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Abstract: this article examines how the writing of Chilean playwright Isidora Aguirre moves from social melodrama into epic theater and then political and documentary theater. We show how the documentary strategies slowly influenced her creations, timidly in the play *Población Esperanza* (1959), written with Manuel Rojas, but mainly in *Los papeleros* (1961) and *Los que van quedando en el camino* (1969).

Keywords: Isidora Aguirre; documentary theater; fictionalization strategies; political theater; Chilean women playwrights.

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Resumen: Este artículo da cuenta de cómo la escritura de la dramaturga chilena Isidora Aguirre transita entre el melodrama social, pasando por un teatro épico, para llegar al teatro político y documental. Aquí se muestran cómo las estrategias de lo documental fueron tomándose sus creaciones, tímidamente con la obra *Población Esperanza* de 1959, escrita junto a Manuel Rojas, pero sobre todo con *Los papeleros* de 1961 y *Los que van quedando en el camino* de 1969.

Palabras clave: Isidora Aguirre; teatro documental; estrategias de ficcionalización; teatro político; dramaturgas chilenas.



1 Presentation or framing

On January 7, 2015, at Isidora Aguirre's house, I was able to access her personal archive before it was donated to the Heritage Archive of the University of Santiago de Chile (USACH), its current holder. I wrote the following in a personal work diary:

I am overstimulated. I am taking the bus after spending the whole morning at Isidora Aguirre's archive, which I accessed thanks to the lovely Andrea Jeftanovic. I do not know what to say or write. I only know that I won't be making any deliveries on January 15th. It is not possible. This woman's work, her method and organization are impressive. I just came across the drama creation workshops at UTE [Universidad Técnica del Estado, now USACH], where she worked alongside Víctor [Jara]... I am shaking with excitement... I need to see Alejandro Sieveking (Aravena, 2015).

That was my first contact and fascination with the documents that Isidora Aguirre had accumulated during years of work. It was astonishing the mix of elements, multiplicities and constellations used in her creations. Scraps of paper, drawings, photographs, press clippings, maps, posters gave way, for example, to stories about peasants and indigenous people murdered by the Chilean state in the 1934 Ránquil massacre.

These small unimportant papers, these stories of women leaders ignored by official accounts, had been articulated in Aguirre's creation since 1959. Several typed drafts are testimony of the shifts in her dramaturgy. Such minor writings could not continue to go unnoticed, and Aguirre articulated a communion of mundane things and ordinary people to construct another history. My driving idea here is that History is not one, but multiple and is mostly written in lowercase and from the rearward, in this case theatrical. Using Isidora Aguirre's creative strategy, glimpsed in her archive (and in her works), this essay will be weaved from "fragments of surviving things, necessarily heterogeneous and anachronistic because they come from places and times separated by gaps" (Didi-Huberman, 2012, p. 20), but united by a theater that reconstructs their history.

Besides reviewing the aesthetic flow in Aguirre, I believe we can distinguish how the documentary strategies came to influence her creations during the 1960s. We must define two concepts that will appear throughout this paper: aesthetic flow and era. Aesthetic flow refers to Aguirre's mobile writing which transits from social melodrama into epic theater, to arrive at political and documentary theater. As for the concept of era, I understand it as the latency of a period in which all was about to change several times. In this reading, we must delimit and position Aguirre's work as constructing another dramaturgy linked to documentary in the play *Población Esperanza* (1959), written with Manuel Rojas. In my years researching her creative work, this was the first play in which she approaches documentary strategies. Both by interviewing numerous people who lived in the first land occupations in Latin America (in Los Nogales and La Victoria Santiago de Chile, 1957), and by working with press documents that covered this event. From then on, she



radicalized this strategy in *Los papeleros* (1961), *Los que van quedando en el camino* (1969) and within the Teatro Experimental Popular Amador (TEPA) in 1969, where Aguirre created a series of dramaturgical devices to question History and its mechanisms.

Aguirre's concern with telling other histories, with other protagonists, made her delve into diverse materiality and media for her dramaturgical creation. Her archive reflects this with materials such as (typewritten) interviews with waste pickers, land occupation residents, survivors and relatives of murdered peasants, photographs of marches and protests, press releases, political advertisements, letters exchanged with social leaders and artists, etc.¹. This allowed her to take on realities and conditions alien to her as experiences, but not in her writings and scenic experiences.

Hence, in this article I am interested looking at Aguirre's creations from the 1960s, in particular *Los papeleros*, which premiered in 1962 and *Los que van quedando en el camino*, from 1969, but noting that these researches, methodologies and positions in relation to dramaturgy have resorted to documentary since 1959.

Isidora Aguirre Tupper (1919-2011), prolific playwright, short story writer, novelist, screenwriter, created more than 40 theater works and actively participated in many of them. Coming from the Chilean upper class, she had connections with various cultural and intellectual agents from Chile and the world since childhood. Aguirre was the great-great-granddaughter of Isidora Zegers (founder of the Chilean Philharmonic Orchestra). Her mother, the painter María Tupper, used to host cultural events at her home in the old neighborhood of Rosas Street, in the heart of Santiago de Chile. Her father was engineer Fernando Aguirre Errázuriz. From a very young age, Aguirre was acquainted with personalities such as Marta Brunet, Margarita Xirgú, David Alfaro Siqueiros (who painted her mother's portrait), Pablo Neruda, Vicente Huidobro. And got to know several intellectuals and artists who had taken refuge from the Spanish Civil War. Isidora attended several courses but finished none of them. She was methodical and a visionary creator. She approached dramaturgy by mixing her work as a social worker, her film studies and her profound rejection of social injustices and inequalities. She produced works related to sociology and historical revision. Most of her characters are the product of research processes, observation and participation in projected realities. Her concern for other histories, alternative to those produced at that time, led her to assemble true constellations of the most diverse materials for her dramaturgical creation, which is reflected in her archive held by USACH and by family succession. One experience that condenses great part of Aguirre's theatrical works was the Teatro Experimental Popular Amador (TEPA), which congregated several individual and collective creations with support from the political project Popular Unity, during Salvador Allende's presidential campaign and at the time when his political measures were implemented, until the 1973 coup. Several of her works have been translated and staged throughout the world. As has been proposed by several researchers, Aguirre's production is part of a series of procedures for politicizing Latin American arts and theater after the Cuban Revolution.

1 (<https://isidoraaguirre.usach.cl/>).



Popular sectors emerged in the arts after an accumulation of forces in certain spaces, which generated complex aesthetic strategies by proposing other historical mechanisms in their processes of comparing facts. As if the history of these sectors were something invaluable but in ruins, Isidora Aguirre became a kind of archaeologist by digging into the rubble of History's constitutive layers. At the core of these excavations and most of her written works onwards were the accounts of popular sectors. I call this excavation and reconstitution exercise "fictionalization strategies" (Aravena, 2022).

These strategies are ways of reclaiming and dismantling the hegemonic positivist, linear historical account focused on great heroes (of the oligarchies) to fragment, interrupt, and redirect it to the chronicle, to the testimony of popular sectors. It functions as a mechanism for dismantling History, interrupting it with press releases, poems, knowledge from small experiences, which nevertheless condense great persecutions and massacres of marginalized populations. These fictionalization strategies questioned the official historical narrative that imposed itself as truth, challenging the way in which knowledge of certain events had until then been transmitted.

By analyzing the work of various writers during the 1960s, I observed that "their interest lied on projecting political, historical, and revolutionary processes from a sensitive kaleidoscope that fused art, sociology, history, literature, and theater" (Aravena, 2022, p. 131). In this regard, Aguirre's writings in the 1960s, especially *Los que van quedando en el camino*, resembles a historical collage. In these writings, the playwright focused on historical verification and comparison by means of other types of documents removed from the official accounts on these social processes. María Gabriela Solano suggests that these works moved between "balanced thinking and... careful research (using documents, interviews, newspaper articles, etc.) either to provide the public with basic information on a verifiable subject, or to increase public awareness of that subject... Always leveraging the words of victims as the greatest evidence to impact the audience" (Solano, 2016, p. 10). In *Los que van quedando...*, Aguirre tells the story of the Ránquil massacre based on the first-person account from one of its survivors, which she complements with photographs of the survivors, of protests against agrarian reform and press releases about the massacre, materials available in the archive.

As for the notion of fiction as a strategy for combating History, I am interested in resuming Pamela Brownell's (2021) argument that what is important in works that use documents is not an exact definition of what could be considered true, but rather on the struggle generated between fiction and official History (prefigured as truth) and how this exercise directly confronts the viewer. What matters is that on the other side of the stage one can recognize the difference between fiction and reality. Although Brownell theorizes about the theater of the real in the contemporary scene, I am interested in resuming her propositions in light of Aguirre's archive and work, and thus demonstrate how she confronted these interpellations against the statutes of reality in the 1960s.



When Isidora Aguirre began to write *Población Esperanza* (1959) with Manuel Rojas, she focused her reference search on the reality of popular sectors. Characters in these works addressed themes that reconfigured the reality projected on stage. In this regard, Brownell characterizes these researches thusly: “the characters who appear in them exist or have existed in the real world, outside the theater, outside her imagination, and the words they are shown saying to the audience are in fact their own” (Hammond; Steward in Brownell, 2021, p. 50-51). In fact, what Aguirre’s characters emulate in the works analyzed here are real people, ordinary as has been said on some occasions, so mundane that their stories of violence and struggle were almost naturalized, silenced or even forgotten. Aguirre produced constellations of political processes that rediscovered problems, experiences, strategies and affiliations which reflect “minor” histories (Deleuze; Guattari, 1978) unfit for the “major” events depicted in the great timeline of History.

2 Finding a thread: first points of aesthetic flux and modification of theater methods

Población Esperanza (1959), written with Manuel Rojas, configures Isidora Aguirre’s first work with an aesthetic flow from her creations prior to 1959, marked by realistic and psychological comedy (centered on the bourgeois family), to documentary strategies. As mentioned, it tells the story of the first land occupation in Chile, in dialogue with the historical events of the time. Isidora Aguirre’s digital archive has several materials related to the work itself and its premiere. Thanks to my PhD research, in which I was able to review the physical archives Aguirre gathered to write this work, I found that several interviews were conducted with residents and that she had gathered a significant number of written press releases about various land occupations during this period.

However, writing *Los papeleros* (1962) will lead Aguirre to develop her documentary methodology. Directed by Eugenio Guzmán, the work was staged with the Professional Union of Actors of Chile, and premiered in a tent in downtown Santiago, at the Alejandro Flores Mobile Theater. In the words of Eugenio Guzmán, the work sought to show the “deep tension between the exploiting class and the exploited class.” Aguirre stated that “the very existence of waste pickers should make us revise the world we live in” (both quotes are from the Isidora Aguirre Digital Archive²).

The play consists of two parts with 10 scenes each, with music and songs by Gustavo Becerra. It tells the story of a group of waste pickers who live and work in a large garbage dump located on the outskirts of Santiago in 1960. These women, men, older adults, and children are considered social waste and carry the mark (and stigma) of their work in their bodies: “Julio: (Shows the palms of his hands, which have only become dark and with a hard layer due to daily contact with the residues). Look!... when you go out to ask for a job, the first thing they look at is your

² <https://isidoraaguirre.usach.cl/grafica/ia-008-009-002/>



hands and they say 'he's one of the filthy'" (Aguirre, 1964, p. 60). In the past, most of these people worked as laborers or peasants, while in the scenic present (1962) they were scavenging due to unemployment, old age, or alcoholism.

Aguirre places a group of waste pickers and their experiences and testimonies at the center of this story, changing the theme and characters depicted by playwriting at the time. Thus, the work belongs to a series of formal transformations (in the beginning) resulting from the social turn in the arts in the second half of the 20th century in Latin America. Immersed in the lives of waste pickers, the author also transformed her modes of theatrical production and named this new writing methodology as "pulling the thread by its end" (Aguirre in Jeftanovic, 2019, p. 167). It consisted of having close conversations with people she projected as the protagonists of her plays and then delving into the group's individual and collective experience and the structure that sustained these living conditions. To write *Los papeleros*, she had daily conversations with waste pickers, whom she approached with simple questions such as: how much do they pay you?, to whom and where do you sell the recyclable materials?, etc. She developed this testimonial process in sociology courses (which she attended at the University of Chile) by reading theoretical texts on the subject and reviewing the press of the time. This enabled her to get to the heart of the exploitation suffered by waste pickers based on their own accounts. She thus got to know the large Guanaco Alto dump in Santiago, in which more than 50 people worked, including older adults and children. In her conversations with Andrea Jeftanovic (2019), Aguirre expressed herself as follows:

That end of the thread revealed the skein... That first contact helped us broaden the research, interviewing those who "lived outside the walls because they didn't like to be seen waste picking on the street." It immediately gave us the directions to get to the Guanaco Alto dump. There we conducted almost 40 interviews—conversations, in fact—which constitute the material of my theatrical work... To write them, we relied solely on memory. When we returned home, we reconstructed the conversations and wrote them down in the form of interviews... For this reason and thanks to this method, which captures the immediacy in these conversations, the work resembles a documentary. The life of waste pickers is narrated in their own words (Aguirre in Jeftanovic, 2019, p. 167).

Isidora pulled the thread by the end and followed it to see how far it went, and with this metaphor she began to move toward the spaces to which she referred in her plays. In this exercise, she herself merged with the characters she observed, such as Guatona Romilia, a fierce female waste picker, protagonist of *Los papeleros*, for example. In this inhabitation, which she recorded in her work diaries, appeared different planes of problems and questions of approximation to the structures that kept waste pickers in their condition of "material exploitable by the unscrupulous" (Aguirre, *El problema de los recolectores de papel*, personal archive of Isidora Aguirre, 1961, p. 1). Analysis of these documents shows the organizational problem in this group, deeply linked to alcoholism and distrust among them. It also evinces that unemployment and rural-urban migration constituted some of the main aspects that led them to this work.



The irruption of oppressed sectors and their issues both in this work, as in many other plays, literature, or visual arts of the period,³ responded to the need to depict these realities to the middle sectors, which after the Cuban Revolution (1959) sought to generate new associations either out of commitment or out of fear of the processes underway. This need questioned the usual modes of representation by including the direct testimony of the oppressed or murdered popular sectors, an example of which is the novel *Operación Masacre* by Rodolfo Walsh or the works of Antonio Berni and his famous *Juanito Laguna*. In the case of Isidora Aguirre's work, although those who staged these testimonies were professional actors rather than the protagonists of these stories, *Los papeleros* and *Los que van quedando en el camino* conveyed problems, reports, and organizational strategies coming from the same (re)presented sectors.

The modifications Aguirre and several artists pointed out occurred in the specific disciplinary fields (dramaturgy fused with sociology, for example) and in the modes of production by the testimonial turn of the first source. This need to make these sectors of society present generated several experiments that sought to "objectify" these other experiences, attracting to the scene people who were in the real world, on the other side of the stage. Aguirre articulated a work that intertwined document and fiction based on testimony and situations extracted from the bloody reality of paper collectors.

By an excerpt from one of her work diaries, Aguirre attracted the language of someone who lived in waste and takes us to a sensitive space in the universe she built for the play:

A girl with a huge head picks up pieces of glass and throws them backward over her shoulder. Nearby is a little over a year-old boy dressed only from the waist up like most, so he doesn't have to change his clothes when they "get wet." A slightly older girl takes care of him; I call her to come and save him from the shards of glass and I approach the other one, the one with the big head. She lifts her head all disheveled: she's blind. I take the broken bottle from her and give her a boiled chestnut. Her hand clings to mine, like that of a drowning person who finds something to hold on to, and stands up (Aguirre, 1961, p. 6).

The image of broken glass, capable of cutting children's skin, will be repeated in several theatrical works of the period (Aravena, 2022). In *Los papeleros*, this account appears after a love scene between *El Tigre*, Romilia's son, and *La Mocha*, a waste picker who adopted a child from the garbage dump. Mocha makes Tiger back down from committing a robbery and takes him to the dump to work with her. In a song, Mocha describes the landscape to Tigre, they talk about the glimmers of misery in the garbage dump. In the stage directions at the end, Aguirre describes the planes that make up the garbage dump, in which the diaphanous sky of the pickers is full of stars of broken glass (Aguirre, 1964).

3 Maria Asunción Requena in theater, Rodolfo Walsh and Francisco (Paco) Urondo in literature, Antonio Berni and Alberto Pérez in the visual arts are a few examples. For more details, see Aravena; Smith. *La escena Inquieta* (ed.). 2018.



As the author herself states in the book *Conversaciones con Isidora Aguirre* (2019), theater is presented as a “vehicle of ideologies, using the emotional path” (p. 174). The love between both characters, the shared upbringing that they wish to undertake of the orphaned child and Romilia’s need to take her son out of that place of misery in which she lives are configured as spaces of resistance that, by affection, seek to modify in some aspect the projected reality. Romilia mobilizes to create a union of waste pickers, to be able to negotiate and influence the value of paper prices. Although Aguirre pulls the thread that leads her to the garbage dump that employs the girl who throws shards of glass that can cut another child, these dramatic efforts fail to cut with an Aristotelian, linear, and successive narrative of the events that the work tells us. Nor enables us to directly look at the documents that underpin its creation. Even so, we can glimpse the first approximations to a theater of documentary and political character that begins to fragment what it sees to understand it.

George Didi-Huberman (2008), in his review of Bertolt Brecht’s diaries, stated that “he never took a stand without seeking to know, never seeking to know without having before his eyes the documents that seemed appropriate to him. But I didn’t see anything without deconstructing and then reconstructing it on my own, to better expose it...” (Didi-Huberman, 2008, p. 27). In this sense, what Aguirre does by pulling this little thread is to enable us to direct our gaze to the shards of glass scattered on the floor of the garbage dump, which in dramaturgical terms will be a first stage of rupture, fracture, or modification of his conception of the theater. This text develops the first strategies of the counter-history around the characters and the social situations that determined them. This social drama (which tends toward melodrama) manages to reflect on the conditions of misery that constitute these characters and test a hypothesis about the poverty of its protagonists inside and outside the work by making us ask about our responsibility (for those of us who expect) in this whole plot.

3 Ovillar: political theater and fictionalization strategies in *Los que van quedando en el camino* (1969)

There was a lot of respect—that’s the word—in my family, respect for the countryside and we were Sagredo’s “dones.” It had nothing to do with education. My father didn’t know how to read or write, and I myself came to learn here in Santiago only to sign and read the big titles... My father never beat my mother, and in the countryside all the men beat their wives, for being women or for small things, for not having a piece of clothing ready, you tell me (sic) sir. [...]. After my father’s death, Simón became the head of the family. Men were “ordered to,” but we were not so we could work freely. Each one of us had to care for a brother. My mother used to say “you have this brother out of obligation” and we had to keep his clothes clean, mend him, take care of him in everything. Food and mate. Ah, that’s a must. We always had to have a boiling teapot on the stove, because that (sic) is the first thing when arriving from the field, you live on bitter mate, although we took it with sugar. One must have a boiling teapot. It’s the first sign of affection. [...].



I had her in a crib that I found for her in a drawer, and no one knew that we had a "guagua" [baby] in the house, she never cried. That was the Guacolda that the pacos [police] killed when I was two and a half years old along with my whole family. [...].

There I learned for the first time about trade unions and politics. Later, from Lota, they took him north with the FOCH (Workers' Federation). Those were the days of Recabarren and Laferte, when there was turmoil in the North with the workers. There Benito began to know "the colors" and Party things. He met him in Lonquimay, where Simón and Juan Leiva formed the Agricultural Union and organized the land cooperative.

(Sagredo, Emelina in Aguirre. Digital archive of Isidora Aguirre, *Los que van quedando en el camino*⁴).

In the midst of Chile's busy landscape in the late 1960s (university reform, the emergence of the Revolutionary Left Movement, formation of the political conglomerate Popular Unity which would lead Salvador Allende to victory, etc.), the interest of certain artists was focused on projecting political processes onto sensitive artifacts that fused art, politics, and history. With *Los que van quedando en el camino* (1969), Isidora Aguirre bet all her cards on Political Theater. Functioning as a historical collage, the play rewrites the 1934 Ránquil Massacre to reflect on the facts and accounts of those who survived the state violence exercised against peasant and indigenous sectors of southern Chile. Of continental echo, the work was published and staged in several Latin American countries and was translated into several languages. In this play, a mixture of artless and material things (Benjamin, 2005) intertwined with accounts from popular sectors, Aguirre radicalized what I have called "fictionalization strategies." By this I mean certain sensitive strategies which are related to cuts in linear narrative time and to the concatenations of circumstances that inscribe a social issue within the history of human exploitation rather than a linear evolutionary fact. Such strategy resembles collage, and both for readers and viewers it gives the impression that the facts are inventions, even data extracted from reality (conservative press releases and figures, for example) because they are crossed with fictional elements. It is a counter-history strategy that does not negate the official account, but rather challenges it, makes it contradictory.

In Isidora Aguirre's digital archive, we find the complex network of political agents she assembled to write *Los que van quedando...*: interviews with peasants and Mapuche individuals from Ránquil, with political leaders, photographs of marches for agrarian reform, a series of debates between her, Roque Dalton and Eugenio Guzmán about the political strategies of the time, etc. The same can be seen in Jeftanovic's book with Aguirre. Thanks to her connections with various Communist Party leaders, she made several trips to southern Chile, where she collected an important number of testimonies.

Emelina Sagredo's words, a survivor of the Ránquil Massacre that took place in the Araucanía region of southern Chile in 1934, during Arturo Alessandri's presidency, and left more than a hundred dead by the police, open this section. She provided one of the main testimonies for Aguirre to write *Los que van quedando en el camino*. Directed by Eugenio Guzmán, the play premiered in

⁴ <https://isidoraaguirre.usach.cl/texto/ia-026-007-016/>



1969 at the Antonio Varas Theater and Emelina was seated in the front row. She managed to escape the torture, persecution and murder perpetrated by the Chilean police, unlike all her family and loved ones, including Guacolda, the orphan girl Emelina adopted at the age of 2.

Consisting of two acts—Good days and Bad days—, the play takes place in Ránquil, Araucanía region, and the story is told by Mamá Lorenza, an elderly woman to whom, in 1969, the ghosts of those murdered in 1934 appear. A young Lorenza (1934) also appears, in direct allusion (and homage) to the life of Emelina Sagredo. “Good days” takes place between 1927 and 1934,⁵ and begins by showing us what life in the countryside means to the characters, in clear relation to Emelina’s vision found in the typewritten interviews, present in Aguirre’s archive. The first act presents most of the characters: Lorenza’s mother, her four siblings (Pedro, José, Mañungo and Dominga), Juanucho (great-nephew), Rogelio (her suitor), Naranjo and Lucila (his daughter), neighbors in the sector. We are also acquainted with a historical figure—Juan Leiva—, a rural teacher who created a Peasants’ Union to support land distribution, an organization of which Lorenza’s entire family were part. As the play progresses, the need for articulation, education and defense of what little they have is highlighted, as the landowners place more and more obstacles to handing over the lands assigned to them by the government. With the repressive state apparatuses besieging them and intervening on behalf of the landowners, the peasants and laborers decide to form a joint union. Its purpose is explained by Dominga, Lorenza’s sister: “He [Juan Leiva] says that on the other side of the world, the peasants conquered land by making a revolution!” (Aguirre, 1970, p. 11).

Mama Lorenza is afraid that the 1934 tragedy will repeat itself. She expresses this fear to Juanucho, her young nephew, throughout the play. Similarly, she is assailed by the memories of her dead, who push her to tell her story and to vindicate her struggles. Aguirre’s narrative covers the period from the massacre in the 1930s to the protests for agrarian reform that took place in Santiago in the late 1960s, precisely when her work premiered. Peasants’ power and political protagonism is a profound debate that will take place throughout the play.

What I am suggesting, as a first discovery, is that Aguirre delves further into her documentary strategy by directly addressing both the account of the massacre and its scenic present. Taking elements from Bertolt Brecht’s theater, from the beginning of the play it is the actors, not the characters, who speak to us and present the work thusly:

ACTOR I – Around the 1920s, a “progressive” government promised land to poor peasants.

CHORUS – Just like today.

5 “MAMA LORENZA – “Agricultural Union of Lonquimay”... this must have been about 1927,” “Lorenza – And it was a great celebration! (*Pause. The music continues*). It was in Ránquil, where the Lagos family, Rogelio’s parents, lived. They danced until dawn. That must have been around 1933... In December, as soon as summer came...” (Aguirre, 1970, pp. 14 and 28, respectively). According to some educational websites, the play takes place between 1928 and 1934 in the first part, when the peasants decided to make effective the law granting them land if they had lived in the place for more than seven years.



ACTOR II – It encouraged them to come out of their resigned slavery and they, trusting in the law, claimed their rights.

CHORUS – Just like today.

ACTOR III – Alarmed, the landowners united to defend their interests. To maintain their privileges.

CHORUS – Just like today.

ACTOR I – Poverty and injustice continued in the countryside.

CHORUS – Just like today.

ACTOR II – The government blamed the landowners. The landowners blamed the government.

CHORUS – Just like today.

ACTOR III – The laws dictated by the ruling class do not serve the dominated class. Then the peasants rose up in “illegality.”

CHORUS – Just like today.

ACTOR II – And that “progressive” government that encouraged them to fight for their rights responded with blood!

...

ACTOR I – 1969: peasants in the south unite to march towards the capital.

... [actors enter with signs] The signs (red with white letters) read: “Legality does not serve poor peasants”... “No to layoffs” (Aguirre, 1970, p. 1).

One of the first fictionalization strategy that appears in Aguirre’s work consists in making this clash of times evident by denouncing turmoils experienced in two historical moments crossed by the same class conflict. This explanation of Chilean society’s injustices in one temporality (in the “being”) translates into a historical implication, both in denouncing what has happened and is happening, and in recognizing the possible tragedy. A second moment of intersection of political strategies shows us the circumstances that led the people of Ránquil to organize and take up arms. Chile was living a political moment deeply permeated by the election of a socialist president, who proposed a peaceful rise to power. As Brownell notes, what causes these clashes of times is “the intelligibility of the present in its historical dimension, as a particular conjuncture at the intersection of different processes” (Brownell, 2018, p. 50).

Jumps in time and the way in which the play’s circumstances are developed particularize this bloody act perpetrated by the state apparatus against peasant sectors, opening fissures to the present and interrupting Aristotelian development. Artless things, too lame to be included in the History of Heroes but incredibly material for the popular sectors, such as the massacres perpetrated against them, interrupt the official linearity. Aguirre goes even further, since political strategies are put into practice and told by peasant women. In my understanding, Aguirre generates is a strategy of counter-history in tension with the official history thus making it contradictory, further particularizing the idea of fictionalization strategies.

Its second act, “Bad days,” opens by showing us how fertile are the lands ceded by the state, where several families have settled near those of Lorenza Uribe. The police’s arrival interrupts the scene, announcing the eviction of the families and the arrest order of two of Lorenza’s brothers. The land’s “owners” have opposed ceding them to the government, even though the state had bought them, as they will be converted into sawmills. The police act as “watchdogs” for the landowners, as the characters state.



As announced from the beginning, in the end the entire machinery of power—police, military, press, paramilitaries—is mobilized against the peasants, betrayed by one of their union comrades (Naranjo), who hands over Rogelio and Juan Leiva. Predicting the horrors of the dictatorship, “exemplary” criminal acts are committed against the leaders Rogelio and Leiva, who are lassoed, tied to the horses and dragged over the cliffs. Rogelio’s father is fatally shot twice for hiding them. Landowners’ houses function as illegal prisons and torture sites, another sinister premonition. Among several cuts in the narrative, we are told that Juan Leiva was shot twenty times and that nothing is known of Rogelio’s fate besides his murder.

Amidst the fear and horror provoked by these memories, Mama Lorenza talks to her affective partner’s ghost. It is Rogelio who encourages her to recount her experiences, presenting another of the play’s ideological premises: “Death does not exist, Lorenza. One believes in an ideal and carries it with them into eternity” (Aguirre, 1970, p. 63). The dialogue continues:

LORENZA – For you, perhaps. But many other did not understand. Fell by the wayside with their sacrifice...

ROGELIO – From those who did not understand, from those who fall by the wayside—that’s what revolutions are also made, Lorenza! (Aguirre, 1970, p. 64).

At this point in the play, account transparency no longer supports fictions. The characters’ dialogue is a direct allusion to Ernesto Che Guevara’s *Episodes of the Cuban Revolutionary War* (1963), which was widely circulated in Chile at that time before Popular Unity. Parallel to this cry of encouragement drawn from the Cuban Revolution, other characters join the story to describe the horrors suffered by the peasants who took up arms and resisted the Ránquil massacre in 1934. The theatrical procedures become transparent, overlapping the accounts of the tragedy and the popular recognition of those who died with the political agitation of the present. These transparencies stem from Aguirre’s dramaturgical and political gesture of picking up those who fell by the wayside and making them present in the play. By the end, the official account of the massacre is challenged by Emelina Sagredo’s testimony reworked in the dialogue between Lorenza and Dominga, which recounts the murder of their family, interposed by the rally cries of the peasants marching towards the capital.

Despite all the pain caused by these events, hope is given by the future popular knowledge embodied in the boy Juanucho. Cuts in the narration and jumps in time strengthen the play’s core idea of “doing justice” through what this history, in lowercase letters, tells us:

MAMA LORENZA – Remember these words, child, remember these words: “the heroic peasants who fought at Ránquil” ... (Smiling) “Death does not exist,” Juanucho. (Listening) Now they’ are marching again... Can you hear it?

JUANUCHO – Those are the tenants, Mama Lorenza. They have joined the march... of the peasant strikers walking to the capital... Do you think they’ll get there?

MAMA LORENZA – Yes, Juanucho! Those who fell by the wayside in their sacrifice now march with them... (Aguirre, 1970, p. 69).



The march to Santiago mentioned by Juanucho took place in 1969 against the measures adopted by the then-President Eduardo Frei Montalva. Lorenza (the memory) invokes the blood spilled in Ránquil during 1934, and Mama Lorenza, terrified, tells the story to Juanucho, her great-nephew. The peasant boy represents a possibility of condensing this historical latency into the struggles that the Chilean people will undertake during the 1970s. As if theater had the capacity, on the one hand, to invoke justice by means of historical reconstruction and, on the other, to propose other possibilities with an ongoing play. It is the pulse of this minor history of the massacres perpetrated against the various peoples of the third world which resonated throughout Latin America in the 1960s. A dialectical play of the times that is present in the peasants' march to Chile's capital. Juanucho is thus shown as someone who could continue Juan Leiva's legacy and take it further.

As such, one of the aspects that crosses the eras in *Los que van quedando en el camino* is its political emotion around the condensation of minor histories, since it manages to "use its memory as a 'warning of future fires,' ... [re]enacting 'imaginings of future sufferings' on the basis of a 'lived memory'" (Didi-Huberman, 2008, p. 25). Such displacement of time between a scenic present (1969) that is constantly assaulted by victims of the 1934 massacre is what I call a fictionalization strategy. Possibility emerges in the fabrication of events, between what happened in Ránquil, what is happening and what could happen.

The play had huge cultural impact once it premiered. It summed up most of the era's zeitgeist, both nationally, in the continent and internationally. It was published in the Cuban theater magazine *Conjunto* and translated into several languages. Its repercussions were such that Salvador Allende, still campaigning for the presidency, proposed that Isidora Aguirre be part of the cultural movement that emerged in Popular Unity. His idea was to take *Los que van quedando en el camino* to different places and realities in Chile. Aguirre expressed the material and human impossibility of bringing this production by the Chilean National Theater to the population. The author thus announced the moment in which theater, even in its political and documentary branch, no longer contained in its structure the political project undertaken by the alliances of the popular sectors. If we consider that "theatre only serves to alert us to other histories behind the official one and that the truth of history has been manipulated by a source of power interested in history being seen and understood from a single perspective" (Solano, 2016, p. 13), Aguirre's participation in UP's political processes required other procedural and political research. Hence why Aguirre created the Teatro Experimental Popular Amador (TEPA) to contribute to the Popular Unity process. More than bringing the plays to the street, the street had to propose its own themes. In this new stage, Aguirre created a series of short didactic plays about the Chilean reality and the policies of Popular Unity. Using news reports, she wrote plays that were staged by the local residents. She also created a series of educational and theatrical experiences with prisoners. And emerged her mythical *cabeções da feira*, big-headed puppets featured in much of Latin America's popular culture.



4 Finishing points

I would like to point out a few finishing points to this examination of Isidora Aguirre's political and documentary creation in the 1960s. First, her playwriting from this period, since 1959 with *Población Esperanza* but especially with *Los papeleros* and *Los que van quedando en el camino*, must be regarded as a fundamental antecedent in the history of Chilean and Latin American documentary theater, considering that her endeavor precedes, for example, the work by Mexican Vicente Leñero, to whom was attributed the pioneering place in documentary theater making in the region. Perhaps one of the distinguishing features of the documentary turn in Latin America is more related to the political processes that center its interest on archives and other non-official documents which gave way to works and scenes focused on popular sectors. Thus, we must untangle the thread that proposes Vicente Leñero as the first to implement documentary theater procedures in the continent (Solano, 2016; Brownell, 2021).

Two aspects here should be highlighted. On the one hand, the invisibilization of women's work in the theater of this period, particularly of those who turned to political theater. As such, the book *Evidencias: Las otras dramaturgias* (2020) intends to settle this debt referring to a century of women playwrights in Chile. On the other, these theatrical processes should be read as networks, not because they are necessarily interconnected, but to understand them as phenomena that happen simultaneously to particular political processes. Such are the analyses conducted by the Cuban theater magazine *Conjunto* (Aravena, 2016; Layera, 1983), which highlight the common affiliations and procedures that crossed Latin America in a period marked by revolution. Hence why instead of debating who pioneered in documentary theatre, I am interested in seeing the connections and networks that were created and how Isidora Aguirre's work—her playwriting, procedures and work as a cultural agent during the revolutionary processes in Latin America—managed to weave the driving force of an era.

A more fine weaving should point out, firstly, that Aguirre's documentary procedure began to take shape already in *Población Esperanza* (1959). In generating play procedures for questioning the "truth" or official history, Aguirre radicalizes her creative strategy between *Los Papeleros* (premiered in 1964, but its research begins in 1961c.) and *Los que van quedando en el camino* (1969). Aguirre, as well as all the playwrights and theatrical collectives that turned to documentary at the time, "discover in the documentary theater of the 1960s and 1970s, sharing the opinion of Bravo-Elizondo, two basic objectives: 'to deliver the results of the author's historical research and to revolutionize the historical fact for the public'" (Solano, 2016, p. 11). Such audience revolution is related to the ability to challenge the official truth and hegemonic narrative, an issue that will problematize the proposal of the Theater of the Oppressed. Brownell further develops this by highlighting "the emphasis on the re-semanticization processes developed by Latin American documentary theater in relation to certain characters and institutions, seeking to promote counter-readings of the official discourses" (Brownell,



2021, p. 200-201). With the passage of political events and time, these counter-readings will no longer come only from theater itself but will be seen in expanded scenes in which people outside theater will use the tools of theater and documentary to tell their own stories and creations in a scenario that will be violently interrupted by the dictatorships of the 1970s.



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