

HOW TO EAT AN ORANGE

By

Catherine Filloux

Based on the writing of Claudia Bernardi

Created for and developed with Mercedes Herrero

# HOW TO EAT AN ORANGE

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## HOW TO EAT AN ORANGE

*How To Eat an Orange* was commissioned by INTAR Theatre, New York City, New York and premiered at La MaMa Downstairs Theatre in New York City. It was a New Georges Supported Production. The cast and staff were as follows:

Claudia.....Paula Pizzi

Director: Elena Araoz; Set and Prop Design by Daniel Landez; Projection Design by Milton Cordero; Lighting Design by María-Cristina Fusté; Sound Design by Nathan Leigh; Co-Costume Design by Suttirat Larlarb & Brynne Oster-Bainnson; Stage Manager: Milan Eldridge; Assistant Director: Fabiola Arias; Press Representative: Emily Owens; Production Manager: Karen Oughtred

Under its previous title, *Under the Skin*, the play received a virtual workshop, created for and developed with Mercedes Herrero, produced, and livestreamed by INTAR and CultureHub.

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CAST: 1 Woman

One actress plays the role of Claudia, with brief moments where she plays others including: Father, Mother, Reporter, Violeta, Man, Clyde Snow, Patri and Grandmother.

Objects, projection images, video and audio for the scenes include: an orange, a plate, fork and knife, a begonia flower in a vase, a letter, a hammer, a purse, a piece of red fabric, a white dress, an image of a skeleton from Casanova cemetery, a fresco painting “Under the Skin”, a perfume bottle, a spoon, a cigarette, a skull, a wooden urn, scissors, a mural and soundscape from Ardoyne Road, Belfast.

The play is performed without an intermission. Silence plays a crucial role in the play; moments of silence are noted in the script.

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*CLAUDIA enters with a plate and an orange. She puts them on a table and sits down. There is an envelope on the table.*

**CLAUDIA.** So, I set the orange down on the plate, take my fork and knife, and cut off the ends. I cut it in half. *(She looks at a vase of flowers on the table, laughing.)* Oh! We had many citrus blossoms, in our garden. When Spring arrives, my little sister Patri and I go about eating flowers. *(She breaks off a begonia flower from its stem in the vase.)* We eat the blossoms, eat the petals and we eat even the tender leaves with the total conviction that, as time goes by, this early devotion will make us beautiful. *(She eats the flower.)* Delicious. I do not recall how we got started with this gastronomic practice, nor how we arrive at this cosmetic certainty. But we understand it as a commitment to vanity which extends for many years, bringing my mother to the point of desperation. *(She smells the flowers.)* All the voices, the places, the smells are compacted together as if kept tight within a membrane that can burst at any time if I am not careful. *(She takes a beat to confide in the audience. She opens the envelope, takes out a photo and leaves it on the table.)* This story is about circumstances.

*(We see a close-up video of a sign with Rodolfo Walsh's face. Time stamp: 57-58 seconds with no sound.*

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ed4\\_a6Uyi2k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ed4_a6Uyi2k)



**CLAUDIA.** Rodolfo Walsh placed his “Open Letter from a Writer to the Military Junta” in the mailbox in Buenos Aires, on March 24, 1977.

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*(She posts the letter through a crack in the floor.)* He understood the circumstances which took me many years to understand. The same day, he was kidnapped, and has been silent since. I did not know of Rodolfo Walsh until many years later. A subterranean hero... That same month of March when he posts his letter, I am 22, also, in Buenos Aires, taking my final exams. Up on the wall, there are about 200 students on the exam list--only 40 students show up. Where are the ones who are not here? If you miss this exam you have to wait a whole other year--?  
*(A scrolling list of names. She picks up a purse.)* Soon after, a young man bumps into me. My purse opens, my stuff is on the ground. *(A hammer falls out of her purse.)* He laughs--asks me if I am carrying this in self-defense. I laugh back. "I use the hammer in sculpture class." He helps me put all my things back in the purse. "Ciao!" He smiles. "Thanks," I wave, and run to the corner to catch the bus. I look for my library card. I have trouble finding it. All was in that little brown wallet. He bumped into me, on purpose, to get my things on the sidewalk, and "chose" what he wanted. God! How can I be so stupid? I even thanked him. The library card is not a problem, it's the other documents. Especially the one for "Good Behavior." Last week, they were taking people away who didn't have them. They were making them stand in a line outside the main entrance. When the lecture was over, there were still police, but the students without documents are gone.

I ask a policeman: "What happened to the students who couldn't come in?" "*Calláte la boca!*" *(Silence.)* I shut it. I ask my friend, he is burly, tall, if he will come with me to the police station to file a complaint about my stolen documents. "Are you crazy, Flaca? *Vos estás en pedo!*" *(She picks up the purse.)* Days go by, I cannot sleep well. I walk like a criminal. It's stupid to feel like this, I have to go and file the complaint. The Central Police Station is not far from my house. The windows are seldom open. I think that the building is mute, gagged. It doesn't have its eyes open to see who enters or leaves. But the mouth, under the gag...? I just don't know what I am afraid of. I didn't do anything wrong. There is rain in this cold June winter, the images of what happened

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beyond the main entrance of the Police Station are clouded, grayish, unfocused like an old movie. One that I have seen a long time ago and I do not fully remember. All the voices, the places, the smells are compacted together as if kept tight within a membrane that can burst at any time if I am not careful. As if contained in a blister. A dense liquid, that will erupt and suffocate me. "I have come to report my stolen documents." The policemen laugh and take my fingerprints. "My documents were stolen!" They take me to a place where there are a lot of people. A jail. We are all young. We hear screams from the other side of a corridor, many people screaming, from the volume. A lot of them crying. A very thin, pale young woman keeps saying, "I was just standing there, I didn't see anything. Please, let me go, I was just standing there." I am anticipating the time I will need to pee, sure, they will not let me go. In all that hell, I'm worried about peeing on myself. A sinister balloon of unconnected puzzled images. *(She crawls away.)* Unfocused memories, the edges of the voices merge with the screams. Whiteness, fogginess, people, sounds, all collected in that blister I cannot speak. *(A moment of silence. She picks up the begonia flower.)* Our most favorite are the begonias, rightly called "sugar flowers." They are small flowers of white-translucent petals, crunchy, with a pompon of yellow pollen that tastes sweet with a pleasant hint of sour. Because the begonias grow without the need of much sunlight, they are planted along the corridor that connects the front garden with the back patio, a transit seldom used. In the coolness of the shade, my sister Patri and I spend the quiet hours of the siesta savoring the delicacy of this secret ambrosia. The big red roses intimidate us, the white ones have thorns, but with the first buds of the yellow roses we are vigilant with scientific attention. *(A kind of explosion appears in Claudia.)* We devour them without compassion. My father sits us in front of him:

**FATHER.** *(With infinite patience, picking up an orange.)* Girls, you must not destroy, each flower will become a ripe fruit, such as an orange, and then you can eat them.

**CLAUDIA.** That summer, many citrus blossoms never mature into fruits. Ants are another fascination. We make maps rendering the passages from where the ants circulate.

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**MOTHER.** *(With humor.) You both are worse than the ants!*

**CLAUDIA.** My mother says, as she looks up from her sewing. What is certain is Patri and I have an uncanny comprehension of the subterranean world. *(Claudia takes off her red bandana.)* Mama gives us small scraps of fabric to make the ants' clothing.

**MOTHER.** *(With a sigh of admiration.) You are not like the other girls. (Claudia slowly unfolds the red bandana.)*

**CLAUDIA.** El Mozote, El Salvador. In the dirt. It is a girl. I search through her dress. In one of the pockets there is something? Two coins...and a red button. *(She carefully puts down the fabric. She goes back to the dirt.)* Because the ants are always so busy coming and going, it saddens Patri and I to think they do not have time, to get their own furniture, clothing and books. During a whole winter, our primordial occupation, besides going to school, is to make dresses, beds, tables, and family photos for the ants. We capture the first ant in a small medicine jar, I make a drawing of the ant, leaving the portrait by the side of the entrance passage. The next day the portrait is no longer there! It is the confirmation we need. *(To Mother, with great excitement.)* Ma, the ants have hung the photo in their family home.

**MOTHER.** *(Breathing, as a young mother, with a sigh of resignation.) Ay, you two! You are not like the other girls!*

**CLAUDIA.** Many years later, a reporter writing an article calls me, at my house in Berkeley, California.

**REPORTER.** *Which of the two of you Bernardi sisters, is part of the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team?*

**CLAUDIA.** "Patri and I have both worked on the exhumations." With the same concern as my mother:

**REPORTER.** *You are atypical sisters! Both of you doing such horrendous work! (We see a faint sketch of a young woman coming to life in the form of a white dress. This is in a dream.)*

**CLAUDIA.** A young woman approaches me cautiously. *(She speaks in a whisper.)*

**VIOLETA.** *I am Violeta. (The young woman looks deeply, intently.)*

**CLAUDIA.** Have we met before? *(She looks mysteriously. Whispering.)*

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**VIOLETA.** *No... Your sister knows me... (A silence. A photo of two young girls running in the garden. Claudia picks up the begonia.)*

**CLAUDIA.** Patri and I are at our house in Buenos Aires. She is five, I am eight--we are running hand in hand from one end of the garden to the other. We wear *soleritos*, that our mother sews, with a white piqué bib, and a skirt and straps made of fabric my father's family from Italy has sent us with a pattern of tiny red roses. Our parents are young and happy, watching us. There, they are and will always be. Patri and I are in full motion.

*(We see video of the generals from the military junta. Time stamp: 1:39-1:59 with no sound.)*

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ed4\\_a6Uyi2k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ed4_a6Uyi2k)

**CLAUDIA.** After the end of the military junta, the generals responsible for “the disappeared” are given amnesty. They are pardoned. *(Claudia takes out the red bandana and hangs it on the clothesline with pins.)* Many people’s job is to destroy. I think it is a fact that many people in the world have the job of destroying. They get up in the morning and try to imagine how to better destroy. *Galerias Pacífico* in the heart of Buenos Aires, is a shopping mall. One day I am nearby on its reinauguration--I decide to investigate the fanfare. The original copula decorated with murals, the perfume of exclusiveness, its unmistakable scent, impregnates the buyers. Suddenly, I am hit by silence. Hardly able to turn around--still pressed against a voiceless crowd. I see someone has entered the building. A circle of emptiness has formed around him, and isolated this man, who never stops looking at us, with arrogance. Murmurs confirm that he is Emilio Eduardo Massera, of the military junta, in charge of ESMA, the torture and extermination center. We all stare at him. *(Silence.)* After Massera turns around and leaves, no one says anything else about the incident. What would my subterranean hero Rodolfo Walsh say? *(She goes to the crack where she posted the letter and puts her ear to the crack in the floor, listening. We see a close-up video of a sign with Rodolfo Walsh’s face.)* He placed his letter in the mailbox, he writes to the Junta that he knows the crimes they are

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committing. He walks down Avenida Entre Ríos, soldiers detain him, force him to surrender. Rodolfo Walsh takes out his pistol and shoots. They shoot back with machine guns, throw him in the back of a car. Fifteen years later, the Junta is now free, shopping in the new mall. Now what do I do? (*Picks up the orange.*) My father's legs are scarred from grenade wounds, fighting as a private in World War II in Italy. Television arrives in Argentina. In the early 60s, there are documentaries of the Second World War. My mother objects. A boy, a few years older than me, hunched over on a ruined street, wide-eyed and bald with hunger, looks for ants and eats them voraciously. My father cries in front of the TV. I go to him and hold his hand so he knows I am close. *No llores, Papi.* Don't cry. The last time I see my mother I am sixteen, she is about to go into the operating room. Lying on the stretcher and covering up her great fear with humor, she looks at me and says:

**MOTHER.** (*Softly.*) *No me olvides.* Don't forget me.

**CLAUDIA.** My grandmother, with her briefcase under her arm, makes her way to the operating room, ignoring the "No Entry" signs. Five years before my mother, my father dies--also, at the age of 40. (*We hear the sound of traffic.*) Years after I leave for the U.S., I am standing at a bus stop in Buenos Aires, on a visit. A man steps toward me:

**MAN.** *Are you a sister of Claudia Bernardi?*

**CLAUDIA.** No! I **am** Claudia Bernardi.

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