

The Buenos Aires Theatre, 1966-67

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In the past decades in Argentina there has been a remarkable expansion in the performing arts, especially in the theatre. Observers are immediately impressed by the movement in and enthusiasm for the theatre in Buenos Aires, center of this dramatic renaissance. Unfortunately, the theatre in the provinces remains in a somewhat retarded state: whatever theatre exists tends to be derivative and tributary. The capital city, however, boasts some sixty theatres which offer a broad selection to theatre-goers, plays ranging from all periods of American and European drama as well as works by national playwrights. Such diversity and contact with international currents have helped the contemporary Argentine dramatist to create a vital and more sophisticated national theatre, as witnessed in the recent 1966-67 season. Likewise, the rejection of the commercial theatre with its economic motivations, and the rapid rise of non-profit organizations (*los independientes*) whose interests are primarily artistic, have radically changed the structure of the theatre in Buenos Aires.¹

The trajectory of Argentine drama in the twentieth century from Florencio Sánchez finds roots in many *realismos*: *realismo crítico*, *realismo fotográfico*, *realismo psicológico*, as well as the cherished *realismo costumbrista*. But from 1950 up to the present moment, the drama has acquired multiple and rather refreshing dimensions in that it is a more liberated form, embracing technical innovations and exhaustive, intellectual interpretations of frustration, failure, social and political involvement and isolation. The young dramatist creates new moods, as opposed to ultimate declamations, and reflects not only Argentine reality in the immediate, exterior sense but probes the realities of the universal human condition.

The most exciting activity of the present-day experimental theatre in Argentina is to be found at the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, a foundation formed in 1958 to patronize the fine arts and foster sociological investigations. Di Tella is essentially a theatrical laboratory where young writers may experiment with technique, theme and representation in adapting audiovisual phenomena to the stage. Although the center has been wrongly accused of snobism, spectacle and lack of commitment, it

has contributed to the promotion of vanguardistic and creative literary currents as well as to the discovery and introduction of new authors and their works. Among these, two dramatists are outstanding: Mario Trejo and Griselda Gámbaro.²

Mario Trejo, forty-year-old poet, playwright, and director is an interesting personality who has presented two inquisitions on the stage, *Libertad y otras intoxicaciones* and *Libertad y más intoxicaciones*. Both works given in 1967 represent the "living theatre" and are politically committed. The spectators must take the responsibility of either participating by condemning the ideological issues at hand or of being found guilty themselves. The first play is a vigorous denunciation and indictment of totalitarianism, while the second speaks out intensely against a particular kind of totalitarianism, Nazi fascism. The scenes depicted by Trejo are enervating, often violent and grotesque. However, the author is rather optimistic in spite of such gloom, for he believes the lone and suffering individual will be helped by his fellow man (as seen in the second play). Not only is Trejo a radical who believes in drama as a social act, but he subscribes as well to the esthetic that drama is an outgrowth of ancient, religious ritual. His recent plays combine a bizarre mixture of austere ceremony (actors carry burning incense up and down aisles of the darkened theatre, chanting prayers), brutal realism (torture scenes) and poetry. Any language, depending on the nationality of the actor, is spoken on stage. As a director, Trejo demands people on the stage, not actors; therefore he works to make people out of his actors, choosing a spontaneous, natural presentation, while opposing stylization of any type. Thus, he prefers to work with young people who are not actors. Trejo also feels that the Argentine audience *per se* is not fully mature; he sees the need for an intelligent and understanding audience appreciative of the dialogue that allows the artist to relate to the present, the past or the future. Trejo, indeed, is a promising and vital figure on the contemporary scene of Argentine drama. It will be interesting to follow his work.

Griselda Gámbaro is the other new voice in the Argentine theatre whose dramas have brought an international accent to the stage. The young playwright has successfully drawn from the intellectual, coldly clinical and pessimistic theatre of Ionesco and Beckett. And from Kafka, she produces precise and meticulous interpretations of the real

world with nightmarish, wild situations which thwart her characters. These characters desperately try to solve the riddles of life only to be hopelessly frustrated and trapped by unfathomable internal and external forces. Gámbaro's theatre basically partakes of existentialism and the theatre of the absurd; she is preoccupied with man as an individual who seeks freedom from both himself and society. Following the existential ethic, she focuses on a few major characters, studies the individual in depth, and underplays the temporal and physical setting. Up to the present moment, Gámbaro has avoided the immediate Argentine reality and culture (e.g., the rejection of the popular, regional *voseo*³) in favor of a total concern for universal man. From an esthetic point of view, her dramas advance the theory of complete freedom in dramatic craftsmanship and stage direction. Such are the structural and thematic considerations of her earlier and well-received dramas *Las paredes*, *El desatino*, *Viejo matrimonio*, and of her fourth and most mature work, *Los siameses*, one of the outstanding successes of the 1967 season.

Los siameses speaks convincingly to the contemporary audience in its elaboration of the Cain and Abel parable within the framework of modern man's schizophrenia. The work is a cold requiem for the spirit of good and evil in which the latter triumphantly annihilates the good and the weak. Written in two acts and blending a noisy and often chaotic dialogue with touches of black humor and mythic symbolism, *Los siameses* are two brothers, heirs to loneliness and fear, who are now bound as figuratively as they once were physically. Sadistic Lorenzo plots diabolically against ingenuous Ignacio; both characters represent the two poles of human existence, perhaps the total personality of man. Gámbaro dramatizes the tragedy of man's anguish and the futility of hope by means of a dialectic interplay in which the two brothers synthesize ideological frustrations, anxieties, loss of innocence and many doubts regarding society and the new generation. Most effective is Miss Gámbaro's conception of life as a purgatory, and, like Beckett, she believes this is and is not a living world. One of the most dramatic and intense moments of the drama is Lorenzo's long walk to the cemetery to bury Ignacio; this is really Everyman's descent into the hell and purgatory of life as he seeks to be cleansed of the sin of existence and redeemed of his frustration. Such strong commentary reveals

Gámbaro as a gifted writer, sensitive to the theatre of the abstract as well as to the tenor of life in the actual moment.

By contrast, the Recova Theatre Group is equally experimental technically but without the intense and serious intellectual preoccupations characteristic of the Di Tella Center. The group collectively writes the text and then directs and performs the work. The theatre is a restored old home which, with its gothic ambiance, provides intimacy and romantic charm. The group fosters no sociological nor ideological position regarding the theatre—just the desire to communicate directly with the public. *Dar gusto al público*, in a rather sophisticated way, is the essence of their artistic endeavors. Their present production, *Help, Valentino!* (more than 700 performances to date), is an all-time success of the 1966-67 season for its impressive and delightful entertainment. The work is a satiric comedy which combines film, dances, taped sound effects and “happenings” by means of *cinemontaje*. The skeleton script calls for creative ad-libbing, and the mood, whether it be humorous, rock-reverent, or serious, depends on the public, for there is a give and take of dialogue between the audience and stage. *Help, Valentino!* treats the myth of the Latin gentleman in North American silent movies as typified by Rudolph Valentino. Several scenes are in French, English, and Italian; take-offs on actual clippings from his movies as well as on contemporary television programs constitute a few of the other happenings. The actors cleverly contrast the dynamic humor of the actual moment with the nostalgic humor and general mentality of the past. Their rapid wit and “in” jokes, mixed with frequent satiric commentaries, and the superb acting have made *Help, Valentino!* a classic with *porteño* audiences. No doubt the Recova group with its newer ideas will continue to participate and contribute to the theatrical movements in Buenos Aires.

Equally important to the Argentine audience is the Teatro Nacional. Argentines continue to attend its presentations of the old masters such as Samuel Eichelbaum (who died in 1967), Conrado Nalé Roxlo, and Armando Discépolo. Of particular interest is the fact that the younger artists have attracted popular attention through the ever-beloved *género chico criollo*. By relying on the *teatro breve*, these dramatists create satirical *trozos costumbristas* which poignantly reflect the immediate and intranscendent realities of the *pueblo*. Enrique Wernicke presented

a group of *sainetes* in *Ese mundo absurdo* in which he takes a grotesque and burlesque approach to human conduct, and his reality emerges more universal than regional. Roberto Cossa, however, deals in *La ñata contra el libro* with a contemporary Argentine youth who wants to participate in a tango-writing contest. This circumstance serves as a point of departure for focusing on certain personality types and human conduct in general. Francisco Urondo, another young dramatist, uses group psychology in his *Sainete con variaciones* to create a vision of a *porteño anacrónico*. Other Argentine writers of the 1966-67 season interested in the *sainete* form, a turn-of-the-century comic mode undergoing a nostalgic revival, are Alberto Vacarezza and Rafael Rosa.

The tradition of comedy in the longer play also figures prominently in the Teatro Nacional. Two young and promising playwrights won special acclaim last year in the world of the theatre in Buenos Aires: Ricardo Telesnik and Oscar Viale. The former, thirty years old, received outstanding praise for *La fiaca*, directed by Carlos Gorostiza. Although the work is structurally somewhat weak, it is indeed creative and delightful. *Fiaca* is a Lunfardo word which means *cansancio, fatiga, agobio, saciedad de estar sujeto a una rutina inexorable*; the common saying used by *porteños* to express this phenomena is *tengo fiaca*, roughly equivalent to "I don't give a damn" or "I'm down in the dumps." A well-defined, workaday reality and tedium are worked into the physical dimensions of the setting; everyone and everything is depicted by tones of grey. *La fiaca*, essentially a comedy of social protest, treats the frustrations of a well-respected office clerk who suddenly rebels one morning against the dull and boring routine of life. *Tener fiaca* means abandoning his job, speaking and laughing at his bosses and colleagues, creating and retreating into an adolescent-type world in which he strives for complete freedom. His experiment fails when the play surrenders a vivid realism for a disappointedly clichéd resolution in which the impracticality of his undertaking is condensed into an unrealistic hunger that forces him to accept a half of a sandwich from his boss (the other half awaits him on his desk at work), thereby indicating his return to conforming normalcy. Not only has Telesnik interpreted a socio-economic problem of the Argentines, but, indeed, of millions of robotized individuals throughout the world.

On the other hand, Oscar Viale, thirty-four years old, is quite na-

tionalistic in his attempt to capture the authentic *argentinidad* in his satiric *El grito pelado*. He himself confesses a "búsqueda de un nuevo grotesco que nos exprese cómo somos, con virtudes y frustraciones." Combining a sharp criticism with farsical tones and black humor, *El grito pelado* (presented by four actors) is a series of some ten *cuadros* which interpret the immediate Argentine reality. There are strong invectives against suburban dwellers, wakes, intellectuals, politicians and the neurosis of the middle class. The most exceptional *cuadro* is inspired by Brecht and his theories of *distanciamiento*. Intellectual jokes, rapid dialogues, witty lines and spontaneity add to the richness of the play. Indeed, Viale is a keen observer of life and applies the Horatian *dulce et utile* to the theatre; he is a moralist as well as an entertainer who augurs well for the art of comedy on the *Argentine* stage.

Of additional significance is the group of dramatists who make up the *teatro nuevo*, supported by several young writers who are *engagés* in a social and political sense.⁴ They search for a creative type of communication and often find inspiration in myth or actual reality which are transformed into concrete and meaningful plots. For them, social, political, and aesthetic problems are closely related. One of the most distinguished dramatists, Carlos Gorostiza, remains in this mainstream of contemporary theatre, presenting several levels of reality ranging from the regional to the universal or vice versa. His most international work, *Los prójimos* (1966), is a sociological drama which treats the problem of lack of involvement so prevalent in big city life. Adhering to the classical unities of time, place, and action, Gorostiza unveils hysteria, man's inhumanity to man, and the terrible problems of urban life.

Another "artistic" playwright, Abelardo Castillo, has been widely acclaimed for his compelling *Israfel*, which won the UNESCO prize for drama in 1966. The dramatic vigor of the play recreates the major conflicts of Edgar Allan Poe, his explosive frustrations, egoism, isolation, and poor economic situation. The title is taken from one of Poe's poems on the Koran.

Two other young, talented writers of the *teatro nuevo* are Agustín Cuzzani and Roberto Cossa; their dramas, which convey ingenuity and wide-ranging concerns for the world, show promise of their becoming

masterful playwrights. In *Una libra de carne*, a serious, intellectual and cold drama in the Brechtian tradition, Cuzzani is preoccupied with fate and destiny. He condemns the computer age in which man has substituted the machine for God. In *Para que se cumplan las escrituras*, a very loosely structured play which capriciously uses symbolic characters, Cuzzani proves to be more optimistic regarding the human condition. His solution finds hope for the poor and freedom for the oppressed.

At the same time, Roberto Cossa articulates strong protests in his well-received work, *Los días de Julián Bisbal*. Strains of existentialism dominate Cossa's protest against routine and the *no saber por qué* of life. The drama consists of six *cuadros*, an anti-hero, and the observance of the classical unities of drama. Cossa is obsessed with the fate of man in the modern city, his lack of identity and powerlessness.

In 1967, *Se acabó la diversión* by Juan Carlos Gené, talented playwright, actor, and director, delighted the theatre public. The play, constantly flowing with new ideas, combines the humorous, the grotesque and the serious. Two brothers, who are the only characters, vividly discuss many polemic issues of the moment, especially those problems concerning the younger generation. Thus, Gené holds a clearly-defined role of the dramatists' social and moral responsibility in the theatre.

Most interesting was the reaction of the Argentine audience to Juan Carlos Ghiano, who is prolific as critic, writer, and now playwright. His play *Testigos* hardly appealed to the populace with its wearisome, didactic intent, long dialogues, and little theatrical interest. *Testigos* dramatizes the effect of Buenos Aires upon a young *provinciano*, a common circumstance which is probably autobiographical in nature. The critics took exception to the lack of tension as well as to the poor structure of the play.

In spite of such dramatic activity, a paradoxical situation remains regarding the theatre in Argentina. Although drama is the oldest medium of expression in Argentina, it is the neglected genre, overshadowed by the great interest in poetry and the novel. Few solid studies by national or foreign critics have been written on the contemporary Argentine theatre.⁵ Meanwhile the intense *búsqueda* for an Argentine National Theatre continues. Many active attempts to orient the theatre towards a more meaningful and educative communication

with the public are to be seen in the drama journals and magazines, such as *Máscara* (sponsored by the Asociación Argentina de Actores), *Revista de Estudios de Teatro* (sponsored by the Instituto Nacional de Estudios de Teatro) and *Talia* (privately owned). *Primera plana* also offers weekly commentaries on what is what in theatre in Buenos Aires and in general has realized extensive promotion of the creative arts. In addition, Argentores, a union-club of dramatists, is dedicated to the encouragement and diffusion of information on the Argentine drama.⁶ One of its major activities is the publication of scripts of contemporary drama. Their library includes one of the finest collections of Argentine drama. The Fondo Nacional de Las Artes subsidizes both composition and production of dramas that are promising. The prospect, therefore, for a continued growth of Argentine theatre seems favorable, especially in light of the fact that it is already an accomplished and productive theatre.

Notes

1. For a discussion of this movement see José Marial, *El teatro independiente* (Buenos Aires: Alpe, 1955).

2. For a revised version, see my article, "Mario Trejo and Griselda Gámbaro: Two Voices of the Argentine Experimental Theatre," to appear in a forthcoming issue of *Books Abroad*.

3. See María Isabel de Gregorio de Mac, *El voseo en la literatura argentina* (Rosario: Universidad Nacional del Litoral, 1967).

4. Other important and talented young dramatists of this group who have staged excellent works in the recent past are: Germán Rozenmacher, *Réquiem para un viernes a la noche* (Buenos Aires: Talía, 1964), Ricardo Halac, *Fin de diciembre* and *Estela de madrugada* (Buenos Aires: Angel Press, 1965), Rodolfo J. Walsh, *La granada* and *La batalla* (Buenos Aires: Jorge Alvarez, 1965), and Sergio De Cecco, *Capocómico* and *El reñidero* (Buenos Aires: Talía, 1965).

5. See Angela Blanco Amores dePagella, *Nuevos temas en el teatro argentino* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Huemal, 1965). And Frank Dauster has given a general commentary on contemporary Latin American drama in "An Overview of Spanish American Theater," *Hispania*, L (1967), 996-1000.

6. A noted reference work is Tito Livio Foppa, *Diccionario teatral del Río de la Plata* (Buenos Aires: Argentores, 1961).