



Refugee hotel by alameda theatre company
photo: Itai Erdal

Spectres of the Past in Carmen Aguirre's *The Refugee Hotel*

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The Refugee Hotel. Written and directed by Carmen Aguirre. Alameda Theatre Company. Theatre Passe Muraille Mainspace, 16 Ryerson Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada. September 26, 2009.

It is an unusually rainy night in Toronto and I am making my way to the Passe Muraille Theatre to catch a performance of *The Refugee Hotel*, written and directed by Chilean-Canadian artist Carmen Aguirre. In the promo material, Aguirre explains that she wrote the play in part to share the pain felt by Chileans who left Chile, those who survived and got out but who, nevertheless, had suffered during the early years of the dictatorship. This work is a recent addition to the growing body of second generation (or 1.5 generation) Latino-Canadian literature and drama, which often explores the historical/political events that led to the

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dislocation and exile of so many Latin Americans in the 1970s and beyond. Aguirre's play is unique in its attention to what happened directly after Chilean refugees (including children) first arrived in Canada.

The performance begins with a *huaso* (Chilean cowboy) in "traditional" dress dancing a *cueca*. He appears first in complete darkness and then under a fogged spotlight. The dim lighting and the wide brim of his hat conceal his face, adding to the feeling of ghostliness the dancer is meant to convey. The program notes provide a short bio of Victor Jara and quote his song about Che Guevara: "El aparecido." Like Che and Jara, the cueca dancer takes on a mythological and otherworldly role, becoming a regular apparition that materializes at moments of intense emotion or action throughout the play. He is at once a symbol of the (highly gendered) national and political identity that Aguirre's characters have lost upon their exile to Canada, and also a representation of the collective incorporation of the trauma they experienced in their now distant country.



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The stage is set to resemble the inside of a hotel, with the reception desk on one side of the stage and a common living area at the other. The main characters—Flaca, Fat Jorge, Manuelita, and Joselito—have just been reunited on the plane to Canada following Flaca and Jorge's imprisonment and subsequent torture by the military forces. We see the family slowly start to come to terms with the violence they left behind and also with their new circumstances in Vancouver. Like Flaca and Fat Jorge, most of the adult characters in the play were also imprisoned or tortured; many others have lost loved ones. Isabel (*la Mudita*) can not—or will not—speak at the beginning of the play; Manuel (*el Condor Pasa*) arrives at the hotel straight from a concentration camp and has barely recovered from his physical and psychological wounds; Cristina (*Cabeza de queque*), a Mapuche woman, has had both her parents "disappeared" and is sick with worry and feelings of guilt over leaving. The children, Manuelita and Joselito, are equally troubled, having finally recovered their parents from the uncertainty and fear of imprisonment only to find significantly altered and wounded versions of their former selves.

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Such stories constitute a well-worn territory in the cultural production of the Chilean exile community, but Aguirre is able to weave this particular narrative into a larger story with the addition of a few unexpected elements. The non-Chilean characters in the play, for example, are also marginal figures who are able to empathize with the refugees. The hotel receptionist, a gay man who is at first indifferent to the Chileans, eventually builds emotional ties with the other characters that go beyond his professional duties. Similarly, the social worker who facilitates the refugees' successful relocation in Canada is herself the daughter of Hungarian refugees and can thus connect their experience with that of her own parents despite the (often hilarious) misunderstandings that arise from language difficulties. These and other details, such as the relentless Chilean habit of nicknaming friends and family, relate the experiences of this particular group of refugees to the experience of the wider Chilean exile community with those of migrants, exiles, and refugees across space and time.



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Another significant intervention made in Aguirre's play is its indirect resonance with Canada's ongoing marginalization of First Nations and its ambivalent role in the current war on terror. At one point in the play, Cristina (played by Mohawk artist Cheri Maracle) vents the fury she feels towards members of Chilean society who have silently stood by while successive governments have terrorized her people and are implicitly condoning the repression of fellow Chileans by the military regime. The stories and implied scenes of torture throughout the play remind us of the most visceral effects of torture and call to mind the notorious images of detainees at Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib. When Cristina accuses "those fucking cowards!" of complicity with Pinochet's military regime, it is an accusation that can be directed at so many of us passively watching the spectacle of violence and torture that has become almost commonplace in the first decade of the 21st century.

Such is the terrible consciousness that this deceptively simple production is able to impart. *The Refugee Hotel* is not only a story about what happened to Chileans after they arrived in Canada; it is also a story about survival, renewal, and the importance of love and ethics in sustaining people who have experienced the limits of inhumanity. The moments of humour throughout the play allow the characters to briefly escape their obvious traumas and build a

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sense of community that transcends the shared experiences of torture and persecution. While many of the carefully wrought scenes and storylines in this play elicited painful, emotional reactions from the audience, *The Refugee Hotel* also has the power to move audiences beyond the tears to a clear-eyed confrontation with the past and its resonance in the present.

Gabrielle Etcheverry is a PhD candidate in the School of Canadian Studies at Carleton University (Ottawa, Canada), as well as a translator and co-publisher at [Split Quotation](#), an independent publisher of poetry and prose in English and Spanish. Her research focuses on Hemispheric American studies, including Spanish-language literary production in Canada and an (unsavoury) interest in the trope of cannibalism in the literature of the Americas.