

Interview with Eduardo Manet

An

Jason Weiss

Born in Santiago de Cuba in 1930, Eduardo Manet lived in Paris and Italy in the 1950s, returning to Cuba in 1960 where he became director of the National Dramatic Ensemble at the National Theater. In 1968 he left again for Paris, where he has lived ever since, after Castro sided with the Soviets in the invasion of Czechoslovakia. Manet has made his entire career as a writer in French: his many plays have premiered in prestigious French theaters and several of his novels have been nominated for the Prix Goncourt. This interview was conducted in October, 1996, when Manet was in New York for the American premiere of his 1977 play, Lady Strass, at the Ubu Repertory Theater.

Jason Weiss: In *Lady Strass*, there is a moment when Eliane's lover Kuala speaks of writing in the colonizer's language, as a question of adoption or betrayal. Why did you start writing in French? How was the choice made?

Eduardo Manet: It was a practical choice, and an angry choice. Because I left Cuba the first time after the Batista coup d'état. I was so angry with the Cuban situation, and I knew that it was impossible to be a writer in Cuba. Every writer must go out from Cuba, as Carpentier did, Virgilio Piñera, everyone. At that time we had no editors, nothing. So I went away and I didn't want to return to Cuba. I decided, one, to marry a French girl, and then, to begin to write - because I always wanted to be a writer - to write in another language. First, I made some bad little poems in English, then some bad poems in Portuguese, and then more seriously, in Perugia when I was a student in Italy, I studied language and literature, in Italian, I wanted to become an Italian writer. I loved so many Italian writers, I profoundly admired Cesare Pavese. But before going to Italy with my very young wife and my very young boy, I studied theater in Paris for three years. I studied with Roger Blin,

and Jacques Lecoq, the great professor of mime. I was very close to Jacques, and he sent me a nice letter to Italy, saying he wanted to open a school, to prepare for a company, and he wanted me to be there because he liked me very much. In Italy, I saw an announcement in the paper, from a French literary review, saying if you are a young writer, we have a new collection at Julliard, the French editor-the director was Françoise Malet-Joris, a well-known novelist-and you can send a short story, if we like it we publish it. I sent them a short story by mail, and she took it. So I said, I can write in French. I wrote my first novel, it was published by Julliard, but then Castro came to power, the Revolution won, and they invited me to Cuba. In Cuba I worked in theater, I made films, I didn't have time to write. Later in Cuba, I wrote *The Nuns*, in Spanish, but they didn't want to stage it. They told me they didn't have the wood to do the set, they didn't have the nails. I wrote a French version, and there was a friend, a French painter in Cuba, and I gave him the play in French. I didn't know he was a close friend of Roger Blin. He gave it to Roger Blin, Roger didn't know I was his pupil, he forgot it of course, but he said, "I want to do it." He wrote me a letter to Cuba and this was a very good thing, because I told my boss at the Institute of Cinema, I must go to Paris to see my play. So, thanks to Roger Blin, the play was a real hit. After that, I wrote a play and they did it. I wrote another, they published it. Anyhow, I wanted to write in Spanish, and I did some little short stories in Spanish and sent it to a very well known editor in Madrid, and they never wrote me to say we don't like it.

And I understood, again. I said, Well, I'll keep writing in French. But now everybody says I'm a French writer and they forget I'm also a Cuban and a Latin American. I gave my Spanish version of *The Nuns* to an anthology in Caracas and it was published. But I hope my plays, my novels, will be translated by someone, perhaps by myself into Spanish.

JW: At what age did you learn French? Did you grow up just speaking Spanish?

EM: I always spoke Spanish. I learned French very late, in my twenties. When I arrived in Paris, I didn't know how to speak French. But I have a musical ear. I don't speak English very well, but I like to speak it. I do speak Italian well, I think. And even now, I work very hard to speak French.

JW: Did you remain in contact at all with Latin American writers? Or, given the fact that you write in French, were you viewed with a certain feeling of betrayal?

EM: I was good friends with all of them - Carlos Fuentes, Cortázar, García Márquez - but at the same time, "Why do you write in French?" I always say two things. I write in French because French editors and French directors wanted my novels and plays. Nobody ever asks me for them in Spain, Venezuela, Mexico, and of course never in Cuba. So, what shall I do? The second thing: One day I had the blues, because I saw some review talking about Latin American writers in Paris, and at that moment I was, modestly, very well known, but they never mentioned my name. They mentioned poets, even unknown people. So,

I felt sad. I was walking in the Luxembourg Gardens and I came across Sam Beckett. We began to talk and I said, "Sam, I have this problem, I'm a Cuban, I'm Spanish." "Oh, don't worry, Eduardo, don't worry. I wrote in French because I wanted to forget Joyce." The influence of Joyce. And I wanted to forget Lorca's influence on me, and Valle-Inclán. And he said to me, "Anyhow, writers are always exiles, and you write in the language that you're published. You are published in French, you are a Cuban-French writer. And I'm from Ireland. I feel even more guilty than you." So, he lifted me up.

JW: About your early work, *Un Cri sur le rivage* has been described as the first novel of the Cuban Revolution.

EM: They're student novels. The first one was nicer, *Les Etrangers dans la ville*, because it was my memories when I was a student at the Cité Universitaire in Paris. For three years I was there, it was very fun. No, my real first novel is *La Mauvesque* (1982).

JW: But given that a number of your books are about Cuba, and certainly the novel about the Cuban Revolution, the fact that they're written in French automatically means something different. You're writing for a French reading public first. So, there's already a certain distance, as if you're an intermediary.

EM: Absolutely. I'm a sort of liaison, you see, a dangerous liaison between Cuba and France. Because I think I know French people very well, and I think I

know Cuban people very well, so I try to be a bridge between them.

JW: Have any of your books been translated into Spanish?

EM: Never. I hope this new one, *Rhapsodie cubaine*, because it's America, Miami, Cuban exiles.

JW: Have you spent much time in Miami?

EM: No, I can't. I love the place, but I don't like the people. I have some good Cuban friends in Miami who are very close. But this strange feeling of Cuba before the Revolution, and Cuba after Fidel. Fidel is everywhere, every day in Miami, they are crazy!

JW: Have you been there often?

EM: Yes, I went every year. Last year I went incognito, with a close friend, a well-known actress, we were incognito - I had a mustache, she had big glasses. We were in Calle Ocho and it was so funny, because we spoke French evidently, and I saw many people I knew. They didn't realize it was me. After, in Paris, I called my friends to apologize that I didn't call them, because they are newspaper people. But I sent them a photo with this actress friend - I'm writing a film for her - and they were amazed.

JW: And do you know New York well? In your novel *Habanera* (1994) when Mario passes through New York, the descriptions are quite detailed.

EM: I love New York! I worked here for two months, in 1985, directing Arrabal's play at the Intar Theater.

JW: When you've written in French, is your experience to surround yourself with dictionaries?

EM: No, I always work as a kamikaze. I'm spontaneous, I write. But then I re-work. For instance, *L'île du lézard vert* (1992), I wrote two times entirely. *Habanera*, I rewrote many times. I have a team of very nice people - a great writer like Dominique Fernández, who is a close friend, many others - and they always tell me how it is. But the real work is after the first draft. With the plays, it's the same. I write, I write, I write, and then I go back.

JW: Some biographical details now. How did your name come about?

EM: My real name, on my papers, is Eduardo González-Manet. My father was a lawyer, a political man -- he was a senator and then minister in the '20s, because he was old when I was born -- and he was very well-known, he was the director of a newspaper. When I was fifteen years old, I began to write theater reviews, I was very tough. I didn't want to be Eduardo González-Manet Junior. So, I decided on Eduardo Manet. Then in France, my first short story was signed Eduardo G. Manet. And because I was so sad and angry about Cuba, and Batista, I said, take off the González, you are French now.

JW: Manet is from your mother?

EM: No, it was part of my father's name. My mother was Jewish, her family name was Lozano-Llul. Her family was in Spain and Damascus.

JW: In the 1950s how long were you actually in Paris?

EM: In Paris I was '52-'54. I went to Italy in '55, '56. And then again Paris, '57 to '59. I worked with the Jacques Lecoq company, and I returned to Cuba the first of 1960.

JW: In the '50s were you friendly with the Latin Americans in Paris?

EM: Yes, I lived for three years in the Cuban House at the Cité Universitaire. So I was always with Latin Americans. The problem was, I was trying to learn French, to speak French, and to be with French people, and they were always in the ghetto. I have a friend who was in Paris during those years and he never spoke French, never.

JW: Did you collaborate with any journals or newspapers?

EM: When I was a student, yes, for one newspaper in Cuba I sent in interviews with actors and wrote about French theater and movies. But later, I was too busy. Now, though, I'm on the editorial board of a well-known review, with Bernard Henri-Lévy, *La Règle du jeu*. And I also collaborate with many theatrical reviews.

JW: You discovered at 13 that you were a Sephardic Jew, on your mother's side.

Did that have any particular influence on your thought in later years?

EM: Oh yes. That was a key experience. That's why I wrote my novel *La Maur-esque*. Because I knew my parents were Spanish, so I had the nostalgia for Spain without knowing Spain. And my mother said she was a gypsy woman - she was really very beautiful - or she was *maur-esque*, a Moor. Then one day - because she received a letter from Spain, her uncle or something, and she was very sad - she explained it to me. I was so angry, I said, "Why didn't you tell me?" It was so important. That's why I have a problem with Jewish friends who... for instance, I have a good friend in New York and I told him about it. He said, "I'm Jewish, but I'm not a religious Jew." It was during Passover, so he kindly invited me to his family's seder. His parents were religious people. I was crying, and he was laughing, because he's a Jewish liberal, against religion. So I told him, "What luck you had, I want to be in your place."

JW: I can sympathize with your friend, though. When I had my bar-mitzvah, it was also the height of my religious rebellion. At the same time, in a number of your works, you touch on religion and God and spirituality, at the edges.

EM: I have the nostalgia of my bar-mitzvah that I didn't have. You can understand it because you did it, now you can say what you want. But you have it. I haven't. And it's impossible for me to have it now. Anyhow, I'm very sensitive about it. And I couldn't be with any religion, I don't know why. I really would like to

have the faith. But I don't want to be dishonest.

JW: Your novels and plays seem quite distinct in the texture of their writing, their movement, the precision of place. The novels are very realistic, the places are carefully described. The plays tend to operate more on a poetic level. Do you have any difficulty alternating between the two forms? Do they help each other in some way?

EM: I think they help each other, yes. I always write one or two plays at the same time as the novel. Because to write a novel is very hard and slow. But after twenty or more plays - I wrote many plays, and then I burned them - after so many plays, now I think I know what I want in a play. So I write them very easily and quickly.

JW: Given your trilogy of novels on Cuba that cover the time from your childhood to early adulthood, how did memory play a part in the work?

EM: It's very strange, because I left Cuba for the first time when I was very young, then I returned, I left again and said I never want to return to that country, that island. And after that, I felt the necessity to talk about my mother, *La Mauresque*, my Jewish problem, all that. It's like a kind of self-analysis, what I did with the novel. And then I said, that's Cuba during the '30s, why not do the '40s? I have so many funny memories about my adolescence in Cuba, and I wrote *L'île du lézard vert*. After that, I felt it could be put into writing what I felt - I left Cuba for almost ten years, I returned

to Cuba, I was a Cuban, but at the same time I was a stranger. I saw the country very differently than before. So I wrote *Habanera*. I don't want to write about the Cuban Revolution because I was very identified with the Cuban Revolution for five years and then I began to have problems for three years. So I can't write about Cuba honestly, during that time. That's why I chose to write about Miami, about things I saw there that were very funny, and about this problem. Because, what is the *Cuban Rhapsody*? Two people who love each other, who could be the most wonderful couple in the world, but she is very against Castro, militant, and he is a writer, a poet, he loves her and wants to be with her, and not with Castro everywhere. That's the problem! I had this problem once, I was in Miami with a girl who was very anti-Castro. At the end, I told her we are three people - you, Castro and I! It was impossible to live like that. Now, I think I'm finished with Cuba, I want to do something else.

JW: What does it mean for you to be in exile, especially as a writer? Do you think of yourself as an exile? Do you think there is a style of exile or a way of thinking perhaps?

EM: Truthfully, I felt exile most when I was young in Cuba. Why? Perhaps because my father and mother were immigrants, they were always with immigrants. My godfather was Basque, communist, Catholic and homosexual. I don't know how he did it. A great man, a poet in his time. I had very great luck indeed to have all these people around me, with no barriers, they were against

Nazism, Franco. And sometimes I feel so French in France, and here, such a New Yorker... Two years ago I was at the Biarritz film festival. I was lucky, I was with Alvaro Mutis. The audience as always asked me, "Why do you write in French, and not in Spanish? You're Cuban..." I was feeling bad and didn't want to answer, I felt guilty, I wanted to say, Go to hell, Fuck you, and all that. And Alvaro answered for me, he said, "Listen, all writers are exiles. I was born in Colombia, I've been living for many years in Mexico. That's not the problem. Eduardo writes in French. He can write in Chinese, but he will be a Cuban or a Latin American writer." And I cried.

JW: Were you friendly over the years with other Cubans in Paris? For instance, Severo Sarduy, or Alejo Carpentier.

EM: Absolutely. Carpentier was very funny, because I was not only a fellow traveler but I love Russian literature and I wanted to read Dostoyevsky in the original. I had a Russian professor at that moment, Alejo Carpentier's mother, Jewish from Russia. He was like a big brother for me, and when I left Cuba the best publicity for *The Nuns* came from Alejo. I saw him often in Paris, he never asked me, "Why did you leave Cuba?" Never. We talked as brothers, as friends, and he'd invite me to the Cuban Embassy. So, that's for Alejo. Sarduy was another scene. He was like a little brother for me. He'd talk to me always about his homosexual problems, his lovers, he was so funny, so intelligent. And he was so brave. I didn't know he had AIDS. Because the last time I saw

him, he was very well, and as always laughing, talking about projects. And then, I didn't see him anymore. At the time I was in an anti-Castro movement. Severo kept a low profile, because he had his mother in Cuba, and he wasn't a political man, he didn't like politics. So I thought he didn't want to see me, because of my involvement. I was sad, but I respected him. After his death, his friend -- at this Biarritz festival -- gave a soirée about Severo and he told me, "You know, Eduardo, that Severo loved you as a brother."

JW: A question about music, finally. It's obviously very crucial in your work. You seem quite knowledgeable about many sorts of music. In *Habanera*, for instance, Mario passes through New York

and Ruben is giving him a lecture about Chano Pozo. Where did your interest arise?

EM: My mother always had the radio on when I was a child. Music for me is like water. The first thing I do when I wake up is put on the radio or a CD. I work with music. Always. I can't live without music, really. And I'm very open-minded, I love everything - *Tristan und Isolde*, Chano Pozo, jazz. And I love Billie Holiday. When I'm sad, I want to hear her; and when I feel good... Every day I think I listen to her. And I love Debussy... But to me it's impossible to live without music. I whistle a lot, in Paris, in the metro, all the time. Sometimes people look at me. But I think music is important to the written phrase. It's a kind of vitamin.

Eduardo Manet

Phyllis Zatlín

In the late 1940s, while still a university student in Havana, Eduardo Manet rose to a position of prominence in the cultural community of his native country. These poetic and yet irreverent, ironic plays form a part of Cuban theater history; they are remembered by Cuban playwrights and critics of Manet's generation and the one that followed as prompting a renaissance of the Cuban stage and are so cited in studies of the period. By the 1950s, the volume of his published plays, in Spanish, was already being used as a text in graduate programs in Latin American literature at Yale and elsewhere.

Manet's decade of study and performance in France and Italy - a period of voluntary exile during the Batista years - did not erase his memory in Cuba; he was invited home when Castro took power. In the early years of the Cuban Revolution, Manet once again rose to a prominent position in the cultural life of Havana. His work in the 1960s as theater and film director was instrumental in bringing Cuba into contact with European artists and theorists.

During his second exile, beginning in 1968, Manet has achieved fame in France as both playwright and novelist - writing in French. Osvaldo Obregón (a Latin Americanist residing in France) has characterized Manet's integration into the French theater world as virtually unique for an author of Latin American origins. His novels, particularly the series dealing with the Cuban experience (*La Mauressque*, *L'Île du lézard vert*, *La Habanera*, *Rhapsodie cubaine*) have been released by the most prestigious publishing companies in France, have been nominated for the Prix Goncourt, won other prizes, and

been translated into several European languages. Two of them have become best-sellers.

Manet's achievements place him on a par with other well-known exiled Cuban authors like Arenas, Cabrera Infante, Sarduy, and Triana who chose to continue writing in Spanish - or with María Irene Fornés, who writes in English and has become a major figure in American theater.

Manet's political stance on Cuba resists stereotypical definition; he is anti-Castro but takes a liberal, indeed leftist, stance in his criticism of political and economic injustice. Similarly, his writings are so varied that it is difficult to pinpoint their appeal. He habitually explores different genres and sub-genres. While he often writes of Latin American themes, he also reveals a deep knowledge and fascination with American movies, British literature, Italian and Jewish culture, and Afro-Caribbean rituals.

Underpinning both novel and theatre, structurally and intertextually, is Manet's lifelong love of cinema. The persistent metatheatricalism of the plays has a certain parallel in the narrative works; characters within the novels also become involved in role-playing of one sort or another, along with an associated quest for self-identity. Both genres over the years have reflected his own bilingual/bicultural background as a Cuban-French writer: his experience as an exile and his love/hate relationship with Cuba.

Addition by Jason Weiss

L'Île du lézard vert (1992, Prix Goncourt des lycéens) is the second in Eduardo Manet's trilogy based on his own life experiences during the decades he lived in Cuba, in this case in the 1940s. Its use of autobiographical elements reflects a growing trend, particularly in the fiction of exiled writers, with its recovery of a past that comments on a changed present. The excerpt chosen conveys his characteristic humor while offering a sense of the multiple voices and cultural rhythms that mark Cuban society then and now.