
Drama Cubano

MIA LEONIN | **AUGUST 15, 2002** | **4:00AM**

Prerevolutionary Cuban thinker Felix Varela declared that intellectuals should not cloister themselves in an ivory tower. In fact he claimed their primary obligation is to take on society's most pertinent issues, to act as an illuminator and guide for the people. In 1998 the first independent library in Cuba was named after Varela. It is no mistake that both of the plays in the Cuban American Repertory Theatre's debut, which opened August 3 at the Miami Light Project, deal with freedom of expression -- one in particular with the independent library movement, a grassroots-level struggle against national censure. As if heeding a call from the beginning of Cuban history, Cuban-American actor and director John Rodaz has made yet another interesting turn in his career.

Formerly known as Area Stage and briefly as Oye Rep, the company and its founder, Rodaz, seem to be narrowing their focus from good theater (Area Stage garnered much acclaim and several Carbonell awards) to good theater by Cuban-American playwrights. This vision began to develop with Area Stage's production of *Passages*, a multifaceted drama about Cuban rafters. Another Cuban-American one-woman show, *Rum & Coke*, written and performed by Carmen Pelaez, became so popular that it caught the attention of Ted Koppel, who taped a segment for *Nightline*. In 2000, taking a new direction, Rodaz and actor Carlos Orizondo founded Oye Rep, dedicating its entire energy to the production of Hispanic works of theater in English. Its inaugural production was the world premiere of *Arrivals and Departures*, by Rogelio Martinez, and *Agua Ardiente*, written and performed by Michael Garces, both Cuban-American playwrights living in New York City.

As Rodaz explains, making the transition to Oye Rep opened the doors for the Cuban American Repertory Theatre (CART). "When we founded Oye Rep, the name itself drew a lot of attention from other Hispanic companies, actors, and writers," he says. "I was bombarded with tapes, manuscripts, and ideas -- some of them quite good. I started looking around at other groups like the Puerto Rican Traveling Theater in New York and thought, 'Why couldn't we do that?'"

Besides developing and producing the work of Cuban-American artists, CART's mission is to cultivate new work and original scripts. No other company in Miami is doing that -- Cuban American or otherwise.

The new season opens with *Lenin's Omelet*, two contemporary one-act plays again by 30-year-old Martinez, who left Cuba on the Mariel boatlift. *The Writers Union* centers on a meeting between a foreign journalist and two writers (one who has conformed his writing to state-supported rhetoric and another who has been shunned for writing a novel that criticizes the Communist system). The play is humorous, acerbic, and well honed. In the second piece, *June 3, 1961 Independent Library*, a man decides to take a stand against Castro's government by opening his private library to neighbors. There are unnecessary moments that bog the story down -- a tragic death never quite unraveled, random neighbors scurrying about, and a few unnecessary dialogues. That said, some delightful allusions to Hollywood of the Forties transport us to a prerevolutionary Cuba, then snap us back into the present. The effect is cinematic, dramatic, and unsettling -- and it makes the story much more engaging on a human level.

Lenin's Omelet feels decidedly Cuban American. One is aware of looking at a moment in history (albeit recent and current) through the lens of distance, family, and exile. The plays sometimes leaves us teetering on the edge of the didactic. There are exceptions -- moments of theatricality that transcend the potentially rigid agenda of social realism and cut to the matter more quickly. The cameo moments from Ricky Martinez, for example. In the first play, he shuffles onstage to push trash to one side of the room from another, and the young journalist (Jennifer de Castroverde) applauds his proletariat purposefulness. Later he reads Flaubert in the independent library while trying to hide a pig from his neighbors. One wants more of this theatrical verve and inventiveness. Both plays also leave us with the question of history -- what do dramatizations of repression mean to us here in Miami at this moment in history? It's a valuable question for a Cuban-American theater group to pose.

Rodaz has assembled a strong troupe for CART's debut, and it makes the evening of theater delightful and entertaining. De Castroverde is a standout in both acts but especially notable as the wide-eyed journalist whose twisted, anti-capitalist theories are all the more humorous and believable in the wake of Enron and WorldCom: "The title of my publication is *Decadent Response*. Our goal is to destroy capitalism by living above our means and spending a lot of money." Oscar Isaac is professional and engaging, and both Ramon Gonzalez-Cuevas and Gonzalo Madurga give moving monologues -- this intergenerational cast works well together.

On the other side of town, in the warehouse venue of Teatro La Ma Teodora's La Magagna, Cuban actress Grettel Trujillo performed *El Enano en la Botella*, a Spanish-language monologue written by Cuban writer Abilio Estevez and inspired by a close friend who left Cuba in the early Nineties. This richly crafted text is an allegory about a dwarf trapped in a bottle. It is easy to see the bottle as Communist Cuba, although that is just the most obvious of many possible interpretations.

Ingeniously this script embraces the didactic and thereby transcends it. *El Enano* (the dwarf) periodically scrawls on a chalkboard at center stage. He writes: "The distance between desperation and hope equals the distance between the thing and the archetype" and "The difference between life and death in a bottle is less than the possible difference between desperation and hope." These lofty ideas coupled with Trujillo's highly physical performance and Raul Martin's astute direction made for an intense theatrical experience. Trujillo's range of physical and vocal control is impressive -- a highly trained actress, she gives the existential questions of the play substance with her projection and physicality. Again, La Ma Teodora has produced a work that is as metaphysical as it is metaphorical. La Magagna's run of *El Enano* has ended, but there's a possibility the show will reopen in Little Havana's Tower Theatre.

At the Miami Light Project, the curtain lowers. At La Magagna, the lights dim. One realizes that not only are different generations of Cuban exiles speaking in different languages and idioms but also that a plethora of voices is being heard from both sides of the Florida Straits -- all here in Miami. If Cuban Americans are exiles of Cuba, artistically and emotionally, Cubans on the island are exiles of Miami. These works celebrate the range of theatrical possibilities that any issue carries. It is also a reminder that in any part of the world, freedom of expression is only as vital as the people who take advantage of it.

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