

PROSCENIUM

Death and the Maiden

By Ariel Dorfman

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Wednesday 11th to Saturday 14th March 2015
Compass Theatre, Ickenham

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Ariel Dorfman

Cast:

Paulina SalasAngie Sutherland
Gerardo Escobar, her husband, a lawyerMark Sutherland
Roberto Miranda, a doctorDavid Pearson

Directed by.....Linda Hampson
Set.....Mark Brookes
Stage ManagerCrystal Anthony
Assisted by.....Anne Gerrard
PropertiesSusi Thornton
Lighting Design.....Paul Robinson
Lighting Operation.....Hannah Lester
SoundCharles Anthony

The time is the present and the place, a country that is probably Chile but could be any country that has given itself a democratic government after a long period of dictatorship.

The Author

Ariel Dorfman was born in Buenos Aires in 1942, son of Adolf Dorfman, who was born in Odessa, Ukraine, a Professor of Economics, and Fanny Zelicovitch, whose family were Romanian-Moldavian Jews. Because of oppressive, fascist forces in Argentina the family moved to the USA in 1944 and then ten years later, again for political reasons (this time the anti-American trials of Senator Joe McCarthy) moved to Chile.

In an interview with Jenifer Berman in 1996, Dorfman reflected on the changes in his life:

‘I left Argentina when I was two and I went through a very dramatic adaptation in the United States. I tried to be a typical American boy, which I wasn’t. And then I had to leave for Chile when I was twelve years old and I found myself trying to remain loyal to the American child I thought I was. It was only gradually as time went by that I fell in love with Chile and with my wife to be, Angelica. I was seduced by the country. And then I lost the country. And I went abroad into exile. I spent a great part of my exile pining for that country. And the years go by, and I’ve gone back to Chile and I’ve not really found myself belonging entirely there. I have discovered that perhaps I must admit the fact that I am a man in between. That I am a man who lives on the frontier between places. But that’s a very stimulating, creative place to be.’

In the 1960s he attended, and later became a Professor at, the University of Chile. Among the number of critical essays he wrote is *The Absurd within the Walls: the Theatre of Harold Pinter (1968)*. He later became a friend of Pinter who was a considerable influence on his work and political thinking.

He also wrote poetry, a novel and short stories and in 1970-73 he served as cultural advisor to President Allende. He wrote, with

Armand Mattelart, a critique of North American cultural imperialism, *How to Read Donald Duck*. He found this period of his life a time of great optimism: 'Before the coup we seemed to inhabit a time of revolution when we were going to change everything.'

In an interview with Danny Pastil in 1996 he spoke of the day of Pinochet's coup, September 11th 1973:

'Life pardoned me. History pardoned me. Violence passed me by. Death decided not to take me. I should have been at La Moneda Palace with Allende but I switched places with one of my good friends. He died instead of me.'

Dorfman explained that he was also on the list of people to be contacted in an emergency – but no call came. Later he was told: 'Well, someone had to tell the story.'

He wrote a memoir of his life in exile: *Heading South, Looking North*. After the end of the coup all his writing (political, novels, plays, poetry) explored the horrors of tyranny and the trials of exile. As well as *Death and the Maiden* he wrote the very powerful *Speak Truth to Power: Voices from Beyond the Dark*, based on interviews with Human Rights activists.

From his 1996 interview:

'I'm constantly trying to figure out how you can be true to an experience which few people in the world would understand, such as having most of your friends disappear or be tortured, and at the same time find a way of telling that story so other people in other places can read their own lives into that.'

Death and The Maiden's haunting relevance

Ariel Dorfman, December 2011

It happened yesterday but it could well be today. A woman awaits the return of her husband as the sun goes down. The dictatorship that plagued her land has just fallen, and everything is uncertain. The woman is full of fear, gripped by a secret terror that she only shares with the man she loves. During the night and the day that follows she will have to confront that fear, she will bring to justice in her living room the doctor she believes is responsible for having tortured and raped her years ago. Her husband, a lawyer in charge of a commission investigating the deaths of thousands of dissidents under the previous regime, must defend the accused man because without the rule of law the transition to democracy will be compromised; if his wife kills that doctor, the husband will not be able to help heal a sick and wounded land.

Twenty years ago, when *Death and the Maiden*, the play that tells this story, opened in London at the Royal Court Upstairs, the country where that woman, Paulina, awaited a constantly delayed justice, was my own Chile or the Argentina where I was born. Or South Africa. Or Hungary. Or China. So many societies that back then were being torn by the question of what you do with the trauma of the past, how to live side by side with your enemies, how to judge those who had abused power, without destroying the fabric of a reconciliation necessary to move forward.

Today, its main drama is echoed in Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, Iran, Nigeria, Sudan, Ivory Coast, Iraq, Thailand, Zimbabwe and now Libya. In fact, because torture became widespread after the criminal attacks on New York on 9/11, because the most powerful nations in the world, and particularly the US, justified or were complicit in egregious abuses of human rights in order to make themselves feel safe, because they unleashed terror to fight and avenge terror, it could be ventured that the core dilemmas of *Death and the Maiden* are more relevant today than they ever were.

It was not something I had anticipated, this planetary weight and import, when I wrote the play in Santiago.

It seemed to me the obligation of a writer was to force the country to look at itself, at what all those years of mendacity and dread had wrought. *Death and the Maiden* plunged its finger into the wound of Chile by showing that the executioners were among us, smiling on the streets, but also interrogated the democratic elite, wondering what ideals they had forced themselves to sacrifice. Neither did I let the victims off the hook. Paulina, the woman who had been raped and tortured and betrayed, was the most violent person on that stage, so the question for her was not any easier: are you going to perpetuate the cycle of terror, how can you forgive if the price they are demanding is that you forget? The elite of Chile hated what I had done, reviled it.

I'm thrilled that *Death and the Maiden* has not aged over these 20 years, that it still moves people to tears, confronts them with a tragedy that has no clear solution, that it speaks to our world today with the same passion it embodied yesterday. I'm thrilled that the relations between men and women that I explored, the intricacies of memory and madness, the aftermath of violence, the uncertainty of truth and narrative, continue to capture the imagination of so many. Thrilled, yes, but it is also sobering to realise that humanity has not managed to learn from the past, that torture has not been abolished, that justice is so rarely served, that censorship prevails, that the hopes of a democratic revolution can be gutted and distorted and warped.

I can't help but ask if 20 years from now I will be writing this phrase all over again: this story happened yesterday, but it could well be today.

Truth and reconciliation in Chile

Chicago Herald Tribune, December 2004

There is no universal answer to how a country heals its soul, and moves on, after years of dictatorship and human rights atrocities. Chile has picked the toughest but surest avenue – unflinching honesty.

During his 17 years in power, and even for several years after he left, Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet lied about his regime's crimes and wrote off his toughest actions as the cost of fighting communism.

Later governments, though, have exposed the dictator's atrocities. The most dramatic moment came last month when President Ricardo Lagos accepted the findings of a lengthy investigation of tens of thousands of torture cases under Pinochet. Lagos' government has promised modest reparations for the victims.

Before he surrendered power in 1990, Pinochet created an elaborate system to immunize himself and his close military associates from criminal prosecution. At first, he remained commander-in-chief of the armed forces, to maintain control even after he left the presidency.

It may have taken more than 14 years since Pinochet's departure for Chile to fully reckon with the crimes of his regime. But the thoroughness of the investigation--and the guts of the Chilean government in facing up to one of the darkest periods in the country's history--are remarkable. In most Latin countries, civil wars or dictatorships are often followed by a period of wishful amnesia, when everyone hopes the victims will just forget and society will move on.

In 1991, Chile's truth and reconciliation commission reported on more than 3,000 people who were killed during the Pinochet era. The massive report Lagos received includes testimonials by 35,000 victims of the Pinochet dictatorship. Women were raped, men were tortured with electrical devices. Bodies were dumped into the Pacific Ocean, weighted down with pieces of rail track.

Some human rights groups complain the report's findings will not necessarily lead to the prosecution of the torturers, unless the victims pursue the cases. But few can argue with Lagos on this: "How many countries have dared to examine their past in depth?" he said. "Because this is a solid and stable country, we have been able to do it." It is a courageous country too.

Arsenic and Old Lace, by Joseph Kesselring

Drama critic Mortimer Brewster tackles his crazy family and the New York police as he debates whether or not to marry the woman he loves.

His two spinster aunts murder lonely old men by offering them homemade elderberry wine laced with arsenic, strychnine and 'just a pinch' of cyanide.

Meanwhile one of their brothers, who believes he is Teddy Roosevelt, digs locks for the Panama Canal in the cellar...

Directed by Michael Gerrard

10th to 13th June 2015

7:45 pm, Compass Theatre, Ickenham

Box Office : 01895 673 200

About Proscenium

Proscenium was founded in 1924. Since then, the aim of this experienced group has been to present classic and contemporary plays to as wide an audience as possible. Since 1990, performances have taken place at the Harrow Arts Centre and, more recently, at the Compass Theatre, Ickenham.

The company meets three times a week in Harrow for rehearsals, so that four plays are presented in each season. Social, fund raising activities and play readings take place throughout the year.

Secretary : Clare Wooster

Chair : David Pearson

Contact us at www.proscenium.org.uk