



Manuel Puig's

# Kiss of the Spider Woman

Mar. 26–Apr. 23, 2023



aNW Edu

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## SYNOPSIS

**The play opens** on a small cell in the Villa Devoto prison in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Inside the cell are two men, Molina and Valentin. For the duration of the show, these are the only two characters the audience sees. Molina is an ebullient and charismatic gay man who was imprisoned for “corruption of a minor,” though the details of this crime are never explored in the play. Valentin is a moody and stoic political prisoner jailed for his role in a radical revolutionary group. From their first interaction, it is clear that Molina and Valentin are opposites, bickering about everything from provisions to films to political views. However, being cellmates, it is equally clear that the two share a uniquely intimate bond.

To pass the time, Molina recounts aloud the plots of his favorite films, the most prominent of which is the story of a woman who fears she will turn into a panther and destroy the things she loves. As Molina explores the film, Valentin opens up more, connecting parts of the film to small snatches of his everyday life within the revolutionary organization.

One evening, the cellmates’ dinner is late to arrive. When it does finally arrive, there is one portion that is significantly larger than the other. After some argument, Valentin convinces Molina to take the larger portion. That night, Molina gets ill and recites more of the film plot to distract himself. Two days later, Valentin is sick with the same symptoms Molina had. He refuses to go to the clinic, however, fearing that the prison guards will use it as an opportunity to get him hooked on drugs. In an attempt to make him feel better, Molina continues with his story, but he is interrupted when Valentin has an accident in the cell. Molina helps him clean it up, resulting in a moment of closeness between the two wherein Valentin reveals that his girlfriend is not the woman he really loves.

This closeness continues in the next scene as Valentin shares a letter he receives from his girlfriend detailing the death of a comrade in his organization. Before Molina learns more, he is called away by the warden for visiting hours. Over the course of Molina’s conversation with the warden, the audience realizes that Molina is working for the warden, trying to get information about the political organization out of Valentin in exchange for a pardon.

As act two opens, the two cellmates continue to share small moments of emotional intimacy, with Molina bathing Valentin and helping him write

a letter to his love. Scattered throughout these moments are pieces of Molina’s story about the panther woman, which seems to be drawing to a conclusion. As he recovers, however, Valentin grows to resent this intimacy and the bickering between the two begins again in earnest, culminating in Valentin exploding and hurling provisions against the wall. Ashamed of his outburst, Valentin tries to make it up to Molina, and some of their previous closeness returns as they discuss love and gender politics. Their intimacy expands from emotional to physical and the two men end up sharing a tender moment of sexual pleasure.

Shortly after this new sexual relationship begins, Molina is once again called into the warden’s office where he learns that he will soon be released on parole. Valentin is ecstatic, convinced he can use Molina as a way to get information to his group. Molina is reluctant at first, but after an affectionate moment with Valentin, he agrees. Molina finally finishes his story about the panther woman and the two cellmates share a single kiss as Molina departs. After leaving the prison, Molina contacts Valentin’s revolutionary group but is caught by the police, who had been shadowing him since his release. He is shot by members of the group before he can be taken into police custody. As for Valentin, he is tortured at the prison until his wounds turn septic, at which point he is administered morphine. As he drifts into unconsciousness, he dreams both of his lady love and of his former cellmate Molina. ♦

## BIOGRAPHY OF **MANUEL PUIG**

**Juan Manuel Puig** was born December 28, 1932, in a small town called General Villegas in the province of Buenos Aires. Puig was the first child in a middle-class family caught in the struggle between the conservative landowners and the populist movements of the time. This childhood of heightened political tensions along with Puig's class consciousness and his identity combined to solidify Puig's leftist political tendencies, which would impact his future writing career.

From a very young age, Puig loved American films, even learning English at age ten to better understand them. For Puig, worlds of movies and film served as an escape from the oppression and violence that populated his day-to-day life. Because there were no schools in General Villegas, he attended an American boarding school in Buenos Aires in 1946 before eventually enrolling at the University of Buenos Aires. Puig was interested in many subjects at university, including literature, psychology, and philosophy, but he found his true passion in film direction. To prepare for his chosen career, Puig perfected his English and set about learning Italian, French, and German.

He followed his passion for movies to Rome in 1957, where he studied film direction on a scholarship at the Italian Institute of Buenos Aires. He then left Italy and traveled to Stockholm and London where he worked on screenplays and supported himself as a language teacher and dishwasher. After his time in Europe, Puig returned to Buenos Aires, where his film scripts were not well received. This critical response led Puig to focus on writing as a new career path. However, he would never truly abandon his love for film.

Puig published his first novel, *Betrayed by Rita Hayworth*, in 1968. In this novel, Puig utilized film techniques such as shifting points of view, flashbacks, and interior monologue to tell an autobiographical account of his own childhood. With these unconventional techniques, Puig portrayed how his characters felt alienated in normal society and found escape in film and pop art, much like Puig himself. After writing his second and third novels, *Heartbreak Tango* and *The Buenos Aires Affair*, Puig moved on to write arguably his most popular novel, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, in 1976.

Puig once again writes this novel non-traditionally, intentionally deconstructing the formula of using a set narrative voice to tell the story, and instead writing the novel in streams of dialogue between the characters. He also incorporates stream-of-consciousness portions of dialogue, meta-fictional government documentation, and recounting of films throughout the text. *Kiss of the Spider Woman* became hugely successful due to its denunciation of sexual and political repression, a topic which was not usually treated with such care and tenderness during the time period.

Due to its success, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* had many adaptations including a 1983 stage play, a 1985 film, and a 1993 Broadway musical. Later in his life, unhappy with the Perons' regime in Argentina, Puig left his home country and lived in Mexico, New York, and Brazil. Puig died in Mexico in 1990 at age 57 following a heart attack. His legacy lives on, however, and he is known worldwide as a master of the occluded narrative and a key figure in LGBTQ+ history. ♦

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF **LGBTQ+ INDIVIDUALS IN ARGENTINA**

**Pre-colonial times:** Before the Spanish colonized the area, local indigenous communities had very different opinions about gender and sexuality. The Mapuche peoples, a community comprised of several different groups of indigenous inhabitants who share a common language and social structure, do not function within the same gender binary as the western world. People who flow seamlessly between masculine and feminine are considered special, sometimes even becoming shaman-like spiritual leaders called Machi. Homosexuality is viewed with indifference.

- 1500s** Spanish conquistadors arrive and force western, Christian values upon native people. The act of sodomy becomes punishable by death by burning at the stake.
- 1887** Homosexuality is made legal under *Law No. 1,920*, the nation's first Penal Code. Some regions use the code to persecute LGBTQ+ individuals anyway.
- 1800s** Like many other parts of the world, homosexuality is treated as a psychological condition which can be cured with the proper care. Though legal, homosexuality is looked down upon sexually.
- 1930** Police harassment of LGBTQ+ individuals increases with the first military coup.
- 1942** The Cadet Scandal- a gay sex scandal in the military- led to violent police suppression of the LGBTQ+ community.
- 1967** *Nuestro Mundo*, the country's first LGBTQ+ rights organization, is formed, focusing on bringing awareness to the oppression suffered by the LGBTQ+ community.
- 1971** *Frente de Liberación Homosexual* (FLH) is formed by activists inspired by the Stonewall Riots two years before. The FLH was more politically active than its predecessor, standing with feminist and leftist groups to call for a change in government.
- 1976** A new dictatorship is formed and the FLH is disbanded. Over the course of this new dictatorship, the police wage war against the LGBTQ+ community; arresting, beating, and murdering them to "cleanse" the country ahead of the 1978 World Cup.
- 1983** The return of democracy ushers in a new wave of LGBTQ+ activism. This push starts a decades-long struggle for protection from discrimination and from the government.
- 2006** *Federación Argentina de Lesbianas, Gays, Bisexuales y Transexuales* (FALGBT) is formed as an umbrella organization for many sects of the LGBTQ+ activism community.
- 2010** Same-sex marriage is legalized in Argentina.
- 2012** The *Gender Identity Law* is passed, allowing people to change their gender without getting the permission of a doctor or judge. The Penal Code is updated to include a strict penalty to any person committing a hate crime based on gender identity or sexual orientation.
- 2015** Argentina abolishes its ban on gay people donating blood.

**Conclusion:** As with the rest of the world, there is a history of discrimination against LGBTQ+ people in Argentina, but the country's commitment to progress should not be ignored. A history of oppression has now turned into a legacy of progress, with Argentina being the first Central American country to legalize gay marriage in 2010. This legislation also protected the right to adopt and ensured equal access to IVF (in vitro fertilization) for LGBTQ+ citizens. Additionally, Argentina was the first country in the world to legalize changing one's gender on legal documents without needing the permission of a doctor or judge. Unlike in the United States, LGBTQ+ people are allowed to donate blood in Argentina with no restrictions. Also unlike the United States, Argentina has banned the use of conversion therapy on LGBTQ+ minors. Homosexuality has been officially legal in Argentina since 1887, over 100 years before the same official legal status was granted in the US in 2003. So although there is still work to do to erase the anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments that still lurk in some parts of Argentina, the tireless work of Argentina's LGBTQ+ community to achieve equal rights cannot be understated.

Edited from: <https://www.thetaskforce.org/argentina-becomes-the-worlds-most-transgender-friendly-country/>

## THEMES

### GENDER ROLES AND GENDER IDENTITY

“And what’s wrong with being soft like a woman? Why can’t a man—or whatever—a dog, or a fairy—why can’t he be sensitive if he feels like it?” —Molina

From the beginning of the story, it is clear that Molina is an extremely feminine character. Although he visually presents masculine, his speech is light and his mannerisms are almost coquettish. Though he is in a prison with many hardened criminals, with one of which he shares a cell, Molina never changes his behavior or the way he talks. He defies masculine gender norms, telling love stories, making tea, and nursing Valentin back to health. Valentin, on the other hand, is all masculinity. He refuses to show genuine emotion, he’s stalwart and stubborn and strong. Because of his very limited view of gender, Valentin is uncomfortable with Molina’s feminine traits, and in the moments when he feels that his masculinity is threatened, Valentin starts arguing, fighting to prove his masculinity again. However, out loud, Valentin preaches a breaking down of gender roles, telling Molina that powerful women are good and shouldn’t just follow their husbands. Although he accepts the concept of breaking down gender roles, Valentin struggles in the case of himself and Molina. For Valentin, the most infuriating thing about Molina is his sensitivity. Molina feels his emotions to the fullest. He is forever growing weepy at a story or interaction, and he is not afraid to vocalize when he is upset. Molina also explores gender identity frequently through the play, referring to himself with he/him pronouns and also referring to himself as a girl. This ambiguity of gender helps add to the dichotomy between the two prisoners and serves as a grounding force in the play. Valentin slowly grows to accept Molina the way he is, and he appreciates those feminine traits as working in harmony with the masculine ones to make him emotionally balanced and open to vulnerability and love.

### ESCAPISM

“Molina: I’d forgotten all about this dump while I was telling you the movie.

Valentin: I’d forgotten about it too.

Molina: Well, then... why’d you have to go and break the spell?

Valentin: I don’t know what you want me to say.

Molina: That I have your permission to escape from reality... why should I make myself more depressed than I am already? What’s the point in making myself more unhappy...?”

Escapism is used as a coping mechanism when an individual is in a dire or upsetting situation, either mentally or physically. In order to cope, the person uses fiction, daydreaming, or dissociation to escape from their reality. When faced with the prospect of many harrowing years in prison, Molina chooses to survive by escaping into the movies of his youth. In recounting the films he once saw, Molina forgets his condition for a moment and is able to find peace and happiness. Initially, Valentin doesn’t understand this; he views the storytelling as a novelty at best and a nuisance at worst. However, as the story continues, Valentin begins to find the same calm acceptance in Molina’s words. The escapism benefits them both, bringing the two men closer together and sparking engaging conversations about hypothetical realities. When Molina gets sick, he tells stories to keep himself occupied. When Valentin suffers the same fate, he asks Molina for the escape and Molina obliges. The desire between the two men is fueled by conversations about stories. In fact, their intimate relationship would not have started if it weren’t for Molina’s insistence on telling the story of the Panther Woman. Though Valentin often criticizes Molina for being unrealistic and naïve for recounting the films with such depth and drama, Molina continues. He knows the soothing effect his stories have on himself and Valentin, and he knows that it is better to find optimism through naïve escapism than to drown in the despair of reality.

## THEMES CONTINUED...

### TRUST

“Valentin: You trust me, don’t you?”

Molina: Yes...

Valentin: Well, then... Inside here it’s got to be share and share alike.”

The only reason Molina and Valentin can share such an intimate bond is because despite everything, they find a way to trust each other. Although Molina initially makes him uncomfortable, Valentin finds himself confiding in him. The two cellmates bond over the shared trauma of being incarcerated and instead of letting this fact make them bitter, they share little moments of levity through stories, food, and wit. Through these moments of connection, the men build trust. Molina doesn’t embarrass Valentin when he is sick; rather, he shows him compassion and care. Valentin, for his part, reassures Molina and tries to care for him in return. This is what makes the end of the first act so tragic. The two men spend almost an hour onstage slowly building up that trust with each other and in turn, a trust with the audience. Then, Molina is called out to talk with the warden and that trust is revealed to be nothing but a ploy to obtain information about Valentin. It’s heartbreaking. Molina realizes this too. However, through the second act, Molina begins to think that the trust, the intimacy that he has built with Valentin is more important than Molina’s own plans for personal gain. So when he finally gets out, Molina follows Valentin’s directions, meeting up with Valentin’s revolutionary group on his behalf. Although it ends tragically for Molina, it almost feels like a victory, because Molina’s death confirms that the trust built between the cellmates was not artificial but in fact, real enough to be worth dying for. ♦

## ABOUT **A NOISE WITHIN**

**A NOISE WITHIN** A Noise Within produces classic theatre as an essential means to enrich our community by embracing universal human experiences, expanding personal awareness, and challenging individual perspectives. Our company of resident and guest artists immerses student and general audiences in timeless, epic stories in an intimate setting.

Our most successful art asks our community to question beliefs, focus on relationships, and develop self-awareness. Southern California audiences of all ages and backgrounds build community together while engaging with this most visceral and primal of storytelling techniques. ANW's production of classic theatre includes all plays we believe will be part of our cultural legacy. We interpret these stories through the work of a professional resident company—a group of artists whose work is critical to their community—based on the belief that trust among artists and between artists and audience can only be built through an honest and continuing dialogue.

In its 30-year history, A Noise Within has garnered over 500 awards and commendations, including the Los Angeles Drama Critics' Circle's revered Polly Warfield Award for Excellence and the coveted Margaret Hartford Award for Sustained Excellence.

More than 45,000 individuals attend productions at a Noise Within annually. In addition, the theatre draws over 18,000 student participants to its Education Program. Students benefit from in-classroom workshops, conservatory training, subsidized tickets to matinee and evening performances, post-performance discussions with artists, and free standards-based study guides.

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