



Inflaming the Fears of Theatergoers

*How Fires Shaped the Public Sphere
in Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1880–1910*

KRISTEN MCCLEARY

On December 30, 2004, a concert in Buenos Aires, Argentina, by the rock group Callejeros had barely begun when pyrotechnics from its light show jumped from the stage to the walls and ceilings of the nightclub, República Cromañón. The fire quickly spread as flames spilled onto flammable materials of the club's construction, which released toxic gases. That night, Cromañón was also overcrowded and its emergency exits were blocked with other exits insufficient for allowing the rapid evacuation of audience members. As a result, this urban fire resulted in the death of 194 concertgoers, leaving a city to mourn its lost youth while devastated friends and relatives sought to understand the loss by assigning responsibility for the deaths to someone or some entity. Who should be responsible? Callejeros for using fire torches as part of its light show? The city government for inadequately inspecting and enforcing safety measures in the night club? The club's owner for neglecting to take care of fire prevention and allowing overcrowding to take place? Buenos Aires continues to wrestle with these questions as Cromañón has become a focal point for human rights and democratization issues since the tragic conflagration has been linked to political corruption and incompetence.¹

Cromañón was also particularly devastating and unexpected given Buenos

Aires's track record in avoiding such tragedies. However, the narratives that surround this twenty-first-century tragedy resonate with discourse on fire safety that consumed the city's modernizing administrators and safety-conscious public citizens from over one hundred years earlier. As Cromañón shows, the potential for entertainment venues to convert into "gas chambers," a term used to describe the horrors from that night, touches on a particularly urban fear: that citizens could partake in the benefits of urban living by assisting a cultural event, and that night could end with citizens suffering a form of death that is usually ascribed to one perpetrated by genocidal governments.²

This chapter examines the urban discourse surrounding issues of fire safety and fears of urban conflagrations in theaters in Buenos Aires between 1880 and 1910. This South American capital city closely followed European urban ideals and, as a result, was finely attuned to the aftermath of devastating theater fires that contemporaneously were occurring in Europe and the United States. Surprisingly reminiscent of the Cromañón situation, most theaters in Buenos Aires, and much of the West, contained all the elements to ignite a fire and foment tragic outcomes: They were largely made of wood, urban fire services were inefficient, and the massing of numerous people together in one building, with inefficient exits, promised that even the most innocuous of fires would result in great loss of life. During the era of pronounced attention to modernizing the city, the quest to ensure the city's theaters against the threat of fire takes on symbolic resonance, underscoring how Buenos Aires's urban officials linked their own material progress to that of Europe and sought to provide on this side of the Atlantic what had not been achieved on the other: fire prevention. Discourse around fire safety provides a unique window into the modernization process that the Argentine nation was experiencing during an era in which it was emerging, albeit temporarily, as one of the world's wealthiest nations. The desire of city administrators to transform the Argentine capital into a showcase heralding the nation's modernity, combined with an active city press and fire chief and the economic wherewithal to raze old and construct new buildings, ensured that the city enacted reforms that helped it avoid the type of tragedy that occurred one hundred years later—when these economic and social forces were no longer in alignment.

Background

Buenos Aires underwent massive demographic, economic, political, and cultural transformations between 1880 and 1910. Propelled by economic growth

that averaged about 5 percent annually, the city served as a magnet for immigrant labor to supplement a small national workforce.³ Between 1879 and 1914, almost six million people came to Argentina with a little more than half of them permanently settling. Up until about 1880, Buenos Aires had been described as a *gran aldea*, or large village, at which point the city began to adopt a new incarnation as an important urban center and took on the sobriquet the Paris of South America. The capital city brokered the newfound wealth from the countryside, largely consisting of wheat, sheep, and cattle exports, to local and international consumers. With limited opportunities to own small parcels of land in the countryside, the majority of immigrants settled in Buenos Aires, where, by 1910, three out of four members of the adult population were foreign born.⁴

Beginning in the 1880s, the urban elite, along with municipal and national politicians, sought to remodel the nation's capital after Baron von Haussmann's transformations of Paris, which stressed carving out green spaces and razing old parts of the city to accommodate wide diagonal avenues, modernizing public services such as sewer systems, and emphasizing Beaux Arts architecture. The Haussmannization of Buenos Aires was carried out most fully under the guidance of the federal capital's first mayor, Torcuato de Alvear, who held the post from 1880 until 1887.⁵ The Argentine ruling elite, like their contemporaneous Latin American counterparts, looked to propel their nation toward "progress" by following the primary philosophical legacies of the Enlightenment: positivism, social Darwinism, and economic and political liberalism. Domingo F. Sarmiento, writer and Argentine president from 1868 to 1874, distilled the general essence of these ideas into a Manichean view in which there was either civilization or barbarism: "The nineteenth century and the twelfth century coexist, the one in the cities; the other in the countryside."⁶

No other Latin American country has stressed the importance of cities for its cultural, social, and economic development to the degree that Argentina's turn-of-the-century elite did, primarily because they had the economic wherewithal to put utopian plans into action. As David Rock notes, Argentina had experienced almost twenty years of growth by 1914, "with a per capital income equaling that of German and higher than in Spain, Italy, Sweden, and Switzerland."⁷ The importance of the capital city had even greater symbolic value at the end of the nineteenth century since this coincided with the golden era of Argentina.⁸ Finally, political changes resulting in the 1880 decision to federalize the nation and establish Buenos Aires as the national capital resulted in a number of physical transformations, in an attempt to showcase the city as a hallmark of "progress" and "civilization." The issue of fire safety in theater buildings needs

to be understood within this larger context of modernization and the maintenance of public order and public safety in the city that symbolically was intended to showcase the country's development and sophistication based on western European models.

Regulating Theater Safety

The federalization of the city in 1880 was followed by a flurry of new municipal regulations as city administrators focused on preserving order in this rapidly growing capital. Theater was the predominant form of indoor urban entertainment at the time, and attendance rates increased along with the population of the capital city.⁹ In 1890, the number of people attending theaters had almost quintupled with 1,066,870 tickets being sold, resulting in a per capita attendance of 2.4 times per year.¹⁰ The number of theaters had only doubled during this four-year period, suggesting that theater space was being used more frequently, plays were shown in hourly "sections" so one theater might put on four or five in a day, and they were also being increasingly overcrowded.

Most theaters were joint stockholding companies located in the city's downtown theater district on Corrientes Avenue, the Broadway of Buenos Aires, or just adjacent to it. Buenos Aires was known then as the center of theatrical activity in Latin America.¹¹ In the 1880s and 1890s, zarzuela (Spanish light opera) troupes from Spain dominated popular theater performances.¹² Theater was always increasing in popularity, and Buenos Aires witnessed a surge in national cultural production after the passage of a 1910 copyright law that gave writers 10 percent of the theater box office receipts for each performance.¹³

No theater in Buenos Aires was exclusively popular or elite. Even the city's relatively exclusive opera house, the Teatro Colon, retained (and has retained even after its 2010 remodel) inexpensive seating so that entertainment there is accessible to all income levels.¹⁴ Theater genre also suggested patterns of social class attendance, with zarzuelas and national comedies, both performed in one-hour sections, drawing a largely working- and middle-class audience. Because the majority of the city's immigrant population were from Italy and Spain, the ability of the ethnic audiences to understand these two romance languages disallowed the flourishing of ethnic theaters (although some existed, notably Yiddish). Also, the perceived social capital of "elite" foreign-language performances fostered cross-linguistic audience attendance.¹⁵ As some of the largest indoor venues of the time, theaters were not used just for plays or movies

but also hosted a wide variety of events in the city, including carnival celebrations, political meetings, and festivities centering on the anniversaries of neighboring nations or those of immigrant homelands.¹⁶

The popularity of theaters and theatrical fare in the cultural milieu of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Buenos Aires cannot be overstated. Municipal officials were constantly trying to regulate and control crowds on streets overflowing with theater patrons, to limit the hours that plays ended to coincide with urban transportation and work schedules, and to end the flourishing business of reselling tickets, since this practice often resulted in chaos both inside and outside theater houses.¹⁷

One of the events that most promised to threaten *order* in late nineteenth-century capital cities was that of fire.¹⁸ Theaters in cities across the western world were sites of devastating losses of life and, subsequently, also of economic investments, during the nineteenth century.¹⁹ As *porteños* were sharply aware, European cities had experienced a number of devastating fires with great losses of life. For example, the theater of the Opéra-Comique of Paris had a fire on May 25, 1887, in which 120 people died; the Ring Theater in Vienna burned on December 9, 1881, killing over 400 people. Devastating theater fires also took place in Exeter, England, in 1887 (130 dead), at the Baquet Theater in Porto, Portugal, in 1888 (300), and at the Iroquois Theater in Chicago in 1903 (736).²⁰ This last fire was particularly tragic not only due to the high death rates but also because it occurred during a matinee performance when the audience included a large number of children. All these fires resulted in great losses of life since they occurred while performances were taking place. According to Buenos Aires fire chief José María Calaza, between 1777 and 1903, a period of 126 years, 8,000 people died in 382 theater fires.²¹

The Vienna Ring theater fire occurred at the beginning of Torcuato de Alvear's tenure and did much to spur theater inspections in Buenos Aires. But two additional and very well-publicized theater fires took place under his mayorship: Nice (1884) and Paris (1887), ensuring that theater fires would remain at the forefront of the city's collective conscience. After the destruction of the theater of the Opéra-Comique of Paris (coinciding with May 25, Argentine independence day), Calaza visited Paris to study the profile of the fire, which resulted in his first book-length study devoted to the causes and preventions of theater fires. Twenty-three years later, he published a three-volume study including the history and causes of global theater conflagrations, as well as maps and diagrams of Buenos Aires's twenty theater houses and their plans for evacuations, and instructions on how to best control fires, should they occur.²²

Fire safety had been a concern in Buenos Aires for at least thirty years, as the city began to embark on its path of modernization. Cobbled roads, limited communication networks, and unwieldy fire equipment prevented fire officials and volunteers from being able to adequately perform their duties once a blaze had begun. In the 1860s, for example, volunteer fire brigades walked the streets of Buenos Aires, toting heavy equipment with them as they moved in the general direction of the fire; the exact address of the fire could not be discerned because the city did not use a consistent numbering system. Lacking pressurized water, volunteer firefighters were quickly depleted of any energy they might have left as they passed buckets of water from hand to hand.²³ In 1871, the city organized a professional fire department in which nineteen officers oversaw two hundred paid firefighters, divided into seven fire districts.²⁴ Regulations directly relating to firefighters and theater houses went into effect only in the 1890s, when firefighters were required to be present during nightly performances. This apparently resulted in the rapid control of fires before they could cause much damage.²⁵

Theater Inspections

In late nineteenth-century Buenos Aires, almost all the public discourse about urban disorder as a result of uncontrollable conflagrations centered on theaters, due to tragic conflagrations in Europe, rather than on other prominent public spaces, such as department stores or churches, or on private residences. Clearly, theater carried great symbolic weight with the city's secular administrators. Immediately after the Ring Theater fire, Alvear ordered a series of in-depth inspections of city theaters. Seeking to elevate the profile of this undertaking and to combat past corruption related to theater inspections, he appointed high-profile figures as inspectors, including the city architect, Juan A. Buschiazzo, and Enrique Alberg, an architect from the National Department of Engineers. These inspectors presented a report to the mayor lamenting the sorry state of most of the eight theaters they had inspected: "We have already given the reports of the city architects on the Colon and Opera Theaters. To close the chapter we may say that we find the Politeama and Variedades but little better than the two more fashionable houses; the little Goldoni in Calle Rivadavia is a mere matchbox; the Alegria is simply a firecracker . . . and the Victoria still worse. In point of fact there is not a single theater in Buenos Aires that one can enter with even an average chance of coming out alive in case of the slightest panic."²⁶ The inspection reports enumerated many of the safety failures including lack of

sufficient exits and outwardly opening doors. The Colon, the city-owned theater, was found to be the one most in want of repairs.²⁷ In fact, fire safety was one of the primary reasons given for its closure in 1888.

Theater inspectors found that the safety curtain, commonly used in Europe (although clearly not to great success), did not exist in any of Buenos Aires's theaters. This curtain was seen as especially important because it could be lowered in case of emergencies to prevent flames from spreading from the stage to the audience or vice versa.²⁸ The first attempt to require that each theater in Buenos Aires install a metallic curtain took place in 1883, but it was so little heeded that the city council had to remind everyone of its existence in 1887. Indeed, there was great resistance on the part of theater managers to comply with city codes. In fact, the very nature of commercial and profit-oriented theater promoted overcrowding and the sidestepping of expensive requirements, like that of the safety screen, which had to be imported from Europe.²⁹ Inspectors frequently commented on finding that theaters would frequently add seating to accommodate more audience members. Often, this seating would block exits. After nearly a decade of inspections, the inspectors' 1889 report found that only two of the city's theaters had complied with safety regulations.³⁰

Despite the unsafe conditions posed by Buenos Aires's theaters, very few theater fires actually occurred. In his three-volume study of theaters, Calaza included a list of fires taking place in Buenos Aires, and only two were theater fires. The first claimed one victim and took place in Theater San Martín on September 3, 1891. The fire had started before the evening performance, originating near the stage when one of the workers was lighting gas lamps. The theater was sold out for the evening, and Calaza noted that if the fire had started an hour later, it would have resulted in many more casualties. Interestingly, Calaza notes that of the fifty audience members present, most were in the *paraíso* section, the inexpensive seats highest up in theaters, reserved for men. Probably, these men came to the theater directly from work, which saved both time and money. The one casualty, an actor, had gone into his dressing room to try to save some of his belongings, although Calaza did note that when his body was found, they suspected he had been inebriated. The firemen arrived to the scene at 8:40 p.m., and the fire was put out by 11:30 only because, as one news reporter put it, there was nothing left to burn.³¹

The only other fire reported occurred in December 1895 at the recently renovated Teatro Nacional, which had not yet reopened to the public. The fire started at 3:37 a.m., and the telegraph system was used to communicate with the fire department. However, by the time the fire department arrived, it was too late to save the theater. Calaza also noted that the abundant use of wood in

its construction literally added flame to the fire, and the absence of water there made it impossible to save the construction. The losses to this latter theater were calculated at 350,000 pesos, and he noted that it was not insured, which resulted in the total destruction of the venue.³²

Calaza omitted to report the destruction of the colonial Buenos Aires theater, Casa de Comedias (aka Teatro de la Ranchería), which burned down in 1792 after a flying rocket, commonly used to advertise performances, landed on the theater's straw roof.³³ He also neglected to report on the 1883 Politeama fire in Buenos Aires, which had been put out before the theater sustained serious damage. Knowingly or not, however, Calaza's report was beginning to show a certain level of national pride: Buenos Aires had reached higher levels of "civilization" than European capital cities in its ability to prevent tragic conflagrations.³⁴ In stark contrast to the two fires that occurred in Buenos Aires, Calaza enumerated twenty-two theater fires in Paris dating back from 1763.

Public Criticism of the City's Lack of Effectiveness in Fire Safety

Carl Smith in *Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief* underscores the imaginative dimensions that accompanied late nineteenth-century urban tragedies, expressed most vociferously in contemporary newspapers and magazines.³⁵ He argues that literary expressions of fear shaped urban attitudes and actions, serving as an important and real extension of calamities into daily life, which lingered long after the tragic event itself. The narrative dimensions of urban fears of fire in Buenos Aires certainly created a large space in the public imaginary manifested in and shaped by the city press. In general, the Argentine press closely followed the events of fires in other theaters around the world and used this information to criticize ineffective efforts at implementing fire-safety regulations by the local government.³⁶ A diverse array of newspapers existed, most published in Buenos Aires, sold to the city's highly literate multilingual population. Newspapers targeted upper-class audiences (*La Nación*, *La Gaceta Musical*) as well as ethnic groups (*El Correo Español* for the Spanish immigrant community, *The Standard* for the English, *La Patria Italiana* for the Italians) and political groups (*La Protesta* for the anarchists, *La Vanguardia* for the Socialists).³⁷ Newspapers closely monitored events across the Atlantic, and it took very little time for news events to be shared. Fires were dramatic media fodder, and the burning down of full theaters seemed to touch on an essentially urban phobia.³⁸

The city press also played an important role in prompting the municipality into concerted action regarding fire safety. During the 1880s, the city's press, led by the British community newspaper, *The Standard*, and the Spanish-language broadsheet, *La Gaceta Musical*, waged a public campaign to galvanize city administrators into carrying out safety reforms in theater houses. Even Calaza, the fire chief, had to resort to the city press from time to time to campaign for the use of new construction and fire-prevention methods, attesting to the difficulties he faced getting the city government to enforce extant regulations: "We [fire departments] continued insisting [on reforms] in notes, published reports, city council minutes, and by publishing a pamphlet about fire conditions in our theaters."³⁹

These public campaigns usually occurred simultaneously with city inspections. For example, in 1882 *The Standard* reported: "When one recalls the smoking that goes on in all parts of our theatres every night, the number of gas lights and the absence of any special precautions it seems really miraculous that we have not had the Vienna horror [referring to the Ring Theater fire] enacted here years ago."⁴⁰ The following month, the newspaper once again commented unfavorably on Buenos Aires's theaters: "Everything is wood, wood, wood from top to bottom; they [Buenos Aires's theaters] are great fire hazards."⁴¹ Between 1882 and 1887, *La Gaceta Musical* published a series on the same theme. A few months after the Parisian fire of 1887, an article titled "The City Council and Theaters" attacked the city council for being too passive in regard to safety in theaters, resulting in fear and panic as part of the theatergoing experience: "The alarm experienced by theatergoers who are fully aware of the serious dangers that face them and see that nobody is worried about fixing them has reached an extreme so that the smallest movement creates great terror and many often get to their feet, and go to an exit."⁴²

In addition to criticizing the municipal authorities, the Buenos Aires press regularly reported on Europe's theater fires, always using that as an opportunity to invoke the dangerous specter that Argentine theater houses posed. The 1887 Parisian Opéra-Comique fire received first-page coverage in many of the city's newspapers, with coverage extending well past the initial tragedy itself. *El Correo Español* published "new and interesting details" of the fire a month after it had occurred, clarifying the death toll and denoting the exact locations of each of the bodies within the theater.⁴³ In an era before forensics, details to help identify the victims rested on an elaboration of personal artifacts, including the color and type of underwear worn, descriptions of jewelry, and initials found on any of these items. These personal details certainly made a powerful connection with the readership.

In addition to covering the event itself, newspapers reprinted telegrams, letters from readers, and other types of primary source documents, in effect presenting an archive of materials that covered both human interest and scientific developments emerging at the time. Telegrams sent at the moment of the crisis were often reprinted in their entirety.⁴⁴ Newspapers also included individual letters from (usually irate) theatergoers as well. The following diatribe citing the municipal theater house was published in 1883, five years before it was torn down:

The Colon is dangerous; *there is no salvation in case of fire*. The insufficient ordinances mandated by the city have yet to be fulfilled. All the stairs are of dry wood ready to burn; its frame alone is made of marble or iron, but that is hung with paper-covered wood. The aisles are narrow and are impeded by the doors of the box seats. The stage is a virtual mine: one spark and it would explode setting fire to everything in a matter of minutes. The Colon does not have adequate exits: there are always crowds of people trying to get out of the theater who are immediately crushed by carriages after eventually making it to the street.⁴⁵

In terms of scientific inquiry, after the Vienna Ring Theater fire, an article was printed in *La Prensa*, "Theater Fires," which presented a detailed technical report, including a toxin study showing how the release of carbonized gas and carbon oxide would impact different sections of the theater, depending on where the fire originated.⁴⁶

Despite the narratives of panic, disarray, danger, and devastation ascribed to theater fires in Europe and the dangerous state of theater houses in Buenos Aires, only a few theater scares seem to have taken place in Argentina. While newspapers seemed to try to outsell one another by offering graphic details about the horror that ensued within the theater during the conflagration, one thing remained clear: audience attendance rates never dropped as a result of the media's attention to fire dangers.⁴⁷

The narratives of the fire scares reported by the city press do, however, offer insight into the dominant attitudes of the era. While the press ostensibly urged the city government to be more effective in ushering in real reform, news articles inadvertently highlighted the elite's distrust of the working classes by blaming moments of panic in theater houses on the gendered seating sections, where the most inexpensive tickets could be bought. In June 1882, for example, there was a false alarm at the Teatro Nacional. Newspapers described the scene as follows: Despite the winter season, the heat rose to such a level in the *paraíso* section, the highest and cheapest in the theater, designated for men only, that some of the people wanted to open the windows. Others objected, yelling,

“*Fuera, fuera*” (get out, get out). Panic at once seized the audience, who thought the cry was “*fuego*,” fire. *The Standard* described the ensuing events: “There was a rush for the doors but a few cool heads in the house managed to stamp out the panic in a few minutes. One girl in the *cazuela* [the section of the theater reserved for unchaperoned women] attempted to throw herself out of the window. The fright in the Teatro Nacional on Thursday night induces many people to think that every theater here that has no means of escape from fire should be closed.”⁴⁸

Another fire scare occurred at the Teatro Colon, and blame was placed again on the *cazuela* section, where screams of “fire” started a stampede for the stairway, resulting in a few injuries. Argentina’s president, Julio Roca, famously appeared on the stage in an attempt to restore order. According to news reports, a cigarette butt flung from the *paraíso* section landed on dry mats in the *cazuela*, generating a wave of smoke.⁴⁹ This narrative underscored attitudes toward gender and social class quite brilliantly: the heroic president prevented a theater stampede that had been caused by women, who were, in the discourse of the era, more likely to panic and cause its spread.

It is important to note that there is evidence that these sections, which did not contain fixed seating, were indeed the least safe areas of theater houses. For example, in 1887 the city inspectors requested that exits be added to the *cazuela* boxes in the Politeama Argentino.⁵⁰ They also found that the *cazuela* section of the Colon was difficult to enter due to a row of seats that blocked easy egress.⁵¹ In 1882, theater inspectors had noted problems with exits for people who sat in the *paraíso* section.⁵² Also, these sections of theaters usually were standing-room only. The lack of fixed seats usually meant that they were extremely overcrowded.

However, criticism of the inhabitants of these sections also involved *expectations* about how people would behave in these sections. In particular, men who inhabited the *paraíso* had been frequently blamed for disorder in theaters. The *Gaceta Musical* described the inhabitants of the *paraíso* section as being prepared for battle, with men shaking in anticipation of the “combat” to come, ready to launch an arsenal of oranges, carrots, and onions at the theater’s unpopular manager.⁵³ Class tensions were often described at the Colon. In 1886, tension erupted over the fact that the city had renewed the contract of an unpopular tenor and theater manager. According to one article, “hired hands” were sent to the upper regions of the *paraíso* section to praise and applaud the tenor, while they vilified the elite members of the audience with shouts of “Death to those in tuxedos!” and “Galleries, get out!” and also threw objects on those below.⁵⁴ Social-class tensions did explode in the Colon during the lavish centennial

celebrations of 1910 when a bomb exploded during mid-performance. Police mistakenly assumed the bomb had been launched from the *paraíso* section only to discover later that it had been placed carefully beneath a box seat in the orchestra section.⁵⁵

Social-class tensions that accompanied the nation's rapid attempts to modernize pervaded commentary about fire dangers even in city publications. Somewhat surprisingly, the city government advertised deficiencies in its own fire-prevention capabilities, and was unflinchingly candid about the topic. The municipal census of 1887, for example, included a description of each of the main theaters operating in the city at the time. The *Edén Argentino* was described as always having a full house; however, "it could burn down in a total of five minutes because it [was] made entirely of wood." The census warned all those who attended the Goldoni, a working-class theater that catered to an Italian clientele, located on the outer margins of downtown, to repeat the sentence that Dante described as hanging on the doorway to hell: *Lasciate ogni speranza, voi, ch' entrate* (abandon all hope you who dare enter).⁵⁶ This same publication treated the city's official theater, the Colon, much better even though evidence from the city press argued that it also presented dangerous conditions and was indeed closed down the year after the city's report was written.

Urban discourse on fire safety is remarkable for the degree to which Argentines ignored fire tragedies nearer to them. Most notable was the fact that none of this press coverage mentioned a devastating church fire in 1863 in Santiago, Chile, which killed between two and three thousand people, nor any of the fires in Valparaíso, Chile, that Samuel Martland discusses in this volume. Nor were fires that had swept through Mendoza, Argentina, after its devastating earthquake of 1861 ever mentioned.⁵⁷ Nor was press coverage overly concerned with other large constructions of the time, notably churches and the early department stores.⁵⁸ In the late 1880s, city press coverage about urban fire prevention focused almost exclusively on theater buildings. Why? For one, Argentina might have been geographically close to Chile, but the Andes mountain range served as a formidable barrier to easy communication and transit between the two neighboring, yet often competitive and antagonistic, South American nations. Ideologically, economically, and demographically, the port city of Buenos Aires was oriented toward Europe. It is notable that Argentina's secular liberal elite preferred to focus its fire safety discourse on theaters rather than on nonsecular venues. This focus was most likely connected with the time frame of modernization attempts. Department stores emerged in Buenos Aires after the 1880s and 1890s, the era of concentrated interest in theater fires.

Implementing Electricity

The city's fascination with fire safety in theaters was also solidified as a result of its interest in the material aspects of modernization. The existence of gas lighting in the theaters had been one of the major causes of fires, both real blazes and fire scares, until the end of the nineteenth century. The 1887 fire in the Parisian Opéra-Comique theater spurred discussion in Europe and Argentina about the need for electricity in theaters as a fire-prevention measure.⁵⁹ This pressure to implement electricity resulting from the campaign for theater safety came relatively early in Buenos Aires. The first ordinance requiring Buenos Aires theaters to install electric lighting was promulgated on April 26, 1892, as part of new theater ordinances.⁶⁰ Electrification and public lighting of the city did not begin in earnest until 1902.⁶¹ Although the Paris Opéra had experimented with electric light as early as 1846, it was not installed until 1887, preceding Buenos Aires by just five years.⁶²

The implementation and regulation of electricity in Buenos Aires followed the stark demarcation of the city's cultural and social geography. In effect, the city center and the northern neighborhoods received most of the benefits of the municipality's services. The center of the city, after all, was primarily a showcase for the powerful elite who resided there until the trend to move to the northern suburb intensified between 1905 and 1912.⁶³ The 1892 ordinances allowed gas lighting only for those theaters outside the city's central radius, where electrical service currently reached.⁶⁴ Peripheral, gas-lighted theaters could not be made of wood, and all gas lights were supposed to be protected by metal screens.⁶⁵ This decision, based on pragmatic concern for cost and efficiency, also illustrates the municipal government's social class and spatial priorities.

It is notable that installing electricity in the city's theaters was almost always referred to as a safety measure. Electricity was no longer used for entertainment or show, an extension of the sophisticated lighting devices that historically accompanied political celebrations or festivals. Electricity was now a viable and practical concern of the city's late nineteenth-century growth and move toward modernization.⁶⁶

Buenos Aires did not experience any devastating urban conflagration on par with the fires in European and American cities at the end of the nineteenth century. So what was the fuss about? This essay argues that the Buenos Aires's city administrators focused on physical transformations of the capital city to showcase its progress to Europe. Preventing fires in theater buildings carried particularly symbolic weight in this context. Ensuring safety in theaters, from

the point of view of Buenos Aires's fire chief, in particular, seemed to be an important marker measuring the nation's degree of "civilization." Yet an examination of the discourse surrounding the fear of conflagrations in theaters also reveals a municipality that lacked either the resources or the political maturity to impose its will on theater managers. Therefore, the city press played an important role in ensuring that the city council stayed on course with implementing urban changes.

Why did the city avoid devastating fires for most of its history? It seems that sheer luck should not be discounted, since it is probable that Buenos Aires's theaters were as unsafe as European ones in the 1880s. By the early twentieth century, laments about the city's theaters being fire hazards had greatly diminished. The lack of any significant fires in Buenos Aires and the increasingly detailed theatrical codes, which included fire safety regulations within them, suggest that over time, Buenos Aires's theaters were most likely becoming safer. Overall, improvements in fire safety were driven by municipal regulations, the press, and very likely by the forces of modernization: as theater became an increasingly lucrative enterprise in the 1890s, a number of new theater buildings were constructed and old ones removed. City administrators were more effective at requiring that new constructions complied with safety regulations than they were at making older ones implement changes. New constructions also successfully implemented electric lighting—a technology that eradicated the cause of most theater fires simply by making gas lighting obsolete.

However, a more optimistic interpretation of urban "planning" amid rapid modernization should not be entirely dismissed. Despite the press coverage attesting to the opposite, the city council put forth a considerable amount of political will to carry out theater inspections and follow up on them during the 1880s. The absence of theater fires may signify a successful story of fire prevention, as a result of the uncoordinated yet consistent efforts of city administrators, civil society, the press, and a dedicated fire chief, who all worked toward a common goal, and whose efforts were buoyed by a robust city budget. By interpreting the discourse surrounding fire safety, however, one cannot ignore the social-class fissures of the era, revealing the city administrators' fear that the masses would be the authors of urban disorder, capable of bringing down the nation if their behaviors were not controlled, modified, and regulated. In this sense, debates over fires and their prevention became a kind of shorthand to debate larger issues related to urban change.

The tragedy that took place at República Cromañón in 2004 serves as an unfortunate bookend to the zealous attention paid to fire prevention over a hundred years before, when the city looked forward, attempting to prevent

fires by highlighting the devastation that took place on the other side of the Atlantic. The narratives following Cromañón, the tragedy that took place in Buenos Aires, not somewhere else, look backward, using the fire to construct a narrative that attempts to explain all that has gone wrong in Argentina since 2001, when the nation suffered devaluation of its monetary unit and great political turmoil, as the office of president changed hands five times in one month alone. In both cases, however, urban fires expose a particularly sensitive cultural nerve, emphasizing the subtle, inextricable, and at times volatile, link that connects fire regimes, urban space, physical materials, politics, economics, and something as ostensibly innocuous as the cultural habits of its citizenry.

NOTES

1. Sergio Ciancaglini, *Generación Cromañón: Lecciones de resistencia, solidaridad y rocanrol* (Buenos Aires: Lavaca, 2005); Diego Rozengardt, *Pensar Cromañón: Debates a la orilla de la muerte joven; Rock, política y derechos humanos* (Buenos Aires: Hernán López Echagüe, 2008).
2. Ciancaglini, *Generación Cromañón*, 17.
3. Leslie Bethell, ed., *Argentina since Independence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
4. James R. Scobie's *Buenos Aires: Plaza to Suburb, 1870–1910* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974) remains the classic study of the city's rapid transformation. See especially chap. 2, "A Study in Contrasts: The Paris of South America and the Gran Aldea," 13–69.
5. Adrian Becar Varela, *Torcuato de Alvear* (Buenos Aires: G. Kraft, 1926).
6. Joseph M. Gilbert and Mark D. Szuchman, *I Saw a City Invincible: Urban Portraits of Latin America*, Jaguar Books on Latin America 9 (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1996) discuss the propensity of Latin America's elite to focus on urban displays; Domingo F. Sarmiento, *Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism*, trans. Kathleen Ross (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
7. David Rock, *Argentina, 1516–1982: From Spanish Colonization to Alfonsín* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
8. The province of Tucumán did become an important exporter of sugar, but this was not until the late nineteenth century, when modernization helped foment exportation of this product.
9. The *Memoria de la municipalidad* (1882) contains an overview of the city's attempts to promulgate detailed theater codes. The first step in the process was an assessment of the current theaters in operation in the city, and that survey is included in this *Memoria*. The extant ordinances for 1882 are found in *Memoria del presidente de la comisión municipal*, March 1883.
10. Figures for 1886 were reported in the *Memoria de la intendencia municipal* (Buenos Aires: 1886). *Anuario estadístico* (Buenos Aires: Kraft, 1894) contains theater statistics for 1887 to 1894.

11. "El teatro nacional y el teatro argentino," *El Heraldo* (Mexico), February 22, 1921, was written in the wake of Argentine actress Camila Quiroga's visit to Mexico, asking why Mexico was so lacking in a national theater in light of Argentina's accomplishments. Her 1915 visit to Brazil evoked similar comparisons. See "Palcos e circus," *Estado de Sao Paulo*, August 8, 1915.

12. Kristen McCleary, "Popular, Elite and Mass Culture? The Spanish Zarzuela in Buenos Aires, 1890 to 1900," *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 21 (2002): 1–27.

13. See *Anuario teatral Argentino: Enciclopedia de la escena Argentina*, 1926–27 and 1927–28, for the text of law 7092, September 23, 1910.

14. John Rosselli, "The Opera Business and the Italian Immigrant Community in Latin America 1820–1930: The Example of Buenos Aires," *Past and Present*, no. 127 (May 1990): 155–82, discusses the frequency with which Italian immigrants went to the theater. I discuss common social class overlapping in McCleary, "Popular, Elite and Mass Culture?"

15. *El Correo Español*, August 20, 1891.

16. I discuss the relationship between theater space and carnival celebrations in "Ethnic Identity and Elite Idyll: A Comparison of Carnival Celebrations in Buenos Aires, Argentina and Montevideo, Uruguay, 1880–1910," *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture* 16, no. 4 (2010): 497–517.

17. See chap. 3, "Order and Positivism: Municipal Regulation and Theater in Buenos Aires," in Kristen McCleary, "Culture and Commerce: An Urban History of Theater in Buenos Aires, 1890–1920" (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2002).

18. Fires, however, had been a cause of concern dating back to 1776, when the site for the Buenos Aires's theater Teatro de la Ranchería was chosen based on its proximity to the fire brigade, helping to ensure investors that their money would not be lost due to fire.

19. Buenos Aires's fire chief studied these conflagrations and published an account of the most sinister in his study: José María Calaza, *Incendios de teatros: Nuestros teatros y seguridad contra incendios* (Buenos Aires: Tip. de la Penitenciaría, 1887). See also José María Calaza, *Teatros: Su construcción, sus incendios y su seguridad (análisis histórico del asunto)*, 3 vols. (Buenos Aires: Talleres Gráficos de la Penitenciaría Nacional, 1910).

20. Nat Brandt, *Chicago Death Trap: Iroquois Theatre Fire of 1903* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006).

21. Calaza, *Incendios de teatros*, 159.

22. Calaza, *Teatros*.

23. Francisco L. Romay, *Las milicias del fuego* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Históricas Argentinas, 1955), 126.

24. *Ibid.*, 138–43. The problems associated with building an effective fire department in addition to the major causes of conflagrations are not unique to Argentina or to Latin America. Lionel Frost, "Coping in Their Own Way: Asian Cities and the Problem of Fires," *Urban History* 24, no. 1 (1997): 5–16.

25. Romay, *Las milicias del fuego*. For a complete list of fires, see 214–21.

26. The original inspection report can be found in Cultura 1882, Archivo Histórico de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires (hereafter cited as AHCBA). It was published in the *Memoria del Presidente de la Comisión Municipal*, vol. 1 (Buenos Aires: Imprenta de M. Biedma, 1882).

27. The inspection report targeted the Colon most vociferously in terms of its state of physical disrepair. This original Colon was torn down in 1888 and reopened in 1908. John E. Hodge details the new theater in “The Construction of the Teatro Colon,” *The Americas* 36, no. 2 (1979): 235–55. The second Colon embraced all safety measures. It has had three safety curtains (1908, 1931, and 2011), the latest of which was designed by Argentine artist Guillermo Kuitca and set designer Julieta Ascar, who won a public bid for the project. *La Razón*, June 24, 2011.

28. Inspector’s report, Cultura 1882, AHCBA. The report is dated January 27, 1882, and signed by Enrique Alberg and Juan A. Buschiazzo.

29. Folder 257, Cultura 1888, AHCBA. The report details the individual regulations and the degree to which they comply with the 1882 regulations.

30. Folder 176, Cultura 1889, AHCBA. This report follows up on the previous year’s inspections, detailing the individual regulations and the particular rules with which individual theaters failed to comply.

31. Accounts from the fire are taken from *El Correo Español*, September 4, 5, and 12, 1891.

32. Calaza, *Teatros*, 2:147–49. Calaza noted that the theater, in different eras, had four small conflagrations that were put out before any damage was done.

33. Marcela Aspell de Yanzi Ferreira, “‘El espejo de la vida’: La regulación del Teatro Porteño en la primera mitad del siglo XIX,” *Revista de Historia del Derecho* 21 (1993): 75–96. There is also some suspicion that the Teatro de la Ranchería was deliberately burned, with speculations made that the church had aimed the rockets at the theater. See Willis Knapp Jones, *Behind Spanish American Footlights* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1966), 83.

34. City officials also looked to the United States for fire-safety methods. A letter dated October 14, 1887, from the Free Information Bureau of the Argentine Republic in New York directed to Buenos Aires mayor Antonio Crespo contains regulations on safety and hygienic standards in effect in New York, Boston and Philadelphia. Folder 161, Cultura 1887, AHCBA.

35. Carl Smith, *Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief: The Great Chicago Fire, the Haymarket Bomb, and the Model Town of Pullman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). Smith defines imaginative dimensions as the “context of thought and expression that suffuses individual and social life” (1).

36. Municipal Census, 1895. *La Gaceta Musical* reported on other theater fires in Europe in the August 13, 1882, edition. It reprinted Barcelona’s code on fire prevention in theaters on December 11, 1887. *El Correo Español* included an article listing all the recent fires in European theaters on July 7, 1887.

37. Samuel L. Baily, “The Role of Two Newspapers in the Assimilation of Italians in Buenos Aires and Sao Paulo, 1893–1913,” *International Migration Review* 12, no. 3 (1978): 321–40.

38. Gaston Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, trans. Alan C. M. Ross (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964). Smith, *Urban Disorder*, examines the daily press coverage of the three events in the book's subtitle.

39. Calaza, *Teatros*, 1:143–44.

40. *Standard*, January 21, 1882.

41. *Standard*, January 25, 1882.

42. *La Gaceta Músical*, no. 14, August 9, 1885; no. 40, September 11, 1887; the quote is from no. 41, September 18, 1887.

43. *El Correo Español*, July 1, 1887.

44. Calaza, *Incendios de teatros*.

45. *La República*, January 9, 1883.

46. A. Candelon, "Incendios y los teatros," *La Prensa*, January 30, 1882.

47. *The Standard*, *La República*, and *El Correo Español* frequently covered the Vienna Ring Theater tragedy.

48. *Standard*, June 17, 1882.

49. *La Gaceta Músical*, May 23, 1886.

50. Folder 161, Cultura 1887, AHCBA, dated August 8, 1887. On February 28, 1889, the theater finally passed an inspection and among the seven modifications made was "improvement in the *cazuela* stairway." Folder 176, Cultura 1889, AHCBA.

51. Folder 161, Cultura 1887, AHCBA, dated August 5, 1887.

52. Folder 589, Cultura 1882, AHCBA, January 27, 1882.

53. *La Gaceta Músical*, June 22, 1884.

54. *La Gaceta Músical*, July 11, 1886.

55. Original descriptions of the event are found in *La Prensa*, June 27, 1910. Analysis of the location of the bomb can be found in Horacio Salas, *El Centenario: La Argentina en Su Hora Mas Gloriosa* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1996).

56. Francisco Latzina, *Censo general de población, edificación, comercio e industrias de la ciudad de Buenos Aires 1887* (Buenos Aires: Compañía Sud-Americana de Billetes de Banco, 1889).

57. Benjamin Vicuña Mackenna, *El incendio del templo de la Compañía de Jesús*, 2nd ed. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Francisco de Aguirre, 1971).

58. See Fernando Rocchi, "Only One Argentina: The Creation of a National Market for National Goods," chap. 4 in *Chimneys in the Desert: Industrialization in Argentina during the Export Boom Years, 1870–1930* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006); "Las grandes tiendas," in Ricardo Cicerchia, *Historia de la vida privada en la Argentina*, vol. 2, *Desde la Constitución de 1853 hasta la crisis de 1930* (Buenos Aires: Troquel Editorial, 2001). Harrod's, the British department store, bought out Gath and Chaves's (founded in 1883) in Buenos Aires, instituting a new phase in conspicuous consumption in 1913.

59. *El Correo Español*, July 12, 1887.

60. In 1783, the viceroys Juan José de Vértiz y Salcedo installed lighting at street corners after the city's elite said that they would boycott performances due to dark streets, thus inaugurating public lighting in the capital city. Trenti Rocamora, "Gente de teatro del Buenos Aires colonial," *Boletín*, June 17, 1947.

61. Scobie, *Buenos Aires*; Jorge F. Liernur and Graciela Silvestri, *El Umbral de la metrópolis: Transformaciones técnicas y cultura en la modernización de Buenos Aires 1870–1930* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1993). See also *El servicio público de electricidad de la ciudad de Buenos Aires: Antecedentes de las ordenanzas 8028 y 8028 que prorrogaron las concesiones* (Buenos Aires: Imp. Caporaletti Hnos, 1940).

62. Eugene Weber, *France: Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986), 165. Weber explicitly notes that the installation of electricity at this time likely came as a result of the fire in the theater of the Paris Opéra-Comique.

63. Scobie, *Buenos Aires*, 114.

64. *Digesto 1893*. The sanction was amended on June 10, 1893.

65. Folder 36, Cultura 1892, and folder 53, Cultura 1893, AHGBA.

66. *El umbral de la metrópolis*, 30–33.