

# Beatriz Seibel

## No Other Option

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"Rooted in a very old tradition, until recently theatre could not be conceived without being on tour, both here and all over the world", the Argentine actress María Esther Podestá (1896-1983) writes in her memoirs.

European theatre arrives in Latin America, after the *Conquista*, with tours of actresses and actors who come to the Spanish colonies from Madrid and to the Portuguese colonies from Lisbon. Until 1880 the tours of Spanish, Italian and French companies proceed in Latin America travelling downwards along the Atlantic and upwards along the Pacific. In 1886, the French Sarah Bernhardt at forty-one, at the apex of her fame, plays in Buenos Aires with her company. She writes in a letter: "Right now, the 17<sup>th</sup> of August at four o'clock in the afternoon, I have two hundred francs... I will return with a clean million. Whole. In spite of this great success, I must admit that I work like a slave... Here I have two admirers. Both are madly in love with me. I think it would be best to leave town before I get into trouble." On this tour that lasts more than a year, Sarah leaves France to play in Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, Peru, Cuba, Mexico and the USA.

In Argentina and other Latin American countries, European companies rule the stages: in 1900 the theatres of Buenos Aires announced one "national", four Spanish and three Italian companies as well as two local *criollo* circuses that performed in tents. That same year a company of *criollo* plays tours Europe for the first time, anticipating the theatre boom of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After Independence, the companies of local *criollo* artists that develop in Buenos Aires go on tour round Argentina, Uruguay, Chile and Peru, enduring all kinds of trials.

### CAMILA QUIROGA

At the end of 1920, a stream of tours of national companies starts from Buenos Aires towards Europe, in the opposite direction from what had happened until then. The first company to leave is led by Camila Quiroga, and opens in the

Gran Teatro of Cádiz. A newspaper calls Camila "the very distinguished dramatic actress" and comments say that the nervous breakdown she played, "according to some doctors who were at the theatre, could easily be mistaken for reality". This opinion shows how Camila's acting technique was valued in keeping with the main taste of the time based on scenic realism. The tour continues in Spanish towns and she plays in Paris where André Antoine praises her enthusiastically: "I am convinced that she is a great artist, whose equivalent we do not have here; our actresses do not possess this power of renovation". Camila Quiroga's tour lasts five months and is relevant because it allowed the recognition of Argentine artists who had previously been compared with the leading European theatre model. It also opened up new work possibilities in other countries for her.

At the end of 1921, Camila Quiroga sets out for a new foreign tour, this time to Mexico, where for the first time an Argentine company had arrived with its repertory of South American playwrights, receiving great acclaim. Gabriela Mistral, a Chilean poet, wrote: "The Mexican press has highlighted the importance that this Argentine theatre has for the knowledge of the customs and the soul of our countries", and she called Camila "the revelation of our own way of being".

Magaña Esquivel, a Mexican theatre historian, affirms that Camila Quiroga's company's performances encouraged young people to get organised and to found, in 1923, the Union of Playwrights. They achieved an important feat: when representing their own plays, the most important actors like Virginia Fábregas "could speak on stage the same Spanish that corresponded to the Mexican people's way of talking". This followed the custom established by "Camila Quiroga and her actors, in terms of a way of talking about

Argentines." As pointed out by the Mexican author and historian Celestino Gorostiza, everything had been in Spanish on stage until then. The few local playwrights had rare opportunities to see their plays on stage, at the same time as Mexican actors had to adapt themselves to the Spanish expression in order to be accepted by theatre companies.

### **MARÍA ESTHER PODESTÁ**

At the end of 1923, another Argentine company goes on tour in Mexico and Cuba with about one hundred artists, actors, musicians and dancers. María Esther Podestá, the main actress of the company, recalls the stations of the journey in her memoirs.

A daughter and grandchild of artists, María Esther makes her debut in 1899, at the age of three singing on a chair in order to be seen by the audience. A playwright writes a little role for her "that she portrays admirably" at seven, according to the critics. At eleven she is the only child in her grandfather's company, "taking possession of as many suitable roles as there were in the plays to be put on stage, be they male or female". She takes part in a performance in honour of Eleonora Duse, who is acting in Buenos Aires, and when the latter greets the cast of the show, she only lifts the hem of her veil to kiss the little María Esther, giving the child an unforgettable memory.

In 1908, on her last tour to Argentina, Eleonora Duse is forty-seven years old, her hair almost completely white so that she usually wears a thick grey chiffon scarf to cover herself with. She uncovers her face only on stage, "full of wrinkles that make bags under her eyes", according to the journalists, who also said: "she had lost her charms, but on stage she was still able to make us forget her decay". Her renderings

are defined as "full of genius"; the "divine" Duse transforms on stage without the need of screaming nor great gestures, giving such intense life to her characters, that the audience cheers her and an enthusiastic crowd waits for her outside the theatre.

Remembering her professional training, María Esther Podestá says: "During those years I learned all kinds of things and thanks to this I could become what I am, an actress, singer and vedette." She did not forget her grandfather's advice: "If you want to devote yourself to theatre, start immediately and continue without interruptions", and how he confirmed his opinion with the French saying, "you become a mason on the scaffolding". Her book of memoirs is entitled *Straight Away and Without Interruptions*, proudly taking responsibility for the course she undertook.

In 1911, at the age of fifteen, she marries Segundo Pomar, who is ten years older than her, and from 1915 she is the leading actress of the successful company Luis Vittone-Pomar, acting in all kinds of plays and receiving very good reviews. For example, in 1919, she interprets the dramatic role of a prostitute whose son gets taken away to prison in *Gracia plena* (Full Grace), a play full of social criticism. The same year she also acts as the main star in big variety shows such as *Los templos de Talía* (The Temples of Talía) or *La Biblia en verso* (The Bible in Verse). The following year, on the first night of a *sainete* (a Spanish traditional farce), she has great success singing the famous *Milonguita* tango.

María Esther writes: "In the variety show as we used to do it, I liked the mixed elements and the near madness it contained. It gave the performer an opportunity to double up almost endlessly. What did I not do? I think I did everything, from singing in Italian or French, to presenting the very Spanish *Valencia* song for the first time, or

dressing up as a peasant or as a *gauchito* (when she would recite the short poem called *El Mate*), dancing the tango or the Charleston."

In her memoirs, she recounts that from childhood she was used to going on tour and in her long career she travelled the whole country as well as making regular trips to Montevideo, in Uruguay. She would go there in November, December and January, with the Vittone-Pomar company, presenting the same repertoire that they played in Buenos Aires during the rest of the year. María Esther especially recalls the young people who took the cheapest seats amongst the audience in Montevideo, who for ten years always bid them farewell with streamers and flowers at the port, when the company boarded the boat to leave.

But the chapter "On Tour Abroad" begins with Mexico: this represented something different and tempting since Camila Quiroga had performed there between the end of 1921 and March 1923. Héctor Quiroga, Camila's husband, is the manager who formalises the tour contract for Vittone-Pomar's company.

At the end of 1923 they leave by train from Buenos Aires to Mendoza and proceed to Valparaíso in Chile, from where they travel by ship to La Havana in Cuba. They stay there for six days and sail again towards Tampico, the second Mexican port. "This journey was terrible", remembers María Esther, "passing the Mexican Gulf we experienced a terrible storm that sunk another boat, whereas ours managed to stay afloat". They reach Tampico safe and sound and after some days they take a train to Mexico City. During this journey they are informed of circumstances they then choose to ignore: amazed people ask them how they can imagine going to work in Mexico City and how was it possible that nobody had warned them about the situa-

tion. "There is a civil war here!" said even the least alarmist. María Esther writes: "These Argentine artists had no other option but to perform".

They made their debut in the Esperanza Iris Theatre with a showcase of their repertoire, with extracts from *La Gran Revista* (The Great Variety Show) with music, singing and dance, *El Último Gaucho* set among peasants, and the urban play *La Recova*, provoking great commotion because of the diversity in the performance. On the first night a misunderstanding occurs: while María Esther is singing, she gets scared and almost leaves the stage when she hears the audience shouting "*diana, diana, diana*," but the stagehands urge her to stay, because this was in fact the highest expression of appreciation.

When they leave the theatre, the city is completely in darkness and they always have to be accompanied to the hotel by a guard who carries a lamp. Occasionally, on their way they hear fighting and the guard immediately turns the lamp out saying: "Shooting!" But he never leaves them and always guides them until they have reached safety.

Even in this atmosphere of fear and insecurity, the artists are greeted and surrounded by writers, actors and journalists, who often organise parties with typical Mexican dances and food in their honour. In exchange, the Argentine artists present their national Pericón dance in the bullfighting ring. María Esther learns to dance the Jarabe Tapatío and to sing Mexican melodies that she later presents in Buenos Aires and other South American towns.

When the time comes for the return to Tampico in order to continue the tour, war is still raging. But they manage to get support for the journey and the roof of the train is covered with Argentine flags so it can be identified and avoid being attacked. They play there ten days. In spite of the difficult

situation, people crowd into the theatre and they are successful once again. On their return to La Havana, they have to put up with six days of confinement since they have proceeded from Mexico, and are subjected to health checks every day.

They open in the Payret Theatre and perform there for several months, presenting their repertoire to great acclaim. Cuban students enthusiastically insist on a special night in María Esther's honour; she was twenty-eight: "What a rewarding night we had!" recalls the actress. When Arquímedes Pous and his company dedicate a play to them on the theme of Argentines and Cubans, María Esther demonstrates a tango dance with an Argentine actor and then dances a rumba with Arquímedes; she also sings the *Milonguita* as successfully as in Mexico, and finally both companies dance the Argentine Pericón together. The Cuban poet and journalist Gerardo Luis Betancourt dedicates a poem to María Esther's "magic talent" emphasising her many facets as an actress, going from "self-assured and aggressive" to "downhearted and moved".

The company receives offers from the USA and Spain to continue their tour there, but Luis Vittone feels sick and they have to go back. They return by ship to Chile, by train to Buenos Aires, and when they arrive in September 1924, María Esther receives the news of her mother's death. She had passed away a few days earlier, at the age of forty-five.

For different reasons, among which the sheer number of people on tour, the company suffers big financial losses and closes. Luis Vittone dies in 1925 at the age of forty-three. He dies of "moral pain" according to his friends. María Esther Podestá goes on working in theatre and takes her repertoire of tangos and Latin American songs on many other tours; she also makes more than sixty films, and works for radio and televi-

sion. Her last appearance on stage was in 1976, at the age of eighty.

The travels of Camila Quiroga and María Esther Podestá to Mexico and Cuba show the beginning of a theatrical and cultural exchange between Latin American countries, that still today goes through the same kind of difficulties of realisation. Their successes, the deprivations they had to undergo during their many travels and hard work, and their performances, remain as Gabriela Mistral said, "the revelation of our own way of being".

Translated from Spanish by Maria Ficara

BEATRIZ SEIBEL (Argentina) is a historian, director and playwright. She has published eight books and one hundred and seventy five articles on Argentine and Latin American theatre in her own country and abroad. As a lecturer, she has participated in sixty theatre festivals and congresses and staged twenty plays, mostly based on her own texts.