The Palomas and Gavilanes: Gender in the Sainetes of Alberto Vacarezza

Donald S. Castro

This article focuses on gender images in the context of the popular culture of the city of Buenos Aires with particular attention given to the most recognized *sainete* playwright, Alberto Vacarezza (1888-1959). The sainete was the short jocular popular theatre play often associated with the cityscape of Buenos Aires and containing musical interludes of tangos and tango dancing. Its origins are in the late nineteenth century, serving originally as an offshoot of the Spanish *teatro por horas* now set in the locale of Buenos Aires instead of Madrid. Its heyday was in the late teens and the 1920s, entering into decline by the mid-1930s. For much of its history, the sainete was a vibrant reflection of urban life and porteño social mores. The most favored settings for these sainetes *porteños* were the patios of slum tenement houses in Buenos Aires (*conventillos* or *casas de inquilinato*) because they brought together all of the porteño ethnic types and also cut across class lines. Often saineteros described these patios as flower laden and as pleasant happy places. The most favored ethnic types were the immigrants (especially the *cocoliche*) and the creole petulant ladies' man, *el compadrito*. The formula for the writing of a successful sainete was clearly stated by Alberto Vacarezza in his 1932 sainete *La comparsa se despide*:

> Un patio de conventillo,
> un italiano encargao,
> un yoyega retobao,
> una percanta, un vivillo;
> dos malevos de cuchillo,
> un chamuyo, una pasión,
> choque, cellos, discusión,

desafío, puñalada,
aspamento, disparada,
auxillio, cana ...¡telón![1]

While Alberto Vacarezza wrote over 100 theatrical pieces, he is best known for his sainetes, which represent some sixty per cent of his work. Unfortunately, only some 70 of these theatrical works have survived and not all these are readily available (Dubatti in Vacarezza 1:292). He also wrote poetry and some well-known tangos. Alberto Vacarezza's most famous sainetes are all sited in Buenos Aires and often in the slum tenements or conventillos of the city. Even though not all his sainetes are specifically described as having their setting in Villa Crespo, many of his most important plays are situated in this, his childhood neighborhood. He was a keen observer of the day-to-day life of Villa Crespo. He is quoted often as saying that he learned more about life from the streets than from school (Garasa 366). In many senses, Vacarezza took the reality of his beloved Villa Crespo and created an imaginary neighborhood inhabited by his sainete characters (see Castro "Villa Crespo").

Vacarezza's portrayal of men and women is significant because of the changing status of gender in Argentine urban society. Women were growing in economic power because of their importance in the work force after 1920. This is especially true in the city and the province of Buenos Aires. Women were entering the professions (white-collar employment) and continued to be significant as factory workers. Such changes were noted in tangos and in the popular theatre. The significance of women as consumers also gave rise to increases in magazines devoted to women readers and to radio programming and advertisements, especially in the decades of the 1930s and 1940s. These changing roles of women seemed to disorient men and the assertiveness of the modern woman even angered them. It also confused government and conservative arbiters of Argentine culture who were almost exclusively male.[2] The gender roles of Vacarezza's characters are static and unchanging even though the world was changing about him. The innovative gender studies of Donna Guy, Asunción Lavrin and David Foster provide a context for analyzing how Vacarezza stereotypically portrays women and male-female relations.

The gender roles of men and women in the work of Vacarezza can be found in his portrayal of the *paloma* and *gavilán* characters in his principal sainetes. The use of birds as identifiers of personality is not new to Vacarezza. It has a long tradition within Spanish folk culture, where for example, *palomo*

[as in Juan Palomo] is a useless and idle person. Women are often given the name *paloma* to describe their gentle nature. When the term is used to describe a man, it is generally descriptive of a weak, meek, dove-like person. To contrast the meek female character, Spanish tradition often used *gavión* or *gavilán* (raptor-like birds such as the sparrow-hawk) to describe a male predator who exploited women. In one of Vacarezza's earliest sainetes, he used the bird descriptor when he introduced the female character La Pichona in *Los escruchantes* (1911), and in 1917 he first introduced the contrasting generic characters Paloma and Gavilán in the sainete *Palomas y gavilanes*. While, he also used names such as Picaflor in *La verbena criolla* (1918) and Palomo and El Gallo in *Tu cuna fue un conventillo* (1920), he is most known for his recurring specific Paloma character used in three sainetes: *El conventillo de La Paloma* (1929), *El conventillo del gavilán* (1931) and *Una escena Villa Crespo* (1932).[3]

Vacarezza introduced this particular character in 1929 and she continued through 1932. By this time the sainete was in full decadence, being replaced by the variety theatre and sound movies. The country was also changing from the prosperous years of the 1920s to the fullness of the worldwide depression with its social and political dislocations. The September 6, 1930 coup d'état of General José F. Uriburu ushered in a new generation of political conservatives and moral reformers. Yet Vacarezza's world was static and the conventillo populated by formula driven characters resisted the changes swirling about in the real world. Perhaps it provided a nostalgic trip back to a more secure past where people's social roles were defined and clear. *El conventillo de La Paloma* opened on April 5, 1929 and ran for over 1000 consecutive presentations. Over 200,000 scripts of the play were sold by the popular theatre press, indicating its acceptance by the public. Its success continued through the onset of the worldwide depression and the Uriburu coup. The sainete *El conventillo del gavilán*, described by Vacarezza as "una inversión" of *El conventillo de La Paloma*, opened in October 1931. The last of the trilogy of sainetes, *Una escena Villa Crespo* opened in October 1932. This last sainete Vacarezza labeled "una derivación" of *El conventillo de La Paloma*.[4]

In *El conventillo de La Paloma*, the namesake of the play is much sought out by the male residents for her great beauty. One of the characters describes her in his broken Spanish as a *hermosura mojacana* with a body having the *jracía arrebatadora*.[5] True, she is a flirt, but an *innocent* one who does not wish to cause anyone trouble and only wants to be left alone.

Yet clearly she is not unconscious of what her coquetry does to men. On the other hand, Vacarezza implies that this temptress is not so innocent; it is the men who are naïve because they are driven by her beauty to make fools of themselves. By doing so Paloma feigns "ignorance" and treats them as dupes (*engrupidos*). Nevertheless, the women of the conventillo look upon Paloma as a flirt intent on stealing their men away. Paloma feels wronged and denies these accusations: "No creía que mi pobre personita fuera capaz de provocar tanto revuelto." Surely Paloma feels wronged, yet it is her coquetry that produces the uproar. Paloma is a bundle of contradictions in the artful hands of Vacarezza who plays her as the foil to men's pretensions and as the parody of a woman of "virtue." In this respect, Vacarezza is at his ironic best.

The two principal male characters are the compadritos Paseo Colon and Villa Crespo.[6] We discover that Crespo is a "reformed" thief and Paseo is a pimp. Crespo is secretly in love with Paloma. Paloma was the former *papusa* (prostitute) of Paseo. The true nature of their relationship comes out in a violent confrontation between Paloma and Paseo where we discover that he forced her into prostitution in the Red Light district of Buenos Aires, El Bajo, a seedy area of bars and cheap hotels serving the clientele of the docks. She fled this life and sought what she hoped would be a safe refuge among decent people. Paseo now tries to make her come back to her former life in El Bajo. She refuses, saying: "Deseo ser buena." When she refuses again, he threatens her: "Paloma, no te olvidés de quién soy y todo lo que soy capaz." His true malevolent nature comes out as he menaces her with bodily harm. Paseo notes the cowardice of the other men, and finally challenges Villa Crespo to come to the defense of Paloma. When Paseo tries to hit Paloma, Crespo intervenes, demonstrating that he will not tolerate such violence to a woman.

The Vacarezza characterization of the two men is clear: one is a defender of women and the other an exploiter of women, the *guapo* versus the *malevo*.[7] The two men square off to fight and each draws his weapon: Paseo a revolver and Villa a knife. Here again Vacarezza draws a sharp distinction between the two compadritos. The revolver is an impersonal weapon that requires little skill and can be the weapon of choice of the coward, while the knife harkens back to the honored tradition of the gaucho's *duelo criollo*. Villa Crespo in a deft move disarms Paseo with a knife jab to the wrist. Paseo flees the scene with Crespo yelling "cobarde." When Paloma thanks Villa Crespo for defending her, he replies: "¿Yo? Yo no la he defendido a usté, senorita. Lo que hice no fué más que defenderme yo de la vergüenza

de ver a un hombre castigando a una mujer." At the end of this first scene, the conventillo women take note of the cowardice of their own men and the virility and chivalry of Villa Crespo.

The last scene takes place the following Sunday night at a courtyard party. It features the famous Vacarezza tango "El Atorrante" [The Wastrel] sung by Libertad Lamarque, the celebrated tango diva, who plays the character Doce Pesos.[8] When asked to dance Paloma refuses by saying that she is not in the party mood; furthermore, she must get up early to go to work at the "fábrica." Her resolve not to return to the prior life in El Bajo is shown by her joining the growing ranks of porteño women working in the city's factories (Lavrin 59).[9] This observation must have resonated with the audience; it was a theme as well in the tangos contemporary to Vacarezza's play. Again there is irony in the former prostitute, now as a factory worker, "selling" herself to male exploiters, the factory bosses. Suddenly Paseo appears with two thugs. The band, noting the threatening appearance of the three, abruptly stops playing. The encargado Miguel exclaims: "¡La madona! ¡Paseo de Julio, el Puerto y la Costanera!" Notwithstanding the tenseness of the scene, Vacarezza still plays with the names of the thugs by treating them as if they were parts of the port area cityscape. The stage is now set for the inevitable conflict with Paseo de Julio and Paloma. The audience, entering into Vacarezza's parody of the classic love triangle, can now cheer the hero (Villa Crespo) and boo the villain (Paseo de Julio) as the hero saves the heroine Paloma, the proverbial damsel in distress.

Paloma moves to him to avoid the inevitable conflict with Paseo. To save the residents of the conventillo from possible harm, she announces that she will return with Paseo to El Bajo. Villa Crespo, shocked, professes his real feelings for her; he tells Paseo that he will defend her right to stay because he loves her. Paloma is overcome with the realization that someone good loves her. Paseo draws his revolver and Villa his knife. The men join in to defend Paloma. As the fight moves into the street, shots ring out, but Villa returns triumphant, explaining: "Y qué ha de pasar con esos gavilanes, si en cuanto erraron los primeros tiros y sintieron cosquillear el fierro, ya no se les vió ni el bulto." The play ends as Villa reaffirms his love for Paloma.

The second sainete *El conventillo del gavilán* opens in the courtyard of the tenement house which is located near Puente Alsina, a bridge that crosses the Riachuelo in the port district of La Boca. The main characters are the compadrito Puente Alsina, Mariposa, Palermo, the inversion of Paloma and a malevo, and the couples: the Gallego Tarragona and the Catalán Fermina,

and the Italian Violeta and don Lorenzo. The husbands of each pair pay little attention to their bored and unhappy wives. Palermo is described by Vacarezza as a "tipo de compadrito ventajero y sobrador" as well as "más púa y sobrador de los táitas que han rayao en esta pista." Palermo seems to be the perfect gavilán because he is rumored to have already seduced the wife of Tarragona and he is poised to seduce Violeta, the wife of don Lorenzo. Further, he has had a romantic relationship with Mariposa, the love child of Puente Alsina. Palermo's shadow is the Turk Harari who tries to emulate Palermo's every move and serves as his "secretary."

Mariposa has come to the conventillo seeking out Palermo. She wants him to marry her, but he will not mortgage his life to "love." What he will do, however, is give her a key to his room so she can come up to visit him "cuando te dá la gana." In an ugly, noisy exchange he insults her, refuses to be anything more than her lover, and goes off singing lines from the tango "En la via."[10] Mariposa, crying, yells after him "¡Canalla! ¡Más que canalla!" When Puente Alsina comes to investigate, to his surprise Mariposa calls him by name. He expresses surprise at how grown up she is, although he realizes that she was looking for one of those "mozos diablos que andan de un lao pal otro enamorando mujeres." Mariposa tells Puente Alsina how much she loves Palermo and wants him to marry her. Puente Alsina reassures her that he will do everything possible to make her wish come true.

Meanwhile, the Gallego Tarragona and the Italian Don Lorenzo are in animated conversation about an un-addressed note the Italian has found, purportedly an invitation for a midnight assignation between his wife and Palermo. The Italian vows "vendetta" and cries out that his wife is no longer his beloved "inocente palomita del paraíso" but instead "una grandísima papagalla del infierno," a humorous interjection alluding to the images of birds in the earlier sainete *El conventillo de La Paloma*. Palermo notes the uproar made by the men and promises a solution. He proposes that they spy on Palermo, catch him in the act, and punish this gavilán.

The next scene opens in the room of Palermo. (Vacarezza describes it with the slang term *bulín* indicating a place of assignation.) The other men bide their time until Lorenzo's wife shows up for her encounter with Palermo. Unexpectedly, Fermina, the wife of the Gallego, appears first and is admitted to the room. Later Lorenzo's wife Violeta shows up and is also admitted. Evidently both women have been invited to Palermo's room but at different times. Caramelo, a creole girl, knocks on the door and is admitted. The women confront each other and the creole girl, who is single, calls the Italian woman

a "tanita simuladora." Fermina, tired of hiding, is surprised to find other women in Palermo's room. Fermina flees, turning off the lights, allowing the other women to flee as well, just as the men rush from hiding and strike the hapless Palermo senseless. Vacarezza uses this scene of assignation as an occasion for making men ridiculous: the married men as cuckolds and Palermo flaunting his machismo beyond apparent masculine endurance. The only one saved from satire is Puente Alsina who stands tall as a hero should.

The final scene of the sainete opens in the patio of the conventillo now decorated for the party with all the married couples dancing. While the chastened women have made up with their husbands, they still see each other as rivals and enemies. The men seem to be oblivious, now that Palermo and their women have been put in their proper places, thanks to the efforts of Puente Alsina. They invite Palermo to join in saluting the happy couple, Mariposa and Puente Alsina. Palermo, bandaged and with an arm in a sling, tries to put on his best face, that of a petulant tough guy (compadrito). Although Mariposa greets him coolly, he asks if it is true that she plans to marry Puente Alsina. She retorts, "¡Sí, señor, absolutamente cierto¡ ¿Acaso te has figurao que 'ese tipo' es menos hombre que vos pa merecerme?" Palermo is at a loss to recoup his advantage with Mariposa who now seems to be much stronger and resistant to his "charms."

Fermina also confronts Palermo with ridicule and taunts. She notes that now her husband is far more loving than before the incident of last night. The same is repeated with each of the other women Palermo had hoped to seduce. No longer the "cock of the walk," he tells Puente Alsina that Mariposa was his girl. Puente Alsina, feigning ignorance, asks Mariposa if it was true that she loved Palermo. Mariposa ridicules the notion. Palermo, claiming to be reformed, truly loves Mariposa and he will give up his criminal ways. When Puente Alsina tells both Palermo and Mariposa that he is the father of Mariposa, both are surprised for very different reasons: Mariposa has found her long lost father and Palermo is now free to marry Mariposa. The play ends with love triumphant and with the special message that even the most evil of men (malevo) can be reformed through the love of a good woman. Mariposa, initially betrayed by Palermo, saves Palermo by demonstrating her inner strength as the sacrificing and redeeming woman (Madonna figure). The last of the Vacarezza sainetes to be analyzed is *Una escena Villa Crespo derivación de El conventillo de La Paloma*. This play is set several years later than the original *El conventillo de La Paloma*. It includes the characters Villa Crespo and Paloma and a host of new ones including the beautiful La

Marocha, who serves perhaps as a reincarnation of the young Paloma. Villa Crespo is now much older and far more subdued that he was in his first appearance in the play of 1929. He has been in prison and only recently freed. He has not seen his beloved Paloma for a long time. He still loves her but he is unsure of her feelings towards him. The same theme of good versus evil, seen in *El conventillo de La Paloma*, is repeated with Villa Crespo as the epitome of good serving as the protector of women against the improper advances of exploiting men.

Crespo intervenes to protect La Marocha from the advances of the compadrito Prepotencia.[11] Crespo forces the compadrito to back down and leave Marocha alone. She thanks Crespo for freeing her of the "brut" and asks Crespo who he is: "Mi nombre fué Villa Crespo, pero, el nombre no hace al hombre, sino lo que lleva adentro." Villa Crespo, now reformed, has shed the image of the compadrito/malevo to become a protector of women and champion of good. This new role is confirmed when Crespo interposes himself in another potential conflict between a couple and counsels patience to the jilted wife, "En la cancha del amor/siempre sale ganador/el que más sabe esperar."

Paloma enters the play in the last scenes, which take place in a cabaret. Paloma still yearns for her lost love, Villa Crespo, whom she believes to be locked away in the penitentiary. While she never went to see him, she confesses she still longs for him, a real man, unlike those of today. When the earlier sainete of *El conventillo de La Paloma* ended, we were left with the impression that Paloma and Villa Crespo were to be married. In *Villa Crespo*, however, we discover that Crespo was sent to prison for unspecified crimes. The former lovers seem burdened by their past, which they try to deny: Paloma through false frivolity, Villa Crespo through the denial of his persona and his name. With the arrival of Villa Crespo at the cabaret, we know that they will meet again.

Crespo sings a song by invitation, a song about the vices of men, wine and women, themes common to the tangos of the time. Wine is a bad counselor and women lead you astray with false promises of love, he sings. Was Paloma unfaithful? Vacarezza does not explain. Crespo ends the song with the last line: "La vaina será mentira/ pero el cuchillo es verdá." What does this mean? Is it an allusion to male and female genitalia and the relationship of love where woman is the betrayer? Is this a further allusion to the infidelity of Paloma? Is it also an allusion to women being the weaker sex and thus easily led astray by men who take advantage? Is it true that man by

his very nature is strong and correct and should serve as the protector of woman's virtue? Vacarezza has Crespo and Paloma playing roles that fit these images.

La Marocha approaches Crespo and expresses her attraction to him. Crespo, although flattered by her advances, claims to be in love with another woman. Marocha, as the beguiler, continues to tempt him but still Crespo resists temptation. He stresses that, with the passage of time, mature love becomes deeper. At this point Crespo assumes the role of matchmaker, aiding her to meet her true love. The estranged couple from the first scene come together and make up through Crespo's intervention. As the play ends, the cabaret bouncer is in the process of throwing out a drunken and disorderly woman whom Crespo does not recognize immediately as Paloma. On hearing Crespo's voice, Paloma is deeply ashamed of her behavior. She apologizes profusely, saying that she has treated him wrongly. Crespo replies emotionally:

¡Paloma, china querida!
Maltratada y dolorida,
¿por qué habré vuelto otra vez
a encontrarte en la vejez
pa castigo de mi vida?
¡Paloma!...¡China querida!

As if in answer to Crespo's question, Paloma has returned as a renewal of both their lives and not as a punishment. The past is forgotten; they embrace and the fires of their old love are renewed. Vacarezza's message is that true love will survive all kinds of barriers and good will triumph over evil.

Lily Franco, Vacarezza's biographer, described him as the prototype urban creole (15). As such, he projected a male view of the porteño cosmos dominated by the male persona: the malevo. He made use of many malevo characters in his numerous sainetes and, as noted, developed a formula for an effective sainete plot. He clearly transmitted his sense of the city, for example, through his protagonists whose names are city related. He believed that people have a symbolic relationship with the area in which they live; they not only take on the characteristics of their neighborhood, but as well, they imbue the area with their special or unique characteristics (e.g., the malevos/guapos Villa Crespo, Puente Alsina, Palermo, Maldonado). Therefore his characters function as symbols; in a sense his work is cerebral in that it is carefully planned out and each character has a special function. His use of a formula plot becomes all the more understandable. This is most apparent in

his use of the guapo-malevo personalities in what might be another Janus view of porteño society and how he used the female persona, la paloma.

The theatrical potential of such a stark contrast between the porteño guapo-malevo was recognized by few other saineteros. Alberto Vacarezza used the guapo-malevo counterpoint as a device in the three sainetes discussed in this article. In his evaluation of these plays, theatre historian Blas Raúl Gallo suggested that Vacarezza used this device to show the self-assuredness and confidence of the guapo and the supreme evilness of the malevo (Gallo 155). Gallo's comments are reasonable in light of a review of the cited sainetes. For example, in the *El conventillo de La Paloma* the conflict is between Villa Crespo, a "compadrito bueno," and Paseo de Julio, who serves as the malevo. Both of these characters represent extremes of goodness and of evil. With Paloma, the female character, they form the eternal triangle, which in the hands of Vacarezza becomes a parody. The names of the characters are symbolic: Villa Crespo is named after the working-class/lower middle class neighborhood of hard working and honest people, while Paseo de Julio is named after a street (modern Avenida Leandro Além) near the port that forms part of infamous El Bajo. In the confrontation that develops between the two, Villa Crespo defends the honor of Paloma, wins her heart, and kills the villain, Paseo de Julio. The message of the play is simple: good triumphs over evil, and those with a pure heart win out in the end. While the reputation of Paloma is not the most pure, she is capable of redemption and can become a person of virtue, a possibility recognized by Villa Crespo. The play is not a work of stirring social content; it does not call the audience to do anything other than to enjoy the presentation. Therefore, the use of the malevo character served to highlight the conflict between good and evil in the human character. This is social commentary (e.g. the human condition) and not social criticism. For example, while we know that Paloma was probably a prostitute, albeit reformed, we do not know the circumstances of her early life. Vacarezza knew, as did his audiences, of the social conditions and the scandals related to the "white slave" trade endemic in the city of Buenos Aires prior to 1935 and the government's efforts to clean up the city. Vacarezza's post-1920 sainetes contrast sharply with those written in the period prior to World War I by Nemesio Trejo, Florencio Sánchez, Carlos Pacheco, or even his own early plays (i.e., *Los escrushantes*, 1911), when the sainete was steeped in bitter criticism of the elite social and economic structure (Gallo, *passim*).

The malevo as a character had essential roles in both periods, but these roles changed. In the earlier period the malevo often was an

unredeemable villain, yet in the Vacarezza presentation of Palermo in *El conventillo del Gavilán*, the malevo character is described as having a good heart. He is even reformed to the point that he marries and settles down as a family man. Vacarezza presented Villa Crespo, in the sainete of the same name, as a paragon of virtue and fidelity, characteristics hardly ever attributed to the malevo. Equally true for the prostitute, she too had essential roles to play in both periods. Unlike the malevo, her role was consistent. In both the tango and in the sainete the role of the prostitute is that of a sad, exploited figure who often gives solace to lonely men even though she has been mistreated by men in general. The twist that Vacarezza gives to this figure in the form of the "paloma" persona is that she can be redeemed and brought to a life of virtue.

Notwithstanding the above, the Vacarezza personas in his sainetes are ironic characters drawn as caricatures in satirical terms. His supreme damsels-in-distress characters, Paloma and Mariposa, are women with hearts of gold, easily exploited and weak. They are not the model women noted for their exemplary behavior with one and perhaps both, former papusas. Villa Crespo and Puente Alsina are both "reformed" criminals whose character traits are not those we would normally associate with the status of hero. For example, Puente Alsina abandoned his daughter and her mother. Both men probably served time in prison for their criminal activities; we know for sure that Villa Crespo did. The sainetes of Vacarezza are comedies and as such we expect the characters to be humorous and at times perhaps silly. In most instances the secondary characters serve this function and often even the heroes do as well.

The plays of Alberto Vacarezza and the city of Buenos Aires are intrinsically entwined. His primary characters and the plots of his plays are, by his own admission, porteño-based: the conventillo, the immigrant-creole mix, the city's folk types of the compadrito, malevo and guapo, and the tangoesque themes of love and betrayal. We can debate how real the world of Vacarezza was. Not everyone in either Buenos Aires or in the barrio of Villa Crespo lived in a conventillo and partied in the tango bars. Not every porteño woman was a Paloma, a Mariposa, or even the conniving immigrant wives serving as the residents of the conventillos. This would not be a fair image of the inhabitants of the city, of city, or of the barrio. One historian of the city of Buenos Aires perceptively wrote: "Debe reconocerse que el sainete contribuyó a forjar el 'mito' de Villa Crespo, el cual sutituyó al barrio real, ya transformado por el progreso, convertiéndolo en un arquetipo de permanente

sugestión" (Garasa 366). Yet, clearly the cityscape of Villa Crespo and primary influence of the city of Buenos Aires in the works of Vacarezza make his sainetes truly porteño.

We can argue that Vacarezza also created the related myths of which the men and women inhabited his world of the conventillo. His plays, when they held sway, did provide a sufficiently realistic world for his audiences. When he was at his best, the porteño loved him and attended his plays in large numbers. The *Conventillo de la Paloma* had over 1000 presentations in the largest sainete theatre in the city, El Nacional (lovingly called "el templo del sainete"), on Corrientes Avenue in the heart of the theatre and cabaret district of the city. Even as late as 1998, this play could still draw packed audiences. This may be due to nostalgia for a city and a time period now long passed. Since I attended this production, I can attest to the fact that there were many young people as well as "old folks" in the audience. Perhaps the sainete, its characters and the era it represented, call forth the same sense of longing for a "simpler time" that our own current craze for the Swing Era evokes today. The same arguments can be made for the persistence of the tango and its arch protagonist, the ever-macho Carlos Gardel.

The porteño popular culture environment was male dominated, demonstrated in the tango and the sainete themes that reflected male values. Yet, males as reflected in the tango lyric, and often in the popular theatre as well, were insecure beings portrayed as dependent on the stronger female figure of an understanding, and forgiving, mother; or at the mercy of a manipulating female figure, the betraying lover or wife. Women in the sainete, especially those of Alberto Vacarezza, were ephemeral to the more fully developed male characters whose names promoted their virile and dominant personas while the women's names were those of delicate birds or insects (e.g., paloma or mariposa versus gavilán). In both the tango and in the sainete, the dominant persona is male even when in the sainete, the apparent protagonist of the play is a woman such as Paloma.

In sainetes, the relationship of married couples is peppered with infidelity or purported infidelity. Even when we have love pairs and the theme of redeeming love, it is unclear if the relationship culminated with marriage. The classic Vacarezza pair, Paloma and Villa Crespo, does not appear ever to marry. Male figures are presented as either dupes or as ambiguous figures whose evil nature is redeemed only through love, as in the cases of Palermo and Villa Crespo. Furthermore, the male sainete protagonist is generally a compadrito or a malevo known for his bravado and machismo and not known

as a sensitive loving person. This side is well hidden and perhaps is brought out by the loving female character such as Mariposa or Paloma only as part of the male's redemption. Even so, this is not clear. This ambiguity also impacted the tango male interpreters. For example, Carlos Gardel had to maintain the image of the seducer, a traditional Latin role of the macho. Yet at the same time he projected an image of a male who needed protection from women. The irony was found in the fact that the protector was a woman, the ever-sacrificing mother (Castro, "Carlos Gardel," 65ff.). Given the perspective of the Catholic society, the tradition of the Virgin Mary serving as the interceder with God to protect man is an apt analogy with the role of the tangoesque mother figure interceding with judges and other male figures to protect the son. The male is presented as the protector and ultimately the savior of the female, yet at the same time it is the love of the female that saves the male from his baser self. The female is able to penetrate the hard shell of the male with love and save him. In contrast, in the tangos the male's vulnerability is shown when his shell is penetrated by love. It destroys him. Why such inconsistency?

The male-female image inconsistency is due to the audience that each cultural expression drew. Often the tango and the sainete worlds merged. For example, in the sainete, many of the tango female interpreters also played important roles on stage as noted by the presence of Libertad Lamarque in the sainete, *El conventillo de La Paloma*. The tango was still aimed at a largely male audience because the tango bars and the cabaret were places of male entertainment. In *El conventillo del Gavilán* the men go off to a cabaret to celebrate without their wives, and in *Una escena Villa Crespo* the men are unmarried and celebrate with their girl friends. Given the level of drinking and carousing, even as late as the 1930s, the cabaret was not a place for married women. The sainete and the movies drew a mixed audience and served as sources of entertainment for families and married couples. However, since the two cultural expressions intersected, the male and female roles were not consistent. Even so, the dominance of the male figure as a more fully developed role demonstrated the persistent message of male supremacy. The granting of voting rights to women under Perón (1947) did not substantially change the subservient role of women even during the Perón Era. While it is true the emphasis was on cleaning up the image of women during this period, they still did not become true three-dimensional persons. In the official literature of the period, but not in the tango, women were presented only as the loyal helpmate, faithful wife, and sacrificing mother,

never as truly equal to men. They were still part of a male dominated society where their persona was defined within these set parameters, and even in the case of Evita, women could not step beyond these set definitions of their role in the "new" Argentina (Castro, *The Argentine Tango*, 230-232).

California State University, Fullerton

Notes

[1] Tullio Carella, in his introduction to a collection of sainetes he edited, quoted another sainetero Carlos Raúl De Paoli's formula for an effective sainete (18):

> I first get a compadrito, a Jew, a Frenchman, an Italian,
> an old gossip, a young man, a tenement house,
> a typical neighborhood street, a sleazy cafe.
> With these elements and a girl who sees
> herself as a lady, she makes a game of being a flirt,
> but in reality is a hooker,
> a boss man who exploits her, and a worker enamored
> with the girl, and follows her with the boss man,
> who makes money off the girl,
> and is much impressed with himself.

[2] For a discussion on the changing roles of women see Castro, *The Argentine Tango as Social History* 187-196 and Castro "The Massification of the Argentine Tango." See also Guy, *Sex and Danger*, passim and Lavrin, *Women*, Chapter 2, "Labor and Feminism," 53-96.

[3] Sources for these plays come from the editions of cheap quickly published theatre magazines noted in Works Cited. These were published shortly after the theatre presentations and were for popular consumption by avid sainete fans. They were published without page numbers, hence quotes given within the text of this article from these sources are given without page number references. Editions cited are from the author's personal collection.

[4] Vacarezza's inspiration for the sainete *Tu cuna fué un conventillo* was from the Pascual Contursi tango "Flor de Fango" (written in March 1920). He was also an author of several important tangos that were used in this and others plays. The most famous were "¡ Padre nuestro!" (1923) and "¡Araca, Corazón!" (1927). The conventillo that inspired Vacarezza has been located on Calle Thames (Nos. 137-139) near the Arroyo Maldonado (also fronted on Calle Serano Nos. 148-152). This Vacarezza made famous in the sainete *El conventillo de La Paloma* where he staged the play in "the happy patio" (alegre patio) of the conventillo. Clearly, Vacarezza was using a bit of poetic license in his description. Serving as one of the oldest conventillos in the city, it was originally called Conventillo Nacional. The Compañia Nacional de Calzados built it in 1888 to exclusively house its workers. By the 1920s it was a run-down slum. In addition to the neighborhood boliches (working class bar-restaurants), there were several famous tango bars and dance halls located in Villa Crespo that may have served as inspirations to Vacarezza. The most famous were the Trianón, immortalized in the Francisco Canaro tango "Muñeca brava," and the Café Venturita where Canaro played the tango violin.

[5] This character is the Galician encargado of the tenement who also states that Paloma should not be called the "dove" but instead she should be known as the "la perdicione [sic] del encargado." To show the Galician dialect, Vacarezza often replaces "g" with "j" so that "jracia" is really "gracia." *Encargado* is a term that describes the tenement's superintendent and landlord's agent.

[6] Vacarezza intentionally uses real city sites as the names for his characters as a means of giving both his characters and his plays a connection to the city of Buenos Aires and to heighten the characterization of the persona so described. For example, Villa Crespo is a working-middle class section of the city filled with hard-working good citizens and an apt description of what Villa Crespo the persona hopes to represent. It is also a parodic use of the city sites because Villa Crespo has a criminal past (and future). The same character associations of Paseo de Julio, Puente Alsina and Palermo, all names for city sites, are in this same vein.

[7] The malevo as a social type can best be described as an urbanized counterpart to the rural *gaucho malo* [renegade gaucho]. Domingo F. Casadevall described the malevo as:

> Always awake and alert to take advantage... his twisted spirit is filled with perverseness and is gifted in the power to convince others that he is to be feared. His power to dominate recognizes no bounds except perhaps the superiority of an adversary. A man of prey, with the soul of a wolf and the spirit of a lion, a man with ice for blood, a man with no remorse or conscience (47).

The theatre historian Raúl Blas Gallo, is less charitable in his description of the malevo than his colleague Casadevall. Gallo, who starts his definition of the malevo as follows: "Between the guapo and the compadrito figures slithered the resentment of the malevo, bastard child of the slum." (Editorial Quetzal, 155). He goes on the describe the persona of the malevo:

> *Repugnant being, bitter, a delinquent even though he does not rob, criminal even though he does not kill, a shadowy figure of the authentic guapo who dominates without reproach, the opposite of the malevo, who offends even if he is not able to dominate.*

Given the importance of the malevo counter figures of the *guapo* and the *compadrito*, a digression to define these might be useful to the full understanding of the malevo. Again Gallo provides the best definitions of the porteño personas. To Gallo, a guapo is a person forever in conflict with the restrictions of civilized life and the limits imposed by city life on individual freedom. The guapo was a man of great courage and bravery that was predestined to always be an outsider and his only "reward" in this life was a violent death or imprisonment. Since he was a man without a future, he lived for the moment and was always ready to do whatever was necessary to maintain his essence of *gapes*. The guapo belonged in a symbolic sense to a particular geographic place, he could not exist out of his "place;" for example, according to Gallo, "The arrarabal [urban fringe area/slum] owed its notoriety to the guapo, and at the same time the guapo got his very essence from the arrabal." (252-253) In contrast, the compadrito was not in conflict with urban society; instead he embraced it. According to Gallo, the compadrito was "a constant source on what was proper, always at the height of fashion in terms of the right clothes to wear and the correct hairdo to use." (154) While the guapo was defined by his slum neighborhood, the compadrito could exist anywhere, "the guapo outside of his ambiance ceases to exist... this is not true for the compadrito who continues to exist, compadritos there are everywhere" (153). The compadrito had to have a female companion, who he often exploited; while the guapo was rarely associated with women, he was a macho who encapsulated the epitome of masculine values; he was a man's man. While Gallo does not state this specifically, the implication is clear: the compadrito had to prove his masculinity through his mistreatment and exploitation of women, the guapo did not (153). If the compadrito should turn to the life of

a criminal, "he will be a thief of little consequence, some common thief of the unwary, or a lookout for a break-in artist." (153). In other words someone, who cannot really make it on his own, is dependent on others even for his livelihood as a thief. The compadrito was a guapo who was born prematurely and would never become fully defined.

[8] This tango is about a man who uses women for his pleasure and when done throws them away, very appropriate for the story-line of this sainete. It is a song of a woman's rebuke of deceitful male behavior.

[9] In 1917 women represented 18% of the labor force in the federal district and by 1939 women employed in both blue collar and white-collar jobs represented one third of the labor force in the Capital and province of Buenos Aires.

[10] The storyline of this tango is a man alone in a bar drinking away his sorrow acting brave and aloof to the reality of his loss of the woman he loves. He claims he is not like the other "otararios" drinking and crying; he is glad she is gone and is much better for her betrayal.

[11] Vacarezza is playing on words because *prepotente* means a person who abuses his power over the weaker and can be synonymous with malevo.

Works Cited

Carella, Tulio. *El sainete criollo.* Buenos Aires: Librería Hachette, 1957. With introduction by author.

Casadevall, Domingo F. *El tema de la mala vida en el teatro nacional.* Buenos Aires: Editorial Guillermo Kraft, n.d.

Castro, Donald S. *The Argentine Tango as Social History.* New York: The Edward Mellen Press, 1991.

_____. "Carlos Gardel and the Argentine Tango," in William Wasabaugh, ed. *The Passion of Music and Dance. Body, Gender and Sexuality.* Oxford: Berg Press, 1998. 63-78.

_____. "The Massification of the Argentine Tango. The Electronic Media, the Popular Theatre, and the Cabaret from Contursi to Perón, 1917-1955." *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 18 (1999): 28-46.

_____. "Villa Crespo: A Porteño Neighborhood. Alberto Vacarezza's Theatric View and Reality." *La Chispa 1999 Selected Proceedings.* New Orleans: Tulane University. 2000. Edited by Claire Paolini. P. 138-159.

Dubatti, José. "Notas para la clasificación del teatro de Alberto Vacarezza," in Alberto Vacarezza, *Vacarezza, Teatro.* Buenos Aires: Editorial Corregidor, 1993.

Foster, David. *Buenos Aires: Perspectives on the City and Cultural Production.* Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1998.

Franco, Lily. *Alberto Vacarezza.* Buenos Aires: Ediciones Culturales Argentinos, 1975.

Gallo, Blas Raúl. *Historia del sainete nacional.* Buenos Aires: Editorial Buenos Aires Leyendo, 1970.

_____. *Historia del sainete nacional.* Buenos Aires: Editorial Quetzal, 1958.

Garasa, Delfin L. *La otra Buenos Aires*. Buenos Aires: Sudamerica/Planeta, 1987.

Guy, Donna J. *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family, and Nation in Argentina*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995.

Lavrin, Asunción. *Women, Feminism, and Social change in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, 1890-1940*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998.

Matamoro, Blás. *La cuidad del tango: Tango histórico y sociedad*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Galerna, 1969.

Ordaz,Luis, ed. *Breve historia del teatro argentino*. 7 vols. Buenos Aires: Editorial Universitaria de Buenos Aires, 1963-1965.

Podestá, José. *Medio siglo de farándula*. Buenos Aires: n.p., 1930.

Pujol, Sergio. *Valentino en Buenos Aires: Los años veinte y el espectáculo*. Buenos Aires: Emceé Editores, 1994.

Vacarezza, Alberto. "El cambalache de la Buena Suerte." *La Escena,Revista teatral,* VIII.343 (January 22, 1925): n.p.

_____. "El conventillo del Gavilán." *La Escena, Revista teatral*, XIV.682 (July 23, 1931): n.p.

_____. "El conventillo de La Paloma." *La Escena, Revista teatral*, XVII. 585 (September 12, 1929): n.p.

_____. *Teatro.*Vol. 1. Buenos Aires: Editorial Corregidor, 1993. Only one volume published. Edited by Osvaldo Pellettieri who also wrote introductory comments.

_____. "Villa Crespo." *La Escena, Revista teatral*, XV.754 (December 8, 1931): n.p.

Vilariño, Idea. *Tangos, antología*, 2 vols. Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de la America Latina, 1981.