

*VIDA DE CIRCO, ROSITA DE LA PLATA:
UNA ESTRELLA ARGENTINA EN EL MUNDO,
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BEATRIZ SEIBEL*

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THE book *Vida de circo, Rosita de la Plata: una estrella argentina en el mundo* (*Circus Life: Rosita de la Plata, an Argentinean Star Around the World*) is written by Beatriz Seibel. Seibel, who is a renowned Argentinean researcher of theater and circus history, clearly draws upon her own experience as a theater director to tell the dramatic story of Rosita de la Plata's career. Seibel examines the biographical and artistic trajectory of Rosalía Robba, a daughter of Italian immigrants, who was born in 1869 in the city of Buenos Aires and died at the age of seventy-one in the same city. Robba was an *écuyere* and trapeze artist of worldwide repute known by her stage name "Rosita de la Plata." Journalists of that time refer to her as "the most attractive circus star of the world" (10) who became the artistic director of Frank Brown's Big Circus.

Through her critical and archival investigation, the author reconstructs Rosita's itinerant life in Latin America, Europe and the US. Seibel points out the difficulty of gathering historical data due to the fact that the names of circus women were usually forgotten in comparison to the great male circus names. These usually overlooked women are often only referred to as the "wife" of various men in historical documents. The aforementioned fact is one of the major contributions to circus scholarship made by this academic study belonging to historiography and theatrical arts fields, since it is one among the few in Argentina and also in the world, making visible the experiences of circus women whose narratives were obliterated by gender bias.

In this way, Seibel carefully relates the sociocultural context of Buenos Aires between the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the

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twentieth century in order to understand the specificity of Rosita's life as a circus woman. When Rosita de la Plata and her sister Dolinda started their circus lives in the Circo Arena with the equestrian company of Henry Cottrelly at the ages of nine and eight, respectively, the city of Buenos Aires was a theatrical center with new theaters. Companies from Europe dominated the billboards as European immigration increased and railways connecting new urban centers expanded. At that time, the arts, labor and political sectors were almost entirely managed by men. The women of urban society were relegated to the domestic sphere and specifically to roles such as "wife" and "mother," which put them in charge of housework and parenting tasks. In this context, the transgressive nature of the circus and its ability to challenge the norm offered Rosita and women of all social sectors a space of independence and autonomy. For that matter, circus life could be understood as a "parallel world" occupying the margins where women could raise children (Ébana 14), work, develop an artistic career, travel around the world and get a salary at the same time due to the fact that the domestic and labor spheres (Losada), as well as private and public lives (Ébana), were mixed together under the tent. However,

La mujer debía entregar algo a cambio de no pertenecer al sistema represivo de la época y gozar de cierto margen de libertad: Nunca sería considerada la autora de su trabajo, sino la imagen de un cuerpo grácil y fuerte, la belleza de lo inalcanzable: Esa era su transacción. (Ébana 14)

[The woman had to give something in exchange for not belonging to the repressive system of the time: She would never be considered the author of her work, but the image of a graceful and strong body, the beauty of the unattainable. That was her transaction.] (Ébana 14, my translations)

Regarding the relative independence and autonomy of circus women, Seibel shows how Rosita worked with many famous circus companies around the world to establish the intercultural, economic, artistic and affective bonds typically found in circus families. For instance, in 1888, Rosita was hired by the famous English clown, acrobat and circus entrepreneur named Frank Brown. This allowed her to work for the first time in the San Martín Circus-Theater with two renowned Criollo Circus families: Podestá and Casali. Their innovative circus subgenre created at the end of nineteenth century consisted of "a first part with bodily based, short circus acts such as juggling, acrobatics, clowning, and equestrian skills; and a second part where theater plays of the Argentine gaucho genre were performed" (Infantino 64). During this Criollo Circus golden age, she married Antonio Podestá and was incorporated into the Podestá Brothers's cast.

However, in 1893, Rosita decided to go on a tour with Frank Brown and left Podestá's cast. In retaliation, her husband initiated a marriage annulment petition and accused her of infidelity. Seibel does a thorough job with the divorce file and finds the documentation of Rosita's response, which denounced Antonio for injuries, mistreatment and taking charge of her salary. This denouncement was authorized, however, by the existing law at that time. This latter financial move (taking charge of her salary) was legal in Argentina since 1871 and was based on the Civil Code written by Dalmasio Vélez Sársfield. Afterward, Rosita shared the rest of her life with Frank Brown. Thus, through the author's archival work, readers may learn of Rosita's agency despite unfavorable laws.

Throughout the book, Seibel portrays the way in which the figure of Rosita de la Plata was built by the media and circus performances to create a worldwide image as an incomparable equestrian artist for her "beauty," "grace," "strength" and "ability" with horses (33, 57). This margin of freedom existed in relation to the norms of the day that governed legitimate forms of expressing femininity. These social conventions along with a strong resistance to them were embodied, albeit with certain dissonances, by women of the circus. The beauty and the sculpture of Rosita's body were highlighted over its power because circuses had to sell their spectacles, and for that they needed to strategically pander to social standards of the period. The theatricality of the hyperfeminine expressed through costumes, gestures and postures was used to distract viewers from the athletic musculature of female bodies (Tait 69). However, Seibel's detailed historiographical research explores how the circus artist Rosita de la Plata managed to artfully resist the social, cultural, economic and legal limitations that women in society faced by reappropriating the margins of freedom through choosing a life in the circus.

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