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Deconstructing opera for opera's sake: an interview with Opera Queer (Argentina)

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Introduction

- 1 Opera Queer is a LGBTIQ+ musical show that defies and challenges the way we are used to thinking of opera in Argentina. The twins Luchi and Ferni de Gyldenfeldt, the stars of the Opera, show a mix of humor, drag costumes and *artivism* in relation to LGBTIQ+ rights. The pianist, Luigi, plays many opera arias and duets, while the twins sing from baritone to soprano registers, according to the requirements of the works. Both singers graduated from the Universidad Nacional de las Artes (Argentina), and have been exploring their vocal registers since the beginning of the project. The shows are presented at downtown pubs and theaters of Buenos Aires. At the same time, they work in collaboration with the Universidad Nacional de las Artes, participating in sexual education programs.
- 2 Attending to a musical show of Opera Queer is an exciting experience. It is a journey across the most famous and beautiful hits of classical operas. Luchi de Gyldenfeldt becomes a countertenor and a soprano, while Ferni plays baritone roles, both dressed in exquisite drag costumes. The show contains an amazing combination of jokes, bizarre translations of the arias and speeches about the rights of sexual minorities.
- 3 Luchi de Gyldenfeldt has a Bachelor degree in Musical Arts at the Universidad Nacional de las Artes (UNA). She¹ made her baritone debut at age 22 at the "Teatro Roma", in Argentina. She sang the roles of Papageno, Nardo, Guglielmo, Belcore, Gasparo, Javert, Grizabella, Musetta, Sorceress in the most prestigious venues in Argentina such as the CCK, the Usina del Arte, the Avenida Theater and the Colon Theater.
- 4 Ferni de Gyldenfeldt holds a Bachelor degree on Musical Arts at Universidad Nacional de las Artes (Argentina), and a degree from the City Conservatory of Buenos Aires. She

sings and conducts at the *murga* company “Notalpié” and is also the lead singer of the folk music group “Allpa Munay”, dedicated to the work of Atahualpa Yupanqui.

5 Ópera Queer channels:

6 YouTube: <https://youtube.com/channel/UCIYikITlTNaS8TptQ7YKS3w>

7 Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/opera.queer/>

An interview with Ópera Queer

JAZMÍN MARÍA TISCORNIA – GISELLE ARACELI MÉNDEZ: We'd like to begin with a quote from an interview you gave the Argentinian newspaper *Página 12*, where you stated the following: “Opera queer is an *artivistic* show”.² With what elements do you support that statement?

Ferni de Gyldenfeldt: I think the *artivistic* character is given by the conjunction between some elements that are typical of artistic expressions and others which are linked to activism as a way to draw attention, fight and call for a philosophical and political reflection about a specific topic. Opera queer is not only an artistic event. The audience is not only watching an opera performance. A major part of our show is based on the way we're dragged, on our make-up, on the clothes we are dressed in. Opera queer is a political statement because it draws attention to the sexual dissident identities, the queer and the new ways of action. Those are the elements that shape the show: they highlight and reflect a political gesture, which is basically to express our identity in a completely free way. That's the reason our show is much more than opera singing. It's also the way we've found to imagine new kinds of art, singing and living. We distance ourselves from the way that we were taught opera should be performed. Those are the reasons our show is not only an artistic but an *artivistic* performance.

Luchi de Gyldenfeldt: In our language there aren't many words that are performative by themselves and I think *artivism* is not a performative expression. Ok, it refers to an action and creates some rhetoric but unless we embody it, it doesn't produce something real, nor any change. And I think we are *artivistic* precisely because we expose our bodies³ every time we perform Opera Queer. That's what defines us as activist artists for the sexual dissident identities, not only because we have a nice speech about the topic, but because we put our bodies on any stage, whether it's in the street, a fair, a theatre or a cultural center. We always have the same attitude. We like to think about ourselves as what Susy Shock defines⁴ as catapults: Opera Queer is a catapult to achieve another kind of humanity that we aspire towards.

JMT-GAM: How do you combine your self-management with your pursuit of getting to a wider audience in mainstream stages?

LdG: If we consider everything has a price in the capitalist system, then Opera Queer has a price too. And I'm sure we are worth a high price in terms of product. But that doesn't mean we are not aware that we live in a world system that promotes really pervert politics in almost every aspect of public life, especially in public life. We take the risk of becoming a merchandise for a capitalist market covering itself with pink washing, taking our pride and dissident statements to use us as a way to hide privileges, lack of resources and opportunities. That's why with Ferni we try to handle this carefully. We know that when we dress up we look beautiful and

hegemonic, we are white and Caucasian. We know we are privileged, even in terms of class. So far, we have successfully avoided the market and I think we'll keep on avoiding it in order to build new stages and spaces that truly reflect dissidence. We know this is a collective path, so we want to build those new stages differently from what mainstream industry proposes. And because we also want to provoke, we never performed a show without a political intention. Our place is next to self-managed artistic expressions and that's the tribe that embraces us. Opera Queer is and will be a horizontal, popular and political space. That's why we say opera is popular. Dissident sexual identities may appear attractive to capitalism, but capitalism isn't attractive to Opera Queer.

JMT-GAM: You have adopted the position of performing "for the people". However, opera is often related to elitist stages. How do you support a denormalisation through the opera repertoire?

FdG: I think we can reconcile our position because we love opera. Since we were children, opera was a refuge. We believe that if opera could be so powerful for us then it could also be the same for other people. Opera is powerful because of the voices, the drama... it provokes something in people, something like universal feelings which make it very attractive to everybody. Let's think for example of the amount of works that teach us about life, love... works that help us become better people.

LdG: On the other hand, it is true that we have to be careful with elitist stages and pink washing. Because we don't want to say "Opera is for everybody" just to ask for a subsidy and keep on doing the same things, singing for the same audiences. Saying "opera is for everyone" and then playing a character who has no love interest or is gay is not what we need. Such performances are already happening in theatres all over the world. Those stereotypes still exist, we have inherited or mis-inherited opera in such a way and that it's precisely the way mainstream plays it, even at the Colon Theatre. To invite sexual dissident artists to that kind of theatres isn't a way to compensate. It is said that we should look for inclusive stages. but what do we want to be included in? It's not time to include dissident identities, it's time to change our perspective about the territory. Our bodies are a real territory. We have to leave behind the idea that setting a quota for some identities is equal to including them.

JMT-GAM: Can we then say that one of the objectives of Opera Queer is to present and educate a new audience to this repertoire?

LdG: Absolutely. And it's clearer every day. We learned that in its beginnings, opera was truly an everyday experience. Let's think for example about Italy during the XVI, XVII or XVIII centuries. It's said that when Giuseppe Verdi composed *Rigoletto* he told the tenor who was to sing "La donna é móbile" that he was forbidden to hum the melody in the street. Otherwise people would have known the song before the premiere. Opera was in people's lives. That was the original context where the romantic opera that we play today was born. I think that if opera has a nature then it is queer and popular.

Regarding the audience, we are currently working with different educational institutions as part of the Comprehensive Sexual Education Law⁵. We go to schools and universities to take part of sex education activities and talk about sexual and gender identities. These activities allow us to draw attention to our activism but also to boost new alternative stages. That might annoy regular Colon Theatre audiences

who can't understand why these faggots perform opera, that we use gender-inclusive language, that Ferni sings as a baritone but wears a dress. Well, maybe we'll never be serious opera artists for them.

JMT-GAM: You say the nature of opera is queer. What makes you say so?

LdG: In the history of opera there are a lot of amazing facts. For instance, Patriarchy and Church established women couldn't sing in Rome which led to the castration of men in order for them to keep the soprano register. That's unbelievable. Thousands of men lost their voice, others suffered from the procedure, or they simply weren't as successful as Farinelli although they sang a lot, due to the prohibition of singing for women. So, castrated men sang as sopranos and played female roles. In the operas they played feminine roles but dragged as men in order to seduce a woman, and many times they dragged again to play the handmaid of that man. No one could write such a great screenplay nowadays! Queer means bizarre, it's something that doesn't fit within a strict definition. I mean, to define "queer" is complex. Moira Perez, an Argentinian sociologist, wrote a very nice article about it⁶. She was asked to define "queer" and she said to define it would be hypocritical, because queer is precisely in a permanent state of transformation. It's the inexplicable, the indecipherable element of existence. There's something very interesting in Perez's article, when she says "queer shouldn't cover up for our own privileges". That's something we keep in mind in Opera Queer, because with Ferni, as activists, we were able to decide that the best we could do was to join the opera we love with our activism to bring our corporality, our sexual dissidence, our identities and those of others, to the forefront. And also, finding the key in humor, which is really important to Opera Queer. It's not some kind of clown humor just to have fun, it's humor as a way to transform. We find in humor, as many artists before us, the balance between tragedy, drama, reality, and laughter. And above all, the chance to play with a code that we are constantly changing. During a show we laugh to make our existence more pleasurable, lighter, to create a space that's free of judgments, prejudice, punishment and normativity.

FdG: We really look for other possibilities of displaying love. That's what resonates with people whether you like opera or not, whether you know Verdi, Mozart, Wagner and Rossini or not, because opera is definitely for everybody. There's also a need to leave behind the idea that "popular" is opposed to classical (music), that lyrical music is linked to the elites and in opposition to the popular. We've been told that popular expressions are low quality, cheap. To me "popular" is a new way of understanding concepts.

JMT-GAM: You want to draw attention to the diversity of identities but at the same time you recognize opera is a Eurocentric genre. How do you also build a Latin-American identity?

FdG: It's what we are. The answer is to be true to ourselves. We don't want to say "we are Europeans, baroque". We can play with different elements but our identity is "sudaca". That's the reason we love starting our shows singing cumbia. In our show we also sing a potpourri that includes ABBA, Gabo Ferro and whatever is in between. It's an important part of our show although we present ourselves as a lyrical show. We try to include these kinds of gestures that reflect our cultural melting pot. We are a lot of things. Opera Queer is a sudaca project. For everybody, for ourselves, for the tribe that listens to us although they may know nothing about opera. They find it interesting even though there aren't subtitles to the Italian or German arias. On the

other hand, when we face a non-Spanish speaking audience, although they don't get our jokes they might understand the lyrics of the arias and duets.

JMT-GAM: If we go back to your definition of queer and specifically to the definition of queer art, we'd like to refer to Mexican musicologist Marusia Pola Mayorga⁷ who defines queer art as a dissident scream, and suggests respelling queer as "cuir"⁸ in order to build a Latin-American perspective.

LdG: That's very interesting. yeah, we are totally "Opera Cuir". We should officially become Opera Cuir within a year! To reassert our Latin-American identity, and also, to make sure everybody pronounces our name right.

JMT-GAM: We already talked about how Opera Queer has changed over time. We would now like to ask you: how has Opera Queer changed you?

LdG: If we are thinking at a vocal level, Opera Queer led me to develop my soprano register and Ferni started to try on a mezzosoprano register. After I tried the soprano register, I assumed my real vocal identity: countertenor. That means my soprano register worked as a transition, and I ended up with my real vocal identity. I know it is only a show, but I still got to discover myself as a countertenor thanks to it. It all happened in Opera Queer.

JMT-GAM: It seems like something changed. At first, you were something separate from Ópera Queer, but then the show took you in and you were finally able to discover and reveal who you really were (are).

FdG: Yes, totally. We were always that. The passing of time and Opera Queer helped us uncover our real identity.

LdG: And that happened because Opera Queer is not only a musical show. It's also saying "Stop!" to so many things. Perhaps I will lose a lot of opera roles because I will struggle with all conductors, because I will tell them that not only I can sing like this but "We can all sing like this". The University must stop saying to the LGBTIQ+ community: "You must be a baritone or a tenor", "You must be a soprano or a mezzo".

We are really lucky. We have the theoretical tools to fight against institutions. Because it's really hard to fight when you don't have an education or opportunities⁹. For that reason we say that we don't want the transgender community to be excluded from University. We don't want them to be in street corners watching from outside the institutions... they can also sing opera! We must demand the opportunity to create, to make art... because, as Marlene Wayar say, we are our first work of art.

JMT-GAM: In that sense, what are the tensions you see between queer studies and activism?

LdG: I think that the University is only one of multiple spaces where one can learn the theory. We did find spaces where to experiment freely. For example, while a student at Universidad de las Artes, I sang my First Lady McBeth and was able to sing as countertenor. Also this year, we will teach the first Chair of Dissident Singing in this same institution. I am proud to be a teacher in this space, I think it is a great step forward in this struggle.

JMT-GAM: Throughout this interview, we perceive that your theoretical background comes from different queer personalities from America Latina.

FdG: Yes, absolutely. Actually, we were already acquainted with queer theory before meeting Marlene Wayar,¹⁰ and the literature is there for everyone to read. But we

think that a certain distance remains between the theory and everyday life. When you meet and talk to a transgender person for the first time it's a really touching experience. I don't think there is any book that could account for that, to really understand the queer issue. It is also related to experience, to the encounter with certain teachers or queer personalities. That framework is not necessarily provided by academia, it's motivated by ourselves and powered by these other people, that are part of our tribe. It's not only the theory that matters. Oftentimes it's saying "Here you can be free, just play and do what you need, using your body".

JMT-GAM: To summarize, how does Opera Queer take into account questions of gender and sexuality?

LdG: It is indeed very interesting to reflect on the place we give to sexuality in our shows. The struggle for visibility and militancy for sexual freedom that precedes us, also as a South American struggle. But now we are in another historical and political moment. And that is why, in our shows, we strive to bring forward everything that comes from a non-binary stance, and that allows us to rethink sexuality through performance. We do this, for instance, by reinterpreting heterosexual characters from operas.

JMT-GAM: Could you give us a specific example?

LdG: For example, the duet from Verdi's *Il trovatore*¹¹. It is a duet of love, revenge and death between the Count of Luna and Leonora. The Count of Luna is obsessed with Leonora but she is in love with Manrico, who is the town troubadour. But because the Count is more powerful, he locks up Manrico and basically rapes Leonora in exchange for Manrico's life. It is a duet that has a lot of dynamism and from our point of view, because of the way Verdi composes, it does not transmit drama in the tragic sense. That's why in the show we deconstruct those two elements a little bit. First, we interpret Leonora as a transvestite (or at least non-binary). Secondly, the Count of Luna is shown to be of an obsessive nature but not necessarily directed towards Leonora exclusively. Finally, at one point we don't know who likes whom in the duo or who abuses whom. So what we do is to question the essentialisms of gender and sexuality. And in this game of deconstruction, the first thing that appears is the music of the composer. What interests us most is to continue deconstructing opera, but to keep it alive, for its own sake. And many times, we seek to do this by underlining and even overplaying the stereotypes.

JMT-GAM: Could we say that in Opera Queer there is the intention to deconstruct sexuality directly related to the choice of repertoire?

LdG: Yes, absolutely. In a way, when we exaggerate our performances or break certain heterosexual stories we are following Paul Preciado, when he argues that as a society we understand sexuality in normative and political terms. As if suddenly heteronormative sexuality was the great sociosexual contract that determines our bodies and our sexuality from the moment we are born. So all people, whether heterosexual or not, feel challenged by what we are saying and proposing, because no one can escape these mandates: not even a heterosexual person. It seems to me that there is question that emerges that no human being today can avoid asking themselves, or least knowing about it. In those terms, sexuality is very present.

FdG: Let's say that, besides bringing opera to unconventional places, the power of Ópera Queer is saying something about gender and sexuality. Something different, another story than the one we have always been told.

NOTES

1. Inclusive or non-sexist language is used throughout the interview, both by the interviewees and the authors, because it proposes a deconstruction of the masculine/feminine dichotomy, reflecting on the predominance of the masculine gender expressed by the vowel o to the detriment of other alternatives. For years now, the use of this has been promoted in Argentina, especially in the academic field.
 2. GUDIÑO Leonardo, "Dar la nota", *Página 12*, 24/5/ 2019, available online: <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/195499-dar-la-nota> (accessed April 20, 2021).
 3. In the Spanish version, instead of the word "cuerpo" (body), an inclusive alternative is used by LdG, "cuerpa".
 4. It refers to the phrase "We don't want to be this humanity anymore" from the poem "Hojarascas" by transgender activist Susy Shock. In SHOCK Susy, *Hojarascas*, Buenos Aires, Pocas Nueces, 2017.
 5. The Comprehensive Sexual Education Law No. 26.150 sanctioned by the National Argentine Congress aims to provide sexual education in all educational establishments not only from a biological perspective but also to understand the emotional and social dimensions of human sexuality.
 6. PÉREZ Moira, "Acerca de qué es lo *queer*", available online: <https://economiafeminista.com/acerca-de-la-pregunta-que-es-lo-queer/> (accessed April 20, 2021).
 7. POLA MAYORGA Marusia, "Transfeminidades: el grito cuir y la performatividad afectiva", *Escena. Revista de las Artes* 79, January – June 2020, p. 214-225.
 8. In Spanish, *cuir* functions as a phonetic reappropriation of the term *queer*.
 9. In reference to the large number of trans people and transvestites, both in Argentina and the rest of the world, that see the violation of their rights to an education, work, and housing, among others. For more information, we suggest consulting the "Report on Trans and Diverse Gender People and their Economic, Social, Cultural and Environmental Rights (IACHR, OAS)", available online : <http://www.oas.org/es/cidh/informes/pdfs/PersonasTransDESCA-es.pdf> (accessed April 20, 2021).
 10. Marlene Wayar is a transgender activist from Argentina, social psychologist and founder of the magazine "El teje".
 11. LdG is referring to "Udiste? Come albeggi. [...] Mira, di acerbe lagrime... vivrà" from Verdi's *Il Trovatore*.
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ABSTRACTS

Ópera Queer is a queer lyric company that emerged in Buenos Aires, Argentina. In this interview we talk to its members, Ferni and Luchi, to know how they carry out the militancy for LGBTIQ+ rights in relation to opera.

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Keywords: Opera, queer, cuir, disidence, gender, sexuality, Buenos Aires

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