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Cuban Heritage Collection Undergraduate Scholar Report

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### Carlos Felipe: A needed study

During my years of study at the Higher Institute of Arts in Havana, I had the opportunity to encounter the work of Carlos Felipe. As a student of Theater Studies, knowing the work of this Cuban playwright was essential in understanding the transition of Cuban theater toward modernity. I remember enjoying the lecture of *Requiem por Yarini* and *El Chino* and having studied Felipe's role alongside other playwrights such as Virgilio Piñera and Rolando Ferrer in the creation of a foundation for the future of Cuban theater. With Carlos Felipe's work, a new period in the history of playwriting began in Cuba. Felipe was one of the first to introduce new dramatic techniques to Cuban Theater such as theatre-within-theatre and psychodrama. Though Felipe used European techniques, his themes were Cuban, characterizing his work by the exploration of cultural aspects of Cuban life. However, if my generation witnessed the rescue of Piñera's work, after a long period of silence, with the presentation of his plays and the publication of his entire work—plays, poems, and stories—the work of Carlos Felipe continues to be virtually unknown to the general Cuban audience beyond the classrooms of the performing arts department in the Higher Institute of the Arts.

Consulting the archives in the Cuban Heritage Collection in search for a possible theme to investigate, I was surprised to find the papers of Carlos and Rosa Felipe. This collection, acquired for the CHC in 2010, immediately called my attention and gave me the idea to inquire into the life and work of Carlos Felipe. I was driven by the belief that his writings need to be shared for a better understanding of the development of the history of Cuban theater. The Goizueta Foundation Undergraduate Fellowship provided me with the opportunity to dedicate the spring of 2011 to enhancing my knowledge of the life and work of this author. In my process

of investigation I had the privilege to work with Professor Lillian Manzor, who served as my mentor. Professor Manzor gave me as one of my main objectives of my fellowship project to expand Carlos Felipe's page in the Cuban Theatre Digital Archive. In the course of this semester I completed a biography of the author and a bibliography of primary and secondary sources. I also worked to identify those visual materials that could be digitized, allowing access to them through the Cuban Theatre Digital Archive website. Another focal point of my project was to create a list of the performances of Carlos Felipe's plays both in Cuba and abroad to understand how his work has influenced the growth of Cuban theater. Hopefully, this information will contribute to the enhancement of the knowledge about this writer not just in the United States but throughout the world.

An additional purpose of my investigation was to research a specific aspect of Felipe's life or writings to amplify the availability of information about the author and, in this manner, take advantage of my privileged position of having access to not only primary sources of the writer's papers, but to the rich collection of secondary sources about Cuban theater available at the Cuban Heritage Collection. At first, I planned to examine Felipe's lesser known plays or analyze how women are depicted in his works. However, as I got more familiar with the material available on the writer, a question started to surface and ended up becoming the topic of my research.

Putting together the author's biography I realized that between the year 1964, in which he wrote his last known work, *Los Compadres*, and 1975 in which he died, there is a period of apparent artistic inactivity for Felipe. I was interested in exploring the causes of such a hiatus in order to find out if indeed the author did not write anything during this time or if he did but preferred not to publish his work. Furthermore, I was interested in learning what was Felipe's

position within the context of Cuban culture of his time and whether his role as an artist in Cuban society could have influenced his decision of not writing or making his work public in this span of more than a decade.

Carlos Felipe was born on November 4<sup>th</sup>, 1911 in Havana, Cuba. He studied in a Catholic school in Guanabacoa, where he received a scholarship because of his family's low income. He graduated as a commercial appraiser, and at the age of 16 he started working in different positions to assist his family. He worked as a waiter at a café and a warehouse worker, until in 1931 he acquired a position in Havana port's customs department. In this position he performed a number of duties for over 30 years. Felipe never endeavored into superior studies but his love for literature led him to achieve vast knowledge and culture: he knew English, French, and Italian, and he could also read music (Escarpanter 16-17).

From a very young age Felipe showcased a natural interest toward the dramatic arts. His sister Rosa Felipe said that he would write short plays to be performed by his friends in his parents' living room. He created his own versions of some Spanish classics such as *La gaceta del pueblo*, an adaptation of Lope de Vega's *Fuenteovejuna*. Still young, he joined the theatrical group Agrupación Artística Gallega along with his sister, and studied acting and singing. However, Felipe pretty soon decided to discontinue his acting and preferred to continue with his writing. His first known play was *El divertido viaje de Angelita Cossí*, written for the radio, which received second place in a competition sponsored by the radio station La Hora Múltiple in 1936 (Escarpanter 17).

In 1939, Felipe received the National Theater Award with his play *Esta noche en el bosque*. Four years later he received honorable mention in the same competition for his play *Tambores*. These plays were never performed in the Cuban stage of his time and hence did not

receive attention from literary critics. Discouraged, Carlos Felipe dedicated the next few years to journalism, becoming a theater and cinema critic for the newspaper *Siempre* and the magazines *Artes*, *Redes*, and *Prometeo* (Escarpanter 18). In 1947 his play *El Chino* wins first place in the Academia de Artes Dramáticas (ADAD) competition for plays. The jury for this award, after having received only the first act of *El Chino*, published an ad in the newspaper asking the author to finish the play and send it in as soon as possible. Felipe did so, winning the price that consisted in the production of the play. That way *El chino* was produced by ADAD under the direction of Modesto Centeno and Julio Martínez Aparición; his sister Rosa played the role of Renata la silenciosa. The play was performed only once as was the norm in Cuban theater of this period. Nevertheless, this was enough to elevate Felipe as one of the most interesting writers of his time. In 1948 he again won the ADAD award, on this occasion with the play *Capricho en rojo*, which was presented a year later in a co-production of ADAD and the Prometeo group. In that same year Felipe won the National Theater Award for the second time with the play *El travieso Jimmy*. A presentation of this work was carried out in 1951 by the group Patronato del Teatro in the Havana Amphitheater, resulting in big success (Escarpanter 18).

Three years later, in 1954, Carlos Felipe completed *Réquiem por Yarini*, which he originally titled *Yarini* (Escarpanter 18). In 1957 he wrote *Ladrillos de plata*, whose premiere was canceled due to accusations of immorality. The following year Felipe saw his work published for the first time when Dolores Martí and José Cid chose *El travieso Jimmy* to be included in the anthology *Contemporary Cuban Theater*. This initial publication is trailed by a collection of his plays *El chino*, *El travieso Jimmy* y *Los ladrillos de plata*, published by Universidad Central de Las Villas (Escarpanter 19). *Capricho en rojo* is published around the same time by Pagram. The final version of *Réquiem por Yarini* is made public in 1960 in a book

titled *Cuban Theater* by Universidad Central de Las Villas, which included the plays *La luna en el río* by Luis A. Baralt and *La alegre noticia* by Samuel Feijóo (Escarpanter 20).

In January of 1959 Fidel Castro takes control of the Cuban government, marking the beginning of the Cuban revolutionary period. Prior to this event, Felipe's work had been known through awards, competitions, one-night performances and sporadic publications. Following the revolution he was able to join the cultural movement in Cuba and dedicate himself fulltime to the theater profession after 32 years of working at the port. Felipe himself described his rise to the official cultural realm in the country: "El administrador designado...se enteró de que había en los Muelles un Aduanero que se defendía en inglés y francés, y que escribía el español sin faltas de ortografía. Me mandaron a buscar y mejoró mi suerte." (Entrevista con Carlos Felipe).<sup>1</sup> Felipe was promoted as literary assistant in the Department of Theater and Dance in the National Cultural Council. He joined the department of literary assistance, created by Mirta Aguirre, along with eleven writers that included Abelardo Estorino, Gloria Parrado and Rolando Ferrer. One of his duties was to provide playwriting assistance to theatrical groups (Correa 17).

Following the Revolution, Carlos Felipe only published three works: *Ibrahim* (1963), *De película* (1963) and *Los compadres* (1964). Although *Réquiem por Yarini* was officially published in 1960, the fact that there are manuscripts available from before the Cuban Revolution hints that this play was written prior to the political change. Of the first, only the first act was published in *Revista Unión* in 1963. In that same year Felipe writes *De película* as part of a project of collective creation of the Conjunto Dramático Nacional, under the direction of Pierre Chausset. Felipe was in charge of writing the dialogues. *De película* was performed in the venue Las Máscaras, receiving great praise by the audience and reviewers. In 1964 Felipe joins

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<sup>1</sup> "The designated administrator found out that there was in the port a customs officer that knew English and French and wrote in Spanish without grammatical errors. They summoned me and my luck improved." (Interview with Carlos Felipe)

the Conjunto Dramático Nacional as an assistant, and in that same year writes *Los compadre* (Correa 18). The play is published in *Isla* magazine a year later (Escarpanter 20). According to Armando Correa, *Los compadres* was the third installation in a trilogy titled *El tren por mi noche criolla*, but the first two pieces were never found (18). According to Rosa Felipe, Carlos wrote another play named *El alfabeto o la bata de encajes* around 1962, but she never read it. This play was probably just a draft and was never made public by the author (González-Cruz 83). All these plays came early in the revolutionary years, and after he did not produce any known works.

The reality that Carlos Felipe wrote or published so few works during the revolutionary period is particularly intriguing, since he not only had the opportunity to dedicate himself to theater, but saw some of his plays performed in theaters under the directions of artists such as Gilda Hernandez and Jorge Anckerman (Escarpanter 20). Even more intriguing is the fact that Felipe did not publish anything between 1964 and 1975, the year of his death. Though it is possible that Felipe abandoned the creative process, his friends and family members attest that he never stopped writing. Moreover, in several interviews, Felipe declared that he had some plays but did not know whether he would ever publish them (Correa 16). In an interview in which he was asked directly whether he was writing, he answered, "Siempre. No dejaré de hacerlo. Mi vida es una constante recepción, por las calles, entre mi pueblo, de estímulos para mis obras, que pueden ser una sonrisa, una canción que escuche, una expresión alegre o triste que cruce junto a mí y siga de largo. El teatro cubano es mi meta absoluta. No tengo escapatoria." (Entrevista con Carlos Felipe).<sup>1</sup> In the same interview he mentioned he had plays that "sleep in a drawer, waiting for me to decide, or to throw them away or revise them and make them known" (Entrevista con Carlos Felipe). After his death on October 14<sup>th</sup>, 1975, his sister denied the existence of

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<sup>1</sup> "Always. I won't stop doing it. My life is constant reception, in the streets, in my town, of incentive for my plays, which can be a smile, a song I listened to, a happy or sad expression that crosses me and then continues on. Cuban theater is my absolute goal. I don't have a way out." (Interview with Carlos Felipe)

unpublished plays. In 1988 José A. Escarpanter published *Teatro* of Carlos Felipe, which included unpublished works that Felipe's sister Rosa brought to the U.S., sneaking by Cuban authorities unpublished pre-revolutionary plays such as *Esta noche en el bosque* (1939), *Tambores* (1943) and *La bruja en el obenque* (195?).

What could have caused this writer to never share his unpublished work if indeed he wrote them? An analysis of Felipe's position in the political and cultural context of the first fifteen years of the revolutionary period can shed some light on the reasons. During the first few years, the Revolution provided a series of opportunities for theatrical artists including playwrights. The Teatro Nacional de Cuba and the Conjunto Dramático Nacional were created, as well as a series of schools throughout the country to train young students on the performing arts. This support on the part of the government allowed for a creative atmosphere. Nonetheless, this situation did not last long and by the mid-1960s a large number of artists emigrated from the country. Among the reasons for migrating were the ideological demands of Fidel Castro's government, especially following his "Palabras a los intelectuales" speech, which served as the beginning of repression against artists who didn't openly support the revolution. Those playwrights who remained in the island and did not adjust to the new system suffered stern censure and were ostracized, like Virgilio Piñera and Antón Arrufat (González-Cruz 10-11). Although Carlos Felipe's name was not among those that were persecuted by the government, could his case be interpreted as self-censorship induced by the political context surrounding him?

From the beginnings of the revolutionary process in Cuba, Carlos Felipe was described as shunned by the official cultural circles. Matías Montes Huidobro remembers that "en los sesenta, Felipe, aunque todos sabían lo mucho que valía, era un marginado en los círculos locales de la

farándula." (Entrevista con Carlos 8).<sup>1</sup> In 1961, in the newspaper *Lunes de Revolucion*, a transcript was published of an informal meeting of directors, playwrights and critics who were the most representative of their time, including Carlos Felipe. In the course of the interview, theatrical critic Rine Leal asked Felipe his opinion, but first offered an introduction that puts the playwright in the context of the theatrical movement at the beginning of the Revolution: "A mí me gustaría conocer la opinión de Carlos Felipe, que se puede calificar como un autor realmente marginado de la actividad teatral; es un señor que está en su casa, a quien es casi imposible verlo, muy difícil de localizar. Le agradezco en el alma que haya venido y me gustaría que nos conversara un poco." ("Lunes conversa con" 4).<sup>2</sup>

This marginalization, or self-marginalization to be more precise, could be explained away by a natural tendency on the part of the author's personality, characterized by shyness and the preference to be alone. However, this attitude made it easy to accuse Felipe of distancing himself from Cuban reality by living in an "ivory tower," to which the author responded: "Es ridículo, (...) cuando se habla de mí, mencionar "torres de marfil." Nadie es más callejero que yo, nadie más convencido que yo de que es la calle la fuente de los estímulos para el artista." (Montes, Entrevista con Carlos 8).<sup>3</sup>

The work of Carlos Felipe was also the object of much criticism. *Réquiem por Yarini*, for instance, was criticized for not adhering to the principles of socialist realism, the norm by which most of the works of the time were judged. In an article by Frank Rivera in *Lunes de Revolución*, the writer comments on the necessity of this play to be treated by an author who is more "down

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<sup>1</sup> "In the sixties, Felipe, though everyone knew how much he was worth, was marginalized in the local circles of popular culture." (Interview with Carlos Felipe)

<sup>2</sup> "I would like to know Carlos Felipe's opinion, who can be qualified as a truly marginalized from the theatrical activities; he's a man who's at home, who's almost impossible to see, very difficult to locate. I thank him deeply that he has come and I would like for him to talk to us a bit."

<sup>3</sup> "It's ridiculous...when talking about me, to mention ivory towers. No one is more down to earth than me, no one more convinced that the streets are the source of stimulus for the artist"



to earth" (26). The language used by Felipe was also questioned because it did not reflect the real way that his characters were supposed to speak. Felipe defended his position in an interview with *Revista Bohemia* in 1965. He stated that his work wants to "demonstrate that *cubanía* on the stage is not incompatible with correct idioms" and that he didn't want to "resort to the realism of the streets" because "Cuban reality goes beyond appearances and careless language" (González 25). Carlos Felipe's perception of Cuban theater was in radical opposition with the political stance that dominated and determined how theatrical creation had to be. Felipe declared that Cuban theater should not narrow itself down to a single definition or limit itself to a program, but rather it is a combination of characters and situations that cherished their complexity:

No creo que el Teatro Cubano se haya de ceñir a un programa ni a una definición sino que todo ese conjunto, es decir una cosa con muchas facetas y caracteres distintos se encontrarán unas facetas buenas, otras malas; se encontrarán algunas obras con valores literarios, otras con valores técnicos; pero de todo ese conjunto saldrán los rasgos aquellos que caracterizarán al Teatro Cubano. Esos rasgos no se pueden predecir cuáles son, pero eso será la esencia del Teatro Cubano ("Lunes conversa con" 5).<sup>1</sup>

On August 25<sup>th</sup>, 1971 an event occurred that largely influenced Felipe's life. His sister Rosa leaves Cuba for Spain. According to the actress, her own brother had told her that in Cuba she wouldn't accomplish much (Montes, Entrevista con Rosa 2). Once she left the country, Rosa fought to retrieve her mother and brother. She saved money from the moment she arrived in Spain (Niurka 11). It is very difficult to know whether Carlos Felipe wanted to accompany her

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<sup>1</sup> "I don't believe that Cuban Theater should conform to one program or one definition but that everything works together, with many facets and different characters one will find some positives and negatives; some works will be found to have literary value, others technical values; but from all of this will come the aspects that characterize Cuban Theater. We cannot predict what these aspects will be, but they will be the essence of Cuban Theater."

sister into exile. What is known is that her leaving Cuba made him a bigger recluse. Around this period Felipe's mother fell ill and he took care of her. The death of his mother on November 8<sup>th</sup>, 1974, together with a feeble health, caused Carlos Felipe to die on October 14<sup>th</sup>, 1975 as a result of a heart attack (Escarpanter 21).

Felipe's reclusive and reserved attitude could be one of the reasons why there aren't any documents that overtly express his political position. It is important to point out that following his death some of the playwrights living in exile accused him of siding with Castro. As a response, his sister said that he was not a communist, that he was humble and timid, but had nothing to do with the revolution (Montes, *Entrevista con Rosa* 3). So many years later, one can only wonder as to what exactly was in Carlos Felipe's mind and the real motive for the lack of publications in the latter years of his life. It seems almost obvious that the political change in Cuba, along with some aspects of Felipe's personal life had some impact on the author's decision to remain reclusive and not divulge his work. Ultimately, Carlos Felipe should always be remembered as one of Cuba's most influential playwrights, even if during the last decade of his life he was more of an enigma than a prolific writer.

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