

BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

Laughing Through the Apocalypse

BY ELIZABETH HANLY

They didn't try to shut *Humor* down until January 1983, when its cover pictured Major General Nicolaides Galtieri, one of the mightiest of Argentina's "Dirty War" commanders, colliding with blind Justice and taking the poor muchacha for a nasty tumble as he fell off his skateboard. By then, the magazine had survived nearly five of the worst years of the Argentine repression and become an institution of sorts, the sole publication willing to poke around in the stuff of the *dictadura*.

The rest of that issue was faithful to its cover. One article compared the military's relationship with Argentina to a fellow who kills his beloved because she's witnessed his impotence. Another told of a judge who took the foolish step of inquiring about some political prisoners; after analyzing the subtext of the military's response, he fled Argentina. Illustrating the story, cartoon thugs turned chorus girls chant, "Ford, Ford, Falcon; Falcon, Falcon, Ford" (Argentina's preferred "operational" vehicle).

As soon as the issue hit the newsstands, members of the armed forces got into their Falcons and scattered. But you can't confiscate what you can't find. *Humor* popped up during the next few days from under the counters in beauty parlors and in neighborhood bars and butcher shops. The Falklands debacle was still fresh, the economy at its all-time worst—terror of the military was curdling into disgust. The junta was on the way out, and at least some Argentines delighted in humiliating the generals any way they could. By the next issue, *Humor's* circulation had risen from 280,000 to 330,000; Andrés Cascioli, the proud editor, thought about dropping off a note to thank the good officers. After five years of cat and mouse, the magazine was free now to criticize and satirize as vividly as it chose.

Why hadn't the military stamped out *Humor* at its inception? "Timing," Cascioli told me. He had tried to register an earlier incarnation of the magazine; various officials looked at the dummies. "Publish this, you're dead," they said. Cascioli waited till 1978: "We sneaked in during the chaos of the World Soccer Tournament. When *Humor* was finally noticed, the military were pleased. Your President Carter was coming down hard on human rights. It was in the junta's interests to be seen as liberalizing."

For a quite a while, stories on auto-censorship and long-standing union/military intimacies were hidden away among articles on extraterrestrials and enemies, nostalgia pieces on the tango, and diagrams comparing men's body types in terms of flower-pots. Anything really hot was handled in cartoons, often broad, raunchy ones—as a censor's willing lady opens to him, he sees only a gigantic pair of scissors. The best of the bunch dispense with captions: a general surrounds himself with infinitely regressing mirror images; khaki legs and boots get transformed into civvies, then back again, to the horror of the little guy watching. The magazine had a favorite out-and-out target, the junta's economic minister, Martínez de Hoz. *Humor* cast him in a Frankenstein-like light, singing a tango for the multinationals to whom many Argentines feel he sold the economy. On one cover, he's a blood-sucking bat-man; on another, he goes pop-the-weasel.

For all this feistiness, like almost every other Argentine publication, *Humor* was silent on the disappeared for a long, long time. The omission might look inexcusable from the safety of distance, but the magazine wanted to survive. Goon squads came twice for Cascioli anyway; like most of his writers, he changed addresses several times. Perhaps *Humor's* life, and Cascioli's, rested as much on monstrous vanity as on luck or prudence

HUMOR la política y las armas
 -El jardín de los rebrotes
 Reportajes: Favalaro/Gorostiza • Argentina Marchal
 La ley en patineta: A LA JUSTICIA NO LE DAN CORTE
 NUMERO 97: \$ 90.000.-



January 1983: Justice takes a tumble; *Humor* gets in trouble.

or political winds. Hermenegildo Sábat, first to bring back political caricatures (banned since Perón), recalls a sketch he did—a member of the junta as a most impassioned Narcissus. The delighted admiral called the artist, pleading for the original.

For *Humor*, as for Argentina, after the euphoria of Alfonsín's presidential victory, malaise settled in. *Humor* ran an article after article on Argentina's ever-ready creed of violence, on the breakdown of populism, and especially on skepticism, omnipresent skepticism. There was no feeling, though, that tackling all this effectively challenged any of it. Cascioli still made some grand moves, like printing the names of 1351 Dirty War torturers, a list compiled by a blue-ribbon commission, then buried, many felt, to appease the country's right wing. Even so, there's a tension in *Humor*, working to distance it from too much horror and too few answers. Its vitality is drained now as never during the *dictadura*, when the issue was a straightforward fight. Occasionally the distance collapses. Some terrifying covers result. In one, captioned "Democracy as she was left us," a moronic, livid Argentina manages nothing more than to stay upright, rotting on her chamber pot. Another shows Young Liberty about to delive; the junta attens her, electric prods in hand. They're salivating. They've become oversized rats and gorillas with shiny coats, but their eyes, their gestures, their semblance of reason are as always. You can smell their heat.

Things have turned around for *Humor* and Argentina. Democracy is wearing better than anyone dreamed; *Humor's* marvelous sass is crackling again. There's issue 145, for instance, featuring photos of Isabelita (Perón's widow and Presidential successor), head shots cut-and-pasted atop *Penthouse* bodies. One is punked out, studs and all, captioned "Hear the sound of broken chains"—words familiar to Argentines from their national anthem. Cascioli got hauled into court for that one, but no matter. He's on a roll, winning a score of slander cases.

worry again. President Alfonsín has asked Argentina to accept a "Punto Final," which would eliminate the possibility of trials for the military's Dirty War crimes. The word is that, this year or next, Alfonsín will extend the amnesty to the commanders who have already been condemned. And so the only nation ever to try its own military may just take it all back. Another gamble for Cascioli, *Humor*, and Argentina.

Enjoy!

THE COLLECTED POEMS OF CARL RAKOSI. National Poetry Foundation, \$35; \$15.95 paper.

It has taken far too long—Carl Rakosi is 83—but here at last are his *Collected Poems*, a monument so free from monumental posturings that its 490 pages could conceivably be read in a single delighted sitting. I can think of no contemporary poet who radiates such an aura of enjoyment—enjoyment of the senses, of the oddness of language, of the mind's capacity to make something out of nothing:

If there is no connection between the wild hemp of Kashmir and the plectrum on a Persian lute, the mind will make one before the mallet comes down on the cymbal.

So begins a poem characteristically entitled "Discoveries, Trade Names, Genitals and Ancient Instruments." Rakosi's unfettered range of association takes him readily from Finnmarken to China to an eighth century Ireland where "The ram leaped/ and the seal disported on small rocks/ and birds and geese cackled in the glen/ and Castlekirk was built in one night by a cock and a hen." Lost imagined worlds surface continually from the humblest objects; an avocado pit is

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Liberty gives birth, Isabelita's hands-on policy.