



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE
Humanities

DIVISION OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS

Narrative Section of a Successful Application

The attached document contains the grant narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the Research Programs application guidelines at <http://www.neh.gov/grants/research/fellowships> for instructions. Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Division of Research Programs staff well before a grant deadline.

Note: The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

Project Title: Staging Frontiers: The Creole Circus and the Making of a Theater-Going Public in Uruguay and Argentina, 1860-1910

Institution: Washington University, St. Louis

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Grant Program: Fellowships

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Staging Frontiers: The Creole Circus and the Making of a Theater-Going Public in Uruguay and Argentina, 1860-1910

Research and contributions

Theater in Uruguay and Argentina, which together comprise the Plata river region of Latin America, has been one of the most popular forms of entertainment since the nineteenth century. Theaters abound in Montevideo, while its sister city Buenos Aires has its own Broadway in the famed Corrientes street. In the age of digital culture and easy access to a long list of entertainment options, the theater remains a mainstay of cultural life for Argentines and Uruguayans, from the wealthiest to the most economically challenged. Yet this theater culture has origins not in the formal space of urban theaters in capital cities, but rather in shows presented by traveling *Creole* circus troupes in the late 1800s and early 1900s. My project seeks to address how these popular performances intersected with economic modernization and powerful strains of nationalism to produce a theater-going public, a proliferation of new modes of sociability, and lasting social identities.

The most important development in the region's circus was the incorporation of short theatrical works into the program in the mid-1880s. Inspired partly by equestrian and acrobatic spectacles prevalent since the 1860s, these plays ushered in what would be an integral component from then on—the *Creole drama*, which put the *Creole* in the Creole circus. Creole (*criollo*) was a colonial term denominating Spaniards born in the Americas and their privileged social status. By the second half of the 1800s, Creole had been stripped of all references to Spain. Its new meaning was an inversion of the original and defined what and who was “authentically” Argentine or Uruguayan and clearly *not* European. The plays told variations of the story of an honest native son, usually a hard-working peasant or *gaucho* (the region's cowboy), who was persecuted by a corrupt system of justice, sent to fight Indians along the frontier, and who became a bandit seeking revenge. At face value the story of country life under siege seems simplistic. But this genre, which became the backbone of an entire entertainment industry at the turn of the century, made for a more personal theater experience with “local content” that was conspicuously absent from opera or acrobatic performances during previous decades. Audiences thus embraced Creole dramas, for these represented tradition and modernity at once, which was exactly what Argentines, Uruguayans, and hundreds of thousands of European immigrants were living at the end of the 1800s.

Literary scholars and historians have explored the history of theater in Uruguay and Argentina dating back to street performances, royal processions, and ceremonies during the colonial period. They have addressed the Creole circus, too, though almost exclusively within national confines rather than in transnational perspective. Moreover, previous studies have focused on the careers of leading circus performers in the cities of Buenos Aires and Montevideo, removed from the rural contexts where they first gave performances. While the influence of the circus on “national theater” has been noted in passing, the effects of Creole dramas on the rise of nationalism at the dawn of the 1900s and the greater impact of the circus on the consolidation of theater as a pillar of social identity both merit much more sustained attention and cross-disciplinary dialogue. Dozens of Creole drama texts exist in print; circus programs depict the swirl of activity at shows, often billed as family events, and detail the running time (in weeks or months) of plays; journalistic accounts and police reports permit readers to peer into reactions of crowds. Such evidence allows for the reconstruction of the world of popular theater and its resonance across boundaries of class and race, though this process requires utilizing a broad source base in ways that have not featured in previous attempts to understand the impact of Creole dramas.

My book project expands on previous scholarship by: 1) tracing the routes of circus troupes and their dramas as they traveled from the countryside to the city; 2) highlighting the reception of Creole dramas in order to understand the social composition of audiences; and 3) providing an overarching framework for understanding how the Creole circus bridged popular and elite classes, practices, and literary traditions. Examples of this exchange between popular and elite cultures include Creole dramas that were rendered for the opera; leading circus actors who received lucrative theater contracts; and the alliance of the region's leading playwrights with circus families in the composition and performance of new plays. The result: by the early 1900s Creole dramas allowed rural and urban audiences to participate

in a group identity that did not end with the fall of the curtain. Rather, such identities continued to grow and feed a collective investment in theater culture and the national community.

More broadly, this project aims to contribute to the history of popular culture across the Americas. Circus performers from the region were familiar with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Shows, while circus families from the United States, like the Carlo brothers, spent decades working the Argentine and Uruguayan performance circuit. Expanding what we know about the intensity of such cultural flows prior to 1900—a line of inquiry relatively untouched to date, especially in the realm of theater—can lead to new collaborations among scholars in American Culture and Latin American studies, and challenge us to see local developments, meanings of frontiers, and icons of nationalism in hemispheric perspective. In this same spirit, *Staging Frontiers* seeks to model a theoretical framework for understanding links between popular and elite cultures via the theater. This framework could clarify stakes in debates on the nexus of print and orality, methods for practicing theater history, and the historical source value of popular literary texts as well as their place in literary canons.

Methods and work plan

My project is based on extensive archival work in Argentina and Uruguay where I have examined primary sources such as photography collections of Creole drama performances, reports of ticket sales and venue accounting sheets for locales where Creole dramas were staged, and announcements for, reviews of, and commentaries on the reception of these shows in the periodical press. I accessed the private collection of Elías Regules at the Sociedad Criolla in Montevideo (Regules authored several of the most commercially successful Creole dramas), which portrays aspects of the Creole drama movement through thousands of photographs and correspondence between authors and circus actors. In Argentina I have also worked with police records of men who disturbed performances and who imitated actions of the plays' heroes (usually involving knife fights). These records point to a valuable measure of popular reception. I have focused as well on the 1921 Folklore Survey at the Instituto Nacional de Antropología. The survey contains oral histories, popular poetry, and recollections of country life that indicate the ways individuals and audiences throughout Argentina responded to and remembered the plays they saw.

The NEH Fellowship would support the final stage of my project: completing my book manuscript during the 2013-2014 academic year. With drafts of chapters 3 and 5 finished, I am well positioned to complete the book during the fellowship period. Below is a brief section and chapter outline. Chapters will consist of 20-25 manuscript pages each. During the fellowship year I will devote six weeks to drafting each of the remaining chapters. The last four months of the fellowship will allow me to revise and submit the manuscript by August 2014.

Section 1: A Cultural History of Popular Theater

1. *The Social World of Theater in Uruguay and Argentina*: This introductory chapter highlights the role of theater in the region in fostering forms of sociability from the late 1700s up through the 1870s, when circus troupes began attracting much larger audiences. The social gathering space of theater events brought people of different backgrounds together to mix in extraordinary ways.
2. *The Rise of Circus Entertainment in the Río de la Plata*: The first records of circus performances date from post-independence years in the early 1800s. This early stage of the circus was about making people laugh or gasp, as this chapter illustrates through sketches of some of the “shallow” acts that entertained audiences for over half of the nineteenth century.

Section 2: Figuring a Creole Identity

3. *Going Creole and the Making of Tradition*: Economic modernization transformed the region at the end of the 1800s. Authors of Creole dramas tapped into stories that allowed rural and urban spectators to see some of the negative bearing of this process on country life. Their plays also built on decades of equestrian and acrobatic spectacles that circus families from the U.S. orchestrated with local counterparts beginning in the 1860s.

4. *The Best Show in Town, Straight from the Countryside*: While Creole dramas took root in rural areas, they became well-attended shows in cities, thanks to their performance of Creole identity. This shift to urban performance spaces made the Creole drama a bridge between popular and elite cultures.
5. *Juan Moreira's 1900 European Tour*: The play that sparked the Creole drama explosion was *Juan Moreira*. In 1900 the Podestá family, who had first performed the play in 1884, travelled to Spain for the beginning of a European tour to culminate at the 1900 Paris World's Fair, effectively illustrating the Creole circus as a cultural ambassador for both the Argentine and Uruguayan States.

Section 3: *Circus Tent to Silver Screen*

6. *The Theatricality of Creole Societies*: At the turn of the century societies formed to celebrate Creole identity at public gatherings with members dressing in country garb, parading through city centers as gauchos on horseback, and some even financing Creole drama productions. The theatricality of these societies evidences the broad appeal of Creole dramas and their ramifications beyond the theater.
7. *Circus Tent, Theater Stage, Opera House, Silver Screen*: This chapter stresses the power of the Creole drama and its diverse messages to move from one venue and medium to another, revealing how popular and “refined” culture mutually reinforced elements of each. Such exchanges inform an outline useful for understanding the intersection of popular and elite cultures in other contexts.
8. *Conclusions: Toward a Theater-Going Public*: By the early 1900s, a theater culture had been born and was rapidly expanding. This chapter emphasizes the lasting impact of staging frontiers for forms of sociability and the consolidation of a community drawn to the theater.

Competencies, skills, and access

Teaching, fellowships for research abroad, and, perhaps most significantly, my previous book (*Everyday Reading*) have led me to this project. *Everyday Reading* focuses on a broad range of sources— independence-era newspapers and patriotic poetry; popular, partisan literature produced to recruit followers for the first political parties in the 1830s and 1840s; school textbooks that taught lessons in patriotism and motherhood at the end of the century; symbolic images on the first national currencies, postal stamps and postcards—throughout the 1800s to illustrate how forms of writing were part of daily life in the Plata region. It was only through sustained, regular interaction with print media that writing could shape social identities.

This previous project on the lasting impacts of everyday cultural production in the realm of print and reading culture has made for a smooth transition to the study of the long-term influences of popular theater. As with texts that were “everyday reading,” Creole circus dramas were created to be ephemeral cultural products. Yet they were performed with regularity and engaged life experiences of viewers in ways that made such plays enormously successful in leaving a lasting economic, social, and cultural imprint. I have explored this staying power of the ephemeral in recent articles (2009, 2011), and it is a prominent theme in my courses on nineteenth-century Spanish American literature, frontier cultural production, and popular culture.

Final product and dissemination

The goal of this research project is to complete a book to be published by a university press, with a narrative style accessible to general readers. Portions of chapters will be presented at upcoming conferences in the U.S., and some sections of chapters 3 and 5 will appear in article form. These final products will help disseminate my results among a broad group of readers. I will also develop new courses based on this project. Examples include “Popular Culture and Popular Literature in Nineteenth-Century Latin America” and “Latin American Theater from the Everyday to the Elite.”¹ Finally, in the spirit of the on-going process of cultural exchange, I will provide all institutions where I have done archival work in Uruguay, Argentina, and the U.S. with copies of my published research.

¹ These courses will be for advanced undergraduate and graduate students, with language material in Spanish and, for graduate students, in Portuguese. The geographic scope of both courses will span from Mexico to Uruguay.

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Instituto Nacional de Estudios Teatrales, Buenos Aires (Colección Jacobo de Diego) Instituto Nacional de Antropología, Buenos Aires (Encuesta de Folklore de 1921) Museo Histórico Nacional, Montevideo (Casas Giró, Lavalleja, and Rivera) Sociedad Criolla Elías Regules, Montevideo (Private Collection of Regules's manuscripts & correspondence)

Newspapers & Magazines

Uruguay: *Caras y Caretas* (Montevideo); *El Departamento* (Mercedes); *El Día* (Montevideo); *Ecos del Progreso* (Salto); *El Fogón* (Montevideo); *El Paysandú* (Paysandú); *El Siglo* (Montevideo)
Argentina: *Caras y Caretas* (Buenos Aires); *La Democracia* (Rosario); *El Nacional* (Buenos Aires); *La Nación* (Buenos Aires); *La Prensa* (Buenos Aires); *El Tribuno* (La Plata)

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