Contemporary Chilean theatre is overtly and overwhelmingly political. While this is a source of Chilean theatre’s vitality, urgency, and, for many artists, its saison d’été, others have found this limiting and rebelled against this focus. In large part, the politicisation of contemporary Chilean theatre stems from its situation within a post-dictatorship political, social, and cultural landscape – an environment in which the legacy of Augusto Pinochet’s dictatorship and a nostalgia for the resistant aesthetics developed by artists during his rule (1973–1990) continue to loom large. The Chilean case thus provokes complex questions about political theatre, including the following: how can theatre be political when political aesthetics are the dominant paradigm? How does a country’s political history produce particular horizons of aesthetic possibility (political or otherwise)? And, finally, when the life and death stakes of a repressive dictatorship are no longer immediately felt, how does theatre, situated in such a post, retain its political urgency and value?

In this chapter, I consider how Ictus’s 2017 play, Esto (no) es un testamento (This is (not) a testament), provokes such questions and problematises the imperative that theatre be politically urgent, particularly when that urgency is historically linked to the experience of dictatorship. With a 63-year history spanning the socialist presidency of Salvador Allende, the dictatorship of Pinochet, and post-dictatorship democratic governments, Ictus is one of Chile’s most important theatre companies in terms of both its aesthetic development and political involvement. Esto (no) es un testamento, a collaboration between Ictus, the theatre company La Laura Palmer, and the Gabriela Mistral Cultural Center (GAM), reflects on the company’s own history, interweaving the personal stories of actors with the history of the company itself, focusing on the identity Ictus forged as a site of resistance during the dictatorship. At its surface, the play is a nostalgic retrospective of the group’s work. Yet it also problematises its own nostalgia, highlighting the personal struggles that underscored the company’s theatre-making, questioning the relevance of the company in the post-dictatorship context, and exploring what resistance and utopia might mean in Chile today. In the simultaneous production of and challenge to nostalgia for the company’s past, the play asserts Ictus’ presence and relevance now.

In 1955, a group of students from Universidad Católica in Santiago left the university in search of new aesthetic forms and self-management. They founded Ictus, marking a turn towards a new kind of Chilean independent theatre. Since then, the company has produced work by some of the country’s most significant playwrights, and they were the first group in Chile to experiment with collective creation and mass media (such as television). Following the military coup on 11 September 1973, they were the only theatre to resume performances. During the dictatorship, Ictus forged a new identity as part of the cultural resistance to Pinochet. Ictus’s work continued after the installation of a democratic
government in 1990, however they have struggled to forge a post-dictatorship identity. They have ceased their method of collective creation and now rely on revivals of previous productions. The retirement of one of Ictus’s most influential leaders, Nissim Sharim has left some wondering what is in store for the company’s future (Hurtado and Ochsensius 1980; Cánovas 1986; Boyle 1992; Stern 2006; Letelier 2017).

It is in this context that This is (not) a testament is situated. According to co-director, Ítalo Gallardo, Ictus sought to create a piece about their history and wanted to enlist younger artists to direct. They turned to Gallardo and Pilar Ronderos, members of La Laura Palmer, a company known for creating documentary works with an aesthetic inspired by Lola Arias (Argentina). La Laura Palmer took charge of much of the creative direction of the piece, and, with Ictus, developed a script drawn collaboratively from the personal stories of three of its actors: Paula Sharim, María Elena Duvauchelle, and José Secall.2

The collaborative development of the piece situates Ictus as both creator and art/historical object. Throughout the play, the dual position of the company – as maker and object, as present and past – works to foster both an empathetic engagement and critical detachment in the audience, producing a fundamental tension that colours the play’s reflection on the company’s history.

The play begins in an overtly nostalgic register. According to Svetlana Boym nostalgia is ‘a longing for a home that no longer exists or never existed’ (Boym 2001: xiii). It is a kind of utopian attachment to a past that is predicated upon a sense of current loss or displacement. In the prologue, the audience sees a series of images of the Ictus theatre projected onto a set consisting of a wall of white drawers (containing, presumably, artefacts from the company’s history) flanked by dressing room tables. The images and the dressing tables evoke the theatre’s past, while also distancing spectators from that past via the images’ mediatisation and the drawers’ implication that the past can be opened or stored away. As the images are projected, the audience hears the voice of Nissim Sharim, who retired in 2015 after more than 50 years with the company. The sound of his voice thus evokes the memory of a company that no longer exists. He proceeds to speak of the theatre as a kind of utopian space, somehow disconnected from the present moment and able to ‘capture lost time’ (Ronderos, Gallardo, and Ictus 2017: 2).3 He links the theatre’s unique relationship to time to his own feelings of temporal dislocation – at his age, he feels that his body and mind are no longer operating in the same time. The visual and aural images of the company’s past, in combination with Sharim’s musings on the utopian space of the theatre and his own personal sense of dislocation all contribute to the initial establishment of the play as an act of nostalgia.

The lights shift, and the actors begin to play a kind of game. A series of cards are flipped over on a projector creating a reverse-chronological catalogue of the company’s shows. As each title is projected, the actors describe personal events that occurred during that year, some quotidian, others more consequential. This game establishes the primary dramaturgical tactic of the piece in which the history of the company is personalised through the life experiences of the three actors and conveyed via an associational logic. These juxtapositions highlight the unique historical circumstances and impact of Ictus’ work, as well as the fact that this was a company composed of individual lives. Throughout, the actors tell their stories directly to the audience while an assemblage of primary source documents (such as rehearsal notes and photographs) are projected onto the set. The technological effects are produced by the actors and on-stage technicians in a visibly makeshift way. This gives the documentary play the feeling of an at-home slide show, which is reinforced by the actor’s confessional tone.

At times, this confessional aesthetic delves into the personal struggles experienced by the actors during the dictatorship, which underscores how their work was deeply connected to personal suffering. The audience learns of Duvauchelle and Secall’s exiles in Venezuela and Russia, the murder of Duvauchelle’s brother, and Secall’s institutionalisation in a mental health facility. In the course of the play, the actors also recall some of the more well-known moments of Ictus’ political struggle: Duvauchelle describes a protest helmed by Ictus in solidarity with 78 actors threatened with violence if they did not leave the country; Secall describes a performance in which one of the company’s actors, Roberto Parada, learnt that his son had been murdered by the military police and insisted that the show continue. Parada continued in the role throughout the run, transforming the play into an homage to his son, and leading audiences to flock to the play in support. Duvauchelle recalls how Parada’s experience infused the text.
of the work and the audience’s response to it stating, ‘Something from reality had forever gotten into
the work’ (Roderos, Gallardo, and Ictus 2017: 42). Such recollections demonstrate how the company’s
work was bound up in events taking place outside of the theatre. The irruption of these events into
the life of the theatre politicises Ictus’s work in profound ways, giving it a heightened significance. Yet, it also
complicates nostalgia for the theatre produced during this period by demonstrating the ways in which
their work was linked to personal trauma.

The play works to further problematise its own nostalgia by adopting a critical attitude to the com-
pany’s history. Early in the play Duvauchelle critiques the company and one of Ictus’s most celebrated
plays – Three Nights on a Saturday. Because it was the only play to continue its run following the coup,
it has attained almost mythic status in Chilean theatrical history. Duvauchelle, however, argues that the
show was homophobic and misogynist and that the company was run in a paternalistic manner. This
kind of revisionism both undercuts a nostalgic valorisation of the company’s history and serves as an
attempt to maintain the company’s relevance for a contemporary audience. Nissim Sharim is called on
Skype to respond to these accusations, which for the most part he denies or excuses as a product of the
times. The debate is never resolved, however, and Paula Sharim and Duvauchelle are left to reckon with
the patriarchal aspects of the company and their feelings of inequality within it.

Towards the end of the play Paula Sharim even more overtly challenges the nostalgia that situates the
high point of Ictus in the dictatorship period. She states, ‘It would be easy to say that the glory years of
Ictus were the 70s and 80s and that now we are a shadow of what Ictus was, but I don’t believe that to
be the case’ (Roderos, Gallardo, and Ictus 2017: 54). Instead, she argues for the continued importance of
the company and asserts that the struggles of today are no less important than the struggles of individuals
during the dictatorship, calling into question the idea that political persecution creates an environment
in which art plays a more significant role.

This approach runs the risk of downplaying the real struggles, risks, and traumas experienced during
Pinochet’s dictatorship. However, it also raises important questions about political theatre, particularly
in the Chilean post-dictatorship period. By weaving stories of personal struggle, exile, and tragedy into
the history of Ictus’s theatre-making, the play illuminates the personal cost underlying the ‘political
theatre’ that Ictus created during the dictatorship period. It thus encourages spectators to ask what we
might be valorising when we valorise political theatre, and whether we are fetishising art-making built
on personal trauma and shaped by extreme repression while overlooking the smaller, quieter struggles
towards the creation of a better world. By establishing and then troubling a sense nostalgia for the
company’s work during the dictatorship period, This is (not) a testament complicates the history of
the company and the audience’s relationship to political theatre. Furthermore, the play strives to assert
the company’s continued relevance now: the parenthetical ‘not’ embedded in the play’s title, suggests
that though one identity is being left behind and the play is a retrospective backwards glance, it is not
the company’s last rites.

Notes
1 Ictus’s identity as a site of resistance emerged from the shows it created and produced which (often metaphorically
or through analogy) criticised the dictatorship, their creation and screening of critical, alternative news
programs and documentaries in working-class neighbourhoods, and the company’s participation in political
activities, such as the organisation of a rally in 1987 in support of artists threatened with exile as well as participation
in the opposition campaign during the 1988 plebiscite.
2 Paula Sharim, María Elena Duvauchelle and José Secall are all active members of the company, who joined the
company in different periods. Duvauchelle joined the company prior to the dictatorship in 1967 and Secall
joined in 1986 after years of exile in Russia. Sharim, the daughter of the company’s former director Nissim Sha-
rim, begin working with the company in 1989 and took over the management of the company in 2015 when
her father retired.
3 This, and all other translations, are my own.
4 The play, Primavera con una esquina rota (Spring with a broken corner) was an adaptation of a novel by Mario Bene-
detti about repression under the Uruguayan dictatorship, with a clear resonance for Chile under dictatorship.
References


