

“Horizonte,” International Festival of Culture/ Latin America

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From May 29 until June 20, 1982, a broad panorama of Latin American cultural life was presented in Berlin via exhibitions, concerts, films, poetry readings and debates. Almost incidentally and at first hardly noticed by visitors, the subcontinent's theatre also left its card. But whereas all the other arts were represented by “big” names, none of the Latin American dramatists whose importance in theatre equals that of someone like Octavio Paz or Mario Vargas Llosa in literature was there. Instead, those who were interested were able to witness the various “types” of Latin American experimental theatre.

The Chilean group El Aleph, exiled in Paris, presented a play of theirs entitled *L'incroyable et triste histoire du Général Peñaloza et de l'exilé Mateluna*, a musical revue telling the story of Fernando Mateluna Rojas, a political refugee in Paris. His ideas of the *City of Light*, of can-can and champagne, contrast sharply with his reality: he has no money, no place to stay, no work and, even worse, no knowledge of the language and mentality of his hosts. The play is a humorous plea for tolerance of South American refugees by the French on the one hand and of the natives by the foreigners on the other.

Grupo de Arte Pau Brasil was introduced in Berlin as the quintessence of Latin American theatre. They presented their play *Macunaíma* on five nights, Nelson Rodrigues' *O eterno retorno* on two. *Macunaíma*, based on Mario Andrade's novel of the same name, was a huge success, as it has been everywhere else. We were shown this jungle Parzival's adventures on a setless stage, with unbelievable verve and remarkable precision. There was noise, laughter, singing, bellowing and swearing, and imaginative tableaux of human bodies were used to show the Brazilian rain forest, the chaos of the big cities and Indian mythology.

The play's hero, together with his two brothers, sets out on a long journey through life and experience. He is naive and cunning, cowardly, lazy and endowed with an insatiable sexual appetite: a child of mythology. He marries

the Queen of the Amazons and has to leave her again. On parting, she gives him a talisman that can make him invincible, but the simpleton loses it. Searching for it, he comes to the cities and fights evil Oger, a man-destroying monster. The earthbound, unspoiled nature of the Indian is confronted with the deforming power of a ruthless civilization.

This conflict, the nucleus of the play, is presented without a trace of moralizing. No didactic finger is wagged. Macunaíma experiences pleasure and pain intensively, mutilates himself, dies several deaths and finally—resignedly?—rises up to heaven and takes up his position in the sign of the Great Bear. This is a superb production that has lost none of its original power and charisma in the three years the group has performed in America and Europe.

In *O eterno retorno*, Grupo de Arte Pau Brasil turns to the myths of the city. It is in fact a compendium of the two “ugly” plays, *Family Album* and *All Nudity Will Be Punished*, by the Brazilian author Nelson Rodrigues. Dead in 1981 at the age of 67, Rodrigues was a determined supporter of Brazil’s military dictatorship and an apparently equally determined despiser of his country’s “better class.” He aimed for a “disgusting theatre,” from which the audience would catch typhus and malaria. With Rodrigues, director Antunes Filho destroys the pretty façade of family and gentility by tempering the author’s angry reckoning with his angst-ridden and sexually obsessed macho characters in a refinedly aesthetic production. As in *Macunaíma*, the marvelous thing about this production is the ensemble’s ability to build vivid stage sets with only a few tables and chairs, and to provide a fiery and riveting evening of theatre enjoyment by rapid scene changes.

By comparison, the Mexican group Taller Epico’s contribution proved rather a strain. With their play, *La sombra del caudillo*, the Mexicans told a long-winded story of revolution between 1924 and 1928. With much ado and a roundabout manner fraught with intrigue, we were shown the struggle of two generals for the presidency. For no particular reason, the portrait of Brecht appeared in one of the countless epic scenes, Brecht being the group’s guiding star.

The Peruvian Grupo Cultural Yuyachkani made a beautiful contribution with a play they wrote themselves, *Allpa Rayku* (For the Land). With various changes in lineup, this theatre group has existed since 1971. They started a theatre school in one of the poor quarters of Lima and began to work with the local population. Parallel to its theatre work, the group publishes a magazine dealing with culture, education and art criticism called *Takiy Llacta*. Their play, told half in Quechua, half in Spanish, tells of Peruvian peasants who drive a big land owner off his land in the seventies and thereby cunningly put into effect the land reform decreed by the military junta. Based on participants’ reports, a humorous and lively piece of agitatory theatre develops. The pleasant and youthful actors constantly change roles, sing and dance and break the language barrier between them and their German audience simply by being charming.

The enthusiastic, bourgeois Berlin audience did not notice the play’s shortcomings. Backstage, Enrique Buenaventura pointed them out during a systematic post mortem. He explained to the young Peruvians that they must

get away from the traditional theatre forms of their country in their work if they want to avoid the elements of Indian folk theatre regarded as nothing but colorful ornament. It is precisely this earthy, lively Indian art that carries the play's message, making the struggle of the peasants which it portrays relevant to all of Latin America, not just the country where it takes place. Despite this criticism, however, the opinion was unanimous that Grupo Cultural Yuyachkani had done a fine job. Next winter, Buenaventura will be working with the group in Lima.

Venezuela's Rajatablas group made its Berlin debut with the play *Simón Bolívar*. Based on a model by Antonio Rial, this interesting piece of work is based on the premise of a play that is supposed to be performed in a political prisoners' camp on Simón Bolívar's 200th birthday. The idea of combining various plots, of a play within a play, and of juxtaposing the reality of an individual's oppression with a utopian idea has been solved intelligently. However, director Carlos Giménez has souped up the rather shallow text a little too garishly. What was intended as a clean and critical exposition of the present situation of the Latin American states ends up as bombastic melodrama.

By way of contrast, the Colombian group La Candelaria's production of *Guadalupe años sin cuenta*—which has already travelled all over the world—was far more informative and artistically convincing. With minimal means and a virtuoso ability to effect metamorphoses, the group takes the guerrillero Guadalupe Salcedo as an example to show the confused and corrupt politics of Colombia during the 1950s, carefully pointing out that this story is by no means concluded. In short and impressive pictures, the rituals of the military are ridiculed and the shameless dealings of the politicians and their society painted in grotesque colors. Whereas with Rajatablas, a cumbersome and inflated ritual is used to force-feed the audience with the information that the church plays a dubious role in Latin American history, the Colombian cardinal of La Candelaria needs no more than a benevolent smile with which he takes a little bow in the direction of the powerful, while his eyes blatantly flirt with the ladies in the audience, thus making a far more complex statement about the church. Of course, the group has already performed this play so often that the various actors, especially the leader Santiago García, sometimes have a little too much fun. But the odd slapstick number or two only intensified the enthusiasm of the Berlin audience, and the purists were probably the only ones bothered.

There were two impressions the German theatre audience was able to take home from this rather fragmentary theatre festival: 1) how undauntedly joyful and humorously acid political theatre can be, even if great—for us, unbelievably great—political pressure is being exerted on art; and 2) that the theatre of Latin America, which is a “poor” theatre working in the face of adversity and hardship, has skillfully employed an expressionist and imaginative style to find its own, unique theatre language.

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