Recent works by historians of Latin American popular culture have focused on attempts by the elite classes to control, educate, or sophisticate the popular classes by defining their leisure time activities. Many of these studies take an “event-driven” approach to studying culture and tend to focus on public celebrations and rituals, such as festivals and parades, sporting events, and even funerals. A second trend has been for scholars to mine the rich cache of urban regulations during both the colonial and national eras in an attempt to measure elite attitudes towards popular class activities. For example, Juan Pedro Viqueira Albán in Propriety and Permissiveness in Bourbon Mexico eloquently shows how the rules enacted from above tell more about the attitudes and beliefs of the elites than they do about those they would attempt to regulate. A third approach has been to examine the construction of national identity. Here scholarship explores the evolution of cultural practices, like the tango and samba, that developed in the popular sectors of society and eventually became co-opted and “sanitized” by the elites, who then claimed these activities as symbols of national identity.¹

The defining characteristic of recent popular culture studies is that they focus on popular culture as arising in opposition to elite culture and do not consider areas where elite and popular culture overlap. This approach is clearly relevant to historical studies that focus on those Latin American countries where a small group of elites rule over large predominantly rural and indigenous populations. Turn-of-the-century Argentina, however, stands apart from the majority of Latin American countries. Massive immigration over a short period transformed the under-populated nation, (nearly exterminating its indigenous population in the “conquest of the wilderness” campaign of 1879). The linkage of Argentina's agricultural economy into the world market created a demand for labor that resulted in the arrival of vast numbers of primarily Spanish and Italian immigrants who re-defined the social make-up of the capital city most dramatically. In the 1850s Mexico City and Rio de Janeiro had twice as many inhabitants as did Buenos Aires. Less than forty years later, Buenos Aires exceeded all other Latin American cities in population. Its population numbered 177,787 inhabitants in 1869; by 1895, it reached 663,854 and by 1904 it totaled 950,891.² This massive demographic shift also brought with it the emergence of a mass culture and a multi-class society. Not only were most of the newly-arrived Spanish and Italian immigrants literate, they were well-accustomed to attending theatrical events for their entertainment.³
The rapid population growth in Buenos Aires resulted in a society that was greatly stratified, including working, lower-middle, middle and upper classes. It also resulted in the tendency for the city council, here a political body used as a proxy for the capital’s elite class, to focus on controlling and regulating the physical expansion of the city instead of paying attention to leisure time activities. As a result, urban entertainment in Buenos Aires developed quite differently from that in other Latin American capital cities, which closely controlled, regulated, and even subsidized cultural activities. This article seeks to broaden the current study of elite and popular culture in Latin America by examining the production and reception of the zarzuela (Spanish operetta or light opera) in the mass culture context of late-nineteenth century Buenos Aires, where all social classes attended performances. This entertainment form, thus, offers a point of overlap between popular and elite culture. The zarzuela reached its height of popularity in the 1890s, and can be seen as the first expression of mass cultural entertainment in the capital of Argentina. The myriad of ways in which this art form impacted Buenos Aires’ society is evidence that the dichotomization of elite-versus-popular can be limiting in the context of mass culture. The zarzuela, that is, transcends neat cultural categorizations by blending, overlapping, and moving between the arenas of elite and popular culture. Overall, the commercialization of culture, exemplified by the great popularity of the zarzuela, did more to form and transform cultural practices in belle époque Buenos Aires than did elite attitudes or official municipal attempts to control and shape culture. Ultimately, the zarzuela’s development was not in resistance to dominant cultural norms, but was a by-product of Buenos Aires’ rapidly urbanizing milieu.

Background of the Zarzuela

Exact theatrical definitions are elusive when discussing turn-of-the-century theater in Spain and Latin America. Generally speaking the zarzuela is a dramatic, music-laden work structured around one unified plot that combines dialogue, song and dance. Above all, the zarzuela is particular to Spain, having developed there in the seventeenth century. The zarzuela began as a court spectacle and it was characterized by the alternation of singing and dancing with spoken dialogue, which set it apart from operas of the time, and the division of the work into two acts. Over time, the zarzuela became less associated with the aristocracy and more directed toward the public at large. In the middle of the nineteenth century, a resurgence of the zarzuela occurred in Spain primarily because of the work of a new group of composers, most famously Emilio Arrieta and Francisco Asenjo Barbieri, and Joaquín Gaztambide. The zarzuela of the nineteenth century is characterized by the recreation and romantic idealization of urban and rural life in Spain. At this time two main classifications of zarzuelas occurred according to length. The zarzuela grande (hereinafter referred to as the three-act zarzuela) consisted of three-acts and they often focused on serious subject matter but were structurally related to the French opera comique, the Italian opera buffa and the Viennese operetta. One-act zarzuelas
sometimes referred to as género chico (small genre) began in 1867 when a weakening economy in Spain prompted theater managers to provide cheaper and shorter forms of entertainment to ensure an audience and income. These hour-long zarzuelas began to dominate in both Spain and Argentina. However the three-act zarzuela was never totally excluded. Indeed, while Spanish performers of the three-act zarzuela moved to the shorter performances, the longer ones continued to be part of their repertoires, even if only in truncated versions. In Buenos Aires, the three-act zarzuela was considered elite urban entertainment.

The advent of the one-act zarzuela contributed to the term’s losing any precision; by the end of the nineteenth century, “zarzuela” became an umbrella term for most Spanish musical theater. Janet Sturman notes:

The term zarzuela has always been a fairly elastic designation, but after 1880 it became even more so. Depending on the circumstances of performance and plot, designations such as juguete, revista, sainete, parodia, humorada, aproposito, écloga, pasatiempo, and others were applied to various types of theatrical presentation featuring music. All these forms were considered to be close relatives to zarzuela, and examples of them were frequently billed as such, despite the composer’s labels.

From Three-Act to One-Act
Most academic discussion of the zarzuela in Buenos Aires focuses on its one-act format. However, at the end of the nineteenth-century the two forms of zarzuela co-existed, although the one-act zarzuela was much more widely attended. The three-act zarzuela, in general, appealed to a wealthier clientele and the one-act zarzuela, also referred to as the zarzuela chica (small genre zarzuela), zarzuelita (little zarzuela), zarzuela por sección (zarzuela by section) or zarzuela por hora (zarzuela by the hour), generally appealed to a more popular audience. Yet neither form was either exclusively elite or popular.

Unlike the tango or the samba, the zarzuela in Buenos Aires became more popular after it had been established as an “elite” form of activity. However, it is important to note that the one-act zarzuela originated in Madrid. That is, the zarzuela by the hour did not develop organically out of the three-act format in Buenos Aires; it developed largely in relationship to changes in theater practices occurring in Madrid, which also corresponded to changes in Buenos Aires that resulted in a demand for cheaper urban entertainment, which the one-act zarzuela provided. However, the fact that Buenos Aires was familiar with the zarzuela in its more elevated form, combined with the fact that the city already had an established group of zarzuela performers, allowed for the rapid development of the one-act zarzuela to take place in the Argentine capital. It is important to note that the two forms were not always separated; some theaters would show both in one evening. In 1892, for example, the Teatro Apolo reserved Friday nights for their día de moda in which the long zarzuelas would be performed with a one-act zarzuela included in the evening’s entertainment. The Apolo is described as having the
"most distinguished public" among its attendees. This transition point between the three-act to the one-act zarzuela can be seen as a point of introduction of elite audiences to the zarzuela’s shorter, and usually more popular (in terms of audience composition) format.

The Zarzuela as Commercial Theater: A Study in Statistics

An examination of entertainment statistics in Buenos Aires sheds light on this transformation from the longer zarzuela into its shorter format. In 1887, the city published statistics for the first time on entertainment attendance rates and entertainment genres. In this year, zarzuelas were performed in eight different theaters and cafés in Buenos Aires, and were performed 161 times, accounting for only eight percent of the city’s total entertainment. These zarzuelas consisted of three-acts and they were shown in the greatest number at the municipal theater house, the Teatro Colón. The entertainment genres of comic operas, dramas, acrobatic, and automaton performances each sold more tickets than zarzuelas at this time.

Given the fact that the zarzuelas were performed at the Colón alongside of opera performances, it is safe to say that there was no stigma attached to zarzuelas in terms of their being a vulgar or lowbrow form of entertainment, as would later be the case.

By 1891, zarzuelas had become the most popular form of entertainment in the city in terms of attendance and number of performances given. This shift occurred despite the impact of 1890’s political crisis and economic downturn, which resulted in a decrease in attendance in 1891, when about 200,000 fewer theater tickets were sold than had been the previous year. Despite this overall decrease in theater attendance, the number of zarzuela performances offered in the city jumped markedly: There were 700 zarzuelas performed in 1890 compared to 1,048 the following year. This seeming paradox of an economic downturn resulting in an upsurge in performances strongly suggests that 1891 was the hallmark year for the one-act zarzuela. After all, the one-act zarzuela was less expensive than its longer counterpart, which allowed more people to attend the theater. Furthermore, one-act zarzuelas were performed several times an evening, which would explain the increase in performances offered. By 1895, zarzuelas were clearly the dominant entertainment form of choice with 3,778 performances attracting a total of 980,504 viewers. In this year, the impact of hour-long zarzuelas was evident: whereas only 38 different three-act zarzuelas were performed to 208,329 audience members; there were 256 one-act zarzuelas entertaining 772,175 people. More telling, perhaps, was the financial intake of the shorter zarzuelas: they generated over five times as much money ($634,442) as the longer format ($111,679).

Zarzuela spectatorship continued to increase throughout the decade so that by 1897, zarzuelas represented 74 percent of the city’s total entertainment offerings. The form dominated the theatrical scene in Buenos Aires until 1904 when the national comedies, commonly referred to as sainetes, outdrew zarzuelas for the first time. While the zarzuela by no means disappeared from the stages of Buenos Aires, by 1904 it was no longer dominant.
Zarzuela Theaters

A close examination of the city’s two most well-attended zarzuela theater houses throws into question the conventional wisdom that the longer format drew an almost exclusively elite clientele while the one-acts appealed to the popular classes. The first theater devoted exclusively to three-act zarzuelas opened in 1892, and was aptly named Teatro de la Zarzuela, after the main zarzuela theater in Madrid. Alfredo Taullard in *Historia de Nuestros Viejos Teatros* explicitly defines the audience of this theater as the elite of the city, “the same who attended opera performances.” Mariano Bosch writes that the Teatro de la Zarzuela deliberately wanted to distinguish itself from the Teatro de la Comedia which specialized in one-act zarzuelas. He defines the people who attended the Teatro de la Zarzuela as elites who “spoke French correctly, had a good command of English, and that these factors, among others, made them want to distance themselves from the lower classes who frequented theater by sections. The [Teatro de la Zarzuela’s] public was always distinguished and cultured.” (The Comedia and the Teatro de la Zarzuela drew the largest zarzuela audiences, but it is important to note that there were twelve other theaters in 1892 that staged zarzuelas.)

Despite the conventional wisdom offered by Taullard and Bosch regarding the elite composition of the public who attended the Teatro de la Zarzuela, there is little evidence to support the belief that the Teatro de la Zarzuela remained distinguished from the Comedia for long. To begin with, the year after the Teatro de Zarzuela opened it began to incorporate one-acts into its repertoire. In addition, the press at the time did not treat one theater as elite and the other as popular. The upscale publication *La Ilustración Sud-Americana* often paired the two theaters in describing the activities of zarzuela companies in Buenos Aires:

The Comedia and the Zarzuela are two little theaters that have not needed excessive praise in order to be successful; for my part, I don’t much like the genre (except when I am in a very bad mood), but I must admit that the young people don’t deprive themselves of this entertainment where full-houses are more common than any applause in favor of the government of Dr. Saenz Peña.

Likewise, a French publication in Buenos Aires, *Revue Illustree du Rio de la Plata*, rarely made any distinctions between the Teatro de la Zarzuela and the Comedia when reviewing or commenting on the entertainment taking place in them. The *Revue*, for example, describes the Teatro de la Zarzuela as always having a full house for its “little one-act zarzuelas.” The *Revue* did note, however, that the Comedia’s convenient location on the Calle de Artes, in the industrial and commercial center of the city, made it one of the city’s most crowded theaters. The fact that both theaters fell into the same city tax bracket—which was based on the prices of tickets sold in each theater—further suggests that there was minimal difference between them. The top tier of theaters were taxed the highest (*Teatro de la Opera* and the *Politeama*), the second tier included those theaters
which specialized in operettas, comic operas, and dramas and comedies in Italian (Nacional, San Martín, and Odeon), and the third tier included the majority of the city’s theaters, encompassing both the Zarzuela and the Comedia.\textsuperscript{23} The per capita ticket prices, however, show that there was a difference in the clientele who attended each theater. In 1895, for example, the Zarzuela averaged 1.1 pesos per ticket sold in contrast to 55 cents for the Comedia. The second tier theater, the Teatro San Martín, averaged 2.1 pesos per ticket and the first tier theater, the Teatro de la Opera, averaged 7.4 pesos.\textsuperscript{24} The difference between the Zarzuela and the Comedia, then, was one of degree, occurring on the lower scale of theaters. That is, despite what Bosch and Taullard write, the Zarzuela can hardly be defined as elite in comparison to the city’s upscale theaters although it did manage to rank a notch above the Comedia. This was a difference, however, that was hardly discerned by the city press, which considered the theaters quite similar. It was a difference, nonetheless, which attests to the increasingly complex make-up of the mass theater audience in Buenos Aires. The Zarzuela stopped operating in 1897, only five years after it had opened, although it was re-opened under new management in 1898 as the Teatro Argentino. By 1900, the Comedia was frequently described as being the zarzuela theater that most appealed to the city’s distinguished citizens: “The Comedia is a small elegant theater always full with the best families of our city.”\textsuperscript{25} Newspapers attested to the staying power of the Comedia: “Neither political crises nor heat prevent the [Comedia] from having full houses every night of the week,”\textsuperscript{26} and, “during these days of a heat wave it takes great bravery to enter into a theater that does not have sufficient ventilation. Regardless of this, the Comedia is packed every evening.”\textsuperscript{27} At this point, the zarzuela theaters perceived as being “popular” in terms of clientele were the Pasatiempo and the Variedades. The press, however, remained divided as to the worthiness of zarzuelas as entertainment fare. One journalist remarked on the “intrepidity of the well-known families who brave the streets of the city to go see a one-act zarzuela. They must be desperate from tedium to do so.”\textsuperscript{28}

The increasing popularity of the one-act zarzuelas forced the Teatro de la Zarzuela to accommodate a wider class of audience than it had before which is evidenced by the theater’s rapid inclusion of one-act zarzuelas along with its three-act counterpart. Bosch and Taullard, most likely, remembered this theater at its inception when the three-act zarzuela was still being performed. Their commentary on the elite public that attended the Teatro de la Zarzuela is evidence that the three-act form was thought of, and more importantly, remembered as an appropriate form of elite entertainment. The history of the Teatro de la Zarzuela shows that it provided a transitional space in which the three-act zarzuela and its elite audience began to accommodate a broader class of audience members. The evolution of the Comedia was almost the reverse in that it first appealed to a largely popular audience, as evidenced by its ticket prices, but as the newspaper reviews show, by 1900 the theater was perceived as worthy of accommodating the upper registers of porteño society.
Despite the persistence of the three-act zarzuela, by the close of the 1890s there was a clear movement towards the one-act form. Thus, popular demand re-defined theatrical performances so that they were more in keeping with the habits of the city’s new urban working-class, which was better accommodated by the shorter zarzuelas schedules—performances were held four times between 8 and 11 each evening—and the cheaper ticket prices, usually fifty cents, although there were more expensive seats available, as well. Theater-going was so variegated that the different hours that people attended the theater could give a clue as to their social status. Middle class office workers might be more likely to attend the first performance; intellectuals and people of some financial means would be more likely to attend the second or third show, and the younger “late night set” was known to frequent the last one.

Overlapping Cultures
The persistence of the three-act zarzuela, and the fact that portions of these longer forms were truncated to fit into shorter formats, shows that they still had an impact on porteño society throughout the 1890s. Janet Sturman notes that a consistent trait of zarzuela is the “continual blend of popular and elite concerns, a trait that manifests itself both in the design of individual works and in the kind of attention the genre came to attract.” Many zarzuelas straddle popular and elite culture given that they turn to well-known operas for their subject matter. Many zarzuelas, in fact, are parodies of operas. This emphasis on borrowing from high culture began in mid-nineteenth century Spain when many zarzuelas bridged the two social sectors by satirizing classical literary works, operas and western mythology. In Buenos Aires, many zarzuelas drew from operas for their own plots; and as had occurred across the Atlantic, many of these were satirical and humorous re-workings of well-known operas: *Carmela* was a comedic version of Carmen, while *Bohemios* (Bohemians) and *La Golfemia* (*The Loafer-Bohemian*) borrowed from Puccini’s *La Bohème* of 1896. Verdi’s *Aida* was parodied in *La Corte de Faraón,* (*The Pharaoh’s Court;* the opera *Mefistófeles* gave rise to the zarzuela *El Capitán Mefistófeles,* and Wagner’s *Tannhäuser* became *Tannhauser, el estanquero* (*Tannhauser, the Keeper of Reservoirs*). The Barber of Seville was parodied in *El barberillo de Lavapiés* (*The Little Barber from Lavapiés*), and *L’Africaine* by Meyerbeer resulted in *El dúo de La Africana.* There was even a zarzuela written as a “consequence” of this opera entitled *Los Africanistas* (*The Africanists*) with its action set behind-the-scenes of the *L’Africaine.* The fact that so many operas were alluded to in the zarzuelas suggests, as well, that knowledge of the high art from of opera was very familiar to a multi-class zarzuela audience.

Most scholarship discussing the thematic content of the zarzuela assumes that the majority of these plays followed the pattern set by the most well-known zarzuela, *La Verbena de la Paloma* (*The Festival of our Lady of the Dove*). *La Verbena* was filled with quintessential Madrid character types and locations. The play debuted in Madrid on February 17, 1894, and it quickly traveled throughout Latin
America, becoming exceptionally popular in Buenos Aires. *La Verbena* debuted in Buenos Aires in 1895, and was shown 562 times to 133,770 people, reaching over five times as many people as the next most popular zarzuela that year.\(^3\) In 1896, the zarzuela was seen by only 12,255 people; but still rated second-in attendance, after *El duo de la Africana* which was seen by 14,441 people.\(^3\) *La Verbena de la Paloma* centers around quintessentially Madrid events, locations, and characters. A “verbena” is a local holiday, a religious festival which includes dancing and street celebrations. The “Paloma” is a Madrid street famous for a particular statue of the Virgin of Solitude, which was believed by many to have performed miracles in the late 18\(^{th}\) century. The zarzuela is presented in the current popular speech of Madrid and it presents a cross-section of ordinary people and events of the time including young working-class girls, a lecherous old chemist who thinks he is irresistible, a typesetter in a print shop, and a model of the educated working-class men whose honesty and intelligence sets him apart from the masses.

The popularity of *La Verbena* has tended to skew common perceptions of zarzuela subject matter so that most scholarship takes it for granted that the majority of them depict the current-day life of Madrid’s working-class inhabitants. The zarzuela should be contextualized in the larger theatrical movements of the time. For example, despite its popularity, *La Verbena* was only one of 256 zarzuelas in the city in 1895 and one of 235 in 1896.\(^3\) In addition to an over-emphasis on the impact of *La Verbena*, other scholarship has focused, not surprisingly, on the extant zarzuela librettos which tend to be the ones written by the most well-known composers. It is important to remember that the zarzuelas were commercial theater in the sense that hundreds of zarzuelas were performed every year, most of which have long since been forgotten. A quick survey of the hundreds of titles of one-act zarzuelas performed in Buenos Aires in 1891, 1895, and 1896 reveals a great breadth of subject matter. While many were indeed centered in Madrid and the provinces of Spain: *La verbena de la Paloma, de Madrid a Paris* (From Madrid to Paris), *La Gran Vía* (The Great Thoroughfare), *La Romeria de Miera* (Miera’s Pilgrimage), *Un gatito de Madrid* (A Kitten From Madrid), *La Salamanquina* (The Girl from Salamanca), *Olé Sevilla* (Olé Seville), others had exotic settings: *La Sultana de Marruecos* (The Sultana from Morocco), *El moro Muza* (Muza, the Moor), *Mercado de esclavos* (Slave Market), *La Czarina* (The Zarina), *Un Viaje a Marte* (A Trip to Mars), *La Indiana* (The Indian Woman). Some were set in Spain’s colonies: *Los de Cuba* (The Cubans), *Artistas para la Havana* (Artists Going to Havana), *Meterse en Honduras* (Plunging into Honduras), *Las Amazonas del Tormes* (Tormes’ Amazon), *El ingeniero hidráulico o el paso de los Andes* (The Hydraulic Engineer or a Passage through the Andes), some focused on the supernatural: *Lucifer, El Diablo Rojo* (The Red Devil), *La Choza del Diablo* (The Devil’s Hut), *Fausto parodia* (Faust, a parody), *La almodena del Diablo* (The Devil’s Granary), and a few were already being set in the locale of Buenos Aires: *El crimen de la Boca* (The Crime of La Boca), *De paseo en Buenos Aires* (Strolling Through Buenos Aires), *Fuego de San Telmo* (San Telmo’s
Kristen McCleary

Fire), and Teatros Portenos (The Theaters of Buenos Aires). A good number of zarzuelas were simply comedic melodramas that focused on family relations and marriage: Bodas de oro (Golden Wedding), Al fin se casa la Nieves (Nieves Finally Gets Hitched), Boda ó Muerte (Marriage or Death), Para casa de los padres (To Their Parents' House), Con permiso del marido (With the Husband's Permission), El termómetro del amor (Thermometer of Love); and another popular theme related to pecuniary interests: El testamento olográfico o la herencia del tio (The Holograph Will or Uncle's Inheritance), Don Dinero (Mr. Moneybags), and Oro, Plata, Cobre . . . y Nada (Gold, Silver, Copper . . . and Nothing!), and despite the fact that poking fun at religion was prohibited under Buenos Aires' theatrical regulations, this proved to be one of the richest areas of zarzuela themes performed in the city: La sobrina del sacristan (The Sacristan's Niece), Los frailes de Villatoro (The Friars from Villatoro), El Monaguillo (The Choirboy), El arca de Noé (Noah's Ark), Las tentaciones de San Antonio (The Temptations of San Antonio), Fray Mojón (Friar "Turd"). Finally, the pervasive theme of entertainment in urban life was noted in the titles Teatro Nuevo (New Theater), Los acróbatas (The Acrobats), La noche del estreno (Opening Night), El domador de leones (The Lion Tamer), La revista (The Review), Monomanía musical, La segunda tiple (The Second Soprano), and Música clásica (Classical Music).

The great variety of zarzuela themes suggests that they served a function similar to that of contemporary television in that new entertainment was continually being offered while old standards (re-runs) were consistently being staged throughout the year. There were runaway hits, like La Verbena, but most came and went quietly, after 20 or so performances. Some of the "standards" were so well-known by the porteño public that newspapers omitted recounting the plots for fear of being redundant. One of the older classic three-act zarzuelas, Marina, originally written by Emilio Arrieta in 1855 and revised in 1871 to be more "operatic," was so well-known that the theater critic for El Correo Español commented that he would not re-tell the plot because everyone already knew it. Indeed, in 1895, Marina was seen by 41,665 people—the most of any of the three-act zarzuelas that year. Its staying power further shows that the standards had not been totally eclipsed by the hour-long zarzuelas.

Audience and Performers: Whose Show Was It Anyway?

Who attended the zarzuela performances? An examination of the demographic make-up of the city will begin to answer this question. The Spanish zarzuela reigned dominant in the 1890s at a time when European immigration was in full swing. In 1895, the city counted 181,693 Italian immigrants, 80,352 Spanish immigrants and an additional 24,000 or so inhabitants who hailed from other Latin American countries, including neighboring Uruguay, and who thus could take advantage of Spanish-language entertainment fare. The native-born Argentine population numbered 318,361. In 1895, then, of a total population of 663,854 people, about 605,000 of them spoke either Spanish or Italian and thus could probably
understand a good portion of the zarzuela entertainment fare. Any of the city’s inhabitants, however, could have bought the 892,175 tickets sold for zarzuela performances that year. While zarzuelas appealed most obviously to the Spanish immigrants in Buenos Aires who were accustomed to seeing them in their home provinces. Most Spanish immigrants to Buenos Aires were from northern Spain, while most Spanish theatrical production originated in Madrid. It is worth noting that their numbers alone do not account for all of the audience members who went to zarzuela performances. Many native-born Argentines attended zarzuelas and it is likely, although difficult to prove, that immigrants from Italy and Latin American countries also attended the zarzuelas from time to time, if, for no other reason than that this form of entertainment so dominated the city and was relatively inexpensive. The majority of Italian-language theater, for example, took place in the mid-range of city theaters; in contrast, the one-act zarzuelas took place in the city’s cheapest theaters.

It is clear that language comprehension was not a barrier between audience attendance and entertainment genre for the elite classes of porteño society; very few operas, after all, were sung in Spanish, fewer yet in French or English, the preferred second languages of many elites. Were all social classes just as likely to dispense with language comprehension in their choice of entertainment? Immigrant newspapers contained advertisements for all theatrical fare taking place throughout the city without regard to the language of their readers, suggesting that there was some linguistic overlap between audiences and entertainment types for all social classes. The main Spanish-community newspaper, El Correo Español, for example, reported on English theater—even if only to note the lack of English-speakers in the audience:

There are as many English faces there (in the Teatro Nacional) as there are Chinese. But it is sure that the empresario is earning a lot of money because the plays are staged with the quality and detail that the English are known for. That explains why so many people who don’t understand English attend the performances.

While ethnic newspapers devoted most of their entertainment coverage to the performances of their compatriots, they consistently reviewed the wide variety of entertainment genres offered in the city.

Zarzuelas were sufficiently known by the city’s Italian population for theater managers to offer the typically Spanish form of entertainment in Italian between 1895 and 1900. Little information exists on these zarzuelas other than the titles enumerated by city publications that suggest that the Italian-language zarzuelas had a variety of origins. Most of the plays are actual translations of Spanish zarzuelas. In addition to these, it does appear that a number were either originally written for an Italian locale or merely relocated from a Spanish to Italian location. Such titles include: Un milanes in mar (A Milano at Sea); El carnaval de Milán (The Carnival in Milan), Un milanes in Africa (A Milano in Africa); Un milanes nell’
Isola (A Milano on an Island). The height of the zarzuelas in Italian occurred in 1895 when 120,095 people attended these performances. The genre had all but disappeared by 1900, when only twelve Italian zarzuelas took place accommodating 5,587 audience members. Because little scholarly attention has been paid to this curious genre it is difficult to be certain if the success of the Spanish zarzuela actually generated new Italian “zarzuelas” or if the term itself was used as a mere marketing ploy. Regardless, the existence of the category shows that the term “zarzuela” carried enough weight to influence non-Spanish language cultural productions in the city. “Zarzuela” most likely was shorthand for affordable, colorful, musical entertainment that merely occupied an hour of a person’s increasingly structured day.

While speakers of any of the romance languages could probably make enough sense of the zarzuelas being performed, these plays offered enough visual splendors to entertain even those who could not fully understand the language. Zarzuelas, after all, emphasized song, dance, and stage design over semantics. Reviews of zarzuelas often skipped over evaluations of performances, instead focusing on the elaborate nature of the set designs. For example, the zarzuela Sueños de oro (Dreams of Gold) was cited for being especially crowd-pleasing due to its “sumptuous stage, magnificent decorations and splendid costumes.” The music, of course, was popular, too, since audience members even made the cast repeat particular songs during the performance. It was not uncommon for theatrical reviews to spend the majority of the space describing the lushness of the stage’s visual trappings. Many reviewers actually included the amount of money that the theater managers had apportioned for stage design and costumes. Some of the most popular zarzuelas, in terms of audience attendance rates, were those that had a variety of exotic locales for which elaborate backdrops could be painted. The successful and often performed “message in a bottle” story of Los Sobrinos de Capitán Grant (Captain Grant’s Nephews), based on Jules Verne’s 1867 novel, Les Enfants du Capitaine Grant, takes place in 18 exotic locales, including Madrid, Patagonia, Australia, and the Argentine Pampas. A separate backdrop and appropriate costumes were supplied for each of those locations. The zarzuela played to 25,673 in 1895, the second most attended of any of the longer zarzuelas that year.

Buenos Aires provided the audience for the zarzuelas but without acting troupes from Spain, the genre would have not been so dominant. During the 1890s, theatrical activity in Buenos Aires was provided almost exclusively by foreign acting groups. The first zarzuela troupes arrived in 1855 but there were not regular visits until the next decade. As the Spanish population increased in Buenos Aires towards the end of the century, demand for entertainment increased and acting troupes from Spain were in no short supply. Furthermore, throughout the 1890s, most theatrical activity in Europe and South America ceased during the summer months, which enabled performers from Spain to “double dip” and take advantage of the fact that the European summer corresponded to the South American winter, the high season for theater attendance. French, Italian, and English
performing companies also toured South America, but no other group came close to competing with the number of Spanish performers in the nation’s former colonies. During the peak of the zarzuela’s popularity towards the end of the 1890s, there were upwards of eleven Spanish troupes performing in Buenos Aires at the same time.\textsuperscript{56} While many Spanish actors made Buenos Aires their permanent home, the majority of acting groups traveled annually between Spain and different regions of Latin America.

Buenos Aires theater managers usually visited Europe once a year to contract performers for the up-coming season. The touring zarzuela companies often consisted of at least 25 individuals who either specialized in singing (sopranos, tenors, and baritones, among other parts), dancing or working the behind-the-scenes (stage directors, prompters, stage painters, tailors, wig-makers and machinists). Each zarzuela troupe had a ready program in their repertoire that they would play on different nights; they usually performed four different zarzuelas per evening. On March 21, 1890, the main newspaper devoted to the colony of Spaniards in Buenos Aires, \textit{El Correo Español}, welcomed the Varela Jordan Zarzuela Company listing the company’s repertoire which included 64 standards and ten new works, and these were both three-act and one-act zarzuelas. Package ticket subscriptions were available for 30 functions, suggesting that the company did indeed perform the majority of the plays in its repertoire. The general entrance fee was one peso, and individual seats within the theater ranged from 50 cents in the “paradise” to box seats for 10 pesos. Even though zarzuela prices were so low that seats were accessible to all, it is important to note that the theaters continued to have cost-differentiated seats and boxes; hence, prices at zarzuela theaters were in everyone’s reach, but those who wished to pay a little extra to sit apart from the \textit{hoi polloi} certainly had that option.

The Buenos Aires press closely followed the movement of theatrical troupes from Spain to Argentina and announced departure and arrival dates. In March of 1893, \textit{La Ilustracion Sud-Americana} reported that Señora Tubau’s comedy company was setting sail from Cádiz, Spain, on the sixth of the month and would begin performing at the Teatro Nacional in Buenos Aires in the first week of April. The reporter was unable to provide names but was sure that “many who had entertained Buenos Aires before would return.”\textsuperscript{57} The continual migration of Spanish acting troupes meant that there was little lag time between the debut of a zarzuela in Spain and its appearance in Buenos Aires. \textit{La Ilustracion Sud-Americana} wrote:

\begin{quote}
Just like last year, no sooner does a new zarzuela open in Madrid than the acting company at the \textit{Teatro Onrubia} is pressured to put it on stage here. Thus, we have seen \textit{Realidad} and \textit{Hijo de Don Juan} at the same time as we are seeing \textit{[the established works] Marina} and \textit{La Loca de la Casa [The Mad Housewife]}.\textsuperscript{58}
\end{quote}

Another newspaper commented that both Madrid’s successes and failures would wend their way to Buenos Aires where a “steeple chase” would then result on the
part of the theater managers, each vying to be the first to stage the new plays. The large number of Spaniards entertaining Argentines had various repercussions for the city. For example, in 1900 it was reported that the local criollo authors were thinking of organizing to promote the work of native-born actors and writers. The actors were needed because, according to the article, Spanish actors had to work harder at criollo parts, to capture the accent and personification of Buenos Aires “types.” As a result, they preferred not to take these roles or when they did take them, they tended to “destroy them either out of ignorance or laziness.”

The one area that caused the most controversy in Buenos Aires occurred at the height of the zarzuela’s popularity during independence day celebrations — a day when it was impossible to forget that the city’s current entertainers were also its former colonizers. The national holidays of May 25 and July 9 were commonly celebrated in the city’s theaters and part of the celebration included singing the Argentine national anthem. Normally, the evening’s performers led the singing. However, at this time the national anthem contained phrases injurious to Spain. The controversy surrounded the last line of the first strophe of the anthem:

Oid, mortals, el grito sagrado
Libertad, Libertad, Libertad;
Oid el ruido de rotas cadenzas;
Ved en trono a la noble igualdad
Se levanta en la faz de la tierra
Una nueva, gloriosa Nación
Coronada su sien de laurels
Y a sus plantas rendido un León

Hark! Hear the sounds, the sounds that are swelling
We are free! We are free! We are free!
Hark! Hear you, our fetters are breaking!
On her throne noble liberty see!
In the sight of the world has arisen
A nation glorious rejoicing and free.
Her fair brow with laurels encircled
The proud Lion of Spain at her knee!

Discussion about the problems arising from the lyrics had taken place in the nation’s congress in 1893. The writer and statesman, Lucio Vicente López, who was also the grandson of Vicente López y Planes, the anthem’s original author, referred explicitly to theaters as being the primary area where singing the anthem was problematic given the “cosmopolitan” make-up of the audience. Congress decided against changing the lyrics of the anthem at this time. The issue had not gone away by any means and seemed to become increasingly volatile as the zarzuela became more popular. On May 25, 1895, for example, a Spanish theatrical com-
pany performing at the Teatro Rivadavia refused to sing the national anthem much to the dismay of the Argentine portion of the audience who whistled and stomped, demanding that it be sung. The audience finally desisted with their demands and the evening’s entertainment took place. The following night, however, a group of young men “of the best society” attended the theater, and demanded that the Spaniards sing the Argentine anthem. During the second act, the lead actor appeared asking the young men to restore calm in the theater. His request went unheeded, and the actor then picked up a wreath of streams bearing Argentina’s national colors, mockingly kissed it, caressed it, and shouted, “Viva Argentina!” Upset with his actions, someone in the audience threw a chair onto the stage and others followed suit. According to the Correo Espanol, revolvers were even pointed in the general direction of the Spanish actor who then began to swear his allegiance to Argentina, hastily apologizing for causing anyone to have “misinterpreted” his previous actions. The actor was reportedly injured (if it was his body or his pride, the press accounts did not make clear) and he absented himself from the stage for a few days. Zarzuela performers in other theaters of the city, namely the Comedia and the Nacional, did sing the national anthem but refused to sing the parts that were injurious to Spain. Similar events took place throughout the country during this year. These incidences show in no uncertain terms that the audience consisted of upper-class members, often rowdy youths, who, according to the newspaper, were so well-known that it was pointless (and very likely problematic for the paper’s editors) to print their names. The issue of the national anthem was not resolved until 1900, when President Roca issued a decree that did not change the lyrics but allowed the problematic phrases to be skipped over during official functions. Theaters, however, had taken on a new role: they were now an arena in which issues of national identity would be processed.

Zarzuela’s Impact on the Development of a National Theater in Buenos Aires

The dominance of Spanish entertainment fare in Buenos Aires inadvertently resulted in a burgeoning sense of national identity on the part of criollo audiences, actors, and writers in a number of ways. It became inevitable that the zarzuelas would eventually be replaced by productions that reflected the nuances of the local landscape, especially as second generation immigrants in Buenos Aires came of age. While the zarzuela cannot be seen as the sole influence on the national comedies, known as sainetes, which came to dominate theater in Buenos Aires in the early twentieth century, it did pave the way for much of the sainete’s evolution. Blas Raúl Gallo explicitly notes that the género chico (small genre) in Buenos Aires started out as zarzuela and became transformed into the Hispanic-Argentine sainete. Spanish playwrights began to adapt zarzuelas to fit a Buenos Aires setting, and write new ones with an Argentine setting relatively early on. As early as 1887, La Gran Avenida, a parody of the Spanish zarzuela, La Gran Via, was written with a Buenos Aires setting. In 1890, the Spaniard Justo López de Gomara
Kristen McCleary wrote *De paseo en Buenos Aires*, which focused on quintessential Buenos Aires locales. Notably, the play opens in one of the city’s theaters, *Teatro San Martín*, and visits other porteño sites like the police commissary, the Plaza Victoria (later Plaza de Mayo), the Immigrants’ Hotel, La Boca del Riachuelo, a fruit market and the *Avenida de Mayo*. These early plays were often quite patriotic despite the fact that they were penned by Spaniards. This play, for example, revolves around the “re-education” of a would-be count, an immigrant who has lived off of the kindness of strangers for the better part of a year. By the end of the play, the loafer has agreed to change his ways and get a job. The aptly-named character, Don Pais, applauds the count’s decision and says “you will be an example for all who will learn that development does not spring from foolish ways, one only prospers who honorably works!” In addition to 81 speaking parts, the play makes use of numerous characters with non-speaking roles who appear in a grand finale in which personifications of Argentina’s economic base (livestock, agricultural and manufacturing industries) parade across the stage. In the last scene, a figure dressed as the Argentine Republic speaks out: “Proud! I am happy with you, my people. Although young in history you have already traveled a long road . . . You will be the first people of the world before the century ends!” This patriotic speech is followed by a promenading group of dancers costumed in Argentina’s national colors of blue and white. They carry banners with the coats of arms from each of the provinces of the country; ironically enough, the play ends with the singing of the Argentine national anthem.

Eventually, a genre of plays that theater historian Luis Ordaz refers to as *zarzuelismo criollo* developed where Argentine playwrights would use the general format of the zarzuela to write their own locally-based plays. These first plays written by Argentine authors were offered as one of the four sections in an evening’s zarzuela performance and were performed by Spanish acting troupes. In 1895, for example, Argentine playwrights David Peña and Martín Coronado, debuted *La lucha por la vida* (Struggle for Life) and *Salvador*, respectively, as the only non-zarzuelas in the evening’s entertainment. In May 1890, playwright Nemesio Trejo, originator of the “genero chico criollo” debuted *La Fiesta de San Marcos* (The Festival of San Marcos) which was intercalated with the zarzuelas *Gorro Frigio* (Phrygian Cap), *Las Niñas Exija* (The Girls Demand It), and *Maestro de Obra Prima* (The Master of the Master Work). By 1897, the Rivadavia Theater, specialized in the genre of zarzuela criolla, with all of the plays performed by the Spanish acting company led by Rogelio Juárez, one of the few Spanish actors who was lauded for playing criollo parts adeptly.

Overall, the transformation of the zarzuela criolla into the sainete nacional resulted in the latter genre retaining much of the general format of the Spanish one-act zarzuelas. Less dependent on musical numbers, although most sainetes still included a great many songs and dances, sainetes were performed by the hour in the same commercial houses as the zarzuelas; they were primarily comedies that were affordably priced; and the sainetes borrowed from the local argot and charac-
ters of Buenos Aires in the same manner as the Madrid-based zarzuelas had focused on local types and language. Also, just as the zarzuela librettos had been sold in kiosks in Madrid, the sainete playscripts were also sold in kiosks throughout Buenos Aires. The zarzuela of the 1890s not only established the template for commercialized national theater in Buenos Aires in the 1900s but also provided the stage for its debut.

**Popular Tastes vs. Official Oversight**

The growth of the zarzuela in Buenos Aires happened against the desires of the city council, which preferred other forms of entertainment. In terms of theater, the city council primarily concerned itself with ensuring the safety of audience members by requiring that the largely unsafe theater houses install reserves of water and add exits so that people could easily vacate theater houses in case of fire. Until the Teatro Colón reopened in 1908, the city had not subsidized the construction or operation of any theater other than giving tax exempt status to the city theater that hosted the nation’s official celebrations while the new Teatro Colón was being built.

The municipality, however, did not mince words in making it clear what type of theatrical entertainment was desirable. During one city council meeting, amidst a debate about which of the city’s two opera houses, the Teatro de la Opera or the Politeama, actually served as the city’s “official” theater, a council member summed up the official view of culture in the city:

> It is nothing new that municipal governments try to help their cities to achieve a high level of civilization; therefore, we should do all we can to foment the lyric arts [opera], and in this way contribute to the culture of our people.

In official publications, the city was not shy about criticizing theaters which did not appeal to the taste of its reigning officials. In 1887, while the three-act zarzuelas were prominent, the main zarzuela theaters, Teatro Nacional and the Teatro San Martín, were innocuously described in the city census. This is in comparison to the truly “popular” theater of the time, the Teatro Pasatiempo, which is described as being a noisy theater house; “thanks to both the artists who perform there, as well as the audience which is composed of rowdy young people who are poorly entertained.” (The Pasatiempo specialized in concerts, dances, and puppeteer groups at this time.) By 1893, the tone that city officials took in regard to zarzuelas had dramatically changed. The city’s 1893 statistical yearbook included a warning that the zarzuela was having an unhealthy influence on the city at large because it exhibited works of doubtful taste: “These zarzuelas are corrupting the artistic theater in Buenos Aires.” Clearly, the rapid growth in attendance showed that official opinion seldom coincided with the actual theater-going habits of the majority of the city’s inhabitants.
While, the city council generally did nothing more than comment on the poor taste of zarzuela audience members, there were times when it intervened in zarzuela productions by using its right to censor plays. Censorship was allowed for plays that: 1) depicted public officials in a comedic or derogatory manner, 2) mocked religious figures, or 3) corrupted the good manners or the morals of its audience. The city never heavily exercised its role as censor during the 1890s, however, a handful of zarzuelas were either prohibited or requested to make changes in their scripts before being performed on the stage. While the city had the right to preview all works before they appeared on stage, the rapidity with which plays came and went in the city made it virtually impossible to review everything. Instead, the city often opted to investigate only those zarzuelas that were rumored to impinge on the public’s sense of decorum. By default, the city’s attention turned to the more popular zarzuelas, for these would be the ones to generate enough discussion to actually reach the council’s attention. More often than not, the council gave theater managers a chance to make changes to the play before actually pulling it from the stage. Of the thousands of zarzuelas performed in Buenos Aires, there is evidence that only a handful were censored.

Given the number of zarzuelas that made fun of religion, one would expect that this would be an active area of censorship. However, *El Monaguillo* (*The Choirboy*) was one of the few to be censored. Written by Miguel Marqués it debuted on May 26, 1891, in the Teatro Apolo in Madrid and arrived in Buenos Aires shortly thereafter. In November of 1891, the Buenos Aires City Council agreed to prohibit its performance on the grounds that it was “morally offensive.” The play revolves around Antonia, the niece of a priest, who falls in love with the son of a pharmacist, Juanito. To avoid being forced into marriages to partners of their guardians’ choice, the young lovers decide to turn to local religious institutions for protection. The comedy of the play revolves around the fact that eventually, instead of Antonia entering the convent, Juanito does and in his place, Antonia takes the role of choirboy. The play, quite predictably, focuses its humor on the mistaken gendered identity of the two main characters made even funnier, presumably, by the fact that the play is set in religious institutions. It seems to have taken quite awhile for the city to actually censor it in 1891 since *El Monaguillo* managed 47 performances in front of 10,920 people. Despite the fact that it was censored, the zarzuela did not languish for long; it appears in the 1895 city statistics where *El Monaguillo* played 65 times to 9,429 people.

Many other zarzuelas were reviewed by the censorship commission but were allowed to play despite the fact that they failed to measure up to the city’s standard of good taste. In August 1892, reports that attendance rates for *El Prior y El Priorato* (*The Prior and his Priorship*) had far out-numbered that of its original run, caused the city council to pull it from the stage. However, after reviewing the play, the commission decided that it could be performed since it was only guilty of falling short of artistic merit. The press commented that the play was a little off color “but what zarzuela isn’t?”
Perhaps the most well-known case of city censorship occurred with the performance of one of the most popular of all zarzuelas in Latin America, *La Gran Via (The Great Thoroughfare)*, which premiered in Madrid on July 2, 1886, where it reached such levels of success that it was exported to Vienna, Paris, Prague, London and New York. The play is quite literally about the streets of Madrid, which appear as characters who complain of their plight in light of urban improvements; they are soon to be routed to make room for a large thoroughfare (*la gran via*). A typical scene has the city fountain situated in the middle of the plaza complaining that the city council is going to get rid of her to make room for a tramcar route. In another scene impending victims of civic improvement also lament that the low-class dance hall and its working-class clientele will be destroyed for the arrival of the *gran via*.

When the play arrived in Buenos Aires in 1887 it could not have depicted the events currently taking place there more accurately. The city’s first mayor, Torcuato de Alvear, who served from 1880-1887, transformed the burgeoning metropolis in a way which *La Gran Via* had anticipated. Perhaps his most well-known plan at the time was to unite two central city plazas into the single *Plaza de Mayo* and to create his own *gran via*, the *Avenida de Mayo*. While street construction did not begin until 1889, the legal entanglements of the project certainly were known by most of the city’s denizens at the time of the play’s debut two years earlier.

Shortly after *La Gran Via* debuted in Buenos Aires, rumors began to circulate that a playwright was adapting it to the city, and would be called *La Gran Avenida* (*The Great Avenue*—a clear reference to Alvear’s project.) Newspapers closely followed the hype building up to the play’s opening night. Anticipation was so great that tickets were sold in advance and even these were hard to come by. While it was rumored that a Buenos Aires journalist was penning the satire, the Spanish press wrote that it was widely believed that the play was being written by a Spaniard, borrowing an Argentine journalist’s name. Regardless of the playwright’s nationality, the current mayor ordered the police to shut it down. The theater’s manager responded that he would make the changes required by the city so that the play would be approved for the stage. *La Gran Via* shows up in the city statistics throughout the 1890s but there is no reference to *La Gran Avenida*, suggesting that even if it eventually made it to the stage, its duration was limited. It is likely that the suppression of *La Gran Avenida* occurred because it deigned to make fun of a well-known political figure, and it was in that respect that the censorship law was most frequently exercised.

While the content of many of the comedic zarzuelas did not coincide with the taste of the city council members, the ruling body did relatively little to control the type of zarzuelas performed in the city. Censorship was not always enforced since some of the censored zarzuelas, like *El Monaguillo*, were eventually performed. The heaviest intervention on the part of the municipality occurred at the end of the 1890s, when zarzuelas became more provocative. Yet even then only twenty were reviewed for censorship and theater managers complained openly about the
need to speed up the review process. The openness with which the press covered theater censorship, and the proclivity of zarzuela companies to be increasingly provocative also suggests that the city preferred to reprimand rather than regulate in the area of theatrical content.

Conclusions

Studying the zarzuela in Buenos Aires throws into question academic conceptions of rigid separations between elite and popular culture in Latin America. While the shorter and longer forms of the zarzuelas appealed to different social classes, these formats were never exclusively popular or elite; there was always a social space allowing for class overlap given the price differentials of theater tickets at all of the city’s theaters. In content, the zarzuelas also stressed an overlap between elite and popular culture by offering parodies of operas. Furthermore, the sheer dominance of zarzuela in Buenos Aires combined with the fact that it was the cheapest theatrical fare during the 1890s suggests that it drew audience members from diverse ethnic backgrounds. The zarzuela fit well with the urban demands at the turn of the century by offering a flexible schedule, and light, humorous entertainment that was affordable to all; zarzuelas filled the audience’s desires to see something new as well as to see something familiar. Ultimately, the laissez faire attitude of the city council in regard to all forms of urban entertainment allowed commercial demand to define cultural norms. The disparaging remarks that the city’s press and the city council made about the zarzuelas being low-brow entertainment, after all, could not even convince elites that a visit to a zarzuela theater was anything less than a perfectly fine way to end one’s day.

Notes

1. An emphasis on the event-driven approach to cultural history can be found in Rituals of Rule, Rituals of Resistance: Public Celebrations and Popular Culture in Mexico. An exhaustive study of regulations and cultural practices can be found in Juan Pedro Viquiera Alban’s investigation of the Bourbon reforms on Mexico City in Propriety and Permissiveness in Bourbon Mexico. Essays focusing on the creation of national identity can be found in Latin American Popular Culture: An Introduction. It should be noted that all the edited volumes previously mentioned also include essays that focus on the regulation of popular culture. Two other books stand out in terms of locating elite culture in contrast or opposition to popular culture. Jeffrey Needell’s A Tropical Belle Epoque: Elite culture and society in turn-of-the-century Rio de Janeiro. Needell investigates elite institutions and practices which methodologically exclude any participation by the popular classes, such as the jockey club, private educational institutions, and the opera house. William H. Beezley in Judas at the Jockey Club and Other Episodes of Porfirian Mexico clearly posits the relationship of popular and elite sectors of society in opposition to one another. He sees the bullfight, for example, as a metaphor for Mexican society in which “los de arriba (the topcats) had no trouble separating
themselves from los de abajo (the underdogs); the gente decente have a sense of identity as strong as those who belong to the pueblo. The poor, the lower class, the workers, the campesinos, and the peones watch in the sun; the owners, the upper class, the wealthy, the foreigners, the managers, the politicians and the churchmen sit in the shade,” (page 5). In terms of the tango and samba, see John Charles Chasteen, “Black Kings, Blackface Carnival, and Nineteenth-Century Origins of the Tango,” and Thomas L. Benjamin, “Racial Parity and National Humor: Exploring Brazilian Samba from Noel Rosa to Carmen Miranda, 1930-1939,” both in Latin American Popular Culture: An Introduction. Also see Chasteen, “The Prehistory of Samba: Carnival Dancing in Rio de Janeiro, 1840-1917.”

2. Censo General de Población, Edificación, Comercio e Industrias de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, 1904.

3. José C. Moya shows that Spanish immigrants to Buenos Aires had rates of literacy that reached 70%. In fact, he argues that lower literacy rates were found among those who decided to remain in Spain rather than emigrate. See pages 28 and 93 of Cousins and Strangers: Spanish Immigrants in Buenos Aires, 1850-1930. Emilio Cotarelo y Mori discusses the zarzuela networks that penetrated the provinces of Spain in Historia de la zarzuela.

4. The zarzuela never totally disappeared from the stage, but beginning in the 1900s national comedies and silent movies began to prevail.

5. The historical development of the zarzuela is more complicated than I have presented here. See Emilio Cotarelo y Mori, Historia de la zarzuela; Matilde Muñoz, Historia de la zarzuela y el género chico; Mary Caroline Montano, The Manuel Areu Collection of 19th-century zarzuelas; and Janet Sturman, Zarzuela: Spanish Operetta, American Stage.


7. Mariano Bosch notes that the three-act zarzuela performers worked in the one-act zarzuelas so as to not “die of hunger.” See Historia de los Origenes del Teatro Nacional Argentino, page 17.


9. During the first few years that the city statistics were published, the following forms of entertainment attendance rates were included: circus, pelota, or Basque jai alai, games, dances, acrobatic performances, automatons, shooting ranges, magic shows, and concerts. By 1898, statistics focused almost exclusively on attendance rates of urban theaters with a new category “other attractions” filling in for most of the other forms of entertainment. In 1887, nine different circuses were included, but ten years later only one remained in the statistics attesting to the increasing importance of theatrical entertainment in the city. See Anuario Estadistico for 1891 (which includes the 1887-91 statistics), 1896 and 1897.

10. This original Teatro Colón should not be confused with the one which opened in 1908, specializing exclusively in operas. The original Colón stopped operating in 1888.

11. All of these numbers are taken from the Anuario Estadistico for 1891. In 1890, 1,073,747 tickets were sold to all forms of entertainment in the city; in 1891,
928,815 tickets were sold.

12. In contrast, there were 33 fewer dramatic performances, 46 fewer comic operas, 170 fewer concerts and 215 fewer “miscellaneous” forms of entertainment, such as the circus, acrobatic performances and the basque pelota game (a form of jai alai).

13. The next most popular form of entertainment that year fell in the city’s category of dramas and comedies, which drew in 241,242 audience members, about one-third of that of the zarzuelas. See Anuario Estadistico, 1895.

14. Anuario Estadistico, 1895. This was the first year that the city distinguished between the three-act and one-act formats.


16. In 1904, 274,000 tickets were sold for Spanish zarzuelas and 399,000 for national comedies. See Anuario Estadistico, 1904.

17. Alfredo Taullard, Historia de nuestros viejos teatros.


19. In 1892, the Teatro de la Comedia did show the most zarzuelas with 430 performances. However, the Apolo had 240 zarzuelas, the Alhambra 175, the Variedades 87, and the Onrubia 40 with the remaining theaters showing fewer than 25 zarzuelas each. See Anuario Estadistico for 1894 which contains statistics for 1891-1894.

20. La Ilustración Sud-Americana, March 1, 1893.


23. The Revista Municipal published in February of 1895 details the city tax code for theaters.

24. These statistics were generated by dividing overall income generated in theaters by the overall attendance rates from the Anuario Estadistico of 1895.


26. El Diario, November 18, 1900.


29. These changes were not particular to Buenos Aires. Silvia Pellarolo shows that the rise of the theater by the hour were contemporaneous in Madrid and Buenos Aires and the other places that Spanish acting troupes performed such as Santiago de Chile, Mexico City, and Havana. See Sainete Criollo, Democracia / Representación: El caso de Nemesio Trejo, pages 98-99.

30. These are the distinctions given by Manuel Abascal Brunet and Eugenio Pereira’s Pepe Vila: La Zarzuela Chica en Chile, page 26.


34. The parody of *Carmen* is mentioned in Mariano Bosch, *Historia del Teatro en Buenos Aires*, page 462. Other operas and their satirical versions are compared between the titles performed in Buenos Aires appearing in the *Anuario Estadisticos* of 1891, 1895 and 1896, and a variety of sources including Manuel Abascal Brunet and Eugenio Pereira’s *Pepe Vila: La Zarzuela Chica en Chile*. Sturman mentions the *Aida* parody on page 24 of *Zarzuela: Spanish Operetta, American Stage*. Synopses of some of the parodies can be found on the website: www.nashwan.demon.co.uk/syn. The other main source recounting zarzuela plots is Roger Alier’s *Diccionario de la zarzuela : biografias de compositores, argumentos y comentarios musicales sobre las principales zarzuelas del repertorio actual*.

35. The appeal of the zarzuela to all social classes is reminiscent of Shakespeare’s popularity in the United States during the first half of the nineteenth century. Lawrence Levine in his book, *Highbrow/Lowbrow : The Emergence of a Cultural Hierarchy in America*, argues that the oral tradition of American society allowed all social classes to enjoy Shakespeare and that it was not until the oral tradition was replaced by the written tradition in the latter part of the century that a “cultural hierarchy” began to emerge which removed Shakespeare from the reaches of a non-literate audience. While it is possible that the zarzuela audience members could enjoy the parody without actually knowing the source of the parody, the fluidity with which segments of operas were used in zarzuelas suggests that at the very least the producers and purveyors of zarzuelas knew operas well. I believe the audience members most likely did, too, since the range of entertainment offerings was much less profuse at the end of the 19th century than what we are accustomed to today.


39. Only three issues of the *Anuario Estadistico* printed individual zarzuela titles and attendance rates, 1891, 1895, and 1896.

40. In May of 1895, *Revue Illustree Du Rio de la Plata* commented that the one-act zarzuelas opened up a new theatrical season in Buenos Aires by introducing new plays and reviving old ones.


42. *El Correo Espanol*, April 26, 1890.

43. *Anuario Estadistico*, 1895.

44. The 1904 census also counts 33,185 French people in 1895, with Swiss, German, Austrians, and Eastern Europeans making up the rest of the city’s population. There are 4,310 people included in the category of “other.” These are very likely immigrants from the Middle East.

45. City population data are taken from the 1904 city census which also published data from the previous census years of 1869, 1887 and 1895. Statistics regarding zarzuela rates of attendance are taken from the *Anuario Estadistico*, 1895.
46. City statistics that list theaters in accordance to entertainment genre show that Italian performances were usually operas and comic operas. These theaters fell into the second of three tax brackets. Zarzuela theaters were in the third tax bracket. Taxes are discussed in *Concejo Deliberante Municipal, Versión Taquigráfica*, June 15, 1900.

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

48. Newspapers examined include the English-community newspaper, *The Standard*, the Spanish-community newspaper, *El Correo Español*, the Italian newspaper, *La Patria Italiana* and the general newspapers *El Diario* and *La Prensa*. Even upper-class magazines covered zarzuela entertainment in the 1890s, almost always favorably. These magazines include *Revue Illustree Du Rio de la Plata* and *La Ilustración Sud-Americana*.

49. I reviewed the *Anuarios Estadísticos* between 1890 and 1905 for this data. The listing of Italian zarzuela titles occurs in the 1895 volume.


51. Argentina's preeminent theater historian, Mariano Bosch, refers to *Los Sobrinos del Capitán Grant* as a piece of nonsense (una pavada) showing that even the three-act zarzuelas were not consistently considered appropriate forms of high culture. See Bosch, *Historia del Teatro en Buenos Aires*, page 339.

52. In 1896, this zarzuela drew 5,473 audience members, ranking it in the top five of the three-act zarzuelas for that year. *Anuario Estadistico*, 1896.

53. Teodoro Klein in *El Actor en El Rio de la Plata: de Casacuberta a los Podesta* writes that the rupture of the system of national acting companies which had begun in 1783 suffered a half century set back and only ended with the advent of Pepe Podesta, who appeared on the stages of the *Apolo* theater in 1901, page 185.


55. Native Argentine actors specialized first in circus performances and later in criollo or gaucho dramas. They had relatively little impact on the theatrical scene until the 1900s. Teodoro Klein, *El Actor en El Rio de la Plata: de Casacuberta a los Podesta*.


60. *El Diario*, August 18, 1900.

61. See, Gabriel Monserrat, *El Poema del Himno Nacional Argentino: Estudio historial y crítico*, pp. 7-8. This English translation appears, as well, having been written by H. Ware and originally appearing in the *Buenos Aires Herald*, May 9, 1931.


63. The Spanish community newspaper continued to note disruptions in theaters where
the Spaniards refused to sing the national anthem during the July 9 celebrations. In the city of Rosario, the national guard actually took to the stage to force the Spaniards to sing the first phrase of the anthem. The editor of the newspaper noted that such things did not happen in Chile where the country eliminated the “injurious” phrases of their national anthem. In Santa Fe, as well, a group of Spaniards attending a zarzuela entitled, El árbol de San Lorenzo, (The Tree of San Lorenzo) which called Spaniards “usurpers, traitors, infamous louts, etc.” could not “suffer in silence” so they protested and were then set upon by the other audience members where the fight then moved to the street. El Correo Español, July 12 and 13, 1895. Argentine theater historian, Alfredo Taullard, recounts yet another event from the same year that took place in the Plaza Lorea when a Spanish actress, “la Perales,” appeared on stage wearing the colors of the Spanish flag with a black band to signify that she was in mourning. She sang the Argentine national anthem in reverse from finish to start, replacing the word “lion” with “mouse,” a change which was not looked upon very kindly by the Argentine portion of the audience who responded by whistling, yelling, and throwing objects onto the stage. The event ultimately ended with Perales’ “emigration” from Argentina. Taullard, Historia de nuestros viejos teatros. Mariano Bosch also recounts the problems with the national anthem. See Historia del Teatro en Buenos Aires, pages 451-454.

64. Monserrat, page 524.
65. Osvaldo Pelletieri in Alberto Vacarezza. Teatro defines the sainete as a predominantly short play with local character types, who are largely caricatures. The plots are sentimental and humorous, revolving around a concrete and obvious conflict. Unlike the zarzuela, Pelletieri argues that the sainete almost always unfolds as a critique of the immediate social context and does so by employing the language of the popular social classes. It should be mentioned, however, that while the sainetes may have been linguistically subversive the majority of the thousands performed were not overtly political in theme or plot.
67. Eva Golluscio de Montoya locates the play De Paseo en Buenos Aires along with works by native-born Argentine playwrights in the 1890s as being a part of the wider democratizing process of the time. She convincingly argues that what I refer to as “patriotism” can be seen as part of a new middle-class esthetic which embraced immigrants, individual workers, and a support for the incipient Radical party. See “El primer levantamiento radical y el teatro popular del Rio de la Plata (1890).”
68. It is difficult to imagine a more patriotic play had it been written by an Argentine author. Indeed, many of the Argentine authors of the era, such as Nemesio Trejo, criticized the national leadership. See Silvia Pellarolo, Sainete Criollo.
69. Luis Ordaz, comp. y ed. Afirmación de la escena criolla.
70. Género chico is the umbrella term given to theater by sections. It encompasses zarzuelas by the hour as well as the other related formats of sainete, comedia, revista, and bosquejo etc.
71. See Silvia Pellarolo, Sainete Criollo. She lists other zarzuela criollas such as Justicia criolla by Ezequiel Soria, 1897; Ensalada criolla by Enrique de María 1898 and Gabino el mayoral by Enrique García Velloso in 1898, page 154. Mariano
Bosch in *Historia del Teatro en Buenos Aires* discusses the advent of the zarzuela criolla as well on pages 457-459.

72. See Nora Mazziotti, “El auge de las revistas teatrales argentinas, 1910-1934.” Librettos of the zarzuelas usually included the kiosk locations of their point of sale. See, for one example, *Las Amapolas (The Poppies)*, zarzuela cómica, original de Carlos Arniches y Celso Lucio, (Madrid: R. Velasco, 1894.)

73. The development of national theater has been well studied by Argentine historians who all mention the important role the zarzuela performers and playwrights had in launching Argentine sainetes. See Mariano Bosch, *Historia de los Orígenes del Teatro Nacional Argentino y la época de Pablo Podesta*; Blas Raul Gallo, *Historia del Sainete Nacional*; Luis Ordaz, *El Teatro en el Río de la Plata desde sus orígenes hasta nuestros días*. See also, Pellarolo, *Sainete criollo* and Taullard, *Historia de nuestros viejos teatros*.


75. *1887 Census* pages 210-217.

76. *Anuario Estadístico*, 1893.

77. Censorship legislation in regard to theatrical performances had existed in Buenos Aires since the colonial era. The first major piece of legislation in the post-independence era occurred in 1861 specifying the creation of a censorship commission that would be composed of three individuals who would fulfill the duties of reviewing all of the plays to be staged in the city. It was understood that the committee would prohibit those plays “which in their plots or language offend social propriety, church dogma, public decorum or which attempt to alter public tranquility.” See *Anexo de la Memoria Municipal de 1875: Censura Teatral. Piezas Principales del juicio seguido contra la municipalidad de Buenos Aires con motivo de la prohibición de la caricatura dramatica titulada, el Sombrero de don Adolfo*, Buenos Aires, 1876. New legislation was sporadically promulgated re-affirming the city’s right to censor those works which may be interpreted as corrupting public morality, or failing to show respect towards political figures or religious themes or institutions. See the *Memoria de la Intendencia Municipal de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires correspondiente a 1884*.

78. The summary of the zarzuela can be found in Alier’s *Diccionario de la Zarzuela*, pages 202-203.

79. *Actas* of the city council for 1891 contain the ordinance prohibiting *El Monaguillo*.

80. *Anuario Estadístico* for 1891 and 1895, respectively.


82. Sturman discusses parodies of *La Gran Vía* shown in Cuba, page 47. Eugenia Pereira Salas notes the many different versions it also took in Chile. See *Historia de la música en Chile, 1850-1900*, page 303.


84. *El Correo Español*, November 1 and 3, 1887. The newspaper covered the upcoming play and its subsequent removal from the stage.
85. *La Gran Vía* was performed 21 times to 3,196 people in 1891; and 10 times to 638 people in 1896. *Anuario Estadistico* for 1891 and 1896 respectively. The play was greatly popular in Buenos Aires but it is noteworthy that it did not resonate everywhere equally. Abascal and Brunet note that it did not take off immediately in Chile due to the fact that the city lacked capable singers. See Abascal and Brunet, *Pepe Vila*, pages 53-54.

86. On August 18, 1900, *El Diario* notes that there were 20 zarzuelas under review by the censorship committee.

Works Cited


