

## La Voz Festival of the Americas

### Margo Milleret

Festival organizer and director Angela Marino brought to Santa Fe, New Mexico, an exciting range of events from the worlds of art, music, dance, film and theatre to celebrate the cultures and peoples of the Spanish speaking Americas. The theatre events for the festival, held June 12-21, 1998, listed in the bi-lingual program consisted of three play performances and a panel discussion of trends in contemporary theatre. The festival featured local actors and scholars, student actors, nationally known performance artists and directors. The Santa Fe Playhouse staged the world-premier of *Sacred and Obscene*, the English translation of Venezuelan playwright and film director Román Chalbaud's *Sagrado y obsceno* from 1961. The Warehouse 21 welcomed the student theatre group Teatro Demos from the University of Cayey in Puerto Rico and their commedia dell'arte interpretation of Federico García Lorca's farce *El amor de Don Perlimplín con Belisa en su jardín* from 1931. The Plan B Evolving Arts presented Coco Fusco and Nao Bustamante in their latest creation *Stuff!* which has been on tour for the last year and a half. An evening panel discussion by Santa Fe drama historian Hilario Romero, Puerto Rican theatre director Rafael Fuentes, and University of New Mexico faculty member Margo Milleret presented the audience with an historic panorama of Spanish speaking theatre. The topics the panel addressed included the origins of Spanish speaking theatre in the Americas, the contributions of popular sources to the rejuvenation of theatre, and the recent theatre movements in universities and cities.

The performance of *Sagrado y obsceno*, translated by Angela Marino and directed by Valli Marie Rivera, brought to life the romanticism and idealism of the sixties in Venezuela. The theatrical experience began before the audience entered the playhouse as cast members mingled with the spectators waiting outside. Once inside Lisette de la Paz sang the Chilean song "Canción por todos" and the candles in the tiny "oratorio" at stage right were lit. These two actions highlighted the conflict of the play between the desire for social justice on this earth and the religious message of a good life in the hereafter.

Chalbaud's play presented a microcosm of Venezuelan life through its treatment of the boarders who live in Doña Edicta's "pensión." The setting, with its sparse furniture, communal bathroom and drying laundry communicated that the "pensión" housed individuals with few financial resources. This fact was confirmed in the opening minutes of the play as we learned that one boarder lost his job, one listens to Bach, several are in a band of robbers, and two are employed in the house as helpers. In contradiction to her religious beliefs, Doña Edicta keeps the "pensión" open by accepting rent from the prostitute Glafira.

The version of *Sacred and Obscene* presented by the Santa Fe Playhouse combined Acts I and II of the published text into one single movement. In this long act we learned of the recent political transition from dictatorship to democracy which had not yet produced either economic benefits or social stability in Venezuela. The police and the political party in power were exercising too much control over the citizenry. This first movement ended with the image of the young lovers Pedro, a Marxist, and Ángela, a Catholic, rowing away in a boat as they pretended to make an escape into a better world. The final movement, Act III of the original text, brought all the conflicts between boarders to a climax when Ángela, dressed in her communion dress, attempted to make a real escape with Pedro. Doña Edicta and her pious friends along with Papá Upa and his gang of robbers tried to stop them. Glafira and the unemployed idealist Ignacio engaged in battle to help the lovers get away. The physical humor and violence communicated in the climax of the play together with the haunting dance representing Angela's nightmare provided the cast with many opportunities to demonstrate their skill and finesse in body movement, facial expression and gestures.

The program notes mentioned that the characters "portray the contradictions within ourselves and our world" (8-9) and from the jaded perspective of the 1990s one felt nostalgia for the problems of the 1960s and for the simplicity of their imagined solutions. In fact during the intermission Kristin Slater, administrative assistant at the Playhouse, described the audience members as appearing wistful as they left the playhouse. The play evoked memories from *Romeo and Juliet*, as well as images more traditionally associated with Latin American society, such as the pious "beatas," the accommodating priest, and the student revolutionary. It was both a trip into history and a measurement of the slow progress toward political and social justice that has been staged in Spanish speaking America since the Cuban Revolution.

The theme of love between unmatched partners also appeared in the García Lorca play brought to Santa Fe from Puerto Rico by the student group Teatro Demos. The group was founded by professor Valli Marie Rivera, who participated in the La Voz festival as director of *Sacred and Obscene* and now lives in Albuquerque. The current director, Rafael Fuentes, shares Rivera's interest and expertise in training actors to develop their repertoire of body and facial expressions. Unlike the mismatching of Pedro and Angela that is overcome by love in *Sacred and Obscene*, Don Perlimplín and Belisa had nothing in common except their arranged marriage. Belisa's singing together with her beauty and sensuality represented the exuberance of youthful desire while Don Perlimplín's experience and cleverness with disguises masked his age and his passions. Fuentes mentioned that the group was somewhat nervous about staging a play that dealt with sexuality so openly, but he reported that university officials and the audiences in the small towns visited by the troupe had shown interest in and support for the production.

The performance by Teatro Demos utilized a simple but effective setting that was centered around what appeared at first to be a backdrop serving as a wall of a tent, or possibly a window draped with curtains, but soon became the newlyweds' bed. To one side of the bed sat a worktable and display of masks representing the workshop of Don Perlimplín while to the other side sat curved railings representing the balconies of Don Perlimplín and his neighbors, the beautiful Belisa and her mother. The "duendes" or jesters provided much of the physical humor of the play with their stage business and creative props. The rest of the humor came from the maid, Marcolfa in her red and white striped gown and dust cap, and from the miscommunication between the crafty Don Perlimplín and his unfaithful wife. The actors' facial and body expressions were powerful enough to entertain an audience that did not speak Spanish, although at the performance I attended most of the audience did understand the physical and verbal jokes. The energy and enthusiasm of the actors made the short performance a vibrant theatrical experience.

*Stuff!* is not about accumulating material objects, as one might suspect, but rather about consuming too much food and too many women, especially those perceived as exotic others. Coco Fusco and Nao Bustamante turned their critical eyes on a world that exploits women, especially Hispanic women, through its exchange of goods and sex. The framework for their performance was a video promotion from the so-called Institute for Southern Hemisphere Wholeness whose sales representative invited the audience to participate in a

club called the Travel Tasters. The club offered “Heat without sweat, delicacies without dysentery, and ritual without revolution.” The opening minutes of *Stuff!* contrasted the experiences being promoted by the Travel Tasters with the stories of exploitation and dependence from women around the world read aloud by the two actresses from picture postcards.

There were two Travel Tasters experiences that involved the audience members in the performance. The first was a ceremony in honor of the goddess Cuxtamali. The second was promoted by the video guide as an opportunity for intercultural growth and contact through multilingual intercourse. Both required selected audience members to come into the setting and to follow instructions given to them by Blanca (Coco Fusco) and Rosa (Nao Bustamante). Audience members were also asked to answer questionnaires by raising their hands and to sing along on the concluding Karaoke song.

According to the glossary in the *Stuff!* program Cuxtamali was a pre-Columbian goddess who invented the recipe. In the first Taste Travelers experience four audience members sat at the dinner table to partake of a dinner/display in her honor. Blanca read the ritual from the oversized Cuxtamali cookbook that dropped from its suspended position above the stage while Rosa, who looked more like a waitress in a diner than a goddess, performed the ceremony. During the ceremony Rosa chopped up and ate raw vegetables on the dinner table, performed a dance with the knife, and built a new lover out of a corn cob, potatoes, chilies, and a banana (in the place of a penis).

For the interlude between the first and second Travel Tasters experiences Blanca and Rosa, now dressed in bright leotards and tops, invited audience members to confess their sexual preferences for vegetables, give translations in Spanish of expressions in English, teach dance steps, and play musical instruments. Audience members who performed the requests were invited to participate in the second experience. In this experience, the Travel Tasters engaged in “Afro-frenetic” dancing and then one audience member was directed by Rosa to participate in a dialogue with Blanca as a test for the Hot International Guide to Sex and Love. The guide provided translations from English to Spanish for tourists in order to facilitate their purchase of sex acts from Spanish speaking women. With Rosa’s guidance the audience member propositioned Blanca, invited her back to his room, discussed sex acts, and finally asked her to go back to the United States with him.

The performance ended with a Karaoke song about John going to Mexico without having learned enough Spanish, sung to the tune of “Itsy Bitsy Teeny Weenie Yellow Polka dot Bikini.” The song is a list of quotations from

John about his travels to Mexico that include words about food that actually refer to erotic body parts in Mexican slang. At the conclusion of the song the video guide returned to thank the audience for joining the Institute on the trip.

The program notes stated that this performance tied cultural consumption to “the trafficking of that which is most dear to us all – our identities, our myths and our bodies.” While it was easy to laugh at the guide on the video tour whose facial expressions and manner were easily recognizable as manipulative sales talk, it was more difficult to find humor in the simple words of women caught in the exchange of their bodies or their hand made crafts for profit. According to Coco Fusco *Stuff!* links its critique of cultural consumption to the Brazilian vanguardist movement of “antropofagia” in which the cannibalistic practices of the natives were adopted to represent the devouring and digesting of European influences. Just as the natives gained power by eating their enemies, so too the colonized world enriched its cultural identity by consuming the artistic innovations of its colonizers.

*Stuff!* is a nineties look at a complex global and cultural economy that cannot be saved by young love or revolutionary zeal as in *Sacred and Obscene*. This is so not only because there are no models able to grasp its scope but also because the only remaining model, capitalism, only knows how to promote one activity – consumption – without regard for cultural integrity, sexual identity, or class solidarity. Coco Fusco and Nao Bustamante explore the meaning of cultural diversity and global economy to uncover the wounds that are not reported in glowing press releases about world economic growth and health. They encourage audiences to question what they consume, how they consume it and at what cost to the producer.

From the farcical sensuality of Lorca to the idealism and purpose of the 1960s in Venezuela to a critique of unrestrained consumerism of the exotic in the 1990s, the plays performed during the La Voz festival portrayed images of Spanish speaking worlds that both question and honor the cultural traditions of a rapidly changing landscape. For the theatre travelers of New Mexico who attended these performances in Santa Fe, the three plays offered more than pseudo-experiences without content or contact. Instead, the plays’ parallel realities presented insights into individuals and societies of Spanish speaking America that should help bring understanding and appreciation of those who have been called “the other.”



*El amor de Don Perlimplín con Belisa en su jardín.* Teatro Demos

Photo by John Hayes



*Sacred and Obscene* by Román Chalbaud. The Santa Fe Playhouse.

Photo by John Hayes