

## The Relativity of Reality and Madness in Arlt's "Escenas de un grotesco"

James J. Troiano

Roberto Arlt's (1900-1942) ability as a dramatist has been studied with increasing interest in the last few years. Several works have been written about Arlt's plays.<sup>1</sup> Although Arlt wrote his first play as late in his career as 1932, the theatre became almost his sole interest in his last ten years.<sup>2</sup>

Arlt's "Escenas de un grotesco" appeared on August 4, 1934, in the Number 2 issue of *Gaceta de Buenos Aires*. Raúl Castagnino describes the work as "dos cuadros y varias escenas, que contienen en germen la idea que luego desarrollará en la comedia (i.e. *Saverio el cruel*)."<sup>3</sup> The critic later mentions that there are characteristics evident in later plays.<sup>4</sup> It is indeed apparent that in this play Arlt creates a world similar to that found later in *Saverio el cruel* (1940) and *El desierto entra en la ciudad* (1942), one in which it is not possible to distinguish between fantasy and reality, nor even between madness and sanity. Specific reference will be made to the 1934 fragment, "Escenas de un grotesco," to emphasize the extent to which Arlt was contemplating actual characters, scenes, and concepts for the two later plays.

"Escenas de un grotesco" begins in an insane asylum as the pompous director of the institution delivers a press conference and declares that many deranged persons walk the streets everyday: "De manera que ya no son diez mil los locos que andan sueltos, sino muchos más" (I,i). The director stresses his point by indicating that anyone might find himself sitting next to a madman in a theatre, a bus, or streetcar on any given day and not realize the potential danger. The scenes in "Escenas de un grotesco" and Arlt's later plays stress dramatically that the director's commentary is indeed true in this case, and it is virtually impossible to recognize the difference between those confined in asylums and others protected by the guise of normality and respectability. The director's own self-confidence and complacency are, however, ridiculed in a very brief but meaningful scene. Here two inmates overhear the director's address and resent his attitude, disdaining "las barbaridades que dijo esa bestia" (I, ii). They feel that the director's interest in the inmates is false and his presentation is a complete farce. Arlt presents

these inmates as spectators of the director's farcical behavior, and in their view he is clearly the madman. The playwright emphasizes in his two later plays this idea of the relativity of madness. The judges and the madman are so intertwined that no one is capable of distinguishing rationality from lunacy.

The director announces to the press that the inmates will present a play. He stresses that all actors and participants in the creation of the work are madmen:

La escenografía es creación de un maniático a quien hoy tenemos encerrado con chaleco de fuerza; el electricista es un paranoico temible, como que intentó degollar a su abuela; el apuntador y los tramoyistas, delirantes en diversos grados. . . . (I, i)

In Arlt's presentation, "cada actor representa el papel que más estrecha analogía guarda con la concepción delirante que reviste su locura" (I, i). The idea envisioned by the director is that the actors become cured by acting out their particular obsession or form of derangement. This is, of course, the implication of the farce created by Susana and her friends in *Saverio el cruel*.<sup>5</sup>

Arlt knowingly utilizes the therapeutic tradition of psychodrama which is described by Jonathan Pedder and George Lyketsos. An article by Pedder deals with the parallels between the portrayal of the subconscious in psychotherapy and in the theatre: "It is suggested that there is something similar between the task of exploring what is not fully conscious in psychotherapy and in other areas of creative play, especially the theatre."<sup>6</sup> In another article, Lyketsos elaborates on the use of theatre as a vehicle for psychotherapy, and describes the process of having patients recreate Greek drama:

During the long months of rehearsal and with the gradual assimilation and interpretation of their roles, the patients had the opportunity to express their own passions and gradually to penetrate deeper into them, all the while safely shielded behind their theatrical roles. They also had the opportunity of experiencing a biomatic participation, of maturing affectively, of having some insight into the fundamental psychic problems and conflicts from which they suffer, without being able to ease them or improve their social life. The second shepherd in *Oedipus Rex* associated his incestuous feelings towards his daughter with the Oedipian incest and punishment. This patient was able to leave the hospital soon after the final performance.<sup>7</sup>

Arlt envisions the inmates actually presenting an original drama which was created by one of the patients. Similarly, in "Escenas de un grotresco," the inmates' play is intended as a therapeutic exercise to purge their particular forms of lunacy by acting them out.

The inmates' play unfolds in Scene three and concerns a character named Hutton who feels that his kingdom has been usurped: "Me ha despojado de mi reino un hombre cruel de corazón y astuto de pensamiento" (I, iii). His house and land as well as friends have been taken by his illusory adversary. His complaints are communicated to his slave within the play, Catón, who laments: "Desdichado de mí. Tener que lidiar con un demente" (I, iii). Several important and relevant elements can be derived from this scene. Once again the spectator is struck by examples of the relativity of madness, as one

wonders if this Catón is not also deranged. According to the director, all participants are mad, and yet Hutton's slave speaks as if he were quite rational, above the lunacy of Hutton's madcap delusion. More significantly, this scene is directly parallel to *Saverio el cruel* and also has clear influences in *El desierto entra en la ciudad*.

That *Saverio el cruel* is a direct outgrowth of "Escenas de un grotesco" is most clearly evident in the scenes in which Susana creates the supposed farce of her derangement and when Saverio rehearses with the maid Simona. Susana conspires with her friends to humiliate a timid dairy salesman named Saverio. The plot, as envisioned by Susana, is to have Saverio participate in a farce in which she will feign madness. Her derangement is identical to that of Hutton in "Escenas de un grotesco." Susana pretends to be obsessed with persecution by a cruel tyrant. This heartless colonel has robbed her of what is rightfully hers and still pursues her. The same farcical, melodramatic language is apparent in the two works.

HUTTON—¡Oh, Dioses! ¡Oh, genios! ¡Vedme extraviado en hostil tierra extranjera! (I, iii)

SUSANA—¡Oh, Dioses! ¿Por qué habéis abandonado a esta tierna doncella? ¡Oh! sombras infernales, ¿por qué me perseguís? ¡Destino pavoroso! (I, v)<sup>8</sup>

Hutton is in a madhouse and Susana's state of mind in this play reflects a madness equal to his. Everyone is convinced that Susana is sane, and they therefore participate in what they feel to be a harmless farce. Susana is indeed mad; Arlt fools everyone with his many plays-within-plays, all indicating that there is no difference between madness and sanity or fiction and reality. The director of the institution in the earlier work insists that no one realizes that madmen walk undetected through the streets of Buenos Aires. Susana's friend, Juan, goes even further, as no one realizes the frightening truth of his words: "Aquí todos somos locos . . ." (III, iii). Susana's persecution complex is equal to Hutton's in the earlier work, although she is not yet institutionalized. The concocted farce was in fact a deranged fantasy for Susana who truly believed that Saverio was the cruel colonel. Before murdering him, the crazed Susana utters these significant words: "Ha sido inútil, coronel, que te disfrazaras de vendedor de manteca" (III, viii).

There are references to César in *El desierto entra en la ciudad* as "comediante" and his flights of imagination as "farsa," "drama," and "fantasía" (II, vi). César's creations directly influence others and have a strong impact on reality. His closest associate and betrayer, Escipión, is similar in both regards to Catón from "Escenas de un grotesco," who scorns and yet flatters Hutton. Escipión is prepared to label César mad to his greedy relatives, who wish to acquire his fortune. Nevertheless, it is he who first gave César the idea of entering the fantasy world: "éste es el valiente que le metió a César la fantasía de disfrazarse de romano. ¡Buena pieza!" (II, vi). Although César is considered mad by many of his followers, these same characters often appear to be more deranged than he. Initially he believes that he is the Emperor César but later on has a religious conversion and imagines becoming endowed with saintly characteristics. César decides to abandon the city, which is a

common motif in Arlt's works. An Arlt critic, Stasys Goštautas writes: "La primera, y aparentemente la más fácil solución al problema de la ciudad, es la fuga. Casi todos los personajes de Arlt piensan en ella, aunque pocos la realizan."<sup>9</sup> Before and after his conversion, the followers' beliefs and/or dependence on César reveal a lunacy which equals and often excels his. His cousin María, for example, commits suicide to prove that César has the Christ-like power to raise her from the dead, while other characters are transformed from criminal to idyllic ways of life. One former thief extols the new life to which the converted César leads him:

Aquí, cuando menos lo esperes, encontrarás tu existencia aquietada, tu alma exenta de tribulaciones, tu sentir libre de amarguras y disgustos. Insensiblemente te irás poniendo en comunicación con la naturaleza; los inocentes trabajos manuales, como sembrar la huerta o cortar la leña en el bosque, te llenarán de placer, y en cada legumbre que recojas con tus propias manos verás un reflejo de la divina providencia. Recapacita, Escipión. Aquí nos deslizamos de costosos placeres y conquistamos otros más duraderos. Los bienes temporales son frágiles, los cuidados que traen entenebrecen el alma, la bestial satisfacción de los sentidos nos degrada por debajo de los brutos, los goces intelectuales nos elevan hasta Dios. (III, iv)

The supposedly deranged César has led the converted bandit into a complete independence from the materialistically oriented world and a deep spiritual tranquility. Is this the work of a madman? Arlt's play casts a haze over society's generally accepted laws surrounding who is expected to be sane. In "Escenas de un grotesco" the spectator is presented with an actual madhouse, while in *Saverio el cruel* and *El desierto entra en la ciudad*, he creates a metaphorical asylum where nearly all characters are tainted with various levels of lunacy.

There is no transition between the scene with Hutton and that of Saverio in "Escenas de un grotesco." When the *Primer cuadro* ends we are led brusquely from the walls of the insane asylum to Saverio's poor tenement house. The director's words haunt us, for this madman is obviously more dangerous than the confined inmate. In the earlier and later plays Saverio is a frustrated individual living in a poor urban dwelling. The original Saverio is first viewed as a violent, power-hungry madman. The initial Saverio perceived by Arlt is not at all similar to the Saverio we first meet in *Saverio el cruel*: "como un perro que busca simpatía" (I, iv). Nevertheless, when Saverio in the later play accepts a role in Susana's farce and begins to rehearse being colonel, he becomes increasingly violent and very similar to the Saverio of "Escenas de un grotesco." Saverio is first seen plotting with a doorman the violent overthrow of the government.<sup>10</sup> He is involved with a secret organization and is not pleased that he has not received permission to acquire more destructive weapons, but he will not be distracted from his goal: "Haremos la revolución con espadas y lanzas y si es necesario, con los pies y los puños" (II, ii). Saverio displays paranoic tendencies as he claims that society fears and hates him as he is denied the power he deserves: "Me temen, don Ignacio. Le veo en la llamarada de odio que les brilla tras los ojos al verme" (II, ii). Saverio's fear of persecution and thirst for power resembles Hutton, the inmate in the asylum, but his desire to spill blood is markedly more

frightening than Hutton's. When the earlier Saverio speaks to his wife he utters the exact words the later Saverio will speak. He compares himself to Hitler and Mussolini and quotes the American dream: "Give him a chance" (II, iii). Given an opportunity, he will be able to acquire the lasting power he deserves. He also describes the violence in the same words uttered by Arlt's later dairyman: "Tendremos que organizar el terror . . . las cabezas caerán en el cesto de la guillotina como las mandarinas en el tiempo de cosecha" (II, iii). The first quotation is spoken to Saverio's doubting and realistic maid in the later play, and Saverio utters the second in disgust after Susana's frightened friends depart. He uses the word "naranjas" instead of "mandarinas" in the later play. Saverio in the full-length play finally believes that he has grasped power, even though it is in the illusory form of a play. He accepts his role as colonel as real, as he reveals to Susana's startled friends: "Entendámonos . . . de farsa para los otros . . . pero real para nosotros . . ." (II, v). The seed of *Saverio el cruel* was definitely planted in Arlt's mind in 1934 and came to full blossom in his complex masterpiece in 1936.

Both *Saverio el cruel* and *El desierto entra en la ciudad* are deluged with the hidden madmen of whom the director of the insane asylum in "Escenas de un grotesco" speaks. It is necessary to quote once again Susana's friend Juan: "Aquí todos somos locos . . ." (III, iii). Juan seems to be merely joking, and yet he speaks also of Susana's hidden passion for Saverio and his own secret love for Susana. Truth and fiction are indistinguishable. Arlt places the same eerie glow on madness as he does on reality. One cannot define reality, nor can madness be described, and lunacy can flourish by merely agreeing to play a role or carelessly entering the bewitching world of make-believe. Many full-fledged lunatics inhabit our streets and hide behind masks of rationality. The director's warning in "Escenas de un grotesco" is evident in Arlt's later plays. In jest Juan suggests that Susana is the maddest of all. Susana jokingly admits her own derangement and reveals in a more serious vein: "Yo quiero seguir siendo loca porque siendo loca pongo en movimiento a los cuerdos, como muñecos" (III, iii). In this same scene Juan compares the madness of his friends and Susana to the Duke and Duchess in the *Quijote*, where the insane behavior of the royal couple exceeds that of the unfortunate knight.<sup>11</sup> Saverio changes from a timid, anti-militaristic dairyman to a bloodthirsty colonel seeking power through violent means. He just as suddenly returns to sanity after Susana's sister Julia reveals that the entire farce has been created to humiliate him. Nevertheless, the greatest shock to spectators is that Susana, so long known to her friends, hides a mad obsession to kill Saverio. She apparently is convinced that he is the evil colonel who persecutes her. No one escapes the lure of the moon in Arlt's world as each character dances toward lunacy, differing only in the kinds of steps he takes.

Similarly, in *El desierto entra en la ciudad* not only are César's followers shown to be more insane than he, but his "normal" relatives reach startling heights of madness. Act Two begins with a "cojo" who takes a dog with him to visit other relatives of César. He believes that the dog will protect him from anyone "que se abuse de mi inferioridad física" (II, iv). He then boasts of bathing and perfuming the dog each day and having him wear special shoes. One suspects this will surely be the maddest, or at least most peculiar, of

César's relatives. Actually it is the seemingly sane relatives whose extravagant behavior and outrageous beliefs exceed the peculiarities of the "cojo." It is the latter who comments on the irony of the fact that everyone listens to Escipión, who is indeed responsible for suggesting that César dress in Roman garb. In *Saverio el cruel* there was the idea of bringing Susana to sanity by presenting her with a wax reproduction of the colonel's head. The priest recommends in this play that César be presented with a mannequin to decide on César's sanity. The priest initially displays some logic when he claims that César's conversion does not mean that he is necessarily mad: "es intolerable que se califique de insano a un hombre tocado por la gracia de Dios. Con ese criterio, todos los santos, en los comienzos de su vida purgativa, debieron ser internados en un manicomio" (II, vi). But later the priest's idea of how to judge César's state of rationality or madness lacks any form of logic. If César attempts to resurrect the mannequin, he is then surely mad. The priest apparently believes that the differences between madness and sanity are clearly marked, and yet the test which he suggests proves absolutely nothing. It is necessary to repeat that César's cousin María believes so strongly in César that she claims that she will take her life to prove his sanctity and miraculous powers are real. She subsequently commits suicide. All levels of madness and derangement are displayed in this act, as those who attempt to prove César is mad and those who defend him as sane are equally illogical. The "cojo" summarizes Arlt's message: "¿Qué diablos pasa hoy aquí? Esto parece la antesala de un manicomio" (II, vi). The parallel to "Escenas de un grotesco" is clear, for there is no difference between the madhouse and the living room in either work.

In the next scene César's "sane" relative Inés claims to have brought into consultation a specialist. To everyone's surprise the person is not a psychiatrist, but an astrologer. The entrance of the bizarrely dressed astrologer provokes such comments as: "Accionista I: Esto es una tomadura de pelo" or "Accionista II: Estoy empezando de dudar de mi propio juicio" (II, vii). The astrologer initially describes the general relationship between the stars and man and proceeds to explain in detail why César is quite possibly deranged. Although he never clearly states whether César is mad or sane, he does state that there is the distinct possibility that César may be the victim of a violent death. Ironically, the strange astrologer is correct, and César is brutally assassinated by the spurned and frustrated husband of one of César's followers. Equally startling is that the astrologer later becomes one of César's disciples and views him as a Messiah. Arlt never allows the spectator one comfortable moment of certainty. The "accionista 2" summarizes the ambiguity of the entire situation with César and offers at the same time an Arltian commentary on the relativity of madness:

Jamás creeré que César está cuerdo por negarse a resucitar a un maniquí. Puede estar loco a querer fundar una religión y cuerdo en cuanto negarse a obrar un prodigio. Nunca los locos son el ciento por ciento locos, ni los cuerdos el ciento por ciento cuerdos. (II, vi)

As in "Escenas de un grotesco," when the director of the asylum seems no more sane in his arrogance and complacency than the inmates who resent

him, here all the judges of César's madness exceed him in bizarre behavior and nonsensical logic.

Arlt's plays present a preoccupation with the relativity of madness. In his theatrical fragment entitled "Escenas de un grotesco," several scenes and characters anticipate those found in the two later works, *Saverio el cruel* and *El desierto entra en la ciudad*. For Arlt, the entire world appears to be a madhouse and every inhabitant exhibits differing shades of lunacy. No one can be sure who is truly mad or know for certain when a slight turn will bring him directly into the bewitching light of the moon.

*University of Maine at Orono*

## Notes

1. For example, see Walter Rela, "Argumentos renovadores de Roberto Arlt en el teatro argentino," *Latin American Theatre Review* 13/2 (Spring 1980); David William Foster, "Roberto Arlt's *La isla desierta*: A Structural Analysis," *Latin American Theatre Review* 11/1 (Fall 1977); James Troiano, "Social Criticism and the Fantastic in Roberto Arlt's *La fiesta del hierro*," *Latin American Theatre Review* 12/1 (Fall 1978); "Cervantinism in Two Plays by Roberto Arlt," *The American Hispanist* (Nov. 1978); "The Grotesque Tradition and the Interplay of Fantasy and Reality in the Theater of Roberto Arlt," *Latin American Literary Review* 4.8 (Spring-Summer 1978); and "Pirandellism in the Theatre of Roberto Arlt," *Latin American Theatre Review* 8/1 (Fall 1974).

2. Mirta Arlt, "Recuerdos de mi padre," *Ficción* (Buenos Aires, Sept.-Oct. 1968): 23: "El teatro le interesaba con exclusividad: lo veía como una síntesis de movimiento, color e intención dramática que lo apasionaba."

3. Raúl Castagnino, *El teatro de Roberto Arlt* (La Plata: La Universidad de La Plata, 1964) 58.

4. Castagnino 60-61.

5. See my article on Pirandello; refer to note 1. See also Frank Dauster, Leon Lyday, and George Woodyard, ed., *3 dramaturgos rioplatenses: Antología del teatro hispanoamericano del siglo XX. Vol. 4* (Ottawa: GIROL, 1983) 88-92.

6. Jonathan R. Pedder, "Transitional Space in Psychotherapy and Theater," *British Journal of Medical Psychology* 52 (1979): 377.

7. George Lyketsos, "The Ancient Greek Tragedy as a Means of Psychotherapy for Mental Patients," *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics* 34.4 (1980): 246.

8. Mirta Arlt, *Roberto Arlt: Teatro completo*, 2 vols. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Schapire, 1968). All quotations from *Saverio el cruel* and *El desierto entra en la ciudad* come from this two volume edition of his theatre.

9. Stasys Goštautus, *Buenos Aires y Arlt (Dostoievsky, Martínez Estrada y Escalabrini Ortiz)* (Madrid, Insula, 1977) 258.

10. Goštautus gives examples of Arlt's tendency in his narrative to portray clandestine revolutionary societies. These are similar to Saverio's organization in "Escenas de un grotesco."

11. See my article on Cervantes and Arlt; refer to note 1.