

The Argentine Stage: Temporada '76

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It was a very good year, in spite of all dire predictions. This is the essence of the cover story of the Sunday magazine of *La Nación* of August 22. The title of the seven-page, illustrated account reads "Teatro: Un año para recordar." Also on the cover appear full-color photos of scenes from five plays. Inside, one-inch capitals spell out EL MILAGRO TEATRAL. The unsigned, detailed overview finds it paradoxical that in the throes of the worst economic crisis—the political upheaval is not mentioned—Buenos Aires should have a season labelled "Una de las más fecundas de los últimos años." How did this appear to an outsider, who could only judge the current facts of the theatrical phenomenon?

It was my third visit to Buenos Aires, but the intervals had been such that I was barely able to keep up on developments by distant reading. Two one-week visits in 1947/8, from residence in Montevideo with a project involving the La Plata Theatre of the start of the century, had acquainted me with some survivors of that period and others then going strong, like Eichelbaum. But my visits were not quite in season and netted little current information. When I returned to Argentina in 1966, it was likewise short—two weeks—and my bibliographical project in comparative literature had somewhat sidetracked my long-term commitment to the theatre. Nevertheless, I saw plays at a time of decline of the "Teatros Independientes," one of beginning experimentation, and of a dull and dulling presidency. I do recall Carlos Gorostiza's *Los prójimos*, inspired by a tragic episode in New York. In 1976 it was different. My project, on the more recent narrative of Mujica Láinez, sponsored by the OAS, permitted me to spend three months in Argentina, at the height of the season. Nothing prevented me from watching it closely and, after collecting the data on the narrative, from devoting considerable time to plays, theatrical publications, and people of the theatre. My general observations were often corroborated by newspaper commentaries, such as the above survey in *La Nación* and by interviews.

The vitality of the Argentine theatre is quite apparent quantitatively. For instance, the survey of August 22 refers to sixty *estrenos* in the current season. While I cannot confirm this, with my limited June-to-August experience and little knowledge of holdovers from previous seasons, the striking fact remains that the *cartelera teatral* of each weekend included about forty different performances of the legitimate stage, plus some "café-concert" items, and a large number of *teatro infantil* shows (not just puppets). The newspaper *Clarín* once referred to seventy-two adult and fifty children shows, but these figures seem to me exaggerated. Still, my sample count of forty from any Sunday's *La Nación*, is comparable to the *New York Times* weekend listing for Broadway, Off-Broadway and Off-Off-Broadway. Children shows, to be sure, were limited to weekends; adult plays were available also on three to five week days, with at least one set aside for *descanso*. Therefore, the public had ample choice, even as regards location, due to progressive decentralization, with performances now ranging from the Boca to the Barrio Norte and beyond.

An examination of the *cartelera* revealed that in Buenos Aires the commercial stage still dominates. Unlike Mexico, Argentina lacks a sizeable public-subsidized theatre. There is only one state theatre and two municipal ones. The University made a weak effort to present three plays of classical antiquity. (In the provinces university theatres may have disappeared in the political turmoil.) The famous Teatro Colón had not yet pulled out from decadence and survived, without an opera season, on concerts and ballet. It presented no serious competition to the theatre of spectacular musical reviews, proven international and national box office hits, and many spirited small-scale operations. There was the usual complaint about inroads from film, radio, and, more recently, television (which likewise presented live plays and provided work and experience for the country's dramatic writers), but it was generally agreed that attendance had not fallen off. Yet attendance statistics are revealing: During the July 18th weekend, the top billing went to *La risa es salud*, a showy *revista* stressing back nudity—perhaps an Argentine favorite—with over 1000 spectators. This was followed, but not closely, by 535 tickets sold for *Coqueluche*, a popular comedy. Next was *Anillos para una dama*, the clever Spanish satire on the frustrated efforts of the Cid's widow to remarry, with 475 *entradas*. Then Arthur Miller's *El precio*, with 322. On the other end of the scale were the numerous small theatres, seating one hundred or less, where we found ourselves among the thirty to fifty younger, curious spectators of very interesting performances. The crowds, middle-class and middle-aged, went to the commercial and the foreign theater.

The latter included not only foreign plays in Spanish versions or Argentine adaptations, often using the *voseo*, but also foreign touring companies. There was a 1976 season of each the British, French, and Spanish theatre, and, before we arrived, an Italian and a brief Mexican one. *Aficionados* of foreign plays one night had their choice of three Molière, two Arthur Miller and two Giraudoux works.

The attached charts contain data collected in June, July and August; they are comprehensive but not 100% complete. On them the national theatre which includes an occasional Uruguayan is well represented, though perhaps inferior—with exceptions—in performance and attendance records. Some report mentioned a 30% ratio for local creations, which on the whole may be accurate. But the *porteños* hardly know anything of the production of other Latin American countries. As a matter of fact, I found very little Mexican theatre in the otherwise excellent, specialized library of Argentores. The dramatists Cuzzani and Pavlovsky, in conversations, used nearly the same wording describing the situation: "We are an island, somehow connected with Europe."

Another observation concerns the continued emphasis on the traditional diva system, with a number of one-man shows. In fact, the *Nación* article appropriately used the English term "One-Woman-Show." However, there were also remnants of theatrical collectives, which may find things difficult because of political implications. This, of course, need not be, since the closest possible co-operation of author-director-actors-technicians is not a monopoly of the left. Indeed, the theatre in Buenos Aires, as it should be, is not merely a literary phenomenon and plays are often billed and acclaimed as the work of certain directors. Although there are exceptions, success for a dramatist may mean two

or more well-received productions, not necessarily multi-season hits. With 10% royalties, faithfully disbursed, the hope to survive on more than one show, like in the days of the old *sainete criollo*, still exists. However, with the exception of a few top names, the theatre, in the Argentine capital, is to a considerable extent a part-time activity and the actor, writer or director may be a bureaucrat, salesman, or psychiatrist. (Three of the latter are currently involved with the theatre.) The figure of 500 people connected with the stage, estimated by *La Nación*, may be much too low, given the extensive repertoire. But there can hardly be big money in the theatre—except for stars—with the price structure of August 1976. Tickets sold at 100 to 500 pesos (the latter figure possibly including a drink), which is equivalent to a range from the cost of eight subway tokens to that of two kilos of choice beef—corresponding dollar figures meaning little.

At show time the crowds still mill around on Avenida Corrientes in the capital, and in the country's second city, Rosario, twenty-six different shows were reported to be available in July, including revivals of Discépolo and Arlt. There was not much going on in Córdoba when we were there, but the papers cited performances of one Molière play and one by Adellach.

Marginal items to be reported are the *cartelera* listing of stage readings—poems by Borges and José Hernández (with guitar accompaniment), Lorca and Machado—and the success of the old Viennese operetta, *El Conde de Luxemburgo*, by Lehar. It was interesting to note that the latter drew numerous parents with children, as did the ballet. Another concern of the audiences was clearly seen in the popularity of plays on matrimonial problems—four of them running concurrently—which I, however, consider escapist, since social and political themes were patently avoided under a new military regime. There was an obvious lack of direction in spring, as the governing Junta was known to be anti-Marxist and anti-Peronist but also stressing moral and cultural values (unlike its predecessors that wanted to put *sainetes* into the Teatro Colón and favored tango shows). The new authorities, of course, intervened in the public theatres, but the appointment of the noted critic Kive Staif to head the San Martín and to change its course in forty-eight hours was generally well received.

In the area of theatrical scholarship I noted the fading of the Instituto Nacional de Estudios de Teatro, but found Argentores, the Society of Dramatic Writers, maintaining its standards of activities and library. However, the publication of plays under the Carro de Tespis label, as well as the private Talía had stopped, yet efforts were being made to resume. In this connection, the election of Juan Carlos Ghiano to the Academy also must be mentioned. The literary critic and dramatist filled the chair of Martín Coronado, one of an earlier period. His "discurso de ingreso," on the "Epoca de oro del teatro," was actually an attempt to demythify the age of Florencio Sánchez. I was fortunate in being able to converse with him, the above-mentioned director Staif, the President of Argentores, R. Talice, professors Castagnino and Berenguer Carisomo, and the dramatists Carella, Cuzzani, Adellach, Gambaro, and Pavlovsky, whose observations were quite in line with the reports in the newspapers (*La Nación*, *La Prensa*, *Clarín* and occasional others) as well as my own observations.

There may be an absence or the eclipse of big names in today's Argentine theatre, compared to earlier periods, but one can say that in Buenos Aires there

is a favorable climate for a lively theatre, both universal and national, in spite of the fact that on the way to a show the *porteños* may read headlines citing the number of dead in the struggle against and among subversives and they may be stopped by two security officers, one checking identification, the other standing by with a submachinegun, not an uncommon occurrence in the season of 1976.

SUNY Buffalo

ARGENTINE PLAYS

Author	Title	Theatre	Observations
A. Adellach	<i>Arena que la vida se llevó</i>	Payró	
A. Adellach	<i>Homo dramático</i>	Colonial	3 one-acters, 2nd season (One available in English)
A. Adellach	<i>Vecinos y amigos</i>		Shown in Córdoba (<i>Voz del interior</i> , July 13)
A. Cuzzani	<i>Cuzzani el breve</i>	Del Centro	2nd season, 3 one-acters
S. De Cecco y	<i>El gran deschave</i>	Regima	2nd season, "un boom de la temporada" (<i>Clarín</i> , July 8)
A. Chulak			one-man show of Chernicof
R. Chernicof	<i>¿Yo? Argentino</i>	Teatros de San Telmo	
A. Gasalla	<i>Gasalla for export</i>	Estrellas	
G. Gambaro	<i>Sucede lo que pasa</i>	T. Popular de la ciudad	120 performances by July (Article in <i>Nación</i> Magazine, June 27)
J. Goldenberg	<i>Fifty-fifty</i>	Eckos	Based on improvisations of two actors
C. Gorostiza	<i>La Gallo y yo</i>	Casa de Castagnino	one-woman show of Rosa Gallo
R. Halac	<i>2º tiempo</i>	Lasalle	
G. Laferrère	<i>Las de Barranco</i>	El periscopio	A vanguard version of the Argentine classic
J. Langsner	<i>Esperando la carroza</i>	Del Centro	Uruguayan dramatist
L. Macchi	<i>Parra</i>	Ateneo	2nd season, 170 performances
R. Mahieu	<i>Juegos en la hora de la siesta</i>	Eckos	On a great actor of old
Malfatti-Llanderías	<i>Dulce, dulce vida</i>	San Martín	Well on the way to be a hit (New author)
C. Mathus	<i>La lección de anatomía '76</i>	Theatron	Last peronista revival of "popular culture"
E. Pavlovsky	<i>Telarañas</i>		4th season, out-of-town success, 2000 performances
A. Rivas	<i>Amanecer</i>	Barracas del sur (within a mental hospital)	Announced but cancelled by T. Payró; to be first performed in Rome, Italy, October, '76
R. Romero	<i>Coqueluche</i>	Blanca Podestá	2nd season
E. Rovner	<i>Una pareja</i>	Payró	5th season nearly 2000 performances (article in <i>La nación</i> , August 15th)
E. Sábato	<i>Yo odio, yo odio, yo amo</i>	San Martín	Psychiatrical expertise
F. Sánchez	<i>Barranca abajo</i>	San Martín	A medley with input from the novelist/essayist
R. Talesnik	<i>Cien veces no puedo</i>	González Tuñón	A prestige revival of a classic
R. Talesnik and H. T.	<i>El chucho</i>	Santa María	100 performances, but a "mistake"