

Krapp's Last Tape, Argentina and History

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Beyond the general importance of Beckett in Argentinian theatre, in this paper I will specifically focus on productions of Krapp's Last Tape, from its premiere in 1960 to its contemporary resonances, particularly paying attention to the social and political contexts in which they were staged and at the same time interweaving the topic with the always heated struggles and debates around gender and sexuality in my country.

"This play is not a tango" said theatre director Augusto Pérez to Héctor Bidonde, an 86 year-old experienced actor in the process of rehearsing Krapp's Last Tape in 2016. What did he mean by that? Pérez told me in an interview "Bidonde's tendency was to become melancholic, he has a musicality like a tango song, so I kept reminding him not to go into tango mood, since Krapp's Last Tape is not a tango".

Tango is very entrenched in our culture, and the lyrics of tango songs are very nostalgic of the past. Also, tango lyrics usually contain strong gender stereotypes: the "saint" mother, the evil woman who abandons the man, the pure, asexual woman vs. the tempting *femme fatale* of the cabarets, etc. Covering up anxiety surrounding diffuse sex and gender roles and identities related to its own origins as a form of dance between men, the lyrics of tango songs depict a stereotypical macho. But also, tango-song accepts suffering as one of the conditions of man-hood (Gasparri), and from a certain period on, tango can only look at its own past and recreate it, much like Krapp.

Krapp's Last Tape also displays gender stereotypes, which is not surprising for a play written in the 50s. Spanish sociologist Josep-Marques affirms that the main slogan in the construction of masculinity in patriarchal society, conveyed to babies born with male genitals from the cradle through all sorts of means is "To be a man is to be important". This message contains ambiguity, meaning both that because I am a man, I am already important, and also that because I am a man I have to be important, and only by achieving importance will I fulfill my masculinity. I think these premises are present in Krapp. Krapp feels important because he is a man, but he also has failed to become a successful individual, therefore his masculinity is at risk. He has decided, at age 39, to end his pursuit of a permanent love relationship to completely dedicate himself to the task of writing, as if they were incompatible. But then he didn't have a successful career as a writer, either. He had as a mandate to be important -in his case, by being a successful writer-, but he didn't achieve it, so now he feels defeated. There are also several women stereotypes in the play: the adored and pure lost girlfriend; the lost mother; the beautiful young women (Peggy with the green coat, the nurse of incomparable bosom,

and the eyes of Bianca and of.....). One wonders what these women must have felt. According to Krapp, the girl in the punt agreed that there was no point in going on, but did he ever ask her what she really felt or wanted?

So, women seen mainly as objects, fear of commitment or emotional closeness, adored mother, and, of course, the figure of the prostitute, Fanny, also a slang word for female genitals (this wouldn't of course be known to Argentinian audiences, because in translation Fanny only is a name). And sex ("an engrossing sexual life") separated from affectionate feelings, another landmark of Western patriarchal masculinity.

However, a more complex view is also possible. According to Jennifer Jeffers, "as Beckett's work matured, he utilized the strategies of emasculation and gender distortion to dismantle Western masculinity". Specifically regarding Krapp, this author thinks that in the vision on the pier (an echo of Beckett's own vision, albeit in a different place, his mother's room) another form of masculinity begins to appear, in this epiphany where writing becomes connected with impotence, with not knowing, with darkness.

Krapp's Last Tape, a play about memory, about identity, also brings to the foreground all these contradictions: the intense masculine stereotypes, as well as its doubts, fractures, impugnations and impossible binds.

I think of Krapp's Last Tape as a good metaphor for several processes taking place in Argentina post-dictatorship. Although some of these processes started way before, as authoritarianism and State repression have been for years entrenched with attempts at defending patriarchal status quo and traditional family values. Argentina is still a society quite influenced by machismo, at the same time completely traversed by the very active resistance of feminist and gender-diversity movements.

Landmarks, contexts and echoes of KLT in Argentina:

I think in the context of Argentinian history, this play allows for a deeply political reading/ spectatorship, as it refers to issues of archive, memory and identity that are crucial in our recent history.

Krapp o La última cinta magnética was premiered in **1960** by a young student, Jorge Petraglia. At the time Argentina had a democratically elected government that had come to power as a result of the proscription of peronism, a movement with a lot of popular support. The government was initially progressive but became increasingly repressive when social demands started to appear. These were the years of the introduction of Beckett's plays to Argentinian audiences.

Beckett wrote the play in 1958, and Emilie Morin argues that Beckett was at the time very aware of the Algerian war for independence, and in his plays of that period made several references to it, especially to one of its most aberrant aspects, the massive use of torture. She does not mention KLT specifically, and no references to torture or war are found in the play, but it was written in that period, and the character Krapp

emanates from Krap in Eleutheria, where, according to Morin, in the third act there is a clear reference to torture.

/ ("Beckett began to write about torture when he turned to the theatre: the third and final act of Eleutheria revolves around the attempts of the Glazier and the Spectator to elicit a revelation from Victor through all means at their disposal", p. 228)/.

At that time there was a big influence of French right-wing Catholic ideas in Argentina. Several French families who fled Algeria sought refuge in the country, in much the same way some Nazi criminals before, and also like several French collaborationists, all of whom found in Argentina a good place to emigrate because of its European style (especially in Buenos Aires) and also due to the welcoming attitudes of successive governments that overlooked their criminal activities in Europe. French ideas linking all forms of protest to the alteration of Catholic and Western order were very useful for the Argentinian government that in 1958 put in place a plan to repress all forms of social protest, the CONINTES plan. We find here then the influence of right-wing French thinking on the making of a State discourse linking subversion with family values, deeply entrenched in Catholicism. Their ideas contributed to the State discourse, and the Plan Conintes was a direct antecedent of the Doctrine of National Security that the Dictatorship would impose later to justify the system of abduction, torture, killings, in sum, state terrorism.

It was in that national context that Petraglia introduced in Argentina, in the capital city, the first Beckett's plays, *Waiting for Godot* and Krapp's Last Tape, using his own translations from the French versions. And although, like Dubatti says, "independent theatre had a left oriented vision that rejected Beckett" (Dubatti, p. 60), the plays were apparently very well received by audiences, running for quite long periods.

In 1967 Petraglia re-staged **Krapp o La última cinta magnética**, in the context of a dictatorship. At that time art and social movements were starting to protest against the dictatorial government with its heavy censorship legislation. A government that clamped down on left-wing views, particularly in universities, culminating with The Night of the Long Batons, the violent beating and dislodging of students and teachers from University of Buenos Aires. Several artistic manifestations started denouncing authoritarianism, like Tucumán Arde and Experiencias 68. Petraglia re-staged KLT in Instituto Di Tella, an artistic institution that was central in the promotion of experimentation and conceptual art in those years.

A few years later, in the turbulent and enthusiastic early 70's, several plays with political themes by Argentinian playwrights were written and staged. Among those playwrights was Eduardo "Tato" Pavlovsky, a doctor, psychoanalyst, and actor who became a prominent theatre figure and political activist, and introduced Jakob Levi Moreno's psychodrama techniques in the country. Beckett's presence articulates the whole of Pavlovsky's oeuvre, ever since he found in *Waiting for Godot* a language that was his. "Godot didn't speak to me the language of anguish the way books did, instead it gave me a new notion of anguish as identity." He accomplished for the local theatre and

intellectual circles the interesting task of combining Beckett's avant-garde with left-wing political activism.

In 1973 Pavlovsky premiered *Mr. Galíndez*, a play that denounced torture by paramilitary groups, one of the first to refer to torture in South America on stage. It was quite influential in other Latin American countries as well. In 1975 Pavlovsky staged *Telarañas (Spiderwebs)*, a play about violence and fascism in the family, at a time when the paramilitary fascist group Triple A (Argentinian Anticomunist Alliance) was persecuting and imprisoning suspects, shortly before the coup d'état.

//(In the same year, his *Mr Galíndez* was staged in Theatre D'Orsay in Paris along with *Happy Days*. Pavlovsky tells the story that he left Beckett a note expressing how important his influence was in his work. Later on, he received a letter in Buenos Aires in which Beckett said he was very surprised to have influenced anyone at all. "You learn something new everyday. At your disposal, Beckett" ended the note (Pavlovsky, 68)//.

Pavlovsky's character are very complex and full of contradictions and facets, like the torturer in *Mr. Galíndez* who is also a loving father.

After that, Argentina underwent an extremely repressive dictatorship during the years 1976-1983. With the advent of democracy, court trials are still taking place for those responsible for the repression, and increasing amounts of information about the existence of clandestine camps, disappearances, torture, assassination of opponents and appropriation of their babies were revealed. Legal and social reparatory processes have gone through different stages over the last forty-five years.

Theatre critic and historian Jorge Dubatti labels the period that started after the restoration of democracy to the present "post-dictatorship theater", a theatre constantly trying to process and somehow talk about the horrors of the dictatorship.

A few years after the restoration of democracy, theatre director Ricardo Bartís staged *KLT* at the same time as he was doing *Postales Argentinas*, a play that imagines the total death of Argentina as a consequence of the dictatorship and, in a farcical tone, is also populated with stereotypical gender roles: a loved and feared mother and girlfriend, a man who can never quite accomplish either his writing nor his affective life.

In 2000 Bartís staged *KLT* again with young actor Pablo Seijo. In this production, proximity to the psychological life of Krapp was emphasized. Pablo Seijo told me in a recent interview that he could feel how the audience identified with the character, especially in the scene of the punt. But also, he told me how lonely he felt after the shows, when often he had to lock the theatre himself, and was loaded with all that solitude of the character.

In 2016, I attended the production of *KLT* by Hector Bidonde, directed by Pérez. Krapp performed by Bidonde is quite an endearing character, and Pérez quite effectively got rid of those tango qualities. But it is interesting to note that, as a difference from British productions, the character gesticulates a lot, is full of outward expressiveness, his

dialogue with himself in the past is constantly stressed or commented upon by hands, face and bodily gestures, much like it is our style, especially in the cities.

Finally, I want to talk about Grupo Krapp, an ensemble group formed in 1998. They took their name from the Beckettian character, and define themselves as a group that explores the problems of representation and the limits of language. They performed nationally and internationally ever since with great acceptance of the public, receiving several awards. I find numerous echoes of Krapp's Last Tape in the work of this group: the idea of rewinding, the presence of acousmatic voices and almost ghost like presences, constant references to analog tapes, the revisitation of the past and anticipation of the future, etc. And in the work of this group, gender roles are constantly challenged. Their productions are very physical and tend to question standardized movement or expected dance choreographies. Their plays are physically very intense, sometimes quite violent. Their first play, in 2000, *No me besabas?* (Weren't you kissing me?) according to critics revealed in women giving men as good (if not better) than they can get.

In Bajo, Feo y De madera (Short, ugly and clumsy), there are three characters (two men and one woman) who try to comply with the instructions of a voice over directing them to do incomprehensible dance steps, while at the same time a perfect, ideal ballet dancer appears, in a sharp and funny contrast mocking the stereotypes of classical ballet.

Gender related intense disputes in Argentina:

As in most Latin American countries, there is still a strong presence of machismo and of traditional Catholicism in Argentina. At the same time, gender issues are the locus of intense and constant legal, political and cultural disputes.

Recent accomplishments have been the Comprehensive protection law for women in 2009, the legalization of same-sex marriage in 2010, the Gender identity law in 2012, legalization of abortion in 2020, job quota for trans-gender people in the 2022.

The main struggles of the last years have consolidated in:

- . The movement "Ni Una Menos" (Not one less) (picture)
- . The green tide (picture)
- . Defense of the rights of the LGBTQ+ and especially trans-gender
- . Intense struggles in the realm of language, with the appearance of inclusive language to degender language.

The last dictatorship involved an attempt to assure or re install patriarchal structures, and a process of moral restoration that also sought to stop the subversion in the inter-gender relationships and of the Christian and Western family values. Some think that homophobia and misogyny were or are thought as structural of civilization and the idea of nation in Argentina.

The constant fight of the human rights movements in Argentina to seek truth and justice for the atrocities committed, is also traversed by the claims of LGBTQ+ activism, in a complex relationship. They are demanding to be included in the archives of human rights violations of the last dictatorship.

30000 is what the human rights movement take as the number of people having disappeared, the number is symbolic and important in relation to constantly renewed negationism. In the last few years, in protests on streets, this 400 is added, as a way to make the gay community visible. It is believed that gay people were not disappeared because of their homosexuality, but because of their political commitments, but being gay they received a special cruel treatment in the State's clandestine concentration camps.

By way of a conclusion:

By recording testimonies of his life on tape, listening and arguing with them, Krapp also raises issues of power and authority related to memory. Whose stories are recorded and kept? Who will listen to them later? How will they be re signified by later generations? "A late evening in the future", the opening sentence in *Krapp's Last Tape*, was probably written for the sake of historical plausibility, since at the time audio tape was a new medium. But perhaps Beckett also intended a sense of futurity to be hanging over the play like a question mark forever.

Different voices struggle in my country to make their way to the public archive of human rights violations, at the same time as conservative powers attempt to silence them all. Krapp's Last Tape, albeit apparently about a single individual's past life, might be also talking about broader issues of collective memory and disputes over conflictual narratives of the past.