

Janelle Reinelt on *My Song Is Free*

Extract (pp 170-172) from 'Resisting Thatcherism: The Monstrous Regiment and the School of Hard Knox', by Janelle Reinelt, in Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan eds, *Acting Out: Feminist Performances*, Michigan University Press 1993 pp 161-180. The full paper can be read in the Commentaries section of this website's ARCHIVE pages.

My Song Is Free (1986) is perhaps the most overtly political play Monstrous Regiment has produced in recent years, if "political" is understood as an explicit protest against the injustice of a specific contemporary situation. Set in Chile just after the coup, which replaced Salvador Allende with military dictatorship, the play was written by Jorge Diaz, from the personal accounts of four women who were "desaparecida", disappeared. The front of the playscript carries the notation: "The play is based on events which happened in Santiago, Chile, in the autumn of 1974 inside a secret detention centre belonging to the D.I.N.A. (today C.N.I., Chilean political police)."¹⁶ When the play was performed, both in London and on tour, the company carried Amnesty International information on conditions in South America and led discussions after the play. Thus, the production itself participated in Solidarity work in a direct way. McCusker says they felt that "must do this play" and that, through "integrated casting," they were able to include South American women whose cultural experiences as women and as South Americans contributed to the research necessary for the production.

The play is, on the surface, a realistic thriller, which has some superficial resemblance to *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, insofar as both plays are set in prisons where prisoners of different political and class backgrounds struggle with issues of trust, friendship, and love. *My Song Is Free*, however, concerns itself only with heterosexual women and involves four, not two, prisoners in a complex web of interrelationships. One of the women, Rosario, works for the underground and has been told to expect a contact in the prison. Olga, the most likely contact, is also the most suspicious since she claims to be a double agent and has a mysterious history of being arrested and released repeatedly. Aurora is a famous actress who has apparently been picked up because of her casual association with Olga, and Jimena is a pregnant women who, coming from the middle classes, claims to have no politics at all.

The play sketches the differences in "positionalities" that these women represent. While Olga has lived the most actively committed political life, her ambiguous status as double agent leaves her the most alienated and alone of the group, her existential experience at odds with her political work. "You don't trust me. They don't trust me . . . but I have to go on . . . Knowing all the time that you

despise me. . . Strange the way things turn out: I always looked for love amongst companeros—And I have ended up alone. "¹⁷ Aurora, on the other hand, is a famous actress, who seems to the others pampered and spoiled. Afraid of torture, focused only on getting released, she seems an unlikely one to be the center of the secret plan to free "an important person," yet she is revealed to be the contact. Rosario, the politically shrewd and experienced *companera*, pronounces her view of artists and intellectuals: "They help popularize the ideas of the movement. . . . Usually political events leave them behind and they end up getting in the way."¹⁸ Aurora, however, is important because she has been the conduit for money coming into the country from exiled comrades. Jimena is a middle-class woman whose political education takes place in the prison as she comes to respect and admire the commitment she sees, even while fearing for herself and her unborn child. Ironically, she is the one taken out and tortured until she dies. Her prematurely born daughter is left in the care of Rosario at the play's end.

My Song Is Free represents these four women and their differences, brought together in intense crisis. The politicosocial aspects of the script are enhanced by lyrical and communal effects of music and sound. The theme song of the play, repeated several times, is a lullaby and a rallying song:

Like a free bird, flying free

like a free bird is how I dream you

NOTES

16. Jorge Diaz, unpub. MS, *My Song Is Free (All This Long Night)*; translated by Paloma Zozaya, adapted by Nigel Gearing.

17. *Ibid.*, 50

18. *Ibid.*, 45.