



Martha Stutz by Javier Daulte. Photo: Carlos Flynn



Alejandro Tantanián's *Un cuento alemán*. Photo: Magdalena Viggiani.

Theatre in Buenos Aires: July-August 1997

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A quick mental review of theatre productions in Buenos Aires during July and August of 1997 brings several terms immediately to mind: quantity, variety, quality, and innovation. In the few weeks I was there, the theatre I saw (and no doubt what I did not see) had all of the above.

Leaving aside “espectáculos” of opera, zarzuela, popular music, musical reviews, performances of theatre for educational purposes, and children’s theatre, I counted more than 50 theatrical productions listed in a single edition of *La Nación* (Sunday, August 3, 1997). There were high budget, grandiose stagings, many of them government supported, as well as modest productions in small neighborhood theatres. During the three-week period from July 29 through August 19, those works ranged from the Teatro San Martín’s productions of *Ricardo III* (directed by Agustín Alezzo) and Puig’s *Boquitas pintadas* (adapted and directed by Renata Schussheim and Oscar Aráiz) to more modest productions, including the following: *La noche*, presented by the Compañía Fantasma Argentina at the Fundación Banco Patricios and based on texts by Alejandra Pizarnik; *Un cuento alemán*, by Alejandro Tantanián at the Callejón de los Deseos; and a theatrical version of Niko Kazantzakis’s *Cristo de nuevo crucificado* at the Manzana de las Luces. *Boquitas pintadas*, which advertised itself as a spectacle of theatre, dance, and music, seemed to be the box-office success of the season, playing to sold-out audiences most nights, even during the week. Indeed, most of the productions I saw in central Buenos Aires played to sold-out houses. No doubt that box-office success was due to a number of factors: the quality and variety of the productions as well as government subsidies, which kept ticket prices in the \$4 to \$8 range at many theatres. As might be expected, the theatre patron was able to choose among works by local playwrights and by foreign ones. Included in the imports were Brian Friel’s *Ver y no ver*, Heiner Müller’s *Máquina Hamlet*, Mark Twain’s *Hoy el diario de Adán y Eva*, Beckett’s *Esperando a Godot*, *Dos mujeres para Federico* and *La pasión según Lorca* (both based on texts by García Lorca), Gibson’s *Dos en el sube*

y baja, Harwood's *El vestidor*, Antonia Brancati's *Preferiría no hacerlo* (translated, adapted, and excellently performed by Mabel Manzotti), and Eileen Atkins's *Vita y Virginia*, staged at the British Arts Center and based on correspondence between Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West. Other possibilities included Shakespeare's *Los dos hidalgos de Verona*, *Hamlet*, *La tempestad*, Pinter's *Retorno al hogar*, Kado Kostzer's adaptation of François Nocher's *Chéjov-Chejova*, Brecht's *Las visiones de Simón Machard*, T. Williams's *Hablame como la lluvia...* as well as Sartre's *Muertos sin sepultura* or *A puerta cerrada*.

Argentine dramatists were represented with contemporary works by relatively new playwrights as well as works (both recent and not so recent) by established playwrights. Among the relatively new playwrights were Tantanián (mentioned above), Daniel Veronese (*equivoca fuga de señorita apretando un pañuelo de encaje sobre su pecho* and *Formas de hablar de las madres de los mineros mientras esperan que sus hijos salgan a la superficie*), Rafael Spregelburd (*Raspando la cruz*), Lucía Laragione (*Cocinando con Elisa*), Ricardo Bartís (*El corte*), Javier Daulte (*Martha Stutz*), Diana Raznovich (*Jardín de otoño*), as well as Veronese and Spregelburd's co-authored drama (*Reconstrucción del hecho*). More established playwrights included Eduardo Rovner (*Alma en pena*, based on Francisco Defilippis Nova's *El alma del hombre honrado*), Griselda Gambaro (*Los pies descalzos*, based on *Cuatro ejercicios para actrices*), Roma Mahieu (*El dragón de fuego*), and Eduardo Pavlovsky (*El cardenal* and *Potestad*). Some of the classics of Argentine theatre were also performed: Roberto Arlt (*La isla desierta*), Florencio Sánchez (*Los derechos de la salud*), and Juan Carlos Ghiano (*Vestida de novia*). In addition, the Centro Cultural Fray Mocho presented its Primer Ciclo de Sainete Nacional, which included sainetes by Juan Villalba and Roberto Lino Cayol. Also available were theatrical renditions of narrative works such as Sábato's *El túnel*, Costantini's *De dioses, hombrecitos y policías*, and the already mentioned *Boquitas pintadas*.

At the same time, a number of theatres staged works of collective creation. Among those were: *Manjar de los Dioses* by the La Noche en Vela group at El Galpón del Abasto, under the direction of Paco Giménez; *Pater dixit* at the I.F.T, directed by Pompeyo Audivert; and *Cercano oriente* at the Centro Cultural Ricardo Rojas, directed by Omar Fantini. In addition there were productions noteworthy for their innovative use of the notion of theatre, such as *Historia secreta* by Silvia Copello at the Del Pasillo, which produced a "noticiero histórico musical" that incorporated 87 unpublished news items, and *Desfile argentino* (at the Fundación Banco Patricios), a multimedia

performance examining the icons of national identity and composed of texts by Jorge Luis Borges, Arturo Jauretche, and Leopoldo Marechal.

Obviously, I was able to see only a relatively small portion of the works being performed. With the exception of *Máquina Hamlet* and *Preferiría no hacerlo*, I focused on works by Argentine authors. Significantly, although the fifteen plays I saw were very different (as might be expected), many of them had interesting points in common, and, I felt, all were artistically valid if indeed for disparate reasons. In the coming pages I shall only touch on some of the highlights.

Martha Stutz, written by Javier Daulte and directed by Diego Kogan at the San Martín, was for me unquestionably the outstanding work of those I saw. It uses the 1938 disappearance of a nine-year-old girl in Córdoba as a springboard to explore a number of themes. In some sense it is a detective story in which the main action revolves around an investigation into the question of "who done it." Yet, that question, to which there is no answer, leads to a number of other unanswerable questions, reminiscent of recent Argentine history. As the author states in the program, Martha's story is told by others, by strangers who never knew or even saw her. In the play those strangers include a journalist who has carefully studied the case, but who has not lived it and whose knowledge is therefore a verbal rendition (re-production) based on the words of others (already reproduction). How, then, are we to ferret out the truth? Furthermore, the lack of a body (Martha's body has "disappeared") leaves open the question of whether or not a crime has even been committed. Without the "cuerpo del delito" (in all senses of the term), how can we be sure there has been a crime? What does that word mean without a body? And, by implication, what does any word or name mean once it is "disembodied" or distanced from its signified? Dramatizing this point, one of the characters (López Zabala) is played by more than one actor, thereby visually underscoring the distance between various versions of events, various perspectives. Those perspectives are so diverse that they evoke non-identical referents. The same name or signifier seems to refer to different "people" or bodies, as it were.

By setting the play in a courtroom ambience, Daulte foregrounds the repeatable nature of the "crime" as he emphasizes the theme of language. The main character, El Conductor, a type of judge, seeks the truth via the testimony (words) of the characters. Each character re-enacts the events, or rather someone's version of the events (what someone said happened) in a gesture that again undermines any hope for re-presenting, re-producing truth or finding a simple answer. At times we go back over the same information,

even the same speeches, all to end up circularly where we began – not knowing, trapped in a labyrinth of words. The play concludes that all are guilty, for acting or for not acting – doubtlessly in both senses of the word. Yet, perhaps the most clever and symbolic moment of the play comes at “intermission,” which ironically but revealingly is not an intermission: none of the characters exits and none of the audience leaves their seats. On the contrary, the play goes on, again suggesting the arbitrariness of the signifier as well as the similarities between theatre and what we think of as non-theatre. Where does one end and the other begin? Thus, when El Conductor calls for a recess, the characters embark on an Alice in Wonderland style tea, in which some of the characters fall asleep while El Conductor pours tea into a bottomless cup, and Alice (Martha) talks about the absurdity of language and names, particularly the absurdity of trying to give things a label.

The season also embraced other young playwrights working in an experimental mode, such as Daniel Veronese and Alejandro Tantanián. I was able to see the former's *equivoca fuga de señorita apretando un pañuelo de encaje sobre su pecho* and the latter's *Un cuento alemán*. Directed by Tantanián himself, *Un cuento alemán* plays on and contests the traditional dichotomy between narration and representation. The two characters, Narrador 1 and Narrador 2, narrate and/or represent the “desencuentro” between German poets Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843) and Wilhelm Waiblinger (1804-1830). The narrative is little more than a vocalization of the words of the poets and the settings of those words. The represented actions or gestures are overtly presented as fictional, the possible (an artistic rendition of what might have been), since while we have the words of the poets, we have little else. In this respect, the play undermines the “realistic deceit” implicitly embodied in the stage presence of the actors. Echoing Daulte's *Martha Stutz*, in this play the actors may be bodily present, but they are shown to be mere renditions of words. Significantly, too, the words (which announce the setting and stage directions) are often contradicted by the actions, leaving us to question the traditional hierarchy between actions and words, representation and narration, and dramatizing that what we take for representation (that is, what we see on the stage) is also based on words (stage directions). This is a drama very conscious of itself and its place as the two characters speak yet avoid addressing each other; they are each other's interlocutors yet the words are aimed at an absence, and thus emphasize the implicit absence of a singular addressee in any theatrical work. At times, the two actors remain silent as the audience listens to a voice in off. At still others, the words of the characters are either inaudible to begin with or drowned out by the roar of a train. One

of the play's central metaphors is borrowed from the figure of Phaëthon, son of the sun god, who engineered his own demise by trying to imitate his father.

The same theatre, El Callejón de los Deseos (under the auspices of the Teatro General San Martín), was also the home of El Periférico de Objetos and their production of *Máquina Hamlet*, directed by Daniel Veronese, Emilio García Wehbi, and Ana Alvarado, and in which Tantanián also acted. El Periférico de Objetos is to be congratulated for their outstanding production, in which many of the characters are "played by" various sized puppets, but puppets overtly handled and worked by the actors/manipulators. In the program, Veronese declares, "El Periférico ejerce el teatro para hacer visible aquello que, culturalmente, de ninguna forma y bajo ningún pretexto puede serlo," a goal they have unquestionably met in this production.

Veronese's own *equivoca fuga..* (produced, under the direction of Lorenzo Quinteros, at El Doble, a new theatre in Villa Crespo) also embraced the innovative and the unusual. The young señorita of the title, who has abandoned the family home, never appears on stage. Like his colleagues, Tantanián and Daulte, Veronese focuses on the absence, on the words (mostly irrelevant) that ensue to fill up or distract from that absence. Here the main actants are several letters. The play opens as the mother pleads with the father to read again (and again and again) the letter the young woman has left for her parents, a letter which announces, but does not explain, her departure. The letter, in some sense a synecdoche for the play as a whole, is composed of language that explains little or nothing and is notable more for what it does not tell us – for its omissions and for the irrelevance or meaninglessness of what it does say. Similarly, the title, which defies theatrical tradition by being excessively long, either communicates what we do not need to know, such as the fact that the señorita disappeared clutching a lace handkerchief to her breast (words contradicted by the photograph on the cover of the program), or presents as fact what is questionable or open to interpretation (that her departure was an escape, and at that an erroneous or ambiguous one). Two other characters enter the stage (the family home), both of whom have also received equally vague letters. Nonetheless, all of the characters impose meaning on the letters, making them signify what they would have them signify (as doubtlessly we the audience do with the play itself). In this way, the drama highlights the importance of the addressee in the process of communication and again, like the Tantanián play, underlines the question of the theatrical interlocutor/addressee. The arrival of the mailman leads to the question of whether the letters have in fact gone to their proper addressees. When that mailman apparently steals the señorita's clothes (makes "disappear"

the few remaining artifacts that might attest to her existence in time and space), we are left to ponder the difficulty of ever understanding or knowing the truth (as in *Martha Stutz*) and/or the possibility that the señorita never existed outside of her relationships with her parents, friend, boyfriend and/or their words or imaginations. The play ends as everyone except the parents exit (promising to return), and the latter lock the door, metaphorically forestalling further intervention from the outside.

The same theatre (El Doble) also staged an interesting production of Pavlovsky's *El cardenal*, directed by Mariano Monsalvo. Also readily classifiable as theatre of metaphor, *El cardenal*, is a study of power and the interchangeability of victim and victimizer as it raises the question of the interplay between imitator and imitated. The "enanos," excellently performed by two actresses, would replace the tyrant, substitute his position of power for their debased position, but little would change. The "actors" would be different, but the roles and the structures would remain essentially unaltered. In many ways, the play might be viewed as a dramatization of the theories of Foucault, juxtaposed with those of Judith Butler. Echoing Foucault, the Cardinal states that power is exercised more than possessed, and thus implies that it changes hands easily. At the same time the "enanos" would seem to embody performativity (the reiterative and citational practices by which discourse produces the effects it names) as theorized by Butler. Before we leave our discussion of performances at smaller theatres, located outside of central Buenos Aires, mention should be made of the production of Gambaro's *Los pies descalzos*. Directed by Guillermo Ghío, with just three actresses (Liliana Moreno, Andrea Vidondo, and Mirta Katz), the three one-act plays brought theatre to the people in a new way – the plays were performed in a small, neighborhood restaurant (Pan y Teatro) that featured Argentine wines and light fare to accompany the performance. Although the night I attended, most of the patrons seemed more interested in the food than in the performance, I found the combination engaging and promising.

Returning to central Buenos Aires's more established and better supported theatres, the theatre patron found another newcomer to the Argentine stage in Lucía Laragione, whose first play, *Cocinando con Elisa*, was staged at the Teatro del Pueblo (under the auspices of the Teatro General San Martín) and directed by Villanueva Cosse. Winner of the 1994 Premio María Teresa León, awarded by the Asociación de Directores de Escena de España, the drama was an impressive box-office success. The two-character play takes place in the kitchen of a wealthy country estate and stages the interaction between the cook, a presumptuous middle-aged woman, and her new assistant, a young, uneducated country girl (Elisa), who is pregnant. In

this unsettling play, protagonized by Norma Pons, the kitchen and the preparation of food function as metaphors of life (and death). The seemingly elegant French cook, Nicole, who proves to be neither elegant nor French, is to train Elisa in the intricacies of the kitchen so that she (Nicole) can go on vacation. From the beginning the play emphasizes the dichotomy between the ostensible elegance and refinement of Nicole and her brutal readiness to butcher animals mercilessly to turn them into edible delicacies. Still, Nicole's brutality at the beginning does not quite prepare us for the end. In the gruesome final scene we discover that she has killed Elisa. It is not completely clear if she has killed her to rid the world of the "mugre" to which she has several times made reference, to be able to keep her baby, or because the young woman was abandoning the life style the cook had tried to teach and impose on her. In that final scene, Nicole's dress is covered with blood, and she gently rocks the baby, again emphasizing the contrast between the brutality she has just exercised and the tenderness with which she treats the baby (the delicacy that is in some sense the product of her ruthlessness). The play brings to mind scenes from Echeverría's "El matadero," and repeatedly underscores our human need to exercise dominance and ascendancy over others. In this case (as perhaps in most) that need is exacerbated by the fact that Nicole herself, the superior being in the kitchen, not only needs the girl to reconfirm that supremacy, but is in turn subject to the dominance of the masters with whom she identifies and whose position of power she would imitate.

While one might argue that history in some form provides the implicit basis for many of the plays discussed here, it is only *En la jabonería de Vieytes* (staged in the Teatro Cervantes) that overtly identifies and reconsiders a specific moment in Argentine history – 1810, the eve of May Revolution and the overthrow of Spanish control. Authors Gonzalo Demaría and Helena Trittek, and directors, Trittek and Paco Giménez, proffer an alternative to the traditional textbook view of that revolution, however, by focusing on the microcosm of the soap factory. As a result the venerable, historical moment is given a somewhat comic twist and reduced to the petty foibles of ostensibly unheroic individuals. That comedy is then countered with the brutality (albeit heroism in some sense) of the murder with which the play ends. At the same time, the work subtly underscores the interplay among the three elements of the Argentine culture of that historical moment (the European, the colonial, and the black slave cultures), their conflicts and cooperation, their rejection and paradoxical imitation of each other. As the play suggests, each of the sub-cultures wants to change the status quo and overthrow the dominance of the other, but each would imitate the other as it places itself in control. Thus, echoing several of the productions discussed above, in this play the revolution

would do (and perhaps did do) little to change the structures of power even though the power itself may change hands.

The Teatro Cervantes also provided the stage for *El dragón de fuego*, by Roma Mahieu, directed by Julio Ordano. This two-character play centers on a brother and a sister and their conflicting needs. A show girl who dreams of being a famous actress, Eva performs in a sordid cabaret and prostitutes herself in order to support her mentally retarded brother, Angel. He performs as a clown during the intermissions of her show. Wanting to be her, imitating her, and often failing to comprehend their separateness, his greatest fear is her abandonment. In his mind, he will cease to exist without her. The poignant drama ends as he, apparently far wiser than his mental retardation would suggest, tells the tale of the fire dragon, who much to his anguish, burned and destroyed everything with which he came into contact. So that he would not continue to hurt those he loved, the dragon eventually learned to hold his fire inside, and as a result destroyed himself. As he finishes his tale, Angel dies, and Eva exits to her "new" life. That life, however, does not promise to be much better than the old one, since in many ways her existence is as dependent on Angel as his on her. Indeed, as Angel realized, one is an extension of the other, and each needs the other to provide a mirror in which to find the self.

Finally, this report would not be complete without a few words about the "new" project that promises to impact the future of Argentine theatre: Teatro Nuestro, being linked, in publicity at least, to the Teatro Abierto of the early 1980s. Apparently the brain child of the recently deceased actor, Carlos Carella, the project is the collaboration of a number of actors (Lito Cruz, María Rosa Gallo, Juan Carlos Gené, Ulises Dumont, Cipe Lincovsky, Pepe Soriano, Fabián Vena, and Alicia Zanca), directors (Roberto Castro, Rubens Correa, Javier Margulis, and José María Paolantonio), and writers (Roberto Cossa, Carlos Gorostiza, and Mauricio Kartún). The opening cycle of works is composed of Gorostiza's *A propósito del tiempo*, Cossa's *Años difíciles*, and Kartún's *Desde la lona*. The three plays, all written especially for this project, are presented in sequence at that theatre, allowing the spectator to see one, two, or all three on the same day.

Thus, our quick tour of the Buenos Aires theatre scene during the summer of 1997 ends where it began, in admiration for the quantity, variety, quality, and innovation that were found in these productions and that promise to characterize those of the future.

Notes

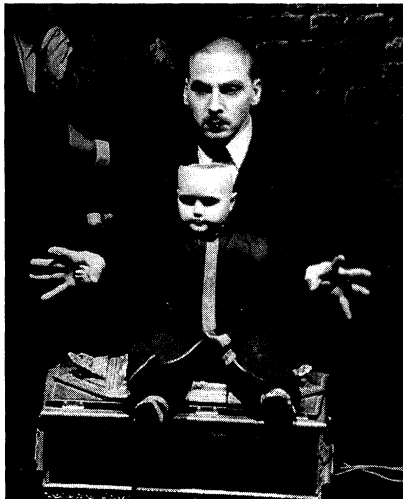
1. My omissions here are admittedly arbitrary and arguable, intended not as an indication of quality but rather simply to narrow down our field of study and definition. I would like to note, however, that there seemed to be significant support for theatre in education. For example, the Abanico Cultural, offered “teatro interactivo para el alumnado,” Monday through Friday mornings, including *Jettatore*, *Locos de verano*, *Prohibido suicidarse en primavera*, and *La tercera palabra*. Sponsored by the Ministerio de Cultura y Educación and coordinated by R. Aldemar, the Abecedario, the Alejandro Casona, the De Piedras, and the Victorial offered various combinations of the following: *El conventillo de la Paloma*, *Jettatore*, *Rosaura a las diez*, *La nona*, *El Lazarillo de Tormes*, *La dama del alba*, *La barca sin pescador*, *Prohibido suicidarse en primavera*, *Romeo y Julieta*, *Papá querido*, *Las de barranco*, *La casa de Bernarda Alba*, *Bodas de sangre*, *Una viuda difícil*, *M’Hijo el doctor*, *Los árboles mueren de pie*, *La zapatera prodigiosa*, *El médico a palos*, *El capitán Veneno*, and *El caballero de las espuelas de oro*. Similarly, under the sponsorship of the Secretaría de Cultura de la Nación and the general direction of A. Di Stéfano, the Colonial and the Del Globo presented a Ciclo de teatro clásico, including *Una viuda difícil*, *La barca sin pescador*, *El conventillo de la Paloma*, *M’Hijo el doctor*, *Antígona Vélez*, *El acompañamiento*, *Los árboles mueren de pie*, *Bodas de sangre*, *Fuenteovejuna*, *Jettatore*, and *Las de barranco*.

2. By “realistic deceit” I refer to the tendency of realism in any of the genres to efface the controlling being that organizes the spectacle, what we take for “reality.”

3. Obviously, in a theatrical work the addressee of any articulation is multiple: the overt addressee (the other character to whom the words are addressed) and the implicit one (the audience who is “eavesdropping” as it were on the conversation among the characters, or the character’s monologue).

4. In that photograph the woman holds the lace handkerchief over her face.

5. Although not included in the body of this article, note should be made of theatrical performances brought into the homes of the citizens of Buenos Aires, via the radio. Radio Nacional Buenos Aires airs a reading of a classical play each week (performed by professional actors and directed by Nora Massi). During my stay in Buenos Aires I was fortunate enough to attend a rehearsal of *La casa de Bernarda Alba* and was most impressed with the quality of the reading.



Heiner Müller’s *Máquina Hamlet*.

Photo: Magdalena Viggiani