THE ARGENTINE THEATRE

One night in 1886, a man in mad flight from the police, rode his horse into the circus ring of the little town of Chivilcoy, Argentina. The memorable ride of this gaucho, Juan Moreira, began a most important play. At last there had been found a hero around whom to group the several dramatic elements of Argentine folklore and a plot to which could be assimilated the riding acts of the circus which was that theatre's early home. In this happy combination of hero, folklore, and circus originated Argentina’s national theatre.

The Juan Moreira play of 1886 was never actually written. That was unnecessary. Actors and audience already knew its lines even before they were spoken; the plot came from an earlier and popular novel. Perhaps this very familiarity with the life of Juan Moreira endeared him to his audience. There is pleasure in knowing what will come next, fun in actually seeing predictions come true. Again, the tragic fate known to await Juan Moreira must have seemed a personal fate to many in his audience, in that it might only too truly come to be their own.

The novelist Eduardo Gutiérrez had first given expression to Juan Moreira’s story and made it the best-seller of his time. Gutiérrez wrote of simple things. His characters were few in number, elementary in design. Pawns of Fate, they moved swiftly to a pleasantly tragic end. So the story of Juan Moreira was a story of unjust persecution. Juan Moreira had married too attractive a lady. His Vicenta unhappily caught the fancy of Francisco, the local justice of the peace. In revenge for her unwise choice of his rival and for Moreira’s non-complaisant attitude in the matter of attention paid his wife, Francisco began a series of persecutions destined to lead his victim into crime and, therefore, into his power. Heavy fines for trivial or non-existent
reasons forced Moreira to re-claim a loan made to Sardetti, the keeper of the local saloon, or pulpería. Conspiring with Francisco, Sardetti denied the loan; Moreira was put on the rack for disturbing the peace in his claims. Freed, Moreira began a career of honorable homicide by killing Sardetti. When his wife and child were put in jail to incite our hero's return to legal retribution, Moreira accepted the challenge, returned, and killed the ignoble justice of the peace together with all his accomplices. The completion of Moreira's moral ruin followed upon his knowledge of the unfaithfulness of his wife. That Vicenta had been forced into dishonor by a desire to get food for her son and by inability to find other aid in a community terrified at the avowed official enmity for Moreira, was no acceptable excuse in the latter's eyes. Moreira sought revenge. Pursuit of his enemies from town to town was accompanied by many a murder, and, having learned of injustice and suffering, Moreira attempted to right the wrongs of others as well as his own. Death to the unjust was the easy solution of the new champion; as a result, and as the unjust were legion, his very presence presaged calamity. But the role of victim was happily reversed; the oppressors of the poor were those who died until finally all the police forces of Buenos Aires combined to end Juan Moreira's unorthodox career.

This Juan Moreira story was so successful that Eduardo Gutiérrez wrote many other novels. One of the most popular of these was of Santos Vega, Argentina's most famous payador or minstrel. According to the Gutiérrez version of this folk tale, Santos Vega unhappily killed the father of the girl he loved. A fugitive from justice, he was nevertheless welcomed at the friendly estancias or pulperías, where he sang the verses which brought him fame. Finally he won the friendship of one, Carmona. Together they fought the police, until one night Vega killed his friend by mistake. After the customary retreat to Indian land when the police followed him too hotly, Vega returned to mourn at Carmona's grave. Here he held a famous duel in verse with a mysterious stranger and died when the Devil won.

But whether taking his characters and episodes from police records or from the traditions of Argentine folklore, Gutiérrez
repeated himself from novel to novel. A whole series of his books can be reduced to the two plots named, and even these often resemble each other. A Gutiérrez novel normally treats of a brave, generous, singing gaucho, who is the victim of the saloon-keeper, the master of the estancia, the commissary of the police, or the justice of the peace. The drama results from the conflict between that gaucho and these unjust representatives of local authority. Episodes of love alternate with hearty knife duels. As the gaucho is practically always in love, there is usually a china about — or several such ladies follow each other in succession. As the gaucho is a payador, there are scenes where he may display his peculiar skill — at dance or funeral wake, at the local pulpería, or at the fiestas held at branding time. Most noteworthy are the Homeric battles of our gaucho with the police in episodes which call to mind Robin Hood and brother outlaws of England or the idealist Don Quijote of Spain. The gaucho portrayed in the Gutiérrez novels is the « persecuted gaucho » of Argentine society after 1860.

The dramatic significance in the number of Gutiérrez novels was to be found in the number of characters which they thus created, made known, and presented for subsequent use in the theatre. The novel Juan Moreira alone might not have served as an enduring dramatic pattern. By utilizing the other Gutiérrez novels, and then by combining their many well-known characters into still other, though similar, plots, the new theatre gathred the necessary material and momentum to start upon its way.

1. The word gaucho varies in meaning according to the date of its use. At the beginning — i. e., around 1750 — the gaucho was an outlaw, a cattle-hunter, a contrabandista. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the term was synonymous with soldier, cavalryman. Around 1860, with the transformation of the cattle industry and the gradual establishment of law and order, the term gaucho acquired two meanings dependent upon the kind of life led by the individual to which it referred. If he held true to type and refused to give up his wild ways and to submit to the new usurping civilization, he once more became an outlaw; if he recognized the inevitable and submitted to society, he became identified with the old Spanish vaquero and bused himself with the legitimate phases of work with stock. Only in this late and brief period may the term of gaucho be justifiably compared with that of cowboy. Finally, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century came a final transformation of the term, when it reflected the poesy of a brave and vanishing class of society. Romantic literature popularized this conception, which now seems the one more likely to endure.
While the play of *Juan Moreira* is generally noted as the beginning of the Argentine theatre, that beginning itself had indefinite antecedents for nearly one hundred years. The importance of *Juan Moreira* is that it made so many of those antecedents its own by including them in the unity of a first definite plot. Dialogue, dance, song, character, theme, properties, and stage combined for the first time in *Juan Moreira*, but they had existed severally, separately, before. The significant thing about the Argentine theatre is that around the Moreira plot combined Argentine folklore and the Argentine circus. In this it was distinctive. Those elements of Argentine folklore, important in their influence on the theatre, were the folk dances, with their dramatic verse accompaniments, and the equally dramatic verse duels, or payadas. The fact that *payadas* commonly ended in real knife duels marked a move from passively theoretical to actively dramatic conflict. Drama really went to work.

To be a social success in early Argentine rural society one had to be a poet of sorts. Verse and folk dance went together. As an Argentine party began, the guitar player of the occasion would introduce in appropriate verse each arriving guest. He could then be induced to sing complimentary songs to one’s favorite lady, uncomplimentary songs to one’s rival. Though here he must exercise caution. In a land where the knife flashed easily, skill in song must necessarily be accompanied by skill in battle; any mere poet’s life was short. But verse had its kindly influence on life as well. One’s first declarations of love were in appropriate verse. Again, if refreshments went the rounds at a party and one were forgotten, verse was the clever medium in which to make his plaint:

*The Paraguay and Mission tea,*  
*Comes to everyone save to me...*

And then dancing began. The many Argentine folk dances fall into three classes: dances to the accompaniment of music only; dances to the accompaniment of music and with words serving as gloss to the action of the dance; dances to the accompaniment of music and the verse dialogue of the dancers themselves. The increasing complexity of the dances of these three
stages marks a definite progression toward the drama. Naturally those dances with rudimentary dialogue were of greater importance in their influence on the theatre than the mere pantomimes of gallantry. Thus in the dance called the *gato*, two couples exchanged improvised couplets in rhyme. Each of these verses was followed by calls and sarcastic remarks from the spectators. Usually, wit took the form of *double entendre*, as the interchange of chaff had always one perfectly innocent superficial meaning and another quite the contrary. The parties to this skilled contest of repartee kept perfectly immobile countenances and neither gave any sign — save by latent reply — of any perception of the underlying significance of the conversation. The actual dance with its tapping and stamping by the men and courtesying by the women, was relatively unimportant. Wit, expectant eagerness to hear improvised verse, the thrill of a contest, play at dangerous sarcasm and hidden insult — these were the important elements. The dance had every possibility of becoming a battle. It was dangerous; consequently, it was thrilling.

The *pericón* was the gaucho dance *par excellence*. Its dancers were necessarily poets. Six or eight couples composed their verse in turn. The old man who chose the couples, directed the dance, and called off its formations, announced the verses of the dancers. Between the movements of this dance to the music of the guitar the gauchos took turns at putting questions to their ladies, who, in turn, must respond in verse. The audience served as chorus.

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He
Loving one girl is nothing
Loving two is vain
But loving three or four
Is fun and calls for skill.

She
Little man of twenty loves
And with me, twenty-one,
If all are as I
You'll be left with none.
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Or again,

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He
There is so much fire in your face
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That each eye is a living coal
And when I am near
I sizzle, even as hot fat.

She
Surely my eyes are not hot enough
To burn you, meat and hide,
The drinks the pulpero sells
Burn you, rather than my eyes.

Less sarcastic in tone,

He
Were God to come to know
The love of a certain country maid,
He would don a chiripá
And become the brother-in-law of your sister.

She
Let's leave God in His heaven
To serve us as witness
While there are young fellows
Like the one who dances with me.

Definite verse forms accompanied specific dances. Of these, the two most common were the quatrain, rhymed or not, either in the octosyllable of the old Spanish ballads or in the combination of heptasyllables and pentasyllables of the Spanish seguidilla. Thus,

Fetters and chains
Are your curly hairs,
With them you caught me,
Blood of my heart.

Or, among the seguidillas —

The consolation I have
When I am sad
Is to look down the road
Where you went away.

Or

For a blue-eyed blond
One day of sorrow
But every one of the days
For a brunette.

Many of the early erotic dances changed in meaning after 1810.
Love of lady then became love of country or love of political party; or it might be personalized into admiration for a local military or civil leader. The pericón became the national dance under the Rosas régime and the proper opening dance in every loyal Federalist party. The gauchos and their chinas used as adornment a great colored handkerchief loosely knotted around the neck. At the end of the pericón these were untied and waved to the rhythm of the dance. In the time of independence and the civil wars, when politics in a very literal sense ran true to color in Argentina, handkerchiefs followed suit and the Unitarist blue and Federalist red shaded every Argentine dance. Not to dance the pericón became politically and personally dangerous.

There were religious, as well as amorous or political dances. Such dances reflected primitive elements which had their roots in the liturgical tradition of the gaucho's Indian ancestry. Particularly important in this respect were those singular dances held in the celebration attending the burial, and presumably immediate entrance into Heaven, of an angelito, or little child. To have an angelito under your roof was good luck. The little corpse was borrowed from place to place, even rented, that it might serve as the occasion for a merry wake, with banquet and dance. Just as the Indian languages impregnated the Spanish idiom, so Indian idolatry lay behind a superficial Christianity. This Indian influence was most evident in those sections of Argentina where the Indian population was destined to survive. Thus the custom of the funeral dance of the angelito centers in Santiago del Estero, up in Quechua land.

Besides the elementary dramatic dialogue of the Argentine folk dances, the Argentine theatre found another source of dialogue in the payada of its folk verse. In method of composition, subject matter, and verse form the two often closely resembled each other. Both were improvised dialogues in verse, frequently contests in verse. It was at the dance that the payador usually found both his opponent and his audience.

A payador was a professional poet. Like the mediaeval troubadour he took pride in his poetic reputation; unlike the troubadour, however, the payador sought no mere display of skill,
but victory in an actual verse duel with a rival poet. This duel, or *payada*, began as our poet challenged a possible rival, introduced himself to his audience, and presented questions which were to serve as themes for the poetic improvisation of his opponent. He would ask to be informed of the meaning of a kiss, whether or not he might expect life to endure after death, or for information about some similarly controversial subject. In turn he answered questions until either he or his rival must admit final defeat. And such contests went on for days!

But, like the dance, the *payada* involved more than a simple answering of questions. It had begun with a challenge. It involved an audience to appreciate victory and to mock defeat, to advertise one's skill and the shame of a defeated rival. The actual verses sung might take the form of innocuous hymns to nature or the solution of naive problems, but at the same time there was an undercurrent of piquant allusions to members of the audience and of personalities destined to inspire a hot retort from one's opponent. The verses were destined to amuse ribald company or else to convey insult to a rival. Thus, intentionally, hidden insult was heaped on insult until one contestant publicly confessed ignominious defeat or attempted to retrieve a lost poetical reputation by victory in a real fight with the knife.

When one's rival sang —

Then down from some old withered branch,
A vulture such as you...

no appreciable comfort was to be gained even if he did finally continue, after a significant pause, with...

Such as you have often seen...

Again, if one liked a drink at another's expense, it was annoying to be told

Whenever you bend your elbow, your arm goes to sleep.

Such remarks, and especially their enthusiastic reception by the audience, tended to upset the poise requisite to one's own verse improvisation. And defeat was dishonor.

The *payada*, then, was a verse dialogue between two rustics
who sang before their public. To be sure the device of presenting on the stage rustics who talk in the language of their class or locality is ancient to the theatre in every literature. Dialogue is dramatic. In Argentina the resultant literature became distinctive through the systematic use of hidden insult and the constant stress on combat whether it be by verse or the subsequent knife. In literature Argentina’s payadores were personalized in one hero — Santos Vega, the greatest of them all. It took over one hundred years, however, before a Santos Vega played his first role on the Argentine stage in the play of Juan Carlos Nosiglia (1894). The payada might involve a dramatic character type, an elementary dialogue, a dramatic and often tragic conflict, but still other elements had to be added before the Argentine drama could begin. Those distinctive Argentine elements served as further differentiation from the general rustic dialogue literature and advanced the formation of a distinctively national theatre.

In addition to the verse dialogue of folk dance and payada, a third source for dialogue is in the political verse of the early nineteenth century. Of these « patriotic dialogues », the most famous were those between Bartolomé Hildago’s gauchos, Chano and Contreras, and between the gauchos, Paulino and Aniceto, of Hilario Ascasubi. These dialogues, in which several characters discuss the affairs of the country, mark a union of five preexistent elements: the subject — i.e., the patriotic themes found in the early cielito1 verses; the use of several characters; the dialogue; the ballad meter; and the vocabulary of payador and gaucho. They mark a transition between oral and written gaucho verse; they combine « the soul of the country » with « the reflection of the city ». This change from an oral to a written popular literature took place in the heat of the Argentine war of independence from Spain and of the early period of national organization.

To the same period belong a whole family of simple patriotic « dramas », in which a single character would relate noteworthy events and his reflections upon them. Such a play was La acción

1. The cielito was so named from the refrain of the verse; usually it was patriotic in character.
de Maipú, commemorating the winning of Chilean independence and the Argentine part in the famous battle. A similar, but post-independence play, is *El brasilero fanfarrón i la batalla de Ituzaingó*.

Far more truly dramatic than any of these verse monologues or dialogues were the earlier *El amor de la estanciera, Las bodas de Cívico*, and *Un día de fiesta*. The first, the oldest known Argentine play, belongs to the end of the eighteenth century (1792 or 1793). It tells a story of the dispute of the Argentine Juancho and the Brazilian Figueiras for the hand of the creole girl, Chepa. Marcos Figueiras, a kind of itinerant merchant, is ignominiously defeated in the fight which concludes the play. The characters are not yet called gauchos, but they already include the gaucho type, the *payador*; habits, clothes, dwellings, speech, dances are those of the gauchos. For the first time an Argentine play combines octosyllable verse, dramatic dialogue, rural type characters, and the gaucho manner of speech. Two other interesting « first appearances » in this play are an expression of love for the horse, without whose aid life in the pampas was practically impossible, and an expression of hatred for foreigners.

*Las bodas de Chivicó y Pancha* (1826) is a little farce, consisting of three scenes. In the first scene Chingolo arrives and proceeds to tell Juancho and Chivicó of events in town. He has noted how poor fellows there get caught and recruited into the federal army. He had been taken to a play and was just starting an interesting flirtation with two girls when « down came a lame, old nag, spitting out fire » and spoiled it all.

The second is the wedding scene. First Jusepa complains of her husband Juancho. Then Juancho gives his blessing to his newly married daughter. She must remember that she and her new husband are now like two animals harnessed together. Pancha must also remember to keep Chivicó's clothes nicely mended. When he comes home she is to have the *mate* ready for him — and not treat him as her mother treats her father, not even having the water hot. She is to do as Chivicó says; if she doesn't, her father recommends proper punishment. But as for Chivicó, whenever he comes home drunk, he must remember not to start a fight with his wife, he is to give her the proper clothes, and, whe-
never they go out together, he is to let her ride behind him on his horse. After Pancha's mother and father have finished expressing their views on matrimony, the new bride is praised by the sacristán. She is as «graceful as asparagus in July». Finally, the sacristán wishes her luck. «May no cow ever kick as she milks it.»

The final scene includes a banquet and a dance. When García and Chano want to dance with the same woman, there is trouble, and the play ends with the arrival of the police.

From the year 1836 dates the play _Un día de fiesta en Barracas_. Its character may be deduced from the rest of its descriptive title — «con mucho gaucho, bailarín y cantor y no pocas alusiones políticas. Bailábase en ella el minuet federal... y el cielito». Our play is to have gauchos, dances, songs, and no few political allusions. The federal minuet and the _cielito_ will be danced. The gaucho character, so named, had finally entered an actual Argentine play.

Another aid to the growth of the Argentine théâtre is to be found in the inclusion of certain dramatic plot elements in such primarily poetical works as José Hernández' _Martín Fierro_ and Estanislao del Campo's _Fausto_. With their use of lengthy conversations between pairs of friends, they added new plot elements to the collection furnished by Eduardo Gutiérrez.

All of the new gaucho plays were presented on the circus arena, after the usual performance of riding, trapeze, and strong-man acts. The year 1829 marked the appearance of the first circus in Buenos Aires. The regular performances were concluded by pantomines. By 1835 «mixed» pantomines had been introduced which combined riding acts and a rudimentary stage setting. Stage properties acquired importance. The transition into a gaucho play was simple.

A rough set — representing a gaucho hut, a _pulpería_, or the police headquarters — was arranged on one side of the ring. A fire blazed at its side. Around it, on their cattle-skull stools, gathered gauchos and their _chinases_. A solitary ombú tree served to recall the boundless pampas where it furnishes the only shade in which man and beast may rest. Meat roasted on the fire. Wa-

_Bull. hispanique._
ter heated for the *mate*. If the fire were by an oxcart, it indicated a halting place on the trail of the travelling caravans of trade that creaked their weary way up to Peru. The fire by a rude hut served to indicate a gaucho home; if placed by a *pulpería* it would suggest the horserace which followed when gauchos got together at such a social center; if in the yard of the estancia, one thought of branding time, and the dances and merrymaking that followed upon the hard work of the day. But wherever it was, the fire indicated peace, even though that peace might be only temporary. A representation of the local police head-quarters, however, was an ominous stage setting. Fast riding flights from the officers of the law, knife duels, exhibitions of skill with *bola*¹ and lasso were to be the order of the night’s pantomine.

And then the pantomime acquired words. Timidly at first, in the verses of the gaucho dances which served as primitive chorus, or in the songs of the *payada* which served as interlude. Then Eduardo Gutiérrez created a popular gaucho character in his novel of Juan Moreira; a famous theatrical family, the Podestás, were inspired to adapt that character to the circus pantomines; all the scattered early dramatic elements fell into the unity of the play of *Juan Moreira*, and the Argentine national theatre really began. The feats of physical skill of the circus — riding, roping, knife fights; the elementary dialogue of dance, *payada*, patriotic verse, and conversations between pairs of friends; gaucho stage properties such as horses, fire, cattle skulls; and, finally, the gaucho character himself and the gaucho’s lady, his *china*, all fitted into the pattern of the new Argentine play. The circus ring itself served for the accompanying riding acts, as gaucho and police pursued each other and proved skill in horsemanship, in roping, or in duels with the knife to audiences expert in such matters. On such a stage, the heroic criminal; his little country-girl sweetheart, local despots such as soldiers, policemen, judges, and political bosses; and the despicable foreigner — not the least of whose crimes was his ridiculous inability to speak a proper Spanish — played out their stock roles. Folk dance and song offered relief to the tragedy. The triumph was

¹. A hunting tool.
enormous. The Argentine gaucho, the Argentine folklore, the Argentine circus had combined into Argentina’s national theatre.

First presented in the circus in the suburbs of Buenos Aires, these gaucho plays then advanced to the dignity of separate performances in the theatres of the city. Later the « creole dramas » were performed, for the most part, by traveling companies who carried with them a portable theatre which included even an auditorium. This building was about 120 feet long and a third as wide; its top was of corrugated iron, while the body of the structure was of wood. At one end was the stage, with just enough room behind it for the necessary changes of costume. In front of the stage was a ring, a relic of the circus days, and from it an aisle led through the audience to the outside. This facilitated the use of horses which were so much a part of the gaucho that even on the stage his « sorrel steed » had a role to play in the performance. While the players in the guise of gauchos raided the peaceful hacienda on the stage, their friends held their horses in the ring below. When their dreadful work was done, the villains would leap the footlights, swing themselves on their plunging mounts and dash out through the excited audience.

The plays themselves were usually not long, but consisted of many scenes. This resulted in making them episodic in the extreme; perhaps the closest likeness to their form is that of the moving picture1.

The appeal of the gaucho play was highly personal. First of all, it stressed certain ideals in Argentine life — a courageous and hopelessly tragic fight against overwhelming odds, skill in any kind of physical combat, disdain for imposed law and order, traditional pride of race, hatred and ridicule for foreigners. An understanding of the enthusiastic Argentine reception of the portrayal of such traits would go far toward leading one into a comprehension of Argentine history.

Again, Juan Moreira was a symbol as well as a character. He was a protagonist of liberty. He represented the brave, but tragically hopeless fate of a misfit in a changing society. In a sense

he came to be an incarnation of the Argentine peon, of the poor, the homeless, the oppressed. This unhappy state had been forced upon him by the very government which he had served as a soldier, not only in the wars of independence, but afterward in all the later struggles for liberty. Two laws had met in conflict: the unwritten, individualistic, and primitive law of the pampas and the written law of the new republic. The struggle between these laws was a struggle destined to be marked by the disappearance of the whole gaucho class in Argentine society. Ignoble foreigners like Sardetti and all-powerful political bosses working through such base hirelings as the justice of the peace, Francisco, were mysteriously in control of honest, brave, and honorable folk. That the only solution, homicide, presented only temporary relief, added to the tragic intensity of the struggle. The whole situation was beyond the simple understanding of Moreira and of his audience; for that very reason they rationalized it and called it Fate. Moreira was popular because he fought against that Fate, a bigger antagonist than those ordinarily met in life. Moreira stood for the defense of the weak against those unjustly strong. His appeal was that of courage, of struggle against injustice, of inevitable tragedy. That Juan Moreira's audience sensed that his fight was their own, may be seen in that many a spectator personally drew his own big knife and started to the defense of the play's hero.

After the Juan Moreira plays of the 1890's, the Argentine theatre has, in the main, followed two lines of development. In many a suburban theatre, even at the present time, typical and bad Juan Moreira plays are still being given while worthy middle-class audiences romanticize over a past life whose inconveniences they have happily escaped. The foreign immigrant to Argentina and his children have become enthusiasts who idealize the gaucho even as we in the United States idealize the wildness of our West and its cowboy. As may be expected, plays written for such a purpose keep comfortably close to the set conventional pattern. They are social documents of value, but they are not literature.

The other and literary line of development of the gaucho
The Argentine theatre has led directly to South America's greatest dramatist and to South America's one distinctively national theatre. Recognizing and accepting the inevitable transformation of society which was dimly to be sensed even back in the Juan Moreira plays, modern Argentine dramatists have straightforwardly portrayed that changing society and the modern rural and urban societies which have finally replaced the gaucho. From a romantic and melodramatic regret for the past, the Argentine theatre seems to be progressing into a realistic portrayal of the transition into modern Argentine life. The greatest of the dramatists of this new period was Florencio Sánchez. It is possibly because of the essentially dramatic character of that very transition that no dramatist of the exclusively modern period has as yet equalled the work of Florencio Sánchez. He is still unique in the South American theatre.

The gaucho theatre is still far from dead. It is too Argentine to die. Appealing to fundamental Argentine ideals, it is at present impressing those ideals on the immigrant population of the Argentine urban centers. True, the gaucho may have passed from the stage of Argentine life, but the things for which the gaucho stood are still inherently Argentine.

Madaline W. Nichols.