

La Cubanía: The Soul of Cuban Theatre in the Mid-1990s¹

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In a 1979 article George Woodyard wrote: “the theatre in Cuba has undergone significant transformations in recent decades, analogous to Cuban reality itself” (42). Today, Cuban theatre and Cuban reality continue the transformation that began in the late 1950s, encountering new cultural, social and political conditions with each passing decade. While multiple factors produced the most recent metamorphosis in Cuban theatre, the 1991 breakup of Cuba’s longtime relationship with Russia is the source of the country’s current self-evaluation. By 1993, the Cuban population was experiencing severe shortages with little strategy for recovery. As blackouts shut down power for up to sixteen hours at a time, food and medicine grew scarce, and prostitution and black markets thrived, the government imported a million Chinese bicycles to resolve the gas shortage problem. Alongside the economic stress, other events shape this particular moment in Cuban theatre history as well.² The Ministry of Culture, instituted in 1976, founded the Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA), an agency whose graduates revitalized Cuban theatre. By 1985, Rine Leal noted a difference: “descubro con entusiasmo síntomas de una recuperación que permite entrever cierta renovación” (Pianca 123). More recently, the government’s 1988 moderation of censorship in favor of a more lenient policy, followed by the 1989 formation of the Consejo Nacional de las Artes Escénicas to support artistic individuality, introduced an atmosphere of possibility. While these structural revisions by no means grant license that would exceed government parameters, they present a marked contrast to Cuba’s more repressive periods.

The theatre’s concern with Cuba’s difficulties was already evident in the 1980s, but has intensified in the 1990s with the added posture of nationalism and Cubanism. Magaly Muguercia, theatre critic and historian, examines the situation: “Todos estos directores son muy cubanos. Le rinden culto a la cubanía, todos ellos. Hay una onda de los años ’90 que es una especie de poner los ojos no ya en un proyecto político sino en los valores

absolutos de la cubanía” (Muguercia). This brief article centers on four theatre companies in Havana whom I met and interviewed in November of 1996: DanzAbierta, Teatro El Público, Teatro Obstáculo, and Teatro Buendía. Their practice of theatre, a political apparatus rather than an entertainment vehicle, has an explicitly didactic objective. Their commitment to Cuba and its future inspires both the creativity and the urgency of their art form as Cuban society undergoes reconstruction.

Marianela Boán (b. 1954) founded DanzAbierta in 1988 after a fifteen-year tenure with the company Danza Contemporánea. Her troupe, consisting of three men and three women, satisfies Boán’s need for a more experimental form. Her goals for a style that does not confine itself to dance are specific:

la ruptura de los límites del movimiento; el manejo de la literalidad y la dramaturgia para la danza; la investigación cinética; la convivencia de diferentes lenguajes en el espectáculo coreográfico (postura, gesto, texto, voz, acción dramática, máscara, espacio emotivo, movimiento puro y en consecuencia); el entrenamiento de un intérprete capaz de conjugar todos estos lenguajes expresivos dentro de estructuras abiertas de composición que sitúan al espectador como activo co-creador. (Boán 1)

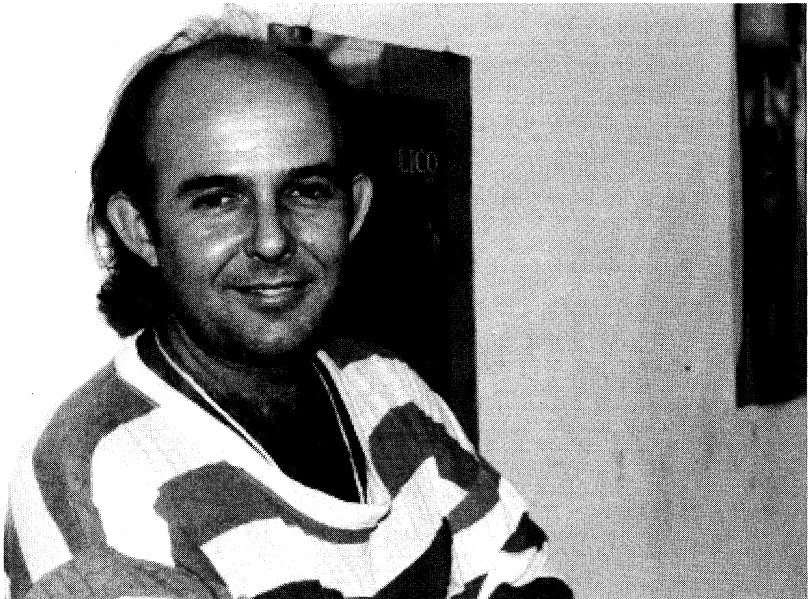
Performing with minimal and acutely representational props, Boán’s unique work extends Cuba’s deep-rooted affinity for dance, turning it toward commenting on the human condition within the Cuban context. Boán classifies her form as *danza contaminada* for its incorporation of other communicative forms – dialogue, slides, radio, etc. – to carry her message.

While her audience is ostensibly exclusive, appealing to university and art students and other intellectuals, the full houses that her work draws suggest that her message is inclusive. In 1994 the company staged *Autoretrato con escalera de caracol*, a collective choreography emphasizing image and space. Audience members climb nine flights of stairs to watch the performance. The dancers drew a self-portrait on a chalkboard, danced, sang and played the piano as they addressed Cuba’s crises. The play studies the doubling of spaces, physical and emotional, in a “house” left empty after the migration of Cubans. The audience enters through the same door that becomes the door to the house; because the dancers appropriate audience space and block the door, spectators cannot leave. In other words, Boán shows the determination of today’s artists to remain in Cuba.

Among Boán’s 1995 productions is *La carta*, a personal twelve-minute solo that resonates throughout Cuba. With only a table on stage,



Marianela Boán



Carlos Díaz

Boán reads and dances to a letter that she has written to her family, all of which, save a sister, now lives in Miami. The background radio is tuned to Radio Martí whose program, *Puente Familiar*, transmits letters from Miami Cubans to their families in Cuba. The empty table represents the void left by absent family members. DanzAbierta continued its theme of crisis in its October 1996 production of *La pez en la torre nada en el asfalto*, played each night to a full house in the Teatro Nacional. The title, taken from Virgilio Piñera's 1960s vanguard theatre classic *Aire frío*, is an example of the way Boán incorporates things Cuban into her work. As the play opens, the dancers greet the entering spectators with phrases from the black market: "Te vendo cuatro de aquello" and "Te cambio aquello por lo otro." Spectators recognize the black market dialogue, connect with the play and enjoy its humor. The final scene, however, is sobering. The dancers begin to stage a rumba in a type of play-within-a-play scenario, donning cheap costumes for a cabaret-type performance. Then they begin to deconstruct the dance in a rejection of its commercialization by the tourist trade, seeing it as a prostitution of the Cuban spirit. Ever mindful of their relationship with their audience, the dancers step to the proscenium and throw props into the orchestra pit: food items, passports, and finally their clothing. Stripped of the conflicts that encumber them, the nude performers stand silently, their nakedness a symbol of their spiritual allegiance and commitment to remain in Cuba.

Articles about Carlos Díaz (b. 1955) and his company, El Público, frequently appear in various critical venues, attesting to the troupe's impact in the 1990s. Newly organized by actor Jorge Perugorria, and while still an unofficial company, Díaz directed the players' first production in 1990. The trilogy of American plays, *Té y simpatía*, *Zoológico de cristal*, and *Un tranvía llamado deseo*, earned multiple prestigious awards and was credited by some critics with stimulating the then lethargic theatre scene (Díaz). Further, the plays presented motifs that would be repeated in later works, such as sexual identity (Gocio), and "visual excess" (Martin, *Socialist Ensembles* 181). Encouraged by both critical and popular reaction, they petitioned for official status, and in 1992 formally became Teatro El Público.

After their first productions, Genet's *Las criadas* and Chekhov's *A Moscú*, a member of Virgilio Piñera's family gave Díaz an unknown play, *La niñita querida*, which became El Público's next stage triumph. The drama, performed in the Teatro Nacional in 1992, established the company's presence in Havana. Commenting on Díaz's direction, which elevates Piñera's text to a singular spectacle, Cuban playwright Joel Cano (b. 1966) writes:

El Teatro El Público es más que todo un fenómeno de dirección y es ésta la causa principal que dificulta el análisis de un proceso donde muchas de las claves son demasiado secretas y yacen en la poética íntima y particular de Carlos. Pero nada es imposible máxime cuando la revelación fundamental que decide las imágenes es la propia alteración de la imagen textual de Virgilio (13).

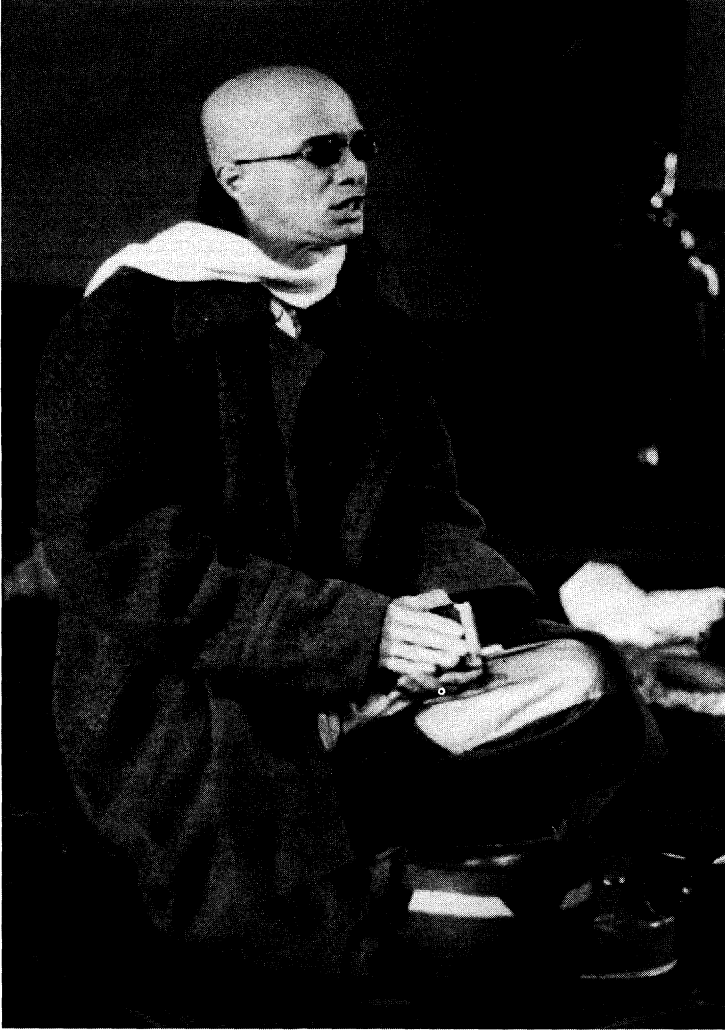
La niñita querida confirmed Díaz's stature as a director and contains those characteristics that identify El Público's style in general. While faithful to an author's text, Díaz interprets it through a particularly Cuban lens which, joined with his highly individualized, almost baroque attention to costumes, music and scenography results in productions keenly attuned to Cuban society.

Díaz chooses provocative topics, as seen in his 1994 staging of García Lorca's *El Público* in the Hubert de Blanck theatre. Beyond its daring to address homosexuality, the staging is a type of investigation and experimentation, "en pos de una comunicación no extenta de opuestos, de dudas, riesgos y contradicciones" (Santos Moray 93). Díaz pursues this same paradigm in his 1996 rendering of Camus' *Calígula* in the Teatro Trianón, now permanent home to the company. Acknowledging the universality of power structures in general (he utilizes Greek, German, French and Russian costuming), Díaz explains that the play "registers how people may feel bitter resentment but, at the same time, a lingering attachment for an autocrat who intimidates them" (Thomas). Two features distinguish this production. During the final days of power, Calígula asks for the moon, declares himself to be Venus, and throws a party. Violating the spaces between illusion and reality, actors enter the auditorium to carry spectators onto the stage for the *fiesta*. They encounter Calígula's double, a puppet fashioned from Cuban folklore, and the second distinctive feature of this play. Calígula deceives all of the people all of the time, for when he is finally murdered, it is his image that dies. Throughout the play a mirror has reflected his younger alter ego with whom most of the play's characters have interacted, an ambiguity that stirs anxieties. Wrapped in his red mantle (of spandex-lycra that stretches to suggest the Soviet Union flag), Calígula binds himself to the image who dies in his place. The celebratory parade borrows costumes from other epochs of Cuban theatre (*Los amaneceres son aquí apacibles*, *El carrillón del Kremlin*, and *Los abajo aquí firmantes*, to name a few), commemorating dead and exiled Cuban writers. In the midst of the celebration, the "real" Calígula interrupts: "Todavía estoy vivo." Díaz's message is that one tyrant replaces another in unending succession. Díaz continues his study of power in his



Calígula in the Teatro Trianón.





Escuadra hacia la muerte. Director: Carlos Díaz.

scheduled 1997 production of Alfonso Sastre's disturbing indictment play, *Escuadra hacia la muerte*. He pointedly interrogates power, blemished though it may be, for its authority and resilience, and for the punishment that all endure since all are guilty of something (Díaz). While not pointing to Cuba's dictatorship specifically, both *Calígula* and *Escuadra hacia la muerte* are a means of analyzing power structures that ignore human need and of implying society's complicity and guilt in maintaining these structures.

With a penchant for Grotowski, Barba and Artaud, Víctor Varela (b. 1962) writes poetic, experimental, philosophical theatre for his company, Teatro Obstáculo.³ Graduated from the Escuela de Instructores de Teatro in 1983, Varela formed his company two years later. Their modest beginnings in Varela's home lasted four years until an antagonistic neighbor forced them to relocate to their present site near the Plaza de la Revolución. In 1991, the company encountered a second crisis. During a trip to participate in the Gran Festival de la Ciudad de México, some troupe members elected to remain in Mexico so that only Varela and Bárbara Barrientos continued in the company. Undaunted, if not stimulated, by such obstacles, it was during this period that *La cuarta pared*, *Opera ciega*, and *Monodrama cuarta pared 2* were staged.

In 1993, the company performed *Segismundo ex Marqués*, an hermetic, multi-cultural, yet definitively Cuban, work. Reviewing the play, Amelia Santana writes: "El propósito de Víctor Varela es hacer un ritual teatral que funcione como pulmón espiritual en espera de una nueva historia de la humanidad. . .No es una puesta en visión porque no está orientada a que el espectador vea todo lo que está en escena. El espectador no tiene las llaves" (131). The elitist nature of the spectacle predisposes it to a highly specialized audience. Whereas *Segismundo ex Marqués* applies gesture and sound in the process of the characters' mystical and spiritual self-realization, Varela's 1995 drama, *El arca*, employs language. Varela wrote the play when invited to participate in a festival of contemporary playwrighting in Véroli, Italy, and was asked to present a less abstract text (Barrientos). *El arca*, then, is less ambiguous, less coded, than Varela's earlier plays, an openness that led to difficulties in the fall of 1996. Varela finds his intertexts in the *Bible*, since Cuba is a society of collective sacrifice, and in Joseph Beuys' *Operación Coyote* for his notion of self-creation (del Campo 130). The play is about Cuba today in the story of a couple seeking paradise to escape an uninhabitable society.

El arca premiered in 1995 in the Festival de Habana and the Festival de Santa Clara.⁴ In the fall of 1996, however, as an entry in the Festival de



Monodrama cuarta pared 2. (Víctor Varela) Actress: Bárbara Barrientos;
Foto: Giorgio Viera.

Teatro de Camagüey to perform in an official theatre, it was censored. While poetic in the style of his other plays, *El arca* is candid about Cuba's difficulties. La Pionera, a young girl struggling with her adult identity, suggests: "Cuando yo sea grande quiero ser extranjera" (152), for the good life that foreigners lead in comparison to her own. And when she questions whether her sister, a prostitute, ever even wanted to be like Ché, she ponders: "¿O es que una puta puede ser como el Ché? ¿Por qué no?" (150). Varela was no longer in Havana, and his play was too direct. The violation of a national myth is intolerable, and Varela concludes that "la pobreza genera mediocridad" (Barrientos).

In 1997, after a return from Argentina and Brazil scheduled for mid-February, Varela plans to reprise *Opera ciega* in the Teatro Nacional, and *El arca* in his home theatre, Teatro Obstáculo. Then Varela starts rehearsing *No nato en el útero*, right now a premise that will later be completed during rehearsals. The action takes place in a uterus among a collection of unborn persons who strive toward birth, surely a reference to Cuba's struggle for rebirth in the 1990s.

While not a newcomer to Cuba's stages, Flora Lauten's productions speak to the ever changing socio-historical climate in recent Cuban history. An accomplished actress, teacher, writer and director, Lauten was a member of the Teatro Estudio in the 1960s. She then moved to the Escambray region where by 1973 she had formed a theatre troupe from among regional inhabitants. By 1980, Lauten had returned to Havana, became an instructor at ISA, and directed the first graduating class project, *La emboscada*, in 1981. After directing the 1983 class in *El pequeño príncipe*, and the 1985 class in *Lila la mariposa*, her work figured into Rine Leal's assessment of the innovations in Cuban theatre. Of Lauten, Leal writes: "ha creado una ventana abierta por donde penetra un torrente revitalizador que ya acumula éxitos y furores fanáticos" (Pianca 124). Her company, Teatro Buendía, is comprised of 1985 ISA graduates.

Lila la mariposa, restaged in 1986, illustrates theatre innovation in the late 1980s.⁵ Taking Roland Ferrer's 1954 text, Lauten restructures it into an open-ended inquiry of the individual in today's society. Several changes mark Lauten's style, such as audience interaction, issues of identity, and the open ending. The multiplication of the character Mariano, for example, imitates society's confusion in daily life. The Marianos pose questions to the audience as the play closes: "Why should I stay at home? What must I do to become a man?" (Martin "Cuban Theatre" *TDR* 49). Strikingly, however,

the doubling also prefigures the more complex identity crises on national, social and ethnic levels in the 1990s.

Lauten's scheduled 1997 production of *La tempestad* continues the theses and style laid out in *Lila la mariposa*, but in a radically new context. The idea is to bring Cuba's European and African cultural heritages face to face in a Yoruban version of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* where Shylock, Hamlet, Macbeth, Prospero, Desdemona, Miranda and Othello meet the Orishas. In this dramatic combination of European and African cultures, *La tempestad* looks at present-day Cuba. Played out on an island where foreigners hope to find refuge from their guilty past, the two cultures meet, contaminate each other with their stories, and in an apocalyptic collision of passions, destroy themselves. In the closing scene, Ellegua, daughter of Xycorax who opens the play, blows a conch and the island lives again, an ending which returns to the story's beginning. When asked what issues she wishes to raise with this play, Lauten responds: "si el hombre siempre es como la serpiente emplumada que se muerde la cola, si uno va de la utopía a la Apocalipsis y otra vez a la utopía" (Lauten).

La tempestad is the result of a collaboration between Lauten and Raquel Carrió, professor of dramaturgy at ISA and consultant to Lauten's theatre company. Their presentation avoids a simply folkloric rendition of Cuban legend, or another denunciation of colonization. Rather, their goal is a deepened understanding of these heritages. While Lauten and Carrió's message articulates the multiple Cuban crises in terms of both the individual and plural society, they are teachers, and as such, they explore the praxis of the dramatic performance. Carrió believes that the actor must find within the culture – its structures, sounds, and rhythms – the means to organic acting. Lauten concurs that the actor must be liberated from the servitude of inhibitions: "lo anclan a lo cotidiano, ... lo hacen refugiarse todo el tiempo en las máscaras que uno se pone todos los días para salir a la calle" (Carrió and Lauten). In the Yoruban culture, then, the states of semitrance and trance permit the actor a pure impulse unfettered by the artifices of social or cultural imperatives. Finally, the play finds a connection between ancestral archetypes, European myth, and today's social structure: "¿Qué es lo que puede haber en un actor cubano de 30 años de Ochún o de Yemayá o de Obatalá? y ¿de qué manera esto tiene otro puente con un mundo europeo que puede ser Próspero, Calibán o Miranda?" (Lauten).

Lauten's question is, ultimately, one of the underlying issues in Cuban theatre in the mid-1990s. That is, what does the past have to do with the



La tempestad. Director: Flora Lauten.

present, and where is the present going? In 1997, while the economic situation has improved somewhat, shortages and rationing persist, so that daily life is fraught with compromises and complications. While the theatre companies are subsidized by the government, a sometimes startling fact given the plays' content, they often cannot find the equipment necessary for staging their plays. Lauten, for example, was forced to postpone the premiere of *La tempestad* since she cannot find the lighting needed for her theatre. Each company has a similar story of technical hardships during this economic

crisis, a crisis that has its antecedents in earlier crises. In his *Breve historia del teatro cubano*, Rine Leal asks:

¿Por dónde comenzar esta breve historia? ¿Por las más tempranas representaciones en español; por aquellas obras en las que el criollo se manifiesta; por las formas vernáculas; o por los espectáculos de origen afrocubano? ¿Cuándo exactamente el teatro deja de ser copia del español y se transforma en nacional? ¿Cómo refleja nuestra identidad, nuestra conciencia cultural, y su lucha por independizarse? ¿Cuándo aparece lo cubano en el teatro? (9)

It seems that the Revolution was intended to answer these questions, yet they remain unanswered, and today's theatre revisits the question: What does it mean to be Cuban?

Muguercia argues that this theatre is neither anti-socialist nor pro-capitalist. Rather, it is a theatre that experiences the destiny of the country in which these artists choose to live and work (Muguercia). Multiple identities, whether indigenous or colonial, capitalist or communist, revolutionary or authoritarian, influence this (r)evolutionary moment. In his study of Cuban performance, Randy Martin calls theatre "a form of historical reckoning" ("Theatre" 116), a fitting assessment for this moment when Cuban theatre raises a public voice to social concerns. It is within this climate that the theatre companies of the 1990s recast Cuban theatre in a spirit of innovation and passion.

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Notes

1. I express my gratitude to Magaly Muguercia for her collegiality and scholarship that introduced me to Cuba's theatre community. Her most recent book, *Teatro y utopía*, discusses Cuban theatre in the 1990s (Havana: Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba, in press).

2. For a more extensive discussion of theatre structure under Castro's government, see Randy Martin, Marina Pianca, and George Woodyard.

3. For a brief outline of Varela's theatre method, see Alicia del Campo, 126-27.

4. Laurietz Seda includes Varela's *El arca* in her report of the January, 1996, International Symposium sponsored by Casa de las Américas: "Coloquio Internacional en Cuba", *Latin American Theatre Review* 30.1 (1996): 133-34.

5. See Randy Martin and Marina Pianca for more detail on *Lila la Mariposa* in performance. It is on their studies that I base my comments.

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