

The play's setting: Villa Devoto Prison

“Palm trees and well-tended flower beds brighten the grounds of the four grey stone and concrete buildings of Villa Devoto Detention Institute in Buenos Aires. But the facade hides a multitude of sins and sinners: inside, Villa Devoto is the darkest penal hellhole in all Argentina. The prison has a rated capacity of only 800 prisoners, but the filthy cells are crammed with 2,180 men. Some have been waiting three years for their cases to come to trial.”

— *TIME* magazine, Friday 28th December, 1962

The play's setting, a small cell in the Villa Devoto prison in Buenos Aires, is a powerful visual metaphor for two men literally imprisoned by their culture, with the ever present threat of torture and destruction hanging over them as they face the daily annihilating monotony of their incarceration. Society has its subject trapped and will punish deviation from its rules savagely.

Conditions in prisons such as Villa Devoto were abhorrent. The environment that prisoners such as Molina and Valentin endured would have included:

- Not being allowed to lie down on their beds during the day, the strain of which could cause paralysis or atrophy of the legs.
- No contact with family or friends.
- The seizure of most of their letters by the censors.
- When a prisoner was moved out of his cell, he had to keep his eyes straight ahead; one glance over his shoulder meant loss of all privileges and possible torture.
- Newspapers and radios were banned inside the prison.
- Prisoners were experimented on with tranquilizer darts; tortured with cattle prods; had the soles of their feet beaten with batons; had metal buckets placed on their heads and then the buckets hammered; had electrical wires applied to their body parts.
- The length of sentences was completely arbitrary and had nothing to do with the “crime” committed. At the end of the prison term, the prisoner or his family had to pay the state back for the cost of his imprisonment or he would not be released.