

The Costa Rican Stage: An Update

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Anita Herzfeld and Teresa Cajiao Salas in their valuable critical anthology, *El teatro de hoy en Costa Rica*, have provided an excellent overview of the little known Costa Rican stage. The authors point out that although there exists no movement which can be termed "national" the seasons from 1967-1970 reveal an accelerated activity which bodes well for the future.¹ The subsequent years (1971-1974) have indeed proved fruitful and demonstrate a sustained effort to create a vibrant and varied theater.

Costa Rica hosted the Segundo Festival Centroamericano de Teatro in 1971. The success of the Costa Rican groups served to underscore the University groups' complete dominance of the season. Premiering two plays by national authors the Teatro Universitario and the Teatro Estudiantil Universitario captured five festival awards while these two theatrical entities plus the Departamento de Artes Dramáticas received all of Costa Rica's post-season honors. During the festival, the Teatro Estudiantil Universitario staged Samuel Rovinski's humorous satire in one act, *Las fisgonas de Paso Ancho*. This depiction of life in a present day *barrio Josefino* touches in caricature fashion the time worn topics: drugs, generation conflict, mass media, authority, church, etc. *La Segua* by Alberto Cañas was performed by the Teatro Universitario. Cañas' latest play retains the Pirandellian flavor of his earlier works (*Algo más que dos sueños*, *En agosto hizo dos años*) but mythical and *costumbrista* elements combine to produce a richer more complex piece. Set for the most part in colonial Cartago with corresponding language and staging, the drama explores the personal conflict of its protagonist. Convinced that she is a mythical *segu*a who drove her first suitor mad, (his insanity was really due to venereal disease), Encarnación is obsessed with the *segu*a myth.² She realizes that all women are *segu*as in that physical beauty turns into or leads to ugliness and death. In a futile attempt to stop time she scorns her second suitor to marry an elderly blind family friend. Thus, her husband's only image of her will be that of a fifteen year old girl and Encarnación will

have preserved indefinitely her beauty and defeated the *segua* of age and death. Ionesco's *Las sillas* and Juan Enrique Acuña's highly praised adult-children's drama, *El músico y el león*, rounded out the University's sparkling season.

For the newly established National Theater Company, 1971 was a year of organization and member selection with only one production, a collection of *entremeses* by Cervantes, which met with mixed reviews. The Teatro Arlequín also staged only one play, Alexei Arbusov's *La promesa* which encountered little public or critical acceptance. Some foreign companies did appear in Costa Rica but made no appreciable impact on the theatrical scene.³

The spotlight shifted in 1972 and focused on the intense activity of the National Theater Company to bring theater to a wider audience. First, the Company mounted the first open-air summer season, (now a San José tradition), at popular prices (3 colones, which often included transportation to the theater). For three months the group entertained the San José area with performances of Catalonian dramatist Angel Guimerá's *Tierra baja*, Williams' *El zoológico de cristal*, Lope's *La dama boba* and one Costa Rican work, *Capitán Pólvora* by Manuel Angulo González, a comedy which presents the problems of an aspiring military officer who is allergic to gun powder. This was hardly a theme of great national impact; yet it had a certain box office attraction. After the summer season, the Company toured 77 rural communities staging some of the above mentioned plays and adding others: Jorge Orozco Castro's *Germinal*, Chekhov's *El pedido de mano*, Casona's *Farsa del cornudo apaleado*, and the Quinteros' *Mañana de sol*.

University groups found a disappointing year in 1972. Their performances of Williams' *La marquesa de Larkspur* Lotion, Synge's *Jinetes hacia el mar* and Kay and Michael Kanin's *Rashomon* encountered public apathy and from some quarters severe criticism of the quality and goals of the Departamento de Artes Dramáticas. Even the students of the Department voiced publicly their dissatisfaction with the orientation of the department and certain personnel decisions.⁴ The Teatro Universitario did premiere *La casa* by the talented national dramatist, Daniel Gallegos, but the drama of a 1920 family dominated by the mother who seeks to stifle the freedom of her offspring failed to make the impact of Gallegos' previous *estreno*, *La colina*. There was one bright light for the University, namely, the formation of Teatro de Estudios Generales under the guidance of Sergio Román. Created with a view toward encouraging students to participate in the theater as an avocation, the group with little funding presented their plays in the University, Central Park, the Arcades and high schools. The quality of their productions might not have been high, but their enthusiasm was and their repertoire interesting: Carballido's *Parásitos*, Chekhov's *Sobre el daño que hace el Tabaco*, Sieveking's *El paraíso semiperdido* and José Martínez Queirolo's *Que en paz descanse*.

In 1972 the Teatro Arlequín reasserted itself as one of the most important Costa Rican groups.⁵ The Arlequín first performed *La vida es sueño* to excellent critical response and staged special educational performances for students. Late in the year the group announced the construction of their own *sala de cámara*. As their first offering in their new home, the Arlequín presented an award winning production of Jorge Díaz's *El cepillo de dientes* which filled the house night after night.

Theater enjoyed a healthy year in 1973. The major groups all mounted full programs which supplied the public with a praiseworthy diversity of choice. For 143 days out of a 194-day season the Arlequín's new theater was occupied. Almost 10,000 filed through the small arena theater to see five Arlequín productions and plays by other groups utilizing their facilities. The Arlequín's balanced schedule included Albee's *Delicado equilibrio*, José Triana's drama of ritual violence, *La noche de los asesinos*, Molière's *El cornudo imaginario* and *El médico á la fuerza*, Ricardo Talesnik's *La fiaca* and a festive Café-Teatro in December.

Strengthened by five Spanish professionals, the National Theater Company continued its work as a promoter of theater throughout the country. During the summer season the Company staged memorable performances of *Las troyanas* and Benavente's *Los intereses creados*. As part of the summer repertoire the Company premiered the Costa Rican play *La hora de morir* by José León Sánchez. Primarily a prose writer, Sánchez's first dramatic piece about an unjustly accused, convicted and executed man suffers from emphasis on static narrative situations and its basically anecdotal style. Later in the year, the Company presented a sickly production of Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman* which died quickly to be followed by Goldoni's *Arlequín servidor de dos amos*.

After their dismal 1972 season, the University groups put together a widely acclaimed 1973 program consisting entirely of Latin American material. The Teatro Estudiantil Universitario chose Dragún's *Historia de mi barrio* and Jorge Díaz's *Requiem por un girasol* while the Teatro Universitario staged Egon Wolff's *Flores de papel*. Following the Latin American emphasis, the Teatro de Estudios Generales adapted for the stage Augusto Roa Bastos' novel *Hijo de hombre*. Finally Juan Enrique Acuña formed a new group under the auspices of the Department of Dramatic Arts, namely, Teatro Moderno de Muñecos which premiered director Acuña's adult-children's play, *Aventura submarina*. The play's success in Costa Rica was underlined by the invitation to present it in the V Festival Latinoamericano de Teatro in Manizales where the piece was praised for its "depuración técnica y preocupación estética . . . gran riqueza y variedad técnica."⁶

Before moving on to 1974 we should comment briefly on the number of theatrical organizations which were born only to pass from sight after one or more productions.⁷ In the last four years the quantity of such groups has multiplied and should be interpreted as a healthy sign for the Costa Rican stage. For the most part formed by the young, they represent a search for new techniques and alternatives to the established companies. Out of one of these short lived groups there emerged in 1973 the Tierranegra company which appears to be growing in strength. Completely independent, Grupo Tierranegra stresses economy of theatrical devices, heavy reliance on corporal expression and a concern for presenting a Costa Rican and Latin American reality. Their award winning piece, *La invasión*, (first real drama of collective authorship in Costa Rica) focuses on the political and economic invasions suffered by the country since the conquest: the arrival of the Spanish, American *filibusteros*, United Fruit.

As in 1973, the Arlequín staged a complex six play program opening with *La ginecomaquia o La lucha de las mujeres* by the Mexican author Hugo Hiriart. This was followed by the mystery classic, Agatha Christie's *La ratonera*. Other

productions included René Obaldía's absurdist play, *Rockefeller en el lejano oeste*, Osborne's *Recordando con ira* and Slawomir Mrozek's *Tango*. For the first time in five years the group staged a Costa Rican drama, *Pinochio Rey*. Author and director Antonio Yglesias creates a powerful experience for the audience by combining oneiric, grotesque, violent, poetic and satiric elements to treat problems of personal identity, political power and social institutions. This play of an adult Pinochio, ruler of the world and torn between the corrupting and perverse influence of his chief advisors (Hada Madrina, Grillo, and Alto jefe de los Guerreros) and the idealistic counsel of the Bruja, appears at times overdone and plagued occasionally by excess verbiage; yet *Pinochio Rey* marks an important departure from Yglesias' first drama, *Las hormigas*.⁸ For 1975 the Arlequín has announced a repertoire which includes *Flor de cacto*, Ugo Betti's *Delito en la isla de las cabras*, Arrabal's *Emperador de Asiria*, Paul Zindel's *Los efectos de los rayos gamma sobre las flores de la luna*, Albee's *Quien le teme a Virginia Woolf* and the American comedy *Como quiere la otra mitad*.

As indicated above, the Grupo Tierranegra did not fade into oblivion. On the contrary they were invited to participate in the II Festival Internacional de Teatro in Caracas where their *La invasión* was well received. Tierranegra premiered two works in 1974. The first was Eugenia Chaverri's *La fábrica de muñecos*, a children's play which seeks to involve more actively the young audience and eliminate from the plot violence and stereotype concepts of good and evil. As their major work of the year, the group staged Luisa González's dramatic version of her successful autobiography, *A ras del suelo*. The play depicts in short rapid scenes the author's formation and motivation for entering the socialist party. With language, humor and characters clearly "tico," plus an imaginative staging, the play was widely acclaimed by both critics and audiences. In two or three instances the social message seems to be overdone, especially the ending, but Tierranegra shows their capacity to confront a text and problems of characterization with excellent results. If they go ahead with their announced schedule 1975 will prove to be an ambitious year: three *retablos* by Lorca in the Café-Teatro of the Teatro Nacional and a major production of *Antigone*.

Whereas the Teatro Arlequín and Tierranegra were on the right track, the National Theater Company suffered a derailment. Their director, Esteban Polls, resigned at the end of 1973. The 1974 summer season proved to be disheartening as only two new plays were presented, a lackluster production of Frisch's *Andorra* and *Comedia de equivocaciones* by Shakespeare. After a major reorganization and the appointment of Oscar Castillo as director, the Company embarked on a demanding new course. Not only did the group seek to continue and expand their efforts to bring theater to all sectors of Costa Rican society, they also set out to form theater groups among these different sectors. One contingent of the Company toured the country with *La familia Mora* by Olga Marta Barrantes. A total of 35 rural communities were visited and almost 15,000 spectators (many for the first time) attended the play. *La familia Mora* presents the problem of Costa Rican *campesinos* dispossessed of their land and forced to enter a dehumanizing and corrupting urban existence. Barrantes' first drama proved to be a good vehicle to interest the public in theater as the Company succeeded in forming eighteen theater groups in various communities. The Company hopes to sponsor

a theater festival among the different rural groups in March of 1975. Another of the Company's programs consisted of staging a play from the secondary school curriculum, which played to over 50,000 high school students in both San José and the provinces. The play chosen was the ever popular *La ópera de tres centavos* by Brecht. Members of the cast worked with eighteen high school groups which produced San José's first student theater festival at the end of 1974. Primary schools were not neglected as the Company sponsored a course in puppet theatre under the direction of Juan Enrique Acuña. Ten primary schools and 24 teachers participated in the course, and from a demonstration by one school the results were truly impressive. Recognizing the need for national dramatists, the Company established in 1974 a drama workshop in which 17 writers have been working under the guidance of Carlos Catania. The Company intends to stage some of the products of this workshop and to use them in presentations by the rural, high school and primary school groups. Future projects will consist of expanding the scope of existing programs and adding others like Teatro para las industrias which will bring theater to and involve industry workers in the phenomenon of theater. In comparison with the depressing outdoor season of 1974, the Company has organized an enlarged and dynamic program of eight adult plays, ten children's plays, modern dance and symphony concerts.⁹ Once the summer season concludes in March, the Company will present plays in several of San José's most populous *barrios*, thanks to a recently constructed portable theater (stage and seating for 500). As one person remarked, the goals of the National Theater Company are unassailable; it only remains to see how far they can go in achieving such lofty objectives.

If the Compañía Nacional de Teatro has apparently solved its problems, the University seems to be in the midst of reorganization since the season unfolded with no clearly stated aims. Latin American works predominated as the Teatro Estudiantil presented *Sebastián sale de compras* by Guatemalan author Manuel Arce. The play, subtitled a tragic farce, focuses on the cultural and economic imperialism of the giant to the North. The Teatro Universitario first staged the Brazilian collective work, *Libertad, Libertad*, which in a collage format presents episodes from different countries and times to explain the essence of liberty. Scenes are drawn from the early labor movement in the U.S., the Nazi atrocities, American intervention in Mexico, and repression in Brazil, for example. Teatro Universitario also carried *Libertad, Libertad* to the Chicano Theater Festival in Mexico City and to Venezuela as part of a cultural mission. As their final production, the Teatro Universitario, with award winning performances by the Uruguayan couple, Javier Salcedo and Lilian Olhagaray, staged Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Juan Enrique Acuña's new children's play, *La caja de sorpresa*, as usual, received the plaudits of both critics and public. Plans for their 1975 season have not been finalized at this date. Teatro de Estudios Generales worked within the context of Acción Cultural Universitaria, an organization which seeks to involve and expose students to theater, pantomime, radio, plastic arts, dance and music. Theatrical works sponsored by the organization consisted of Sunday morning children's theater, an adaptation of Jorge Díaz's *Vispera del degüello*, and Albee's *The Zoo Story*. The founder and principal force behind Teatro de Estudios Generales and Acción Cultural Universitaria, Sergio Román, will soon

leave the country to study theater and film in Mexico; the future direction of these activities is not known. It is expected that this valuable exposure and involvement in the arts will continue.

Foreign companies are visiting Costa Rica less and less. In general, this constitutes no great loss since many time visiting groups brought only superficial entertainment. Costa Rica should strive in the future to attract worthwhile Latin American, European, and American groups which could enrich the movement here and present new orientations, techniques and themes. There was one notable exception in 1974 when Alejandro Sieveking's Teatro del Angel visited Costa Rica in the Spring with a production of *La Celestina* and Sieveking's own *Cama de batalla*. This recent winner of Casa de America's prize in theater has returned to San José where he and his group intend to settle permanently in Costa Rica. This injection of professional talent can only help the movement as already Bélgica Castro, the group's well known Chilean actress, has been contracted to offer classes at the University. At present the Teatro del Angel has been successfully presenting a Café-Teatro show, *Ja-Jaque Mate* which consists of short humorous and satiric sketches of the contemporary scene. If the group succeeds in establishing itself in Costa Rica, the theater movement will be strengthened and diversified even more.

Costa Rica has recognized the impossibility of establishing a thriving theatrical tradition without national dramatists. We have already mentioned the efforts of the National Theater Company in this regard. The Editorial Costa Rica, in an attempt to stimulate the pens of Costa Rican authors, offered a 10,000 colones (\$1,200) prize for the best play. At the closing date (Feb. 1975) the publishing firm had received 20 entries, a number far beyond their expectations. One would hope that Costa Rica will soon enter an era in which national artists see drama as a viable means of expression.

In sum, the search for Costa Rican dramatists, recent participation in international festivals, efforts to involve more sectors of the society in theater, the stabilization of the existing theater groups, the addition of two new groups, (Tierranegra and Teatro del Angel), and increased attention to children's theater have been significant factors in the enrichment of the Costa Rican stage in the last four seasons. This activity points hopefully to a movement which in the future can reach, entertain, instruct, and inspire the various elements of Costa Rican society.

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Footnotes

1. *El teatro de hoy en Costa Rica* (San José: Editorial Costa Rica, 1973), p. 20.
2. The *segua* is a mythical creature who takes the form of a beautiful woman who follows men at night. If the men turn back to look at her, they see a grotesque face, (that of a horse), which drives them mad.
3. The Little Theater Group of Costa Rica continues to present works in English.
4. The organization of students in the Dramatic Arts Department published in the University paper an open letter explaining some of their complaints: "Queremos un teatro que no sea institucionalizado, que no nos digan lo que tiene que hacerse, y una mayor libertad de creación para un teatro que vaya dirigido al pueblo. Estamos cansados de hacer un teatro para un público burgués. Queremos identificarnos con los marginados." *Universidad*, 11 (diciembre 1972), p. 1.

5. Anita Herzfeld and Teresa Cajiao Salas describe the Arlequín: "Quizás sea ésta la agrupación teatral profesional más importante y válida del país; su permanencia y continuidad ha permitido iniciar una tradición teatral." *El teatro de hoy . . .* p. 16.

6. Susan D. Castillo, María Elena Sandoz Montalvo, "V Festival Latinoamericano y I Muestra Internacional," *LATR*, 7/1 (Fall 1973), 59-60.

7. For example: Grupo de Teatro T H 71, Café-Complot, Grupo Ensayo, Grupo 4, Grupo Purruja, Teatro Laboratorio Experimental, Teatro Infantil Ata y Nene, Jóvenes Nacionales, El Pequeño Teatro.

8. Yglesias explains this departure: "Hace algunos años creí en el teatro como medio de transformación social, como instrumento para el mejoramiento de los demás, pero me he dado cuenta que no es el teatro ni ninguna forma artística lo que puede contribuir al cambio, sino el compromiso con uno mismo, la comprensión de la realidad y la firmeza con que estemos dispuestos a luchar por eso." "Tras la nariz de Pinocchio reaparece un dramaturgo," *La Nación*, 6 octubre 1974, p. 2C.

9. As a pre-estreno of the summer season, the Company staged one performance of the lead play, Anouilh's frothy comedy, *El baile de los ladrones*. Obviously chosen as a light piece to attract the public, nonetheless the staging and direction were excellent. Both the director and set designer won awards.