

Utopian Projects and Crises of Theory: Describing the Elephant

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The title of the symposium was daunting: “The crisis of the posts (post-structuralism, -colonialism, -modernism): Latin American theatre faces the 21st century.” This year, the Theatre Division of Casa de las Américas proposed what was probably the most challenging theme in its ongoing series of conferences and workshops. The core participants, about a dozen Cuban, North American and European scholars and critics, met for five days along with more than thirty other Cuban theatre workers (artists, actors, directors) to tackle the topic from various perspectives, in what came to resemble the legendary meeting of blind men describing an elephant. Early enough in the proceedings it began to appear as if there was probably more than one elephant involved, not only because the papers ranged from overviews to studies of specific texts and authors, but also because there was some confusion both as to the nature of “postmodernism” as applied to experimental theatre and the relegation of Postcolonial theory in the course of discussions.

The topics presented in the 1998 symposium included:

- the function and representation of memory in contemporary South American and Cuban theatre (Rosa Ileana Boudet of Casa de las Américas);
- the problem of the meeting/collision of Cuban playwrights inside Cuba and in the U.S.A. (Vivian Tabares of *Conjunto*);
- theatre as “eternal heresy” (Omar Valiño of the *Gaceta de Cuba*);
- the politics of theatre in Spain from the late Franco era to the eve of the millennium (David Ladra, of *Primer Acto*);
- studies of specific texts and authors: the theatricality of Sarduy’s novel *De dónde son los cantantes*, by Victorien Lavou of the University of Perpignan; the Gay and Lesbian Nuyorican performance artists as bridges between communities, by Larry La Fountain-Stokes of Columbia; Rovinski’s *El martirio del Pastor and the auto sacramental*, by Kristin Shoaf of Georgia; “memories of our time” – Teatro Buendía’s

Otra tempestad and the revival of *La noche de los asesinos* in Cuba, by Marilyn Garbey of the Consejo de las Artes Escénicas, Cuba.

- surveys of the canon (Jacqueline Lazu on the Neoricana theatre against the canon, and Kati Röttger of Munich on the postcolonial theatre of Latin American female playwrights);
- theatre pedagogy: the teaching and staging of Hispanic drama in the current Neoliberal climate (Judith Weiss of Canada).

The opening afternoon consisted of a round table of critics, directors and actors, which brought together such veterans as Vicente Revuelta and Flora Lauten (both of them working now with young actors) and Raquel Carrió (of the EITALC and the Instituto Superior de Arte) and younger artists like Raúl Martín (Teatro de la Luna) and an actor from “El ciervo encantado” (arguably one of the most interesting young companies).

The debate, all too short perhaps, the last morning of the *encuentro*, tackled the thorny problem of the canon in Latin American drama (an unresolved debate, complicated by the reemergence of neglected texts and by the ironic rereading and reabsorption of established authors, and particularly because of the asymmetry of canons between the North and the South); the role that a new vision of heterogeneity (feminist, ethnic, gay/lesbian theatre) can play in redefining both Latin American and national identities, and the role of theatre in community, i.e., as a continuation of the utopian project (mildly contested by two or three of the Cubans); the space of memory and *testimonio* in the theatre, and “theatre of memory” as an heir of the theatre of the seventies (with an aside by one participant, who facetiously asked nobody in particular whether most theatre isn’t essentially of memory); the dangers of Postmodern theory as a vehicle of obfuscation and an expression of academic cowardice, and its concomitant value as a critical tool to validate the margins and challenge the reemergence of the hierarchical and the mercantile as standards for the profession; the tensions between institutional and non-institutional theatres, and the global emergence of the Right, from electoral politics to an influence on cultural institutions.

In some respects, Postmodernism is itself the narrative of a universal crisis of humanism and the global crisis of social cohesion, of traditional institutions, of national identity, and of the very notions of self-determination, progress, rationalism. This was explored at various junctures in the discussions and from the core of most of the papers. Regarding postmodernism itself, there was a mixture of skepticism, resigned acceptance, and enthusiastic espousal (if not simply mouthing of formulas).

For those of us who had been disconnected from Cuban theatre for years and who had not been to the International Theatre Festival (FIT) in Cuba last year, the issues of *Tablas* and *Conjunto* launched on the last day of the symposium provided some insights into the “elephant” problem. Unfortunately, for participants like this writer, the *ex post facto* discoveries from both journals on the return trip home proved frustrating, because much of the material had obviously been known already to the Cuban participants and constituted the foundation of their discussions, and understanding the referential framework in advance would have made the terms of the symposium clearer and the level of analysis more consistent. It strikes me that it must have been equally frustrating for our Cuban colleagues to have to entertain, from the handful of foreigners there, blank stares and very primitive questions about productions and issues in criticism that had become common currency in Cuba months ago. The role of the theatre journal in chronicling and documenting festivals, symposia and the artistic journey of directors cannot be underestimated. *Conjunto* and *Tablas* continue to provide this continuity and to fill in gaps for theatre workers who cannot participate in the ongoing process represented by the festivals and conferences in Cuba. The symposium held in May this year can be better appreciated in this context, particularly since a number of presentations by Cuban participants built on earlier work published in the main theatre journals of the Island.

The symposium was heightened by special performances of a number of significant plays were scheduled, plus the opening of Danza Abierta’s latest production, *El árbol y el hombre*, on the eve of a European tour. The one sad loss was the cancellation of Teatro Buendía’s *Otra tempestad*, a highly-claimed new version of Shakespeare’s *Tempest*, when the lead actor wounded himself on stage. Two high-energy ensembles provided keys to the current state of mind of Cuban youth: Brecht’s *Baal*, by the Buendía’s young company, directed by Carlos Celdrán, offered an intense and claustrophobic staging of Brecht’s youthful scream of frustration and pity, while García Lorca’s *La zapatera prodigiosa*, directed by Vicente Revuelta, in the first act trapped the audience, *sans* shoes, in a carriage house, with a hyperactive cast slamming shutters and doors and racing over the scattered spectators, then liberated us in the courtyard for the second act, with an equally virtuoso use of indoor and outdoor space and infinite grace. In the lovely small theatre of the Museum of Colonial Art, in Old Havana, Ariel Bouza directed a *teatro bufo* version of Martí’s children’s story “El camarón encantado,” a not-inappropriate medium, although the accents of the Mulata and the Negrito seemed to be reversed and the actors

over-projected for the small space, which made for both a deafening and a disconcerting revival of the Cuban national genre. In the same space, we saw *La noche de los asesinos* – a first in Cuba since the ill-fated 1967 production, and to all accounts an unauthorized staging by an idealistic and enthusiastic young director, Julio César Ramírez – with excellent acting, a beautiful ritualization through candlelight and movement but somewhat cool and almost plastic nonetheless. *El ciervo encantado* by the group of the same name, directed by Nelda Castillo, is a haunting allegorization of Cuban history, from the enslavement of natives down to the pathos of the “special period” – in which a black cloth represents the ocean that has swallowed hundreds of boat people and then, revealing a bright red star, becomes a cover for the players, before they emerge, crawling and chanting for the finale. The central metaphor is Fernando Ortiz’s *caldera*, a cauldron in which successive arrivals fuse into the Cuban identity. The structure and tone of this production were similar to *Danza Abierta*’s, whose dance theatre offers an even more powerful affirmation of solidarity, humanism and hope.

One is left with a sense that the theatre is going through a most encouraging of times, despite the physical hardships (funding, transportation) and the emigration or temporary sojourns for work abroad of many of the over-forty generation. The humanism explicit in several of the productions and implicit in the revival or adaptation of texts from periods of hope and nation-building, along with the inventiveness, the aesthetic boldness and the actors’ passion, are – to use an unavoidable term – inspiring.

The upcoming *encuentro* of this series will be held between April 12 and 16, 1999, with the title “Rito y teatralidad.” The motif of ritual will be explored this year, meanwhile, November 25-29, in a workshop organized by Yana Elsa Brugal, editor of *Tablas*.

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