

Las chicas no fuman igual: Visibilizing Oppression and Gender-Based Violence through Forum Theatre

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Forum Theatre. Lucía Miranda. Gender Abuse. Oppression.

Abstract:

This study explores the ways in which the Spanish playwright Lucía Miranda employs forum theatre as a platform to visibilize gender-based abuse, oppression, and violence in her 2015 play *Las chicas no fuman igual*. By engaging with contemporary situations and structures of gendered oppression within the framework of forum theatre, Miranda deconstructs dominant ideological paradigms and discriminatory practices designed to subjugate women and hinder the development of autonomous agency and individual subjectivity. The theory advanced by Michel Foucault regarding the concept of heterotopias provides a useful critical lens through which to consider how forum theatre crafts alternative spaces of collaboration and dialogue while appealing to the shared ethical responsibility and social consciousness of the audience.

Las chicas no fuman igual: visibilización de la opresión y la violencia de género a través del teatro Fórum

Palabras clave:

Teatro foro. Lucía Miranda. Abuso de género. Opresión.

Resumen:

Este artículo explora cómo la dramaturga española Lucía Miranda emplea el género del teatro foro como una plataforma para visibilizar el abuso, la opresión y la violencia de género en su obra *Las chicas no fuman igual* (2015). Al enfrentarse a situaciones y estructuras contemporáneas de opresión de género dentro del marco del teatro foro, Miranda deconstruye paradigmas ideológicos imperantes y prácticas discriminatorias dedicadas a subyugar a las mujeres e impedir el desarrollo autónomo de la agencia y la subjetividad individual. La teoría avanzada por Michel Foucault en cuanto a las heterotopias ofrece un concepto útil para considerar la manera en la cual el teatro foro crea espacios alternativos para el diálogo y la colaboración al mismo tiempo que apela a la responsabilidad ética y conciencia social compartida por el público.

Initially developed in the 1960s by the Brazilian theatre practitioner Augusto Boal, the tenets of forum theatre have been progressively adopted worldwide as playwrights work towards establishing connective links between performance production and social concerns. Forum theatre provides a uniquely collaborative framework through which to visibilize the mechanisms of oppression and the operations of violence that contribute to situations of inequality among interpersonal relationships. Firmly rooted within the social fabric of the community and drawing from lived experiences, forum theatre reformulates the dichotomous relationship of actors and spectators by eliminating the divisionary boundary separating stage space/audience space, crafting in the process a novel spatial dimension predicated on the communal relationship between both groups.¹ Audience members are encouraged to shed their passive roles as spectators and witnesses, leave their sedentary positions, and step into the performance space alongside the actors. By doing so, they become empowered to substitute and take on roles in the play as performers in order to rehearse alternative avenues for redirecting the course of the dramatic action and change the outcome within this newly forged space. This consciously metatheatrical rupture of the fourth wall results in both a subjective and a spatial reconfiguration from passive spectators to active spect-actors, and the communal involvement in the world of the play consequently carries the potential for real-world implications and transformative possibilities of social change.

Despite the legislative implementations in Spain of the Ley Orgánica 1/2004, de 28 de diciembre, de medidas de protección integral contra la Violencia de género and the Ley Orgánica 3/2007, de 22 de marzo, para la Igualdad efectiva de mujeres y hombres, critics have long advanced the claim that much work still needs to be done within public and social discourses in order to provoke a widespread shift in the collective

¹ Lived experiences can be defined as those «experiencias vividas por los participantes, bien en primera persona, bien con otras personas muy cercanas con las que comparten sus vidas y experiencias» [Calvo Salvador, Haya Salmón, and Ceballos López, 2015: 97]



consciousness geared towards the eradication of gender-based violence and discriminatory practices. María José Gámez Fuentes, for instance, points out that «a systemic process involving significant changes in societies and societal institutions needs to be addressed. Such changes cannot be pursued without recurring to alternative modes of intervention» [2013: 401]. One effective strategy responding to Gámez Fuentes's call for an interventionary platform is that of the theatre, and the number of examples ranging from the volume of one-acts *50 voces contra el maltrato* published in 2017 in the journal *Estreno* to the more recent 2019 documentary piece *Jauría* by Jordi Casanovas demonstrates the ways in which playwrights have made a conscious effort to employ a wide variety of genres within the performing arts as artistic tools to engage what Francisca Vilches de Frutos described as the «grave lacra social que pervive todavía en el siglo XXI en España» [2017: 13] that is violence against, and oppression of, women. This study seeks to contribute to this wider collective dialogue by exploring how Lucía Miranda (Valladolid, 1982) draws on forum theatre as a performance tool to both visibilize oppression and violence, and appeal to the shared ethical responsibility and social consciousness of the audience.

Within contemporary Spanish theatre of the last decade, Lucía Miranda has emerged as one Spain's most prolific and leading exponents of forum theatre.² Combining the techniques of scenic repetition, interventionary audience involvement, and the thematic treatment of current community-relevant topics of inequality and injustice, Miranda's plays have been widely performed, and the number of awards she has received attest to the positive reception and impact of her writing both locally and abroad.³

² Antonio Hernández includes Miranda among «Madrid's Brightest Young Theatrical Voices» [2019]. She is also listed in an article by Raquel Vidales titled «El año en que estallaron las dramaturgas» [2016] and covering the commitment made by the Centro Dramático Nacional to premiere works written by women playwrights Carolina África, María Fernández Ache, Denise Despeyroux, Lourdes Ortiz, Carolina Román, and Lucía Carballal.

³ Miranda's awards and prizes include, among others, the Teatro Autor Expres 2019, Premio El Ojo Crítico de RNE de Teatro 2018, ONU Woman Award of Latin America 2014, Premio «José Luis Alonso» Jóvenes Directores 2013, and the awards HOLA and



Her works extends beyond Spanish geographical borders to other countries in Europe, North and South America, and Africa where she has led a series of workshops and classes dedicated to the development of forum theatre. In what follows, I propose an analysis of her 2015 play *Las chicas no fuman igual* in order to examine the ways in which Miranda employs the techniques of forum theatre as a specific means of visibilizing gender-based abuse, oppression, and violence.⁴ By staging a play that engages with contemporary situations and structures of gendered oppression within the framework of forum theatre, Miranda aims to deconstruct dominant ideological paradigms and discriminatory practices designed to subjugate women and hinder the development of autonomous agency and individual subjectivity.

By blurring the divide traditionally separating the dichotomous spaces of actors and spectators, forum theatre provides the audience with a communal democratic and participatory platform through which to rehearse creative and original strategies to actively counter oppression. The figurative first step towards the development of autonomy, agency, and the positive construction of subjectivity is temporally produced in the moment the spectator first ‘freezes’ the scene in place through either a vocal ‘stop’ or a gestural raise of the hand, physically steps on stage, and assumes the active role of spect-actor. On the structural plane, forum theatre facilitates audience intervention both internally by way of the convention of the «repeated scene» [Boal, 2002: 266], wherein «the same scene will be shown several times» [2002: 266], and externally with a second repeat run of the

ACE 2011. Miranda was recently named as one of a select group of theatre practitioners to teach classes through the newly created Máster Oficial en Enseñanzas Artísticas: Pensamiento y Creación Contemporánea at the Escuela Superior de Arte Dramático de Castilla y León. Additionally, she founded the theatre company The Cross Border Project and regularly combines directing and acting in her plays.

⁴ *Las chicas no fuman igual* premiered in 2015 at the Sala Cuarta Pared in Madrid and was performed by the graduating class of the Curso Regular de Interpretación. In his review of the performance in *El País*, Javier Vallejo praised the play as «un teatro diferente, para nuevos tiempos» [2015]. His emphasis on the way the play «pone al espectador y al intérprete en práctica igualdad de plano y hace del teatro una herramienta efectiva de cambio social» [2015] alludes to the conventions of forum theatre developed by Miranda for the production.



entire play. The objectives of the first run of the performance is to develop audience familiarity regarding the basic plot structure and to expose potential sources of conflict that oppress the protagonist and actively impede a positive construction of selfhood. Consequently, through inaction and the lack of positive solutions, forum theatre necessarily «ends unfavourably for the main character(s)» [Day, 2002: 22]. Their identity and sense of self remain subjugated to a dominant and oppressive ideology for which there appears to be no end in sight.

At this juncture, either the entire play or a selection of scenes is performed again, only this time with the active participation and interventions of the newly configured spect-actors in the communal playing space. In the playscript of *Las chicas no fuman igual*, Miranda includes instructions for how to encourage audience involvement in this 'repeat' performance, writing that «algunas escenas se volverían a representar tras la función para dar la oportunidad a los espect-actores de intercambiarse por los personajes y probar maneras de resolver los conflictos» [2015: 2]. By coming together on stage, actors and spect-actors produce what Broderick describes as a «polyphony of voices» [2019: 756] within this communal space that aims at a collective exposure and subversion of superficially retrenched ideological discourses of power. Tania Baraúna contends it is for this reason that forum theatre can rightfully be described as «el teatro de la primera persona plural» [2012]. Through their assumption of agency, spect-actors work together to negotiate alternative options that contest previously ossified conceptions of identity formation resulting from oppression and discriminatory practices.

Michel Foucault's theory of heterotopia provides a useful theoretical framework through which to consider this collaborative social dialogue between actors and spect-actors generated in forum theatre the moment the spectator makes the decision to step into the world of the performance space. In his essay «Of Other Spaces», Foucault develops the notion that heterotopias are capable of destabilizing dominant paradigms through the



creation of alternative spaces that carry the implication for social change. By its very nature, theatre provides a particularly advantageous heterotopic ‘counter-site’ because it is both «capable of juxtaposing in a single real space several spaces» [1986: 25] and it «may productively engage with its public, both the public audience and the public space» [Tompkins, 2012: 105]. Through the conventions of spect-actorial collaboration and the staging of lived experiences, forum theatre bridges on and off stage, stimulating what Joanne Tompkins describes as the «potential for (re)thinking theatre’s function in its social space» [2012: 106]. The motion to ‘freeze’ or stop the scene taking place and enter the playing space not only exemplifies the initial ‘rite’ articulated by Foucault as a requirement for the passage into the heterotopia; it marks the initial moment of awareness and consciousness-raising that the improvised course of action executed on stage can be enacted in the real world for the communal benefit of social change.

Miranda’s *Las chicas no fuman igual* portrays how a once romantic and healthy teenage relationship between Laura (fifteen) and Charly (sixteen) quickly devolves into a cycle of jealousy, emotional manipulation, and verbal abuse. Laura’s friends and family witness the negative impact that the relationship exerts, though they find themselves powerless to prevent Charly’s increasingly manipulative control and hold over Laura. The play ends with Charly hitting Laura, suggesting that the physical violence and emotional manipulation will only escalate from this point forward. Throughout the twelve scenes that structure the play, Laura becomes unwittingly trapped in an interpersonal situation of violence and abuse that contributes towards an unfolding erasure of her agency. Considering Leona English’s affirmation that «Women’s identity is more helpfully understood as in flux, as a process of negotiating the spaces and the hyphens» [2004: 99] reinforces both the value of Miranda’s forum theatre as an artistic medium devoted to foregrounding women’s issues for contemporary audiences and the continuation of a dialogue intrinsically tied



to the notion of theatre as a fluid process rather than a static product. The theoretical framework of Foucault's heterotopias provides additional valuable support in crafting new ways of thinking about the impact of forum theatre through critical lenses.

Miranda explores the thematic motif of invisibility in *Las chicas no fuman igual* through her depiction of relationship abuse and teen-dating violence. Gender-based violence, and the abuse inflicted upon female partners in relationships specifically, constitute the focal point of global social efforts seeking to draw attention to this pervasive issue and that take the form of annual public protests and marches such as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women on November 25th, collective movements like Ni Una Menos, and the organizations Take Back the Night and the One Love Foundation, to cite just a few examples. Nevertheless, despite these efforts to increase awareness worldwide, gender violence and relationship abuse are still fraught with invisibility in the public arena. In a recent study examining the developing impact in Spain of the aforementioned 2004 Ley Orgánica de Medidas de Protección Integral contra la Violencia de Género, Pilar Álvarez and Noor Mahtani note that women often do not come forward to denounce their oppression or publicly accuse their abusive partners «Por miedo, porque no son conscientes del riesgo que corren, porque ven que no tienen adonde ir». As a result, of the victims of uxoricide, «apenas el 21% de las asesinadas por violencia machista había denunciado a sus maltratadores» [2019]. When we consider the focal demographic of *Las chicas no fuman igual*, the statistics likewise point to an elevated number of cases of gender abuse amongst teenage relationships. Miranda explains that her protagonist, Laura, «está dentro de ese 23% de menores españolas que reconocen haber sufrido conductas violentas de sus parejas» [«Sobre la obra», 2015]. It is important to point out that these figures and statistics only reflect those cases that are openly and publicly admitted. If we consider the teenagers and adult women who live in



abusive relationships but find their voices silenced and never come forward, these numbers would certainly be substantially higher.

The origin and development of *Las chicas no fuman igual* reflects Boal's original intention for forum theatre plays to emerge from a situation of collective creation and improvisation. As Miranda states, the piece:

nace del encargo de la Escuela Cuarta Pared de Madrid de dirigir a sus alumnos del último curso en la primavera de 2015. Pensé en mis amigas, en cómo éramos cuando teníamos quince años, en cómo pensábamos que iban a ser nuestras relaciones... y trabajé a través de improvisaciones con un grupo de jóvenes actores para crear esta pieza de teatro foro sobre la violencia de género que nos habita desde adolescentes [«Sobre la obra», 2015]

Miranda's work with young actors as they engage in the process of devising the piece appeals to the principle of connecting to the «target audience» [Dunne Acevedo and Barlag Thornton, 2013: 110] by way of the staging of lived and relatable experiences, activated on the performance plane by teenagers with whom audience members of similar ages can establish a basis of identification. Moreover, by crafting *Las chicas no fuman igual* specifically as a forum theatre play, Miranda has additionally created an empowering experience for both actors and spectators, and at the same time has provided a unique opportunity for young actors to be involved from the initial stages of the creative process through to the performance. Reflecting on her own personal and past experiences, Miranda has expressed the notable lack of opportunities «donde las voces de los jóvenes estuvieran representadas, proyectos donde ellos fueran los protagonistas y los participantes» [«Lucía Miranda: el teatro», 2017]. What Miranda's statements here highlight is the unique advantage posed by forum theatre given its potential to bring the audience and the actors together both in the democratic construction of the theatre experience and in what Miranda describes as an «espacio de encuentro, diálogo y participación» [Díaz, 2015].



In his book *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, Boal emphasizes the importance of activating this communal encounter for the benefit of the spectators from the outset of the play, «not only to warm them up and help them shed their inhibitions, but also to establish a form of theatrical communion with them» [2002: 18]. In order to do so, Miranda draws from the contemporary multimedia intertextual referent of the singer Britney Spears's «...Baby one more time» as a warm-up to lower the inhibitions of actors and spectators as they dance and sing along to the song together, and as a technique to introduce the audience to one of the mimetic spaces of the play, a public high school.⁵ The popularity and commercial success of Spears's «...Baby one more time», called «one of the defining songs of the golden teen-pop era» [Arnold, 2019], would more than likely carry familiar resonances with audience members, thereby facilitating spectator disinhibition through the recognizable song lyrics and rhythmic tunes.

However, the choice of this particular song and the lyrics also strongly connect with the play's central theme of relationship abuse. Perhaps the most popular and recognizable verse, «Hit me baby one more time» has been attributed multiple meanings since the song was first released in 1998. On the one hand, songwriter Max Martin's original intention to employ teenage slang through the use of the term 'hit me' was conceived as «a fun way to say 'call me' in the song» [Truong, 2018], shifting the rhetorical designation in order to better reach the targeted listener demographic of teenagers. Yet Peggy Truong notes how the record label Jive «would make a tweak to the title and settle on '...Baby One More Time'» [2018] due to the risk of overt associations between the song and physical abuse in relationships. The problematic use of the term 'hit me' points to the polysemic nature of the original song title as evidenced by the variety of interpretative readings that have been attributed since it was first composed.

⁵ Boal proposes that «if one can use music, it should be used a lot; if one can use dance, there should be as much dancing as possible! If one can play with colours, why limit oneself to black and white?» [2002: 263].



Nevertheless, the choice to begin the title of the song with an ellipsis remains compelling in its invitation for the reader to consider what exactly has been silenced and omitted. Elaine Showalter notes that feminine space unfolds in «the gaps, silences, and absences of discourse and representation, to which the feminine has been relegated» [1994: 36]. In *Las chicas no fuman igual*, we can look to Laura's increasing loss of self and autonomy derived from Charly's own imposed assertion through surveillance, manipulation, and control in their relationship as an example of how Laura's voice and opinion become silenced over the course of the play. By presenting the characters for the audience with a choreographed dance number to the tune of Britney Spears' song, yet under the structural heading «Hit me baby one more time», Miranda both explores the ambiguity operative in the lyrics and foreshadows the conflictive relationship that will develop throughout the following scenes.

Laura's growing sense of isolation from her friends and family is presented by Miranda as a direct result of the amount of time she begins to spend exclusively with Charly, and the play traces how an oppressive and suffocating relationship can come to dominate and control all aspects of a person's life. As opposed to centralizing the focus on a single mimetic stage setting, the dramatic action of *Las chicas no fuman igual* unfolds in four separate spaces: the high school classroom, the park bench where Laura and her friends spend their time outside of class, Laura's bedroom, and a «no lugar donde representar las escenas no realistas» [2015: 2]. The non-realistic nature of this 'non-place' corresponds to a single scene where the narrator-character of the magazine *Top Sexo* describes the mechanics and sensations of four different types of kisses. While this scene stands in stark contrast to the realist settings of the other three spaces, its significance for the play lies in the depiction of the variety of expressive possibilities in romantic and personal relationships. By depicting the four varieties of kisses (which include 'romántico', 'apasionado', 'íntimo', and 'expres') both the character *Voz de Top Sexo* and, by extension the play as a whole, showcase that there



is no uniform approach for expressing affect and emotion. As a forum theatre piece, where the protagonist «intenta hacer frente a esta opresión, pero no lo consigue» [Madurga and Serra, 2016: 190], consequently yielding to the oppression, Laura is only exposed to a single negative relationship experience. However, what *Las chicas no fuman igual* conveys to the audience members is the notion that if we can recognize the multiplicity of expressive behaviors, we can identify which ones affect us positively and which ones negatively, thereby determining the course of our life and the people that comprise our social and intimate circles.

Miranda juxtaposes the shifting dramatic action on the structural plane through the consecutive sequencing of scenes in alternating mimetic stage spaces with Laura's own subjective experience of a developing sense of restrictive spatiality. The audience bears witness to the way in which the collective sites of the high school classroom and the park where the students hang out after school become zones of enclosure and spatial conflict. Charly's jealousy and intense desire for control over Laura exert a powerful influence and radically transform these once positive spaces of personal, intellectual, and social development. The second scene, for example, takes place in the classroom during a discussion of Pablo Neruda's poetry. Laura's analysis of the rhetorical devices in the poem, and her comparative analysis with other works studied previously in the semester make it clear that Laura is a bright, creative, and intelligent student with valuable and insightful contributions. The positive attributions of the classroom as a space for academic exploration and fulfillment become drastically distorted as Charly appropriates the setting, seizing the moment in a later scene when the two are sweeping the classroom alone together in order to engage Laura in conflict and accuse her of betrayal and deceit.

Charly's paranoia and heightened jealousy in this particular scene (titled «Como un gilipollas») directly result in his emotional manipulation of Laura. When she refuses to show him her phone (something which is absolutely her right to do as his request constitutes a violation of her



privacy), he subjects Laura to undue pressure through accusations of lying: «¿Ves? Tienes algo que ocultar, por eso no me lo enseñas [...] Entonces por qué no me lo enseñas» [2015: 14].⁶ Though Laura ultimately accedes, the emotional abuse and manipulation does not stop there, as Charly alters the discourse to cast himself as the victim, exemplifying the notion of «shifting responsibility for abusive behavior» [«Understanding the Power and Control Wheel»] that is one of the hallmarks of the exercise of power and control in a relationship.⁷ By the end of this scene, Charly has so substantially transformed the once positive space of the classroom to the point that Laura is forced out of it as she is no longer able to withstand the barrage of constant accusations and manipulative behavior.

By staging contrasting scenes set in the public site of the park, Miranda demonstrates how a possessive and controlling relationship can likewise exert fissures in a community based on female friendship. The play suggests that Laura, Raquel, and Déborah often frequent the park bench as a meeting place to spend time with each other after class, thereby providing an ideal site for what Laurence Bachmann defines as «gender transformation mechanisms» [2014: 169]. According to Bachmann, positive transformations of the self arise from communal female interactions that comprise «breathing space, becoming aware, taking action and mutual support» [2014: 170]. However, this symbolic site of friendship and complicity in the play is subject to Charly's invasive presence serving to disrupt the group dynamic in order to isolate Laura from her friends. Towards the end of the play, this same park bench has likewise been radically transformed into a site of conflict between the group of friends, as Déborah confronts Laura with the fact that Charly is deliberately removing

⁶ Vilches de Frutos highlights how one of the manifestations of abusive behavior is «el control sobre todas y cada una de las acciones, que en los tiempos actuales se realiza también por medio de los mensajes enviados a través de los móviles» [2017: 7].

⁷ In her article «Sensibilización y denuncia de malos tratos en el teatro español contemporáneo: Paloma Pedrero e Itziar Pascual», in which she examines the characteristics and parameters of domestic and relationship abuse in theatre, Raquel García-Pascual highlights the fact that «es frecuente que la víctima de violencia de género sea manipulada emocionalmente para que se sienta culpable» [2010: 266].



her from her network of support and controlling her actions and discourse. Déborah, aware of the danger posed by Charly's uncontrollable outbursts of jealousy, warns Laura that «a ver si un día no puede controlar meterte dos ostias a ver entonces qué haces» [2015: 21]. However, what Déborah fails to realize is that by aggressively confronting Laura, she is pushing her friend further away and into Charly's arms. As a result, in the last scene we find Laura alone «en el banco de siempre en el parque» [2015: 28] as she waits for Charly.⁸ The complete fracture in the girls' relationship has left them entirely isolated from one another, and Charly will ultimately prey on their absence to further cement his emotional manipulation and control over Laura. As he insults Laura, tells her what to do and, in a final violent gesture, physically strikes her to the ground, the audience ultimately witnesses how she finds herself in a situation of abuse with no immediate escape and no network of mutual support.

Even Laura's turn to the refuge of her bedroom so that she can find some time to spend alone becomes a futile action. Miranda reveals the paradoxical notion that the only remaining space for Laura to assert as her own is located within the enclosed interior of the domestic sphere. Nevertheless, the boundaries of this sought-after sanctuary suffer both virtual and physical violations from the imposing external presences of Charly and her own mother, who exact their own forms of voluntary and involuntary pressure on Laura. Even though she is momentarily alone in her bedroom, the relentless sound notifications signaling incoming messages from Charly permeate Laura's space. Miranda demonstrates how in a technologically mediated society, controlling behavior can take the form of virtual surveillance through cell phones and computers. In *Las chicas no fuman igual*, Miranda employs the messenger phone application WhatsApp

⁸ The play invites an association with Keir Elam's 'co-referential rule' to signify the shifting symbolism of this park bench from positive friendship and community to abuse and negative isolation. Elam writes, «If [...] one names a certain individual or object – say, John Smith or a red car – it is understood that successive references to John Smith or the red car will denote the same individual or object and not a homonymous individual or an identical car in this or some other world» [1980: 64].



as the primary method of communication between the teenagers in the play, and she even incorporates various emojis (‘Emoticono’) as characters to point to new forms of non-verbal communication of emotions and to exemplify additional mechanisms of control and oppression.

The popularity of WhatsApp and the pervasiveness of emojis would certainly strongly connect with a target teenage demographic audience and their own daily engagement with cell phone technology.⁹ Spectators accustomed to communicating through emojis would thus be able to recognize the ways in which these emojis can come to exert emotional pressure on an individual in order to elicit a specific response. For example, after his initial attempts to engage Laura fail and evoke only silence, Charly resorts to sending her an array of emojis in order to emotionally manipulate her to the point of forgiveness. His apology statements, wherein he promises that how he has previously hurt her «no volverá a pasar» [2015: 16], are immediately followed up by lines in the script that call for the portrayal of «Emoticonos de caritas tristes» [2015: 16], «Dos líneas de emoticono de flores y corazones» [2015: 17], and «Emoticono de carita que guiña un ojo» [2015: 18], and «Más emoticonos de caritas con corazones» [2015: 18], to list just a few of the many examples that can be found within a single scene. However, new features for WhatsApp would also more than likely lead to greater constraints imposed on Laura. One of the noteworthy features of the WhatsApp application as opposed to other messenger services and even text messages are the grey ticks (check marks) that denote a sent and received message (single tick and double tick, respectively). Novel updates from 2014 included two blue ticks, signifying that the message has been opened and read by the receiver. In a piece for *Expert Reviews*, Nathan Spendelow highlights the anticipated negative emotional and psychological impact derived from the implementation of these blue tick marks, and that after

⁹ Released in 2009, by «late 2017, monthly active users of WhatsApp crossed the figure of 1.5 billion» [Farid, 2019]. Reasons behind the popularity of the application lie in its free usage worldwide and the ability to create messenger groups where users can send pictures and video.



seeing that the message sent has been read but not answered, «you can begin the paranoia as to why the recipient is taking so long to reply» [2017]. Within the context of an abusive and controlling relationship, Laura's sensation of feeling watched by Charly and placed under undue pressure would be heightened to a considerable degree as she would now operate with the full knowledge that any message received and opened would invoke expectations of an instant response.

Miranda additionally shows how our closest family members can unwittingly contribute towards a situation of oppression by disclosing remarks that impact our own self-conscious image, even if these are made with the assumedly best of intentions. When Maite, Laura's mother, catches her daughter smoking at the window of her bedroom, she quickly recognizes that something is wrong, pointing out that this behavioral action is drastically out of character for Laura. She reminds her daughter that «te has pasado toda la vida diciéndonos que qué asco, que no fumáramos, que lo dejamos y ahora te pones tú» [2015: 26-7] and that if Laura continues to smoke «te vas a quedar hecha una enana, con los dientes amarillos, ya verás. A ver si luego le gustas a los chicos con los dientes amarillos» [2015: 27]. Despite her observations that Laura has been crying [2015: 27], and that her friendship with Raquel and Déborah appears to have diminished as of late [2015: 27], Maite fails to connect on an emotional level with her daughter and provide Laura with the much needed time and space to confide in her. As a result of her accusations of lying, her ironic comments on the potential effects of smoking on her daughter's physical appearance, and her lack of insistence, Maite is unable to break the cycle of oppression and abuse in which Laura finds herself, despite her daughter's obvious external signs of anguish and distress.

Miranda's contrasting use of the information explicitly conveyed through the dialogue of the characters in the onstage mimetic spaces as opposed to allusions of events that have taken place offstage in diegetic space emphasize the notion of relationship abuse as a damaging yet still



largely invisible social issue. As the figures and statistics included earlier highlight, many partners do not come forward to publicly denounce the abuse they suffer, though in a majority of cases «existió un maltrato anterior que nadie vio y cuya detección podía haberlas ayudado» [Álvarez, 2019]. In *Las chicas no fuman igual*, Miranda calls attention to the invisibility of relationship abuse on the structural plane by locating numerous specific instances of conflict between Charly and Laura in the interstitial breaks between scenes. As a result, her characters make frequent mentions of the abuse that Laura suffers, though as spectators we are never privy to these events since these occur in the diegetic spaces and are consequently placed outside the realm of visibility.

For example, in the eighth scene, Charly writes to Laura asking for her forgiveness. He indirectly references something he has done to her, and that «no volverá a pasar» [2015: 16]. Charly excuses his behavior as an emotional consequence of his excessive love and care for her: «No te quería asustar. Sólo quería estar contigo [...] Te quiero mucho Laura. Nunca había querido así» [2015: 17]. As the two exchange WhatsApp messages, it becomes clear that Charly has behaved in such a way to the point of frightening and upsetting Laura. However, the events to which both Laura and Charly refer and that comprise the central topic of discussion in their messages have taken place in an intervening time and space offstage between scenes. Consequently, as spectators, we only witness the aftermath wherein Charly engages in strategies of rationalization and emotional manipulation to excuse his behavior. A similar instance occurs in the following scene, when Déborah and Raquel confront Laura with Charly's abusive behavior. Déborah states that «el número del otro día en clase, Laura, no es normal, lo está comentando todo el mundo» [2015: 21]. The dialogue of the three characters allows for a reconstruction of previous events, revealing that Charly's public outbursts of jealousy in class led to a breakup and subsequent reconciliation between the couple. Again, Miranda temporarily avoids staging explicit conflict in mimetic space, leaving the



spectators dependent on the dialogue between the characters to become aware of the development of abuse in the relationship.

The tension implicit between the events occurring in diegetic space and the content of the dramatic action in the onstage mimetic spaces is ultimately brought to the fore in the final scene of the play, significantly titled «Pequeña, muy pequeña». In these concluding moments, Miranda fully visibilizes the verbal and physical abuse that had previously taken place offstage in earlier scenes by encapsulating the escalation and explosion of violence within the span of a few pages. In an allusion to the play's title, Charly first berates Laura for smoking, leaning on justifications based on the construction of biological and aesthetic differences between men and women. Though Laura rightfully points out that Charly also smokes, thereby exposing the hypocrisy and double standard when he attempts to censure her own actions, he defends that «es distinto, mi constitución es distinta a la tuya [...] vuestro organismo es distinto» [2015: 28-9]. Moreover, his differential reasoning is reminiscent of Laura's mother when he implicitly references stereotypical beliefs that the smell of cigarette smoke on a man is considered an attractive feature, whereas for women it is regarded as inappropriate and physically repulsive.

Their conversation quickly shifts to the topic of Déborah's brother who, according to Charly, is secretly conspiring with Déborah to undermine their relationship. As Charly's paranoia and jealousy grow, he accuses Laura of being blind to the truth of the situation, «tú eres boba, Laura. No sé si de verdad no te das cuenta o no te la quieres dar» [2015: 29], and shifts the blame to Déborah. His actions further exemplify the rhetorical maneuvers and strategies highlighted in the Duluth Power and Control Wheel that are geared towards isolating Laura from her friends.¹⁰ In the closing moments of the play, Charly is unable to restrain himself. Overcome with irrational paranoia, he first grabs Laura's arm to physically prevent her

¹⁰ The specific tactics outlined in the Wheel include «controlling what she does, who she sees and talks to, what she reads, where she goes; limiting her outside involvement, and using jealousy to justify actions» [«Understanding the Power and Control Wheel»].



from leaving, and then hits her in the ensuing struggle. Charly justifies his actions by declaring that everything he does is for Laura's own good, pointedly and poignantly asking her «¿Te das cuenta, pequeña?» [2015: 31]. Miranda invites the audience to read the term «pequeña» through a variety of interpretive lenses. While it is superficially intended as a term of endearment, within this context of relationship abuse and gender violence, «pequeña» acquires notably sinister overtones of inferiority and belittlement. Throughout *Las chicas no fuman igual*, Miranda invites the audience to consider how Laura's agency and subjectivity has suffered progressive nullification due to the emotional manipulation and social isolation stemming from an emotionally and physically abusive relationship. Moreover, in order to benefit from the opportunity afforded by the platform of forum theatre to collaborate as spect-actors and, consequently, enact positive change in our own lives, it is imperative that we learn to read the signs and symptoms of relationship abuse in our surrounding contexts.

In *Las chicas no fuman igual*, Lucía Miranda consciously adopts and adapts the techniques of forum theatre in order to engage individual spectators with the need for collective civic and social action. By broaching the themes of gender-based abuse, inequality, oppression, and prejudice underpinning interpersonal affective relationships, Miranda projects current social issues relevant for contemporary audiences on to the performance space. Her plays create alternative sites for the rehearsal of agency and a positive construction of the self, and the presence of multimedia, technology, and popular intertextual referents reinforce the thematic implications while reducing audience inhibitions. Though by the end of the play Laura meets a fateful end, Miranda encourages the audience to occupy a critical stance and consider the ideologies and mechanisms of oppressive discourse that have led to these negative outcomes. Her forum theatre appeals to the our shared ethical and moral responsibility by crafting a heterotopic space that empowers audiences to emerge from the margins of



passive spectatorship and witnessing, occupy the active spatial position of spect-actors and, together, work towards a more equitable society.

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