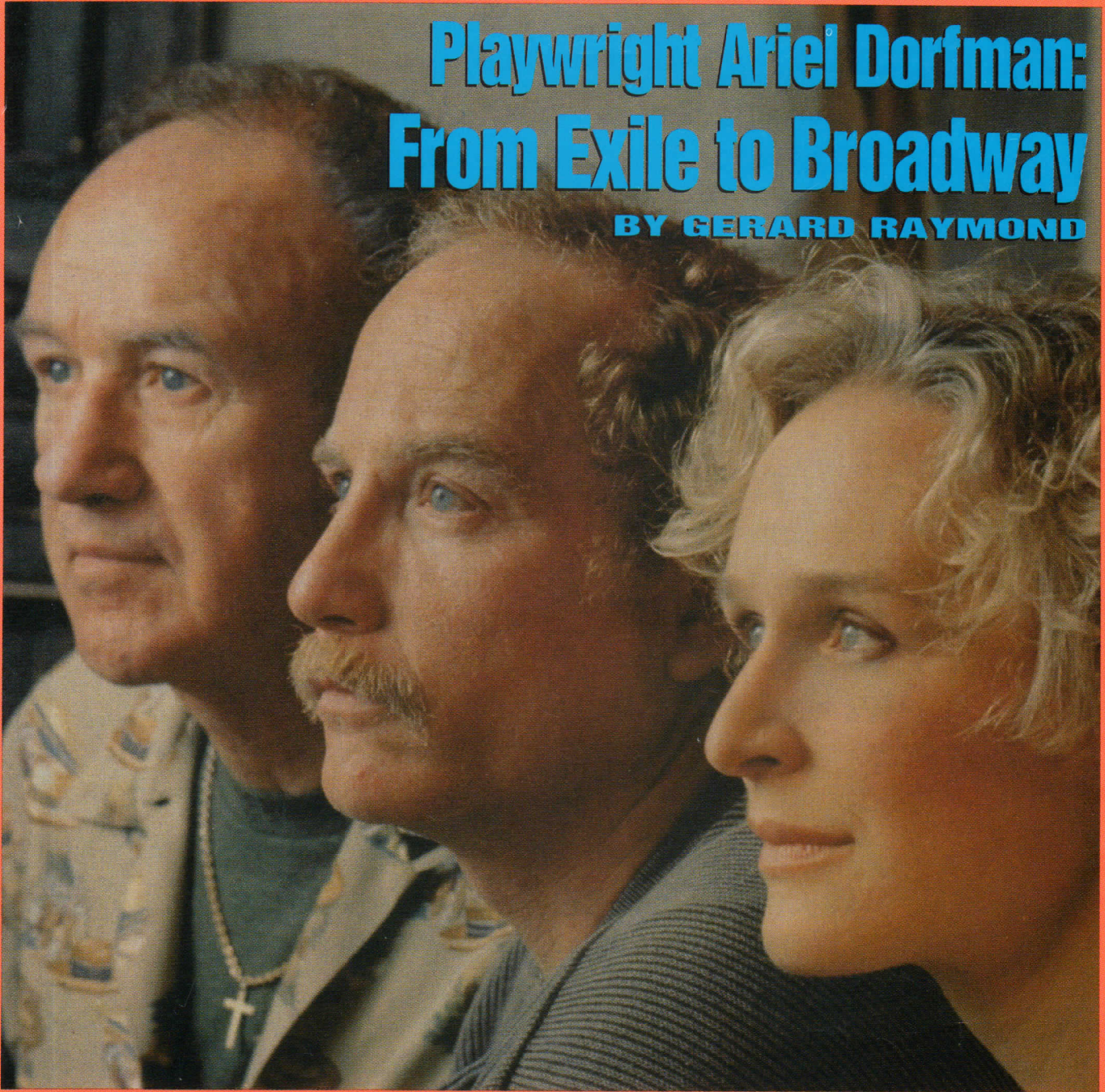


# TheaterWeek

March 30, 1992/\$3.00

## Playwright Ariel Dorfman: From Exile to Broadway

BY GERARD RAYMOND



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# Ariel Dorfman In Exile

The author of *Death and the Maiden* reveals the truth and terror behind life in Chile.

by Gerard Raymond

I AM INTERESTED IN PEOPLE WHO ARE never heard, who all of a sudden find a voice and speak," declares novelist, poet and playwright Ariel Dorfman. "When they speak the world goes crazy, because it reveals the structure of the world." In *Death and the Maiden*, Dorfman's new play at the Brooks Atkinson theater, a woman in an unspecified Latin American country confronts the man who she believes

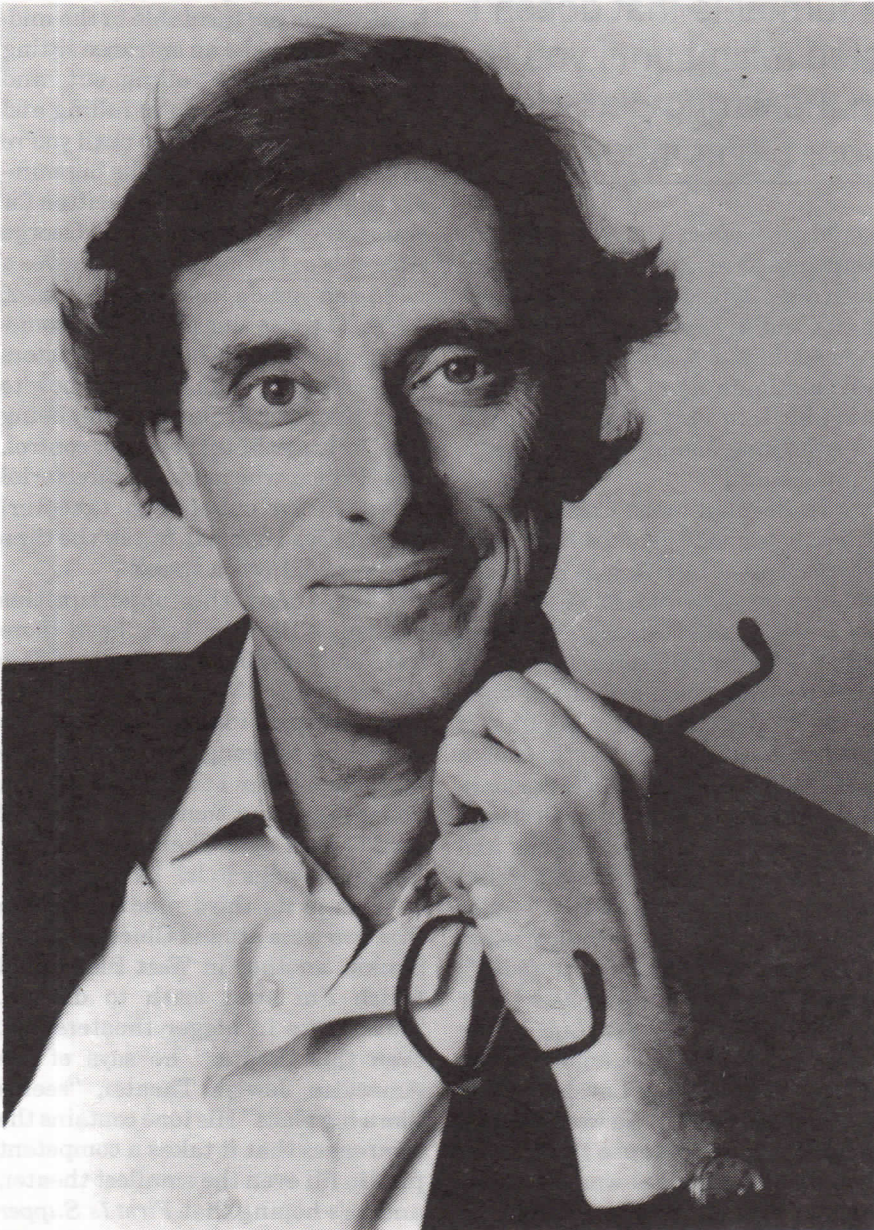
tortured and raped her 15 years ago.

When his car breaks down on the highway, lawyer Gerrado Escobar (Richard Dreyfuss) is helped by Dr. Roberto Miranda (Gene Hackman). Grateful for the kind deed, Gerrado

invites the stranger to visit him and his wife Paulina Salas (Glenn Close). Paulina is convinced that Roberto is the same man who brutally abused her during the reign of terror under a past totalitarian regime. Demanding justice, she puts her tormentor on private trial. Her husband's loyalties are divided. He knows it is crucial for his wife to confront the horror of her torture and rape. He must help her in order to save their marriage. But he must also defend Roberto against his wife's revenge. After a recent transition to democracy, the new government in his country has just appointed Paulina's husband to a new commission charged with looking into the human rights violations of the previous dictatorship.

At the play's emotional center is Paulina, who has endured her trauma in silence for too long. But its complexity lies in the three-way pull of the characters. *Death and the Maiden* unfolds in the form of a thriller. As the horrors of the past resurface, it is clear that Paulina must have her justice if she is to lead a normal life, that Gerrado must make moral compromises if he is to prevent bloodshed, and that Roberto, who claims he is innocent, must have basic rights.

"I think political drama should not be about the moment when someone rises against a tyrant," Dorfman explains. "Much more interesting are the moments way before, or way afterwards when you are victorious against the tyrant, then all sorts of conflicts happen." Dorfman was present at both such points in his adopted country of Chile. He had to flee the country in 1973 when General Augusto Pinochet, aided by the CIA, staged a coup d'etat against the democratically elected Marxist government of President Salvador Allende. When Pinochet's reign of terror ended in 1990, Dorfman was back in Chile following the election of President Patricio Aylwin. The new president appointed a special eight-member National Commission on



Thomas Victor

Ariel Dorfman

Gene Hackman in *Death and the Maiden*

Truth and Reconciliation to bring to light the human rights violations of the Pinochet years, but Aylwin's hands were somewhat tied because Pinochet still retains command of the armed forces in Chile.

Over six feet tall and bespectacled, the soon-to-be-50 Spanish- and English-language writer speaks passionately and fluently in English, which is as much his mother tongue as Spanish. Although he was born in Argentina, he came to New York at the age of two-and-a-half, where he lived until his early teens. His father, who was a UN economist, decided to leave America when McCarthyism reared its ugly head. From New York the family moved to Chile, where Dorfman reached adulthood in the heady years of the Allende presidency. Adopting the country as his own, Dorfman wrote his first books in Spanish.

Dorfman was a staunch supporter of Allende, and when Pinochet took control and the writer's books were publicly burned, he was forced into exile.

Initially he lived, unhappily, in Paris and then moved to Amsterdam, before he arriving in the U.S. in the early '80s. In 1984 he made his home in Durham, North Carolina, where he still lives with his family, teaching Latin American studies at Duke University.

**D**orfman first conceived *Death and the Maiden* as a novel some ten years ago, while still an exile from Pinochet's Chile. "I was interested in the idea of a woman recognizing the voice of somebody who had done her terrible harm and terrible damage. But I saw this in the context of a dictatorship. The world outside was a world of great fear and in a sense, that would be turned upside down by putting her in charge." The story of a woman turning the tables on a man recalls William Mastrosimone's play, *Extremities*, where a rape victim avenges herself on her assailant. Glenn Close's presence in the play may even bring back distasteful

memories of the misogynistic *Fatal Attraction*.

But Dorfman's play is enriched by a moral ambiguity and the larger political and ethical questions it raises. These elements fell into place when Dorfman returned to Chile in 1990. Only then did he find the key to his story. "In the context of a transition to democracy, not having fear on the street, but rather of having a process of liberation on the streets, created much more drama. It became more ironic, more interesting. Rather than the woman representing the needs of the community, she was opposed to the community. There is a way she represents the voice of the community, but it is a submerged voice."

Since Pinochet was defeated—in some respects at least—many of Dorfman's friends from the Allende days were actively involved in the transition to democracy. "My best friend, who was the president of Amnesty International, was a member of the commission," he reports. "And that's when the triangle in the story finally



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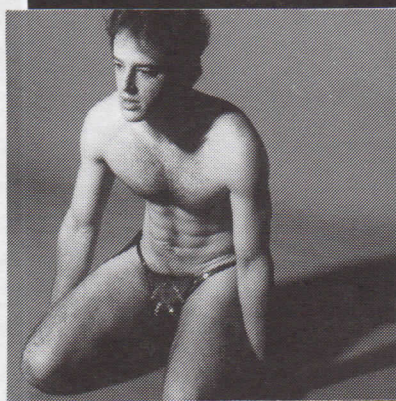
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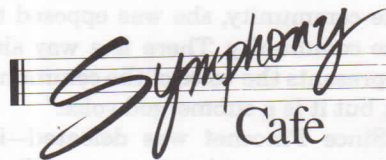
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"I was very sure that I wanted an ambiguous, terrifying ending, even if it meant opening in a smaller theater."

came together, because you need the husband as a pivotal element. I also realized it had to be a play, because it was very urgent to get the story out immediately."

At that point in his career, Dorfman was better known as a novelist, poet, and author of numerous essays and newspaper articles in both Spanish and English. He had written two plays previously—*Widows*, co-adapted with Tony Kushner from an earlier novel and *Reader*, which he adapted from a short story—but *Death and the Maiden* is his first work written directly for the stage. "In one sense playwriting is new for me since I have come to it as a mature author. I started writing plays when I was 44 or 45," he concedes. "On the other hand, my primary love was always the theater. My major thesis was on Shakespeare, and my first book was on Pinter," he adds, citing these two playwrights as the major influences on his writing.

If Allende's government hadn't fallen and if the writer had remained in Chile, Dorfman says that he inevitably would have written for the stage. Various projects to write plays for his friends were pending. He believes that the destruction of his community in Chile prevented him taking that logical step towards playwriting. Theater is a community art, he says, a way of telling stories for a specific group of people. "The loneliness of my years in exile made it very difficult to begin to write plays."

Once he had got past the decade-long block of the original idea for a novel, Dorfman reports he wrote *Death and the Maiden* very quickly. "My wife says I mustn't say such things, but I felt that this was probably the most important work I have done so far. You know how it is when someone puts a blindfold on you and tells you to throw an apple, and you know you are going to hit the target? I knew, as I was doing it, that I was hitting the target on every word I was writing. You wait all your life to tell a certain story in a certain way, in

which reality and unreality come together, and that's what I was doing with this play."

After the play was completed in Spanish, titled *La Muerte y la Doncella*, Dorfman made an English literal translation and then rewrote it in English, a bi-lingual process he has employed in much of his recent writing. He submitted it for a reading in the Censored Plays series sponsored by London's Institute for Contemporary Arts. The ICA had already decided to hold a reading of Dorfman's *Reader*, in which a censor suddenly discovers that one of the subversive books he intends to ban is describing his own life. Although *Reader* dealt more ostensibly with the subject of censorship, Dorfman convinced them of the urgency of getting his new play heard.

At the reading, *Death and the Maiden* acquired two influential champions, playwright Harold Pinter and actress Dame Peggy Ashcroft. The late actress had opened the series by reading some of Dorfman's poems and the writer recalls her sitting next to him during the reading of his play. "She started sighing deeply, and I turned to her and said, 'Peggy, what is the matter?' and she said, 'It's so wonderful.' I was very moved because she was heaving with it." Ashcroft sent the play to Sir Peter Hall and the play seemed set for the West End under Hall's direction.

But Hall did not agree with Dorfman's ending and tried to get the author to change it. "Peter basically felt that the play needed a different sort of ending," Dorfman reports. "He felt it needed to not leave people dangling, if he were to make it a commercial venture. I agreed in the sense that I thought this man probably knows what he is talking about in relation to the British theater. On the other hand, I was very sure that I wanted an ambiguous, terrifying ending, even if it meant opening in a small theater somewhere."

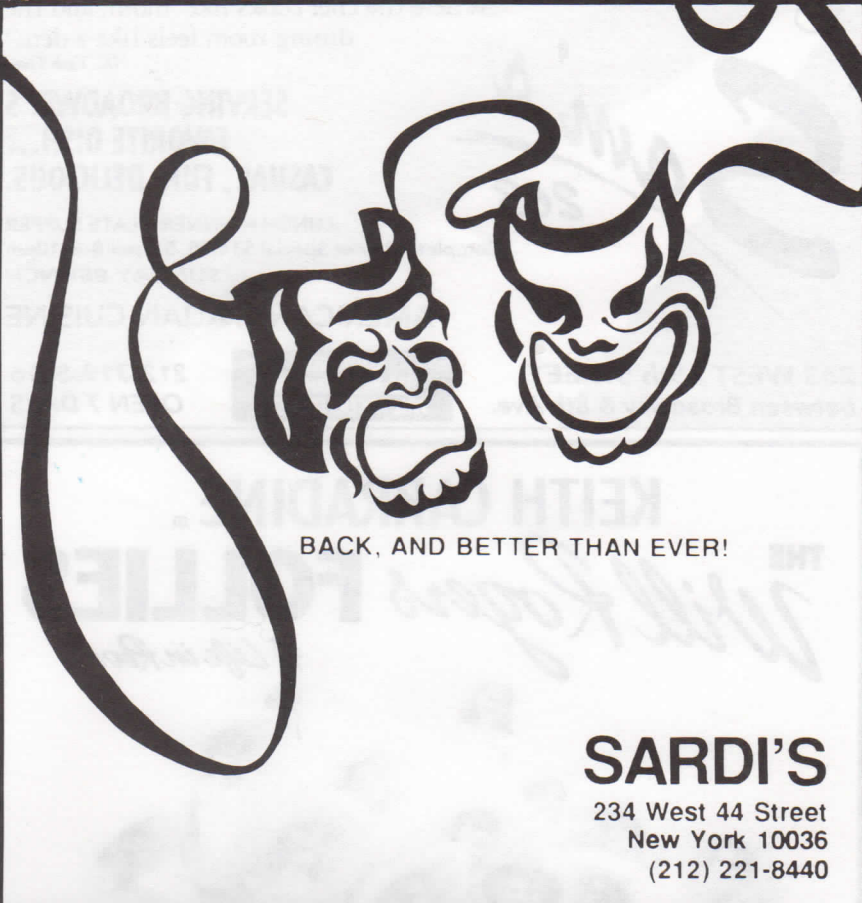
Dorfman stuck to his guns, and claims he couldn't have done otherwise. "Peter was very sweet, very

gentle and extremely useful. But in March of 1991, he said, 'Ariel, I think we should part ways. I think you could write the ending that I want, but I don't think you want to write it, and therefore we shouldn't do it together.' Dorfman relates with satisfaction that when they met recently in New York, where Hall is directing John Guare's *Four Baboons Adoring the Sun*, Hall said to him, "Well, I am very glad to have been wrong."

When it seemed that Dorfman had lost his only chance to get the show mounted commercially, Pinter came to the rescue. He passed the script on to the Royal Court where it was very successfully produced and initiated the enthusiastic response that has resulted in the high profile Broadway production, directed by Mike Nichols. The play just re-opened in the West End for an open-ended commercial run. Additionally, a film version is already in the works, to be directed by Roman Polanski, who is also directing a Paris production in the fall.

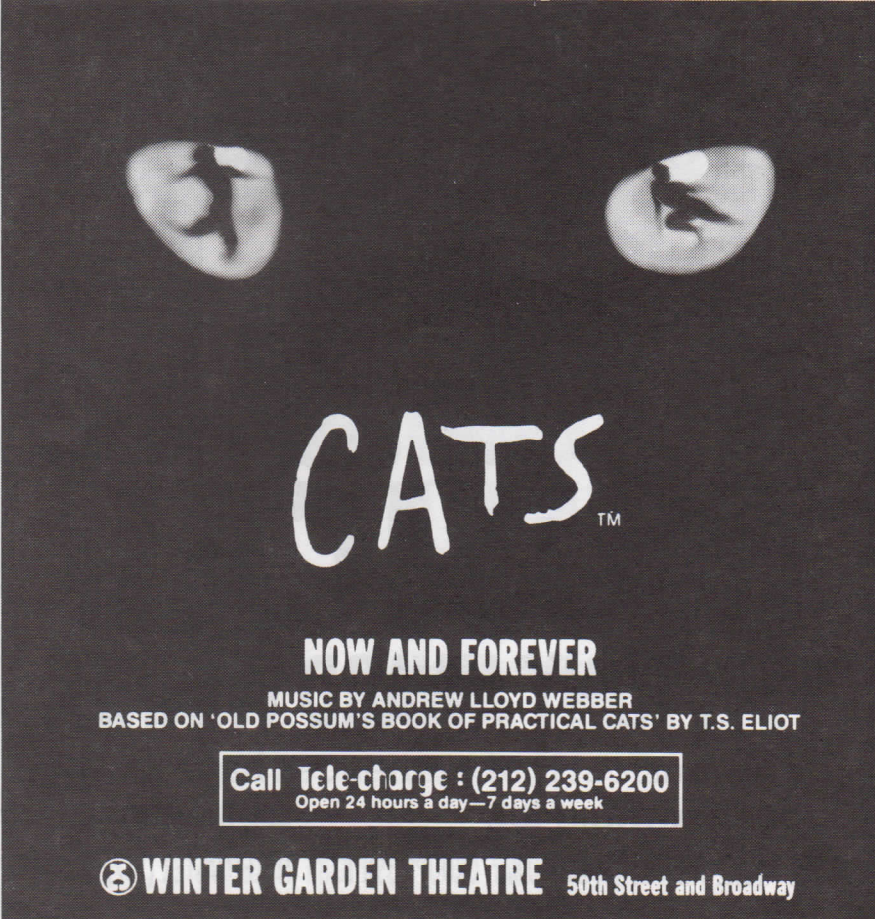
**B**ut alas, the people to whom the play speaks most directly did not embrace *Death and the Maiden*. Even in the post-Pinochet era, the Chileans found the play too dangerous. Dorfman describes the Santiago production of *La Muerte y la Doncella* as a workshop because the text was mutilated through self-censorship, and actors were replaced at the last minute because they were terrified of doing the play. And not only Pinochet's supporters were upset. Many of Dorfman's friends, who were now in the new government, treated him the way the two men in the play treat Paulina. "You are mad, you shouldn't speak about these things. Let's bury the past." Dorfman retorts that funerals are important, but "you can't bury air, you have got to bury a body." The truth about the past must first be brought to light before it is put behind.

Dorfman speculates that far deeper than the fear of exhuming a terrible past was the fear of watching a woman take power. "It is threatening in this country, but in a macho culture such as the Chilean one, I think that was what really disturbed people—both men and women." Many women



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"So far we have had Thomas, Smith, Tyson, and Clinton. Four men, four women. Conflicting testimonies is what the past is about."

have come to him, Dorfman relates, and asked him how he is able to give voice to their feelings and emotions so accurately. "It's because I am really interested in sub-versions—that is other versions—of reality and I think I have a capacity to understand what women feel in these circumstances."

Yet in *Death and the Maiden* Dorfman does not merely celebrate Paulina's transformation from silent victim and docile wife to the revenge-driven aggressor. In the course of the play, we have doubts about whether she has recognized the right man as her torturer, or even if she is sane. We also balk at the eye-for-an-eye system of justice that she is ready to execute. "How can you tell the truth, if you don't have a time machine?" Dorfman asks. He notes a parallel to recent events in this country, which are obviously not of the same magnitude of Paulina's fate at the hands of Pinochet's goons, but where the same ultimately unanswerable question was asked. "So far we have had Clarence Thomas, William Smith, Mike Tyson, and Bill Clinton. Four men, four women. In all these cases the women spoke out. Whether they were right or wrong, they all decided to put these men on trial. Before long we will have another one," he predicts, because "conflicting testimonies is what the past is about."

Can Dorfman have expected his fellow Chileans to respond any differently than they did to *Death and the Maiden*? His friends who are in the new government, like Gerrado in the play, have the task of re-building bridges and moving on. President Aylwin's Commission had a mandate to record the abuses, but not to punish the wrongdoers. His democratic government is in power only because a general amnesty absolves the security forces of their part in the reign of terror. The harsh reality is that the officials of the former regime still hold positions of power in the new re-

gime.

"My answer is a schizophrenic one. As a citizen, I am perfectly happy with many of the ways in which this transition is going and I support it. This is my government and I voted for it. But as an artist, I think there are things that need to be said. In other words, we don't all have to sing in a chorus. The truth of the matter is that the transition is ambivalent, and there has got to be compromise. But art should not be compromised in the midst of it. I kept on telling my Chilean politician friends: 'You may go and compromise all you want. I am glad you are doing it because then I don't have to do it.' But my position is that there are certain things that need to be said, and I have to say them. I think a democracy is strong when you push it, and when you test it."

**T**he price Dorfman pays for being true to his vision continues to be exile, at least spiritually, in his own country—a state his family has known for several generations. His Jewish grandparents fled the pogroms of Eastern Europe and Nazi Germany; his father left Argentina after the military coup, and then America after McCarthy. Even in his current home in North Carolina, Dorfman was denounced for being "one of the prime disinformation agents of the radical Chilean left," by Senator Jesse Helms.

"I've always looked for a home but have come to the conclusion that I don't quite belong anywhere, and that is too bad, because I need it so much." He insists that he feels "most comfortable" in Chile. He fell in love with country at the same time he fell in love with Maria Angelica Malinarich, the woman who became his wife. "The tragedy of my life has been that when I found a place for myself in the world, I had to go into exile when the government was overthrown. There is a pact, though, which I have subscribed to—a pact with the people of Latin America and Chile. I know things about their reality, and I have lived things from their perspective. I have to tell that story. It is not the only story that I have to tell, but those experiences are the ones most important to my life." □

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