

***Saverio el cruel*: national history and the subversion of melodrama**

Abstract: Arlt's literary stature is largely based on his narrative, not his theatre, which has received scant critical attention. However, despite receiving some adverse criticism when they were first performed, Arlt's plays proved a triumphant success, making an important contribution to the development of an Argentine national theatrical tradition. In the present article, we set out to establish not so much the intrinsic value of Arlt's contribution to the stage, but the significance and cultural meaning of *Saverio el cruel* (1936) at the time it was written. In it, Arlt exploits the combination of different theatrical conventions. By subverting melodrama and borrowing from both the *grotesco criollo* and Pirandello's metatheatre technique, he renders an original, privileged insight into Argentine culture. We argue that in this play Arlt demonstrates a high degree of social concern going beyond party political questions: he is the tireless opponent of poverty and social injustice – two major themes in his works for the theatre.

Keywords: Staging national history, subversion of melodrama, militarisation on stage, democracy and the working class.

Resumo: A importância literária de Arlt é muito atribuída à sua narrativa, não a seu teatro, que tem recebido escassa atenção. Contudo, apesar de terem recebido certa crítica contrária quando foram representadas pela primeira vez, as peças de Arlt mostraram um sucesso triunfante, fazendo uma importante contribuição para o desenvolvimento de uma tradição teatral nacional argentina. No presente artigo, objetivamos estabelecer não tanto o valor intrínseco da contribuição de Arlt ao teatro, mas a relevância e o significado cultural de *Saverio el cruel* (1936) na época em que foi escrita. Nesta peça, Arlt explora a combinação de diferentes convenções teatrais. Ao subverter o melodrama e emprestar do *grotesco criollo* e da técnica do metateatro de Pirandello, ele oferece um *insight* original e privilegiado da cultura argentina. Argumentamos que nesta peça Arlt demonstra um alto grau de preocupação social, indo além das questões de partido político: ele é o incansável oponente da pobreza e da injustiça social – dois temas principais em suas obras para o teatro.

Palavras-chave: História nacional da encenação, subversão do melodrama, militarização no palco, democracia e a classe trabalhadora.

The place occupied by Roberto Arlt within Argentine letters is today incontestable. All the same, it is Arlt the auto-didact novelist and

journalist that attracts the greatest attention; Arlt the playwright is a much lesser known figure, one that is frequently overlooked even. As Florian Nelle (2001) points out, Arlt made a name in the theatre by means of adapting his own novels for the stage. In fact, his first play, the one that actually pushed him towards the theatre, *El humillado* (1931), represents a “translation” of a fragment of *Los siete locos* (1929) for Leónidas Barletta’s Teatro del Pueblo¹. This could explain why critical works discussing Arlt’s prose fiction vastly outnumber those which set out to analyse his dramatic contribution. In fact, the only critical work on Arlt’s theatre prior to 2000 was a study by Castagnino published in 1964.

The fact that Arlt abandoned novel writing (*El amor brujo* of 1932 is his last novel)² in favour of a completely different medium may well be responsible for the largely negative evaluation that his theatrical oeuvre has received (Nelle, 2001, p. 126). Figures such as Julio Cortázar, who praised Arlt’s prose writings, considered his drama as “dispensable”. Similarly, critics such as Adolfo Prieto have attacked Arlt’s theatre, deeming it a sign of the artistic decadence of writer who had given in to “presiones socio-culturales” (1978). Despite adverse critical opinion, *Saverio el cruel* (1936), possibly the most enduring of Arlt’s stage plays, proved a triumphant success, making an important contribution to the development of an Argentine national theatrical tradition. So much so, that other important critics such as Ordaz believe that Arlt “fué [sic] por autonomasia, el autor del movimiento independiente” (1957, p. 228). Here, however, we will take a different approach, arguing that Arlt’s “conversion” to the theatre was very much the product of a particular historical juncture. As Isidro Saltzman suggests, the historical context of Arlt’s writing for the stage might in itself have provided the socio-cultural trigger leading to a switch from one medium to another. Likewise, it is important to note that though Arlt’s implicit socio-political critique may be masked there is no doubt that it is also omnipresent.

Osvaldo Pellettieri points out that “[l]a función estética que le ha atribuido nuestra comunidad de intérpretes a la dramaturgia de Arlt es marginal” (2000, p. 11). In the present article we set out to establish not so much the intrinsic value of Arlt’s contribution to the stage but the significance and cultural meaning of *Saverio el cruel* (1936) in the context of the mid-1930s. One line of enquiry that we shall follow is that Arlt’s decision to “switch genres” is simply a practical solution to the ever-present issue of how to articulate a certain line of political thought. More precisely, we shall argue that by means of appropriat-

ing the conventions of both high-brow and popular theatre traditions Arlt could use the stage as a vehicle to voice a new moral agenda. This agenda—and we know the extent to which the author was a tireless opponent of poverty and social injustice (both strong themes in Arlt’s drama)—goes far beyond party political issues or a straightforward appeal to a single class interest.

Whichever way one looks at Arlt’s dramaturgy, one cannot overlook the fact that Arlt approaches the theatre with the same sense of experimentalism, the same sense of a “hands on” experience, that characterizes his work as a novelist. Indeed, his work for the stage replicates the two most persistent features to be found in his fictional oeuvre—namely, a “narrative amateurism” coupled with a tendency towards “cultural *bricolage*”³. Both these tendencies, however, tend (perhaps deliberately) to obfuscate the underlying political message of his writing. Arlt’s apparent lack of long-term commitment or a consistent political stance⁴ certainly earned him a few unfavourable newspapers reviews⁵. Yet Arlt’s theatrical oeuvre offers numerous parallels between contemporary political and social developments. What is more, as we shall see shortly, it could be argued that Arlt’s work for the theatre was far from value-free but sought instead to deliver a sophisticated (i.e. one that was resistant to crude exposition) ideological message. Perhaps only in some of his *Aguafuertes*, as Salzmann (2000) argues, does Arlt set out so consciously to adopt a clear political stance.

In order to illustrate these points, let us concentrate on *Saverio el cruel*, originally published as *Escenas de un grotresco* in 1934. All in all, the play received very good reviews. That being said, the majority of reviewers did not fail to point out the eclectic nature of the elements out of which it was constructed. Mainstream newspapers, such as *La Nación*, described *Saverio* as a purely avant-garde piece⁶. Other publications, especially those critical of Arlt’s oeuvre in general, also highlighted the author’s “evidente propósito renovador” although noting at the same time certain hostility “a las normas del teatro tradicional”⁷. Indeed, *Saverio* can only be seen as the product of that seemingly disorderly juxtaposition of different styles that would constitute Arlt’s trademark throughout both his novelistic and journalistic career.

In the play, Saverio is a stereotypical Italian immigrant who sells butter on commission for a living and seems quite happy with his humble lot in life. Susana, a wealthy young lady, sends for him with the excuse of making a business proposal. Hopeful and expectant, Saverio arrives at the *estancia* only to meet Susana’s brothers who inform him

she has gone mad. The young men also have a proposition to make: they want naïve Saverio to take part in an experimental farce they are organising in the hope of “shocking Susana back to sanity”. This necessitates Saverio “playing the part” of a tyrannical Colonel since Susana believes she is a queen and that her kingdom has been usurped by him. In this therapeutic farce, the Colonel’s head would be severed from his body (one of the brothers would get a “real” head to provide the charade with a realistic touch), thus causing Susana the psychological shock needed to cure her. Unaware of this, Saverio reluctantly accepts and the group of hoaxers anticipate his public humiliation—the farce is to take place before a group of friends at a fancy-dress party—with keen delight. To their annoyance, Saverio gets tipped off and disgraces them all when he confronts Susana with the truth of the matter. But a reversal of fate occurs when Susana, who in actual life really has gone mad, shoots Saverio when he rejects her, both in his capacity as a phoney Colonel and in that of a real man.

Although at times the nature of the hoax gone wrong may seem too transparent, the sources and influences commonplace and easily identified, perhaps the real achievement of *Saverio el cruel* lies in the fact that Arlt’s piece can also be read as being the result of an unlikely combination of popular and highbrow traditions. But this is no mere avant-garde experiment as Arlt exploits his hybrid to provide a commentary on current historical developments of particular relevance to his audience. Thus, in order to denounce the rigid social distribution of roles, Arlt looks to the conventions of the *Grotesco criollo*, depicting Saverio as the stereotypical Italian immigrant of the twenties⁸. Drawing on the conventions of Ibsen’s drama, as well as Ibsen’s concerns with the social and moral restrictions of bourgeois society, the protagonists’ profiles are developed as the play moves towards its climax, one which ultimately disrupts the audience’s expectations. As a result, Saverio is neither as naïve as he first appeared, soon growing into his part of tyrannical Colonel to the point of having a real guillotine made to promote the realism of the charade, nor is Susana as in control or sane as she originally seemed. Through this subversion of stage melodrama, Arlt succeeds in developing a trenchant critique in which he denounces injustice, alienation and the lack of moral purpose of Susana and her friends, while at the same time defending the moral virtue of Saverio’s social peers. Also central to Arlt’s dramaturgy is Pirandello’s technique of the play within the play⁹. As we will see, Arlt exploits this technique in most of his stage plays not only because metatheatre offers the possibility

of introducing an additional dimension to the world of the play but also because it provides room for ideological comment.

Keith Michael Barker, one of the chief exponents of the “political culture” historical approach, notes:

If politics, broadly construed, is the activity through which individuals and groups in any society articulate, negotiate, implement, and enforce the competing claims they make one upon another, then political culture may be understood as the set of discourses and practises characterising that activity in any given community (1987, p. 6).

Thus, by looking at the very different highbrow and popular manifestations employed (whether songs, caricatures, literary genres, dress codes, icons and emblems, ritual and civic ceremonies) we can garner a clear picture of a particular historic setting. Theatre, of course, is no exception to this rule and also serves to paint an important politico-cultural picture of an epoch. The question, then, concerns the nature of the “political culture” that underlies *Saverio*.

In light of the historical context of the play, it is hard to overlook the possibility that Arlt might be mimicking national historical events that have caused so much blood to be spilled in Argentina. Indeed, the 1930s are known as the “*década infame*” and the *caudillo* personified by Saverio imitates the fascism so much in vogue in Argentina, as in Europe, creating an implicit link between political extremism and the Argentine working class. Thus, in a first reading, *Saverio el cruel* seems allegorical, in that it may represent Arlt’s attempt to put history on stage for a popular audience—especially since *Saverio el cruel* was first performed six years after the Uriburu coup. Although not marking an exact anniversary, the timing of the premiere occurred at a particularly sensitive moment for the nation’s historical memory. This, of course, may also be a repercussion of the increasing militarization of Europe. Arlt had followed Europe’s increasing militarisation, and had attentively witnessed and chronicled the build up to the civil war in Spain¹⁰; and, back in Argentina, where he arrived in May 1936, he cannot but have felt the exacerbated air of fascism that seemed to be haunting the country. All this becomes apparent in *Saverio el cruel*.

Arlt might also be commenting on the increasing militarisation in Argentina and in the world generally: Salzman (2000, p. 70) suggests that Arlt’s abandonment of narrative in favour of the theatre was fundamentally triggered by the outburst of despotism he witnessed. Nationally, the 1930 *coup d’état* against Yrigoyen’s second administration brought about changes that still have cultural and social repercussions

in Argentina today. In the present case, the cultural break triggered by the 1930 overthrow of democracy had a collateral effect on the Argentine stage. In Arlt's particular case, his trip to Europe would prove decisive "para la politización de su escritura dramática"¹¹.

Perhaps emulating what was happening off stage, namely the change in people's attitude towards the military¹², Saverio's change of heart towards his role as dictator also shifts dramatically as he gets used to his part. Mirroring history on stage, we see that although at the beginning of the play (in Act I Scene VII), Saverio declares his disapproval of the military ("Es que yo no soy actor, señorita, Además, los coroneles nunca me han sido simpáticos", 1968, p. 55), he later takes his role very seriously; ultimately Saverio is also corrupted by power and finds himself very comfortable with his new militaristic identity. As we have pointed out, exploiting metatheatrical devices would provide Arlt with the perfect tool for political commentary. Thus, Saverio assumes not only the appearance of a Colonel but also the discourse of a dictator frantically performing his new role in front of Simona (the maid) on the improvised stage of his *pensión* ("General, que fusilen a estos atrevidos", 1968, p. 58). Although it is Pedro who pushes Saverio into the role of the Colonel, a charade which is essential to shock Susana back to sanity, Saverio accomplishes "his orders" to the letter. Before long, Saverio considers himself "el hombre de Estado indispensable" (1968, p. 61). In doing this, he not only impersonates a national despot but also evokes Mussolini and Hitler in his discourse, pronouncing that "nuestra época abunda de tantos ejemplos de hombres que no eran nada y terminaron siéndolo todo..." (1968, p. 65).

Consequently, it does not come as a complete surprise to the audience to recognize in the "new" Saverio, the one behind the mask, allusions to local dictators. Equally recognizable is the Nazi propagandistic discourse, at times quite explicit according to Nelle (2001, p. 134), echoing a commonplace of Nazi "Butter zu Kanonen" (literally, "canons over butter"), a recurrent metaphor Hitler used in his speeches¹³. Thus, Saverio justifies his speedy transformation into the totalitarian Colonel, and fervent partisanship, when he declares that "se toma el poder por quince días y se queda uno veinte años" (1968, p. 60). By sentencing the colonel to "public" execution (his decapitation would take place during the party) Arlt in effect, seems to introduce a contemporary social twist, translating the historical narrative of *el golpe* onto the stage.

So, why do we talk about melodrama and why its subversion? According to Peter Brooks, melodrama is, in fact, the staging of a heightened and hyperbolic drama, making reference to "pure and polar con-

cepts of darkness and light, salvation and damnation" (1985, p. ix). Indeed, melodrama could essentially be read as a socio-political conflict demonstrating to the audience the difference between the values of "the people" and those of their aristocratic rulers and masters. Proletarian values revolve around truth, honesty and communion, while aristocratic morality is presented as basically corrupt and hypocritical. In one form or another, melodrama was the dominant theatrical mode of popular theatre throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, finally expiring, as in Argentina, only in the 1930s. Not surprisingly, melodrama was the mode of discourse which came to prominence during the Revolutionary period, and as we shall see in a moment, it reflects the class antagonism of that period. In that respect, the period is highly analogous in terms of class interests and political violence to that of Argentina in the 1930s.

In the case of *Saverio el cruel* Arlt seems to be subverting the values of melodrama. Central to melodramatic conflict is the recognition of certain standard characteristics. It is essential, then, that both virtue and evil are clearly recognizable. It is also imperative that the stereotypes are unequivocal; in the case of Arlt's play, we know from the outset what kind of social ethics are espoused by Saverio (good) and Susana (evil). Arlt's personal twist consists of an inversion of the "traditional" melodramatic roles of good and evil.

According to Brooks, melodrama is about the confirmation and restoration of virtue. Contrary to what happens in traditional melodrama¹⁴, in Arlt's dramaturgy it is mainly the man who suffers from that social "deflowering of virtue". With regard to Saverio this translates not so much into his public humiliation and exposure at the planned party but as the calamity of having his dreams shattered: "Mi drama es haber comprendido ... que no sirvo ni para coronel de una farsa... ¿No es horrible esto?" (1968, p. 85). We find that it is Saverio who represents the democratisation of morality, and the virtuous values of the working class, the struggling immigrants in the big city.

But Susana's role is equally crucial for the triggering of the farce; she is the mastermind behind the duping of Saverio. Exploiting the supposed moral supremacy of her class, a common practice in melodrama, "those that have power and use it to hurt" (Brooks, 1985, p. 44), Susana uses her authority to amuse herself and her "aristocratic" peers. Thus, the play can be read as a tale whereby Saverio's values of decency and virtue clash with those of Susana (who epitomises the lack of moral purpose of her class). It soon becomes clear that the part Susana plays is not just the fairly innocent yet cruel bourgeois lady

who seeks entertainment at any cost. Susana (and her partners) represents a type of social evil, while Saverio represents the “purity”, innocence and morality of the hard-working immigrant class.

In this way, Arlt successfully domesticated melodrama for local consumption at a particular historical juncture. By framing a popular genre within the rather more sophisticated technique of metatheatre, we can see how Arlt overcomes the traditional weakness of plot which we associate with melodrama, by exalting the element of socio-political critique and exploiting “Grand Guignol” devices such as the “public” decapitation on stage.

In this respect, two elements are crucial to the effective development of the play. Both are represented by powerful and popular symbols; both are borrowed from France; and both are adapted for local consumption. The first one is the topic of madness. The second is the presence of the guillotine. The former is developed according to the popular scientific view that madness can be cured by shock. Intended to “harmlessly” entertain the bourgeois party, this experiment triggers the farce, and with it Saverio’s transformation. The latter transforms an inoffensive hoax into a cruel, bloody episode with very clear political connotations. What we find interesting indeed is that the icons Arlt chooses are perhaps the two most powerful images we have of the French Revolution: melodrama and the guillotine. Significantly, if we bear in mind that melodrama has been described as the voice of the French Revolution¹⁵, Susana could represent not only her social class but the very country itself, *La Patria*. And in that context, could Saverio constitute a threat to the country in his quest for popular justice? Furthermore, could Susana’s madness symbolically represent the desacralization of the powerful in favour of the people?

In all revolutions, particularly in the French Revolution, women become symbolic of class hatred. As feminist historians have been at pains to demonstrate, Marie-Antoinette was hated even more than Louis XVI himself. Indeed, an entire campaign, intent on her desacralization, was carefully orchestrated against her. Significantly, such campaigns, which through their use of pornography and innuendo are specifically intended to wound and humiliate, are less successful when directed against male rulers. Louis XVI was also targeted, though to a much lesser extent, and proved partially immune¹⁶.

Indeed, the very fact that political organizations can be imagined as a body leaves the way open for that same body to be deliberately associated with the female body. The role played by women regarding the representation of the political body depends, of course, on the fact

that just as the legitimacy of the royal line depends on the purity of the queen, so too the health of any particular social class depends on the reliability of its female members. Men have traditionally occupied a central role in power, but many of their social and political relations rely in turn on their relationship with women's bodies. Although women have been imagined as dangerous when meddling with public domains (essentially, the campaigns against Marie-Antoinette can be seen as a protest against the notion not only of queenship but of women occupying a public place), social and political order cannot be reproduced without women. This was particularly true in France where the Salic Law meant that though women could be wives of kings or mothers of regents acting in advisory capacity, unlike in England, they could never assume power in their own name. The fact that women play a crucial role in reproduction, and thus the transmission of power, has "ensured that their representation in art and literature would be multivocal" (Hunt, 1991, p. 2). This multivalence of the female body was especially striking in Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the time when democratic and mass politics emerged, accompanied by a persistent set of issues about the role and place of women. In European history, the damaging potential of associating a political organization with a physical body was further increased by the political identification of royalism with the body of the king, whose body was often believed to have magical qualities. The guillotine, however, focuses our attention not on the complete body but on the head severed by the blade. The ideology behind decapitation was "...to put to death a representation of the body politic in which the head (of State) incarnated the nation in his own body. The guillotine separated this head from its body [...] systematically deprived it from the body of its representative value" (Arasse, 1989, p. 45).

Still, why not target Susana instead of the Colonel who, as we know, will be the one executed? One answer is that this could, of course, be interpreted as the crucial element used by Arlt in subverting melodramatic conventions, as it implies the inversion of the grammar of melodrama and a statement of Arlt's dissidence in relation to the then Argentine regime (Saverio also embodies the dictator). The second powerful, perhaps even more significant symbol that may help us find the answer, is the other crucial element for the development of the play: the guillotine.

During the French Revolution the guillotine became the symbol of justice for the people in the light of the abuse of the powerful. Perhaps because the "killing machine" is not talked about or described

but physically present on stage, Saverio's idea of having one custom-made introduces a two-fold melodramatic impact. On the one hand, the idea is internal to the play in the sense that it is addressed to the characters, particularly Pedro, Luisa and Ernestina. In the second act we see how they pay Saverio a visit, on the pretext of checking up on his rehearsals, but really in the hope that by encouraging him to play as melodramatic a part as possible they can make sure Saverio does not spoil the joke. Perhaps more importantly, the guillotine may represent a comment directed at the audience who represent Saverio's side of society. As such, we could read this as Arlt's expression of dissidence in relation to the current regime brought to power by the backing of oligarchs such as Susana's family¹⁷. Interestingly enough, what shocked Pedro, Luisa and Ernestina the most, is neither the Colonel's uniform nor Saverio's discourse which, as we have pointed out, mirrors only too well the rhetoric of national and international fascism. (Perhaps this acceptance reflects the fact that historically, Latin American ruling classes have usually supported the military.) The real cause of their anguish is the physical presence of the guillotine on stage, dominating the claustrophobic space of Saverio's *pensión* room.

Saverio. — ¡Y cómo quiere gobernar sin cortar cabezas!

Ernestina. — Vámonos, che...

Pedro. — Pero no es necesario llegar a esos extremos.

Saverio (riéndose) — Doctor, usted es de esos ingenuos que aún creen en las ficciones democráticas parlamentarias.

Ernestina (tirando del brazo de Pedro). — Vamos, Pedro ..., se nos hace tarde. (1968, pp. 70-71).

The theatrical effect of the actual object on stage, together with Saverio's acting out the part of the Colonel, introduces an unequivocal element of Grand Guignol into the play. This insistence on gore can hardly have passed unnoticed at the time of the anniversary of the *golpe*. In this way, though the plot line of *Saverio el cruel* may not be the strongest, Arlt's use of melodrama transforms a minor anecdote concerning a hoax perpetrated on a country bumpkin into a powerful indictment of oligarchic rule.

Finally, it is necessary to recognise the extent to which Arlt refused to accept the rules of the canonical game, but rather played by a set of norms he himself devised. We believe that in the case of *Saverio el cruel*, perhaps more than in any other play, Arlt stretched his creativity even further, introducing (perhaps reviving) and subverting conventions of melodrama to deliver a particular political blow. Further-

more, we could see Arlt attempting to fight for his social revolution with two weapons: the pages of the newspaper *El Mundo* (from 1928) and his drama. Arlt would exploit both that daily newspaper column and later on his presence in the Teatro del Pueblo, a theatre he uses "... como 'aguantadero' para asestarle sus golpes al capitalismo, al comunismo y al anarquismo" (Salzman, 2000, p. 76). And here we agree with González who describes Arlt as particularly sensitive to his historical setting, in a way that perhaps allowed him, unconsciously, and like nobody else, to "recibir datos" from his historical context and translate them into his drama (1996, pp. 13-14).

In conclusion, it is perhaps unfair, for the reasons previously stated, to reproach Arlt for his supposed lack of political commitment. Though he himself admitted not having overtly declared his discontent with the 1930 *golpe*, nevertheless, Arlt did indeed voice his critical view. In any case, and we may all agree here, in his work in the theatre, particularly *Saverio el cruel*, Arlt exploits the combination of different theatrical conventions for political ends. Subverting melodrama and borrowing from both the *grotesco criollo* and Pirandello's metatheatrical technique, Arlt renders an original, privileged insight into Argentine culture, providing an example of class struggle in the history of the fourth decade of the twentieth century.

Notes

1. Most of the plays Roberto Arlt saw staged were premiered at the Teatro del Pueblo: *El humillado* (1931); *Prueba de amor* (1932); *Trescientos millones* (1932) *Saverio el cruel* (August 26th, 1936); *El fabricante de fantasmas*, Compañía de Milagros de la Vega and Carlos Pirelli (October 8th, 1936); *La isla desierta* (December 30th 1937); *África*, (March 17th 1938); *La fiesta de Hierro* (March 18th 1940). Arlt finished *El desierto entra en la ciudad* (Teatro El Duende, November, 5, 1953) in 1942 but died on June 26th the same year.
2. Though Arlt abandoned the novel, he continued to write his *Aguafuertes* and also produced a number of short stories after 1932. As Saitta points out, after 1932, in fact, 'la cantidad de relatos publicados aumenta considerablemente' (2000, p. 172).
3. Nelle claims that Arlt practises *bricolage* as defined by Lévi-Strauss, that is, not using raw materials for literary creation, or artistic creation, but using residues of cultural productions. Nelle also comments that as a cultural practise this is not an isolated case, but seems to be a recurrent tendency amongst artists of the time (2001, p. 135).
4. As Pellettieri comments, Arlt does not seem to have a particularly constant political orientation. It was public knowledge that Arlt's political ideas were not very consistent. After Rodolfo Ghioldi published an article, also in *Bandera Roja*, clarifying some of Arlt's "errores ideológicos" ("ideological mistakes") Arlt publicly announces his intention of studying the dogma in depth. See Larra, 1986, p. 111). In addition, in the 1930s, Arlt joins the Liga Antimperialista, an organization fighting against Urriburu's coup. Etchenique (1962, p. 108) points out that due to his "individualistic, rebel and disruptive temperament" Arlt leaves the Liga soon after joining it.

5. The last piece Arlt would see on stage is *La fiesta del hierro* (Teatro del Pueblo 1940). *La Prensa* newspaper, following its tradition of hostile reviews to Arlt, deems the antibellic piece as an inconsistent critic of society claiming that "El asunto, con notas del autor con espíritu de crítica social, a veces ruda, que en nada beneficia la pieza".
6. "Saverio el cruel en el T. del Pueblo. La obra de Roberto Arlt continua la línea de nuevos moldes" in *La Nación*, 28th August, 1936.
7. "*Saverio el cruel* fue estrenada anoche en el Teatro del Pueblo", in *La Prensa*, 27th August, 1936.
8. See Golluscio de Montoya (1998).
9. Although not Pirandello's invention, it is Pirandello who is ultimately associated with the technique of metatheatre. As a dramatic device, metatheatre may include the resource of a play-within-the-play, the featuring of an illusory world within the play presented as a real one or exploration/exploitation of the nature of theatre itself. Emulating "external" historical moments, that are external to the play, could be another reason for using metatheatre. *Saverio* could fall in this category as while commenting on its internal world it extends the comment to the reality of its context. See Abel (1963). Mirta Arlt points out that, in *Saverio el cruel*, Susana suffers from a "problema pirandeliiano de enmarcar su personalidad con otra personalidad" (Arlt, 1968, p. 34).
10. See Gnutzmann (1992); Arlt (2000).
11. Sylvia Saïtta quoted in Salzman (2000, p. 81).
12. By September 1930, when the coup against the second presidency of radical Hipólito Yrigoyen occurred, the political arena was already irreconcilably divided. With the exception a few loyal *radicales* the majority of the political classes as well as the intellectuals welcomed the coup. The coming of General Uriburu completely transforms Argentina's physiognomy of power. Salzman points out that Uriburu "promueve una auténtica exaltación de las fuerzas armadas" exploiting repression and censorship; "del austero reducto de los cuarteles se suben al inmenso escenario de la república" (2000, p. 71). People seem to notice it from the very first day. Sánchez Sorondo (1958) comments that "la ciudad entera acompañó a los cadetes" as they marched towards Casa Rosada.
13. See Golluscio de Montoya (1998, p. 237).
14. In melodrama, the world consists of bipolar contrasts and clashes; good and evil appear in permanent and irreducible terms, the upper-class female protagonists voice the need for a more democratic morality; villains are only too often tyrants and oppressors (Brooks, 1985, p. 43).
15. See Nodier in his preface to the *Théâtre choisi* of Guilbert de Pixérécourt (1841-43).
16. See Hunt (1991, pp. 35-54).
17. In Argentina, the coup against Yrigoyen, in September 1930, was certainly backed by the patrician elite. There were actually nine coups d'état from 1930 to 1981, most of which were backed by the high-born.

References

- Abel, L. *Metatheatre : a new view of dramatic form*. New York: Hill and Young, 1963.
- Arasse, Daniel. *The Guillotine and the Terror*. Tr. Christopher Miller. Harmsworth: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1989.
- Arlt, Roberto. *Escenas de un grotesco*. *Gaceta de Buenos Aires*, n° 2, August, 1934.

- _____. *Teatro completo de Roberto Arlt*. Prologue by Mirta Arlt. Buenos Aires: Editorial Schapire, 1968, vol. II.
- _____. *Aguafuertes madrileñas. Presagios de una guerra civil*. Prólogo, compilación y notas de Sylvia Saítta. Buenos Aires: Losada, 2000.
- Barker, Keith (ed). *The Political Culture of the Old Regime*. Oxford: Pergamon, 1987.
- Brooks, Peter. *The Melodramatic Imagination, Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976. Reprint New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.
- Gnutzmann, Rita. "Roberto Arlt, cronista de España". *Río de la Plata*, nº 15/16; Actas del IV Congreso Internacional del CELCIRP: "Encuentros y desencuentros" (1992/1996), pp. 91-99.
- Golluscio de Montoya, Eva. "Procedimientos citados en un farsa argentina de los años 30 (Saverio el cruel de Roberto Arlt)". In *El Teatro y los días. Estudio sobre el Teatro argentino e iberoamericano*. Ed., Osvaldo Pellettieri. Buenos Aires: Galerna, 1998. pp. 235- 43.
- González, Horacio. *Arlt, política y locura*. Buenos Aires: Colihue, 1996.
- Hunt, Lynn (ed). *Eroticism and the Body Politic*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991.
- Larra, Raúl. *Roberto Arlt, el torturado*. Fifth edition. Buenos Aires: Futuro, 1986.
- Nelle, Florian. "Roberto Arlt y el gesto del teatro". In *Roberto Arlt: Una modernidad argentina*. Morales Saravia and Schuchard, eds. Madrid: Iberoamericana, Frankfurt am Main: Vervuert, 2001. pp. 125-38.
- Nodier, Charles. *Théâtre choisi* of Guilbert de Pixérécourt. 4 vol. Paris and Nancy: chez l'auteur, 1841-43.
- Ordaz, Luis. *El teatro en el Río de la Plata. Desde sus orígenes hasta nuestros días*. Second edition. Buenos Aires: Liatán, 1957.
- Pellettieri, Osvaldo (ed). *Roberto Arlt: dramaturgia y teatro independiente*. Buenos Aires: Galerna/Fundación Roberto Arlt, 2000.
- Prieto, Adolfo. "Roberto Arlt. Los siete locos. Los lanzallamas" in *Los siete locos*. Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1978. pp. ix-xxxiii.
- Saítta, Sylvia. *El escritor en el bosque de ladrillos, una biografía de Roberto Arlt*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 2000.
- Salzman, Isidro. "Una lectura de la obra dramática de Roberto Arlt en el contexto de la década del 30". In *Roberto Arlt, Dramaturgia y teatro independiente*. Osvaldo Pellettieri (ed.). Cuaderno de GETEA nº 12. Buenos Aires: Galerna, 2000. pp. 69-83.
- Sánchez Sorondo, Matías. "El 6 de setiembre de 1930". In *Revista de Historia* nº 3, 1958.

* Abstract translated by Juliana Steil. Translation review by Thiago Blanch Pires.