The Queering of Cuban History: Carmelita Tropicana and *Memories* of the Revolution

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Cuban-American and lesbian performance artist Alina Troyano has created a hyper-feminine and hyper-ethnically Cuban personality in her character Carmelita Tropicana. Carmelita is known for her raucous sense of humor, thick accent and campy behavior. Upon seeing her perform, it does not take long to notice that Carmelita embodies, in dress and in attitude, all the stereotypes associated with Cubans specifically and Latinos in general. For Troyano, Carmelita Tropicana is, in fact, an incarnation of her memory. Alina Troyano came to the US at the age of seven, too young to vividly remember details of Cuba. Therefore, her *cubanidad* is a construction of idealized memory from the older Cuban exile community that romanticizes pre-revolutionary Cuba and the exaggerated ethnic media and cultural stereotypes from Anglo culture. When considering this, Carmelita, as a persona, and much of what she appears in, can be construed as a performance of memory, Troyano's own, and those of her dominant culture(s), both Anglo and Cuban.

In this article I propose to examine the representation, manipulation, and queering of memory and history in Troyano's first play, *Memories of the Revolution*, written with her collaborator Uzi Parnes and first performed in 1986. As the title suggests, the act of remembering and reconstructing is essential to this play text; however, in *Memories of the Revolution*, Troyano re-writes history and appropriates memory and cultural identity until they become her own queer tale of heroism. In this play, Troyano, with the help of Carmelita, subverts preconceived concepts of gender and *cubanidad* for both the Cuban-American community and Anglo culture and calls into question the origins of the notions of her own ethnicity and sexuality through a reexamination of Cuban History. Through a process of queering, the playwright constructs a unique Cuban/American/lesbian space by manipulating these memories and inserting herself into an official history from which she, and others like her, have typically been excluded. This act of queering Cuban history becomes one of the first steps of many that empower Troyano as a lesbian of color attempting to define herself on several cultural, sexual and political plains.

The meaning of the word "queer" has evolved significantly in its usage in recent years. According to one of the dictionary definitions it is a term "used disparagingly" to refer to a homosexual (965). Nowadays, most would argue that this definition is no longer accurate since queer has been re-appropriated by the gay and lesbian community as a term of empowerment. Many gay and lesbian civil rights groups adopted this word in an attempt to encompass all those that practice sexual and gender behaviors that differ from what has been deemed normal by society. Therefore, when referring to sexual identity, queer includes gays, lesbians, transvestites, and transsexuals (Alzate 22). In literary and cultural terms, gueer not only refers to sexual orientation, but also to any person or art form that does not, and will not, prescribe to heteronormative cultural, political, or social mores (Savran 153). Queering includes "numerous strategies, all of which carry the charge of multiplicity, openness, contradiction, contention, the slipperiness of sexual practice seeping into discourse, into fashion, into style and politics" (Dolan 5).

Many critics clarify that one need not be homosexual to produce queer art because it is more a produced effect than an inherent quality of a given text or object. In theatre, queering is produced by the performance and the relationship between the actors on stage and those in the audience (Savran 154). It challenges and subverts the notion that identity is fixed and immutable (Hall 15). Dolan remarks that "to be queer is not who you are, it is what you do, it's your relation to dominant power, and your relation to marginality, as a place of empowerment" (5). Therefore, queer, or the queering of an object, situation, or person becomes an act of power in that it subverts dominant ideologies and normative representations, which is one of Troyano's goals in *Memories of the Revolution*.

With Carmelita Tropicana, Alina Troyano engages "in a *tête-à-tête* where memory, humor, and autobiography become integrated" (Arrizón 150). In her semi-autobiographical play, *Milk of Amnesia*, Troyano describes how Carmelita came to life. In the mid-80's, Troyano signed up for a comedy workshop at the WOW theatre in New York, a "space grounded in gender

and sexual politics" (Introduction xvi). Although she did not feel comfortable being on stage, she explains:

I couldn't stand in front of an audience, wear sequined gowns, tell jokes. But she could. She who penciled in her beauty mark, she who baptized in the fountain of America's most popular orange juice, in the name of Havana's legendary nightclub, the Tropicana, she could. She was a fruit and wasn't afraid to admit it. (57-58)

José Muñoz describes Carmelita as a "memory enactment" (No es fácil 79). In *Milk of Amnesia*, Troyano acknowledges that Carmelita "was the past I'd left behind. She was Cuba. Mi Cuba querida, el son montuno…" (58). In an interview with David Román, the playwright admits to a personal need in creating this character when she says, "I had to be Carmelita to give Alina the freedom to explore her own identity" (92).

On the other hand, Carmelita is an exaggeration of *cubanidad* in that her characteristics also reflect popular media culture. Her last name, Tropicana, is a direct reference to the famous Havana nightclub, often evoked nostalgically by both Cubans and Anglos as an example of Cuba's glory days before the Revolution. Also, Tropicana alludes to the famous orange juice of the same name produced in the United States. Carmelita's thick accent and stilted, sometimes grammatically incorrect English is reminiscent of *I Love Lucy*'s Ricky Ricardo, America's best loved Cuban.¹ Her use of fruits on her costume reminds the audience of another famous fruit wearer, Carmen Miranda.² Ultimately, Carmelita is an interesting mixture of Cuban and North American cultural icons, and media exaggeration of the Latino type. Her male counter-part, Pingalito Betancourt (i.e. Carmelita in drag), is also a memory and media construction holding onto a cigar and wearing "the national Cuban dress of the Cuban male, the guayabera shirt" (Muñoz, Sister 131).

Troyano points out that Carmelita's openness about her sexuality is what is so groundbreaking about this character since "Latinas are stereotypically linked with heterosexual romance. Carmelita has her romances but she's a lesbian" (Román 87). For this reason, and her multifaceted identity, one needs only begin with Carmelita Tropicana as a persona to appreciate the power of queering. While she embodies many familiar and, sometimes, stereotypical aspects of *latinidad* to Cubans, Cuban-Americans, and US citizens in name, accent, and costume, she is a lesbian who openly desires women. With her sexual identity, Carmelita completely transgresses one's initial estimation of her and what she represents. Her last name reminds us all of those mythical statuesque, curvaceous women, exposing all their seemingly heterosexual desire at the famous nightclub, but these visions are queered when we become aware that this Tropicana is a lesbian. She is also extremely feminine, disturbing the cemented stereotype of the lesbian as a man-hating butch dyke who dresses more or less like a man. In contrast to this image, Carmelita loves being a woman, and proudly desires women in the process, thus queering what it means to be a lesbian for the heterosexual public.

Alicia Arrizón notes that Carmelita's "inscription of queerness resides in her own constructed identity as a performance artist who theatricalizes and embodies a permanent masquerade of ethnic exaggeration and parody" (164). Those people who do not understand Troyano's artistic mission often criticize Carmelita since they say that she offends them through her performance and the stereotypes she seemingly promotes (Román 91). By performing this extremely feminine and tremendously queer Cuban persona, Troyano is not trying to support these paradigms of latinidad; instead she is attempting to probe these characteristics we associate with certain ethnic and gender groups. Through humor and parody she actually subverts these stereotypes by calling attention to them while, at the same time, she challenges the audience to see through her performance and question their own notions of ethnicity and identity. David Savran notes that queer theatre by lesbians "rather than attempt to universalize the queer subject, [...] delights in deconstructing subjectivity, or rather in revealing the disruptions and divisions that structure all subjectivities" (159). Through Carmelita's camp performance, Troyano is seriously examining and exploring the construction of identity (Muñoz, Sister 133). By being an exaggeration of latinidad she queers one's understanding of all Latinos by being a lesbian, no longer allowing us to take for granted Cuban or even Latino identity in general.

The fact that much of Carmelita's personality also stems from a collective memory, shared by Troyano's Cuban exile community, highlights yet another dimension to Carmelita; it calls into question how memory and history are essential to the creation of identity for the Cuban community in the US. Because they are members of an exile community unable to return to their land of origin, many first generation Cuban-Americans have had to rely on the mostly idealized memories of others to construct their Cuban identity and, subsequently, invent their nation of Cuba. Muñoz indicates that he has "lived in Cuba through the auspices of memory. By this I mean to say that exilic memory has reproduced Cuba for me" (No es fácil 76). Through

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Carmelita, Troyano encourages her own community to interrogate their own constructs of *cubanidad* and not to accept them as the ultimate truth.

The use of memory is a major characteristic of most Cuban and Cuban-American exile literature, including that of Troyano. However, in Memories of the Revolution, it is obvious that she moves beyond the problems of acculturation, transition, and nostalgia. In her first play, Troyano takes the memories of pre-Castro Cuba and twists them, making room for herself as a lesbian within those memories. She appropriates romanticized types of good and bad, as well as memories of her Cuban community and humorously rewrites a queer history by "putting pressure on simplistic notions of identity and in disturbing the value systems that underlie designations of normal and abnormal identity" (Hall 14). In this sense, in Memories of the Revolution, she is "oriented towards issues of recovery" attempting to create an identity that takes into consideration all her cultures: Cuban, United States, and lesbian (Alvarez-Borland 9). According to José Muñoz, Troyano's move to re-write history to include alternate representations of sexual desire and gender is a natural step for all queers of color as they search for their own voice and a space within their ethnic culture. As I mentioned before, official national histories rarely include queer subjects; instead they portray the heterosexual man and, sometimes, woman as the catalyst for change and accomplishment. For the queer of color, memory and "memory performances" are essential for "coming to power, coming to self, for such subjects require that they write themselves into history" (Muñoz, Cuerpo 233). History making and writing is an essential element of creating identity and community unification and valorization (Hall 22). For Troyano, not only does Cuban history ignore queers and women, more importantly, exilic memory has completely erased any anti-normative behavior that might have existed in Cuba. While forming her cubanidad through her family's memories, Troyano realized that there was no place for her sexuality or politics in this representation of "normative citizenship" (Muñoz, Cuerpo 231). Therefore, Memories of the Revolution becomes a powerful "counter-narrative" that places Troyano, through Carmelita, directly into a Cuban history that includes all types of people and sexual orientations (231).

Memory and history are immediately questioned when one analyzes the title of the play. *Memories of the Revolution* is potentially misleading to the audience who might automatically assume that it refers directly to the Revolution of 1959. Instead, Carmelita's reenactment is a somewhat ahistorical revolution set in Havana in 1955. That she would refer to another revolution besides Fidel's initially confuses the spectator, but immediately reminds the audience that Cuba was not entirely politically stable before1959.³ To the public, this "other" revolution relived by Carmelita appears to be completely fabricated by the authors of the play; yet, Carmelita asserts that *Memories of the Revolution* is based on facts: her memories.

As the play begins, Carmelita appears on stage and speaks directly to the audience. Here, she makes it clear that what the audience is about to see is a performance of memory, yet she hints at that it will not be a nostalgic return to the past:

Memories from the deep recess cavity of my mind, misty water color.... Memorias-we all have them. (*To audience*) You do. And I, Carmelita Tropicana, have them of my beloved country Cuba. (*Looking back at the slide projection*) Who knew in 1955 what was to happen to us? Who knew then what destiny was to be? If maybe my baby brother Machito had his mind more on the revolution and his date with destiny than on his date with the two Americanas, who knows? Who knows? (2)

The first lines of this monologue will be somewhat familiar to the majority of the public; they are a variation on Barbara Streisand's melancholic and nostalgic song "The Way We Were." While her song begins with the line "Memories light the corners of my mind," Carmelita satirically transforms the nostalgia of the memories by having them come from a less sonorous part of her mind: a "deep recess cavity." She then expresses her disillusionment and surprise with the outcome of 1955, blaming destiny for this cruel act. These lines are clearly ones that Troyano heard growing up in the Cuban exile community from her parents and family friends in reference to the Revolution of 1959. However, before the audience can become nostalgic, in a comedic twist Carmelita blames her situation, and in turn those of all Cuban exiles, on her brother Machito and the two Americans who were more worried about having an affair with a "sexy, virile, gay caballero" than securing Cuba's freedom (*Memories* 2).

According to the stage directions, Carmelita's opening monologue is played in front of a slide "of a tourist postcard of Havana circa 1940. The word *Havana* is boldly written on it" (1). Since it is a tourist postcard of Havana, not an actual photo, we can assume it is a beautiful and idealized view of the capital city. This technique is used throughout the play as slides of Cuba are used to indicate scene changes. Instead of props and a set, much of the play is performed in front of these photos, which add to the retrospective aspect of the play and point to the importance of photos as a primary element in the construction of *cubanidad*.

Muñoz admits that, ironically, "Cuba, for this Cuban, is a collection of snapshots," a reality that rings true for the majority of Cuban-Americans (No es fácil 76). Troyano emphasizes this queer aspect of her community's identity by making photographs an essential part of her *Memories of the Revolution*. Nevertheless, she subverts and uses even this nostalgic component for humor. When Machito reluctantly agrees to take Brendaa and Brendah, the two Americans, on a "quick tour" of Havana, the stage directions read that the "slides in the background change as Machito names different tourist spots and they all run in place" (6). It is obvious from the beginning scenes of *Memories of the Revolution* that Troyano sets the tone for the entire play by demystifying exilic memory and Cuban history, manipulating it into something uniquely queer.

Much of act one occurs in the famous Tropicana. Instead of living up to its reputation of being one of the most beautiful night clubs in prerevolutionary Cuba, the audience is treated to Troyano's and Parnes' campy, and kitschy, version of this legendary landmark.⁴ The stage at the Tropicana is described as having a "red-orange lamé curtain with lime-green ruffles" (10). The emcee of the show, Rosita Charo Rosita Charo, comes on to the stage "pointing out that the dress she is wearing is made of the same fabric as the curtain"(10). To further offend bourgeoisie senses, the famous Tropicana stage is also not as elaborately decorated as expected with only "two cabaret tables" on stage and in the background "there is a Henry Rousseau backdrop with lots of palm trees and flowers" (10). Even the voluptuous dancers at the nightclub with their skimpy outfits have been relegated to mere caricatures of their mythical image by singing campy songs such as "Yes, We Have No Bananas" and wearing "large fruits attached to their costumes on their rears" (10). When the two Americans walk into the nightclub, Brendah wonders out loud the confused sentiments of the entire audience when she asks, "Are you sure this is the Tropicana? It doesn't look like much of a hot spot" (16). By queering the illustrious Tropicana, one of the glorified staples of the memory of both Cubans and Anglos alike of pre-Castro era Cuba, Troyano breaks the nostalgic image of this club by making it a queer place for all levels of society instead of just high society.

Troyano queers Cuban history in *Memories of the Revolution* not only by twisting facts but also by introducing several characters both queer in gender identity and in sexual orientation.⁵ In the scene at the Tropicana where the audience meets the rest of the characters and becomes acutely aware that they are all twisted exaggerations of romanticized figures of the past, Latino stereotypes from the media or simply queers that have never appeared in the history or memory of the Cuban community both on and off the island. The two *americanas*, Brendah and Brendaa, are typical American tourists looking for love in the tropics who say "They can't do anything to us. We are American citizens" whenever they feel threatened (19). Machito's counterpart Marimacha is strong and brave and appears to be all man except for the fact that her "banana has been sliced" (18). Called a "hot tempered latin" on more than one occasion, Carmelita also breaks out of a stereotype by being a lesbian and openly desiring Lota Hari, the German spy (35). Maldito, as the ultimate heavy, is so easy to hate because there is nothing redeeming about him. He is a torturer, a murderer, and an adulterer. He is abusive, homophobic, and has no fashion sense.

Perhaps the most humorous and irreverent scene in the play is the Virgin Mary's apparition before Carmelita. After having their revolutionary plot uncovered by Maldito, Carmelita, Lota Hari, and Marimacha flee Cuba on a small rowboat. After 20 hours with no food, potable water, or having sighted land the "sound of a storm is heard. The waves start to get rougher" (36). Lota tells her Cuban *compañeras* that they must be near the Bermuda Triangle where "the most powerful ships like the Love Boat have been swallowed" (36). Soon there is "thunder, waves crashing" and the passengers of the boat start to panic, especially Marimacha. The stage directions state: "the storm subsides and both Lota and Marimacha fall asleep" (37). Carmelita is the only one awake to see "two angels appear and open doors to a backdrop triptych with painted cherubs on either side" and on "screen for a film projection of an apparition of the Virgin Mary on 16mm film" (37).

What follows is a hilarious conversation in which the Virgin assures Carmelita that she will be safe, but will never be able to return to Cuba. She reveals to her that she has "been chosen to be the next hottest Latin superstar" but this will not really come about until 1967 (37). The Virgin also promises Carmelita that she will never age, not look one day over twenty-one, if she only does, or actually does not do, one thing: "Never let a man touch you. You must remain pure, like me"(38). Although Mary most probably meant that Carmelita should maintain her virginity intact, Carmelita uses the double entendre to her advantage and replies, "Never let a man touch me. Believe me, to Carmelita Tropicana Guzmán Jiménez, Marquesa de Aguas Claras, that is never to be a problem (*She winks*)" (38).

This scene is loaded with several cultural, historical, sexual, and religious references. The obvious religious iconography of the Virgin runs constant in several cultures, but this scene is particularly familiar for the Cuban audience in that it is a direct allusion to Cuba's Patron Saint, La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre. History, memory, and religious myth dictate that the Virgin appeared to three men in a rowboat while they were attempting to survive a storm off the coast of Cuba sometime in the early 17th century. As in this scene, the three men survived the storm with the help of the Virgin. By using this exact "Cuban" Virgin, Troyano is again reaching back into her culture's memory and rewriting the story into something far from nostalgic.

After seeing this scene one must consider what this visitation means in terms of Carmelita's exalted status. Many of those throughout history who have had visitations from the Virgin have either been canonized by the Catholic Church or are at least revered as the most blessed of individuals. What are the implications when the Virgin visits a campy, lesbian, performance artist? The fact that Carmelita, an openly gay woman, is leading this revolution, succeeds in overwhelming Maldito, and is visited by the *Virgin* is a conscious jab to both conservative Cuban exiles in the US as well as to Cuban society on the island.

Many of the Cubans who came to the US during the Mariel boatlift of 1980 were mistakenly labeled as criminals since Castro made it a point to send his "politically undesirable as well as those that were creating social problems on the island" (Cafferty 44). The politically undesirable according to Castro were the old, sick, homosexuals, drug addicts and criminals. The established Cuban community in Miami turned a cold shoulder to these recent arrivals, marginalizing them because of their different social status, racial make-up and sexual preference. Even in Cuba, where the Revolution aimed for equality, homosexuals have been openly persecuted and imprisoned in jails or in concentration-type camps (Appendix 212). Castro felt there was no place for homosexuals in his Revolution and saw them as political dissidents (212).

By making the heroine and many of the characters of *Memories of the Revolution* lesbian or queer in some way, Troyano forges a space for herself in the memory and history of Cuba and Cuban identity. The exilic memories told by most Cubans about their pre-Revolution homeland completely leave out any stories about gay or lesbian life on the island. Therefore, she had to disidentify with both memory and history to create a place in them for someone like herself. On a less personal agenda, Troyano is well aware of the plight of homosexuals in modern day Cuba as being no better, if not worse than before. Even in the US, gay civil rights are something that cannot be taken for granted. Therefore, by having Carmelita courageously defeat the ultimate *machista* villain, and be blessed by a visitation, not only does Troyano etch a personal lesbian space within the Cuban exile collective memory, she also empowers her fellow queers by placing them onto center stage.

As La Virgen predicted, Carmelita does confront Maldito again in the second act. It is some 12 years later in New York city and it is the opening night for Carmelita's new club Tropicana-A-Go-Go, "which looks very much like the Tropicana in Havana" from the first act (39). All of Carmelita's friends from the first act are present for the opening, in a summer of love state of mind. Maldito, also in exile, comes to the club to see if he can finally punish Carmelita for her work in the revolution in Cuba by catching her in some illegal or subversive activity. While at the club Maldito finds that there are drugs, courtesy of Machito, and he is convinced that the club is a "front for drugs and revolution" and is satisfied that Carmelita's arrest is now assured (47). To congratulate Maldito on his find, Carmelita wants to make a toast, with a punch spiked with hallucinogens. Soon, "Maldito begins to trip as OP Art images on slides and film are projected onto the stage and on the actors" (48).

What follows is quite symbolic, particularly for those from the Cuban exile community. In a daze, Maldito, surrounded by the other actors, is placed on a pseudo trial for his wrongdoings. Carmelita begins the proceedings by stating, "in the name of all here at the Tropicana A-Go-Go, j'accuse Maldito. Let the witnesses to your crimes step forward" (48). One by one, the characters accuse Maldito of everything from torture and murder to being a misogynistic pig. Carmelita ends this scene with a *santería* type incantation, which Carmelita later reveals comes from Nepal, which eventually turns the villain into a chicken. It begins "Maldito, if justice prevails/in hell you will burn/ But before that/Your earthly fate you can't escape./Tonight in full you will be paid" (49).

This serious of accusations towards Maldito are reminiscent of the horrific crimes committed by Fidel Castro's regime according to Cuban exiles. In this cathartic ending, Troyano taps into a Cuban exile's ultimate dream of being able to personally accuse Fidel Castro or any of his officials of crimes. Although this scene takes place in 1967, it is significant because it does not take memory or history as its creative base but, instead, it is a projection into the future, at least a future in which most Cuban exiles would like to take part. Jill Dolan points out that queer theatre is:

our rewritings of the relation between art and culture, we insist on the importance of desire as history, desire as future, on our import as bearers and shapers of different, necessary cultural meanings, through the presence of our desire. Our theatre is our historiography; it encompasses our past, present and future. (6)

Troyano's *Memories of the Revolution* creates an alternative version of history from the margins that provides queers a chance to engage in both the past in Cuba and future in the US.

In Memories of the Revolution, Troyano first queers Cuban history by introducing a plethora of characters that deviate from the norm in both sexual orientation and gender representation. Secondly, she queers it further by using the components of extremely familiar stories from the Cuban exile community's collective memory, as well as official history, and makes them slightly unfamiliar by telling them from a different perspective, one that creates an alternate national history. By placing these queer characters in a familiar setting, the audience becomes acutely aware that the history and culture they know as true is heavily one-sided, only inhabited by heterosexual males. The act of writing history is often criticized for being more of a creative effort on the part of the historian who either, intentionally or not, bases his point of view on his experience and ideology. While this is most certainly true, no one can deny its importance as a political act (Hall 22). For Troyano, Carmelita's direct participation in these events that make up Cuban history and define the Cuban exile community is a move to solidify her lesbian identity within her already existing Cuban and American ones. Donald Hall writes that:

> [...] naming something and giving it a history (either within an individual life or over a great span of years) does make it available as a way of organizing one's identity and of seeing and proactively creating affiliations. (22)

Through the act of queering Cuban history, Troyano gains a voice within her own ethnic political and social history by inserting characters and images that reflect her sexual and political desires.

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Throughout Memories of the Revolution, Troyano queers by problematizing normative representation and concepts of identity in Anglo, heterosexual, Cuban exile and the growing Cuban-American culture. She does this by manipulating memory, undermining and queering idealized and romantic concepts of Cuba and Cuban identity, as well as gender and sexuality. The Virgin tells Carmelita that she will be fighting another revolution during her lifetime and "your art is your weapon" (38). In this play text it is obvious that Troyano does just that; she uses her art, which is her performance space, as a place of resistance against the dominant ideologies that dictate the why and how of gender, ethnicity, and nationality. Feeding off of the political memory and official history of the Cuban community, Memories of the Revolution offers an interpretation of the history of Cuba before Fidel Castro by transgressing, queering, and questioning the rigid gender, social, and sexual politics that have defined Troyano's community's identity, and her own, up until now.

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Notes

¹ For a thorough analysis of Ricky Ricardo's place in US media culture see Gustavo Pérez-Firmat's *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way.*

² Carmen Miranda was one of the only non-Anglo actresses in Hollywood films in the 1940s and 1950's. Although Brazilian, she played many different Spanish-speaking nationalities. She was always vivacious, had a strong accent, a short temper and a song for the movie going public. She was often made to wear fruit on her head as representative of her ethnic origins.

³ Essentially Troyano reminds the audience that another dictator was in power before Castro; therefore the attempt by Cuban exiles to romanticize pre-Castro Cuba is an idealization to further political goals. In *The Contemporary History of Latin American*, Tulio Halperín Donghi gives a concise political history of Cuba during the first half of the 20th century.

⁴ Although still a very popular nightclub in Havana, Cuba, the Tropicana, built in 1939, historically was famous for catering to American tourists. It often featured some of the best bands and singers of the day.

⁵ In the first production of *Memories of the Revolution*, Troyano further queered the performance by having women play all the roles in the play, both female and male, except for the filmed portion of the Virgin Mary who was played by Uzi Parnes.

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