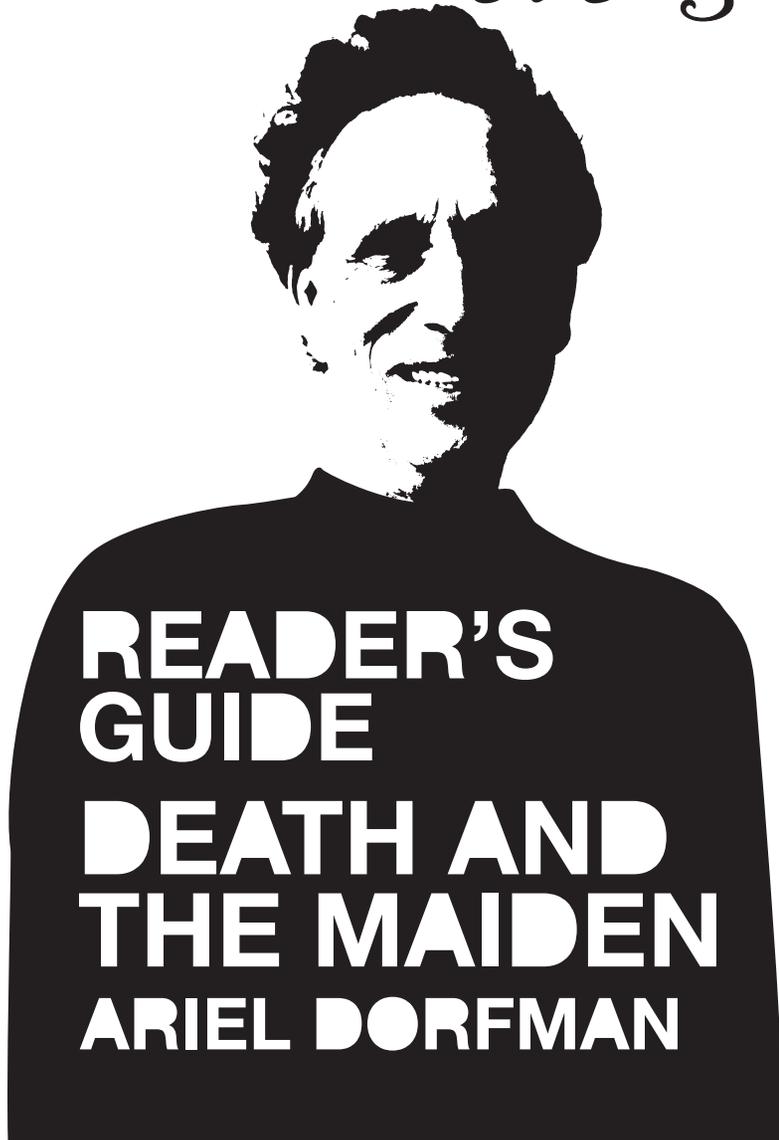
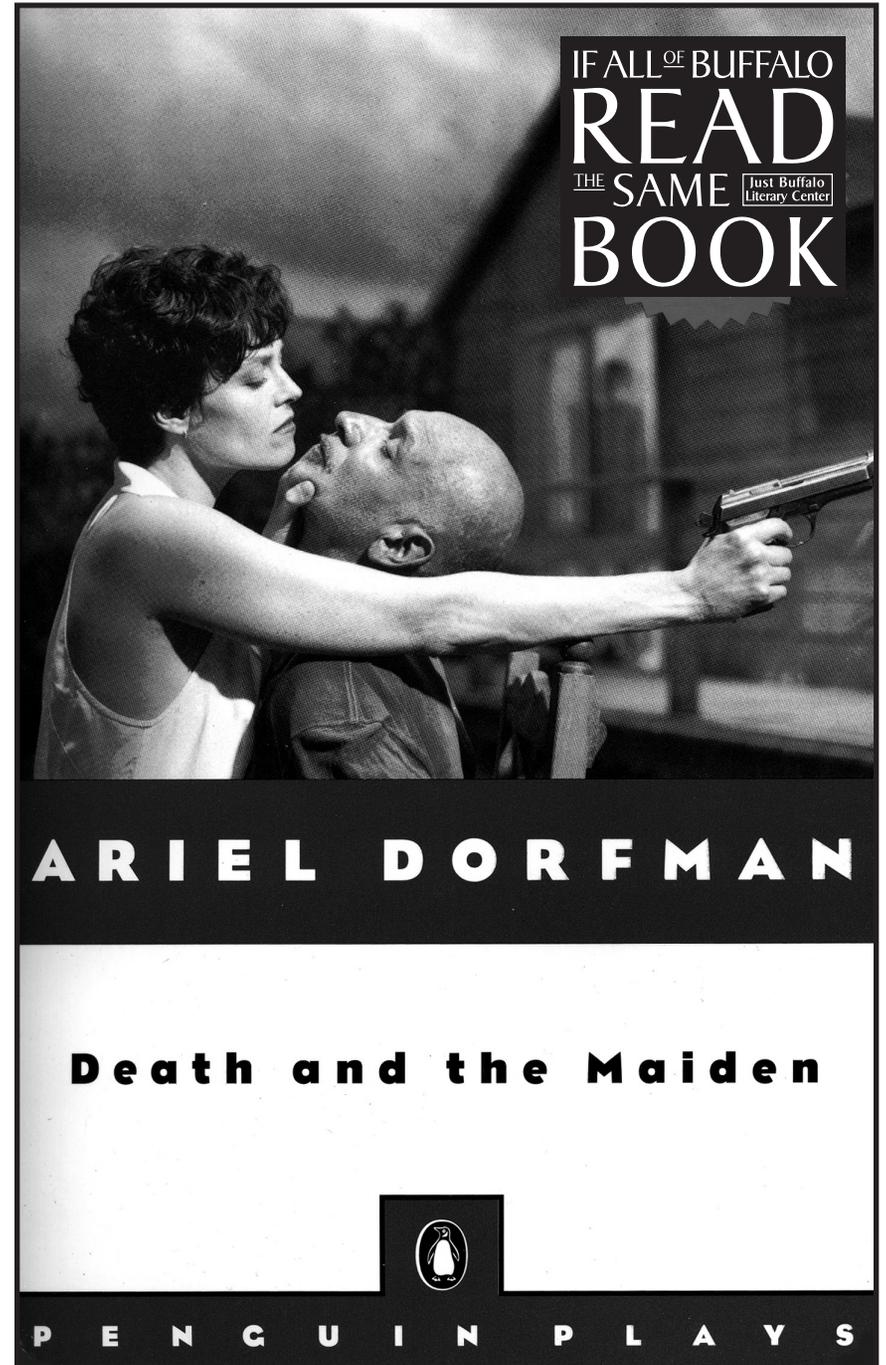


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**READER'S
GUIDE**

**DEATH AND
THE MAIDEN
ARIEL DORFMAN**



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READ
THE SAME Just Buffalo
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BOOK

ARIEL DORFMAN

Death and the Maiden



PENGUIN PLAYS

ARIEL DORFMAN

Ariel Dorfman's life has been marked by a love of two languages, each of which he has scorned. He returned to Spanish as a suitor with nothing(s) on the tongue. He has been wedded to English in desperate times. In his memoir of a bilingual life, *Heading South, Looking North*, Dorfman notes that languages "do not only expand through conquest: they also grow by offering a safe haven to those who come to them in danger."

Dorfman came to English in danger. Three years after he was born Vladimiro Ariel Dorfman in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 1942, his family was forced to flee following a pro-Fascist military coup. His parents were secular Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, and his father, a Communist economist, was critical of the new government. They moved to New York where Dorfman contracted pneumonia. "I entered the hospital speaking Spanish but when I came out I didn't speak a word of it," he has said. After three weeks in an isolation ward where doctors spoke to him only in English, Dorfman didn't speak Spanish again for ten years.

Dorfman's family returned to Latin America in 1954. They settled in Santiago, Chile. Dorfman relearned Spanish in high school then went to college at the University of Santiago, where he was later a professor. He joined the Popular Unity government of Salvadore Allende, working as a publicist and propagandist for Allende's political efforts and, in 1971, co-writing a legendary critique of North American imperialism called *How to Read Donald Duck*. In 1973, the year Dorfman published his first novel, *Hard Rain*, a military coup led by General Augusto Pinochet left Allende dead. Dorfman survived by seeking asylum in the Argentine Embassy and declaring himself an exile.

Dorfman eventually settled in the United States and returned to the English language. In his 17 years of exile during Pinochet's rule by torture and disappearance, Dorfman published three novels of isolation, where men mysteriously disappear and their widows find their bodies floating in rivers, and exiles try and fail at rebellion. He has taught at Duke University since 1985 and, since democracy was restored to Chile in 1990, he has split his time between the two countries. His first work after the end of Pinochet's reign was *Death and the Maiden*.

In all, Dorfman has published six novels, a memoir, numerous essays, short stories, poetry, and several plays, each of which, he has said, tells the story of Chile in a different way. That has meant that much of his work is about being haunted, he has said. "You have to make amends to the dead. There are people who died so that you could be alive. How do you do that? How do you speak to the dead, for the dead, in spite of the dead? But mine is not only a narrative of death; it's a narrative of life and of celebration, as well."



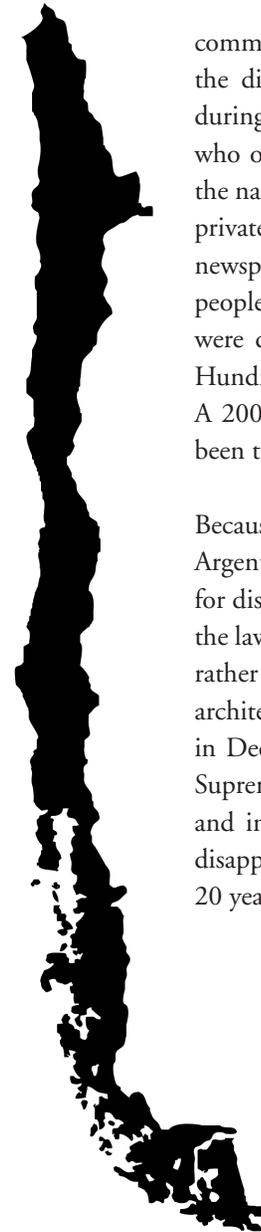
CHILE

Death and the Maiden is set somewhere between the universal and specific, in “a country that is probably Chile but could be any country that has given itself a democratic government just after a long period of dictatorship.” The prerequisite is that the country examine its experience of terror and loss, which means the play has a sadly expansive applicability. Since it was first performed in Chile in 1991, *Death and the Maiden* has been performed in 30 countries. In Israel, Belgrade, Belfast, Brazil, Kenya, Dorfman has said, “audiences were able to read their own experiences into the text.”

The play also has a historical specificity that applies not just to Chile, but to much of Latin America. The 1973 military coup, in which General Augusto Pinochet established a 17-year military junta in place of Chile’s elected government, echoed in neighboring countries throughout the decade. Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil each saw their elected socialist governments overthrown and replaced by repressive military rule.

In each country, the military rulers used a brutal tactic of “disappearing”—quietly kidnapping, torturing, and killing—left-wing sympathizers. Disappearing was built for disorientation; it was a way to erase enemies and paralyze the populace. “Nunca Mas” (“Never Again”), the 1984 report of the Argentine National Commission on the Disappeared, was begun in the first weeks after the military dictatorship’s end to investigate the fate of the country’s disappeared. The report detailed the carefully crafted reasons for the technique and its layers of concealment: “First it was the people, their absence giving hope to the relatives that the kidnap victim would be freed and return; then the concealment and destruction of documentation, which undoubtedly existed in every case, prolonging the uncertainty about what had happened; and finally, the nameless bodies, without identity, driving people distraught at the impossibility of knowing the specific fate of their loved one. It was a bottomless pit of horror.”

Reports called “Nunca Mas” were also created in Brazil and Uruguay, while Chile’s equivalent was known as the Rettig Report, after the head of the National Truth and Reconciliation Commission (the inspiration for the commission Gerardo heads in *Death and the Maiden*) that released it. Each of the countries’



commissions was limited in scope: they examined in detail the disappearance and torture only of those who died during the regimes, and they did not name the people who organized or carried out the torture. (In Argentina, the names of military personnel were included only in the private report to the President, but they were leaked to newspapers and published.) It is estimated that 30,000 people were disappeared in Argentina, about 3,000 were disappeared in Chile, and about 300 in Uruguay. Hundreds of thousands more were tortured and survived. A 2004 investigation concluded that 35,000 people had been tortured in Chile under Pinochet.

Because of amnesty laws established in the 1980s, Chile and Argentina have had little success trying those responsible for disappearances. Chilean courts have used loopholes in the law to convict more than 100 torturers of kidnapping, rather than murder or disappearances, but the main architect of the regime, General Augusto Pinochet, died in December 2006 before he could be tried. Argentina’s Supreme Court struck down its amnesty laws in 2003 and in late 2006, two police officers were convicted of disappearances. Theirs were the first convictions in over 20 years.

QUESTIONS

1. Dorfman has written that he used Paulina's character to act out the trial of Chile's torturers he couldn't conduct in reality. But even in fiction, he "could not imagine another ending: the tragedy of my country is that we cannot put the murderers and violators on trial." What is the use of fictionalizing an act of reckoning or revenge that has the same result as reality?
2. Dorfman was criticized by an Hispanic actor's group for using Anglo actors (Glenn Close, Richard Dreyfuss, and Gene Hackman) in the Broadway version of his play. Dorfman has said that the play is a universal one, not limited to Chile. Does the race or ethnicity of Paulina, Gerardo, and Roberto change the dynamics of the play? How?
3. "In a country such as Chile, where everything has been deformed and twisted by dictatorship, love is also a victim," Dorfman has said. "But love is also the last place of refuge, so I think [*Death and the Maiden*] is also a love story. It's a story about how a love survives." Do you agree with Dorfman that love survives in the play? How is Paulina and Gerardo's marriage entwined with the country's fate? What are the private, and public, strains on their relationship?
4. Paulina says that what she really wants is for Roberto to confess about what he did "not just to me," but "everything to everybody." Once he writes his confessions, she will "keep a copy forever, with all the information, the names and data, all the details." How is her desire for names and information different than the names and information the Commission can collect?
5. How does Roberto's introduction as a "Good Samaritan" influence your view of him?
6. The first scene in the last act of *Death and the Maiden* ends with a giant mirror in front of the audience and spotlights trained on certain people in the seats. What is the purpose of these devices? How would you feel if a spotlight fell on you? How would you feel if it fell on the person in front of you?

7. Why is Schubert's string quartet *Death and the Maiden* important for Paulina? What does it represent by the end of the play?
8. When Roberto and Gerardo discuss the Commission in Act I, Scene 2, Roberto begins by saying, "In this country everything finally comes out into the open," and ends by saying, "I'm afraid there are things we'll never know." Why does he change his mind? What information does Roberto learn through the course of this dialogue? What is the tenor of this conversation if he is an interested citizen, and how does it change if he is a torturer?
9. In the last scene, Roberto enters the concert hall under a ghostly light; the stage directions note, "He could be real or he could be an illusion in Paulina's head." What are the implications if he is real? What are the implications if he is a figment?



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