

Realities of Art/Arts of Reality: Taking the Pulse of Cuban Theatre Today

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Although headlines occasionally bring Cuban news stories to readers outside the island nation, reliable information on developments in theatre and performance is scant, even for specialists in Latin American studies. I recently attended performances, gathered materials, and interviewed Cuban dramatists, directors, performers and spectators in Havana for a pulse-taking effort that continues to the present.¹ Our exchanges yielded candid observations about the artistically possible and how theatre arts have responded to the realities shaping the Cuban stage since the heyday of the 1960s through the 1980s. During the Special Period of the 1990s, financial backing dropped dramatically in comparison with the available funding that had encouraged theatre professionals in all areas of writing, designing and staging. Most dramatists and directors cope with financial realities by staging small-scale plays, especially more monologues, reviving works highly successful in the past and presenting Spanish or other classic foreign plays. Productions of today require less-ambitious staging than was known at the height of post-revolutionary theatre development when works by Abelardo Estorino, Virgilio Piñera, Eugenio Hernández Espinosa and other masters met high acclaim. However, the energy and creativity with which theatre professionals have responded to economic and other realities is remarkable.² Theatre in Havana today has a special “Cuban feel” that always seems intensely artistic and realistic in ways apparent to Cubans as well as to foreign spectators.

If the increasing number of monologues being written and performed today in Cuba is due to a shortage of funding for larger-scale projects, the results have been ironically enriching. The diminished size of productions seems to have stimulated both artistic production and the intensity of

involvement by spectators, often filling theatres, especially on weekends and for openings under promising directors. Cuban audiences demonstrate clearly the work of theatre as a co-production of spectators, performers, designer/directors and dramatists. In comparison with more textual art forms, the immediacy, ephemeral and yet highly personal nature of theatre encourages the public to engage freely in the interaction of art and reality.³ Spectators in their twenties and thirties, in particular, seem to engage actively in expressing their thoughts about themes, favorite theatre professionals and why they attend so many performances. A monologue structure strengthens the co-productive art of theatre since spectators concentrate on one performer expressing thoughts and feelings about themes of common interest in a limited and precisely designed setting. The personal connection a spectator invests in conceptualizing a lone actor's every word and every gesture assures that the staged world feels all the more real and vivid. The usual distractions audiences experience are almost impossible under these conditions, since one performer and his limited space have our undivided attention. In effect, every spectator dedicates his or her energies to co-creating meanings and feelings along with the character's "monologued" realities in their shared space.

A stellar example of this experience is Raúl Martín's production of *El enano en la botella*, written by Abilio Estévez especially for Martín and inspired by the emigration of a Cuban friend. Staged by Martín's Teatro de la Luna in Havana's newly remodeled Teatro Adolfo Llaudró, the monologue drew devoted audiences when paired with another (Virgilio Piñera's *El album*, discussed below) in late June 2003. The fame of the mesmerizing *El enano en la botella* had preceded it, having played in Havana and then in Miami for the 2001 Primer Festival Internacional del Monólogo.⁴ Spectators of *El enano en la botella* realize relatively quickly that the embottled speaker is metaphorically contained by his own attitudes and life experience in an island-like space: a bottle surrounded by water. The role as currently played by Mario Guerra in the set designed by Martín is a good example of what the young director-designer sees as the baroque quality of his art, of his training with Roberto Blanco and director-designer Carlos Díaz, and a tendency of Cuban culture in general.⁵ Guerra's performance portrays a complex, highly verbal, and clever young mulatto sporting dreadlocks, spouting philosophy and psychoanalytic theory, humming and gymnastically dancing to Cuban melodies, and surveying the space of his bottle/home in bare feet and somber, ragged clothing resembling that of the legendary figure of Havana's streets,

the so-called Caballero de París.⁶ This baroque maze of psychological, poetic and ideological detail flows from Estévez's dense narrative text and onto huge chalkboards that Guerra's *enano* energetically fills before the spectators' eyes. His containment in the bottle/jail is aptly conveyed by constantly moving about, often on haunches within the ironically vague barriers of the bottle's form, outlined by a ring of sand and chalk that Martín himself carefully prepares for each performance. In effect, the dwarf's imprisonment is as much conceptual as actual. Despite all his talk about freedom, about liberation from the Genie and from the Father Jailer, when given the chance to escape his embottlement, the *enano* stays "home" rather than join the Diaspora of so many Cuban emigrants.⁷

Diaspora, then, is a significant subtext, if not a main theme, in Cuban stage and film production today.⁸ Although Diaspora may be a solution to contemporary socio-economic or political problems, some theatre professionals sense that émigrés also leave lacunae in the Cuban performance arts.⁹ In some works staged in summer 2003, like Alberto Pedro Torrientes' *Esperando a Odiseo*, Diaspora is on center stage. Pancho García as Kiko Palomo dutifully, if not always sanely, awaits the arrival of the homing pigeons signaling that his son Odiseo has safely rafted his way to a new home in the north. Palomo is obsessed by his dual concern for his son and his paranoid fear of aerial attacks on his roof-terrace home. Ironically, the father had returned to Cuba from living in the U.S. in a more tranquil era. As a professor of English in Cuba he never earned a promised endowed chair and retired as a *bricoleur* of sorts, trying not to be an "underdeveloped" intellectual *burgués*. In total denial over his son's death at sea, the protagonist launches himself from the terrace and leaves the audience with mixed reactions on emigration, its causes, repercussions and Kiko's ultimate act.

Several types of monologues are a popular draw for Cuban audiences today, whether or not the brief subgenre is more frequently performed for economic reasons or in order to highlight the richness of acting talent in Cuba's theatre companies.¹⁰ *La Legionaria*, a highly popular monologue by Spanish playwright Fernando Quiñones starred Pancho García under the direction Susana Alonso at the home base of the Compañía Teatral de Hubert de Blanck, Havana, in summer 2003. Perhaps García himself best sums up the Cubanization of the mature Andalusian female he plays so amusingly yet sympathetically to the delight of audiences. In part, the appeal of *La Legi* is universal: a lady of the night with a heart of gold, a woman dedicated to creating as well as enjoying life's intimate pleasures. At the same time, García

sees something in common between Cubans and *andaluces*: their legendary warmth of persons and community. And audiences agree! At a Sunday matinee in June, I found a middle-aged fellow escorting his elderly mother, a pair of married Spanish tourists, mature professionals as well as young Cuban adults, male and female, from diverse backgrounds. García's "Dame Edith"-style adds to the sense of community that "La Legi" builds through dialoguing with her audience and appealing to their sympathies for her aches, pains and "girl talk." Truly an experienced actor, Pancho García played this role while simultaneously rehearsing his monologue for *Esperando a Odiseo* and an additional one-man part in preparation.

El album, paired by Raúl Martín with *El enano* in the summer of 2003 at the Teatro de la Luna, embodies a one-woman monologue drawn from Virgilio Piñera's narrative. Veteran actor, professor and theatre critic Robert Gacio Suárez stars in the role of La Dama, a matronly and provincial *burguesa* who clings to her lost, pre-revolutionary identity. Desperate to keep alive, at least in photos and memory, the loved ones as well as the estranged companions or relatives who peopled her world, she talks incessantly to the audience and album photos about living in a by-gone era. Martín's set design and costuming in white, grey and black contrast with the grotesque "pinkness" of her make-up and the ample folds of her aging body. Her huffing and puffing figure precariously climbs upon a chair, reaching for the photo portraits and, futilely, trying to preserve herself with them in the emblematic album of memories. Carefully drawing spectators into her slice of the absurd, La Dama presents a dark and cruel portrait, one as compelling and as universal as La Legi but without the latter's good humored celebration of life. La Dama is more Cuban yet simultaneously "arcaica y universal" in Martín's words (interview). The young director thinks that Gacio's Dama ends up seeming baroquely comic in her desperate attempt to preserve her past self and community. Like *El enano*, this monologue from *El Album* was presented in Miami, where spectators from the area's Cuban community might have made their own meanings from Gacio's portrayal of La Dama.¹¹

In addition to the variety of monologues offered in the summer 2003, audiences enjoyed revivals and a few performances of works new to Havana. The extremely prolific writer and director, José Milián, offered in late June his *Las mariposas saltan al vacío*. Originally staged in 1997, production's thematic material and gravity of performance feel intensely current. While the central themes on love, desire and mortality could not be more universal, the specifics of the play's setting, characters and Cuban circumstances make

Mariposas extremely poignant for any spectator in a mixed audience. All scenes for the cast of six characters take place in a quarantine sanatorium for AIDS patients. Male and female, they offer each other support, alternatively compassionate or realistic about whom they have loved and why they may be close to death. The notion that our daily lives are roles we only partially choose to play is accentuated by the inmates' staging of a play where the outspoken resident Arsenio plays his transvestite self, Lavinia La Salvaje. The graveyard setting, with its smoky air and colored lights, effectively engages all spectators in contemplating life on the margin with death and the hope of transcendence. Although this play might be labeled AIDS theatre in the United States,¹² it is significant that all the Cuban theatre professionals whom I interviewed or emailed stressed the universal themes of the play. The same is true regarding what might be called "gay theatre." All of the writers, directors or actors emphasized the multiplicity of themes and cultural elements woven together in dramatic and performance texts. For example, I asked Raúl Martín about comments volunteered to me by a young male spectator during *El album*. The twenty-something Cuban theatre student seated beside me had commented that Roberto Gacio's cross-dressed monologue as la Dama was steeped in "una estética gay." Martín remarked that gay theatre is one of several topics Gacio treats as critic and theatre professor (interview). And regarding AIDS on stage, he commented that "no hay ningún problema en ello; no son temas tabúes, como tampoco lo es la homosexualidad, por ejemplo" (email).¹³

Scholars from outside Cuba are also interested in another "minority matter": the relationship of the stage arts to everyday race relations. This past summer saw the revival of a work by one of the major figures writing and directing theatre about the descendants of Afro-Cubans and their considerable impact on society and culture. A revival of Eugenio Hernández Espinosa's monologue *Emelina Cundiamor* opened at summer's end with the new star and staging used in his 2001 version of the 1987 hit. Even in this brief yet powerful work, the complexity of questions regarding culture and race are examined or certainly suggestively presented for spectators to contemplate. There is no utopian or post-revolutionary colorblindness in Monse Duany's stunning performance as a black woman sacrificing her own cultural identity and values in order to help her husband advance professionally. Her self-affirmation emerges in dance, song and rebellion against a society that continues to uphold the ideals of "aclorar" or "adelantar la raza," in the words of writer-director Alberto Pedro characterizing the continuing racial climate

in Cuba (email). Hernández Espinosa's works, along with those of Gerardo Fullea León, are the strongest reminders that the Cuban stage must reflect its realities, of which skin tone variations and everyday racism are hushed yet significant issues. Fullea explains that he does not believe in a "teatro negro" per se, but rather in the power of the popular, the margins and the ritualistic aspects of theatre and of Cuban culture that contribute both to its richness and to the possibilities of social change (interview and articles). He does not see, however, young writers and directors staging the complexities of Cuba's racial questions in the manner that Estorino has done in *Vagos rumores* (recollections of slavery) or *Parece blanca*. Estorino, winner of the Premio Nacional de Literatura and other honors, remarks that "se puede hablar abiertamente de problemas raciales en Cuba" although he believes it is still too soon for a revival of *Parece blanca*, his socio-psychological drama based on the mulata character Cecilia Valdéz and first staged in 1994 (email). Young director Juan César Ramírez observes that a multiracial presence is a necessity on the Cuban stage but laments that opinions differ regarding whether a black actor should play certain roles, just as one would not find a white Cuban "interpretando a Chango, o participando en un espectáculo folklórico" (email).



Emelina Cundiamor

Photo by Monse Duany

While Ramírez's work doesn't directly present racial questions, this promising young director's works deal with other cultural conflicts, memory and social adaptation as seen in his staging of *La edad de la ciruela* by Ecuadorian writer Arístides Vargas in summer 2003. Ramírez's Teatro D'Dos starred two highly talented actresses (Yaquelin Yera and Deisy Sánchez) playing roles of several family members whose lives chronicle several decades of socio-cultural memories adapting to changes that could have easily characterized rural Cuba or another other Macondo-like environment. Each era's memories are plagued by the *rata*, the play's central metaphor for the decomposition of the family, a condition that only utopia will eliminate. Almost emblematic of the changes that individuals must adapt to if they are to survive, the metatheatrical of *La edad de la ciruela* brings us one voice after another from women who dramatically demonstrate that "la memoria es un músculo que necesita mucho ejercicio para recordar" (Ramírez interview). As each recounts her youthful pleasures and their passing, the metaphor of the *ciruelo* of their girlhood home passes from blossom to prune, as each life stage is celebrated and even as each generation must adapt to a new life in the city or, as Cuban spectators might see it, to life after the revolution. Yera and Sánchez totally alter their identities, embodying new characters with new expressions, gestures and inventive use of minimal props, all confirming Ramírez's comment that much of the Teatro D'Dos's creative effort is communal and reminding us how much Cuban spectators bring to making their particular meanings of such productions.

The Havana summer theatre season opened and closed with two productions representing two significant types of Cuban staging. In June, audiences were delighted with Carlos Díaz's creative design and direction in a very Cuban version of the late fifteenth-century Spanish dialogue *La Celestina*. Díaz's lively Cubanization of Fernando de Rojas's classic provoked diversity of opinion among Havana spectators. Theatre professionals and theatre-goers under forty tended to love everything about the adaptation, while a few of the more mature yet theatrically less experienced viewers found the use of nudity inappropriate. Nonetheless, Díaz's staging was enormously popular, and the final performance (the 150th) was an excellent example of how his productions transform foreign classics into something Cuban. And just as a Golden Age *comedia* might end with audience and cast making a general *ambiente carnavalesco*, Díaz turned the stage into a festive celebration of Cuban culture and Cubans' everyday "roles" with appearances on stage of famous dancers and musicians as well as other renowned

personalities like dramatist Abelardo Estorino. At summer's end, Alberto Pedro Torrientes staged a revival of *Delirio Habanero*, a one-act play from 1994 that provokes our personal and socio-cultural notions connected or in reaction to Cuba's rich musical traditions. Two characters, La Reina and El Bárbaro, believe they are, respectfully, Celia Cruz and Benny Moré, and their roles reincarnate everything the famed singers contributed to a cultural mystique. Celia has just returned from her American exile, and Benny readies himself for great success again in Varilla's bar, even though the dilapidated former hangout of intellectuals during the "dark decade" of the 1960's is about to be razed. Ironically, at the conclusion of this "tragicomedia musical a capella," as the author calls *Delirio*, the only item saved from demolition is the old victrola playing singer-songwriter Pablo Milanés, the legendary voice of the Nueva Trova Cubana. Significantly, this September's revival of Pedro Torriente's *Delirio* coincided with the deaths of Celia Cruz and Compay Segundo, events that brought Cubans to reevaluate their feelings about cultural icons at home and abroad. Success had come to Compay again, especially after the *Buena Vista Social Club*, and Celia, at least in *Delirio*, fulfilled the dreams of many by her "return." ¿And Milanés? The "young" sixty-year-old has toured Spain this fall, continuing to build more Cuban musical bridges.

This brief panorama of reality and art in Cuban theatre today would not be complete without referring to performance art director Nelda Castillo and her company El Ciervo Encantado. The current fall/winter season provides Havana audiences with an opportunity to see again their *Pájaros en la playa*, a one-act performance that awes spectators when the company travels abroad.¹⁴ The potentially diverse reception of the performance is promoted by its skeletal dialogue, the sheer beauty and highly metaphoric nature of the staging and costuming, and the bird-like movements and sounds emitted by the three highly flexible and semi-clad performers. They show us the human condition, from "hatching" to death, along with all the challenges humans encounter in between. We find metaphors for the struggle of the will against disease (AIDS in particular) and a stunning portrayal of the birds' desperate efforts to fly off "la Isla" as Castillo calls the space of plastic gauze and colored chiaroscuro on which the birds twist and turn. It is not surprising that *Pájaros*, a performance that appears, on the surface, the most removed from everyday Cuban reality, may provoke intense contemplation about very real and current situations many Cubans face today.

Indeed, the Ciervo Encantado shares, along with most works currently being staged, a capacity to draw spectators into the co-production of meanings

relevant to Cuba's present and to speculation about its future. Whether they are foreign or national in origin, new creations or revivals, monologues or slightly larger productions, Cuban performances today engage audiences in their artistry of the real. Such tendencies are the mark of directors or writers like Carlos Díaz, José Milián, and Alberto Pedro and particularly of Nelda Castillo and the young directors Raúl Martín and Julio César Ramírez. Any new trends are likely to emerge from the latter grouping. As most of the interviewees remarked, the next generation of theatre professionals currently in training is more interested in acting rather than writing or directing.

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Notes

¹ This report would not be possible without the collaboration of Marcelo Fajardo de Cárdenas, Cuban television and film director, in organizing interviews. I am forever grateful to him.

² Dramatist Alberto Pedro Torrientes sees this energy as always pulsating toward the new, toward recreating selves and society (Leonel León film interview). It is difficult to resist a comparison between the creativity and success of Cuban theatre experts staging works of artistic and social interest and the everyday successes of Cuban transportation wizards ingeniously creating automotive marvels for contemporary realities.

³ The power and intensity of the ephemeral was a subtext in all my interviews with performance professionals in summer 2003. Raúl Martín remarked, for example, that every element in design and direction is presented "para que la gente juegue con todo" (interview June 2003).

⁴ Audiences in the U.S. will have another opportunity to see the *Enano* staged in this country. The Repertorio Español de Nueva York will present the monologue early in 2004.

⁵ "Nosotros los cubanos somos muy barrocos," remarked Raúl Martín to describe how he sees his work within a continuing tradition (personal interview, June 28, in Havana). Abelardo Estorino senses that the young directors Nelda Castillo and Martín use the term to refer to their superabundant and total utilization of scenic space and time, resulting in dynamic effects for their performance arts. In effect, "baroque" serves to identify the richness and variety possible within the apparently small scale of Cuban theatre, what Alberto Pedro calls the "banquete infinito" of Cuban life.

⁶ The Havana street dweller is also the subject of the prize-winning monologue *De París, un caballero*, acted by José Antonio Alonso for the Primer Festival del Monólogo in Cienfuegos (February 2003) and at the Festival Nacional de Teatro de Pequeño Formato in Santa Clara (January 2003).

⁷ Linda Howe places the *enano's* decision to remain in his bottle in the Cuban context: "For many Cubans, after forty years under the rule of a paternalistic government that has restricted freedoms, the idea of radical transformation instills fear and triggers self censorship many have acquiesced to the paucity of options and internalized restrictions on expression." See Chapter One, "Art in Revolutionary Cuba," in her forthcoming book *Cuban Artists and Writers after the Revolution: Transgression and Conformity*. In our interview, Martín referred to the

Diaspora's draining effect on Cuban performance arts. In fact, Grettel Trujillo, the original *enano* in Martín's staging, did not return to Cuba with the Teatro de la Luna Company after receiving a best-actress prize during the Miami festival of monologues in 2001. Trujillo ironically stepped out of the bottle the *enano* was unable to leave.

⁸ One of the best known stage treatments of Diaspora is found in the theatrical adaptation of Senel Paz's novella *El lobo, el bosque y el hombre nuevo*, better known in its popular film version by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea as *Fresa y chocolate*.

⁹ Even more than Raúl Martín, Alberto Pedro Torrientes is quite concerned about the effects of Diaspora on the arts as well as society in Cuba today. In my interview with Miriam Lezcano, his wife and the director of Pedro's monologue "Esperando a Odiseo," she emphasized Pedro's concern that the loss of friends in the theatre arts has taken a toll on production possibilities in Cuba.

¹⁰ Estorino holds that finances are not necessarily the reason for more monologues. For instance, spotlighting talented actors was the motive for organizing the Primer Festival Internacional del Monólogo in 2001 in Miami (email). At that time he wrote *Las penas saben nadar* for actress Adria Santana at the request of the Teatro Estudio. Santana shared the best actress award with Trujillo.

¹¹ Mia Leonin remarks that although the Festival del Monólogo was international, it seemed a celebration of Cuban theatre tradition and of the Cuban companies she saw as clearly the highest in "calidad y energía dinámica" (56). She also remarked that none of Miami's Cuban actors presented monologues for various reasons but that they attended and received the visiting performers enthusiastically.

¹² Hispanist and theatre expert David Román's book is an excellent survey of the field and the term "AIDS theatre" in the U.S.

¹³ Homosexuality was decriminalized in Cuba in 1979, and the quarantine and other medical policies have resulted in one of the world's lowest prevalence rates for HIV infection. While the "gay scene" is more open than in the past, observers still comment privately that there is certainly both racial and gender-based discrimination in Cuba.

¹⁴ The company has performed in Spain, South Korea, Mexico, and Colombia and has been invited to performance arts festivals in the U.S. In late summer they toured in Spain.

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