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Agustín Gómez-Arcos

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AGUSTÍN GÓMEZ-ARCOS
(1933–1998)

Sharon G. Feldman

BIOGRAPHY

Agustín Gómez-Arcos, a bilingual dramatist and novelist, was born in 1933 in the village of Enix (Almería). The origins of his theater can be traced to his childhood experiences, in which he witnessed firsthand the horrors of the Spanish Civil War and the dark clouds of oppression of the Franciost regime, images that left indelible imprints on his literature and his life.[1] Although in the future he would leave behind both native country and language, his memories of the Civil War and postwar period would continue to surface in his plays.

The evolution of Gómez-Arcos's career as a writer entails four stages that are delineated by several shifts in residence, literary genre, and language. His artistic trajectory began during the 1950s when, as a law student in Barcelona, his fascination with drama grew with his involvement in various university theater productions. Eventually, he completely abandoned his legal studies in order to pursue a life in the theater in Madrid. His public debut as a dramatist took place in 1960 with the premier of *Elecciones generales*, a "farsa político-disparatada" based on Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls*, which won a prize at the Primer Festival Nacional de Teatro Joven. During the 1960s he wrote a total of fifteen plays (listed here in order of composition): *Doña Frivolidad; Unos muertos perdidos; Verano; Historia privada de un pequeño pueblo; Elecciones generales; Fedra en el Sur; El tribunal; El rapto de las siamesas* (in collaboration with Enrique Ortenbach and Adolfo Waitzman); *Balada matrimonial; El salón; Prometeo Jiménez, revolucionario; Diálogos de la herejía* (staged 1964); *Los gatos* (staged 1965, 1992–1993); *Mil y un mesías*; and *Queridos míos, es preciso contaros ciertas cosas* (staged 1994–1995). He also adapted and translated into Spanish Jean Giraudoux's *La loca de Chaillot* (staged 1962, 1989) and *Intermezzo* (staged 1963), René-Jean Clot's *La revelación* (staged 1962), and Thorbjorn Egner's *La villa de los ladrones* (staged 1963).

In 1962, he won the Premio Nacional Lope de Vega for his historical drama *Diálogos de la herejía*, but the prize was swept from his hands in a wave of

controversy, annulled in a blatant gesture of censorship that signified the Franco regime's official response to his unorthodox choice of thematic material. It was not until 1964 that Gómez-Arcos finally saw a censored version of his play premier to conflicting reviews at Madrid's Teatro Reina Victoria. Also that year, the censored text appeared in *Primer Acto* with a series of articles addressing the play's audacious subject matter and its polemical production/reception (see bibliography). The controversy surrounding *Diálogos de la herejía* would serve as a prelude to a series of combative encounters with Francoist censorship that eventually prompted Gómez-Arcos's voluntary exile from Spain in 1966. That year, upon receiving his second Lope de Vega for *Queridos míos, es preciso contaros ciertas cosas*, he used the prize money to buy a ticket to London, and two years later, he moved to France.

The second stage of his career began amid the Parisian *café-théâtres*, where he was employed as a playwright, director, actor, and sometimes even a waiter. His Parisian debut took place in February 1969 at the Latin Quarter's Café-Théâtre de l'Odéon where French spectators witnessed the dual premiere of *Et si on aboyait? (Adorado Alberto)* and *Pré-papa* (*Pre-papá*). Together, these one-act absurdist pieces share an inseparable history and exemplify his creative output during this period. Both were originally conceived in Spanish and subsequently translated into French by his friend and fellow actress Rachel Salik (who also played the role of Mademoiselle Adèle in *Pré-papa*). They were then staged in French under Gómez-Arcos's direction at the Odéon, where their extremely successful run of seventy-one performances led to the subsequent publication of Pré-papa in the bimonthly *L'Avant Scène Théâtre*. The events surrounding this Parisian debut constitute a significant moment in Gómez-Arcos's artistic evolution, for it was on this occasion that he began to comprehend fully the creative implications of his exile and his freedom from censorship. During this period, he also wrote *Sentencia dictada contra P y J, Dîner avec Mr & Mrs Q* (staged at the Café-Théâtre Campagne in 1972), and *Interview de Mrs. Muerta Smith por sus fantasmas*. In November 1972, he accepted an invitation to present *Et si on aboyait?* and *Pré-papa* at the Université de Paris-Sorbonne on the occasion of the Jornadas Internacionales Universitarias sobre el Teatro Español Contemporáneo (chronicled by Moisés Pérez Coterillo, Vicente Romero, and Ricard Salvat in the January 1973 issue of *Primer Acto*). There, he participated in a round-table discussion of the "new Spanish theater" along with playwrights Fernando Arrabal, Josep Maria Benet i Jornet, and Francisco Nieva. Both *Et si on aboyait?* and *Pré-papa* were met with enthusiastic applause, and following the *mise en scène* at the Sorbonne, the plays enjoyed still another successful run at the Café-Théâtre de l'Odéon in 1973.

The third stage in Gómez-Arcos's literary trajectory began one evening at the Odéon in 1973. An editor from Éditions Stock, captivated by what he had witnessed on stage, asked his unsuspecting waiter if the playwright was in the house. The waiter responded, "C'est moi!" And the result of this fortuitous encounter was Gómez-Arcos's first novel in French *L'agneau carnivore*, which

won Prix Hermès in 1975 (ironically, the same year as Franco's death). Since that time, Gómez-Arcos's publication of fifteen novels, written in French and translated into several languages, has earned him international acclaim. His narrative voice in French, his language of exile, expresses a cry of defiance, freedom, and openness.

The fourth and current stage of Gómez-Arcos's career can be described as a "tale of two cities," in which he divided his time between Paris and Madrid. During the 1990s, his theater underwent a renaissance on the stages of his native Spain, where seemingly overnight he has succeeded in reestablishing his prestige as a dramatist. In February 1991, the premier of *Interview de Mrs. Muerta Smith por sus fantasmas* at Madrid's Sala Olimpia (Centro Nacional de Nuevas Tendencias Escenicas) marked his triumphant return to the Spanish stage after an absence that had endured nearly twenty-six years. *Los gatos* opened at the Teatro María Guerrero (Centro Dramático Nacional) in November 1992 and was promptly selected for a national tour of Spain. Then, in December 1994, the long-overdue premier of *Queridos míos, es preciso contaros ciertas cosas* took place at the María Guerrero, twenty-eight years after it originally received the Lope de Vega prize. All three productions were directed by Carme Portaceli, and all received subventions from Spain's Ministry of Culture. It appears that Gómez-Arcos's life finally came full circle in that the Spanish government that once denigrated his work, with the advent of democracy, began to promote it. He died in 1998 in his beloved Paris.

DRAMATURGY: MAJOR WORKS AND THEMES

For Gómez-Arcos, the stage is a battleground where allegorical wars are waged, always in the name of freedom. His theater is "committed" in the sense that it is never oblivious to history and sociohistorical circumstance; yet at the same time, it resists identification with any particular political or ideological designation. Echoing the "realist" perspective of theatrical predecessors such as Alfonso Sastre and Antonio Buero Vallejo, Gómez-Arcos affirms that "el artista debe estar al servicio de la sociedad, y además, en la manera más difícil del mundo, es decir, como Casandra, haciéndole ver las cosas que no quiere ver" [the artist should be at the service of society, and moreover, in the most difficult way in the world, that is, like Cassandra, making people see what they don't want do see] (Interview with Montero 7–8). His plays employ an allegorical language of the stage as a tropological weapon in the irreverent violation of taboos and systems of oppression. The allegorical nature of his theater is a crucial thread that links his work to that of other censored playwrights of his postwar generation. However, throughout his career as both dramatist and novelist—and during the past three decades of living (and writing) in exile, far from Spain and what was Spanish fascism—he has, curiously, continued to develop and refine his allegorical strategies. The metaphoric inversions, hyperbolic depictions, and dark humor of his allegorical domains are tendencies that situate

his theater within the European and Spanish traditions of the absurd, the carnivalesque, the *esperpento*, the grotesque, the surreal, and even the postmodern—epitomized in twentieth-century Spain by the work of artists, such as Ramón del Valle-Inclán, Salvador Dalí, Luis Buñuel, Fernando Arrabal, and Pedro Almodóvar.

In *Diálogos de la herejía*, history is allegorized as an endless quest for freedom of expression. Set amid the sacrificial flames of the Spanish Inquisition, this historical drama portrays the turmoil and hysteria that rock a sixteenth-century Extremaduran village when its inhabitants are entranced by a bizarre outbreak of *alumbrismo*, embodied in the characterizations of a lustful religious pilgrim and two sensuous nuns. In a grotesque parody of the Immaculate Conception, the pilgrim (*el Peregrino*) seduces a wealthy noblewoman (Doña Tristeza de Arcos) and convinces her that she is pregnant with the son of God. At the end of the play, the *alumbrados* are burned at the stake for engaging in "heretical dialogues," a gesture that establishes a clear correspondence between censorship and the sacrificial flames of the Inquisition.

With *Los gatos*, Gómez-Arcos continues the exploration of sacrifice, oppression, eroticism, and religious fanaticism that he initiated in *Diálogos de la herejía*; however, this time, he casts these themes within a modern, bourgeois setting. *Los gatos* depicts the story of two virgin sisters in their fifties, aptly and ironically known as Pura and Angela, whose beliefs have become so twisted and misconstrued that they have lost all sense of differentiation between right and wrong. When they learn of the pregnancy of their young unmarried niece (Inés), their obsession with her sexual promiscuity compels them to commit a perverse act of murder. They bludgeon Inés to death and throw her body to their hungry cats. Hence their blind adherence to sociocultural taboos converts them into transgressors in a grotesque portrait of religious and sexual repression.

Pré-papa, a short absurdist piece containing interesting reversals of gender, is situated in the doctor's office of a science-fictive world in which the young couple John and Mary (the biblical reference is obvious) await a diagnosis for John's mysterious malady. As the audience listens to the dialogue between John and Mary, they are simultaneously subjected to the sanctimonious judgments of Mademoiselle Adèle, a devout Catholic who prays to God over the telephone, as well as the scientific-philosophical discourse of an iconoclastic female Professor. The Professor (with the help of a male nurse) informs John that he is pregnant, and his wife consequently abandons him. The Professor then proposes that John exile himself to the realm of outer space in order to express himself freely and perpetuate a new race. His baby will be born in a completely unstructured universe, free of censorship, intolerance, and restrictions.

The setting for *Interview de Mrs. Muerta Smith* is an even more elaborate—though less optimistic—futuristic universe of surreal invention, *guignolesque* caricature, and dark humor. In this dream world of phantoms and nonsensical language, Mrs. Muerta Smith, a resuscitated cadaver (and ex-American diplomat), disillusioned with how things have turned out on earth, traverses the bar-

riers of space and time as part of her quest for an interview with God. Her ultimate desire is to colonize the heavens and impose her authoritative (North American) system upon the celestial world. She is accompanied by two faithful companions: Boby, her talking dog, and "Doble Nick, blanco y negro," her gigolo. On her voyage, she discovers that both the celestial world and the underworld have been sold as material commodities to left-wing governments, and in the end, she has no other choice but to return to earth empty-handed.

Queridos míos, es preciso contaros ciertas cosas enjoyed an eleven-week run at Madrid's Teatro María Guerrero during the 1994–1995 theater season. It is, perhaps, the play that best exemplifies Gómez-Arcos's continued interest in the themes of censorship and exile. In this work, the scenic space functions as a metaphoric representation of the notion of eternal return, whereby certain universal characteristics appear forever engraved in the souls of all human beings and in the framework of their societies. In his stage directions, Gómez-Arcos calls for the construction of an allegorical theatrical realm whose concrete spatiotemporal dimensions seem infinitely and instantaneously alterable: "El escenario, es un ámbito especial que puede ser o convertirse en todo: palacio, cárcel, plaza pública, calle, campo, o cualquiera de las cinco partes del mundo, o cualquier nación, o cualquier ciudad, o cualquier casa" (17). As the play progresses, the scenic space seamlessly transforms itself into several historical contexts, transgressing the limits of linear and rational chronology: that is, a seventeenth-century Spanish colony, the nineteenth century, the Middle Ages, 1966, Nazi Germany, and so on. The characters appear indifferent to these successive transfigurations. They emerge and reemerge, scene after scene, within the different periods and places as reincarnations (and *pre*incarnations) of their former selves. The transformative setting, as a result, signifies an ambiguous "everywhere": the combination of past, present, and future. It evokes a sensation of timelessness, of a never-ending "process" and a "closed cycle" (to translate the playwright's words) in which history seems forever condemned to repeat itself (18).

The first scene is situated on the public plaza of a seventeenth-century Spanish colony where the supreme figures of sociocultural authority emerge as a collection of absurd incarnations. They include an Ubuësque Governor, the Governor's Wife, a Captain, and a pompous Duchess. The play commences with the arrival of a sideshow tumbrel that immediately infuses the stage with an air of the carnivalesque. The tumbrel is accompanied by a raucous barker (*el Feriante*) and Cassandra, his main attraction. They are clad in a slovenly sort of garb that clashes with the more aristocratic, ostentatious attire of the Governor and his counterparts.

In his opening speech, the Barker, addressing the audience as well as the characters on stage, urges passersby to witness the forecasts and divinations of Casandra, a psychic visionary who knows all and who always speaks the truth: "(*A gritos*) ¡Señoras y señores, piadosos, pecadores, hijos de España y de las Indias de España, en una palabra, cristianos, ha llegado el carro de Casandra,

la adivina, lectora de manos y de naipes, lectora del corazón, visionaria de la fortuna y del destino, de la tempestad y la plaga, del oro y la calderilla" [(Shouting) Ladies and gentlemen, saints and sinners, sons of Spain and the Spanish Indies, Christians, in a word, here you have Cassandra's cart. Cassandra, the sibyl, reader of hands and cards, reader of the heart, teller of fortunes and foreteller of fate, of tempest and plague, of gold and coppers]. (19). Imbedded in the Barker's discourse is a warning to the spectator to proceed with caution when venturing into this mythical realm: "Lo difícil es reconocer a la injusticia, saber cuáles son sus diversos camuflajes, bajo qué disfraces de orden o desorden, de paz o revolución se esconde. Por eso, queridos míos, es preciso contaros ciertas cosas" [The difficult thing is to recognize injustice, to know what its various camouflages are, under what masks of order and disorder, peace or revolution, it disguises itself. That is why, my dear friends, it's time we get certain things straight] (420). Within this theatrical space, several versions of the truth will be placed on display for all to behold. Injustice, for example, may assume several disguises. The task put forth for the spectator, therefore, is that of a quest for the truth that lurks behind an infinite assortment of masks and veils.

Through the art of divination, as the Barker infers, Casandra will play a revelatory role in this scheme, disclosing "certain things" that lie beneath the exterior facade of the Governor's realm. However, it is unclear whether the sacred words of this unkempt-looking sorceress will serve as remedies or poisons. Her name, derived from classical mythology, is an allegorical allusion to prophesy and revelation, but here the allusion is also an ominous and ambiguous one: the Cassandra of ancient myth, having resisted Apollo's love, witnessed as punishment a systematic rejection of her truths when he extinguished her prophetic abilities.

Casandra and the Barker are bearers of new, foreign ideas and "poisons" (communism, for instance), and their arrival threatens to open windows of change into the minds and souls of the people of the Governor's realm. The Duchess describes Casandra as "Una especie de quiromante, o bruja, or estudiante, or judía, o negra prosélita de la palabra 'no' vestida de greñas, peinada de harapos . . . que anda por los caminos del reino, por las calles de la ciudad, por las cafeterías, por los nightclubs, por los hipódromos y los campos de fútbol llamándolo al pan vino y al vino pan" [A sort of palmist, or witch, or student, or Jewess, or Negress, or devotee of contradiction . . . who travels the paths of the kingdom, roams the city streets, wanders through cafes, night clubs, racetracks, football fields, calling black white and white black] (47–48). Despite her nonsensical tone, her commentary subtly reverberates with the familiar sounds of fascism, the Inquisition, Nazism, and other oppressive orders. In effect, Casandra is the simultaneous embodiment of all marginalized, exiled, and disenfranchised "Others" whose voices have questioned and challenged the dominant hierarchy at one time or another. Like a censored writer, condemned for her artistic creations, her words are regarded as her most volatile weapon.

Casandra looks into the Duchess's eyes and foresees a future of sin, death, and misery, but this is not the sort of truth that the Duchess was hoping to hear. The Governor decides that Casandra must be silenced in order to suppress the power of her contaminated words. He calls for her arrest, and she is promptly quarantined within the silent walls of his prison. Eventually, the Governor offers to grant her freedom in exchange for her silence. But when Casandra rejects his proposal of censorship, exile is offered as a final solution.

If Casandra is the truth, then the hatred and censorship that challenge her words and thoughts represent a rejection of the truth. The Governor's presumptuous decision to silence the voice of a prophetess implies a denial of her premonitory visions and therefore a complete rejection of the future as well as the historical past. In order to perpetuate his system, he recognizes the need to remove the past and future from her hands, so that he may fabricate his own "false" truths. He and his cohorts are hypocrites, more concerned with appearances and falsely contrived realities than with the veritable, underlying truth.

The Captain is granted permission to escort Casandra to the border region of the Governor's realm, to a narrow strip of land known as the "tierra de nadie." In this empty zone of nothingness, they are at last able to speak freely and openly, without fear of censorship. Casandra's truth-seeing eyes and truth-bearing words have penetrated ("contaminated," in the Governor's opinion) the Captain's mind and soul. He realizes that Casandra not only *speaks* the truth; she is the embodiment of truth. "Casandra," the Captain declares "es otra cosa. Es una verdad" [is something else. She is the truth] (144). Before bidding farewell to his prisoner, he candidly reveals the (com)passion and hope that she has inspired in him: "¡No mueras nunca! ¡Necesito que vivas! Todos los días que termine mi guerra, antes de acostarme, pensaré en ti. Pensaré: 'Ella vive. Yo también.' Déjame tener esa esperanza" [Don't ever die! I need for you to live! Every day, when my war ends, before I go to bed, I'll think about you. I shall think: "She is alive. I am, too." Permit me that hope.] (63–64). But for Casandra, the distinctions between life and death do not apply. She is an immortal being: timeless, ageless, and eternal.

In the final scene, the Governor, his Wife, and the Duchess—glasses of scotch in hand—lament the unexpected return of Casandra who, according to the Duchess, is now twice as mattedly dressed and raggedly combed (161). They can no longer tolerate Casandra's ceaseless cries. This time, in order to silence her, the Governor decides to have her tongue surgically extracted. The censorship of Casandra is performed as a surgical rite of purification. The Barker plays the role of surgeon, dressed in a white robe. The ruthless stoicism maintained by the Governor and his loyal subjects clashes with the piercing scream that Casandra unleashes as her final expression of truth. The Barker/Surgeon summarizes the results of his medical exploits: "(*Con tono profesional.*) Ha sido muy sencillo. Una incisión limpia. Los nervios perfectamente degollados. El foco de infección, en vulgo, la lengua duerme en la basura el sueño de los justos. Quiero decir el sueño de Luzbel. ¡Agua de rosas para lavarme la sangre de las manos!"

[(*Professional tone.*) It was very simple. A clean incision. The nerves perfectly severed. The center of infection; in vulgar terms, the tongue sleeps the sleep of the just in the garbage pail. The dream of Beelzebub, that is. Rose water to wash the blood off my hands!"] (168).

The spectator is left with the revelation that the truth has been tossed into the trash can. As the play concludes, the Barker assumes his original stance, as in the opening scene, shouting, "¡Señores y señoras, piadosos y pecadores, ciudadanos del mundo" ["Ladies and gentlemen, saints and sinners, citizens of the world"] (170). This time, he offers to sell Casandra's story in leaflet form. The story of Casandra thus seems forever governed by the singular presence of History, forever enslaved by the authority of the Governor's system, and condemned to repeat itself ad infinitum.

CRITICS' RESPONSE

On the occasion of the premier of *Diálogos de la herejía*, Elías Gómez Picazo wrote: "La crítica, sea de individuos o de sistema, no se ve por ninguna parte. . . . No basta con encadenar blasfemias para conseguir, por el desagradable impacto que produce en los oídos, que se considere valiente al autor e importante la obra. . . . Hubo, afortunadamente, bastantes protestas, lo que salva al buen gusto de nuestro público." [It's not enough to link together a series of blasphemies so that, through the disagreeable impact produced in one's ears, the author may be considered daring or the play may be considered important. . . . Fortunately, there was a substantial amount of protest, which salvaged the good taste of our audience.]

In his 1965 review of *Los gatos*, Enrique Llovet wrote: "La aventura de Gómez-Arcos merece repeto. *Los gatos* es obra de un escritor. Nadie ha sostenido que la misión de la literatura sea, en nuestro tiempo, una misión azucarante." [The adventure that Gómez-Arcos has offered us deserves respect. *Los Gatos* is the work of a real writer. Nobody has ever claimed that the mission of literature, in our time, should be a sugar-coated one.] Following the 1992 premier of the same play, Javier Villán wrote: "Gómez Arcos aprovecha como elemento dramático el brutal contraste de un marco intolerante y atroz y el júbilo de la juventud y la vida que lo invade. La dirección de Portaceli lo subraya con tacto." [Gomez-Arcos takes full advantage of the dramatic possibilities derived from the brutal contrast between an intolerant, horrific context and the joyful youth that invades it. Portaceli's taging tactfully underlines this situation.]

Referring to the 1991 production of *Interview de Mrs. Muerta Smith por sus fantasmas*, Enrique Centeno wrote: "*Interview* es un texto todavía sorprendente. . . . Exceptional equipo para un montaje ha dirigido magníficamente Carme Portaceli en una escenografía espléndida—decrepitud, holocausto, ironía—donde Julieta Serrano muestra su inacabable talento junto a un espléndido Manuel de Blas. A todos ellos, y a lo que el estreno significaba, dedicó el púbico muchos aplausos la noche del estreno." [*Interview* is still a surprising text . . . An excep-

tional team for a production that Carme Portaceli has magnificently directed with a splendid set design—decrepitude, holocaust, irony—where Julieta Serrano displays her endless talent along with a splendid Manuel de Blas. To all of them, and to what the premier signified, the audience devoted much applause the night of the premiere.]

Following the premier of *Queridos míos, es preciso contaros ciertas cosas* in 1994, Javier Villán wrote: "*Queridos míos* . . . mantiene su desafío agitador y ni siquiera para un público anestesiado por una historia fatal resulta cómoda." [*Queridos mios* . . . maintains its rousing defiance and not even for an audience anesthetized by its own dreadful history does it result comfortably.]

AWARDS AND DISTINCTIONS

During the 1960s, Gómez-Arcos won the following Spanish prizes: Premio Primer Festival Nacional de Teatro Nuevo (1960) for *Elecciones generales*, Premio Nacional Lope de Vega (1962) for *Diálogos de la herejía* (subsequently annulled), and Premio Nacional Lope de Vega (1966) for *Queridos míos, es preciso contaros ciertas cosas.*

In addition, he has been consistently recognized by French literary circles with awards for his writing (Prix Hermès, Prix de Livre Inter, Prix Roland Dorgelès, Prix Thyde-Monnier de la Société de Gens de Lettres, Prix Européen de l'Association des Écrivains de Langue Française, Prix du Levant, and Prix Littéraire du *Quotidien du Médecin*). Gómez-Arcos has been twice a finalist for the Prix Goncourt—for *Scène de chasse (furtive)* (1978) and *Un oiseau brûlé vif* (1984)—and in 1985, he became, at the time, one of only four Spaniards (along with Picasso, Bergamín, and Alberti) ever to be decorated by the French Legion of Honor as "Chévalier de l'Ordre des Arts ès Lettres."

NOTE

1. I wish to express my appreciation to Mr. Agustín Gómez-Arcos for sharing with me the biographical data included in this entry. Most publications by and about Gómez-Arcos erroneously list his birthdate as 1939.

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