in power for another eight years.

We are optimistic. We’re building a cultural center with a theatre, workshops, a restaurant, coffee shop, art gallery. It’s almost finished. It’s beautiful. It will be a meeting place where the arts can be shown in a free atmosphere, for all of us who, though we may not agree on everything, want what is best for the country.

DELFINA GUZMAN, co-director of Teatro Ictus: We knew the day the torturing, deaths and disappearing began that our theatre would be one of daily and constant protest against an event that was absolutely hostile. And these 15 years have been just that. We have been asked many times if our theatre is against the dictatorship. It is, in the sense of recreating the values of democracy, of solidarity among people, honesty, respect for people. Our theatre is filled with these values. Our theatre answers back. But to respond conceptually to the dictatorship is a complex problem, because this dictatorship has been very poor ideologically. Our struggle against the dictatorship has been one of ethics more than ideology.

NISSIM SHARIM, co-director of Teatro Ictus: In a way, the dictatorship “pardoned” theatre life during these 15 years, because it discovered that direct repression of theatre people and plays would cause more harm to the dictatorship than a more permissive attitude with many limiting restrictions. The government made a quantitative analysis: they calculated how many people attended the theatre and they learned the number of people who attended a play was less than the number of those who would know about the repression if they banned the production. That’s why theatre was “pardoned.”

Ictus’s situation was exceptional. Although we were adversaries of the regime, we were rather privileged in that we did not dissolve as a group. We were able to maintain ourselves financially and stay alive as an organization. That’s something few groups can say. We employ an intuitive tactic of survival. We enter the spaces this regime leaves open by mistake.

GUZMAN: Having our images appear on television during the campaign was testimony to that. Modesty aside, the participation of these actors was an act of bravery, a big risk. I am proud of my union SIDARTE, because many of the actors who participated in the “No” campaign risked their jobs. And their participation had an impact. It contributed a lot.

SHARIM: In my opinion these appearances were decisive to the triumph of the “No.” The “No” campaign was given 15 minutes a day of television for 27 days. It seems incredible that after 15 years of no access it was possible to change the balance

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which I assuaged the guilt of leaving others to die, was that abroad I could tell the story. I had assumed that my ability to write was an asset which, like a toothbrush, you carry wherever you go.

Back home people were being jailed or killed for what they wrote; back home, friends were scribbling furiously and then hiding their manuscripts; back home, Oscar Castro was finding ways to express himself inside the very shadows cast by the soldiers.

28 And here I was, tongue-tied.

PROLOGUE: THAT DEAFENING NOISE IS THE GARBAGE TRUCK

Today the cup broke;
how could I be so clumsy.

It made me very sad when it broke,
it was the one we had bought right after
we left the country,
one that we were fond of,
you could say it was almost

James and Mary in this last week.

My husband saw the final performance, and was very happy.

I heard a program on PBS in which Jonas Salk and some other man famous for his work on vaccines were being interviewed. They were being asked, "Why don't you invent a vaccine for AIDS?" Salk said, "That's not easy to do." The interrogators were all primed to discover narrow-minded conspiracy somewhere, and pounced on them with "Why? Why not? Who's stopping you? What's stopping you?"

Salk's fellow scientist said, "Because we have no idea why vaccines work. When we find one that works, we use it. But we don't know why. We only use it because it works."

The actor seems to work in the same slippery field of research and discovery. Except, poor forked instrument that he is, he keeps going out of tune in some mystical place in his head, and he has to keep finitely (and infinitely) readjusting, shifting slightly this way and that—it's like trying to find your light on stage. I am glad if I could be the right instrument for O'Neill perhaps six times out of fifty performances.

There must have been a night when Ella O'Neill came out from behind her fog-bound walls and tried to make her son understand, tried to communicate her hell, her fall; and he looked at her and understood. And in that moment this play was born. □

ANATOMY OF FEAR

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ence. The people who are still there, whom I continue to believe in and who hope against hope—those people have got me captive, in the best sense, captive of their project of a new humanity. There are few places you can really call home, but there are many homes you have. Where did home exist for the first time? When did people become attached to the land? When they did their first funeral rites, I think. In other words, when they began discovering how you speak to the dead and how the dead speak to you, which is one of the major things we have to confront. So I think that home is the place of resurrection. I mean that not as a religious concept, but in the sense that you are resurrected in language, in others, in a relationship with the culture. And that's where I feel I belong.

When I was writing my second play, *Reader*, for a production next spring in Chile, I felt an enormous sense of relief when I discovered that I

was censoring myself a bit: I was asking, "Could the actors really say these lines in Chile?" So censorship became a way of saying, "I'm coming back home; I'm rediscovering the language that they're playing with every day."

There are many different forms of exile. In my case, the first years of exile were the worst and most traumatic experience I have ever been through, because they were accompanied by silence; because I felt useless; because I felt guilty; because I felt that people were being killed and I felt impotent. I didn't have the words to calm my fears, to give them to others so that it wouldn't be so fearful.

Chile is full of stories, stories that are being told and many that are not being told, that are being suppressed. Artists have an enormous responsibility to tell them. □

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of strength in 15 minutes a day for 27 days. The technical or artistic excellence was not as important as seeing the reincorporation of 500 actors an aesthetic that had been absent from television for 15 years.

GUZMAN: The diversity and plurality that you see in a democracy had not been seen for many years. With the joy of the triumph, the calmness of the triumph, we have to remember that hatred and a desire for revenge still exist. In the midst of our euphoria, we have not yet come to the moment of reflection. Someone said we must bring this joy down to earth.

The political strategy of the alliance of the 16 parties has been extraordinary. Having won a victory with no money, with repression, with censorship, with 15 minutes a day on television, with all the gifts Pinochet was giving people to buy their votes—winning was due to an extraordinary political strategy. Now we need a strong organization to build strong unity. That is the most important thing.

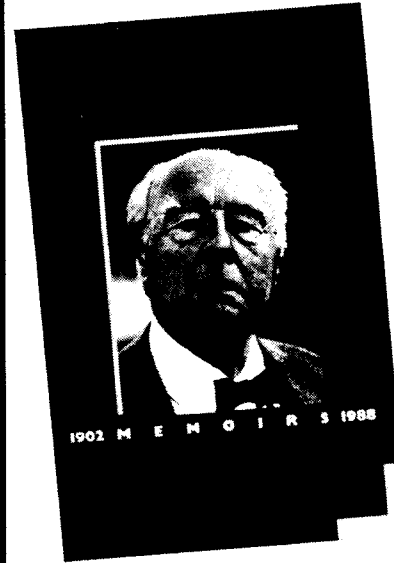
RAUL OSORIO, director and professor of the Catholic University: Someone needs to do a study very soon about the sophistication with which this government has used the element of terror, of fear, which not only unravels national life, but which destroys individuals and their most personal intimacies. Fear stops us from thinking about ourselves and from delving deeper into what is happening to us. The victory of the "No"

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was very positive. Above all, the fear has been overcome. Now it is the people in the government who live in fear. They are quite desperate, realizing they cannot continue governing the country. The democratic force was very clear. But we cannot deceive ourselves. We must be calm and non-violent, but not naive. It is necessary now to fight for more justice to make Chile a better country. After experiencing the fifth and sixth of October, I believe this is a very physical, very real task. It is key that people transformed their fear into constructive energy by saying "We've had enough."

We who work in cultural arenas do not want more repression. We need to be free, to be critical along with the rest of the world, critical of everything: of our colleagues, of our own ideologies. We have to graduate from kindergarten into systems which permit growth and discovery. We must not remain isolated and stunted.

RAMON GRIFFERO, director/playwright: The artistic generation that existed before the dictatorship and the generation that was born within the dictatorship are very different. First, there is the official culture of the regime; then there is the official dissidence, people against the regime who were active before the coup. Also, there is a whole other generation which began to generate work in 1983 and 1984. The official dissidents have been more fearful, because they lived through the coup. People who are 22 or 23 only know the dictatorship. They are fighting against something that is the only thing they know and they are less afraid. We don't care about the censorship tax; we simply don't pay it. We have nothing to lose. What could we lose? The garage where we perform? We write and perform without thinking about Pinochet. Obviously these expressions are marginal, with no access to television, with only xeroxed publicity. But the public has responded, and our spaces, which hold from 800 to 1,500 people are overflowing. Audiences come because they want to be in touch with more than the official forms.

MARCO ANTONIO DE LA PARRA, playwright: The Chilean theatre has acted like dreams, in the Freudian sense. On one hand, it has interpreted the desires of a population, and on the other, it has put on the stage things that the public cannot think. We playwrights consider ourselves the dreamers of the tribe.

Like the people who drew figures on the walls of the cave of Altamira. They painted the desires of the tribe; they didn't paint for decoration, because Altamira has no access to the light, but to fulfill desires. So you will see plays of fantasies about overthrowing governments, about despair. I call this post-Pinochetism, which is a kind of post-modernism, made-in-Pinochet, which appeared around 1985-86, when social mobilization seemed useless.

Several authors, myself included, began to renounce the ideas that democracy is wonderful, that Pinochet is bad, and we began to write about a much more complex world. We began to consider ourselves accomplices; we began to empathize with the torturers; we began to feel that we were all Pinochets, we were all arrested and disappeared, we were all Francos. And we began to work with the internal fascist. Why have I survived this regime? It's my fault more than anyone else's. We started to write about the middle class, its complicity and masochistic suffering, and the thematic possibilities opened up tremendously. Now you no longer see militant plays. You see the pain, but treated in a different way. We have gotten farther and farther from realism.

What has been harmed most is the word. For that reason, I believe it is urgent to return to a theatre of text, to recuperate language in Chile. That's why the classic authors interest me now—Shakespeare, Moliere—to return that power of the word to the actor. Suddenly I have a real obsession for the actor. I have felt the harm done by all the lies, the distorted speeches. The word "democracy," the word "freedom," the word "country," all distorted. Incident, arrested, disappeared. They are words which have begun to lose their meaning for the Chilean. Death is a word which has lost its meaning. Ideas have nowhere to alight, like birds that have nowhere to perch. So the word is urgent. Books are banned, so it is urgent to hear words.

The day after the "No" victory, I couldn't sleep. I had been up till five in the morning. I was hoarse and hung-over, but I woke up very early. It was such a beautiful day. I felt absolutely kitsch with the dawn and all those outdated symbols. And I went out; I went downtown for an interview with a French journalist. There I ran into Tennyson Ferrada, a traditional actor, a good actor from the time of the republic. And he got into my car and told me that Miguel Littin was look-

ing for me to work on a film. I asked him why he was looking for me? And he said because he didn't want to make political films anymore.

So, Miguel Littin doesn't want to make political films. I felt that the era of post-Pinochetism had begun to happen. Post-Pinochetism means that we're going to begin to create democracy here, with freedom here, on the stage now. On stage, in painting, in texts, in culture, we are abandoning the theme of Pinochet.

The "No" campaign was very post-Pinochet, post-modern because it used humor. And humor is laughing at yourself as well as at others. That's what the "Si" campaign never understood. They thought that humor meant laughing at someone else, but humor is laughing a little at yourself. It has an element of self-criticism. Humor, as Freud said, is someone who is going to be hanged on Monday and says, "What a nice way to start the week." It's taking the pain we are living in with humor. It provokes in us a feeling that we have a lot to do. And we have a lot to think about; we have to create a new history, completely; we have to integrate everything we've learned, the bad with the good. We have a lot to do. And if someone comes from the right, the left or the center, I don't much care. Because now we can speak. Fear is no longer a dangerous animal in the shadows. Now we can speak. □

LETTERS

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Correction

Because of a mechanical error, two sentences in Peter Zeisler's editorial "Joining the Debate" (Oct '88) were garbled. The passage should have read: "For reasons not quite understood, the NEA has always been led by bureaucrats. yet in other countries artists are tapped for the post: the French once named renowned author Andre Malraux as their arts minister; actress Melina Mercouri is Greece's current minister of culture; the distinguished writer Jorge Sempurn hold the post in Spain.

"While we must be careful not to become confused as the current administration often has between entertainment personalities and artists, surely we could raise the example of these enlightened countries." □