

## Latin American Theatre in Montreal

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Caracas, Venezuela's Grupo Rajatabla and Teatro Irrumpe of Santiago de Cuba brought *Bolívar* and *María Antonia*, respectively, to Montreal's recent Festival de Théâtre des Amériques (May 1985). Written by José Antonio Rial, *Bolívar* puts loose-fitting historical trappings on a reenactment of the South American liberator's final days as staged by inmates in a present-day concentration camp. Although the verbiage is at times as thick as the incense, the broken treatment of history achieves its desired effect. Simón Bolívar, as leading actress Pilar Romero points out in this interview, "walks back and forth through time" until the centuries converge. Eugenio Hernández Espinosa's *María Antonia* travels chronologically backwards as well, but remains set in pre-revolutionary Havana as a full-blown, Afro-Cuban period piece. Under Roberto Blanco's direction, this folklorically colored exploration has served to show Cuban audiences both the distinctions and the blurs between what Cuba once was and what it seeks to become.

Both plays were performed in Spanish for four nights and to full houses. They were among the highlights of a festival that brought more than 20 groups and companies from both American continents to receptive audiences in largely French-speaking Montreal.

### INTERVIEW WITH PILAR ROMERO

*With its play-within-a-play premise and its progress towards a kind of exploded climax, Bolívar resembles Marat/Sade.*

Everything Carlos Giménez directs has a *sui generis* esthetics to it. When we bring *Bolívar* to New York, or perhaps *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, we expect these resemblances to show, though only to the advantage of the play.

*A little more on that special esthetics, please.*

Well, consider the *Marat/Sade* trappings—inmates, guards, drama under the gun, nudism, lunacy—but set up for an exclusively domestic, meaning

Venezuelan, audience. So much of the historical background is taken for granted. Simón Bolívar, his lover Manuela Sáenz, his plan for a united South America—these are things that Venezuelans know so automatically that perhaps they don't really know them at all. The *Marat/Sade* drappings serve to jar all the assumptions about Bolívar, so that the bust-in-the-park image can be reassessed.

*Do you think costuming and set alone achieve that?*

No, it has to be in the fabric of the play, too. In this case it is there. The concentration camp prisoners choose the last five days of Bolívar's life because they are fraught with misery, conspiracy, anguish, betrayal. Bolívar himself doesn't believe in the acclamation he gets from Manuela and others, nor in the possibility of his being remembered other than as a great but more or less empty public figure. The interaction of history and actuality changes all this, as you saw. For instance, at one point the concentration camp overseer jumps into the play he has forced the inmates to perform and breaks into a ringing speech on the inspiration that Bolívar's name still brings to Latin American military officialdom.

*Yes, I remember the music nearly drowned him out.*

We use the "vanitas, vanitas" choral score obtrusively because we wish to break the spell of compliance, the conspiracy between music and the audience which we feel sterilizes a work's potential for memorability. So you have a classical military peroration forced to compete with this strident choral music.

*Isn't that a bit preachy?*

I don't think so, not when played against the other angles from which Bolívar is viewed. For instance, Bolívar himself—and here you have what I mean by Carlos Giménez's esthetics strengthening the play—tends to oscillate between his role as concentration camp inmate and his classical incarnation of the 19th-century hero. When it's the former, he's denouncing 20th-century militarism right and left, half inmate, half Bolívar. When he is fully the historical Simón Bolívar, he interacts with his own early 19th century: its high society *criollas*, called the *mantuanas*, his half-crazy lover, Manuela, the generals who betrayed him. And this pulls the staging right along with him and you are in the period piece until you are forced out of it again. It's always back and forth like that.

*How has the play done outside of Venezuela?*

I think we amount to a kind of exorcism of military juntas whenever we do *Bolívar*. Every time we perform the play in a country having a military dictatorship, they have elections there before the year is out.

*In what countries, for instance?*

In Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay.

*Aside from those miracles, how has the play been received?*

It has done very well, but let me tell you something that happened in

Montevideo when we played *Bolívar*. You saw the concentration camp military police in uniform placed in the audience at the beginning of the play. Well, the Uruguayans were so accustomed to this kind of vigilance that when the guards grabbed me, that is, Manuela, at the beginning of the play as part of the play's action, the people in the theatre thought that they were real military police and pulled me down into the rows of seats in order to protect me. I had to break character to tell them it was part of the play. So imagine what it means to those people to see characters like the guards in a work like *Bolívar*, to see them challenged, placed in a context they do not entirely control.

*Surely the reaction has been different in Montreal.*

Yes, and in one very special way. I'm not so Stanislavskian that I am subsumed in my role, meaning I often watch the audience out of the corner of my eye when the part I'm playing allows it. And in Montreal, Manuela Sáenz had a remarkably strong and supportive public. There was a real partiality to the woman's role here, a real sympathy. I hadn't ever experienced it. It came out in the press, in the applauding, and in the attention I could feel as I performed the part.

#### INTERVIEW WITH ROBERTO BLANCO

*María Antonia must have been a strenuous play to perform, in the sense that many actors had to carry plenty of weight in lines, props, dancing and singing.*

I think that is especially true for the lead role, that of María Antonia. The role was conceived, you know, as a break with certain clichéd images of Cuba and the Cubans. The international tourist's image of the island as *rumba*, *maracas* and all that was hanging on, so I set up *María Antonia* to bring all that to an end. And yes, it was a tall order.

*Do you think that was the author's intention as well, and did you have his collaboration for set and directing?*

I am sure that was his intention. I met Eugenio upon returning to Cuba from Africa and Europe in 1967. They were already talking about *María Antonia* at that time. Someone had tried to present it but the author had stopped the production because of this phony image I am talking about, which, incidentally, is very easy to fall back into. I invited Eugenio to work with me and for a long time he was my technical assistant. So he was an early and decisive collaborator.

*During the intermission I heard a French Canadian woman say that María Antonia seemed like a Cuban Carmen. You probably don't care for the comparison.*

You might call them similar characters, even universal ones. That's fine if people want to see it that way. Some have called María Antonia Carmen, others say the play is *Porgy and Bess*, and still others see *West Side Story* in it. There are many levels at which one can read the work.

*Assuming that some of the play's prerevolutionary archetypes and their world have*

*disappeared—the prostitutes, the sailors, crimes of passion, superstition and poverty—does María Antonia then stand as a showcase of the past, a play that has no relevance for contemporary Cuba?*

I would start by saying that the 1984 audiences we have had in Cuba have been different from those of 1967. That is why we state in the program that the play is from the point of view of a world which María Antonia needed but never knew. On the other hand the revolution is not a magic wand which does away with everything people have stored in their memory. That is why the archetypes, as I see it, still have relevance. Their gradual death in the course of the Cuban Revolution is in fact a transformation towards another reality. You could say that their death is social change itself. For example, as of January 1, 1959, racial discrimination does not exist in Cuba. Yet, in the minds and conduct of the people in 1984 it still exists. It is not supported in the least by any social structure or entity, but you can still find it. You can even find new variants of discrimination that have arisen since 1959 from a union of the old with the new. Now, I should clarify that today's Cuban youth view *María Antonia* almost from within a Brechtian alienation mode. That is, they see all these struggles between men and women and ask, "What's that?" Cuban youth is much freer now and in that sense Cuba is different from the rest of Latin America. At the same time, it would be cynical to say that *María Antonia* showcases the past in the interests of theatrical dazzle. No, *María Antonia*'s success derives from its power to unite the country with its past by presenting those people who have been overlooked by history. That is one accomplishment of the Cuban Revolution: it vindicates history at that level.

*Have Afro-Cuban history and folklore become the subject matter of much contemporary Cuban theatre?*

Yes, quite a few plays have now sprung up in this vein. You could call *María Antonia* the detonator of the whole movement. Don't forget, also, the National Folkloric Ensemble, whose director appears in *María Antonia*. They are a group which researches and recreates Cuban folkloric expression. Much of what you saw in the way of dances and chants is their work.

If I might digress somewhat, I'd like to tell you the story of the return of *María Antonia*, so that you can see how influential it has been. The play premiered in 1967. I was its first director but then left it in 1969 for 14 years. When I created Teatro Irrumpe in 1983 I suggested to the company that we attempt it again for our repertoire. The public was very much in favor of bringing it back and my only hesitation concerned whether the actors, most of whom had been in the original cast, could get it back together after so many years. I set a date for a trial run through the first act. Word of this leaked out, so we ended up with an unexpected audience to add to the tension. But the real surprise was that this cast performed the entire first act flawlessly, as if they had been doing it all along. Later, in our discussion of this first try, they got right down to details of set and staging. You see, they had done surveys and interviews and found out that the public wanted the same *María Antonia* as it remembered. I said fine, we would accept the challenge and see if the play still had anything to say. And it did. It ran its first season successfully and went on to take three first prizes in the Havana Theatre Festival in January, 1984.

*And how has Montreal responded to María Antonia?*

The response we have gotten here in Canada has been extraordinarily similar to the show's success in Havana.

*Is it possible to read a kind of solidarity in that?*

Well, yes, but it is solidarity that has to come from something concrete. My feeling is that when you get right down to it, Quebec is a Latin American province. That is, to the extent that it is French it is Latin and therefore Latin American. The only other explanation I can think of is the possible universality of the work.

*What about the theme of this festival—the Americas—how do María Antonia and Teatro Irrumpe in general fit that concept as you see it?*

Considering that the festival reaches from southern South America north through the only socialist country in the Americas and all the way up to the Inuits, I would have to say I tip my hat to the organizers. It is a very beautiful and novel idea and I expect it will have an effect on the repertory companies of both Americas. I also believe that we of American theatre must bring about a renovation of the formal images of theatrical art. We're the young countries and our possibilities are endless. Imagine what could be done in theatre with magical realism, for example. Imagine *One Hundred Years of Solitude* or something like it adapted for the stage.

*Middlebury, Vermont*