

Performing Argentina in Spain after the Bombing: The Resignification of Theatrical Referents in *Cecilia Rossetto in Madrid*

Melissa A. Fitch

El efecto del espectáculo artístico en el espectador no es independiente del efecto del espectador en el artista.

Bertolt Brecht

Madrid. March 13, 2004. Anywhere else. I would have preferred to be in any other city. Just not in Madrid on March 13, 2004. And specifically not in Alcalá de Henares, the working class city 15 miles outside the capital where I was residing. It was there that terrorists had placed bombs on four trains only two days before. In an effort to escape the shock and sadness that filled the city, I booked tickets to see Argentine cabaret singer and comedian Cecilia Rossetto in the Nuevo Teatro Alcalá. Theatres had been closed Thursday, the day of the bombings, and Friday was declared a national day of mourning. Saturday night was the first time that everything would reopen. Rossetto had premiered her show *Cecilia Rossetto in Madrid* only one week before, on March 5. In it she sang and danced, told stories, teased the audience and joked both with them and with her pianist Freddy Vacarezza. That was exactly what I needed. Laughter. What I seek to explore in this essay is how theatrical meaning was transformed in a specific context, in this case the bombings of March 11, 2004. How does a feminist camp cabaret performance, something predicated almost entirely on humor and audience interaction, become infused with and/or altered by national tragedy? How are semiotic referents altered to reveal new layers of meaning?

The trajectory of my article is as follows: I situate *Cecilia Rossetto in Madrid* within the Latin American tradition of “teatro frívolo” and beyond that as a specific example of feminist camp cabaret, a theatrical form that

requires the role (and good-humored complicity) of the audience. I then review the critical framework of reception theory as it relates to theatre semiotics and performance. I place *Cecilia Rossetto in Madrid* both in its general sociohistoric context – that of the Argentines currently living and working in Spain – and in the particular contextual moment of the performance on March 13, 2004. The specific show I attended took place in the midst of what were the four most turbulent days in recent Spanish history, a period that began with that first bomb exploded on Thursday morning, March 11, 2004 at 7:39 am and culminated in a national election that removed the president’s political party, the results of which were confirmed on late Sunday night, March 14. Throughout the essay, I will underscore connections between postcolonial theory and the representation of gender and nation for a European audience by a Latin American performer. Within these multiple overlapping frames of understanding, I discuss the performance in detail by focusing on the resignification of the show’s semiotic cues. My interpretation of the performance of *Cecilia Rossetto in Madrid* is as much about the politics of production in the age of globalization as it is about the context of its reception; thus this analysis fits squarely within the rubric of cultural studies.

Rossetto’s show draws liberally from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century popular theatre styles known as *teatro frívolo*: cabarets, sketches, teatro de revista, teatro de carpas and street theatre. These were short shows, topical in nature, which incorporated music and dance as well colloquial linguistic registers that would resonate with a given audience. While all theatre requires a degree of communication, if even unspoken, between audience and performer, successful cabaret actually hinges upon it. The spectators are expected to talk back, and their response will in large part determine the subsequent answer from the performer on stage, in a form of verbal volleyball. As Roselyn Constantino and Diana Taylor explain:

From the 1880s to the 1930s, audiences from the burgeoning semi-educated populations in the urban centers and provinces of Latin America mingled and participated in some local version of “teatro frívolo.” Performers drew their material from daily events, transmitting news and information through skits and songs, voicing socio-political criticism, and creating a sense of nationhood and of ethnic or national identity. Realistic and stock characters – including the street vagrant, the revolutionary, fancy cowboys, the innocent virgin, the prostitute, the rancher, students, dancing skeletons, politicians, the cabaret diva, and the drunk – were constructed through

iconic gestures and spoken through popular language characterized by the use of *albures* and *lunfardo*, plays on words and puns with double meanings, often with sexual connotations. The play between performer and audience highlighted the rich oral traditions of popular sectors that prided themselves on an agile sense of humor and strategies of one-upmanship. (18)

The “teatro frívolo” is always infused with popular language. There is nothing difficult to understand and there are few intellectual pretensions. The shows are also connected to the immediate socio-historical moment of their representation and circumstances. Thus the audience members form a fairly cohesive and homogeneous community, watching and participating in a show that speaks directly to their experiences. In the performances, the lyrics of the “boleros, corridos, rancheras and tangos also transmitted histories and conflicts about love, gender roles, claims to geopolitical space, and heroic resistance to encroaching hegemonic forces” (Constantino and Taylor 18).

Cabaret aims to please. In the case of *Cecilia Rossetto in Madrid*, Rossetto’s tongue is firmly in cheek as she pokes fun at almost everything. She looks like a male drag queen, and her exaggerated femininity make her campy. She is also a parody of her country, the stereotypical hysteria-driven Argentine woman. She is playing with constructs of both gender and nation.

Unlike other Latin American feminist cabaret performers, notably Mexico’s Astrid Hadad and Jesusa Rodríguez, or Brazil’s Denise Stolkos, Rossetto does not violently alter the dominant First World and patriarchal paradigm for understanding and viewing either gender or Latin America; she just pushes the stereotypes so far that she denaturalizes them and reveals their ludicrousness. What she is doing is feminist camp cabaret, a performance form “related to masquerade and rooted in burlesque, which articulates and subverts the ‘image and culture’ making processes to which women have traditionally been given access” (Robertson 10). But Rossetto’s feminist camp cabaret is more subtle than that of her Mexican and Brazilian counterparts, and it is also one predicated on the audience’s understanding of her wink-wink nudge-nudge humor.

To camp something up is to occupy it temporarily. “If camp ‘is’ something, it is the crisis of identity, of depth and of gravity. Not a stable code but a discourse produced by the friction with and among other discourses” (Cleto 34). As Flinn clarifies,

Camp adores cliché, surface image. With its emphasis on textures, appearances, materials, and bodies, camp poses a challenge to depth

models of textuality (going against, for example, structuralism's insistence on meaning being embedded within the deep structures of a text) and models of identity (repudiating the belief that external signs of one's appearance 'express' inner truths a stable, 'real' self). (440)

Cecilia Rossetto in her double role as writer and director has simply created a show around an Argentine character that happens to share her name.

For feminists, camp's appeal resides in its potential to function as a form of gender parody (Robertson 10). Mary Ann Doane believes that the credibility of images of the feminine can be undermined by a "double mimesis" or parodic mimicry. Parodic mimicry, she says, allows one to disconnect from a seemingly naturalized femininity: "Mimicry as a political textual strategy makes it possible for the female spectator to understand that recognition is buttressed by misrecognition" (182). In Rossetto's outrageousness and flamboyance, in her exaggeration of the feminine gender code, her excessive artifice, theatricality and self sexual objectification she knowingly produces herself as feminist camp.

The over-the-top feminist camp cabaret can be viewed as problematic by some feminist scholars because it is simultaneously critical of the dominant patriarchal ideology while at the same time complicit with it, a problem that Constantino located in the work of Astrid Hadad ("Politics" 205). This is one potential area of conflict for the spectator. Beyond that, as mentioned, the show requires complicity and interaction with audience members to be effective. Thus the viewer's sense of humor (and shared grid of cultural understanding) and his or her own particular frame of mind during the performance will be of paramount importance for its interpretation and reception, leading us to our third and final theoretical consideration.

Reception

Para nada pasivo, ese espectador es muy activo aunque esté inmóvil, y su actividad resulta múltiple: sensorial, emocional e intelectual. Recibe las informaciones, las selecciona, elige lo que le interesa, focaliza en lo que le emociona; recibe *shocks* estéticos, reconstruye cuadros. Recibe los sentimientos expresados por el actor-artista y les *responde* mediante la reacción (psíquica) apropiada. Intelectualmente,

comprende lo que ve en relación con su propio universo, su competencia estética, su universo ideológico.

(*Diccionario de términos claves del análisis teatral* 52)¹

Understanding reception is essential to effective theatre analysis. One cannot study theatre exclusively by virtue of a playtext, as it was so often done in the past at colleges and universities. It is common knowledge now that the original meaning of the playtext may be rendered insignificant or radically transformed in the moment of performance. Part of this is because the spectators will always have an effect on the performers, “Aun cuando el espectador no exteriorice ruidosamente sus reacciones, éstas son percibidas por el emisor: un silencio absoluto, súbito, una inmovilidad acrecentada (el espectador “retiene su aliento”), indican al actor el momento en el que él emociona” (*Diccionario* 54).

The primary dimension of theatre reception takes places within the performance itself, as Mario Rojas explains:

Una representación teatral es pluridimensional. El espectador recibe simultáneamente palabras, espacio, color, movimiento, música, efectos de sonidos, en fin todos los signos que el director, técnicos y actores dan vida a un espectáculo. Este conjunto de signos requiere de una síntesis, interpretación, y compresión; en términos semióticos, de una descodificación. Pero sabido es que los espectadores ven y oyen cosas diferentes y que su lectura del espectáculo depende de dónde fijan su mirada, de su capacidad de concentración que varía a cada instante y de su competencia para descodificar los signos teatrales o culturales en juego.... El significado último del espectáculo depende exclusivamente del espectador. (187)

Reception will always be conditioned by the horizons of expectations on the part of the spectator, to use Hans Robert Jauss’s term, which is to say the particular frame, or the group of codes that s/he is working with as a result of any number of factors such as age, social class or gender that will necessarily frame expectations. Yet another factor to consider is if the spectator is expecting a certain kind of character in a given performance because this expectation will also color his or her appreciation (or repudiation) of a given work (Jauss qtd. in *Diccionario* 54). The question for the purposes

of our study is this: what were the audience expectations for the character in *Cecilia Rossetto in Madrid*?

The advertisements for Rossetto's show made obvious what audiences were going to see. Wearing an off-the-shoulder black blouse that fades into the background of the ad itself, displaying her shoulders and neck, the actor's bright red hair appears to stand on end. It matches her bright red lips as well as the color of the child-like writing on the page announcing her show. Her bottom lip comically juts out to the right. A clothespin is attached to her nose. Her eyes bulge out and her eyebrows are in two all-too-perfect painted arches. She looks exactly like the "cantante, sex symbol clown" she bills herself to be. In other words, unless someone was given a ticket and had absolutely no idea what to expect, the audience members who are present at *Cecilia Rossetto in Madrid* have already self-selected. But then we must ask: did audience members make the choice to see her before or after the bombing? Was this something planned weeks in advance or was it similar to my own case, an attempt to find an escape hatch in the midst of a few days of collective grief? These factors will all have an effect on the spectator's degree of participation.

What must be underscored by way of this discussion is that Roman Jakobson's standard communication model, i.e., addresser > message (including code, contact and context) > addressee, extends much further in theatre. It starts before a performance has begun, in the moment one contemplates buying the ticket and it even encompasses whatever mitigating circumstances were involved in buying the ticket (for example, is such an expenditure a rare luxury or commonplace? will it require a special trip to the city?). As Voltz explains "Por cierto, la actividad teatral se sitúa, por un lado, en el nivel de la representación del espectáculo, pero por el otro, *comienza antes*, continúa durante, y se prolonga después, cuando se leen los artículos, cuando se habla del espectáculo, cuando se ve a los actores, etc. Es un circuito de intercambios que concierne al conjunto de nuestra vida." (Voltz qtd. en *Diccionario* 96, "Recepción," my emphasis). Beyond that, what is unique to theatre is that the communicative code also works in reverse, as the opening quote to my essay by Bertolt Brecht illustrates.

Theatrical signs in a given performance adhere to the linguistic code of signifier > signified > referent and will always have a double referent, the first directly on stage that corresponds to the theatrical logic and the second in the world just outside the theatre doors. As such, grids of intelligibility and interpretation are always woven into the performative moment. Meaning is

constantly negotiated and will also be constrained by the audience's specific cultural determinants.² All of this is to say that meaning in theatre cannot be conveyed or contained solely by the written text. Connections with the "real" world are made before, during and after a given representation.

Reception will always be, first and foremost, about how an audience is able to read and interpret theatrical signs. Phenomenologist Maurice Natanson has elaborated on Jauss' horizons of expectation, explaining how our consciousness posits horizons of *probabilities*, which then constitute the expectations. In performance, these are created in four interdependent ways:

- 1) the daily experiences and cultural assumptions that inform the experience each spectator brings to the performance;
- 2) performance experiences similar to or different from the one that each is having now;
- 3) expectations created by publicity, word of mouth, etc.; and
- 4) what happens within the frame of the performance that one is attending. (Natanson qtd. in Zarrilli 24)

For the purposes of this essay we will be concentrating on the first and fourth of these four postulates, although it must be cautioned that this is predicated on a fundamental assumption, namely that the daily experiences of the audience members at *Cecilia Rossetto in Madrid* were in some way similar during the 48 hours prior to the show's representation, something impossible to ascertain. What can be guaranteed is that at least a *minimal* level of similarity was there – the shock and sadness. But the levels of engagement with the tragedy are unknown, that same shock and sadness could quite possibly have been greater or lesser depending on each spectator's connection to the event – as victim, witness, co-worker, medical personal responding to the emergency, or *madrileño/a*. What is clear is that the audience is sharing, in general, a particular frame of mind, and that this will be crucial to the show's reception.

Sociohistorical context

Official estimates say that there are 80,000 to 120,000 Argentines now living in Spain illegally, though other sources say the numbers are actually much higher, closer to 200,000 or even 250,000 (Pisani "Beneficiará"). The majority arrived after the economic crisis in 2001 that left almost one half of the country's population living below the poverty line ("Argentina" *CIA Factbook*). Between that year and 2003 the number of Argentines in Spain actually doubled, making Argentina one of the greatest sources of illegal immigration from South America. It is a dubious distinction. Argentines have

always taken pride in coming from one of Latin America's richest and most advanced countries, a European country that by some fluke of history ended up in the Southern Hemisphere. It was a nation that had welcomed immigration at the turn of the last century, primarily from Italy, Spain and Eastern Europe. The population is considered highly educated, intellectual, and for many years, it had been one of the most developed manufacturing sectors of Latin America.

So it is with no small measure of irony that the same descendants of those who came to "hacer la América" at the end of the end of the last century are now forced to return back across that same ocean to the countries of their grandparents and great grandparents, Spain and Italy. The dream of a better life is now sought on the streets of Rome or Madrid, or in the case of Rossetto, it is encapsulated by the names of Metro stops in the Spanish capital:

"Me dijeron: 'En Barajas coge el Metro'. Oiga, pero ¡qué ilusión que me hace! No más llegar, y ver "Pan Bendito" ¡Qué ternura! Y después 'Sol' y 'Esperanza.' ¡Qué bucólico! 'Mar de cristal' 'Casa de Campo' ¡Hubo algo que me mató! ¡ME MATÓ! '¡Plaza Elíptica!' No canso de decirlo, ¡Qué poético! ¡Oiga, pero este es un lugar impresionante!"³

Then Rossetto reaches her own Metro stop, "Lavapiés" and, "claro, ¡la poesía se fue a la mierda!" It is in Lavapiés that one finds the most ethnically diverse neighborhood in Madrid. In phone centers there one can find rows of clocks on the wall announcing the time in Spain, Morocco, Ecuador, Nigeria and Argentina as well as the long distance rates for calls to each.⁴

The quest to find the core of an ever-elusive identity is probably the single most unifying attribute that Argentines share. That identity, inevitably, is always somewhere else, somewhere just out of reach, just over the *charco*. The architects of Buenos Aires sought to build a capital that would remind both residents and visitors of Italy, or France or Spain. The fact that so many Argentines are now forced to return, to go backwards in time, in order to "hacer la España" or "hacer la Italia" adds another layer to the permanent sense of rootlessness. And yet, perhaps, it is precisely this *not* belonging, the perpetual nostalgia no matter where one finds oneself, that has fueled such creative genius. And there was no better place to witness this than in Madrid in 2004. It was possible to spend six months living in the Spanish capital and see little Spanish in origin on the cultural scene, with many shows, concerts or exhibits in some way rooted in Argentina. The only significant difference

was the cost of such indulgences, prices far beyond the reach of the majority of the population in Argentina as well as the majority of their counterparts living illegally in Spain. To partake in the city's cultural life is a luxury reserved almost exclusively for their Spanish hosts or wealthy foreign tourists. Ticket prices for Rossetto's show alone were 25 Euros, or 35 dollars.

"¿Hay argentinos acá esta noche?" she asks. A few scattered voices respond: "Sí."

"¿Hay madrileños?" A robust: "¡Sí!"

"Y bueno, saludos a los cuatro psicólogos de mi país"

Rossetto is in good company in Spain.⁵ While Argentines make up among the largest groups of the massive influx of immigrants who arrived in Spain over the last few years, (Pisani "Nuestro") there are significant differences between them and their Moroccan, Algerian, Polish, Romanian, Ecuadorian and Colombian counterparts.⁶ The Argentine exiles, first political during the late seventies and early eighties and now economic, are changing not merely the demographics in the city but more significantly the cultural and intellectual life in the Spanish capital. They are everywhere. They are in theatre, both on stage and backstage. They are in musical venues and in art exhibits. They have revitalized dance. Argentine films, often co productions with Spain, have been box office sensations in recent years. The Madrid *Guía del ocio* reported, "Por suerte para los espectadores en Madrid el desembarco de profesionales argentinos de la escena está siendo uno de los fenómenos más gratos que ha dado las carteleras españolas de los últimos años" (19-25 de marzo 2004).

"Al principio del siglo pasado había en Buenos Aires un 50% de extranjeros." Cecilia tells us, "En el barrio donde vive mi hija ahora en Barcelona hay un 49% de extranjeros. ¿Quién me iba a decir a mí que un siglo después iba a repetir la historia de mis abuelos conviviendo con bolivianos, ecuatorianos, dominicanos, filipinos, chinos, moros del norte de África y pakistanis?"

The terrorist attacks on March 11 claimed the lives of people from many different countries; among the Latin Americans were five Ecuadorians, four Peruvians, three Dominicans, two Hondurans, two Colombians, a Brazilian, a Chilean and a Cuban. They were part of an estimated 200,000 or more illegal aliens living in the outlying regions of Madrid, the less expensive areas that are connected via local trains to the city center. It is clear that Madrid is feeling the strain of adapting to this new wave of visitors from

other countries and it is reflected in the attitudes of the native-born inhabitants, forty-six percent of whom view the newcomers with suspicion.⁷

Performative Context

It has been raining for two days now. I have spent the moments since Thursday morning bombarded by the grotesque images that arrive via television, newspapers and magazines. As the magnitude of the tragedy becomes clear, 191 dead, 1500 injured, stillness descends upon the city like one I had rarely experienced before. Thirteen bombs, four trains, all departing from Alcalá de Henares between 7:00 and 7:15. Three trains had a capacity of 1,500 people and the fourth, 1,800, for a total of over 6000. That meant that 27% of the riders on those four trains were either killed or injured. Eleven nationalities were represented beyond Spain, 47 of the total number killed. The people who died were workers and students, not wealthy individuals, and many were immigrants living illegally in the country. They were going to work at menial jobs in the city.

The rainy evening before Rossetto's performance, on March 12, one fourth of Spain's population took to the streets in silent protest, eleven million people, something inconceivable to most US citizens. Their umbrellas formed a multicolored patchwork quilt. On that Saturday, as word emerges that internationally all leads in the tragedy are pointing to Al Qaeda, the Spanish government still refuses to call into question its own hypothesis that the bombing was the result of Basque separatists, thus inciting growing anger. This evening, the night of *Cecilia Rossetto in Madrid*, angry crowds demonstrate in front of government buildings, "¡Que nos digan la verdad!" they shout. Just before the show begins, a video is found in a garbage can near the city's main mosque. A voice speaking in Arabic claims responsibility for the bombings, and says it was the direct result of Spain's support of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. It is beginning to dawn on people that blaming ETA had been a shrewd attempt to retain power by the Spanish government. The presidential election is slated for the following day and their party's candidate, Mariano Rajoy, had been leading in all of the polls prior to the bombing. In the city there is a mix of emotions; fear, anger, confusion and profound sadness. It is in the midst of all of this that Cecilia Rossetto takes the stage at 10:30 pm.

The Show

Not surprisingly, the theatre is mostly empty. The silence weighs heavy among the few of us who have gathered. Surely the majority are doing the same thing I am, using the night to be transported somewhere else, in this case, specifically, to Buenos Aires. The air inside the Sala María Guerrero in the basement is thick. It is unnerving. There is almost complete stillness before the show begins, no laughing, nor conversation amid the audience members who have gathered. She emerges from a cloud on stage, all spiked heels, fishnet stockings and push up bra. “¡Soy una mina de café concert!” she sings to us, “¡Soy un pedazo de tía!” She sings brazenly, hips undulating, legs kicking.

There are shouts from her pianist: “¿Cómo estás, Ceci?” “Estoy muy bien, Che. Estoy rebién.” She rolls the rrrrr and casts a flirtatious gaze his way. We don’t believe her. She isn’t, in spite of her wide smiles and high kicks. Neither are we. She tries to cajole the audience into playing with her but it isn’t working. We are a mute, sullen bunch.

Estoy en Madrid, Manolito, Madrid, la de los cielos esplendorosos. Acabo de aparcar la patera. Entramos en el porvenir retrocediendo ayyyy. Argentina, un país a medias malhecho y a medias por hacer. Solamente quiero comentarles que ya por las madrugadas solemos despertarnos como en medio de una pesadilla. Ayyyy...¡qué susto! soñé que el país se iba a la mierda, pero en realidad en la Argentina no ha pasado nada, ¿no? si no ha sido más que una pesadilla, en realidad no ha pasado nada y ha sido todo una alucinación de la hierba mate, una alucinación *colectiva* de la hierba mate. Una fumata del banco nacional...ayyyy Manolo...somos muy sensibles los argentinos...y tengo la sensación como que en estos últimos años algo no ha salido muy bien.

The words sound odd in their new context. A few polite chuckles, scattered, but for the most part we remain silent. The original meaning of the signifier “pesadilla,” the Argentine economic crisis of 2001/2002, now has another layer of meaning, one much more relevant to the audience at this given moment, that of the train bombings. The reception and interpretation is overshadowed by the tragedy.

From the moment of her stage entrance, Rossetto attempts to directly engage her audience with her *teatro frívolo*. Her feminist camp cabaret is characterized by jokes, confessions, family stories, humor, political commentary, and sexual innuendos directed at the male audience members

in the front row. Her agility and capacity to make use of the entire stage, each movement perfectly planned, reveal her extensive dance and theatre training and twenty five years on stage. Given Argentine history, the hysteria-inflected monologues make sense, as Leslie Damasceno reminds us; “the hysteric feels her/himself to have no history, or at least no integrated personal history that can be the basis for dealing with the demands placed on him/her” (158). The second half of Rossetto’s show is more traditional theatre, when she transforms into the morbidly shy, awkward and unattractive Alicia, performing her award winning monologue about a woman whose macho husband, a man who consistently humiliated her in public, has left her for another woman. This show, “Alicia, la separada,” won the Sabastiá Gasch award for “Mejor monólogo” in Barcelona in 1995.

Rossetto, embodying the stereotype of the Argentine cabaret diva in the first half, does not produce a show in which her spectators are expected to do much intellectual work, nor question how culture is produced for and consumed by First World audiences. But she does require that we play with her. She tells us: “acabo de arribar con la patera al manzanares.” Her show was elaborated for a Madrid audience – in it she self-tropicalizes and changes her language to fit their understanding, “Soy un pedazo de tía!” she shouts, using a colloquial register particular to Spain, and not Argentina. She is playing the “sudaca” but her words so often register Spanish colloquialisms that they strain her credibility, even in as much as they represent the fictional character that she has created. The actress has lived principally in Barcelona for the last 15 years. Thus her initial monologue is disingenuous, as are the wide-eyed innocent questions she asks her audience about Spanish life and customs.

Rossetto has been performing Argentina, and by extension, Latin America, for European audiences since 1990. It could be argued that her shows in many ways can be seen as the result of global influences and economic necessity that require her to ‘perform’ her country in a way that is in accordance with her audience’s frame of understanding, taking part in what Chilean critic Nelly Richard has called the “culture-spectacle” (73).⁸ Her shows invariably include tangos, often boleros, and she also displays her linguistic dexterity by singing and speaking in *lunfardo*. In her show *Resiste Rossetto* in Barcelona in 2003, she showed up on stage wrapped in the Argentine flag. She was asked to perform Argentina in her depiction of the character Jenny in Bertolt Brecht’s *La ópera de los cuatro cuartos* by acclaimed European director Calixto Bieito in 2005 in France and Germany. She has plans to play the lead in Astor Piazzolla’s one opera, *Maria de*

Buenos Aires in France in 2006. It is clear that playing the tried-and-true Argentine role for First World audiences has allowed her to make a living, not a bad situation to be in compared with that of many others from her country.⁹

In the program for *Cecilia Rossetto in Madrid*, referencing the stereotype of Argentines' fascination with Freud and Lacan, she calls herself "una chica nómada y adicta al psicoanálisis, como yo necesito madres en cada rincón"... "y ahora toca a Madrid... ¿me querrá dar la teta? Una ciudad que apenas conozco y que no me conoce... ¿podrá alimentarme? Dispuesta a conseguirlo, metí en la mochila algunos boleros calientes, unos tangos desgarrados y bastante humor salvaje."

Beyond the clichéd reference to psychoanalysis there is something in the program that catches our eye in the immediate aftermath of March 11. It is her reference to her "mochila." In Madrid it was discovered that the explosive devices had been put in backpacks and sports bags. The packs themselves, the innocuous staple of school children, college co-eds and sports fans, have already taken on another layer of meaning. As has recently been documented following the bombings in London, what had once been an innocent sign has now been recoded to have a potentially sinister signification.¹⁰ In Madrid, on the *cercanía* trains and in the subway during the days following the tragedy, people glanced anxiously at the packs, especially if there was no apparent owner in view.

Playing with the notion that she embodies the exotic and erotically-charged excitement of her native country, her program also states: "de las márgenes del río de la plata, del 'reservorio' de la pasión, vengo para hacer lo que más me gusta y que mejor hago." She talks to everyone, learns names and will return to these audience members time and time again. They have become characters in her show. The jokes she tells them (often at their expense) are filled with sexual innuendos. The stories she shares while on stage refer to the political situation in Argentina, her life, she jokingly refers to herself, as a "diva sex symbol." Most often, however, they are about her compatriots:

"¿Sabés por qué en la Argentina no hay terremotos? Porque ni siquiera la tierra los traga."

"¿Sabés lo que está haciendo un político argentino cuando está cagando? Se está clonando."

Cecilia is trying to get us to laugh but the interaction with the audience and her humor feel forced. The best jokes that poke fun at Argentines are usually

told by Argentines themselves, ruthless and unsparing in their self-analysis. But her humor is not effective with us.

She tries harder, playing the porteña stereotype to the hilt: “¡Me agarró un melodrama porteño, una tragedia argentina!” she wails overdramatically, the back of one hand placed theatrically on her forehead, inciting us to smile slightly but little else. The word that she uses to describe the Argentine economic collapse, “tragedy,” is now robbed of its original semiotic punch and thrust into the new context. The Nuevo Teatro Alcalá, where we are gathered, is only a short walk across Retiro Park from the Atocha train station where 98 of the 191 victims lost their lives two days before. The “tragedy” of Argentina now seems far away and irrelevant.

After September 11 in the United States the sentiment was similar. Exactly when is it okay to laugh again? When can one do so without being immediately consumed by guilt and remorse? When is it acceptable?

Rossetto’s show works with the established repertoire of signs, the tropicalized image of Latin American woman as the exotic cultural Other for First World entertainment.¹¹ She exaggerates gender and nation, her words are melodramatic, her hands fly in the air as she talks. In contrast to the short clipped sounds that characterize Castilian Spanish, Rossetto draws out the syllables in each word in almost a wail – “pero Che, ¿por quééé?” She is an Argentine product re-packaged for Spanish consumers, reminding us at every turn, almost apologetically, “Es que así somos los argentinos.” She wears her ethnic exoticism well.

And who can blame her? “No fue mi intención establecerme en España. Fui a buscar sustento para mí y para mi familia,” Rossetto tells an interviewer in the Spanish press. This is how she makes a living. She gives the public what they want and what they expect, playing the *sudaca* for them with the unspoken subtext: “buy me,” or perhaps even more desperate (and accurate), “love me.”

Cecilia Rossetto en Madrid breaks no new ground, artistically speaking. The theatrical code that is required by camp (the humor and complicity on the part of audience members) is not honored that evening of March 13, 2004, a night when spectators are not willing or perhaps not able, given the circumstances, to engage Rossetto. It is obvious that most of them, most of us, just want to be left alone, passive, quiet, to watch and listen. One nonparticipant she jokingly calls the “filósofo” for his brooding silence but she does not press him further, understanding the new boundaries that the last few days have created. People are fragile. The new context means she

must work within the different interpretative codes that the circumstances require. She tries and is only marginally successful.

That is, until the bolero.

The Bolero

Cecilia tells us she wants to share a bolero “argentino psicoanalizado.” She says that it always brings to mind the face of someone she knew and who she would never see again and sings to him. Rossetto’s husband “disappeared” in El Vesubio, one of the notorious detention centers, during the Proceso de Organización Nacional from 1976 to 1983. She does not mention this, and it is probably not known by the majority of the audience members (having not been mentioned in any of the critical notes regarding the show). She begins to sing the song “Cuenta conmigo”:

Cuenta conmigo
 por si tuvieras que encontrar algún motivo
 si necesitas algo más que conformarte
 si se te ocurre por ejemplo enamorarte
 aquí me tienes,
 siempre dispuesta
 a ver el mundo como tú ni lo imaginas
 y si me quieres ver feliz y no te animas
 cierra los ojos al aroma de una rosa
 mientras mi alma
 ¡te cuenta cosas!....

[Her voice, full of emotion, conveys a sweetness and sincerity that fills every space in the darkened room.]

Cosas que nunca te dijeron hasta ahora
 si eres consciente de la gente que te adora
 de ser un poco la razón de esta canción...

[It happens. A damn has burst. People begin to cry. For some, the tears fall down their faces, while for others their eyes merely glimmer as they listen.]

Y si resulta
 que no resulta mi sistema de quererte
 cuenta conmigo nada más que para verte
 y si tuvieras que dejarme,
 no te ocupes:
 yo me podría acomodar sin molestarte

[Some cannot contain themselves. The woman sitting in front of me is sobbing. She is so overcome by emotion that she must temporarily leave the theatre.]

en un rincón donde pudieras acordarte
que cuando el tiempo haya pasado y tengas ganas
en esas ganas
¡me encontrarás!

An immediate, visceral connection with the public is established. “Cecilia Rossetto” the character has become Cecilia Rossetto, the woman living in Madrid who, like us, is just trying to make sense of all that is happening. She says that standing on stage that night is the most difficult professional moment of her life, outweighing the performances done in prisons, in convalescent homes, in orphanages and in hospitals. Her responsibility is to alleviate our pain. She knows that. And she does. The shock of the previous two days that had manifested itself in the audience’s silent stupor and tension throughout the first half of her performance is unleashed by the power of an Argentine bolero.

As Carlos Monsiváis has said: “Songs add psychological credibility to cabaret...collectivities gathered in bars and cafes hear songs that make intimate history a public concern-the autobiography of everyone and no one” (318). In this case, Rossetto’s bolero made public history an intimate concern, a sadness felt deeply, silently and collectively in that moment, in a common bond forged in grief between audience members and performer.

The bolero is always about longing. There is “un anhelo de pureza que quiere imponer el bolero, pureza no sólo del impulso amoroso sino del alma del amante, es decir, recuperar la inocencia” (West-Durán 71).¹² In Madrid, the innocence lost and longed for was clearly demarcated by an invisible line drawn on that early morning of March 11. Life in the city would be thereafter framed in terms of before or after, and that “before” from the present vantage point seems all too innocent. It was a time when the country thought it was immune to an attack by Al Qaeda, a time when terrorism was understood strictly in terms of Basque nationalists, a group that launched attacks in which, comparatively speaking, few died. Alan West-Durán explains: “Toda memoria implica una ausencia, sea temporal o física. Esta lejanía es afectiva, histórica y simbólica. En su dimensión afectiva siempre conjura la palabra nostalgia, cuyo origen viene de *nostos* (regreso) y *algia* (dolor o luto)... anhelo de la plenitud, de lo completo, que siempre subyace el impulso nostálgico” (original emphasis 68). The longing that we feel, the *dolor*, or *luto*, is for a return to that previous state.

In the sociohistorical context of March 11, 2004, *Cecilia Rosetto in Madrid* acquires shades of tragedy. And as in Greek tragedy, the spectators, via an identificatory process (one that primarily takes place via the bolero) are provided a moment of catharsis. The song expresses a communal sadness and the catharsis thus provides a moment of liberation and subsequent “purification” of emotions (in the original Aristotelian sense of the word). As such, although the show does not work as an example of feminist camp cabaret that particular evening, for the audience, it nonetheless achieves a lasting transcendence.

The Return

One month later I return to see Cecilia Rosetto at the Nuevo Teatro Alcalá on April 17, 2004. I want to examine how the new context (the intervening weeks since the bombing) has changed the texture of the show and its reception. It is back to the basement, the Sala María Guerrero, or “the Jacuzzi” as Rosetto had called it. This time the laughter flows freely. The “cantante, clown, sex-symbol y agitadora de masas” does not disappoint. This time, we love her from the start.

Notes

¹ According to the *Diccionario de términos claves del análisis teatral*, “La recepción es un *acto complejo* que se realiza sobre dos ejes: a) el eje diacrónico, a través del cual el espectador sigue la acción y experimenta las reacciones afectivas y la situación psicológica de expectativa propia del suspense dramático; b) el eje de las combinaciones, por el cual recibe toda una serie de mensajes simultáneos (verbales, gestuales, musicales, visuales) y los recompone momento a momento.” El cruce de esos dos ejes de la recepción obliga al espectador a una precepción “acrobática” tanto más rica cuanto más elaborada sea su experiencia teatral.

² Critical theorist Susan Bennett expands this notion of the interactive state of flux in the relationship between culture and performance when she writes that “Both the audience’s reaction to a text (or performance) and the text (performance) itself are bound within cultural limits. Yet, as a diachronic analysis makes apparent, those limits are continually tested and invariably broken. Culture cannot be held as a fixed entity, a set of constant rules, but instead it must be seen as in a position of inevitable flux” (101).

³ All quotes for Rosetto’s performance are based on notes taken throughout the two performances attended March 13 and April 17, 2004.

⁴ Argentines argue that they should be treated differently than the other immigrants and in the same manner that the Spanish immigrants have always been received in Argentina, a population numbering some 300,000 even today (Barone 2). The Spaniards were welcomed and in 1947 Argentina broke the economic blockade against Spain and Franco that was decreed by the United Nations by sending meat, wheat and visas so that Spaniards could come and live in Argentina. The treaties between the two countries, the reciprocal accords, had been in place since the XIX century and most recently were revitalized in 1960. It is now Spain’s turn to

respond in kind, the Argentines argue. Alas, the treaties came into existence long before the formation of the European Union. And Spain has never approved of a mass regularization based on a certain nationality (Barone 2).

⁵ Les Luthiers (Carlos López, Jorge Maronna, Miguel Ángel Solá Carlos Núñez, Marcos Munsdstock and Daniel Rabinovich) played to sell out crowds in Spain in 2004 after more than 36 years together with their show *Todo por que rías*. In the first half of 2004 three of the top seven shows in terms of spectators and revenues garnered were from Argentina: *Todo por que rías*, *El Diario de Adán y Eva*, and *Cabaret*. Perhaps most surprisingly is that two of the Argentine shows, *El diario* and *Todo* had a theatre occupancy rate of 92.37% and 99.98%, respectively. Ricardo Darín, famous for *Kamchatka*, *El hijo de la novia* and *Nueve reinas*, joined Germán Palacios y Oscar Martínez in *ART*, first in Madrid, then Barcelona. Enrique Pinti was also doing his one man show in Barcelona while tango singer Susana Rinaldi appeared to sold out crowds in Madrid.

⁶ One factor that sets them apart is that 85% of them arrived in the last four years. Of these, 79% finished high school and 35% began their university studies, of which one third completed their degree.

⁷ In a study conducted by the Fundación de las Cajas de Ahorro (Funcas), only one out of every four Spaniards feels that foreigners are greeted with friendliness, while 46% view them with suspicion and 12% say there is outright disdain and even aggression against them. This same study shows that almost one half of the Spanish population, 46%, now thinks there are “too many” immigrants and they blame the immigrants for growing urban unrest (“Ola de inmigrantes” *La Nación*, 22 enero, 2004, 4). On the bright side, at least for Argentines, a study conducted by the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas in Spain did a ranking of all of the foreigners to determine which countries the Spaniards preferred. Argentines won the popularity contest, while the US Americans ranked in the penultimate position, just above the much despised Moroccans. (“Los españoles y argentinos: El país más amigo” *endoscontinentes* No. 1 Marzo, 2004, 26).

⁸ According to Richard, the culture-spectacle is a show “filled with visibility and mathematical calculation to the point that the complacent symbols of majority culture erase any nuance of critical-reflective layering and dissipate the ambiguities of everything that does not contribute directly to the performances show worthiness. There is no confrontation, no discord, mere presentation. While it shows tolerance for the maximum diversity of opinions, that same tolerance is “insufficient for that diversity to articulate competing readings that design alternative meanings” (*Insubordination* 73).

⁹ Later that year Rossetto would be named Argentina’s cultural attaché in Spain by Argentine president Néstor Kirchner.

¹⁰ *The New York Times* Section IV “This Week in Review” (31 July 2005): 2.

¹¹ Juan Villegas explains this self tropicalizing inherent in representing one’s country in Spain in terms of the annual Festival Internacional de Teatro de Cádiz, in which groups from Latin America come to perform each year: “Al buscar la satisfacción o aceptación de la auto-representación dirigida a los practicantes de las culturas del “otro” un festival puede conducir a una preferencia por teatralidades estereotipadoras de sistemas culturales o identidades nacionales. Aún puede darse el caso que rasgos aparentemente estereotipadores que en los contextos nacionales adquieren una dimensión subversiva, en el contexto políticamente neutralizado del festival, son leídos como definitivamente estereotipadores. En varias versiones del Festival de Cádiz han recurrido modalidades aparentemente definitivas de identidades nacionales. Es el caso de Cuba, por ejemplo, que tiende a definirse con baile afrocaribeños y teatralización de leyendas africanas, como indicio de la redefinición de los populares en la Cuba revolucionaria. La teatralidad brasileña, por otra parte, tiende a reinterar espectáculos con bailes, música, gran actividad física o corporal

y desnudos. En los grupos argentinos, con frecuencia se habla del tango o se le baila en el escenario....Estos sistemas de teatralidad confirman las imágenes de lo nacional desde la mirada del otro, descontextualizado su potencial subversión o su búsqueda de aceptación por parte del 'otro' europeo que espera al final del puente de la entrada a Europa" 214-15.

¹² The bolero...occupies a central space in the history of Latin American popular expression. The origins of the bolero from Hispanic melodic forms developed and popularized during the nineteenth century. The exact moment is difficult to pinpoint, but first mentioned in 1865 was "Tristeza," composed in Cuba. Since then it has become a representative form of Latin American popular culture, particularly in Mexico and the Caribbean. Between 1930 and 1960, the bolero achieved enormous popularity with the growth of radio and the record industry and became popular throughout the continent. "Bolero lyrics, invariably about love, form part of the symbolic baggage through which every Latin American, and particularly the inhabitants of the Caribbean, has learned to express his or her own feelings of love.... "Emotional language spoken by every level of Latin American society, where every Latin American can see him or herself reflected in imagery which synthesizes the collective experience of love" (197).

Works Cited

- "Argentina." CIA Fact book Online (30 March 2005) <<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ar.html#Econ>>.
- Barone, Roxana. "Provincia 25: La Argentina en España." *endoscontinentes* 1 (2004): 1-2.
- Bennett, Susan. *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*. London: Routledge, 1990.
- Castillo Zapata, Rafael. "Bolero." *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Latin American and Caribbean Cultures*. Vol 1 A-D. Ed. Daniel Balderston, Mike Gonzalez and Ana M. López. London and New York: Routledge, 2000: 197.
- _____. *Fenomenología del bolero*. Caracas: Monte Avila, 1990.
- "Cecilia Rossetto en Madrid." Mar 5-May 8, 2004. Nuevo Teatro Alcalá. Dir and Text. Cecilia Rossetto. Poemas Oscar Balducci. *Illuminación Ariel de Maestro*.
- Cleto, Fabio. "Introduction" in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*. Ed. Fabio Cleto. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1999: 1-42.
- Costantino, Roselyn. "Visibility as a Strategy: Jesusa Rodriguez's Body in Play" *Corpus Delecti: Performance Art of the Americas*. Ed. Coco Fusco. London and New York: Routledge, 2000: 63-77.
- _____. and Diana Taylor. Introduction. *Holy Terrors: Latin American Women Perform*. Durham and London: Duke UP, 2003: 1-24.
- Couture, Mark. "The Importance of Being Agustín Lara: Cursilería, Machismo and Modernity." *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 21 (2002): 69-80.
- Damasceno, Leslie. "The Gestural Art of Reclaiming Utopia: Dense Stolkos at Play with the Hysterical-Historical." *Holy Terrors: Latin American Women*

- Perform.* Ed. Diana Taylor and Roselyn Costantino. Durham and London: Duke UP, 2003: 152-78.
- De la Hera, Alberto. "Hacerse con el público tiene su mérito" *Guía del Ocio* "Críticas" Mar 2004: 116.
- Desmond, Jane. "Embodying difference: Issues in dance and cultural studies." *Everynight Life: Culture and Dance in Latino/a America*. Ed. Celeste Fraser Delgado and José Esteban Muñoz. Durham and London: Duke UP, 1997: 33-64.
- Doane, Mary Ann. *The Desire to Desire: the Woman's Film of the 1940s*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987.
- "Estadística del movimiento migratorio de la Comunidad de Madrid 2003." *Instituto de estadística, Comunidad de Madrid* (7 agosto 2005) <<http://www8.madrid.org/iestadis/fijas/efemerides/migra03nt.htm>>.
- Esteban, Rafael. "Entrevista con Cecilia Rossetto 'Durante el espectáculo canto, bailo, lloro y hago chistes.'" *elmundo.es/metrópoli* 3 mayo 2004. (13 nov 2004) <<http://www.elmundo.es/metrópoli/2004/03/04/teatro/1078391149.html>>.
- Flinn, Caryl. "The Deaths of Camp." in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*. Ed. Fabio Cleto. Ann Arbor: The U of Michigan P, 1999: 433-57.
- Monsiváis, Carlos. "Bolero: A History" in *Mexican Postcards*. Edited, translated and introduction by John Kraniauskas. London and New York: Cerso, 1997: 166-95.
- Natanson, Maurice. *Phenomenology and the Social Sciences*. Vol 1. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1973.
- Nieto, Linda. "Entrevista con Cecilia Rossetto." *Teatros* 5.34 (marzo 2004): 21.
- Novarro, Chico. "Cuenta conmigo." (Song). Music by Raúl Parentella, 1979. *Tango Lyrics homepage* 10 Nov. 2004 <<http://argentina.informatik.uni-muenchen.de/tangos/msg06915.html>>.
- Pisani, Silvia. "Beneficiará a los argentinos un blanqueo de ilegales en España" *La Nación* (lunes 23 agosto 2004) <<http://www.lanacion.com.ar/629851>>.
- _____. "Nuestro país fue el que más indocumentados exportó a la península en 2002; en dos años sumó 235.000" *La Nación* (11 nov 2003) p 4 15 Nov. 2004. <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/03/07/11/dx_510465.asp>.
- _____. "Ola de inmigrantes en España: en 2015 serán el 27% de la población" *La Nación* (22 enero 2004). 4. 10 Nov, 2004 <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/04/01/22/dx_566036.asp>.
- Richard, Nelly. *Masculine/Feminine: Practices of Difference(s)*. Trans. Alice A. Nelson and Silvia R. Tandeciarz. Durham and London: Duke UP, 2004.

- Richard, Nelly. *The Insubordination of Signs: Political Change, Cultural Transformation, and Poetics of Crisis*. Trans. Alice A. Nelson and Silvia R. Tandeciarz. Durham and London: Duke UP, 2004.
- Robertson, Pamela. *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna*. Durham and London: Duke UP, 1996.
- Rojas, Mario A. "La experiencia teatral como evento sociocultural: El Galpão y la búsqueda de una estética sertaneja" *Propuestas escénicas de fin de siglo: FIT 1998*. Ed. Juan Villegas. Irvine: Colección Historia del Teatro 3, 1999: 173-92.
- Román, David and Alberto Sandoval. "Caught in the Web: Latinidad, AIDS, and Allegory in Kiss of the Spiderwoman, the Musical." *Everynight Life: Culture and Dance in Latino/a America*. Ed. Celeste Fraser Delgado and José Esteban Muñoz. Durham and London: Duke UP, 1997: 255-87.
- Schneider, Rebecca. *The Explicit Body in Performance*. London: Routledge, 1997.
- Ubersfeld, Anne. *Diccionario de términos claves del análisis teatral*. Colección teatrología. Osvaldo Pellettieri, dir. Buenos Aires: Galerna, 2002.
- Villegas, Juan. "Palabras finales: los festivales y las instituciones culturales" *Propuestas escénicas de fin de siglo: FIT 1998*. Ed. Juan Villegas. Irvine: Colección Historia del teatro 3, 1999: 209-15.
- West-Durán, Alan. "Devo(ra)ciones: sabores y saberes de la memoria en el bolero." *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 22 (2004): 61-73.
- Zarrilli, Phillip B. "For whom is a King a King? Issues in Intercultural Production, Perception, and Reception in a Kathakali King Lear." *Critical Theory and Performance*. Ed. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1992: 16-40.
- Zavala, Iris. *El bolero: historia de un amor*. Madrid: Celeste, 1989.