

Ramona: Quintessential Cuban Drama

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Just when the audience is getting restless for the long-overdue performance of a new play by Grupo Teatro Escambray (GTE), a graying man in casual slacks and plaid shirt strolls onstage. He asks the people whom they want to nominate for the region's outstanding worker award. One grandmotherly woman suggests "Ramona." He asks who this Ramona is, and a middle-aged woman in black work boots and slacks identifies herself. And yes, she would like to be considered for this honor. Others scattered throughout the crowded theatre debate Ramona's qualifications.

About the time that it seems the play will never get underway and that Ramona's supporters will come to blows with her detractors, the outspoken audience members unobtrusively slip backstage. The play already has begun. Unconventional, perhaps, for North American theatre but a typical beginning for Cuba's most famous guerrilla theatre group. Audience involvement is only one characteristic of this forerunner among the theatre movements in Revolutionary Cuba.

Ramona, first presented in the Escambray region of the crocodile-shaped island and again in its capital, Havana, commemorates International Women's Day, March 8. It was also GTE's selection for its first appearance in North America. Audiences in Washington, D.C., New York City, and Montreal, Canada, watched *Ramona* during the last week in April and first week in May, 1982. Only the ending of the play differs significantly between the local and exported versions. In Cuba, audience involvement continues after the text of the play has finished. Director, musicians and cast talk with the audience about Ramona's situation: her morals and her right to be chosen the outstanding worker. Abroad, though, the actors and actresses take their bows after the final scene and the play is over. They do not believe foreign audiences can appreciate the changing position of women and their relationships with men as well as the worker orientation of communist Cuba.¹

Between *Ramona*'s unusual opening and its dual endings, though, the plot is the same. Ramona herself begins the action from a stark wooden box stage right. Against a plain red backdrop she intervenes in her own behalf, shedding light on her qualifications for the honor. By telling her life story, she hopes to

defend herself from co-workers who have objected to her morals. They have contended she does not live up to the annual award's standards.

Recorded music introduces the Batista era when Ramona was 17. A younger actress with long brown hair falling softly about her round face plays this protagonist. She is barefoot and wears a tattered gingham sun dress. The set is a simple semicircle of natural burlap, disguising bleachers for the chorus of stoop-shouldered peasants in straw hats. Here the young Ramona is serenaded by her boyfriend Manolo and in the same scene berated by her mother for choosing a fellow without a job. Instead, her parents pressure her to marry an older man, Julián, who can upgrade her position in life.

By this time the audience sees both the miserable teenager Ramona and the adult Ramona, standing on boxes at either side of the stage. Together they introduce a third Ramona, this one in short hair and cloth slippers. To keep the young lovers apart, Ramona's family sends her to live with relatives. Her uncle, a political boss in Batista's violent dictatorship, rapes her. Manolo finds out and rejects her because she refuses to identify her attacker—and thus allow him to cleanse her honor. During their tearful farewell he cries, "Yo soy un hombre, Ramona." To minimize her family's dishonor, Ramona finally marries Julián.

The next scene brings the excitement of the Revolution. Villagers toss their hats into the air and eventually knock down the flimsy cloth screen—the last the audience sees of painted signs for Western capitalists like Esso and Coca-Cola. Spectators join with the cast in their exuberance over Fidel Castro's triumph in 1959. Throughout the play the three Ramonas have been speaking directly to the audience. Now they explain that Ramona cannot remain untouched by the sweeping cultural, economic, and social changes the Revolution brings. Her girlfriend Rosa, the older woman in the opening scene with the audience, convinces her to take a job.

In addition to joining the region's agricultural cooperative, Ramona goes to night school. Her educational experience provides one of the play's funniest scenes. Ramona sits in the classroom's first and only real chair. The male students line up behind her and, linked together, they pretend to sit. Her teacher, not immune to her charms, helps her to write the letters A, M, O and R. Another humorous scene follows, this time with Ramona joining the local military brigade. She cannot seem to tell her left from her right in marching drills. When she finally learns, she virtually twirls "a la derecha" to the shouts and claps of her delighted comrades.

By now Ramona has met Antonio, a dedicated cooperative worker who convinces her to leave her husband. This new boyfriend confronts her with a tough choice. If she marries him, she must renounce her work because he is convinced his former spouse's job ruined his previous marriage. He demands that Ramona be only a housewife. Antonio's insistence that he is "un hombre" is an echo of Manolo's earlier entreaties. Ramona, though, chooses to continue working; she rejoins her comrades in the construction of a symbolic wooden structure that only together they manage to lift upright.

This contemporary drama, written by Roberto Orihuela, fulfills more than the entertainment function of the performing arts. For Cuba, the theatre also has didactic and ideological uses. More specifically, it is considered a

vehicle of mass culture and of political reinforcement. It helps establish the island as an important cultural center internationally. Since the Revolution of 1959, the government has played the major role in Cuba's cultural life. Entertainment has been regarded as important—but not as an end in itself. Instead, officials stress their desire to raise the level of cultural appreciation among all Cubans.² To do so, they broadcast many cultural programs daily through television to reach residents of Cuba's remote areas. In addition, they have stepped up efforts to bring live performances to the countryside, thus blurring the boundaries between the elite and the general population.

This cultural policy echoes Castro's educational aims. In the same way that he sent teachers from urban to agricultural areas in the Battle for the Sixth Grade, he has been establishing theatrical groups away from the cities. As a result, most Cubans have been re-educated—academically and culturally. To make theatre available to the common people, it is usually free and costs one *peso* at most. Audiences in Havana are extremely varied—they include many families, students, blacks, whites, mestizos (African-Spanish mixture), laborers, artists, diplomats, and bureaucrats. The audience in Washington, D.C., for *Ramona* mirrored this composition.

The government's attention to and resources for cultural expansion out of cities has been successful in building a demand for and an appreciation of literature, ballet, and drama heretofore concentrated in Havana. Although about 20 percent of the country's 10 million inhabitants still live in the capital, more and more are being encouraged to move to the country. The housing shortage in cities is acute throughout the island, so the government incentives like lower-cost dwelling units in the country might make rural theatrical groups like GTE even more critical in the future.

The growing awareness of drama of all kinds throughout Cuba has brought with it a need for experimental theatre, especially in the countryside. One of the most famous of the four experimental groups is the Grupo Teatro Escambray, 12 performers who moved to central Cuba's Escambray region. GTE uses theatre for educational and social purposes there. Like other troupes in Cuba, GTE is dedicated to bringing theatre to audiences even in isolated, rural areas like Escambray.

An alternative playbill, distributed at the University of the District of Columbia the night of GTE's first performance in the Washington area (April 25, 1982), offers a minority viewpoint on how the group came into being:

Its Director was punished to exile in El Escambray, by being forced to work in the fields for his contribution to the film *Memorias del subdesarrollo*, which was considered by the Castro regime as a negative propaganda of its Revolution. Serving this sentence he starts to promote the interest amongst the peasants in the area, in the performing arts, and this theatre, which Castro claims today to be a success of the Cuban Revolution, is only the result of the well-known punishment practiced by the Communists to the intellectual freedom of thought exposed in the film *Memorias del subdesarrollo*, which pictures the truth of the Castro-Communist system. (*The Mariel Generation*)

GTE's guerrilla theatre project often has been compared to the San Francisco Mime Troupe, with one notable exception. Teatro Escambray stays

in a given area longer than does the travelling show from California. GTE conducts open rehearsals, makes explanations to the villagers, presents seminars on the history and techniques of drama, and involves the peasants in improvisations about local problems. The group does all of this on a three-month cyclical basis, returning to the first locale and picking up where it left off in cultural progress there.

GTE, funded by the Ministry of Culture (called the National Cultural Council, or Consejo Nacional de Cultura at the time), was founded by Sergio Corrieri, *Ramona's* director and co-designer of the set, in 1968. The group began by conducting a massive sociological study. It set out to learn as much as possible about the peasants in the hills south of Las Villas where it would be living. Only then was its repertory born and performed in open-air stages and in schools.

The Cuban countryside, traditionally deprived of such amenities, has been the locus of folkloric expressions—especially Afro-Cuban music and dance. GTE and its current work, *Ramona*, are part of a continuing effort to emphasize the native parts of Cuban culture over the more commercialized and westernized aspects. This goal has been called the “nationalization of Cuban culture” and implies a preference for either folkloric or newer socialist themes over Northamerican or Western European ones. *Ramona*, with its traditional guitar music, folk dances and socialist worker motif, provides both. The only instance of the influence of the United States is beaten down at the time of the Revolution.

Theatre in Cuba has had three main purposes in relation to the Revolution: to justify it, to explain it, and to criticize it. Dramas with justification as their theme generally take place in the years just before the fall of the Batista regime, as does *Ramona*. Most deal with racial or social discrimination, corruption in politics, morals or institutions, exploitation or oppression. All of these elements are present in this play to celebrate International Women's Day.

Plays that purport to explain the Revolution often present hypothetical situations. They try to reorient the public toward constructive participation in creating a new social order. Again *Ramona* fits. Only by working together are the men and women able to raise the abstract column constructed in the final scene. Their earthy dialogue, their utilitarian garb and their traditional Cuban music all emphasize the importance of collective action—fundamental to the socialist regime there. Establishing a national identity with which audiences and theatrical groups both can relate is also critical.

Ramona, although a professional production, has been staged as an inspiration, an example, to show amateur groups what can be accomplished with a minimum of props and sets.³ A single chair replaces a laundry basket and thus changes the scene from livingroom to schoolroom. With no money for stage make-up, the cast blends more easily into the audience. Combining live guitar with taped background music eliminates the need for a costly orchestra.

Various literary and artistic competitions have influenced the themes of all Cuban productions, amateur and professional. Since the Revolution, officials have encouraged socialist expressions like the triumph of work and solidarity

in *Ramona*. Contests represent only one part of the reward-punishment control operating in Cuba, according to the latest publication issued to U.S. Department of State personnel travelling there:

The government has used its power to prevent expression of dissenting views or to punish them when they are uttered. It does this by rewarding conformists and punishing nonconformists; hiring "good" revolutionaries and firing counter-revolutionaries; subsidizing, obstructing, or banning their publications, films, or plays; opening and closing publishing houses and journals; praising "good" writers and artists and condemning "bad" ones; and rewarding them with national recognition, awards, and foreign travel or punishing them with internment in labor camps.⁴

The Cuban Revolution has been credited with creating the cultural renaissance there.⁵ Before, Havana's theatres were famous for their pornography. Now, the whole country takes advantage of amateur and professional productions like *Ramona* that deal with themes like hard work, independence from capitalistic oppression, changing social customs and the position of women. This powerful play, a product of the history of Cuban theatre and the Revolution of 1959, is an evolving vehicle that will continue to reflect official patronage, cultural homogenization and changing social values in Cuba.

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Notes

1. Interview with Blanca Acosta Rabasa, Director of International Relations, Cuban Ministry of Culture, Washington, D.C., 26 April 1982.

2. Jan Knippers Black, Howard I. Blustein, J. David Edwards, Kathryn Therese Johnston, and David S. McMorris, *Area Handbook for Cuba*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976) 321.

3. Interview with Sergio Corrieri, Director, Grupo Teatro Escambray, Washington, D.C., 26 April 1982.

4. Black 312-13.

5. Terry L. Palls, "El carácter del teatro cubano contemporáneo," *Latin American Theatre Review* 13/2 (Spring 1980): 51.