

# Truth and reconciliation: Confronting the past in *Death and the Maiden* (Ariel Dorfman) and *Playland* (Athol Fugard)<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

### Truth and reconciliation: Confronting the past in *Death and the Maiden* (Ariel Dorfman) and *Playland* (Athol Fugard)

*Both plays deal with the devastating effects of the sociopolitical on the individual and point to the ways that factuality enters fiction, either to defictionalize it or refictionalize it. The characters in each play confront the past by seeking the truth, either to tell it or have it told to them. In Fugard's play, written in the middle of a transition period, the confession is complete and this resolution places the play in the generally utopian world of protest theatre. Dorfman's play, written after the redemocratization of Chile, is grounded in uncertainties, half-truths and deceit. The confession is incomplete and thus there is no resolution or final harmony, placing this play within the operative dilemmas of the theatre of crisis.*

## 1. Introduction

In the sense that both of these plays deal with the devastating effects of the sociopolitical on the individual, they point to the ways, in the words of Elrud Ibsch (1993:188), that “factuality enters into fiction” either to ‘defictionalize’ it – the case of *Death and the Maiden* – or to ‘refictionalize’ it – as in *Playland*. The interaction between the factual and the

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imaginary inheres in the plays' characters, in their struggle to come to terms with their past experiences in the light of a shifting present. The dilemmas they face with respect to the past place them in a state of crisis, in the medical sense of a 'turning point' between death and recovery. *Crisis* is a term which has been used to describe aspects of Latin American society and literature, particularly dramatic literature, of the late 1960s and it is being used again to describe the 1990s.<sup>2</sup> In short, a society is said to be in crisis when it has undergone systemic shifts – political, economic, social and cultural – which bring about "the subjective, personal experience of disorientation and loss of identity" (Taylor, 1991:6). What I seek to demonstrate is that the unresolved crisis in *Death and the Maiden* roots this play in the urgency and complexity of crisis ideology – a factual reality – whereas the resolution in *Playland* identifies it as a play which attempts a leap of faith over the crisis ideology and into the promise of a negotiated and happy-ended future – an utopian fiction.

The reception of the 1992 Johannesburg productions of *Death and the Maiden* and *Playland* provides some indicators of how both the public and critics deal with plays whose subject is the legacy of a violent past as it is reconfronted in a specific present by characters representing the victimizers, as well as the victims. Dorfman's play was critically acclaimed at the time, but was not a commercial success, whereas the Fugard production was a commercial success but the critics were divided: praise from white critics, and sceptical if not negative reviews from black African critics.<sup>3</sup> The reasons which account for the different receptions will emerge in the course of this study.

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<sup>2</sup> Diane Taylor's *Theatre of Crisis* (1991) examines plays of the late 1960s and early 1970s in Latin America and shows how they reflect a loss of ideological certainty. George Yúdice and others in *On Edge. The Crisis of Contemporary Latin American Culture* (1992) describe Latin America of the 1990s as a continent 'in drift', struggling to come to terms with the so-called 'new world order'.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Victor Metsoamere: "One can best describe *Playland* as a convenient conscience salve for South African whites who wish to be forgiven for racism and its related socio-political ills of over 300 years" (*Sowetan*, 1992-07-22, p. 23) and Barry Ronge: "... it is a play about redemption and forgiveness, which in this time of hatred felt like a cool, healing balm" (*Sunday Times*, 1992-07-19, p. 17).

*Playland* was written in 1992 – a year which saw the breakdown of negotiations among the parties to the transition and increasing violence on the ground in South Africa – but the action of the play extends over the last day of 1989 and the first of 1990. It is set at a funfair called Playland in a small town in the Karoo where its two characters – Martinus and Gideon – confess their past crimes to one another. Martinus, Playland’s black night watchman, fifteen years previously had murdered a white *baas* for raping the family servant, Martinus’s fiancée; Gideon, in the year of 1989, had ambushed and killed twenty-seven SWAPO (South West African People’s Organization) fighters in the ‘Operational Area’. After their respective self-revelations, there is tacit forgiveness and a New Year resolution to give the future and themselves a chance. The past in *Playland* is re-lived in a present that projects itself into a more promising future: one part of it already known at the time of writing – the historic reforming speech of 2 February 1990. On that day, then president F.W. de Klerk not only announced the impending release of Nelson Mandela, the long-imprisoned leader of the African National Congress (ANC), but also the unbanning of previously proscribed political parties and the repeal of the remaining apartheid legislation.

*Death and the Maiden* was written and set in 1991, in a seaside cottage in what is recognisably Chile, though, as the author states, it could be “in any other country that has given itself a democratic government just after a long period of dictatorship” (Dorfman, 1992:1). Each of the three characters in the play – Paulina, Gerardo and Roberto – is forced to grapple with the truth about past atrocities perpetrated by agents of the state during the previous regime. Paulina, a victim of torture and rape as a political prisoner, suddenly and unexpectedly encounters Roberto, the man who, she believes, brutalized her fifteen years before; her husband Gerardo, who has just been appointed to sit on his country’s truth commission to investigate past human rights violations that ended in death or disappearance, is forced by Paulina to extract a confession from Roberto about his role as her torturer; Roberto, a doctor and a man Paulina never actually saw before because she was kept blindfolded during her torture, consistently denies that he was ever her victimizer and claims that his confession is therefore a false one. The three characters face dilemmas of how to respond to the confession. None of them can offer a

solution. They all re-live the past in the context of a specific present. In Chile, this was 1991, one year after the return of civilian democracy in 1990, but more importantly, in the same year as the publication of the report of the Commission of Truth and Reconciliation which investigated deaths and disappearances in Chile from 1973 to 1990.

The centrality of crisis in each play informs the following notes which focus on three constructions of crisis: the characters as emblems of crisis; the discourse of confession as a sign of resolved or unresolved crisis; and the role of the audience in connecting with or remaining outside the representation of crisis.

## **2. Characters as emblems of crisis**

The characters in each play are the most obvious portrayers of crisis: they either are or see themselves as poised on the edge between forgiveness and condemnation, forgetting and remembering, revenge and reconciliation; they also hover between being victims and victimizers.

From the outset in *Death and the Maiden*, it is clear that Paulina is a victim many times over. The crime perpetrated against her is textually implicit at the beginning of the play: in Gerardo's concern about her possible inability to physically and emotionally withstand hearing about the testimonies presented to him (Dorfman, 1992:8); in her pointed remarks about the exclusions from the truth commission (9); and in her desperate wish for the whole truth to come out (10). She was raped and tortured fifteen years earlier for refusing to reveal information about Gerardo, her then boyfriend and fellow dissident. However, this is a crime which has never been acknowledged – “Gerardo: ... Nobody knows. Not even your mother knows” (Dorfman, 1992:8) – and thus Paulina has suffered the consequences of politically enforced silence, and will continue to do so as the play reveals. It is not something she and her husband Gerardo talk about either and this other silence undoubtedly has exacerbated Paulina's psychological damage. Her history of breakdowns is also an index of how well torture works: its true purpose – as many documents on human rights violations attest – is not to get information from political prisoners but more importantly to punish them, to deprive them of their individuality and

to instil fear in the larger society.<sup>4</sup> However, in this play Dorfman does not limit the character of Paulina to that of being an object of past torture because, for most of the play we see her as victimizer as well as victim. Roberto, the doctor who could have been her torturer, is now her prisoner and she threatens to take immediate revenge on him several times. She, in effect, subjects him to illegal imprisonment and torture. Her behaviour is described as 'sick' by her husband and as she veers from emotional vindictiveness to cool and calculating legal logic, she does seem to undermine the moral authority which her suffering has conferred on her.

This hovering between the roles of victim/victimizer is evident in the two male characters in *Death and the Maiden*, where it is also portrayed as complex and deliberately confusing. Roberto spends most of the play tied up and threatened by a gun; he is thus cast in the victim role. Also it is not clear until near the end of the play that, more than likely, he was indeed Paulina's torturer. His confession, which is supposedly based on evidence from Paulina's testimony to Gerardo, is used as a further device to foreground the changing (and interchangeable) roles of victim and victimizer. When Roberto describes the rape and torture of Paulina, we ask whose voice it is – his voice as victimizer or hers as victim? I believe it is both and this double agency brings before the public – audience or reader – in a brief and stark narration, evidence of how human lives have been destroyed – those of the victim and the victimizer:

Roberto: ... It was slowly, almost without realizing how, that I became involved in more delicate operations, they let me sit in on sessions where my role was to determine if the prisoners could take that much torture, that much electric current. At first I told myself that it was a way of saving people's lives ... But afterwards I began to – bit by bit the virtue I was feeling turned into excitement ... the excitement, it hid, it hid, it hid from me what I was doing, the swamp of what – by the time Paulina Salas was brought in it was already too late. Too late (Dorfman, 1992:59).

The pronoun 'they' to which Roberto alludes points to the further all-embracing victimizer in this play: the state.

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, *Síntesis del informe de la Comisión Verdad y Reconciliación* (Anon., 1991a) and *Uruguay Nunca Más. Human Rights Violations, 1972-1985* (Anon., 1992).

Gerardo can also be seen as a victim and as a victimizer. He was powerless to protect Paulina fifteen years before and now both his sense of humanity and his position as a member of his country's truth commission overwhelm him as he faces Roberto. He recoils from taking personal revenge against a guilty Roberto, yet he cannot bring him to justice, for his crime remains outside the terms of the truth commission. If Roberto is innocent, Gerardo has colluded in a situation of torture. The solution, engineered by both men, is to have Roberto sign what is supposedly a 'false' confession in order to appease the 'sick' Paulina. In this way Gerardo is freed from having to serve justice at all. He also becomes a victimizer of his own wife, closing her off from access to the full truth. Here there is an implicit allusion to the continued role of the state as victimizer: the Chilean Truth Commission left undisclosed the identities of the persons responsible for human rights violations.

The final resolution in Fugard's *Playland* makes it more a play *about* crisis than *of* crisis. At the beginning, both Martinus and Gideon see themselves as already condemned and therefore beyond crisis: Martinus because he is not sorry for his crime and Gideon because he cannot receive absolution for his. However, there is a point in the play wherein crisis and moral uncertainty are brought back. This is when Gideon's remorse is seen to unsettle Martinus's convictions about his judgement of himself and the world. But that moment soon passes and the crisis is resolved through a mutual willingness to forget the past and make a commitment to the future. The past that is to be forgiven is not just Gideon's and Martinus's, but also, it seems, the broader sociopolitical one which gave the black man no hope of recourse to justice and the white man an unquestioning belief that freedom-fighters were terrorists and therefore legitimate targets for elimination by any means.

Although there is no on-stage female character in *Playland*, it is worth noting here that 'women as victims' are central figures in the crisis as lived and re-lived by Martinus and Gideon. Martinus's girlfriend was a 'silenced' victim of racial and class oppression: by the employer who raped her and the judge who disbelieved her version. For Gideon it is the figure of the lonely and silent mother grieving the loss of her dead sons which brings him to the full realization of the meaning of his crime and to seeking forgiveness for it.

### 3. Confessional modes: Forgiveness and reconciliation

The characters in both plays engage in a specific kind of communicative event: *the confession*. Confession is essentially a narrative mode in which one person recounts or unburdens to another aspects of his or her past, aspects which usually involve some wrongdoing.<sup>5</sup> There are several elements in the confession which can be examined: the nature of the crime or misdeed confessed; the participants – namely, the confessant (the one who confesses) and the confessor (the one who hears the confession); the act of confession itself; and the effects of the confession. It is a discourse which intersects with other discourses, theological, ritualistic, juridical and inquisitional – official and unofficial.

In *Playland*, it is clear from the outset of the play that both Martinus and Gideon are burdened by their respective and different pasts. Why is it then that these two men come to hear each other's confessions? After all, neither has the moral authority to be the confessor of the other. Gideon initially assumes the role of self-styled inquisitor when Martinus's remarks about the fires of hell make him suspect that the black watchman is guilty of the sin of murder. However, Martinus reveals nothing, assuming the black man's traditional mode of resistance to white domination: withdrawal and avoidance. Gideon is the first to confess that he killed, and he does so in answer to a straight question from Martinus. The black watchman's 'confession' is not meant to be a confession at all, but rather a warning to Gideon to stop his menacing and physically aggressive behaviour. Gideon's response to this threat is to dismiss both the validity of the reasons which brought Martinus to murder and to underplay the severity of this crime in comparison with his own killing of twenty-seven men. There is something in this, Gideon's full confession, however, which turns Martinus from an unwilling confessor into an interested one: the white man's feelings of remorse. From this point in the play it is Martinus who asks the questions and Gideon who readily answers, delving further into the past layers of his life and revealing more and more his wish for forgiveness. Gideon's act of confession is complete and he has shown remorse; Martinus, in his role as confessor and now judge, is faced with

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<sup>5</sup> Of the nine meanings for 'confession' in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, five include the notion of the acknowledgment of sin, wrongdoing, fault, crime, etc.

the consequences of punishing him or forgiving him – Gideon: “... Forgive me or kill me. That’s the only choice you’ve got” (Fugard, 1992:58). But he is defeated by the choice – the didascalía state: “It is Martinus’s moment of defeat” (58) – as he cannot really do either. This impasse brings both men into a real dialogue with one another, for the first time in the play. They talk about their present feelings, the dreams they had in the past for a different future, and this, in turn, brings them to make a commitment to their immediate future. Each one makes a New Year’s wish for the other – a wish which is accepted: to let go of past hatreds – of the self and the other – and to laugh together at the next New Year.

In Fugard’s play all the conditions of the confession are fulfilled: the confessants tell all, remorse is expressed, forgiveness granted and reconciliation achieved. However, it is important to note that the circumstances and nature of the crimes in *Playland* are quite different from those of *Death and the Maiden*. This, in turn, points to the different ways in which the discourse of a state ideology is inscribed in each play. Gideon, as a soldier-victimizer, is in the service of the state. Fugard, however, places him in a war zone – ‘The Operational Area’ – wherein both sides in the conflict committed atrocities and therefore both the victims and the victimizers can be regarded as war casualties. The fact that Martinus was provoked beyond endurance does not alter the fact that he committed a crime for which he was punished according to the law and he served out his sentence. In *Death and the Maiden* the crime is the explicit violation of human rights by an agent of the state, the state being the invisible yet ever present ‘third’ party which is responsible for creating both the victims and the victimizers in this play. The state is present in two time frames in *Death and the Maiden*: there is the past state which sought to rid society of ‘dangerous elements’ and the current one which seeks the accommodation of pragmatism, the ‘politics of agreements’ whereby the demands for individual justice are set against the concerns for a stable future.<sup>6</sup> In *Playland* the nature of the crimes allows for more distance and indirectness.

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<sup>6</sup> ‘The politics of agreements’ was the style adopted by the multi-party grouping of President Patricio Aylwin’s government of Chile (1990-1994) wherein the search



The confessional mode in *Death and the Maiden* places Paulina and Gerardo in the role of confessors. Both are entitled to hear Paulina's torturer confess the truth. However, this authority is compromised by the circumstances in which the confession is brought about. Paulina uses a gun to threaten Roberto to give it and her husband to get it. Obviously, Roberto is an unwilling confessant and Gerardo an unwilling confessor. Paulina is the only deliberate confessor. However, she also acts as judge and the question arises: Does she seek vengeance or justice?

The on-stage portrayal of the act of confession is both complex and problematic. Roberto, the unwilling confessant, arranges for it to be perceived as false from the beginning: he persuades Gerardo to obtain a statement from Paulina so he can use it as the basis for his confession – "... I'll need your help, you'd have to tell me so I can – invent, invent, based on what you tell me" (Dorfman, 1992:48). Gerardo's role in taking down her statement, just, as he says to her, "as if you were sitting in front of the commission" (57) is thus compromised as he does not tell her the truth about how her testimony is to be used. Paulina's statement before her husband contains "small lies, small variations" (64) which she later confesses she had inserted to see if Roberto would correct them, which he did. These corrections verify for her the truth of his confession and his identity as her torturer. Nevertheless, she allows her husband to continue to believe that Roberto's confession is false. Does this playing with the truth in a fictional text trivialize the evil truth of torture and rape perpetrated by agents of the state? I believe the answer is no.<sup>7</sup> Paulina, the character, may represent an imaginary victim, but the factual truth of victims of torture – the documentary intertext of the Chilean truth commission – enters the fiction of the play, and in effect defictionalizes it. Gerardo at one point in the play, in his role as counsellor to Roberto, argues that Paulina's need to know the truth "... coincides with ... the

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was for consensus and compromise (*Human Rights and the "Politics of Agreements"* – Anon., 1991b:4).

<sup>7</sup> However, at least one overseas production of the play, where it was billed as a 'political thriller', suggests otherwise. I refer here to the 1992 Broadway production so billed, and the *New York Times* critic's remark: "History should record that Mr Nichols [the producer] has given Broadway its first escapist entertainment about political torture" (Rich, 1992:B1).

whole country's need to put into words what happened to us" (46). That 'us', that relationship between the victim and the victimizer is portrayed on-stage in the dark by means of a tape recorder. Paulina's statement to her husband is overlapped by Roberto's voice, accompanied by the second movement of Schubert's quartet *Death and the Maiden*. The betrayal of one human being by another is projected through this music and the commentary on it. Paulina's voice states: "... There is no way of describing what it means to hear that wonderful music in the darkness, when you haven't eaten for the last three days, when your body is falling apart, when ..." (58). Roberto's voice continues: "I would put on the music because it helped me in my role, the role of good guy, as they call it, I would put on Schubert because it was a way of gaining the prisoner's trust" (58).

The deep truth of human betrayal in its most grotesque form undermines the surface toying with the truthfulness of the confession in this play. However, that said, the moral quandary as to what to do about the truth remains. Roberto confesses and asks for forgiveness. For Gerardo the confession is ultimately a false one, and one in which he has conspired in order to appease Paulina. Therefore he avoids taking any action except ensuring that Roberto is let go. For Paulina, Roberto's confession is true but since he denies it, his stated plea for forgiveness is false. She is faced with the dilemma of whether to punish him – "What do we lose by killing one of them?" (66) – or forgive him. In the end we know that she does neither. In letting him go, she ends her role as victimizer and breaks the cycle of violence that threatened to continue, as Roberto pointedly alludes to throughout the play. She also protects her husband by allowing him to believe in his own lie. Paulina remains a victim, however, as she has condemned herself to reliving a past never fully disclosed and for which the guilty have not repented. The conditions of the act of confession are not fulfilled in *Death and the Maiden*, and the final reconciliation is truly an 'arranged' one.

#### **4. Role of the audience**

How is the 'live' audience meant to deal with the dilemmas presented by these plays? Each play sets quite different conditions for their respective audiences. In *Playland* the role of the audience is that of on-looker, watching two people engage with each other, express their inner conflicts,

and finally resolve them and go on their separate ways. There is an escape from the world outside the funfair and outside the dramatic world itself.

The author of *Death and the Maiden* does not allow the audience to watch a conflict unfold and to maintain a distance between the real and dramatic worlds. The stage directions require that a giant mirror descend on stage in front of the characters, just as Paulina struggles with her dilemma of whether to kill Roberto or set him free. This forces the audience to face themselves in that mirror and to struggle with the same dilemma.<sup>8</sup> In addition to this stage effect, there is a reverse crossing of the proscenium arch, as it were, in the way Schubert's quartet *Death and the Maiden* is used in this play.<sup>9</sup> When a musical piece such as this is played to accompany a torture session, not only is its original function completely perverted, but it is unlikely that this function will ever be recovered for those involved. This becomes clear in the last scene of the play, when Paulina, Gerardo and Roberto re-live their respective pasts listening to this music played now in its intended setting: a concert hall. The quartet itself is a further carrier of meaning. It is based, in part, on the music accompanying the song of the same title previously composed by Franz Schubert. In the song the Maiden pleads with Death to pass her by, while Death enjoins her to sleep softly in his arms, assuring her that he is her friend and that he has not come to punish her. Through this music Ariel Dorfman has transformed the unspeakable trauma of human betrayal, torture and rape into a more collective memory, thus contributing to "the struggle against forgetfulness" (Jelin, 1994:49).

## 5. Concluding remarks

As was said at the beginning, both *Playland* and *Death and the Maiden* are examples of plays dealing with crisis ideology. However, the resolution of crisis in *Playland* locates Fugard's play in the utopian and

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<sup>8</sup> For financial reasons, this stage effect was not used in the South African production of the play.

<sup>9</sup> This more than 'decorative' role for music in a play is also evident in Tom Stoppard's *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* (1978), a work which integrates music and drama to portray the plight of a political dissident in a totalitarian regime.

fictional future generally associated with protest theatre. Perhaps in 1992, the time of writing, it was important to be reminded that it was better than 1989, the play's time, and that a future held promise if South Africans would only trust each other and negotiate it. The unresolved crisis of *Death and the Maiden* places this play in the dilemmas of its time and place. Dorfman wrote his play out of his own experience as an exile returned to Chile at a particular time, in 1991, when his country had just made its decision about dealing with its past. The dilemmas his compatriots faced were real and his play projects them through character-victims like Paulina and Gerardo, whose lives have been damaged and will remain so for years to come, despite the decisions they themselves made for the greater good. What might this play mean now to audiences in South Africa? Would it be regarded as closer to our reality in 1995 than it was in 1992? Perhaps already foreseeing this reality three years ago, Ariel Dorfman addressed himself to South Africans with these words: "One must tell as much of the truth as one can stand" (Gevisser, 1992:41).

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