**GROTESCO CRIOLLO**

The *grotesco criollo* was a genre belonging to the commercialized theatre of Buenos Aires in the 1920s and 30s. The influence of the Italian grottesco of Luigi Pirandello is evident in the way characters are conceived as living with a false image of themselves. In the grotesco criollo the false image or mask is revealed when a character fails in his or her attempt to fit in with reality. Armando Discépolo is considered the creator of the genre. Other authors of grotescos include Francisco Defillipis Novoa and Juan Carlos Ghiano. The new genre was a conscious reworking of the sainete criollo, popular in the Rio de la Plata region at the beginning of the twentieth century. The sainetes were comic and melodramatic representations featuring the urban immigrants who crowded the patios of tenement buildings. The grotesco genre transferred the dramatic action to the interior of the Italian immigrant’s household. It typically mixed the comic and the tragic in a familial conflict involving failed expectations of success in modern life. Discépolo’s plays [*Mateo*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYQNJjInjkI) (1923)and [*Stéfano*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5b5-qbkyMBE) (1928) are most representative of the genre, which has influenced Argentine theatre through the years, from avant-garde author Roberto Arlt to more recent playwrights such as Roberto Cossa and Griselda Gambaro.

At a time when Argentina could boast enormous economic success due to its participation in global markets, Buenos Aires was a city where poorer immigrants struggled to reap the rewards offered by capitalist enterprise. These conditions created an urgent political need to develop consensus and create confidence in a national modernity. This call was answered by the rise of democratic populism with the presidency of Hypólito Irigoyen. The contradictions of the regime became evident in the violent repression of the labor movement during the *semana trágica* [tragic week] of January 1919 and the reactionary coup led by General José Felix Uriburu in 1930, following the crash of global markets in 1929. The grotesco criollo reflected these anxieties, tensions, and fragmentation by staging the all too apparent failure of a generation of lower-class immigrants to fulfill their American dream. Grotescos were presented in the same large commercial theatres as sainetes, but the plays’ interior settings allowed for a more reflexive and critical dramatic representation. A process of trial and error is shown in plots where the family struggles to achieve the skills needed to succeed in the modern city. The acting style borrowed gestural, physical, and speaking techniques from the comic sainete and transformed them for stronger tragicomic effect and depth of character. Characteristics of the genre include financial failure and the stubbornness of the protagonist, a moral dilemma presented by the pressures of urban life, and animal-like behavior. A lack of flow in communication and action increases the characters’ self-consciousness while they are mocked and put to the test against a reality that is revealed as alienating and unjust.

This tension between the individual and his environment as well as the disintegration of language as a reliable form of communication can be related to the European theatre of the absurd, which developed thirty years later. The mask of the grotesco character, indicative of the spiritual emptiness of modern society, also has an affinity with European expressionism. The grotesco criollo’s emphasis on confusion and doubt commented on a developing Argentine identity and the illusory dreams of modernity. Moreover, since the elder characters’ failures remain part of the family drama, the grotesco plot does not reach closure but suggests the continuation of a ritual of trial, error, and survival. In this sense, the modernism of grotesco criollo is reflected in both its critical stance and its view towards the future. Later Argentine plays such as [*La nona*](http://comedianacional.montevideo.gub.uy/node/609)[The Grandma] (1978) by Roberto Cossa have elements of the grotesco that fulfill satirical and farcical intents. Griselda Gambaro’s plays experiment with [grotesco masks](http://www.angloargentinesociety.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/SIAMESE-POSTER-1.jpg) to show how violent authority and its victims can be complicit with one other. The grotesco criollo continues to be an important point of reference in Argentine theatrical practice today.

**References and further reading**

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Pellettieri, Osvaldo. (2008) *El sainete y el grotesco criollo: Del autor al actor*, Buenos Aires: Galerna.

Romano, Eduardo. (1986) ‘Grotesco y clases medias en la escena argentina’, *Hispamérica: Revista de literatura* 15(44): 29–37.

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**IMAGES AND PARATEXTUAL MATERIAL**

*Mateo*

link to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYQNJjInjkI>

first part of 1937 movie adaptation by author, featuring original cast actor Arata and brother Enrique Santos Discépolo.

Old movie, no copyright.

*Stéfano*

Link to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5b5-qbkyMBE>

Video shows trail for recent theatrical production and example of acting style

Copyright inquiry: video by tallofilm.com.ar

*La nona*

Link to <http://comedianacional.montevideo.gub.uy/node/609>

Site shows poster and pictures that reflect aesthetic of play.

Information of 1982 production in Uruguay and critical reactions to original Buenos Aires production.

Copyright?

Griselda Gambaro

Link to <http://www.angloargentinesociety.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/SIAMESE-POSTER-1.jpg>

Page shows poster for play, that illustrates concept of grotesque mask explained in entry.

Copyright: graphic design is used in published translation of play. Trans. Gwen Mackeith, *Siamese Twins*, Oberon Books (December 7, 2012)