

The Argentine Theatre and the Problem of National Identity: A Critical Survey

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One of the basic problems of modern Argentine culture and society is the question of national identity. It has been commented upon and analyzed to an almost obsessive extent by social observers, creative writers and literary critics.¹ The problem could be described as an uncomfortable awareness among Argentine intellectuals of a lack of definition in their social structure, an absence of an organic community spirit with which they can identify. Naturally, to prove the *objective* existence or non-existence of a national identity is a very difficult and perhaps impossible task. There are, of course, certain social factors which underlie this sense of rootlessness: the waves of Italian and Spanish immigrants at the turn of the century and the consequent problems of language and cultural integration, the expansion of the capital and the decline of the interior, the phenomenon of *caudillismo* which has inhibited the growth of any deep-rooted social institutions and political maturity, the political saturation of public life which has blunted the individual's sense of reality. What concerns us here, however, is the effect rather than the cause, the existence of the subjective preoccupation, the collective psychological phenomenon which has acted and still acts as a powerful conditioning force on Argentine literature. The problem for the creative writer has been summed up by H. A. Murena as follows:

Escribir exige bajo estos cielos un esfuerzo sobrehumano. Quiero decir que la falta de comunidad incide también en la tarea del escritor. Igual que en otras actividades. Y más, porque el escritor debe proceder constantemente con el punto de referencia que es el sentimiento de comunidad. Al no existir éste, el escritor trabaja a tientas y en el vacío. Habla y le responde el silencio.²

This is a situation which presents special problems for the man who writes for the theatre. For unless a dramatist can in some way sense the collective spirit

of his time and environment, his work is unlikely to survive. When that collective spirit is lacking he feels disoriented. He can neither conform nor rebel, since he is not sure what there is to conform to or rebel against. The social picture that confronts the Argentine dramatist seems to defy any kind of synthesis and this imposes certain pressures on him. The one thing he cannot do is take his social context for granted and write with a sense of freedom. A well-meaning public urges him to write "national" works. Critics require him to write works which are both "national" and "universal." The writer can submit to these pressures or reject them, but in either case his action tends to be self-conscious. In such circumstances it is difficult for the writer to discover himself and his relationship to society. He is inhibited, constantly walking a tightrope between excessive localism and vague generalities.

The preoccupation with national identity in the Argentine theatre can be traced back to the declaration of Independence in 1810 and even before that. Flushed with the triumph of repelling the English invader in 1806 and breaking away from Spanish rule four years later, Argentina began to feel the need for a national theatre to express the newly emancipated community. From the start of its history, Argentine theatre was bound up with political and social questions. Far from being a spontaneous expression, the theatre was made into the instrument for inculcating a national spirit. The following quotation from the great nineteenth-century statesman and writer, Juan Bautista Alberdi, is a categorical affirmation of this attitude:

El teatro actual es llamado al desempeño de un deber austero. . . . Instrumento admirable de propaganda y de iniciación popular, debe agitar en su seno todas las cuestiones de la época y presentar . . . las soluciones más conformes a las opiniones, a los intereses, a las necesidades más generales, más completas de la sociedad.³

Today, a century and a half after independence, this militant, nationalistic conception of the theatre has disappeared. The pioneering enthusiasm has gone but the only thing that could have taken its place—an organic community spirit—has failed to emerge. And it has failed to emerge partly because of the country's inbuilt political instability and partly because of the problems created by the immigrants. Most Argentine dramatists write in the cultural climate of the capital, for the public of the capital, which has more cultural affinity with Europe than with the Interior. He therefore feels himself torn (much more so than the writer of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) between his spiritual affinity with Europe on the one hand and the uneasy awareness that he is a citizen of the New World—with its Indian and *criollo* heritage—on the other.

In the theatre of the last thirty years or so three main tendencies can be detected, all to some extent determined by this dilemma. It should be borne in mind that these are not rigorous divisions, that they do not constitute "schools" or "movements" and the characteristics of two or more of these tendencies may overlap in any given author. In view of the absence of a body of critical opinion on the subject, the categories can only be regarded at best as tentative.

The Universalist Attitude

The peculiar structure and problems of Argentine society have polarized those who have opted for a cosmopolitan or universalist solution of "eternal human values" and those who are determined to forge a "genuinely" national style or expression. Those who can find no stimulus in the home environment have tended to withdraw into a theatre of psychological analysis or into one of universal abstractions, based vaguely on the European tradition. In both cases the social and historical realities of Argentina are either shunned or intellectualized beyond recognition. The greatest exponent of the universalist attitude outside the field of drama is Jorge Luis Borges:

¿Cuál es la tradición argentina? (he asks) Creo que nuestra tradición es Europa, y creo que tenemos derecho a esa tradición. No debemos temer, debemos pensar que nuestro patrimonio es el universo.⁴

A similar attitude can be seen implicit in the plays of Atilio Betti, Julio Imbert, Omar del Carlo and Alberto de Zavalía. The inspiration for their work is generally literary, the themes abstract and the language a purist, stiff-necked Castilian. Language, setting and characterization are carefully refined of any element that might encourage a local or national interpretation. We are constantly reminded, for instance, that the action could take place "anywhere and at any time" or that it evolves "en el alma de los personajes." We are confronted with abstract metaphysical, ethical or psychological problems divorced from any real living context.

Julio Imbert is perhaps the most eclectic in his choice of rootlessly abstract themes. He derives them from classical mythology (he has written a version of Electra), morality plays (*El diente*) and the Bible (*Los navegantes del Génesis* is about original sin in Noah's ark!). There is of course no reason why a writer should not be eclectic in his subject matter, but in Imbert's case all the diverse problems he presents add up to no coherent artistic personality. He seems to *look for* themes rather than find them. His plays are born from abstract concepts rather than from intuitions into experience. A sentence from his preface to *El diente* is particularly revealing in this respect:

La penosa impresión que me produce la enemistad del hombre y, sobre todo, la falta de solidaridad humana—especialmente en momentos en que la desgracia debería, por razones obvias, unir y hermanar—son los motivos que me han impulsado a escribir *El diente*.⁵

The play may be about lack of human solidarity but it is certainly not about men in a prison cell. The stage fiction is a lifeless corpse, swamped by tracts of predigested ideology.

The works of Omar del Carlo are shaped not so much by abstract intellectualism as by the moral values of Catholicism. (He and Zavalía form the old guard of the *teatro católico*.) He may use concrete historical settings and characters—*El jardín de ceniza* (1955)⁶ is set in San Isidro where the old criollo oligarchy retired to spend its declining years—but they are subordinated to religious and moral categories. What matters in *El jardín de ceniza* is not so much the decline

of the ruling caste, exemplified in the character of Gabriela Ramos de Moncada, as the idea that the sin of pride leads to isolation and death. Similarly in Zavallá's *El límite* (1958) abstraction devitalizes a perfectly concrete historical episode in the Unitarian-Federalist war. Everything—style and characterization—conspires to remind us that the real theme is a struggle between tyranny and the desire for freedom. Each is pushed to its human limit: the revolutionary heroine, Fortunata, is driven to the limit of sacrificing her family; Oribe, the local *caudillo*, is pushed to the limit of executing a woman. The author's determination to "purify" his work of "distracting particularities" gives it an air of unrelaxed solemnity, as if it were afraid to smile in the wrong places.

Of all the dramatists who avoid commitment to the national environment, Atilio Betti is the most interesting. When he was asked to say what influence the social situation of his country had upon his work, his reply was categorical:

En cuanto a si la realidad o actualidad nacional grava en mi obra, diré que no. Escribo para mí, en primer término. No por egoísmo, sino porque creyendo en la persona como sustancia intransferible, colaboro hasta donde puedo en la afirmación de mi esencialidad.⁷

For Betti theatre is a kind of spiritual striptease: "Exponerse ante los otros con la alegría que da el valor, para que ellos, por afecto o por repulsión, se acerquen al hombre por el hombre."⁸

His characteristic themes are the conflicts of sensual and spiritual drives in his own make-up, often stylized in the form of allegorical fables. His first play, *Farsa del corazón* (1953), establishes the style and line he was to develop. It is an allegorical fable which explores the theme of love in its dual aspect of self-indulgent sensuality and compassion. *Francisco Bernadone* (1954), based on the life of St Francis of Assisi, again reveals a tormented preoccupation with love and union with one's fellow men. The whole action centers around the Saint's struggle to achieve mutual love with other men on a basis of equality and to avoid the awe and reverence accorded to saintliness ('no me condenéis al cielo!'). Two short pieces produced in 1956, *El juego de la virtud* and *El buen glotón*, follow the allegorical pattern of his first play. In both there is an opposition of indulgence of the vital instincts and the restrictions of conscience. It sounds like moralizing but in fact is not. Betti is more concerned with giving artistic form to paradoxes and conflicting emotions than with self-justification or self-abasement. His tormented dialogues may lack visual impact but offer the interest of a *debate*. They do not give us the doubtful satisfaction of a solution or of telling us what we should think. Betti's theatre is entirely divorced from his surroundings, but it is rooted in his own personality. A powerful strain of sensuality gives it a distinctive personal flavor which prevents his plays from falling into the somewhat anemic generalities of Imbert or Zavallá.

The Theatre of Myth and Legend

The natural counterpoise to the abstractions of the universalists was the tendency to isolate the "purely American" aspects of the Argentine scene and present them as a synthesis of the country's reality. Some dramatists, therefore, have tried

to seek out representative images of their country in the semi-legendary figures and episodes of national history and the urban folklore of Buenos Aires. The traditional image of the *gaucho*, the *criollo* and the Pampa, the tango and the environment which gave it birth, the *conventillo* or *arrabal*, have all become part of the collective heritage and mythology of the Argentine people. These themes naturally exerted a powerful attraction on certain authors since they conveyed a strong impression of "character" and "distinctive personality." They also seemed to provide a ready-made basis for a national and popular theatre.

According to Américo Castro in *La peculiaridad lingüística rioplatense*, the rise of gaucho literature and the mystique surrounding the gaucho hero was, even in its origins, largely the result of a self-conscious attempt to create a national "image."⁹ *Tipismo* and local color were made to pass for genuinely national and popular expression. Whether or not one agrees with this political interpretation of the origins of the gaucho myth, the continued exploitation of these themes into the 1940's and 50's does seem a little anachronistic and contrived. The myth of the *criollo*, the *gaucho* and the pampa and the mystique of the tango both correspond to specific periods of Argentine development: Independence and the immigration period at the beginning of the century. They are no longer adequate to express the more complex social malaise that has arisen since about 1940.

The plays of Rodolfo Kusch constitute the clearest attempt to base a national theatre on the "mythification" of aspects of rural and urban folklore. Kusch came to the theatre with extremely strong views about its social mission, based on academic research into South American sociology. In his preface to *Tango*, he maintains that Argentine letters have been dominated by a Europeanized middle class mainly inhabiting the capital. The real people of America—the poor of the *arrabales*, the *mestizos* and Indians of the Interior—have been discreetly ignored. Argentine theatre, he claims, is a theatre without people. What exists is written by and for an urban bourgeoisie unwilling to soil its hands with the realities of the country.¹⁰

In *Tango* (1957) and *Credo Rante* (1958) Kusch takes as his subject the *arrabal*. He strips the setting of the false lyricism and conventional sentimentality that had become encrusted on its literary image as a result of the *sainete porteño*¹¹ and restores its authentic squalor. But the impression of crude realism is dispelled to a certain extent by a labored mystique which he attaches to the characters. By this I mean he imposes a fatalistic pattern on their lives which is intended to transcend the influence of mere social environment. The *arrabal* in Kusch's works is a place with its own lore, culture and irreversible destiny. In both these plays he dramatizes the tragedy of the *arrabalero* who is doomed to play out his destiny in isolation from the alien European culture and civilization represented in the capital. He either instinctively resists absorption into this alien world, like the *compadre* Maidana in *Tango*, or, like another character, Juan, fails to break away from his destiny despite his efforts to do so.

According to Raúl Castagnino in his book *Sociología del teatro argentino*, the popular success of the gaucho play *Juan Moreira* in 1884 marked the only period when the Argentine theatre achieved a genuinely national expression,

that is to say, when there was complete coordination of author, actor and public, and, more important, when the public was the people of all social levels. Kusch's *La leyenda de Juan Moreira* (1958) and *La muerte del Chaco* (not yet performed) are attempts to rediscover the lost link between the people and the theatre. They are designed not for a theatre but for a circus ring, where the original *Juan Moreira* was performed. The idea was to suggest by a large open stage in the round the spaciousness of the pampa. Both plays deal with folk-heroes and in both cases the popular conception of the hero takes precedence over historical accuracy. In *La leyenda de Juan Moreira* Kusch introduces the folkloric device of the *payador* (improviser in verse), who fills in narrative passages and comments on the action. The theme remains virtually the same as in the original: the *gaucho* forced into a life of crime by the ambitions of local political bosses and commercial exploitation. Kusch knew that he was being anachronistic but he was doing it deliberately to create a different public for the theatre: the urban proletariat and peasants of the Interior. Not surprisingly, his plays failed to stir the racial subconscious of the urban middle class before whom the works were presented.

The decline of the popular theatre is a universal phenomenon, the product of social development and capitalist society. Kusch seems to regard it as peculiar to Argentina. The problem of the Argentine theatre is different. If we accept that the theatre has become a middle-class minority art, the question of how to write for that minority still presents a problem in Argentina. And it is a problem which Kusch does not even attempt to tackle.

Another dramatist who has looked to the mythological past in order to create a collective theatre is Bernardo Canal Feijóo. Here the word "collective" should be emphasized as opposed to "national." His treatment of popular material consciously avoids any kind of mystique. He tries to trace the growth of myths in the collectivity rather than give mystical significance to the myth itself. His treatment of the popular hero is significantly different from that of Kusch and most gaucho literature. As an example of this we may take his earliest play—one of the most outstanding Argentine plays of the century—*Pasión y muerte de Silverio Leguizamón* (1940). The play synthesizes the pre-revolutionary spirit of the *criollos* in the period immediately before Independence. He sees the plight of the *criollo* as basically the consequence of commercial exploitation and as a conflict between town and country. Like the traditional gaucho *Juan Moreira*, Silverio Leguizamón has two alternatives: to be a slave or to be an outlaw, and he chooses the second. Yet unlike the traditional gaucho hero who fills the work with the force of his personality and his personal sense of valor, justice and honor, Silverio is not cast in the heroic mold. It is not the hero who creates his myth but the people. After his initial defiant gesture of defending his property against the King's forces, who come to evict him and take over his land, Silverio the man gradually fades into obscurity and Silverio the myth grows in the hearts and minds of the people. The essential theme of the play is contained in this dual process. The protagonist no longer belongs to himself; he becomes part of the *criollo* heritage. Silverio the individual is an anonymous hunted animal, fleeing from justice, struggling desperately to save his life, while his name and myth inflame the imagination of both his enemies and his own people.

In order to preserve the popular and collective spirit of the work, Canal Feijóo has deliberately avoided elaborating upon a second theme which is inherent in the situation. That is the psychological drama of his hero, the problem of his return, the confrontation of the man with his myth, with something that is no longer himself but an image created by the latent desire for freedom in the collectivity. This would undoubtedly have added psychological and dramatic density to the play, but it would have been another play.

Tupac Amaru, the hero of *Tungasuka* (1963), is another such character who has greatness thrust upon him. Canal Feijóo presents Tupac Amaru's ill-fated rebellion against the Spaniards as the end of one era and the beginning of another—the completion of the Indian destiny, their inevitable destruction and the dawn of American independence from the decaying Spanish empire. Tupac himself is depicted as a curiously undynamic leader, who is pressed by his followers and historical circumstances into the role of Inca. Like Leguizamón, he is a force created by those who believe in him. The real strength lies in the collectivity.

Clearly Canal Feijóo's interest is more in the mechanism of myth and legend and the *process* of collective lore than in exploiting their individual appeal or emotional capacity as a basis for a National Theatre. He should therefore be absolved from any charge of self-conscious exploitation of *tipismo*, referred to by Américo Castro.

Social Polemics on the Stage

The playwrights who sought to synthesize their visions of the country in revamped versions of the old Argentine myths were comparatively few and found little response in their audience. By far the strongest tendency of recent years has been towards some kind of social and ideological commitment. The political events of the thirty years leading up to the chaos of *Peronismo* inevitably produced a more politically oriented and polemical attitude in the creative writer. This is how Enrique Pezzone sums up the literary outlook of the mid-forties:

Rebelarse, dar pruebas de su rebelión, se impondrá como lema a nuestros escritores jóvenes: condenarán toda la literatura que no testimonie *nuestro afán de conocernos*, nuestra certeza de no ser o de ser falsamente: rechazarán moldes culturales heredados; enjuiciarán a los autores ya consagrados para indagar si responden a estas nuevas exigencias.¹²

The generation of playwrights that emerged after Perón was a generation of mainly leftist tendencies, passionately involved with the present, with live social issues. The writers of the generation—Carlos Gorostiza, Osvaldo Dragún, Andrés Lizarraga and Agustín Cuzzani—though different in style and approach, have at least one feature in common: their work is conditioned by a *political* view of society. Implicitly or explicitly, their plays defend a pre-established political ideology. They tend either to prejudge the issues, which makes them tendentious, or to become passionately involved, which frequently accounts for a lack of artistic distance from their subject and a failure to form a dispassionate synthesis of the material. In his "Notas sobre la crisis argentina" H. A. Murena

argues that the writers of this generation accepted the opportunity for political commitment with something approaching gratitude since it seemed to give shape to the amorphous social situation that confronted them. In other words, it fulfilled the writer's need to involve himself with and define his own vital context. Yet, Murena maintains, this too was perhaps only another form of escapism—not into vague generalities about life or into past mythology, but into *rationalization* or *schematization* which gives a specious coherence to a reality that is nebulous and intractable.

Any discussion of modern Argentine social drama must start with a reference to Carlos Gorostiza's play *El puente* (1949). Apart from its technical innovations, the play's importance lies in its searching analysis of Argentine social attitudes and avoids the cliché-ridden situations and concessions to local color of its immediate predecessor, the *sainete*. *El puente* is about social classes but dramatizes a *divorce* rather than a conflict. The two sets—a street and the interior of a middle-class home—correspond to two different social levels and two different outlooks on life. The street scenes show the lives of the working class in the form of a group of youths waiting for their friend Andrés to come home from work on a bridge which is being constructed in the neighborhood. The scenes in the house depict a well-to-do middle-class environment totally divorced from the reality of what is going on in the world outside, where Elena is waiting for her engineer husband who is also late in returning home from work on the bridge. Apart from the tension of these two late arrivals, the only other dramatic prop which sustains the action is the raising of 100 *pesos* which Andrés' mother needs to pay a debt by midday. The youths in the street club together and painfully manage to raise the money, while the mother vainly tries to persuade a cruelly indifferent Elena to give her an advance on Andrés' wages.

Gorostiza does not, in spite of a tendency to black and white distinctions, make his characters into oppressors and oppressed. The responsibility for the poverty and misery of the working class is not laid at the door of Elena and her kind. The question of responsibility is hardly raised by the author. The question of responsibility is hardly raised by the author. What concerns him is the blindness to reality and the callousness that comfortable living forms. For Elena to realize the nature of the world she is living in, it is necessary for her husband to die. When at the end of the play it is learned that Andrés and Elena's husband, Luis, have both been killed in an accident on the bridge, the central symbol of the bridge becomes clear. Elena and the mother are linked for the first time in their common humanity and suffering.

With *El puente* Gorostiza achieved a poetic realism which suggested universal and typical qualities by unobtrusive symbolism and an *interpretation* of social reality without apparently distorting its surface naturalism. His later work, *El pan de la locura* (1958) and *Vivir aquí* (1964), shows an increasing tendency towards the imposition of ideas. *El pan de la locura* has two parallel themes in it, one on the level of social responsibility and the other on the level of personal relationships, both of which express the idea of divorce from reality. The structural link which unites them is artificial and improbable. In *Vivir aquí*, still pursuing the same theme, he makes all the characters inhabit private and illusory

worlds. An upper-class family is compelled through pressing financial circumstances to let the front part of their house as a television studio. The mother, still living in the past, has not reconciled herself to the changed circumstances. Marcelo, her son, the neurotic product of a doting mother, joins a neo-fascist party without realizing the implications of his action. Marcelo is thus divorced from the world of his wife, Elsa, who, in her turn, cannot face the reality that love and marriage are not what she imagined. An aging television producer, occupied in providing a celluloid dream world for his public, still imagines himself as an irresistible Don Juan. And Elsa's father floats amiably and ineffectually above the action blind to his daughter's problems. In the program note Gorostiza claims to have eliminated the *costumbrista* and anecdotic elements of his earlier work to concentrate upon "las razones interiores, las razones subjetivas importantes." "Los personajes y acontecimientos," he writes, "son puntos de partida para un planteo inquietante, esperanzado y universal." The author unites all his characters in terms of the theme rather than the dramatic situation. In his determination to write serious, thought-provoking drama it seems that Gorostiza himself has lost his grip on reality. He has drifted towards abstraction. The pressure of the social situation has pushed him towards obsessive commitment to a single idea, which has gradually undermined his capacity to give it convincing artistic expression.

In the case of Osvaldo Dragún it is perhaps less justifiable to generalize in view of the variety of his work. He is, generally speaking, concerned with the "here and now" social problems and sees the world in left-wing political terms, yet he surprised the critics in 1964 by writing a straight-forward commercial comedy, *Amoretta*. His plays generally suffer from a lack of artistic detachment and too much anger, yet he wrote *Historias para ser contadas* (1957), in which he discovered an admirable and original vehicle for social comment. It would perhaps be true to say that he is more polemical in his outlook than Gorostiza. *La peste viene de Melos* (1956) is a political play about the commercial colonization of Latin-American countries by the U.S.A., placed in the context of classical antiquity. *El jardín del infierno* (1961) is a naturalistic piece about the degradation and squalor in one of Buenos Aires' *villas miserias*. *Y nos dijeron que éramos inmortales* (1963) is an angry Brechtian work about the youth of Argentina who find themselves involved in armed political struggles and right-wing coups which have no relevance to their lives, who have a rifle thrust into their hands and are told to fight for a cause which is not theirs. Dragún may use a conventional realistic approach, symbolism, expressionism and epic-theatre styles, but his work usually involves an indictment of some aspects of Argentine society. His early work shows an angry young man protesting or condemning: the strong set against the weak, the rich against the poor, the reactionary generation of elders against idealistic youth. In the later Dragún, protest has given way to resigned pessimism. *Heroica de Buenos Aires* (1966) is a more mature and greatly enriched working of the themes of *Y nos dijeron que éramos inmortales*. The mood of subjective indignation which prevailed in the early works is distanced by a certain amount of expressionistic farce.

The reservations that have been made about these two dramatists—progressive obsession with a single theme in Gorostiza and the rather *ad hoc* and polemical treatment of social issues in Dragún—are both the result of a social climate in which art has been pushed into an uneasy relationship with politics. Andrés Lizarraga has gone further than either Gorostiza or Dragún in formalizing this relationship in his own dramatic theory. His is an explicitly Marxist view of the theatre—if by this we understand that he sees the theatre primarily as an instrument of social change.

Uno de los objetivos a cumplir por la gente de teatro latinoamericana es precisamente la creación de un teatro latinoamericano. . . . Tablados latinoamericanos ayudarán a mejor comprender, a mejor comer, a mejor educar. Es decir, a mejor logro de nuestra felicidad.¹³

In other words, he places his theatre at the service of social development and the formation of a national consciousness. His plays are designed to clarify national issues for the greater good of society. In his preface to *Color de soledad*, which deals with the problem of alienation between capital and interior, he says, “confieso que sería para mí inmensa alegría que ese público del interior dijese: ‘archivemos esta obra, porque ya no sucede lo que en ella se dice.’”¹⁴ His *Trilogía sobre mayo* (1960), three plays about the Revolution of 1810 (before, during and after),¹⁵ is conceived as a piece of political psychoanalysis in which he tries to trace present day problems to their original historical causes. It is the story of how the ideals of the Revolution, the popular uprising of the landless peasants to shake off the yoke of Spanish rule, were gradually corroded by the forces of the right-wing counter-revolution. In the last play the wheel comes full circle and the original revolutionaries are condemned as political extremists and savages, while the commercial interests occupy a position of power in the new independent Argentina.

Lizarraga's picture is not an objective one and there can be no doubt where his sympathies lie. There is an explicit attack on capitalist ethics and an idealization of the “downtrodden people.” The social issues are seen in rather unsophisticated terms with little internal conflict in the characters. We are left with a simple opposition of values: revolutionary faith and nobility of purpose defeated by the more devious and insidious power of commercial interests. It is doubtful whether Lizarraga's tendentious and oversimplified interpretation of the history of Argentine Independence really does very much to illuminate the complex social and political situation of contemporary Argentina. He has chosen to try and evoke a total vision of the country—embracing capital and interior, urban and rural mentalities—via an appeal to history at a time when most European drama and the latest manifestations of Argentine drama are focused on the stresses and anxieties of urban man. In this Lizarraga may well be swimming against the tide.

Agustín Cuzzani is concerned with the problems of urban man. His plays are about the depersonalization of the individual in modern capitalist and bureaucratic society. His work to date shows a clear development in his treatment of this theme. In *Una libra de carne* (1954) Cuzzani portrays his “little man” as

utterly obliterated by social pressure. His protagonist, Elías Beluver, without uttering a single word throughout the play, registers only inarticulate bewilderment as the weight of a complex social structure crushes the life out of him. Then Garibaldi, the football hero of *El centroforward murió al amanecer* (1955) represents a step forward in the process of revolution; he achieves a lucid insight into his situation and foresees the possibility of liberation. In the next play, *Los Indios estaban cabrerros* (1958), Tupa the Indian not only makes a stand but gives his rebellion against Church and State historical shape and significance. In the last play, *Sempronio* (1961), the power of love in the individual is made to triumph over political and social criteria.

The theme of progressive departure from individual human realities in the politically saturated atmosphere of national life (which is what Cuzzani is concerned about) is echoed in a corresponding departure from naturalism in the theatrical representation. Cuzzani has created a blend of farce and satire (he labels his plays "farsátiras") which is purely expressionistic. Capitalists, exploiters, inquisitors and aggressively ordinary housewives are drawn in bold firm lines, all of a piece without a suspicion of a redeeming features. They are placed in the framework of a plot which, rather than an exaggeration of "normality," is a fantastic abstraction from it. As an example of this we may cite the basic situation of *Una libra de carne*. The whole action takes place inside a courtroom and centers on the trial of Elías Beluver for default. It is the story of Shylock's pound of flesh with a twist in the tail. Beluver has been hounded to poverty and despair by his bosses, his colleagues, his wife and the whole social structure. He has been deprived of any capacity to react. Driven by sheer necessity he has borrowed money from one Shylock García who, having bled his victim white, demands his pound of flesh in lieu of the balance of the debt. Beluver is found guilty by a grotesque jury and payment is extracted upon the stage. When, as an afterthought, Beluver's counsel recalls Portia's ruse about the "drop of blood," it is discovered that unfortunately Beluver's flesh has no blood left in it. He has been squeezed dry by his oppressors. The basic situation is thus an irrational fantasy, not a logical situation carried to a fantastic extreme. It *represents* rather than describes or explains what the author has to say. The audience has no doubt about the attitudes it must take to characters and events and willingly suspends belief.

This adoption of the technique of expressionist farce means that Cuzzani avoids for the most part the pitfall which Gorostiza, Dragún and Lizarraga, writing in a naturalistic convention, have frequently fallen into. That is the pitfall of trying to be convincing on two levels: the level of surface reality and the level of the author's ideology or imposed interpretation. He fails to be convincing on either level. Cuzzani does not have the problem of harmonizing abstract rationalizations with realism because he abandons the naturalistic level altogether. In the prologue to his collected works he explains that the inspiration of the plays came to him in each case as "situación-espectáculo" or stage image, not as abstract ideas:

Esta situación-espectáculo central, lo confieso, es la que ha dado origen a cada farsátira por separado. Más aún, sin la aparición brusca e inesperada

de estas estampas cargadas de voltaje escénico, no me hubiera animado a escribir teatro.¹⁶

However, and here we see once again the pressures of the political and social climate impinging on the writer, Cuzzani is unwilling to let the fantasy of his plays speak for itself without a rationalized explanation. In all four of the *farsátiras* the tone of the final scene switches from burlesque farce to intense seriousness. The atmosphere of fantasy is dispelled and the reality of the situation is thrust at us. In *Una libra de carne*, for instance, he lulls the audience into laughter and callousness for Beluver's plight and then breaks the spell by an abrupt descent into naturalism. It would perhaps be unjust to call this a mere ideological appendage since Cuzzani exploits the change of tone dramatically. It does seem, however, that clarity of meaning was important to him and that, while use of fantasy can provide the necessary visual and emotional stimulus, he considered it inadequate on its own to convey the author's definitive and reasoned attitude to his material. So Cuzzani too succumbs to the temptation to intellectualize and spell out his message.

In his "Notas sobre la crisis argentina" Murena contends that political and ideological commitment distorts an artist's view of reality (because he is more interested in what he believes than what he sees). Even when the dramatist seems most committed to his contemporary situation he is in fact indulging in another form of escapism: the escapism into political generalization. By far the commonest accusation of Argentine critics to writers and writers to everyone else is that they do not confront *la realidad*. This may be in part attributable to the difficulty of finding the exact expression and in part to a collective inferiority complex. The fact is that the dominant tendencies in the modern Argentine theatre have been at a tangent to the reality. Some take refuge in rootless abstract ideas, others in the private world of their own psychological conflicts, others in the mystique of the folkloric past, others in political commitment or rationalization of reality? What, one may ask, is there left for the dramatist to do? Surprisingly enough there is something: to look at and record experience with a sensitive yet unprejudiced eye. Murena claims that a true knowledge of oneself and one's social context can only come with the abandonment of the ideological approach. In the recent generation of playwrights there are two young men who have done this, who have simply written about aspects of Argentine society they know from personal experiences: Roberto Cossa in *Nuestro fin de semana* (1964) and Ricardo Halac in *Soledad para cuatro* (1961).

Technically and structurally there is nothing new about these plays. They are both written within a broadly naturalistic convention. The language the characters speak is the language of the average *porteño*. What is new is the unobtrusive way in which they harmonize the particular and the general. That is, the world of their characters, who live out their situation blindly, inarticulately, uncomprehendingly, and the interpretation and meaning that the author gives to these characters in that situation. In Gorostiza, Dragún and Lizarraga, the author's rationalization of the situation and characters either jars with the reality they portray or swamps it entirely. Cossa and Halac abandon the cerebral approach and write primarily for the emotions.

Cossa's *Nuestro fin de semana* and Gorostiza's *Vivir aquí* are both basically out to convey what it is like to live in Buenos Aires. Yet whereas Gorostiza's play is cerebral, analytical and contrived, Cossa's is emotive and evolves naturally. Unlike Gorostiza's, Cossa's characters are, with one possible exception, inarticulate. The words "divorce from reality," "solitude" and "alienation" are never mentioned, yet this is what the play is about. Cossa manages to say something valid about Argentine society without going outside the day-to-day experiences of his characters and without contriving implausible situations. Very little happens in the play. Three families gather for a weekend get-together at the house of Raúl, a travelling salesman, grimly determined to enjoy themselves. Despite their efforts the boredom and emptiness of their lives come through. The whole play is focused on the characters and the tension of their relationships. Each is struggling to keep the reality at bay, putting up a smokescreen of words and contrived attitudes to conceal from themselves the void that lies beneath the surface. They cling to each other with enforced gaiety because they are terrified of their own inner solitude. The presentation of the characters owes much to Chekhov, with eloquent silences, pregnant situations expressed in deliberately banal dialogue and groping incoherent phrases. Cossa gives a picture of the Argentine middle class through the window of an individual and domestic situation. The larger context of a *social* malaise is subtly implied. Gorostiza's *Vivir aquí* is a social analysis implausibly disguised as a domestic situation.

Ricardo Halac's *Soledad para cuatro* is similar to *Nuestro fin de semana* in its rejection of the cerebral and analytical approach. It presents a specific social environment with rounded and individual characters and leaves the generalized social implications in the background. Whereas *Nuestro fin de semana* explores the lives of the middle aged, *Soledad para cuatro* is about the younger generation, the spiritual restlessness of a youth who have inherited no stable values from their elders, youth left to its own spiritual devices. The action takes place in a modest middle-class flat where two young *señoritos* attempt to seduce two factory girls. Again the basic themes are those of boredom and a confused searching for communication, understanding and love in each of the characters which somehow only come out as irritations, frustrated sex and ultimate retreat into one's own private world. Like Cossa, Halac sees the state of affairs as a product of a specific social climate rather than as a permanent human condition. The wider social context is perhaps less evident in *Soledad para cuatro* than in Cossa's play which achieves an admirable combination of the general and the particular.

The politically oriented theatre has by no means exhausted itself in this generation of playwrights. Nestor Kraly's *La noche que no hubo sexta*, for instance, follows in the ideological tradition of Gorostiza. But the works of Cossa and Halac seem to indicate a significantly different reaction to the problems of the Argentine social environment. The political theatre takes as its starting point a rationalization of the situation and illustrates it in terms of a particular action: it tends to adjust action to ideas and tries to embrace the whole social spectrum—the middle class, the military, the working man, the capital, the Interior—in representative characters. It diagnoses rather than reflects. In a sense the plays of Cossa and Halac are less ambitious, in that they limit their

scope to one particular section of society and see the general problems as they affect the lives of certain individuals. Their plays do not analyze or dissect the problem. They portray the truth of what they see rather than the truth of what they believe.

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Notes

1. The bibliography is extensive but the following may serve as an example: Julio Mafud, *El desarraigo argentino* (Buenos Aires, 1959); Juan José Sebrelli, *Buenos Aires, vida cotidiana y alienación* (Buenos Aires, 1964); Tomás Roberto Fillol, *Social Factors in Economic Development: the Argentine Case* (M.I.T., 1961); H. A. Murena, "Notas sobre la crisis argentina," *Sur*, No. 248 (Sept-Oct, 1957).

2. Murena, p. 12.

3. Quoted by Bernardo Canal Feijóo in *Una teoría teatral argentina* (Buenos Aires: Centro de Estudios de Arte Dramático, 1956), p. 15.

4. Quoted by Enrique Pezzone in his article "Literatura y realidad" in *Argentina 1930-1960* (Buenos Aires, 1961), p. 416.

5. Julio Imbert, *El diente* (Buenos Aires, 1954).

6. Dates in brackets refer to first performance.

7. Answers in reply to a questionnaire in *El escarabajo de oro*, Año IV, No. 20 (October, 1963).

8. *Ibid.*

9. "Se trata de argentinidad por sospecha de que aún no existe como evidencia indiscutible—lo cual, sea dicho de camino, es un error, puesto de que la argentinidad, lo rioplatense está bien manifiesta en la obra magnífica de quienes prefieren hacer que imaginar." Américo Castro, *La peculiaridad lingüística rioplatense* (Madrid, 1961), p. 83.

10. Rodolfo Kusch, *Tango* (Buenos Aires: Ed. Talía, 1959).

11. The Argentine *género chico* flourished from about the turn of the twentieth century to the late 1920's.

12. Pezzone, p. 414.

13. Author's prologue to *Teatro de Andrés Lizarraga* (Buenos Aires, 1962).

14. *Teatro de Andrés Lizarraga*, p. 87.

15. *Tres jueces para un largo silencio, Santa Juana de América, Alto Perú.*

16. *Teatro de Agustín Cuzzani* (Buenos Aires, 1960), p. 11.