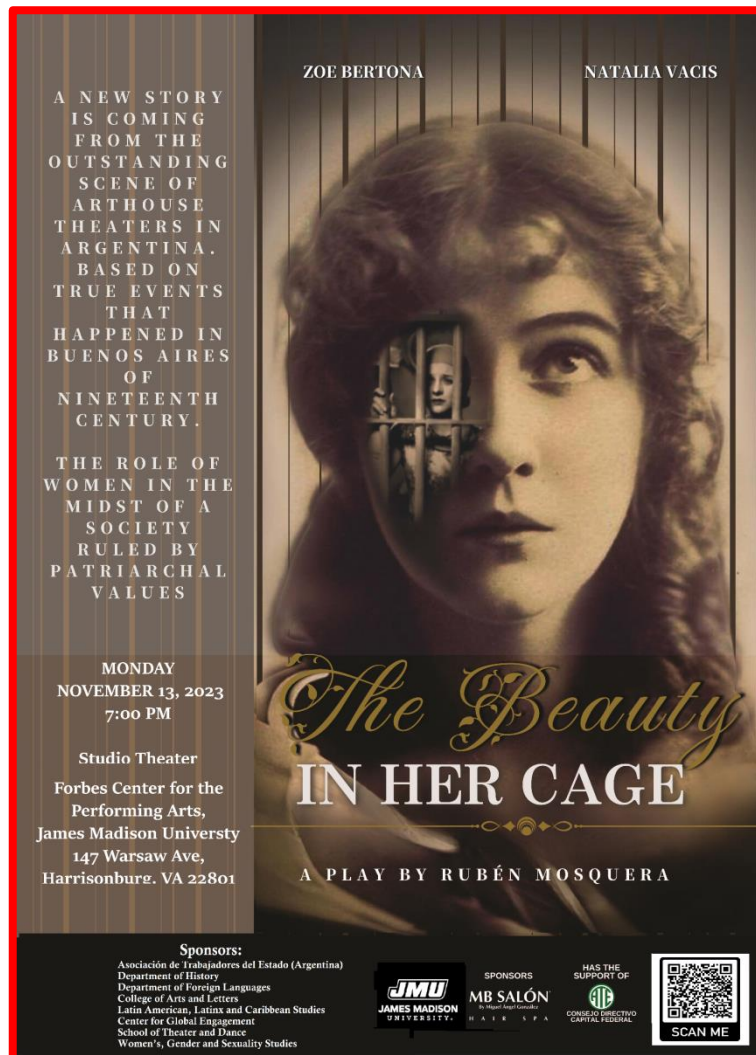


# Historical background for Ruben Mosquera's *The Beauty in Her Cage*



A NEW STORY IS COMING FROM THE OUTSTANDING SCENE OF ARTHOUSE THEATERS IN ARGENTINA. BASED ON TRUE EVENTS THAT HAPPENED IN BUENOS AIRES OF NINETEENTH CENTURY.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE MIDST OF A SOCIETY RULED BY PATRIARCHAL VALUES

ZOE BERTONA NATALIA VACIS

MONDAY  
NOVEMBER 13, 2023  
7:00 PM

Studio Theater  
Forbes Center for the  
Performing Arts,  
James Madison University  
147 Warsaw Ave,  
Harrisonburg, VA 22801

*The Beauty*  
**IN HER CAGE**

A PLAY BY RUBÉN MOSQUERA

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## Summary of the Play:

"The Beauty in her Cage" is a play, based on a true event, that recreates the last minutes of the life of Felicitas Guerrero who is murdered by a former suitor: Enrique Ocampo. She is murdered right before she is about to become engaged to another man. This murder shook

Buenos Aires in 1872, the year the city was also experiencing a pandemic of Yellow Fever. It was a story told as one of romanticized love, based on the patriarchal historical narration, characterizing it as a crime of passion. Ocampo, before murdering Felicitas, demands: "if you are not mine, you will not belong to anyone", and when she refused, he decides to shoot her in what today would be understood as a femicide.

Felicitas Guerrero, was often described as the most beautiful woman in Buenos Aires—underscoring the emphasis on a woman's youth and physical appearance in a patriarchal society. She had been widowed approximately two months before her murder. Her husband Martín de Álzaga, was immensely rich and powerful who paid a handsome dowry for her hand to her parents, when she was a teenager. They did not take into account the opinion or will of his daughter, giving her hand to Álzaga. In fact, the play asks us to consider who is allowed to say "No," in society, who is allowed to direct their own lives and who has to pay a penalty for trying to do so.

This story takes place in the midst of the yellow fever plague that devastated Buenos Aires, killing almost half the population, including Felicitas' two children and her husband.

## Guide to the Historical Context of the Play:

Here is a brief guide to some of the important historical themes behind the play as well as some thoughts on contemporary connections which the play makes:

### Elite Marriages

Marriage in Argentina like many places in the world originated as a business transaction and was especially important for the upper classes as a way to cement social ties and establish financial stability. Thus, marriage might be seen as transnational and symbolic rather being about romantic love. Marriage highlights a number of social contradictions related to social class, economics, sexuality, age, and gender.

To a certain degree, we might see a connection between the concept of marriage and prostitution. While marriage cannot be reduced to a sexual relation, the play does ask us to think about the relationship between economics and marriage. What is the role and history of dowries in marriage? Why is 'beauty' and 'youth' so important as they relate to women?

According to an historiographic article by Sueann Caulfield, ("The History of Gender in the Historiography of Latin America." *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 81, no. 3–4 (2001): 449–90. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00182168-81-3-4-449>), scholarship in the 1970s had its own biases but also identified the importance of race and social class in understanding women's roles and perceptions of those roles. Caulfield argues that in this scholarship "elite white women appeared as instruments in male negotiations to extend the clan through marriage alliances, which required protecting their virtue by cloistering them in the home; non elite women appeared as victims of white male sexual prerogatives, which resulted in the creation of subordinate mixed-race populations'."

For elite women, marriage was decided on by men and family members who supported the patriarchal order and utilized by them for economic or elite gains. You could not be independent nor live a separate life from your husband. To simply get a job, a woman, as a minority, needed express permission from "their fathers' authority—and after marriage, when [this] authority passed to their husbands'" Marriage was just a transfer of power from one patriarchal figure to another. We see all of these themes play out in the play.

In the play, Felicitas says, "I now find repulsive it that I believed so firmly in my own beauty, that whoever speaks of me does so only in reference to my beauty, especially when beauty becomes a means to obtain wealth, a social status, or any other distinction to ascend economically."

Erin E. O'Connor explores how elite marriages in the nineteenth century were motivated by a desire for social status and respect in, *Mothers Making Latin America*. Similarly to how the play emphasizes that a woman's beauty is a source of admiration and prestige, but also a source of constraints, O'Connor's work demonstrates how women were expected to fulfill specific tasks in order to improve their family's social status.

Both play and this history suggest that marriage reflects the ornamental position that women were frequently relegated to within elite houses. O'Connor's research on gender, homes, and politics supports the notion that women's marriages were important in preserving or elevating family status, encompassing the economic and social components of marriage.

Significantly, however, O'Connor also highlights the complexity of women's lives: from their unique selections of fashion to their backstage roles as household managers, caregivers, and family leaders. That is, she shows how women lived complex lives within the patriarchal contours of the world of elite women. This source paints a portrait of hardworking and adaptable women in an age where society's recognition of their contributions was still not recognized. In 19th-century Latin America, the art of gossip among women was a crucial part of women's social status, failing to partake in the intricate web of social gossip not only rendered one standing but also posed significant

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consequences. One might think closely about the gendered dynamics of the word “gossip” itself which serves to denigrate female communication.

## Notions of Honor

Honor is bestowed upon people who abide by society's conception of their gender role. Gender roles for elite young women were clearly defined. They were not supposed to disobey or go against their parents. They were not supposed to have sex outside of marriage. This, of course, was a double standard. Hence, the emphasis on Felicitas' proof of purity in the play.

## Gender, Age, and Marriage

In *la Bella en su Jaula*, the main character is very young when she is married to a much older man (18 to 50-something). *La Bella en su Jaula* is not the only play that covers topics of economic transitions for marriages, and plays can be used to help us understand the way in which the world is seen through the playwright's eyes and how their world was.

Age was also important to the "value" of an unmarried woman. Women could actually choose whom they married at 25 years or older which is probably why parents made sure they marry off their daughters before that age. But it also shows that most young women were no longer "of marrying age" after 25 years old.

Susan Socolow writes that younger women were less resistant to their parents' wishes than they were when they got older, so this encouraged parents to marry their daughters off when they were under 18 years of age. Having parents control young women was also important in the views of elite society because it allowed parents to surveil their daughters to try to ensure their virginity upon marriage.

## Connection to Argentine plays of the early 20th century

In early 20th century Argentina, popular theater frequently asked audience members to think about the true cost of dating and marriage in a moment of rapid transformation as women began to work increasingly outside of their homes. Something was amiss in society: the patriarchal order was not functioning as it was designed to perhaps due to economic transformations centered in cities.

Playwrights might not have understood exactly why the patriarchal order was not working but they did explore it in their stage plays, opening up discussions with an emerging middle class about the role of women and men in a society under rapid change.

Gregorio de Laferrère's 1908 play, *Las de Barranco*, is a perfect example. The eldest daughter of a family without a patriarch, (he had died leaving his widow to raise three daughters), feels she is being prostituted by her mother who lures in suitors for the gifts they bring. In fact, the mother does not want her daughter to marry so she can continue receiving all the gifts from her multiple suitors, as the mother is selfish and only worries about not having her daughter to leech off of. This play as well as *Gente Bien* embodies the need for social mobility, how focused families are to achieve economic and class mobility, and how society has made it acceptable to link women, marriage, sexuality, and economics together, either positively or negatively.

Cabaret-themed plays which flourished in 1919 in Buenos Aires allowed for an exploration of the financial dimensions not just of sex but also of courtship, love, and marriage. Escobar highlights the economics of romance quite explicitly in his play, *La vibora de la cruz*:

Ricardo: [Your] romances have cost you dearly?

Diderot: Let's see. Anywhere between two hundred and one thousand pesos monthly. Also, in love, there are sales, payments, and other costs.

Ricardo: And you have resigned yourself to a life without sincere love?

Diderot: And what was I going to do about it? You do not order, organize, or manufacture love. It falls on you like a big win at the lottery.

[Julio Escobar, *La vibora de la cruz*, Scene I, 1919.]

This play also connects to later Argentine theater where plays like Nemesio Trejo's *Las lindas mujeres* [*The Beautiful Women*] 1916, and Armando Discépolo's *Mateo*, 1923, which both depict the most vulnerable character of the play as a beautiful young woman. These conversations are central to Argentine history which was the seat of South America's first feminist congress in 1910.

Many plays in Latin America explore similar themes related to women's role in society, their freedom, and rights in relationship to marriage and motherhood, roles that they were expected to fulfill. The Ecuadorian feminist playwright, Mercedes González de Moscoso, wrote *Abuela*, which touches on similar themes about courtship and marriage between a young woman and a much older man.

More famously, tango lyrics explore fraught marital and sexual relationships, framed by moral and economic "calculations," and debates between audience member and playwright. These plays highlight the role of women in society and how the quality that makes them the most 'desirable' (their beauty and age) has a high social cost in that they are vulnerable to social violence.

In Argentina in 1908, Gregorio LaFerrère's *Las de Barranco* tells the story of a family headed by a mother, Doña Maria, struggling to make ends meet. Captain Barranco, the family patriarch, has recently passed away, leaving his widow to raise their three daughters, on a pension of 150 pesos a month. This is one more of the ubiquitous references to insufficient pensions for surviving family members of military veterans in plays. Doña Maria supplements her small pension by taking in three male boarders. Carmen, the eldest daughter, is the play's protagonist and the most serious, thoughtful, and empathetic of the sisters. She has a series of male suitors, including a medical student from the provinces, a dentist, a creditor, and a writer - who bring her a constant flow of gifts, aided and abetted by her mother, who sees the gifts as a financial boon to the family income. Meanwhile, the two younger sisters frequently bicker with each other and are depicted as frivolous.

Much of the plot revolves around Doña Maria's self-centeredness as she is always looking for personal gain from the people who cross her path. In particular, she uses Carmen to benefit from the material gifts of her suitors and expects that Carmen will play along. Doña Maria therefore does not want Carmen to get engaged—for that would put an end to the gifts consisting of articles of clothing, theater tickets—he tried to get a box seat but failed--and flowers. Carmen feels great shame for being thus used, feels as if she were being "prostituted." At first, Carmen tries to find a middle ground by rejecting the gifts and pleading with suitors to stop bringing them, but the suitors and her mother ignore her wishes. Doña Maria does not miss an opportunity to advance her interests, which she feels are also the family's. Not a sympathetic character, Doña Maria, nonetheless, fulfills the patriarchal duties in the absence of one and does so by using the mechanisms of informal negotiations which are at her disposal. This play lays the groundwork for a common theme that emerges in plays of the twentieth century and in tango lyrics: marriage and courtship are socially-accepted expressions of prostitution. In a society in which everything is monetized, so are courtship, marriage and sex—not always in that order.

## Femicide in Latin/South America

The death of Felicitas Guerrero at the hands of Enrique O’Gorman has been referred to as the first femicide in Argentina. This is surely not the first one but it was an event which rocked elite society and began a conversation about the violence men direct towards women within a patriarchal society. In Argentina, there was another famous story about an elite young woman, Camila O’Gorman, that is well-known in Argentina. Here it is not a man, singular, who kills a young woman but rather the state, the government of Juan Manuel de Rosas.

### Camila O’Gorman: Does an execution count as a femicide?

Thomas John Brinkerhoff explores the well-known case of Camila O’Gorman, an elite young woman of 19th century Argentina who fell in love with a priest, and both were subsequently executed for the “crime,” in Argentina (“A Case of Forbidden Love: Camila O’Gorman, Ladislao Gutiérrez, and the Gender Anxieties of a Nineteenth-Century Argentine Caudillo.” *The Latin Americanist* (Orlando, Fla.) 59, no. 2 (2015): 67–84). Camila and Ladislao paid the ultimate price for their love in 1848, facing execution for their forbidden love. This authentic historical story is a vivid testament to the extreme pressures and dire consequences that fell upon women who dared to challenge the established norms of the 19th century.

## Femicide and Social Class in Latin America

The play, *La Bella en su jaula*, documents a case of femicide that takes place in elite society. Femicide, or the murder of women and girls due to their perceived gender and/or sex, is increasingly prevalent in Latin and South America; in fact, 50% of all femicides in the world are committed in Latin America.

Contemporary research about gender based violence focuses on the working classes rather than on elite society.

Scholars find that socio-cultural factors like migration, religious beliefs, language, cultural norms, and the workplace contribute heavily to the amount of women’s deaths as a result of gender based violence (GBV). This system evolves out of patriarchy, which is a system of male rule or male authority, that developed out of Roman and Spanish law. Sometimes this is referred to also more currently as “machismo,” an exaggerated notion of masculinity in interpersonal relationships. Machismo expresses an idea that women are subservient to men (Violence Against Women., 4). Ideas of patriarchy are spread through media, such as newspapers, soap operas, passed down orally from generation to generation, music, and any other ways. By making “everyday acts of violence against women” or machismo thinking a norm, a place in society for femicide is fostered (No More Killings., 30).

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As described in “Violence Against Women in Latin America” structural violence encompasses race, ethnicity, ideology, and class. This form of violence was/is frequently enacted during periods of civil strife or time under a dictatorship including Pinochet in Chile, the civic-military dictatorship in Argentina, as well as those in Uruguay, Bolivia, and other countries. These women were targeted because of their ideologies, ethnicity/race – specifically indigenous women in Guatemala, and even women of a certain class like lower class civilians.

Structural factors that lead to gender based violence include but are not limited to: economic instability (mass unemployment, extreme poverty, privatization of industry and services), lack of supportive government interference and labor protections, and wealth inequality.

The case of Felicitas shows that femicides happen at all levels of society but research shows that marginalized women and girls face greater risk of gender based violence.

There continue to be significant limitations in data and information on gender-related killings of marginalized groups. For instance, the women’s rights organization MundoSur analyzed data portals of 12 Latin American countries and found that only one country collects information on whether the victim had a disability or was pregnant; two countries collect data on the victim’s ethnic identity; and three countries record whether the victim was a migrant.

Scholars have found that gender-based violence is common in working-class labor like *maquiladoras*, or foreign based factories. Women who work in maquiladoras often face discrimination and are subjected to abuse and harassment at work. Women are often blamed for lower wages or overall instability in the workplace. This instability is paralleled in both Ciudad Juárez, Mexico and Guatemala (Global Economics., 227-229). This economic liberation found in employed women also challenges the previously mentioned belief, machismo; this makes men feel displaced in society and like they have lost their identity which leads to fatal violence towards women.

Ertürk discusses another structural factor arguing that authorities in Guatemala and El Salvador have repeatedly failed to have an appropriate response including a satisfactory investigation, prosecution, or sanction for those that are guilty of gender based violence. This in turn leads to victim blaming and makes it seem that it is justifiable to enact violence against a woman and that the aggressor will not face any repercussions. The same was seen in 2002 in the City of Chihuahua where mothers of victims of gender based violence banded together to investigate the whereabouts and cases of their daughters (Femicide in Latin America., 168-169).

## Ni Una Menos = Not One Woman Less



"Ni una menos" spraypainted on a door in downtown Buenos Aires," photo by Kristen McCleary, July 2023.

The collective takes its name from a 1995 phrase by Mexican poet and activist Susana Chavez, "*Ni una muerta más*" (Spanish for "Not one more [woman] dead"). It began in the wake of the brutal murder of a pregnant teen (14), by the father of her child. *Ni Una Menos* started out as a slogan, merged into a viral hashtag used online, and eventually a regionwide movement. The message spread and has continued to expand in the years since. Other women-led demonstrations also erupted in Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Mexico, Peru, Paraguay, Uruguay and El Salvador — areas that also suffer high rates of femicide. The movement is symbolized by a green scarf, probably based off of the power of the white headscarf worn by the Mother's of the Plaza de Mayo, a human rights group that confronted the military during the civic-military dictatorship of 1976-1983.



Left: “Revolutionaries” Association of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, marching on Thursday afternoon, Photo by Kristen McCleary, July 2017.

Right: Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo white scarves, street art, Colegiales, Photo by Kristen McCleary, July 2023.

## Urban Context of the Play: The Yellow Fever Epidemic

How did the Yellow Fever epidemic affect 19th-century Latin America?

*La bella en su jaula* takes place in Buenos Aires in 1872. The year in which the murder occurred was also the year Argentina and much of Latin America were experiencing a pandemic of Yellow fever, an infectious disease that is transmitted by the bite of a mosquito. It killed one out of three people in Buenos Aires. In the 19th century, doctors and government officials were not aware of the cause of Yellow Fever. Symptoms of Yellow Fever include: lack of appetite, headaches, vomiting, body aches, high fevers, and in extreme cases, death. As the name suggests, it can cause an infected person’s skin to appear yellow. Yellow Fever killed Felicitas’s two children as well as her husband.

The yellow Fever epidemic had numerous effects in 19th century Latin America including effects of urbanization, race, and the emergence of the beginnings of a health care system. This epidemic intersects with themes of urbanization, modernization, and industrialization in nineteenth-century Latin America.

People blamed the spread of disease on poverty, poor living conditions, and on the marginalized. Indeed, in the play, Felicitas says that her husband used to say: “Yellow fever is a disease of Blacks; it will never win against the good blood of our lineage.” But, of course, this was not true—it does reveal society’s racist views, however.

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As urbanization increased during the 19th century, the spread of diseases began to make people, specifically elites, question how the city was 'encouraging' the spread and how it could be prevented. Dr. Carbone discusses a meat factory that was blamed for polluting Buenos Aires, possibly causing the Yellow Fever epidemic. Elites, who had the economic ability to relocate, fled the city.

In Latin America, Yellow Fever was also explored for its apparently different impact on people due to their ethnicity. In Brazil, public health officials started guessing that Yellow Fever was connected to the slave trade. The most common belief was that Yellow Fever was migrating around the world through the slave trade, but it was not because of the Africans themselves, they were just spreading it wherever they were sent. Because of this, the Brazilian government enforced strict immigration policies to limit the spread of Yellow Fever, as well as enforced sanitation policies that were deeply impacted by race.

In Buenos Aires, it was the immigrants and the poor who were blamed for spreading the disease. The people who were watched the most closely were prostitutes, immigrants, poor people, and homosexuals; the reasoning for this is that they were viewed as unclean.

In Latin America, a person's class could make a difference in the type of care a person was receiving. For example, an elite could afford to have care in their home whereas poorer people or the lower class had to either go to hospitals or sanitariums, where they received lower quality care.

In regards to the play, *La Bella and su jaula*, one wonders why Felicitas did not get Yellow Fever when the rest of her family died from it. Ultimately, it was found that most diseases spread due to the unclean water which also allowed mosquitoes to flourish in the region. The 1872 Yellow Fever Epidemic also resulted in a transformed Buenos Aires with the elite moving out of central downtown area to the northern and increasingly wealthier part of the city.

## Study Questions:

How would you describe the role of women in Argentine society in the 19th century based on this true story?

Do you think Felicitas was "Honorable" in her society? Why or Why Not?

How would you describe the friendship that Albina and Felicitas share together?

Describe the role of Felicitas' mother in the play? Did she support Felicitas? Why or why not?

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Based on this play, who is allowed to say “no” in Argentine society and who is not?

Why would Enrique O’Campo shoot and kill the woman he wanted to marry and how does his action reflect the contours of a patriarchal society?

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