

## Festival Reports

### Notes on Recent Cuban Theatre (2002-04)

#### Candyce Leonard

The present wealth of theatre activities in Havana commands vast opportunity for both research and recognition of the many figures and theatre pieces that distinguish contemporary Cuban theatre today. In addition to Cuba's premiere theatre journals *Tablas* and *Conjunto*, Pepe Murietta's<sup>1</sup> webpage (<http://www.cniae.cult.cu>) provides constant updates of theatre activities and criticism of current plays. This brief report surveys a variety of plays, playwrights, and directors that I encountered during two visits to Havana.

#### Carlos Díaz and *La Celestina*

Catching a glimpse of the marquis at the Teatro Triañon to see that Carlos Díaz (b. 1955) was staging *La Celestina* was titillating. Although I arrived (March 9, 2002) at the Triañon, home of the Teatro Público and its director Díaz, in ample time for the 8 PM performance, it was not until 8:20 that I was seated. Some forty to fifty more patrons in their twenties and thirties pressed to buy tickets outside at the box office creating confusion and delays to entering the theatre. The Triañon's 300 seats were mostly filled for this play that revealed less of the Spanish classic and more of Díaz's Cuban style. I met Carlos in 1996 so I already knew of his penchant for artistic freedom within a censorship environment.<sup>2</sup> Such worries have dissipated; whether inspired by the text or a quest for artistic freedom, complete male frontal nudity with full house lights up highlighted his production of the *Celestina*. The presentation of the ever-swinging male genitalia was farcical and bawdy, provoking laughter and eliminating virtually any discomfort between audience and actors that a live performance might generate.

Portions of the set were reduced in size and almost charming in appearance. These miniatures focused audience attention on the action while also clearly defining the historical period, story, and space that the set represented. Designer Amaury Castrillón Rodríguez explained the intricate nature of the set and the three months that it took to construct the castle towers out of papier mache, with three days simply to create the tiny stained-glass windows (Castrillón Rodríguez). The overall effect was to render the Spanish classic within a contemporary Cuban context where issues of sexualities, hierarchies, and representations continue to undergo reconsideration amid Cuba's shifting sociopolitical climate.



*Celestina*

Photo by Pepe Murrieta

### **Flora Lauten and Raquel Carrió and *Bacantes***

Housed in a former Greek Orthodox church building since 1986, the Teatro Buendía, directed by Flora Lauten (b. 1942) with dramaturgy by Raquel Carrió (b. 1952), redefines the sacred space born of a communion between spectacle and spectator. The collaborative efforts of Lauten and Carrió, both professors at Havana's Instituto Superior de Arte, produced *Bacantes* in 2001, the same year that the play formed part of the Tercer Festival Internacional de Teatro de Santo Domingo, and won at the Festival Nacional

de Teatro, Camagüey. I saw it in Havana in March of 2002: a stunning production that honors a ritual connecting us with our past, offering a source of identity in the present, and exploring the human condition as we move toward our future. While re-enacting Euripides' *Bacchae*, Lauten and Carrió create new parables centering on Cuba's rich heritage vis-à-vis the Mediterranean as one of the island's points of origin. The director and dramaturg ask about the blending of cultures, reaching deep into Cuba's memory to find their cultural ancestors. Music and song give form to these cultural legacies so that allusions to Spain's running of the bulls, the flamenco dance and the haunting *cante jondo* of southern Spain reflect one Mediterranean influence even as songs of Greek/Italian dialect – the progeny of Greek colonies in southern Italy – reflect another (Lauten and Carrió).



*Bacantes*

Photo by Candyce Leonard

*Bacantes* demonstrates the cycle of destruction wrought by the human frailties visited upon each generation. As with their production of *Otra tempestad* that I saw in 1996, they return to the cycle of birth, death, and

regeneration theme (Lauten).<sup>3</sup> On a local level, “replanting” is the rebirth of the Teatro Buendía after waves of emigration literally left the company depleted. On a national level, emigration means the separation of families and loved ones over such a long period of time as to dislocate the offspring of the émigrés in a new land and a new heritage; but at the global level, millennia of migrations forge us into one people who continue to invest energies in war and destruction.

In addition to the “cubanization” of the original myth, Carrió inverts the thematic structure of the *Bacchae* so that *Bacantes* begins where Euripides’ drama ends. She writes: “Esta alteración de la estructura obedece el desplazamiento en la jerarquización temática. En lugar de la relación: *transgresión (hybris o exceso)/culpa/castigo*, priorizamos la indagación (mítica, histórica) del comportamiento. En lugar de la *katarsis*, la *distanciación* que permite la imagen *extrañante*” (VI). Ultimately Lauten and Carrió produce a play that is distinctly Cuban yet the same action occurs throughout the world, past or present. Above all, their anti-war posture emphasizes the cyclical pattern so that as sure as the city is laid to waste, we will rebuild.<sup>5</sup>



*Bacantes*

Photo by Cnadyce Leonard

**Pancho García in *En el túnel un pájaro***

Since Spanish playwright Paloma Pedrero is both my colleague and friend since the early 1980s, it was of particular interest that her recent play, *En el túnel un pájaro*, has its world premiere in Havana on April 19, 2003 in the Hubert de Blanck Theatre. With Pancho García directing and performing the lead role as Enrique, *En el túnel* received both critical and popular acclaim, ultimately earning five awards including Best Actor and Best Play of 2003. Pancho and Pedrero met in Madrid in 1996 when the actor performed Argentine Eduardo Pavlovsky's *Potestad*. Given García's vibrant personality and powerful performing style, Pedrero invited him to co-star in her play *Una estrella* and later gave him the manuscript of *En el túnel un pájaro*.



*En el túnel*  
Photo by Pepe Murrieta

*En el túnel* focuses on sixty-something, terminally ill playwright Enrique (Pancho García), separated from his older sister at a very early age and reluctant to meet her now that she has located him. His acerbic temperament softens as he reconciles with Ambrosia (Miriam Larrá) who enables him to die with a sense of tranquility, bathed in fraternal love. *En el túnel* relies on its realistic form to ground the action, but Pancho wanted to transcend the commonplace environment. When by chance he saw a television program on Salvador Dalí, *La otra mirada*, he realized that a surrealistic

approach would serve his purpose. After conferring with a physician to determine what mental state painkillers might produce, Pancho established Enrique's delirium as the point of departure. With the author's approval, Pancho removed realistic details from the stage, allowing only those pieces essential to Enrique's progression from anguished suffering to the gift of relief from his sister (García).

The interesting addition to Pedrero's play is a TV reality show whose mission is reuniting missing loved ones. In her 1995 play *El pasamanos*, Pedrero is openly hostile to the media mongers that leave carnage in their paths. In his interpretation of *En el túnel*, however, Pancho sees Arturo (Ernesto Tamayo) as a victim whose desire to be an actor results only to his job as the obnoxious host of a reality show, the bottom feeder of television programming. When we first see Arturo, his dress is prime-time camp topped off with a toupee; but his later appearance portrays his transformation from flashy reality-show host to an individual capable of understanding Enrique's emotional dilemma. In fact, the play closes with a sense of optimistic satisfaction as each character reaches a sense of personal fulfillment. Within a collage of topics – euthanasia, family relationships, media, theatre – *En el túnel* is essentially a play about personal dignity and how each individual learns to create and nurture those circumstances that allow for personal growth.

### **Carlos Celdrán and Michel Azama's *Vida y muerte de Pier Paolo Pasolini***

Upon graduation from Havana's Instituto Superior de Arte in 1986, Carlos Celdrán (b. 1963) joined Flora Lauten's Teatro Buendía for two years. Then after a number of impressive theatre experiences he formed his own company, Argos Teatro, in 1996. Celdrán chose a 1984 play by contemporary French playwright Michel Azama to stage in the spring of 2004. *Vida y muerte de Pier Paolo Pasolini* debuted April 9, 2004 and is scheduled to run until June 20 in the "novenio piso" of Havana's Teatro Nacional.<sup>4</sup> Michel Azama was in Madrid in February 2002 for Spain's Contemporary Theatre Festival, so *Primer Acto* published a special section on him in 2003 along with his play *Vida y muerte de Pier Paolo Pasolini* which is how Celdrán discovered the play. Carlos Celdrán serves as a prime example of the most recent chronological generation of directors who have matured on the cusp of the twenty-first century.



*Vida y muerte de Pier Paolo Pasolini*  
Photo by Candyce Leonard

Celdrán selected *Vida y muerte* specifically because of the historical figure's struggles with life as an intellectual, as a homosexual, as a communist, and as an individual with religious beliefs – conflicts that can all be related in one way or another to Cuba's present reality. These opposing and explosive forces within one individual – a seemingly impossible and surely excessive amalgamation – discharge a dramatic tension that asks the spectator to look beyond the ideologies or definitions that identify Pasolini in favor of viewing the complexity of the individual and the antagonistic social forces with which he collides (Celdrán). In her review of the opening performance, Vivian Martínez Tabares confirms that “el superobjetivo del montaje va más allá, enfilado hacia la defensa de la libertad de elección humana y a la validación de un mundo propio, no reñido ni excluyente con otras posturas sociales e ideológicas.” ([http://www.cniae.cult.cu/pasolini\\_porVivianMT.htm](http://www.cniae.cult.cu/pasolini_porVivianMT.htm)).<sup>6</sup>

Although perhaps a popular topic, homosexuality is no longer a taboo topic since the release and swell of acceptance for the film *Fresa y chocolate* (1993). The agonizing experience of Pasolini, then, as an individual condemned for his sexuality gains significance for Celdrán only when combined with the Italian filmmaker's environment and his unwavering insistence on complete honesty with himself, thus casting aside all facades and prescriptive social roles. Structured in thirteen scenes linked and contextualized by a narrator, the play begins with Pasolini's untimely and mysterious death and the interrogation of the alleged assassin, followed by a reconstruction of the

events leading to his demise. While rehearsals can only promise an idea of what the actual theatre performance will be, and even though I was moving about taking photographs and adjusting the videotaping of the rehearsal, the tension of the character's anguish was palpable, even surprising. It is this tension, not only between society and a creative individual, but tension within the individual himself that has connected with audiences and extended the play into June.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Pepe Murrieta is photographer for many of Havana's plays, but he is also official chronicler of the website of contemporary Cuban theatre where he posts a wealthy amount of information on current theatre activities.

<sup>2</sup>For a brief review of Carlos Diaz's recent theatre, see Leonard 142-46.

<sup>3</sup>For a brief study of the play immediately preceding *Bacantes*, *Otra tempestad*, see Leonard 148-50. Both plays demonstrate some of the essential tenets of the Teatro Buendía's theatre.

<sup>4</sup>At this writing, reviews and photos of Celdrán's production of *Vida y muerte...* are at the website chronicled by Pepe Murrieta: [http://www.cniae.cult.cu/Viday\\_Muerte\\_dePPP.htm](http://www.cniae.cult.cu/Viday_Muerte_dePPP.htm).

<sup>5</sup>The text of *Bacantes* is in *Tablas* 67, 2002.

<sup>6</sup>Since Murrieta updates this page constantly, the site on Celdran's production of *Vida y muerte...* will ultimately be removed to make space for newly staged plays in the coming year.

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## Panamá: Festival Internacional de Artes Escénicas

### Roberto Enrique King

Panamá ya tiene su festival de danza y teatro a partir de la inauguración el pasado 15 de julio del I Festival Internacional de Artes Escénicas (FAE '04), un evento que durante siete días congregó en esa capital centroamericana a agrupaciones de seis países, con presentaciones en los teatros Balboa y Anita Villaláz, y talleres y conversatorios en diversos sitios de la ciudad. El FAE '04, una presentación de la Asociación Cultural AlterArte, núcleo de la Red de Promotores Culturales de Latinoamérica y el Caribe, bajo la producción general de quien suscribe, abrió con el espectáculo

*Seductive Reason-ing*, de la compañía Bridgman Packer Dance de Nueva York, cuya participación fue posible gracias al programa *Performing Americas* que auspician la Red y Arts International. Esta agrupación presentó un novedoso y atractivo trabajo de fusión de danza, video y música, con la participación especial del músico y compositor Robert Een, que fue absolutamente bien recibido por el público.

También estuvieron en territorio canalero los chilenos Marco Antonio de la Parra y León Cohen con una de las obras más representadas en Latinoamérica y el mundo, *La secreta obscenidad de cada día*, un vigoroso



*La secreta obscenidad de cada día*



*Conversatorio con Juan Fernando Cérdas,  
director del Teatro El Ojo de Costa Rica. Foto: Tony Johnson*

enfrentamiento actoral a través de teatro de texto de la vieja escuela, pero de una riqueza y agudeza que sobrepasa sus limitaciones y logra apoderarse casi por completo de los espectadores, que gozan y meditan ante este improbable encuentro entre un Marx y un Freud decadentes y depravados. Con menos suerte corrieron los unipersonales teatrales. El colombiano, *Mujeres en la guerra*, dirigido por Fernando Montes y protagonizado por Carlota Llano, es una adaptación de un exitoso libro que testimonia como han impactado tantos años de guerra interna en la vida de las madres, hijas, esposas de los involucrados en el conflicto. El trabajo adoleció de una protagonista con limitaciones y de una puesta plana que no convenció mucho a público ni a especialistas.

Por su lado, el costarricense *Mujer y carnicero*, adaptación de dos relatos de Heiner Müller, es un teatro de investigación que busca romper los códigos dramaturgicos tradicionales y pretende la participación del público en cuanto a completarlo con su aporte intelectual. Es el primer trabajo del Teatro El Ojo, nuevo proyecto de Juan Fernando Cerdas, conocido internacionalmente por el tándem que formó por años con Rubén Pagura en el otrora Teatro Quetzal. Sin embargo, Flor Urbina, la joven protagonista, no tiene la garra suficiente para sostener totalmente un trabajo tan difícil como éste que resulta interesante, provocativo, pero bastante críptico.

Panamá estuvo representada por el solo de danza contemporánea, *Cabanga*, creación e interpretación de la bailarina y coreógrafa Milvia Martínez, un trabajo altamente emotivo y de una gran belleza plástica, en la que su protagonista hace gala de un depurado manejo corporal y del espacio y de una técnica realmente muy buena. La Martínez estuvo durante años bailando internacionalmente con el grupo de butho del maestro japonés Min Tanaka y ésta es la primera coreografía que realiza en su país.

El cierre estuvo en manos de la compañía mexicana, Delfos, Danza Contemporánea, con el programa *Breves instantes*, compuesto por coreografías creadas por distintos artistas del colectivo, especie de recuento de las emociones y búsquedas del hombre y la mujer contemporáneos. Un grupo joven, sólido técnicamente, que experimenta, y que goza de una sensibilidad y fuerza escénica que se traduce en momentos y atmósferas acabados que conectan al espectador. Destacaron por su temática, plasticidad y carga emotiva las coreografías *Del amor y otras barbaridades* y *Fractura*. Un gran final para un gran esfuerzo. Es importante destacar, para ayudar a medir el nivel pretendido por los organizadores en esta primera edición, que la internacionalmente destacada agrupación española, Teatro La Zaranda, estuvo hasta último momento programada para inaugurar el Festival con *Ni sombra de lo que fuimos*, lo que no pudo ser por enfermedad repentina de la única actriz del colectivo, lo que le impidió viajar.



Art Bridgman, director de Bridgman Packer Dance (EE.UU.), da instrucciones que brindó la compañía a bailarines profesionales. Foto: Tony Johnson



*Afiche de Mujer y Carnicero, de Henrich Muller, montaje del Teatro El Ojo de Costa Rica, dirigido por Juan Fernando Cérdas. Foto: Tony*

Pero el FAE '04 no sólo fue representaciones artísticas. Cada grupo invitado contribuyó también con su aporte a las actividades especiales y formativas, lo que se tradujo en la realización de los talleres *La Voz Intima*, a cargo del ya mencionado cantante y músico estadounidense, Roberto Een; dos talleres para bailarines y estudiantes de danza, respectivamente, llevados por Art Bridgman y Myrna Packer y una clase maestra para profesionales bajo la conducción de uno de los directores de Delfos, Víctor Manuel Ruiz, agrupación que también aprovechó para hacer audiciones para la Escuela Profesional de Danza Contemporánea de Mazatlán, que dirigen en México.

También se llevó a cabo la presentación del libro, *Espectáculos escénicos, producción y difusión*, un recién publicado y valioso documento/manual sobre el tema, de la productora mexicana Marisa De León, quien estuvo en el festival como gerente de gira de la compañía Bridgman Packer Dance, y se realizaron conversatorios con los grupos colombiano, chileno y costarricense, y con la bailarina panameña Milvia Martínez. El FAE '04 tendrá carácter bienal, por lo que tiene prevista su próxima edición para verano de 2006. Toda la información del evento puede ser vista en [www.alterarte.org](http://www.alterarte.org)

*Panamá*