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Cultural Exchange Goes Only One Way

Why Los Van Van Here, But Not Willy Chirino There?

By Jesus Hernandez Cuellar
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A group of journalists once asked Italian dictator Benito Mussolini when would he allow freedom of expression in his country. It is said that Mussolini, known for his showy military attire and his dramatic poses, wrinkled his nose and answered:

"Freedom? What do they want it for? They wouldn't know what to do with it!" The governing elite of the Castro regime and their sympathizers in the United States seem to have arrived at this same conclusion regarding the right of Cubans to listen to composers and singers of their predilection, to read the books of their favorite authors, and to watch the movies that spark their interest.

But political debate is not being focused in that direction. There is always an incident that takes place and eclipses the essence of this controversy, to the detriment of the real victims of this policy. Recently, the international music festival MIDEM took place in Miami. Hundreds of musicians from various countries, including Cuba, participated. From Chucho Valdes and Irakere to Omara Portuondo, singer-songwriter Carlos Varela, and the brilliant nonagenarian Compay Segundo, Cuban performers paraded down the stage.

Peacefully, the patriotic Cuban opposition in Miami made known its feelings against the presence of performers from the island -a right that is exercised every day in democratic nations. And immediately, as usual, the epithets of "radical," "intransigent" and "troglodytes" were hurled at them. But this debate did not end as it should have either. Just a few days before, another controversy had been unleashed as it became known that the exiled Cuban actress Ana Margarita Martinez Casado would be traveling to Cuba with the N.Y. stage company Repertorio Español (Spanish Repertoire) to present the play "Revoltillo," by Cuban-American author Eduardo Machado, at the Hubert de Blanck theater in Havana. These are not only the two most recent examples of this ongoing controversy, but also the most confusing, the

ones that give out a message that is most favorable to the Castroist stance, whose purpose is none other than to misrepresent all Cuban exiles as "intolerant."

The logic of official Cuban circles would be this: if the Cuban exiles in Miami demonstrate against visiting performers, it is because this exile group is made up of people who love censorship, not democracy. And if Repertorio Español travels to Cuba, then it is false that the Cuban government censors exiled performers and writers: the theater company's producer and general director, Gilberto Zaldivar, and its artistic director, Rene Buch, are Cubans who have lived many years in the United States. And if, in addition, Miami's Pan American Hospital cancels a TV ad featuring Martinez Casado, as a result of her trip to Cuba, then the situation becomes even less favorable for the exiles, as far as their image is concerned.

One must not forget that Castro -and when one speaks of Castro one is speaking about the mind set of the Cuban governing elite- may be a failure as an administrator and a statesman, but he is a Machiavellian genius when it comes to political conspiracy and the manipulation of ideas. That is why there is Castroism inside of Cuba, and a very sizable group of exiles outside of the island.

Therefore, the Cuban patriotic opposition has a responsibility to make a major effort to undo this injustice. And this effort must extend beyond the boundaries of Little Havana and of the Spanish language. In the first place, it is not true that the organized Cuban opposition loves censorship. What these groups want to bring to light is very easy to understand: Why is it acceptable to present Irakere, Compay Segundo and Los Van Van in the U.S., while Willy Chirino, Celia Cruz and Gloria Estefan are forbidden fruit in Cuba?

Why is it that the movies of Tomas Gutierrez Alea, Humberto Solas and Santiago Alvarez (all members of the Cuban Institute of Art and Cinematography) can be shown in the United States, while those with Cuban themes by Nestor Almendros, Leon Ichaso and Orlando Jimenez Leal -all political exiles- can't be shown in Cuba? Following this line of reasoning, one immediately realizes which group is truly on the side of censorship. And it gets even worse if one takes into consideration that the movies dealing with Cuban themes made by Almendros, Ichaso and Jimenez Leal have been censored and ignored even by U.S. film festivals, in spite of having been financed by well established European movie and TV institutions.

On the other hand, one would dismiss the argument that the trip of Repertorio Español to Cuba with the play "Revoltillo" is a sign of official openness towards exiled writers and artists. One would realize that the works of Machado are

known as caricature representations of the Cuban family in exile (such as his "Floating Island") and not as soolid examinations of the Cuba reality, like the works of true playwrights of the Cuban diaspora, such as Eduardo Manet, Jose Triana, Maria Irene Fornes, Ivan Acosta, Pedro Monge Rafuls, Hector Santiago, and others.

The subject of the debate could be much wider, since writers from the island travel frequently to North American universities and present their points of view here with complete freedom. Or hasn't that been the experience of Pablo Armando Fernandez? On the other hand, can the most important living Cuban writer, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, do the same thing? Can new and successful literary talents, educated in Castro's Cuba but now exiled in the U.S., such as Zoe Valdes, Eliseo Alberto, Daina Chaviano and Maria Elena Cruz Varela, do the same thing? While they were still alive, were monumental literary figures Gaston Baquero, Lydia Cabrera and Severo Sarduy able to do so?

The day that this happens, and when ordinary Cubans are able to go completely unafraid to a movie house and watch movies such as "Improper Conduct," "Nobody Listened" and "Bitter Sugar," then one could start, cautiously, to speak about political openness in Cuba, at least in regards to the arts and literature. But it would still be necessary to examine, among many other things, the fate of the authors of the political document "La Patria Es de Todos" ("The Motherland Belongs to All"), who even at this time remain in jail in the island without a trial, since July of 1997.

And, above all, it would be necessary to examine where stands the right of Cubans to freely decide their own destiny, through electoral processes that offer them diverse alternatives, informed by an independent press, and feeling themselves free from the control machinery of the State. So, alas, we ask, which is the side that exhibits censorship, intolerance, and radicalism?

Translated by Gladys P. Martinez

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