

**Argentina's "Theatre for Identity":  
Intergenerational Memory and Performative Acts of Recovery**

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**Abstract**

Doubt--one of the driving themes behind Argentina's Teatro por la Identidad (Theatre for Identity, 2000-) movement--has been a central motif in the Grandmothers' "Right to Identity" Campaign, orchestrated to raise awareness of the approximately 500 children who were appropriated illegally under dictatorship and "adopted" by families, oftentimes complicit with the military regime. This paper traces the evolution of this campaign in the Grandmothers' collaboration with international organizations, human rights groups, scientists, psychologists and artists to ensure the protection of their grandchildren's right to identity, while in the process fostering their constitution as subjects of the law and protagonists in the narration of their life stories and relationships to their disappeared parents. Building on Marianne Hirsch's notion of postmemory, Elizabeth Jelin and Ana Amado's observations on intergenerational memory, and Diana Taylor's genealogies of activism and the "DNA of performance," I offer an in-depth analysis of Patricia Zangaro's play, *A propósito de la duda* (With Regard to Doubt, 2000), considered the inaugural play of the Teatro por la Identidad festival, to discuss theatre's unique role in the fight for the right to identity, and the potential implications of the strategy of doubt in this fight.

This reconstruction of identity from absence borrows from the concept of postmemory, described by Marianne Hirsch as "a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation."<sup>1</sup> Though coming of age during postdictatorship and historically removed from the events that generated the trauma experienced by their parents' generation, many of Argentina's youth nonetheless feel a deep personal connection to the country's recent trauma, a connection Hirsch identifies as a central component to the phenomenon of postmemory (22). Dori Laub

identifies the “historical gap” that separates the experience of mass trauma from its cultural expression, often spanning a generation, both connecting youth to the event and establishing distance from it at the same time.<sup>ii</sup> Highlighting the transformative agency found in collective, public responses to traumatic experience, Diana Taylor writes, “By emphasizing the public, rather than private, repercussions of traumatic violence and loss, social actors turn personal pain into the engine for cultural change.”<sup>iii</sup> And, as Taylor demonstrates, in Argentina nowhere is this more visible than in the collaborative work undertaken by the Abuelas, the H.I.J.O.S.,<sup>iv</sup> and groups of young activists and artists in the enactment of *escraches*<sup>v</sup> and other urban interventions (166).

This paper examines the coming-of-age of a new generation of youth in postdictatorial Argentina and the performative strategies they employ in the constitution and—in the case of the children of the disappeared—*restitution* of their own identities. Encompassing legal, psychological, and scientific dimensions, the Grandmothers’ “right to identity” campaign has had an impact on the cultural practices of Argentina’s youth, notably in the theatre festival Teatro por la Identidad (Theatre for Identity, 2000), orchestrated to raise awareness of the approximately 500 children who were appropriated illegally under dictatorship and “adopted” by families, oftentimes complicit with the military regime. This paper discusses Patricia Zangaro’s, *A propósito de la duda* (With Regard to Doubt, 2000), considered the inaugural play of the festival, to examine theatre’s unique role as a forum for the education of rights and the reinterpretation of unresolved history. And in the specific context of postdictatorial Argentina, I consider the strategy of doubt—one of the driving themes behind the festival—as an educational tool and instrument in the fight for identity. I

ask: how does theatre participate in the fight for the right to identity? And what are the potential implications of the strategy of doubt in this fight?

### ***Las Abuelas and their Fight for the Right to Identity***

One Thursday in 1977 one of the mothers marching around the Plaza de Mayo asked, “Who is looking for their grandchild, or has a daughter or niece who is pregnant?” initiating the beginnings of the Abuelas movement, originally called the Argentine Grandmothers with Disappeared Little Grandchildren.<sup>vi</sup> The Abuelas have since fought tirelessly for the restitution of their grandchildren. Rita Arditti explains that, to the Abuelas, restitution “is not simply an act by which a child meets with her or his family. It is a complex process requiring attention at all levels: individual, familial, and social.”<sup>vii</sup>

The Abuelas have pioneered extraordinary advances in the areas of the law, genetics, and psychology in order to pursue justice and create and enforce their grandchildren’s right to identity. Realizing early on that photos and memories would not be sufficient to prove their grandchildren had been illegally appropriated, the Abuelas sought recourse from the scientific community in the hopes of enlisting advances in genetics to prove the children’s identity unequivocally without having access to the parents for blood tests.<sup>viii</sup> After consulting with geneticist Mary King-Claire, epidemiologist Victor Penchaszadeh, and researchers with the American Association for the Advancement of Science, it was determined that the identity of a child’s grandparents could be determined with 99.9% accuracy, leading to the coinage of the term “Índice de la Abuelidad” [Index of Grandparentage] (49). In May of 1987 the Argentine Congress approved the law that established the creation of a National Genetic Data Bank, designed

to resolve conflicts regarding the biological affiliation of the children of the disappeared.<sup>ix</sup> The Abuelas also appealed to the law and international treaties to further protect the rights of the children of the disappeared. They pushed to have the right to identity included in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted in 1989. According to Arditti, the Abuelas worked with the Argentine Ministry of Foreign Affairs in drafting Articles 7 and 8 (referred to as the “Argentine articles”) to preserve the child’s inalienable right to his or her “true and genuine personal, legal, and family identity.”<sup>x</sup> Arditti identifies article 8 as being particularly important because it “fills a void by forcing the state to respect the right of the child to preserve his or her identity and to take action to restore that identity when it has been put in jeopardy” (146). Thus the Abuelas were able to influence legislation to the extent that the child acquired agency as a subject protected by the law.

During the nineties the Abuelas realized that the grandchildren they had been looking for were no longer children but young adults capable of taking over the search for their own identities.<sup>xi</sup> This realization led to a creative explosion of cultural initiatives geared toward raising awareness of the existence of children who had been illegally appropriated from their disappeared parents during the dictatorship, and promoting consciousness of the “right to identity.” A sample of the names of the cultural activities organized with help of the Abuelas attests to the overwhelming emphasis placed on identity: in addition to “Rock for Identity,” there were also events to celebrate “Music,” “Photography,” “Film,” “Dance,” “Tango,” “Architecture,” and “Sports” for identity.<sup>xii</sup> More recent incursions include “television” for identity and “radio” for identity. Conrado Geiger, host of the radio show *Rock argentino* and co-organizer of the popular event

“Rock for Identity,” explained that after the unexpected success of the event, the Abuelas, in collaboration with artists, started to focus on music and culture as key links to those youth who would be approximately the same age as their appropriated grandchildren (129).

From early on the Abuelas collaborated on projects highlighting the protagonism of Argentina’s youth and the children of the disappeared in the creative expression of their identities. Ana Amado observes that children of the disappeared belong to a generation that borrows from film, photography, graphic design, painting, and theatre to construct their identities.<sup>xiii</sup> Psychoanalysts Diana Kordon and Lucila Edelman explain that for children of the disappeared, recovery and loss are simultaneous, integral processes in the construction of their identities.<sup>xiv</sup> The agency in this construction belongs to the youth who are able to select the language, genres, and strategies to re-envision an interrupted genealogy and reinterpret their relationship to the past and present.

### ***Teatro por la Identidad***

Considered the inaugural play of the Teatro por la Identidad festival, Patricia Zangaro’s *A propósito de la duda* [With Regard to Doubt] premiered June 5 2000 in the Ricardo Rojas Cultural Center. During the height of the campaign to spread awareness of the right to identity through culture, playwright Zangaro, director Daniel Fanego, and the actress Valentina Bassi met with the Abuelas to see if there might be a way to use theatre to connect with young audiences. The Abuelas responded enthusiastically and provided Zangaro and Fanego with testimonies, videos, and documentaries, from which Zangaro drafted the script of *A propósito de la duda*. Eugenia Levin, one of the co-founders of the

Teatro por la Identidad movement, confesses that she believed that the first staging of *A propósito de la duda* would be the one and only, but during the performance she realized that the play was resonating with the audience in powerful and unexpected ways.<sup>xv</sup> To every audience member between the approximate ages of twenty and thirty, the play posits the very real (though statistically improbable) possibility that they may be children of the disappeared.<sup>xvi</sup> The doubt spectators internalize as a result of the play's premise goes far beyond traditional bonds of identification established between characters and audience members. The play's ability to raise consciousness of this doubt and identity uncertainty among young spectators inspired organizers to build on the success of Zangaro's play to expand the Teatro por la Identidad festival to further assist the Abuelas in educating the public and particularly Argentina's young generation of the existence of the children of the disappeared.

Zangaro's play begins with a series of questions and statements drawing attention to the uncertainty of identity and the encompassing inclusiveness of this uncertainty:

Who am I?<sup>xvii</sup>  
Who are we?  
Because even if the voyage is individual, there is a collective destination.  
For that reason, the question:  
Do you know who you are?<sup>xviii</sup>

Here Zangaro predicates the possibility of collective recovery upon individual restitution, a central idea echoed by the three Abuelas in the play, who announce to the audience, "While there is just one person with his/her identity stolen and falsified, everyone's identity is placed in doubt" (157). *A propósito de la duda* draws on narratives of the children of the disappeared to introduce the audience to the experience of restitution and to disclaim some of the myths and misconceptions surrounding the process. The cast of characters is fairly

large, including three Abuelas, a couple who illegally appropriated their child under dictatorship (Apropiador / Apropiadora), their “adopted”, balding son (el Muchacho pelado), three young men (Muchachos I, II, III) and four young women (Muchachas I, II, III, IV) who have recovered their identities, a military collaborator (Hombre), and a chorus of young people (el coro).

The play opens with a little boy playing with a ball when the sound of a helicopter interrupts the scene. Startled, the boy abandons the ball and the Abuelas pick it up and begin to throw it back and forth, their attention suddenly drawn to the Apropiadora who is determinedly massaging her the scalp of her “son.” In the background, each of the Abuelas asks separately, in repeated fashion, “Is baldness hereditary?”<sup>xix</sup> Though not the most elegant dramatic image, this scene efficiently introduces the genetic component to the Abuelas’ identity campaign. This emphasis on genetics might seem to undermine or overshadow the conceptualization of other kinds of identity, but the script responds to this potentially restrictive message by alluding to the significance of less empirically determined forms:

Chorus of Young people: And do you know who you are?

Abuela I: It is not just the voice of blood.

Abuela II: It is the voice of the spirit.

Abuela III: It is the voice of my daughter that impels me to look for my grandchildren.

Chorus of young people: And do you know who you are? (160)

In this compelling exchange between the chorus of youth and the Abuelas, the idea of identity is expanded to include more abstract formulations. The agency (the voice) behind identity originates not only in genetic markers, but also in the tenuous realm of the soul and in the ethical imperative that drives the Abuelas to seek justice on their children’s behalf.

In the narratives of the muchachos and muchachas, representing children who have learned the story of their appropriation and have undergone the process of restitution, attention to the inheritance of gesture and embodied behavior provide additional clues to “true” identity. For example, Muchacho III reveals that he’s been told he crosses his arms in the same exact way his father does and he laments the fact that photos cannot convey those gestures, “I would like so much for the photo to be put into motion. For him to speak, to laugh, to bitch, to talk nonsense. To cross his arms, as if he were holding a baby, just like me. And you... Do you know who you are?” (161). Emphasizing the performative component of resemblance between generations opens up the idea of inheritance to what Taylor has coined the “DNA of performance” or the “representational practice of linking the scientific and performatic claim.”<sup>xx</sup> By not limiting the definition of heredity to the transmission of physical traits, but rather incorporating gesture and embodied behavior in the discussion of inheritance, the production of *A propósito de la duda* includes itself, self-referentially, in this performative genealogy.

Toward the end of the play Abuela II announces, “In twenty years none of us will exist, but the fight will continue for all of those who experience doubt and think they may be children of a disappeared generation.”<sup>xxi</sup> This emphasis on the transcendence of the search is of fundamental importance to the Abuelas, many of whom were already in their seventies when Teatro por la Identidad festival began. The last character to speak is Muchacha IV, who states, “I have the hope that one day, now, or in forty years, my brother will begin to search” (162). The National Genetic Data Bank preserves the scientific information to ensure that this is a possibility. Teatro por la Identidad provides the ongoing forum for an exploration of identity uncertainty, establishing community and a sense of belonging,

somewhat counterintuitively, through the bond of consensual doubt. As Muchacho II proclaims, “Lies are what cause damage, not doubt” (161). This underlying doubt has an ethical component that contributes to the perseverance and longevity of Teatro por la Identidad, long outlasting Teatro Abierto, whose force diminished once the dictatorship was no longer in power.

Over the years Teatro por la Identidad has expanded its scope, conceptually and geographically.<sup>xxii</sup> In 2002 organizers offered playwrights complete freedom to explore notions of individual and collective identity. In 2003 Teatro por la Identidad Itinerante (Traveling TxI) was founded in the attempt to reach out and spread awareness in greater Buenos Aires and the provinces. In 2004 Teatro por la Identidad debuted in Spain and has since had several cycles in Madrid and Barcelona, recently introducing works that deal with memory of the Spanish Civil War. In 2008, for the first time Teatro por la Identidad in Buenos Aires included works from Spain and Uruguay.

Zangaro’s *A propósito de la duda* once again inaugurated the Teatro por la Identidad festival in Buenos Aires on November 13 2008 at the National Cervantes Theatre. The backdrop of the performance was a collage of photographs of the disappeared, all in black and white, except for the photograph of Julio Jorge López, which was in color. Vanishing in 2006 after testifying against ex-police officer and repressor Miguel Etchecolatz, López is now considered the first person to be disappeared under democracy; the presence of his photograph, shiny and new compared to the others, is a powerful reminder of the continued urgency of the fight against impunity. After the performance of *A propósito de la duda* the Abuelas were onstage giving a speech when the director of the theater, Rubens Correa, took the microphone and announced to the filled auditorium that he had received an anonymous

phone call from someone announcing there was a bomb in the theatre. The news created a brief moment of heightened anxiety, in which spectators looked to one another to determine how to respond collectively. Onstage the Abuelas remained completely unfazed until one of them proclaimed, “Don’t think we are going to leave here running.”<sup>xxiii</sup> The resolve of the Abuelas calmed the audience and fostered consensus to stay and the evening’s performances continued without incident. This brief episode demonstrated to me (present that evening) that audience members perceive the Abuelas not only as icons of past resistance but also as leaders and activists with a vision for the future, capable of forging solidarity even amidst the threat of harm, and fostering an intergenerational community of individuals conscientious of their rights and willing to fight for them.

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<sup>i</sup> Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 22.

<sup>ii</sup> Laub, Dori. “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening” *Testimony*, 84.

<sup>iii</sup> Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 168.

<sup>iv</sup> Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo (Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo); H.I.J.O.S.: Hijos e Hijas por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio (Children for Identity and Justice, Against Forgetting and Silence)

<sup>v</sup> “Escraches” are public shaming rituals carried out by children of the disappeared (H.I.J.O.S.) and other activists, designed to reveal the identities and whereabouts of repressors from the dictatorship period who have avoided prosecution.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>vii</sup> Arditti, *Searching for Life*, 103.

<sup>viii</sup> *La historia de Abuelas. 30 años de búsqueda*, 48.

<sup>ix</sup> Arditti, *Searching for Life*, 72.

<sup>x</sup> Arditti, *Searching for Life*, 146.

<sup>xi</sup> *La historia de Abuelas. 30 años de búsqueda*, 119.

<sup>xii</sup> *La historia de Abuelas. 30 años de búsqueda*.

<sup>xiii</sup> Amado, Ana. “Órdenes de la memoria y desórdenes de la ficción,” *Los Lazos de la Familia*, 49.

<sup>xiv</sup> Kordon and Edelman, *Por-venires de la memoria*, 65.

<sup>xv</sup> *La historia de Abuelas. 30 años de búsqueda*, 151.

<sup>xvi</sup> After the first cycle of Teatro por la Identidad more than 70 young people approached the Grandmothers with uncertainties regarding their identity.

<http://www.teatroxlaidentidad.net/editables/>

<sup>xvii</sup> All translations are mine.

<sup>xviii</sup> Zangaro, *A propósito de la duda*, 156.

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<sup>xix</sup> Zangaro, *A propósito de la duda*, 156.

<sup>xx</sup> Taylor, “‘You are Here.’ H.I.J.O.S. and the DNA of Performance. *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 171.

<sup>xxi</sup> Zangaro, Patricia, *A propósito de la duda*, 161.

<sup>xxii</sup> See Patricia Sicouly’s comprehensive study: *Teatroxlaidentidad: Un teatro para la memoria*.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Cabrera, “Teatro por la Identidad, a ocho años de su primera temporada.” *Página 12*, November 15, 2008.