



The Dramatist's Ethic and the *Espíritu* of Capitalism



Tomás González, Matteo Citarella, and Trinidad González in *Espíritu*. Credit: Publicity photo via the Public Theater.

Espíritu, by Teatro Anónimo via the Public Theater online this spring.

BY ZOE SHERMAN

Several people lean against a wall, speaking quietly in the dark. It is hard to say how many, because of the fragmented view granted by the extreme close-up, but after a few minutes they resolve into three distinct individuals. They speak of something haunting the city. It has no color or smell (which rhymes in Spanish, which is the language they are speaking: *color, olor*); it is hard to identify or locate; it is doing great harm. How will they protect themselves? They devise a ritualistic plan of attack. Each pricks a finger, squeezes a drop of blood into a wine bottle as bait, and commits to capturing the devil in the bottle.

So begins the theatrical film *Espíritu*. (It had been in development as a play and was then adapted into film when the pandemic closed theaters. They still plan to produce a longer theatrical version for live audiences when that becomes possible.) This piece by Teatro Anónimo, from Chile, was included in the 2021 edition of Public Theater's annual Under the Radar festival, usually held in New York, this time held everywhere and no place, which is to say online. I watched the on-demand streaming video and a recording of what had been a real-time webinar talk-back.

After the opening pact, the same three performers who are also the creators of the show—playwright and director Trinidad González, composer and musical director Tomás González, and Matteo Citarella—reappear re-

peatedly, but the same characters do not. Over the next half hour, a series of one- to three-character scenes play out, connected to one another thematically but not narratively. The scenes are highly abstracted from the conventions of realist (or even fantasy) genres of film. None of the characters have a name or a filled-in backstory. The places, too, are never named or given a concrete history. It appears to have been filmed in a black box theater with only the sparsest of sets and props. Scaffolding places one performer above another to indicate a conversation between someone in a second-story apartment and someone on the sidewalk below. A row of theater seats isolated in the middle of the space indicates a park bench. Eventually I convinced myself to stop asking the reportorial

questions, “Who? What? Where? When? Why?” and accept the disorientation. The vignettes are not fables that will dig their chin into your shoulder, lecturing, “and the moral of that story is... .” In the talk-back, the members of Teatro Anónimo explained that though they certainly have political convictions, and they consider ideas to be the core purpose of their work, they do not aim to produce a pamphlet that conveys a fixed conclusion. Instead, they aim to raise questions. Perhaps the scenes are better characterized as parables: short tales that evade the lepidopterist’s pin and unfold into layers of ambiguous meaning.

Each scene restages a conflict pitting a drive toward accumulation and materialism against the stance of the marginalized observer-poet-artist-skeptic. The most oft-hurled insult by the former toward the latter is “useless.” Though the accusation carries a sting, the accusers judging their fellow-humans useless often come across as even more miserable and wounded than their targets. The sets and characters and plots may be highly abstract, but the parts are played with intense emotional specificity. One scene, in which a man expresses a flicker of curiosity about a teenage boy’s interest in wandering and observing and writing poetry, ends with the man recoiling from his own incomprehension by turning to insults and breaking into a mocking peal of laughter that lasted long after the boy had walked away. I shuddered. In another, a man in his apartment veers frighteningly from accusing the woman passing on the sidewalk below of theft—she walked into the patch of light generated by *his* lamp in *his* living room, making the light equally *his* property—to inviting her in with the offer of TV and sex, to a vile barrage of insults when she refuses first the premise of his accusation and then his invitation. In yet another, a woman weeps to her

partner that she will leave him. Why won’t he even try to get a decent job? Why can’t they have at least a few nice things? What is wrong with him? He tries to soothe her with a different vision of the purpose of life, but she is tired of living in the margins.

By pure serendipity, my turn to borrow my city library’s copy of Jenny Odell’s book *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* arrived just a few days after I watched

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Espíritu. Odell’s concept of doing nothing resonated for me with the “uselessness” of *Espíritu*’s dreamers and drifters. Of course, she explains, when she advocates doing nothing she does not literally mean doing nothing at all; she means doing nothing that the capitalist attention economy values, enacting an entirely different set of priorities. (My friend Shahram Azhar likes to answer the question “What do you do?” by saying something like, “Well, I wake up in the morning. I make breakfast for my son. Sometimes I write a poem or take a walk.” This rarely satisfies his questioner who usually meant to ask, “What do you sell?” or “Who buys your labor power and how do they consume it?”) Even as she encourages refusal to engage with the attention economy on the terms set by the exploiters who profit from it, Odell acknowledges

that some people, in some social positions, have a greater “margin of refusal” than others.

At the social margins, when survival itself is tenuous, the options are fewer. I wondered how to read the characters in *Espíritu*. Had they deliberately refused to be useful (to capital)? Had they been discarded and consigned to uselessness against their intent? Had they exercised their margin of refusal or simply been marginalized? How might the revolutionary potential of those two circumstances differ? In October 2020, as Teatro Anónimo was preparing for filming, the questions they had been pondering through the long development of *Espíritu* burst onto the streets of Chile in mass protests that led to a referendum vote on the national constitution. Chileans voted to reject the existing constitution and begin writing a new one.

In the last scene of *Espíritu*, a deposed dictator, wistfully reminiscing about how happy he was when he had power, listens with growing enthusiasm to a faceless creature who suggests a more secure route to power than the blunt force of militarized politics: Create an illusion of choice, seduce your subjects into complicity by promising abundance. (The pamphlet version of the ideas animating *Espíritu* would probably say something about entrapping them in the isolation of individualistic, competitive, neoliberal selfhood.) As the tyrant’s eyes gleam with the possibilities, a dancer in a blue dress, the most vivid color we have yet seen in the sepia-toned film, approaches from upstage and offers him a bottle of red wine. **D&S**

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NOTE: A Spanish-language version of this review is available at dollarsandsense.org.