

## The Politics of Motherhood: Poetic Monologues of Ana Istarú

Istarú, Ana. *Baby boom en el paraíso / Hombres en escabeche*. San José, Costa Rica: Editorial Costa Rica, 2001. ISBN: 9977237468.

Actress, poet and playwright Ana Istarú is among the most versatile of her Central American contemporaries in the performing arts. Her theatrical repertoire consists of four plays: *El vuelo de la grulla* (1984), *Madre nuestra que estás en la tierra* (1988), *Baby boom en el paraíso* (1996), and most recently, *Hombres en escabeche* (2000). She has won literary prizes for all of her plays, including the "Becas Taller of 1984" for *El vuelo de grulla*, and the "María Teresa León para Autoras Dramáticas" (1995) awarded by the Asociación de Directores de Escena (Madrid) for *Baby Boom en el paraíso*. In 1999 Istarú was honored with the "Hermanos Machado por Teatro" award in Sevilla for *Hombres en escabeche*, and most recently, she claimed the prize "Ancora de Teatro 1999-2000."

Among the multitalented dramatists of the 1980s, Istarú is most noted for her uniquely feminist perspective that is marked by the complex ideological themes that affect and define the roles of women. In her plays, she exposes the frustration that Central American women have faced in coordinating their multiple roles as wives and mothers. She weaves the search for identity that marks the often difficult and demanding role of women in late twentieth-century society into the experiences of her characters. Through her experimental and innovative dialogue, Istarú empowers the traditionally passive or repressed women who are her audience. Her repertoire exemplifies the needs, longings, and regrets of the traditional Costa Rican woman.

Her most recent publication, *Baby boom en el paraíso/Hombres en escabeche*, reunites her praised satirical and comedic pieces, which in the opinion of the Costa Rican newspaper, *La Nación*, bring forth "los más distinguidos aportes a la dramaturgia costarricense de fin de siglo." Written in fifteen days, *Baby boom en el paraíso*, is a quasi autobiographical account of Istarú's experience with pregnancy. Through a fantastic soliloquy which begins with a Homeric account of the voyage of the egg leaving the ovary, to the intimate narration of the trials and tribulations of the difficulties of pregnancy, the author exposes an underlying message

which breaks down machista attitudes towards pregnancy by dismantling myths created by a patriarchal society.

*Baby boom en el paraíso* is a powerful drama which questions the emerging presence of the Central American woman as a working mother and the many obstacles she must face in a male dominated society. Istarú manages a perfect dance with comedy by keeping her audience entertained with scenarios of a husband and wife discussing the most effective positions for conception as well as cameos of neighbors, the mother-in-law, and doctor visits that add a unique Costa Rican perspective on child rearing and motherhood. *Baby boom en el paraíso* is a celebration of birth and a ballad of the love between a man and a woman that culminates in the ever changing experience of parenthood.

In *Hombres en escabache*, Istarú personifies in the protagonist, Alicia, the childhood dreams and aspirations of a young woman who feels imprisoned by her own fears and insecurities towards love and sex. The play opens with Alicia dressed in a wedding gown, sitting alone on a love seat waiting for a man: "Estoy esperando a un hombre. [...] Nunca he tenido uno que pueda llamar propiamente mío [...]" (65). Through Alicia's character, Istarú exposes the ambiguities and contradictions that women face in a patriarchal society full of moral hypocrisy with regards to sexuality, an issue also raised in her previous play *Madre nuestra que estás en la tierra*. With perfect satirical humor, *Hombres en escabache* takes the reader through the protagonist's most memorable stages in life, beginning with her infancy, through her discovery of puberty, and culminating with her endless search for her own sexuality. This journey of self awareness is juxtaposed with serious and, at times, comedic scenes shared with the men at different times in her life: as a child, they are her father and brother; as she matures, her boyfriends and admirers. The distinguishing quality of this play is that it focuses on the relationship between daughter and father and how the failure of this relationship can have damaging effects on the female's perception of life, sexuality, love, and self worth. Throughout the play, Alicia seeks attention and approval from her father. His constant rejection of her devotion and admiration finally unmasks its true self, revealing an unfaithful husband and misguided father that does not uphold to Alicia's idealized father figure. As she matures, boyfriends and admirers reveal to her that the perfect man does not exist and that she must

let go of the fantasy she had created. The end of her journey culminates in Alicia challenging the patriarchal structures she learned as a child. She freely explores her sexuality, casting aside the traditional role of the chaste unmarried woman and adopting those of the lover/mistress in order to assert her newly found female identity.

There is no doubt that emanating from both plays are the voices of struggling women seeking their independence and their right to arrive at freedom of expression. Itsarú's work explores unique perspectives of critical issues which challenge Central American society to ensure that women are recognized as legitimate members of society, deserving of political rights equal to those of men. Ana Istarú's plays consistently criticize the condition of women in contemporary Costa Rican society. The memorable, strong-willed, and independently-minded women she projects in her theatrical work convey her feminist messages. Both *Baby boom en el paraíso* and *Hombres en escabeche* transcend new frontiers and bring a fresh critical view of the fairly new feminist movement in Central America. The publication of this new edition of Istarú's plays by the Editorial Costa Rica proves that her success in Costa Rica and internationally is welcomed and most deserving.

María Luisa Collins  
University of California, Santa Barbara