Who’s Afraid of Virgilio Piñera? Violence and Fear in Dos viejos pánicos (1968)

Tabo: Tota, ¿qué vamos a comer mañana?
Tota: Carne con miedo, mi amor, carne con miedo.

Virgilio Piñera Dos viejos pánicos

Dos viejos pánicos (1968) from Vigilio Piñera (1912–1979) explores the violence inherent in the repetition of everyday existence by portraying a routine day in the life of a sixty-year-old married couple. The quotidian violence that characterizes the couple’s lives is provoked by fear. Piñera’s characters, Tota and Tabo, represent a domestic dispute that mirrors the spectacality of the political context that was taking place in Cuba off-stage in the late 1960s. This violence is sparked by a fear that characterizes Tota and Tabo’s existence and comes between them and the outside world. Their fear is triggered by the knowledge that everything about them—including their intimate secrets—is known by another. This comprehensive fear is embodied in a planilla the couple is forced to confront in the second act. The planilla, in Dos viejos pánicos, is a governmental survey that becomes the personification of fear for the middle-aged couple. Their violence against one another and against the outside world can be witnessed in their struggle with, and attempted elimination of, this very planilla. The internal world of Tota and Tabo reflects the national context (that of Cuba in the late 1960s, but also the larger Latin American political and social context) and portrays a growing fear and the violence that it provokes. The small, claustrophobic existence that the couple describes is doubled by the
political events that surround the writing of *Dos viejos pánicos*, a context in which the spectacularity is mirrored by Piñera’s work.

Outside Cuba, the political and economic situation of the late 1960s and early 1970s in Latin America was experiencing an instability that contributed to a time marked by change and unrest. The year before Piñera wrote *Dos viejos pánicos*, Che Guevara was killed in Bolivia while attempting to spark a revolutionary uprising along the models of the triumphant Cuban one. In 1968, the very year that this play was written, the Mexican President, Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, ordered the massacre of protestors, many of them students, in the Tlatelolco district of Mexico City. Both events highlight the unstable international environment in which Piñera was writing *Dos viejos pánicos* and underline his notions as to the centrality of fear in everyday life.

The beginning of the Cuban Revolution marked a time of tremendous creative production and growth that came as a welcome relief to the years of Fulgenico Batista’s control. Batista’s March 10, 1952 coup d’état ushered in a time marked by constant plots and rumors, all of which Batista answered with censorship and the suspension of many democratic rights. The Revolution of 1959, in turn, was defined by openness and possibility both within the theater and the arts, more generally. This can be seen in the return to Cuba of many exiled artists from the 1950s and the prominent positions that they and other artists began to occupy. They had left Cuba in the 1950s in response to Batista’s restrictions on democracy and the opposition. While Virgilio Piñera had already returned to Havana from Buenos Aires in 1958, many other Cuban intellectuals like Heberto Padilla, José Triana, Antón Arrufat, Nicolás Guillén, and Alejo Carpentier rushed back to Havana in the wake of the Revolution’s triumph. Many intellectuals saw the Revolution as the long-awaited fulfillment of the promises of independence from more than a half century earlier.

The decade of the 1960s was both a time of hope and anticipation as well as one of restrictions and limiting definitions. While the main goal of the government was to establish a stable revolutionary government and economy, all sectors of Cuban life were affected by the political and economic decisions on the island. On the one hand, writers and artists received much more attention and government support than they had before the Revolution. On the other, in exchange for this support, they were to defend the Revolution and its practices or suffer in silence and oblivion. This expected allegiance was often antithetical to the artists’ way of thinking, as seen in the case of Padilla. In 1965, the Cuban Communist Party was formed, consolidating much conflict between old and new communists. From 1966 to 1970, the focus turned to the construction of both a social consciousness and economic development, underscoring the need