

S K E N È

Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

3:2 2017

General Editors	Guido Avezzù (Executive Editor), Silvia Bigliuzzi.
Editorial Board	Simona Brunetti, Lisanna Calvi, Nicola Pasqualicchio, Gherardo Ugolini.
Managing Editor	Lisanna Calvi.
Assistant Managing Editor	Francesco Lupi.
Copyeditors	Francesco Dall'Olio, Marco Duranti, Antonietta Provenza.
Layout Editor	Alex Zanutto.
Advisory Board	Anna Maria Belardinelli, Anton Bierl, Enoch Brater, Jean-Christophe Cavallin, Marco De Marinis, Tobias Döring, Pavel Drábek, Paul Edmondson, Keir Douglas Elam, Ewan Fernie, Patrick Finglass, Enrico Giaccherini, Mark Griffith, Stephen Halliwell, Robert Henke, Pierre Judet de la Combe, Eric Nicholson, Guido Paduano, Franco Perrelli, Didier Plassard, Donna Shalev, Susanne Wofford.

Copyright © 2017 SKENÈ
Published in December 2017
All rights reserved.
ISSN 2421-4353

No part of this issue may be reproduced in any form or by any means
without permission from the publisher.

SKENÈ Theatre and Drama Studies
<http://www.skenejournal.it>
info@skenejournal.it

Dir. Resp. (aut. Trib. di Verona): Guido Avezzù
P.O. Box 149 c/o Mail Boxes Etc. (MBE150) – C.so Milano 54/56, 37138 Verona (I)

Contents

RONALD BLANKENBORG – <i>Rhythm for Situational Contexts: The Case of Ancient Greek Epic Performance</i>	5
MARCO DURANTI – <i>Iphigenia Taurica and the Narrative Artificiality of Euripides’ Prologues</i>	33
NIKOS MANOUSAKIS – <i>The Extant Rhesus and Its Two Supplementary Prologues: A Question of Affinity</i>	55
VASILIKI KELLA – <i>Plauti “somnia narratur”: Dreams in Plautus’ Comedy</i>	79
DOMINIQUE GOY-BLANQUET – <i>“Noble in body and judicious in mind like Homer”: Enacting Richard II</i>	99
DAVID SCHALKWYK – <i>Macbeth’s Language</i>	115
MARIN E. LAUFENBERG – <i>Laughing Bodies, Bodies in Pain: How Humour Approaches Torture in Two Works by Eduardo Rovner</i>	129
KATHERINE FORD – <i>Interrogating Cuban Womanhood in Norge Espinosa Mendoza’s La virgencita de bronce</i>	145
 Special Section	
GHERARDO UGOLINI – <i>The Seven at War from Thebes to Aleppo. On Two Performances at the Greek Theatre of Siracusa</i>	163
ERIC NICHOLSON – <i>“La terra in palcoscenico”: Playing the Common Grounds of Aeschylus and Shakespeare</i>	175
RAPHAEL CORMACK – <i>Arab Arts Focus – Edinburgh: Review</i>	187

MARIN E. LAUFENBERG*

Laughing Bodies, Bodies in Pain: How Humour Approaches Torture in Two Works by Eduardo Rovner

Abstract

Torture is a uniquely difficult experience to represent accurately. Nevertheless, we continually struggle to understand, deal with, and preserve the memory of torture. It is paramount to our human societies that the voices of those who were tortured are heard. The transmission of affect in theatre pieces that deal with torture deserves closer attention, in particular in order to understand how dark humour can communicate trauma and torture. Ultimately, laughter and torture are both bound up in the languages of the body and implicate the physical as well as the psychological. As J.M. Bernstein notes, extreme pain and other limit conditions, like laughter, imply our recognition of the instinctual, out of control body. In the theatre, we experience these affective transmissions as a temporary community, which allows for an inquiry into the role of the group, or those who witness torture as an ephemeral community and who also take part in laughter together. Both *Concierto de aniversario [Birthday Concert]* (1983) and *¿Una foto...? [A Photo?]* (1977) by Eduardo Rovner expose and explore this intersection between the laughing body and the tortured body. These works, which deal with both physical torture and psychological manipulation of Argentine citizens during the military dictatorship (1976-83), employ strong applications of the grotesque and absurd which rely on humour. The Argentine tradition of the *grotesco criollo* places enjoyment and displeasure in direct contact, a process which creates emotional knowledge. This article aims at establishing the value of emotional knowledge when recording the event and aftermath of torture.

KEYWORDS: theatre; trauma; torture; affect; Argentina; Eduardo Rovner; *grotesco criollo*

Laughter is an emotional approximation that can be an effective approach in creating an alternate way to understand dark subjects such as torture. That is to say, laughter and resulting humour can aid us in processing the *overwhelmingness* of torture, violence, and pain. In fact, the complexity of both experiences (pleasure and pain) may be better understood by putting them in conversation with one another. One great similarity they share is their

* University of Wisconsin-Madison - melaufenberg@wisc.edu

boundedness in the body. Additionally, laughter and pain might be deemed ‘limit conditions’ or extreme feelings, though on opposite ends of the same spectrum, of feeling and sensation. While the experiences of laughter and pain may seem utterly disconnected, they both come about when humans identify entirely with their bodies. In other words, the tortured victim or the laughing person *becomes* their body instead of maintaining a distance from their physical being through mental contemplation. Both these moments of laughing or feeling pain cause us to lose control, and therefore pertain to the realm of affective experience, or in other words, instinctual, unmediated, unqualified emotional experience.¹ Showing the shared genealogy between pleasure and pain, in his work *Torture and Dignity: An Essay on Moral Injury*, philosopher J.M. Bernstein states that “Extreme pain, like some other limit conditions – most notably, laughing and crying – requires the identification of the person with her out of control, involuntary body” (2016: 92). I contend that, in the two plays I will look at, this bodily identification, accessed through the unlikely pairing of laughter and pain, provides a key entrance into the theatre audience’s understanding of the experience of torture.

In particular, contemporary Argentine theatre, inspired by the autochthonous genre of the *grotesco criollo*, takes these two affective languages (humour and trauma, or pleasure and pain) to their limits, often in order to stimulate audience reflections about human behaviours surrounding torture. Similarly, as Eva Claudia Kaiser Lenoir observes, “Laughter has always been a social strategy . . . it has been used as a way of transcending (even momentarily) and attacking the symbols, central ideas, and images of official culture” (1978: 21),² indicating the power of humour to shock us as we take in the dual existence of horror and absurdity, and then focus our attention in order to evaluate the event and aftermath of torture. Bringing together both the characteristics of the Argentine grotesque and trauma recovery tactics, I will examine the benefits of laughter in the communal atmosphere of the theatre when witnessing scenes of violence and torture, specifically in the historical context of Argentine military dictatorship. I claim that the interaction between enjoyment and displeasure is a process through which emotional knowledge is created. Notably, this interaction between emotional states is achieved when the playwright, Eduardo Rovner, uses techniques that involve the audience physically (by provoking

¹ Raw affect is physiological, though not yet mentally or cognitively evaluated. According to Brian Massumi, as opposed to affect, “emotion is qualified intensity . . . it is intensity owned and recognized” (2000: 277).

² “La risa ha sido desde siempre una forma de estrategia social . . . la ha usado como una forma de trascender (aunque sea momentáneamente) y de atacar los símbolos, las ideas centrales y las imágenes de la cultura oficial”. All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

laughter and involving the audience in the dramatic action at its height) in order to bring attention to the troubling case of Argentine citizenry's denial of its participation in the military dictatorship and also its problematic self-blinding. Society's passive attitude and accomplice role, often referred to as "percepticide" or "self-blinding", is still a much-discussed topic in post-dictatorship Argentina and one that Rovner poignantly addresses in his plays.³ Finally, with this in mind, I propose that emotional knowledge is both valid and a valuable record of torture and its aftermath.

The plays I investigate here are Eduardo Rovner's *¿Una foto...?* (debuted in 1977) and *Concierto de aniversario* (debuted in 1983, but reworked into a longer version presented in 1991 under the title *Cuarteto* which I will also refer to). Together, these pieces provide evidence to support the idea that laughter can be seen as an affective approach towards the topic of torture. *¿Una foto...?* tells the story of a mother and a father who try various tactics to get their baby to smile for the camera, so that they might preserve the appearance of its happiness. Their desperation grows as they try to make the baby smile: first by playing classical music to entertain it, then by shaking toys before its face, next by drawing a smile on the baby's face with lipstick, and finally by determining that a grimace may look like a smile in a picture as they first twist their child's leg and eventually kick over its stroller in order to achieve their goal. The only characters we see on stage are the parents, while the baby stays hidden in the stroller. Humour in this short one-act piece grows in tandem with building ominousness and malignity.

Similarly, in the one-act play *Concierto de aniversario*, eccentric and absurd characters without moral obligations are found alongside pathetic victims, who are hardly seen on stage. Four musicians gather to rehearse for a televised concert to honour Beethoven's fight for liberty, peace, and happiness. As they play, one of the musicians' (Anselmo) wife (Zulema), who is very ill, continually interrupts the rehearsal by asking for assistance in calling the doctor and getting her medicines. They first ignore her, but gradually take more sinister measures: they laugh at her suffering, cut the phone cord so she is unable to call or be called by the doctor, physically remove her from their rehearsal space, torture her into submission, and finally, gravely injure or perhaps even kill her (this is left uncertain in the stage directions) in order to obtain the peace and quiet needed to practice. She may die of shock, pain, or some combination of inattention and torture. The death of Anselmo's and Zulema's son (José María) is also am-

³ "Percepticide" is a term coined by Diana Taylor (1997). She uses it with reference to the self-blinding of a population. As Taylor further explains, "[b]ut seeing, without even admitting that one is seeing, further turns the violence of oneself. Percepticide blinds, maims, kills through the senses" (124).

biguous in *Concierto*: at the end he lies inert on the stage. However, in the play's longer version (*Cuarteto*), José María intervenes and is killed, strangled offstage with the string of a cello. Most of the torture in the two versions of the play occurs off stage, and is merely alluded at in the play text. Therefore, the victims are again left in the periphery. Those who occupy centre stage are the eccentric musician-buffoons, wearing tuxedos, classic white wigs, and a lot of make-up and holding their instruments as if they were ready to give their performance of a lifetime.⁴ Ironically, these imposters never produce pristine, classical music but waste their time arguing, repeatedly failing to get in tune, and playing along to a recording of Beethoven. Once again, the exaggerated absurdity that stems from this motley group amuses and frightens at the same time.

The black humour permeating both works belongs to the genealogy of the local Argentine *grotesco criollo*. This specifically Argentine theatre genre is best characterized by its tragicomic presentation, use of black humour, and warped exaggerations which critically highlight social and political wrongs and failures by showing the disintegration of families and the irremediable suffering of individuals. At a basic level, the humour employed in the *grotesco criollo* is adept at creating sudden alternations between the purely comic and the somber, emphasizing horrific absurdity and thereby demanding that the audience evaluate and take a closer look at what is going on under their eyes. It is clear that in order for this to work, the *grotesco criollo* requires the interaction between the actors and the audience, since the action must be perceived by the spectators as intentionally shocking. According to Dianne Zandstra, "the space for evaluation is presented, when the comic treatment strikes readers or spectators as inappropriate, [and] a comic distance is created that does not permit them a total identification with a character" (2007: 23). This sort of dilemma presents us as an audience with work to do, with something that must be processed.

Another dynamic that has come to define the *grotesco criollo* is the use of masks: both the actions of covering one's face with a mask, and especially the action of removing a mask to reveal the face beneath are relevant in this context.⁵ The mask underscores the lack of correspondence be-

⁴ I am drawing these observations from my own impressions as audience member in 2015 at Buenos Aires' CELCIT theatre (Centro Latinoamericano de Creación e Investigación Teatral).

⁵ Osvaldo Pellettieri (1998) explores this defining characteristic and dynamics of the *grotesco criollo*; in particular, he explores the duality of the mask and the coexistence of the emotional experiences of pain and pleasure. Pellettieri concludes that the juxtaposition and tension produced by this relationship is a key emotional experience of the genre.

tween somebody's social façade and their true face (Kaiser-Lenoir 1977: 35), and can be literal or symbolic. In *Concierto*, the four musicians show this extremely ironic juxtaposition between their own supposedly joyous experience of practicing and reveling in Beethoven's music and an underlying cruelty experienced by the victims and witnessed by the audience. In a recent performance of *Cuarteto*, which took place in 2015 at the CELCIT theatre in Buenos Aires, the actors did not wear proper masks but their faces were powdered, and their costumes (tuxedos, white wigs, and jabots) were typically remindful of classical musicians *à la* Beethoven.⁶ Adding to the ghostly white face powder, the four sported a permanently exaggerated facial expression, which made their faces look even more like masks. Besides, these expressions grew more disturbing or extreme as the violence intensified and reached its climax. While their facial expressions and over-the-top make-up caused laughter, the audience was also aware that this façade operated as a mask. Similarly, in *¿Una foto...?* Rovner plays with the idea of the facial expression as mask. First, the father models various facial expressions as he and his wife look for their child's 'correct expression', the one they would like to preserve in the permanence of a photo. At one point, they even cover the child's face with make-up, using lipstick to draw a smile. We imagine this smile to look somewhat like a clown's: overly exaggerated and disturbing in its being obviously fake, while its fixedness conceals any real expression.

In order to understand Rovner's insistence on the comically ironic two-faced, doubling dynamics provided by the *grotesco criollo* tradition, we must look at the historical context of these pieces. Just like the way in which a mask displays one expression while the human face beneath may be showing another, during the dictatorship, a contradiction often existed between the military regime's discursive practices, on the one hand, and its real actions, on the other. The incongruence between the purported values of the musicians (happiness, freedom, and peace) and their vile actions in *Concierto* are an unmistakable reference to the gross violation of human rights by a regime that outwardly represented itself as civilized and morally upright. The same contradiction between discourse and action is evident in *¿Una foto...?* as the parents literally mask their pained baby's face with a grotesque clown smile for all of posterity to enjoy it in a photograph, while they are actually twisting its leg.

Placed in the context of the Argentine dictatorship, which lasted from 1976 to 1983, both pieces premiered while the oppressive regime was phys-

⁶ For images and other information regarding this performance, see the CELCIT's webpage <https://www.celcit.org.ar/espectaculos/117/cuarteto/> (last access 8 September 2017).

ically torturing citizens as well as making use of coercive and psychologically damaging tactics to crush and overpower the entire country.⁷ Art was censored, certain behaviours, such as gathering in groups in public spaces, were prohibited, and a culture of suspicion among fellow-citizens was encouraged as the military government carried out a witch hunt for so-called ‘subversives’.⁸ In that historical moment, the use of allegorical strategies and the masking of criticism against society and the current politics were unavoidable. As a result, the laughter provoked in the audience in 1977 or 1983 when watching absurd buffoons engaging with pathetic victims, was a laughter which ultimately criticized, ridiculed, resisted, and was subversive to the regime under which Rovner and other artists were forced to work. However, these plays maintain their bite and continue to be staged regularly in present-day Argentina, evolving into modern classics.

In August 2015, I attended the production of *Cuarteto* at the CELCIT – the house was packed and the air was saturated with laughter. Is this laughter today different from that of 1983? I suggest that it is, due to the fact that laughter itself, as a reaction to stage action, has evolved to fit a new context. When imagining the audience’s response and reception when faced with darkly humorous tones in 1983, it is important to recall the context of the *Teatro Abierto* movement by which *Concierto* is framed. Playwright Pompeyo Audivert describes *Teatro Abierto* as a moment of cultural resistance which began during the dictatorship by claiming that “it was a striking force, a rock thrown into the mirror of a sinister reality that the military civic power had established through blood and fire”.⁹ Clearly, the *Teatro Abierto* pieces were meant to address the political environment which, at the time, was a lived reality. Furthermore, in describing the audience reception at the debut of *Concierto* in 1983, Osvaldo Pellettieri adds that the humour was, “a

⁷ For further reading on the specifics of the atrocities committed during the Military Dictatorship and the violations of human rights, the role of the military in kidnapping and holding citizens in clandestine detention centres, as well as the process of national recovery after this period, see, for example, Feitlowitz (2011), Méndez (1987), Andermann (2011; 2015) Avelar (1999), and Calvert and Calvert (1989). For a more specific study on how the theatre that has dealt with these issues, see Taylor (1997) and Graham-Jones (2000).

⁸ As Feitlowitz explains in *A Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and the Legacies of Torture*, according to the regime, a subversive was “a terrorist . . . a person whose ideas are contrary to our Western, Christian civilization” and “[n]ot only was the ‘subversive’ not Argentine, [he] should not even be considered our brother’ . . .” (2011: 27).

⁹ “fue una fuerza de choque, un piedrazo en el espejo de una realidad siniestra que el poder cívico militar había establecido a sangre y fuego” (qtd in “Se cumplen 35 años...” 2016). The article “Se cumplen 35 años de la histórica experiencia de Teatro Abierto”, which appeared in *Télam* on July 28, 2016, looks back upon the years of *Teatro Abierto* from our present-day perspective.

true transgression to conventional morality, which is perceived with disquiet by the spectator”.¹⁰ In contrast, I noticed how today’s audience responded to *Concierto* by laughing loudly and unrestrainedly, thanks to the safe distance which comes from the fact that many years have passed since the end of dictatorship in 1983. Today, an element of playful *farce* is highlighted by the director’s choices, and carried out by actors on stage, while the original production was characterized by a shadier atmosphere and black humour. This difference in the audience’s response could be attributed to the fact that present-day laughter is one that does not convey rebellion and resistance, but rather strives to remember. Nevertheless, today’s audiences are still highly aware of the significance of the allegories of out-of-control power systems and the very absurdity of those systems. The fact that the audience effortlessly recognizes the dictatorship as these play’s background is enough to understand that the trauma of that dark period has not been overcome yet. Artistic productions such as these keep passing on affective legacies, reminding younger generations of those years and I believe that in both periods, now and then, the appeal to laughter through humour is paramount not only to inspire complex reflections and establish emotional knowledge, but also to ease communal healing after trauma.

Humour in these plays was first devised by Rovner in his scripts in order to be later activated by performers on stage. Pellettieri believes that humour is part of Rovner’s mode of looking at the world, adding that it frequently illuminates contradictions between hidden truths and outward appearance, classifying both *Concierto de aniversario* and *¿Una foto...?* as “satirical absurdist”.¹¹ They share much in their progression, tone, and underlying messages. In both, humour grows as horror grows. At the onset of each drama, our laughter is light and more infrequent, as we observe the petty bickering between husband and wife, or as the musicians dispute what to wear for their televised concert. By the end of both pieces, the audience frequently explodes with laughter as a reaction to either shock or disbelief; indeed, the most humorous moments often coincide with torture, horror, or come in close succession. As *¿Una foto...?* draws to its conclusion, the baby’s stroller is kicked (in some productions, the stroller ends up flying off stage, and the stroller enters the audience’s space), and subsequently, the parents embrace and smile ridiculously, looking down towards where we suppose the baby to lie:

(Luis va hacia el cochecito y le pega una patada, volcándolo. Apagón e inmediatamente un foco ilumina las caras de Luis y Alicia juntas, mirando al piso.)

ALICIA ¡Qué sonrisa hermosa!

¹⁰ “una verdadera transgresión a la moral convencional, que es percibida con inquietud por el espectador” (1994: 133).

¹¹ “absurdo satírico” (1994: 129).

LUIS Como queríamos los dos...
(Rovner 1977: 103)

[Luis goes towards the stroller and kicks it, causing it to flip over. Lights out and immediately a spotlight illuminates the faces of Luis and Alicia together, looking at the floor. // ALICIA What a beautiful smile! // LUIS Just like we both wanted...]

Likewise, in *Concierto*, the four musicians surround the son of the ailing woman, resembling a group of predators closing in on their prey as one of them raises and supposedly stabs the son fatally with a violin bow. This incredibly physical scene, in which human beings act with animalesque brutality, is entirely contained within a long segment of stage directions:

(Ignacio, Pedro, y Esteban se levantan y lo van rodeando lentamente mientras José María sigue rompiendo partituras y gritando. Zulema va lentamente hacia el lugar donde cayó, mientras Anselmo se acerca y le da el arco afilado a Pedro. Pedro lo toma lentamente, mira a José María y se lo clava en el estómago. Zulema acusa la estocada a su hijo, pega un grito y cae a su lado. Los cuatro miran y después de un momento, lentamente van hacia sus lugares y toman los instrumentos sin sentarse.)
(Rovner 1983: 370-1)

[Ignacio, Pedro and Esteban get up and slowly start surrounding him while José María continues ripping up sheet music and yelling. Zulema goes slowly towards the place where he fell, while Anselmo gets closer and gives the pointed violin bow to Pedro. Pedro takes it slowly, looks at José María and stabs him in the stomach. Zulema realizes her son has been stabbed, lets out a yell and falls down at his side. The four watch them and after a moment, slowly go towards their places and take up their instruments without sitting down.]

Seconds later, the televised concert begins, and the play ends.

In both pieces, the humour is very physical and is centered in and on the body, rather than coming solely by way of language. Also, humour may arise when there is extreme discord between words uttered and physical actions or gestures; this can be best experienced in a live performance, arguably the only way in which affective communication may occur. Humour is the result of alternations between the horrible or immoral and the absurd or incongruent, as the bodies of the performers bring to life unexpect-

ed expressions, gestures, motions, and actions.¹² Anselmo's crippled body is wheeled around in merry circles by his fellow musician in a jubilant scene, as he grabs the urn containing his father's ashes and begins to toss them about, gleefully but heinously showering his friends with them.¹³ Another musician, Pedro, leaves the stage in order to stop the interruptions that come from the ailing woman who keeps summoning them offstage by ringing a bell; he soon comes back, smiling and carrying a bloodied bell, and exclaims: "She wouldn't give it to me... What greasy hair she has!" ("No quería dármela... ¡Qué grasoso tiene el pelo!", Rovner 1983: 367).

Likewise, in the final torturous scene of *¿Una foto...?*, Alicia cannot manage to twist her own arm far enough to make the baby grimace, which could be regarded as a smile in the picture they are desperately trying to take. Having failed to make the child to cry, she gives up, disappointed, pouting, and rubbing her sore arm. Once again, the body becomes the epicentre from which grotesque absurdity radiates and affects the audience's own bodies.

By means of this kind of humour, one that brings the question of morality into focus, both *Concierto de aniversario* and *¿Una foto...?* make the audience muse on the fact that tortured bodies may be ignored or torture may be allowed to happen by passively accepting it. Ironically, as the audience is asked to look at the warped morality on stage, they partake in the very same behaviour that is called into question by passively observing and silently allowing for torture to be carried out. As the musicians either watch or partake in the torturing of the son and his mother in *Concierto*, we – as audience – also indirectly allow for it to take place before our eyes. Worse yet, the audience's laughter actively acknowledges that what we are seeing is actually taking place; we are nearly approving of it, as we encourage the continuance of the drama. In both plays, laughter sets off our engagement with the work; however, it also highlights our collective role as onlookers and urges our judgment on what is going on in front of us.

Why would an Argentine playwright choose to depict such a deep and painful trauma through a seemingly irreverent and certainly non-realistic lens? The emotional experience of trauma needs a space to be dealt with, understood, and passed on to fellow citizens or future generations. After the atrocities of the dictatorship, the Argentine community required sever-

¹² This references the classical humour theory of incongruence, championed by several scholars from Aristotle and Immanuel Kant, to Arthur Schopenhauer, and most recently, Peter McGraw, who has coined the term "Benign Violation" (2014: 9) which is inspired by the same idea of incongruity. See also Critchley for a concise description of this sort of humour.

¹³ I am still commenting on the 2015 performance I attended at the CELCIT theatre in Buenos Aires.

al kinds of approximation to understanding, remembering, and healing to deal with their past; no single interpretation would suffice. While individual human bodies are directly, physically affected by torture, the community as a whole suffers psychological strain. A community that allowed the torture to happen and which supported the tortured individuals as they were reinserted into the community itself suffers and deals with suffering as a community, that is, differently from how individuals would handle and react to the same issues. In Argentina, a truth commission was established in order to gather information, evidence, and testimonies about the disappearance and torture of its citizens. After the commission's work had been done, an official trial brought its findings to the public, assessed responsibilities, recommended punishment for the victimizers, and finally sentenced some of the highest ranking Generals, though others were acquitted.¹⁴ To be sure, a legal, judicial procedure directly addresses and verifies the atrocities that have gone by and holds a certain kind of official validity, but Rovner's work and that of other Argentine artists may speak to different sensibilities and deal with more emotional common wounds.

An equally important facet in the post-trauma healing process is the need to respond to the validity of a community's emotive experience. In this light, Argentine theatre scholar Brenda Werth notices that in the Trial of the Juntas – the members of the military government that ruled Argentina from 1977 to 1983 – “the nonverbal expression of emotion was considered a threat to the integrity of the proceedings and was abruptly cut off” (2010: 40) and in fact the display of emotions was expressly prohibited by the court during the trial and whoever wished to attend it had to agree to this rule and refrain from openly showing any feelings. In this regard, Werth adds that “The limitations placed on nonverbal language in the trial reveal an uneasiness with the body, which finds expression in the heightened tension between bodies and narration in theatre during the post-dictatorship period” (40-1). Although she is referring to a different play, we can agree on the emotional benefit facilitated by the theatre being a wide-reaching phenomenon in Argentina. The theatre and the arts in general provided a space for a different kind of healing than the one offered by the official trials and investigations. In both plays presented here, this comes about by encouraging emotional exchanges between the audience and stage, affectively approaching the topics of torture and trauma, and do-

¹⁴ A report of the findings of this commission was published under the title *Nunca Más* in 1984 in Argentina and has been available in print ever since. The commission was established in December of 1983 and collected testimonies through September of 1984. The Trial of the Juntas occurred from April to September of 1985 and sentencing took place in December of the same year.

ing so as a collective.

The experience of feeling together, which partially includes laughing together, plays, I contend, a major role in the creation of a community experience in the theatre. This affectively unified audiences in temporary communities that mirrored society as a whole, showing possible ways of acting and interacting. In the introduction to *Imagining Human Rights in Twenty-First Century Theater*, Becker, Hernández, and Werth remind us that a stage representation, “is part of an essentially cooperative activity that takes place in a shared place and time” (2012: 3), therefore, these space and time naturally create a togetherness or a temporary community. We may think of this community experience as what Argentine theatre researcher Jorge Dubatti terms the “convivio” (2007: 84) or convivial experience.¹⁵ The “convivio” makes the experience of the theatre-goer unique; it is unavoidable to affect and be affected by our fellow audience members in addition to the physicality of stage action. When we laugh inside the playhouse, those sounds are emitted individually, but we cannot help but hear others laughing around us. Hearing the others’ laughter makes our own grow and, in turn, diminish and this sharing enhances our engagement in the theatrical experience. An invisible affective web unites us in the theatre space and time. In his theory of the “vibratorium”, theatre scholar Nicholas Ridout (2008: 221) posits that affective communication occurs in the theatre between the bodies of the people via physical, though invisible, waves which are produced by the sound; thus he imagines the intangible and the corporeal, affective and bodily reactions to be connected to each other. A “vibratorium” is created as we emit and hear sounds, in this case, laughing and responding to laughter.

Heightening a sense of collectivity, both plays actively involve the audience, creating a closeness or intimacy. Rovner breaks the fourth wall in subtle but very specific ways at the conclusion of both pieces. In *¿Una foto...?* Luis eventually raises the camera to capture the ideal shot of the baby who is now lying on the ground (and we suppose crying or frowning). The camera, however, is not directed at the baby, but rather points squarely at the audience as “*A flash blinds the audience. Curtain*” (“*Un flash encandila al público. Apagón*”, 1977: 103). As he takes his final shot, a flash of light simultaneously blinds us and implicates us. This photograph evinces our role as passive witnesses of torture and we all become guilty of “percepticide” (Taylor 1997: 124). What happens is that we have taken the place of the tortured child, and are now the focus of Luis’ and Alicia’s attention. The two parents are left smiling and happily embrace as they look at us lovingly, but

¹⁵ Jill Dolan (2005) is another contemporary critic who has explored the audience experience of togetherness, conceptualizing this affective interbody communication.

disturbingly, commenting upon the beauty of the baby's smile. Immediately after the flash, the stage and auditorium go black, and the piece ends in one shocking final gesture. Rovner unites us all here, and as a collectivity we become the body of the injured child. Involving us in such a way makes the humour we experience rather troubling; it calls us to action rather than passivity, which requires us to follow through with some deeds when faced with such disquieting juxtaposition of humour and violence.

In a similarly engaging and entangling move, in the very last scene of *Concierto*, as the musicians have just 'taken care of' the nuisance of the ailing wife and her nagging son, they draw close to the proscenium, facing the audience and speaking directly to us. They inform us that this evening we will be treated to a program of Beethoven's music, titled "Beethoven, his Fight for Liberty, Peace, and Happiness".¹⁶ They then raise their instruments as if to start playing as the stage goes dark. In this swift final scene, the audience members have been transformed into TV viewers. Again, extreme violence is juxtaposed with a pretense of happiness (the happy parents, or Beethoven's passionate music that exemplifies the search for happiness). The result is that these final combinations of pleasure and pain awake us from any passivity or submissiveness we may have been immersed in. By implicating our bodies through these sensory shocks, Rovner makes us come together in our new-found role of engaged and affected subjects. In both plays we can see that while affect unites us as a group, and laughter troubles the performance, it is precisely this unavoidable participation in what is going on in front of our eyes that heightens our sense of morality as a community, or nation.

Watching psychological and physical torture occur onstage, the audience's bodies are not allowed to remain distant, as Rovner activates sound and music to engage with our auditory senses beyond the mere use of dialogue on stage. Through laughter, cries, screams, and the incorporation of music, the sonorous atmosphere is vibrant in both works. Sounds are pervasive and difficult to ignore or shut out. We react instinctually to them as well, so that they form yet another part of the affective communication between stage and audience. Of particular importance in both works is the use of sounds which emit from points that we cannot directly see, or off-stage, diegetic sounds. For example, in *Concierto*, frequently "a little bell" ("una campanita", 1983: 362) is heard ringing off stage, indicating that somebody, a body, which is unseen but part of the fictitious world (in this case it is Zulema's, Anselmo's sick wife), requires assistance or is suffering. The musicians mostly ignore it, but at times they are bothered by

¹⁶ "Este programa lleva por título: "Beethoven, su lucha por la Libertad, la Paz, y la Alegría" (1983: 371).

it enough to exit the stage and address that noise, oftentimes in a violent manner. Later on, in a culminating moment of physical off-stage violence – that is, which is implied but which occurs off-stage and is perceived by the audience aurally only, stage directions read: “(A cry is heard from Zulema. Everyone looks towards the door until Pedro enters with his hand bloodied).”¹⁷ Through sound, the audience is made aware of the existence, if invisible, of a suffering body. Torture is partially revealed and yet it remains veiled and this uncertainty has the audience respond in terms of (physical) tension. This technique both creates suspense and adds intrigue as it piques our curiosity, perhaps making us crane our necks, trying to get a glimpse of what is happening. By not being forced to *see* the violence directly, such distancing techniques provide a certain lightness and pleasantness to the audience who witness the ridiculous reactions of the absurd musicians on stage. Nevertheless, we may presume that the spectators are eager to see those implied off-stage interactions, which calls into cause a problematic issue, that is, the voyeurism of trauma. Rovner highlights here the dichotomy between the seen and the unseen, or between the appearance and the reality which lies buried underneath it. Once again, this alludes to the ‘dirty’ aspects of the dictatorship era such as torture and kidnappings which, back in those days, citizens either chose not to see or were prevented from seeing, as the dictatorship was careful in covering up and hiding its atrocities from the public eye.

In both plays analysed here, on-stage diegetic sounds or those coming from visible sources – I am thinking of the music coming from record players which are used as props in *Concierto* – are also problematic. The stereo (in a contemporary production of *¿Una foto...?*) or the record player (in the original production of *Concierto*) may be emitting pleasurable classical tunes by Beethoven, Vivaldi, or Tchaikovsky, but this aural delight is actually screening something ominous which lies hidden to our senses – the torturers, absolutely oblivious to real-world moral codes.¹⁸ The clash of pleasure and pain that we experience in the two dramas carries into the realm of the musical choices (classical European music) too. Rovner illustrates again that appearance and reality are two very separate things which may often mingle and mislead the human mind through chaotic times, such as those characterized by dictatorship.

These various forms of audience implication demand that we inherit a responsibility as witnesses of the torture as we view it onstage or perceive

¹⁷ “(Se oye un grito de Zulema. Todos miran hacia la puerta hasta que entra Pedro con la mano ensangrentada)” (1983: 367).

¹⁸ I am referring to a March 2015 production of *¿Una foto...?* put on by the group Décimo Piso at the University of Wisconsin-Madison which used a stereo to emit the music.

it to be happening offstage. Watching and taking part in the pain of others raise some thorny ethical questions since, as an audience, we become willing watchers or voyeurs of the performance, and thereby of the violence it represents. Yet, we allow it to go on, even actively approving of it with our laughter. Is it possible to forget about what we have seen when we leave the theatre? The guilt that may arise from our passiveness is in itself a critique of those Argentine citizens that saw or understood what was going on, but did not act or speak out against the psychological and physical torture carried out by the military during the dictatorship. According to psychiatrist and Holocaust scholar Dori Laub, taking on a responsibility of witness is fundamental to overcoming guilt (1992: 57-8). Witnesses choose to carry with them the atrocities they have seen, speaking about them, understanding, sharing, and dealing with the violence they have beheld.

Choosing to continually question, be bothered by, and contemplate this kind of violence, perpetrated against unseen or unresisting bodies on stage (the sick wife, the baby), carries the implication of the spectator/witness beyond the stage. Sparked by the questionable mixture of pleasure and pain (that is, dark laughter), the issues we face force us to carry the experience with us, outside the here and now of the performance. Rovner has devised a way to unsettle our certainties and make us uncomfortable by transforming us from spectators into witnesses. Pain and pleasure end up by being troublingly wrapped up in one another and although this is a difficult process to decipher, we can certainly feel it through our senses. By appealing to dark laughter, Rovner makes a case for the place of emotional knowledge in assessing and remembering the trauma caused by torture. Torture cannot be entirely encompassed by statistics and objective reporting, nor entirely remedied by court trials and official procedures. The emotional knowledge and memory of violence potentially become necessary for the communities which have been affected by it, and can be accessed in a place of togetherness, such as the theatre, where our affects mingle and communicate with each other.

Works Cited

- Andermann, Jens (2011), "Returning to the Site of Horror: on the Reclaiming of Clandestine Concentration Camps in Argentina", *Theory, Culture & Society*, 29 (1): 76-98.
- (2015), "Pacing Latin American memory: Sites and the politics of mourning", *Memory Studies*, 8 (1): 3-8.
- Avelar, Idelber (1999), *The Untimely Present: Postdictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Becker, Florian, Paola Hernández, and Brenda Werth (eds) (2012), *Imagining Human Rights in Twenty-First Century Theater*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Bernstein, Jay M. (2016), *Torture and Dignity: An Essay on Moral Injury*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Calvert, Peter A.R. and Susan Calvert (1989), *Argentina: Political Culture and Instability*, London: Macmillan.
- Dolan, Jill (2005), *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Dubatti, Jorge (2007), *Filosofía del teatro I: convivio, experiencia, subjetividad*, Buenos Aires: Atuel.
- Feitlowitz, Marguerite (2011), *A Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and the Legacies of Torture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Graham-Jones, Jean (2000), *Exorcising History: Argentine Theater Under Dictatorship*, Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press / London: Associated University Presses.
- Kaiser-Lenoir, Claudia (1977), *El grotesco criollo: estilo teatral de una época*, La Habana: Casa de las Américas.
- (1978), “La particularidad de lo cómico en el Grotesco Criollo”, *Latin American Theatre Review*, 12 (1): 21-32.
- Laub, Dori (1992), “Bearing witness or the vicissitudes of listening”, in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (eds), *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, New York: Routledge: 57-74.
- Massumi, Brian (2000), “The Autonomy of Affect”, in William Rasch and Cary Wolfe (eds), *Observing Complexity: Systems Theory and Postmodernity*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 273-97.
- McGraw, Peter (2014), *The Humor Code: A Global Search for What Makes Things Funny*, New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Méndez, Juan E. (1987), *Truth and Partial Justice in Argentina: An Update*, New York: Human Rights Watch.
- Nunca Más* (1984), Buenos Aires: Editorial Martes.
- Pellettieri, Osvaldo (1994), *Teatro Argentino Contemporáneo, 1980-1990: Crisis, Transición y Cambio*, Buenos Aires: Editorial Galerna.
- (1998), “Armando Discépolo: Entre el grotesco italiano y el grotesco criollo”, *Latin American Theatre Review*, 22 (1): 55-71.
- Ridout, Nicolas (2008), “Welcome to the Vibratorium”, *Senses & Society*, 3: 221-31.
- Rovner, Eduardo (2003) [1983], *Concierto de aniversario*, in Osvaldo Pellettieri (ed.), *Teatro breve argentino (1962-1983)*, Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva: 359-371.
- (2012) [1977]. *¿Una foto...?*, in Irene Pérez (ed.), *Teatro breve contemporáneo argentino III antología*, Buenos Aires: Colihue: 87-103.
- “Se cumplen 35 años de la histórica experiencia de Teatro Abierto” (2016), *Télam*, July 28, <http://www.telam.com.ar/notas/201607/156747-teatro-abierto-aniversario.html> (last access 8 September 2017).
- Taylor, Diana (1997), *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's "Dirty War"*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Werth, Brenda (2010), *Theatre, Performance, and Memory Politics*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Zandstra, Dianne (2007), *Embodying Resistance: Griselda Gambaro and the Grotesque*, Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press.

