

## **Accusing and Engaging the Audience through Theatreform: Griselda Gambaro's *Information for Foreigners***

Selena Burns (New York University)

*Information for Foreigners*, written by Argentine playwright Griselda Gambaro in 1971 and 1972, reads more like a tour through a haunted house than a stage play. In the preliminary stage directions, it is suggested that the play should take place “in a two story residential house with empty rooms, some of which interconnect, and passageways, some dark and some crudely lit” (Gambaro 69). The audience is to be divided into groups who are led through the house (and thus through each of the twenty scenes scripted by Gambaro) by guides. “I ask that you stay together and remain silent. Careful on the stairs,” says each guide before breaking off with his or her group to witness the scenes in a different order, until the final scene where all the groups gather together (Gambaro 70-71). However, rather than being led into rooms with ghosts and ghouls and peeled-grape eyeballs, Gambaro’s unsuspecting theatre audience is lead through a horror house of torture. They are taken past prisoners who are kept locked in vertical wooden boxes and into rooms where they view sometimes highly realistic and sometimes highly theatrical scenes of torture, abduction, punishment, and deference to authority. Some of the scenes they witness are recreations of incidents being reported in Argentinean newspapers of the time.

In 1971 and 1972, incidents of disappearances and torture of civilians labelled as dissident were indeed being reported in the media, but at that time, play translator Marguerite Feitlowitz suggests, there were both Argentinians and non-Argentinians who were either actively ignoring such reports or accepting the half-truth explanations for it– thus prompting the

ironic title of the play (Feitlowitz 6). According to Antonius Robben in his anthropological study of political violence in Argentina, torture and “disappearances” of criminal suspects, both common and political, had occurred in the country throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century irregardless of the particular government in power, with torture turning into a “routine practice” in 1970, as guerrilla organizations rose in number (Robben 215). In 1976 under the Videla military junta, a reign of terror lasting through the early 1980s that came to be known as Argentina’s “Dirty War” would begin, during which time as many as 30,000 citizens labelled as left-wing subversives by the government were arrested, tortured, and often murdered or “disappeared” (Taylor, “Theatre and Terrorism” 207). Gambaro, who had thematically addressed political disappearances in previous works, including in her more traditionally staged play *The Walls*, written in 1963 and performed in Buenos Aires in 1966 (Gambaro 14), is seen as somewhat prophetic as an author, though she explains this as stemming from her being tuned into the data “floating around” in her role as artist (Betsko 188).

Why in 1971 did Gambaro move to an experimental interactive play structure to explore the escalating situation of human rights violations in Argentina? Robben notes that in 1971, there was a marked increase in the number of disappearances, and that the system of abduction, torture and disappearance that the Videla junta would later systematize and expand was already in place by 1973 (263-264). Marguerite Feitlowitz argues that Gambaro’s work “.....is a combative theatre, and grows out of the belief that the human condition can change” (3). If this is so, then it is possible that in *Information for Foreigners* Gambaro is responding to the escalating political and artistic repression by escalating the intensity of her communication with her audience. *Information for Foreigners* stands apart from Gambaro’s earlier works on the topic of political violence in that, in combining an experimental promenade play structure with unusual

presentational modes, it attempts to harness the inherent interactive possibilities of the theatrical medium in order to not just present information and ideas, but to actively critique the audience, and to create opportunity for reflection and motivation for action. One of the concepts Gambaro presents through these means and asks theatregoers to engage with is the idea that state sponsored torture is a performance for which the Argentine citizens are the complicit audience.

In keeping with the ideas of dramatic theorist Richard Schechner, who describes performance as a continuum that ranges from the traditional staged theatre performance to “life” performances such as public events and demonstrations (Schechner 41), Diana Taylor, in her afterword to Marguerite Feitlowitz’s translation of three of Gambaro’s plays (*The Walls, Information for Foreigners* and her 1986 play *Antigona Furiosa*) argues that spectacle of arrest and torture in Argentina is a real life performance, intended to demonstrate the authority of the military and police to the public. She notes that Gambaro deliberately mirrors this performance of torture in her plays of the 1960s and 1970s in order to “expose the theatricality of Argentinean political violence” (Taylor, “Violent Displays” 161). In *Information for Foreigners*, this is explored not through narrative storytelling, but through the staging of a variety of scenes representing experiments, children’s games, abductions and torture, that are seemingly unconnected to one another, except that they expose the theatrical nature of those techniques used by those in power to control, persuade and silence. Furthermore, in this play Gambaro uses interactive techniques in order to comment on the ethics of being a silent observer to these theatrics. In one scene for example (scene four in publication, but the order the audience might see it in varies), Gambaro does this by recreating the infamous Stanley Milgram psychology experiment conducted at Yale University in 1961-1962.

*Accusing and Engaging the Audience through Theatreform*

Stanley Milgram, in an attempt to discover why there was so little resistance to authority and so much complicity in Nazi Germany, designed an experiment intended to test obedience to authority. He attempted to see how far subjects would go when instructed by a scientist in a technician's coat to "teach" another supposed subject by zapping them with increasing volts of electricity every time they missed an answer on a word association game. In Milgram's original experiment, the "student" subject was an actor and the electrical volts were not actually delivered, but the student would scream in pain, sometimes driving the "teacher" subject to tears as he or she continued to deliver shocks of increasing value in deference to the instructions of the scientist (Milgram 13-26). Sociologist Erving Goffman, whose ideas provided a foundation for the theories of Schechner, pointed out that performances take place in everyday life that indicate rank or power. Furniture and décor might serve as "scenery" and "setting" presented to make an impression while clothing might serve as a "costume" that indicates the hierarchical "role" one will play in interaction with others (Goffman 22-24). Accordingly, in Gambaro's reproduction of the Milgram experiment in a room in her house of horrors, she places emphasis in her stage notes on the laboratory accoutrements and the lab coat, or the "setting" and "costume" of authority in the experiment, thus highlighting the legitimization of inflicted pain through costumes and institutional settings of authority (Gambaro 74-75).

Further, Gambaro plays with some of the word associations used in the learning game in order to connect the scene to current events in Argentina. "Nation-Germany" and "torture-dissuasion" are initially given as word pairs by the scientist. At one point the "student" subject, who has been screaming in pain as he is "electrocuted" in response to wrong answers, is asked to recall which word was originally paired with Nation, and given the multiple choice options "prison, bars, Germany, torture". He ends up screaming "Argentina" as the answer rather than

Germany. At the end of the scene, the scientist relates to the audience that 85% of subjects in Germany and 66% in the U.S. went up to the maximum voltage of 450 volts in Milgram's original experiments. Further, he informs the audience that many of Milgram's subjects, when debriefed after the experiment, claimed lack of responsibility for their actions due to the fact they were only following the rules. The guide quickly ushers the theatregoers out with chiding words to the scientist: "Don't wear out the audience, these experiments took place in Germany and the U.S. Here among ourselves it would be unthinkable, absurd," (Gambaro 84). In recreating Milgram's experiment and explicitly suggesting parallels to Argentina, Gambaro enacts a commentary on torture as a performance, enhanced by costumes and settings of authority. At the same time, by having her actors break the fourth wall and acknowledge the role of the audience as spectator, Gambaro implies an uncomfortable connection between her theatre audience and the public who turns a blind eye to what is happening in Argentina –suggesting that citizens who accept the arrest and torture of political dissidents out of respect for rules and authority are complicit in their torture or death.

Torture as performance and audience complicity are also explored in scenes more directly and explicitly tied to the particularities of the situation in Argentina. In another scene in the play (scene 3), a clearly terrified woman sits in a chair while a man establishes his control over her with language and gestures of intimidation. Everything he says to her is a performance, but one designed for her to see through. His words taken on their own seem benign and possibly even kind: At one point he says to her "What a mess- they fill the tub but don't put any of the towels. Was it [the water] warm (Gambaro 72)?" What is evident from the subtext of the scene, however, is that the bath is clearly for holding the girl's head down under dirty water, a torture method that was used on the "disappeared" political prisoners in Argentina (Robben 217).

*Accusing and Engaging the Audience through Theatreform*

Further, seemingly innocent comments to the girl by the man such as “Don’t you have a boyfriend,” become suggestive of implied threat of rape through his physical caresses, alluding to women political prisoners being frequent rape victims of their guards (Robben 227). Both the man and the girl reference the presence of the audience in this scene, with the man pointing to the spectators and offering the false comfort as he loads his gun “Nothing will happen to you. There are lots of people. They’re watching us” (Gambaro 73). Later, when the man tells the girl to go to the bathroom her response is a humiliated reference to her exposure to an audience: “They’re watching me (Gambaro 73).” Gambaro in this scene uses the breaking down of barriers between the audience and the actors to comment on the ethics of being an audience to the theatrics of torture, as the theatregoers become complicit in the girl’s humiliation in their role as silent, passive observers. The author takes advantage of the interpersonal nature of the theatrical medium in order to move the relationship between the torturers, the tortured and the Argentine public into the same shared physical space. In doing so, Gambaro confronts the theatre audience with the active role the inactive public plays in the face of human rights abuses.

As her use of audience-actor interaction indicates, is not just through the content of the scenes that Gambaro presents in the various rooms of the house but through the “guided tour” format of the play that the playwright makes her commentary on citizen inactivity in the face of government sponsored torture. Gambaro manages to allow theatregoers to be engaged in typical and expected modes of audience behaviour (her stage notes specifically indicate that they should never be forced to participate) while simultaneously taking advantage of the power of the shared actor-audience space to implicate the audience in the action of the play. One can guess that the cognitive dissonance between the physical proximity to suffering and the adherence to regulated modes of audience behaviour (an audience member on a guided tour typically does not interfere

in the presentation) has the potential to inspire a sort of witness guilt in audience members. The interactive elements of the play related to its “tourist and tour guide” format seem designed to foster and enhance such guilt. For example, at the end of scene seven, the theatregoers are offered wine and refreshments (all included in the price of the ticket) by an usherette just after they have witnessed another scene between the girl prisoner and the guard, in which she has clearly recently been tortured and begs “I’m thirsty” while raising her hands to the audience (Gambaro 90).

One might assume that this creation of witness guilt in the audience is in line with Aristotelian notions of creating pity and fear in the spectator, or even an Artaudian eruption and reformation, yet the goal of Gambaro does not seem to be purging these emotions or providing a type of therapy, but rather politically harnessing them. Gambaro says of Argentine theatre: “Our theatre is [...] connected with a social element and our plays deal directly with a political and social content. We also believe that society is modifiable, changeable” (Betsko 195). She adds in response to the relationship between the audience and her plays “I believe that all theatre means to produce not shock but a response in the spectator. It could be an emotional response or a rational, sensible response” (Betsko 196). In keeping with this aim, Gambaro also, at several points, seems to use what might be described as Brechtian distancing techniques in order to prompt the audience not just to feel, but also to think. Brecht suggests techniques such as unrealistic and exaggerated costumes and gestures in order to “alienate” the spectators from the action on stage in order to allow them to think critically about what they are seeing (Brecht 136-47). In her recreations of disappearances reported in Argentine newspapers, Gambaro frequently uses stage directions and modes of presentation where she calls for exaggerated acting. For example, the stage directions for scene 9 read:

*Accusing and Engaging the Audience through Theatreform*

The room is lit with a rosy light. Four chairs. There is a group comprising a man, a woman, and two other adults, disguised as children, a girl and a boy. Their makeup is exaggerated and their clothes are cheap, vulgar. The MOTHER is sewing, the FATHER is seated a little apart and the CHILDREN are playing at throwing a hoop.

On the far side of the room are the CHIEF and two POLICEMEN. They sit very erect with their arms crossed over their chests. The characters act very broadly, a little like marionettes. The tone is grossly exaggerated. (Gambaro 92)

This is a scene of an arrest, but it is presented with over the top falseness, including gestures that are described as being like those from a heroine in a silent movie. Other highly stylized scenes that seem intended to remind the audience that they are observing performance include an abduction scene staged as a musical comedy (scene 14) and a scene in which an actress who has supposedly just been killed is told in the stage directions to make it obvious she is “only acting” and still alive (scene 13).

In addition to potentially providing the audience members with moments of emotional distance where they can think and reflect rather than be caught up in feeling, the very artificiality of the abduction recreation scenes seems to comment on the trustworthiness (or rather untrustworthiness) of the official story being told in those papers and recounted by the guides. Rosalea Postma points out in her 1980 article, “Space and Spectator in the Theatre of Griselda Gambaro,” that in *Information for Foreigners*, the guides are frequently telling the audience deliberate lies. Postma notes that from the first moment of the play the audience must see the guides as untrustworthy, when they claim they won’t let anyone in who is younger than 18, older than 36 or younger than 35 (but let in everyone who pays) and claim there will be no foul language in the play (while proceeding to use a great deal themselves) (Postma 39). Because the audience is put in a position of being dependant on the guides and deferent to their authority, the play itself then reflects the wider political situation of those reading news vetted by the



Argentine government. The artificiality of certain dramatized scenes juxtaposed with the “explanation for foreigners” extracted from real newspapers and police blotters and delivered by these untrustworthy guides certainly seems a pointed commentary on the untrustworthiness of Argentinean authorities. Further, it calls attention to the lies the audience members (be they in Argentina or abroad) must tell themselves in order to acquiesce to being guided by untrustworthy authorities.

On the other hand, in spite of these unrealistic elements, which it would seem to cause distancing and space for analysis and reflection, the particular environmental theatre context in which Gambaro places the audience may indeed provoke an emotional response rather than a critical one even to such exaggeratedly presentational scenes. After all, “distanced” performance is juxtaposed with excerpts the guide reads from true stories taken from Argentinean newspapers. This juxtaposition highlights the fact that the scenes being presented, in spite of all the costumes and fake acting being used to represent them, are taken from events that are real. Thus, the aim is perhaps not necessarily, or at least not only, Brechtian “alienation” or distancing as much as, once again, an attempt to provide an interactive commentary on the reaction of a passive audience to the political spectacle of arrest and torture. What does it mean after all if you are able to distance yourself from this performance of abduction, murder or torture which is based on events that are actually occurring in your own country merely because of the stylized means through which the information is delivered to you? What does it mean if you are able to distance yourself from the reports of the disappearances you read in the news? Is there a difference? Gambaro’s play begs the question of whether or not the public has a reciprocal obligation to the news and to the arts –that of not being uncritical, silent and passive consumers.

*Accusing and Engaging the Audience through Theatreform*

In *Information for Foreigners*, Gambaro exposes what was happening to Argentine artists and journalists in 1971 in a scene recreating the recent arrest of troupe of actors, whom she shows performing *Othello* at the time of their arrest. She also presents the arresting officers as themselves speaking lines from *Othello*, again exposing the performative nature of the act of arrest and perhaps (through her choice of *Othello* in particular) indicating the harm to innocents based on false information that was then occurring in Argentina. At the end of this scene, the guide informs the audience that all the members of the acting troupe plus a journalist were jailed for 9 months before being absolved. The 1980 Organization of American States Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in their “Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Argentina” confirms that, even before 1976 and the military junta that officially started the Dirty War, newspapers were subject to government censorship and journalists were being arrested, detained and probably tortured (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Chapter VII, pars. B1, D1-D2). According to the Report, by 1980, with the Dirty War well underway, the press was “refraining from assigning any importance to the ‘operations’ involving the seizure of citizens regarded as terrorists or subversive elements by the authorities” and refusing to print paid insert lists of the missing which even the commission described as “understandable in light of the circumstances” (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Chapter VII, par. B2). If real information does not lead to action and clearly false information is met with passivity and acceptance –is the audience also complicit in losing truthful news and truthful political art altogether?

The multitude of questions that are brought up by Gambaro’s play seem particularly relevant to a contemporary US audience who, particularly since 2004, have been exposed to media images and reports of US soldiers and interrogators torturing detainees in Abu Gharib and

Guantánamo, from the April 28, 2004 *60 Minutes II* television news magazine report and May 10, 2004 Seymour Hersh *New Yorker* article that broke the story in mainstream media by revealing photographs of Abu Gharib torture victims, to the recent March 31<sup>st</sup> 2007 *New York Times* article detailing the experience of a prisoner who reported that he made a false confession at Guantánamo after being tortured (Liptak and Williams A10). Does the distance provided by the mediated nature of these images and stories make them easier to ignore? Is it too easy to turn away from a painful media image –to turn off the television or avoid clicking on a link– to be an audience who goes back to their wine and refreshments after being rushed away from witnessing something unpleasant? Are we complicit in the torture if we watch someone’s humiliation without acting, or if we accept political spin without questioning it? Can the interpersonal, proximal and potentially interactive nature of theatre play a role in creating citizen reflection and action by confronting them face to face with the reality of torture? Can it do so by highlighting the fact that a silent spectator performs action even by their lack of action? Can theatre provide an alternative to making news consumers complicit in a victim’s torture through their role as an audience to humiliating photographs? Can theatre be a unique tool for combating citizen complacency about human rights violations? Certainly with the multitude of new plays surrounding the issue of torture –including those based on real stories of contemporary human rights violations, such as *Guantanamo: Honor Bound to Defend Freedom*, the 2004 ethnodrama by UK playwrights Victoria Brittain and Gillian Slovo– the question is an important one. Are such plays “preaching to the choir”, as *Chicago Tribune* critic Chris Jones indicated of *Guantanamo* in its original London production (Jones)? We might imagine that the response that *Information for Foreigners* implicitly gives to this accusation is that knowledge that something is happening and belief that it is wrong does not imply action. It is worth noting that Slovo’s words

about the urgency of the themes of her own play echoes the major theme of Gambaro's play. "We are all complicit," says Slovo. "If it raises discussion, that is the way art can effect change" (Rourke).

"I ask that you stay together and remain silent" are the words that begin her play, but Gambaro herself harnesses the possibilities of the theatrical medium to try to get the audience – be they Argentinian, or those outside Argentina consuming the news and free to act with fewer restrictions– to do just the opposite: to resist authority, to stand apart from the crowd and to speak for change as she herself does as an artist. Unlike the contemporary *Guantanamo*, which has been performed not only in the UK but in several major US cities, including Washington DC, *Information for Foreigners* could not be performed inside the country the play was written about at the time it was written as it would have put the author's family in Argentina at risk. Gambaro smuggled the play out with her when she went into exile in 1977, and copies circulated on the international scene (Feitlowitz 6). The play was not published in her home country until 1987, four years after the restoration of democracy in Argentina, and as late as 1992, twenty years after it was written, the play had still never been produced (Feitlowitz 6). Today however, the play gets produced both in Argentina and abroad. Just recently, in March 2006, the city of Junín, Argentina included an adaptation of *Information for Foreigners* by El Grupo Experimental Teatro in its "week of memory" events commemorating those affected by the March 1976 military coup that started the Dirty War ("Noticias"). In the US, City College at CUNY (City University of New York) put on the play in March 2007 ("CUNY Events Calendar"), and in April 2007, the Undergraduate Theatre Association at the University of Wisconsin at Madison staged a full production of the play ("Production"). The current interest in mounting the play in US perhaps indicates that students and artists find that the play indeed speaks to contemporary

US political issues in a uniquely powerful way. Victoria Lantz, director of the Wisconsin production commented on what they hope to accomplish with their own distinct staging choices, “I am hoping to walk a fine line between comfort and discomfort [...] hopefully taking the conversation of the play outside the time and space of the performance and connect discussions to present-day oppression and antagonism.” Thus, thirty-five years after it was written, the play continues to raise questions about the citizen’s role as spectator in human rights violations and to serve as an example of the potential power of the theatrical form to speak for action and change on an individual, national and global level.

## References

- “Abuse of Iraqi POWS by GIs Probed.” 60 Minutes II. CBS. 28 April 2004.
- Betsko, Kathleen and Rachel Koenig. *Interviews with contemporary women playwrights*. New York: Beech Tree Books, 1987.
- Brecht, Bertolt. “Short Description of a New Technique of Acting which Produces an Alienation Effect.” *Brecht on Theatre; The Development of an Aesthetic*. Ed. and trans. John Willett. New York: Hill and Wang, 1957. 136-147.
- “CUNY Events Calendar,” *City University of New York*. 4 May 2007.  
<<http://66.212.81.77/eventDetail.asp?EventId=12721>>
- Feitlowitz, Marguerite. Preface. “Crisis, Terror, Disappearance: The Theater of Griselda Gambaro.” *Information for Foreigners: Three Plays by Griselda Gambaro*. By Griselda Gambaro. Ed. and trans. by Feitlowitz. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1992. 1-11.
- Gambaro, Griselda. *Information for Foreigners: Three Plays by Griselda Gambaro*. Ed. and trans. Marguerite Feitlowitz. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1992.
- Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Doubleday, 1959.
- Hersh, Seymour. “Torture at Abu Gharaib.” *New Yorker* 10 May 2004: 42-47.
- Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. “Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Argentina.” 1980. Organization of American States. 8 Dec. 2006. <<http://www.cidh.org/countryrep/Argentina80eng/toc.htm>>
- Jones, Chris. “*Guantanamo* has had time to gain insight.” *Chicago Tribune* 13 Feb. 2006. Online. LexisNexis® Academic. 8 Dec. 2006.
- Liptak, Adam and Margot Williams. “Detainee says torture led to confession.” *New York*

*Platform*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Theatres of Resistance, Spring 2007

*Times* 31 March 2007: A10.

Lantz, Victoria. "Information for Foreigners." E-mail to the author. 10 April 2007.

Milgram, Stanley. *Obedience to Authority*. New York: Harper and Row, 1974.

"Noticias 23.03.2006: 30 años. Semana de la memoria." *Junín Gobierno Local*. 8 April

2007. <<http://www.junin.gov.ar/index.php?sector=0&div=10000&divLnk=10714&sdiv=0&IT=0&idTxt=10714>>

Postma, Rosalea. "Space and Spectator in the Theatre of Griselda Gambaro." *Latin American*

*Theatre Review* 14 (1980): 35-45.

"Production: Current Season." *University of Wisconsin at Madison*. 8 April 2007.

<<http://uta.rso.wisc.edu/production.htm>>

Robben, Antonius C. B.M. *Political Violence and Trauma in Argentina*. Philadelphia:

U of Pennsylvania P, 2005.

Rourke, Bryan. "Theater of War - British play throws a spotlight on Guantanamo's dark secrets."

*The Providence Journal*. 9 Apr. 2006. Online. LexisNexis® Academic. 8 Dec. 2006.

Schechner, Richard. "Six Axioms for Environmental Theatre." *The Drama Review* 12 (1968):

41-64.

Taylor, Diana. "Theatre and Terrorism: Griselda Gambaro's *Information for Foreigners*."

*Theatre Journal* 42 (1990): 165-182.

---. "Violent Displays: Griselda Gambaro and Argentina's Drama of Disappearance."

*Crucibles of Crisis: Performing Social Change*. Ed. Janelle Reinelt. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1996.