

Review

Staging Buenos Aires: Theater, Society, and Politics in Argentina, 1860-1920

Clearly written and meticulously researched, *Staging Buenos Aires: Theater, Society, and Politics in Argentina, 1860-1920* is an interdisciplinary study which blends theatre studies, urban history, and literary criticism to argue that the theatre played a primary role developing Argentine democracy in a crucial period in the nation's history. With its post-independence civil war having drawn to a conclusion, the establishing of its national borders and of an economy largely based on the agro-export model, it was during the period studied by Kristen L. McCleary that Argentina was largely consolidated as a nation. Moreover, it was during this same period that Argentines sought to redefine their national identity as masses of European immigrants arrived to the young nation, as its capital, Buenos Aires, massively expanded and modernized. It is this quest for identity which largely occupies McCleary over the course of the book and she paints a vibrant picture of the theatre as a vital space for the development of a dynamic and expansive Habermasian 'public sphere', precisely because it appealed to both popular and elite audiences and, as she suggests, because the theatre potentially played an important role establishing the middle-class in Argentina.

To build her argument, McCleary draws on an impressive range of sources including ticket receipts, legislation, reviews, and dramatic texts, among others, to provide a detailed depiction of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Argentine theatre as both a physical space where different social classes came into contact, and as a dramaturgical space where playwrights and audiences could examine, question, and challenge the political and social structures of the time. The scope of this far-reaching study is equally impressive and individual chapters provide: a brief history of the theatre in Buenos Aires from the colonial era to the 1920s, focusing particularly on prominent censorship cases; analysis of the Spanish *zarzuela*, which retained mass popularity in post-independence Argentine theatres; a reflection on urban planning and modernization through the lens of fire safety, examining the writings of José María Calaza, Buenos Aires fire chief from 1881 to 1913, in particular; close examination of the ways in which politics, social class and gender were represented and replicated in the theatre space; a provocative argument that the securing of intellectual property rights 'encouraged playwrights to identify as middle-class and to respond to the interests and tastes of an aspirational middle-class audience by creating plays that resonated with them' (142), some ten years earlier than scholars have previously suggested the middle-class first emerged in Argentina; and two chapters analysing the plays produced by these new middle-class authors, concentrating on representations of Paris, black and provincial Argentines, and the most popular plays produced in 1919, respectively. A short Conclusion reflects briefly on more contemporary theatrical production and makes a persuasive case for incorporating theatre studies into broader social histories.

While the ambition of the book is to be lauded, the diversity of the subject matter explored means that, at times, the individual chapters can seem a little disconnected, some unusual structural choices can somewhat obscure key arguments, and there are some notable omissions. To provide a couple of examples: in a sub-chapter focussed on politics, McCleary mentions in passing the bomb which exploded in 1910 in the elite opera house, the Teatro Colón, but she only explains the political significance of this event (the passing of the *ley de Defensa Social* which banned anarchist meetings and allowed for the expulsion of anarchists from the country) in the subsequent chapter, ostensibly focussed on the emergence of the Argentine middle-class; and it was surprising that there was no mention at all of the yellow fever outbreak of 1871 which killed some 8% of the city population, had significant effects on the Afro-Argentine population, and led to *porteño* elites abandoning southern and central areas of the city to move North, all of which would seem pertinent to McCleary's analysis of the urban and social history of Buenos Aires.

It must be said, however, that these are very minor issues and the book constitutes an invaluable contribution to the social history of Buenos Aires that will appeal to a broad range of students and scholars interested in theatre studies (including performance history, dramaturgy, and the theatre space), urban history, and the histories of class, race, immigration, and gender in Argentina. It also fits very

well with Pittsburgh's recent Latin American publications, providing an interesting counterpoint to both Camila Gatica Mizala's *Modernity at the Movies: Cinema-Going in Buenos Aires and Santiago 1915-1945* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2023) and Eleni Kafala's *Buenos Aires Across the Arts: Five and One Theses on Modernity, 1921-1939* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2022).

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