Riding Juan Perón's Coffin

by Michael Luongo, 21 May 2009.

Illustration by Nick Mahshie

The outpouring of grief and solidarity this April for Raúl Alfonsín, the president who brought Argentina back to democracy in the early 1980s, was an impressive event to see.

The ceremony brought to my mind a far more tumultuous state funeral the last time I was lived here – the reburial of Juan Domingo Perón on 17th October 2006. '*Quilombo*' is my favourite Argentine word, and in contrast to Alfonsín's orderly sendoff, it is the word that best describes this other funeral.

As someone obsessed with all things Juan and Evita, from the musical to real history, the disorder called to mind a line in the musical about how with "chaos installed" there is opportunity to be grabbed. Indeed I did that day. How often does one get to claim that he rode the coffin of a dead president through the streets of city? I can, and it is one part of what makes my life as a travel writer so surreal. The last major presidential burial in my country was Ronald Reagan's and I could never imagine being able to have done the same. But then, Argentina and the United States are two very different places.

I'll owe the beginnings of my luck to attending a press conference the evening before. I was the only foreign journalist there, and those speaking – from Peronist politicians to labour leaders, to the men maintaining the condition of the body – welcomed me in an extraordinary way.

They told me that Peron was to be removed from Chacarita Cemetery and driven to the Confederacion General del Trabajo, or CGT, in Monserrat. Like Evita, the plan was to place him in a glass coffin so crowds could come by and give him a kiss off one more time.

The CGT was where Evita's body was embalmed, and an eternal flame on the building above her portrait marks the place as a shrine. However, unlike Evita, a dead Perón was far from a kissable Sleeping Beauty. Instead of pucker-ready crowds, there was a mess of camera crews, photographers, workers, and people hanging outside the building, waiting for the parading of his coffin through Buenos Aires. Cavalry soldiers in colonial era garb waited to lead him away.

I was supposed to have building access, my name on a media list. This meant nothing to the thugs guarding the entrance. I bided my time with the crowd, photographing soldiers and police who festively posed, instead of putting on a grim display. It's part of the national vanity in a country where half the population is of Italian blood, ready to be a spectacle.

Photo by Michael Luongo

But then the moment arrived. Suited men poured from the CGT with the casket, thugs beating down the crowds. I held my camera up in the air, easily passing through, shouting, "*periodista, periodista*" as I got closer to the coffin, strapped onto the back of a waiting jeep. Several of the men from the press conference surrounded the flag wrapped coffin, each nodding in recognition. I placed my body over, and as I snapped away, I realised no one had any intention of telling me to leave.

The high perch allowed me to see over the crowds. When we emerged on to Paseo Alem, I was stirred by the sight of hundreds of thousands of people, insane devotion projecting from all points. People leaned over balconies waving flags, throwing flowers, cheering and screaming. One building burst into flame, fire rising above a sign with a smiling Juan and Evita. Someone must have tossed a cigarette down while they were throwing confetti.

The jeep moved on, the driver aware even a moment's stop would mean that he would be trapped by the crowds. Tearful old women tried to rip me from the trailer, to get closer to a man they refused to give up loving more than 30 years after his death. Shirtless workers, *descamisados* of Peronist lure, pounded on the coffin, pulling themselves over the vehicle, their feet dragging against the pavement. Through it all, the men surrounding the coffin remained still, but then the horrific occurred. One of the clamoring young men slipped, and the wheels of the trailer rolled over him. Miraculously, he was not killed, and even if my photographer's instinct meant when I jumped off, I photographed the man, I didn't fight to get back. The jeep inched its way to a new burial ground, a mausoleum at San Vicente, the Peróns' country home.

I convinced a cab driver to essentially, "follow that coffin". We took off on the highway leading from town, past Ezeiza, built by Perón, past Ciudad Evita, whose streets form into Evita's profile, and onto the dusty suburban fringes of Buenos Aires. Thousands of spectators lined the roads and hung from overpasses, cheering and holding signs for their god-like leader. School busses, vehicles, motorcycles, anything with wheels was part of the caravan. Each time the road bent, I could make out the jeep and the coffin, its caretakers holding on, a dusty streak we all followed for four hours.

Photo by Michael Luongo

The eerie calm upon arrival at San Vicente was broken by piercing screams and shattered bottles. Dozens of people, many covered in blood, began pouring from the grounds, police in riot gear behind. My immediate reaction was to rush in, my camera above my head when I wasn't photographing. The police stopped me, thinking I was insane until I explained I was a journalist.

Inside, huge, hairy men climbed trees and broke them apart. They looked like cavemen, swinging clubs made from branches at anything that moved as political speeches projected from loudspeakers. At first, I thought they must have been coming from a radio, but I soon realised the political rally was here. Bleachers, surrounded by enormous billboards of Juan and Evita, had been set up, with politicians at a podium. The cavemen threw branches, bricks, and twisted pieces of metal while each speaker took his turn, ignoring the injuries raining on those just steps below.

I photographed the chaos in near disbelief, worried the crowd would turn on me, as I learned, they had on other journalists. One man was near me, his face cut, blood soaking his clothing, as he shouted "Perón, Perón" in the air above him, as if in a painful ecstatic trance. Juan's coffin was paraded through the grounds, one man riding over it, continuing the chant of Perón, Perón. He riled the crowds, his hands in the air, but then he would use the same hands to beat people away. I followed the coffin as more brutes beat others back, and somehow, I made it into the crypt.

I was with the coffin inside of a serene white room, surrounded by women in lab coats making chit-chat with me. Calm reflection was not what the leaders in charge of the body wanted however, and the coffin was soon brought back the crowds. Politicians and union leaders hovered over the coffin, waving their hands over the wooden surface, as if holding a séance, perhaps to bring Perón back to life. In a way, they were, tricking people into believing they were heirs to his spirit.

Photo by Michael Luongo

The back and forth of the body started once again, on its way into the mausoleum. I followed the coffin, making the mistake of falling behind to photograph it from behind, but the crypt doors slammed in my face. No amount of begging, no name, no press ID would allow back in. Instead, I watched through a glass wall into the crypt's interior, the coffin now on a slanted, polished black top of a platform inside. I thought this was where it would permanently rest, but after several minutes, it was slipped inside of an opening under the granite. The men inside of the glass room ignored the photographers, TV crews and the crowd peering in. They were like a zoo display, but the animals were those of us outside, the passionate crowds, staring, praying, crying, beating against the glass.

One by one, the men in suits and the women in lab coats left the glass room, until there was nothing but the solitary black polished granite crypt. Aware that the body would never be paraded around again, that there was no more reason to chant for Perón, or to bruise and bloody each other in a struggle to get closer to the body, the crowds filtered away.

My cab driver and talked about the exhausting day, making better time heading back to Buenos Aires than we did leaving. I asked him to drop me off at the Casa Rosada and Evita's famous balcony, the place where the revolution she and Juan started on that very date in 1945 had begun.

We parted ways, but the legacy of that date was apparent in our meeting. Peronism created a worker's revolution, bringing men like my cab driver into the middle class. But it also made a legend whose interpretation in stage and film would make Argentina a curiosity of tourists the world over. It was this image which first made me want to come to this country, one whose strange passions are hard to explain to the package tourists who come for Evita, wine and tango with just a week to explore. There is a passion here in Argentina we don't have in the US, something you have to see and experience to understand what lies within this nation's psyche. And this is what draws me back to Argentina time and again.

Michael Luongo is the author of Frommer's Buenos Aires, the most popular US published guide to the Argentine capital. The third edition of the book is due to be released later this year. www.michaelluongo.com

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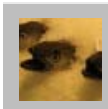

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