



## BACK IN TIME

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### THE CENTRE

From the street it looked like any another warehouse. Shabby and nondescript, just a few blocks from the port of Montevideo. If the railroad had run through that part of town, this place would have been on the wrong side of the tracks. But that was the outside. When you stepped through the door at Calle Paysandú 1076, you entered The Montevideo Players Centre, a cosy place where my family and I spent quite a bit of time in the late 1950s and 1960s.

The Montevideo Players Society was started on July 14, 1949 by a handful of theatre aficionados. It was actually Uruguay's first independent theatre company, formed just a few months after the government launched the country's Comedia Nacional. The Society has been active ever since and is now the granddaddy of English-speaking amateur dramatic groups in Latin America. During the first few years the members of the troupe were transients, wandering players in the time-honoured tradition. They rehearsed in each other's living rooms until, in 1958, they managed to rent the premises mentioned above, and The Players finally had a place to call home. It was supposed to have been a temporary arrangement, but they were there for over a quarter of a century, until 1986, when they found permanent digs in an old house at Acevedo Díaz 2324, where they remain to this day.

The Players presented "Simon & Laura" in 1957 at the Teatro Victoria. This play, by Alan Melville, was a soft British satire about a couple of actors who play husband and wife on what would now be called a reality TV show. The script called for them to have

a child so, at the suggestion of one of my teachers at school, my parents were approached and, to my boundless delight, agreed to let me take the part. I was twelve at the time, and that was my introduction to The Players. I was thrilled for this chance to hang out with a group of older people, most of whom I considered incredibly cool, and was delighted all over again when my parents also showed an interest and joined the group. My father discovered his inner Thespian, and my mother and brother decided they liked being part of the backstage crew, so it became a family affair and we were all involved in theatre for many years after that. By that time the group was installed in the warehouse on Calle Paysandú, and



work soon began on making the place comfortable. The first priority was, naturally, a decent place to meet and socialize—which was code for a bar—and it wasn't long before the front room was ready to host the first of many events: fund-raisers, anniversaries, New Year's Eve celebrations and, of course, cast parties.



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Every theatre group needs a place to build and store sets. Preferably a space where it won't matter if paint is splashed around and walls are bumped and gouged. The warehouse had a large covered loading dock behind the building, which was ideal. A theatre group must also have a ready supply of members who enjoy hammering and sawing and painting; hardy souls who don't mind getting dirty for a good cause. People like my brother, Christopher, who couldn't imagine anything better than wearing grubby overalls and puttering around with a hammer in one hand and a bottle of beer in the other.

When people think of amateur dramatics they usually think of actors and directors, and of course you couldn't produce a show without those highly visible members. But no play can be put on without a backstage crew to work the lights, sew costumes, gather and manage props, create sound effects, apply makeup and, as my mother used to do, sit in the prompter's box at the front of the stage, following the script and whispering a few precious words when actors forgot their lines. Volunteers are also needed for front-of-house duties like manning the box office, handing out programmes, and ushering the audience to their seats.

The back room at the Centre—that is, the one between the bar and the set-building area—was the rehearsal room, and that's the one I remember most clearly and fondly. It had a very high ceiling, and a couple of tall windows that gave onto the driveway leading to the loading dock. Ricketty metal folding chairs were ranged along the wall, facing the low platform that was used as a makeshift stage. There was a pervasive aroma of dampness that one got used to, and it was freezing in the winter and sweltering hot in the summer. But it was our clubhouse and we loved it.

The rehearsal room was where the plays came to life. Plays by Jean Anouilh, Noel Coward, Edward Albee, Peter Schaffer, Oscar Wilde, Neil Simon, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, Samuel Beckett, and many others. This was where we rehearsed the lines

and the moves, and came to grips with the characters we had been chosen to play. A place where we could disengage from our ordinary daily lives and lose ourselves in events and relationships far removed from our own. In my case, this involved exploring emotions I had never thought much about—joy, sorrow, fury, jealousy—and learning how to make them mine. Learning how to make room within myself for others, and how to see myself through other eyes. None of us had any formal training; none of us had been to acting school. We drew inspiration from whatever plays and films we might have seen, and from literary works we might have read. We encouraged each other, and watched as we slowly blossomed, gained confidence, and finally summoned up the courage to let go of the script and start acting. There came a moment in every play when, over the beers and post-mortem that followed our rehearsals, I realized that I had finally managed to step outside of myself and enter the character I was supposed to be playing. Nothing in my “ordinary” life came anywhere close to being as intoxicating as that feeling, and I'm fairly sure that was true for the other actors as well.

After two or three months of rehearsals at the Centre, it was time for the technical rehearsal at whichever theatre had been rented for the production. This was always a long night, when lighting and sound effects could take hours to perfect, and we all walked around on eggshells as grim-faced backstage boys struggled to accomplish what, to a young actor, looked like daunting tasks indeed. Next came the dress rehearsal that usually dragged on into the wee small hours of the morning, when tempers were strained to the limit and raw nerves could snap over the slightest thing. Our mantra during those tense hours was: “It'll be all right on the night!” And, to our constant amazement, it always was. The curtain finally went up, and we were all swept away by “the smell of the greasepaint and the roar of the crowd.”<sup>1</sup>

1 Michael Paloma, actor, entertainer.