

The influence of Carnival, "grotesco criollo" and other forms of popular performance on Beckett's theatre in Argentina

Alicia Nudler

Universidad de Río Negro, Argentina

Beckett's plays have been staged frequently in Argentina since 1956, when *Waiting for Godot* premiered in Buenos Aires. In my research, I have counted more than 140 productions¹; practically all of Beckett's plays have been staged, as well as some of his non-theatrical texts. During about 10 years, a Festival completely dedicated to Beckett took place annually in Buenos Aires. Diverse theatrical poetics and traditions have infused the different productions of Beckett's theatre. The theme of this IFTR Conference has prompted me to investigate the influence of Argentina's early theatrical traditions on some of the productions of Beckett's theatre; additionally, I found connections between some of the debates sparked by the arrival of Beckett's theatre in the 60s and earlier disputes surrounding Carnival festivities.

During the second half of the XIX century, shortly after the process of independence from Spain, a local type of spectacle emerged in the young Argentina: "circo criollo". *Circo criollo* took many of the characteristics of European circus and transformed it in local ways. This spectacle consisted of a two-part show: the first featured typical circus sketches (dexterities and clowns) and the second part was a pantomime – later on transformed into dramas with words - representing social situations of local people. The most famous *circo criollo* performer, José Podestá, impersonated a famous clown character, *Pepino el 88*, in the first part, and *Juan Moreira*, a gaucho persecuted by the police, in the second. This type of spectacle became extremely popular, and people identified with Juan Moreira, becoming the first form of political theatre in this area. Circus families travelled long distances in horse-drawn carts to offer the spectacle in circus tents in the countryside and in small villages. It is considered the origin of theatre in Argentina.

But long before *circo criollo* was invented, in the Rio de La Plata area, Carnival – celebrated in February in the days previous to Lent, as in Europe - was extremely popular and attracted big crowds during colonial times and long after independence. One newspaper of the period calculated that in 1881 a third of the total population of Buenos Aires had participated in the Carnival festivities. Carnival here was a space where class, gender and ethnic-racial tensions were processed at the time of the formation of the modern Argentina, with its massive

¹ Probably there are many more, but archives are scarce and information difficult to find.

immigration from Europe, and at the same time, it was an event where a sense of belonging was achieved: different ways of “being Argentinian” were tried out (Adamovsky). Carnival took on those characteristics Bakhtin describes in the European medieval Carnival: the excesses, the inversion of social and gender roles, the mix of social classes. Also, Carnival was associated with the collective, and people were seen as a whole, defying socioeconomic and political organization. “[A]ll were considered equal during carnival. Here, in the town square, a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age” (Bakhtin, p. 10)

In those celebrations there was no difference between performer and audience, everyone participated equally. One particularly interesting aspect of Carnival in the *Rioplatense* area (Buenos Aires and Montevideo) was the important presence of *Afro-porteños*, freed from slavery since 1853. In another frequent Carnival subversion, *Afro-porteños* impersonated white people and viceversa: the borders separating the two ethnic groups were deliberately blurred (Adamovsky).

For decades, the governing elites tried to discipline the festivities. The horror, for instance, of being soaked with water, and thus humiliated, by an inferior, led to the practice being prohibited. The fight over the control of Carnival became a class struggle. Born as a popular festivity, Carnival resisted adapting to the requirements of the elites. The contrast that Bakhtin describes between Carnival and official festivity applies to what happened in Argentina, with the elites wanting to convert the popular festivity into an orderly celebration: “Carnival absolves and confuses; official festivity sets and differentiates” (Adamovsky).

Juan Moreira, the rebellious and brave gaucho created within *Circo Criollo*, appeared frequently as a costume or as part of a show within Carnival. One year, the newspapers reported “an epidemic of Juanes Moreira”; the gaucho became precisely the icon of barbarism that the official discourse tried to extirpate in the name of civilization.

In the last decades of the XIX century and first of the XX, Argentina received massive immigration, mostly from Europe, that within a few years doubled the population. Several expressions of popular culture arose as a product of the combination of “criollos” (descendants of Spaniards born in this territory in colonial times), gauchos (rural workers from the Argentinian pampas, skilled with horses and cattle), and European immigrants. Another character born out of *circo criollo* that became very popular in Carnival was *Cocoliche*. This comic character represented an Italian immigrant who disguised and tried to pass as a criollo, but whose accent and poor use of local customs always betrayed him. ‘Cocoliche’ later became the word to refer to the mix of Spanish and Italian in oral language.

Massive immigration was the product of the project of the elites in government to develop the country and to “europeanise” it. The problem was that the immigrants who arrived were not “the right type”, the type the elites were hoping for, that is educated Northern Europeans with white skin. Instead, the immigration was comprised of rural workers from poor areas of Spain and Italy. The promises made by the government were not fulfilled, and at the turn of the century, poverty increased and immigrants crowded in the port city of Buenos Aires, living in precarious multifamily dwellings, known as *conventillos*. Theatre was an important part of the Buenos Aires of the time; many theatrical companies emerged which frequently used street language and situations in their performances. The context of underemployment and marginality, especially for immigrants but also for poor criollos and gauchos from the countryside, was the arena in which *sainete criollo* and *grotesco criollo* – and also tango- were all born. *Sainetes*, a theatrical form imported from Spain, was locally transformed to show, in rather comic and exaggerated ways, the life in the *conventillo*. The *sainetes criollos* represented patios, the common areas in the *conventillos* where immigrants from diverse parts of the world, with different languages and cultures, met everyday, creating problems of miscommunication and other situations, in a comic, buffoonish way. The type of theatre called *Grotesco criollo* also took place in the *conventillo* but went deep into the individual, revealing anguish and failure in a way that became tragicomic and grotesque. It showed the pains of being an immigrant unable to cope with reality upon arrival. If the *sainetes* happened in the patio, the *grotesco criollo* entered the rooms and showed family dramas and conflictual relationships. In the patio, appearances were maintained, but in the intimacy of the room, the harshness of the disillusion and lost dreams were striking in their crudity: it was the tragic other side of the *sainete*. Immigrants and their pain were at the centre of the scene, but it was still ambivalent, because the situations were exaggerated to the point of being grotesque, and spectators didn’t know whether to laugh or to cry.

Beckett’s drama arrived in Argentina in 1956 when Jorge Petraglia and his group of Architecture students staged *Waiting for Godot* in a small alternative venue. The group’s members, all admirers of Buster Keaton and the Marx brothers, had some training in circus and vaudeville. They emphasised the clownish, the comic and the grotesque, prioritizing the extroverted aspects of the play. Several newspaper critics directly associated the performance with the acting of circus clowns, and some linked it with *Pepino el 88*, the popular *circo criollo* character, and judged it negatively for that reason.



Waiting for Godot, Buenos Aires, 1956

Another early staging of a Beckett play influenced by the legacy of the circus tradition was *Act Without Words I*, staged in 1960 by Julio Castronuovo, a mime artist who apparently had personally met Beckett. He also staged *Endgame* in 1961, and in 1965 created the spectacle *Pantomima en Blanco y Negro* (Pantomime in Black and White), which included *Act without words I and II*. He later emigrated to Spain where he also directed *Waiting for Godot*, *Happy Days and Not I*. Castronuovo and Beckett exchanged several letters, in Italian, in relation to the plays Castronuovo staged in Spain and Portugal². The cover of Castronuovo's book about training in mime, *Lecciones de Pantomima*, is an image of *Act without Words*.

Castronuovo bestowed his staging of the play with the features of his acting as a mime. The Spanish newspaper *El País* wrote that "he found the mix of tragedy and comedy -a clown's nightmare- that the play requires".



Castronuovo, *Pantomimas en Blanco y Negro*, 1968



Cover of Castronuovo's book.

² The letters are in the Beckett Collection in Reading.

Act Without Words I was later staged with another mime, Gerardo Baamonde, along with *Act Without Words II*. The director was Miguel Guerbero, a Beckett specialist who staged many of his plays, to whom I will come back later.



Gerardo Baamonde and Javier Blanco, *Act Without Words II*, 1986

In 1991, the group *Periférico de Objetos* staged *Act Without Words* using puppets, a tradition related to carnival.



El periférico de objetos, *Variaciones sobre B (Act Without Words I)*, 1991

With this production, the group changed their work from the more traditional form in which the puppeteer tries to remain invisible, to the puppeteer being at plain sight for the audience, an actor on stage. In their version of the play, the puppeteers gave their opinions about the puppet's misfortunes and displayed cruelty towards the character. This was a post-dictatorship production, clearly speaking about the human rights violations during the 1976-1983 murderous dictatorship and about the - at the time of the production - Argentinian government's reversion of previous justice and memory policies.

Regarding *Waiting For Godot*, the play has been staged many times in Argentina since its 1956 premiere, employing a wide variety of aesthetic approaches. In 1979, during the last dictatorship, director Hugo Urquijo staged it using several grotesque and circus elements. “Magic” made Vladimir, Estragon and the tree appear from under the stage, for instance. As Urquijo described his *mise-en-scene*, “Every time a game ends, a new bunny appears from the hat”. The play was conceived as a succession of games invented to distract the audience from the void. Vladimir and Estragon wore heavy make-up and clown-like white boots.



Waiting for Godot directed by Hugo Urquijo, 1979

Despite its many differences, *grotesco criollo* and Beckett’s theatre share the theme of the impossibility of communication, the confusion between comedy and tragedy, and some exaggeration at odds with verisimilitude or realism. *Grotesco criollo* shows the failure of communication: its characters try to communicate, and they babble in that attempt. Absurdism, going beyond that, seems to disbelieve altogether in the capacity of language to communicate. Pellettieri states that good *grotesco criollo* actors are those who act in a way so that the spectator wants to laugh and cry at the same time, or alternates from one state to the other. For Beckett, in a “balanced” production of Krapp’s Last Tape, for instance, “neither the comic nor the pathetic aspects of the character’s appearance and predicament should be lost”.

In a similar vein, Bryden contends that Beckett’s clowns are not the happy specialists of slapstick and merrymaking typified by certain styles of clowning. It is the darker, more disturbing aspects of the clownish event which recommend themselves in Beckett’s theatre. “Within these

must be spotlighted the dialectic of tension between the vigour of performance and the reflective and/or depressive environs of prelude and postlude”.

According to Kern (?) Beckett’s theatre has a preference for grotesque stylization at the total expense of verisimilitude and probability, like Comedia del Arte; *grotesco criollo* presents that stylization at the expense of verisimilitude as well.

Martin Esslin linked Theatre of the Absurd, the Carnavalesque and circus in this way:

What is the tradition with which the Theatre of the Absurd -at first sight the most revolutionary and radically new movement- is trying to link itself? It is in fact a very ancient and a very rich tradition, nourished from many and varied sources: the verbal exuberance and extravagant inventions of Rabelais, the age-old clowning of the Roman mimes and the Italian Commedia dell'Arte, the knock-about humor of circus clowns like Grock (p. 7).

In her studies of Argentinian theatre, Graham-Jones asserts that the 1920s *grotesco criollo*, with its ties to middle-class expectations and (mis)fortunes and its innovations with text and performance, directly influenced Argentinian avant-garde theatre. And some consider that the popularity of *grotesco criollo* paved the way for the acceptance that Beckett’s theatre, especially *Waiting for Godot*, achieved among audiences quite early on.

In historical terms there is another important, and direct link between Beckett’s drama and popular forms of theatre, involving the province of Mendoza. Even though Argentina is a very centralized country and the biggest part of cultural life happens in Buenos Aires, in that Western and mountainous part of the country Beckett’s drama became known to audiences almost concurrently with Buenos Aires. Theatre director Clara Giol Bressan, who had a key role in disseminating Beckett’s work in Mendoza in the 60’s, had trained with the creator of the popular *grotesco criollo*, Armando Discépolo. And one of Giol Bressan’s students was Miguel Guerberof, possibly the most prominent Beckettian actor and director in the country, founder of the Buenos Aires Annual Beckett Festival.

At least two productions of Beckett’s plays in Mendoza took on elements of the popular theatrical traditions I am analysing here. Armando Lucero staged WFG with *Grupo Popular*, a group he had founded in a football club with rural workers. In one record of this production (Pellettieri, 2005, p. 257) the play is listed as “Esperando a Godoy”, that is with a change from “Godot” to “Godoy”. Godoy is a mythical character known as the first *gaucho*, and a symbol of country life and resistance to authority. It is likely then that the name change sought to induce audience identification.

Much later, another director from Mendoza, Walter Neira, staged *Endgame* using elements that could be considered related to those popular traditions too. Both Hamm and Clov were women, and Clov walked on stilts, to exaggerate, take to the maximum, his (her) impossibility to sit.

Local theatrical tendencies and idiosyncrasies have also affected Argentinian productions of *Krapp's Last Tape*, one of which, featuring Héctor Bidonde, I studied for my doctoral thesis. Bidonde's version is not clownish at all, but his performance of the character is full of hand gestures and body expressiveness. Even though Krapp is obviously introverted, but Bidonde converts several of his tales into extroverted and gestural passages, almost like in the *conventillos*, where "Turkish, Polish, Gallegos, Italians, Jewish people tried to understand each other, always accompanied by gesture, unavoidable for survival" (Barruti, p. 9).

Another interesting point of encounter between Carnival and some of the Argentinian productions of Beckett's plays is transgender performance. Leonor Manso staged in 1996 an acclaimed version of WFG in which a female actor played Lucky. As the CFP of this SBWG meeting states: "queer performances of Beckett not only bring to the surface the queerness of the texts, but they can also provide a path to explore the "masquerade" of femininity (Butler, 2015), the identity of characters beyond the binary". Argentina has had in the last decades important advances in terms of legislation for non-binary people and transgender identity. When, as recently as 2018, a group of professional actors were about to re-stage Manso's version (now with both Lucky and The Boy played by women) the rights, that had already been granted, were at the last minute withheld by the Beckett Estate and the premiere had to be cancelled, creating a small scandal and a lot of disillusionment.

Finally, a few lines about the early reception and debates around Beckett's theatre. When Beckett's theatre arrived in Argentina, it was met with different reactions in the capital, Buenos Aires, than in Mendoza. In the capital the critics rejected it quite bitterly. The intensity of critical attacks created curiosity, and as a result, people started attending the shows. WFG was mostly accepted by the public, but not by critics. And in the sixties, it was subject to further controversy, the arguments being related to historical debates and ideological positions. Previously, I stated that Carnival became an arena for opposing models of a country, the governing elites wanting to make Carnival appear as European as possible, and in general wanting to create a white European identity, negating the traditions and customs of native people, gauchos, and people of other ethnicities. In the sixties, Beckett's theatre was met with much suspicion by left-wing political groups and theatre dramaturgs and practitioners. They criticized the absence of a positive character, and deemed absurdist theatre elitist. For these people, theatre had to be committed with social change, social denunciation, and Beckett's

theatre seemed unable to meet those standards. Also, it was strongly attacked for being European, precisely as a reaction to those historical attempts on the part of elites in power to make our country more European and white, disparaging local identities.

Curiously enough, however, in the province of Mendoza Beckett was received in a much less judgemental way. It was accepted by the public and by the critics. And it was popular among working class people. Brater states that “The play achieved one of its most popular successes in the western town of Mendoza, near the Chilean border, where a poorly funded provincial theater presented the play before an audience of mostly agricultural workers” (p. 148).

In that province Beckett’s work was actively promoted by cultural agents like the aforementioned Clara Giol Bressan and the writer and journalist Antonio di Benedetto. The latter published numerous articles in the local newspaper praising and “explaining” the point of Beckett and other absurdist European writers, especially Ionesco. Although the subject needs further research, I think the imprint coming from the popular tradition of grotesco criollo brought by Giol Bressan to Beckett’s theatre and the pedagogical attitude of Di Benedetto had an impact on the popular, early reception of Beckett in that part of the country.

However, Argentina remains an extremely centralised country, and one that is greatly divided, economically and politically. In such circumstances, theatre in Argentina, with all its linkages to popular carnivalesque traditions and what Peter Brook called the “Rough Theatre”, has continued to find critical space for subversion through laughter, as well as marking grief and emptiness, in Beckett’s work for the stage.

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