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Spanish satirist trains his fire on Communists

By Peter Wynne
Drama Critic

Hailing from Spain, where as a child he witnessed a bloody civil war, playwright Fernando Arrabal early turned his talent to ferocious political satires aimed at fascists such as those who ruled his homeland. At one point, it is said, Generalissimo Franco declared Arrabal Spain's public enemy No. 1.

But if leftists imagine Arrabal their exclusive property, they'll find some surprises in his new play, "The Extravagant Triumph of Jesus Christ, Karl Marx, and William Shakespeare," which has opened in its American premiere at INTAR, Hispanic American Theatre, 420 W. 42nd St. Here Arrabal has turned his fire on the Communists, particularly Fidel Castro and his Cuba, and the playwright's aim is deadly.

There's no use trying to recount the plot, such as it is, of "The Extravagant Triumph." The action follows a dream logic that is at once transparent and perplexing. Tallarin (Ron Faber), dressed in an army fatigue uniform and sporting a raggedy black beard, has ruled his country sternly for 20 years.

In his tropical paradise, bourgeois vices are a thing of the past. Cigars are doled out four a month to each worker, and homosexuals have been sent to rehabilitation camps where they cut sugar cane.

But some revolutionaries are more equal than others. Tallarin's orderly, Garapito, is a tranvestite queen, literally closeted stage right, who spends much of his time lasciviously

licking and lighting cigars for his master. That is, of course, when Garapito (Naseer El-Kadi) isn't too busy playing Tallarin's surrogate mother or his father-confessor.

Characters are inverts or perverts

Far from incidentally, all the characters in the play save one (a spaceman from the 85th Century) are inverts or perverts of one sort or another. Sexual depravity, with special emphasis on sadomasochism, becomes a symbol for all kinds of abuses of power. Arrabal plays do get pretty ugly.

Most of the action is a series of plots against Tallarin, involving an Albanian-style Marxian purist (Betty La Roe), Tallarin's etiolated minister of the interior (Thomas Kopache), an international terrorist (Cecilia Flores); and the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, which Arrabal wryly suggests is second only to Moscow in fostering the establishment of Communist governments throughout the world.

"The Extravagant Triumph" is hilarious, but it's also perplexing. I have no idea why Arrabal introduces the spaceman, Cis (Brian Rose), and has him rescue Tallarin at play's end in the best deus ex machina tradition.

There are more than a few hints that Arrabal means to satirize more orthodox religions than Communism. At the moment of the rescue, a bonneted and diapered Tallarin is sitting in a baby stroller, babbling about how he has been born again.