When Ballet Became "Popular": Dance and Politics During the 1950s Peronist Loyalty Week Festivities

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Introduction

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Argentine cultural elite was made up of a Buenos Aires oligarchy that wanted Buenos Aires, and by extension Argentina, to be the most modern nation in Latin America. They needed a concert dance that distinguished itself from popular forms like folklore, circus, and tango (See Pasolini 1999). Consequently, dance as "elite culture" was shaped by a Eurocentric model of cultural modernity, with the Ballets Russes —in 1913— as the most representative form of the time (Tambutti 2011). However, this universalistic, elite background was challenged by the Peronist cultural policies that promoted not only a "popular/mass" culture, but also enabled working class-access to "high" culture events (Cadús 2017).

In its first two terms, the administration of President Juan Domingo Perón (1946-1955) introduced a cultural project that mirrored his "welfare democratization" (Torre-Pastoriza 2002, 304) state policy, which focused on expanding social welfare programs. Through cultural diffusion, these policies promoted greater access for the working class to cultural goods and created access to areas previously established as the exclusive patrimony of middle and upper classes, such as the Teatro Colón (Colón Theater), the most prestigious opera theater in the country and one of the most prominent of the region. Thus, a new "cultural consumer" arose (Leonardi 2010, 67). During this First Peronist period, ballet became a popular expression capable of "appropriations," i.e., what in Ginzburg's terms could be defined as "making one's own what is someone else's, what one does not hold" from what you have or know (Zubieta 2004, 45-46).

In this article, I use the term "popular" to analyze the democratization of culture and the art consumption that this policy promoted. In this context, I understand art consumption as a "second degree production" (de Certeau 2000, XLIII). That is what de Certeau (2000) named as a "use" (36) of cultural goods by the popular classes, something which constitutes the place of freedom created by the "tactics" of micro-resistance (43). In this sense, consumers cease to be passive recipients but rather develop secondary productions. In opposition to this meaning of "popular" within the context of Peronist cultural policies, I use the term "high" culture to refer to the universalistic classic culture that symbolically belonged to the elite intellectuals of the time. Peronist cultural policies aimed to democratize this elite/high culture, and as a result, educate the people. Notwithstanding, I understand that the consumption of art as a tactic of appropiation by the popular classes does not necessarily imply indoctrination by said classes.

Although the aesthetic or the agents of the Colón Theater Ballet Company did not completely change during Peronism, ballet's reach extended over a wide and massive audience through the

implementation of the cultural policy of democratization of culture. Ballet became a populist tool used by Peronism in its attempt to democratize culture. This change was expressed in the government bulletin entitled *Cultura para el pueblo* (Culture for the People), where popular culture was defined as "to give the people everything that was once reserved for wealthy circles, and stimulate the national identity" (n.d., 33). The text continues to explain this meaning by stating the policies introduced at the Colón Theater:

> World famous artists have performed in this coliseum and, around it, a pernicious climate of "elite" was built, stimulated by an aristocracy able to afford expensive season tickets. The Peronist revolution ends with these privileges, and opens the doors of the Colón Theater to the lower classes, offering special and free performances to the labor unions. This way, the valuable artistic wealth that once only a small circle could appreciate, reaches all the spirits without depending on the economic possibilities of each one. Ballets, operas, the lyrical art, and their most famous performers of this time, are finally available to the people (*Cultura para el pueblo* n.d., 47).

The Colón Ballet mirrored the dialogues and tensions between elite and popular culture and politics. Ballet still represented elite culture and the privileges of the upper class, yet in its appropriation as a populist tool by Peronism, it could achieve some democratization. One such example of this attempt can be identified in the play *Electra.*

Electra (1950)

In 1950, the Colón Ballet performed in the political and artistic event that concluded the festivities of "Loyalty Week." These festivities commemorated the events that took place on October 17, 1945. That day, Perón was imprisoned on Martín García Island by an internal coup of the military government that had been in power since 1943. Perón had been the Vice President, Secretary of Labor and Social Welfare and Minister of War.[1] Perón pretended to be ill, and was moved to the Central Military Hospital in the capital city. Meanwhile, thousands of workers marched on the *Plaza de Mayo* to demand Perón's release. This historical mass demonstration ended that evening with the release of Perón, a political agreement to conduct elections, and Perón's speech from the balcony of the presidential palace reaffirming his popular leadership. October 17 became a key moment for the construction of a Peronist identity, and it was celebrated throughout this government.

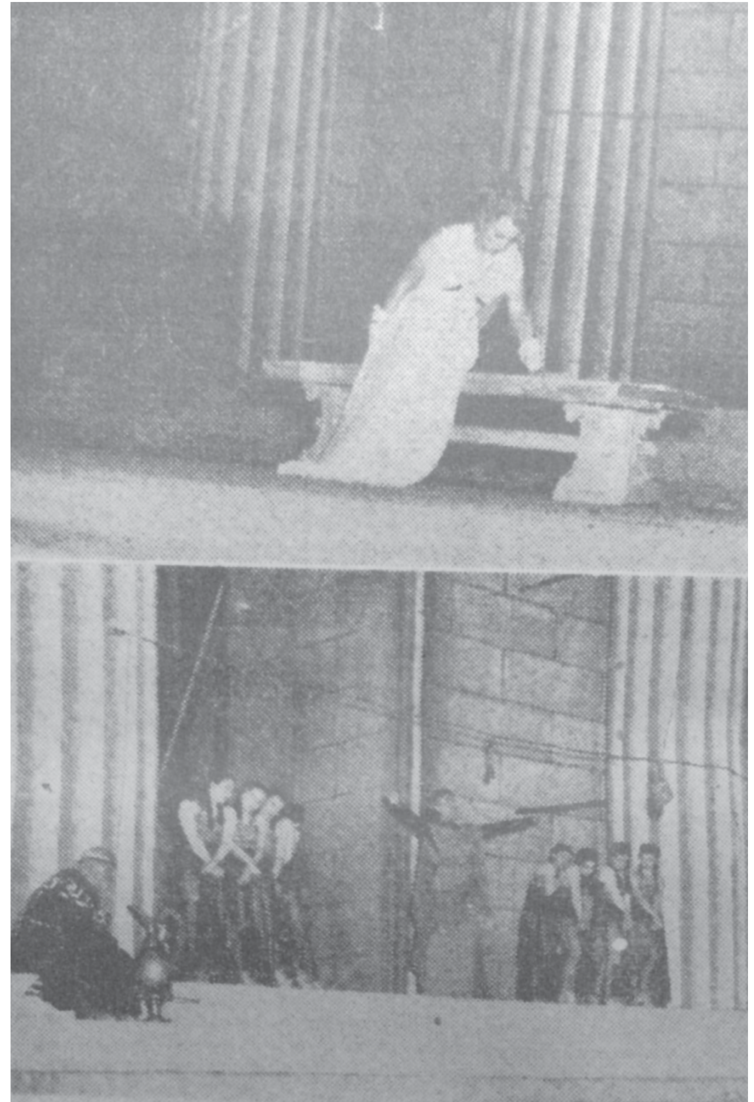

Photo 1: Published in newspaper Noticias Gráficas October 23, 1950, 12. Caption explains: "Two moments of the brilliant performance of 'Electra' presented last night in the atrium of the School of Law. Above: Iris Marga as the miserable Electra, who regrets her house tragedy, where her father's murderers are in charge —the unfaithful Clytemnestra and Aegisthus the traitor. Below: Ángeles Martínez as the cruel queen who celebrates the news of her son Orestes' death. She saw him in her dreams, get revenge on Agamemnon murder. In the photographs it can be seen the chorus' attitude that highlights the nature of the classic tragedy situations." Located at the Biblioteca del Congreso de la Nación Argentina.

Photo 2: Georges Hirsch (Director of the Paris Opera), Juan Perón, Eva Perón, and Serge Lifar. Published in newspaper *Crítica* September 17, 1950, 11. Located at the Biblioteca del Congreso de la Nación Argentina.

As political propaganda, workers' spontaneous mobilizations were transformed into annual rituals of communion between Perón and the people. This day became known as "Loyalty Day." Peronism led people to use urban public space, encouraging "a kind of *symbolic occupation* of the city and public areas previously considered inaccessible to the masses" (Ballent 2009, 51). This use of public space reaffirmed the October 17 myth: "the irruption of the masses in the city, which meant also its irruption in politics" (Ballent 2009, 51). The 1950 celebration was an impressive arts festival presented as "culture for the people" (Gené 1997, 185). The festival took place between October 14 and 21, and was based on the concepts of "national culture" that Peronism promoted. The programming included folkloric and workers' choirs as well as classical theater, symphonies, and ballets. The Colón Ballet performed in several parks and provided the closing performance of Sophocles' *Electra*. This version was an adaptation by the renowned Peronist writer and intellectual Leopoldo Marechal.[2] The play was directed by Eduardo Cuitiño. The musical director was Roberto Kinsky and the stage designer, Mario Vanarelli. The cast consisted of popular actors and actresses from radio, television, and revue theater.[3] There were two danced scenes: "Sunrise"[4] and "The Furies,"[5] both choreographed by Serge Lifar, then director of the Paris Opera Ballet.

Electra was presented on October 22, and it took place on the expansive steps in front of the School of Law and Social Sciences of the University of Buenos Aires. Due to its neoclassical style, the front area of the building was used as scenography (see Photo 1).

This picture reinforced two messages: the audience could imagine entering into spaces traditionally restricted for educated elite classes that the University represents, and the space of classical Europeanist culture — represented by the play (Gené 1997, 189). Therefore, the performance had at least two effects that embodied Peronist ideology. Firstly, it engaged a mass public with signifiers of high culture such as classical literature and ballet in a play with a cast of popular actors whom the audience already knew. Secondly, the event represented

a symbolic occupation of the city, with working class audiences accessing an academic place and privileged neighborhood that was normally out of reach for the populist classes. It was an act of "democratization of intellect and spirit" (*Noticias Gráficas* 1950a, 6) considering that "Culture is[was] no longer a privilege" (*Noticias Gráficas* 1950d, 5).[6] Here, culture operated as a marker of bourgeois attainability, something the populist government sought to undo.

There exists no comprehensive information about how the dance pieces in *Electra* were performed. There is only one photograph available (see Photo 1) of a dance that shows the chorus performed by the *corps de ballet*, in which the dancers' posture recalls Nijinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*. The titles are suggestive, invoking an abstract subject like "Dawn." For example, the Sunrise scene was described by the newspapers as a rhythmic dance, while the mythological characters known as the Furies call to mind the irrational, tempestuous entities from other classical works of literature and ballet. In the Aeschylus tragedies *The Libation Bearers* and *The Eumenides*, the Furies constitute the dark past. They represent vengeance and retribution against human crimes against the natural order. The Furies are described as horrifying and nasty. In this sense, Furies were catalyzed to represent the dark past that changed with Peronism and the creation of a New Argentina based on social justice through the intervention of a Welfare State. Nevertheless, the use of dance to represent this could work against possible Peronist "indoctrination" as Plotkin (2007) suggests, allowing potential secondary interpretations by the audience/consumers. They could have easily read other meanings into the presence of the Furies, yet I want to stress that the use of Furies to represent Peronist social changes might not have reinforced Perón as a leader or Peronism as a "regime," as Gené (1997) describes in her analysis of the play and the October 17, 1950 celebrations.

That Serge Lifar was the choreographer of this piece is of significance here. Lifar came to Argentina for the second time in 1950 as director of the Paris Opera Ballet, presenting *Phaedra* (1950) and *Icarus* (1935) making a great impact on the local art field. Perhaps, the dances performed in *Electra* might have had a similar style of movement to that of those plays which were created according to Lifar's *Manifeste du chorégraphe*.[7] His use of an all male ensemble to perform as The Furies stemmed from his development of the male dancer's roles during his tenure at Les Ballets Russes. Given his success with performances about Greek mythology, the government chose him to choreograph *Electra*, but as Lifar stated in the local press, he had to actually audition for the position. However, his sympathy for Perón's government and his international fame made him a good candidate. During Lifar's first visit to Argentina in 1934, he had a negative impression about local dancers and the status of dance in the country, which he attributed to politicians (Lifar 1987). Nevertheless, in 1950 he said to the press that he found Argentina socially transformed, with people showing "the joy of living" (*Noticias Gráficas* 1950b; 1950c). He emphasized the labor of Juan and Eva Perón and highlighted the "spiritual and intellectual" atmosphere among the Argentine audience. Moreover, in his second visit, the Paris Opera Ballet performed for the labor unions at the Colón (see Photo 2), and for the students at the República de los Niños.[8] Additionally, the company visited various social aid institutions of the Eva Perón Foundation.

Lifar wrote: "Dance is no longer the patrimony of a selected class or of a 'dilettante' audience, as it used to be. Due to its universal language, it has become an essentially popular art (…) Thus (…) it became a magnificent medium to know and love at home" (*Noticias Gráficas* 1950b, 24). Lifar's statement demonstrated his interpretation of a Peronist understanding of culture where the debate around elite and popular culture and the negotiations that were part of this debate during Peron's first term materialized through *Electra*. That these reified cultural divisions between "high" or "popular" or "low" art were not completely deconstructed through the government's discourse (or its appropriation of ballet) does not discount the fact that dance (regardless of its origins or style) serves as a powerful tool for enacting popular and populist sentiments.

Notes

1. While being in charge of the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, Perón achieved unprecedented improvements in the legal and social conditions of workers such as the creation of labor courts, paid vacations, Christmas bonus, and maternity leave.

2. *Electra*'s libretto by Marechal remains unknown, but it is possible to imagine that the play recalls relationship with his next adaptation of a Greek tragedy, *Antígona Vélez*, premiered on May 25, 1951. This play was requested by the government, and it merged the classical Greek tragedy with a religious dimension, and the nativist genre. Thus, it allowed the author to create a play that was both national and universal (Leonardi 2009).

3. Iris Marga as Electra, Silvana Roth as Chrysothemis, Pedro Maratea as Orestes, José de Angelis as Aegisthus, Ángeles Martínez as Clytemnestra, Julio Renato as the Old Man, and Italo Sportelli.

4. Ballerinas were Juana Martini, Estela Deporte and Paula Svagel.

5. Dancers were Ciro Figueroa, Wasil Tupin, Enrique Lommi, Víctor Moreno, Antonio Truyol and José Neglia.

6. It must be pointed out that the newspaper *Noticias Gráficas* was at the moment a Peronist sympathizer newspaper. Nevertheless, the play was also praised by opposing press such as *La Nación* (1950) and *La Prensa* (1950).

7. The *Manifeste du chorégraph* was written by Lifar with the objective of proclaiming a new aesthetic that defended the independence of dance from music. He stated that musicians "must compose in collaboration with the choreographer" (Lifar 1970, 132). As I mentioned above, the Sunrise scene was described as a rhythmic dance, and I described it as abstract. Likewise, Lifar explained that he produced *Icare* without music which "would gain in power of abstraction, and would prove moreover that the Dance is able if not to do without any accompaniment, to at least create for itself the one which suits in." (1970, 134) That is why, Honegger "accepted to orchestrate the rhythms of *Icare* for an ensemble of percussion instruments" (134).

8. The Children Republic was opened on November 26, 1951 by Perón. It was planned in 1949 by Domingo Mercante, then governor of Buenos Aires. It is the first children's theme park of America. It was founded with a double purpose: creative leisure in a fantasy world, and to learn to exercise the rights and obligations that citizens have in every democratic country.

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____. 1950b. “Antes de partir, Sergio Lifar escribió para Noticias Gráficas. ‘He encontrado transformado socialmente este país, con un pueblo que muestra toda su alegría de vivir’” [Before Leaving the Country, Sergio Lifar Wrote for Noticias Gráficas. ‘I Have Found Socially Transformed This Country, With a Nation That Show All Its Joy of Living’]. *Noticias Gráficas*, October 10. Buenos Aires.

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