Plays in Performance

A Barter in Barrio Ansina

March 30, 1987, 10.30 A.M.: a large crowd gathers amid the ruins of an inner city barrio (district) and slowly gravitates towards an open space where benches are laid out in a semi-circle, facing what remains of a brick wall. Against a backdrop of discarded rubbish, crumbling row houses overgrown with grass, and façades pock-marked with gaping holes that were once windows, a 15 foot skeleton figure on stilts and wearing formal black tails entertains the crowd with his antics. The figure, known affectionately as Mr. Peanuts, is familiar to many of the spectators because he has been around the streets of Montevideo, in the newspapers, and on television for the past few weeks. Wherever he goes crowds of children gather around him watched over by their parents who, though they remain at a respectful distance, are equally intrigued by this bizarre character that seems to combine death and the playful. Here is no different as Mr. Peanuts reaches down to shake hands with one of the children who barely reaches up to his knees, only to be thwarted at the last minute when the child backs off fearfully, prompting a mock sign of offense from Mr. Peanuts who blows the duck decoy whistle in his mouth and scowls menacingly at everyone, provoking howls of laughter. As the laughter subsides one of the braver children reaches up and manages to shake hands with the daunting figure that towers over him. This contact breaks the ice and all the children rush to shake his hand as the adults smile and applaud their approval.

Suddenly on top of an old rococo building across the street a man in a white shirt, black pants, and top hat lifts a trumpet to his lips and sounds a fanfare. As the last notes drift across the barrio several black men on the balcony of an adjacent building begin singing a melody not unlike the samba.

The crowd bursts into applause as the gentle rhythm of the

singers is taken over by a pounding beat and a group of drummers, led by a woman dressed as if she were the trumpeter's twin, appear from among the ruins. As the black drummers, each dressed in a colorful cape which matches his loose fitting shirt and pants, come to a halt on the wall in front of the audience dancers descend from behind them into Mr. Peanut's semi-circle. The dancers, the men dressed in what appears to be hand-me-down remnants of eighteenth century clothing and the women in archetypal nanny costumes, begin dancing a mock quadrille as they sing and clap in time to the incessant beat of the drums.

Thus begins the Odin Teatret's first "theatrical exchange" on its current tour of South and Central America. An exchange which has brought together its street theatre skills, nurtured in its European homeland, with Uruguay's Candombe.

The Odin Teatret, whose home is in Holstebro, a small town in Western Denmark, has instigated similar exchanges in many places around the world from Europe to Venezuela, Peru, Colombia, Israel, and even Japan. This concept of theatre as an exchange originated when the company began experimenting open air and street performances during two extended residencies in Southern Italy in the early 70's. These experiments led to the group exchanging its outdoor performances for the folk songs and dances of the local peasants who could not afford the price of a theatre ticket. In writing about these exchanges Eugenio Barba, the group's founder and director, coined the term barter, that is, an exchange in which the only currency is performance: a dance for a song, a tune for a parade of stilt figures, or a violin solo for an acrobatic display.[1]

In its current barter the Odin is working with the leading exponents of Candombe, Montevideo's black people. These people, who number less than 60,000 and represent only some three to four percent of Uruguay's population, are fortunate enough to live in a country where racial prejudice is virtually non-existent. This lack of prejudice is nowhere more evident than in Uruguay's high level of racial integration, something that many countries might envy, but which has created its own, unique problem. Since the black minorities' roots and skin color differ from the whites many blacks are confronted with a question of identity: on the one hand they are Uruguayan, but on the other they are aware of being members of a minority which is dispersed among the greater population and has all but disappeared as a distinctive community.

Candombe is the soul of this ephemeral black minority because it is its only unique manifestation still shared and loved by the majority of black people. This black art is an oral tradition which developed from a variety of sources including the African rhythms

brought with the slaves, the Spanish flamenco, Cuban and Caribbean influences, and the quadrille of the former colonial white aristocracy. These sources have synthesized into a musical form that includes guitars, singers, dancers, and above all drums. The drums, or tambores, are the heart of Candombe and most groups boast forty or fifty of them.

Montevideo has many Candombe groups, all of which center around a city district or charismatic leader. These groups vary considerably in size and in their member's expertise, but even the smallest and least proficient of groups boast a number of drummers and a troupe of singer/dancers made up of stock characters and the rough equivalent of a corps de ballet that sings as well as dances.

Representatives from six Candombe groups have joined the Odin for the Montevideo barter, which grew out of a meeting between Barba and several black leaders some twelve months before, when he visited the city with Odin's off-shoot company, Farfa. At this meeting these leaders and Barba discussed the idea of working together, but commitments made it impossible at the time.

When Barba returned with the Odin, contact was re-established and the project discussed once more. During these discussions the black leaders suggested that the barter take place in the barrio Ansina, as a symbolic gesture, because many black families lived in it prior to its demolition helping to make it an important center of black culture. Barba agreed and plans were made.

Faithful to the concept of barter as an exchange rather than as a rehearsed performance, the Candombe artists and the Odin actors worked together for the first time when the audience filled the barrio. An audience now sits captivated as the Odin trumpeter sounds another fanfare and begins descending a rope to the street some fifty feet below. On reaching the street he is met by his twin and together they join the Candombe dancers as a squatting, dwarf-like figure in a menacing pink mask appears amongst the drummers. With a swirl of the ribboned stick he holds in his right hand he marshals the drummers, in a parody of the formal drum major, and leads them in among the dancers.

The tempo of the drums increases as the top hat twins blacken their faces and don black gloves, a mark of respect when whites join blacks in the Candombe, and begin a mock combat in time to the drummer's beat.

As the audience applauds their humorous antics the dwarf drum major raises himself to his full height and performs an acrobatic tour-de-force of body rolls and contortions to the pounding rhythms.

The drummers increase their tempo yet again as the drum major exits to a thunderous ovation and the huge skeleton figure of Mr.

Peanuts takes center-stage. The Candombe performers and drummers gather around the dancing figure as it removes its jacket and skeleton head to reveal an Odin actress in a traditional Candombe costume. The audience cheers this symbolic marriage of the two traditions and begins to clap in time to the drums as all the performers blend into a climactic blur of pounding beats, singing, and frenzied dancing.

Suddenly everything stops. A distinguished looking black man steps up to a microphone and all eyes focus on him as he formally welcomes Barba and his actors. He then begins reading a prepared speech in which he notes the source of pride in these festivities for the black community, firstly because a leading international theatre company has asked to work with them, and secondly because it has demonstrated a unity among the black people of Montevideo insofar as several candombe groups and their fans, who rarely fraternize, have combined to realize the barter. Finally he turns his attention to the political aspirations of the gathering: to draw attention to the fact that the barrio, formally one of the black community's major centers, remains in ruins despite government promises to rebuild it. This point draws loud applause from the audience and the drummers take up the beat once more, which serves as a signal for the performers to begin dancing again, and to slowly move off into the street together.

With the drums and singer's voices fading and the crowd slowly deserting the barrio one is left to mull the broader implications of what has taken place.

Barters, like this one in Uruguay, question the traditional value of performance because they alter our conventional measure of theatre's worth. Exchanging performance for hard currency, obviously, has no meaning in such a context. In Montevideo, for example, the audience saw the performance for free, and neither the professional Candombe artists nor the Odin actors were paid. Similarly, even though politics were an important consideration for the black leaders, they had little direct impact on the barter itself since the performance contained no explicit political "message" in the form of a text or narrative. The "messages" were left for the speech at the end of the performance.

The primary focus of the barter was the meeting between the actors, singers, dancers, and musicians. This meeting took the form of a celebratory performance in which an exchange between very different theatrical traditions played the leading role. Politics were implicit in the exchange, but to borrow from Marshall McLuhan, the medium (i.e., the performance) was the message. In such an exchange theatre becomes a point of active cultural interaction, with its value measured in social rather than monetary or esthetic terms.

The barter in barrio Ansina was, to borrow a colloquialism, "fun," but it was "fun" with important ramifications for today's theatre.

Ian Watson
New York

Notes

1. In keeping with Barba's approach to dramaturgy, these street performances are based on improvisations explored during rehearsals rather than on a scripted text. This reliance on improvisation dates from Barba's work in the early 70's when he abandoned the dramatic text as a production source, and began creating entire works which combine a physical score based on improvisation and fragments of various "found" texts, such as verses of poetry and sections of prose.

Tango varsoviano on North American Tour

The Teatro del Sur from Buenos Aires toured the United States and Canada in 1988 with its play *Tango varsoviano*. The play was created by director Alberto Felix Alberto, who founded and has directed the group since the 1960's. Alberto was rewarded for his efforts on *Tango varsoviano*, for which he also did the set and lighting design, in late 1987 with the Molière Award for Best Director. The tour began in Baltimore and Philadelphia, then traveled to Knoxville and Memphis, Tennessee in late April. Next it went to Washington, D.C. and Toronto before concluding at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York.

Tango varsoviano challenges the traditional viewing skills of the audience with a performance that is confusing, disorienting, and at times frustrating. It provides viewers with a series of events in which information is given in short, quick scenes that repeat, then vary slightly, and then repeat again as they focus on first one side of the stage and then the other. There is little verbal communication. Only two lines are spoken, then repeated several times through the play, and their function seems more poetic than dramatic. Most of the drama of the play is communicated through the lighting, the music, and the movement of the actors and actresses. The explanation for the disjointed nature of the scenes revolves around the main character, Amanda, who is either remembering or imagining events from her

past. The play presents its events as if they were coming straight from Amanda's unconscious mind, unorganized, redundant, and confused.

There are several possible stories that can be constructed after viewing the play. The following plot summary provides the bare bones of the dramatic developments. As the play begins Amanda is ironing and listening to the radio in her room. A song, "Pero Yo Sé," written and sung by Azucena Maizani, brings images to her mind. After numerous cuts between the two areas of the stage the audience is introduced to El Polaco, a slender almost effeminate man dressed in a dark suit, and La Diva a sensual performer of tangos and/or owner of a brothel. The play depicts the romantic relationships between Amanda and El Polaco, and La Diva and El Magnífico. On the surface the two affairs contrast the elegance and daring of El Magnífico and La Diva with the humble crudeness of Amanda and El Polaco. Finally the two affairs intersect when El Polaco declares his love for El Magnífico, who returns it. The abandoned Amanda murders her lover and seeks to avenge herself against El Magnífico as well. When the play ends both women have lost their men and resign themselves to a life of prostitution.

As was mentioned earlier, the stage establishes two areas of action: the world of Amanda, that consists of a table to iron on, a radio on the wall, and a full clothesline, and the world of La Diva containing tables and chairs of a nightclub or brothel. The two worlds are separated by a screen made up of panels with carved gilded frames that surround a transparent fabric. The viewers can see through the fabric and witness the action on the other side. The division between these two worlds appears to separate fantasy or memory from reality. yet, at one point in the play the screens are turned around to reveal theatrical lights as the new frames for the transparent cloth. La Diva suddenly moves her bar into the middle of the stage in front of Amanda's clothesline and the lives of the two women seem to fuse.

The performance itself is a sophisticated orchestration of sound, light, stylization of movement, and sequencing of events. Both the music on the radio and the music that accompanies the performance are essential to the dramatic action. They trigger Amanda's memory, but they also foreshadow and accentuate the meaning of specific actions. Numerous, sudden black-outs shift the audience's attention from one area of the stage to another. Lighting changes (there are over 300 cues) uncover and expand the desires of the characters and project their emotions onto their surroundings. Amanda's features are made harsh by blue and white spots. El Polaco's death is made larger but less real by a red spot that projects the shadow of his head on

the wall. The colors of the lights change with the characters and with the movements between the different areas of the stage.

The actors and actresses passing in front of and underneath the lights hold and move their bodies in a stylized manner that often echoes the posturing of soap opera or "fotonovela" characters. The repetition of some gestures, such as La Diva's mocking laugh as she flings back her head and El Magnífico's defiant stance, allude to stereotypes from the world of the tango. Other gestures take on new meaning as they are repeated in different contexts. Amanda's thwarted dreams of sexual fulfillment are communicated in the opening moments as a nervous straightening of her housedress. That action of smoothing out the dress is then reintroduced in a first meeting with El Polaco and then again in the closing moments as she smoothes out the creases in her new "street-walking" dress.

The characters in *Tango varsoviano* are products of Argentina's nostalgia for the past and its love for the tango. Director Alberto stated that the play tells of the mythology of Argentina, a mythology that is sung and lived in tangos. La Diva, El Magnífico, and El Polaco represent the prostitutes and rogues who are said to be the first devotees of the tango, and also the subjects of the songs. Amanda's lonely existence appears to brighten when she escapes to the world of memory inhabited by these flamboyant characters. Yet, she and the audience eventually realize that the memory only conserves handsome façades. All the characters of the play are attempting to cover up the sadness of unfulfilled dreams. It is a sadness that Argentineans sing about in the tango and that they identify as endemic to their homeland.

Tango varsoviano was made for an intimate playhouse, such as the one Teatro del Sur occupies in Buenos Aires. However, it has the power to enthrall a larger audience for the one hour and thirty five minutes of its performance. It is a complex dramatic experience that incorporates the broadest range of technical and artistic elements possible. The richness of its theatricality cannot be adequately reproduced in a review nor conserved in a playscript. It must be experienced along with others in the audience.

Margo Milleret
University of Tennessee

Tango varsoviano by the Teatro del Sur (Buenos Aires), directed by Alberto Felix Alberto. Production staged at the University of Tennessee. Courtesy: Margo Milleret.