# **Cuban American Theater**

edited by

Rodolfo J. Cortina



Arte Publico Press Houston Texas 1991

#### Acknowledgements

This volume is made possible through a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency.

The editor gratefully acknowledges the invaluable assistance of the following persons and institutions: for the preparation of the typescript and some textual editing, María Elena Cros, Mercedes Boffill, Soledad Díaz, Sandra Bergeson and Catherine Barry; for financial support in terms of editing, Florida International University's Department of Modern Languages; for the financial support for translation, Arte Publico Press; for translation in record time, David L. Miller, and for other translation assistance and editing, Lynn E. Rice Cortina; for bibliographic suggestions and research, Nicolás Kanellos, and for running down one of these items in New York, Alberto Moncada.

> Arte Publico Press University of Houston Houston, Texas 77204-2090

#### Cover design by Mark Piñón

Cuban American theater / edited by Rodolfo J. Cortina. p. cm.

Contents: Martínez / by Leopoldo M. Hernández — Your better half / by Matías Montes Huidobro — Birds without wings / by Renaldo Ferradas — With all and for the good of all / by Uva Clavijo — A little something to ease the pain / by René R. Alomá — Once upon a dream / by Miguel González-Pando ISBN 1-55885-020-1 1. American drama—Cuban American authors. 2. Cuban American drama (Spanish) — Translations into Facility 2 Orbes

American drama (Spanish)—Translations into English.3. CubanAmericans—Drama. I. Cortina, Rodolfo J.PS628.C82C83 1991812'.5408097291-dc2091-9898CIP

The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials Z39.48-1984.

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# INTRODUCTION

#### Definition and Periodization

Cuban literature, Cuban exile literature, Cuban American literature: where does one end and the other one begin? It is in the midst of these thorny questions that the issue of definitions arises. In the case of the other U.S. Hispanic literatures such as that of Mexican, Mexican-American and Chicano literature, the demarcations are more clearly observed, though there are moments in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution of 1910 that exile Mexican literature enters the U.S. Cuban literature has been traditionally written both on the island and abroad. The cases of Heredia, Avellaneda, Casals, Merlin, Martí, Florit, Carpentier, Sarduy, Arenas are but a few examples of this phenomenon. So then, if Cuban literature has often been written in exile, is there a difference between the literature of exile and that of the homeland? The answer, of course, is no, as long as the writer is considered both as a national author and as an exile after his or her death.

Cuban American literature, on the other hand, requires other considerations. For instance, the very nature of the context makes it difficult to make perfect analogies with other U.S. Hispanic literatures. Should Cuban American authors be born in the U.S.? Should they write only in English or, at least, in alternating codes? Should they write only about their immigrant experience? To some degree, whereas the questions are legitimate, they are not irrelevant, but impertinent. It seems to me that if José Martí lived in New York for fifteen years, he was to an extent a Cuban writer, an exile writer, but also a Cuban American writer. There is no law that forbids literary historians from including the same figure in several categories, or even in distinct groupings that are based on nationalist definitions, when the author lives a transnational reality.

It is my preference to view Cuban American authors as those who live in the U.S. and write about whatever topics may interest them (home country, new country, other places, peoples or things), and to place them in generational cohorts for ease of classification. Hence, in the case of theater, it would be better if we were to group authors in the following scheme: a Romantic generation, a Realist generation, a Naturalist generation, an Impressionist generation (corresponding to *Modernismo*), an Avant-Garde generation, an Existentialist generation, a Revolutionary generation, and a Postmodern generation. These groupings correspond, roughly, to the nineteenth century for the first three, turn of the century for the next group, and the twentieth century for the final four groups. The difference between both centuries lies in the fact that both Romanticism and a significant Cuban presence in the U.S. did not begin in 1800, but almost thirty years later. This general classificatory scheme also serves another very useful purpose: besides creating a mechanism for ordering the facts that we now know about the Cuban American writers whose persons and works have received some attention, it prepares the way for other newly researched facts to fit into the outline, or to demand changes in it.

#### Themes and Genres

In addition to the general issues of definition and periodization which have been addressed above, there are problems of genre which demand our attention. Perhaps some of the best work on Cuban theater history regarding the issue of genre has been in the major identification which has existed since Aristotle's *Poetics* in dividing tragedy from comedy.<sup>1</sup> The very nature of classifying across this gulf marked by laughter and tears is not in itself a problem; the notable exception is that theater that is not funny, becomes serious, and, therefore, more important. This, obviously has more to do with class prejudice than with anything else: the lords act tragically, the servants, comically.

Some scholars of French seventeenth century theater have very ingeniously availed themselves of approaches to communication theory designed as such by Roman Jakobson in order to elucidate the Aristotelian distinction even further. By identifying comedy with the emotive, poetic and conative functions, and farce with the referential, phatic and metalinguistic functions, they have managed to clarify not only the source of humor, but also the shape of its dramatic presentation.<sup>2</sup> This is helpful to those who would continue the verticality of judgement, making comedy superior to farce in the general esthetic scale of value. Thus, one could conclude from these general exercises on dramatic genre definition, Cuban theater would be ranked as follows: serious theater, comedy, *teatro frivolo*, and *teatro bufo*, the latter being gradations of comedic drama. But what appears logical in the deductive realm is contradicted by an investigation of historical experience.

The origins of Cuban American theater are intimately tied to a tradition of theater in Cuba which marked Cuban theatrical tastes,

dramatic possibilities, and artistic aspirations for actors, artists, playwrights, and entrepreneurs.3 They are also inextricably connected to the dimension of exile literature which brings together the twin preoccupations with the homeland as a lost paradise, and the new land as an alien place.<sup>4</sup> For Cuban American theater, therefore, the major themes will cluster around the political and the social lives of the exile and the immigrant communities, respectively. But these are not the only divisions, as we have been discussing above. Likely as not, Cuban American theater will tend to follow the dichotomy imposed by a similar dramatic schizophrenia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when the Cuban theater separated the popular slapstick from the elite dramaturgy. Spanish colonial censorship forbade the serious treatment of Cuban nationalist themes in the theater. This led playwrights who preferred working the serious side of the stage to imitate Spanish drama. Thus, serious Cuban colonial theater became a servile imitator of the Spanish stage. This took place not only in Havana, but also in Tampa, the exile capital of Cuban independence patriots, where theater flourished.5 The only authentic Cuban themes were left to the genres of comedy and farce. So much so is the case that the general division has included a range of subgenres of comedy such as juguete, juguete cómico de costumbres, juguete histórico-dramático. alta comedia, apropósito, sainete, sainete provincial, pieza cómica, comedia mundana, ajiaco bufo-lírico bailable, pasillo cómico-lírico, disparate cómico, disparate bufo-lírico, pasatiempo cómico, paso de comedia, película cómica, capricho cómico, humorada lírica, episodio lírico-cómico, esperpento cómico-bufo, descarrilamiento cómico, zarzuela bufa, and disparate catedrático.6

With a few exceptions that took place in the twenties and thirties when labor and other social topics were introduced to the stage, this has remained true since then, practically to this day. Cuban American serious theater during the Revolutionary period for the first twenty-five years struggled to survive. Meanwhile, the comic theater continues to blossom.

Another important circumstance that affected Cuban and Cuban American theater, as it has most theaters, was the advent and growth of the radio, film and television industries. These technological innovations have made theater an art of the masses in new ways, but have left traditional stagecraft as a more marginal enterprise. Entrepreneurs have, therefore, catered to the mass appeal of comedy, and to some extent to the musical comedy. Such are the cases of Miami, New York and Tampa in our day, where serious drama continues to lose ground to comedy.<sup>7</sup>

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#### A Bit of History

It is in the latter part of the 1820s that New York boasted two Spanish language newspapers, El Mensajero Semanal and El Mercurio de Nueva York, which carried news as well as literary artifacts.8 These consisted mostly of poetry and stories, but already in their pages there appeared actual dramatic literature from Spain. By the second half of the century, the Hispanic publishing industry was including drama among its titles on all manner of subjects. Some books like Francisco Javier Balmaseda's Los confinados a Fernando Poo, which was issued in 1869, are political tracts that took advantage of the venue for free expression, leaving their creative work for publication in their homeland. But others who had either fled permanently or happened to have a passing connection with the U.S. did entrust their work to the stateside publishers. In his A History of Hispanic Theater in the United States: Origins to 1940 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990) Kanellos makes reference to Orman Tu-Caes (which he suspects is a penname) as having had his play published by the Granja firm El hermano generoso in 1840. I agree that it is a pseudonym used to hide the author's name whose four-act prose work probably contained unflattering allusions to the Spanish government. Others like José Francisco Broche were not so lucky. Broche had one drama, Mendoza, refused for publication in 1841 by the Spanish colonial authorities. And in 1842 he managed to get another one in print in Havana, El Juglar, a prose and verse five-act ponderous piece. The government forbade its distribution immediately. This was also the case with Nicolás Cárdenas y Rodríguez whose historical four-act prose drama, Diego Velázquez, was denied publication, and Isaac Carrillo O'Farrill whose sonnet addressed to Isabel II cost him some prison time. Orman Tu-Caes established a trend that Broche's obstinacy confirmed: publish political works abroad.

Beside those obviously political works, there were others which dealt with just plain nationalist themes. This in itself was offensive to the colonial establishment and made it easier for some to avoid the tortured language necessary to escape censorship. In this category we can place some of the Realist theater of manners following the more political Romantic dramas. Among them, Justo Eleboro's *El rico y el pobre*, a three-act play which appeared in New York in 1864. Two other important literary figures of the time had their plays published in New York: (1) José María Heredia, whose *Abufar o la familia árabe* saw the light in 1854, though it had been written in 1826 and staged in 1833 and (2) Gertrudis Gómez de

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Avellaneda, whose play *Baltasar*, which had been published both in Madrid and in Bogotá in 1858, was reissued in New York in 1908 as one of the early Hispanist versions for the Hispanophiles of the time. The New York version contained an introduction, notes, and vocabulary by Carlos Bransby, making this Biblical four-act verse drama an important title for the American Book Co.

Other Cuban American plays of the time include José Jacinto Milanés's Obras, reissued by Juan F. Trow y Cia. in one volume in New York in 1865; Luís García Pérez's El grito de Yara published in New York by Hallet & Breen in 1879; Diego Tejera's La muerte de Plácido, a dramatic play on the death of the celebrated Cuban Romantic poet, appeared in New York under the imprint of Imp. Ponce de León in 1875. Meanwhile in Key West Félix R. Zahonet saw his two-act zarzuela printed by the Imp. de la Revista Popular in 1890 with the title of Los amores de Eloísa o Heroicidades de una madre. Two plays by Francisco Sellén also saw the light in New York: Hatuey, a 147 page five-act dramatic poem, was published by A. Da Costa Gómez in 1891, and Las apuestas de Zuleika, a 33 page one-act prose piece, was offered by M.M. Hernández in 1901. In 1892 G. Gómez y Arroyo had a one-act satirical, burlesque, comical, lyrical juguete entitled Polilla regional released by Conner in New York. Desiderio Fajardo Ortiz's La fuga de Evangelina, a one-act juguete in four scenes, written to celebrate Evangelina Cossio's sensational escape from political Spanish imprisonment in Havana, was dated in 1898 by Howes upon publication in New York. With Mario F. Sorondo's Locura repentina, published by The Speranto [sic] Student in Rutherford, N.J. in 1909, we may bring the nineteenth century to a close.

The history of twentieth century Cuban American theater prior to the Revolution is no less rich, but the information is just as scanty and the documentation is no less spotty. Thanks to José Luís Perrier and to Nicolás Kanellos there is some sense of what may have taken place in the U.S. urban areas where Cubans and theater intersected. In his *Bibliografía dramática cubana* (New York: The Phos Press, 1926), Perrier provides an accounting of Cuban and Cuban American dramatic publishing and production. (He also includes Puerto Rico and Santo Domingo in the book.) But Perrier's information is offered within a context of abundant periodical commentary by newspapers and magazines of the time in New York. Much of this material is lost or in recondite collections of difficult access for most. What Kanellos has done in his *A History of Hispanic Theater in the United States: Origins to 1940* is to painstakingly unearth some of that lost history. In two key

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chapters of his book (chapters 4 & 5 covering New York and Tampa respectively) he offers careful reconstruction of the context of the times by utilizing old newspapers and magazines, looking for theater chronicles, reviews, announcements and advertisements. This task is made more difficult for him because of a most peculiar characteristic. In Tampa and in New York the Hispanic communities were that, Hispanic. They consisted of Spaniards, Cubans (in Tampa), plus Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Argentines, Venezuelans, Dominicans, etc. in New York. It is sometimes difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish a particular writer's background. Here Perrier is invaluable, and Kanellos, relying on both Perrier and the periodical materials is able to detail what we will merely sketch very broadly here.

The twentieth century may be segmented as follows for the purpose of establishing some order to the facts: from 1898–1925, from 1926–1940, from 1941–1960, and from 1961–1991. These dates correspond roughly with the above mentioned generational scheme (Impressionist, Avant-Garde, Existentialist and Revolutionary). These labels are not meant to necessarily characterize (we know too little of the actual content and style of much of the production of those earlier years), but to orient ourselves in terms of the broader categories of literary history.

The first years are well set in Tampa where the institutions of the Hispanic (primarily Spanish and Cuban, though to some extent Italian) community were able to sustain a non-profit theater activity which had two interesting characteristic notes. First, it has left a legacy which continues to this day. In Tampa the children and grandchildren of the theater crowd of that time have continued, if somewhat diminished, a theatrical tradition. Second, it has had the distinct historical quirk of being the only Spanish-language Federal Theater Project supported by the government during the Depression years. Tampa's tobacco workers and their families were able to group together into seven mutual-aid societies: the Centro Español, the Centro Asturiano, the Centro Español de West Tampa, the Círculo Cubano, the Unión Martí-Maceo, the Centro Obrero, and L'Unione Italiana. Each of these societies had a show committee in charge of events, an amateur group, and a theater. The presentations ranged from light musical operettas (zarzuelas) at the Centro Español, the most conservative society, to the more liberal fare at the Centro Asturiano which, without giving up the zarzuelas themselves, added the ever present bufos cubanos, including the negrito and the gallego with the participation of directors like Manuel Aparicio and Rafael Arango, playwrights like

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Cristino R. Inclán, and actors and actresses like Bolito (Roberto Gutiérrez), Alicia Rico and Luis Guerra, all veterans of the Cuban and Cuban American stage in Havana and in New York. At the Círculo Cubano and at the Unión Martí-Maceo it was easier to find the bufos, while at the Centro Obrero the more socially progressive protest plays and political satires could be enjoyed. Typical offerings in their various programs might include La viuda alegre at the Español, Bodas de Papá Montero at the Asturiano, the Círculo or the Unión, and Justicia humana at the Obrero. The Tampa-Ybor City audiences may have been working class, but they were not untutored. Through the institution of the lectores or readers, cigar workers got to listen to great literature while toiling in the factories. They also alternated amateur performances with those of professional traveling troupes which they invited to their theaters. This made Tampa theater better than could be otherwise reasonably expected at first glance. Cuban American theater has always had a very good home there.

The New York scene, much more complex because of the lack of clearly established Cuban or Hispanic theatrical centers throughout this period, contrary to the case of Tampa, does acquire a firmer foothold in the later part of the Roaring Twenties. During the 1926-1940 period, New York Cuban American theater history becomes a bit clearer. The first years of the century had seen some activity by groups like the Club Lírico Dramático Cubano and later the Compañía de Bufos Cubanos. But until theaters like the Dalys, the Apollo, the San José (later Variedades), and the Campoamor (later Cervantes, and still later Hispano) provide solidity to the varied theatrical boom of the period, Cuban American theater cannot take hold in the Big Apple. In addition to the establishments themselves, there appeared an important group of playwrights and actors. Among the playwrights are several mentioned by Perrier, such as Alberto O'Farrill, the editor of El Gráfico, a newspaper devoted to the theater and entertainment world which began publication in 1927. O'Farrill, a well-known blackface actor of Cuban farce, penned plays like Los misterios de Changó, Un doctor accidental, Un negro en Andalucía, Kid Chocolate, and La viuda como no hay dos, all presented at the Apollo during 1926. Another dramaturg is Juan C. Rivera, also an actor who played the gallego roles opposite O'Farrill's negritos; he authored Terremoto en Harlem and Cosas que pasan, two zarzuelas bufas also presented at the Apollo in the same year. The most prolific of these playwrights was the famous Afro-Cuban singer Arquímides Pous who created over two-hundred (200) of these obras bufas cubanas,

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among which one might mention Pobre Papá Montero or Las mulatas de Bombay. Other authors like Guillermo J. Moreno (Bronca en España, De Cuba a Puerto Rico, both premiered at the Apollo in 1927) had works produced at the Teatro Campoamor (like De la gloria al infierno) as late as 1936. The Cuba bella revue which was presented at the Teatro Hispano dates to 1937. But with few exceptions Cuban American theater appears to go from a strong river to a smaller stream into the next period.

The fifties, which comprises the next period in the Cuban American stage, is the province of one very important playwright who practically on her own makes New York hospitable to Cuban American theater again. She spans the late fifties, sixties, seventies and has served in different capacities as model playwright, perspicacious commentator, generous teacher and ardent advocate of Cuban American, Hispanic and women's causes in the theater. But she has served it best by being the best. María Irene Fornés received critical acclaim in 1977 for her play Fefu and Her Friends in which eight women join each other for a weekend retreat during which they reveal their hopes, aspirations, frustrations, regrets and most of all their innermost selves. She has a varied repertoire among which we might mention Promenade, a light musical piece; Mud, an examination of dire poverty; The Conduct of Life, a consideration of the cruelties of a tyrannical dictator; and Sarita, set in the South Bronx in the 1939-1947 period, in which she follows the life of her protagonist from her age thirteen until age twenty-one when she enters a mental hospital. Though her work has merited her six OBIE awards, she has not reached the popularity with mass audiences in the past. Nevertheless, Fornés stands alone in the U.S. during a critical period for the Cuban American stage.

The Revolutionary period of the last thirty years or so, has brought many changes to the Cuban American theatrical experience.<sup>9</sup> According to Watson Espener, who prefers to separate the exile from the immigrant, there is now an incipient immigrant theater next to a dominant exile enterprise.<sup>10</sup> For Pottlitzer, Miami has not been easy on serious theater, because the first wave of Cuban exiles had not really been exposed to serious drama at home, only vaudeville and comedy revues.<sup>11</sup> But if we look carefully at the facts, we will see that in the late sixties and early seventies several Cuban American/Hispanic theatrical institutions came into being in various parts of the country. In New York Cuban refugees began to become involved in the theater during the sixties. Gilberto Zaldívar and René Buch founded the Repertorio Español in 1968. Buch had studied theater at Yale University and never went back

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to Cuba: Zaldívar was a Castro refugee who arrived in the U.S. in 1961. INTAR (International Arts Relations) was founded as ADAL in 1966, changing its name in 1972. It was the product of seven Cuban Americans and Puerto Ricans interested in the theater; among them was their current director, Max Ferrá. Their main contribution to it has been the development of new playwrights who write in English and the production of new material. One of their programs sponsored by the Ford Foundation under the direction of María Irene Fornés was their INTAR Playwrights in Residence Laboratory. Among the first interns was the late René Alomá. In Los Angeles, Margarita Galbán, a Cuban American, was one of the three founders of the Bilingual Foundation of the Arts (BFA) in 1973. Leopoldo Hernández's Martínez was produced by the BFA in Los Angeles. In Miami Teresa María Rojas founded Teatro Prometeo at Miami Dade Community College in 1972. By 1973 Mario Ernesto Sánchez had founded Teatro Avante. Salvador Ugarte and Alfonso Cremata opened in the late sixties two small theaters named "Las Máscaras" which are very financially successful by dealing with topics of adaptation within the genre of comedy known as comedia bufa. Plays like Enriqueta se ha puesto a dieta, for instance, address the ideal of feminine beauty in both cultural realms (Cuban/American) and explore the problems of culturally derived models of behavior.

The political dimension of theater in Miami has had not so much to do with the content of the plays, but with the views of the playwright on issues alien to the stage. Such was the case with Dolores Prida (Coser y cantar, Beautiful Señoritas, Savings, Pantallas) and her brush with censorship in Miami in 1986 or even the case of Rafael de Acha's New Theater whose county funds were jeopardized because of questions, similarly alien to the stage, of local politics. While Tampa continues since 1959 with the Spanish Lyric Theater, now under the direction of René González, Miami has seen other theaters and theater groups flourish: Mirella González's Teatro Bellas Artes, Pepe Carril's Teatro Guiñol, Judith Delgado who runs the Hispanic Program at the Coconut Grove Playhouse, Pili de la Rosa's Pro Arte Grateli, Marta Llovios's Chicos, Inc., María Malgrat's M.A.R.I.A., Ernesto Capote's Capote Enterprises, Inc., and Jordana Webster's Andromaca in Hollywood, Florida, within the Greater Miami area.

Among the new playwrights, one needs mention, Iván Acosta, whose play, *El super*, has also not only been well received by the critical establishment, but through León Ichaso's film it has received mass distribution. In English Julio Matas has distinguished 16

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himself with Penelope Inside Out, though he is better classified with those authors who were educated in Cuba and who came to the U.S. already with a literary profile. Also important in English (with some Spanish) is Manuel Martín whose Swallows and Union City Thanksgiving are very interesting plays. Of the younger generation, Omar Torres's If You Dance the Rhumba (still unpublished) and Achy de Obejas (Brisas de Marianao) bear watching. Of the masters who were accomplished playwrights in Cuba, Matías Montes Huidobro's work is of special importance, as is that of Leopoldo Hernández. Montes Huidobro is also important because of his editorial efforts in promoting Cuban and Cuban American theater through his Editorial Persona, which has allowed several authors to see their work in print. Also worth mentioning are several exile writers like José Sánchez Boudy (La soledad de la playa larga), René Ariza (El hijo pródigo), Tomás Travieso (Prometeo desencadenado), Celedonio González (José Pérez, candidato a la alcadía), Carlos Felipe (Un requiem por Yarini), José Brene (El gallo de San Isidro), Raúl de Cárdenas (Recuerdos de familia, Los gatos), among others.

This anthology presents a variety of plays from the Cuban American experience. It has plays that deal with the »Cuban problem," as is Clavijo's play, and in a more personal way, Alomá's. Others deal with life in the U.S., especially young people (Ferradas), and their relationship to adults (González Pando). Hernández explores discrimination, as does Montes Huidobro, although the former does so experimentally and the latter metatheatrically. Nor is the anthology as originally conceived: Acosta and Prida who were to be in it got their own collections from Arte Publico Press, while Achy Obejas has been impossible to reach, even by visiting Chicago and speaking to friends and former employers. As usual, the works of human beings are fraught with accident and accumulation, rather than with design. I hope, however, that the collection will open a door to the world of Cuban American theater. Cuban American Theater: Introduction

Notes

<sup>1</sup>See Rine Leal, *La selva oscura* (Havana: Arte y Literatura, 1975).

<sup>2</sup>Anthony Ciccone, Comedy of Language: Four Farces by Moliére (Potomac, MD: Porrúa Turanzas, 1980).

<sup>3</sup>Rine Leal, Breve historia del teatro cubano (Havana: Letras Cubanas, 1980).

<sup>4</sup>See Maida Watson Espener's forthcoming book *Cuban Exile Theater* (Gainesville: University presses of Florida).

<sup>5</sup>See Nicolás Kanellos, A History of Hispanic Theater in the United States: Origins to 1940 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990).

<sup>6</sup>See José Luis Perrier, *Bibliografia dramática cubana* (New York: Phos Press, 1926).

<sup>7</sup>See Nicolás Kanellos "Hispanic Theater," *Goodlife Magazine* (May, 1985), pp. 8–10; also his book *Hispanic Theater in the United States* (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1980).

<sup>8</sup>See Nicolás Kanellos "Towards a History of Hispanic Literature in the United States," in Asela Rodríguez de Laguna, ed., *Images and Identities: The Puerto Rican in Literature* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1987).

<sup>9</sup>For the Revolutionary generation, see Matías Montes Huidobro, *Persona, vida y máscara en el teatro cubano* (Miami: Universal, 1973); Maida Watson Espener's articles "Teatro, mujeres e identidad," in R.J. Cortina and A. Moncada, eds., *Hispanos en los Estados Unidos* (Madrid: Ediciones de Cultura Hispánica, 1988), and "Ethnicity and the Hispanic American Stage: The Cuban Experience," in Nicolás Kanellos, ed., *Hispanic Theater in the United States* (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1984); José Escarpenter's many articles, reviews and introductions, including his latest "El exilio en Matías Montes Huidobro y José Triana," *Linden Lane Magazine* IX, 4 (1990), pp. 63-64, and John C. Miller's two articles "Hispanic Theater in New York, 1965-1977," *Revista Chicano-Riqueña* VII, 9 (1978), pp. 40-59, and "Contemporary Hispanic Theater in New York," in N. Kanellos, ed., *Hispanic Theater in the United States* (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1984).

<sup>10</sup>See note 4 supra.

<sup>11</sup>See Joanne Pottlitzer, *Hispanic Theater in the United States* and Puerto Rico (New York: Ford Foundation, 1988).