

# Chilean author champions the view of the intellectual

By **CHRIS CAIN**  
Staff Writer

There at the foot of the couch on the linoleum floor, the tape recorder was bound to pick up his voice. He cautioned me to take notes as well, but this man is an engaging speaker, his voice demands attention, so, of course, I didn't. And, of course, the tape didn't pick that voice up — except when, in order to make his point absolutely clear, he sat up to the very edge of the couch and leaned over the quietly humming recorder.

Luckily, Ariel Dorfman, who is presently the most popular writer in Chile, has more than a few ideas he wants to make absolutely clear; points he feels it imperative to drive home. I left Duke that day with mostly garble on tape, Dorfman fading in and out to the tune of The Boomtown Rats who were being recorded over. But the ¼ that made it in, that triumphed over Bob Geldof, was full of the sort of passionate intensity Yeats warned against, full of an animated, immediate sort of earnestness — whether whispering or shouting.

Dorfman's office in the International Studies building at Duke is sparsely decorated: a desk, a chair, a couch, a box of hardback copies of his most popular book — "Widows," a novel about the pain and suffering of "the disappeared" in his country. There is no carpet and his voice echoes as he talks of the popularity of Latin American literature in the North.

"We have an exceptional amount of very good writers," he says, without a trace of an accent, "writers for whom literature is a matter of life and death. I think that shows in the passion of the prose, in the originality, in the search for meaning. I think it may also be part of the fact that Latin American literature is one of the best ways of understanding what's happening down South. It's a way of initiating yourself much better than any tourist trip."

A tour of Ariel Dorfman's literature proves it to be as varied as the Chilean-American landscape: Essays on Donald Duck and The Lone Ranger, poems, novels, regular contributions to The Village Voice, New York Times and Los Angeles Times, and, most recently, a play. His fiction is allegorical, often fantastic, and always, he believes, political.

"In Latin America it's absolutely normal for writers to engage in politics all the time — for several reasons. The first and obvious one is if you're being censored, your colleagues are being killed and tortured, if your readers are being persecuted, you can't stand back and not be political, right? That's one reason.

"The other reason is that in our



DTH/Tony Deifell

**Ariel Dorfman is the author of Chile's number one bestseller "Widow"**

nations in Latin America the word of the intellectual matters. I think here it matters very little. I think it's trivialized, it's marginalized, it is not felt essential. There's an anti-intellectualism in the United States, which is very different from what I would call a pro-intellectualism in Latin America. Which means of course if you're an intellectual they'll also take you so seriously they'll try to kill you, okay. But, on the other hand, you also have the privilege of the fact that what you write about means something. You see?"

The right wing dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet took Dorfman's intellect seriously enough to send him into exile in 1973. A decade later in 1983, he was re-admitted and he began spending half the year as a professor at Duke and half as a writer in Chile. This until two months ago, when he was again kicked out of the country, the first "re-exile" in its history. But, partly as a result of extensive coverage in the U.S. press, Dorfman was given permission to

return after a month. Whether he can do so safely is a question he is now in the process of answering.

Dorfman has had difficulty dealing with the publicity surrounding his case. "These are difficult times for me," he said, before granting me an interview. Another reporter who called in the middle of our conversation wasn't as fortunate: "I am really going crazy," he says into the phone, trying earnestly to make the voice understand. "I must tell you that I feel pretty exhausted." Finally he hangs up and sits back down. He is tired of talking politics, he says. He is a writer first. Yet, he admits, the two are inseparable.

"I'm political — but every writer is political in Latin America. There is no one writer who is not." He pauses, thinking, then sits up to the edge of the couch: "There are two basic political acts that writers can have in Latin America. One is an immediate effect. Like for instance when I comment on, when I denounce, what

is happening in my country and other countries. That is taking a journalistic attitude.

"And another attitude is a deeper attitude, a longer range, a longer term attitude. . . . The language that we speak in Latin America is degraded by dictatorship and by poverty. It's a language which is not fully grown; it's a language that is hemmed in, restricted — it's a language that is full of lies. What you've got to do is clean up that language, you've got to tell the real stories."

It is this deeper attitude that he has taken in his fiction, telling the real stories of violence and triumph, and in his most recent novel, the real, and utterly surreal story of birth, "The Last Song of Manuel Sendero," published this year, is the tale of a yet unborn baby who organizes a strike of fellow fetuses until the adults change the world into which they must emerge. "I'm talking about the problems of birth. How do you give birth in impossible situations?"

"If you think of physical birth it's something you can't possibly imagine — that something so large could come out of such a small place. I mean, come on, between the legs of someone? It's an incredible act. To give birth is just as difficult — to give birth to a revolution or to give birth to a piece of work. To give birth in the sense of renewing yourself every day. To give birth to yourself."

Just as there is more to "The Last Song of Manuel Sendero" than babies, more than protest in Chile, there is more to "Widows" than first meets the eye. In order to fool the Chilean censors Dorfman assumed the name of Eric Lohmann, who writes of "The Disappeared" in Denmark during World War II. As it turned out the

publisher refused to print the book in Chile anyway — until this year. The publicity surrounding Dorfman's re-exile has made "Widows" the number one bestseller in Chile for months. "I don't want to say it myself, but it's had the wildest success you can imagine. It's become the major bestseller in I don't know how many years."

As for the timing, he credits Mr. Pinochet. "Now I'm nationally known as a writer because of what the government did to me. So when they say the government doesn't care about culture, they're wrong. This government has done an enormous amount for culture: by persecuting a writer they have made his book a bestseller.

"But I'd rather my books sold a bit less and they'd just leave me alone."

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