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Allegories of Dissent

The Theater of
Agustín Gómez-Arcos

Sharon G. Feldman



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Preface

*C'est le moment. Ce voyage, tu dois l'entreprendre dignement, sans peur. Avec l'espoir que moi, je ne serai pas aussi mesquine avec toi que la Vie.*¹

—Agustín Gómez-Arcos, *Ana Non*

OF ABSENCE, MEMORY, AND REDISCOVERY

“THE case of this writer is in great measure irreparable.”² This somber affirmation, written by the venerable Spanish theater critic Moisés Pérez Coterillo, appeared in his introduction to the 1991 edition of Agustín Gómez-Arcos’s one-act farce *Interview de Mrs. Muerta Smith por sus fantasmas* (Mrs. Dead Smith’s interview with her phantoms). Indeed, the case of Gómez-Arcos (b. Almería, 1933) represents an extraordinary paradox for those prone to observe the ebb and flow of European literary history. In France, where he has lived in self-imposed exile since 1968, he has garnered preeminent status as a prolific award-winning writer. He is the author of fourteen novels written directly in French, and in 1985, he became one of only four Spanish artists (along with Rafael Alberti, José Bergamín, and Pablo Picasso) ever to be decorated by the French Legion of Honor as *Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts ès Lettres*.

Yet, in Spain, the mere mention of the name “Agustín Gómez-Arcos” is bound to inspire a pensive stare or bewildered gaze.³ Curiously, in his native country, he is still regarded by many as a kind of phantom figure of Spanish theater history, a member of a lost generation of playwrights whose work was censored and prohibited during the years of the Franco dictatorship and whose rebellious cries have all but since been forgotten. He attributes his enigmatic condition to a persistent rejection and erasure of his historical memory, of the remembrances and allegorical evocations of authoritarian Spain that have always been a constant in his literature. He commented on this situation in a 1990 lecture, presented at the Dia Art Foundation in New York City:

In some cases, like mine, memory is the key to this general rejection. The freedom to remember and recount is converted automatically into

libertarianism. And if this freedom is practiced in exile, or in an exiled language, the memories that it reveals loose legitimacy, are transferred into aggressive acts aimed towards the new order, an order which, if we judge its desire to hide history, to minimize it and even to erase it, looks like a twin brother of the older order. . . . The rebellious work, the work in constant rebellion, continues without having rights to citizenship.⁴

To be scorned and cast aside by one's homeland is perhaps the most tragic form of rejection that one could possibly endure. It is analogous to the experience of an orphaned child, abandoned by his mother. The scars do not heal easily, and the damage is likely to be, in Pérez Coterillo's words, "irreparable." Over time, the artistic freedom and success that Gómez-Arcos was able to achieve through exile may have offered him a semblance of compensation for this rejection and even a feeling of revenge. Nevertheless, I personally recall a particular summer evening in which I wandered through the streets of Madrid with my friend Agustín, and as we strolled passed the hallowed Teatro Español, a site of his former battles with censorship, he confessed to me that for many years, during his occasional visits to Spain, he would feel an overwhelming sense of sorrow and anguish each time he walked by a theater. The sight of the marquee bearing a name that was not his own was a painful reminder of his absence from the Spanish stage. Despite his international acclaim as a novelist, Gómez-Arcos has always considered himself to be first and foremost a dramatist.

It was only recently that signs of a change in attitude toward his work and toward his memories began to emerge in the so-called "new democratic Spain." A prominent young director, Carme Portaceli, was invited to stage his plays, and the Spanish Ministry of Culture followed with economic support. Opportunities such as these, which he had only dreamed of as a young playwright in Madrid, continued to unfold, prompting him to embark upon the difficult journey home, to return to the scene of prior battles and publicly confront his enemies after an indeterminately prolonged absence.

Presently, as I compose this preface, Gómez-Arcos's theater is undergoing a renaissance on the stages of his native Spain, where seemingly overnight he has succeeded in reestablishing his prestige as a dramatist. The culmination of this process of renewal and rediscovery came in 1994, when he was selected as a finalist for Spain's Premio Nacional de Literatura Dramática. Between 1991 and 1994, Spanish spectators witnessed the premières of three of his plays at major Madrid theaters: the María Guerrero (Centro Dramático Nacional) and the Sala Olimpia (Centro Nacional de Nuevas Tendencias Escéni-

cas). All three of these productions received large subventions from the Spanish Ministry of Culture. The staging of *Los gatos* under Portaceli's direction during the 1992–93 theater season was so successful that it was selected for a national tour of Spain. It prompted theater critic María Francisca Vilches de Frutos to call Gómez-Arcos one of the “great renovators” of the contemporary Spanish stage.⁵ Portaceli and the cast, which included the distinguished Argentinean actor Héctor Alterio, also accepted an invitation to stage *Los gatos* in Buenos Aires. Each of these three recent premières coincided with the publication of the corresponding dramatic text. As a result, more of Gómez-Arcos's theater is now available in print than ever before, and interest in his work continues to grow on both sides of the Atlantic.

Allegories of Dissent is a case study of the artistic strategies employed by a single playwright in his ongoing struggle against censorship and oppression. In this study, I draw upon theoretical discussions of contemporary culture in order to situate Gómez-Arcos's theater in terms of the historical trajectory of twentieth-century Spanish drama, establish the relevant correlations that exist between his theater and the allegorical strategies of postmodernist art, and trace the structural and thematic transformations that emerge in the course of his radical move from censored artist to bilingual *exilé*.

This book begins with a two-part introduction. The first part, “From Censorship to Exile to Bilingualism,” is a biobibliographical profile, which navigates Gómez-Arcos's labyrinth of plays and novels in Spanish and French, maps out the fundamental stages of his literary career, and summarizes his connections with Spanish theater history. The second introductory section, “A Poetics of Expanse and Enclosure: The Allegorical Way of Seeing,” proposes a critical framework for the treatment of postmodernist allegory and, more specifically, considers the unique implications of allegorical imagery as expressed both visually and verbally in Gómez-Arcos's theater. The chapters that follow proceed in chronological order and treat seven of Gómez-Arcos's most important plays. For historic as well as thematic reasons, I have grouped the first six plays into pairs. Generally, I open my discussion of each play with a summary of the circumstances surrounding its performance, reception, and/or censorship. I then offer a detailed analysis of the dramatic text. Part I, “Spectacles of Sacrifice,” examines two pre-exilic works, *Diálogos de la herejía* (Dialogues of heresy, 1962) and *Los gatos* (The cats, 1965), in relation to the notion of sacrificial ritual.⁶ Part II, “Allegory and the Absurd,” presents analyses of *Mil y un mesías* (One thousand and one Messiahs, 1966) and *Queridos míos, es preciso contaros ciertas cosas* (My dear friends, it's time we get certain things straight, 1966) and demon-

strates how Gómez-Arcos's absurdist allegorizing functions as a strategic camouflage for an underlying critique of political oppression. Part III, "The Language of Exile," focuses on *Adorado Alberto* (Adored Alberto, 1968) and *Pré-papa* (1969), two plays written at the beginning of Gómez-Arcos's residence in France, and looks at how his treatment of the themes of sexuality, gender, and bilingualism translates into an allegorical quest for freedom of expression. Finally, Part IV, "Sanctifying the Scatological and Debasing the Divine," explores Gómez-Arcos's postmodern conception of the sacred as manifested in one of his most defiant works *Interview de Mrs. Muerta Smith por sus fantasmas* (Mrs. Dead Smith's interview with her phantoms, 1972).

In addition to the previously mentioned sections, I have also included two appendices in this study. The first is an alphabetical listing of premières and performances, including information on actors, directors, places, dates, and theaters. The second is a comprehensive interview with Mr. Gómez-Arcos, conducted in Spanish, in which he discusses his work as both playwright and novelist, and his situation as a bilingual writer living in exile.

Allegories of Dissent is the first book-length study of the theater of Gómez-Arcos. His work has received lavish attention from the popular press in the form of articles, book reviews, and play reviews, and I have included an extensive selection of these articles and reviews in my bibliography. However, to date, Gómez-Arcos's literature has received only scarce mention in critical anthologies and academic journals. On the whole, most standard histories of modern Spanish theater devote very limited attention, or no attention at all, to his work as a dramatist. María Pilar Pérez-Stansfield (*Teatro español de postguerra*, 1983), José García Templado (*El teatro español actual*, 1992), and Alberto Miralles (*Aproximación al teatro alternativo*, 1994) allude momentarily to his theater in their discussions of the playwrights of the realist generation, and Juan Emilio Aragonés (*Teatro español de postguerra*, 1971) cites his name as part of a list of *novísimos*.

The exceptions to these fleeting glimpses of his drama can be found in the works of César Oliva, L. Teresa Valdivieso, and Phyllis Zatlin. In *El teatro desde 1936* (1989), Oliva offers a short commentary on Gómez-Arcos and his activities in Spain with specific reference to *Diálogos de la herejía* and *Los gatos*. In her essay "El intertexto como principio configurativo en el teatro de Fernando Arrabal y Agustín Gómez Arcos" [*sic*] (1995), Valdivieso focuses on *Diálogos de la herejía* and *Interview de Mrs. Muerta Smith por sus fantasmas*, observing a series of biographical and stylistic parallels in the work of Gómez-

Arcos and Arrabal. In *Cross-Cultural Approaches to Theatre: The Spanish-French Connection* (1994), Zatlin devotes her attention to Gómez-Arcos's ties with the French stage, offering brief commentaries on the productions of *Et si on aboyait* and *Pré-papa* in Paris, and *Diálogos de la herejía* and *Interview de Mrs. Muerta Smith por sus fantasmas* in Madrid. In addition, Zatlin's essay "The Return of the Prodigal: The Theatre of Gómez-Arcos" (1995) provides a fascinating overview of Gómez-Arcos's recent return to the Spanish stage.

With regard to the treatment of Gómez-Arcos's narrative work, I am aware of the publication of only two scholarly articles: Elena Gascón-Vera's psychoanalytic study "Los reflejos del yo: Narcisismo y androginia en Agustín Gómez-Arcos" (1991), and Ann Duncan's comprehensive essay titled "Agustín Gómez-Arcos" in *Beyond the Nouveau Roman: Essays on the Contemporary French Novel* (1990).⁷

Allegories of Dissent considers published and unpublished, performed and never-performed plays. If I were to cite a precedent for this type of study it would be George E. Wellwarth's *Spanish Underground Drama* (1972; Spanish translation, 1978). Wellwarth attempted to resuscitate the theater of more than twenty Spanish dramatists whose work had been suppressed by Francoist censorship. Although he perceived the first wave of realist playwrights (e.g., Antonio Buero Vallejo, Carlos Muñiz, Lauro Olmo, and Alfonso Sastre) as undoubtedly pertaining to the Spanish "underground," he chose not to include them in his study and, instead, devoted his attention to what he considered to be a younger "lesser-known" generation of dramatists, often referred to as the "new" Spanish theater and/or the "symbolist" generation (e.g., Jerónimo López Mozo, Manuel Martínez Mediero, Miguel Romero Esteo, and José Ruibal). Wellwarth eventually encountered abundant criticism for his overall selection of dramatists and his omission of the realists—who considered themselves to be just as far "underground" as the younger generation.⁸ Nevertheless, his study, written during the period of the Franco dictatorship, was significant in its endeavor to uncover and rescue these muted voices. He did not include Gómez-Arcos in his book, although he conceivably might have done so.

With regard to this process of resuscitation and redemption of once-prohibited works, it is also important to recognize the crucial endeavors of José Monleón, editor of the leading Spanish theater journal *Primer Acto*. In 1980, during the democratic transition, Monleón organized a Spanish theater series at the Teatro María Guerrero, known as "El ciclo de los lunes," which was devoted to the revival of plays by several dramatists whose works had been prohibited under Franco. Monleón subsequently published the work of many of these

playwrights, such as Alberto Miralles, Jerónimo López Mozo, and José Ricardo Morales, in *Primer Acto*.

Over the course of the past two decades—with the exception of Buero Vallejo, Sastre, and Fernando Arrabal—very few monographic studies of individual playwrights from the Spanish post-Civil War period have appeared in print. Some relatively recent departures from this norm include Jesús Barrajón on Francisco Nieva (1987), Ángel Cabo on José Martín Recuerda (1993), Elda María Phillips on José Ruibal (1984), Virtudes Serrano on Domingo Miras (1991), Juan Tebar on Fernando Fernán Gómez (1984), and Zatlin on Jaime Salom (1982). There are also various studies that take up the work of several playwrights from the postwar and/or post-Franco period within a single volume. Some noteworthy examples are Gwynne Edwards's *Dramatists in Perspective: Spanish Theatre in the Twentieth Century*, 1985; Martha Halsey and Phyllis Zatlin's anthology *The Contemporary Spanish Theater: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 1988; Marion P. Holt's *The Contemporary Spanish Theater (1949–1972)*, 1975; Oliva's *Disidentes de la generación realista (Introducción a la obra de Carlos Muñiz, Laura Olmo, Rodríguez Méndez and Martín Recuerda)*, 1979; and Alfonso de Toro and Wilfried Floeck's anthology *Teatro español contemporáneo: Autores y tendencias*, 1995. Only this last volume treats the theater of Gómez-Arcos: in Valdivieso's essay on his theater and that of Arrabal.⁹

It is my hope that the present study will serve to uncover the work of yet another playwright from the postwar period and thereby contribute to the process of recuperation and reconsideration that can be traced back to Wellwarth and Monleón. I am concerned with not only how Gómez-Arcos's allegories of dissent may have been perceived in the past, in totalitarian Spain; but also, how they can be interpreted in the present, in a contemporary world where oppression and intolerance have become universal notions, indelibly inscribed in the headlines of our daily newspapers. In the program notes for the 1994 production of *Queridos míos, es preciso contaros ciertas cosas*, director Carme Portaceli wrote that the voice of Gómez-Arcos is that of "someone who, unfortunately like so many others, had to leave this country because he was not permitted to speak, to work, or to live." That same voice that was once silenced is now able to speak, even to scream, and if we refuse to listen to it today, in the present, then we run the risk of validating the censorship that was once imposed upon it in the past. Perhaps the moment has finally arrived in which Gómez-Arcos's memories can and should be heard.

I wish to express my sincere appreciation to Lee Fontanella, who introduced me to the work of Agustín Gómez-Arcos and encouraged

me to take on this project. I shall always be grateful for his generosity and mentoring. My gratitude extends as well to Andrew P. Debicki, Roberta Johnson, Douglass Rogers, W. B. Worthen, and especially Phyllis Zatlín for their thoughtful insights and suggestions and their unyielding encouragement. I am grateful to Moisés Pérez Coterillo, Director of the Centro de Documentación Teatral, and to Ana Jelín of Producciones Teatrales Contemporáneas for providing me with the photographs that are reprinted in this study. I also wish to express my gratitude to Agustín Gómez-Arcos for his friendship and kindness in graciously providing me with unpublished manuscripts and sharing with me his thoughts on his life, his work, and the creative process. I am grateful to my family for their endless enthusiasm, and finally, a special thanks goes to my friend Javier Guitart, whose passion for detective fiction facilitated my first encounter with Agustín in Madrid.

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