

# Living with the fear factor

## Death by Survival, written by Elizabeth Ruiz, directed by Dori Salois

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*Death by Survival*, written by Elizabeth Ruiz, directed by Dori Salois. World premiere presented by Vantage Theatre and Centro Cultural de la Raza at the Centro Cultural de la Raza in San Diego, California

Though this play recently closed, it remains deep in the memory. On June 14 Argentina's Supreme Court, under years of pressure from large segments of the population, overturned the amnesty laws that had protected the military and the police from prosecution for its participation in the "Dirty War" of the 1970s, in which tens of thousands of trade unionists, workers and intellectuals were imprisoned, tortured, murdered or just plain "disappeared."

*Death by Survival*, by playwright Elizabeth Ruiz and directed by Dori Salois, tackles the Argentinean tragedy.

By drawing parallels between what happened in Argentina and what is happening today in the United States, it is unique and an important contribution to the growing repertoire of politically charged theatre.

The play starts with great energy: mothers of the disappeared demonstrating against the government at the Plaza de Mayo. From the sudden blackout, an unseen venomous voice shouts: "Mothers of communists!" Lights then come up on Rosana (Savvy Scopelletti). It is 20 years later in New York. She remembers the Buenos Aires of her teens as the Dirty War reaches the apogee of its murderous excesses.

Thus the play is split between two worlds: Argentina during the junta's rule, and post 9/11 Manhattan, where Rosana barely managed to escape the collapse of the Twin Towers. Her experiences, and the disturbing parallels between then and now, connect her two worlds. Director Dori Salois's staging underscores both the separation of Rosana's past and present and their emotional proximity. A cluttered upstage platform represents her triple-dead-bolted walkup where she paints, hides out, and imprisons herself; an open downstage area is reserved for the scenes in Argentina (with one exception). The script demands this division, which poses the greatest obstacle to its realization. More on this later.

Rosana's Buenos Aires family in the 1970s are comfortably working-class but beginning to feel the strain of a deteriorating economy. Her older sister, Lili (Karla Francesca), a smart and sensitive young woman, becomes a journalist student at the university just as the Dirty War begins. Yet, politics forms a large part of the family squabbles. In one of the play's funnier conversations, one of the characters refers to the guerillas who always seem to conveniently "show up" in the mountains whenever the economy gets in trouble.

Satisfied more or less with the status quo, these good people assume that the government exists to maintain social order. But their illusions

are soon shattered when armed men in camouflage jackets and ski masks invade their home and brutally snatch Lili away from the family at 3 a.m. Apparently, the fact that she worked for some charity to help the poor is apparently too subversive and threatening to the military dictatorship. She becomes one of the 30,000 "disappeared." Her arrest scene ends the first act. It is chilling and terrifying.

Pepita (Celeste Innocenti), Lili and Rosana's mother, does whatever she can to find out what's become of her eldest daughter. She becomes one of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. Rosana then shocks us twice: her mother, too, was "disappeared" and soon after her father Marco (Spike Sorrentino) kills himself by overdosing on sleeping pills. So, by the time we discover Rosana in New York, her immediate family is dead, directly and indirectly the victim of the junta's predations. She keeps them in her memories by painting portraits of them.

The play implies that something approaching the Argentinean horror is *already* happening in the US. One scene (among many) draws this parallel sharply: the cruel interrogation by American authorities of Rosana's friend, José (Rhys Green), the young medical worker who had saved her life in the Twin Towers, apparently because he "looks Arab." We never see him again; he has become one of the United States' new crop of "disappeared," an uncharged suspect held in secret detention somewhere in the state's burgeoning anti-terror gulag.

When we first discover Rosana in her New York artist-studio "cell," we don't immediately know what or who she is or why she's dressed in a white haz-mat suit. She dictates into a tape recorder, describing events from her past and her family's. She gives free rein to her mounting paranoia about repression in present-day United States.

Is she sane? Did Argentina's Dirty War drive her mad? Has survivor's guilt driven her into an agoraphobic state? Or is her paranoia justified, far more alert to the threats of a state-terror regime and its early warning signs because of her experiences? What if we are as naïve as her family once was, comfortable in our bourgeois illusions of safety, security and immunity from state actions?

*Death by Survival* raises these questions deftly, insinuating that historical and material circumstances in the Argentina of 20 years ago and in today's United States are eerily similar. It is rare that a play asserts that things didn't just happen, that events arise from definite socioeconomic circumstances. That the play asks us to look into the near future by extrapolating from past events poses a challenge. But when it literally takes us into that near future, the work shows its weaknesses.

For, in general, this is a realistic play: a narrative told in multiple scenes and settings, time and place. Its events insist that we confront that they actually occurred. In case we have any doubts, archival news film footage from Buenos Aires during the Dirty War is projected, actual mothers interviewed. Much of the drama's power comes from the fact that the events portrayed are dramatically conceived versions of *real* events involving *real* people in a *real* time and place. In Rosana's New York world, she is a survivor of the World Trade Center attack. We are told, in one of her more stirring monologues, about how she escaped the burning Tower while her co-worker, an Iraqi-born woman, didn't. She is found barely alive by José, the rescue worker from a medical staff at a downtown hospital who later "disappears."

Rosana's survival in the World Trade Center and Argentina's Dirty War feels coincidental, but then this is a play about the high cost of survival, the burden of guilt carried by those who cannot quite come to terms with their inexplicable and "undeserved" fortune.

Rosana's "delusions" begin when her terrified parents send her to live with her uncle's family, which is above suspicion because of its close ties to the regime. But even this does not provide a refuge. Her uncle, an inveterate anti-Semite, molests her. He justifies his behavior as tribute for having agreed to foot the bill of her boarding school in Europe until the troubles in Argentina are over.

Some of the New York scenes are problematic. The flight into a slightly surrealistic near future raises some credibility issues. If the author is making up stories such as mandatory inoculations for all alien residents under pain of incarceration or deportation, a scenario to which three scenes in the New York half of the play are devoted, then we may legitimately ask whether Ms. Ruiz has also made up or exaggerated stories about events in Argentina—which she has not.

Other credibility issues arise. At one point, a "friend," who comes off as some kind of self-styled "Che of 10th Avenue," arrives unannounced at Rosana's apartment, begging her to flee because the authorities are about to close in and haul her away. This friend (how she knows him and why they are friends remains a mystery) seems to be affiliated with some kind of insurgency group similar to the Montoneros, the Argentinean guerillas that the junta branded as terrorists to justify its repression. Such a phantom group in Manhattan strains credibility. It feels more like a convenient dramatic device; we never know what it stands for, what it advocates, what its goals are.

Also, this young man's comments lead us to believe that Rosana has not left her apartment since the World Trade Center attack of 9/11. If Rosana never goes out, how does she manage to get her food or cash her government disability checks (from the Twin Towers survivors fund)? How does she actually get her painting supplies? Her food provisions? How did she become a painter?

More puzzling is why, late in the play, Rosana enlists a junkie's aid in starting a fire in the tenement's fifth floor hallway. To force herself to leave her apartment? And why, after finally breaking out of her self-created cell, does she return to the studio? Just to retrieve her tape recorder? And then, just at that moment, Tamara, a torture victim and friend of Lili's, shows up at Rosana's door. This episode occurs in the play's final scene, unfortunately. This encounter further complicates matters because, despite its awkward coincidence, it serves to illuminate the play's themes beautifully while at the same time raising unnecessary questions about timing. Hadn't Tamara been tortured and imprisoned some 20 years earlier?

We suspect that all the elements in the New York half of Rosana's story are the result of a dramaturgical impulse to "liven up" that part

of the play. Apparently, Rosana's talking to a tape recorder is not sufficiently engaging. The frighteningly pushy city health worker (a chilling portrayal by director Salois) who wants to stick needles into Rosana, the jonesing junkie, the visits from the mailman, and the arrival of the insurgent friend are all extraneous to the core of this material. Sure, they add some environmental color and a procedural element to the way in which a police-state regime begins to take control of its population, but they risk sabotaging the power, clarity and galvanizing story of how this young woman ended up holed up in New York. A slightly less busy New York half of this story would have made *Death by Survival* a better play.

But some of its scenes rival some of the best theatre we've ever experienced. One is a gem in its domestic simplicity and charm. Rosana sprawls on the floor of her Buenos Aires home doing what looks like homework. Her father, reclining in his chair, reads the sports page. Rosana asks him, "Daddy, who makes the lines on the maps?" The subsequent exchange between them manages to plumb such deep questions as the meaning of nation-states and the nature of nations, all with a sense of humor.

The way in which the testimony of a "disappeared" woman is presented—in ghosted back light and video-projected onto a big screen—is quite effective. We never fully see her face, either on stage or on the screen. This heightens our emotional connection to her story and the circumstances of its telling. Because her face remains at all times in the shadows, she means much more than just an individual; she's the voice of the 30,000 disappeared.

Other brief interrogation scenes are similarly deft in both writing and execution. They ring of truth; we know that it is also happening here, though at a less developed stage.

Whenever the action moved downstage, close to the audience, the production sang. While some of the acting was uneven, certain members of the ensemble, most of whom play multiple roles, stood out as exceptionally strong: Mike Sorrentino as Rosana's father; Nancy Hunter as Emi and one of the Mothers; Rhys Green as José and a police officer; Dana Hooley as prisoner and torture victim; and Savvy Scopetelli as Rosana. They are all wonderfully committed to their roles and movingly effective.

Vantage Theatre, in collaboration with the Centro Cultural de la Raza, has taken a courageous chance in presenting this play in our current political and social climate. *Death by Survival* is an ambitious, intelligent, provocative, and engaging work of theatre. Though the script has some problems (the New York half), the cast is somewhat uneven, and some staging is awkward (also only in the New York half of the play), *Death by Survival* generally satisfies. It is on the whole compelling: politically sophisticated, socially relevant, and has heart and humanity to spare.



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