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Adapting A *Single Numberless Death*

Bob Mayberry  
*Grand Valley State University*

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Adapting *A Single Numberless Death*

Nora Strejilevich’s memoir *A Single Numberless Death* recounts her experiences in Argentina in the late 70s when she and her brother Gerardo were captured by the Milicos, secret police of the Argentine military junta. Nora was released only to be re-arrested. Incarcerated in a special prison for political prisoners, she was tortured by electric cattle prod and raped by her torturers. Released a second time months later, she escaped from Argentina and has lived in exile since. Nora has never located her brother; he is among the thousands “disappeared” by the military junta during its reign of terror.

Nora’s experience as an actress prompted her to consider adapting her memoir for the stage. She’d been looking for a playwright, without any success, when our colleague, David Alvarez (English), introduced us last spring, while Nora was an Assistant Professor of Modern Languages at GVSU. She gave me copies of the translation and encouraged me to find a dramatic way of staging her memoir. I was moved by her story, by the lyric quality of her language, by the unspeakable horror of her experiences—and began work on an adaptation immediately. During the summer of 2000 I drafted and redrafted various attempts to find a theatrical technique capable of depicting such violence without driving audiences from the theater.

The device that seemed to work best was to present the violence abstractly. All stage violence is artificial—even the simplest slap is an optical illusion. Actors create the illusion of violence through precise choreography, but the audience participates in the pretense by suspending disbelief. In this play, I wanted to make the illusion transparent, remind the audience of the artifice, and by so doing invite them to consider how truly brutal electrocution and rape are: so brutal they cannot be dramatized.
I intended to do this by separating the torture from the victim, the cause from its effect. In Scene 7 below, this was accomplished by having a group of Narrators describe the effects of torture in the vivid and poetic language of Nora’s memoir. The torture is not enacted but recalled by the Narrators. While the Milicos mock the protagonist, Naomi, the Narrators describe the effects of the electric cattle prods used by the Argentine junta. But there are no cattle prods on stage: effects are separated from causes. In another scene, not published here, the cattle prods are carried onstage by the Milicos and used as props in a grotesque dance around an empty chair, a ritualization of violence. But they’re never realistically employed on staged, never used as they were historically, on Nora and countless others. My intent in adapting the play was not to recreate a realistic torture scene but rather to dramatize the effects of torture on the characters and, by extension, on Argentina itself.

Scenes 7 and 11, published below, were given a staged reading at the Conference on the Americas, held October 14, 2000 at the Eberhard Center in Grand Rapids. I selected this pair of scenes in part because they represent the techniques used to adapt the play—monologs, narrated actions, choral voices—but also because the two scenes suggest how such violent and tragic subject matter can give rise to political movements and great hope. Scene 7 occurs at roughly the midpoint of the play; scene 11 is the finale.

The two scenes are presented here with my thanks to David Alvarez and the Latin American Studies committee for sponsoring that reading; to Dan Royer and the Grand Valley Review staff; to Gabriella Pozzi, Diane Wright and the sponsors of the Arts & Humanities Symposium on Violence (for providing a second opportunity for a staged reading); and especially to the colleagues and friends who served as actors in the two public readings: Denise Stephenson, John Rich, Kate Remlinger, Gretchen Cline, Paul Pierantozzi, Emily Maurin, Jay Thompson, Gretchen Galbraith, and David Alvarez.

Finally, I want to thank Nora Strejilevich, for entrusting me with her memoir and for creating such a lyrical, inspirational survivor story.

Scene 7: In a prison

NAOMI

Bring the knife, (Whispered) Step on a crack
Bring the knife, (Whispered) Step on a crack
Bring the knife, (Whispered) Step on a crack

NAOMI

The guards give me pants, shirt, shoes who won’t be sweaty hands drag me to repeat my official version of who signed it without knowing who I signed blindly they drag me below

Guards

Attention!

NAOMI

I stand in front open. I don’t know about the chain
A Single Numberless Death

Reading: Fifth Conference on the Americas
GVSU, Eberhard Center
14 October 2000

Scene 7: Interrogation & Death

NAOMI is alone in her prison cell in an official detention center, somewhere in the city of Buenos Aires, Argentina, in the year 1976.

Naomi
Bring the knife, ring the bell . . .
(Whispered) Step on a crack!
Bring the knife, ring the bell...
(Whispered) Step on a crack!
Bring the knife, ring the bell, when you die—
Step on a crack, break your mother’s back!

Naomi
The guards give me someone else’s clothes—the pants, shirt, shoes, and underwear of someone who won’t be needing them any more. Cold, sweaty hands drag me to an office where I have to repeat my testimony in front of a typewriter, my official version of the facts, so official that I sign it without seeing what it says, without knowing who will be made guilty by my name signed blindly at the bottom of the page. Then they drag me back to my cell.

Guards
Attention!

Naomi
I stand in front of the door to my cell, which is open. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do about the chain I hear dragging along the corri-
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dor. I think that I’ve been left alone in my section, that the other cells are empty and that they’re going to punish me for not following the invisible group of prisoners I belong to. I remain at attention, defying the darkness, and the fear of reprisals. The voice of a woman comes to rescue me.

Helpful Woman
That order was to go to the bathroom. When they open the door, you have to wait for the signal to turn right, put your hand on the shoulder of the person in front of you and start moving. I’ll take you this time so they won’t know you stayed behind.

When you hear them call out number one, you turn. When they say two, you put hands on the shoulders of the one in front of you. On three, you march. Like a train. Sometimes they want us to make sounds. *(She demonstrates.*) Don’t let them notice we’re falling behind. You march on command, squat on command, return on command.

Naomi
What if I can’t—you know—on command?

Helpful Woman
You’ll learn. You have to.

Naomi
And if you need to go some other time?

Helpful Woman
You can’t. If you foul yourself, they beat you. If you continue shitting your pants, they beat you to death.

Naomi
I come back coupled to the train of bodies I had lost. A half-turn, my hand on a shoulder, one, two, one, two . . . a centipede going to its hole, an insect with twenty, thirty, forty pairs of legs, crawling blindly along.
alone in my sec­
empty and that
not following the
belong to. I remain
ness, and the fear
nan comes to res-

bathroom. When
wait for the sig­
and start moving.
won't know you

number one, you
put hands on the
of you. On three,
sometimes they want us
Don't let them
march on com-

command?

other time?

they beat you. If
they beat you

in of bodies I had
shoulder, one,
going to its hole,
ifty pairs of legs,
Naomi
I was filled with dread every time a guard’s footsteps echoed in the corridor. Everyone was afraid to be taken back for more torture.

Guards
I’m saving it for you!

Narrators
Sometimes you wanted to go out just to stretch your legs or use the bathroom . . . But at the same time you didn’t because that exposed you to their glances . . . To anything and everything that popped into the minds of your captors.

Guards
Heh, you! Come here.
Let’s look you over.
We could make it easier for you. Whadda you say?

Narrators
You grew progressively smaller, limiting your world.
When they open the door, when they close it . . .
What you eat today, what you eat tomorrow . . .
When you are punished, when not.
Life gets so small you forget where you are, who you are.
You’re grateful for a friendly gesture, for a plate of decent food.
Happy to be out for a bit.
You’re not allowed to speak . . .
Couldn’t look . . .
Couldn’t walk.
Codes tapped on cell walls . . .
Whispers squatting over the hole.
The cells had a peep-hole on the outside.
They’d approach suddenly and look in . . .

And if they found you—even in the darkness—with your blindfold off . . .
Or walking about . . .
Or exercising . . .
Or giving the least sign of being human in any way . . .
Or showing any sign of resistance . . .

Guards
Put your blindfold back on, bitch! You’re gonna pay for this!

Narrators
At least they remembered to bring us food.
Yeah, food the other prisoners didn’t want.
Heh, I would eat whatever I could, never knew when I’d get another chance.
in the corridor.

in the corridor.

the bathroom . . .
glances . . .
raptors.

A Single Numberless Death

Naomi
Soup is my clock. It marks my nights and dawns until I lose track and enter an unrelieved twilight. The massive door of the cell opens three times a day. Once to go to the bathroom, twice to provide the concoction they call soup. I grope for a place for the bowl on top of the mattress and I try to place the spoon in the liquid. It’s scalding. I blow on each spoonful so I won’t burn my mouth. But I’m not used to it. I take too long for their liking. At the fifth spoonful, they take it away.

Narrators
Time has gotten sick . . .
Lost in a labyrinth where tomorrow, yesterday and today search for each other without ever meeting . . .
Time flickers and goes out.
Those who lead us to and from the bathroom . . .
Those who drag us to the cattle prod . . .
Those who quietly hand a cigarette to someone desperate . . .
Those we know only by their voices echoing in the hollow silence of our cells . . .
They locked us up every night . . .
Locked us out for bathroom and shower . . .
Locked us back in after each.

So we called them ‘locks.’
Which meant there was a lock on the door to your cell and another one outside to guard you.
And you were called out by your lock number.
The guards are prisoners as much as we are.
Bosh!
They too are among the disappeared . . .
Come on!
They end up collaborating just to be without a blindfold . . .
Willing to exchange anything for the hope of survival . . .
Exchanging even their selves for a certain satisfaction in doing a job . . .
Whatever it might be.
Remember their names?
The names they told us to call them by?
Shark . . .
Viper . . .
Tiger . . .
Blondie . . .
Turk . . .
Belly . . .
Lightbulb . . .
Pacifier . . .
Angel . . .
Scorpion.
They were better than the regular police . . .
Part of the Special Forces.
Better than Milicos, that's for sure.
(Spits) Milicos!
(Whispered) Bring the knife, ring the bell . . .
Death is better than Milicos.

Naomi
How do you remember so much? The only thing I recall is a window, but not whether the beds were metal or wood. I remember the toilet and how the prison felt like a vault. I remember the so-called donkey, a kind of storage closet and not much more. I remember very little else. The need and the urgency of forgetting situations, of forgetting partners, of forgetting faces was such that I really did forget them. For nothing, right?

Narrators
Don't forget to forget the forgetting.
(Whispered) Bring the knife, ring the bell . . .
Where are we?
In a hell hole.
Top security.
(Whispered) Bring the knife, ring the bell . . .
For how long?
I been here six months.
All my friends have been killed.
(Whispered) When you die . . .

Naomi
What keeps you going?

Narrators
Step on a crack!

Enter MILICOS, the military secret police. They ask and answer their own questions as they gather NAOMI up in a white sheet and carry her offstage like a corpse. Their tone is sarcastic,bawdy, mocking.

Milicos
(Spoken in NARRATIVE)
What is your name?
Naomi.

Where do you reside?
Buenos Aires.

Nationality?
Argentine.

Ethnicity?
Jewish.

Politics?
Marxist.

Sexual preference?
From the rear.

Guffaws.

Associates?
Gerardo, Juan, Jos.

Charges?
Violating curfew, interfering with act of Special Forces, tarnishing image of associating with known circulating anti-Argentina.

How do you plead?
GUILTY!

MILICOS exits

Narrators
The charges are so . . .
I am already dying.
I only want to finish
window, but not how the prison cage closet and not theency of forgetting that I really did

Milicos

(Spoken in the pauses between the NARRATORS’ lines.)

What is your name?
Naomi.

Where do you reside?
Buenos Aires.

Nationality?
Argentine.

Ethnicity?
Jewish.

Politics?
Marxist.

Sexual preference?
From the rear.

Guffaws.

Associates?
Gerardo, Juan, Jose, Raul, Manuel—
Charges?
Violating curfew,
interfering with activities of the Armed Forces,
tarnishing image of Security Police, associating with known subversives, and circulating anti-Argentine materials.

How do you plead?
GUILTY!

MILICOS exit. Silence.

Narrators

(Whispering) The shocks come faster than before, more powerful. Spasmodic rhythms, strange percussion, jolts to my skin. Something brushes past, stinging, burning, shaking, drilling.

(Louder) All that humming, the hatred, the agony, the hatred, the sharp point—

Everything explodes on contact with the skin,

vibrating,
cutting,
slashing,
piercing,
destroying my brain,

my teeth,

my gums,

my ears,

my breasts,

my toes,

my lips,

my eyelids,

my ovaries,

my nails,
even the soles of my feet.

(Shouting) The soles of my feet!

(Whispered) My skin gives off a burnt smell.

Narrators

The charges are so fast, so persistent, that it doesn’t seem that I’m going to die . . . I am already dying.
I only want to finish dying.
But no, they stop and I’m still alive.
They untie me and take me along stinking corridors to a wider place they call the infirmary.
I try to orient myself by using my ears, the only sense available to me.
The voice of the male nurse, or doctor, or paramedic, echoes in a space which I estimate to be as big as a hospital room for twelve beds.
They are well-equipped and they treat my infected wounds.
The cattle prod opens them and they, with great care, close them . . .
So that it can open them again.
I am being bandaged by soft, delicate hands.
It’s the first time I’ve been touched without being beaten . . .
Spoken to without being sworn at.
Perhaps it’s because of this that words bubble up:
I don’t know anything!
They have to release me!
I’ve got nothing to do with it!
I know nothing . . .
Nothing . . .
If I speak, I condemn myself.
If I don’t speak, they condemn me.
I will be liquidated, either way.
No more fresh air . . .
No more friends . . .
No more books . . .
No kisses . . .
No letters . . .
No more.
I would love to submerge myself in tears.
But what for?

Naomi
Tears don’t open padlocks, my grandmother used to say.

Narrators
Don’t forget to forget the forgetting.

Naomi
I am nothing. Everything is erased.

Narrators
Don’t forget.

Naomi
I am invisible.

End of scene.
Scene II: Forget the Forgetting

Months later, NAOMI has been released. Even the Milicos can no longer justify holding her in the detention center. She wanders the streets of Buenos Aires, disoriented, wondering what happened to her brother Gerardo.

Naomi

I dreamed that one day, a sunny day preferably—though fog would be more fitting—one day I would step outside, into the light again, onto the street, without shackles or blindfold, no armed escort, and I would see... everything, everybody, the Argentina I thought I’d lost.

I would walk the streets and greet strangers like lost brothers until, quite by chance, I found you, Gerardo. Why you? Why not me? I feel guilty to be alive. Half of me is missing.

Mothers of the disappeared march each day around the Plaza. I want to join them, but I am afraid. I will go out one day with your picture in my purse.

She shows his picture to passersby.

I will take you around the city to show you to whoever holds the key, the clue to putting you into a conventional narrative with a beginning, a middle, and an end. You will pass from hand to hand, wander among ex-prisoners, survivors, the reappeared, strangers, acquaintances.

The MOTHERS unfurl handwritten banners and posters and pictures held on sticks. They process in silence.

I spot the corner where the marchers are gathering, but before I take a step in that direction you cut in front of me. I bump into your first name, into our last name, scrawled across a worn strip of white cloth. Your black letters sting my memory and my legs take on a will of their own. I stand there, rooted before your one-dimensional scream.

A banner with Gerardo’s name on it appears behind her.

Someone knows. Someone misses you. Someone marches for you, Gerardo. You are counted, among the disappeared. They won’t tell me how long you survived, only that someone had seen you in another prison, only that you’d been shot. I already knew—knew from the moment I smelled you in the adjoining interrogation room, smelled your blueness—but it’s not the same as hearing it.

I almost cry. I almost scream. Almost. Still, each day I go in search of you.

She holds aloft the picture of Gerardo.
Ladies and gentlemen, the one I’m looking for likes to strum the guitar, has a weakness for coffee, plays soccer and other sports, has been known to watch TV, and cooks much better than Mama ever did.

_She is joined by other MOTHERS who hold aloft their child’s name or picture while speaking._

**Mothers**
She’s fond of camping and staying up all night . . .
Has friends in many different languages . . .
Travels the length of the continent . . .
Writes poems at dawn.

**Naomi**
He’s about to finish his thesis on the permanence of matter, but he can’t endure even the metal of the scissors that I threw at him when I was four years old.

**Mothers**
She is thinking about getting married.
He is accepted at university.
She passed the bar exam.
The one I’m looking for has eyes that speak . . .
Untamed hair . . .
Imposing height . . .
Wavy voice.

**Naomi**
The one I’m looking for has never grown old, his brow is not wilted nor his temples graying.

**Mothers**
He delights in playing hide-and-seek . . .
Cowboys and Indians . . .
Hopscotch . . .
Chess.
He’s great at math but incapable of drawing a cow.
As a kid she locked herself in the bathroom.
As an adolescent, in his bedroom.
(Together) Now they lock them in a camp.

**Naomi**
He lives yet in a black and white photo ID.
the guitar, has a
town to watch TV,
rame or picture while
he can’t endure
ur
years old.

Mothers
In a color slide, her T-shirt in a knot showing her navel.
In a math notebook filled with formulas.
In a pair of shoes.

Naomi
Why not go backwards, you used to say, remember, Gerardo? When we played as
kids? Backwards, like in fairy tales, brother, why not? Why don’t you come back?
(Pause) Say something to me.

Narrators
(To audience) Compañeros . . .
We came today to tell you a story...
Because they never succeeded in vanquishing our minds . . .
Or our souls . . .
Or our memories.
It was 25 years ago today . . .
On a dark and stormy night . . .
That the dictatorship began.

Naomi
(As if in a trance) The key to the front door turns as if by some perverse magic steps
rush in three pairs of shoes practice their disjointed tapdance on the floor the clothes
the books an arm a hip an ankle a hand . . .

Narrators
Step on a crack . . .

Naomi
I look around me, surprised by a voice.

Narrators
Break your mother’s back.

Naomi
I turn the page, paper rustles between fingers inventing the figure of a circle, in-
credulous amid images that are and are not.

Narrators
They’re taking me, they’re taking me!
The secret road between my house and the city is filled with Ford Falcons—green Falcons without license plates. The floodgates have opened. Voices from the past take over my body. I am—we are—a song, a poem, a memory, one voice.

Narrators
They murdered my brother
her son
his grandson
her mother
his girlfriend
her aunt
her grandfather
his friend
his cousin
her neighbor.

Cast (in one voice)
Ours
Yours
All of us.

Narrators
We were injected with their emptiness
our dreams haunted by their fears
our ears infected with their insults
our bodies wracked by their cruelties
we all lost a version of ourselves
and we tell our stories in order to survive.

Naomi
(Whispered) Bring the knife, ring the bell
When you die, you go to hell.

Cast
Remember us!

End of play.