

Study Guide



Prepared to complement
The Latino Arts Theater
production of



The Man Who Turned into a Dog (*El Hombre que se Convirtió un Perro*)

Written by Osvaldo
Dragún

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Osvaldo Dragún and His Bare Stage: Imagination, Absurdity, and Politics



Osvaldo
Dragún
(1929-1999)

Acknowledged as one of the greatest theatrical figures of the 20th century, Osvaldo Dragún used drama as a political weapon in ways that resonated far beyond his homeland of Argentina.

Born to a Jewish family who had emigrated from pre-World War II Europe, Osvaldo grew up in the countryside where his father was a horse tamer. When the Argentine economy suddenly crashed, the family was forced to move to Buenos Aires when his father lost his job, a devastating disappointment from which he never recovered. Later, Osvaldo would document his father's overwhelming sense of defeat in his plays, most particularly *The Man Who Turned into a Dog*.

Although he initially enrolled in college to study law, Dragún soon became intrigued by the potential power of the theatre as an instrument for social change.

For much of his early life, Argentina was ruled by a military-backed dictatorship. Tanks in the streets of Buenos Aires were a common sight. For his people, he wrote, "censorship, repression, and internal exile are daily occurrences."

To effect his goal of "enlightening the masses" about these issues, he and the many troupes that he founded often performed in the streets and public squares of Buenos Aires, often involving the audience in the production itself. (During one streetside production of *The Man Who Turned into a Dog*, even the neighborhood dogs added their voices to the actor's barking).

Dragún's constant battles with government authorities, who often banned his plays or closed the theaters in which they were performed, actually served as a source of inspiration for him. And, since censorship often curtailed the profitability of politically focused groups, it also helped to form a major characteristic of Argentine theatre: the element of imagination. Without the money for elaborate props, costumes, or sets, Argentine theatre companies enjoyed a

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PLOT SYNOPSIS FOR

"The Man Who Turned into a Dog (*El Hombre que se Convirtió un Perro*)"

The Story of the Man Who Turned Into a Dog begins as four actors announce that they are going to tell the story of "a man they knew."

He needs a job, they explain, but every time he applies for one, he is told that there are no jobs – only if someone dies, retires or is fired. As it happens, the night watchman's dog dies. ("He was very old," they add.)

The man applies for the job and gets it. Since he now has a dog house to sleep in, his wife Maria must move in with friends.

Adjust to this new job has its difficulties. (The Man: "This dog house is too tight." The Boss: "Get on all fours and squeeze into it. Come on try it, you can do it!" The Boss: "Now when I walk by, you must bark. Come on try.")

Maria visits him, but she is more and more distraught by his behavior. ("You bit me!" "No, I was only trying to kiss you, Maria.") Finally, he completely succumbs to his humiliating situation, and is last seen running through town on all fours.

Although the play's plot seems simple, in the end, it conjures up deeper questions on work and life. As one writer has put it, "This is not about finding a job in a tough job market. It is about becoming your job."

ARGENTINA IN BRIEF



Flag of Argentina

Capital: Buenos Aires

Population: 39,537,943

People: 85% European descent, 15% mestizo, Indian and other minorities

Size: 1,068,296 square miles (the second largest country in South America, after Brazil)

Major Industries: Agriculture, food processing, motor vehicles, textiles, chemicals, metallurgy.

Currency: Argentine Peso

Government: Republic

stronger degree of audience involvement than those in other less restrictive societies. “There is no place more free than that of an empty stage”, he stated.

This environment also proved to be a perfect setting for the avant-garde, Marxist theatrical style known as “Theater of the Absurd.” Developed in the 1950’s, Absurdism rejects reality, instead telling the “story” through coded language and symbolism – a perfect means for political expression in a society that kept a close watch on content.

Dragún’s reputation for artistic courage and innovative techniques resulted in invitations from theatrical groups around the world. Although his aim as a writer was to create specifically Argentinean works, his themes of transformation and strong political statement struck a universal chord.

Dragún also more than two dozen other poignant and pointed plays and screenplays, such as *Tupac Amaru* (1957), *Los de la mesa diez* (1957), *Desde el 80* (1958), *Historias de mi esquina* (1959), *Jardín del infierno* (1961), *Milagro en el Mercado Viejo* (1962), *Y nos dijeron que éramos inmortales* (1963), *Heroica de Buenos Aires* (1966), *El amasijo* (1967), *Historias con cárcel* (1972), *Pedrito el Grande* (1976), *Jugemos en el bosque* (1976), *Y por casa ¿cómo andamos?* (1979), *Mi obelisco y yo* (1981), *El perdedor* (1982), *El vencedor* (1982), *Al violador* (1983), *Hoy se comen al flaco* (1983), *Como Pancho por San Telmo* (1986), *¡Arriba, Corazón!* (1987), *Volver a La Habana* (1992), and *La Soledad del astronauta* (1996). No matter what the scenario in which these plays take place, whether in a marketplace or in an office, at the heart of each one lies the theme of the dehumanization. Although his stories display the results from the oppression felt by the Argentinean people living under authoritarian governments, they continue to strike a note of familiarity with audiences and actors the world over.

Resources for Further Study

Books for students:

Caistor, Nick. *Argentina in Focus: A Guide to the People, Politics and Culture*. Latin America Bureau, 1996. (Ages 12-adult)

Nickles, Greg. *Argentina: The Culture*. Crabtree Publishing Company, 1997. (Ages 9-12)

Source books for educators:

Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Vintage, 2004.

Now in its third edition, this classic text decodes the mysteries of the absurdist style in clear, interesting, and readable prose.

Boal, Augusto. *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Theatre Communications Group, 1985.

Boal’s highly regarded examination of the roles that politics and social issues play in the modern theatre traces the history of the stage and offers illustrative games and exercises for teachers and directors.

Thornton, Lawrence. *Imagining Argentina*. Bantam Books, 1991.

Although a work of fiction, this novel of a playwright’s struggles in 1970s Argentina effectively paints a picture of life under a repressive regime.

Nouzeilles, Gabriela (ed.) *The Argentina Reader: History, Culture, Politics*. Duke University Press, 2003.

A diverse collection of songs, articles, comic strips, scholarly essays, poems, and short stories by Argentine writers.