

# When Grandmother Is a Hungry Monster

By D.J.R. BRUCKNER

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## Review/Theater

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Roberto Cossa's comedy "La Nonna" is sometimes dark, and often its humor may be too robust for delicate sensibilities. But in the production by Repertorio Español, the Argentinian writer's play at the Gramercy Arts Theater is very funny; the laughter it brings from the audience is gleeful and utterly unashamed.

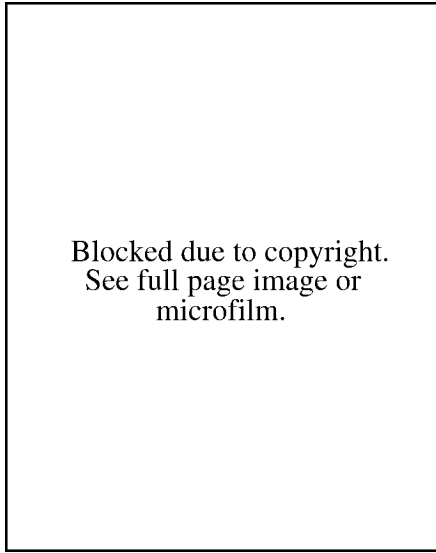
Mr. Cossa toys with some dangerous themes. How many playwrights would risk making a 100-year-old matriarch a comic monster? There are rough ethnic jokes; people fall victim to nothing more blameworthy than their own innocence; calamities are made ridiculous. The play is a formidable challenge to a director and cast.

In this case, seven regulars from the Repertorio Español, under the direction of Braulio Villar, create characters whose absurdities ward off an audience's sympathy and keep the action moving so swiftly that there is no time for ethical reflection. And they do it without turning the characters into cartoon figures even though some of the pranks here put one in mind of the mayhem of Saturday morning television.

The story is simple enough: A family of Italian extraction in Buenos Aires is driven into poverty and desperation by its centenarian grandmother, who is eating them out of house and home. Her language is a hilarious mixture of Italian and Spanish, but she is easy to comprehend; every word is about food and she does nothing but eat.

Her family's efforts to avoid ruin become schemes to get rid of Nonna. But the great survivor is as impervious to their plots as she has been to time for a century. Each trap they lay for her springs on one of them. In the end, every stick of furniture may be gone, even the lampshades, but Nonna remains, still eating.

Ofelia Gonzalez, as Nonna, is the key to the comedy. Every time the play seems to be coming a little too close to dangerous emotions like sorrow, compassion or indignation, she rolls on stage just a bit more imperious, and hungry, than before. There is not a pitiable bone in this character's old body. There are ways for an actor to fake eating, but Ms. Gonzalez cannot fake them all. Nonna gorges on bags of popcorn and potato chips, pots of stew, loaves of bread, pecks of apples, plates of sausage and cheese,



Gerry Goodstein  
Ofelia Gonzalez of Repertorio Español in "La Nonna" at the Gramercy Arts Theater.

jars of jam and mayonnaise and a basket of flowers. And as others eat around her, Ms. Gonzalez's eyes

## Wages of Gluttony

LA NONNA, by Roberto Cossa; directed by Braulio Villar; assistant director, Beatriz Cordoba; production designer, Robert Weber Federico. Presented by Repertorio Español, René Buch, artistic director; Gilberto Zaldivar, producer. At the Gramercy Arts, 138 East 27th Street.

La Nonna .....	Ofelia Gonzalez
Carmelo .....	Rene Sanchez
Marí .....	Tatiana Vecinos
Marta .....	Adriana Sananes
Chico .....	Ricardo Barber
Anyula .....	Lillia Veiga
Don Francisco .....	George Bass

seem able to watch the hands of half a dozen people at once as they lift a bite from plate to mouth.

George Bass, as an 80-year-old man tricked as much by his own greed as by the wiles of Nonna's family into marrying her, only to have her devour his entire candy shop in a few days, turns a small role into a large comic performance. And Ricardo Barber, as one of Nonna's sons, whose absurd schemes for avoiding work and solving the Nonna problem lead to the family's downfall, is the kind of rascal whose just rewards at the end make you feel warm inside even as you laugh at him.

Altogether, this cast is as nimble as an acrobatic troupe performing in a mine field. Nothing is too sacred, or fearful, to be ridiculed by them and yet they give no offense.