

The 1984 Theatre Season in Buenos Aires

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Thanks to the financial support of the Fulbright Commission, I was afforded the opportunity to spend July through September of 1984 in Buenos Aires, doing research on Argentine theatre. In the three months I was there, attending one or more theatrical performances nearly every night, I found a vast array of productions and a world of contrasts—a world of contrasts when one compared Buenos Aires theatre to that of other major cities and a world of contrasts when one considered the various productions within Buenos Aires.

If one examines Buenos Aires theatre in relation to that of Mexico and New York, one notes first that theatre tickets were far less expensive in Buenos Aires than in New York (and on a par with those in Mexico). One also finds that Buenos Aires offered as much variety and as many possibilities as does New York (and more than Mexico City). Nevertheless, theatrical productions in Buenos Aires tended to be very meagerly budgeted, and the theatres themselves were seldom inviting places. They were often small, unostentatious at best, cold in the winter (many of them were not heated) and, I suppose, hot in the summer. With some notable exceptions, theatre audiences tended to be very small and performances readily canceled. For the most part, the spectator in Buenos Aires needed to be physically hearty and truly dedicated to the art.

On a more positive note, what was most impressive about theatre in Buenos Aires was the sheer breadth of the proffered repertoire. In the short three month period I saw significant diversity in terms of the national origin of the playwrights, the style of the texts as well as the productions, their budgets, and themes. For example, some of the foreign plays produced during the 1984 season included: Genet, *Las criadas* (performed by a Spanish company); Dostoievsky, *Memorias del subsuelo*; Darío Fo, *Aquí nadie paga* and *Muerte accidental de un anarquista*; Pielmeier, *Cordero de Dios (Agnes of God)*; Norman, *Adiós mamá ('Night Mother)*; Amado, *Doña Flor y sus dos maridos*; Brecht, *Galileo* as well as several montages of his songs and works; Marlowe/Brecht, *La vida del rey Eduardo II de Inglaterra*; Arrabal, *El triciclo*; Santana, *La empresa perdona un momento de locura*; among many others. *Galileo* and *Eduardo* were lavishly staged at the Teatro Nacional Cervantes, while the Dostoievsky and Santana plays

were modest productions with a minimum of characters and scenery, although both excellently executed.

Among the Argentine plays produced during the same season, one found everything from the elaborate presentation of the Vacarezza sainete, *Tu cuna fue un conventillo* (1920) and Gorostiza's latest hit, *Papi*, to experimental theatre's unpretentious *Restos de una familia*, and the one-woman performance of Lema's *Mater*. Also staged were works by well-known Argentine dramatists such as Gambaro's *El campo* and *Del sol naciente*, Dragún's *Al violador*, Pavlovksy's *La mueca*, and two of Cossa's works (*De pies y manos* plus a new work, *Los compadritos*, each of which was produced prior to or after my stay), as well as excellent plays by dramatists such as Alicia Muñoz (*El pobre Franz*), Pacho O'Donnell (*Vincent y los cuervos*), Juan Carlos Badillo (*En boca cerrada*), Jorge Grasso (*Jugar a partir*), Esteban Mellino (*Loco*), Roma Mahieu (*Juegos a la hora de la siesta*), and Mauricio Kartun (*Chau Misterix*).

Space limitations obviously prevent me from sharing with the reader all my comments on this impressive variety. In the coming pages I shall offer just a few observations on some of the plays and productions that were particularly original or unusual, for me at least:

Vincent y los cuervos. In terms of its exceptionally creative staging, Pacho O'Donnell's *Vincent y los cuervos*, performed by the Teatro del Bosque group (La Plata), was one of the outstanding plays of the season. This was more than theatre in the round; it was four-dimensional theatre, which made the audience a part of the play. The audience entered the already darkened theatre and sat on cushioned paint cans, which allowed us to rotate to watch the action as it occurred on a raised platform which surrounded us on all four sides. In addition, some of the action took place on a net over our heads. Similarly, the "cuervos," representatives of the presumed sane but devouring society, often moved among us, as did the other characters, and in fact often spoke either directly to us or from one end of the theatre to the other, over our heads. The passive spectator was not a possibility here. Based on the life of Vincent van Gogh, the play demonstrated that life is art and art is life and that the theatre that exists inside the auditorium continues once we leave those confines. Special congratulations for scenography and costumes go to Claudia Billourou, Carlos Mendes de Faisca, and Alejandro Sago. (See my "Art and The Audience in O'Donnell's *Vincent y los cuervos*."')

Memorias del subsuelo. For this critic, another exciting moment in the 1984 season was the Grupo FYI's production of Fiodor Dostoievsky's *Memorias del subsuelo* at the Teatro Catalinas. Billed as a "creación grupal basada en la novela homónima," the play was an eloquent artistic creation in its own right and anything but a simple translation of the novel from one media (and language) to another. As in the narrative, the mature writer, recording his memories of days past (which may never have existed except in his fantasy), provided the framework for the plays within the play—a technique which, of course, we already saw in Vargas Llosa's *La señorita de Tacna*. Thus, the drama marked itself as literature, as theatre which does not pretend to be anything else, a concept highlighted on several levels. Fiodor, excellently performed by

Ricardo Bartís, was physically surrounded by books as he penned his memoirs and evoked his literary phantoms. The writer's ability to give corporeal substance to his phantoms was reified as Fiodor wrote, for his mental chimeras did materialize on stage, as "real" as he himself. His statement, "todo se vuelve a repetir," was dramatized by the fact that the entire performance reproduced his writing, which was a repetition of his past life (which on some level re-created the Dostoevsky novel)—reflections of reflections, each a bit more "literary" (and theatrical?) than the previous. Furthermore, when he determined that his writing/creation was not completely accurate, he was able to draw back and evoke that past all over again, ever attempting to capture, via language and its repetition, that fleeting and elusive thing we call reality. Also very much in the style of the Vargas Llosa play, Fiodor not only directed his discourse to an absent interlocutor (as perhaps all literature must), but he also changed, before our eyes, from the elderly narrator to the young "actor" whose life he re-presented. Thus, the play dramatized the autobiographic act in which the narrator is simultaneously writer and actor, as it objectified the autobiographer in his two roles, separated by time and space but speciously united in the artistic endeavor.¹ Significantly, the play concluded with Fiodor's insistence that everything had been a lie (as theatre, art, autobiography, necessarily are). The only alternative which remained was to recommence the artistic process in one more effort to capture that past moment, a moment which, because it is past, can never be more than literature, verbal reproduction.

The staging of the play was particularly effective and concretely highlighted many of the themes. For example, the setting was simple, almost barren, painted in dark tones, which presumably reflected the "underground" as well as the darkness and barrenness of life without the artistic gesture and the writer who adds color and "life." The ramp into the audience (much like what one finds in a beauty pageant) allowed the actors to move out of the "official" stage area, in a sense off the page, and into the audience without actually becoming a part of that audience. Special praise is also due to the scenographers, who created a single prop resembling an antique armoire, which served not only as an armoire, but also as a kitchen, a bookcase, a restaurant, a bed, a horse-driven coach, etc. As might be expected in a play which presented itself and its theme as literature, the characters embodied a mixture of naturalism and fantasy, while the main character himself (as in the novel) was a blend of seeming antitheses— sensitivity and brutality, shyness and aggression, etc. As Rafael Cansinos Assens noted in the program, "El hombre del subsuelo siente y habla como un ángel, pero se conduce como un demonio." Obviously, one of the main points of the play was that this is literature, and words cannot capture our "reality" no matter how sincere the intentions of the artist.

La mueca. The Grupo Sol production of Eduardo Pavlovsky's play at the Teatro Payró was another particularly exciting moment in terms of staging. This production highlighted several aspects of the play which, for this critic at any rate, are not as apparent in the published text (Buenos Aires: Talía, n.d.), for example, that all of life is theatre, art, and vice versa. The play focused on

an evening during which four men, some of them homosexual, filmed a documentary about the everyday life, including the erotic habits, of a middle-class, heterosexual couple. Intended to be a naturalistic slice of life, the movie succeeded in capturing only a series of theatrical rituals and artistic renditions, demonstrating 1) that the entire existence of the middle-class couple was merely a series of masks and role playing, theatre within theatre, or as Sueco expressed it, "una porquería viviente . . . arte" (p. 37), and 2) that art can never be more (or less) than art regardless of its sincere intention to reproduce reality.

That all existence is art (theatre) was accentuated in a number of ways in the Buenos Aires production. First, the faces of the "artists" were painted in grotesque half masks which allowed us to see part of the "faces" underneath. Thus, the masks negated the portended naturalism of the play while emphasizing the characters' simultaneous status as actors and characters and stressing to the audience that what we had before us was art, not "reality." That is, we were concretely reminded that people are both role and essence, surface mask and inner being, actor and character, and that either aspect might reveal itself at any given moment but that neither aspect exists independently of the other. In the published text, Sueco has an "aspecto extravagante, exagerado" (p. 11), but it is never suggested that the faces should be so unnaturalistic. The production also differed significantly from the published text in that the setting of the latter is a modern living room, "muy bien puesto" (p. 11), whereas the stage was so futuristic that it might have been anything, even a spaceship.

For this critic, the master stroke of the production was the false stage superimposed on top of the traditional stage. As the four "artists" metaphorically "broke through" the masks and theatrical facades of the middle-class couple and as the latter's world began metaphorically to "fall apart," so too did the stage as the false floor boards separated and spread apart, graphically mirroring the destruction of their world. The theme that our world is composed of endless, indistinguishable layers of theatre and role playing was exemplified then by the "false" stage boards (*tablas*), which, although superimposed on the principal stage, were ultimately neither more false nor more "real" than the latter, again suggesting that perhaps art is neither more nor less "real" than "reality." After the departure of the four who had destroyed the ritualistic theatre of their lives, the couple's struggle to put the pieces of their previous life back together was visually exemplified as they physically strained to reassemble the pieces of the false stage boards. In an eloquent gesture, Helena, the wife (who has no name in the text until the end of Act One; she is merely *Ella*), fell between the "false" stage boards and was caught as she labored to reconstruct their former "theatre"—which again was superimposed on the larger "theatre" of our world.

Restos de una familia. The other particularly unique play of the season was Gustavo Riondet's *Restos de una familia*, performed by the Teatro del Totoral of Córdoba at the Centro Cultural San Martín. This was experimental theatre to the extreme, where symbolism reigned and dialog was almost totally suppressed in a gesture which underlined the impotence of the word to

communicate, portray, or change anything. Divided into two parts, the performance began with children playing (as so many of this season's Argentine plays did). The games were portrayed as children's renditions and perceptions (essentially valid) of society and adult life as they dramatized our rituals of initiation and family life. The second part functioned more as a metaphor of the history of society or humanity.

Although the cast was composed of four very talented young people, the "theatre" itself, which was merely an empty, elongated room with three rows of chairs along each of the longitudinal walls, seriously detracted from the play and the performance. The "stage" was merely the floor space between the two groups of chairs, and the "dressing rooms" in which the actresses disrobed were nearly as public as the stage itself. As noted, although dialog was virtually nonexistent, screaming and shouting were not and presumably epitomized the primitive "screams" of mankind and society while underlining vocal noncommunication. There was a great deal of frantic activity and running in circles, symbolic of society with its frantic but futile activity which continually brings it back to its point of origin. In terms of shock value, the fire ignited in the middle of the "stage," and then spilled to spread over much of the stage, was certainly effective. Unfortunately, the audience was less than tolerant of the experimentation and giggled or otherwise reacted with derision throughout the performance. It was apparent that the Argentine audience was not yet prepared for a theatre of sensations and symbols.

Although these four plays impressed me the most in terms of their original or avant-garde staging, there were a number of more "traditional" plays that were also well written and well performed or otherwise worthy of comment:

El pobre Franz. Alicia Muñoz and the Grupo Taller produced another success this season with this play. Acclaimed the previous year for their *La taberna del cuervo blanco*, this group and dramatist are ones from which we can expect great things in the future. *El pobre Franz* is based on Franz Kafka's letter to his father and was commissioned by the Austrian embassy for a celebration of the anniversary of Kafka. Although the original plan was to stage the play just once as part of the homage, it was such a success that it was taken to commercial theatre.

Once again, one was reminded of Vargas Llosa's *La señorita de Tacna*, for this play was framed by the young Franz, at his desk, writing his letter to his father, and the action alternated between that moment of *énonciation* and the earlier moments of his childhood, the *énoncé* which was more or less mental recreation. This production was particularly effective, however, for unlike *La señorita de Tacna*, *El pobre Franz* never lost the audience in its pendulous movement between the two temporal points, and we never doubted which moments were mental projections. Although the play reenacted Kafka's life validly (at least from Franz's point of view), it also functioned on another completely distinct level and might well be analyzed as a theatrical study on discourse.

The play opened, "Querido papá," a statement which underlined the play's status as discourse and, specifically, discourse directed to an absent interlocutor. Thus, the letter was shown to be repetition, substitution, for if

Franz had been able to communicate his thoughts and emotions directly to his father, Hermann, the letter would have been superfluous. In the semiotically laden staging, while Franz wrote his letter, Hermann was also present and visible to the audience. However, since the latter existed in another time frame and only as a mental chimera, he and Franz could neither see nor hear each other, as perhaps they were unable to do even when in the same time frame, and the father's words were also directed to an absent (nonexistent?) Franz. Ultimately, of course, although each was the apparent interlocutor of the other, the veritable recipient of the discourse was the audience, for the words were indeed aimed at and meaningful only to us. At the same time the play underlined the contradictory status of Franz's writings whose express objective was to provide a vehicle for defining himself and becoming independent from his father. Paradoxically, however, even he acknowledged that as much as his literary endeavor strove to free him from his father, he did write everything for him (not just the letter which was ostensibly directed towards him). Thus, Muñoz demonstrated the paradoxical nature of the act of writing which antithetically frees and enslaves both its producer and its recipient while it simultaneously represents and makes powerful that which it seeks to eliminate or debilitate.

El pobre Franz also recognized itself as theatre and focused on the theatre within the theatre. The frame play, Franz's writing of the letter, emphasized the repetitive nature of the play within the play, which was Franz's mental projection of his past. At the same time, one of the themes of the work was Franz's incapacity to separate role and inherent being, to understand that the surface does not necessarily mirror the internal; he could not recognize role playing (theatre) when he saw it. Franz, perhaps because he lived in a world of literature, was ill equipped to comprehend why his father must continually shout and behave aggressively if those actions did not accurately reflect his inner being. He failed to understand that Hermann's aggression, like his belittling of Franz's "womanlike" frailty and debility, was merely a mask, a smoke screen for his own weakness and insecurity. Thus, the audience comprehended that Hermann himself was role playing even within the already acknowledged play within the play.

This entire concept of a play within a play (a favorite technique of Muñoz) was carried one step further towards the end of the one-act play when the young Franz fell asleep in the play within a play and had a dream which, unlike his other mental projections, was overtly presented as fictitious, surrealistic, mental re-creation. In this dream Franz appeared before the tribunal to be judged by the powerful figures, all of whom, paradoxically, were female rather than male as might have been expected. Nonetheless, during this dream sequence, Hermann, although not a part of the dream/fantasy, was ever present to us the audience, for he was seated at the front of the proscenium, casting a huge shadow over us in the audience—certainly a powerful, semiotic indicator.

The performance ended with Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* as a smile spread over Franz's face, in direct contrast to Muñoz's text which terminates, "(Franz siente que todo ha sido inútil . . . Dándole la espalda al padre se encoge sobre sí mismo anulando toda posibilidad de comunicación)." ¹² Obviously, the two

finales lead to very different conclusions regarding the ultimate meaning of the play. The performance suggested that once the letter was written and sent to its intended recipient, the exorcism was complete, and Franz could now be "free" of Hermann and the shadow of his power. Thus, the writing had provided him with the power he lacked in a physical sense. Antithetically, the written text underlines the futility of the literary gesture and its impotence to truly change anything. Both premises seem equally valid to this critic.

Doña Flor y sus dos maridos. An enjoyable evening of entertainment was to be found at the Teatro Odeon with the production of Jorge Amado's *Doña Flor y sus dos maridos*, a theatrical version of the novel, developed and directed by José María Paolantonio. Although I had been warned that this production was "just pornography" (by those who had not seen it), I found it tasteful if indeed predominated by eroticism. The eroticism and nudity were anything but gratuitous, however, since the action of the play centered on doña Flor's search for sexual fulfillment and society's insistence that her desires remain unarticulated and preferably unsatisfied. The weakest moments of the performance were those involving music and dance; the performers were much more successful as actors than as dancers. Paolantonio is to be commended for the skillful manipulation of the symbolic and for the smooth blending of levels of fantasy and reality.

El campo. Surely no commentary on the 1984 theatrical season in Buenos Aires would be complete without a word on the new production of Griselda Gambaro's *El campo*, which ran for a very short period at the Teatro Nacional Cervantes and which received considerable negative (much of it undue) criticism. Directed by Alberto Ure, the play dates from 1967 and according to the program had not been staged in Argentina since 1974. The Ure production incorporated some notable changes, but the modifications were neither gratuitous nor detrimental to the original text. The huge stage was delineated by an architect's plan of a concentration camp supported by a Gargantuan, yet completely naturalistic, human hand. Such a setting served several purposes. First, the architect's plan visually identified the locale as a concentration camp, something less obvious in the written text (and perhaps in earlier productions), so that the audience understood from the very beginning the nature of the business before us. Second, the diagrammatic nature of the plan reflected the schematic nature of the work itself in which Gambaro has merely sketched the outlines of human violence and power struggles and has left to the director or spectator the completion of those outlines. It also served to remind us that there was more to all this than met the eye, that human interactions are much more complicated than is apparent on the sketchy surface. At the same time, the enormous hand also functioned as a reminder that all forms of power, all the nuances of any given situation may not be immediately apparent. It was significant that this overwhelmingly large hand, which metaphorically sustained the play and the action therein, was not visible to the actors in the play—again proffering a potent social comment.

This staging of *El campo* also differed from earlier renditions in that the

presas were dressed not as prisoners but rather as maids, whether they were male or female prisoners. Significantly, the maids' attire was the stylized, theatrical, sensual, low-necked, short-skirted outfit whose design patently negates its implied function. (Presumably a maid's job is to do the housework, but surely no work could be done in these costumes.) Furthermore, Ema, also dressed as a maid, tiptoed in her bare feet as if wearing high heels. According to Gambaro (who cited Ure as the originator of the concept), the purpose of the gesture was to emphasize Ema's subservience and humiliation: "porque se supone que una mujer debe caminar con ese tipo de zapatos con tacos altos. La humillación se hace doble si no los tiene, si solamente le queda el gesto" (Magnarelli, "Gambaro.'). The play ended with the subtle but surprising revelation that the "power" was not where we had believed and with the potent symbolic gesture in which Martín was branded, marked by the experience through which he had passed.

Galileo Galilei. Last but not least, the Argentine theatre devotee was offered a splendid production of Brecht's *Galileo Galilei*, produced at the Teatro Municipal General San Martín, a very large and nicely appointed theatre. Brecht might have disapproved of the production which eliminated most of his "alienation" devices, but the spectators loved it in spite of its unwieldy length—two and a half hours, which is virtually unheard of in Buenos Aires. The circular, nearly unadorned stage which split apart was particularly effective in highlighting the scientific theories dramatized in the play. Walter Santa Ana was outstanding as Galileo. This was definitely theatre at its best.

Space limitations prevent me from sharing with the reader observations on the many other performances available to the spectator during July through September of 1984. In spite of the severe economic problems that Argentina is enduring and in spite of the fact that the Argentines themselves insisted that 1984 was definitively inferior in terms of theatrical productions, this critic found nearly infinite variety and a surprise around every theatrical corner.

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Notes

1. I discuss this aspect of *La señorita de Tacna* in more detail in "Mario Vargas Llosa's *La señorita de Tacna*: Autobiography and/as Theater," *Mester* 14 (In press).

2. I am grateful to the author, Alicia Muñoz, for providing me with a copy of this script as well as her other works.

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