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review

SUMMER 2006

An Exciting
World Premiere by
Ariel Dorfman

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Ridge Mountains

**URINETOWN
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THE HELENS!**



Model of set design by Lewis Folden

the story of *Picasso's Closet*

by Deryl Davis

Imagine this: What if Pablo Picasso, towering icon of modernist art, didn't die a nonagenarian in Mougins, France in 1973? Instead, what if he was shot by a Nazi officer—a would-be artist like Hitler himself—in Paris in the closing days of World War II? That's the premise of *Picasso's Closet*, a new play by Chilean American writer Ariel Dorfman, which receives its world premiere at Washington's Theater J in June. Constructed like one of Picasso's Cubist paintings, with multiple surfaces and shifting perspectives, *Picasso's Closet* is at once a detective story, an intellectual examination of the role of the artist, and a stylistic experiment in multiple narratives. One might expect no less from the acclaimed author of *Death and the Maiden*, the riveting 1990 play about the psychological effects of political oppression which garnered Britain's Olivier Award and a Tony for actress Glenn Close on Broadway. Central to *Picasso's Closet*, is the question of what one—in this case, a famous artist—is willing to accept or to surrender in order to survive.

"One of the one hundred or so obsessions I have circulating in my brain is, 'What do artists do under occupation?'" Dorfman asks. "If you have to choose life or choose art, what do you do?"

That's not idle speculation for Dorfman, who fled his native Chile in 1973, following the military coup led by General Augusto Pinochet. Dorfman spent the next 17 years in exile, watching government-sponsored death squads from a distance during much of that time, until the country's uneasy transition to democracy in 1990. Since then, he's divided his time between Chile and the United States, teaching at Duke University in North Carolina and writing fiction, essays, and plays which



Ariel Dorfman
(Photo by Rodrigo Dorfman)

deal with the trials of exile and the struggle for human rights.

"I know what it's like to be an artist in an occupied land," Dorfman

asserts in reference to Picasso's experience in Nazi-occupied France. "In my case, that land was my own country occupied by our own army."

Although France was not Picasso's native land (he was a Spaniard), most of his artistic life was spent there. In Paris, the setting for *Picasso's Closet*, the artist created many of his most famous works, including the anti-war masterpiece *Guernica* (1937) and the early Cubist *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907), both of which figure prominently in the play. An enigma in life as in art, Picasso supported the Republican, anti-Fascist cause in 1930s Spain, but did not fight in that country's civil war, as did many Left-leaning artists and writers. He also adopted a neutral stance during World War II, which enabled him to continue working in German-occupied Paris, although with no public exhibitions. His reluctance to state a clear position on the war drew the ire of some fellow artists who accused him of cowardice. The mystery of what happened to Picasso during those

years led Dorfman to conceive of *Picasso's Closet*.

"You've got the most celebrated artist of the 20th century and four years of his [work life] that was hardly documented," Dorfman says. "What did he do? Was he a coward? Did he help the Resistance? There's no final word on anything. I like ambiguous situations like that."

Ambiguity is a major component of *Picasso's Closet* and one of the play's many strengths. While the unfolding plot—a detective story centering on Picasso's supposed murder—is pretty clear, time, place, and point of view are constantly shifting. The play begins and ends in retrospect, as Picasso feverishly completes work on his masterpiece *Guernica*. In between, characters (both real and fictional) float in and out of Picasso's Paris studio, telling the parallel stories of what did happen and what could have happened from 1941 to 1944.

"Ariel's using some extraordinarily convincing ideas from the worlds of reality and metaphor to tell a prismatic, *Rashomon*-like story," says Theater J Artistic Director Ari Roth, referring to Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa's 1950 film in which multiple narrators tell different versions of the same story. "Here you have three narrators and a protagonist in the middle, and the audience has to be actively engaged in decoding the metaphor: What does it mean that

Picasso died in 1944 and that the Germans murdered him?"

Portions of *Picasso's Closet* are told by Dora Maar (Kate Clarvoe), Picasso's real-life lover during the war years; the fictional German officer Albert Lucht (Saxon Palmer), who dreams of creating his own artistic masterpiece called "The Death of Pablo Picasso"; and Charlene Petrossian (Kathleen Coons), a young American journalist who writes "what if" books about the lives of artists cut down in their prime. Of the three, Maar, Picasso's most famous muse and an artist in her own right, holds particular fascination for Dorfman.

"I really started zeroing in on Dora as a protagonist of the play," Dorfman says. "She's central to *Guernica* [Maar documented the creation of that work in photographs], and perhaps Picasso wouldn't have done it without her. But Dora's life is ruined by Picasso in some ways....He used everybody around him for his own purposes. In every period of his life and painting where there is change, he also changes a woman who will be the inspiration and companion of that phase."

In *Picasso's Closet*, Dorfman explores the tensions within Dora—balancing her knowledge that Picasso may soon leave her for another lover and her simultaneous desire to protect the artist from the forces bent on destroying him—in this case, Albert Lucht. Interestingly, Lucht's ambiguous



Mitchell Hébert and the late Paula Gruskiewicz in Theater J's 2002 production of Ariel Dorfman's *Death and the Maiden*
(Photo by Stan Barouh)

feelings toward Picasso (a mixture of jealousy, hatred, and fascination) are in part fueled by the artist's depiction of women in the ground-breaking *Les Femmes d'Alger*.

"He had no right, that man, Picasso, to invade me like that...[to] mock all the mothers of the world from behind the grunting curtain," Lucht says. "And one of them—she had no face, he had twisted an African mask onto her flat neck and you could fall into that face as you fall into a pit that has no bottom."

Lucht's words reflect the Nazi condemnation of Picasso's art—and most modern art in general—as degraded. The Nazis especially condemned the appropriation of African influences and the Jewish background of many artists. Yet at the same time, Lucht is fascinated with Picasso's work, and he wants more than anything to create something lasting, as Picasso has

done. “We Germans can beat this sort of degenerate assault with our own true art,” Lucht says. “The art of changing history, making history perfect. A history without ambiguity, safe, secure, decent, clean.”

Dorfman recognized the need for a character who would bring together the contradictory impulses Lucht represents. “Somebody who knew Picasso’s art intimately,” the author says, “and at the same time, wanted to destroy what he was doing.” Dorfman recalls the Nazi officers in Paris during World

Did the real artist trade his soul for security?

War II who mercilessly persecuted and killed many accomplished artists, yet stole their art and kept it for themselves. While Picasso certainly did not collaborate with the Nazis, it is not known whether he did anything to prevent the arrest of artist friends, such as poet-painter Max Jacobs, who appears in *Picasso’s Closet*. In the end, the fictional Picasso faces a choice between risky political action, in the form of aiding an unknown refugee from the Nazis, or total absorption in his work.

“That’s the fundamental dilemma for every artist in every moment,” Dorfman asserts. “With so much injustice in the world, you could

spend all your time trying to alleviate suffering rather than creating [artistic] beauty...The choice between political action and artistic action has been present from the Romantics onward.”

For the Picasso of *Picasso’s Closet*, the temptation to risk everything in life as in art is indeed powerful. However, the fictional character’s thoughts and motivations remain purposefully opaque. Director John Dillon, longtime friend and producer of Dorfman’s work, calls the play “both a whodunit and a did-it-get-done-dunit,” in reference to the play’s willful ambiguity. In the end, the alternate reality Dorfman has constructed feeds back into the actual history of Picasso’s life. The question that remains is did the real artist trade his soul for security, for the opportunity to work relatively undisturbed while others around him were being persecuted?

Picasso actually lived another 29 years after the period in question, leaving us the great works of his later periods—reminding us that, whatever really happened in that war-time studio, beauty at least survived. Perhaps the real Picasso took to heart the words of his writer-friend Michel Leiris, reiterated in *Picasso’s Closet*: “Everything we love is going to die, and that is why right now it is important that everything we love be summed up into something unforgettably beautiful.”

Deryl Davis is WTR’s Senior Writer.
***Picasso’s Closet*, at Theater J,
June 21 – July 23.**



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