

El gran circo eucraniano by Myrna Casas

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Like many Puerto Rican artists, Myrna Casas probes the fractured psyche of Boricua islanders caused by the duality of a Latin American heritage under U. S. sovereignty, and utilizes *avant-garde* farces, unstable characters, mordant satire, actor-audience parleys, and Brechtian distancing to provoke an intellectual response to this dilemma. These techniques were fully engaged during the performance of *El gran circo eucraniano* at the Anfiteatro Ramón Figueroa Chapel at the Mayagüez campus of the University of Puerto Rico on February 19, 2009. The mostly student audience nearly filled the 300+ seat house and roared with laughter almost continuously.

As directed by Casas, the staging consisted of folding chairs placed in front of a tri-fold back screen with pictures of previous performances of *Circo*. The costuming began with street clothes and make-up, but Cósima and Alejandra wore gold shoes, a whimsical touch. Gabriela José, the protagonist and circus owner, wore leather boots and a riding outfit, suggesting an animal trainer. In mid-act, some characters donned clownish garb, then ran out into the house to greet the spectators. Alejandra, for example, looked like Dame Edna: flamboyant purple wig, outsized rhinestone sunglasses, huge breasts. The audience recognized the image of Dame Edna (a male



El gran circo eucraniano. Foto: Arturo Quiles



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cross-dressing personality who made racist remarks about Latinos in a 2003 *Vanity Fair* article), and hooted. As the characters evolved, names, family relations, previous careers and events were fabricated, dismissed or denied. They even disputed the name and

nature of the performance itself: was it a circus? theatrical piece? rehearsal? preview? In fact, the early episodes, called numbers instead of scenes, obscured when this play-within-a-play began. In her multiple introductions, Gabriela José deconstructed the first syllable of *eucraniano* into two sounds: “e-u,” but disavowed any connection to the U.S. or Ukraine, even though the characters have Russian names.

Likewise, references to this or that country reveal the alienation between the island, its capital and other cities, and its vague political status. While the satire skewers life in Puerto Rico, the only specific mention of location is that no one comes to Puerto Rico to work. The audience snickered at this line, given the high unemployment and brain drain of the workforce. Ironically, laughter underscored even the saddest, most tragic moments of life on an island beset by crime, drugs, marital and family stress, homelessness, government incompetence and indifference, ineffective education and dependence on welfare programs. Oddly, politics and religion are taboo subjects in a country that bends the law and has deified the car.

Circo repeatedly calls attention to its nature as professional fiction. The actors assert that they blend reality and imagination, outrage and nostalgia to hold up a mirror where the spectators may see their own image, distorted for comic effect. Beyond provoking laughter, the actors did an admirable job of presenting the foibles and failures of island life, and the need to take collective action to address common problems; kudos to Rocky Venegas, who debuted the role of Nené in 1988, and has played all the male roles since then.

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