During the 1990s, Passion plays emerged as a new theatrical trend in the northwestern region of Argentina (NOA). This phenomenon began in 1993, with La pasión Tafí del Valle, presented in the touristic village of Tafí del Valle, located in the mid-western part of the province of Tucumán. Tucumán is the smallest but most densely populated province in the NOA. With a population of almost 1.5 million inhabitants, Tucumán is traditionally known as the region’s center of economic and cultural activity. The majority of the population is Catholic, but there are large Jewish and Muslim communities in the province’s capital, San Miguel de Tucumán.1

Following the popular success of La Pasión Tafí del Valle, it did not take long for other Passion plays to be staged all around the provinces of the NOA and turn into a typical family outing during Holy Week.2 Most of the Passion plays in the NOA are performed outdoors with the backdrop of the landscape providing the natural scenery. Several wooden platforms are installed throughout the outdoor space and the viewers move from one stage to the next following the sequence of the play. These platforms correspond to each of the major scenes described in the Gospels: the Entrance to Jerusalem, the Temple, the

2 Other passion plays include La Pasión directed by Luis Caram and Jorge Scannavino, in El Galpon, province of Salta; Vida y Pasión de Dios Hombre, performed in Parque 9 de Julio, San Miguel de Tucuman, Tucumán. Additional Passion plays are performed in San Pedro and El Valle. de San Javier, both in the province of Tucumán.
Last Supper, Pontius Pilate’s palace, the tree on which Judas hung himself, the column of the Flagellation, the Crucifixion, and the Sepulcher. The result is a hybrid form of procession and performance, blurring the division between actors and audience. The Tafi Passion play’s producers emphasize its affinity with the medieval open-air theater where mobile audiences would stop at various stations located at convenient intervals in order to view particular scenes. The linkage with a well-established tradition of devotional theater points at an attempt to endow the new Passion plays of the NOA with historical legitimacy, and perhaps to evoke a suggestion of deeply-ingrained authenticity.

While the purpose of the Tafi directors has been to create a traditionally-structured and themed Passion play, they also aimed to invest the work with local character and relevancy. They included autochthonous and folkloristic elements so that its message would resonate with local audiences. The script, too, was written with the purpose of addressing issues directly related to local and national history, with particular emphasis on promoting the ideal of an egalitarian society in which justice overrides corruption.

Though the play’s already familiar plot includes negative stereotypes of Jews, the local Jewish community, consisting of about 1,000 families, has never expressed grievances over this aspect of the popular production.3 This attitude undoubtedly reflects recognition of the rootedness of medieval Catholic tradition in northwestern Argentine culture. Indeed, it is an inseparable aspect of Argentine national identity and is used to convey a political and social message.⁴ In the case of the Tafi play, traditionally negative Jewish stereotypes are used to address sociopolitical issues in response to the events that occurred in Argentina over the past three decades.

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