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## **Unspooling from the Center: Krapp's Last Tape and Post-Dictatorship Argentina**

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In this paper I trace the route of Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* in Argentina, unspooling from the "center" (Europe) to the "periphery" (South America), as well as from the core topics of the play to its far resonances. My use of the word *unspooling* is also in reference to the mechanical, analogue way in which tapes are recorded and can then rewind and fast forward through recorded time, and a reminder of the playful pleasure that Krapp finds in pronouncing "spooooool".

Beckett was introduced to Argentinian audiences through *Waiting for Godot* directed by Jorge Petraglia in 1956 in Buenos Aires. A few years later, and only a short time after its London premiere, the same actor and theatre director staged *Krapp's Last Tape*, using his own translation and with the title *La última cinta magnética*. The play has since been performed many times in the country, and continues to be so. In this paper I will talk about why I think KLT addresses several of the issues of post-dictatorship Argentina, and, following on from this, I will point to its resonances in the production of *Grupo Krapp*, a performance ensemble that takes its name from Beckett's character.

This conference's call for papers suggested that Beckett's words and the unstable geographies of his work might help articulate the notion of nowhere. Nowhere is a concept we are only too familiar with in Argentina. 30,000 people were disappeared by the dictatorial regime that controlled Argentina between 1976 and 1983. Some bodies buried as anonymous by that regime were in subsequent years exhumed and identified through comparative genetic analysis with a DNA bank of possible relatives. However, most of the people kidnapped during the dictatorship are, effectively, nowhere. Everyone knows that they were murdered, but that fact was never officially acknowledged, and no human remains have ever been restored to their families. This nowhere is therefore not just a geographical off center but a total, bodily disappearance from families, neighbourhoods, life. The disappeared are still haunting us, decades later, and there is something in Beckett's universe that speaks to this deep nowhere-ness, this void.

Post-dictatorship theatre is a historiographic category referring to the theatre produced after and marked by the right-wing rule and dictatorship in Argentina. Critic and theatre historian Jorge Dubatti labels this the period starting after the restoration of democracy in 1983. This category of historical-cultural periodization speaks of a unity, because of its deep cohesion, in the redefinition of the country as it comes to terms with the consequences of the dictatorship (Dubatti, 2015). Post-dictatorship points to "the

feeling that nothing can be the same after the aberrant military dictatorship of 1976-1983, added to the actions of the Triple A (Argentinian Anticomunist Alliance) between 1973 and 1976”<sup>1</sup> (p. 2). It defines Argentina as the country of 30,000 disappeared people, as well as of concentration camps, torture, assassination, exile, censorship (and self-imposed censorship), terror, hegemonic right-wing subjectivity, and civil complicity with the repressive state apparatus. A vast area of theatre works today in representing this historic horror through the construction of memories of the past, denunciation of crimes committed, and making audiences alert to what is still present from the dictatorship. At some point Argentina will recover from this post-dictatorship condition, but not in the immediate future, and it is painful to think that we don’t know when this will happen, as mourning is impossible with disappearance (Dubatti, 2015). Even though it is a periodization with which not all theatre historians agree, abundant academic analyses understand Argentina’s theatre under this light.

I now want to look at Krapp’s Last Tape in the context of Argentinian post-dictatorship theatre, one of whose key figures is Ricardo Bartís. Bartís’ theatre metaphorically or directly speaks about the country’s history and political circumstances at the time of each performance. *Postales Argentinas: Sainete de ciencia ficción en dos actos* (*Argentinian postcards: A science fiction farce in two acts*), one of his most successful plays, was developed out of actors’ improvisations<sup>2</sup> in 1988, a few years after democratic restoration, when widespread disappointment was already starting to grow and a massive economic, social and political crisis was foreseeable.

Bartís was at the time creating his own type of theatre based on the actor’s body, as Spanish researcher Cornago explains:

“It is in this physical potency, on which, paradoxically, the illusion of representation is created, where also lies its (political) capacity to link to a historical and social process, that which the actor’s body carries, loaded with memory, experiences and past. For this reason, as Bartís explains, an actor doesn’t just act the play, that is the representation of a character, but over all he/she acts themselves; this type of theatre is capable of leaping, poetically, across the void between external, political reality and physical, here-and-now reality” (Cornago, 2006: 8).

*Postales Argentinas* imagines the death of the country as a consequence of the dictatorship. The protagonist is an obscure post office employee and frustrated writer. In tragi-comic manner, many of the sentences he and his mother/muse utter are actually quotes from literature, popular sayings, tango lyrics, the national anthem, and well-known historic phrases, such as when, towards the play’s finale, the character combines a famous sentence by Jose de San Martín, nineteenth century South America’s great military leader in the struggle for Independence from Spain, and one uttered by President Juan Perón in his farewell speech to the people before dying. It is therefore a play full of quotations from the historical past.

During the same year Bartís and his group were doing *Postales Argentinas*, with great success abroad and locally, he staged *La última cinta magnética* (*Krapp’s Last*

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<sup>1</sup> All translations from texts originally in Spanish are mine.

<sup>2</sup> The text was written and published a few years later, when Bartís dictated what he remembered from the show to Dubatti (Bartís, 2003).

*Tape*). This is the only play this prolific director staged following a complete dramatic text. (He has done plays based on playwrights but only taking parts of them, like *Hamlet: La Guerra de los Teatros*). Unfortunately, there is no video or audio recording of that production of KLT, but Bartís re-staged it in 2000, during a period that approached Argentina’s next big political and economic crisis. On this occasion, Krapp was performed by a young actor, Pablo Seijo. Elaborate make-up and costume were used to convert him into an old man, but without resorting to any grotesque appearance because Bartís “wanted truth”, Seijo told me in a recent interview. And they must have accomplished it, because the closely-positioned audience was emotionally very engaged with Krapp, according to critics of the time and what the actor remembers. Bartís wanted to create intimacy, proximity, so the play was done deliberately in a tight, neglected corner of an old house in which the director had his theatre. The stage and props created the appearance of clutter, resembling a messy kitchen. According to the actor, in the moment when Krapp listens to the scene with the woman in the punt, “the scene to which Krapp wants to go back”, people were very silent (“no volaba una mosca”, “not even a fly was flying”); “I remember it and feel moved now. It was very moving, very powerful”, Seijo told me. “What I remember clearly was a sense of loneliness. In some of the evenings, after everyone had gone I had to lock up the theatre, and I remember the deep feeling of loneliness, with all that text, that character.” Recalling that he was only 33 then, he added: “I feel more moved now, when I think of what I did, than at the time, in terms of approaching Krapp’s age”.



Fig. 1: Pablo Seijo in *La última cinta magnética* directed by Bartís in El Sportivo Teatral, Buenos Aires, 2000. Photo: Andrés Barragán.

In 2016 there was another staging of the play, featuring Héctor Bidonde, an experienced actor in his late 80s. I saw this production, and although the space was a more conventional one, with the audience not so close to the stage, and I was sitting in the farthest row, I got totally immersed in the performance. I felt very much inside the present time, moment by moment, captured by the pauses, the silences, Krapp’s breathing. Later, in an interview with the director, Augusto Pérez, I partly understood how this sense of

proximity was accomplished. Perez organized the stage according to a carefully calculated golden ratio, and gave the actor precise directions that meant he could only be in the center of the space for short moments, and had to move back and forth from light to darkness. Also, he used a reproduction of a painting by Mark Rothko on the back wall (perceived dimly by the audience) to intensify the atmosphere.<sup>3</sup> “I liked the place to which that painting took me emotionally, so I decided to give the den the same feeling of depth....I wouldn’t say darkness, but density, that density to which Rothko’s painting takes me”, Perez told me.

This director thinks that in KLT the story is told from the present backwards and forwards, in a continuum, like a tape. There is no separation of past, present and future. For him, there was no need to give the audience clues as to whether or why it is the last tape, or what Krapp’s future might be. Although he personally thinks it is death, he didn’t want to make this obvious because it is not clear in the play. My impression when I saw this version was of an endearing, quite lovable Krapp, but it turns out that, according to Pérez, Bidonde’s tendency was to go down, to become melancholic, so he had to keep insisting that he didn’t go into tango mood – that is to say, full of sadness and nostalgia. “Bidone has a musicality that is really like a tango. He said the text with a tango inflection, and I had to keep reminding him this play is not a tango”, Pérez told me.

The play has proved to provide an opportunity for audiences to share Krapp’s complex and obsessive need to play with memory, and this perhaps begins to explain the continuing relationship between Argentinian audiences and this particular Beckettian text. But the unspooling of KLT in Argentina has gone much further than performances of the original play in Spanish. It is significant, in the context of our theatre and recent history, that there exists a performance group that has actually been named after Beckett’s play. And therefore next I will explore the farther-reaching resonances of *Krapp’s Last Tape* in the work of the ensemble *Grupo Krapp*.

This theater, dance, music and performance group was founded in 1998 by Luis Biasotto and Luciana Acuña. The other three members of the group are Edgardo Castro, Fernando Tur and Gabriel Almendros. Biasotto’s University Thesis had been about Beckett, and the group was deliberately named after Beckett’s character. They define themselves as a group that explores the problems of representation and the limits of language (Biasotto & Acuña’s blog). They have performed nationally and internationally with great acceptance of the public, and received several awards. But, tragically, in May 2021, Luis Biasotto died at age 49 of complications from Covid-19.

I will refer here to their productions *Adonde van los muertos (Lado A) (Where deadmen go (A Side))* premiered in 2011, *Retrocedida Krapp (Winding back, rewinding, backing off Krapp)*, 2013, and *Requiem: La última cinta del grupo Krapp (Requiem: The last tape of the Krapp group)* premiered in October 2021. My interest is to show how the work of the group, especially in these pieces, is marked by echoes of *Krapp’s Last Tape*. Krapp is not just a name; rather, the preoccupations of the Beckettian character haunt the group’s creative search and themes.

In *Adonde van los muertos (LADO A)* “the group confronts the impossibility to answer the dilemma of death on stage” (Biasotto & Acuña’s blog). The performance is a series of responses to ten pre-recorded answers from well known artists on the Buenos

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<sup>3</sup> The painting was very likely *Black on Maroon*, which coincidentally was painted in 1958, the same year KLT was written.

Aires dance and theatre scene to the question “How would you represent death on stage?” These answers are projected onto a screen, questioned by a separate pre-recorded voice. Subsequently, the scene inspired by the artist’s instructions unfolds, with a combination of live bodies, projection and music. The scenes are created by Grupo Krapp, based on the interviewee’s ideas. On the left of the stage a title for each scene is projected, slightly delayed in regard to the interviewee’s answer, creating a strange effect of scenes overlapping.

In one of the scenes, choreographer Diana Szeinblum says that in order to represent death she would have performers somehow pulled out of their clothes, which should be left on the floor, as if the dead person’s soul is leaving their body. The group stages this idea -entitled *Cuerpos que se van (Bodies that leave)*- by using Cervantes’ characters Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, plus a “horse” performed by two actors. When the clothes are finally flat on the floor, arranged with the shape of two human bodies, two tape recorders placed in what would be their heads maintain the dialogue in which, approaching death, Don Quixote apologizes with Sancho Panza for having dragged him into believing in knights.

Another important moment is filmmaker Federico León’s *Finales (Endings)*. His idea was to represent death by a play that is constantly finishing. The way they realize this is with Acuña performing a brief dance with a crescendo (and smoke to increase intensity), and at the peak of dance and music she abruptly drops “dead” to the floor, simultaneously with a sudden stop in sound. Then the scene starts all over again, exactly the same, and finishes in the same way. This is repeated several times, to powerful effect.

As González (2015) shows, Lola Arias’ intervention is a turning point: “The play that preceded this one (*Adonde van los muertos LADO B*) is actually about the death of your lighting operator. That’s never said, but that’s what it was about. What happens when someone in a theater group dies?” Arias says in the play. It should be noted that Arias is an artist well known for her *Biodramas*. The concept of *Biodramas* was proposed by Argentinian visual artist and theater director Vivi Tellas, consisting of the exploration of one’s own or another’s biography as material for the scene, proposing a hybrid type of spectacle that builds micro universes from personal experiences of living people. In the creation of biodramatic scenes, personal narrations, objects, documents and so on intervene. As part of the *Biodrama Project*, Arias created and directed two plays that became significant in relation to recent Argentinian history: *Mi vida después (My life after)* where a group of actors born in Argentina in the 70’s and early 80’s review their parents’ youth from pictures, letters, tapes and clothes, and *Minefield (Campo Minado)* where three Argentinian and three British veterans of the Malvinas War together talk about and re-enact their experiences during and after the 1982 war. Here again, we can see that as in Beckett’s play, coping with memory remains central to a key element in contemporary Argentinian theatre.

In Grupo Krapp’s *Adonde van los muertos (LADO A)*, Arias’ intervention makes the play deeply -and painfully- autobiographical: “This is not a play about death in general, this is a play about the death of a member of this group.” She reflects on the absence of the illuminator of the group in terms of darkness, and on the power of voice, directly invoking the Beckettian play: “I suppose also that’s why *Krapp’s Last Tape* has to do with that. With what the register of the voice of a dead person does, with an old person and their voice, with losing your voice.” Several layers are revealed at the same time in her intervention. Her idea is enacted in the scene *La voz (The voice)*, one of the most chilling of an already powerful performance: simultaneously with Arias’ voice, projected words read “This is not a play about death in general. It’s a play about the death

of one member of the group”. Then, in complete darkness, screams of members of the group calling each other sound: “Edgard!”, “Gaby!”, “Luciana!”, “Luis!” The screams reach a crescendo of sound and emotion, and start overlapping. Simultaneously, all the sentences uttered by Arias are projected, floating in the air, then in smaller and smaller cases. In this way, when the play becomes more personal, it also becomes more general; it seems to refer to groups at large, beyond themselves, to encountering and failing to encounter people, and to feelings of urgency, of desperation to find each other. And this is perhaps an echo from KLT: speaking about something deeply personal, intimate, it ultimately addresses social themes. It creates bridges between the most personal, and the most political, perhaps because, as the famous 60’s feminist sentence goes, the personal **is** political.

There are other echoes of *Krapp’s Last Tape* in the production of this group. *Adonde van los muertos (LADO A)* was part of a diptych along with *Adonde van los muertos (LADO B)*. This diptych is like two sides of an analog tape, or two sides of an argument. Also the opening sentence in KLT, “A late evening in the future” echoes here. *Lado B* was staged before *Lado A* and it was about that future play. “*Adonde van los muertos (B Side)* appears to be an essay about another play, a play about the future, a play about death” (Biasotto & Acuña’ blog). Beckett’s mysterious opening sentence was written, perhaps, at the service of historical plausibility, as Lawley (2013) suggests: in 1958 tape recorders were only just becoming available, thus Krapp couldn’t have had one forty-some years prior to that. The whole premise of a play built around one single character’s ability to record magnetic tape and play it back forces us to think about posterity and preservation, as well as recovery and reassessment; the future is then in a way staring us in the face in the character of Krapp. Whatever the reasons Beckett had for it, that opening sentence pushes the play, at any given time, into a constant future, and so does *LADO B*, a play about a future play, pushing time forward.

The constant presence of an acousmatic voice in both *LADO A* and *LADO B* and the dialogue between that voice and on-stage voices clearly resemble the continuous presence of the two voices in KLT. Finally, *Adonde van los muertos (LADO B)* and *Adonde van los muertos (LADO A)*, originally performed in that order, were revisited as part of a 2013 spectacle, *Retrocedida Krapp*. The show was a retrospective of some of the group’s pieces, mostly fragments, but, notably, they didn’t call it *Retrospectiva* but *Retrocedida*. *Retroceder* means to rewind, and also to back off. It refers to going back, and also to stopping before an obstacle, a menace, a difficulty, a doubt; therefore a revisitation of a past, an evaluation, full of doubts, much like Krapp’s visit to his own recorded past.

In October 2021 the group did what might be their last creation: *Réquiem: La última cinta del Grupo Krapp*, a homage to Luis Biasotto. The play was born out of an audio file with Biasotto’s voice that Acuña found in her computer after his death, like *Krapp’s Last Tape* is born out of the ritualistic voice recordings of the character. In *Requiem*, the members of the group maintain a dialogue with Luis on screen, which is very emotional, and quite eerie. In KLT, the character dialogues with himself in the past. It is different, but it is also the same. Beckett’s echoes, Krapp’s echoes, Biasotto’s echoes, the echoes of the Disappeared are all still sounding in the air.



Fig. 2: Grupo Krapp in *Requiem: La última cinta del grupo Krapp*. Buenos Aires, December 2021.  
Photo: Celeste Alonso.  
<https://www.telam.com.ar/notas/202112/576926-luis-biasotto-grupo-krapp-ckk.html>

Elsewhere (Nudler, 2021) I posited the idea that the way in which Krapp stores his memories, an archival manner, is a good metaphor for collective memory and the social need to keep records of traumatic events. In 2003 the Archivo Nacional de la Memoria (National Archive for Memory) was established in Argentina, dependent on the Human Rights Secretary, with the purpose of obtaining, analysing, classifying, duplicating, digitalizing and archiving testimonies and documents about the breaking of human rights and basic freedoms in which the responsibility of the Argentina State was involved, and about social and institutional response to those violations. Archives, oral testimonies, the need to preserve memories of traumatic events are key elements in post-dictatorship. In a way, the tape-recorded voice connects all these issues. Krapp's voice on tape is suggestive of a presence, while at the same time it lacks bodily form<sup>4</sup>.



Fig. 3: Building of the Archivo Nacional de la Memoria, Buenos Aires.

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<sup>4</sup> In relation to this it is interesting to mention that the actor who played Krapp in 2000 kept the tape containing his 33 year-old voice, that he might re-use in a future staging of the play, because, he said, "I am a bit like that character."

One key aspect of the reparatory processes taking place after the restoration of democracy is the constant search for children of the disappeared, now adults in their forties, stolen as babies by the dictatorial regime. The campaign to identify children of the disappeared -illegally adopted and raised with a false identity- has been mainly carried by the organization Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo (Plaza de Mayo Grandmothers). In October 2021, on the National Day for the Right to Identity, an image was released as part of a new campaign to identify and restore identity to missing grandchildren. The image shows a cassette tape with a pen through one of the winding holes. Under the image, the caption “If you understand this image, you were probably born between 1975 and 1983. And you could be one of the grandchildren missing”.



Fig. 3: Image of the campaign “Argentina Unida te busca”. Página 12, 23 October 2021.  
<https://www.pagina12.com.ar/376426-la-secretaria-derechos-humanos-lanza-la-campana-argentina-un>

The image of the cassette is here used as a mark of identity of a generation. But it is also interesting that at the time of cassettes, a pen could be used to disentangle or repair them. So, intentionally or not, this image is also a metaphor of repairing something faulted, wrong, broken. That is what analog recording, the same technology Krapp uses, affords. It stores memories in its materiality where it is also possible, in a crafty way, to repair some of the past, looking into the future, bearing some resemblance with Krapp, who also tries to disentangle his own identity and past.

To conclude, I think Krapp’s Last Tape addresses several key issues that Argentina continues to face in the post-dictatorial period up to this day: collective and individual memory, the importance of archives, oral testimony, tapes, and identity: the search for it, and its fractures. Also, perhaps one of the reasons why the play is so poignant and continues to be staged is because of its appeal to the personal - time, ageing, identity touch every one of us- while at the same time it contains, in a powerful metaphorical way, several collective issues concerning memory and the present. Finally, Krapp’s going back, pausing and fast-forwarding reminds me of recent Argentinian history which feels -to many of us who live here- as if it is constantly taking two steps forward, three steps



back. And while tape rewinding is for Krapp a way to evaluate his own life, our re-visiting this play in Argentina in different moments of our history serves as a reminder to question our past in order to construct our future.

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