

The Well-Made (Feminist) Play: Malena Sándor's Challenge to Theatrical Conventions

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In the late 1930s, Argentine playwright Malena Sándor (pseudonym for María Elena James de Terza, 1913-1968) initiated a uniquely feminist brand of comedy. Sándor's theatre uses and adapts standard guidelines for the three-part plot, complete with intrigue, suspense, mimesis, and neat conclusions. Her plays are both realistic and traditional in that they represent believable interactions among bourgeois characters in common, everyday settings. Nevertheless, within this apparent adherence to typical theatre conventions, Sándor skillfully constructs an innovative form of comedy that promotes a feminist message in a format agreeable to the bourgeois spectators of her time who may have been otherwise unwilling to pay attention to the women's rights movement.

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, realism was a driving force on the Argentine stage.¹ By the 1920s, realistic theatre had begun competing with the cinema and had moved away from the rural "criollista" tradition, catering instead to the young metropolitan culture (Seibel 740). According to Willis Knapp Jones, the conventional "Buenos Aires Play" of the first half of the twentieth century is "a light, humorous, sure-fire hit with amusing dialogue, some slight attempts at characterization, and a happy ending, but brittle and built on formula" (*Men and Angels* xlv). This is reminiscent of the "comedy of manners," as defined by Allardyce Nicoll, which relies heavily on the audience's identification with the action and the characters (123-24). The plays of Sándor's time also privilege unexpected plot twists and action over lengthy discussion, much like the European "well-made play" as described by John Russell Taylor. Like many of her contemporaries, Sándor's plays are designed to draw in the viewers. Yet she diverges from convention when she encourages the drawn-in spectators to

empathize with the women on stage and with feminism. With an abundance of strong female leads, Sándor's works expand the limits of female space, attempt to repair communication failures between the sexes through more equal dialogue, and use role-play to demonstrate feminist concerns. These innovations are found in the four Sándor works that I study here and were performed in Buenos Aires in the late 1930s and 1940s; *Yo me divorcio, papá* (1937), *Una mujer libre* (1938), *Tu vida y la mía* (1945), and *Ella y Satán* (1948).

Though little is known about her life, Sándor's career as a writer in the public sphere was diverse and far-reaching. She was awarded the "Premio Nacional de Cultura" for her first three-act comedy *Una mujer libre* ("Malena Sándor: Su fallecimiento" 38). This play was translated to Portuguese and performed in Rio In 1939, a year after its opening in Buenos Aires (Jones, *Behind Spanish American Footlights* 172). Eventually, *Una mujer libre* was adapted to the cinema in a French-Italian co-production (Foppa 612). Sándor lived in Europe between 1948 and 1956 where she contributed to some Argentine publications and the Mexican newspaper *Novedades* while continuing to write plays for the stages of Buenos Aires (612). During her stay in Spain, Sándor penned *Penélope ya no teje* (1946) which was adapted into a musical (Ordaz 266). In addition to these professional experiences, Sándor wrote for television and radio in Argentina (Zayas de Lima 250). Willis Knapp Jones considered her the female dramatist "most likely to endure" of her generation (*Behind Spanish American Footlights* 172). Her plays featured prestigious actors such as Luisa Vehil, Pilar Gómez, Miguel Faust Rocha, Guillermo Bataglia, Gloria Ferrandiz, and Iris Marga as well as important directors like Antonio Cunill Cabanellas. These artists were considered by the critic Luis Ordaz to be among the most talented of their generation (184).

All but one of Sándor's eleven plays published in the posthumous collection *Teatro completo* (1969) were performed in her lifetime and they were often reviewed positively by critics, especially in the 1930s and 1940s. Sándor's success as a playwright is particularly noteworthy when compared to her female predecessors and contemporaries. The few women who wrote plays in the 1920s received little attention and their works were either harshly criticized or received with disinterest. The poet Alfonsina Storni's play *El amo del mundo* (1927), which was canceled after only one performance, is just one example of several.²

Sándor seemed aware of the limitations imposed upon her playwriting by her society, her gender, and her nation's male-dominated stage. Perhaps for this reason she devised a way to be accepted as a conventional/realistic playwright while at the same time actively promoting feminism. Although some influential European theorists such as José Ortega y Gasset and Bertold Brecht had posited that a break with realism was necessary to inspire social change, Sándor chose not to stray far from the urban realistic comedies of her time. Her theatre actively promotes an emotional connection between the spectator and the action as a way to foster a sense of solidarity between the audience and the female characters on stage. She encourages the drawn-in spectators to abandon their deep-seated prejudices in order to empathize with the feminist perspectives of the plays' characters.

Sándor's efforts to capture the interest of her bourgeois audience were both effective and appreciated by theatregoers. An anonymous critic who witnessed *Tu vida y la mía*, paints a picture of the spectators' reactions to Sándor's play:

Los conflictos sentimentales que presenta no tienen mayor acción escénica, pero el vigor que les imprime la autora, les presta vibración y además, como los personajes tienen calor humano, realidad de vida, la obra encuentra eco en el ánimo del espectador, que sigue con interés y atención las incidencias de la pieza. (“Tu vida y la mía’ se estrenó” 12)

The relationship Sándor wishes to establish with her audience is mirrored by the role-play employed by her female characters as a way to re-educate their friends and loved ones. In the form of a dialogue, the one-act play *Yo me divorcio, papá*, tells the story of outspoken Andrea and her father, Dr. Horacio Aguirre, a staunchly anti-divorce senator. The two hold opposing viewpoints on the subject of divorce, which they debate by discussing divorce laws.³ In a subsequent scene, Andrea confesses to her father that she has decided to divorce her husband. Aguirre disagrees strongly with divorce, but cares deeply for Andrea. Thus, his daughter's decision brings about a conflict between his desire to be a supportive father and his sense of remaining loyal to his moral and political principles.

As he slowly becomes drawn into his daughter's personal drama, Aguirre begins to recognize the anguish of all women in need of divorce. Finally he tells Andrea: “Tú sangras y recién advierto la sangre de las otras mujeres. Es horrible, es horrible” (Sándor 26). As her father continues to struggle with his conflicting feelings, Andrea tells him that what is happening

is not the dissolution of his ideals but rather “la liberación de tu conciencia, papá” (27). Eventually the senator acquiesces stating, “me vences, hija, pero no sé si es con tu dolor o el de otros” (27). He then goes on to speak of his former arguments as “pura dialéctica,” revealing his awareness that it was through his emotional connection with his daughter that he was able to understand the error of his former position. Following this revelation, Andrea receives a telephone call from her husband. As she talks to her spouse, Aguirre, and the spectators, learn that she is happy with her marriage and has no real intention of getting a divorce. In this way, Andrea reveals that she has been role-playing (27). When the perplexed Aguirre asks his daughter to explain her “farsa absurda,” Andrea simply embraces him affectionately saying “ha caído la venda de tus ojos, para mí... para otros... ¿Qué importa?” (28). Aguirre’s situation in this play mirrors that of the spectators viewing the performance. As the two characters begin to debate their positions, the average audience member is unlikely to be moved to change his or her personal opinion. Nevertheless, as the play progresses, and the spectators become emotionally involved in Andrea’s struggle, they, like her father, are drawn into her individual drama. To accomplish this identification, Sándor has Andrea simultaneously role-play for her father and perform for the spectators in the playhouse. Thus, assuming they too have come to sympathize with Andrea, the audience members are equally surprised to realize that she has been play-acting. The message Sándor sends through Aguirre’s realization is something the spectators can carry beyond the theatre.

Two other protagonists in Sándor’s subsequent three-act comedies, *Una mujer libre* and *Ella y Satán*, role-play feminist issues for the men in their lives. The heroine of *Una mujer libre*, Liana, is a recently divorced woman attempting to reestablish herself as a sculptor. She is soon dismayed to discover that, in the eyes of her male friends and associates, her divorce has automatically stereotyped her as sexually promiscuous. In the second act, she laments:

No estoy perdida. Estoy cansada. Terriblemente cansada de todos ustedes. Siempre la misma mirada, siempre la misma pregunta, siempre la misma sospecha. Cuando salgo, cuando llego, los ojos me buscan en los ojos la verdad. ¿Qué es lo que quieren saber? ¿Si guardo un secreto? ¿Si guardo un nombre? Y si así será, ¿acaso no tengo derecho a vivir? (68)

By the last act of the play, Liana is finally able to subvert and redirect these invasive and insulting gazes. She has just avoided the sexual advances of an associate when her newest model, César, arrives. Though married, César has become obsessed with Liana as a sexual object. In the scene that follows, Liana's sculpting of César's image parallels her reshaping of his misguided morality. Without once interrupting her work, she admonishes her model for not notifying his wife of his visit, and when he confesses his attraction for her, Liana decides to cut short her "friend's" advances (75). Taking advantage of the control over her model that her position as a sculptor provides her, she accuses César of monstrous egoism, ridicules his naïve assumption that she would accept his advances, and chastises his indecency emphasizing that he has inspired in her: "Desprecio. Te quería como a un hermano y me has golpeado con tu deseo" (76). Frozen by his pose as model, César is forced to subject himself to a significant amount of objectification and impotence while the spectators, through Liana's comments, are offered the opportunity to reconsider his immoral desire. Implicitly rejecting her accusations, César finally stands up to grab hold of her but she rids herself of him immediately (75).

Aware that he is slow to comprehend the error of his ways, Liana, like Andrea in the earlier play, decides to convert César into a spectator of her experiences (in this case as an objectified woman): "A ti te voy a mostrar mis luchas de mujer sola, de mujer libre, de mujer emancipada" (Sándor 76). At this point, Liana receives a phone call and César is obliged to listen to her conversation with Fernando as she sarcastically repeats her caller's sexually charged comments for César's benefit. "Es cierto Fernando. Soy una mujer que ha nacido para los grandes amores" (76), she says as she gestures to César, encouraging him to witness this conversation as a demonstration of her objectification by men. With a facial expression described as "casi trágica," Liana continues repeating Fernando's comments: "La gloria de un amor oculto... Sólo las mujeres excepcionales ¿verdad? Tiene razón, Fernando. Las otras son unas pobrecitas burguesas..." (76). Upon realizing the torment Fernando is inflicting on Liana with his misinterpretations of what it means to be a "mujer libre," César becomes contrite. He now appears "conmovido y sin atreverse a resistir" and sincerely apologizes before making his exit (77).

By being forced to shift his gaze, César becomes drawn into Liana's performance, and realizes the damaging effects of his own advances on his friend. His realization is performed for the spectator who is likewise urged to

examine the effects of female objectification by men. Sándor uses a similar strategy in *Ella y Satán*. In this play, the extremely wealthy Claudio believes that all women have a price. His mistress, Mágina, urges him to admit that he hides behind his money to avoid making himself vulnerable. Claudio, like César in the earlier play, is slow to learn the lesson, so Mágina decides to auction herself off to the highest bidder at a party. Claudio is forced to watch his mistress's performance of "selling" herself to another man, while at the same time he receives word that he has lost his fortune (and therefore his ability to bid). In this scene, like César in *Una mujer libre* and Aguirre in *Yo me divorcio, papá*, Claudio becomes a witness to his own mistreatment of women. Any spectators who identify with the male characters in these three plays are thus pressured to re-consider their perspective as Sándor deliberately manipulates their gaze by focusing through the female point of view.

In addition to role-play, Sándor uses discussions to advance the feminist message of her plays, often converting intimate confidences into social, political, and philosophical debates. Scenes that forgo action in favor of extended discussion had been typically left out of conventional comedy. Commenting on Ibsen's unexpected inclusion of discussion in the last act of *A Doll's House* (1879),⁴ George Bernard Shaw notes that this innovation inspired a new school of dramatic art in England and, that "since that time the discussion has expanded far beyond the limits of the last ten minutes of an otherwise 'well made' play" (220). Additionally, while a variety of political and social factors surely contributed to the acceptance of female playwrights at that same time, Shaw saw the introduction of discussion as an element of their success: "Within twenty years women were writing better plays than men; and these plays were passionate arguments from beginning to end. The action of such plays consists of a case to be argued" (220). Evidently, Shaw not only considered discussion an integral part of the "new drama" but a forum more accessible to female than to male playwrights. He viewed these discussion-based plays as more true to life, and applauded their efforts to replace the contrived plot twists of the past with the more meaningful conflicts of "unsettled ideas" (221).

Despite writing in a different environment and lacking the support of female colleagues, Sándor's works are akin to those Shaw attributes to British women's plays. Her discussion-based plays also propose a feminist revision of gender disparities within the dialogues. Sándor's reviewers, who complained of a break with realism, did not enthusiastically accept this innovation. The

anonymous review of *Una mujer libre* in *La Prensa*, though mostly praising the play, complains that it is not believable that the protagonist's brother, Leonardo, would tell his sister, Liana, of his intention to challenge her ex-husband to a duel. "Eso no ocurre en la realidad" explains the reviewer, since "la posibilidad de un desafío precisamente a quienes se oculta es a las mujeres de familia" ("Una mujer libre" se estrenó" 17). As for the play's dialogue, the same critic objects to her "lenguaje artificial, rebuscado, frases trabajosamente formadas, que los personajes sin excepción emplean en todas las oportunidades, hasta en la intimidad" (17). The anonymous review of *Ella y Satán* similarly found fault with Sándor's use of language: "Los diálogos cuidados tienen, no obstante, una inclinación a lo afectado, con expresiones que no suenan como naturales de la vida real" ("Ella y Satán" fue estrenada" 10). Despite these comments, carefully polished dialogue was not uncommon in the works of Sándor's time. Her innovation was precisely the emphasis she placed on discussion (especially on feminist topics) and on the female voice, which is perhaps what underlies her reviewers' criticisms of her dialogue.

Most of Sándor's plays do revolve around a central debate or discussion. In the very beginning of *Yo me divorcio, papá*, Andrea greets her father with the intention of entering into a serious dialogue (19). As the play progresses it becomes apparent that she wishes to talk about the ideological differences that separate her from her father (and feminists like her from conservative legislators). Similarly, *Una mujer libre* consists of a series of discussions between the divorced Liana and those closest to her about what it really means to be a "free woman." In *Penélope ya no teje* (1946), female historical and literary personalities meet in heaven and dispute women's supposed obligation to be unwaveringly faithful. These are some of the most striking examples of the types of debates characteristic of Sándor's theatre in general, but not the only ones.

The feminist implications of Sándor's discussion-based strategy and its justification are best understood by examining how her dialogue relates to gender inequalities in real-life communication. Sándor's dialogues reveal a dramatic discourse that corrects disparities between the sexes in conversation, offering its public more equal models to consider. In a 1936 radio address, "La mujer y su expresión," Victoria Ocampo, the editor of the literary journal *Sur* provides some insight into the difficulty women had expressing themselves in late-1930s Argentina. Ocampo confessed that, because she was a woman, she felt uncomfortable limiting her speech to a monologue: "Este monólogo

no me hace feliz, es a vosotros a quienes quiero hablar y no a mí misma. Os quiero sentir presentes” (272). Later, she accuses men of preferring to hear themselves talk rather than share the floor with women:

Creo que, desde hace siglos, toda conversación entre el hombre y la mujer, apenas entran en cierto terreno empieza con un: “no me interrumpas” de parte del hombre. Hasta ahora el monólogo parece haber sido la manera predilecta de expresión adoptada por él. (La conversación entre hombres no es sino una forma dialogada de este monólogo). (Ocampo 272)

Vimala Herman’s overview of twentieth century gender-based linguistic studies in relation to dramatic dialogue confirms the disparity in language observed by Ocampo.⁵ Herman concludes that in real-life conversations, men commonly dominate women by interrupting and stealing attention away from them or by deliberately ignoring, censoring, or refusing to communicate with them (256). She adds that, “women seem to confer and display a more collaborative and non-competitive attitude to talk which is reflected in the strategies they use. Dominating practices are generally eschewed in favor of inter-personally attentive ones” (260). While male-dominated discourse is commonly found in modern realistic drama, a reading of Sándor’s plays reveals a less common, more equal, and perhaps more “feminine” model of male-female interactions. Like Ocampo, Sándor strives to create a dialogue without allowing the familiar patriarchal “no me interrumpas” to silence her female characters. Despite their difference of opinion on divorce, Andrea and her father in *Yo me divorcio, papá*, are remarkably compassionate, mutually respectful, and polite toward each other throughout the play’s extended debate. Instead of exhibiting dominance over her, Aguirre neither interrupts his daughter nor are his utterances longer than hers. Both Andrea and her father take turns of similar length although the daughter’s longest speeches tend to be slightly longer than those of her father.

When Aguirre changes the subject, after debating with Andrea for several minutes in the beginning of the play, he does it in such a way so as not to silence his daughter. In fact, the senator remarks that their debate is too removed from their personal relationship and reminds Andrea of the original purpose of her visit: “Tú venías a hablarme de algo, y algo serio ¿verdad?” (Sándor 22). With this reminder, Andrea’s father shows a sincere interest in his daughter’s concerns and invites her to take the floor on a more personal note. Andrea seems cognizant of the differences between the ways men and women communicate when she responds to her father by complaining, “es

como si habláramos en dos idiomas distintos” (22). The senator once again appears surprisingly compassionate as he pleads “te exijo que hables. Quiero saber. ¿Qué te pasa Andrea?” (22).

While she strongly disagrees with Aguirre, Andrea manages to persuade him to see her viewpoint without resorting to “male” strategies of dominance such as deafness, interruption, or monopolizing the floor. Instead, *Yo me divorcio, papá* proposes a more just model for cross-gender communication in which patriarchal power structures are subverted. This debate represents a feminist concept challenging the paternalistic and sexist power structures at work in Argentina. Aguirre, a representative of the aging patriarchy, agrees to side with his feminist daughter, a representative of the new generation of progressive women, which further suggests that changing the way we talk to each other can lead to a change in our society. In this way, Sándor creates the semblance of natural dialogue in her plays while carefully eliminating and correcting patriarchal structures that perpetuate cycles of dominance and the silencing of women.

By 1945, Sándor had added more action to her plays, and began shifting her attention from extensive dialogue to feminist uses of dramatic space. In *Woman's Theatrical Space*, Hanna Scolnicov traces the way that these spaces have been associated with gender from the ancient Greeks to the present. She argues that gender roles have been clearly divided along the lines of indoor/outdoor spaces and that woman is often associated with, and limited to, the space of the home. As comedies moved indoors in the Renaissance, Scolnicov observes that “the seemingly innocent plot aimed at gaining access into the house takes on almost explicit sexual overtones of penetration” and that “the open door and the open mouth were taken to signify sexual incontinence” (7). Nineteenth century drawing-room dramas were particularly repressive because women were forced to find refuge further inside the house as the audience was invited to peer into their living rooms (93). Scolnicov maintains that Nora’s rebellious departure in the last act of Ibsen’s *A Doll's House* is a breakthrough in the evolution of woman’s relationship to her theatrical space and an important step toward female liberation (100). In contrast to Ibsen’s heroine, however, Sándor’s women find freedom and power without leaving the domestic sphere. The play, *Tu vida y la mía* is reminiscent of the renaissance “comedia de enredo,” yet Sándor’s heroine, Marcela, thwarts the male characters’ attempts to seduce her and her sister Martha, through access to their home. As these two women reclaim the domestic sphere, they redefine female theatrical space as one

associated with feminism and female liberation. Picking up where Ibsen leaves off, Sándor offers a glimpse of life after divorce. While, Marcela, the upper middle-class protagonist, is very much associated with her home, it is clear from the beginning that her relationship to this space is unique. A wealthy, divorced woman who lives alone, she answers to neither a father nor a husband. As in the nineteenth-century well-made play, the comedy's action takes place within an elegant drawing room, which contains one door leading directly outside and two others leading further inside. Marcela, the only character who remains on stage throughout all three acts, strategically manipulates the passing of the other characters through the doors to and from her parlor (135). She allows the spectator, her sister, and her male guests access to her drawing room yet, like a director or choreographer, she exercises exclusive control over the play's action.

At the start of the play, the older sister, Marcela, tricks Martha into believing that she is having an affair with their friend, Guillermo (Sándor 142). In reality Marcela is having an affair with another married man, Osvaldo, but she feels the need to deceive Martha lest the latter's new crush distract her from marrying Juan José. In the following scene, Marcela is entertaining Osvaldo and another male acquaintance. When Guillermo arrives, Marcela vacillates about whether or not to receive him, prompting Osvaldo to protest: "¿otro aspirante más? Pero Marcela... Aquí dos y otro que llega [. . .] ¿Qué piensas hacer con todos nosotros?" (145). Though they are initially reluctant to leave, the two men graciously follow Marcela's instructions to retire to the "otro salón," through one of the three doors, confirming her authority over the drawing room (145). In another instance, Marcela commands Osvaldo to leave so that Martha will not catch them alone together (152). When her sister is about to enter, Marcela issues Osvaldo one last demand: "escapa...escapa por la puerta de atrás" (152). Martha enters through one door just as Osvaldo exits through another (152).

Both sisters decide in the end that their relationship with one another is top priority. In the last act, Osvaldo is again removed from the drawing room, forced to hide in the bedroom, while Marcela visits with Martha's husband. Marcela learns from this conversation that her sister, though angry, misses her deeply. As a result, Marcela decides to leave Osvaldo with the intention of repairing her bond with Martha. When Osvaldo exits for the last time, Marcela symbolically rids herself of feelings for him: "Osvaldo...Osvaldo...Osvaldo...Es como si mis labios se quedaran desnudos de tu nombre" (Sándor 169). Martha is the next to hide in the bedroom

(from Guillermo this time). She does this voluntarily, proving that she, like Marcela, has chosen to concentrate on her relationship with her sister rather than explore an extramarital affair. Realizing that he has been rejected, Guillermo, like Osvaldo before him, is forced to recognize that he is no longer welcome in the space controlled by the two women (175).

In this modern (feminist) “comedia de enredo,” Marcela’s use of doors reverses the theme of entry into the house as a metaphor for male penetration. While she allows men to enter into her space at times, they never enter without permission, and she exercises her right to expel them at will. Additionally, *Tu vida y la mía* comments on the relationship between women and the home in nineteenth and twentieth-century bourgeois dramas. Unlike Ibsen’s drawing-room matrons, Marcela and Martha find liberation and fulfillment by reoccupying and redefining, rather than escaping, the domestic sphere. While men are allowed into Marcela’s space, they must consistently recognize and respect the power she has over her place. Juan José must also wait at home for Martha until she decides that her liberation will not be sacrificed by building a life with him. In both cases, the men defer to the power that each woman has over the home. Thus, the protagonists have found a way to liberate themselves from male domination without being forced to abandon their households, commit suicide, or go insane (as was often the case for rebellious female characters of the time).

Through this expansion of domestic space, combined with innovative dialogue and role-play, Sándor deftly introduced conventional Argentine spectators to feminist theatre. Rather than ignoring or opposing the techniques familiar to the average theatregoer, Sándor took advantage of them, consistently working from within the structures of traditional comedy in order to dismantle patriarchal conventions. In this manner, she gave her public the comedy it expected while subtly subverting it for her purpose. The result was a theatre designed to cause spectators to question sexism not only during the performance but in daily life as well.⁶

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Notes

¹ In *Las ideas estéticas del teatro argentino*, Arturo Berenguer Carisomo points out that naturalism, social realism, and "costumbrismo" together with a rising immigrant population and an influx of socialist ideologies, significantly shaped Argentina's theatre from 1900 to 1918.

² For more information on female dramatists of the 1920s see Beatriz Siebel's *Historia del teatro argentino: Desde los rituales hasta 1930*.

³ Divorce was a major legislative concern for Argentine feminist activists at this time. Though it was legalized in Uruguay in 1907 it was not legalized in Argentina until 1950. See Asunción Lavrin's *Women Feminism and Social Change in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, 1890-1940*.

⁴ Beatriz Siebel's *Historia del teatro argentino* records representations of *A Doll's House* (Translated as *Casa de muñecas*) in Buenos Aires in 1893 by the Mariano Galé theatre company, in 1898 by the Teresa Mariani theatre company, and in 1927 and 1928 by the Gloria Ferrandiz theatre company.

⁵ In a chapter entitled "Gender and Language," of her book, *Dramatic Discourse*, Vimala Herman includes a linguistic examination of communication between men and women in Western society and its possible applications to the study of theatre. This analysis draws from the gender-based studies of linguists such as Don H. Zimmerman and Candace West, V.L. DeFrancisco, and C. Edelski.

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