

1985 Festival Latino

Adam Versényi

From its genesis in *teatro popular* to its present incarnation as the Festival Latino, the wave of Hispanic theatre at the Public Theater that now hits New York with the regularity of the August heat has become an institution. While this maturation means that there is no longer the excitement of discovering "a diamond in the rough," it also means that the breadth of offerings has widened and the size of the audience has grown. This is partially a function of the Festival's acceptance in New York, and partially the effect of the proliferation of groups and individuals across the country who are studying, promoting, or writing criticism about Hispanic-American and Latin American theatre. Our own government's insistence upon focusing North American eyes on Latin America through military intervention, and the way in which our own economy is now inextricably linked to the region's debt, make the necessity of events such as the Festival Latino paramount. Exposure to Latin American theatre, dance, music, and film helps us to comprehend the formation of Hispanic ideas and the presence of Hispanic events. If the Festival Latino in New York serves to cut away the rough edges of ignorance it will serve a laudable purpose indeed.

One of the first events at this year's festival, the performances by El Teatro Campesino, embodied this trend towards institutionalization in itself. Founded on picket lines during the great California grape strike of 1965, El Teatro Campesino is now a twenty-year-old company which has beaten a path for itself from the fields to Broadway. The two one-act pieces performed at the Public, both early pieces by Luis Valdez, were marked by the concerns of the company's seminal years. Both deal with the Vietnam War and its consequences in the Chicano community. The tenth anniversary of the Vietnam War and a sense of historical artistic perspective were the motivations for reviving these early pieces to celebrate El Teatro Campesino's twentieth anniversary.

The Dark Root of a Scream takes its title from the final line of Lorca's *Bodas de Sangre* (Blood Wedding), and was written during a period when Valdez, the company's founder, was under Lorca's spell. Tripartite staging presents the

dominant image of a coffin draped in the U.S. flag atop a dais whose steps resemble Teotihuacán, flanked by a graffiti-covered brick wall on one side and the family wake with all of its Catholic icons on the other. This set baldly focuses our attention upon the play's influences—the strands that compose Chicano culture itself.

The Dark Root of a Scream seeks to combine Mesoamerican myth with *barrio* society of the 1960's in imitation of Lorca's combination of Andalusian society with folk myths. While all the proper elements are present, the play itself is structurally weak. It attempts too many things at once, converting otherwise powerful images into artificial renderings.

Soldado razo attempts less and is more successful. Performed on the same set as *The Dark Root of a Scream* minus the dais and the coffin, *Soldado razo* primarily deals with a Chicano soldier's last night at home before shipping off for Vietnam. The play opens with a figure shrouded in half light playing taps on a harmonica before the assembled members of Johnny's family. The figure turns, snaps his fingers and the lights reveal him to be Death in the habit of a monk. Street-wise and *barrio*-hip, Death narrates Johnny's last few hours at home in which he dreams of his escape from poverty and the favorable impression he will make on his girlfriend's parents by enlisting. We are then shown Johnny writing letters home describing his growing disillusionment with the war and the part he is forced to play. In the midst of this Death shoots him with a pistol at point-blank range. To the tune of songs describing the slaughter of Mexican-American soldiers in Vietnam, Death brushes away a tear as he gives Johnny his last rites and then moves each character offstage with his gestures.

The Dark Root of a Scream and *Soldado razo* are small pieces. Dramaturgically thin, their interest comes not from their content but from what El Teatro Campesino has done with them. Well acted and very well directed by Tony Curiel, the plays show their debt to the long line of itinerant performers who came from the continent to Central America. Lorca took his cue for *La barraca* from similar sources. Such performers evolved a style of acting that, in its expansive gestures, vibrant costuming, and highly visual staging was especially appropriate to open-air performance. These pieces by El Teatro Campesino from the 1960's carry on that tradition.

Also opening the Festival was one of its most exciting offerings, Teatro del Sesenta's *La verdadera historia de Pedro Navaja*. Written and directed by Pablo Cabrera, the play is based upon a pastiche of John Gay's *Beggar's Opera* and Brecht/Weill's *Threepenny Opera*, and owes a great deal of its spirit to Rubén Blades' *salsa* hit, "Pedro Navaja." Although Cabrera's play has two endings, the first bloody finale being protested by the play's characters on the grounds that the hero never dies, this is hardly Brecht. It is, rather, a smart transposition of Gay and Brecht into a 1950's Puerto Rican milieu.

Cabrera's tale is told in a lively, flashy fashion which astutely captures the feeling of Puerto Rican society. *La verdadera historia de Pedro Navaja* moves with the rhythm of a *meringue*, and music and dance compose a large part of its appeal. The point here is first to entertain; instruction is a by-product. In this way Teatro del Sesenta's production, despite its non-Brechtian orientation, is probably closer to Brecht's *theatrical* intentions than lugubrious stagings which assault us with attempted manifestations of Brecht's theories.

Dance and music were also the medium of Wilson Pico and Susana Reyes at Circle in the Square (Downtown). From Ecuador, Wilson Pico and Susana Reyes have been at the forefront of institutionalizing Latin American modern dance as a vital force. Their performance at the Festival Latino went under the title of *Los materiales de la ira y el amor* (Materials of Anger and Love). Its intent was to show the vagaries of Latin American life past and present.

While both are technically accomplished dancers, the choreography presented was exceedingly repetitious (nowhere was repetition incorporated as a choreographic idea), and badly in need of some judicious pruning. The performers were obviously unfamiliar with their performance space, frequently dancing on the murky fringes of their light. Of the six pieces performed, only Susana Reyes' *Los mantos* (The Shawls) and Wilson Pico's *Boca Ira* managed to break the pattern. *Los mantos* did so more by the force of its individual images than its overall content.

One of the most visually compelling events at the 1985 Festival was Fundación Rajatablas' production of *Bolívar*. This ambitious work by the Venezuelan company is an elaboration of a text by the Spanish playwright José Antonio Rial and directed by the Argentinian Carlos Giménez. Both men are expatriate residents of Venezuela forced to leave their respective countries by politics.

Rajatablas' *Bolívar* opened in 1983 on the bicentennial of his birth. Far from a strict retelling of Bolívar's life, it draws parallels between the events of his life and the tyrannical governments existing in the region today. The play seeks to de-emphasize Bolívar's heroic status by stressing his private tribula-



Simón Bolívar, Grupo Rajatablas (Venezuela). Festival Latino, Nueva York, 1985.

tions. In this way Bolívar's long struggle to liberate Spanish-speaking America from colonial oppression is given broader resonance.

Bolívar begins the moment the spectator enters the auditorium and is faced by an armed soldier patrolling the aisles. On stage, other soldiers lounge around a central elevated platform, framed by long wooden benches at both upstage corners and two benches to either side. A man is dragged up a staircase onto the platform. Two soldiers pin his arms while a third cuts his hair, forcing him to eat the clippings. The other soldiers laugh.

In a manner consciously reminiscent of *Marat/Sade* it becomes apparent that this is a concentration camp for political prisoners where the inmates are being forced to perform a play in honor of Bolívar's bicentennial. Unlike *Marat/Sade*, however, *Bolívar* is an unfinished production whose complexity allows the company a constant means of exploring their craft as new scenes are investigated, new images discarded. For this reason it sometimes has a rehearsal quality, a process fulfilling for the participants but hollow for the spectator.

From the play's beginning there is a constant tension between the story of Bolívar's life and the contemporary concentration camp. In a brief dialogue the camp commandant speaks in mechanical tones while the Poet, the author of the prisoner's play, employs surrealistic imagery. The Poet's creed is that "creation is a means of avoiding fear," but fear permeates the type of utterance—broken sentences, sharp intakes of breath, non sequiturs—used by the prisoners themselves.

Bolívar is a huge play for thirty actors and contains impressive special effects. It converts Bolívar's life and more recent Latin American history into baroque theatre. Like a cathedral which can never be viewed in its totality, *Bolívar* gives us fragmented images of scenes, history, and dreams. Unlike the cathedral's construction which is proportionately harmonious, however, *Bolívar* is a study in imbalance. There is no de Sade directing the action. Brutalized prisoners fear the events of the Poet's play will come true (an actor will suffer his character's execution), and flee. The guards, as representatives of mindless authority, press them back into the prescribed framework. Both destroy the Poet's play. *Bolívar* is "total theatre." Although it is a work in progress—there are a number of extraneous portions which might be cut—when the proper images are juxtaposed against one another we are forced to view them in a new way. It sucks us into its world where we can experience the fear, the hope, and the exaltation of Bolívar the Liberator as well as the smaller figures of what he called his Gran Colombia.

Another fine piece in the Festival Latino was the Universidad Católica de Chile's production of *El loco y la triste* (The Madman and the Sad Woman). This small jewel of a play by Juan Radrigán deals with the hopes and aspirations of two street people, Huinca and Eva, as they struggle for happiness.

The physical action of the play is minimal, largely composed of Eva's insistence upon cleaning up their slum shack, but the interior development of the two characters gives the play enormous implications. The story is simple. Eva is a woman who tenaciously holds on to her dignity by making up her dilapidated mattress and cast-off bedstead each morning. Her companion



El loco y la triste de Juan Radrigán. Teatro de la Universidad de Chile. Festival Latino, Nueva York, 1985.

Huinca is a bum slightly addled by drink. Although he is labelled as the crazy one, Huinca finds Eva's mania for a house of her own to be the true madness. To him "mankind is a desert populated by hope . . . You have to be mad in order to be free of all ties . . . You'll have a house on the other side. The thing to do is die. Die singing." Eva flees from Huinca's philosophy, finding nothing outside but a truck whose loudspeaker announces that the slum will be razed. In the face of destruction Huinca initiates an intricate courtship game. He makes brightly colored crepe streamers and proposes to Eva. They marry each other with a kiss beneath the strung up crepe and sit down to a meager wedding feast, Eva's bedsheet spread over one of their crates as a table. As they eat the sound of a bulldozer bearing down upon them is heard. Eva frantically gathers together her possessions while Huinca begins to dance, his crippled legs gradually regaining their youthful vigor. Eva watches in astonishment, then joins him. They dance joyfully as the bulldozer approaches.

El loco y la triste reminds one at times of the frenetic humor of a play like Murray Schisgall's *The Tiger*, but its ultimate resonances are more akin to Fugard's *Boesman and Lena*. It is no accident that the music to which Huinca and Eva dance is played by Víctor Jara, the Chilean folk singer and Allende supporter whose hands were cut off after the 1973 coup.

Though quite different in style from Fundación Rajatablas' *Bolívar*, Nucleo Pessoal do Victor's production of *Feliz Ano Velho* (Happy Old Year) was equally compelling visually. The play tells the story of two men's lives: Rubens Paiva, a socialist congressman who disappeared during a period of repression in the early 60's; and his son Marcelo Rubens Paiva, paralyzed by an accident at the age of twenty. The action ricochets between Marcelo's present reality, his memory, and his fits of delirium. Flashbacks, rock music, gymnastics, and popular films are *Feliz Ano Velho's* tools.

The play's opening image is of a young man in red shorts and sneakers kneeling, his face to the ground. He stretches, then climbs to the top of the set's central ladder and swan dives off of it, landing on a mattress at stage center. Marcelo has broken fifteen of his vertebrae. From this moment on the play becomes a rapid flow of scenes and images culled from Marcelo's delirium, his memory, and his hospital bed. The play's final tableau is of Marcelo on his hospital bed, R2D2-like mechanical figures moving across the stage as Rubens and Eunice light sparklers.

Feliz Ano Velho is a product of the raucous, industrial São Paulo milieu. Where *Bolívar* dazzles us with baroque complexity, *Feliz Ano Velho* stuns us with its raw energy. Such industrial power is made all the more evident by Noqueira's poignant portrayal of Eunice endlessly searching for Rubens while supporting her son. As with *Las madres del Plaza de Mayo* in Argentina, it is the women of Latin America who suffer the most and yet are expected to endure.

Two of the most disappointing events presented at this year's Festival Latino were *La increíble y triste historia de la cándida Eréndira y de su abuela desalmada* (The Sad and Incredible Story of the Fool Eréndira and Her Heartless Grandmother) performed by Teatro el Local de Colombia, and *El jinete de la divina providencia* (The Godsent Rider), performed by Teatro de la Universidad de Sinaloa from México. The first failed to embrace the spirit of Gabriel García Márquez' novella, and the second to effectively bring to fruition its initial promise.

Gabriel García Márquez' *La cándida Eréndira* tells the story of a pretty young girl named Eréndira whose grandmother forces her to sell her sexual favors to all comers after she inadvertently burns down the grandmother's house. Eréndira becomes an extremely sought-after prostitute as they travel throughout Márquez' magical world, the grandmother keeping a ledger in which she lists Eréndira's earnings alongside the value of her destroyed home plus all the expenses they incur in their journey. Eréndira's misery only ends



Feliz Ano Velho de Alcides Noqueira, Nucleo Pessoal do Víctor. Festival Latino, Nueva York, 1985.



La cándida Eréndira, Teatro el Local de Colombia. Festival Latino, Nueva York, 1985.

when she falls in love with a sixteen-year-old customer named Ulises. After many foiled attempts they manage to free her by murdering her grandmother.

Teatro el Local tries to portray the broad scope of García Márquez' world by adding numerous scenes from his other short stories as transitory links between portions of the *Eréndira* story, or to embellish its individual scenes. Unfortunately, such a strategy only adds to the production's central problem: a failure to find an effective stage equivalent for García Márquez' form of literature. Teatro el Local's production limps through the moments of *Eréndira*'s life, subjecting us to interminable scene changes as it follows the novel's progression literally.

The set, with its bright yellow floor where black lines swirl in circles reminiscent of desert sand or a spider's web, a brilliant blue eye, and one multi-panelled flat, points the way to a possible solution: a cartoon palette. Such an approach would only be successful if the cartoon exaggerations were invested in fully. Teatro el Local accidently approximates what I mean when Ulises and *Eréndira* attempt to escape and a lengthy chase in cardboard cutout trucks, the drivers shouting "vroom, vroom," ensues. If this type of irreverent circus atmosphere had been maintained throughout the piece it might have been possible to encounter a three-dimensional stage equivalent of García Márquez' work.

Teatro de la Universidad de Sinaloa's production of *El jinete de la divina providencia* is based upon the historical figure of Jesús Malverde, a Mexican Robin Hood who roamed the countryside at the turn of the century stealing from the rich and giving to the poor. Caught and executed, his body was dumped in the open, the authorities giving strict instructions to the populace not to bury him. Ignoring their decree, each person brought one river stone to the place where he lay until he was completely covered. According to legend,

the grateful Malverde's soul performed a miracle for every person who brought a stone.

El jinete de la divina providencia, written and directed by Oscar Liera, juxtaposes a diocesan investigation into Malverde's possible sainthood with scenes from the town's history as told by the investigation's informants. The stage is divided into two playing areas: a central rectangle filled with thousands of stones upon which sit a wooden table and a bathtub, and the rectangle's perimeter where the contemporary investigation takes place. Isolated images: the sea of stones before anyone steps on them making seventy-five percent of the play inaudible, the entire town wearing bloody bandages on their hands when Malverde is shot during a close escape, or the final tableau in which the whole cast bends and drops a stone in unison as Governor Canedo's skull is smashed by Adela, his serving woman, are quite arresting, but the full play fails to fulfill the promise of its parts. Liera's production forces us to work so hard for so little that it ultimately desecrates the memory of the Malverde it wishes to deify.

Another disappointment was Comedia Nacional Cervantes from Argentina's production of Roberto Cossa's play, *Los compadritos*. Cossa is one of the best known contemporary Argentinian playwrights, a position justified by his early *Nuestro fin de semana* (Our Weekend)—an accomplished foray into psychological realism—and his very funny *La Nona* in which a grandmother's voracious appetite destroys an entire family.

Los compadritos, in contrast, struggles towards hilarity. The play departs from the historical sinking off the Uruguayan shore of the German submarine *Admiral Graf von Spee* during World War II. Approximately one thousand German sailors were granted asylum in Argentina. Some two hundred settled there permanently and many are still alive today. Cossa's play rearranges history to serve its own needs, resurrecting the sub's captain, Commander Steiner, who committed suicide after obtaining asylum for his men. In its physical execution, with the exception of stereotypical mugging (raised eyebrows and moustache twitching) by the German Commander, this production is technically accomplished farce, but its content lacks any shred of intelligence. Perhaps a perception that the play satirizes the recently retired junta has afforded it such success in Buenos Aires. One can only hope the city's other stages have moved beyond this sort of thing.

To mark the end of the United Nations Decade of Women, the 1985 Festival Latino presented seven plays by or about women under the rubric "Women in Theater." Sistren Collective of Jamaica's performance of *Muffet: Inna All A Wi* was one of the first of these productions. Celebrating their own eighth anniversary, Sistren brought the unabashed excitement of a certain type of popular theatre to New York. Founded in 1977, Sistren Collective is now an active cultural and political force in the Caribbean region. Through its Popular Education Programme, its theatre, its textile manufacturing, its music, and, more recently, a movie, Sistren offers individuals an opportunity to re-examine the capability of working women's imagination to transform their lives.

Muffet: Inna All A Wi continues the same themes that Sistren's workshop material employs but broadens the technique to include a loosely constructed

series of linked scenes. A Little Miss Muffet character, played interchangeably by a number of women in patchwork costumes, encounters a variety of different situations in which her degradation or humiliation is orchestrated by a masked, male Trickster figure. Muffet finally defeats the Trickster by exhausting him in a dance battle and the audience is invited to sing.

Muffet: Inna All A Wi is overly long as it now stands, and a number of its vignettes may seem derivative or clichéd to North American audiences. The gains made by the women's movement here and the impact of women's issues upon our daily lives are not matched in a Jamaica where a man holds the post of Minister of Women's Affairs and was slated to head the Jamaican delegation to the International Conference of Women in Nairobi. Nor does the economic situation of the majority of North American women match that of their Caribbean sistren. In the Caribbean context a work such as *Muffet: Inna All A Wi* will not by itself end an oppressive system, but with its humor and simplicity it helps people to have the hope necessary to fight to rectify societal abuses.

Among the plays included in the "Women in Theater" section of the Festival was the winner of the New York Shakespeare Festival's First National Contest for Latino Plays, Edward Gallardo's *Women without Men*. Directed by Santiago García, director of the well-known Colombian company La Candelaria, *Women without Men* tells the story of six women who work in a garment factory during World War II. Although Gallardo has attempted to expand his play by including a sensitive portrayal of lesbianism and the presence of a fiery pacifist among the women, *Women without Men* is a formula play. Predictable and frequently sententious, it is bad Tennessee Williams saved by some very good acting. While a national contest for Latino playwrights is unquestionably a commendable idea, it can only be hoped that future contests will produce plays of greater quality.

Si me permiten hablar (If You Allow Me to Speak) performed by Susana Alexander provided the Mexican entry into the "Women in Theater" portion of the Festival. Directed by Roberto D'Amico, primarily known for his television work in Mexico, *Si me permiten hablar* is composed of a series of poems and prose pieces written by Latin American women. Presented in front of a phalanx of flippable boards of the kind used to display posters in museum gift shops, to which are attached a variety of blown-up pictures, *Si me permiten hablar* is more of a recital than a performance. While Alexander is sensitive to the different tones of her selections, her delivery rarely varies. There is little attempt to explore the pieces from the inside, most of them are presented to us straight from the page. Rounding out this portion of the Festival was the Brazilian Marília Pera's performance of *Brincando em cima daquilo*, a Portuguese translation of Dario Fo and Franca Rame's *Tutta casa, letto e chiesa* (All House, Bed and Church), performed in this country by Estelle Parsons under the title *Orgasmo Adulto Escapes from the Zoo*.

Marília Pera began the evening sitting on stage, greeting the audience. As latecomers straggled in she joked with audience members and answered their questions about the show's history. An intimate, cabaret atmosphere was created which added an extra dimension to Pera's excellent performance of the piece's five monologues. Vivacious and sexy in "A Woman Alone,"

comically demented yet poignantly persuasive in "Freak Mama," harrowingly descriptive with only her face appearing in a tight spot in "Stupor," hilariously realistic in "Waking Up," and appropriately feline in "The Same Old Story," Pera bounds through the play connecting each monologue with a song sung to the hilt. Displaying the same raw energy she brought to Huberto Babenco's *Pixote*, yet adding to it an appealing sophistication, Marília Pera is a delight.

In summary, this year's Festival focused upon established companies or theatre artists. Although it included groups such as Sistren Collective or El Teatro Campesino, who have their roots in popular theatre, their longevity and (in El Teatro Campesino's case) commercial exploits have legitimized them. The plethora of companies in exile that has marked previous festivals was represented this year by the author and director of *Bolívar* alone. In contrast to other expatriates, José Antonio Rial and Carlos Giménez have both established permanent residences in Venezuela. The character of their work derives from the Venezuelan context, not that of exile. The characteristics of longevity, legitimization, and established reputation found in the companies, reflect the changing character of the Festival Latino in New York itself. While it retains connections to the *barrio*, the Festival is now an institution providing the metropolitan region the opportunity to experience Hispanic sensibility and perspective rather than a crucible of community activism and theatrical technique. As an institution the Festival Latino in New York deserves the support of those who would seek to remove barriers to cultural understanding, thereby benefiting us all.

New Haven, Connecticut