

## Festival Internacional de Buenos Aires

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During the first weeks of October 1997, in the midst of *primavera porteña*, the City of Buenos Aires hosted its first international festival of theatre, music, dance, and the visual arts. From October 2 to 12, the city exploded with performances by groups from Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas. In addition to ticketed events in 36 of the Argentinean capital's theatres, there were free performances in subway trains and stations, on the streets and even the buses, and in parks and plazas. Special events were also held, including a week-long series of *encuentros* with visiting and local playwrights, as well as meetings of local and invited directors and producers. An open discussion around the theme of "la mujer frente al hecho creativo" attracted international women performers as well as such national figures as Mapuche actress Luisa Calcumil. The presentation of the second collection of plays by Caraja-jí brought to national and international attention the work of some of Argentina's most interesting young authors. The visual arts were represented: a multimedia video-dance festival; a festival of video and electronic arts; and screenings of documentaries (such as Ariane Mnouchkine's *Au soleil même la nuit*). The festival closed on a high note when, during the final weekend, Corrientes Street was closed to traffic and taken over by a parade of neighborhood *murgas*, the "operama" *Aída*, and some 6,000 spectators.

Even for one of the world's greatest theatre-going cities, the amount of cultural activity was overwhelming. Invited participants included dance and theatre groups from Belgium (*Última Vez*), Italy (Teatridditalia Elfo-Porta Romana), Germany (the Berliner Ensemble), France (Centre Choréographique National de Nantes and the Théâtre National de Bretagne), Slovenia (Primorsko Dramsko Gledalisce), Tunisia (El Teatro), Poland (Teatr Biuro Podrozy), England (Volcano Theatre), Israel (Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company), Japan (Kim Itoh and the Glorious Future), and the United States (Eiko & Koma).

Three musical events generated the greatest advance interest: the Kronos Quartet from the United States; Hanna Schygulla (known to most for her work

in Rainer Werner Fassbinder's films), who gave a one-woman concert accompanied on the piano by the composer Jean-Marie Sénia; and the Italian actress-singer Milva, performing "un nuevo Brecht," in a staging by Giorgio Strehler (in addition to giving a free outdoor concert, performing tangos by Astor Piazzolla).

The theatre highlight of the festival was the Berliner Ensemble's staging of Bertolt Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*. Not only was the production historically significant, being the last play directed by the late Heiner Müller, it was a truly remarkable evening of theatre, topped by the outstanding performance of Martin Wuttke in the title role and the response of an audience that detected in Brecht's story of Chicago gangsters not only Hitlerian parallels but also traces of their country's official response to the assassination of Argentinean photojournalist José Luis Cabezas. The National Theatre of Brittany received the most mixed reactions for its adaptation of Kafka's *The Penal Colony*, a production heavy on narration and set-pieces (including a gigantic, moving ship) but light on action. Hailed by some for its breathtaking set design and risky slow-moving pace, the production also had many critics, witnessed in the almost constant trickling out of spectators that began soon after the curtain rose and continued through the performance's non-ending, as actors-cum-tropical creatures watched the audience leave.

Two theatre groups represented Spain: Sémola Theatre (founded in 1978 and working in the vein of its Catalonian contemporaries) contributed *Híbrid*, a theatre-of-images tragic-ironic investigation of human interrelationships, scenographically unified by the element of water. The production suffered from being staged in the traditional Teatro de la Ribera instead of a more open, fluid space. From the Basque Countries, UR brought its visually-arresting version of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

There was a definite, if not complete, Latin American theatre presence at the festival. El Teatro de los Andes, from Bolivia, performed *Las abarcas del tiempo*, in which one man's trip through "la tierra de los muertos" provides a journey through Bolivian history. Colombian choreographer/dancer Alvaro Restrepo performed *Rebis*, a one-man dance-meditation on Federico García Lorca's artistic and sexual androgyny. Uruguay was represented by La Caballeriza, with their staging of the Argentinean playwright Alejandro Tantantián's *Juegos de damas crueles*. Finally, Brazilian groups contributed two award-winning productions: Camilo de Lélis's staging of Tankred Dorst's *O estranho sr. Paulo* and Rubens Rusche's version of Samuel Beckett's *Fim de jôgo*.

One could certainly chide the Festival organizers for excluding Caribbean, Central American, Chilean and Mexican performers from their program; however, they should be commended for their inclusiveness regarding Argentinean representation, with an offering of more than thirty national productions. In a country where the “interior” often seems more removed culturally than geographically from the capital city, the inclusion of groups from outside Buenos Aires furthers Teatro Abierto’s early 1980s attempt to shorten the cultural distance. Buenos Aires audiences enjoyed their first opportunity in many years to see Paco Giménez’s Córdoba-based group, La Cochera, which brought two shows: *Enfermos del culo* and the interactive cabaret, *Polvo de ladrillos*. In addition to Los Delincuentes de la Cochera, the Río Negro group Teatro de Las Dos Lunas presented *La luz pendular*, a Chekhovian-inspired collective creation under the direction of José Luis Valenzuela. Santa Fe sent two theatre companies: the Compañía Punto T with *Algo de rojo en el gris*, based on fragments of Büchner’s *Woyzeck*, and Equipo de Teatro Llanura with the authors Rafael Bruza and Jorge Ricci reprising their roles as the two grotesquely absurd *tangueros* in *El clásico binomio*, directed by well-known playwright Mauricio Kartún.

Buenos Aires performers also made their presence felt. In the underground theatre of one of the city’s newest clubs (Morocco), Susana Torres Molina premiered her latest work, *Paraísos perdidos*, a bittersweet spectacle constructed on the “mythology of love.” Daniel Veronese and his Grupo Teatro Doméstico staged *El líquido táctil*. Playwright, director, and actor Juan Carlos Gené restaged the *criollo* classic, *Un guapo del 900*, by Samuel Eichelbaum. The jazz wind quartet, Grupo Cuatro Vientos, presented *Alma de saxofón* while Ana María Stekelman’s Compañía Tangokinesis staged an evening of hybrid dance, *Tango y fuga*, featuring the classical ballerina Eleonora Cassano.

As if all this performance activity were not enough (and certainly beyond this reviewer’s ability to take in entirely), there was a series of *homenajes a la trayectoria*, performances by groups whose work the Festival believed to constitute, in the words of critic Jorge Dubatti, “capítulos fundamentales en la historia de la Argentina.” Audiences had the opportunity to see the work of Susana Tambutti and Margarita Bali’s Nucleodanza (founded in 1974), as well as performances by key theatre groups born during mid-1980s “redemocratization”: Diablolomundo (*El álbum de la familia sepia*), Grupo Catalinas Sur (*Venimos de muy lejos*), La Banda de la Risa (*Arlequino* and *El Fausto, o Rajemos que viene el Diablo*), La Pista 4 (*La desgracia: Truco gallo por turno*), Los Macocos (*Ayer, hoy y Macocos*), and El Periférico de Objetos (*Máquina Hamlet*).

There remains to account for only one more group of performers, the city of Buenos Aires itself. The festival was everywhere, on the television, in the newspapers, on posters, banners and flyers, in the streets, on the *subtes* and the *colectivos*. And the city responded. Audience response to some of the events was truly overwhelming. Tickets sold out immediately; performances invariably started 20 to 30 minutes late as dozens of theatre students, armed with free passes, waited to take unclaimed seats. The ushers at the usually very staid Colón Theatre were unprepared for the spectators' rock-star treatment of the Kronos Quartet. A story circulated that one patron, frustrated at not being able to get into the sold-out Berliner Ensemble's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* at the General San Martín Municipal Theatre, slapped a bewildered box-office saleswoman.

In fact, the spectators' reactions to some of the events were of the sort I have witnessed only at rock concerts or soccer matches. The Berliner actors became visibly moved by the 15 minute ovation they received from an audience that found the only way to express its admiration was in the form of a *coro de cancha*. During performances of the Tunisian *Femtella*, spectators became participants as the actors maintained a silent, ghostly family portrait, barely changing positions during the entire performance. The dialogue was provided by the largely *porteño* audience who engaged first in catcalls directed to the stage and then in debates and even quarrels with their fellow spectators. Such festival-going experiences generated a true "fervor de Buenos Aires."

It is hard to believe that this was Buenos Aires's first international festival. The Secretariat of Culture of the Government of Buenos Aires together with the festival organizers, Javier Grosman and Darío Lopérfido and their staff, are to be commended for successfully inaugurating what many hope will become a biannual event. As with any festival (and especially with an initial attempt), there are areas that warrant improvement. The festival made available free passes to theatre students – an excellent idea but one that was the source of much confusion and consistent delays in curtain times. More disturbing than the technical bugs, which will certainly be worked out in future festivals, were the precedents set in the selection of international groups invited and the restrictions placed on the national groups. Seven European countries were represented at the festival, but there were groups from only four Latin American countries, and many of the countries not represented have groups that enjoy a high international profile. Why were there no theatre groups from, for example, Cuba? or Mexico? Colombia? Chile? In general, among the international groups, there was very little of what we might call "experimental" theatre, dance and music. One local critic complained that the majority of the dance productions

were either butoh or gymnastics-inspired. Where was post-expressionistic dance?, she asked. While I applaud the Festival for bringing such groups as the Berliner Ensemble to Buenos Aires, I would welcome a broader representation, both geographically and aesthetically, with more groups invited from the Americas, Asia, and Africa.

National groups were required to premiere “new” works. The only reprised pieces were those featured in the *homenaje* series. This requirement limited Argentinean theatre groups in the national and international arenas; their new, untried works were being compared to the international groups’ polished productions, many of them veterans of multiple-year performances. This certainly diminished the national performers’ opportunity to be considered on a par with the international groups. As a longtime Buenos Aires theatregoer, I can attest that many of these groups easily hold their own on the international scale, and they should be given every opportunity to do so. Finally, the Festival took place at the same time as another festival, *Mujeres en Escena*, at which the groups from Norway, Cuba (Teatro Obstáculo), Peru (Grupo Yuyachkani), Colombia/Spain (La Máscara/Bekereke), and Spain (La Fanfarra) performed. Although this festival was billed as a “parallel” event to the Municipal festival (and indeed shared at least one encounter, “La mujer frente al hecho teatral”), it seemed a shame for two festivals to be competing for spectators.

Such considerations notwithstanding, this was an excellent festival. Judging from the audience response, the enthusiasm and dedication of the organizers, the number and overall high quality and originality of the artistic contributions, and the support of the city of Buenos Aires, this reviewer eagerly anticipates the next Festival Internacional de Buenos Aires.

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