What is community theater?

Theater made by the community for the community, by neighborhood residents for neighborhood residents. A theater defined by those who are part of it. Community theater, that of Argentina, is neither synonymous with street theater (since it can also take place in auditoriums), nor with popular theater (a rather wide category with blurry limits, by the way). That is so, among other things, because there might well be those who, on a professional basis, choose the street as their stage or deal with popular tradition, while community theater, on the other hand, owes its name to the population that makes it up, which is, to say it clearly, a portion of the community, composed by a wide variety of trades, professions, ages, extractions, walks of life, etc., with all the heterogeneity this implies.

So that’s what it is, basically. A phenomenon that emerged in 1983, with the appearance of the Grupo de Teatro Catalinas Sur, followed by that of the Circuito Cultural Barracas, in 1996, which, in turn, later would spawn its first two ensembles in inland Argentina, mainly in Misiones province: Murga de la Estación, in the city of Posadas (1999) and Murga del Monte, in Oberá (2000). From 2001 until today, it would give rise to many more, in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area, in Buenos Aires Province as well as in various places across the country.

Anyone who wants can join community theater. There isn’t any kind of selection or age limit, and no ability or previous training is required. Community theater has no affiliation, either political, religious, or of any kind that might restrict the access to anyone not belonging to a certain circle, or that requires some kind of dependency that might prevent its autonomous development. It works on the assumption that every human being has a creative potential, which, when nurtured within a suitable space, might bring about transformations, not just personal but also social, since the context where this personal expansion takes place is a collective one, and the latter can only be achieved when it’s closely tied to the flourishing of others.

Community theater develops and grows within a territory that usually is a neighborhood, but can also be another communitarian space, such as a factory, a hospital, a school, etc. Lots of neighbors take part in it. It’s not about small groups of five or ten individuals, but of larger ones, made up of no less than 25 people and even, in the case of those groups that have been around the longest, 300 members.

Community theater is transforming. It develops the creativity of the community, thus producing changes both at the individual as well as the social level. Its way of constructing knocks down individualist and exclusionist paradigms. On the contrary, its activity, which revolves around the creative development of both neighborhood residents and community memory, generates inclusion and collective development.