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Buenos Aires

JULIE ANN WARD

Vivi Tellas is the Argentine creator of the Proyecto Archivos, a series of documentary plays or *biodramas* that feature non-actors telling real stories about their own lives. When I found out she would be directing a workshop on autobiographical theatre – just the topic I was going to Buenos Aires to research this past June – I emailed and called so many times that if I were not a shameless graduate student I would have been ashamed of myself. But the persistence paid off. After agreeing to participate in the workshop in order to make members comfortable, I was in.



I checked out the extraordinarily handy and, in a GoogleMaps age, quaintly intricate Guia T, a booklet dividing Buenos Aires into tiny maps with a grid system that tells you which bus routes go from one given point to any other in the city. After studying the guide for ten minutes, I realized the Subte was my best bet, and took off from Recoleta for Palermo. Upon exiting the station, I walked along an abandoned train depot and crossed the tracks to arrive directly at the address I had memorized. There was an empty building that looked

like it might have once been a restaurant in the spot where the workshop was supposed to take place. I walked around the block and, just before breaking down and asking for help, I decided to check my notes. I had the street number mixed up, and the studio was actually on the other side of the train tracks. Luckily I had budgeted an extra hour for such an eventuality. I soon found the place and was able to enjoy a nice sunset and a coffee around the corner before heading in for the workshop.

Ten minutes before the scheduled start, I buzzed at the door, Vivi, a small, warm and delightful person, led me through a gravel-floored patio with ivy-covered walls and into the studio. She offered me a sip of my first *mate*, and I sipped and shared it with the actors, directors, and students who took about an hour to show up. Vivi wanted to know if something was going on in the city – traffic, cultural events, and possible pregnancies were all offered up as possible reasons for the absent members. The conversation evolved into a discussion of Lola Arias's currently running biodrama,



Mividadespues, and the implications of her use of actors in the production rather than non-actors, which is Tellas's preferred method. The debate that resulted was thought-provoking and left me with questions to answer in my dissertation. What is the role of acting in any autobiographical gesture? What is the role of the director, producer, or dramaturge in composing or arranging the autobiographies of others? Can such arranged texts still be called autobiographical?

After it was decided that all who were going to come had arrived, Vivi told us to warm up. I had some high school drama classes and have participated in community theatre, but I really did not know what to do, so I just pretended I was at Pilates class and walked around doing dynamic stretches. Vivi began giving us instructions: you're walking somewhere, somewhere in particular; you're walking somewhere with someone; one of you knows where you're going, one of you doesn't; switch; explain why you want to go to the place you're going; you can't remember where it is; now two groups join up; convince the other pair to go where you're going. I had a blast, and found the quickly fading discomfort of suddenly being thrown into an improv exercise energizing and inspiring. For a few minutes I was no longer just observing, analyzing, and interpreting theatre – I was a part of it. This sensation reinforced the theoretical questions that had come up in the conversation around the table – just as the director's hand is visible in autobiographical theatre, the researcher's role in a performance must be examined. By bodily participating in the improvisational exercises, I was forced to reflect on the autobiography and the "acting" that I bring to my work.

After warming up, some workshop members presented the pieces they had prepared – personal letters made into song, a family photograph narrated for the group, and a past accident acted out with audience participation. The crowd and Vivi provided feedback. We then all went back to the plywood-on-sawhorses table and she gave us advice on how to conduct interviews in order to gather information of subjects for biographical theatre productions. At the end of the night, some people paired up to share taxis, a couple took off on their bikes, and I headed for the bus the trusty Guia T told me would take me to meet friends to listen to tango across town.

LUCERO

