

A Letter from Buenos Aires

In the wake of not one but two drugs and bribery scandals, in early October, Argentine president Javier Milei took to the stage, wide-eyed and leather-clad, to screech rock cover versions to the faithful. With stagflation and shrunken wages, slashed funding for health, welfare and education, it feels like political and/or economic collapse is just around the corner. But the mid-term elections gave the unpredictable incumbent a surprise victory, with President Trump's threat to cut off credit and choke the flow of dollars if the opposition won, proving decisive. More cuts are sure to follow and Milei has the arts firmly in view — he closed down the Ministry of Culture soon after taking office in December 2023 — yet the sector is proving surprisingly resilient.

I'm in Buenos Aires researching contemporary Argentine theatre and film. My first stop is the play *Viento blanco* (White Wind) by Santiago Loza at the Dumont 4040 theatre, one of the off-off-venues that sprang up in the Chacarita district, near where Perón is buried, close to the yet-to-be-gentrified Parque de los Andes. The theatre is a long, narrow hangar, once a motor garage or workshop, and at the back is an austere, intimate auditorium. *Viento blanco* tells the story of a lonely young man left managing a semi-abandoned Patagonian hostel. Small casts and stripped-back staging are a response to economic necessity. The one-man show places an intense focus on the actor, Mariano Saborido. His gestures — the repeated fingertip touch of a bar of white soap as he scrubs a stubborn stain on a white sheet — are perfect, just the right side of clowning. Like much of Loza's work in film and theatre, this is whimsical, but intense and moving, an emotional punch achieved with minimal resources.

The next day, I head to the Cine Gaumont, the national cinema institute's theatre on the Plaza del Congreso. The institute itself was in effect shut down last year, three days into a festival, but there is still a functioning film industry here, and production values remain high. The global success of *El Eternauta* (The Eternaut) on Netflix has provided a welcome boost to the sector. The last remnant of

state subsidies, likely to be cut in the next round of Milei's "reforms", means that tickets are cheap — AR\$ 5,400, which for anyone changing dollars is next to nothing. At weekends, there's always a long queue, even longer for new releases. I see *Gatillero* (Hitman), directed by Cristian Tapia Marchiori, an action-movie set in the city's criminal underworld, filmed as if in a single take, like *Birdman* or *Adolescence*. Sergio Podeley plays "El galgo" (The Greyhound), a hired killer just released from jail, battling alcohol and remorse. He naively accepts a "little job" from his former boss, only to become the unwitting scapegoat for a far bigger crime. It's a familiar set up, but the combination of committed acting, technical brilliance and attention to local details, creates a firecracker of a movie. I needed to lie down afterwards. Everyone involved should raise a glass, probably of Fernet and coke.

In the evening, I head to Buenos Aires's theatreland, Avenida Corrientes, for a performance of Mauricio Kartún's *La Vis Cómica* (The Gift for Comedy). Corrientes was partly pedestrianised a few years back, with side effect that, when it isn't flooded, the street is full of Michael Jackson impersonators. Set in the colonial era, this play about plays, with echoes of Pirandello and Stoppard, tells the story of a little theatrical company and its stoical dog, struggling to find work in vice-regal Buenos Aires, where there is only room for one theatre company. The small auditorium in the Centro Cultural de la Cooperación and a very central seat create the illusion that the cast are addressing me directly. The dog (marvellous played by Eduardo Cutuli) tells a joke about audiences — that there are bad plays, poor actors, but also "públicos de mierda" (shit audiences) — that is doubly funny because of how much this packed house is laughing. Despite constant self-reference to its status as a play we never lose the emotional connection to the characters, human or animal. The political allegory — a regular feature of Kartún's work — about power and corruption is particularly telling given events outside the theatre.

Over coffee in the Bar Palacio, a café and photography museum in which the tables are glass cases filled with cameras and lenses, I meet F., a filmmaker friend. We talk about the economic disaster, with salaries, even for a prize-winning director teaching two university professorships, not enough to

last the month. F.'s response is to keepfilming, completing two films on no budget, calling on friends and contacts for practical help. One of his regular actors had supporting roles in Netflix's *El eternauta* and a big-budget Spanish series, and what he earns in these gigs means he can act for no fee, and bring resources to local independent cinema. The situation, he tells me, is becoming impossible, and he dreads to imagine what it might be like if Milei, Kemi Badenoch's "template" for government, wins another term. But the difficulty is what drives him on. "Hay que trabajar": you've got to work.

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