

## Candidate 5 evidence

Advanced Higher Drama Dissertation

**Oppression in Theatre: How did the Pinochet Dictatorship of 1973-1990 affect Chilean Theatre Companies' creativity, and what developments have been made in Theatre since the regime?**

Word Count: 3297

**Oppression in Theatre: How did the Pinochet Dictatorship of 1973-1990  
affect Chilean Theatre Companies' creativity, and what developments  
have been made in Theatre since the regime?**

All South-American countries —except for Guyana and French Guiana— have gone through dictatorships, and usually more than once<sup>1</sup>. We always hear how dictatorships have affected people psychologically, and how the economy has been affected, but what happened with theatre? How is creativity affected in a period of ten to twenty years where everything is censored? How can there be self-expression when the very essence of it is prohibited, persecuted and murdered?

Chilean theatre company Ictus was created before the dictatorship, continued throughout and is still active today. Their story conveys the changing socio-historical contexts of Chile and their plays mirror the social reality even when they were being censored, yet, every story is different, and Ictus does not represent the reality of most Chilean theatre companies. However, as one of the few that survived the dictatorship, its growth previous to, during and after the regime will be a useful depiction of Chilean history.

The history of Chilean theatre began with the Spanish conquerors, but didn't develop until 1810 with the opening of the first purpose built theatre called Teatro Coliseo<sup>2</sup>, located in Santiago, the Chilean capital. This was the same year the independence

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<sup>1</sup> Notimérica (2016), *La larga lista de dictadores iberoamericanos de los últimos 50 años*. Available: <http://www.notimerica.com/politica/noticia-larga-lista-dictadores-iberoamericanos-ultimos-50-anos-20160813122949.html>

<sup>2</sup> This is Chile (2009), *Theater*. Available: <https://www.thisischile.cl/theater/?lang=en>

process began, and as expected, several things changed: one of them was the support and stimulation of the Arts in general, theatre in particular. A century later, important names started emerging, plays with social importance and some theatre companies. The first company was formed in 1917, led by Enrique Báguena and Arturo Bührle, named Báguena-Bührle, yet, theatre in Chile —because of the country's isolation from the world— developed slowly<sup>3</sup>. It was in the early 1940's when the change began: two university theatre groups were created, which revitalised theatre in Chile. In 1941, Teatro Experimental de la Universidad de Chile (University of Chile's Experimental Theatre) was created under the leadership of Pedro de la Barra and renamed in 1959, to Instituto de Teatro de la Universidad de Chile, or ITUCH— and Teatro Ensayo de la Universidad Católica, or TEUC, was created in 1943. Both groups implemented European methods, such as those of Stanislavski, Copeau, Piscator and Antoine, theatre growing vivaciously. From both these universities' groups the most important practitioners and plays were created, vibrant plays which mostly included socio-economic themes present in society, often as a form of social critique<sup>3</sup>. It was 1955 when third-year students from TEUC created a separate company: Ictus. This company has lasted through the years, their relevance growing, and their resistance making them the most resilient company in Chile. In 1961 they performed Jorge Díaz's absurd play *El Cepillo de Dientes* (*The Toothbrush*), for in that decade the Theatre of the Absurd was booming in Europe, and as previously mentioned, there was a high European influence at the time. The production began as a one-act play and then developed into a full play years later— Ictus becoming one of the first groups to explore elements of the Theatre of the Absurd.

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<sup>3</sup> Banham, Martin, *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre*, (Cambridge, 2000), p196.

Although in Chile there was a clear preference towards Realism, and conventional plays and performances, the absurdist playwright made a name for himself. Jorge Díaz was famous for his black humour, which he referred to as existential clowning, his critique of Latin American politics and the themes of ineffective communication, solitude and deception<sup>4</sup>. He wrote *Counterpoint For Two Tired Voices: The Visiting Room*, and *Love Yourself Above All Others*, but his most famous work is definitely *The Toothbrush*. The story follows an estranged couple and their “miscommunication within a circus atmosphere.”<sup>5</sup> The bourgeois marriage is constantly looking for ways to kill time, disguising themselves as different characters. There is such a variety of personalities that most of the time Jorge Díaz’s script refers to the characters simply with the pronouns HE and SHE, their identities trapped within their gender stereotypes —a partly hidden critique towards the society at the time, a trait of Díaz’s productions. To explore this further, the stage is divided in two: one half being the woman’s half and the other one the husband’s<sup>6</sup>. This idea is highlighted in the beginning, as the play begins with SHE and her monologue:

*“I am his wife. So I should be feminine. Which isn't easy. There are rules which say I am to act helpless and bat my eyes to get Big Feet to protect me. I am also supposed to be attractive. (...) I am tired, terribly tired of being a feminine wife to that masculine animal who scratches himself, systematically loses his hair and sings ballads which have long since gone out of style! (Dreamily) I would like, I would like to get fat, smoke a cigar, and be painlessly and elegantly widowed.”<sup>7</sup>*

<sup>4</sup> Out of the Wings (2011), *Jorge Díaz*. Available: <http://www.outofthewings.org/db/author/jorge-diaz>

<sup>5</sup> Banham, Martin, *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre*, (Cambridge, 2000), p196.

<sup>6</sup> Giordano, E, Casa Litterae (2018), *El cepillo de dientes de Jorge Díaz*. Available: <http://www.casalitterae.cl/index.php/contexto/teatro/87-el-cepillo-de-dientes-de-jorge-diaz>

<sup>7</sup> Díaz, Jorge, *The Toothbrush*, (Sweet Briar, 1991), p6.

Álvaro Viguera did a recent production of said play on May 2017, with Chilean actors Geraldine Neary and Luis Cerda, honoring ten years after Díaz's death. In spite of the Chilean's fondness of Realism, *The Toothbrush* was one of the most popular plays of 2017, with 10 thousand spectators<sup>8</sup>, which shows the play's transcendence over time.

The original version in 1961 was a success as well, pushing Jorge Díaz to become an influential theatre practitioner. The play is considered a fundamental part of Chilean theatre's history, studied in all theatre careers and even has a place in Memoria de Chile, a national website which compiles important historic events relevant to the Chilean history. Jorge Díaz's *The Toothbrush* shattered what people thought they knew about theatre and created a completely new tendency. The previous year, Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* had been performed by the same company, but it was considered merely a European elitist piece, which would eventually go out of fashion<sup>6</sup>. Díaz's play on the other hand, adapted the absurd to the Chilean reality of the time, exposing said reality from within instead of distancing us from it. *The Toothbrush* had such a positive impact that it is now considered the inauguration of Theatre of the Absurd in Chile.



<sup>8</sup> Bahamondes, P, La Tercera (2018), *75 años del Teatro UC, agitador de las filas universitarias*. Available: <http://www.latercera.com/cultura/noticia/75-anos-del-teatro-uc-agitador-las-filas-universitarias/63045>

1960's Chilean theatre was moving forward, growing and evolving, pulsating with life and creativity, but its progress stopped dead when the dictatorship began in 1973. The country had a socialist president (Salvador Allende) in the midst of the Cold War, which was complemented with an economic crisis. On September 11, 1973, the Chilean armed forces with the support of the USA staged a coup and took over. Allende committed suicide that morning and the military government began. Pinochet's 17-year regime killed, tortured and exiled thousands of political opponents, hence it comes as no surprise that theatre and other forms of self-expression were repressed as well, "Theatre was seen by Pinochet as an act of terrorism"<sup>9</sup>. There were black lists, which had practitioners' and actors' names on them so that they wouldn't be hired, causing 90% unemployment among the Chilean actors by December of 1973<sup>10</sup>. Only three months had passed since the beginning of the regime and theatre was already being highly censored by the state. In March of the next year, theatre company El Aleph staged *Y al principio existía la vida (And in the beginning there was life)*, with a harsh and direct critique towards the dictatorship, one of the characters of the play being Allende himself, performed so the audience would feel sympathy towards the former president. The consequences were severe. The play's director Oscar Castro along with several actors and producers were arrested and exiled, while other actors and their families just disappeared<sup>11</sup>. Although never found, it's not difficult to guess what happened to them: in 1991, the new president attempted to make up for the corruption in Pinochet's dictatorship and

<sup>9</sup> Quote by Benjamin Galemiri, included in Billington, M, The Guardian (2004), *On with the show*. Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2004/sep/07/theatre.chile>

<sup>10</sup> Martínez Vera, V, Universidad del Bío-Bío (2014), *El testimonio teatral postdictadura: La Muerte y la Doncella como una manifestación de las cicatrices en la memoria de los torturados*, p53. Available: [http://repopib.ubiobio.cl/jspui/bitstream/123456789/299/1/Mart%C3%ADnez\\_Vera\\_Valentina.pdf](http://repopib.ubiobio.cl/jspui/bitstream/123456789/299/1/Mart%C3%ADnez_Vera_Valentina.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Martínez Vera, V, Universidad del Bío-Bío (2014), *El testimonio teatral postdictadura: La Muerte y la Doncella como una manifestación de las cicatrices en la memoria de los torturados*, p55-56. Available: [http://repopib.ubiobio.cl/jspui/bitstream/123456789/299/1/Mart%C3%ADnez\\_Vera\\_Valentina.pdf](http://repopib.ubiobio.cl/jspui/bitstream/123456789/299/1/Mart%C3%ADnez_Vera_Valentina.pdf)

called for a commission to write the Rettig Report, or The National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation Report —a document that recorded every violation of the human rights during Pinochet's regime. 3,550 denunciations of human rights violations were made, of which 2,279 were murders. Of all the people who lost their lives in this period, only 164 were considered victims of political violence (police officers, for example). 350 cases of disappearances remain open, with 700 militaries and civilians involved<sup>12</sup>.

Despite fear ruling people's lives and the state censoring the arts, Ictus was too popular to be silenced and was allowed to continue — yet, in the intermission of the play *Lo que está en el aire* (*What's in the air*), actor Roberto Parada was informed that his son had been executed by the regime; the actor refused to be intimidated and performed the rest of the play<sup>13</sup>. With support from international non-governmental organisations, Ictus became a group of resistance with plays that conveyed the fears and hopes of the common people. In fact, one of their projects was to film and send out videos, which would express opposition to the government, in spite of the prohibition. Despite the state-sponsored repression, exiles, censorship and murders, Ictus fearlessly answered with denunciation. They couldn't publicly advertise their plays, for apparent reasons, so they resorted to the original methods like word of mouth advertising or leaflets and drawings. They were trying to hold on to previous freedoms while also trying to survive the regime, like many others, hoping that it would be over soon and they could move on. To do so, however, they first had to endure the dictatorship, and fight it with all their strength: their notable social plays

<sup>12</sup> Rettig Report, Available:

[https://web.archive.org/web/20090506012049/http://www.usip.org/library/te/doc/reports/chile/chile\\_1993\\_toc.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20090506012049/http://www.usip.org/library/te/doc/reports/chile/chile_1993_toc.html)

<sup>13</sup> Reuters, El País (1986), *La dictadura militar, representada en un teatro chileno*. Available:

[https://elpais.com/diario/1986/02/23/cultura/509497206\\_850215.html](https://elpais.com/diario/1986/02/23/cultura/509497206_850215.html)

during that period were *Pedro, Juan y Diego* (1976), *¿Cuántos años tiene un día?* (1977), *Primavera con una esquina rota* (1985) and *Lo que está en el aire* (1986) — all of which reprimand the government in subtle and not so subtle ways.

In 1976, actors Jaime Vadell and José Manuel Salcedo left Ictus to create their own company representing popular realism: La Feria. They used a tent for a stage, and adapting poems from Chilean poet Nicanor Parra, they wrote their first play, *Hojas de Parra, salto mortal en un acto* (*Grape's leaves, mortal leap in one act*). The play consisted of a circus, which was economically unstable during the election period. At the very start of the play, a big sign was displayed stating, “The Left and the Right, united, will not be defeated”, referring to the political opponents. Jugglers and tightrope walkers performed astonishing tricks while the stage was slowly packed with crosses and tombstones, becoming a cemetery. The play ended with Nicanor Parra's poem *The Final Toast*, and the following lines:

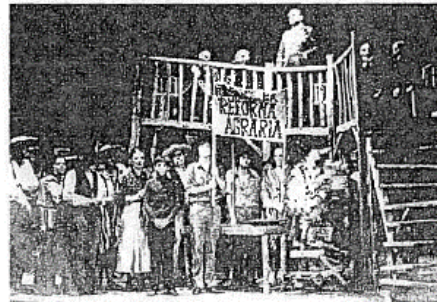
*“In the end  
We are only left with tomorrow.  
I raise my glass  
To the day that never arrives.  
But that is all  
We have at our disposal.”<sup>14</sup>*

The poem is optimistic on a better future, hoping for change. The context in which it was said is what gave it its edge, as the actors called for a better tomorrow, in other words, the dictatorship's end. The company, being new, was noticeably weaker than

<sup>14</sup> Parra, Nicanor, *The Last Toast* (Chillán, 1914).



Ictus, as it didn't have its popularity and clout—qualities that turned out to be key for survival. Performed for the first time in February of 1977, *Hojas de Parra* was a success among audiences but as it made reference to the political reality of the time, it was severely criticized by the newspaper *La Segunda*—which supported the state—describing it as an infamous attack on the government. They received additional harassment from several governmental institutions including the national public health institution, which accused them of hygiene problems. Authorities forced the tent to close on three different occasions until they changed some elements of the play in order to go back to business, but before they were able to do that, during the curfew on the early morning of March 12 of 1977, barely a month from *Hojas de Parra*'s inauguration, the tent was mysteriously set on fire and the guilty were never found<sup>15</sup>.



This story is only one of many tragic events that negatively affected Chilean theatre during Pinochet's dictatorship, producing an important recoil over the young theatre, that affects it even nowadays<sup>15</sup>. Even years after the dictatorship's end, theatre has not fully recovered. It is crippled, an important part of its development was taken away and it is recovering still. As Benjamín Galerniri, Chilean dramatist, said:

<sup>15</sup> Pérez Rouliez, S, Hiedra (2011), *A 43 años del golpe: la censura de la dictadura al teatro chileno*. Available: <http://revisahiedra.cl/opinion/la-censura-de-la-dictadura-al-teatro-chileno/>

*"We are a society in transition. We have shaken off the military dictatorship. But survivors like myself are left with a sense of guilt. We are also confronted by the emptiness of public discourse, the power of advisers over politicians and the fragility of our democracy. We are foolish and crazy people but the raw material for drama is all around us"*<sup>16</sup>.

After a period of transition, a plebiscite, and the victory of 'the NO' (the vote against Pinochet), Chile returns to democracy in 1990 with Patricio Aylwin as the new president. Exiled theatre practitioners and actors like Ramón Griffero or Andrés Pérez returned and helped with the development and internationalisation of Chilean theatre, and new practitioners began to emerge. One of them was Benjamín Galemiri, who helped to integrate an international culture and a satirical, hyperbolized language into his plays<sup>17</sup>. During the dictatorship, the plays' objective was to critique the government, to expose what was going on. Galemiri's plays, however, didn't include such crucial messages, which allowed him to use a playful language instead of using a straightforward and realistic one. Meanwhile, Ictus was supporting with the retrieval of the democracy and the protection of human rights, but they still held their critical view towards the reality they were living in. In 2017, Álvaro Rudolphy staged his play *El Velorio (The Wake)* with the help of Ictus, a dark comedy about two siblings holding a wake for their dead father while facing their mother who abandoned them years before.

<sup>16</sup> Quote by Benjamin Galemiri, included in Billington, M, The Guardian (2004), *On with the show*. Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2004/sep/07/theatre.chile>

<sup>17</sup> Villegas, J, Revista Arrabal (2010), *25 años de teatro chileno: el retorno a la democracia*. Available: <http://www.ocio.ca/index.php/arrabal/article/viewFile/229326/327865>



The play has had a positive impact on audiences and critics; it breaks common conventions like the idea that all the deceased are perfect, that their family wants to give them a proper burial, or that a mother who returns after abandoning her family feels remorse —rejecting the status-quo of plays about death. *El Velorio* uncovers the modern society's hypocrisies and explores the moral grey area. Dealing with socially relevant themes like child abuse, abandonment, mental illness and overall violence, Ictus continues to criticize society's flaws through theatre.

Nowadays, the world is more conscious of Chilean history, and the importance of remembering these events, however terrible. The Royal Court Theatre in London collaborated in a 2-year project to celebrate the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary from the day of the coup d'état in 1973. They showed 5 plays by Chilean playwrights, all of which convey life in Chile, talking about the regime's repression, but also adding subjects like the Mapuche's segregation (indigenous inhabitants) and the society nowadays<sup>18</sup>. These playwrights were able to present Chilean society's flaws without being censored by the government, as they would have been in the past, and that is a great improvement on its own, but the fact that they did so in an established and relevant international theatre is evidence of an evolving society and hence an evolving theatre.

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<sup>18</sup> Royal Court Theatre. Available: <https://royalcourttheatre.com/new-plays-from-chile-at-royal-court-theatre/>

In Chile, the Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos organized a free event called *6 Historias de Dictadura*, consisting in 6 plays which talk about the dictatorship and its effects and repercussions<sup>19</sup>. The event was financed by the department of DIBAM (Dirección de Bibliotecas, Archivos y Museos) in the Chilean government<sup>20</sup>, which shows a government that now not only has stopped censoring the arts but that actually supports them, that accepts its past mistakes and cares about remembering them to keep them from happening again. Although there have been several plays like these, where the struggles during the regime are revealed, recent theatre in Chile is mostly focusing on other social problems (such as drugs, abortion, family or romantic problems, environmental messages or mental illness), with plays like *El Velorio* (previously mentioned), *Historia de una gaviota y del gato que le enseñó a volar* (Teatro del Canto), *La vida obscena* (Escuela de Teatro UC's graduation), among others<sup>21</sup>.

An important change the dictatorship brought on Chilean society, is the way people look at artists, the supposed inferiority of acting opposed to other “real” professions. “In Europe, being an actor, musician, visual artist, etc. is valued. The person who is dedicated to the arts isn't an eccentric”, commented Francisca Reiss, Chilean actress, when asked about the main differences between theatre in South American and Europe. This negative view of actors and theatre was born out of the conflicts and rebellion they represented during the dictatorship. There are still people who think

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<sup>19</sup> Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos. Available: <https://ww3.museodelamemoria.cl/Informato/ciclo-de-teatro-seis-historias-de-dictadura-2017/>

<sup>20</sup> El Mostrador. Available: <http://www.elmostrador.cl/cultura/2017/07/05/ciclo-de-teatro-gratuito-6-historias-de-dictadura-en-museo-de-la-memoria-y-los-derechos-humanos/>

<sup>21</sup> Teatro UC. Available: <http://teatrouc.uc.cl/programacion/temporada-2017.html>

actors are just subversives, rebels, and protesters —as the dictatorship convinced people of this— and that idea is still rooted in people’s minds, therefore to them, acting isn’t really a job.

This has affected theatre’s development, as it lacks support from the people, but it has not influenced practitioners’ creativity. The opposite, the fact that they need to come up with ways to lure people into theatres has made them even more creative. And the dictatorship’s censorship, although terrible, helped them develop techniques to accuse authorities without making it too obvious, forcing themselves to ‘think outside the box’. Theatre learned how to be subtle, and their creativity has only grown. It is still finding its confidence, that self-assurance that would allow them to fearlessly portray whichever situation, character or issue they’d wish to. It obviously cannot hold the same degree of relevance and social importance as that of European theatre, since said theatre began centuries before, but thanks to the internet and social media, Chilean theatre is moving forward fast. After all, what dramatists really need is “continued exposure to the best of world drama”<sup>22</sup> in order to evolve, and despite history and reputation, Chilean theatre is and will continue to grow. Its suppression during Pinochet’s regime held it back, but looking at all the progress it has made since then, we can’t help but wonder: where would Chilean theatre be if it had been allowed to develop without the dictatorship’s interruption?

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<sup>22</sup> Billington, M, The Guardian (2004), *On with the show*. Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2004/sep/07/theatre.chile>

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