

## Filling the Empty Space: Women and Latin American Theatre\*

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In his study *The Empty Space*, director Peter Brook argued that all the theatre really needs in order to thrive is an empty space where people can create imagined and significant worlds. While Brook's argument is basically one for the democratization of theatre, the long history of this art form shows, however, that these empty spaces have not been available to just anyone. Indeed, the modern theatre as an institution has been notoriously male-dominated, driven by box-office success and eager to please middle-class tastes. Much of the theatre vanguard of this century can be explained as a reaction to at least some of these driving forces; for example, Brecht and his open warfare on a theatre of bourgeois consumption, Artaud and his hallucinogenic theatre of the plague, the alienating and alienated scenarios of the theatre of the absurd, and the portable guerrilla theatre of the 1960s. Still, in each of these examples spaces were not opened very widely, if at all, to women. The fact is that the agenda even for so-called alternative theatre has been written mostly for and by men, with the result that women's concerns either have been ignored or deferred. It is really only in the last two, nearly three decades that women, impatient at being told to wait their turn, have themselves taken the initiative to become major players in today's theatre, not just as the actresses they traditionally have been, but also as playwrights, directors, scenographers, and perhaps most importantly in a profession where money can talk loudest, as producers. It is not surprising, then, that

the allusion to the appropriation of space is a common one in critical discourse about women's theatre—of spaces aggressively taken over and then filled with imaginative worlds that speak to, for and of women.<sup>1</sup>

However, one of the lessons learned in this process has been that the signifier *woman* is hardly univocal, that *gender* is a complicated social construct in which race, ethnicity and a host of cultural factors come into play, making for significant differences among women, even among those with a shared nationality. So when I speak of Latin American women and the theatre, as I do in this essay, I recognize the dangers of making gross generalizations, as I also recognize that their many voices speak from and to worlds that can be both different and like mine. This conscious negotiation of difference and similarity, and the awareness that it does not always yield tidy results, is perhaps one the major lessons learned by recent critics and theorists of women's theatre, an especially important one for those of us who study a geographic area as diverse, as contradictory and as elusive as Latin America.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, I would like to focus on the theatre work of not one but various contemporary Latin American women, to give an idea of the many ways they have of filling that empty space to which Brook refers, and of how in the possible worlds that the theatre can conjure up, they give substance and voice to their concerns about real women in a particular context. In the process, I will focus on: 1) the notion of gender as performance; 2) the feminist deconstruction of narrative; 3) the female body in theatrical space; 4) new, postmodern ways of doing feminist political theatre.

Building on Simone de Beauvoir's oft-quoted observation that "one is not born, but, rather *becomes* a woman," and influenced by poststructuralist discourse, a pivotal concept of much recent feminist theory is that gender is a social construct and not biological destiny. At its core, this concept is theatrical in that it sees gender as a performative act, or as Judith Butler has suggested, "Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceede [sic]; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body

and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (270).

The framing of gender as something scripted, directed and enacted, as a learned and practiced behavior rather than an essential part of one's identity is fundamental to a play like *Casa matriz* 'Womb House' by the Argentine playwright Diana Raznovich. Written in 1986, this text has had critically successful performances in English and Italian, as well as in its original Spanish, and is a fine example of women's theatre in Latin America that has as its primary goal the deconstruction of traditional notions of gender. Like so many of these plays, *Casa matriz* breaks with theatrical realism, rejecting its essentializing tendencies.<sup>3</sup> Instead of the simulacra so typical of realism, Raznovich uses metaphor and defamiliarization to fill her theatrical space. The play has just two characters: the very attractive and moody thirty-year-old Barbara, and the Substitute Mother, a well-groomed middle-aged woman who, as a veteran employee of the Womb House, is expert in the art of role-playing. Barbara has rented her especially so that she can spend her birthday in the company of the mother she, and not biology, would have chosen for herself. But when the Substitute Mother arrives and confuses Barbara with another client, the two women get off to a bad start and spend the rest of their time trying to outdo each other, enacting various mother/daughter roles, from the most gushingly loving couple to the most hateful enemies.

Obviously, *Casa matriz* is not a typical drama about female relationships. The play's title is an immediate indicator that Raznovich has another more playful purpose, that she means to invert signs and to dislocate arbitrary meanings from their signifiers. The play's single set is a very staged space: the bed's salmon-colored silk sheets are carefully tousled; hose and other undergarments spill out aesthetically from a chest of drawers. Everything in the room is red and rose-hued, with Barbara to match, dressed seductively in a skin-tight slip, bouncing on her bed, baton in hand, as she energetically conducts an imaginary orchestra. And then, the bell rings. The whole setup here reads "prostitute" and "whore house," or at least that is the visual cliché with which Raznovich

toys. But this sign is subverted as soon as the Substitute Mother arrives; the brothel is elsewhere, in the Womb House, and the visitor is the whore, a dream and fantasy-fulfilling Mother, the pleasure-giver who comes to rent *her* body to a daughter-client, in a relationship that is strictly business, a buying and selling of physical favors (at one point the Mother Substitute pulls out a giant breast overflowing with a Dream Whip-like substance, to nurse her baby Barbara), and more importantly, a trafficking in emotional and spiritual favors.

Notable here is the parodic, carnivalesque inversion of sign functions and meanings, the playwright's refusal to represent on stage archetypal mothers-daughters. Instead, she de-naturalizes these archetypes, plucking them from their everyday contexts (which for being everyday, seem natural, normal, eternal), and then inserts them into another context where their artifice is bared for public viewing. In this case, the artifice is self-referential, the theatrical one of role-playing in which mothers and daughters enact various scripts; for example, the long-suffering mother, the rebellious daughter, the exotic mother, the supermom, the perfect daughter, and the daughter who thinks she can have a better mother, but who must turn to fantasy for this to come true.

In her book *Feminist Theatre*, Helene Keyssar has noted that "[t]heatre is a fertile home for feminists . . . because so many of the issues of feminism—role-playing, relationships to others, individuality and collectivity, power, authority, responsibility, production and reproduction—are also the issues of theatre" (167). By subverting the process by which gendered behavior is produced and reproduced in life and in art (which refers back to the productive and reproductive processes of mothers and daughters), *Casa matriz* underscores that behavior is something that happens rather than is, that female roles are too often *other*-authored according to the discursive practices of patriarchy and its variations on Nietzsche's master narrative of the Eternal Feminine. In this, Raznovich shares a space with many other feminist playwrights, in and outside of Latin America, wherein theatre practice means to break the power of the male gaze that looks at, sees and consequently presents women as seamless, as finished rather than becoming, as objects for the viewing of

others, rather than subjects in and of themselves.<sup>4</sup> Within her own cultural context, Raznovich's prime target is the powerful mythology of Motherhood, born of Argentina's strong Catholic and Spanish/Italian heritage.<sup>5</sup> For her and for other playwrights with a similar target, recent feminist theory about gender has provided a welcome ally and an effective oppositional strategy. To quote Judith Butler again: "If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relations between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking and subversive repetition of that style" (271). That is to say, biology need not be destiny; scripts and roles are and can be subjected to radical change, and even be made totally irrelevant.

Part of the subversive strategy of *Casa matriz* is the way it tells its story, or perhaps better said, the way it does *not* tell a story in the traditional sense. The question of narrative, both in form and content, has been an important one for many recent women playwrights, who see it as emblematic, as well as supportive of patriarchy. That is, traditional narration, with its forward thrust and desire for closure, rejects the possibilities of a more disrupted (and disruptive) movement in space and time, and insists on a final (tidy) product rather than a (oftentimes messy) process. Of course, most postmodern writing, regardless of the gender of its source, is a reaction to this kind of narrative, but in the case of women there are other reasons for reacting against it, most particularly because of what it so often tells—stories of male protagonists—and who tells them—a male voice in the first person or one hiding behind an all-powerful, all-knowing third person narrator.<sup>6</sup> This explains the need of many recent Latin American women playwrights to fill a once empty space with stories told and retold in the rhythms and cadences of their own voices.

I would like to talk about two such plays, which are almost polar opposites, but nevertheless have the question of how to tell a story and which one to tell as a prime concern. The first one is *Solas en la madriguera*, (premiere 1988), a title which is not easily translated because the word "madriguera" can mean an animal den or lair, or figuratively, a refuge. Both of

these translations can work for the play, so the two possibilities are 'Alone in the Lair' or 'Alone in the Refuge.' The Spanish title is an intertextual play on another title, of the movie *Solos en la madrugada* 'Alone in the Early Morning,' about a very well-known Spanish actor, José Sacristán, who as a daring all-night radio announcer, let loose the gag that the Franco regime had once tied on generations of Spaniards, for whom any "talk" about certain topics was absolutely taboo. The basic premise for Cristina Escofet's play is that the actress in it has asked for, and been refused permission to adapt Sacristán's monologue. Thus she finds herself alone, not in the early morning, but in the "madriguera," with only her own voice, also long-silenced by societal proscription.<sup>7</sup> Once she speaks, however, that voice becomes powerful, filling space with a feminine *I* telling stories for and about a feminine *we*. According to Escofet, the source of this play surges from "la catarata de palabras que las mujeres tenemos dentro, en esos dos extremos por los que transitamos: la verbosidad y el silencio, y en medio los matices" 'that waterfall of words we women have inside us, in those two extremes through which we travel: excess verbosity and silence, and in between, gradations, different hues' (*Solas en la madriguera* 65).

But the particular way that these words are used in Escofet's text does not follow the lineal, patriarchal paradigm. Narration here is fragmented into a series of vignettes, or watercolors, as the playwright calls them, that are held together by the presence of the one actress who interprets them all and by a single, overriding concern: what women have to say and what that reveals about their situation in a man-made world. Some of the titles of these vignettes are therefore quite revealing; for example, "Las caperucitas" 'The Little Riding Hoods,' about women who dutifully prepare baskets full of food and other objects that produce male delight, only to find that these same men—or rather, wolves—will marry them only if they get them pregnant; "La mujer de la desfachatez" 'The Impudent Woman,' who belches and scratches her genitalia in public, a cigar-smoking bisexual who dares to have a child and call herself a mother; "¡Qué linda pareja!" 'What a Beautiful Couple!,' newly-weds who nibble on each other until there is literally nothing left of them except the reflection of their

lovely smiling faces in the mirror of their honeymoon hotel suite; "La esposa del esposo que salía en viajes de negocios" 'The Wife of The Husband Who Went on Business Trips,' a woman who is so ignored and neglected that she turns into a beautiful rug so that husband can literally walk all over her; "Chau, Rufián," in which the actress listens to the recording of a male voice that utters all the misogynistic clichés of tango culture; "Chau, Flaco," a good-bye to the male intellectual who seduces women with lofty speeches but ends up taking them to cheap and tacky hotel rooms that rent by the hour; "El terrible discurso del señor Eduardo Motta el día en que se graduó en la Universidad del Matrimonio" 'The Terrible Discourse of Mr. Eduardo Motta the Day that He Graduated from the University of Matrimony,' an exhortation to men to treat their wives well and to enjoy the wonders of marriage to their fullest, with a piece of advice for women: earning a living is hard work, so best to go back to playing the piano, like Schumann's good little wife did.

Something important to underline in these vignettes (some as short as ten lines, the longest only a few pages of text), is that in many of them the actress speaks the words of men, not hers. This kind of ventriloquism is what gives the vignettes their force, for by putting a man's words into a woman's mouth, Escofet makes them seem strange, out of context and ultimately, nonsensical. In some vignettes, the actress tells stories about women, as in "Las caperucitas" and "¡Qué linda pareja," that parody their intertexts (children's literature and romance, respectively) and in the process, reveal the dangers for women of traditional narrative. In other cases, the playwright weaves new stories for her actress, taking clichés about women and turning them into narratives that function as metaphors, something which again shows up both the perils and absurdities of talk about women (as in "La esposa del esposo que salía en viajes de negocios" and its treatment of the cliché about women being doormats for men).

In *Solas en la madriguera*, Cristina Escofet uses talk to make the point that talk is not cheap; men manipulate it to repress women and women need it to free themselves of this repression. Since the spoken word is so basic to this play, it is little wonder that the text calls for a very spartan performance:

one actress, a few props and a minimal set. The actress's voice, face and body are her essential tools in communicating with the public, in a kind of theatre known in Latin America as the *unipersonal* (loosely translated, the one-women show). There are various reasons why this kind of performance would be popular with women, among them the fact that it does not need expensive theatre venues, thereby circumventing the obstacle of powerful male theatre managers and impresarios who can be quite hostile to women's or feminist theatre. But another, more overarching reason is that the *unipersonal* can center all attention on women—as playwrights, actresses and directors, for often they assume all three jobs. The idea of the personal is also very much at the heart of this theatre, in its use of monologue which is, by its very nature, confessional. But the voice that issues from one woman assumes many guises, and speaks not only for the individual subject, but also about the personal things that concern women in a more collective sense.

The personal, however, can be put to very different uses by women theatre artists in Latin America, as in the case of Raquel Araujo from Mexico and her *Teatro de la Rendija* (rather unelegantly translated as the 'Theatre of the Crack,' but very well named for its allusion to theatre as a way of opening up spaces for women). This group, usually numbering five of mixed gender, actually calls its work "Personal Theatre," because it looks to and within the individual self as a source of creative imagery. A former student of Professor Gabriel Weisz and the now defunct seminar for the study of ethnodrama at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, Araujo explains that personal theatre forces the actress to fill the empty theatrical space without the protective shield of a written script or a stage character:

Una de las herramientas del teatro personal . . . es el *testimonio*, subir al área representacional sin la protección de un personaje, volcar nuestra persona en el embudo de la representación. Es como un proceso creativo extraviado, sólo me tengo a mí. El marco de investigación se hunde en el caos del objeto de estudio y experimentación: mi persona.

One of the tools of our personal theatre . . . is *testimony*, getting up onto the acting space without the protection of a character, pouring your Self into the funnel of acting. It's like a creative process gone astray, I have only myself. The frame of investigation sinks into the chaos of the object of investigation and experimentation: myself. ("Estrategias fatales: dramaturgia del actor" 'Fatal Strategies: Dramaturgy of the Actor' 1-2)

This baring of the person—physically, psychologically, spiritually—allows for a process of "macrointrospection" that fragment by fragment, image by image, writes the language of the *Teatro de la Rendija's* performances, rejecting the objective for the subjective, the lineal for the atomized. Araujo mentions influences like Richard Foreman, Kate Manheim, Linda Montano, Spalding Gray, Robert Wilson, all of which point to the decidedly postmodern bent of her work. Needless to say, then, the idea of narrative assumes very different, and quite surprising qualities in works by *La Rendija*.

The *Teatro de La Rendija* has used as a symbol the lizard, which, according to Araujo, is "la voz de mi cuerpo . . . a veces inmóvil, a veces lúbrica, infantil y huidiza, escondida en mi espalda" 'the voice of my body . . . sometimes still, at others slippery, child-like, fleeing, hidden on my back' (2). If Araujo herself sometimes speaks in difficult, often cryptic images and metaphors like these, so does her most recent work, *La condesa sangrienta* 'The Bloody Countess,' which is based on the life of the seventeenth-century Hungarian Countess Erszebeth Gathory, who according to legend, sadistically killed and then bathed in the blood of hundreds of young virgins, in a perverse effort to remain eternally youthful. The Countess's tale, however, is but a pretext for Araujo to explore the relationships of contemporary heterosexual and lesbian couples, through a series of highly plastic scenes, where the naked human body, sounds and noise, light, abstract music, and single objects (like knives and buckets of blood, water and body paint, a tall metal sculpture in the shape of the lips of a clitoris or/and of a torture instrument) become conduits of meaning, a new set of tools for the telling of women's stories. So while not at all like *Solas en la madriguera*, *La condesa sangrienta* shares with it a focus on women and their relation-

ships—with men and themselves—and refuses to speak in the rational language of patriarchy, or in the traditional spaces of patriarchal theatre. For *La condesa sangrienta*, with all of its nudity and violent images, was first staged in summer 1993 in the Centro Cultural Santa Teresa, which is housed in the small Gothic church of the same name, in the center of Mexico City, behind the Templo Mayor, the infamous site of literally thousands of bloody Aztec sacrifices.<sup>8</sup>

Araujo has described the structure of *La condesa sangrienta* as a series of modules, with their own internal up and down graphs, which in sequence are very much like the multiple orgasms of women. This simile underscores the degree to which the text explores female sexuality, through both the relationships among the characters and, most noticeably, the naked female body. I say noticeably because in a performance text where the “story line” is so hard to grasp, much less to follow, the presence of female nudity will almost certainly become a central focus of the public’s eye. This brings me to the third point I wanted to touch on with regards to the theatre practice of contemporary Latin American women: the female body in theatrical space. As Diana Raznovich has insisted:

Nuestros cuerpos han cedido a la presión fantasmática del deseo del otro y han perdido libertad. Se comportan como se espera que se comporten y no como quieren comportarse. . . . Por lo tanto para hablar de la mujer en términos teatrales tengo que privilegiar esta condena corporal.

Our bodies have given in to the fantastic pressure of the other’s desire and have lost freedom. They behave as they are expected to behave and not like they want to behave. . . . Therefore, in order to speak of women in relationship to the theatre I have to privilege this condemnation of our bodies. (“El cuerpo femenino como espacio teatral” 2)

Because theatre is corporeal, that is, it always involves a body in space and time, and because the female body has been so overcoded by male desire, the liberation of this body is, as Raznovich says, the very first, the most important challenge to be met.

However, there is no one or sure way of meeting this challenge. In Raznovich's *Casa matriz*, her strategy is to first imagine the female body synecdochically, the womb standing for the whole, and then to deconstruct the most powerful symbolical value that this synecdoche has acquired: Motherhood. In this way she underscores the conceptual, ideological linkage between the female body and the meanings it has accrued or rather, that have been imposed on it. The womb, therefore, is not only an empty receptacle waiting to be filled with/by a fetus, but also one that is filled with/by the meanings that patriarchal society gives to it, as well as to this fetus. Escofet's approach is similar, in that she too explores the semantization of the female body and how this affects the way such a body is seen and how it sees itself. By embodying her many characters in the sole actress of *Solas en la madriguera*, Escofet underscores the metatheatrical quality of gender, the way a woman's body gets covered by layers and layers of signification through role-playing.

Although Raznovich and Escofet mean to figuratively remove these layers, neither does so by literally stripping the female body, as Araujo does. While nudity may once have been used primarily for its shock value, a practitioner like Araujo is well beyond that, and she uses the naked female body as the essential source of meaning, the vessel from which images and metaphors issue. For her the question of production and reproduction is very different than for Raznovich; indeed, it is almost contradictory. But they both are searching for ways to make the experience of female bodies authentic, self- and not other-centered. Araujo feels a real connectedness to her body, to its secretions, its rhythms, its impulses of pleasure and pain. In a performance like *La condesa sangrienta*, however, the sensation of pain is what seems to dominate; as Araujo explains:

[E]xpone los cuerpos femeninos, no como el objeto del deseo, sino como el cuerpo del horror, de la violencia y la autotortura. Es una burla al amor moderno, al deseo de matar a quien más se ama, tal vez, entonces, al suicidio más cercano.

It exposes female bodies, not as objects of desire, but rather as bodies of horror, of violence and self-torture. It's

a mocking of modern love, of the desire to kill what one loves most, perhaps then, of the most intimate of suicides. (publicity brochure, *La condesa sangrienta* n.p., n.d.)

The use of such imagery, however, raises the important issue of whether it functions to shatter and deconstruct, or to confirm and reiterate old ways of seeing women's bodies. For Araujo and her fellow female players, the experience of their naked bodies filling theatrical space, moving in almost sculpted ways, sometimes inflicting pain on themselves, at others giving themselves obvious erotic pleasure, produces a feeling of freedom, as it does for many women who perform in the nude. Still, there is the eye that beholds this performance, and one should ask whether its way of seeing is altered significantly by the performance, or if it continues to encode the female body in old ways. Does the spectator desire to participate in this body's pain, or does he/she want to end it? In many ways, these questions echo the ones posed in the heated feminist controversy over pornography, and images of sexual violence against women in visual media. As in this controversy, there is no single right answer, but the question itself necessarily arises, for whenever female nudity is offered for public viewing, there is no assurance that the viewer will see this body as those displaying it would wish. And yet the challenge, one that Araujo assumes with integrity and great professionalism, is to keep on trying to find a way to naturalize the female body to such a degree that it will cease to be an object of desire, and become a subject of its own making.

The plays I have looked at thus far share a common goal: that of producing change—in the way that women's stories are told; in the way that an other's gaze defines the concept of Woman; in the way that theatre itself has collaborated in the semantization of gender identities that places men first and women second. None of them would seem to carry on the older tradition among many women playwrights in Latin America of addressing more generalized social and political issues. In recent years, since the fall of Communism, there has been much debate in Latin America about the nature and purpose of political theatre. There has been talk of the failure of the Leftist project and of the theatre that supported it (Marxist and Brechtian theatre, collective theatre, people's theatre), and of

the beginning of a new world order that is at the same time, and quite contradictorily, both global and decentered, plugged into a worldwide communications and economic network, while also rejecting any master narratives and all totalizing solutions. In Latin America, where the Leftist utopia was the dream of some and the nightmare of others, this debate can be heated and painful, and often is framed as one between modernists and postmodernists, with the latter declaring the former dead and buried.

It is true that in the theatre, at least, there has been a marked change since the late 1980s, and much of what is being written and produced today has an unmistakably postmodern sense—with its fragmented narratives, its decentered characters, its focus on the individual rather than on the collective, its parody of authority in all guises, its focus on processes rather than solutions. All of this is markedly different from the political theatre of the 1960s and 1970s. Because the old political theatre in Latin America has so often been associated with what is now considered the defunct Left, it is easy to see why some would proclaim such a theatre has gone the way of the dinosaur in Latin America. And yet, this only *seems* so. A careful look at plays like *Casa matriz*, *Solas en la madriguera*, and even *La condesa sangrienta*, shows that what happens to women in the private sphere because of their gender, has roots and repercussions in the public sphere. To have no voice of one's own, to hate and mutilate other women because of their youth, to be the prisoner of roles assigned to one's body, are not the traditional, patriarchal themes of political theatre; however, neither are they any less political. What has happened is that the new women's theatre has begun to dramatically redefine the concept of political theatre. While its formal trappings may be postmodernist, not for this does it reject the possibilities of and urgent need for the same kind of change that the older political theatre sought, but with one major difference: the framing of the problems, as well as of their solution is not being left to men alone.

This new framing of the political is quite prominent in the play *La madre* 'The Mother' (1994), by the Peruvian playwright Sara Joffré. During her long career in the theatre, Joffré has championed the rights of all dispossessed peoples in her country, with its endemic poverty and long history of human

rights abuse. Yet in *La madre* it would at first appear that she has left these concerns behind and is now more interested in exploring gender identity through the sole character of a mother who earns her living as a transvestite; that is, as a woman who dresses as a man who dresses as a woman. The text of *La madre*, only ten written pages, is rather like a parody of Stanislavski's *An Actor Prepares*, as the mother gets herself ready for the first of her shows that her son will attend. She wonders how he found out about it, would prefer that he not come, but then, the show must go on. So while she prepares her make-up and puts on her costume, she talks about any number of things: her son, the young men who come to see her as both "transvestite" and whore, her aging body, the run in her stockings, her career as a once-legitimate actress in roles like Doña Inés in Juan de Zorrilla's classical *Don Juan Tenorio*. Her language is coarse, her movements frenetic, her tone humorous, angry, defiant, resigned.

According to Joffré's written text, the gender bending in *La madre* can work in two ways: 1) the role is enacted by a woman only, and therefore, the male transvestite is alluded to but not represented; 2) the role is enacted by a man, but one who *is* a woman, for everything in the text indicates that the person on stage is unquestionably female. In this case, then, the male actor has to communicate that his maleness is but a passing identity in the process of a woman play-acting a man who then pretends to be a woman. This kind of gender confusion has become a quite popular postmodern technique in the work of many feminist playwrights, for the way that it uncovers the performative nature of gender to which Judith Butler has referred. In the case of Joffré's play, its première and to my knowledge, sole performance (Cincinnati, October 1994) was with the Mexican actress Susana Alexander in the role of the mother, so there was never any confusion about the real biological identity of the character. This, however, did not take away from the parodic treatment of the transvestite, who in the popular mind, at least, is usually a man. At all times during the performance there was a consciousness among audience members that the character had been hired to do something that usually excludes the need for women, when men assume and usurp the engendered and erotic identity of

women. That the woman who assumes the identity of a male transvestite should be a mother is also darkly parodic, and like Raznovich, Joffré also places the concept of motherhood within a theatrical frame that underscores to what degree mothers are actresses who play many and contradictory roles.

The fact that *La madre* is an *unipersonal*, that it has a woman as its central and sole concern, that it parodies traditional notions of gender—these are all elements that identify the text with the most current, postmodern trends in women's theatre in Latin America. Still, there is one extra and key element here: why this mother does what she does. Like the Substitute Mother, Joffré's character is a "working mother" who has to earn a living. If for Raznovich a woman's work is a vehicle for deconstructing gender identities, in *La madre* it is a harsh reality in a country where unemployment is so devastating that the only job this trained actress can find is one impersonating her own gender. Thus the many references she makes to the "shitty" country she lives in, to the poverty, to the shortages of basic necessities, to the constant blackouts. Indeed, her performance for us, that is, her monologue, takes place during one such blackout; her other "performance" only begins when the electricity comes back on at her cabaret and when the lights go out at the theatre where Joffré's text is being staged.

*La madre* is a reminder of how important it is to recognize cultural contexts and differences when entering texts by Latin American women playwrights. A North American academic reader, steeped in theories of gender, might not focus on these references to Peruvian reality; or perhaps another reader, who does focus on them, might wonder if Joffré has not used the transvestite motif merely as a pretext to talk about old political issues, thus putting in question her "feminism." However, within the parameters of her world, that of present-day Peru, and of her own working-class background, Joffré is very much a feminist, who sees how women's choices and freedom to develop are curtailed if not totally cut off because of political corruption and feeble economic systems. It is one thing for a working mother to willingly choose to be a female impersonator, but altogether another if that is the only job available to her, despite her job qualifications.<sup>9</sup> Yet unlike many political

plays written (by men *and* women) in the past, *La madre* does not suggest that gender and politics are separate issues but rather, that they are woven into a single strand; this being the case, any political project that does not give special attention to women's issues is not and cannot be an acceptable one. Very much in a postmodern vein, then, Joffré's text insinuates the need for a new micropolitics, rather than the worn and tired macropolitics of the old Left.

Despite the differences between *La madre* and the other texts studied here, where politics in the more usual sense are not such a primary concern, the similarities among them are nonetheless striking. Like Raznovich, Escofet and Raquel Araujo, Joffré sees the stage as a flexible space for women, stretching its limits well beyond those of traditional realism and patriarchal narrative. Taken as a group, these theatre artists cover the gamut of recent feminist concerns most everywhere: the urgency for women to empower themselves through discourse; the need to deconstruct and redefine gendered identities at home, in the workplace and on the stage; the intimate relationship of women with their own bodies and the ways that these are subjected to the distorting gaze of a male other; the fact that the personal is indeed the political and vice-versa; that the culture one is born into has very much to do with the life one ultimately leads. These plays challenge the *status quo*, and take a first defiant step towards radical change by reappropriating the stage for women, by filling a once empty space with new and old stories, told in daring, innovative ways.

\*I wish to extend my deepest thanks to the Taft Memorial Fund of the University of Cincinnati, which funded most of the field research for this essay.

### Notes

1. Because of the timeliness of this image, Professor Patricia W. O'Connor and I decided to use it for the October 1994 theatre event we organized in Cincinnati, Ohio: *A Stage of Their Own/Un escenario propio: A Symposium/Festival on Spanish, Latin American and U.S. Latina Women in the Theatre*. Three of the plays I will discuss in this essay were performed

during a *A Stage of Their Own . . . : Solas en la madriguera* by Cristina Escofet, a one-woman piece acted by Ana María Casó, with partial sponsorship by the Sociedad Argentina de Actores; *Obsesiva condesa* by Raquel Araujo and the *Teatro de la Rendija* (a special adaptation of their Mexico City production of *La princesa sangrienta*), with partial sponsorship of the Mexican Fondo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes and Mexico's Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores; *La madre* by Sara Joffré. Other sponsors of the event were the Taft Memorial Fund of the University of Cincinnati; the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures, Women's Studies, the College of Arts & Sciences, the Office of the Vice President for Research, the Office of the Provost and the Helen Weinberger Center of the University of Cincinnati; the Program for Cultural Cooperation Between Spain's Ministry of Culture and United States' Universities; the Ohio Arts Council; *Estreno*; Miami University of Ohio and the Spanish Club of Xavier University. I am very grateful to them all for the opportunity to have seen these plays in performance and to speak with the playwrights and actresses involved in them.

2. Although her study concentrates on narrative prose written by Latin American women, the following words of Amy K. Kaminsky are very much germane to what we have to say about women's theatre: "Feminist work at its richest is always aware of the fundamental connection between . . . apparent poles. Uprooted from its soil, disengaged from its material sources and consequences, the most brilliant analysis dies. Convenient divisors like race, class, gender, and nationality are not simply separate categories that operate independently if, at times, analogously, but are, rather, interacting phenomena that shade each others' meanings" (18).

3. Not all scholars or practitioners of women's theatre argue that realism and feminism are incompatible; see for example, Helene Keyssar's *Feminist Theatre*. However, many do, seeing in realism the supreme expression of patriarchal order. Jeanie Forte, in "Realism, Narrative and the Feminist Players—A Problem of Reception," argues quite convincingly along these lines.

4. Raznovich's fellow Argentine Susana Torres Molina has also explored the culturally encoded nature of gender in . . . *Ya otra cosa mariposa* 'And on to Something Else, Butterfly' (1988; "butterfly" can also be translated as "fag" or 'queer'). Here the playwright has women perform the roles of various Argentine men as they go through life, never shedding their extremely macho ways. The Mexican Sabina Berman, in *Suplicio del placer* 'The Agony of Ecstasy,' takes an ironic and parodic look at gender indeterminacy wherein the differences between male and female are not so apparent, as well as at gender overdeterminacy, e.g., the case of the paradigmatic "super macho Mexican male." Available to English readers is

Rosario Castellanos' *El eterno femenino* 'The Eternal Feminine,' which deconstructs the long list of essentialist clichés about gender in her native Mexico.

5. It should be noted that Raznovich wrote *Casa matriz* at a time when it was risky in Argentina to treat motherhood in this way; that is, during the heyday of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, who met (and still meet) regularly to protest the disappearance of their children, grandchildren and husbands during the so-called Dirty War. For an insightful and provocative study of the relationship between the Madres, performance and feminism, see Diana Taylor's "Performing Gender: Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo."

6. I owe much to Elin Diamond's "Refusing the Romanticism of Identity: Narrative Interventions in Churchill, Benmussa, Duras," for these insights. For a discussion of narrative in plays by Mexican women playwrights, see Kirsten F. Nigro, "Inventions and Transgressions: A Fractured Narrative on Feminist Theatre in Mexico."

7. I want to thank Cristina Escofet for her time and generosity in personally giving me insights into and information about *Solas en la madriguera*, during *A Stage of Their Own* and subsequently in correspondence.

8. The version I saw of *La princesa sangrienta* (*Obsesiva condesa*, Cincinnati, October 1994) did not use all of these props. The description of them comes to me through newspaper reviews in *La Rendija's* publicity brochures. Another Mexican theatre artist who uses nudity quite regularly is Jesusa Rodríguez, although her theatre is very different from Araujo's. For a discussion of this nudity, see my "Un revuelto de la historia, la memoria y el género: expresiones de la posmodernidad sobre las tablas mexicanas." Studies written in English about Jesusa's internationally-known work are: Jean Franco, "A Touch of Evil: Jesusa Rodríguez's Subversive Church," and Diana Taylor, "'High Aztec' or Performing Anthro Pop: Jesusa Rodríguez and Liliana Felipe in *Cielo de abajo*."

9. Just how culturally different and class-based expectations about women's work can be is confirmed by the fight among many of Mexico's lower-class women to have the right to *not* work, to not have to be away from home all day and into the night, in low-paying service jobs that require spending sometimes up to five hours a day using city transportation to travel the many miles to, and then back from their workplace. Their political agenda specifically makes demands for a stabilized economy that can pay men salaries substantial enough to allow wives to stay at home.

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