VI Festival Internacional de Teatro de La Habana: A Festival against All Odds
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VI Festival Internacional de Teatro de La Habana

A Festival Against All Odds

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Although traveling to Cuba is quite difficult for everyone, it is particularly problematic for those who, like myself [Manzor-Coats], were born there. I returned to Cuba to attend Havana's VI Festival Internacional de Teatro (FIT) which took place 10–19 September 1993, and to participate in the "Theatre and Ritual" workshop and seminar sponsored by the Escuela Internacional de Teatro de América Latina y del Caribe (EITALC, see Epstein 1990).[1] I had returned to Cuba previously in 1986, during perhaps the revolution's high point economically as well as culturally. Many of the best new theatre groups now participating at FIT were forming then. Playwrights and theatre collectives, along with plastic artists, were reconsidering the relationship between theatrical language and content. The work of Flora Lauten's Teatro Buendía and Víctor Varela's Teatro del Obstáculo, primarily, began a theatrical renovation which transformed theatre into a public forum for an audience that felt "marginalized": young people. These young people, having lived through the achievements of the revolution, demanded a form of expression that was different from those characteristic of the "official voice of the Revolution."[2] The heroic posture of the *hombre nuevo* (new man), a posture which had been instrumental for the revolution, was being questioned (see Muguercia 1991). Thus, the cultural spheres of theatre and visual arts became sites of critical rearticulation, displacing the state (see Martin 1994 and Baliño Cedré 1994).

My first reencounter with Cuba meant that I had found a utopic "home" where I could belong but unfortunately did not, and a project in which I could only participate from a distance. In 1993, I found the remnants of that project and a shattered home I had refused to acknowledge. However, within the remains, I also found those who were still anxious to revise and revitalize that project as well as those who were eager to reconstruct the splintered pieces.

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Inés María Martiatu Terry, coauthor of this essay, is one of those people. She is one of the foremost Cuban critics specializing in Afro-Cuban and Afro-Caribbean cultures. We met at the workshops in Machurrucutu and immediately became friends. *Lo curioso fue que nadie nos presentó y no recuerdo cual de las dos se identificó primero. La experiencia misma del taller y el interés de Lillian por el teatro que se hace aquí y allá, anudaron una amistad, una casi complicidad como de gente que se conoce de toda la vida.* (The interesting thing is that we were not introduced by anybody and we do not remember which of us first identified herself. The experience at the workshop and Manzor-Coats's interest in the Cuban theatrical practice from both shores helped to strengthen a friendship which is now almost a complicity characteristic of people who have always known each other.) We found that, while we held different points of views about some things, we agreed upon many others. Martiatu Terry had seen most of the Cuban plays of the festival and knew all the directors, playwrights, and plays dealing with Afro-Cuban rituals.

Aware of the many political and ideological difficulties surrounding attempted dialogs among the communities of the Cuban diaspora, we decided we would not let these get in the way of our project;[3] nor would the constant blackouts in Havana or the U.S. embargo, which make communication between Cuba and the U.S. practically impossible. Relying on real and virtual electronic friends and acquaintances, very much like the bygone "Pony Express," we have written this review essay which is the first coproduction by Cuban critics from both shores.

Needless to say, the 1993 FIT took place in spite of an economic situation not at all fit for an international festival of its kind; the material and financial resources were minimal. For that reason, only a small number of international groups (in comparison to previous FIT gatherings) participated in the festival. Yet, in spite of the challenges and obstacles, there were more shows and theatres from within Cuba participating than in years past. There were 23 international theatre groups from Latin America, Europe, and the United States. The Cuban theatre groups participating were selected from shows produced all over the island since the previous festival in 1991. In 1993, 64 national theatre groups brought their work; over 100 shows represented the broad spectrum of theatre and performance in contemporary Cuba. Pantomime, dance-theatre, unipersonals, folklore, classical theatre, experimental theatre, children's theatre: all were staged in the 29 spaces that were part of the festival. The Teatro Nacional opened the doors of the Avellaneda and Covarrubias rooms; the Teatro Mella offered its main stage and its gardens; Havana's Gran Teatro made available three of its stages: the García Lorca, Antonin Artaud, and Alejo Carpentier. The Brecht Cultural Center, the Sala Alternativa, and the welcoming Café Teatro all opened their smaller spaces to the festival; shows were also staged at the Hubert de Blank, El Sótano, Teatro Buendía, Teatro del Obstáculo, and in eight alternative outdoor spaces.

The lack of material resources was offset by the overwhelming hospitality and generosity of the Cuban organizers, theatre critics, theatre groups, and the Cuban audience; they welcomed the international participants and were eager to show and share the diversity of styles and expressive languages comprising contemporary Cuban theatre. The festival participants and attendants were divided into two groups: international and national guests. Our badges of different colors indicated our origins and permitted us entry into the shows.

1. Teatro Obstáculo's Monodrama La cuarta pared *(directed by Víctor Varela, Havana, 1993) was an adaptation of the groundbreaking 1987 version, which spoke, without words, about frustrations and lack of liberty because, as its director said then, "In Cuba People are dying of security." (Photo by Kike González)*

Entrance into the theatres was by no means guaranteed. The lines outside were very long, perhaps comparable to a film premiere here in the U.S. Although most spaces were filled to capacity and beyond—people stood up or sat on the floor in the smaller spaces—the international guests rarely had any problems of entry. Some theatres had separate reserved seating; others had different lines for different color badges. At times, this became a problem if you were attending a show with a Cuban colleague. For some of us, this hospitality and special treatment was embarrassing. Even if we arrived at the last minute, via special buses or taxis, we were able to go ahead of the Cubans in line, most of whom had arrived on foot or bicycle.

Without a doubt, the real protagonist of this festival was the Cuban audience. They were able to overcome transportation obstacles, move from one space to another, and face these "status" differences with the very Cuban attitude of *choteo*: making fun of everything and everyone (see Mañach 1991; Manzor-Coats 1994a, 1994b; and Suárez Durán 1994). Always friendly and with sardonic humor, more than one person referred to our badges as "diplo-badges" or "diplo-tickets." (The reference here is to the so-called *diplotiendas*, stores originally set up for members of the diplomatic delegations, where now anyone with dollars can purchase items unavailable in the Cuban market.) In many ways, the quotidian performances outside the theatres echoed the ones onstage. The Cuban audience, managing the various daily obstacles and completely filling the theatres, participated in a special way in each and every play we attended; they were proof that the contemporary Cuban stage is indeed a multifaceted space of discovery and reflection (see FIT 1993 and García Abreu 1993a).

The Cuban productions presented the most interesting and polemical stage proposals at FIT. Recent experimental currents have resulted in innovative dramaturgies and stagings as well as new pedagogies that search for alternative approaches to the actor's formation. Although we cannot cover all of the FIT productions nor the many tendencies of contemporary Cuban theatre, we will try to present a survey and critique of the productions we found to be most interesting and representative of the many theatres produced on the island.

As may be expected, experimentation with traditions of African origin and alternative theatricalities are some of the salient characteristics of the contemporary Cuban stage (see Martiatu Terry 1992, 1993a, 1993b). At FIT, this was evident in a number of performances, such as Elaine Centeno's *La piedra de Elliot* (Elliot's Stone) by the group Teatro Rita Montaner and Gerardo Fulleda León's *Chago de Guisa* (Chago from Guisa) by Teatro Caribeño.

Centeno's *La piedra de Elliot* came as a surprise to most people given the fact that this was her graduation project at the Instituto Superior del Arte (ISA, Cuba's most prestigious art school). Centeno's ritual theatre brought to the audience rather strange events: the recovery of a river stone from the sea by the goddess Yemayá Olokún, Simón's surprise upon his encounter with the goddess, Elliot's recognition of his ancestors after receiving the stone from one of them, Ochún's transformation into a goddess after obtaining the gift of revelation, which she loses at the end. In *La piedra* the protagonist's teleological worries and his ability to perceive the magic inherent in his surroundings were placed at the center of the dramatic conflict. His problem lay in finding an equilibrium between logic, his most urgent earthly desires, and mystery, the hidden side of events one must accept without question.

The staging was envisioned so as to integrate it with the natural elements of the open surroundings. It was staged at one of FIT's most suggestive spaces, the patio of the National Theatre. The well-known playwright, Gerardo Fulleda León, assumed the challenge of this mise-en-scène, and worked with the group which he directs, the Teatro Rita Montaner. This collective was founded in 1962 to promote contemporary Cuban drama. It has created the prestigious Rolando Ferrer competition for unpublished plays; the prize is the staging of the selected play by the group.[4] In *La piedra*, Fulleda León was able to transmit, without illustrating, the spirit of the play. The actors moved among the trees in the patio, descended from roofs, and utilized the outdoor elements as

props for both entrances and sudden disappearances. The actors' vocal rhythms and body movements were suggestive of the rhythms and movements associated with rituals for both Yemayá Olokún and Ochún. Most of the actors performed with the professionalism expected from experienced actors; others were hesitant and insecure or had problems with voice projection.

Chago de Guisa, which won the coveted Casa de las Américas prize for theatre in 1989, is a milestone in Afro-Cuban theatre. It is a text

2. Members of director Tomás González's Teatro Cinco perform Danza Oráculo *at the old Taoro sugar mill and slave barracks (1993). They are invoking different spirits of dead ones which they will eventually "mount." (Photo by Kike González)*

with transcendental aims which abandons the superficial illustration of myths or rituals. It is also a *mestizo* (hybrid) text in its language—a poetically rendered Spanish inflected by Yorubá and Bantú, it uncovers different angles of our reality. *Chago,* while inspired by the legend of Ochosi (Yoruba's hunting god), does not present this god as an archetype. Instead, it constructs the hero/god as a man within a specific historical context and with psychological characterizations. Using a bildungsroman trajectory, it follows the development of a young boy who must grow and mature during a voyage of initiation. Chago's search for knowledge leads him to a philosophical questioning about life and death, and the nature of revealed mysteries.

Tony Díaz directed *Chago* with the collective Teatro Caribeño. Founded in 1990 by Eugenio Hernández Espinosa, one of Cuba's foremost playwrights, Teatro Caribeño bases its gestural, textual, and visual codes on the myths and legends of Afro-Caribbean culture. Díaz's staging was particularly noteworthy for its stage design. The play takes place in a *palenque* (village) of maroon slaves in the 19th century and Díaz transformed the scenic space into the village and surrounding woods, mountain, and river.

The most engaging and innovative productions stemming from Afro-Cuban traditions are those resulting from a rigorous search for a Caribbean ritualistic theatre. The most important characteristic of this theatre is the use of possession as a mode of acting. On the Cuban stage, the pedagogy and techniques for so-called "acting in trance" or "transcendental acting" have been developed by Tomás González. The basis of this mode of "acting" is the achievement of different stages of transmutation in which the actors, following various techniques of acute concentration, "assume" a character. Acting in trance, then, does not require rehearsal in the traditional sense. Instead, the actors follow a powerful psychophysical training in which all of their energies are intensified and from that point the character "begins to flow."[5] As a matter of fact, the word "character" is not appropriate in this method. The actor's personality is partially lost within an interior space in which intuition, not rationalization, is the source of all expression. The characters flow from within the self, from within a liminal space in which the "actors" have to be partially aware of all their actions.

González and his Teatro Cinco employ these techniques in *Danza Oráculo* (Oracle Dance). This show is constructed on the basis of the actors' exchange with the audience. This exchange is the result of a theatrical practice *sui generis*: the training incorporates techniques from Grotowski, Yoga, I Ching, and alternative modes of knowledge. Most importantly, the group's acting in trance employs Ifá's (santería's) oracular techniques. These are used as tools for the actor's formation as well as for the establishment of a relationship with an audience that recognizes in this theatre operations similar to the Caribbean rituals which serve as its inspiration.

There is no plot, no development. The staging per se is the oracular exercise, the divination practiced by the actors/mediums with the spectators. Chance opens up the space for the unexpected; the performance constructs itself, grows or fails according to the achieved level of communication in each encounter with the audience.

In this same vein was Fátima Patterson's *Repique por Mafifa* (Ringing for Mafifa) with Cabildo Teatral de Santiago's (Santiago's Theatre Chapter). This well-known theatre collective, created in 1961 in the eastern

province of Santiago de Cuba, has developed an aesthetics based in the area's cultural and historical traditions. The group's director, Ramiro Herrero, has worked successfully with the carnival tradition in its *teatro de relaciones*, a mode of popular street theatre born in Santiago de Cuba during the 18th century (see Herrero 1983). Its stage language makes it distinct, since it renovates the use of popular theatrical forms in which music and dance serve as the focus of the actors' preparation as well as the link between the production and its audience.

Recently, the group began experimenting with other Caribbean rituals such as possession. From within the Cabildo, Fátima Patterson organized the "Estudio Macuba" project which focuses mainly on the problems of Caribbean women. The resultant production, *Repique por Mafifa*, is a short piece incorporating ritual possession that revolves around a specific character, Mafifa. This signals a rupture with the group's tradition of creating a collective hero as protagonist.

The performance, officiated by Patterson, an experienced actress, took place in a space which fostered spectator's participation: the patio of Havana's Center for Theatre and Dance in historic La Habana Vieja (old Havana). The actress-medium, seated in the audience, mounted the spirit of Mafifa, and then threw herself into the arena joining the percussionist and the rest of the actors.

To create the character of Mafifa, Patterson inspired herself by means of a real and well-known character. In the city's popular tradition, Mafifa is now a disembodied spirit in that peculiar and magical way in which death is perceived in Caribbean culture. In the Cuban theatrical context, however, Mafifa constitutes a departure from the stereotypical mulatta and black characters who are traditionally objectified as sexual objects. She is a black woman who is ostensibly homosexual. We say ostensibly because she has never come out as such. Her strong personality, her men's clothes, and her mode of speech would locate her in a role analogous to that of the butch in U.S. culture. This is further underscored by her decision to play the *campana,* the main instrument in the *conga* of Santiago's carnival. Traditionally played only by men, the campana consists of a heavy car tire which is stroked with a piece of iron.

The staging, as directed by José Oriols González and performed by Patterson, focused on this woman's struggle for acceptance in a profoundly *machista* culture, that of the percussion orchestra of Los Hoyos, Santiago de Cuba's most popular neighborhood. Mafifa entered this male world and tried asserting her sexual independence as a "mannish lesbian," a lesbian in drag (Newton 1984:573). The actress's gestural control and command of her physical characterization were especially noteworthy in the violent transitions in which Mafifa, as a homosexual woman, faces rejection, curiosity, slander, and even sexual harassment from the men who force her to define herself. The audience joined the actors in dancing to live music, signaling the end of the staging and the beginning of the communal festivities.

Monologs, monodramas, and unipersonal performances are some of the names given in Cuba to what we generally refer to as performance art. Since 1988, there has been a yearly "Monolog Festival" staged at the Café Brecht (see Gacio 1992 and González López 1993) and the best monolog performances at FIT were prizewinners from that festival. Sara María Cruz won the prize for best direction in 1993 when she staged Joel Angelino in Heiner Müller's *Hamletmachine*. Conceived as a multimedia performance, *La máquina Hamlet* interwove cinema, theatre, pantomime, drag, and clown techniques. The use of films and

3. Fátima Patterson performs Repique por Mafifa *in a trance during a moment when Mafifa's spirit comes to life (directed by José Oriols, patio of the Casón de Línea/Teatro Estudio, 1993). (Photo courtesy of Fátima Patterson)*

the soundtrack highlighted the relevance of Müller's text to Cuban present-day realities. Some miscuing of the technically complex soundtrack affected Angelino who, otherwise, offered us a superb performance in which he displayed his impressive gestural, vocal, and expressive potential.

Actor-director William Fuentes, who won honorable mention at the 1993 Monolog Festival for *¡Oh Virgilio!*, gave one of the most memorable performances at FIT. Fuentes based the text for his performance on a selection of poems, plays, and short stories written by Virgilio Piñera. Piñera, probably Cuba's most important playwright, fell from grace from the official cultural intelligentsia in Cuba's "dark decade" due to his homosexuality (see Leal 1992). In the words of Rine Leal, founder and holder of the Virgilio Piñera chair at the Instituto Superior

del Arte, Piñera was "the iconoclast of the forties, the cultural exile of the fifties, the master of the sixties, the ostracized of the seventies, the rediscovered of the eighties" (in Díaz 1993:n.p.).[6]

Fuentes chose not to present a literal interpretation of Piñera's legendary, provocative, and mistreated figure. The scenery was simple: only a rocking chair and a side table, each covered in a white cloth resembling diapers. The apparition of Piñera on the nearly empty stage visually and emotionally captured his solitude during the 1970s in Cuba.

Given the austerity of the mise-en-scène, the weight of the performance fell on Fuentes' acting. A variety of characters—an abused wife, a cannibal dancer, even a Pope on a bicycle—were gesturally suggested and flowed organically from the body of the actor (see Alfonso 1993). The incorporation of these characters was neither naturalistic, stereotypical, nor caricaturesque; Fuentes' control of his voice, hands, and body convincingly revealed interior motives.

Light and sound were Fuentes' only technical resources. The soundtrack included a variety of musical registers, from Chopin to Cuba's legendary Bola de Nieve. The music, like the text, was more evocative than illustrative. The only lights used were opaque whites and a few yellows to contrast with the general black-white which dominated the stage. This created a feeling of unreality or perhaps of surreality which was, at times, rather suffocating. *¡Oh Virgilio!* captured aspects of the Cuban character and reenacted with unmerciful satire the ambivalence with which the character/playwright tackled certain elements of Cuban society and culture, uncannily still in force today. Thanks to the theatrical magic of Piñera's writing, William Fuentes' impeccable performance reinforced the writer's impact on Cuban culture.

Many young playwrights in Cuba have been creating dramatic heroes from the writings and lives of poets from the so-called Golden Age of Cuban letters.[7] Most of these poets were controversial figures in their time—the end of the 19th to the beginning of the 20th century.[8] It seems to us that the ambiguous and polemical status these poets occupy in the Cuban tradition, along with Cuba's historical period of transition, are used by contemporary playwrights to reflect upon the nostalgia characteristic of Cuba's present moment: the *fin-de-siècle* and the end of many revolutionary utopian projects of which these playwrights were/are a part. *La virgen triste* (The Sad Virgin), written by Elizabeth Mena and acted by Vivian Acosta, is the only staged reconstruction of a female figure from that period: Juana Borrero, a poet and painter who died at the age of 18 and was deeply admired by many *modernista* poets, such as Cubans José Martí, Julián del Casals, and the Nicaraguan Rubén Darío.[9] Directed by José González, this performance approached the personality of Juana Borrero through a nonlinear story. The dramatic text is based on Borrero's passionate poems and letters; the text, however, is subordinate to the performative visual and sound images. There are constant spatial and temporal ruptures in the play which required demanding transitions from Acosta. These were efficaciously executed and demonstrated her remarkable internalization of neuroses and a whole gamut of emotions that the playwright used to construct the complex character of Borrero. Borrero's character was, at times, eclipsed by her counterpart, her black wet nurse who hauled around an old trunk filled with Juana's spirit and memories. The performance text was also a function of Acosta's acting methodology: acting in trance. Like a possessed medium, the spirits of Juana and the wet nurse were embodied by Acosta who maintained contrapuntally two states in transmutation.

4. Elizabeth Mena in La virgen triste *acts in trance. She embodies the character of troubled Juana Borrero (directed by José González, el Sótano, Havana, 1993). (Photo by Ismael N. Rodriguez)*

The performance presented Borrero's life as an attempt to live from within a fragmented memory; this adolescent woman, aware that she is too young to die, hurries all her experiences. The audience was able to relive her torment and despair as well as reflect upon her intelligence and her response to a society which at once impelled and restricted her.

The lighting design created by Carlos Repilado contributed to the oneiric and ritualistic atmosphere of the staging. The old white dress of the character(s) at times turned sepia under the lights; the complex lighting also gave the actress a specterlike quality. A beautiful plastic image of *La virgen* was enhanced by both candlelight and stage lights.

It would be impossible to talk about plays based upon the works of Cuban poets and not refer to Abilio Estévez's *Perla Marina*.[10] In the playwright's own words:

> *Perla Marina no es una obra de teatro: no hay en ella conflictos ni acción, ni se halla en los personajes lo que llamamos de modo impreciso "progresión dramática."* (Estévez 1993:2)
>
> Pearl of the Sea is not a work of theatre: it contains neither conflicts nor action, nor do its characters undergo what we call, imprecisely, "dramatic progression." (Estévez 1994:511)

Indeed, when reading the script, it is difficult to envision its staging. It is an extremely poetic, highly evocative piece composed, for the most part, of direct quotes from the works of Cuban poets and writers of the last two centuries. There is no characterization, no conflict, no progression. Instead, the text captures as it recreates a reflexive nostalgia based on these writers' lyricism and their different invocations of Cubanness.

Roberto Bertrand's staging with *Teatro Irrumpe* (Irrupting Theatre) was characteristic of the group's aesthetic and scenic language. Founded in 1982 by General Director Roberto Blanco, this theatre collective is considered to be one of the most important and established in Cuba. Blanco's disdain for realism and his passion for spectacle were evident

in this production. Bertrand's superb use of a visual language in the service of the written word achieved the metaphorical richness and complexity demanded by Estévez's text.

The stage setting captured the suffocation and insularity suggested by the text. There was a large curtain/screen on which elements from the natural world were drawn: butterflies, flowers, a moon. Over part of the curtain and stage hung a fishnet which also covered part of the stage floor. A large bucket painted blue and full of water was placed on the stairs leading from the spectators up to the proscenium. Prerecorded water sounds both roared and soothed, and were heard repeatedly in the background. These objects and the music metaphorically suggested the sea encircling all the characters as well as spectators. The water's "onstage" presence represented Estévez's words from the play's prolog:

> *[E]se sitio fuera del mundo, condenado a la maldita circunstancia del agua por todas partes, donde nacer es, además de una fiesta innombrable, el saberse hombre-aislado para siempre.* (1993:2)
>
> [T]hat unworldly site, condemned by the cursed circumstance of water on all sides. Where to be born is, besides an unnameable joy, to know that you will be forever isolated. (1994:511)

The "altar" was located backstage center and was reserved for the different apparitions of the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre (Virgin of Charity). The actress's yellow dress and the yellow light encompassing her also suggested the Virgin's counterpart in santería, Ochún.

The various characters related to each other in their search for those things long forgotten by contemporary Cuba. While most of them were invented by the author, a learned audience would recognize Julian del Casal's *ennui* behind Julián el triste (Julian the Sad), Juana Borrero's passion behind Juana la ingenua (Juana the Naive), and José María Heredia's exile behind José María el místico (Jose Maria the Mystical). These characters were on a pilgrimage to recuperate lost traditions. Using passages from the different poets, they grieved for the sensorial experiences aroused by sights, sounds, and flavors that any Cuban would undoubtedly recognize: the freshness of mango juice, the serenity of siestas, the festive atmosphere of Sunday reunions, the comfort of unbroken families gathered around hot coffee.

From within the *horror vacuo* of the characters' present precarious circumstances, which probably many spectators could identify with, lyrical remembrances seemed to be a means of escape. The recollections masterfully evoked the spectators' nostalgia expressly in matters relating to food. They literally sighed out loud when Julián el triste lamented:

> *¿Recuerdas el sabor del mango? ¿Cómo nos corría su jugo por el cuello? El cuerpo entero endulzado por el jugo del mango.* (Estévez 1993:21)
>
> Do you remember the taste of mango? How the juice would run down our necks? Your whole body sweetened with mango juice. (1994:515)

Their sighs were accompanied by the sounds of traditional Cuban music. The soundtrack's *danzones* and *sones*, superbly chosen by Juan Piñera, seemed to disperse the evoked sensations throughout the theatre.

5. The vagabond Filemon Ustariz, in search of the island, tells the other characters, "My house came down a long time ago, many years ago. One day, a part of the roof fell off. Next day a wall. Another good day the rocking chair where I used to read disappeared (in those days my eyes were still mine)" (Perla Marina, *directed by Roberto Bertrand, Teatro Mella, 1993). (Photo by Kike González)*

The play's lyrical and dramatic construction of nostalgia was troubling because such nostalgia reinforces the mythical Cuba constructed by the first generation of Castro's exiles. However, this nostalgia has its purpose on the Cuban stage: to recapture quotidian traditions that have been lost or erased because they supposedly belonged to the Cuban bourgeoisie, and authors who had disappeared from Cuba's literary history, such as Gastón Baquero, Lidia Cabrera, Carlos Loveira, and Jorge Mañach. Still it is emotionally and politically distressing to see on the Cuban stage precisely what many younger U.S. Cubans have been fighting against: a depoliticized version of concepts such as "homeland" and "Cubanness." This overall concern was mitigated partially at the end with Juana la ingenua's call for a family reunion:

> *¿Dónde están mis hermanos? Los que murieron, los que no veo conmigo. ¿Dónde están? ¡Qué vuelvan! ¡Los quiero aquí! ¡Ahora mismo, a mi lado!* (Estévez 1993:31)
>
> Where are my brothers? Those who died, those whom I don't see next to me. Where are they? Let them return! I want them here! Right now, next to me!

Although physically and ideologically all Cubans are not together, Bertrand and Estévez's *Perla Marina* successfully place exiled writers such as Gastón Baquero and Lidia Cabrera in conversation with revolutionaries such as Fayad Jamís and Pablo Armando Fernández. Indeed,

for those of us present at this "liturgy," it was not theatre but, as Estévez has said, an act of faith (1993:2) and also an act of hope.

The most polemical presentations at FIT were those addressing the reality of contemporary Cuba through different aesthetic approaches. Historically, theatre in Cuba has been a critical expression, never offering a complacent nor triumphant view with respect to its context. Nevertheless, the plays' recurring references to contemporary everyday life and the audience's reception of these came as a surprise. Allusions to hunger, the lack of vital necessities, and the hard-liners' side of Cuban cultural politics—at times quite direct and irreverent—call into question the belief held by most outsiders that there is no freedom of expression in Cuba, at least in the theatrical realm. In this context, it is no wonder that Senel Paz's short story, "El lobo, el bosque y el hombre nuevo" (The Wolf, the Forest, and the New Man), serves as the basis for so many theatrical adaptations.[11] One of these was Sara María Cruz's version, a solo composition performed by Osmel Poveda, entitled *La catedral del helado* (The Ice Cream Cathedral).

La catedral is a play about friendship and intolerance; in Senel Paz's own words, it is a story about

> *intolerancia al distinto, al que está en minoría, al que es más débil. La obra hace referencia a la intolerancia subsistente en Cuba en el plano de la sexualidad, la religión y la cultura.* (1994)
>
> intolerance towards those who are different, towards the minority, towards the weak. The story refers to the consistent intolerance in Cuba regarding sexuality, religion, and culture.

David, a young peasant, scholarship student in Havana, and militant in the Union of Communist Youth, meets Diego, a homosexual, at Coppelia, a well-known ice cream parlor in Havana. During the course of the play, Diego and David become friends and discover that they have common interests in spite of their differences.

Diego's apartment, where most of the action takes place, is referred to as the hideout, the drawer, the closet, the alternative. The minimalist set consisted of a stage covered with torn pieces of paper—a verbal carpet—which were used as newspapers, letters, and censored books during the play.[12] The words and pictures on the papers, traces of a violent historic and personal memory, were transformed during the play into messages and objects and used as theatrical connections and transitions. At stage left was a stool where Osmel Poveda as Diego or David sat. The stage and a portion of the audience was encompassed by smoke as the actor enters the evanescent space of memory, and the two characters began to unfold.

An important element in the production was the way music was used for dramatic and theatrical development. The soundtrack by Juan Piñera utilized the voice of Maria Callas singing arias from *La Traviata*. At the dramatic level, these arias were interwoven with the developing plot. More interesting, however, was the opportunity the music offered for campy theatricality. It gave Diego, the gay character, a space to perform the emotion, excess, and exuberance characteristic of divas and their stereotypically feminine performances.[13]

The play continued as a dialog between the two characters. At times, however, Diego seemed to address the audience directly. These asides established the erotic and political dynamics of the character's relationship with the audience. In one of these speeches was an allusion to intolerance toward homosexuals by Marxists and Christians. It is well

known that in Cuba, this intolerance resulted in serious abuses during the 1960s and '70s. During this "dark decade," homosexuals were equated with *gusanos*[14] and counterrevolutionaries because of their "improper conduct" (see Almendros and Jiménez-Leal 1984; Argüelles and Rich 1989; Manzor-Coats 1994b; and Young 1981). At the end of the play, Diego has to leave the country due to problems at work, apparently caused by the intolerance prescribed by Cuba's official culture. Although the play does not clarify what the problems are, the result is clear. Diego uttered his dramatic words, "I'm leaving," and their finality was underscored once again by the music.

The tragedy is of special relevance in present-day Cuba, particularly in the artistic world. The play ends in that emotional space where one mourns the absence of a loved one. This ending will only be replaced by a recuperative ritual when friendship, mutual understanding, and the elimination of our repressive and homophobic monsters are achieved.

Following a Cuban camp aesthetics, one of the most daring critiques of Cuban reality was Carlos Díaz's staging of Virgilio Piñera's *La niñita querida* (Darling Little Girl) with his Teatro el Público (The Public Theatre; it takes its name from García Lorca's play). In spite of the group's recent formation (they have been working as a collective since 1990 but were officially recognized in 1992), their productions have quickly become Havana's best-attended. They became known through their production of a trilogy of North American authors: Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Robert Anderson's *Tea and Sympathy* (see Martin 1994). Characterized by their spectacular stagings, they base their visual language on a neobaroque design in which objects become as important as the actor/characters onstage (see Cano 1993 and Sarduy 1980). As Joel Cano states, the Public Theatre

> *se integra de forma irreverente a la tradición, asumiendo la festividad del hecho escénico con carácter de desmesura sensual, en un posmodernismo que podría catalogarse de posbarroco si lo traducimos a nuestro devenir cultural.* (1993:12)
>
> approaches tradition in an irreverent fashion assuming the festivity of the stage act with sensual excess, with a postmodernism which, in our own cultural terms, we could call postbaroque.[15]

Piñera's text, like most of his oeuvre, was never published or staged while he was alive. It has a rather simple plot (see Piñera 1992). A darling little girl is about to celebrate her fifteenth birthday. This rite of passage—in Cuban culture a girl's fifteenth birthday marks her entrance into adulthood—will take a different turn. At the end, she kills her parents only to reproduce the same familial structure. Piñera's play follows a classical linear organization: a prolog, two acts, and an epilog. It presents two main conflicts: the girl hated the name her mother had given her, *Flor de Té* (Tea Flower); and she preferred to practice shooting as opposed to more feminine activities such as playing the piano. These two conflicts were the pretext for unveiling, in Piñera's sardonic fashion, the authoritarian nature of Cuba's middle-class families as well as the performative nature of gender constructs.

Díaz's staging was, to use Sarduy's phrase, a true "baroque feast" (1980:168). As the audience entered the National Theatre we were greeted by the Men in Black, four of the party organizers dressed in tuxedos (performed by Vladimir Cuenca, costume designer; Joel Cano, dra-

*6. Flor de Té (Adria Santana) on her 15th birthday chooses shooting over playing the piano. Her relatives—Oscar (Gilberto Subiaurt), Pepe (Carlos Acosta), Paco (Alberto Ramírez), Cuca (Leandro Espinosa in drag), and Pancha (Roberto Govín in drag)—accompany her during the festivities. (*La niñita querida, *directed by Carlos Díaz at the Teatro Nacional de Cuba, 1993). (Photo by O. Silvera)*

maturgy consultant; Lester Veira, assistant director; and Carlos Díaz himself). They were already celebrating, throwing confetti as we arrived. We were each given a party memento, a small flag made with newspaper cuttings. As guests, we were then accompanied to the Covarrubias stage, where the party continued with festive music and dimmed lights. The nearly dark stage had a large sign in the background: "*Lo que se sabe no se pregunta*" (If you know the answer don't ask the question). Stage right, there was a man dressed in Soviet military garb, rifle and all, guarding the stage, pacing back and forth.

The entrance to/beginning of this festivity signaled many of the theatrical elements and procedures Sarduy delineated as characteristic of our Latin American neobaroque: the highlighting of artificiality through mechanisms of substitution, proliferation, and condensation; the parodical approach to reality via an intertextuality achieved through citations and reminiscence; the construction of an erotics of the image based on excess Carlos Díaz's neobaroque strategies mixed Cuban choteo, camp, and drag to bring to the fore elements in Piñera's text which, recontextualized, speak to Cuban daily life and sociopolitical problems. This address was never direct or literal. All dramatic sequences were overloaded in the performance: campy histrionics, passages delivered in operatic style, pauses which altered the meaning of the sentences; in other words, utter disequilibrium.

Piñera's text and the performance were bombarded from within. First, the stage production added quotes from famous revolutionary playwrights. These quotes were delivered in a recitative style. Even punctuation marks were read out loud, as if turning language onto itself. For example, in the midst of a discussion about the good nature of the darling little girl (Adria Santana), the father (Gilberto Subiaurt) stood aside and said: "*Pobre hombre. ¿Cómo sobrevivirá el invierno? Quintero coma Héctor punto Contigo pan y cebolla. La Habana Editorial Letras Cubanas*" (Poor man; how will he survive in the winter? Quintero comma Hector period With you onions and bread. Havana Cuban Press). These citations pay homage to famous playwrights. More importantly, however, they serve as a distancing mechanism for the au-

dience. While interrupting the flow of the story they speak directly to an audience that no longer believes in facile stories and realizes that the actors are on its side (Cano 1993:13).

The stage production added two elements to the dramatic text. First, the use of heat as a leitmotif. This was connected to the campy use of fans throughout the production. It also allowed for a sardonic critique of Cuba's tourist industry. In the prolog, a character complained: "*¡Qué calor! Nos estamos muriendo poco a poco*" (It's so hot! We are dying little by little). This was immediately followed by a short pause in which the father, approaching the front of the stage, mimicked an advertising jingle saying: "*¡Visite Cuba! Paraíso tropical. Visite la familia Romaguera [...], una familia respetable que está encantada de la vida*" (Visit Cuba! Tropical paradise. Visit the Romaguera family [...], a respectable family who is absolutely delighted with life). This sarcastic criticism was picked up again at the end of the performance when the onstage banner reproduced another false touristic image of Cuba: "*Cuba, alegre como su sol*" (Cuba, happy as its sun).

The second element was an imposing white refrigerator—one of the few objects onstage besides a park bench, a gigantic cardboard birthday cake, a stuffed poodle, and a wooden submachine gun. It served many functions: It was a substitute for the chest in Piñera's text; at one moment in the performance, it was also used as a pedestal on which a young Russian actor (Andrei Roubtsov) recited verses of Pushkin in Russian; for the most part, it was open and empty, standing, as Cano has beautifully described it, "*en opuesta armonía* [...] *solitario y desposeído en su batalla contra la calidez*" (in opposing harmony [...], lonely and dispossessed in its battle against heat) (1993:15).

The final textual assault came during one of the most festive and irreverent moments of the production, the transition between the two acts. The whole family was gathered waiting for Flor de Té's entrance into her party. They were playing with the birthday banner and rehearsing the music they would play. In the midst of this rehearsal, the actors brought out red flags, reminiscent of the flags waived at so many political rallies. The mother (Caterina Sobrino) then addressed the audience and commands: "*¡Compañeros! Cuando yo diga ¡banderitas! saquen las banderitas*" (Comrades! When I give you the cue "little flags!" you must wave the little flags). In utter festive chaos, the audience, aware of the emptiness of the red flag as a political signifier and their own mechanical participation in so many ambiguous "festive" occasions, joined the family in wishing the darling little girl a happy birthday.

As in all of the Public Theatre's productions, the costumes were grand and glamorous. Designed exclusively for this staging, they were not beholden to realism or historicity. Highly allusive, they suggested, among many things, Cubanness; the family; failed aspirations; the sad and bygone festive birthday parties; Latin machismo in its Mexican version with the mariachi outfit; and stereotypical Spanishness in the female flamenco dancer outfit; irreverence toward familial authority with the grandmother and aunt as men in drag. The "background" music, once again Piñera's creation, served a similar function. Like the refrigerator, it occupied the position of protagonist onstage.

All of the above elements underlined the artificiality of all stage creations. This spectacular performance also had a specular function. From within the festivities of a familial and familiar world on the verge of being overturned, the audience caught a glimpse of the artificiality of political rhetoric, the emptiness of historical references, and the deadly

7. Medida por medida *(Measure for Measure) dramaticized daily events in a space suggestive of the 1601 tavern, The Siren (directed by Raquel and Vicente Revueltas, patio of the Casón de Línea/Teatro Estudio, 1993). (Photo by Hector Molina)*

effects of authoritarianism. In *La niñita querida* Carlos Díaz staged (borrowing Sarduy's words again) a true "Baroque of the Revolution":

> the contemporary baroque, the neo-baroque, structurally reflect[ing] the disharmony, the rupture of homogeneity. [...This] neo-baroque of disequilibrium is a structural reflection of a desire which cannot reach its object, a desire for which the logos has organized a screen which only hides its lack. [...It is a] baroque which refuses all restoration, which makes metaphor out of the discussed order and of the transgressed law. Baroque of the Revolution. (1980:131–32; *edited translation*)

Classical theatre was also present at FIT. Vicente Revuelta's innovative staging of William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* by Teatro Estudio de Cuba and the Cuban-Venezuelan coproduction of Fernando de Rojas's *La Celestina* by the Rita Montaner collective were the festival's favorites.

The directors and founders of Teatro Estudio de Cuba, Raquel and Vicente Revuelta, established in 1958 the original Teatro Estudio, the oldest theatre group in Cuba (and the second oldest in Latin America after Uruguay's Teatro el Galpón).

Medida por medida (Measure for Measure) was particularly striking for its creative utilization of a scenic space. This production brought to the Cuban stage a different vision of Shakespeare's classic, focusing on everything that it could possibly say to contemporary Cuban reality. The ramshackle patio of an old mansion in El Vedado—Teatro Estudio's house—and its interior halls became the tavern, the duke's mansion, the prison, and the gallows. These spaces were inhabited by both actors

and spectators who participated in a game in which class rivalries and the fissures of national unity were recreated.

The staging hyperbolized the decisive role of the individual in social mobility and the internal transformations within classes. The play developed in what seemed a perfect space for the excellent actors to interact with the audience, creating a temporary community. At dusk the space was lit with torches and kerosene, the action and visual images accentuated by the chiaroscuro game of light and shadow. This adaptation presented a rather humanist approach which, in contemporary Cuba, spoke to the audience's most urgent lacks and needs. An audience of all ages packed the patio, their enthusiasm confirming the contemporary validity of this classical play, Vicente Revuelta's excellent adaption, and also the caliber of the cast of Teatro Estudio de Cuba.

One of the most interesting aspects of FIT was its broad program for children and adolescents. Children's theatre has been widely produced and staged throughout Cuba, mainly since the early 1960s, when the National Theatre School inaugurated a chair for its new program in Children's Theatre.[16] In March 1963 the children's theatre collective Teatro Nacional de Guiñol (National Puppet Theatre) was founded. This group has become the leading company for experimentation and the refinement of different creative tendencies in children's theatre.

Thirty years after its inception, Guiñol presented Joel Cano's *Fábula del insomnio* (Sleepless Fable), directed by Raúl Martín (see Cano 1992a and Torres 1992). Joel Cano is one of Cuba's youngest and most daring and innovative playwrights. His play *Timeball o El juego de perder el tiempo* (Timeball or the Game of Wasting Your Time) is considered by many to be a milestone, marking a "before" and "after" period in post-1980 Cuban theatre (see Cano 1992b; Hernández Arocha 1992). This fable picks up the nonlinearity of time and the image-scenes characteristic of Cano's plays. As spectators, we asked ourselves perhaps naively, whether *Fábula* was really a performance for children or whether it was meant to awaken the child within us. A musical comedy of complex structure, the text, written in verse, uses the poetic tradition of Cuban popular lyrics, particularly its *guajiro* (peasant folk) variant.

The festival production parodied the conventions of children's storytelling and cartoons, primarily Walt Disney characters. It was set at the bottom of a pond, the kingdom of Rey Carpa (King Carp), a powerful little thief who had dictated the behavior that his subjects had to follow if they wanted to survive. Insomnia became the rule thanks to the whims of this king who made sleep his sole privilege. The Toad Buffoon, using music, pantomime, and farcical gestures was the hero who was able to magically transform the kingdom. The play unfolded alternating between fabulous, unimaginable episodes and episodes that were all too real. This counterpoint presented to the public a gamut of ethical options and alternatives, delineating the risks which the characters/subjects of the kingdom had to assume in their daily lives. As a fable of insularity, whimsical abuses of power, survival (perhaps of life in Cuba?), it demonstrated this young director's ability to create convincing visual images. The original music composed by Aimée Nuviola borrowed from rock and Cuban folk music; it can only be described in one word, magical. The actors succeeded in creating characters that were neither caricatures nor stereotypes, and transformed the fable into a portrait of contemporary history shaped by the misdeeds of individual human beings.

8. The prestigious children's theatre group Papalote in El poeta y Platero *(directed by René Fernández, Teatro Guiñol, 1993). (Photo courtesy of Lillian Manzor-Coats and Inés María Martiatu Terry)*

Papalote (Kite) is the name of the prestigious children's theatre group from Matanzas, directed by René Fernández Santana. Since its founding in March 1962, its plays have incorporated the theatricalization of Afro-Cuban folklore and traditional popular culture in connection with classical European culture. The group brought to FIT *El poeta y Platero* (The Poet and Platero), based on *Platero and I* by the Spanish poet Juan Ramón Jiménez. Fernández worked with his usual team: designer Zenén Calero and actor Rubén Darío Salazar. The construction of this work was rather risky given the fact that the text is poetic prose, which presents problems in finding dramatic dynamism. Nevertheless, the resulting spectacle was a beautiful exercise of the imagination.

The public's favorite, as well as ours, was *Patakín de una muñeca negra* (Legend of a Black Doll), written and directed by Alberto Curbelo with the group Teatro Caribeño. Curbelo, a young writer of children's short stories and theatre, created this play based on *Historia de una muñeca abandonada* (Story of an Abandoned Doll) by Spaniard Alfonso Sastre, José Martí's *La muñeca negra* (The Black Doll), and different elements of Cuban culture of Yorubá origin. Using dances, songs, balloons, stilts, batá drums, proverbs, and street-vendor cries, this *patakín* (a Yorubá word meaning story or legend) narrates the misadventures of a black doll from Nigeria and her relationship with two girls, who fight over

9. For 1993, theatre critics gave Patakín de una muñeca negra *the Villanueva Prize for one of the best productions, and the Havana Center for Theatre and Dance gave Curbelo the prize for Best Artistic Direction. Lolita (Marietta Sánchez) is pulling the black doll (Monse Duany) away from the loving Paquita (Tania Rodríguez) who does not want to hurt the doll as Mirandoflores (José Armando Celaya) watches (directed by Alberto Curbelo, patio of Teatro Nacional, Havana, 1993). (Photo courtesy of Alberto Curbelo)*

*10. Amidst the clouds Cúmulonimbo (Julito Reyes) and Estratocúmulo Opacus (Vladimir Espinosa), Fumiké (Sonia Boggiano) takes care of the black doll (Monse Duany) after she has been "torn apart" (*Patakín de una muñeca negra, *Havana, 1993). (Photo courtesy of Alberto Curbelo)*

ownership of the doll. The doll, acted by Monse Duany, became a humanized toy who moved and talked for the children. The actress's superb training and body movement, particularly the extraordinary use of her hands and eyes, incited the curiosity of many children who approached and touched her to see if she really was a doll.

There were many other characters who represented natural forces as well as forces of evil, justice, generosity, envy, and maternal love. The character of Kuni Kuni, the Rap dancer, was skillfully played by Vladimir Espinosa who displayed his training in both acting and dancing. The children's favorites were Fumiké, the balloon vendor (Sonia Boggiano); the Hawk (Julito Reyes); and the narrator (Julián Villa). These three quickly achieved a close relationship with the children via the different interactive games related to the play's plot.

Curbelo conceived this play to be staged in an open, natural space. At FIT, it was staged in the yard of the National Theatre. He masterfully incorporated the vegetation, trees, stairs, and roofs. The accompaniment of live music, Afro-Cuban chants, and the calls of the batá drums were an integral part of the performance and added the ludic element in which children were willing and active participants. We were fortunate to watch the show standing behind a woman who had been at each performance. She knew the songs by heart, although many of them were in Yorubá, and acted almost as a second narrator. She knew exactly where we could not stand to avoid interfering with the work of the Clouds; she also knew where the children should sit to get the best of the treats distributed at the end: balloons, candy, puzzles, and other trinkets which are practically a luxury in contemporary Cuba. As a matter of fact, at the end of the performance there was a small dispute between two mothers who argued over a balloon. Our second narrator quickly called Fumiké who brought the doll into the dispute; with her charming movements and voice the doll was able to pacify the adults who did not seem to have learned much from this patakín.

The success and high caliber of the different stage proposals thus far reviewed would not be possible if Flora Lauten's Teatro Buendía and Víctor Varela's Teatro del Obstáculo had not dared to carve the road in

*11. Death peeks at the audience from behind a tree (*Patakín de una muñeca negra, *Havana, 1993). (Photo by Lissette Solorzano)*

the mid- to late 1980s. The Teatro Buendía was formed in 1986 by recent graduates from the Instituto Superior del Arte who had been disciples of Flora Lauten, the general director of the group. Their pedagogical formation is founded primarily on the value of experimentation as an essential principle of theatrical creation and learning. In the late '80s, they defended this principle of experimentation against all odds, mainly against most other sectors of the theatrical and cultural movements in Cuba. The group is now one of the strongest and most innovative on the Cuban stage.

Víctor Varela's Teatro del Obstáculo on the other hand, was formed by a group of students who were not part of the Instituto Superior del Arte's theatre clique. It was 1985 and monotonous Cuban theatrical praxis bored them to death. Since they didn't belong to any theatre collective they did not have access to a space in which to stage their work. Thus, they decided to empty Varela's small living room and work from there. In 1987, they presented *La cuarta pared* (The Fourth Wall) nightly in a room holding eight spectators. *La cuarta pared* signaled a radical rupture in Cuba's theatrical movement as it became an unprecedented phenomenon (see García Abreu 1993b; Muguercia 1988). Its revolutionary extraverbal intervention prompted discussions that went beyond aesthetics to ethical and ideological concerns. As Ileana Diéguez Caballero states:

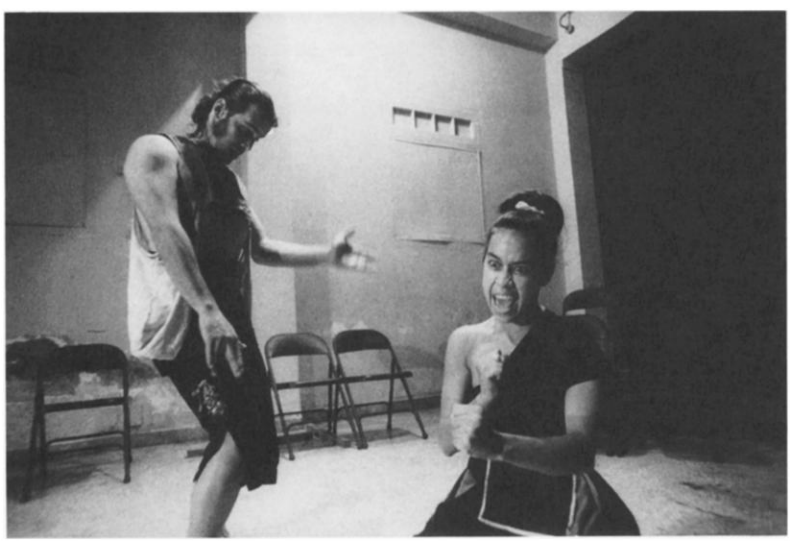
> *Estar con aquel grupo de jóvenes que en determinadas condiciones decidían buscar un sentido distinto y exponer sus contradicciones a través del teatro, llegó a significar una "declaración de principios." (1993:44–45)*
>
> To support that group of young people who decided to search for a different meaning and expose their contradictions via theatre and from within specific conditions eventually became tantamount to a "declaration of principles."

They were recognized as an official theatre group in 1991; since then they work in their "theatre," the bottom floor of an old Masonic lodge with no theatrical architecture.

*12. The members of Teatro del Obstáculo, Alexis González, Bárbara Barrientos, and Víctor Varela, embody the characteristics of Segismundo, Mishima's grandmother, and the Marquis de Sade (*Segismundo exmarqués*, directed by Víctor Varela, Teatro del Obstáculo, Havana, 1993). (Photo by Kike González)*

Teatro del Obstáculo is, more than the group's name, a premise: obstacles can be transformed into creative elements. For this group, to create in precarious conditions, with what they call an "aesthetics of difficulty," is also an ethical principle: a way to create while establishing a dialog with society (see Diéguez Caballero 1993 and Varela 1993). At FIT, they presented *Monodrama La cuarta pared* (The Fourth Wall Monodrama) and *Segismundo exmarqués* (Segismundo the Ex-marquis). The movement of *Segismundo* loosely follows the structure of the Japanese *Ikebara sabi ido*, the way of floral arrangements. There are 12 spiritual postures which the group puts into motion by constantly disrupting each posture.

Teatro Buendía presented two stagings: *La cándida Eréndira*, based on Gabriel García Márquez's story "Erendira," and *Las ruinas circulares* (Circular Ruins). *Circular Ruins* was without a doubt, the most moving, visually complex, and emotionally disturbing performance at FIT. The theatre in which it was staged used to be a small old Russian Orthodox church. As it is beyond Havana's regular circuit, getting to it requires



13. One of the most intense moments of Segismundo exmarqués *(Teatro Obstáculo, Havana, 1993) is when Víctor Varela and Bárbara Barrientos metaphorically search for a center and a concrete utopia. (Photo by Kike González)*

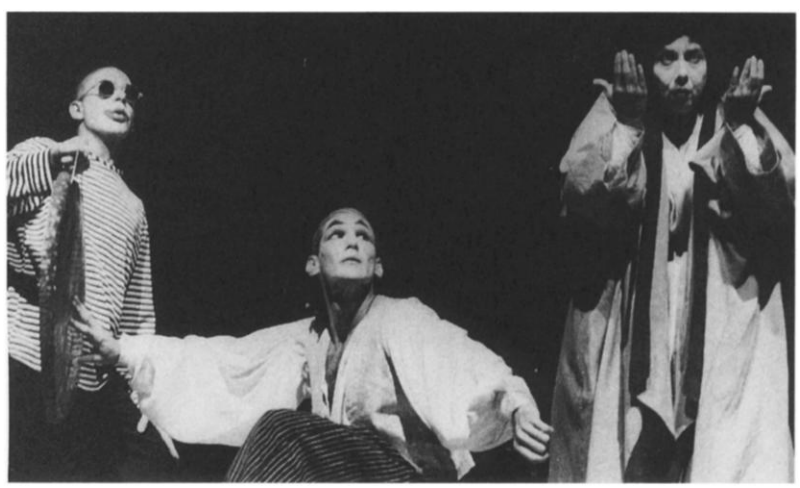
considerable willpower. A full house at all performances signaled the audience's desire to find in their theatre the kind of searching, ritualistic experience that characterizes all of Buendía's recent productions.

We waited on a sidewalk outside an iron gate to get into the theatre. Here, some met acquaintances; others explained why this was their first time there; the majority wondered whether they would be able to get in as they talked about the long walk or bicycle ride after a frugal dinner, if they had eaten at all. Although the performance was to begin at 9:00 P.M. most of them had been there since 6:30, disappointed that today they would not participate from the very beginning: there would not be a training session ("rehearsal") today. There is an odd disparity between the hour-and-a-half of training and the 58 to 59 minutes of show/ritual. This performance was proof that the rules of ritual are, indeed, not those of theatre; the average spectator is in no way prepared for or accustomed to this level of internal intensity and might not be able to go beyond an hour of performance time.

We crossed the small yard and entered the theatre/church in complete silence—the ritual had already begun. Three male actors (Carlos Cruz, José Antonio Alonso, José Juan Rodríguez), one of them black, were lying on the floor, hands on their pelvises. They were doing breathing exercises which slowly increased in tempo. Eventually there were sounds, pure sounds, some recognizable as sighs and tantric oms. Little by little, body parts were energized and began to move; their eyes were still closed. Strangely, the bodies moved separately, as if they were alone, but one sensed that each was in communication with the other two.

This is an organic training; a training of and in the body which is the repository of memory, not the mind. Without seeing, the body responds to harmony, to the energy of the other. You breath slowly, only air; then you create sound from the air. Breathing becomes a dilating act. Sound comes from the pelvis, a point of energy; it is created at the level of senses, of sensations. This training cleanses the actors of all tensions and it prepares them for a trance. It is as if they are born every day, cleansing everything, especially the mind (Carrió 1993).[17] Somehow, the audience is also involved in this cleansing. Once our minds are free, reason as a decoding element stops functioning.

Light fell on a shirtless percussionist who began to play the sacred batá drums (Jorge Morejón). His place was to our immediate right. The black



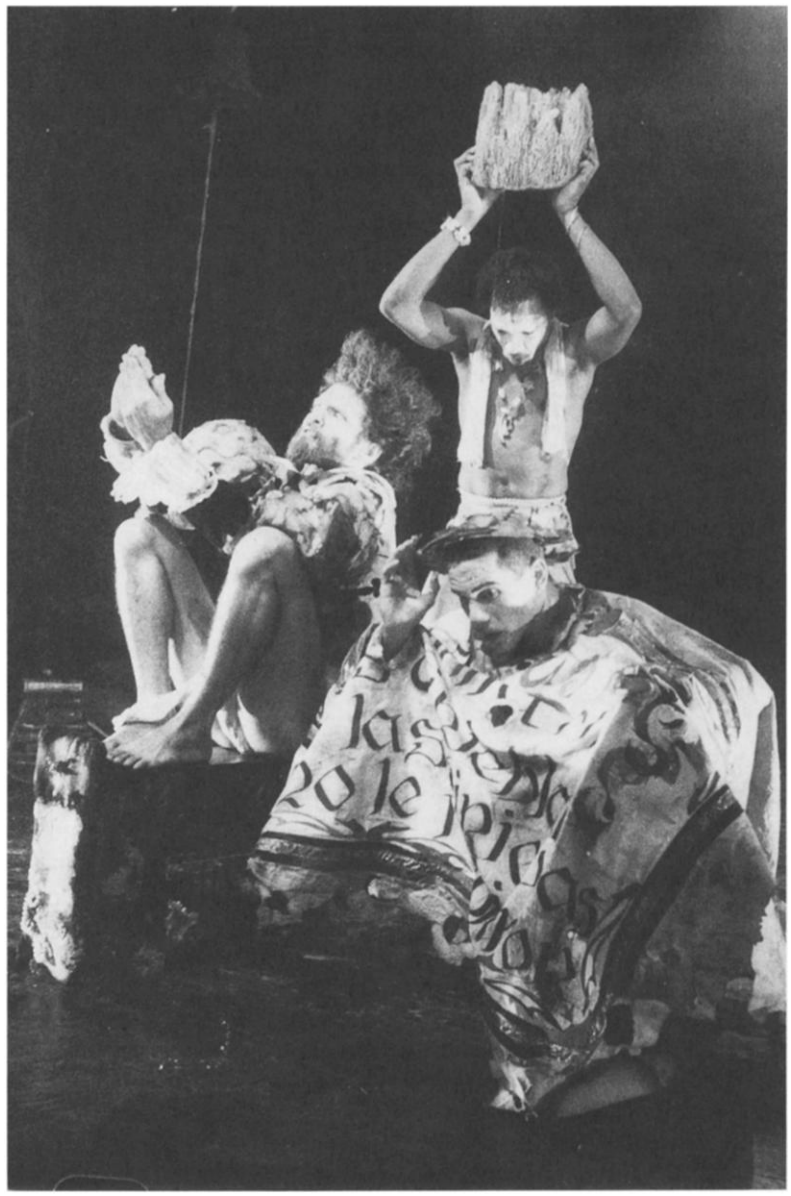
*14. In Teatro Buendía's collective adaptation of García Márquez's short story "Erendira," Flora Lauten plays the role of the merciless grandmother (right) (*La increible y triste historia de la cándida Eréndira y su abuela desalmada, *directed by Flora Lauten and Carlos Celdrán, Teatro Buendía, 1993). (Photo by Kike González)*

actor, now alive with the drums—actually, as if the drums were inside him—approached the area of the "stage" that had the santería paraphernalia: candles, shells, cleansing herbs. He opened a book, tore a page, and masked himself with it as he approached the liminal space of possession. At the highest point of this paroxysm, he repeatedly rang a bell and yelled out *Ikú!!*, the Yorubá invocation of death. It is as if we were all reborn at that very moment, as if we were participating in a ceremony or ritual of rebirth, based on the slave's memory, our memory. The two white actors were now uttering unintelligible phrases; one body is half naked, covered only by a loincloth and a small knight's jacket; the other is hidden in parchment cloth. When logic invaded our minds, we tentatively recognize them to be Don Quijote and Sancho Panza.

This, nevertheless, was only a temporary identification. Light eventually filled the entire space while the three beings roamed about, alone and independent of their surroundings. They talked but there was no communication among them. Nothing indicated that the three were aware of their coexistence in the same space-time, but somehow each presupposed the existence of the other. Poetic reason told that these were not characters, per se; they were errant, wondering beings, like the rest of us, in search of their/our own *ínsulas* (islands). Throughout this voyage some of us recognized patakines in Spanish, as well as Yorubá chants and rituals. These were interspersed with fragments from Martí and Cervantes, as well as from Columbus's *Diary*—particularly the moment when he discovers the island and utters the line all Cubans know by heart: "This is the most beautiful land human eyes have ever seen."[18] It really didn't matter whether or not you knew the textual origins of the phrases. They were interwoven in a skillful Borgesian game in which different spaces and centuries, absences and presences were confused so as to appeal to our sense of helplessness, errancy, and insularity. The most resounding words for the audience that night, and also for ourselves, seemed to be: "*Señor, es más fácil morir con honra que pensar con orden*" (Sir, it is easier to die with honor than to think with order).

In Buendía's *Ruinas circulares* three actors participated in a ritual of memory recuperation (see Carrió 1992). A black slave, who was also Sorcerer, Runaway, Horse, invoked the figures of Errant Knight and his Esquire. They could very well have been the three "Johns" in the Catholic tradition. In Cuban Catholic iconography we might also identify them as the black, mulatto, and indian to whom the Virgin of Charity, patron saint of Cuba, appeared. The actor's body "received" and incorporated/embodied his ancestors. The slave officiated the ritual while he inscribed a circle on the ground by dragging his chalk-covered foot. The Knight wanted to kill giants and discover "new lands"; the Squire wanted to govern his own island. Ideals, utopias, delusions of grandeur led to the "Discovery" which led to hunger, both physical and spiritual. The troubling fact was that, on that voyage, the masks of Conquistador and Slave were all imprinted, literally and metaphorically, within the same circle of images (Carrió 1992:28). Ikú, or death, personified by the slave, opened and closed the roads. It was a synthesis of the different deities in the Yorubá religion: Olofi (Creator and Master of the World), Yemayá (Goddess of the Seas), Elegguá (God of the Roads), and Changó (God of Fire and War) (see Castellanos and Castellanos 1992).

It seemed that Obatalá (God of Knowledge) and Ochún (Goddess of Love) were absent; however, in one of the most intense moments of the ritual, the moment of the "shipwreck" toward the end, the three characters were able to find faith again. In this scene, we also reached a



*15. Within the space of memory, actors Carlos Cruz, José Antonia Alonso, and José Juan Rodríguez "receive" and embody Cuban ancestors: the Spaniard (in the characters of the Errant Knight and the learned religious man) and the African (*Ruinas circulares, *directed by Nelda Castillo, Teatro Buendía, 1993). (Photo by Hector Molina)*

sort of paroxysm via the visual and auditory stimuli: intense bright and dark lights, a contrapuntal dialog among Pachelbel's "Cannon," "Ave Maria," Gregorian chants, and batá drums. From within this polyphony came the untiring voices of the three characters who, by screaming, invoked their deities and ours: Dulcinea, Mary, Ochún.

The feminist in me was obviously troubled by the dangerous but typical idealizations of a feminine utopia as well as by the absence of a female body in this ritual, be it a Mary or a Dulcinea. After the performance, I dared to voice my concerns, knowing too well that it would expose a part of my bicultural experience. There was a long silence among the actors, Castillo (the director), and Carrió (the researcher and dramaturgy advisor). After glances and hesitation, Carrió offered an ex-

planation. Originally, there was an actress who had participated in the development and reenactment of this ritual/fable. As a matter of fact, she had been with the group from its inception. During their last trip to Europe, she chose not to return to Cuba. The group decided not to replace her; instead, they incorporated the pain of her absence in this ritual of fragmented memories. At the moment of invocation, she was there, along with the vision or apparition of Dulcinea and Ochún. Indeed, in spite of the different conflicts enacted in this ritual, we felt as if we still might be able to find or build beauty, peace, knowledge, love in and on the ruins of utopias. As García Abreu has so eloquently stated, the metaphors of *Ruinas circulares*:

> *en sus metáforas quedan transmutadas las incontables tensiones de los hombres que hoy asistimos a la convocatoria del teatro como un acto de defensa de nuestra existencia cotidiana y de la herencia espiritual que nos corresponde.* (1992a:38)
>
> are transmuted into the many tensions of those of us who attend theatre's summons as an act of defense of our daily existence and of the spiritual heritage which belongs to us.

FIT 1993 staged the strength and power of Cuba's theatrical practice. It was, above all, a product of and proof that the island's theatre practitioners and audiences are willing to defend that cultural space and its festive possibilities amidst the innumerable hardships generated by present economic and political circumstances. This overview demonstrates that Cuba's contemporary stage offerings are as diverse and contradictory as their context. Above all, theatre is still a vital space for creation. The many stories it weaves are not just critical of Cuba's present reality; they offer hope and solace in the midst of so many urgencies.

It is unfortunate that this complex and heterogenous space cannot yet accommodate the theatrical production of the "other" Cuba, of those who have left. While borders and frontiers are being dismantled by theory and cultural workers, Cubans continue to have "*del lado de acá, el mar; del lado de allá, el mar*" (on this side, the sea; on that side, the sea) (Estévez 1993:25). In spite of that obstinate line we might call the horizon of ideology, many of us are trying to rearticulate this divided cultural production from different shores (see de la Nuez 1994). In Spain, Carlos Espinosa Domínguez edited a theatre anthology (1992) that includes plays from "within" and "without" Cuba (see Leal 1993). Ruth Behar at the University of Michigan edited "Bridges to Cuba," two special issues of *Michigan Quarterly Review* (1994) dedicated to Cuban cultures from both shores. "Exiled" playwrights and performance artists who have returned to Cuba have based their U.S. productions on that experience but are not yet being staged or read in Cuba. It seems untimely that Cubans from this shore cannot share and learn from the FIT proposals examined here. It is also a pity that Manuel Martín's *Swallows*, Pedro Monge's *Nadie se va del todo*, and Carmelita Tropicana's *Milk of Amnesia*,[19] for example, are not available to the Cuban audience on the island. It is our hope that this review essay may be a first step toward future theatrical joint ventures. We are ready for the next FIT. Let's summon theatre practitioners and audiences to be ahead of geopolitical games, to make the theatre, as it has always been, that space where barriers are broken down. After all, isn't the cold war supposed to be over?

Notes

1. Funds for this research and trip came from the Organized Research Initiative on Hispanic Theaters, Humanities Research and Travel Grant, and Chicano/Latino Studies (SCR 43) at the University of California Irvine.
2. We recognize that these brief paragraphs written from the outside are extremely schematic. This is not the place nor the moment to analyze in detail Cuban theatre during the 1980s or that ambiguous and problematic concept "official voice of the Revolution." Rosa Ileana Boudet, for example, suggests that Cuban theatre has never had an official line (1992:11). Other playwrights, however, without referring to an official culture, do refer to normative forms which seemed to have dictated creative as well as interpretative practices.
3. For example, in conjunction with the seminar at the EITALC, U.S. Cuban playwright Pedro Monge and I [Manzor-Coats], together with Oswaldo Dragún and Ileana Dieguez—director and subdirector of the EITALC—had tried to coordinate an encounter/roundtable discussion among Cuban playwrights, directors, and critics residing in Cuba and the U.S. This encounter, the first of its kind, was canceled by the Cuban Ministry of Culture as soon as plans had begun.
4. Information about the different theatre collectives comes from informal personal interviews with the directors as well as from the *Catálogo de las artes escénicas* (Scenic Arts' Catalog; Consejo Nacional:n.d.). This catalog offers historical as well as factual information on Cuba's most important theatre, dance, and lyric theatre groups.
5. We were lucky enough to be able to participate in Tomás González's workshop in which Martiatu-Terry was the *sistematizadora teórica* (scholar-recorder). These paragraphs are from notes taken at the workshop, "Transcendental Acting," conducted in Machurrucutu, Cuba, 1–30 September 1993, as part of the EITALC's X workshop.
6. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by Manzor-Coats.
7. José Jacinto Milanés, for example, has been a source of inspiration for Abelardo Estorino in two plays, *La dolorosa historia del amor secreto de don José Milanés* (The Painful Story of the José Minanés Secret Love, written in 1974 but not published nor produced until 1985), and *Vagos rumores* (Vague Rumors, 1992). Juan Clemente Zenea has been revived in Abilio Estévez's *La verdadera culpa de Juan Clemente Zenea* (Juan Clemente Zenea's Real Guilt, produced in 1986 by Havana's Teatro Estudio and in 1991 by Miami's Prometeo).
8. Historically, this period marks the end of the Cuban War of Independence, the end of Cuba's colonial status, and the beginning of the Republican period.
9. Silvia Ramos has written *Tula 1854* based on the life and work of another female writer, Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, but to our knowledge, this play has not been staged or published.
10. Estévez received the Tirso de Molina prize in December 1994.
11. Rafael Gonzalez's unipersonal version (1992) maintains the story's original title and approaches the subject matter as if it has happened years ago. Tony Díaz's adaptation (*La catedral del helado*, 1992) had two characters. There is also a filmic adaption titled *The Ice Cream Cathedral* (1993). This film, directed by Tomás Gutierrez Alea with a screenplay by Senel Paz, has had a very successful run in Cuba as well as in Europe's popular film theatres. It also won several prizes at the 1994 Berlin Film Festival. The U.S. rights were recently acquired by Miramax Films.
12. Eberto García Abreu interprets these strewn pieces of paper as "*fragmentos depositarios de la ficción literaria, del estímulo inicial*" (depositary fragments of literary fiction, of the initial stimulus) (1992b:46).
13. For a study of the play's campy use of music in relation to the intersection between camp and *choteo*, or gay and "ethnic" camp see Manzor-Coats (1994b).
14. *Gusano* literally means worm and is used to refer to all those "slimy and dirt walking" individuals who left or wanted to leave Cuba. Obviously, this ideological equation did not only take place in Cuba. In the U.S., for example, beginning with Eisenhower's administration, homosexuals were equated with spies and communists. This aside is important because it highlights the incredible similarities between capitalism's and Marxism's heterosexism.

15. I believe that Cano's concept of "postbaroque" is precisely what Sarduy previously theorized as "neobaroque."
16. See Artiles (1992) and Fulleda León and Martiatu Terry (1991) for studies of children's theatre in Cuba.
17. Nelda Castillo is responsible for the actors' training as well as artistic direction.
18. Indeed, the program notes indicate the following:

> *Un cuento del argentino Jorge Luis Borges, una reflexión sobre la herencia hispánica en América Latina a partir de* Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho *de Miguel de Unamuno, una obra teatral* EQUUS, *de Peter Shaffer y el ensayo "Nuestra America" de José Martí, son textos que se entrecruzan para conformar una fábula que utiliza la estructura del sueño como espacio de encuentro de la cultura europea y los signos imborrables de la presencia africana en Cuba.* (in Teatro Buendía 1993)
>
> A short story by the Argentinean Jorge Luis Borges, a reflection on the Hispanic heritage in Latin America starting from Miguel de Unamuno's *Life of Don Quijote and Sancho*, a play by Peter Shaffer, *Equus*, and Jose Marti's essay "Our America": these are texts which intercross to shape a fable that utilizes the structure of the dream as a space of encounter between European culture and the unerasable signs of African presence in Cuba.

19. Manuel Martín's *Swallows* (1980) was presented at INTAR in New York City. It had to play with a guard at the door and under strict security because anonymous callers warned that a bomb was going to be placed in the theatre. Pedro Monge's *Nadie se va del todo* (No One Leaves Completely, 1991) received staged readings in Miami (1991) under the direction of Alberto Sarraín. It was also read in Cadiz, Spain, at the 9th Iberoamerican Theatre Festival, October 1994, by the Grupos ALJIBE. Carmelita Tropicana's performance piece *Milk of Amnesia* (November 1994) was produced in New York at P.S. 122; it was directed by Ela Troyano.

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