

## Dancing in the dark with Dorfman: the poetry of loss

**Last Waltz in Santiago**  
By Ariel Dorfman  
Penguin Books, 78 pp., \$8.95

By Lou Lipsitz

NOVELIST AND ESSAYIST ARIEL Dorfman has been an eloquent and persistent spokesman for democracy and decency in his native Chile. He has lived in exile since 1973, the year of the military coup that over-

threw Salvador Allende, Chile's last democratically elected president. Dorfman's voice has been heard frequently on the Op-Ed page of the *New York Times* and elsewhere, calling attention to the brutality taking place in Chile. He has fought for a return to respect for human rights. It has been a long time. Fifteen years. Fifteen years of disappearances, murder and exile.

*Last Waltz in Santiago* is a book of poems that in one sense is deeply

political. Every poem speaks, however obliquely, of the tragedy and suffering in Chile. But with very few exceptions these are not what most of us would recognize as "political" poems, or poems of protest. They do not address the big issues in the political arena. They do not moralize or harangue. These poems are quiet, personal and moving. They speak directly out of the suffering that Dorfman has experienced personally and known in others.

Ariel Dorfman probes the disappearance of the everyday in *Last Waltz in Santiago*.



**Indecent burials:** Many of the poems focus on some simple human need, question or dilemma that holds an extraordinary poignance amid the atmosphere of terror and brutality. In one poem someone says: "just/ to be able/ to bury your body/ to have a place/ where your mother/ can go..." In another, God is asked if he has seen one of the disappeared. In yet another, children

you even in my dreams/ let me have the night at least/ for dreaming of you alive, at my side, in the dark, your face quiet and warm like an echo...." And later in the same poem: "in my dreams and at dawn/ in that other place/ you scream and you scream/ and there is nothing/ understand?/ I can do/ to make you/ stop."

**Essential repetition:** The poems have a slow, cumulative effect. Their quiet, persistent questioning growing out of loss, grief, confusion, pain, fear, revulsion and the wish to survive and remember builds a strong feeling of empathy. At first it seems that Dorfman has written too simply, too repetitively. Why are his speakers asking the same question, making the same statement, again and again? But it becomes apparent that this is part of the process of grieving and recognition, of confronting an impossible and terrible reality. In their simplicity, many of these poems achieve a sense of being there with the sufferer. There are not many political poems that proceed with so much quiet dignity and reach such simple, but vast, human depths.

Dorfman also manages to write with unusual honesty about his own confusions and struggles, his loneliness in exile and his sense that he

### CHILE

play a game of being mommy and daddy, asking each other what they will do if the authorities come to take them away—as they have overheard their parents doing:

*What if they take the children?  
That's what you have to ask  
if you're the mommy.*

*That's what I have to ask?  
What if they take the children?  
That's what I ask, right?*

In many other poems, people remember the day someone disappeared. A mother does not want to open the letters her missing daughter is still receiving. A wife whose husband is missing says: "must I lose

### One way to be "disappeared"

There is one short poem in the volume that can be quoted in full that exhibits the elements Dorfman brings together to achieve a seemingly effortless, natural voice:

#### SUN STONE

*They put the prisoner  
against the wall.  
A soldier ties his hands.  
His fingers touch him—strong,  
gentle, saying goodbye.  
—Forgive me, companero—  
says the voice in a whisper.  
The echo of his voice  
and of  
those fingers on his arm  
fills his body with light  
I tell you his body fills with  
light  
and he almost does not hear  
the sound of the shots.*

cannot, really, speak for others. In one, he says: "I find myself crying at the end of General Hospital. I swear it's true: the worst soap opera on TV, the cheapest song a good-bye on a platform or a broken balloon in a child's hand are all it takes.... I learn they killed your sister on a street corner the children in the slums eat cats and dogs if they can find them...and I am not moved. I am not moved. I must be very sick. I'm afraid. I'm afraid. I'm afraid of what's happening to me. I'm afraid so afraid of what's happening to me." In another he describes "this unspeakable relief" when, receiving a phone call from Chile, he discovers it is not "you" who has been killed

or disappeared, but someone else." **Side-stepping the polemics:** Because of Dorfman's approach one usually cannot get a full sense of what the poems are like by quot-

ing a few lines. And sometimes the poems do repeat the same ideas too much; sometimes they are simpler than seems appropriate. But often their telling, everyday details

bring us toward people living with pain and confusion.

During the Allende years, the great Chilean poet Pablo Neruda produced a book of political poems

declaiming against conservative forces in Chile and against the interference of the U.S. in Chile's fate. Though he was one of the century's most original and powerful writers, Neruda's volume unfortunately shows us just how manufactured and unmoving political poetry can sometimes be. He was trying so hard to express his anger that his work degenerated into a dry polemic, leaving us out of touch with the genuinely human meaning of events. This is what Dorfman does not do, and we must honor his restraint and sensitivity. ■

**Lou Lipsitz** is a professor of political science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

By Michael Phillips

**D**URING THE LAST 15 YEARS OF imposed, retracted, re-imposed and re-retracted exile from his native Chile, author Ariel Dorfman's status hit bottom when a government-controlled radio station erroneously announced news of his death.

Prior to 1973, Dorfman had become a key cultural influence as novelist, poet, critic and head of the state publishing agency during Salvador Allende's democratic socialist era. With the CIA-backed assassination of Allende and the subsequent rise of Gen. Augusto Pinochet, Dorfman found himself one of between 11,000 and 50,000 citizens (depending on whose reports you believe) told to get out of Chile or risk execution.

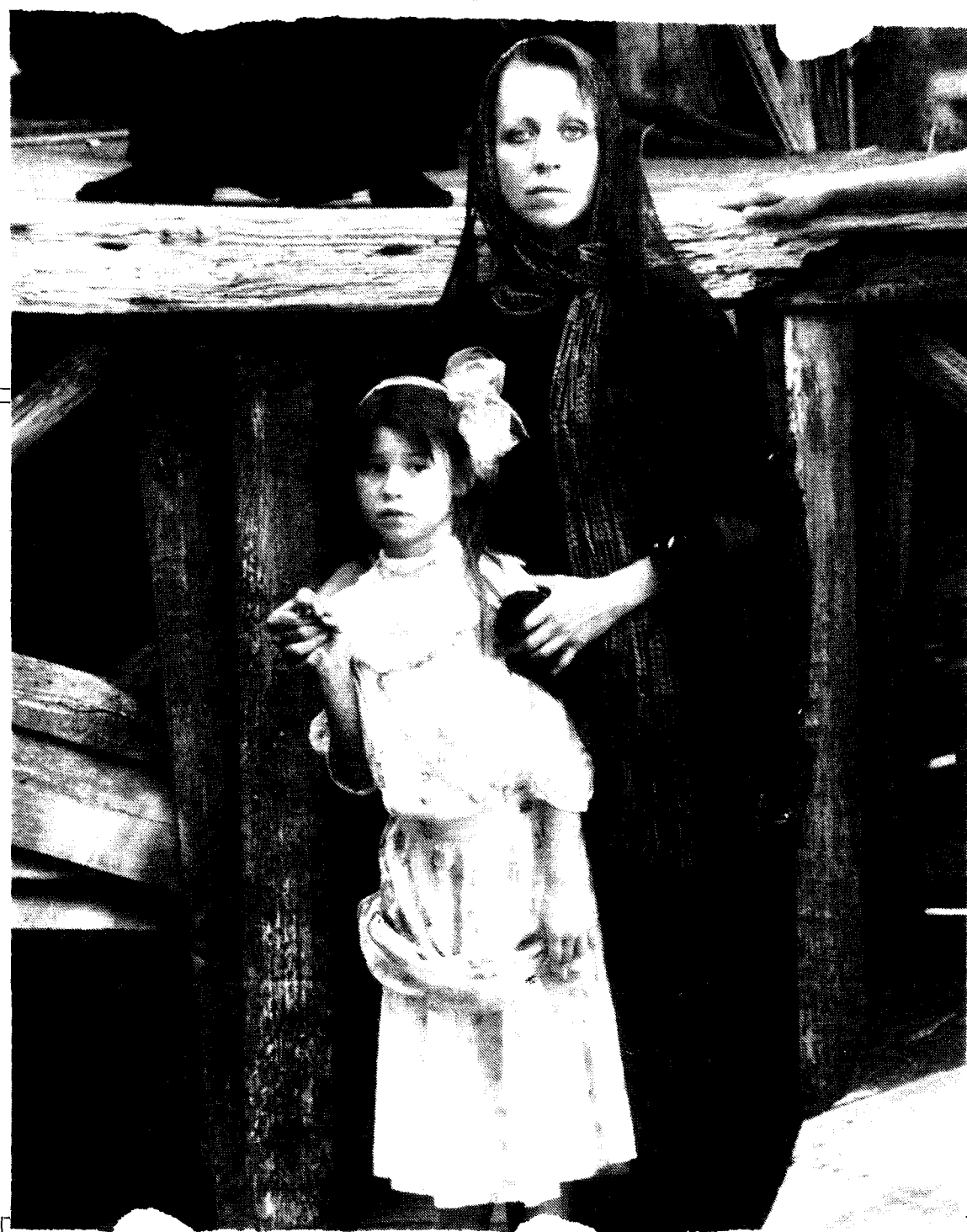
Now, Dorfman makes his second home in Durham, N.C., teaching at Duke University eight out of every 24 months in between far-flung writing and travelling projects. Currently he wears the hat of first-time playwright. A second play is already in the works back in Chile.

*Widows*, adapted for the stage from his anguished novel of the same name, recently closed its world premiere at Fort Worth's Hip Pocket Theatre, as well as its official Equity premiere at the Williamstown, Mass., Theatre Festival. Other productions, including one at the New York Shakespeare Festival, are planned, along with a film version.

**Kid stuff:** As to how Dorfman's script found its way to a converted cow pasture outside Fort Worth, it was done "as these things should be done," said Dorfman, "through one's children."

Last fall Johnny and Diane Simons, founders of the Hip Pocket Theatre, visited Duke University to stage an antic amalgam based on works by Miguel de Cervantes. One of the cast members was Rodrigo Dorfman, Ariel's son. Impressed with the show, the elder Dorfman passed the Simons duo a copy of the *Widows* script as a friendly gesture.

"I've never been terribly political," admitted Simons. "But I felt haunted by the play.... We here in Cowtown have lived such a sheltered existence. And by Cowtown, I mean most of the United States."



Dorfman's *Widows*: a parable for Chile with global implications.

## Dorfman's *Widows* won't disappear

In novel form, *Widows* (published in Spanish in 1979, with the English translation appearing four years later) was ostensibly set in Nazi-occupied Greece. It concerned a military-ruled village. Most of the men have long disappeared during "interrogation" as potential agitators. At the outset, a battered body floats downriver and washes up on shore. Sofia Fuentes, a woman whose husband and sons are among the missing, claims the body as one of her own and demands a proper burial. The local captain refuses to give it up. It's clearly a parable for modern-day Chile, and applicable to every cycle of dictatorial rule throughout history.

**Cross-cultural resonance:** For the Hip Pocket premiere, the Simons brought together several Duke University staffers, including designer Wenhai Ma. The play's theme of exile plucked an all-too-familiar chord with Ma, whose native northeast China village was ravaged by the Cul-

tural Revolution.

"I was very little," said Ma, who created a multilevel village for the outdoor Hip Pocket stage. "But I still remember some horrible scenes. 'Human rights' wasn't an issue."

*Widows* has undergone some 20 or so revisions since the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles commissioned the stage version in 1985. Why the current flurry of interest in the play and its subject?

"Maybe it's the right moment," said Dorfman. "I think the U.S. is entering a new phase politically, and they're interested in taking a look at some of these problems. For many years America has been in a happy-go-lucky mood, or at least trying to convince itself that everything is fine—that if we just smile, our troubles will go away."

In bringing *Widows* to the stage, Dorfman has been only partially successful in finding theatrical equivalents to his literary voice. The majority of the 13 scenes deals with the

escalating battle of wits fought by the commanding captain and the stubborn Sofia Fuentes over possession of her late husband.

Dorfman's most impressive achievement comes in the fleshing out of the captain, a genuinely complex character at odds with his increasing self-doubt in the face of the village's widows. Ironically, he's far

**Dorfman conjures up world injustice by concentrating on tiny details.**

more interesting than the play's protagonist, Sofia. The stage version loads all Dorfman's heaviest baggage at her feet, making her more than just a central character. Often self-consciously, she's an idealized, mythic-sized series of character traits: Strength, Guts, Wisdom.

**Truth in details:** The best scenes allow for small, telling truths amid the larger picture. At its best, Dorfman's play conjures up a sense of a larger world of injustice by concentrating on a tiny detail, such as one of the Fuentes' "interview" after a two-year prison term. In the same way, a film such as *The Official Story* (peripherally about the missing of Argentina) outshines the more didactic *Missing* (explicitly about the '73 Chilean coup).

Dorfman, meanwhile, has already moved on to his second work for the stage, to be performed in early 1989. Titled *Reader*, it concerns a Latin American censor undergoing a series of interlocked crises. Dorfman recently visited Chile to work on the project with a group of actors and artists singled out with death threats by the government.

Like *Widows*, *Reader* was written in the long shadow of the Pinochet regime. For all the pain, the death of friends and collaborators and his own exile, Dorfman owes a tremendous creative debt to his homeland. He finds the task of creating overtly political art a tricky one.

"You can get preachy, you can get overwhelming, you can get morally superior, you can get abstract," he said. "What I wanted to see with *Widows* is if the actors and the director could give it the quality of the real and the unreal simultaneously. It's happening in one place concretely, but it's also happening everywhere, in what we call the landscape of the soul."

"It's happened ever since men have gone to war and women have waited. It's happened since young kids have been growing up without fathers. And since the land has been taken away from the peasants who have rebelled."

With two productions of *Widows* under his belt and more to come, Dorfman also has another novel—his first not to deal explicitly with Latin American politics—titled *Mas-cara*. A book of essays is forthcoming as well. Clearly Dorfman hasn't lessened his pace.

"I've always been like that," he said. "But I'm writing for a lot of dead people. And they still have a lot of stories to tell." ■

**Michael Phillips** is the theater critic for the *Dallas Times Herald*.