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### LÉO AT THE TARRAGON: NATURALIZING THE COUP

Rosa Laborde's play *Léo* draws on the complex (Chilean and Latino) cultural memory of the 1973 coup that deposed the Salvador Allende government, but the debut production at Toronto's Tarragon contains that memory to serve dominant cultural narratives. The Tarragon production of *Léo*—a play ostensibly 'about' Chile—is a clear example of how dominant cultural paradigms can persist across the borders of intercultural performance. I consider the ways in which text, production, supplementary material provided in the program, and the theatre's public discourse work to appropriate a memory of rupture and re-activate a familiar vision of multicultural Canada.

*La pièce Léo de Rosa Laborde s'inspire de la mémoire culturelle complexe (chilienne et latino) du coup de 1973 qui a marqué la fin du règne de Salvador Allende. La première présentation de la pièce au Tarragon, à Toronto, restreint toutefois cette mémoire pour la mettre au service des récits culturels dominants. La production de Léo au Tarragon—une pièce portant ostensiblement sur le Chili—est un bon exemple de la manière dont les paradigmes de la culture dominante peuvent traverser les frontières de la performance interculturelle. Verdecchia examine les façons dont le texte, la production, les renseignements additionnels fournis dans le programme et le discours public tenu par le théâtre servent à s'approprier un moment de rupture et à réactiver une vision familière du multiculturalisme canadien.*



The Tarragon theatre, whatever its many merits and achievements, is not known for its intercultural programming. The success of its 2006 production of Rosa Laborde's play *Léo*—nominated for four Dora Awards, remounted the following year, and, according to the theatre's website, slated for a tour "across Canada" in 2008—therefore, seemed a positive development, suggesting a new understanding of the theatre's mandate to "produce new work from all parts of this country" (Tarragon home page). Here was a new play, set during the turbulent Allende years in Chile, at this established mainstream theatre, enjoying high praise from critics

and approval from the Tarragon's predominantly Anglo-Caucasian audiences. *Léo* draws on the complex (Chilean and Latino) cultural memory of the 1973 coup that deposed the Salvador Allende government, but the Tarragon production contains that memory to serve dominant cultural narratives. In the Tarragon production of *Léo*—a play ostensibly about Chile—Chilean cultural memory works to re-activate a familiar vision of multicultural Canada.

The play takes its name from its central character, Léo, and traces his intimate friendship with two other young, middle-class Chileans, Rodrigo and Isolda. Set in Chile in the 1960s and early 1970s, *Léo*, a delicate and carefully wrought script in the Tarragon's predominant (and by now familiar) mode of poetic, behavioural naturalism,<sup>1</sup> follows the triad of friends as they mature and struggle with the challenges that life presents them: absent fathers, infirm mothers, adolescence, the tension between self-fulfillment and social responsibility. Léo's memories of the era, often glossed by Léo himself, are the body of the play. However, Léo has been forcibly "disappeared" (abducted by security forces and illegally detained in a clandestine location) and quite probably dies during the play, so it would be more accurate to say that the play itself remembers Chile during this turbulent period that saw, in 1973, a military coup overthrow the democratically elected, socialist government of Salvador Allende.

By conservative accounts, the sixteen-and-a-half-year military dictatorship that followed the coup disappeared 3,000 people, tortured approximately 30,000, and exiled some 300,000 (*Comisión*), of whom 7,000 eventually settled in Canada (Government). Though the dictatorship has ended, its consequences endure, particularly in the form of continuing struggles over memory of the period, which include efforts to try "dirty warriors" for their crimes.<sup>2</sup>

Though *Léo* only glances at the coup and its cruelty, the play's pathos derives from the devastation the coup creates in the lives of its three protagonists. *Léo* recalls the Allende era before the coup as one of youthful exuberance and transformational promise, a moment of idealism and optimism snuffed out by the military coup. The coup is remembered as rupture (Stern 108). I have borrowed the conceptual tool of memory as rupture from *Remembering Pinochet's Chile*, the first volume of Steve Stern's "history of memory" (xx), *The Memory Box of Pinochet's Chile*, a comprehensive examination of the struggle to shape collective memory of the Chilean coup.

In his study of how this national cataclysm has been remembered by Chileans, Stern identifies four ‘emblematic’ memories in response to the trauma of the ’73 coup—not remembrances of particular events, but memories that “purport to capture an essential truth about the collective experience of society” (113), and operate as “framework[s] that organize meaning” (105). Individual memories, recollections of particular moments or incidents support and are, in turn, supported or validated by these organizing structures. Individual recollections “energize and provide raw material for emblematic memory” (106). These categories of memory are not discrete; there are affinities between some of them as well as potential areas of overlap. Nonetheless, the theoretical tool of emblematic memories foregrounds the social processes of selectivity and organization that inform the development of collective memory, and provides a productive framework for analysis that captures the complexity of memory struggles.<sup>3</sup> Of the four emblematic memories Stern identifies, two, memory as rupture and memory as a closed box, are useful for understanding the memory work *Léo* performs. I will focus first on the rupture framework and unpack the closed box later.

Memory of the coup as rupture “haunts” those survivors of the military repression who lost relatives or friends (Stern 108). Under this memory framework, the coup plunged the country into a nightmare of destruction and cruelty “without historical precedent or moral justification” (109), a nightmare from which there is still no waking. The practice of forced disappearance left a social body punctured by absence, an absence that could not be filled or overcome because of the uncertain status of the disappeared. The disappeared victim was, if not definitely alive, then not definitely dead either. Survivors of the repression still, now, lack the body of their disappeared relative or loved one, which, through the rituals of mourning and interment that segregate the living from the dead (Roach 50), could provide closure.<sup>4</sup>

The memory of rupture is introduced in the Tarragon production through the publicity materials (posters, interviews, advertising), which, as Marvin Carlson, Ric Knowles, and others have noted, influence audiences’ horizons of expectations and begin to shape the meanings audiences will make of the performance. The theatre’s website and press release focus on the youth of the characters and the notion of “innocence disappeared.” The image of Che Guevara on the original poster floats as a transnational signifier of ‘political’ agitation, if not revolutionary struggle, even for the most uninformed theatregoer.<sup>5</sup> These key tropes

are reinforced by the poster image of graffiti hearts on a wall and two figures (of indeterminate sex) kissing all washed in a faded red—faintly nostalgic, but also the colour of communism, love, and blood—that colours the entire poster. Pre-show interviews are even more explicit about the rupture that will be staged. In an interview for Toronto weekly *Now Magazine*, Laborde explains, “It hit home for me that you could be young and idealistic and still have all that taken away” (qtd. in Kaplan). This setup prepares the audience for a narrative of passionate young lives interrupted. It also, somewhat more subtly, through references to “Allende’s Chile” (Tarragon, Press release #6; Home page), and the careful placement of Spanish words (*revolución*, in particular, on the original Tarragon poster and *desaparecido*<sup>6</sup>) suggests Latin American politics and anticipates an inter-cultural encounter.

This suggestion is further reinforced by the song that opens the production. Chilean-Canadian musician Marcelo Puente sings Violeta Parra’s well known (to Latin Americans at least) *La Carta* (*The Letter*), which was written in the late 1960s and tells of a letter that arrives with news of an arrest. The poet/singer’s brother, who supported a strike (and, by implication, a more general struggle for social justice), has been arrested and “pitilessly dragged through the street in handcuffs.”<sup>7</sup> For Latinos and hispanophones, the song may conjure associations of arbitrary detentions and radical struggles. For an Anglo-Canadian audience that cannot understand the words, the song’s musical structure, two alternating major chords a tone apart, creates a sense of anticipation and tension. Puente’s strong, deep voice singing in Spanish is a powerful signifier of otherness and implies realms of experience, narratives, that are not yet accessible to the anglophone listener. The production will quickly work to overcome that distance, to situate the Anglo-Canadian audience within the memory of rupture.

To stage rupture, *Léo* concentrates on the complex relationships between the three characters, their aspirations, and their efforts to transform their lives and their country. The characters’ dispositions are clear early on. Rodrigo, who will become a socialist youth leader who works steadfastly to improve the lives of the poor, insists, as a young boy at a birthday party, on sharing all the candies absolutely equally. Léo—the hedonist who will become a poet—wants the candies for himself because, after all, it’s his birthday. Isolda is caught between the two boys, between her desire for pleasure and excitement and her sense of what is moral and necessary. She deeply admires Rodrigo’s commitment and is often by his side, though she is not as committed; she has a complicated family

life and struggles with her identity; thieving, she claims, is her “only gift” (25). Instead of bringing other perspectives to bear on the arguments or conditions that arise, Isolda oscillates between the two positions the men hold, trying to be “good” but, at times, succumbing to the temptation to indulge herself. While Rodrigo and Léo stake out their respective political territories during the course of the play, Isolda’s “life revolves around hope” (38). She lives in hope of an epiphany that will help her decide “what is bigger”: the “entire universes [that] are unfolding in [her] heart” or “what’s out there” (41) in the world, essentially re-stating a choice between the poet Léo and the activist Rodrigo.

Isolda circulates between Rodrigo and Léo intellectually and sexually. The first signal of this other exchange between the points on the triangle occurs at the birthday party when Isolda gives Léo a kiss in return for more candy. Léo then begins to distribute candies to the audience—having discovered an economy of desire, where candies can be exchanged for something sweeter still (5). Engaging and including the audience in the action by casting the public as guests at the party, this tactic begins to lay the ground for the rupture by playfully drawing the audience into the world of the play. As a breach of the distance between performers and audience, this moment is very low risk (for the audience at least), but the moment’s charm (skillfully exploited by Salvatore Antonio, the charismatic and attractive actor who plays Léo) goes a long way to preparing the audience for a fuller imaginative engagement and emotional investment in the world of the play.

Léo’s frequent asides also work to enmesh the audience in the world of the play. Neither Isolda nor Rodrigo addresses us, though Rodrigo has a very clear opportunity to do so with his speech at “a political rally” (27). Léo’s address to the audience is facilitated both by the intimacy of the playing space and the staging. Performed in the Tarragon’s Extra Space, a 100-seat ‘black box’, and staged in the round, or more precisely, triangle, the production repeatedly interpellates the audience into the emotional world of the characters through Léo. When Léo’s commentary corresponds to what we see, such as in his description of Rodrigo and Isolda in a game of hide and seek (7), we are made co-equal with him. When he tells us “I will not care that my mother doesn’t see into my eyes ever, ever again that minnows know my father better than me, that the two people I need most would happily have each other without me, I’ll shut my eyes and make love to the darkness” (11), we gain privileged access to his inner life; we become his confidantes. We follow Léo as he begins an intimate, sexual relationship with Isolda (who

is “engaged” to Rodrigo) and, later, with Rodrigo.

As this sexual triangle develops, the actors do not exit off-stage when they are not in the scene. Instead, there are seats reserved for them in the house, next to the audience’s seating. This may at first appear to be an anti-illusionist staging strategy designed to interrupt the audience’s identification with the characters, but it may not be so simple. Character does not simply vanish because an actor leaves the stage. Some trace or whiff of character clings if the actor does not verbally or physically indicate a deliberate break between character and actor, as is the case in *Léo*. Instead, placing the actors in the house creates an overlap between the world onstage and the world of the audience, and generates a productive uncertainty. This movement (leaving the stage to sit in the house) blurs the distinction between stage and audience without necessarily absorbing the audience into the world of the play. The audience now coexists with the actor and the fictional world in an ambiguous suspension. Carlson points out that when an audience “share[s] apparently the same physical space as performing actors,” it experiences the actor as an “uncanny, disturbing” presence, in “a personal capsule, which the audience, however physically close, can never truly penetrate” (*Places* 130). In the case of *Léo* however, the actors do not perform (in the strictly limited, theatrical sense of the word) when they are seated in the house. They observe the action onstage as we do, which makes their “space” perhaps more porous or accessible to the audience. Though the audience may still not “penetrate” the actor’s “personal capsule,” the very uncanniness, the ‘there-but-not-there-ness’, of actors among the audience, suggests (for this viewer at least) the presence of the disappeared. This ‘presence’ is marked visually when the actor (rising from ‘our’ space) returns to the stage (disappearing into his or her role and coming to “life” before us as a character from the *past*) and leaves an empty chair, an absence. Disappearance and the rupture it produces occurs, then, not simply on the stage (in a fictional Chile of the past), but also in this zone of convergence between Chilean memory and the present day “Canada” of the audience.

It is the military coup, rather than sexual tensions or infidelity, that conclusively ruptures the lives of the threesome. Isolda flees the country with her family after being abducted, presumably tortured, and then released. She and her family are leaving, she tells Rodrigo and Léo, because, “this country is not safe for us right now” (50). “Night falls” (51) immediately upon her departure. Rodrigo and Léo fall asleep together for “the first time” (51), but

even this small moment of solace is stolen from them. There is “a light in [Léo’s] eye, a yank on [his] wrist, a punch in [his] belly” (51). Rodrigo is shot almost immediately but Léo is detained and disappeared. “And the current... dragging you down... the whirlpool the whirlpool... like the universe knows we’re entering into a darker place... there is nothing” (Laborde 3). The “continuity of life and relationships” destroyed (Stern 108), the scenario of rupture is played out.

A performance of *Léo* depends to some extent on its audience’s historical knowledge and memory. The aspirations and potential of the characters, which are, in turn, expressive of the promise Chile represented to the International Left—all of this—is snuffed out by the coup, which we know is just around the narrative corner. This “discrepant awareness”—we know something about the future that the characters don’t—creates the play’s pathos (Carlson, *Haunted* 29). Moments, for example, such as this exchange:

RODRIGO. We plan on marrying.

LÉO. I plan on nothing. You never know what’s just around the corner.

(34)

can become highly charged by the discrepancy between our knowledge of “what’s just around the corner” and the characters’ much more limited understanding.

Because the Tarragon’s predominantly Anglo-Caucasian audience may have a less-than-thorough knowledge of Chile’s history, may not know there is a coup just around the corner, and to suggest a resonance between this memory and contemporary realities such as the occupation of Iraq—the theatre has provided a chronology in the program. Carlson notes that “message-bearing constructs” such as publicity, programs, and reviews “constitute for most audiences the most obvious first exposure to the possible world of the performance they are going to see” (*Theatre* 18) and, therefore, significantly shape an audience’s reception. Carlson proposes that detailed programs with plot summaries, interpretive essays, literary quotations, or images, “seek to condition audience response” or “suggest[. . .] a preferred interpretive strategy” (19). The Tarragon program’s chronology “condition[s] audience response” through its particular, limited, and, in some ways, familiar framing of the Chilean coup.

The chronology takes up the fifth page of the program for the play. Under the title “Chile: Chronology 1970-73,” the first two

items of contextualizing information relate directly to the USA. The first is the now infamous quotation from then Secretary of State Henry Kissinger regarding the possibility of Allende's electoral victory: "I don't see why we need to stand by and watch a country go communist because of the irresponsibility of its own people." The next item, the first in the chronology proper, is about the creation of the US Committee of 40 to resist the Allende campaign for the Presidency of Chile. Various other items highlight the establishment of a CIA "coup team" at the US embassy in Santiago; the millions of dollars paid to "right-wing groups, newspapers, radio stations, and political figures" to destabilize the Allende regime; the 1972 state of emergency Allende declared after a "shopkeepers' strike"; and the crippling 1973 truckers' strike followed a month later by the resignation of the pro-Allende army commander General Pratts and his replacement by General Pinochet. Of the eleven items in the chronology, including the Kissinger quotation and the Allende quotation at the bottom of the page, five items refer directly to US involvement. The Allende quotation is taken from his final radio broadcast, in which he expresses the Marxist belief that history has an irreversible direction and final destination: "They have the power, they can smash us, but social processes are not detained, not through crimes or power. History is ours, and the people will make it... Long live Chile! Long live the people! Long live the workers!" (Tarragon, Program). Allende is speaking more generally of the power of the (reactionary) dominant classes and the military, but given the preceding information, this quotation could be understood to refer directly to the US as well. Perhaps most telling in terms of how the chronology structures audience response is the structure of the page, framed by the Kissinger quotation bolded at the top and the Allende quotation also bolded at the bottom. Visually, an equivalence as well as limits (to understanding) are created by the two quotations. The coup and the dictatorship are contained within those two voices, those two positions: the leftist or "progressive" voice, optimistic in spite of the evidence, a voice we may hear or read through the bitterly ironizing filter of contemporary geopolitics (the ongoing occupation of Iraq, for example), and the familiar voice of US 'imperialist' arrogance.

The point is not that the chronology's information is erroneous, only, and crucially, that it is (must be) selective. The chronology emphasizes a generalized US involvement in Chilean politics and underplays the specifically Chilean conditions, context, and actors that made the coup a reality. A differently struc-



tured chronology would have produced a different frame for understanding the play.

Limited to the years 1970-73, the chronology does not mention, for example, the Christian Democratic government of Eduardo Frei that preceded Allende. Frei, trying to contain socialism through a program of progressive capitalism, nationalized three major copper mines and launched a modest program of agrarian reform, which alienated wealthy and middle-class Chileans (Stern 13). The chronology does not mention the troubling debt Allende's government inherited from Frei's. This local national background is at least as important to understanding what occurred in Chile as the establishment of the Committee of 40.

The chronology does not tell that the US opinion on the subject of Allende was not monolithic. The ambassador to Chile, the former ambassador, and the ambassador to the Organization of American States (OAS) each opposed US intervention in the Chilean electoral process. The chronology does not tell us of the many acts of violence perpetrated by right-wing groups throughout Chile (Sigmund 118-23). The chronology makes no reference to the differences and divisions within the Popular Unity government, to the repeated calls for an accelerated and violent path to revolution by the MIR and other leftists, to the assassination by a far-left group (the VOP—*Vanguardia Organizada del Pueblo*) of Frei's former minister of the interior (Sigmund 148). The chronology makes no mention of the (often spectacular) resistance Chilean women of all classes offered to the Allende government (Power 3), no mention of the substantial public support for the military intervention and the coup, and no specific mention of the involvement of Chilean or US capital (ITT or Pepsi, for example). The chronology contains the conflict to two monolithic protagonists.

What, for example, would we make of the play if the chronology included the fact that in 1972 Canada voted with Washington “to cut off all money from the International Monetary Fund” to Chile, further destabilizing the Chilean economy and creating more uncertainty for the Allende government? What would we make of the play if the chronology noted that Canada “quickly recogniz[ed] the legitimacy” of the military government after the coup (McFarlane 136)? Or that when church groups approached External Affairs Minister Mitchell Sharp to ask “the government to take immediate steps to open Canada's doors to some of the thousands of Chileans whose lives were in danger” they

were met with questions, scepticism and even attack from the minister and his senior officials, who insisted this was just another Latin American coup of no great importance and assured them that the situation in Chile was already returning to 'normal'? (ICCHRLA)

What if, in place of the Kissinger quotation, the chronology quoted Andrew Ross, the Canadian ambassador to Chile at the time of the coup? While the junta detained and killed hundreds of people in the weeks immediately following the coup, the Canadian ambassador contextualized the situation for External Affairs in Ottawa by explaining that “[r]eprisals and searches have created panic atmosphere [*sic*] affecting particularly expatriates and the riffraff of the Latin American left to whom Allende gave asylum” (*Canada*). The ambassador opined, “the country has been on a prolonged political binge under the elected Allende government and the junta has assumed the probably thankless task of sobering Chile up” (qtd. in McFarlane 136). What if the chronology noted that the Canadian government was reluctant to receive Chilean refugees and it was only the sustained intervention of church and labour groups that forced the government to accept Chileans fleeing the dictatorship?

Laborde’s play read through that revised program would position us very differently to the staging of rupture we witness. The chronology’s avoidance of any mention of Canada (coupled with the narrative suggestion of Isolda’s exile—she leaves her unsafe country for one that is safe) works to reassure the predominantly Anglo-Canadian audience, equally and non-hierarchically distributed around the equilaterally triangular playing space, that Canada is indeed a liberal nation of quiet diplomats and peacekeepers, not coup plotters, and not implicated to any extent in the suffering of thousands of Chileans. Further, the performance of the play in a Canadian theatre could suggest, in keeping with familiar popular notions about the value of “telling our stories,” that as a nation, we have created the space for “others” to tell their narratives of rupture and loss, and so begin a process of recovery. Chilean memory of rupture serves a tacit narrative about Canadian benevolence.

In *Cities of the Dead*, his provocative study of cultural renewal through performed substitution or surrogation, Roach argues that circum-Atlantic cultures “have invented themselves by performing their pasts in the presence of others” (5). This performance also required the performance of “what and who they thought they

were not. By defining themselves in opposition to others, they produced mutual representations from encomiums to caricatures [ . . . ]” (5). This same process of producing identity through the performance of otherness—though less anxious and on a much smaller scale than in the circum-atlantic context Roach explores—is at work in this production of *Léo*, which stages a different kind of (multi)cultural encounter. Produced in a theatre that, since its creation, has presented itself, and in turn been re-presented by the media as “an unrivalled purveyor of Canadian drama,” a “champion and influential arbiter of plays Canadian” (Tarragon, Home page), *Léo*, a play that stages the memory of an ethnocultural other, becomes, through the alchemy of the theatre’s cumulative public discourse,<sup>8</sup> not simply a Canadian play but also a play about Canada. In a variation on Bhabha’s formulation, we see here the nation as it is (re-written and) staged (2).

Constantly working to embed the public deeply in the play’s emotional life through its staging, direct address, and strong naturalistic acting, *Léo* studiously avoids marking difference between the Chilean characters onstage and the Anglo-Canadian audience. The use of Spanish, a key signifier of identity and difference, is minimal, and, if Spanish dialogue is not immediately translated, it is easily comprehensible through context. The use of English, obviously, invites the audience into the play. A long radio broadcast announcing the coup, for example, runs entirely in English and clearly serves to ensure that the anglophone audience understands exactly what has happened. While the use of English allows access, it also converts this particular narrative into something more familiar for the anglophone audience.<sup>9</sup> This conversion occurs at the level of reception and at the level of the speaking subject. The use of English demonstrates that, in some sense, Chileans (represented on the stage by non-Chilean, non-Latino actors) have also been “‘invited into’ the imagined community” of Canada (Anderson 145). The almost exclusive (and theatrically unproblematic) use of English allows the audience to imagine “fellowships” on which nations are built (Anderson 154). The linguistic conversion “naturalizes” the characters represented on the stage.

As well as the linguistic conversion at work, the production performs a memorial substitution (or surrogation, in Joseph Roach’s terminology) that works to build national feeling. Nations, Benedict Anderson argues, are narratives that derive from the misremembering of “exemplary suicides, poignant martyrdoms, assassinations, executions, wars, and holocausts” (206). This misremembering (a kind of surrogation in the way it erases conflicts

and tensions) works through the “fond imagining” (154) of a relationship, of a kind of equivalence or continuity with a long-dead or vanquished other. Precisely this kind of nation-building surrogation is at work here. This production of *Léo*, a play that remembers the Chileans whose lives were ended by the military coup, produces, through material and textual strategies that collapse the distance between stage and spectator, a “fond imagining” of equivalence or continuity between the audience and the memorialized (imagined) dead.

While the production identifies with the Chilean dead, it insinuates a difference—through the chronology—between the audience and those responsible for the rupture. In this way, the Tarragon’s production of *Léo* performs “what and who” we are not. Playing with difference and identification in this way, the Tarragon’s production re-produces a familiar Canadian identity: liberal, tolerant, and multicultural in contradistinction to the equally familiar “caricature” of the US as hegemon.

This appropriation, or naturalization, of the coup could not be achieved simply through the chronology and the theatre’s self-identification as the home of Canadian playwriting. Key elements of the play lend themselves to this process. The foregrounding of the men in the play, at the expense of the female character, may facilitate it. Many theorists of nationalism observe that “nationalism favors a distinctly homosocial form of male bonding,” though historically the nation “finds itself compelled to distinguish its ‘proper’ homosociality from more explicitly sexualized male-male relations” (Parker 6). In the context of the relatively liberal Tarragon audience, however, *Léo* and Rodrigo’s sexuality may not be too troubling (sounding an appropriately progressive note), and, in any case, the physical aspect of their relationship is given scant attention. It is not “explicitly sexualized.” It is, physically, fairly innocent, staged in a few kisses and glimpses of (non-sexualized) body parts. These choices, textual and at the level of *mise en scène*, highlight, instead, the “fraternity” that Anderson holds to be at the centre of the nation (7).

Perhaps the most important contribution to the process of appropriation is the text’s conflation of the particular historical moment of Chile in the early 1970s with youth. The libidinal economy that structures the play can in some ways be located within the youth of the characters, for example. More generally, the spirit of optimism that informs Rodrigo and Isolda as well as their aspirations for a more just Chile can be ascribed to youthful naïveté. In a delightful scene where the three friends get high together, Isolda

asks, “Will it always be this good?”; to which Rodrigo replies, “Right here it will.” Léo then turns to the audience and speaks part of what we are thinking.

LÉO. This is the moment in time. Before consequences, before guilt, before the spine begins to curve down, shorter, inch by inch, every day, til death eats the bone. Before the reality of regret, missed opportunities, stifled talent and squandered love cast every day break a different shade of sad. This is youth. Anything is possible. (18)

However, it is not simply time and age that will rupture this idyll. The audience knows that the coup will curtail their future possibilities much more firmly than “regret” or “squandered love.” Similarly, Allende’s statement, “To be young and not be revolutionary is a contradiction in terms,” approvingly quoted by Rodrigo in the play (27), reinforces the equation of the pre-coup era with a kind of national youthfulness. The coup becomes, in this metaphor, the soberness of age, a kind of ‘natural’ event, inevitable, like the shortening and curving of the spine. While the discrepant awareness generated here forms part of the pathos of the play—it is central enough to the production that the text “[t]his is youth; [a]nything is possible” is featured on the original poster—the metaphor contains the coup, dampens political critique, and softens the blow enacted by the scenario of rupture.

This dampening effect is further supported by the play’s ending. Though *Léo* stages a memory of rupture, it undermines that memory in the play’s final moments. Though Léo has been detained and is being interrogated, he is spared the worst of that reality through a fortunate dissociation. As he’s being hit, he cries:

Until I can’t feel it! Until I can’t feel it! And then the hit hits and I don’t care. I watch it like boxing on television. Thank god that’s not me. Thank god I’m not there. But if I’m not there, where am I? Where am I? Where am I? . . . (53)

Rather than end with the terrible and desperate uncertainty of disappearance, as reflected by Léo’s repeated question, “Where am I?”, the play transports Léo (and the audience) to a “sweet afternoon” on a beach with Isolda and Rodrigo. This scene would seem to explain Rodrigo’s earlier cryptic comment about the permanence of good feeling between the three friends. In this memory, the disappeared are not thrown out of airplanes into the ocean or dumped in unmarked mass graves but are, instead, transported to

a space-time of permanent idyll at which point they are reunited with their closest companions.

The Tarragon production resists the optimism of this final scene. Though the script calls for a “sweet afternoon glow” (53), designer Graeme Thomson and director Richard Rose opt for a dark aqueous blue, suggesting the watery depths of the Bermuda Triangle in which Léo claims his father drowned. This lighting seems to undermine the reliability of the remembrances that structure the play. The lighting (and the use of atmospheric haze elsewhere in the play) may also suggest, however, that forced disappearance and death under interrogation is a case of dissolution and disembodiment, rather than profound physical torment. The play offers a dictionary definition of the intransitive verb *desaparecer*, to disappear, at the beginning and end of the play, which supports this sense of disembodiment: “To cease to be seen. To vanish from sight. To cease to exist or be known” (3, 54). The transitive sense of the word (and its barbarous physical realities) is not acknowledged.

Any tempering of the last scene’s optimism through the lighting design is mitigated (or annulled?) by the song which concludes the performance: *Gracias a la vida*, perhaps Violeta Parra’s most famous song, an ode of thanksgiving for all that life has given the poet/singer, particularly the poet/singer’s beloved. But in the context of the rupture just staged, and the history the play refers to, we might well ask who is giving thanks here and for what? *Gracias a la vida* seems, at best, an overly optimistic conclusion to a play about “innocence disappeared”—unless, of course, the forced disappearance of innocence is part of the tapestry of life in the same way that “crickets and canaries” or laughter and sorrow are.<sup>10</sup>

This abrupt trajectory—from a scenario of rupture to a poetic celebration of community and fellow-feeling—is a variation on what Stern identifies as “memory as a closed box” (111). Memory as a closed box regards the coup and ensuing dictatorship as a deeply contentious issue that must not be allowed to fester and create further divisions and wounds on the social body. An agreement (tacit or explicit) to put the difficult memories of that period away is necessary to reconcile families or “divided citizens in the imagined national family” (111). This memory framework, Stern points out, can accommodate a range of views or subject positions. People who wish to close the memory box may not feel that the coup and dictatorship were positive or even necessary; they may feel, however, that remembering—keeping the box open—is simply “too destabilizing and counterproductive” (112).

*Léo*, as the production attempts on occasion to remind us, of course, remembers selectively. It remembers the disappeared before they “vanished” and seems to offer the magical possibility that they are somehow still among “us”—just as the actors are among us in the production. It is as if, having staged the memory, the play concludes the memory is too terrible to bear and must be contained. This containment—closing the box—makes the play more amenable to “naturalization” by dominant cultural narratives. In the context of ongoing struggles for justice in Chile and elsewhere, as well as the current “security” climate (security certificate detentions in Canada, the ongoing detentions at Guantánamo Bay, and the “rendition” of “terrorists” to secret interrogation centres around the world), closing the box on the memory of the Chilean coup, the dictatorship, and the disappeared in this way is regrettable.

Tarragon’s production of Laborde’s play reveals many of the complexities of intercultural performance and spectatorship. While intercultural performance may (under certain conditions) allow us, as Victor Turner claimed, to better know one another (15), it is clear that there is no easy path to that improved understanding. The Tarragon production of *Léo*, with its emphasis on spectatorial access and identification, demonstrates how dominant paradigms can persist across the borders of intercultural performance. Rather than upset familiar notions about Canada and its relations with Chile or Latin America, this production appropriates a memory of rupture to re-activate dominant narratives about Canada and its place in the world. ❁

## NOTES

- 1 By behavioural naturalism, I mean only a style of acting that aims to represent psychologically motivated, “believable” characters. I avoid the term realism for its “gritty” or “edgy,” working-class connotations. The staging of the Tarragon production was non-naturalistic: an almost empty, triangular set with a minimum of properties.
- 2 In March 2006, shortly after *Léo* premiered at the Tarragon, a Chilean judge ordered the arrest of thirteen former army officers for their role in the so-called Caravan of Death, which toured Chile immediately after the coup, executing leftist activists and opponents of the military regime, many of whom voluntarily turned themselves in when their names appeared on arrest lists after the coup (Stern xxii; BBC).

When Pinochet died on 10 December 2006 (Human Rights Day), the struggles over memory intensified. The former dictator was

given military honours (as leader of the armed forces) but not a state funeral (as a former president). Whether he will be formally recognized with a bust in the presidential palace or other commemorative monuments has become a matter of intense national debate. Writing about the general's death, Ariel Dorfman claims, "The battle for my country's soul has just begun" (Dorfman).

- 3 Stern resists the binary of collective memory as simple resistance against oblivion, for example (xxvii).
- 4 Stern opposes the emblematic memory of rupture to memory as salvation, which remembers the Allende era as three years of economic mismanagement and rising class violence that brought the country to the brink of civil war. The coup then is remembered as saving the country from civil war. As Stern documents, Chilean salvation memory, even post-truth commission, holds that "the cost in deaths would have been far worse had the military refrained from intervention." While deaths or errors may be lamentable, they were necessary to avoid "a state of war" (29). Laborde bravely—given the deeply contentious nature of this memory struggle—dedicates *Léo* to members of her family who believe the coup was "the best thing that could have happened" to the country.
- 5 Even if Guevara is associated only with the band Rage Against the Machine, the central, vaguely "political" connotations apply.
- 6 Ernesto Sabato, novelist and chair of Argentina's inquiry into its dirty war (1976-83), during which some 30,000 people were forcibly disappeared, considered it "a sad privilege" that the word *desaparecido*, now used internationally, is usually left in Spanish rather than translated (3).
- 7 My (prosaic) translation of "*Y sin lastima con grillos por la calle lo arrastraron.*"
- 8 Knowles notes that a theatre's public discourse "includes the cumulative impact of" posters, programs, advertising, public discussions of productions, logos, season brochures, artistic directors' statements, even lobby displays and amenities (91) "as each of these things establishes itself over a season, several seasons, or the life of a company" (92). This public discourse, elaborated over a period of time and not simply a production, can work to associate "the theatre in audiences' minds with" any number of particular qualities, such as "new work" or "outstanding acting or directing." It can also "evoke nationalist sentiments" (92).
- 9 Access is, perhaps, the tacit demand of liberal multiculturalism. It transforms the difficulty of cultural difference into uncomplicated cultural diversity.
- 10 My translation. The relevant lines are "Gracias a la vida, que me ha dado tanto / Me ha dado el oído que, en todo su ancho / Graba noche y día grillos y canarios [. . .] and Gracias a la vida que me ha dado tanto/ Me ha dado la risa, y me ha dado el llanto."



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