Accents of a hundred different languages and dialects cross through the air, mixing with one another, resulting in confusion: Ché, á las cinco nos veremos en el Aguila—buon giorno—Wir sehen uns nächher und sprechen darüber—nus veremus luegu—no triguis gaire—je vous attendrez jusqu’à sept heures—cia bleu tusá—good bye. Y Wish you á very good dinner. . . . In many small businesses in Buenos Aires it is necessary to have an interpreter to deal with the French, Germans, and English. What country are we living in? What language, what customs, what types predominate here?

—Aníbal Latino, Buenos Aires por dentro

In April 1919, the Argentine playwrights Armando B. Rillo and Victor Dolard, who were frequent collaborators but are little remembered today, debuted La doctora de Lantera, a satire of the political campaign of Julieta Lanteri, the first woman to run for national political office in Argentina.¹ The title loosely translates as “The Woman Doctor Out in Front,” which is a play on Lanteri’s name with her last name becoming an adverb. The play also satirizes Elvira Rawson de Dellepiane, a contemporary of Lanteri’s, the second woman to receive a medical degree in Argentina and a leader for women’s rights.² La doctora de Lantera recounts the story of a woman running for political office, told through the eyes of these two women’s husbands, who are forced to trade roles with their wives by taking care of domestic duties.
Characters depicting Spanish, Italian, and Russian immigrants integrate questions of gender and citizenship into the play. The audience might laugh, for example, when Celedonia, an Italian immigrant, tells her husband that she will now be giving the orders, so inspired was she by one of de Lanteri’s speeches. When she demands that he apply for citizenship before the next election, however, the play steers the conversation into deeper political terrain. Julieta Lanteri herself showed up to the theater one evening, an event that was detailed in all the newspapers and magazines and that extended the reach of the moment more profoundly into the public sphere. Although *La doctora de Lanterá* is entirely forgotten today, it offers invaluable insights into gender relationships, the transformation of immigrants into citizens, and the ways in which dialogues about social changes rippled from daily life to the stage and back again.

In this book I use such popular plays to show how a diverse public identified, accessed, and processed the rapidly changing environment of urban Buenos Aires by engaging with theater as both live performance and written script. The city’s playwrights wrote for a broad audience consisting primarily of the working and middle classes, which were increasingly comprised of immigrants and women. Playwrights drew from a wide array of cultural references, including history and current events, high and low culture, and native and foreign genres. This created rich and provocative narratives about the city and the nation. Although playwrights were undeniably interested in politics and social issues, the plays I address in the following pages have been little analyzed as addressing these themes.

**National Identity, Race, Gender, and Early Argentine History**

Theater helps us to understand how we might make sense of the question posed by Aníbal Latino in the epigraph, “What language, what customs, what types predominate here?” And by extension, what does it mean to belong to the Argentine nation? These are especially compelling questions given the dramatic transformations that Buenos Aires and Argentina underwent from the colonial era through the early twentieth century. Sparsely populated, Argentina was far from South America’s colonial administrative center, the Viceroyalty of Peru, and about one-third of its seventeenth-century European male population was Portuguese. The changing meaning
behind the term “Creole” (criollo in Spanish) itself gives insight into the complexity of race/ethnicity and geographic identification that evolved from the colonial to the national era. The Portuguese term crioulo was introduced by the Portuguese to refer to the first generations of enslaved peoples born in the Americas. In eighteenth-century Río de la Plata, criollo was used to indicate people of mixed race. In the nineteenth century, “Creole” came to distinguish Spaniards who were born in the colonies from those born in Spain or Portugal, who were designated as peninsulares (those from the Iberian Peninsula). In twentieth-century Argentina, “Creole” becomes the equivalent of “patriot.” I use the term “Creole” to refer to Europeans born in the Americas who are racialized as white even though they were usually of mixed race.4

The evolution of the term “Creole” toward one of whiteness reflected nineteenth-century demographic changes, which similarly trended toward whiteness in Argentina. The Black population in Buenos Aires dramatically declined from a high of about 30 percent between 1778 and 1810 to only about 2 percent by 1887.5 Nineteenth-century campaigns to consolidate land for the modernization of Argentina resulted in the decimation of Indigenous peoples and gauchos (mixed-race cowboys). At the same time, Argentina became a destination for massive waves of immigration from Europe, especially from Italy and Spain. By 1910, three out of every four adults in Buenos Aires were foreign born. Thus, within one hundred years or so, the nation’s demography totally transformed, elevating whiteness to a construct of national identity that is still being contested, explored, and unraveled today.6

In Argentina, these demographic changes were accompanied by political ones. After independence, Argentina became ruled by a landholding oligarchy. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, democratic opening began to occur for men—women would have to wait until 1947 to achieve the right to vote in national elections. The Sáenz Peña Law of 1912 allowed for the secret ballot and gave the vote to all native-born and naturalized men—except for brothel owners.7 The quest for women’s suffrage took on renewed vigor after World War I. Of course, democratic development and citizenship are not just about voting rights but also about belonging to a society. This is where urban theater is particularly insightful. Every-
thing was in flux. In the late twentieth century Argentina becomes known for embracing psychoanalysis, but the penchant for using narrative frameworks to understand social changes was well integrated into cultural mores through theater beginning in the mid-nineteenth century.8

**Theater and Argentine National Identity**

Theater has been far removed from the story of the complex nation-building projects that occurred both in Argentina and in the broader context of Latin America. With its intersection of diverse audience members in the public sphere, why has theater been omitted? Part of the answer may lie in the impact of Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, with its focus on the rise of print capitalism and novels in nation building without interrogating the role of theater. With respect to Latin America, Anderson’s influence can be seen in the work of Doris Sommer, whose influential book *Foundational Fictions* shows how Latin American elites used romantic novels to foster a sense of community and national belonging in the nineteenth century.9 Nicola Miller expands narrative formats to include essays, short stories, journalistic articles and poetry but also ignores theater as source material.10 In addition to this lacuna in historiographic studies on theater and nation building, one must also acknowledge that in postindependence Latin America, historians were interested in highlighting what made their new nations unique, and they deemphasized the Spanish cultural expressions typical of nineteenth-century theater.

I argue that theater is more reflective than novels to understanding nation building for two reasons. One, unlike reading novels, attending theater is a public act, occurring in a space where a diverse public comes together and partakes in the same content, albeit with some separation of social class imposed through seating arrangements and ticket prices. Two, reading was largely an elite exercise in the early nineteenth century, limited to those who were literate in an era that predated public education. Theater, in contrast, drew in people from all social classes and literacy was not a requirement. Although I attend to literature in this book, because so many playwrights adapted and integrated well-known literary tropes into their works, in many ways theater and literature might be considered as
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opposites to one another. The theater that I study was meant to be ephemeral so as to speak to the moment in which it was written, performed, and experienced. Literature, as part of its elite pedigree, sought something grander—to be remembered, to be reread, and to work toward a deliberate creation of a canon of national letters. Finally, if literature was read in the comfort of one's own home, theater might be considered as taking place in uncomfortable but rousing spaces of unanticipated interactions, a space that promoted, nurtured, and at times forced dialogue and negotiations about what it meant to belong to a nation.

The Rise of the Middle Class and Mass Culture

In this book I argue that it was through theater that a middle-class identity was first articulated in Argentina, occurring around 1910, about a decade earlier than the extant historiography places it. The formation of a middle-class identity emerged naturally out of the powerful urban and historical discourses that developed, in part, from the dualities identified by intellectuals like the nineteenth-century statesman Domingo F. Sarmiento, who famously bifurcated the city and the countryside into “civilized” and “barbaric” spaces, respectively. Playwrights, who often worked as journalists and who were in tune with current events, were well positioned to observe and then fictionalize everyday urban life, spinning humorous and dramatic tales with audience approval (or disapproval) guiding modifications. This close attention to daily life contributed to playwrights identifying the degree to which their own middle classness had been absent from national discourse.

The first studies of the history of the middle classes in Latin America emerged out of the Cold War and were guided by questions of international development and political ideologies. Modernization theory articulated that a strong and growing middle class would provide political and economic stability to the region, hence the middle class was seen as providing an alternative to socialist revolution. One of the flaws of modernization theory was its centering of Western approaches and ideas onto non-Western realities. Dependency theory, in contrast to modernization theory, drew from a Latin American point of view, one where the middle classes were not important actors. Similarly, Marxist theory discounted the importance
of a middle class, arguing that “intermediary” groups would either disappear or form temporary coalitions with the working or capitalist classes. Diane Davis explains: “Patterns of capitalist development determine the fate of the middle classes and to the extent that they are assumed to disappear in the process, attention is focused on other class actors.”

Beginning in the 1990s, Latin American historians have renewed their interest in the middle classes, seeking to better understand this group—especially in cities, where the middle class was primarily situated, an outcome of the region’s dramatic urbanization. This scholarship seeks to understand the connection between the middle classes and democracy. Were the middle classes in Latin America for democracy or were they opposed to it? Again, these questions arise out of a Cold War context where it has been argued that the middle classes supported military coups in order to impose economic and social order on rapidly fragmenting societies. Political scientist José Nun has argued, for example, that the military coups of the 1960s were in fact middle-class coups. Such scholarship argues that the middle classes shared little in common with the working classes, and that the middle classes were much more likely to identify with capitalists than with socialists.

I add to this historiographic discussion by providing a more nuanced assessment of the rise of a middle-class identity that is linked to a particular place and moment in time, one in which the middle-class writers focused on the working classes—in part, because they were the theater’s largest audience. Theatrical production gives us insight into how professional writers understood and represented what it meant to be middle-class and how they conveyed these ideas to a heterogeneous urban audience. Plays about social class and upward mobility opened spaces to dialogue about social changes. They provide a myriad of visual clues, jokes, and material culture about social class, not only in dialogue but also in stage design and costuming.

Indeed, everything about theatrical performances made social class visible, from the prices of the seats to set design to the genre of entertainment and the time of performances. Beginning in 1886, statistics reported audience attendance, ticket prices, and other aspects of theatergoing. Newspaper listings followed a similar template, listing theaters in a hierarchical fashion in their advertisements, from
the most to the least expensive. While physical theaters emphasized class differentiation through seating sections, everyone consumed the same staged entertainment, which created a shared experience in a constantly changing city. Elite opera houses also reserved affordable sections for the working classes, which were especially popular with Italian immigrants. Zarzuela (Spanish light opera with spoken and sung dialogue) theaters, usually considered popular or “lowbrow” venues, attracted increasingly elite audiences.21

I show how middle-class playwrights often wrote plays that centered on working-class families, struggling to make ends meet. They did not advocate copying the elite, another common stereotype of Argentine social class, although their plays were rife with jokes depicting this. The art of mimicry arose out of a culture of immigrants who adapted to their new home in part by imitating the habits they saw around them, during a time of modernization and the rise of a consumer-oriented society. The dominance of elite discourses related to “mimicry” as a characteristic of the Argentine middle classes has more to do with an overreliance on elite sources than with actual practices of non-elites. In fact, in this book I debunk the stereotype that Argentines were so insecure of their own cultural identity that they had to first have European approval before they would accept the validity of their own cultural production.

**Democratization and the Rise of the Middle Class**

The emergence of an Argentine middle class was closely connected to the rise of the “public sphere,” or Habermas’s “realm of social life in which public opinion can be formed and access guaranteed to all citizens.”22 Habermas argues that in Europe bourgeois public spheres—separate from the state and from state-driven economics—acted as counterweights to political absolutism. He has been criticized for overlooking that women, people of color, and the working classes did not have the same access and rights of “citizenship” as bourgeois white males.23 If we enrich the notion of a public sphere with “attention to the inclusion of gender, ethnic, and colonial ‘variables,’” it is a useful concept for Latin America.24 Indeed, here I argue that theater should be considered a central location from which both to view and to understand the expansion of the public sphere, as women and the emerging middle classes became more included in it.
Centrally locating theater as an active part of this public sphere asks us to reexamine the rise of the middle class and the ways in which nonvoting members of the public carved out ways of belonging in an era that preceded their political citizenship. Renato Rosaldo’s notion of “cultural citizenship” applies here. Rosaldo focuses on how people organize their values, practices, and beliefs about their political rights based on a sense of cultural belonging rather than on their formal status as citizens of a nation. He contends that cultural citizenship develops during a range of public activities and performances through which historically oppressed populations exert their place within the larger civic arena.25

The Rise of Mass Culture as Seen in Gaucho Narratives and the Spanish Zarzuela

In this book I examine theater as a form of mass culture, a concept that has often been defined as concomitant to mediated forms of technology arising in the twentieth century that enabled a rapid distribution of similar copies of a product on a massive scale. More recently, scholars such as Jeffrey Knapp have applied the term to earlier eras of entertainment, underscoring the technological importance of the printing press, for example, in distributing Shakespeare’s plays to a Renaissance audience.26

In Argentina, “mass” culture arises with massive urbanization and the rise of a multi-class audience capable of consuming the production of middle-class writers who were economically able to make a living from the income generated by writing, which had previously been an elite pastime. The emergence of mass culture in Argentina begins in the mid-nineteenth century, and it arises out of two diverse genres of entertainment: gaucho poetry from Argentina and light opera, known as the zarzuela, from Spain. Playwrights pragmatically drew from these two popular forms of cultural production in order to attract large audiences. Gaucho poetry was circulated in pamphlet form, telling stories about the lives (real and fictional) of gauchos from the Río de la Plata region. The zarzuela, which was further divided between “serious” one-act operas and light or comedic three-act operettas, dominated city stages. Both genres deliberately appealed to multiple social classes.
First, the gauchos. In nineteenth-century Argentina, elite writers created fictionalized characters who offered wise observations and critiques of Argentine society delivered in the gaucho’s rustic vernacular, a genre known as literatura gauchesca (gauchesque literature). Hilario Ascasubi is often credited with initiating this genre with works such as Santos Vega y los mellizos de La Flor (Santos Vega and the twins of La Flor; 1851) and Aniceto el gallo (Aniceto the rooster), a gazette published from 1853 to 1859. José Hernández’s gaucho poems Martín Fierro (1872) and La vuelta de Martín Fierro (The return of Martín Fierro; 1879) transformed the genre by giving voice to the gaucho, emphasizing his plight and persecution. The readership for Martín Fierro was initially intended to be urban, but its relatively large run of forty-eight thousand copies in six years and the sequel’s first run published at twenty thousand meant that its reach was national. According to the observations of Josefina Ludmer and Ezequiel Adamovsky, gaucho poetry was never exclusively targeted toward one social class but encompassed both elite and popular interests, forming a national literature that existed in both the countryside and the city. In addition, gaucho poetry existed in a variety of formats. It was recited and performed in public, read at home, and it also circulated widely in pamphlet form.

Gaucho dramas on the stage were never statistically dominant in the city during the period in question here. But the mass circulation of gaucho stories in pamphlet form and their inclusion as part of rural circus entertainment saturated the public sphere. Actor and playwright Elías Alippi recounts how pervasive such dramas were in his own childhood, when he would stage amateur gaucho dramas for his friends, putting into play what he had seen at the circus. Indeed, playwrights built on audience knowledge of these stories for both dramatic and comedic effect.

Gaucho dramas also interjected questions about race and ethnicity into the city during a time when gauchos were receding as an actual social group and immigrants were increasing. The elevation of gauchos, who were generally considered non-white, into national symbols, is curious in a place such as Argentina, where scholars have argued that to identify oneself as white and European was to be Argentine. Adamovsky explains how there arose two discourses about Argentina national identity and race/ethnicity. One thread promot-
ed by elite writers evolved from Sarmiento’s *Facundo*, which pitted a white and “civilized” city against the “barbaric” and darker countryside. In this vision, the people of color of Argentina had been declared extinct or so greatly reduced to be barely visible, emphasizing the dominance of whiteness. The other school of thought, *criollismo*, claimed that Argentines were of mixed race. Leopoldo Lugones, writing about *El gaucho Martín Fierro*, in the centennial celebrations of 1910, resolved the tensions of these contrasting views by saying that the mestizo gaucho had left his mark on the nation spiritually but had physically disappeared.31

Racial and ethnic distinctions become an important structure of gaucho plays, which often separated the main gaucho character from an ethnic “Other,” a secondary character who might either be the gaucho’s enemy or transform from enemy into friend. Such characters were identified as “gringo” or “foreigner” usually implying Italian ethnicity, but they also might be Indigenous or Black.32 In my reading, therefore, as gauchos became symbols of Argentina, they were racially ambiguous, defined in stage plays by what they were not.

Gauchos had always been somewhat complex as a social group. Sarmiento had divided them into four categories based on their “skill” set, or dominant characteristic: the pathfinder, the tracker, the singer (*payador*), and the outlaw.33 On the stage, the main characters were the gaucho “outlaws,” men who had been unfairly persecuted by the law, as occurs in both *Juan Moreira* (a serialized novel [1879–1880] and play [1886]) and José Hernández’s *Martín Fierro* (1872). Both characters lost their families and homes because they were unfairly persecuted. Juan Moreira was an actual historical figure; and Fierro was fictional. Each story contained villainous Italian characters, reflecting the xenophobia that arose with their mass immigration.34 *Juan Moreira* found success as a play because of its popular nature and the malleability of its formats, while *Martín Fierro*, an epic poem told in verse as part of the gauchesque literary genre, was somewhat constrained by its literary structure and was not as frequently adapted to the stage. On the stage, the *dramas criollos* (“native” or locally written plays about gauchos) that borrowed from *Juan Moreira* became so prolific that they were referred to as the *Juanes* plays (referring to the plays *Juan Moreira*, *Juan Cuello*, and *Juan Soldao*, among others).35

If the lead characters of gaucho dramas were “Juans,” secondary
gaucho characters were often Black *payadores* (Sarmiento’s “singers,” or gaucho troubadours), important communicators for nonliterate segments of society, who reflected the oral culture and traditions of the countryside. Payadores still existed in Argentina during the era of my study. Brian Bockelman notes that they “elaborated the landscape of the urban underworld and still sang about the pampa heartland well into the 1920s,” occupying the liminal space between city and countryside.\(^3\) The *payada*, a form of musical dueling performed between two payadores, is African in its origin. The payador reveals the degree to which African traditions are claimed as authentic Argentine ones in stage plays and elsewhere.\(^3\) Thus, gaucho dramas contribute to a middle-class identity through their multivalent appeal to a variety of audiences, their discussion of race/ethnicity during a time of intense demographic shifts, and the dichotomy of the main figure who is identified ethnically against the secondary characters of Black payador or Italian villain.

Gaucho dramas played in theaters alongside the zarzuela although this latter genre significantly outdrew the former in the 1890s. Argentine theater history has been intent upon establishing a national canon, and the impact of the zarzuela has been undervalued. The fact that two very different genres—one rural and native to Argentina, the other urban and native to Spain—existed side by side in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century reflects the diversity of entertainment offered in the city, as well as the wide-ranging tastes of the public. Like gaucho dramas, zarzuelas also appealed to a multi-class audience. Until the late nineteenth century, there was a continual blend of popular and elite concerns embedded in one- and three-act zarzuelas.\(^3\) The shorter one-act format appealed to a more popular audience and the longer three-act form to a more elite one. Many zarzuelas deliberately straddled popular and elite culture, reworking well-known operas into satirical and humorous performances: for instance, the zarzuela *Carmela* was a comedic version of the opera *Carmen*, while *Bohemios* (Bohemians) and *La golfemia* (The loafer bohemian) both borrowed from Puccini’s *La Bohème* (1896). Verdi’s *Aida* was parodied in *La corte de faraón* (The pharaoh’s court); the opera *Mefistófeles* gave rise to the zarzuela *El Capitán Mefistófeles*, while *The Barber of Seville* was parodied in *El barberillo de Lavapiés* (The little barber from Lavapiés [a working-class neighborhood of Madrid]).\(^3\)
The fact that so many operas were alluded to in zarzuelas also suggests that, by the end of the nineteenth century, knowledge of this high art form was very familiar to a multi-class zarzuela audience. The mixing of popular and elite cultural spheres recalls Lawrence Levine’s work on the emergence of cultural categories in nineteenth-century United States. He argues, for instance, that American oral traditions allowed all social classes to enjoy Shakespeare and that only in the late nineteenth century did a “cultural hierarchy” begin to emerge, as writing replaced oral traditions, thus removing Shakespeare from the reaches of a nonliterate audience.40

Although it is possible that zarzuela audience members could enjoy the parody without actually knowing its operatic source, the fluidity with which segments of operas were used in zarzuelas suggests that, at the very least, both producers and purveyors knew operas well. The zarzuela also came with its own history of representing different ethnic groups, combining with gaucho dramas to create a dialogue about racial and ethnic differentiation.41 Audience members most likely did too, since the range of entertainment offerings was much more limited at the end of the nineteenth century than what we are accustomed to today. Because the zarzuela contributed much to the shape of national theater in Argentina, the blend of high and low culture in popular theater became a central and well-defined trait of Argentine popular culture.42 If published chronicles about social class in Argentina focused on the dichotomies between the elites and the working classes, popular entertainment formats such as gaucho poetry and plays and the zarzuela were doing the work of mass culture, which was to appeal to a wide variety of audience members. Unarticulated by scholarship until relatively recently, the wide expanse of popular entertainment contained the seeds for the emergence of a middle-class identity.

Methods

At the heart of this book is an analysis of playscripts. Most scholarship on nineteenth- and twentieth-century theater in Argentina emphasizes the relationship between author and text to establish and define a canonical history of national theater.43 Analyses of canonical plays have ignored gender and overlooked plays penned by Spaniards as well as the role of the zarzuela in shaping Argentine popular the-
Instead of being guided by the canon, I have chosen plays that have high attendance rates, and I focus on the themes that pushed the envelope on what politicians viewed as acceptable themes to stage, usually framed by their desire to ensure public, or really political, order and “moral” content. Popular plays often attracted the attention of municipal authorities, who sometimes tried to censor them, often before they had even been staged, showing that theatrical content circulated by word of mouth as well as through the printed press.

Some “classic” secondary studies on Argentine theater are essential to understanding the chronological evolution of theater houses, acting companies, and evolving genres because they identify key moments of change centered on the stage. These sources are problematic, however, in that they tend to borrow from one another, lack citations, and often their tone reveals a bias against the popular classes. I am therefore careful to read “against the grain” and to verify their arguments when drawing from them.

I use mixed qualitative and quantitative methods, both of which have their strengths and weaknesses. In his study on Spanish immigration to Buenos Aires, José C. Moya highlights how qualitative sources do not always accurately reflect historical trends. According to published descriptions, he notes: “Basques enjoyed the highest reputation among all the Iberian ethnic groups in Argentina,” while Andalucians had the lowest. Quantitative sources, however, reveal that Andalucians managed to get better-paid jobs than did the Basques. He explains this as a bias of qualitative sources: Many Argentine elites were Basque, and they tended to overly praise their compatriots in their writings. He argues—and I would agree—that before the rise of mass culture, qualitative sources largely reflected the views of elites. Similarly, in his sociocultural study of tuberculosis in Buenos Aires, Diego Armus uses both qualitative and quantitative methods to study how tango lyrics, plays, poetry, and movies represent the milonguita, those young working-class women whose work in cabarets and whose economic circumstances drew them into prostitution. He states: “In such works, men don’t get tuberculosis, though in real life they did and usually at a higher rate than women.” Once again, we are reminded that representation is not a measure of reality: the map is not the territory.

Nevertheless, traditional quantitative sources for social history
such as censuses and tax lists, wills, and governmental reports have their own biases and inaccuracies. They are also created and collected by elites, the numbers are rarely questioned, and they fail to adequately inform us about everyday life, as Castro points out in his history of Argentine popular theater.\textsuperscript{50} He describes how sainetes—short plays with ethnic-based working-class content usually set in the working-class outskirts of Buenos Aires—have been omitted from traditional histories of theater precisely because of their appeal to non-elites. In his view, such theater sheds light on the “living conditions and attitudes of the lower classes not necessarily available in more traditional sources for social history.”\textsuperscript{51} Sirena Pellarolo deepens this argument by showing how Argentine theater histories that do include sainetes overlook \textit{sainetes de cabaret}, the subgenre that takes place in the ambience of cabarets, where the main characters are women.

The plays I analyze in this book were popular in terms of ticket sales, and scholars are increasingly using them to understand the formation of mass culture and the everyday lives of the non-elite in Buenos Aires.\textsuperscript{52} I set them in context within their contemporary milieu and draw from city statistics that counted theater attendance rates by theater and genre from 1887 to 1914. This allows me to see genres of entertainment in relationship to one another and to remember that French operetta, Italian opera, Spanish zarzuela, criollo/gaucho drama, musical concerts, and circus acts were all offered in Buenos Aires at the same time. Theatrical entertainment thus included genres and cultural references that cut across geographies, chronologies, and social classes. Most were multimodal, with porous boundaries creating spaces for interplay between “high” and “low” forms of entertainment as well as transcending social class identities and increasingly accommodating women as audience members.

\textbf{Genre and Melodrama}

There is no consensus about what genre best applies to the plays I study. Nor is there a stable understanding of the connection between genre and the historical importance of the play. For instance, the authors of \textit{Teoría del genero chico criollo} identify eleven genres of popular theater through various criteria of their own making. The genres they define do not coincide with the genres the plays themselves are identified with in the theatrical magazines of the era. The most general
term for the plays I write about is género chico, meaning “small genre,” signifying “lowlbrow,” with an emphasis on costumbrismo or localized representations of everyday life. This genre encompasses the vast numbers of one-act plays performed by Spanish and national groups throughout the Americas. Yet even this skirts the fact that three-act plays continued to be performed simultaneously. As a rule, I default to the genre that emerges from the primary sources of playscripts, statistics, and newspaper accounts.

In order to appeal to a broad audience, the plays I analyze deliberately crossed genres or, at the very least, transgressed narrow understandings of them. Florencio Iriarte’s La venganza de Don Chicho (Don Chicho’s revenge) offers an example of the way this might be carried out. La venganza debuted at the Teatro Nacional on October 9, 1919, becoming the seventeenth-most-popular play of the year. The play is categorized as a sainete, signifying an ethnic-themed working-class context. The play is indeed situated in a working-class Buenos Aires neighborhood where immigrants mix with native Argentines at the almacén (neighborhood store) owned by Don (a title of respect in Spanish, here signifying his success as a businessman) Chicho, an Italian immigrant. The actual public for the play, however, was likely not exclusively working-class since the play was performed in the city’s central commercial district at the Teatro Nacional. In addition, the play references reading material that ranges from William Shakespeare’s Othello to Gustave Flaubert’s Madame Bovary to the poetry of Nicaraguan modernist Rubén Darío. These authors all appeared in an advertisement for a bookstore printed in the magazine Teatro Popular around the time the play debuted. We know, then, that the Argentine public had access to these authors and that this reading material united a multi-class public of readers and theatergoers in Buenos Aires during that year.

The plot of La venganza revolves around Don Chicho and his Black Argentine wife, Lisandra. She lives and breathes romance novels, much as Emma Bovary does in Flaubert’s famous novel, and encourages the attention of the neighborhood flirt, Candelario, a Black payador. Lisandra often quotes from Darío’s poetry. Allusions to Othello are everywhere: Chicho’s extreme jealousy turns him into an Italian Othello and he frequently mentions wanting to see Othello while it is being performed at the Marconi Theater, an actual
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contemporary theater named after the Italian inventor. La venganza also pulls from gaucho narratives in its plot structure. Yet rather than mimicking the tragedy of such narratives, this play is a comedy. In a typical gaucho drama, daggers might be utilized to protect the spoken word and reputation—the “honor”—of said gaucho. But, here, playing for laughs with the stereotype, Chicho attempts to defend himself with the only knife he has on hand—one for slicing cold cuts for his customers. The play ends with a physical confrontation between the two rivals for Lisandra’s affection—a type of duel expected in a gaucho drama, where someone would die. But Chicho undercuts the typical gaucho standoff by pulling out a revolver instead of a knife and demanding that Candelario take off his clothes and exit naked into the pouring rain.

Script notes explain that the clientele of the almacén (and presumably the audience) are laughing at both Chicho and Candelario. The joke, apparently, is that neither the Italian immigrant nor the Black Argentine are “authentic” gauchos in the vein of Juan Moreira and Martín Fierro. Chicho forcing Candelario to remove his clothes is also a specific reference to Santos Vega, the gaucho known in folklore as being the best payador of the land, who famously loses a payada (singing duel) to a Black devil, Juan Sin Ropa (Juan unclothed). This detail signals another layer to the play since a film Juan sin ropa was released in June 1919, a few months before La venganza’s debut. The well-known anarchist and playwright José Gonzalez Castillo wrote the script for the film, adapting the famous story of Santos Vega to one about workers’ strikes of the era. The specific choice of revenge in La venganza—to force a Black payador to “unclothe” himself—certainly drew from the story of Santos Vega. La venganza reflects the complex layering of contemporary and historical references, both local and international in scope, all the while touching on prescient themes related to social class as well as to race, gender, and political ideology. Such rich literary and cultural references are not adequately conveyed by limiting this play to any one genre.

To what extent might I understand these plays as belonging to melodrama, a kind of meta-genre used in cultural studies to analyze mass culture? Melodrama arose after the French Revolution, developing alongside Western democracies. The rise of melodrama reflected modernity: it was a sign of disruption marking a sea change.
in human relations. Melodrama was a break from rigid hierarchies embodied by classical tragedies that reinforced notions of the immutability of power relations within a closed political system. In contrast to classical theater, which had no musical accompaniment, music became an essential component of melodrama: the word in French, *melodrama*, means drama with music, with music deepening theater’s emphasis on emotional responses. Peter Brooks argues that melodrama motivates spectators to resist injustice: “The polarization of good and evil works toward revealing their presence and operation as real forces in the world. Their conflict suggests the need to recognize and confront evil, to combat and expel it, to purge the social order.”

In Latin America, scholarship has often stressed the conservative outcomes of melodrama as a genre that disconnects injustices from the political and social class systems in which they operate. But melodrama is complicated. According to Mathew Karush: “The mass cultural melodrama of the 1920s and 1930s represented an alternative modernism . . . it offered different things to different audiences.” It allowed the public to process the impact of modernization, to work through the dramatic transformations of gender relations, and “in its most subversive incarnation, mass cultural melodrama was packaged with a populist condemnation of the Argentine elite.”

In this study, with its focus on a working-class and emergent middle-class audience, I do not see such a strong condemnation of the elites per se. I do, however, see a tendency to valorize the working classes as the most “authentic” and “sincere” characters within any particular play. The extent to which many popular plays ignore the elites altogether is striking. In relationship to women, I am reluctant to see female characters as primarily victims on stage—a hallmark of many melodramatic plays. Does melodrama shed light on the cultural work accomplished by the plays? As theater historian Bruce A. McConachie notes, we “need to explore what the experience of melodrama did with, for, and to their willing participants [my emphasis].” I attempt to do just this, and especially in chapter 7, where I analyze the cultural production of a particular year.

Because of the links between commercial theater and its working-class audience during an era of working-class strife, I wonder if Libertarian theater might provide a more solid basis for theorizing about commercial theater. Libertarian theater presents utopian outcomes to
contemporary social problems. According to Eva Golluscio de Montoya: “It could be said that there was no anarchism without the production of fiction: concrete militant activism seemed to project itself onto an imaginary dimension and find there the impetus for utopia.”61 Romina Akemi and Javier Sethness-Castro, also writing about Argentina, comment, “there is a sense that literature, and popular poets were a prime force in spreading revolutionary prefigurative dreams among the popular classes.”62 Once again, I might note that plays were left out of these analyses. Many playwrights with strong anarchist ideologies, such as González Castillo, Alberto Ghiraldo, Pedro E. Pico, and Florencio Sánchez did write plays for centrally located commercial theater. Juan Suriano notes that for anarchists, “Theater was central to the libertarian velada [evening’s entertainment] especially in the latter part of the first decade. Like song and reading, it also served as written and oral propaganda. In fact, many anarchists thought that drama was a better means of propagandizing ideas than lectures and books because it embodied them physically and because the force emanating from the stage galvanized the audience [my emphasis].”63

Plays written by anarchist and socialist playwrights offered new visions of society by highlighting social failures. At times, playwrights offered to show utopian transformations, as they strove for leisure-time activities to be both enjoyable and consciousness-raising. Most of the playwrights I study were engaged in the business of making money; but such an endeavor was not always distinct from utopian or melodramatic theater. For my analysis, I argue that stage plays encouraged a public to think broadly about the issues that arose in their contemporary milieu by providing a wide array of outcomes and perspectives related to social changes that were contemporaneously occurring.

This question of how mass culture impacts its publics frames cultural studies, a field that arises in the post–World War II era. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer develop one idea of “mass culture” in their seminal essay “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception.”64 For Adorno and Horkheimer “mass culture” referred to how civil society uncritically adhered to state-produced propaganda, such as that of Nazi Germany, with commercial film an ideological medium of domination for a public acting as passive recipients of manufactured products.65
In the 1960s, this view was countered by the Birmingham School’s Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, spearheaded by Stuart Hall. For Hall it was important to connect cultural production, state censorship, and elite notions of “morality” through “cultural circuits” that connected texts (in the broad sense) to their audiences. The center advocated interdisciplinary engagement with literary studies, sociology, and anthropology so as to understand how meanings and values are circulated and articulated within the larger circuit from which culture flows and in which it exists. My approach to the democratizing tendencies of Argentine theater borrows from the concept of such circuits. The undeniable evidence I found carrying out this research was that in the urban context of a city under compressed transformation, live theater performances and the reading of play-scripts in pamphlet form resulted in an audience of active and critical participants, who then contributed to Argentina’s democratization. The state was little interested in controlling or regulating theater—although it did collect taxes from it. Logic suggests that a growing municipal government would be more likely to encourage than to discourage theatrical production. If twentieth-century Argentina is remembered for its harsh civic-military government that exercised censorship as part of its authoritarianism, the era I study is exactly opposite to this. The state took a laissez-faire approach to controlling play content, shaped by the early nineteenth centuries of a Liberal elite who were inspired by enlightenment notions of free speech. All of this suggests that theater practitioners and audience members mediated social change through direct participation in it via theater.

Comedy and Social Change

One of the outcomes of a close adherence to genre has been that comedy has been overlooked as an important mover of change. Indeed, just as it was for the Argentine Liberal elites who wanted to do away with Spanish popular theater, scholars have neglected laughter and humor as themes worth studying in popular Argentine theater. The melancholy lyrics of tango music telling stories of treacherous love have instead dominated inquiries into Argentine popular culture. By engaging with one-act plays, I emphasize that comedy—not tragedy—reflected the popular tastes of the era. If tragedies reinforced hierarchical relationships, comedies helped to dismantle them.
Donna Goldstein argues in her anthropological study of the use of humor in Rio de Janeiro’s favelas, humor “opened up a window onto the complicated consciousness of lives that were burdened by their place within the racial, class, gender, and sexual hierarchies that inform their social world.” A theater critic captures how important laughter was to live performance when describing the audience’s reaction to the Spanish comic tenor Julio Ruíz in Buenos Aires: “The noise level rose so high it was almost a disturbance to public order; one audience member said he laughed so hard that Ruíz should be declared a threat to public health—he won’t be able to eat for 4 or 5 days since he now has a terrible stomachache.”

Laughter as emotional expression can be both democratizing—a multi-class audience, after all, reacts to the same joke and the joke then must appeal to most of them—and transgressive. City statistics reveal that the zarzuela Château-Margaux (1887) was staged twenty-one times in Buenos Aires to an audience of over four thousand, making it one of the most highly attended zarzuelas in 1891—four years after its debut. The play came to my attention not through scholarship on it (indeed, Château-Margaux has not been included in most studies of zarzuelas) but as a result of my research into two Spanish performers, the sisters Dolores “Lola” and Carlota Millanes, both comedic sopranos who portrayed Angelita in Château-Margaux as a staple of their careers. The zarzuela depicts a newlywed couple, Angelita and Manuel, who prepare to host Manuel’s wealthy, childless, and titled relatives for dinner—his uncle is a baron. Manuel wants to make a good impression so that they will be put in the baron’s will. Angelita, normally reserved, has not yet met Manuel’s family members.

The play’s title refers to a particular type of wine the couple has selected to serve to their esteemed guests. Angelita sips a bit in advance of the dinner and the wine changes her personality completely. She becomes a merry extrovert who forgets the normal social conventions. The jokes are silly but also transgressive—Angelita constantly forgets the baron’s name and refers to him instead of as the Baron of Broccoli, of Cauliflower, and of Artichoke. She breaks social class convention by engaging her Galician butler in an Andalucian flamenco, where she humorously appears with flowers and a Manila scarf on her head. Angelita misspeaks, and Manuel intercedes explaining that
Angelita’s behavior must be a result of the wine. Now curious, they each try some. The zarzuela ends with everyone having a jolly good time thanks to the *Château-Margaux*.

This brief description omits the musical numbers at the heart of the piece, but my point is that this zarzuela did not rein in Angelita nor punish her for breaking covenant with social norms. She and Manuel were not disinherited. Quite the opposite; the message was that everyone should have some wine, dance, enjoy life, and follow in Angelita’s agile footsteps. Although it might not have an obvious political message, through its sheer popularity this zarzuela nonetheless challenged conformist notions of appropriate behaviors for women as well as social class conventions in a way that the audience fully approved. It both anticipated and promoted further social changes.

**The Reach of Popular Theater and the Scope of This Book**

This book is an urban history, but its impact and reach go beyond Buenos Aires. The business of theater, much like today, relied on contracts between theaters and acting companies that moved to different theaters throughout the nation and often in bordering countries. In addition, theatrical magazines like *Bambalinas*, *Teatro Nacional*, and *La Escena*, which published playscripts in their entirety, were sold in kiosks throughout the capital and provinces and internationally, with publishing correspondents in Montevideo, Santiago de Chile, and Madrid.

Until the late nineteenth century, acting companies were largely from Europe. The Argentine Uruguayan Podestá family, who originated national acting companies, slowly expanded their networks in the 1890s as they promoted national dramas as part of their circus performances. They performed *Juan Moreira*—often considered in the 1880s to be a seminal play for jump-starting national theater—in the provinces, in Jujuy on the borders of Chile and Bolivia, and in Uruguay. A typical tour of an acting company like that of Enrique Muñó and Elías Alippi, formed in 1916, would travel to Santiago de Chile, larger provincial Argentine cities, and then on to Montevideo. Many also toured further afield. For instance, Camila Quiroga’s company visited Mexico, Rio de Janeiro, Madrid, Barcelona, Cádiz, and Paris in the 1920s. In 1919, over 120 agents were designated to collect authors’ copyright fees, with offices in different neighborhoods
of Buenos Aires, provincial cities, and in the neighboring countries of Peru, Paraguay, and Chile. In the 1910s, between 150 and 200 locally written one- and three-act plays were staged in Buenos Aires annually, and they then circulated nationally with acting companies. Playwrights wrote to appeal to a broad audience, and this included publics in the provinces and neighboring countries, even if the primary focus might have been on Buenos Aires.

The theatrical milieu of Buenos Aires was perhaps the most dynamic of all Latin America, given the sheer size of the urban population and the robust economy that evidenced the growth of a middle-class, but connections were also forged between urban centers and capital cities throughout the Americas. The zarzuela created circuits from Buenos Aires, Mexico City, to Havana, Cuba. Both Buenos Aires and Mexico City created lavish centennial celebrations in 1910, although their aftermaths took divergent paths, with Mexico exploding into a revolution and Argentina experimenting with democratic openings. Despite these differences, 1919 was also a year fraught with change in both capital cities, and these changes are reflected in the theatrical environment. Theater in Buenos Aires was closely connected to European theatrical practices, but as an urban environment it had much in common with US cities, and especially, as Charles S. Sargent notes, with Chicago. He states: “in both form and function, modern post-1850 Buenos Aires much more resembles rough frontier Chicago than ‘genteel’ cultured Paris.” Thus, theater provides us with a roadmap to trace continuities and changes in urban cities across the Americas.

The focus of this book, however, is not on international circuits but on the city’s commercial theaters, identified by municipal statistics from tax collection records. The statistics counted a variety of entertainment venues, which over time became concentrated in and around a central district emanating from Corrientes Avenue, the “Broadway” of Buenos Aires. Statistics included venues other than theaters, such as the social clubs of mutual aid societies and the halls of socialist and anarchist organizations, where plays were also performed. Theater also occurred in venues that were not counted in the city statistics, which overlooked Yiddish and German-language fare.

Theater has always been a necessary and central element of life in Buenos Aires, especially in the key years of this study, which corre-
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spond to theater’s institutionalization and growth as the dominant form of mass culture. Despite its apolitical reputation, playwrights and audiences were engaged with the democratic transformation of a nation that saw seismic changes in the decades in question here. These changes are reflected in the rich texts and expansive performances of the popular plays examined in the following pages.