

Ariel Dorfman: On the Frontier of a Fairy Tale

by Lake Sagaris

Once upon a time, kids, on the frontier of a fairy tale, there was a singer whose name was Manuel. Once upon a time there was we ourselves in that country that never was. Once upon a time there was a land of meanwhile, a time of between parentheses, a land of the back door, a land where they put women to sleep and take children prisoner. Once upon a time Manuel Sendero had dreamed that with his voice intact he could rescue his beloved from the Hell and resurrect his son and move the beasts to pity. Once upon a time, in a word, Manuel Sendero believed he was immortal.

As we all do.

Ariel Dorfman is a rare creature in today's world, although also he may well represent the cultured person of tomorrow. Born in Argentina, raised in Chile and longtime resident of the United States, he's a genuine citizen of America, North and South, capable of linking both, in his writing and his life. He's also one of the more interesting writers working in any language today.

Although he's primarily known as a poet, journalist and novelist, Dorfman's third play, *Death and the Maiden*, is a current hit of London's Royal Court main stage. Roman Polanski bought the film rights, with plans for Glenn Close to star. The play, directed by Mike Nichols, is also headed for Broadway.

Dorfman's work overflows with exiles and returns, utopias engulfed by flames, feminism, machismo, extraordinary and ordinary courage. While there's no doubt he's fully conversant with magic realism, a literary style which made many Latin American authors famous, his writing also reveals the influence of the terser language common to Anglo writers.

One of the best things about Dorfman is that he's a truly Latin American author available to English-speaking readers in what is very close to the original language. While he usually writes in Spanish, he often rewrites in English. "Translations" are close to genuine originals. Dorfman didn't always enjoy his biculturalism, but he overcame the identity

crisis it produced. Now he divides his time between teaching at Duke University in the US and Chile.

"As long as your ethics are clear then I think you may be able to live in two societies", he says.

Ethics are key to Dorfman's writing and are often linked with politics. He warns that "there's a tendency to link that because something is political it's automatically simple, instead of saying this has to do with politics, with power, with morality; it has to do with how you construct your consciousness and how you destroy myths".

His novel, *The Last Song of Manuel Sendero* (Viking Penguin, 1988), weaves these and other concerns into a difficult but rewarding experience for the reader. Strands of narrative, divided by language and united by theme, untangle to reveal the fractured diamond of survival through catastrophe.

Dorfman's fascination with the mass media (an early book of his was "How to read Donald Duck" and he contributes regularly to *The New York Times*, *The Nation* and other

periodicals) is expressed by a movie-like dialogue between two Chilean exiles.

Footnotes indicate the exiles' dialogue is a relic, dug up and analyzed by future students who argue over whether the pair correspond to the heroes of an ancient myth about the "Dragon Pinchot", tyrant of Tsil. A father tells his children this story, revealing unwanted truths:

"Who sent him, huh? Who sent the dragon?" ... Some say he was made by taking a little piece of heart from every inhabitant of the land and that's why he was so strong."

Throughout the novel, the unborn son of Manuel Sendero searches for the Caballero (the Gentleman responsible for the evil in his world. Sendero's son is the official representative of a generation of babies who refuse to be born until their demands for a decent world are met.

Above all, Sendero, which was written in the early 1980s, is a stubborn search for hope when circumstances don't warrant it. "I just bet that hope was there. If I had discovered that there was no hope, I would

have written it like that. I don't know if I would have published it," said Dorfman.

His work is representative of a generation of writers now acclaimed in Latin America, whose lives were shaped by the vibrant movements for social change which Pablo Neruda immortalized in his poems of the late sixties. They later saw their hopes torpedoed by military coups and are now trying to adjust to their countries' attempts to rebuild democracy.

"Neruda created a whole wonderful way of seeing Latin America, but we're living a very different reality now. All of our works deal with hope, but a bleak hope."

Dorfman's short story collection, *"My House is on Fire"* (Viking Penguin, 1990) includes "Badlands", a story about a lonely soldier guarding a city which has been razed. He never looks back. "Badlands" is not about writing, but it could be. It's a parable about causes and those who refuse to lose them, the blindness of hope, strategies of survival.

The soldier talks endlessly to his absent brother and their conversation hints at what life abroad has taught Dorfman, what he breathes into every book.

"Why so serene? Where did you learn to forgive but not forget?"

"It's the way we are, brother. It's a gift for you."

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