

Theatre in Buenos Aires: 1976-1977

CHARLES B. DRISKELL

I reached Buenos Aires during the peak of the 1976 theatre season, which was "a year to remember,"¹ and departed just as the 1977 season was going with all the stops out. During the year I spent in Argentina, I was fortunate enough to talk with some fifteen playwrights and several critics while being afforded an opportunity to see theatre as it is made in Buenos Aires. My intention here is to record some of my observations (keeping in mind George Schanzer's comments on the 1976 season²) and to address myself, as well, to several Argentine plays I saw while searching for some conclusions based on new perspectives.

No longer was the play the sting in 1976, and, in the face of an economic crisis, the euphoria felt in the Buenos Aires theatre was perhaps, in certain respects, unwarranted. The theatre flourished, to some extent, because black lists in television and cinema were in force, few Argentine films were being made, and many actors (Alfredo Alcón, for example) returned to making theatre; and, in part, because cinema choices were not up to par. By exercising an alternative choice, the younger movie audience went looking for good theatre. In what was the best theatre season in a decade for Buenos Aires, in spite of all the "ominous predictions,"³ roughly one-half of the plays performed were Argentine, but, following the maxim "there's nothing more modern than the classics," a return to these was in evidence, and the *élan* was based, to a large degree, on foreign texts such as *Equus*. Very few Argentine plays were successful at the box office.

The exodus of several writers, especially to Spain, and the economic situation of the theatre in the hands of impresarios who prefer to produce sure hits from London or Broadway were two important contributory factors. Then too, some of the better productions, such as *Parra*, were a *succès d'estime*, but dismal box-office failures. In view of this, certain theatre people were asking whether there is an Argentine theatre or is it a heteronomous Argentine manner of making theatre?

Several good Argentine plays opened in 1976, but few received proper critical attention and not all of them were popular successes. A few new names appeared

on the billboards—Roma Mahieu, Alberto Drago, and Jorge Goldenberg are examples—and several well-known, if not always accepted, playwrights had theatrical premieres. As a prefatory remark, it must be said that most Argentine playwrights were concerned with writing about what they knew best, that is, the Argentine milieu, if not the *porteño*.

Griselda Gambaro is always an original playwright. Like Armando Discépolo, her plays transcend the limits of Argentine theatre. Her newest play, *Sucede lo que pasa*, was probably the best Argentine play of 1976. The plot of its two acts dramatizes the simple story, seemingly disordered, of characters who exist on the fringes of society, a sick youth (Tito) and his sister (Teresa). Tito is a smalltime thief. Other characters are his thievish sidekick, the boss who handles stolen goods, and a young doctor who diagnoses Tito's incurable disease. The play follows the structure of a soap opera, with the events presented in a restrained, Naturalistic manner: stereotyped characters who are indifferent and insensitive to pain, sickness, and death. The characters tend to hide behind their games and their laughter.

Sucede lo que pasa tells the story of Teresa's coming of age, of her passage from adolescence to maturity. Into this world of stereotypes, through the imminent death of Tito, bits and pieces of life begin to filter through the crevices, and we witness the demise of stereotypes. Games turn into reality once more as Teresa experiences life through death, which enriches her understanding of life. A work carefully wrought with contradiction and ambiguity, Gambaro's play turns the soap-opera structure into an excuse for something else, because the "work," i.e., Teresa's emotional growth, is born from the foundation laid by television serials. Suddenly Teresa can no longer play because she has grown up and something new awaits her. The ending is inconclusive but it is concerned with authentic vitality. Gambaro says that "no nos conmueve la muerte de una persona" and Teresa is permitted here the enjoyment of the "innocence of her emotions," with her emotional equilibrium placed on a tightrope.

Sucede lo que pasa presents a truncated story, an accessible one, concerned with the making of choices and with passivity. One critic called the play a "borrador inconexo" and it was generally lambasted as something *sentimentaloide*. During the 1960's Griselda Gambaro was charged with being "absurdist," with favoring foreign ways, which was pure invention. Her latest work is a new encounter, an attempt to unify the fabricated tendencies that have divided the making of Argentine theatre (i.e., the polemics between "social realists" and "autores de vanguardia").

Sábado de vino y gloria by the talented Alberto Drago, a new author, opened in 1976 at the Sala Molière, where it enjoyed little success at the box office. During the course of Drago's three scenes, we can see, in its intimate fusion of comedy and tragedy, an example of what is a contemporary *grotesco*. In my opinion, Griselda Gambaro's play lends context to this work, poorly judged by the critics. In this play, a sister has postponed her own happiness in order to play mother and sister to her brothers. A birthday party becomes the catalyst and detonator for feelings repressed for a long time. A minor, everyday conflict in the family environment is given a poetic metamorphosis.

At the Teatro Payró, a play by Alberto Adellach, who now works in Spain,

was staged bearing a title that renders homage to Homero Manzi: . . . *Arena que la vida se llevó*. The work is a team effort, according to Adellach, "un poema de nuestra inmediatez." The play consists of a series of vignettes from *porteño* life, a sort of collective memory given dramatic form by Adellach. In an appeal for understanding and to our sensibilities, we find infancy, love, God, death, and neighborhood streets among the topics incorporated into the scenes. The work bears an affinity with *Sucede lo que pasa*.

Roma Mahieu wrote her one-act *opera prima* in one night. Her *Juegos a la hora de la siesta* was awarded both the Molière and Talía prizes for the best Argentine play of 1976. After its premiere at the Sala ECKOS, the work had enjoyed 300 performances by July, 1977, and the Polish-born playwright was very much in vogue, with the best press of any dramatist in Argentina. A production of the play opened in Montevideo in 1977, and there is a film version to be made. Despite its critical accolades, the play is more than anything else a sketch for a greater work.

In *Juegos* . . . playing guns after school turns into the real thing. Games played in the plaza by seven children, between the ages of five and eight, become a kind of war in the end as the specter of tragedy hovers over the playful group. When coupled with lots of improvisation in the excellent *mise en scène*, the effect was devastating.

But *Juegos* is not a play about children. Conscious irony makes it a dramatic metaphor for the physical, moral, and emotional violence of the adult world. Even with its structural weaknesses—the ending seems somewhat forced and contrived—the play expresses, in an imaginative fashion, the existing guidelines upheld in that world, replete with fearful aggression, competition, greed, a search for social status and the process of conglomeration, appearances, social ostracism for the non-conformists, and the dictator. Under the watchful eye of a *loco*, the children play at soldiers, statues, explorers, and artists, even performing a wedding—all part of their conditioning—, and the final crime is supposed to be the natural consequence of these games. Hide and seek, after all, has its dramatic aspect and its pathos.

This work can easily be seen as an allegory of how the middle-class adult world molds and influences, in part, via television: the seeds of the future are to be found in the soil of the present. In violent, *porteño* language, the play also manifests the erroneous, idyllic view some of us hold of the child's world, where one finds the greatest of extremes (as contrasted with the refreshing innocence found in another successful spectacle, *¡Qué porquería es el glóbulo!*, which *was* about children). On another level and in a tragicomic vein, *Juegos* asks the spectator to reflect on his own reality. It can be seen as an antifascist work, as a disquisition on power—dependence and submission to it—, which is one of the recurrent themes in contemporary Argentine theatre.

Marital conflicts in and out of the home were *de rigueur* in 1976 in the theatre. The best play to deal with these was *Segundo tiempo* by Ricardo Halac, which was his first play in eight years. It was billed as "escenas de la vida conyugal porteña." Some very colloquial but agile dialogue is found in this two-act play in which ideas are questioned. Man and woman are alienated and they indulge in playing games. All the needed changes are suggested by the woman. But it is

difficult for the spectator to feel alienated to what happens on stage because the action has intrigue as well as a pathetically political side, which is implied through reiteration, although Halac takes no position. After Marisa and Pablo, the couple, have become reconciled, the play ends, but the ambivalent outcome of their marriage is just that, if anything. A "tercer tiempo" will be played off-stage, within the spectator. In this work, marriage and soap-opera structure are used once more as an apology for something else. We also find here the *sine qua non* of the grotesque in inextricable fusion, the dramatic and the comic, pain and humor.

As the 1976 theatre season was coming to an end, revivals were staged of several celebrated Argentine plays. A new production of Agustín Cuzzani's *Los indios estaban cabreros* had some success and a fairly long run. The new production gave free rein to the farcical aspect of Cuzzani's *farsátira*. Nine years after its premiere, Ricardo Talesnik's *La fiaca* was given a second Buenos Aires opening, directed as before by Carlos Gorostiza. The play revealed itself to be still somewhat applicable to the present, though it was something less than a successful revival.

As though a search for the roots of contemporary Argentine drama were taking place, 1977 was the year to exhume and reevaluate Armando Discépolo and the *grotesco criollo*. In a program called "Discépolo X 2," the Teatro San Martín inaugurated its new season with *Mustafá*, a sainete, and *Mateo*, the author's first *grotesco* (1923). Productions of varying quality of *Stéfano*, *El organito*, and *Babilonia* came one after another in other theatres. Towards the end of the season, *El movimiento continuo* was given a new representation, confirming once more the permanent validity of Discépolo's plays, which are now Argentine classics, and the authenticity of his characters.

A commendable cooperative effort is being made by a theatre group called Grupo de Trabajo. The mentor of the group seems to be Carlos Gorostiza. It set out to provide revivals of Argentine plays from the last two decades. Gorostiza's *El pan de la locura* (1958) was given a wonderful production under the direction of Héctor Aure. Other works slated for production were *Réquiem para un sábado a la noche* (1964) by Germán Rozenmacher, *Nuestro fin de semana* (1964) by Roberto Cossa, and *Amarillo* (1965) by Carlos Somigliana. As it turned out, the Grupo de Trabajo staged one of the best and most successful works of the 1977 season, a new play by Roberto Cossa.

Announcements for the new season contained few Argentine titles. The season promised a "visión universal." Among the "classic" authors represented were Sophocles, Euripides, Molière, Shakespeare, Kleist, Shaw, Wilde, Ghelderode, and García Lorca. Together with these, a production of *A Chorus Line* was anticipated, but I've not seen it materialize. What did materialize were productions of plays by Israel Horowitz and Leonard Malfi. The Teatro San Martín offered a *commedia dell'arte* spectacle, written by Patricio Esteve. The list of premieres of Argentine plays included: *El postre* by Luis Carlos Edelman, *Dúo de flauta y batería* by Roberto Perinelli, *Encantado de conocerla* by Oscar Viale, *Visita* by Ricardo Monti, *Lo frío y lo caliente* and *¿Lobo estás?* by Pacho O'Donnell, *El invitado* by Mario Diamant, and *La nona* by Roberto Cossa. Most of these works were staged and several were successful. In addition, Juan Carlos Ghiano's

fine work *Narcisa Garay, mujer para llorar* was given a new staging late in the season.

Visita is Ricardo Monti's third play and, in my opinion, the finest Argentine play of the 1977 season. Before it opened in Buenos Aires, *Visita* had already won in 1976 the Carlos Arniches Prize from Spain and this year it received, as well, the Juan Sujo Prize from Venezuela. The Equipo del Teatro Payró, under the direction of Jaime Kogan, gave the work an extraordinary *mise en scène* in which a new kind of theatre language was manifested, using special lighting and sound effects that created climates. The play stirred up sufficient interest and curiosity among the spectators to stage Friday-night debates with the playwright and guest artists. It was, indeed, a play to be seen twice.

The young author of *Visita* describes the play as "una especie de relato de una crisis" given the structure of a poem, or a metaphor, in which we see dramatized man's descent into his "zona interna y su lucha contra los personajes que lo habitan." These "personajes" are *fantasmas*, social and personal stereotypes, who live in a mansion covered on the inside with a verdigris patina. The man who makes the "visit" to the putrid, claustrophobic mansion inhabited by Perla and Lali is named Equis, a serious individual and an outsider who represents the life force in opposition to his antagonists, who represent death. Equis finds a repugnant and yet fascinating environment, and he is asked to stay in this mansion of cruelty.

The dream sequence which we find in *Visita* also belongs to what we are familiar with, and synthesizes suggestively the quintessence of oppositions, like a tapestry woven of different levels: individual, social, philosophical, metaphysical, and religious. But it is Monti's aesthetic perception that we most admire. As in a grotesque Goya etching, *Visita* allows the spectator to approach the quotidien in a new way. In the author's use of the *doppelgänger*, the play's menacing, phantasmagorical quality in what Equis encounters makes his visit quickly nightmarish and infernal. In this enigmatic play, Equis is concerned with two important matters: first, he is forced to deal with his personal identity, or his ambivalent self, and the loss of it; secondly, he is obsessed by a fear of death. His inner self is revealed to him (the *doppelgänger*) in the form of Perla, Lali, and the dwarfish Gaspar, who represents Equis arrested in time. These visible "fantasmas" represent his past as well as his present, and are intent on modulating his future.

Visita is a play that has a disconcerting effect on the spectator. Its elements are an amalgam of Argentine reality—all the while avoiding *costumbrismo*—and the universal scheme of things. The work is open to various interpretations, such as a dramatization of the struggle between life and death, of power, of a sacrificial rite, but it is, in essence, via its linguistic ambiguities, whatever the spectator wishes it to be. The play reminds one of the plays of August Strindberg, Edward Albee's *The American Dream*, and Thomas Mann's novels, as well as other works, but *Visita* is original in its grotesque, or tragicomic, vision of man's complexities, his suffering, and his struggle to retain his freedom—which is, in turn, a life-death struggle—in a rigid and sinister world. These abbreviated comments can only suggest the richness of Monti's text.

Roberto Cossa's *La nona* was the second successful Argentine play of the season. Directed by Carlos Gorostiza, *La nona* is a very *porteño* allegory about the omnivorous *abuelita* of a rather poor family that is destroyed in its efforts to

satisfy her gluttony. The magnificent staging emphasized her appetite in a realistic fashion, with piles of empty boxes. Full of black humor, this play is almost an *esperpento criollo* and has strong vibrations from the *grotesco criollo* as well, as tragedy and comedy are merged in the working-class family environment.

Cossa's dramatic creations seem real to the spectator, even though only the *nona* is clearly not a type. The gluttonous granny is a sinister, all-absorbing individual who literally eats everyone to death but herself. In the course of the play, she devours her old-maid daughter, her grandchildren, the wife of one of them, her great-granddaughter, and an eighty-year-old husband. And notwithstanding, her cruelty is hilarious when she says, "buon giorno," "formaggio," etc. What talking she does is concerned with eating and the rest of the family is there to sate her steady appetite. All to their detriment.

Cossa's new course, from "realism" to the grotesque of cruelty, scratches the surface of the metaphysical and has universal application. *La nona* lacks a clear message, but among other possibilities, the *nona* may represent time, the consumer society, the matriarchal society, or the charismatic leader.

In July another play with black humor and an impending atmosphere of doom was given a premiere at the Payró: *Extraño juguete*, by Susana Torres Molina. Her first play is the story of the bizarre relationship that two spinster sisters, who suffer from abulia and hate each other, enter into with a traveling salesman (played by the playwright's husband, Eduardo Pavlovsky) who manages to get into their house. Scenes of fear, cruelty, and pathos tempered and controlled by black humor lend substance to the shadow of imminent tragedy as the three characters recount episodes from their past, until they suddenly reveal that it is all an act, i.e., an enacted plot, designed to entertain two bored sisters who expect to act out a new text next week, which their purveyor, the salesman, will furnish. This is their strange toy. Torres Molina's play maintains dramatic tension and its dialogue is very lively. The text was written with the actor very much in mind.

Following certain performances at the Teatro Payró of *Extraño juguete*, debates took place. It was the kind of play I would have liked to see a second time. This somber, entertaining comedy was expected to open also in Madrid under the title *El juguete* and the direction of Norman Briski.

Roma Mahieu's second play to premiere in as many years was *María Lamuerte*, and it was a failure on the stage. The work deals with the game of power and how free one is to exercise it. In the play, a masochistic niece is subjected to the violence and domination of her sadistic uncle. The two show themselves to be involved in a relationship based on dependence and submission, à la Beckett, but in its lack of clarity, and despite an underlying mythical horror and mystery that might be exploited, the work amounts to no more than a humorous sketch, or a kind of *grand guignol*.

I will mention only the titles of four other Argentine plays that opened in 1977: 1) *Lo frío y lo caliente* by Pacho O'Donnell (a mother-daughter relationship treated by a psychoanalyst); 2) *El postre* by Luis Carlos Edelman (a one-act sacrificial rite); 3) *Familia se vende* by Eugenio Griffiero (a good monologue that turns into a *walpurgisnacht* for a woman whose husband is leaving her); and 4) *Historias alegremente crueles* by Alberto Drago (part of the Teatro's Payró's "Encuentros 1977").

In addition to the Grupo de Trabajo, two other Buenos Aires groups deserve special mention for their theatrical ventures: the Equipo del Teatro Payró and the Grupo de Repertorio. Since its founding in 1968, the Payró group has supported Argentine theatre and around fifty Argentine authors have been presented in the theatre's "ciclos de autor nacional" and "encuentros." (Why not in the Teatro San Martín?) Out of six spectacles at the Payró in June, 1977, five were Argentine works by playwrights such as Monti, Mahieu, Goldenberg, and Griffero. Beginning in November, something new for Buenos Aires theatre was to be offered: noon theatre, with works by Roberto Arlt, Eduardo Pavlovsky, and Eduardo Rovner. The group's artistic director, Jaime Kogan, is particularly interested in the *equipo* and in making the author an integral part of the creative staging process. Kogan, who is an extremely rigorous director, allows that his own *equipo* should risk doing more plays.

Under the imaginative guidance of its young director, Agustín Alezzo, the Grupo de Repertorio staged three hits in 1976—which were restaged in 1977—and by giving young directors free rein in the selection of texts, technical collaborators, and actors, the group had planned an eclectic program for 1977. Some ten spectacles were scheduled for production, including Israel Horowitz's *El primero*, Colin Higgin's *Harold and Maude*, and a sainete. Anything that might be said for the dynamism, youth, and vitality of this group must be laudatory.

It was a good year, a euphoriant year, for the Argentine theatre, with quantitative vitality and productions of high quality, especially as regards set designs. As actors felt a need to further develop their skills, an abundance of theatre workshops suddenly made the scene. The emergence of *equipos*, with a new breed of director and the author present as guides, may prove to be a significant development. The official theatres were extremely busy in 1977, but with neither younger names nor with new Argentine plays. The demise of the *Revista Talía* left playwrights in Argentina without a place to publish in Buenos Aires, and very few plays are being published anywhere. A critical need is being felt for published texts. Another felt need is for intelligent theatre criticism by critics with expertise, and a magazine devoted to this task that will receive the scattered criticism being written.

Along with an almost total absence of plays from other Latin American countries, I noted few names of contemporary Argentine dramatists whose works were being staged in Buenos Aires. This is attributable, in part, to an exodus from Argentina of playwrights such as Alberto Adellach, Griselda Gambaro (who plans to return), Oscar Viale, and Pacho O'Donnell.

Many, many plays are being written in Argentina by lucid, talented playwrights, or aspiring playwrights, but few of these young playwrights manage to see their works staged. Ricardo Monti is a *rara avis* in this respect, "joven pero consagrado." There is not what might be called a coherent drama movement among a group of writers. A generation gap exists and, consequently, the art of the theatre in Argentina is lacking in continuity. A recent Argentores competition attracted over 200 new works, of which at least ten per cent were worth reading. Besides Monti, who may very well become the first internationally known Argentine playwright, the list of new playwrights for tomorrow includes Alberto Drago, Elio Gallípoli, Marta Gavenski, Jorge Hayes, Luis Macchi, Roberto Perri-

nelli, Rolando Revagliatti, and Susana Torres Molina. Only with the maturity of young dramatists such as these and with opportunities extended to them will the Argentine theatre live, grow, and develop, and that would be true vitality.⁴

University of California, Los Angeles

Notes

1. "Teatro: un año para recordar" was the cover story of the Sunday magazine of *La Nación*, No. 372 (August 22, 1976), 1.

2. See George O. Schanzer, "The Argentine Stage: Temporada '76," *Latin American Theatre Review*, 10/1 (Fall 1976), 90-93.

3. Ernesto Schoó, "Las candilejas de la crisis," *La Opinión Cultural*, Sunday, September 12, 1976, 3.

4. These observations were made possible by a dissertation grant under the auspices of the Fulbright-Hays Act.