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## **MUSICAL COMEDY AS COMPROMISE FORMATION: JUDIO AND JUDIA (1926), BY IVO PELAY**

by Claire Solomon  
Oberlin College

**Abstract:** *In 1926, well-known Argentine playwright Ivo Pelay premiered two plays during the Buenos Aires theater season, both about Jews. Judío [Jew] recast the Merchant of Venice as a comical “Shylock criollo [Creole Shylock].” Judía [Jewess] premiered three months later. Though both are virtually forgotten – notably, the script of Judía is nowhere to be found – recent cultural criticism reclaims Judía as the founding work of Argentine musical comedy. The problem is that there were musical comedies in Argentina before 1926 – chiefly in Yiddish. Despite obvious influences of Yiddish theater, Judía elides any connection with Yiddish, as its Spanish-speaking, foreign-born Jewish main character acts out contemporary preoccupations about immigration. Read together in the context of the 1926 season, Judío and Judía, “Jew” and “Jewess,” thematize anxiety not only about the Argentineity of Jews, but also about the Jewishness of Argentina: the promise of assimilation and the threat of subversion. For this reason, I propose the psychoanalytic concept of compromise formation as a useful metaphor for how radically ambivalent, “allosemitic” Jewish stereotypes function in both plays, as well as for the revisionism that has made Judía the founding text of Argentine musical comedy.*

**Keywords:** Argentina, Theater, Argentine Jews, Ivo Pelay, Musical Comedy, *Judía*, *My Official Wife*

*Judía* (Jewess), the so-called first Argentine musical comedy, premiered at the Teatro Porteño on July 8, 1926. Playwright Ivo Pelay claimed credit for importing the “new” musical comedy genre to Argentina, with a series of declarations “entre traviesas y agresivas [ranging from daring to aggressive]” (Staff Review, *Última Hora* 9 July

1926).<sup>1</sup> Pelay cross-promoted *Judía* with his already successful *Judío* (Jew), which had debuted three months earlier at the Teatro Nuevo.

Though largely forgotten since then, *Judía* has recently been reclaimed as the first Argentine musical comedy. A spate of cultural supplements celebrated the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its premiere—and of the musical comedy genre—with a musical homage at the Teatro Nacional in 2016. A surge of interest in the “forgotten” genre (Seibel 2007, 9) has brought *Judía* back into both popular consciousness and specialized theater criticism (Gorlero 2004, 68).<sup>2</sup>

The problem is that there were musical comedies in Argentina before 1926—many of them in Yiddish. I propose that it’s helpful to consider the reinvention of *Judía* as the founding text of Argentine musical comedy in relation to the psychoanalytic concept of compromise formation.<sup>3</sup> In psychoanalysis, a compromise formation is the form assumed by a repressed wish, idea, or memory in order to become tolerable to consciousness, and therefore (partially) known. A compromise formation is by definition only partially satisfactory: it is a partial representation of an unconscious element, distorted enough to (partially) protect consciousness from it. By beginning the history of Argentine musical comedy with *Judía*, the canon of national theater remains separate from Yiddish, avoiding the significant impact of Jewish authorship—and the fact of Argentina’s multilingual, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious origins—thus protecting a view of Argentina as fundamentally Spanish-speaking, non-Jewish, and non-immigrant.

The notion of compromise formation also helps illuminate the formal workings of stereotypes in both *Judío* and *Judía*. Each play rests on the belief in a “Jewish difference” that is evident from the marquee; yet the very self-evidence of this “Jewish difference” ends up making it ironically hard to distinguish from a putative Argentine “normality.” Both protagonists blend into Argentinian society successfully. This

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<sup>1</sup> Staff Review (unsigned), “Judía,” *Ultima Hora*, 9 July 1926. Other reviewers took Pelay’s word for it. See e.g. Staff Review (signed “L.A.”), “La comedia musical. ‘Judía,’ la primera obra del género” in *Anuario Teatral Argentino. Enciclopedia de la Escena Argentina* (Bs. As.: Ediciones ATA, 1928): 103-104.

<sup>2</sup> Gorlero posits that the term “musical comedy” had never been applied to a work in Argentina before *Judía*. Seibel also voices the idea that it was the first of its genre in Argentina. See Beatriz Seibel, “Introducción” in Ivo Pelay and Francisco Canaro, *Canción de los barrios* (Buenos Aires: Argentores, 2007), 9-14 and Pablo Gorlero, *Historia de la comedia musical en la Argentina: desde sus comienzos hasta 1979* (Bs. As.: Marcelo Héctor Oliveri, 2004), 68. See also Pablo Gorlero, “Entre tangos y jazz se celebran los 90 años de la comedia musical argentina” (28 July 2016), <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/espectaculos/musica/entre-tangos-y-jazz-se-celebran-los-90-anos-de-la-comedia-musical-argentina-nid1922369>.

<sup>3</sup> Freud first used the term [*Kompromißbildung*] in 1896, suggesting that obsessive representations and compulsive acts “are structures in the nature of a *compromise* between the repressed idea and the repressing ones” (Freud 1964: 170). He expanded the idea in *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (1916–17) to include all mental phenomena that are the products of a conflict and which partially express all participant forces in the conflict: “The two forces which have fallen out meet once again in the symptom and are reconciled. It is for that reason, too, that the symptom is so resistant: it is supported from both sides” (Freud 1916-7: 294). It is this broader definition of “compromise formation” that interests me in considering the revisionist history of making *Judía* the founding text of Argentine musical comedy. See Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. III., Trans. and ed. James Strachey, Anna Freud (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1964); *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (1916–17) in *Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing* (<https://www.pep-web.org/>).

underlines the measure in which perfect assimilation is indistinguishable from perfect deception, the promise of assimilation from the threat of subversion. The compromise therefore keeps Jews present, but reduced to stereotypes, and therefore affirms a certain continuity—a fictive continuity, to paraphrase David Nirenberg—of an Argentina whose minority “others” have been assimilated into its mainstream without changing it.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the radical ambivalence of Jewish representation can be seen as instantiating in each play what Erin Graff-Zivin called “aporias of *marranismo*”: the *marrano* secret (that there is no *marrano* secret). Rather than affirming a stable Jewish difference, each play ironically remits to the instability of the non-Jewish Argentine self.<sup>5</sup>

After offering an overview of the context in which *Judío* and *Judía* premiered in 1926 in Buenos Aires, I turn to situated formal readings of *Judío* and *Judía* to explore more deeply how Jewish stereotypes split along gender lines. I argue that even such stereotypical representations rebound with multidirectional irony, revealing some of the complexity of what the compromise attempts to keep under wraps: the protean nature of all identity. By concealing Yiddish – both as the original Argentine musical comedy vernacular, and as the language spoken by the vast majority of Jewish immigrants to Argentina – the thematically explicit “Jewish difference” becomes unexpectedly ambiguous, and it is the illusion of a “normal,” non-Jewish Argentine identity that falls apart. Ultimately, both plays thematize not only anxiety about the Argentineity of Jews, but deeper fears—and hopes—about the Jewishness of Argentina.<sup>6</sup>

### **Fictional Jews in Buenos Aires in 1926**

Known by his pen name, Ivo Pelay, Guillermo Juan Robustiano Pichot (1893-1959) was one of Argentina’s most prolific and successful playwrights. Author of more than 200 plays and the lyrics to more than 100 songs, Pelay went on to become

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<sup>4</sup> David Nirenberg’s work has shaped my understanding of two important responsibilities we have toward the past. First, we need to recognize our own presentist tendency to want to see ourselves in the past, to understand it in terms of “systems of thought,” which establish “a continuity between the hatreds of long ago and those of here and now” (Nirenberg 1996:4). At the same time, we have to guard against the equally dangerous fantasy of “freedom from the past” (Nirenberg 2013:9). With respect to the history of conversion, Nirenberg considers a series of attempts to distinguish Jewish converts and their offspring from “true” Christians, marking the former as “*Cristianos nuevos, confessos, conversos, marranos*” in distinction to “*Cristianos de natura, cristianos viejos, lindos, limpios*” (Nirenberg 2014:242). See David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996); *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: Norton, 2013); *Neighboring Faiths: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in the Middle Ages and Today* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> For Graff Zivin, the *marrano* always provides a “double or metacritical gesture” (Graff Zivin 2014:24). On the surface, *Judío* and *Judía* stand in stark contrast to fictional portrayals of the *marrano* – their identities blazing on the marquees – yet formally the contradictions of their “Jewish difference” can be illuminated by comparison to the secretly Jewish Jew, whose secret is that there is no secret. In her foundational 2008 book, Graff Zivin maintains that the rhetoric of Jewishness in Latin America consists of “wandering” signifiers – not wholly empty, but full of anxious attempts at a national self-definition that is never fully realized (Graff Zivin 2008:2). See Erin Graff Zivin, *Figurative Inquisitions: Conversion, Torture and Truth in the Luso-Hispanic Atlantic* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2014); *The Wandering Signifier: Rhetoric of Jewishness in the Latin American Imaginary* (Durham: Duke UP, 2008); “Marrano Secrets; Or, Misunderstanding Literature,” *New Centennial Review* 14:3 (2014):75-91.

<sup>6</sup> I use the term “Argentineity” in the broad context of 19th and 20th century Argentine constructs of the nation and “lo argentino,” bridging before and after the consolidation of the modern state. I am not referring particularly to the 1937 work by Eduardo Mallea, which is sometimes credited as coining the term “*argentinidad*” in the specific context of 1930s nationalisms in Europe and America. See Eduardo Mallea, *Historia de una pasión argentina* (Bs. As.: Sur, 1937).

one of the directors of ARGENTORES.<sup>7</sup> His gimmicky double feature of *Judío* and *Judía*—and his claim that *Judía* was the first musical comedy in Argentina—came halfway through a decade bookended by the *Semana trágica* [tragic week] of 1919 (anti-Jewish riots often called “the first pogrom in America”) and the military coup of 1930.<sup>8</sup>

In *La Temática judía en el teatro argentino*, Alberto Kleiner dates the first Argentine play with a specifically Jewish topic to 1916, with *El gaucho judío* by Carlos Schaefer Gallo (Kleiner 25). Capitalizing on the success of Alberto Gerchunoff’s short-story collection, *Los gauchos judíos* (1910), Schaefer Gallo’s protagonist was, according to Ricardo Feierstein, “más gaucho que todos los que había descrito Gerchunoff [more gaucho than all the gauchos Gerchunoff had described]” (Feierstein 2006, 90).<sup>9</sup>

There is considerable ambiguity, of course, in what constitutes an “Argentine” play, not to mention a play with a “Jewish topic.” Susana Skura and Leonor Slavsky date Yiddish theater in Argentina to the 1901 premiere of the comic operetta *Kunye Leml* (*El tartamudo*), by Abraham Goldfaden, at the Teatro Doria in Buenos Aires. For Jewish immigrants of the time, Yiddish theater was “como un medio de contención familiar mientras se producía la adaptación al nuevo ambiente social y cultural [a familiar means of support during the adaptation to a new social and cultural environment]” (Slavsky and Skura 2002, 297, my translation).<sup>10</sup> Theater in Spanish couldn’t fulfill this function, Paula Ansaldo writes, “en tanto la barrera idiomática y la representación de problemáticas por las que el inmigrante judío no se sentía interpelado [due to the linguistic barrier and the representation of issues into which the Jewish immigrant didn’t feel interpellated]” (Ansaldo 2018, 5<sup>th</sup> para).

At the same time, Jewish writers actively sought to incorporate Latin American culture (Goldberg 312).<sup>11</sup> In a study of “criollo” [explicitly “Argentinean”] elements in eighteen works of Yiddish theater, Skura found that:

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<sup>7</sup> La Sociedad General de Autores de la Argentina (ARGENTORES) is a professional mutual aid society, based in Buenos Aires, which serves as a publisher of original theater works, maintains a preeminent theater archive and library, and protects the rights of authors.

<sup>8</sup> Mollie Lewis Nouwen has argued that it is an oversimplification of multiple social *dynamics* to call the *semana trágica* a pogrom (2013:43), it is a choice of words that has inflected and been inflected by Argentine literary history, from Ivonne’s association with old country pogroms to David Viñas’s novel *En la semana trágica* (1974) to Herman Szwarcbart’s documentary, *Un pogrom en Buenos Aires* (2007). In 1930, the newly promoted federal commissioner of police – previously the Buenos Aires police chief – promptly went after “Jewish prostitution” in a spectacular public show trial in which Jews were blamed for “importing” prostitution to Argentina (Solomon 2011, 310). See Mollie Lewis Nouwen, *Oy, My Buenos Aires* (Albuquerque: U. of Albuquerque Press, 2013); Claire Solomon, “Reconsidering Anti-Semitism and White Slavery in Contemporary Historical Fiction about Argentina,” *Comparative Literature* 63:3 (2011): 307-327.

<sup>9</sup> See Ricardo Feierstein, *Historia de los judíos argentinos* (Bs. As.: Galerna, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> See Susana Skura, “‘A por gauchos in chiripá...’: Expresiones criollistas en el teatro ídish argentino (1910-1930) in *Iberoamericana* 7:27 (2007): 7-23; see also Susana Skura and Leonor Slavsky, “1901-2011: Cien años de teatro idish en Buenos Aires” in Ricardo Feierstein, ed. *Recreando la cultura judeoargentina* 2: (Bs. As.: Milá, 2002). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations in this essay are mine.

<sup>11</sup> See Florinda Goldberg, “Literatura Judía Latinoamericana: Modelos para armar” in *Revista Iberoamericana* 66:191 (2000): 309-324.

Estos autores optaron no sólo por el uso de recursos lingüísticos y estilísticos locales sino también por temáticas más cercanas a la nueva situación de un público compuesto por inmigrantes que concurrían asiduamente al teatro y alternaban obras de géneros diversos (melodrama, vodevil, cuadros costumbristas [*lebns bilder*], etc.) de autores consagrados a nivel internacional con estas obras que presentaban en forma realista sus propios dilemas y experiencias.

[These authors opted not only for the use of local linguistic and stylistic resources, but also for themes closer to the new situation of a public composed by immigrants who went assiduously to the theater and sampled works of diverse genres (melodrama, vaudeville, costumbrist scenes [*lebns bilder*/life sketches], etc.) of famous international authors with works that presented in a realist mode their own dilemmas and experiences] (Skura 2007,14).

In other words, Argentine Yiddish playwrights sought to integrate a complex experience that was simultaneously local and international, Argentine and Jewish. Despite this, Argentine theater in Yiddish was considered non-Argentine by theater anthologies. Neither “foreign” nor “national,” Argentine Yiddish theater was a third category: “*israelita*” [Jewish] (e.g. Foppa 906; Seibel 488-9; 533; 592; Solomon 2014 n5).<sup>12</sup>

The exclusion of Yiddish from the complex self-fashioning of “Argentine theater” didn’t prevent Jews from being a topic of interest in Spanish-language plays. For example, Ivo Pelay was not even the only playwright in 1926 to put on a male/female Jewish double-feature. Samuel Eichelbaum premiered *El judío Aarón* at the Teatro Sarmiento, and *Nadie la conoció nunca* at the Teatro Ideal. *El judío Aarón* starred a rigidly upright Jewish man: pro-integration, Aarón was determined to give agricultural workers a fair share of profits regardless of their religion. *Nadie la conoció nunca* starred a Jewish prostitute, a “franchuta” named “Ivonne.”<sup>13</sup> In the climactic brothel scene, Ivonne’s boyfriend, Ricardito, participates in a rowdy retelling of an incident in which the men present had harassed a Jewish man and cut off his beard. This prompts Ivonne to reveal her true identity: “I am Jewish. Just like the man whose beard you cut

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<sup>12</sup> Beyond a prejudice against Yiddish, there were other factors that complicate the question of the inclusion or exclusion of “Jewish” plays in Argentine literary self-fashioning. Donald S. Castro argued that the lack of prestige may have influenced the inclusion of popular or “trivial” genres. Any assessment of inclusion and exclusion of particular “Jewish literature” within “Argentine literature” must properly consider the various parties who, in the words of Castro, “may not have considered the genre to be ‘literature’” (Castro 11<sup>th</sup> para). This further complicates what it means to “include” or “exclude” “Jewish” texts in an incipient “Argentine” literary self-fashioning. Though it exceeds the scope of this essay, I think we ought to study the ambivalence *within* Yiddish theater about high versus low art, and the Yiddish critique of Yiddish *shund* [trash] operettas and melodramas, in relation to the contemporaneous popular Spanish genres to mass Spanish literacy, as explored by Beatriz Sarlo and others). See Donald S. Castro, “‘But We Are a Separate Race!’ The Image of the Jew in Argentine Popular Theatre, 1890-1935,” Latin American Studies Association Congress (1995): <http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/lasa95/castro.html>; Beatriz Sarlo, *El imperio de los sentimientos* (Bs. As: Norma, 2000); Tito Livio Foppa, *Diccionario Teatral del Río de la Plata* (Buenos Aires: Argentores, 1961).

<sup>13</sup> Franchuta” is *porteño* slang for French, metonym for a “French” prostitute, which in turn was (as in the case of Eichelbaum’s Ivonne) a pose, because French women were purportedly the most coveted as prostitutes (Londres 241 in Guy 180). See Donna Guy, “The White Slave Trade in Latin American Jewish Writing.” *American Jewish Archives* 39:2 (1982): 178–189.

off. [...] I never saw [my father] again, but tonight *your friends gave me the vision of his death*. I seemed to see him suffering that mockery, and I felt the torture of that humiliation in my own body” (Eichelbaum 55, emphasis and translation mine).<sup>14</sup> Thus, Ivonne connects casual, everyday Argentine anti-Semitism to her father’s death in Poland, and therefore the audience makes the connection between the local violence of the *Semana trágica* and the systemic violence of old-world pogroms.

Throughout the 1920s, there was a constant repetition of Jewish stereotypes in Argentine theater (Castro 1995, 19<sup>th</sup> para). Yet the effect of this repetition wasn’t unidirectional or simple to characterize. Pelay translated and reworked English-language plays about Jews as comic others; Eichelbaum wrote original plays in Spanish allegorizing anti-Jewish violence in national terms in order to humanize and “nationalize” Argentine Jews.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, both wrote for a mixed audience, in the mainstream vernacular, in the same year, relying on similar stereotypes of a fluid Jewish femininity in contrast to the moral inflexibility of Jewish men. Both instantiate a cultural practice of “splitting” Jews antithetically along gender lines. This is in keeping with Sander Gilman’s observation about the “German fantasy of difference,” which finds the Jewish male body indelibly marked while the Jewish woman is “ambiguously identifiable” (Gilman 1993, 195).<sup>16</sup> As Heather Nathans proposes, to assume that Jewish representation could be reduced to stereotypes is to miss nuances in how such stereotypes both affirmed and challenged audience expectations (Nathans 2017, 1).<sup>17</sup>

Though this essay focuses on situated formal readings rather than the plays’ reception, I rely heavily on theatrical reviews, guarding against oversimplification of how audiences responded to the productions while providing a certain check on how the

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<sup>14</sup> Samuel Eichelbaum, “Nadie la conoció nunca” in *Tejido de madre / Nadie la conoció nunca* (Bs. As.: Argentores, Ediciones del Carro de Tespis, 1956).

<sup>15</sup> Scenes of anti-Jewish violence were nothing new in Argentine literature, nor were they to lose their relevance for allegorizing national conflicts. Bergero points out the similarity of the scene in Eichelbaum to the torture and murder of the “*jude*” in Borges and Bioy Casares’s short story, “La fiesta del monstruo” (1947) (Bergero 275), allegorizing the 1945 pro-Perón uprising. See Adriana J. Bergero, *Intersecting Tango: Cultural Geographies of Buenos Aires, 1900-1930*, Trans. Richard Young (Pittsburgh: U. of Pittsburgh Press, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> Scholarship abounds on Jewish stereotypes and the relationship between the representation of such stereotypes and the lived experience of Jews. Sander Gilman’s work has been fundamental to my understanding of such stereotypes as always involving splitting into ‘good’ and ‘bad’ objects (1985) and particularly the construction of antithetical male and female Jewish stereotypes (1993) and the fundamental role of even ostensibly “positive” stereotype in the rise of Nazism (1996). See Sander Gilman, “Salome, Syphilis, Sarah Bernhardt and the Modern Jewess” in *The German Quarterly* 66:2 (1993): 195-211; *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1985); and *Smart Jews* (Lincoln: U. of Nebraska Press, 1996). Erdman’s discussion of the trope of the *belle juive* (1997) similarly explores the inherent ambivalence in ostensibly “philosemitic” representations of female Jewish beauty and sexual charisma. See Harley Mitchell Erdman, *Staging the Jew: The Performance of an American Ethnicity, 1860-1920* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997). I have previously written about the splitting of Jews along gender lines as a compromise in Argentine self-fashioning vis a vis Europe. See Claire Solomon, *Fictions of the Bad Life* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2014): 95ff. Not all scholars accept the notion of “splitting” Jews along gender lines. Notably, Slicher privileges the gendered couple of Jewish father / daughter as a “relational pattern,” through which we can reinterpret stereotypes such as the *belle juive* as showing how “gendered difference works across a range of discourses about the body, religion, race and sexuality” (Slicher 2017:14). See Efraim Slicher, *The Jew’s Daughter: A Cultural History of a Conversion Narrative* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017).

<sup>17</sup> See Heather Nathans, *Hideous Characters and Beautiful Pagans: Performing Jewish Identity on the Antebellum Stage* (Ann Arbor: U. of Michigan Press, 2017).

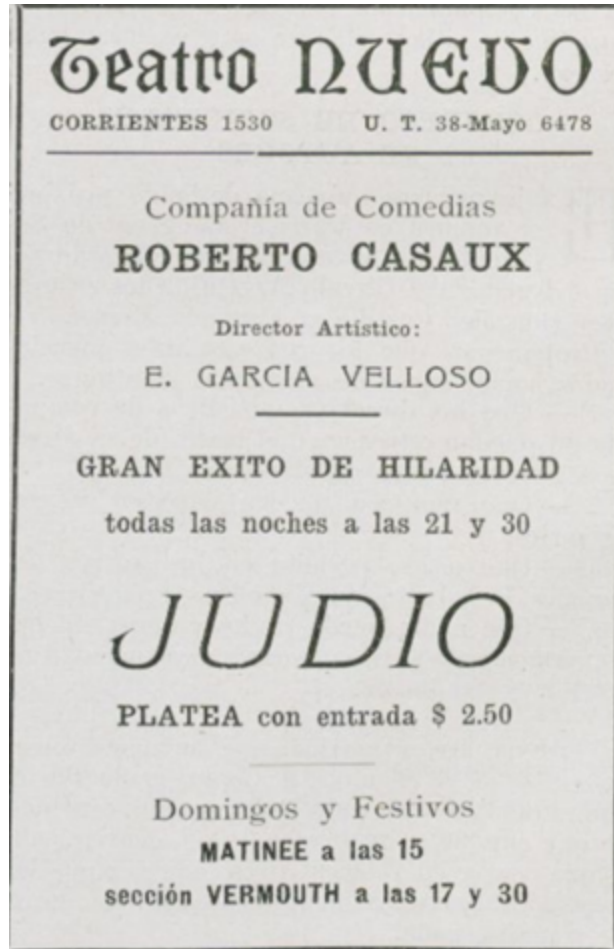
plays' deployment of stereotypes would be evaluated by audiences today. *Judía* and *Judío* have often—but not always—been regarded as antisemitic. In contrast, my reading seeks to illuminate how their use of stereotype reflects what Zygmunt Bauman called “allosemitism,” a “radically *ambivalent* attitude” toward Jews (Bauman 1998,148).<sup>18</sup> I don't presume to define a relationship between the representation of Jews onstage and the lived experience of Jews offstage, but rather to reveal the contradictory forces at work within stereotypes, by which allosemitic Jewish characters stage ambivalence not only about Jews as minorities in Argentina but about the Jewishness of the Argentine self.

### ***Judío***

Ivo Pelay's *Judío* starred well-known comic actor Roberto Casaux in the role of a recent Jewish immigrant to Argentina, a comedic *Merchant of Venice* transposed to Buenos Aires. In anticipation of the play's premier at the Teatro Nuevo in April 1926, an ad in theatrical magazine *Comoedia* promised “a great success of hilarity.”

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<sup>18</sup> The term “allosemitism” is originally credited to Artur Sandauer's (*O sytuacji pisarza polskiego pochodzenia zydowskiego w dwudziestym wieku* [On the Situation of a Polish writer of Jewish descent in the twentieth century], (Warsaw, Czytelnik, 1982). Its use in contemporary Jewish studies – including several cited here – is due to Bauman's popularization of the term, which serves to privilege the “othering” effect of stereotypes, regardless of their ostensibly positive or negative valence. Bauman wrote that allosemitism is that radically ambivalent attitude by which Jews serve as “the wasteyard onto which all the ambivalence squeezed out of the universe could be dumped” (Bauman 1998:148). See Zygmunt Bauman, “Allosemitism: Premodern, Modern, Postmodern” in Bryan Cheyette and Laura Marcus, eds., *Modernity, Culture and 'The Jew'* (Stanford UP, 1998), 143-156.



*Comoedia* I:4 [1926, 10. Courtesy Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut

Later, a review in *La Patria Degli Italiani* gushed that *Judío* was “un grande, magnifico successo [a great, magnificent success]” (Staff Review, 1 May 1926).<sup>19</sup> Casaux’s Shylock, *Comoedia* proclaimed, “es una pintura exacta del ‘judío.’ Ello basta para describirlo [is an exact portrait of the ‘Jew.’ That alone is enough to describe it]” (Staff Review, *Comoedia* 1:4 [1926], 34).<sup>20</sup>

This “exact portrait of the ‘Jew’” appears self-evidently in the stage directions as “un judío harapiento [a shabby Jew]” (Pelay 1936, 3).<sup>21</sup> A recently ruined millionaire, Shylock describes how as a moneylender he exacted revenge for the mistreatment of his race: “me vengaba, y apretaba el tanto por ciento, más y más... y más aún... hasta quedarme con el oro de todos [I took my revenge, and squeezed a certain percent, more and more... and still more... until I had everybody’s gold] (Pelay 1936, 5). Though the provincial locals don’t instantly identify Shylock as a Jew, when he tells them he is Jewish they “see” it. Nicanora, the woman who will become Shylock’s most devoted servant, mutters to herself, “Ya decía yo que algún ‘defeto’ debía tener,” [I said he must

<sup>19</sup> Staff Review (unsigned). “Judío di I. Pelay al Nuevo.” *La Patria Degli Italiani*, 1 May 1926.

<sup>20</sup> Staff Review (unsigned). “Judío de Pelay en el Nuevo.” *Comoedia* I:4 (16 May 1926):34. Accessible at <https://digital.iai.spk-berlin.de/viewer/image/771191154/36/#topDocAnchor>.

<sup>21</sup> See Roberto Pelay, *Judio* (Bs. As: Argentores, 1936).

have some ‘defet’ {defect}} (Pelay 1936, 13). Nicanora’s criticism is ironically mispronounced, her speech emphasizing a relationship between being uneducated and indisputably native: salt-of-the-earth goyish. Meanwhile, Shylock speaks correctly. Despite having just arrived from Italy, his speech has nothing foreign in it.<sup>22</sup>

Shylock’s difference is therefore both there and not there, marked and unmarked. He is an Italian Jewish immigrant who sounds neither Italian nor Jewish; in the stage directions he is a “shabby Jew,” but the locals have to be told he is Jewish—a dramatic irony underscoring their putative innocence of Jews up until his arrival. His Jewish difference is essential (non-contingent, non-Venetian, not inflected by place of origin, culture, or language) and *therefore* inarticulable. Its *quid* cannot be expressed in imagery or description but only impressionistically, in appealing to an already understood relational dynamic with “Argentineity”—as a “defe(c)t” which is, ironically, that there is in fact no defect of pronunciation, no traceable accent, no local ignorance.<sup>23</sup>

For example, at the start of Act Two, stage directions tell us that three or four years have passed, and that Shylock’s house “en una palabra, se ha ‘extranjerizado’ [in a word, has been ‘foreignized’].” The sum total of the “foreignness” of Shylock’s house is described as follows:

La misma decoración del acto anterior. Han pasado tres o cuatro años y se notan modificaciones en la propiedad. Del primitivo estilo y costumbres queda poco. La casa, en una palabra, se ha “extranjerizado”. El gallinero ha desaparecido. En su lugar hay ahora una pequea [sic] habitación.

[Same set from the previous act. Three or four years have passed and modifications have been made to the property. Little is left of the primitive style and customs. The house, in a word, has been ‘foreignized.’ The hen house has disappeared. In its place is now a small room.] (Pelay 1936, 15).

As a matter of set design and scenery, the only stipulated change is the disappearance of the henhouse. Any other changes are implicit, left to the reader’s discretion. This creates a complicity, therefore, not only of writer and director and actors, but with the readers of the script, published ten years later by Argentores. To not stipulate the tropes of Shylock’s Jewish difference is to allude to a shared imaginary of Jewish “foreignness” that doesn’t require foreign speech or dress, which exceeds the tropes of “foreignness.”

By Act III, Shylock lives in a luxurious mansion. He looks completely different: “Su barba ha ido desapareciendo por *conveniencia*. Y es esa misma *conveniencia* la que le ha hecho vestir a la última moda [His beard has been disappearing for *convenience*. And that same convenience is what has made him dress in the latest fashion]” (Pelay 1936, 34, my emphasis). The word *convenience*—applied to Shylock’s change of appearance, his assimilation to Argentine norms—is inseparable from his ability to bully

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<sup>22</sup> Notably, Pelay avoids caricatures of either Italian or Jewish speech, typical in *sainetes*. See, for example, the Italian-inflected speech of Humberto Malatesta in *i Criollos, Gringos y Judíos!* (1921) or the heavy “Jewish” accent of Simón in *Donde menos se piensa salta la liebra* (1914) (See Castro 1995, op cit).

<sup>23</sup> Gilman discussed the means in which the Jewish male was constructed in 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century German fantasies of difference as “feminized” and ultimately as that which is antithetical to the “Aryan”, an *absence of* or contrast to, “what the Aryan is not” (Gilman 1993:196). Thus “Jewish” speech distorted by the deformed and defective Jewish body itself (1993:198).

and use the locals. He buys a local newspaper in order to defame the police superintendent. In order that no one realize that the newspaper is Jewish-owned (“not for shame of being Jewish, but for business” [Pelay 1936, 28]), he mentors a young, non-Jewish journalist named Ricardo, using him as the face of the newspaper. He allows Ricardo to believe that he is doing this in order to help him pursue his own ambition of becoming police superintendent, only to reveal that he has intended that job all along for his own son, Isaac.

Ricardo plays the Lorenzo character with whom J sica inevitably falls in love. J sica is vulnerable to the seductions of intermarriage (and therefore of Christianity), while Shylock figures brittle Jewish male resistance. Thus Shylock and J sica instantiate what Efraim Sicher calls the stereotypical Jewish father-daughter pair:

The Jewish daughter’s beauty and desirability function in the narrative of the Jew’s daughter in binary opposition to her father’s filth and gold lust. She can be converted to social or religious values that allow her to assimilate into society and reject the detestable father-figure, who represents the unacceptable “ghetto” Jew and who can be discarded when his daughter successfully assimilates (Sicher 2017, 11-12).

Ricardo doesn’t care that J sica is Jewish—that doesn’t matter “in this country.” However, J sica counters that “[p]ara nosotros, Ricardo, son todas las tierras iguales. En todas somos extra os, en todas somos jud os [for us, Ricardo, all lands are the same. In all of them we’re foreign, in all of them we’re Jews]” (Pelay 1936, 20). Unlike in *The Merchant of Venice*—and departing from Sicher’s paradigm—J sica sacrifices her love in the name of filial duty: she gives up Ricardo and lets her father arrange a marriage for her to an unknown Jewish man.

When J sica disappears, so do Ricardo’s progressive ideas about Jews. This initiates a move away from assimilation as a means of incorporating the Jewish “other,” but also opens up an unexpected identification of that “other” with Argentineity. Speaking to Shylock’s new *shikse*, Nicanora, who is now chief servant in the mansion, Ricardo says, “No en balde son jud os!  Jud os!  Jud os perros y arrastrados, miserables y traidores!...  Si dan asco! [Not for nothing they’re Jews! Jews! Dog-Jews, stingy, miserable traitors!... They are disgusting!”<sup>24</sup> Do a Nicanora, however, defends the family:

NICANORA: No, son; not dogs, nor stingy, nor miserable, nor traitors... Jews... and nothing more.

RICARDO: Trash!

NICANORA: Don’t believe it. I called them that too and I believed that they were... and see for yourself. Old and mistreated they found me one night in the street and they took me in... From a useless woman, they made a good woman out of me (Pelay 1936, 34).

Nicanora’s admiration for Shylock—having early on identified him as “defective”—suggests a different type of assimilation: that of Argentine locals to

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<sup>24</sup> In Argentine *castidich* (Spanish-Yiddish), *shikse* is metonymic slang for domestic help.

Shylock's unethical ways. What began as an explicitly anti- or 'allosemitic' "Jewish difference" leads unexpectedly to the alliance of Nicanora and Shylock, earth and capital, the national and the foreign.

Further, in his amoral relationality, Shylock embodies the ambivalently acceptable—even admired—homegrown cunning known as *viveza criolla*: ignoring rules, taking the path of least resistance to reach objectives, by which the ends justify the means. At the end of the play, having successfully defamed Peñalva in his newspaper, Shylock insists that not only didn't he lie, but that in fact he *can't* lie, because he is illiterate:

SHYLOCK: —Yo no puedo mentir, porque no escribo. Yo soy el capitalista. El diario es independiente.

COMISARIO: —Sí: tan independiente que me independizó a mí del puesto de comisario.

[SHYLOCK: I can't lie, because I don't write. I'm the capitalist. The newspaper is free.

SUPERINTENDENT: Yes: so free that it freed me from my job as superintendent] (Pelay 1936, 41).

Shylock's lie about lying—this meta-dishonesty—can be read as an aporia in Pelay's play. At one level, this is an apotheosis of "Jewish difference": speaking to the police superintendent he has wronged, Shylock even denies that he has wronged him. Yet, formally speaking, Shylock's anti-intellectual prejudice against writing, the grudging mutual respect between criminal and cop, the blurred lines of a state-sponsored legality that delivers something other than justice—even the shared pun on "independence"—makes Shylock classically, even stereotypically, Argentine. Shylock's "difference" is suddenly hard to distinguish from the very definition of the national.<sup>25</sup>

In this way, Pelay's Shylock embodies Bauman's definition of allosemitism as a radically ambivalent attitude, based on the fear not of difference, but of the inability to differentiate: a proteophobia, rather than a heterophobia. Having subverted the stereotypical pair of Jewish father and daughter, *Judío* forecloses a stereotypical "resolution" of antisemitic hate through intermarriage. Instead, the last image of the play is a wild apotheosis of heterophobia as proteophobia: Jewish difference rendered

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<sup>25</sup> Perhaps this contradiction can help explain *Judío's* mixed reviews. *El Diario Español* wrote with distaste of its "trite and uninteresting" Jewish stereotype: "Desde hace bastantes años, el tipo de judío, que llega pobre a la Argentina y que se enriquece a fuerza de oprimir a los cristianos manejando cuantos resortes, más de los malos que de los buenos, encuentra en el camino, está desfilando por la escena con los mismos procedimientos y las mismas cualdiades e idénticos efectos en cada obra." [For many years now, the type of Jew, who arrives poor in Argentina and gets rich by oppressing Christians managing whatever resources, more bad than good, he finds in his path, is parading through the scene with the same proceedings and qualities and identical effects in every work] (Staff Review (unsigned). "Judío, un folletín escénico demasiado manido y poco interesante." *El Diario Español* 2 May 1926). Criticism repeatedly characterized *Judío* as anti-Semitic (Senkman 1983, 434; Canaparo 2016; Karduner 1937, 101), though Alberto Kleiner in his foundational *La temática judía en el teatro argentino* found "justeza y equilibrio en el manejo de los personajes [fairness and balance in the workings of the characters]" (Kleiner 39). See Leonardo Senkman, *La identidad judía en la literatura argentina* (Bs. As.: Pardés, 1983); Ismael Canaparo, "Tango que me hiciste goy," *Semanario* 29 September 2019, [http://semanariodejunin.com.ar/nota/9122/tango\\_que\\_me\\_hiciste\\_goy/](http://semanariodejunin.com.ar/nota/9122/tango_que_me_hiciste_goy/); Luis Karduner, "Carta abierta a César Tiempo," *Judaica* 4:45 (1937): 99-104; Alberto Kleiner, *La Temática judía en el teatro argentino* (Bs. As.: Polígono, 1983).

fungible, caught in the act of disappearing into capital. The stage directions put Shylock in the center of the scene, triumphant, “como un símbolo” [as a symbol]:

¡Mía la ciudad!... ¡Mío y de los míos el mundo!... Porque somos fuertes... porque nos amamos... porque nos une la desgracia... porque ya nada nos detiene... porque el oro puede más que todo. ¡Adelante, Isaac!... Y firme el paso!... ¡El judío avanza!...

[The city belongs to me!... The world belongs to me and mine!... Because we are strong... because we love each other... because disgrace unites us... because nothing holds us back any longer... because gold can do more than everything. Onward, Isaac!... And with steady steps!... The Jew advances!...] (Pelay 1936, 45)

At one level, the “symbol” of Shylock is squarely heterophobic and antisemitic: the boundlessly ambitious, amoral Jew running amok in Argentina. He *uses* people, capitalizing on their naiveté, just as he had done as a moneylender in Venice. At the same time, Shylock’s very boundlessness--his capital expansion--creates an ambiguity in the meaning of his possessive pronouns: his *nosotros* is clearly a heterophobic Jewish “us”; yet what limits are there to that “us,” to what—or *whom*—belongs to Jews, when gold can do anything?

The compromise formation in Shylock’s case governs the relation of surface and depth, appearance and reality. Perfect assimilation is indistinguishable from perfect deceit, true transformation from concealment, truth from lies. Following Graff-Zivin, we could view Shylock as an example of the aporetic marrano subject “bear[ing] witness not to a secret that he keeps,” but rather to “the secret that there is nothing to hide” (Graff-Zivin 2014, 81). At the same time, the comic *mésalliance* of Nicanora and Shylock, earth and capital, proposes an assimilation not of Jews into Argentina but of Argentina into “Judaism”—which is portrayed with allosemantic ambivalence as an imported version of *viveza criolla*.

## **Judía**

Despite *Judía*’s recent popularization as the revisionist origin of Argentine musical comedy, the script of the play is nowhere to be found.<sup>26</sup> I managed to locate the program at ARGENTORES, and together with reviews from Biblioteca ARGENTORES, Yale University, the Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut, and Gorlero’s production history, I pieced the play together. *Judía* premiered at the Teatro Porteño on July 8, 1926, only three months after *Judío*. It was advertised with great fanfare as the first musical comedy in Argentina (Seibel 2016, 17). The play was relatively popular, running for five months. Many reviews focused on how well the “new” genre would play in Argentina.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> I searched ARGENTORES, IWO, YIVO, Biblioteca Nacional, the New York Public Library, as well as digital collections. It was never published, I was told by an archivist at ARGENTORES, because it was based on Savage’s 1891 novel, *My Official Wife*. Pablo Gorlero minimized its literary importance, characterizing it as “una pretenciosa drama de intriga y suspenso con una encadenada serie de gags y equívocos [a pretentious drama of intrigue and suspense with an intertwined series of gags and mistaken identities]” (Gorlero 2004, 68). IWO is the Argentine branch of YIVO, the premier institute for Jewish Research and main archive of Yiddish and Jewish works of literature.

<sup>27</sup> “Ayer en el tablado del Porteño, ante auditorio numerosísimo, curioso e inquieto, hizo su aparición la comedia musical [Yesterday on the stage of the Porteño, before a multitudinous, curious, and anxious

Others were critical, complaining about the “stupidity” of the libretto, contrasting it unfavorably with the popular English-language American novel on which it was based, Richard Savage’s *My Official Wife* (1891).<sup>28</sup>

In Savage’s novel, the main character, Helene, is a mysterious woman traveling from Germany to Russia. The narrator, Lowell, an upstanding American abroad, can’t resist helping her enter Russia. The dark comedy hinges on the false identity of Helene, and the contrast between her lovely (and implicitly non-Jewish) appearance and the surprise reveal that she is hell-bent on assassinating the tsar because she is “both a Pole [and] a Jewess!” Lowell is forced to drug Helene (putting morphine in her champagne) to prevent her from shooting the tsar (with her lady’s pistol, conveniently hidden in her evening bag) in the climactic winter ball scene:

“[...] in another minute I would have struck a blow that would have given Russia perhaps freedom; a blow for the wronged, the oppressed, the down-trodden under the heel of this tyrant.”

“My dear Helene,” said I, lightly, “You speak like a Pole or a Jewess!”

Then she astounded me, for she cried, “I AM BOTH!”

“What?” I gasped.

“Yes,” she repeated. “A Pole — by my father’s blood! A Jewess — by my mother’s wrongs!” (Savage 1891, 191)

Savage’s Helene was simultaneously a *femme fatale* and a dangerous *belle juive*—stereotypes deriving their power, respectively, from misogyny and antisemitism (Gilman 1993, 198). The character was thrillingly reported to have been based on real-life nihilist Sophie Gunsberg, who was executed for plotting to murder Alexander III. Even more thrillingly, Savage was reported to have met—and been bewitched by—Gunsberg in Paris (*The Publisher’s Weekly*, 17 October 1891).

Previous adaptations and translations of the novel kept the title and name of the main character, preserving the climactic reveal of Helene’s secret identity. The 1909 Spanish translation is virtually word-for-word, with a few omissions that don’t affect my reading.<sup>29</sup> However, it’s noteworthy that the Broadway (1893) and Hollywood versions

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audience, the musical comedy made its appearance]” (Staff Review, *Ultima Hora*, 9 July 1926). *Anuario Teatro Argentino* quipped, “Se ha discutido mucho respecto a lo que es la comedia musical. Y mucho también se ha disparatado. [...Los autores de] largos artículos y sabrosas cartas [...], demostraban que estaban todos tauteando [There has been much argument about what musical comedy is. And much nonsense. [...The authors of] long articles and juicy letters [...] demonstrated that they were all shrieking]” (Staff Review, signed “L.A.,” *Anuario Teatral Argentino*, 1928).

<sup>28</sup> See Richard Henry Savage, *My Official Wife* (New York: The Home Publishing Company, 1891).

<sup>29</sup> It’s interesting that both the 1909 Biblioteca de *La Nación* and the 1911 Biblioteca de *El Imparcial* translations skip a brief preamble to Helene’s backstory, in which she frames it as a justification: “‘I do not wish to be misjudged, even by you; you think I have the heart of a murderer. Listen to my justification!’ And her face became sad, and her eyes pathetic, and her lips trembling as she whispered [...]” (Savage 1891, 190). As a general note on the two translations, there are both global differences — e.g. the Mexican translation uses the archaic “vos,” the Argentine “usted” — and specific differences of both word choice and interpretation. It’s possible that one used the other as its source text, due to identical omissions such as the above. However, there are also discrepancies. For example, Lenox says that he drugged Helene to save his own life — “That was to save my life,” he says (Savage 1891, 189). The Mexican translation renders this correctly (given the use of the archaic ‘vos’) as “Os las suministré por tal de salvarme la vida” (Savage 1911, 119). The Argentine translation reads “Se las suministré para salvarle la vida” — to save *her* life (Savage 1909, 296).

of the play (1914, 1926)—as well as, unsurprisingly, the 1936 German film version—elide Helene’s Jewishness. In each of these versions, the main character is named Helene, but her Jewish otherness is erased (or perhaps subsumed) into different identities: that of a “Polish patriot” (1936), “Countess disguised as a peasant” (1926), or a woman who has “a just cause against the Russian aristocracy,” having “seen her family butchered in cold blood” (Staff Review, *The Moving Picture World*, 6 January 1917, 138).<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Judía* was preceded by theatrical versions in English and German, including a Broadway premiere starring Minnie Seligman as Helene (1893), with a script by Archibald Clavering Gunter, and two Hollywood films, starring Clara Kimball Young (1914) and Irene Rich (1926), respectively. Each of these plays and films was called *My Official Wife*, with the main character called Helene, despite updates to include contemporary costumes and political references (see, for example the glamour shot of Irene Rich as Helene in full flapper costume in John Kobal, ed., *Hollywood Glamor Photos of Stars (1926-1949)*. New York: Dover, 1976):15). The story was also turned into a film in Nazi Germany, *Eskapade* (1936), subtitled *Seine Offizelle Frau*, a romantic comedy starring Renate Müller. While a reading of the portrayals exceeds the scope of this essay, it would be interesting to examine the ambiguous or tacit “Jewishness” in how Helene is portrayed in each of these versions, particularly given the allure of the rumors about the “true-life” basis for Helen’s character in Gunsberg. Another tangentially Jewish (and unfounded) rumor was that Trotsky himself appeared as an extra in the 1914 film. This rumor was recirculated to popularize a Vitagraph Movie Album of film clips, released in 1931. An uncredited review or press release, dated 28 February 1932, source unknown, reads “Leon Trotsky, red army war lord, had no sex appeal in the “movies.” He had no “It,” says Harey T. Morey, the Clark Gable of his day and fellow actor of Trotsky in “My Official Wife.” Shots of this old-time film showing Morey, Trotsky and Clara Kimball Young, the leading lady, are soon to be released in local theaters as part of “The Movie Album” series which Vitaphone has assembled from old prints of early Vitaphone silent pictures” (Staff Review, Source Unclear, 28 February 1932). See Staff Review (unsigned), “Vitagraph” in *The Moving Picture World* (6 January 1917): 138-9; Staff Review or Press Release (unsigned), “Leon Trotsky Revealed in Old Film Play with Clara Kimball Young.” 28 February 1932. Source Unclear, [hollywoodheyday.blogspot.com/2008/11/february-28-1932.html](http://hollywoodheyday.blogspot.com/2008/11/february-28-1932.html)

TEATRO  
BOITEO  
5/26

**POR PRIMERA VEZ EN BUENOS AIRES**

**M. M. GONZALEZ**  
PRESENTA

— A —  
**IRIS MARGA, CARMEN LAMAS, DORA GALEZ, ENCARNACION  
FERNANDEZ, HORTENSIA ARNAUD Y LEOPOLDO SIMARI**

— en —  
la comedia musical

# JUDIA

Libro de **IVO FELAY**  
Números Musicales originales y adaptados por  
el maestro **ERMANNIO ANDOLFI**  
Asunto tomado de la novela rusa, del  
**CORONEL SAVAGE. "Mi esposa oficial"**  
Coreografía del maestro **ELADIO ALONSO**  
Decoraciones pintadas por **JOSE TARAZONA**  
Modelos dibujados por **C. KIVIETTE**  
Toda la obra puesta en escena bajo la  
dirección personal del autor

**REPARTO POR ORDEN DE APARICION**

UN ACTOR .....	Sr. PORTA
HERTA JUDITH .....	Srta. IRIS MARGA
DON MACARIO GEMINDEZ .....	Sr. L. SIMARI
DORA LAURA, su esposa .....	Srta. FALCON
EL SECRETARIO .....	Sr. J. ARIAS
GUARDA 1° .....	Sr. CUMO
GUARDA 2° .....	Sr. DAVILA
EL ROCO .....	Srta. DORA GALEZ
SOLDADO 1° .....	Sr. DE LABAR
SOLDADO 2° .....	Sr. GENTILE
SARGENTO .....	Sr. CAPLAN
FRIEDRICH, jefe de investigaciones .....	Sr. PORTA
EL CHAMBELAN .....	Sr. CAPLAN
SACHA, oficial de la guardia imperial .....	Sr. FERRANTE
LA PRINCESA DOZIA .....	Srta. CARMEN LAMAS
LA ENAMORADA .....	Srta. ENCARNACION FERNANDEZ
EL PRINCIPE HEREDERO .....	Srta. GREEN

**PRIMEROS BAILARINES**

Srta. Hortensia Arnaud y Sr. Domingo Alonso

**CUERPO DE BAILE Y SEGUNDAS TIPLES**

Srta. Olivier, Reynold, Castex, C. Gonzalez, Parlex J, Dabarry, Supervia A., Ventura, M. L., Ventura J, Berelli, Parlas M. A., Polo, De Labar, Supervia T., Thallade, Bonorino, Rufino, Levy, Clayton, Supervia L., Galbani, Arenales R., Padron, Giordano, Dalton, Lotten, Dormal, Schervary, Quiroga, Galbani J., Daneri, Amira, Martinez A., Durán, Zepeda, Rosales, Daneri D., Juncal N., Gonzalez D., Lopez, Castilvra, Mehan, Deval, Guber, Rose y Casal.

**OTROS ACTORES**

Sres. Vaccaro, Enriquez, Davila, Roger, Durio y Diaz.

**TITULOS DE LOS CUADROS**

- Cuadro 1° — En una ciudad del mundo...
  - " 2° — A Sajonia va Don Macario.
  - Intermedio — El rápido internacional.
  - Cuadro 3° — Donde aparece la hermosa desconocida.
  - " 4° — En las fronteras de Sajonia.
  - Intermedio — En el Gran Hotel Europa.
  - Cuadro 5° — La aventura se complica.
  - " 6° — La gran fiesta del Club Casino Imperial.
  - Intermedio — Después del baile.
  - Cuadro 7° — En una taberna de los barrios bajos.
  - " 8° — En las puertas del palacio.
  - " 9° — El baile del principe.
    - a) La primera danza.
    - b) La fuente del palacio.
    - c) El atentado.
  - Intermedio — El canto del odio.
  - Cuadro 10° — Las madres del mundo.
  - " 11° — Se cierra la trampa.
  - " 12° — La hermosa realidad.
- Orquesta dirigida por el maestro E. Andolfi  
Maestro sustituto: Alejandro Liska

Program for *Judía*. Teatro Porteño, 1926. Courtesy ARGENTORES.

In Pelay's musical, by contrast, the protagonist's identity as "a Jewess" is not only preserved but pre-revealed as the title of the work, used in advance publicity as a sort of "umbrella branding" of *Judía* with *Judío*. Some reviewers suggested that Pelay chose the title opportunistically, to capitalize on the success of *Judío*.<sup>31</sup> Pelay refuted this, claiming the title was simply because "the protagonist is a Jew" (Staff Review, *Comoedia*, 1 July 1926), though this is belied by the sheer number of publicity stunts drawing attention to the pairing.<sup>32</sup>

Pelay's choice to call the play *Judía* required a serious reworking of the Savage novel as well as a departure from previous theatrical and film adaptations. Pelay lost primary elements of both the suspense and comedy of the original: the allosemantic stereotype of the Jewish woman as protean, threatening in the measure that she passes as non-Jewish, that her Jewishness isn't "marked." Pelay not only marks her Jewishness with the title, but also renames Helene the very Jewish-sounding "Berta Judith." Every ticket-holder knows Berta Judith's "secret." Helen's half-Jewishness is simplified away with a one-drop aptonym.

As a femme fatale and belle juive, Berta Judith is therefore reduced to a harmlessly comic figure. Whereas the titillation of "My Official Wife" was fueled partly by the context of anarchist and nihilist opposition to not only tsarism but statism, by

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<sup>31</sup> "Pelay aprovecha el éxito de su obra *Judío* que interpreta Roberto Casaux en el Nuevo y el 8 de julio estrena en el Porteño la comedia musical judía [sic], basada en la novela rusa [sic] [Pelay takes advantage of the success of his work *Judío* starring Roberto Casaux at the Nuevo and on July 8 premieres at the Porteño the Jewish musical comedy [sic], based on the Russian novel [sic]]" (Pico 18). See also Staff Review (signed signed "Fumista"), "Ivo Pelay, el éxito de *Judío*, y la comedia musical" in *Comoedia* I:7 (1 July 1926):45. A cartoon in the August 1 issue of *Comoedia* depicts an ailing "teatro nacional" as a woman lying in a hospital bed with a bandaged head. A bearded, hat-wearing character regards her. Medicine bottles are labeled "Judía," "Judío-Aaron" and "Judío." Castro analyzed the cartoon as meaning "that these plays, based on 'Jewish' themes, were good medicine for the national theatre. Perhaps the ailing patient would survive and get well" (Castro, op cit). On the other hand, the cartoon is captioned "Ojo con el diagnóstico [Careful with the diagnosis]" – remitting us to an ambivalence toward Jews. See Oñiverta, "Ojo con el diagnóstico" in *Comoedia* I:9 (1 August 1926). Accessible at: <https://digital.iai.spk-berlin.de/viewer/image/771192223/16/#topDocAnchor>.

While popular, "Judía" was not an unqualified critical success. *El Diario Español* wrote that the Richard Savage novel on which it was based was "ya de sí triste [already sad in itself] [...] Pero el señor Pelay ha buscado los motivos más tristes para darlos [But Mr. Pelay has chosen to present the saddest motifs]" (Staff Review [unsigned], "Judía, comedia musical estrenada ayer," *El Diario Español*, 9 July 1926). Others said the argument was lost among too many musical numbers (Staff Review [unsigned], "El jueves se estrenó 'Judía' en el Porteño," *La Época*, 10 July 1926). *La Argentina's* headline was succinct: "En el Porteño fracasó el ensayo de un nuevo género [In the Porteño, the attempt at a new genre failed]": "El libreto, en sí, es una tontería sin nombre, que nada se parece a la novela de Savage; la partitura, a pesar de los once autores que en ella intervienen[,] es un verdadero atentado filarmónico y al buen gusto [The libretto, in itself, is an unspeakable stupidity, that resembles not at all Savage's novel; the score, in spite of the eleven authors who contributed to it is a genuine philharmonic assault and an affront to good taste]" (Staff Review [unsigned], "En el Porteño fracasó el ensayo de un nuevo género," *La Argentina*, 9 July 1926). Even *Judía's* leading lady, Iris Marga, omitted the play from her account of the 1926 season (Marga 1983). See Pedro E. Pico, *Antología de obras de teatro argentino. Desde sus orígenes a la actualidad. Tomo XIV (1921-1930)* (Bs. As.: Inteatro, 2017); Iris Marga, *El teatro, mi verdad* (Bs. As.: Tres tiempos, 1983).

<sup>32</sup> For example, Pelay participated in a review the following month called *Manicomio Teatral*, which promised "Judías, caretas y caretas y caretas!" in which he delivered a comic monologue entitled "El judío errante [The Wandering Jew]." See "Manicomio teatral" in *Comoedia* I:9 (1 August 1926):51.

1926 in Argentina the once-powerful anarchist movement was in decline as a viable threat to state power. Contemporary playwrights such as Salvadora Medina Onrubia and Alcira Olivé defended the principles of anarchism from the stage in “thesis-dramas.” The Jewish anarchist had long been an entrenched cultural stereotype in Argentina, and to expose the true identity of Berta Judith as a theatrical climax might have fallen flat.<sup>33</sup>

Pelay’s script also transposes the geopolitical setting from Russia to “Saxony” (*Sajonia*) in Germany, reversing Savage’s travel narrative from enlightened West (Prussia) to barbarous East (Russia). Savage’s original description of geography was clearly allegorical:

My first peep of Russia was not inspiring. Out through the Russian half of the border town we whirred, clattering away on that line road traced by the impatient finger of the great autocrat Nicolas. The landscape gradually changed. German thrift gave way to Russian slovenliness (Savage 1891, 31)

In the Spanish translation, the change was even more abrupt and extreme: “Bien pronto el paisaje empezó a cambiar: á la laboriosidad alemana sucedían el desaliño y la dejadez de la Rusia [right away the landscape began to change: after German industriousness came the slovenliness and negligence of Russia] (Savage 1909, 46).<sup>34</sup>

Pelay, in contrast, removes Russian barbarism from the story entirely. In *Judía*, the plot against the barbarous tsar is transformed into a barbarous plot against the enlightened “Prince of Saxony.” The change rewrites Jewish vengeance so that it is not directed against tsarist Russia, from which Jews had fled *en masse*, but “Saxony,” a country that no longer existed in 1926 (but did exist during the reign of Alexander III, when the action ostensibly takes place). By attacking “Saxony,” with its clear if impressionistic connotation of Germanic Northern Europe, Berta Judith is interpolated into an Argentine binary as an agent of barbarism. She becomes a metonym of the violently idealistic “bad” Jewish immigrant Sarmiento warned about (Sarmiento 1928, 178) attacking “civilization.”<sup>35</sup>

Confused by too many dance numbers, critics lost track of where the action was taking place.<sup>36</sup> Some referred to the setting as “el imaginario país de Sajonia [the

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<sup>33</sup> Medina Onrubia and her husband, *Crítica* publisher Natalio Botana, were both imprisoned by the Uriburu dictatorship in 1931. With the 1930 coup, the Argentine Anarchist movement lost its status as the most important Anarchist movement in the hemisphere, never to recover from the dictatorship of the so-called “infamous decade” (1930-1943). See José C Moya, “The Positive Side of Stereotypes: Jewish Anarchists in early-Twentieth-Century Buenos Aires.” *Jewish History* 18 (2004):19–48; Ronaldo Munck, *Argentina from Anarchism to Peronism: Workers, Unions and Politics, 1855-1985* (London: Zed, 1987).

<sup>34</sup> See Richard Henry Savage, *Mi esposa oficial: novela rusa* (Mexico: Biblioteca de “El Imparcial,” 1911), <https://archive.org/details/miesposaoficialn00sava>; *Mi esposa oficial* (Bs As: Biblioteca de “La Nación,” 1909).

<sup>35</sup> See Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, *Condición de extranjero en América* (Bs. As.: Biblioteca Argentina, librería “la Facultad,” de Juan Roldán y C<sup>ia</sup>, 1928.). Sarmiento – writer, intellectual and seventh president of Argentina – was best known for his foundational 1845 work, *Facundo: Civilización y Barbarie*, in which he identified civilization with Northern Europe and North America in contrast to the barbarism of Latin American *caudillismo*, exemplified by 19<sup>th</sup> century dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas.

<sup>36</sup> Though I haven’t found a single review that commented on the incoherence of the “Saxony” plot, reviews tended to forgive contradictions as part of the difficulty inherent in balancing the “two planes” of action in the new musical comedy genre. To hear this described by someone seeing a musical for the first time is defamiliarizing: “no permite al auditorio establecer siempre cuándo está frente a un episodio de la

imaginary country of Saxony]” (*La Razón* op. cit.), losing the geopolitical allegory entirely. What was more common, however, was to refer to the climactic action as taking place in *Russia*:

“‘Judía’ [g]ira, toda ella, alrededor de la figura, misteriosa y sugerente, de una aventurera, cuyas artes de habilidad y de seducción son utilizadas por la policía rusa, a la cual termina por burlar, como ha burlado a todos los que ha querido. Para lograr el aspecto cómico indispensable se ha relacionado su vida azarosa con la lamentable aventura de un buen señor que va a Rusia con el objeto de visitar a su hija [...]

[‘Judía’ turns, all of it, on the mysterious and alluring figure of an adventurer whose arts of seduction are utilized by the Russian police, of which she ends up making a mockery, as she mocks everyone she has loved. To achieve the indispensable comic aspect, her chaotic life has been intertwined with the lamentable adventure of an upright man who goes to Russia to visit his daughter [...] (Staff Review, *La Nación* 9 July 1926).<sup>37</sup>

“[E]l argumento de *Judía* se refiere a las cosas rusas de antes de la guerra. Todo gira alrededor de una pobre mujer que por vengar a su padre maltratado y deportado a Siberia pasa mil vicisitudes [...]

[the plot of *Judía* refers to Russian things from before the war. Everything hinges on a poor woman who, to avenge her father who has been mistreated and deported to Siberia, goes through a thousand happenstances] [...]” (*El Diario Español* 9 July 1926).<sup>38</sup>

It’s noteworthy that so many audience members resituated the play geopolitically—thus projectively restoring Savage’s allegory. Though it is beyond the scope of this essay to define the play’s reception (let alone the meaning of its reception), we could consider this “misunderstanding” within the large category of a “negotiated reading,” as defined by reception theory, and therefore meaningful as a compromise between a “dominant” reading (that intended by Pelay) and an “oppositional” reading that rejects it (Hall 2018, 273).<sup>39</sup>

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fábula de la obra y cuándo frente al comentario coreográfico, alegórico o simplemente decorativo del mismo episodio [it doesn’t always permit the audience to establish when they are watching an episode of the main plot and when they are watching a choreographic, allegorical or simply decorative commentary on the same episode].” See Staff Review (unsigned). “Se estrenó ayer ‘Judía’ en el Porteño,” *La Razón*, 9 July 1926.

<sup>37</sup> See Staff Review (unsigned), “Se estrenó en el Porteño la primera comedia musical,” *La Nación*, 9 July 1926).

<sup>38</sup> See Staff Review (unsigned). “Judía, comedia musical estrenada ayer,” *El Diario Español*, 9 July 1926.

<sup>39</sup> See Stuart Hall’s foundational “Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse” in , *Stuart Hall. Essential Essays Vol. 1., David Morely, ed.* (Durham: Duke UP, 2018): 257-276. In the spirit of a “negotiated” reading, it’s relevant to consider the pervasive metonymy of “Jews” and “Russians” in Argentine Spanish of the era, in which “ruso” was used in common slang to mean “Jew.”

Furthermore, even in contemporary accounts of *Judía*, apropos of its celebration as origin of musical comedy, critics perpetuate the misprision of “Russia” for Saxony”:

“para representar una escena de la helada Rusia, se utilizaba una pantalla gigante en la que se proyectaba una tormenta de nieve. Era un recurso aplaudido a rabiar por el público de entonces

[to represent a scene of frozen Russia, they utilized a giant screen on which a snowstorm was projected. It was an effect applauded rabidly by the public of the time] (Gorlero 2004, 68).

As the audience applauded the technological miracle of the snowstorm projected onto the screen (“*a rabiar*”), they projected their own metonymic free-associations of Jews and Russia onto what they were seeing, thus restoring what Pelay had erased—and tempering the play’s most explicit antisemitism.

In an enduring parapraxis, the allosemitic Jewish agent of barbarism attacks Saxony, but is misheard by Argentine audiences as attacking Russia. In both the play’s formal substitutions (a “revealed” Berta Judith for “concealed” Helene, “Saxony” for “Russia”) and the projections of audiences and critics that turn “Saxony” metonymically back into “Russia,” we can see the signature qualities of compromise formation as simultaneously defective but also persistent, “supported from both sides” (Freud 1916, 294 op cit).

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The allosemitic portrayal of Jews in both *Judío* and *Judía* makes for aporetic moments. Even as Shylock stages a grotesque antisemitic stereotype, there is no alternative hero in the play. We don’t root for the corrupt and incompetent rural police against Shylock. As Berta Judith acts out a foundational Sarmentine fantasy of the disloyal Jewish immigrant destroying “good” Europe, nobody notices. In fact, at the most antisemitic moments of each play—when Shylock and Berta Judith are most stereotypically disagreeable, individualistic, paranoid, and lawless—they are quintessentially Argentine. By trying to assassinate *any* dictator, blackmailing *any* police superintendent, the protagonists are already operating within the tradition of the Argentine popular hero, wherein the police are corrupt, the state is incompetent, and the law is not always the locus of rights (Ludmer 1993, 153).<sup>40</sup> As Borges wrote, “the Argentine, in contrast to the Americans of the north and almost all Europeans, doesn’t identify with the State. [...] the Argentine is an individual, not a citizen” (Borges 1946, 658).<sup>41</sup>

In both *Judía* and *Judío*, the compromise formation remains partially satisfactory, defective and persistent. In each case, the promise of Jewish assimilation is indissociable from the threat of subversion. “Jewish difference” appears as self-evident,

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<sup>40</sup> See Josefina Ludmer, “El delito: Ficciones de exclusion y sueños de justicia” in *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana* 19:38 (1993): 145-153.

<sup>41</sup> See Jorge Luis Borges, “Nuestro pobre individualismo” in *Obras completas* (Bs. As.: Emecé, 1974): 658-9.

its signifiers paradoxically fungible. This ambiguity itself in turn threatens the self-evident “norm” of the national with which it is meant to contrast.

As a revisionist historical origin for Argentine musical comedy, *Judía* can therefore be seen as a compromise formation that erases Jewish authorship—and Yiddish—from Argentine theater history, while keeping Jews present as stereotypes. It offers a fictive continuity of Jewish-Argentine identity—an identity that at the time was mutually incompatible. And yet the compromise, though stable, in its radical ambivalence reveals disturbing glimpses of what it conceals: the fact that all identity is protean, any self is other. In this context, doña Nicanora’s words vibrate with a different overtone. What if Argentina itself is just “Jews, and nothing more”?

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