



Jacobo Timerman, a victim of brutal Argentine oppression, is robbed of some of his heroism in this docudrama because the background is so sketchy.

TELEVISION

Docudrama: horror without a context

By Elizabeth Hanly

After nearly a decade of blood letting, Argentina is now beginning to look at her wounds. And so is prime time U.S. television with the recent NBC docudrama about Jacobo Timerman.

In the mid-'70s, the military junta threw out Isabel Peron's corrupt civilian government and proceeded to answer Argentina's leftist guerrilla threat with one of the most brutal state terrorist operations in modern history.

Disappearances.

Most human rights agencies describe those actions differently. The Organization of American States (OAS) commission on human rights refers to "...a process which dispensed with all legal and moral considerations." Amnesty International more graphically records that: "regularly in various places throughout the country unidentified bodies were found floating in rivers, at the bottom of lakes, decomposing on rubbish dumps or blown to bits in quarries."

From 1976 to 1979, as many as 30,000 Argentines were taken away from homes, workplaces and even restaurants by heavily armed men for "questioning." Most of them never returned. Government officials generally denied any knowledge of these people's whereabouts. Every writ

of *habeus corpus* presented on behalf of the missing was dismissed by the courts after the military refused to give even their hand-picked judiciary access to the records. Each branch of the armed forces had its own list of possible "subversives." To be respected by one group was no guarantee that your name would not appear on another's list.

Terror out of control.

Pat Derian, assistant secretary for human rights in the Carter administration who traveled several times to Argentina, described it this way: "The military didn't know how to stop their campaign once they had begun. I'm not sure they wanted to stop. When officers began to become afraid of each other, even more people were fingered—pawns in their disputes."

Very few Argentines would talk about the disappeared. Those who publicly demanded information about the missing were often ostracized by their families and threatened by the government. Likewise, few Argentine journalists would admit that anything peculiar was happening in their country. Only two Buenos Aires newspapers regularly carried information on the disappeared: the English language *Buenos Aires Herald*, under Robert Cox, and *La Opinion*, when under Jacobo Timerman's direction, before his ab-

duction and the paper's expropriation by the military in 1977. In short, according to Robert Cox, "The silence in Argentina was tremendous."

The NBC docudrama *Jacobo Timerman: Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number* with Roy Scheider and Liv Ullman aired last Sunday evening. The TV film was based on Timerman's account of his torture and nearly four years of imprisonment without charges by the Argentine military.

Ullman's performance as Timerman's wife added texture and credibility to every scene she was in. Roy Scheider only came alive in the small moments when he played Timerman the man and not the hero.

Any effort to bring this issue to a prime time television audience deserves praise. Yet docudrama director Linda Yellen so protected herself emotionally from the material that she was unable to give it life. Instead, she delivered a nearly one-dimensional hero and a story disjointed from its context.

The film never clearly explains what a disappearance is, nor how it is distinct from that of a political prisoner. Perhaps this is the docudrama's most serious flaw. Although political prisoners usually are not tried or given formal sentences and are often arbitrarily incarcerated for as long as a government chooses, at least

The issues are alluded to in a kind of shorthand.

everyone agrees that they exist and they are being held. A macabre unreality surrounds a disappearance. Someone is gone. None of the clues surrounding a disappearance leads to any sure answers. No one knows if a disappeared person is alive or dead.

There is little suggestion in this docudrama of the vast number of the disappearances, of the dissolution of Argentine institutions or of the wider response of the Argentine people to the military's various strategies. When these issues are covered at all, they are alluded to in a kind of shorthand, which is disorienting to those not already familiar with them. One knows far too little about what Timerman was fighting for. The audience is almost asked to accept his heroism on faith.

In the prison and torture scenes, Yellen refuses to fully explore the horror. And so even in the most graphic moments one is left naive and uninformed about the depth of the atrocities. By keeping herself from the real horror of the story, Yellen denies us access to its wealth of heroism and faith.

Argentina today.

Argentina is now at a crossroads. After so many years of silence, the issue of the disappeared seems ready to explode. Thousands recently marched with the relatives of the missing in protest over the government's refusal to give any new information on the disappeared. The country is divided between those who believe Argentina must come to terms

with the past in order to move beyond it and those who talk of the need to forget. Many fear that if the military is pressed too hard, there will be further reprisals and bloodshed. Every day the military loses more credibility. Yet there is talk of alliances between the junta and powerful right-wing trade unions. Meanwhile, those whose courage is so great (Timerman says in the docudrama that it would be sinful not to record it)—the relatives who over the years have risked everything for their missing loved ones—are as yet unanswered. ■

Elizabeth Hanly, a screenwriter, is writing a book about families of the disappeared in Argentina.

CALENDAR

Use the calendar to announce conferences, lectures, films, events, etc. The cost is **\$20.00 for one insertion, \$30.00 for two insertions and \$15.00 for each additional insert.** for copy of 50 words or less (additional words are 50c each). Payment must accompany your announcement, and should be sent to the attention of **Beth Maschinot**.

CHICAGO

May 27

A forum on the new independent political movement. Speakers: Emily Carter Padilla, Coordinator Harlem New Alliance Party; Dennis Serrette, Founder Coalition of Black Trade Unionists; John Fraire, Chicano activist, Founder Boston Institute for Social Therapy and Research. Admission: \$3 employed, \$1 unemployed. Sponsors: Illinois Welfare Rights Coalition; Organizing Committee for Chicago Institute for Social Therapy and Research. For more information, call 935-1033.

June 2

Physicians for Social Responsibility Chicago Chapter meeting. Rush Medical Center, 1750 W. Harrison, Room 1245-Jelke. Thursday, June 2, 6:30 p.m. General discussion. Everyone welcome. For further information—call 726-8087.

Sylvia

by Nicole Hollander

