

The Generational and Aesthetic Orientation of a State Award Addressed to Independent Theatre

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ABSTRACT – The Generational and Aesthetic Orientation of a State Award Addressed to Independent Theatre – This article analyses the orientation of an awarding practice held by the State – the Fiesta Provincial del Teatro de Tucumán (Argentine) between 2002 and 2017 – in relation to the cast's ages and the aesthetics awarded. It is shown that awards are mainly addressed to young directors who practice a post-dramatic aesthetic, while these awards exclude other traditions such as realism, popular humor and the theatre of cruelty. Finally, State's reasons to make those exclusions are evaluated and so are local games of power, since the award recognition of youngsters and the reject towards consecrated figures is appealing for research.

Keywords: **Award. Generation. Aesthetics. State. Theatre.**

RÉSUMÉ – L'Orientation Générationnel et Esthétique d'un Prix de l'Etat dirigé au Théâtre Indépendant – L'article analyse l'orientation d'un prix théâtral remis par l'Etat – la Fiesta Provincial del Teatro de Tucumán (Argentina) entre 2002 et 2017 – en relation à l'âge et l'esthétique de groupes reconnus. On explique que plusieurs prix se dirigent aux jeunes directeurs qui pratiquent une esthétique posdramatique, alors que le festival exclue d'autres traditions comme le réalisme, l'humour populaire et le théâtre de la cruauté. Finalement, on évalue les motifs des exclusions et les jeux de pouvoir qui émergent de la reconnaissance de jeunes et le rejet de personnalités consacré du théâtre local.

Mots-clés: **Prix. Génération. Esthétique. Etat. Théâtre.**

RESUMEN – La Orientación Generacional y Estética de una Premiación del Estado Dirigida al Teatro Independiente – Se analiza cómo han estado orientados los premios de un festival del Estado – la Fiesta Provincial del Teatro de Tucumán (Argentina) – entre 2002 y 2017, en relación a los grupos etarios y corrientes estéticas reconocidos. En el artículo se muestra que los premios se dirigen fundamentalmente a elencos con directores jóvenes que cultivan una estética posdramática, excluyendo la tradición realista, el humor popular y el teatro de la crueldad. Por último, se evalúan los motivos del Estado para realizar dichas exclusiones, así como los juegos de poder en el ámbito local que implican el reconocimiento de figuras jóvenes y el desdén por las figuras jerárquicas del campo teatral provincial.

Palabras-clave: **Premio. Generación. Estética. Estado. Teatro.**

The purpose of this article is to analyze the role of the State in the practices of artistic recognition within the arena of independent theatre based on the specific case of the Provincial Theatre Festival (*Fiesta Provincial del Teatro*) in Tucumán, an annual award ceremony held by the National Theatre Institute (*Instituto Nacional del Teatro – INT*) in Argentina. The interest in this case lies in a remarkable paradox: an official award is meant to establish the aesthetic guidelines of a specific activity which is distinguished by its autonomy, unlike other forms, such as the official or the commercial theatre. First and foremost, some theoretical input regarding the discussion on legitimacy in any artistic field will be clarified. Then, there will be an analysis on the orientation of the awards in the *Fiesta Provincial del Teatro* in Tucumán between 2002 and 2017, both in the generational and the aesthetic dimensions. In the fourth section, the excluded aesthetics of the award will be characterized: the realist tradition, the Theatre of Cruelty and the popular-humor tradition. In the conclusions, we will outline the empowering possibilities of emerging artists, the suspension of local hierarchies and the practices of reproduction carried out within the context of the Provincial Festival. Finally, we highlight the benefits of examining the theatrical awards so as to accurately characterize an artistic field. In terms of methodology, the work is grounded in a database of all the award-winning plays plus a series of fifteen interviews, all carried out by the author.

The *Fiesta Provincial del Teatro* is an annual festival organized by the INT which takes place in each Argentinean province, where a special selection committee selects two plays to be participating in the Regional and National Theatre Festival. Originally, starting in the late 1980s, these Provincial Festivals were held by the theatrical performers together with the Provincial Cultural Office in certain points of the country. In 1997, along with the introduction of the National Law for the Theatre, the INT is created as the primary federal agent for the activity's financing. Among its core purposes are the "promotion of theatrical activities through the organization of contests, competitions, exhibitions and festivals, as well as the granting of awards, incentives and special recognition" (National Law for the Theatre Art. 14, Section E). Therefore, with the introduction of the new law, the Provincial, Regional and National Theatre Festivals became

the INT's most important policies throughout the country. One of the Festivals' distinctive features is the exclusive participation of independent-management theatre companies, that is to say, no theatre companies coming from the official sector nor those receiving economic support from the private sector are allowed to register. This way, the Provincial Theatre Festival is an award-giving celebration from the State exclusively aimed at the independent theatre.

After the 2001 crisis, following Néstor Kirchner's presidency, a period of economic recovery begins in which unemployment drops significantly. Whereas in the prior decade – the 1990s – there was a trend towards encouraging private participation in the cultural sector in contrast with the decline in public investment (Bayardo, 2007), during the presidencies of Kirchner and Cristina Fernández the State's financing on the cultural sector recovered, yet never surpassing 1% of the national budget as recommended by UNESCO (Bayardo, 2007). It is within this context that the National Law for the Theatre as the unique national State's public policy will have striking consequences in the districts of the interior of the country, especially those whose provincial cultural budgets are limited, considering that, as shown in official reports, there are enormous differences throughout Argentina in terms of how much each individual province assigns to Culture. In 2007, for instance, the Secretary of Culture in San Luis or the City of Buenos Aires (CABA, by its Spanish acronym) assigned an annual budget close to 115 ARS per capita, while in Formosa, Misiones or San Juan the budget did not even go beyond 5 ARS (SINCA, 2010). That is why the implementation of a cultural policy coming from the National State fosters equality, on the one hand, while it provides more decisive effects in places lacking provincial policies for the culture.

Even though Tucumán is not among the provinces with the lowest budget assigned to this area, the INT awards play a key role which entail palpable effects in terms of how theatrical artists experience the activity itself. Tucumán is located to the northwest of Argentina, and its capital city together with the surrounding area is Argentina's sixth most crowded territory. There are close to forty theatrical premieres annually, with casts and groups emerging from independent workshops as well as from the drama school of the National University in Tucumán. It is worth noting

that due to Buenos Aires' pre-eminence in the theatrical arena, migrations occur frequently from the interior of the country to the center, as well as renowned teachers travelling from the City to the provinces to offer workshops and special training.

Independent artists of the theatre in Tucumán as well as those from the rest of the country actively participate in the Theatre Festivals. Admittedly, since its very beginnings the independent theatre has built its tradition on the basis of three major enemies: the leading actor, the commercial producer and the State (Dubatti, 2012). Nevertheless, according to María Fukelman (2017), from the very beginning, the legendary *Teatro del Pueblo*, the very first independent theatre in Buenos Aires, received four different theatre rooms from the Government. In other words, the independent theatre was never entirely separate from the State. This, however, may not be construed as a "legitimate reason for questioning the freedom in which people in theatre currently work" (Fukelman, 2017, p. 19). Nonetheless, even when the author acknowledges the impact of the State over artistic practices, she utterly rejects the idea of public policies interfering in the purity of its aesthetic decisions. Consequently, the State is regarded as an entity which is limited to providing money and material resources. Having said that, the present article attempts to prove that public policies effectively affect the definition of value of artistic work, thus threatening its typical autonomy in its area of competence, which is the legitimacy of aesthetic forms.

Theoretical Contributions of the Sociology of the Arts by Pierre Bourdieu

The work of Pierre Bourdieu is an invaluable reference in the development of the sociology of the arts. From a Marxist structuralist perspective and following Durkheim's objectivist tradition, he considers the arts as a *field* with a relative regulation autonomy as opposed to other instances of symbolic goods (Bourdieu, 2010), bringing into play a common interest among its members, who share a certain knowledge and who equally recognize the rules of the game (Bourdieu, 1990). The structure of a field is that of the conditions in which power balance occurs among its agents; a space of struggle where the authority's legitimate

violence comes into play. Those who within this context monopolize such capital, that is, the foundation of the authority, lean towards preservation strategies, whereas those who have less capital at their disposal aim at subversion strategies and heresy. All those involved in the field share the common interest in sustaining the belief in the value of the game (Bourdieu, 1990).

This field of production of artistic symbolic goods is structured in two parts: the *field of restricted production* that produces goods objectively targeted to the producers of symbolic goods, and the *field of large-scale symbolic production*, which aims at non-producers. Whereas the latter is regulated by competition laws to win over the largest possible market, the former creates its own assessment criteria and follows the fundamental law of competition for the strictly cultural recognition granted by their own peers, who are at the same time competitors and privileged customers (Bourdieu, 2010). The level of autonomy of a field is measured by its ability to impose its own rules and assessment criteria of its products where to compete for cultural legitimacy. Consequently, the wider the differentiation between producers who attain hierarchy on account of the audience versus those who attain hierarchy from specific cultural evaluations, the greater the autonomy of a field (Bourdieu, 2010). Because “any act of cultural production implies the assertion of its desire of cultural legitimacy” (Bourdieu, 2010, p. 92), the crucial motivation that all artistic productions share is to be positioned at the core of the field.

The sociology of the arts by Pierre Bourdieu was mainly meant to argue Sartre’s hegemonic view, who believed the artist is a person who risks his or her freedom and values in order to produce his/her work of art. By contrast, Bourdieu (1995) emphasizes that art is a field full of struggles for prestige, where the possibilities for the artist are limited by the field’s structural factors and by his/her ambitions of cultural legitimacy. In this perspective, it is an error to reduce the artist’s activity to one free creative project, expressive of an irrepressible conscience.

Bourdieu’s work gave rise to both followers and detractors alike. Lahire (2005) points out that the concept of field should not be entirely dismissed, as it may be useful to reflect upon the conflicts and hierarchies within an activity, although he pointedly mentions that the category forgets

about a large number of significant social events. In his view, the theory of fields devotes too much energy to enlightening the great scenes of eminent hierarchies, yet it fails to delve into the connections of those actors with other spaces of social life. On the other hand, the fact that there are positions of hierarchy within an activity does not necessarily imply that those who occupy such positions will turn into promoters or accomplices of domination. The figures of hierarchy in an activity may be people who *stand out*, who have conquered the *preference or taste* of its community, situations that not necessarily entail process of domination (Heinich, 2002). Even when this remark avoids the mechanization of interpretations, it does not entirely lead to throwing away Bourdieu's considerations regarding the eagerness for legitimacy and the dispute for the symbolic capital, most of all in relation to those who occupy hierarchy positions, whose continuity ought to be sustained through time and in a wide variety of contexts.

Generational Orientation of the Awards

Award practices usually raise the question about whether there is a rule for the administration and distribution of such prizes. The diachronic analysis of the Provincial Theatre Festival in Tucumán allows us to identify certain common points which account for consistency and enable to measure the influence of such awards in the local theatre arena.

The generational element is a key factor for the organization of artistic practices. Measuring the ages of the participants of the award-winning plays in the Festival is not, however, an automatic procedure, considering that, because it is a collective activity, there are different ages coexisting in one same group, thus making it more difficult to analyze; this leads to making more precise methodological decisions. In the studies about theatre, directors and playwrights are usually given priority in the analysis of their production, as they are considered to be the real authors of the plays. Nevertheless, instead of working out the age average of award-winning directors, it is advisable to qualitatively measure the age factor in terms of the creation of the companies, especially in terms of the director-actors bond.

It is quite common for directors to belong to an older generation compared to his or her actors. In these cases, the plays are directed by a drama teacher where the students are the actors, or the director is already a renowned figure and can call younger or contemporary actors. On the other hand, there are plays in which director and actors share the same generation of young artists, with a recently-born bond that began in a prior experience as classmates in a workshop or at the university. Such differences or equalities in terms of age between director and actor set specific production dynamics. In the second case, legitimacy for the role of director does not come from a position in the field, but rather from an agreement within the group.

Below there is an age array of the groups awarded by the Provincial Festival:

a) Young theatre companies: companies created in drama-training spaces either in workshops or in the Drama School of the National University of Tucumán, where everyone was a student. The members of the company are under thirty years old at the time of being awarded. In many cases, the awarded play is the debut of the director or of an actor. The defining feature is that the director is the same age range as the actors. The director is not the director of a theatre room.

b) Intermediate companies: companies organized by a director who is between 30 and 40 years old, someone who is renowned, and who calls people of whom he or she was the drama teacher with just a few years of experience. The director may also be the director of a theatre room.

c) Companies with second-generation directors: companies whose director is over 40 years old. He/she is a renowned figure within the activity and the awarded play is not his or her first work. In some cases, they are also directors of a theatre room.

d) Companies with third-generation directors: companies where the director is over 50 years old, he/she has held a position at the university (scholar), in state administration or the direction of an independent theatre room. The director is a renowned figure and it is not a first work, although it may be the first for the actors.

This listing has the intention to show in a qualitative manner the age factor in the creation of groups. Therefore, it is evident that one same age does not imply the same thing for all cases, nor one same age range means the same power relationships or articulations with the rest of the activity.

Being the head of a department at university, running an independent theatre room, being a member the board of the *Asociación Argentina de Actores* (Argentinean Association of Actors and Actresses) or holding official positions are all activities condensed in the fourth group, as these tasks can only be attained after years of experience in the activity. This shows that group (d) is certainly heterogeneous – unlike the first group, especially –, yet it clearly has a common aspect: they include social actors which, in many ways, are more qualified than others in their artistic, educational or management practice in the theatrical activity. Bearing this contrast in mind between groups (a) and (d), it is worth running the momentary risk of making a somewhat schematic classifying gesture in order to shed light on certain award orientations in the Provincial Theatre Festival in Tucumán.

This classification shows that the relationship between director and actor adopts different forms depending on their ages and experience. As it is a power relation, and because the director holds an organizing and decision-making role, while in some companies the director and actors' work experience is quite asymmetrical – thus enabling the director to support his/her legitimacy on that asymmetry –, in companies composed by people of similar ages, with experience levels close to zero, the negotiations are different. That is why the age array transcends a purely quantitative approach as it represents different qualities of internal organization.

Beyond this distinction, groups (a) and (b) show a remarkable closeness in terms of director-actor bond, on the one hand, as well as a certain institutional precariousness regarding their position in the field. Below, there is a list of the award-winning plays from the Provincial Theatre Festival in Tucumán between 2002 and 2017, detailing the type of company they belong to according to the previously elaborated listing.

Year	Award-winning plays	Total	Number of plays by: a) Young Companies b) Intermediate Companies	Number of plays by: c) Companies with second-generation directors d) Companies with third-generation directors
2002	- <i>Terapia</i> - <i>Mujercitas... Eran las de antes?</i> - <i>Jamuychis... el grito</i>	3	2	1
2003	- <i>Personalmente Einstein</i> - <i>Detrás del vidrio</i> - <i>Huid mortals</i>	3	2	1
2004	- <i>Las fabricantes de tortas</i> - <i>Fotograma de los amantes</i>	2	2	0
2005	- <i>Acerca de la mejor estrategia...</i> - <i>Suspiro crudo fosforescente</i> - <i>Un mundo de Cyrano</i> - <i>Como la que se extravió</i>	4	3	1
2006	- <i>Freak Show</i> - <i>¿Qué pasa con Roberto?</i> - <i>Zoom del pensamiento volátil</i>	3	3	0
2007	- <i>Tiempo suspendido</i> - <i>Cómo matar un espejo de agua</i> - <i>La familia Punk</i> - <i>El escorial</i>	4	3	1
2008	- <i>REM</i> - <i>Medio Pueblo</i>	2	2	0
2009	- <i>4.48 Psicosis</i> - <i>La verdadera historia de Antonio</i>	2	2	0
2010	- <i>Monotonía (viceversa)</i> - <i>Víctor en el país</i>	2	2	0
2011	- <i>Tartufo o los impostores</i> - <i>Amor de músico</i>	2	1	1
2012	- <i>Museo Medea</i> - <i>¿Qué soñará Corbalán?</i>	2	2	0
2013	- <i>La Cebolla (o el sellamiento del Chero)</i> - <i>Todo cerca</i>	2	0	2
2014	- <i>El tiempo de las mandarinas</i> - <i>La margarita</i>	2	1	1
2015	- <i>La lechera</i> - <i>Vertical</i>	2	0	2
2016	- <i>Amar amando</i> - <i>Un tonto en una caja</i>	2	1	1
2017	- <i>Que pase algo (título en proceso)</i> - <i>El circo de los Marsilli</i>	2	2	0
	Total	39	27	12

Table 1 – Award-winning plays from the Provincial Theatre Festival in Tucumán between 2002 and 2017. Source: Elaborated by author.

Between 2002 and 2012, it is remarkable the presence of young companies in the selection of the Festival. From the 39 awarded plays between 2002 and 2017, 27 were entirely carried out by groups and directors who are under 40 years old, 12 of which – half of this group – were the directors' first plays. The trend towards awarding young theatre is stronger between 2003 and 2009, when 19 plays were granted awards in groups (a) and (b), and only 3 belonged to groups (c) and (d). It is quite evident that an insignificant number of plays with directors over 50 were given a prize, which leads to believe that the Provincial Festival in Tucumán does not reward acclaimed personalities.

In the interviews carried out for this research, it became clear that younger groups who were granted awards started their relationships as classmates and students at Drama School or at an independent drama workshop. For many directors, the award-winning play was their first one. In some cases, this gives rise to a truly meaningful experience: the plays by students of drama school win over those of their university teachers or renowned directors. On that subject, one director points out the following:

I started directing with not too many tools. I was on second year at the University and I was 21 or 22 when we premiered. It was a leap in the dark, the truth is that my work was merely intuitive, and quite simple at the same time, completely aware of my lack of expertise; it was quite a modest, stripped-back staging, with just a few elements, we mostly wanted to bring forth that idea [...] There was quite a stir, I guess [...] I assume there were great artists from Tucuman competing as well, more renowned than us.

Thus, the Provincial Theatre Festival is noted as an event in which the INT creates a setting that allows less empowered local agents to put up a symbolic fight where, on many occasions, they come out on top, even though such victories do not directly translate into official positions.

Aesthetic Orientation of the Awards

A study on artistic award ceremonies should not look down on the warning made by Lahire (2005) in reference to Pierre Bourdieu's work on the danger of describing artistic fields as mechanical functioning, where the material contents of the plays are put aside and made equal with the purpose of showing the displacements and fixations of the positions in the

field. This is the reason why it is fundamental for a perspective founded on the sociology of culture to include the theatre own words. In this sense, the evident trend of the Provincial Festival to award theatre executed and created by young artists goes hand in hand with aesthetical works that keep a safe distance from the realist tradition and the more traditional theatre based on dramatic text, thus recording formal innovations in the local activity. One of the awarded directors in the early 2000 claims that his “generation made an update”, as they would use contemporary music, non-conventional spaces and audience layout, as well as other aesthetic and dramatic procedures. Another director mentions the appearance of new theatre rooms and the visit of cultural role models from Buenos Aires during the first decade of 2000s:

It's a boom in terms of this kind of explorations, and also in terms of new theatre rooms: people were looking for their own space and they would open up and closing places. Then there came Veronese and Spregelburd to offer training. It was a time when Buenos Aires' independent theatre experimentation of the 90s rubbed off, and we received it with some delay, but we got there somehow.

The programs (booklets) produced by the groups are important evidence of how they presented their plays to the audience and how producers viewed them. Their distinctive features are, on the one hand, their sense of belonging to the *ephemera*, the ephemeral genres, which are momentarily useful and then disposable, and on the other, the fact that they are *epitexts*, that is, a paratextual element that is not attached to the main text (Sánchez, 2013). The programs of awarded plays by young artists question the typical tutelary and informative role, where the author's biography is outlined, or the context of the play is explained so as to ensure a better understanding from the audience. The award-winning works argue the idea of art as an instance of *illustration* for the spectator, who is to learn about a historical period, a literary author or a moral reflection when leaving the theatre.

On the contrary, there is a wide variety of variations to the typical logical/discursive practices. The programme (booklet) of the play *¿Qué pasa con Roberto?* (2006) consists of a black-and-white photocopy of a folded sheet of paper. On the second page, the spectator finds the following: “Play and win. Fill in the dotted lines with the last names of the characters on the

portraits”. Below this, there were nine squares with question marks and, below each of them, a dotted line. The instruction was fully understood when inside, as the main character of the play was a collector of photographs of well-known *Robertos* and he had nine portraits hanging on the wall. At the end, spectators had to hurry up to write down the names corresponding to each square: Arlt, Sandro, Roberto Carlos, Giordano, Gómez Bolaños. Another example is the programme of the play *Acerca de la estrategia...* (2005); it was a small origami paper boat with a poem by Fernando Pessoa, on whose words the play was based.

In those cases, the programme is meant to become an artistic object in itself or a game, putting the technical information into the background. In these cases, following Sánchez (2013), the programme’s creative work suspends its ephemeral or epitextual feature, thus supplying it with a uniqueness which goes beyond the play or the most immediate function of providing information, thus encouraging the audience to keep it once the play is over.

The disruptive nature seems to be a common aspect for young artists who were awarded during this period. In 2003, César Domínguez stages *Las fabricantes de tortas* by Alejandro Urdapilleta, with César Romero and Gonzalo Véliz. During the National Festival in Río Negro, the art critic from Tucumán Jorge Figueroa with the *La Gaceta* newspaper covered the event and mentions his disgust as the disruptive quality vanished and the only thing remaining was laughter, which he judges as shallow:

Without a doubt people liked ‘Las fabricantes de tortas’, even the very theatrical community, but as usual, the specialized critics didn’t. The staging suffered some inconveniences. It had been designed to be staged in a non-conventional theatre room, and the actors [...] had to manage to deal with a proscenium stage (traditional frontal stage), where the areas for the audience and the stage are separate, thus the contact is not close. That’s why they had to adapt the play when they set it up in the fancy Fundación Patagónica stage [...] ‘Las fabricantes...’ – by Alejandro Urdapilleta – [...] depicts a society in which some people speak loudly and give orders, and others are voiceless. Some rule and others obey. [...] in the staging in General Roca, the play was completely lightened, and the proof of it is that in the toughest scenes the audience would laugh. So, ‘Las fabricantes...’ moved away from Urdapilleta’s text (*La Gaceta*, March 31, 2005).

It is worth quoting Figueroa's reflection in full as he was part of the selection committee of the Provincial Festival that selected this play, and it enables the comprehension of the reasons behind its National selection. Additionally, it should be noted that there exists a strong division between the audience's way of appreciating a work of art and his own, a specialized view, which as such has higher value and disdains the audience's laughter, considered as a sign of lack of understanding of the real meaning of the play. Incidentally, Figueroa points out two problems: the theatre's layout with a proscenium stage (traditional frontal stage) of the "fancy theatre" in Patagonia and the audience's laughter. That is, his interest resided in the questioning/critical potential and the groundbreaking space layout.

Many of the awarded plays would precisely modify the typical relationship between the audience and the stage/actors in terms of the use of the space. *Zoom del pensamiento volátil* (2006) by Teodora Ciega Caníbal group would be staged in a dimly-lit corridor, where spectators would be standing up against the walls as the actors performed in front of them going up and down in the middle. In *La verdadera historia de Antonio* (2009), the audience would get in a car and would be driven to a house in the outskirts of Tucumán, where the play would be staged. In *Museo Medea* (2012), one of the actresses would go out to greet the audience and guide them through a plastic art gallery up to the theatre, where there was a double bed in the center and chairs around it for the audience to sit. The end of the play occurred when the same actress asked the audience to leave the room, and when outside the actors would take a bow for the final applause to take place.

On the other hand, the political nature, typical in the independent theatre, was also at stake in some of these plays. One of the winning directors recounts that at the end of each performance he would announce that the following week's performance would be the last one, as the theatre room would be turned into a gas station shortly and consequently they would be evicted from the theatre, which was located in the outskirts of San Miguel. This *knowing wink*, as the director would name it, did ensure several sold-out shows as the audience in Tucumán wanted to show their support.

In that regard, it is important to mention that in those years Tucumán's youth was a particularly politically-disruptive population. The crime of Paulina Lebbos, a young female student who was murdered when coming out of a disco in February 2006 brought about an authoritarian plan by the provincial government – the controversial so-called “4 AM Law” –, which imposed a 4 AM curfew for any kind of night gathering or meeting. The largest local newspaper, *La Gaceta*, launched the provocative “4AM Supplement” for two years (since May 2006), which would be used for promoting and advertising Tucumán's night events, and where local rock stars and other artists would be able to protest against the law. In addition to the demonstrations to fight against the impunity of Lebbos case and street protests for night restrictions, there were also demonstrations to seek justice for Marita Verón, who was kidnapped in 2002 for human trafficking by a criminal organization and whose trial would take place ten years later, finalizing in 2012 with a highly controversial verdict that would absolve all accused suspects. Understanding these events and facts is essential to have a better comprehension of the overall political context that the youth population of Tucuman was going through in those years.

Would these ground-breaking procedures have given rise to discomfort, incomprehension and rejection from the audience in Tucuman who were used to traditional theatre, and could only see their potential as *artistic genius* after the specialized jury acclaimed them? This is quite a typical form of understanding innovation in artistic fields and it moves from place to place, taking the French poets of the Decadent Movement of the late 19th Century as a model of innovation that would encourage artists to *épater le bourgeois*, disturb the bourgeois. On the contrary, it is precisely their disruptive elements, according to the very protagonists, that were positively welcomed by the audience, even before they were acclaimed by the Festival. In this sense, the idea of aesthetical innovation as an unprecedented procedure that changes theatrical language is not at all accurate. Quite the opposite, they are possible procedures with specific effects that would oxygenate and open the game to trying new possibilities, especially for *prosumer* – producer and consumer of theatre – audiences of the restricted production field; that is, audiences that are at the same time producer and consumer of theatre.

The Excluded Aesthetics of the Provincial Theatre Festival in Tucumán

An immediate and optimistic interpretation of the event shows the empowering capacity of subaltern sectors, such as young artists, to progressively be upgraded in the activity thanks to this award instance. However, when certain aesthetical trends are more highly appraised, other theatrical traditions and practices are put aside and are given a secondary, minor position in the event. In some cases, these plays are not even allowed to participate, as they are not included in the pre-selection of fifteen plays. In turn, some non-chosen aesthetic proposals are given a *normalized* place (Foucault, 2010) in the total agreement of theatrical aesthetics. Below there is a list of three aesthetical traditions that have never been selected: realism, Theatre of Cruelty and popular humor.

The Realist Tradition

The independent theatre movement in Argentina is born out from the realist tradition, which claims that the purpose of theatrical plays is to communicate ideas; therefore, every other visual, performing or staging aspect is regarded as unneeded. Such message is loaded with critical potential inspired by left-wing ideals, which have accompanied the independent theatre since its beginnings (Mauro, 2011a). The relevance of a thesis and the educational/pedagogical relationship with the audience has been strongly criticized by generations of artists since the 1980s from quite a wide variety of viewpoints. While the *Porteño* director Ricardo Bartís (2003) suggests that the critical potential in the theatre does not reside in a prior idea, but rather in the very live performance itself, Javier Daulte (2011, n. p.) states that “the theatre needs to be useless” so that it can be truly free and powerful. In other words, the erosion of the critical imperative of the realist tradition in terms of conveying a message comes from a wide range of trends and movements and it has long accompanied the aesthetical disruptions in the theatre in Argentina.

Nevertheless, in no case is it an abandoned tradition. Stanislavsky’s Method of Physical Actions holds a relevant position in today’s Career for the Performing Arts at the Drama School of the National University in

Tucumán. It is precisely in this sense that post-dramatic theatre (Mauro, 2013) staged by university students bring about rifts regarding the inherited tradition. Even when this is not the only aesthetical orientation at the University, it is nonetheless the hegemonic one. Thus, the Provincial Theatre Festival puts university's realist predominance on hold in an award-ceremony experience which argues the grading scale determined by acting teachers.

Williams (2009, p. 153) rightly warns that tradition is not a lifeless piece, but one that is an “actively configurative force” of the cultural process because “in fact, it is the most undeniable expression of dominant and hegemonic pressures and limitations”. That is why realist theatre tradition must not be understood as mere language, but rather as a series of permanent practice and experience where novice theatrical performers must participate either as spectators, as students, as actors or actresses directed and guided under this viewpoint.

Acting within the realist tradition is rooted in Stanislavski's system, where the Actor/Actress Self is standing in the scene with the certainty that his/hers is an enlightening role, and where every exterior sign is a reflection or an expression of inner emotions (Mauro, 2011b). Consequently, in the history of Argentinean theatre this tradition has favored the development of certain ethics for judging performance against aesthetical and professional dimensions, by giving high priority to the imperative of dramatic text, thus underestimating the value of gesture and acting styles typical of popular or avant-garde traditions, built upon a style not linked to a prior author-related sense (Mauro, 2011b). Needless to say, the realist acting method is not the most permeable technique for performers to introduce their own personal poetic expression.

When taking a quick look over the programmes of the contemporary realist plays in Tucumán analyzed above, the differences are evident. Firstly, the playwright holds a hierarchical position and his/her bio is detailed. All images are photographs of the play itself; that is to say that the visual work is consistent in both, the stage and the adjacent material (programme). In all cases, the univocal link between actor/actress and character is stated. Lastly, in many cases there is a brief explanation of the play's meaning, intention or political connotations.

This confirms the pedagogical feature of the performer-audience relationship, as the performance is regarded as an instance where spectators learn about an author. Additionally, understanding the author's viewpoint is more relevant than having a sensorial experience, which is in turn essential in post-dramatic plays. Furthermore, the realist tradition highlights the supremacy of the author – which in many cases is also the director – over actors and actresses. This is inconceivable in the plays described above, where creation is a collective experience carried out by people of the same age. Finally, the programmes do not try to establish an independent aesthetics; they are intended to be instrumental so as to guide the audience's understanding.

Theatre of Cruelty in Manojó de Calles Group

The exclusion of Theatre of Cruelty are a much more limited case, specifically concerning *Manojó de Calles* group (*Bunch of Streets* group), which was founded in 1993 by Verónica Pérez Luna. Born as an experimental theatrical company, the group soon became renowned on account of their interventions in public spaces. At the same time, they started staging plays inspired by the Theatre of Cruelty developed by Antonin Artaud, exhibiting naked bodies, physical suffering, inarticulate speech and non-realistic or lineal storylines. Their plays would usually operate on the spectator's perception: bodies would get really close to the audience, and performers would walk through people. Spectators usually had to remain standing during the performance and on certain occasions they were offered food. They were addressed directly, and they were invited to participate *onstage*. Many theatre performers in Tucumán who took their first steps around the 2000s mention the work of *Manojó* among the most emblematic experiences they had as theatre-goers:

I really liked *Manojó de Calles*. I used to see their plays and couldn't believe what I was witnessing; it's something I would never dare do, but at the same time it made me wonder, it was all quite moving to me (...). Their classic *Fiesta 5* [*Party Number 5*] was fantastic. Then, it came ¿...? ¿*Qué será?* [*What's it gonna be?*], which was quite controversial. They were all naked all the time, I don't know... one of the actresses, she had her fingers stuck in her pussy, and the audience was really close; a lot of exposure. They would challenge the borderline between

fiction and reality because when you saw that... you wanted to check it out somehow, but at the same time you wouldn't ...

I saw one play by *Manojo de Calles* that's called *Canción gitana* [*Gypsy song*]. It was 1998 and I remember saying to myself 'ok, this is the kind of theatre that I want to do' [...] It was a kind of work where desire was all over, the bodies of performers... You would see the play and you could totally tell they were actually enjoying it. I had heard of the group some time ago, so I started following them.

I've always found *Manojo* absolutely fascinating, and I've always wanted to be a part of it one day.

I absolutely loved *Fiesta 5* by Verónica Pérez Luna.

However, despite the group's long lasting history and relevance within the theatrical community in Tucumán, *Manojo de calles* was never chosen by the Provincial Theatre Festival to participate. The contrast between the local theatrical community's recognition and their exclusion from the official selection leads us to look into the criteria and rationality behind the awards.

These exclusions are not harmless. In 2013, *Manojo de calles* made public their position against the Provincial Theatre Festival. When the two selected plays were announced, Pérez Luna gave a half-page interview to the local newspaper urging the Festival's selection committee to give an explanation on the selection criteria. That same year, she took part in the competition of the Festival with the play *6 (SIX)*, where three men and three women would improvise on stage while standing entirely naked. As usual, the selection committee chose the two winning plays to participate in the Regional and National Festival. Additionally, four substitutes were also chosen, including *6 (SIX)*. However, once again *Manojo's* play was not picked out to represent Tucumán outside the province. This time, the group posted the following on their Facebook wall:

It would be great if the Festival's selection committee was required to put on record their criteria and assessment for each individual work... That way, people or groups who decide to expose themselves to their scrutiny can also be suitably informed of their knowledge on theatre.

In 2013, Pérez Luna also published her book *Experimento Manojo. Veinte años de Manojo de Calles* [*Manojo Experiment. Twenty years of Bunch of Streets*] with a preface by art critic José Luis Valenzuela, who is a member of the selection committee for the Festivals and INT projects. Admittedly,

the book's launch was a significant milestone for the group, who truly deserved to obtain the long-awaited prize.

On the other hand, even when *Manojo* did not win the Provincial Festivals, their book's presentation was indeed included among the events scheduled for the 2014 and 2015 National Festivals, and although their plays were not acknowledged by the committees, Pérez Luna managed to obtain a prominent position in the most distinguished event at a national level on two occasions. In the 2015 National Festival, José Luis Valenzuela was both the prologue writer and head of the book's presentation¹ along with Pérez Luna, César Romero – former member of *Manojo* – and Sandra Pérez Luna – Verónica's sister and group member. Valenzuela (JLV) opened the round table addressing Verónica Pérez Luna (VPL) in quite a challenging way:

JLV: (to Verónica) I'm going to ask you a question: Have you ever been selected for the National Festival?

VPL: No, never...

JLV: Exactly, that's my point... (general laughing) Seriously, Verónica... I believe she is the spiritual mother of at least one third of the theatre in Tucuman.... one third to say the least. So I think it's great that given that we are celebrating the National Festival's 30-year anniversary, which is an unquestionable place of high visibility, how is it possible that Verónica's work has been overlooked, except for all her legatees, her influences and all the dissemination...?

Valenzuela's acute brief kickoff summarizes the reasoning throughout his entire presentation: to underscore the distance between the importance of *Manojo de calles's* work and its permanent absence among the chosen groups. Additionally, the use of the impersonal passive voice – “Verónica's work has been overlooked” – understates his key responsibility in INT's acknowledgement of her work. Valenzuela goes on narrating how he first met *Manojo de calles's* theatre:

I met Verónica in 1993 when she was starting with the group (...) They were putting on *Antígona Vélez* in Córdoba's City Hall and I absolutely loved it. It was an unforgettable revelation to me. I remember the fruit, the fluids, the games, everything was sensorial, and they were putting on a text which one might consider to be rather tough, right? *Antígona Vélez* by Marechal. And quite by mistake my group won the Biennale, but I was sure *Antígona Vélez* should have won, so that's why I was wondering at the beginning if you had ever been chosen for the National Festival. And I guess that this omission is something to think

about... it's somehow a strident neglect..., because I believe... I go around the country giving feedback to groups or sometimes the unpleasant job of being a member of a selection committee and I realize how many things go unnoticed, things that are truly nourishing everything else (...) I feel that there's an underground theatre going on which is nourishing and inspiring everybody else, and sometimes by chance or on occasions it crops up in the most conventional instances. Well, I've always been trying to make up for that guilty mistake in '93 with Verónica.

In order to explain why *Manojo* has never been chosen, a first hypothesis is that the awards granted by the State aim at the *normalization* of theatrical practices. Foucault understands that normalization is the procedure by which power, even when forcing homogeneity, produces individualizations by allowing deviations; establishes specialties and makes differences become productive for the system (2010). When asked about the types of plays that are selected in the Festival, one theatre performer from Tucumán reflects upon the following:

I am definitely not asking the State to choose the weirdest plays ever to represent each province so that a lady in Formosa who is not much of a theatre-goer claims "Theatre sucks". I'd rather have the lady in Formosa go see the play and say "hey, that's nice... Theatre's nice", so that way the theatre can be spurred on in the provinces. I think that's really valuable, isn't it?

According to this, the State creates a contest, an equitable situation in which all plays equally compete, but then selects those that provide the highest *productivity*: a polite, friendly play in this case, at a low cost. The INT does not allow the group to perform in the Regional and National Festivals, where newcomers and amateur audiences arrive, but they are given a special place for the book launch, as a mark of long-standing stability and recognition. The play by *Manojo de calles* achieved such relevance among theatre artists that the INT could not overlook them, and that is why they were given a special mention for their contribution to *experimental theatre* in some of the Festivals.

Certainly, the meaning of *experimentation* has changed between the 1990s and the 2000s. In that regard, a young actor from Tucumán makes the following remark:

- In my opinion, you can follow the tracks of their experimentation. They would rehearse 8 hours a day, they would experiment in the lines of Grotowski and

Barba; they would do a lot of research. Besides they have their very own stylistic mark linked to grotesque which they love. But then I wonder: they've been working like that for 25 years... and personally things that two years ago moved me artistically do not do anything anymore. My life has changed, my personality has changed, my relations have changed and all that has an impact in the way I understand the world, the way I understand politics. All that has changed. And therefore what I do in the theatre is going to change... So I wonder how they manage to have been working on the same thing for so many years... (Silence)

- By trusting their method?

- I cannot say it is a matter of trust... but clearly they are passionate about it! Otherwise, why would they do it? I don't get it; I guess it has to do with their personality. They are still touched by and excited about those bodies... We have all seen *Manojo's* plays, we know that style, and we're done. We are no longer surprised by them...

This statement helps to understand that the experimentation technique carried out by *Manojo de calles* entails the creation of a school where stage plays form a consistent and uniform aesthetical unity which is representative of a set of precepts, whereas the young actor claims that for him aesthetical experimentation implies a more permanent and steep state of change. Indeed, he believes that theatrical experimentation has nothing to do with the fracture of social life standards – such as being naked, forcing violence on the bodies of actors and actresses, breaking the fourth wall – but with the constant cultivation of pursuit and investigation itself where change matters. For instance, in 2017, the winning play of the Provincial Theatre Festival delves into the naturalist performing style, which might be considered as groundbreaking given the time-space circumstances, and it might not be considered as such in the future.

Popular humor

Even in the early stage of western theatre in the Greek world, comedy was underestimated compared to tragedy. While in comedies the heroes were always plebeian and slaves, tragedies contained deep moral debates embodied by gods, demigods and aristocratic characters. Two thousand years later, one of the greatest antagonists of independent theatre in Buenos Aires in its early stage was commercial theatre, especially the head of theatre company, the *capo-cómico*.²

These kinds of shows can be called *popular humor* as they are starred by comedians who would typically use similar techniques as those of American stand-up comedy, with no fictional narration. For various reasons, this type of theatre cannot be submitted to INT's Festivals due to their format. First of all, playwright hardly ever exists as such because scripts usually emerge from stage situations rather than from a script. The head-on staging approach that comedians use gets the fourth-wall concept into trouble. Incidentally, in stand-up shows, actors do not play characters; they play *themselves*, which is the determining element in comedy aesthetics. Furthermore, there is no equivalent figure to that of stage director.

Unlike mostly all the stage plays above mentioned, this kind of theatre reaches a massive audience mostly due to the popular TV cast members. In terms of audience, comedy stands diametrical opposite to *Manojo de calles's* Theatre of Cruelty, which is largely conceived to provoke, and it aims at people who are interested in aesthetical experimentation on stage. It is precisely this massiveness in the theatre that is regarded as a sign of poor aesthetical quality by independent theatre. Finally, it is worth mentioning that there are specific circuits linked to the commercial theatre for this kind of theatrical style, such as *Carlos Awards* which take place during the summer season in Carlos Paz.

Conclusions

The Provincial Theatre Festival is an event that allows young artists in the theatre to earn cultural legitimacy in the field of restricted production. It is the sector with the fewest tools for visibility, which is why the Festival is an invaluable opportunity to compete with more entrenched traditions. Thus, the Festival creates a setting, as a national policy, in which local hierarchies – experienced directors, university professors, theatre room directors, leaders of the actors' union – are suspended as they compete in an event where younger generations are rewarded. Even when these hierarchies are not entirely subverted, a new instance is enabled, which might eventually be used by other winners.

In consequence, the State, commonly accused of deceptively meddling in the autonomy of art, opens up a new instance where emerging figures are rewarded, and, at the same time, it temporarily neutralizes the hierarchies of

the local artistic field. At the same time, the national State becomes a globalizing agent within the provincial territory, not only for sending selected plays to the Regional and National Festivals, but also for bringing in special committees from other parts of the country to the provinces, thus putting values at stake which go beyond provincial boundaries. The Government enables a kind of trans-provincial flow which would be otherwise impossible for independent theatre on its own.

At the same time, the Provincial Theatre Festival replicates standards that are typical of independent theatre in Argentina. The disdain towards humor as a genre and the dissociation of two separate circuits – fine art theatre, popular theatre – are elements strengthened by Provincial Theatre Festival. In turn, realism is underestimated despite the fact that in Tucumán much of the production belongs to this tradition. This can lead to the question of whether such decision may come more from a *Porteño* viewpoint of progressive rejection to realism since the 1980s, rather than from the very desires and own tastes of theatre performers in Tucumán. Finally, the experience of *Manojo de calles* in the Festival constitutes an iconic case to observe that the attempts of INT to foster diversity in the theatre arena finds limitations as a governmental entity which intends to manage a visible theatrical expression for larger audiences. Nevertheless, the omission of *Manojo de calles* might be owing to their experimentation style which is closer to the 1980s and 1990s, where the creation of schooling is a priority.

By pointing out the omission or rejection of such aesthetics does not mean at all the aspiration of them being acknowledged by the Provincial Festival, nor that the event ensures a minimum quote for a certain generation or a type of play, as this might be a simple way of *normalizing* productions, by granting awards based not on their quality, but on their cultural differential. On the contrary, the purpose of pointing out these exclusions is to highlight the fact that aesthetics do not win their battles on the grounds of their prestige and virtues, but mostly according to legitimization mechanisms which are essential to understand. The data collected enabled to distinguish three genres, although it is not possible to conclude that they are the only ones and that new research might not determine a broader range of unselected aesthetics.

It is also important not to reduce the practices of artistic assessment to mere actions of social structure reproduction, and it is vital to understand the committee's decisions as domination hubs. Empirical research has proved that committees include emotions in their assessments, and their own interest in providing knowledge to a field, as well as *self-concepts*, that is, images they have of themselves and that they monitor in order to project it in their own practice (Beljean, Chong, Lamont; 2016). Indeed, in the study on special festival committees in documentaries, De Valck and Soeteman (2010) suggest that judges are not responsible for creating the value of a piece of art, but rather it is the award that endorses an aesthetical code that has been previously built through other channels.

That is why it is not possible to assert a specific intention of the State to reward a specific type of theatre, nor that are their effects unilateral. However, this does not mean there are no trends and preferences towards certain aesthetics. Even though it is not possible to establish relations between Argentina's State over the last twenty years and the aesthetics favored by the INT, it is true that over the years this entity has gained power in the control of Provincial Festivals, especially in terms of selection committees, thus leaving aside other social actors that used to have a larger part, such as provincial directions of culture and the performers themselves (Salas Tonello, 2017). Consequently, the State and the independent theatre are not autonomous, they are *linked ecologies* (Abbott, 2005) where there are permanent flows as well as *hinge* figures which act as a link between the State and the artistic professional world. In this case, INT seems to be populated since the early 2000 – and probably since its birth in 1997 – by a sector coming from the independent theatre which gives priority to post-dramatic aesthetics. This feature does not seem to have substantially changed according to the data gathered after Mauricio Macri took power in 2015. Even though he belongs to a different political sector, opposite to *Peronismo*, the INT does not seem to have suffered changes in terms of reward policies or selection committees.

In theatre-related studies and research, the awards are usually mentioned when describing a prominent figure, but not as an object of study. Rewards are a privileged moment where to observe the most basic forms in which power relations are established. And because they are public

events with predetermined speeches and public decisions, their analysis and observation is simple. On the other hand, theatre festivals develop discourses on themselves, they are openly exhibited towards community and show their judge's credentials, which in all creates a way of settling down in a field as legitimate or democratic, and hiding other power schemes which are essential in its own organization (Salas Tonello, 2017). In this sense, semiotic studies aiming at underscoring the aesthetical quality of a production do not account for real relations in which the plays emerge, are regarded, or either gain or lose value. That is why one of the purposes of this article is to also make an invitation to those who study artistic practices to research and look into reward practices in their full dimensions.

Notes

- ¹ The launch of the book *Experimento Manojó* at the National Theatre Festival in Salta (2015) is reconstructed thanks to footage provided by *Teatro al Manubrio* group.
- ² T. N.: The *capo cómico* is a kind of stand-up comedian, and head of company.

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