The Fantasy of the Real in Romina Paula's *Fauna*

Brenda Werth

Romina Paula's play *Fauna* is about the making of a film that will never take place, a film that brings together a daughter, a son, an actress, and a director in the attempt to tell the story of Fauna, a wild but well-read, otherworldly being who over the course of her life transforms into Fauno. Highly intertextual, reflexive, and subtly ironic, the play contemplates how to tell the story of one's life, how to capture what is true and real, and how to decipher where reality ends and fiction begins. Paula distinguishes her work from contemporary trends in documentary theater and biodrama[1] by exploring the ways in which the real manifests itself reflexively without breaking out of the theatrical frame. While works by Argentine artists such as Vivi Tellas, Lola Arias, Mariano Pensotti, and Federico León seek creative opportunities for the real to interrupt and break through the theatrical frame, Paula's *Fauna* offers a poetic reflection on what this slippage between the real and the fictional means, and indeed what it means to aspire toward capturing the real through performance.

In tandem with her exploration of the real, Paula proposes new gender possibilities that creatively undermine normative categorization. In dialogue with Judith Butler and others, I first analyze Paula's treatment of the real, and then turn specifically to the relationship between gender and the real in this play to argue that Paula forces us to think more critically about the real, how it is constituted, what is valued or disavowed as real, and to what extent the real, as it is privileged in certain strands of contemporary theatre, may not only be liberating in stretching the bounds of conventional theatre but may also hold limitations in its prescriptions of normativity.

Premiered in 2013, Paula's play *Fauna* follows *Algo de ruido hace* (2008) and *El tiempo todo entero* (2009), the latter an adaptation of Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, all three of which she has written and directed

with the theater company El Silencio.[2] She has received overwhelming critical praise for her dramaturgical work and has toured the international circuit, premiering her plays in Brazil, Chile, Spain, France, Switzerland, Belgium, and Germany. In 2010, *El tiempo todo entero* won the Florencio Sánchez Prize for best Argentine play, and in 2011 the play took part in the prestigious Theatre du Rond Festival in Paris.

Like many artists of her generation, Paula thrives in diverse creative roles: playwright, film actor, director, and novelist.[3] The breadth of her work reflects a generational trend to break down barriers that have traditionally separated genres, particularly between theatre and film. In an interview with Mercedes Halfon, Paula addresses this cross-pollination explicitly: "Cuando nosotros empezábamos a estudiar actuación, el cine y el teatro eran dos esferas separadas. No había actores de teatro en el cine. Y esto cambió completamente, ahora hay una circulación natural entre los dos espacios." (Halfon) This "natural" intermingling has resulted in a creative new body of work in Argentine theatre and film that is highly reflective of genre and how these different forms of representation inform one another.[4] Paula's *Fauna*, a play about the making of a film, falls squarely into this new aesthetic and practice.

What serves to heighten reflexivity even beyond the dialogue she establishes between film and theatre is the extraordinary intertexuality Paula infuses into *Fauna*. Throughout the play she engages in dialogue with Calderón de la Barca, Shakespeare, Horacio Quiroga, Rainer Maria Rilke, Dorothea Lange, María Luisa Bemberg, Concepción Arenal, Roberto Arlt, and Juan L. Ortiz. Paula explains, "Estas referencias literarias parten de un profundo amor por la literatura, que no es una cuestión de enumeración" (Halfon). And this love of literature comes across in the way she interweaves these referents cleverly into the essential architecture of the play. Motivations for writing literature vary, and Paula confesses that, for her, writing is more about finding a form of protection than a form of exposure (Viola). She invokes an eclectic canon of great literary and artistic figures and then reveals, in their protective company, her own vulnerability through a probing examination of what constitutes reality and fiction, love, truth, gender, life, death, experience, representation, and art.

Paula embarks on this quest both earnestly and in a subtle, self-parodying fashion. For example, early on in the play, during a dialogue on the use of metatheatrical techniques, one of the main characters, María Luisa, explains in a nonchalant, mildly condescending tone to the director character, "El escenario al que se refiere es la vida. Es un tópico eso, el de la vida como

teatro, está en Shakespeare, y en Calderón, es un tópico isabelino" (12). It is possible to imagine Paula herself acknowledging that these grand ideas have long been reduced to clichés, but through her work she shows that there are ways of breathing new life and meaning into them. Describing her dramaturgy, Jorge Dubatti writes, "[Q]uienes hablan de 'muerte de la representación' o 'postdramaticidad' comprobarían que esas categorías no son válidas para el teatro de Romina Paula, quien multiplica la potencia de la ficción, el espesor de las grandes situaciones dramáticas, y recupera el relato, la historia de acontecimientos, la emoción y la monumentalidad de los personajes" (63). Paula eschews the postdramatic, the biodramatic, and other documentary techniques that are currently popular in Argentina as modes of exploring the real and instead returns to the limitless potential of fiction. Ironically, as I will argue below, through its interrogation of fiction, Paula's *Fauna* provides one of the most sophisticated and nuanced discussions on the real in contemporary Argentine theatre.

Fauna

Structured into nine acts, *Fauna* joins onstage four characters who are involved in the making of a film about Fauna, a legendary figure who in her lifetime dressed like a man, translated Rilke, and rode her horse with abandon through the *campo* until she was in her nineties. Julia, an actress, and José Luis, a film director, arrive in the provinces where Fauna lived and meet with her daughter and son, María Luisa and Santos, to learn more about Fauna's life. Halfway through the play, we learn that Julia had once seen Fauna from a distance, and the vision affected her so deeply that she became obsessed with the idea of creating a film about her life, though Fauna died before they had the chance to meet and talk about that possibility. Over the course of the play, debates erupt between the siblings and the creators of the film regarding the authenticity of some of the events making up the life story of Fauna. Characters argue about which episodes of her life to film and whether or not it is even important or possible to try to remain faithful to the telling of her "true" life story. Julia expresses her concern that perhaps she does not have what it takes to perform the life of Fauna. But she identifies strongly with the mythic figure, and halfway through the play she puts on the men's clothes Fauna wore after she became Fauno. Underlying all of the characters' discussions of how best to represent the life of Fauna is a shifting, multivalent, romantic tension. This tension manifests itself when characters take turn rehearsing scenes from Fauna's life, casting off prescriptive notions of gender

roles as they do so. The play ends with all of the characters professing their love to someone and directing emotional uncertainty toward someone else, leaving audiences with a vision of love that is complex and unpredictable in its many forms and iterations.

In contrast to the intensity of emotion displayed by the characters, the stage itself is austere and minimalist in design. Envisioned for a black-box theater, the floor of the square-shaped stage space is covered by weathered wooden planks. At stage left toward the back there is a wooden table fastened with a saddle. As Halfon notes, the stage design reflects a departure in Paula's work and an attempt to move away from naturalist tropes. In an interview with Halfon, Paula proclaims triumphantly, "¡Por lo menos no hay un sillón! ¡Ni son una familia!" Without the familiar naturalist props and the traditional family unit, the play generates an uncertainty, an unsettling feeling that anything could happen (Halfon). In fact, the most unusual stage details in this play are the square-meter-sized holes in the wooden floor, filled with stones, soil, and various stage accoutrements, and the places in the floor where the boards seem to buckle, creating the sensation that the floor is barely able to contain something that is about to erupt from below. Needless to say, these holes and cracks in the floor provide a mysterious physical manifestation of the poetic fissures that are alluded to in the text of the play.

Photo: Sebastián Arpesella

Fissures, Flashes, and Glimpses of Truth

The first act of the play begins with Julia (the actress) reciting a lengthy fragment from Rilke's poem "Todeserfahrung/Experiencia de la muerte" from her perch on the saddle. In this poem Rilke offers a reflection on the performative roles we play in life, the sudden intrusiveness of death, and the loss of a loved one. The third stanza in particular is of central significance to the play:

> Pero cuando partías, irrumpió en este escenario
> Un haz de verdad a través de aquella grieta,
> Por la que te ibas: verde de verdadero verde,
> Verdadera luz solar, bosque de verdad. (11)

Here Rilke describes the flash of reality or truth that is revealed at the very moment in which the departed one disappears through a crack in the stage of life. The image of this flash of truth, linked to the color green, recurs throughout the play at key moments. Below I will elaborate on how these flashes introduce moments of intense feeling and heightened consciousness that coincide with experiences that also remain in the realm of the expressionless.

The first episode concerns Julia's encounter with Fauna. From a distance, Julia describes the moment in which she sees Fauna appear on her horse: "[D] repente del verde intenso por la lluvia sale un caballo, con una mujer a cuestas, bah, una persona, no sabía ni qué era lo que estaba viendo" (23). We are once again reminded of the Rilke poem in which a flash of truth emerges from a crack on the stage. In this case, it is Fauna who breaks through the brilliant green landscape, arresting in her intensity and yet impossible to fully discern as man, woman, or even human. Julia continues, "[M]e miró por un segundo, no sé cómo explicarles lo que sentí, una conmoción, no entendía si ese terror tenía que ver con que corriera peligro, yo, por esta presencia pero al mismo tiempo no era sólo terror, también era algo más, algo que tenía que ver con el placer" (23). Julia describes witnessing Fauna for the first time as an event that interrupted her frame of reference, a sublime encounter that affected her mind "with a sense of overwhelming grandeur," allowing her, in a sense, to transcend herself.[5] Though fleeting in duration—but a flash—the moment is foundational for Julia, as it marks the beginning of her artistic, intellectual, and personal infatuation with Fauna.

The second episode takes place in Act 2 and refers to the account Santos offers of the gruesome deaths of his two horses. Described as a kind of Horacio Quiroga figure in the stage directions, Santos arrives onstage and says to Julia and José Luis, "Tengo algo para ustedes que es verdad, que

es verdad" (27). He then proceeds to tell the story of how his horses were devoured by a swarm of wasps near the river. He makes use of the historical present in his account, which is commonly used in the dramatic narration of past events, but here this usage seems to reflect the traumatic nature of the episode as well, of first hearing the intense buzzing, then stumbling upon the dead horses covered with wasps and having to run back to the river in order to avoid being attacked by the wasps himself. In his account he describes the thick, green foliage that surrounds the horses. After he finishes telling what happened, Julia once again repeats the stanza from Rilke in which a flash of truth emerges through the green. Here, Santos' insistence on identifying the death of his horses as something that is true or real "que es verdad" resonates with Jacques Lacan's definition of trauma as an encounter with the Real, or that which is impossible and resists mediation or signification (164). Santos' choppy narrative resurrects the event in the present, like a traumatic symptom that resists symbolic assimilation.

Another disarming flash of truth occurs in Act 4, when Julia reflects on the relevance of biographical accuracy in representing Fauna. The characters are arguing over an episode from Fauna's past in which she allegedly suffers a bout of amnesia and is unable to recognize her husband, who has come to fetch her and take her home. For the four characters, there is a lingering uncertainty as to whether or not Fauna feigned amnesia or not during that episode, and it is impossible to prove it one way or the other. In response to this uncertainty, Julia proclaims the following: "Para mí no es lo mismo si me pasó o si es algo que escribí. A lo mejor es algo que me pasó —pero justamente— como fue un episodio de amnesia, no lo recuerdo y me lo contaron y como a mí me avergüenza después solo puedo acercarme a ese dolor a través de la ficción, a través de la construcción ficcional" (38). Here Julia introduces the role of fiction in combating pain and reconstructing life narratives in the wake of trauma. This marks one of the numerous moments in the play in which fiction and the biographical are linked and are seen to mutually constitute one another. But it is the reaction of the other characters to Julia's statement that reveals most clearly a flash of truth: "*Algo misterioso sucede. Santos y María Luisa se quedan mirándola como si Fauna se hubiese hecho presente, y José Luis está un poco atemorizado*" (38). The three characters are left in a state of awe as they witness Julia's sudden transformation into Fauna.

There is something of the uncanny here in this doubling of lives and their seeming coalescence into one body. When it occurs on the theatrical stage, this uncanny doubling aptly describes what actors aspire to in the theatre through

their performance of others. And yet, Paula complicates the significance of this doubling, because while theatergoers might view Julia's transformation into Fauna as evidence of her Stanislavskian "becoming" of the character, the onstage characters, María Luisa, José Luis, and Santos, react emotively to her transformation as if witnessing the real resurrection of Fauna. Through the introduction of these competing frameworks of perception, Paula shows that modes of fiction and strategies of the real are both antagonistic and complicit in the construction and representation of Fauna.

But what does it mean to refer to strategies of the real when talking about a fictional play about a fictional film? Even in the play, José Luis, the director character, makes it clear that the film they are making is not a documentary, but a fictional film based on the life of Fauna (13). When I refer to strategies of the real and their use in *Fauna*, I wish to draw attention to the ways in which Paula employs the biographical and the personal in the play to construct a sense of authenticity and realness that has little to do with historical accuracy. Fauna is, after all, a fictional character, but creating a play about the filming of her life, and in the process revealing some of her most personal and vulnerable moments, all serve to imbue her character with a sense of realness that to some extent even surpasses the realness of historical figures whose lives have been archived in documentaries and memoirs.

One excellent example of how the biographical, and in this case the expression of personal experience, can accentuate a sense of realness occurs when the four characters are discussing from which point to begin narrating Fauna's life in the film. The director wants to start with the scene in which Fauna reencounters her husband after he has left her for another woman, a trauma that left her in an amnesiac state. While rehearsing, Julia interjects, "Perdón, ¿puedo decir algo? A mí la escena me gusta, me parece potente en sí misma, pero lo que no entiendo es, pensando en la película, por qué elegimos un momento tan raro en la vida de Fauna para contar, un momento evidentemente triste y traumático que la muestra débil y confundida" (37). Here Julia shows that she is protective of Fauna and of the way she is represented. At another moment, Julia says, "[H]ay algo en ella que me resulta profundamente familiar, como si ya la conociera desde siempre" (26). Julia's careful attention to how the biographical details of Fauna's story are filmed and the almost confessional tone she uses to express the close bond she feels to Fauna serve to create an intimate, personal atmosphere that draws in the audience affectively and makes spectators feel part of something real that is happening onstage.

The play capitalizes on the newfound interest in the biographical that has emerged globally across genres of cultural production in the last several decades. For example, documentary film theorist Michael Renov identifies a "turn to the subject" starting in the 1990s and a deeper exploration of subjectivity as it is grounded in the personal and the experiential (xi, 177). From the social sciences, Barbara Merrill and Linden West similarly attest, "There has been a major turn towards biographical, autobiographical, life history or narrative approaches in the academy over the last 30 or so years" (3). And Leonor Arfuch invokes Philipe Lejeune's notion of biographical space to discuss the ways in which the subject has been ushered back into discourse through a resurgence of biographical methods, memoirs, and personal interviews (17). In their definitions of the biographical, these theorists refer to real, existing subjects, yet this new biographical mode is equally capable of generating a sense of the real when employed in fiction.

I would put forth that Paula's exploration of the biographical belongs to what Beatriz Jaguaribe in her article "The Shock of the Real" has termed a new "aesthetics of realism" or "realist encoding," which may borrow from documentary registers but is nonetheless fiction. Jaguaribe, too, views this renewed interest in the real as a widespread phenomenon. She writes, "From the manifestos towards an authentic cinema to the debunking of magical realism by a new generation of Latin American writers, new forms of the 'return of the real' have emerged as globalized narratives" (330). Jaguaribe identifies the rich "terrain of symbolic mappings" that are a result of documentary works that use fictionalizing strategies and fictional works that incorporate documentary techniques (329). And yet, she notes that this borrowing of codes and techniques between fiction and documentary does not conflate the two modes: "The close contact between 'fiction' and non-fiction does not necessarily erase the boundaries between the 'real' and the fictional, but it questions the status of representation and our access to experience" (329). This line of questioning is of central importance in *Fauna*, a work in which characters are deeply invested in determining how the representation of a life relates to the kind of access another person has to that life.

Paula explores the boundary between fiction and non-fiction or acting and non-acting reflexively throughout her play, and she does this so inventively that spectators are often unaware that a shift from acting to non-acting (yet always within the theatrical framework) has taken place. For example, the opening scene of the play features Julia on the saddle at the back of the stage reciting Rilke. It is only when the director interrupts her and asks, "¿Qué era

esto?", do the theatergoers begin to realize that what they had been watching was part of a rehearsal for a film and did not belong to the "real" play. At other moments as well, the characters' transition in and out of acting and non-acting is so subtle that spectators are only made aware that a change between modes has occurred because of a comment made by one of the characters. For example, a scene in which Julia and Santos are rehearsing a dialogue reveals confusion as to whether or not they are in acting or "real life" mode:

SANTOS: Yo lo supe todo este tiempo.
ACTRIZ: ¿Qué es lo que supo?
SANTOS: Qué usted era una impostora, "Fauna."
ACTRIZ: ¿Pero no dijo que no le sorprendía? No entiendo.
SANTOS: Es que sorprender no me sorprende, me descoronaza.
ACTRIZ: No estoy entendiendo.
SANTOS: ¿Qué es lo que no entiende? Usted no ama a ese hombre.
ACTRIZ: ¿A mi marido?
SANTOS: A ése *(Señala a José Luis.)*
ACTRIZ: Él no es mi marido. Es Fauno.
SANTOS: Es José Luis.
ACTRIZ: Ah, ¿ya cortamos? (57)

Characters onstage stop acting within the inner play, but the fourth wall remains intact so characters continue to act within the outer play. This heightened metadramatic reflexivity resonates with what Joanna Page has identified in contemporary Argentine documentary film as a trend toward re-examining the relationship between acting, experience, and truth (73). In her discussion of works by the Argentine filmmakers Martín Rejtman and Federico León and Brazilian filmmaker Eduardo Coutinho, Page argues that "by making performance the subject of their documentaries" these filmmakers are able to "consider acting, neither as an expression of authenticity nor as an exercise in artifice, but as an encounter with forms of truth and experience that generates new knowledge" (84). Though Page is discussing documentary film and *Fauna* is a work of fictional theatre, artists working in and across these genres and registers nonetheless pose a similar set of questions on how truth, experience, and knowledge interrelate and constitute one another.

Paula contemplates truth as flash encounters with love, death, and art—ephemeral events that emerge and break through reality, but ultimately remain incomprehensible. She also questions what the role of experience is in acquiring knowledge, understanding, and performing the life of another. Julia misses the experience of meeting Fauna in person, but she gains secondhand

experience through meeting with her children, reading memoirs, and visiting her old haunts. Experience as an actor, though, discredits her in the eyes of Santos, who calls her an impostor and questions her motives for wanting to represent the life of his mother. Paula also questions the value of experience as it is embodied or disembodied. Throughout the play, Julia strives to embody the experience of Fauna. At another moment, she talks about motherhood and confesses that she wishes maternity were a disembodied experience: "¿Por qué una mujer no puede tener un hijo lejos de su cuerpo?" (43). Knowledge is equally mutable and unreliable in this play. Ironically, although José Luis insists they are making a fictional film, he is upset when he is forced to admit that his historical knowledge of Fauna is uncertain; throughout the play it is often contradicted by new information presented by her children. At one point, Santos tells Julia that Fauna made up the story of the amnesiac encounter with her husband. And toward the end of the play, José Luis tells Santos that Julia made up the whole story of Fauna. In the end, there is no concrete and consensual knowledge of Fauna, no certainty that she even existed beyond the changing accounts and multiple reenactments of her life of the four individuals who are brought together because of an idea of her.

To summarize thus far, Paula's explorations of truth, acting and non-acting, fiction and non-fiction, and biography can all be considered as attempts at questioning what is real. I should reiterate that these explorations do not intend to break down the fourth wall; rather, they reveal the ways in which the discourse of the real can be manipulated to legitimize certain perspectives, to unsettle others, to seduce the audience through the construction of intimacy, and to call into question what is at stake when the real is invoked. In the play, episodes depicting flashes of sublime, traumatic, and uncanny truth suggest that what is real is ineffable, resistant to symbolic assimilation, and simply "impossible," according to Lacan. But, in addition to being considered flashes of truth, through her playful take on what constitutes acting and non-acting, Paula poses the real as something that is often imperceptible, illusory, or mistaken for fiction. And through a near fetishization of the biographical and identification between Julia and Fauna, the real becomes equated with a sense of personal closeness and the near doubling that takes place between character and fictional figure.

Fauno

Perhaps the most important question in the play is how these multiple approaches to the real relate to gender and the fact that the four characters are

debating over how to represent Fauna, a figure who over the course of her life becomes Fauno. Paula herself affirms that what most inspired her to write the play was the question of gender: "La pregunta sobre el lugar de la mujer o sobre qué es femenino y masculino me convoca especialmente" (Rabaini). Paula cites the influence of the Spanish writer Concepción Arenal and the Argentine filmmaker María Luisa Bemberg on early conceptualizations of *Fauna*. Additional influences include Claude Cahun, Dorothea Lange, Katherine Anne Porter, Carson McCullers, and Flora Tristan (Halfon). In an interview Paula states that it is impossible to conflate the feminisms of these women, who lived in different times under dramatically different circumstances. For some, Paula contends, feminism was a political act, for others a mode of survival (Halfon). Paula separates herself from these existing versions of feminism to focus on what most interests her: "[P]ensar acerca de lo femenino que puede haber, tanto en un hombre como en una mujer. En lo femenino y en lo masculino, habite donde habite" (Halfon). Of course, Paula is articulating herself from a very specific context as well, one that has recently been shaped by the pioneering laws passed in Argentina to legalize gay marriage (2010) and protect gender-identity rights (2012). And in 2015, two years after the play's premiere, collective denunciation of violence against women took form in the founding of the NiUnaMenos movement and the spectacular march that took place in Buenos Aires and in cities across Latin America on June 3, 2015. By de-linking femininity and masculinity from biological definitions of female and male, Paula's play showcases the performativity of gender, famously described by Judith Butler, within the framework of these rapidly changing legal paradigms of gender identity.

Throughout the play, gender is performative, changing, unfixed, and impossible to discern as belonging to fiction or reality. This is most clear in Julia's recollection of seeing Fauna for the first time: "Y arriba del caballo, que era como un efigie, este ser, esta persona, de sombrero, recia, bella o bello, un ser hermoso, imponente, hierático. . ." (23). The person might be male or female, or both, but gender identity is secondary to the fact that in Julia's eyes Fauna is first and foremost a "beautiful, impressive being." For Julia, seeing Fauna for the first time constitutes a fantasy that both defies gender categorization and her own sense of reality. As Butler writes, "The critical promise of fantasy, when and where it exists, is to challenge the contingent limits of what will and will not be called reality. Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings elsewhere

home" (29). Fauna's character exemplifies this element of fantasy. He/she emerges on horseback from the lush, green backdrop to produce a flash of truth that disrupts reality and forces Julia to imagine possible identities that are not contingent on the ability to locate gender as either male or female.

In defying gender norms, Fauna provides the fantasy of a new gender in which the masculine and feminine are blended, reconfigured in new combinations, and made indistinguishable in the form of a "beautiful, impressive" being. Throughout the play, Paula offers other examples relating to parentage and love that reinforce the possibility of re-envisioning gender in non-heteronormative ways. In one scene, Julia expresses frustration at limitations imposed by stereotypes of femininity: "¿Qué dice que soy una mujer, qué me hace comportarme así, con tanta determinación? ¿Por qué esa manía de saber y entender, todo el tiempo, qué es qué, quién hace a quién? No puedo más responder a esta construcción de la debilidad" (44). And she concludes by stating, "Quisiera poder ser el padre de mis hijos," to which Santos responds, "Fauna fue un padre para nosotros" (44). Through Julia's desire to be a father, and Santos' identification of his mother as a father figure, both characters separate fatherhood from the male gender and in doing so multiply the possibilities of gender (dis)identification and parentage. Immediately after Julia proclaims her desire to be a father to her children, she asks José Luis if he will play the role of Fauno in rehearsing a scene in which Ramón professes his love to him. After the scene, Julia tells José Luis that his version of Fauno is more feminine than her own (45). José Luis (a male actor) thus rehearses the role of a woman dressed as a man, and his interpretation is deemed more feminine than Julia's (a female actor). Through introducing multiple role-playing scenarios, and blurring the lines between acting and non-acting, at times Paula's play undermines normative gender roles by subsuming them under the multi-layered reflexivity of the play and showing that these normative roles constitute nothing other than performances as well. As Butler reminds us, "When one performance of gender is considered authentic, and another fake, then we can conclude that a certain ontology of gender is conditioning these judgments, an ontology (an account of what gender *is*) that is also put into crisis by the performance of gender in such a way that these judgments are undermined or become impossible to make" (214). Paula's play successfully rejects the notion of an authentic or real gender and instead, I would argue, responds to Butler's question, "What if new forms of gender are possible?" (31). Paula achieves this by introducing women who aspire to be fathers, men who are more feminine than women,

women who make good fathers, and figures, such as Fauna, who eschew conventional gender categorization.

One of the most effective strategies Paula employs to undermine gender norms in *Fauna* is cross-dressing. As Laurence Senelick observes, "Dressing and undressing is now the common stage exercise to demonstrate gender construction" (492). In contemporary Argentine theatre, two classic precursor plays in which actors cross-dress are *La Nona*, by Roberto Cossa, and *Y a otra cosa mariposa*, by Susana Torres Molina. Premiered in 1978 and 1982, respectively, these plays use cross-dressing as a means of addressing self-censorship and the social construction of gender under dictatorship.[6] While current Western attitudes may often hold cross-dressing as a liberating form of expression and a way to disassociate biological sex from gender, historically cross-dressing has also provided individuals with disguises and modes of self-preservation and survival under repressive conditions. In Paula's play, although Fauna remains offstage, we learn from the other characters that her transformation into Fauno involved her dressing as a man in order to gain access to the Circle of Poets meetings. Paula distinguishes between the different kinds of gender performances taking place in the play, as she carefully juxtaposes Fauna's historical experience of cross-dressing as a mode of access to the male-dominated cultural circles with Julia's contemporary cross-dressing as Fauno as a mode of exploration of identity, love, and gender performativity itself.

Early on in the play, Julia begins dressing in Fauno's clothes, making her embodiment of Fauno that much more powerful and her gender identity that much more complex. When actors onstage *act* another gender through cross-dressing, they participate in multiplying registers of performance. Senelick states that these actors "indulge not in gender-crossing but in gender-mixing, and offer a polymorphism more desirable than attainable" (10). This desirable polymorphism once again reminds us of Butler's idea of fantasy and the possibility of envisioning other forms of gender. Julia's polymorphic gender mixing allows her to participate in the fantasy of her own gender identity. Not only does she take charge of her own gender expression, she also shows concern regarding how Fauna's gender will be represented in the film. She disagrees with José Luis over the point of departure in telling the life story of Fauna and feels strongly that it would be better to begin with Fauna as Fauno, when he is already participating in the Circle of Poets, because Julia believes that beginning the film with Fauna, in one of her weakest moments, would not do Fauno justice (37). In establishing the point of departure as the

moment in which Fauna becomes Fauno, Julia advocates against upholding the notion of a "real" or "original" underlying identity, and this is important, because as Selenick observes, "The problem with the masquerade approach to gender is that its distinction between the real and false is almost Manichaean (or perhaps Platonic, in its implication that the real is better, more authentic, than the assumed)" (5). In fact, Julia maintains that the identity Fauna assumes later in her life as Fauno is in some ways more real because it is the identity that Fauno chose. Whether through cross-dressing or choosing a new starting point for the articulation of a life, Paula's play creates a space for imagining new approaches to gender that challenge historical categories considered more real or authentic.

Throughout this article I have discussed the ways in which Paula explores the real: as an ephemeral flash of ineffable truth; as a strategy belonging to both fiction and non-fiction; as a sensation constructed through biographical intimacy; and as a normative category, against which characters in Paula's play enact the fantasy of gender. Once again, to quote Butler, "If gender is performative, then it follows that the reality of gender is itself produced as an effect of the performance. Although there are norms that govern what will and will not be real, and what will and will not be intelligible, they are called into question and reiterated at the moment in which performativity begins in citational practice" (218). Imagining new forms of gender onstage

Photo: Sebastián Arpesella

(performativity in its most reflexive sense) rehearses the mechanism for transforming fantasy into something real or normative. And this transformation is complicated because of the double meaning of the norm as inclusive and potentially protective, on the one hand, and coercive and "normalizing" on the other (206). What Paula's play does compellingly is propose a nuanced exploration of what it means to desire to capture the real through artistic expression. While the boom in the real across genres and disciplines has provided artists and critics with a new paradigm for approaching discourses of truth, fiction, and performance, Paula's play—and specifically her treatment of gender—reminds us to be alert to the possibility that the allure of the real might also encompass a hidden desire for the normative.

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Notes

[1] Argentine theater director Vivi Tellas introduced the concept of biodrama in Argentina —the staging of the real lives of individuals— and has made it one of the most exciting dramatic interventions in contemporary Argentine theatre.

[2] The company El Silencio is composed of four longstanding members —Pilar Gamboa, Esteban Bigliardi, Susana Pampin, and Esteban Lamothe— and the recently incorporated Rafael Ferro, who joined the company for *Fauna*.

[3] Indeed, in addition to her work as playwright, Paula has acted in films by some of Argentina's most talented up-and-coming filmmakers, including *La punta del diablo* (2006) by Marcelo Paván; *Resfriada* (2008) by Gonzalo Castro; *El hombre robado* (2007), *Todos mienten* (2009), *Viola* (2012), and *La Princesa de Francia* (2014) by Matías Piñeiro, and *El Estudiante* (2011) by Santiago Mitre. She has also written three novels, *¿Vos me querés a mí?* (2005), *Agosto* (2009), *Acá todavía* (2016), as well as several essays.

[4] Just a handful of recent examples of works that highlight this blending of film and theatre modes include Lisandro Alonso's *Fantasma* (2006), José Glusman's *Final de obra* (2006), Federico León's *Yo en el futuro* (2009), Matías Piñeiro's *Viola* (2012) and *La Princesa de Francia* (2014), Alejo Moguillansky's *El loro y el cisne* (2013), and Mariano Pensotti's *Cineastas* (2013).

[5] The Oxford English Dictionary defines the sublime as "affecting the mind with a sense of overwhelming grandeur or irresistible power; calculated to inspire awe, deep reverence, or lofty emotion, by reason of its beauty, vastness, or grandeur."

[6] See Jean Graham-Jones's discussion of cross-dressing and gender construction under dictatorship in "Myths, Masks, and Machismo."

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