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Guiding the Plot

Politics and Feminism
in the Work of Women
Playwrights from Spain
and Argentina,
1960–1990



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Preface

This book started out as a research project on the dynamics between theatre and political change. I was interested in exploring how those playwrights, who under a dictatorial system of government had provided an oppositional viewpoint to those willing to read between the lines, would cope with a more permissive cultural and political environment. I found that, at a time when the discussion of political issues moves from the cryptically encoded text and performance to the streets, several of the playwrights most successful in surviving the newly created vacuum, or in benefitting from it, were women.

This study traces the development of the work of four better known women playwrights: Ana Diosdado and Paloma Pedrero in Spain, and Aída Bortnik and Griselda Gambaro in Argentina. With the exception of Gambaro, these dramatists have not been widely studied. In recent years, contemporary Spanish theatre has received greater attention in the United States thanks to the seminal work of scholars like Patricia O'Connor and Phyllis Zatlin, and the theatre journal *Estreno: Cuadernos del Teatro Español Contemporáneo*, published at the University of Cincinnati since 1975. Argentine Aída Bortnik is best known in this country as co-author of the script for the film *The Official Story* (1984). Very little is known about her as a playwright. Gambaro's theatre, on the other hand, has fascinated numerous scholars, and continues to be the most widely anthologized.

All four playwrights respond in more or less veiled terms to the changing society around them. While the Latin American playwrights are more directly concerned with the political realities of their country, they coincide with their Spanish colleagues in their increasing preoccupation with women's issues. They often view social injustice and continued political authoritarianism as a direct reflection of the problematic coexistence of the sexes. The solutions they suggest differ widely. Pedrero and Gambaro propose the destruction of the rigid separation between the private and the public spheres. By

turning traditional women's roles into instruments for political and social dissent, or by making the private, previously neglected preoccupations of women the main focus of their plays, these two authors challenge the distinction between the gender-specific spheres of action upheld by patriarchy. Woman ceases to be *el reposo del guerrero*, the warrior's repose, and takes the sword into her own hand, often without removing the apron. Diosdado and Bortnik, on the other hand, seem to believe that women are served better by the separation of the realms of action based on what they perceive as inherently opposing—though complementary—gender characteristics.

The comparative study of Spanish and Argentine women dramatists highlights the conflict between a dramatic discourse shaped by the traditional distinction between the personal and the public, and the struggle against this separation. Notwithstanding the expected, historically conditioned differences between Spanish and Argentine authors, all playwrights discussed here employ female protagonists informed by the social construct called femininity. They attempt, with varying degrees of success, to break down their confinement to the private realm without, however, relinquishing those essentialist (feminine) characteristics, that, in view of their authors, enable them to subvert an unjust social and/or political order. This phenomenon, also observable in the theatre of Chilean Isidora Aguirre, in the novels of Nicaraguan Gioconda Belli, or in the testimonial narrative of Rigoberta Menchú in Guatemala, has interesting implications for the development of a feminist literary theory for Spain and Latin America, a theory that takes into account the particular conditions in which feminism continues to evolve in these countries. I hope that this book provides a step, however small, in that direction.