

Cuba's Teatro Nuevo: First National Festival

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What is Cuba's so-called "teatro nuevo?" The answer is somewhat elusive, perhaps because it is also known as "community theatre," "theatre of collective creation," "of popular participation," and even "extension theatre." It is all part of the active movement of cultural institutions toward the community—the term "new theatre" is valid in that it defines a movement in search of its audience, by theatre troupes which no longer wait for their constituency in theatre houses. New Theatre is the most common name of this movement, the main objective of which is communication and maximum contact with the community, its constituency as audience *and* as a source of material. The fundamental principle is Marxist-Leninist: by making their base in a community, by working with it, the professionals are seeking to reach a multiple goal—to employ their skills in developing local culture (by researching and gathering local materials and training amateurs) and to create a kind of theatre that will raise the social, political and aesthetic consciousness of the people.

In the ten years since a group, under the leadership of Sergio Corrieri, established itself in the Escambray region, more than twelve groups have been formed, all operating along more or less identical lines. One might say that the movement was spontaneous and in some ways informal. Most of the groups were established by their founders' initiative, the Consejo Nacional de Cultura (later Ministry of Culture) furnished its support, and a network of theatre *compañeros* thus grew around the island. This network continued to function and to be strengthened in large measure because of the professional ties between groups and individuals (most of them former colleagues in other groups or in theatre school), and thanks also to the press. The first official *encuentro* did not take place until December, 1977, by which time the Ministry of Culture had already shown its commitment through its Theatre and Dance Section. By that time, also, several groups had already been established with objectives similar to those of the Escambray Group, and in most cases with similar styles of operation.

The Escambray Group invited all New Theatre directors to this meeting at

the Group's camp, and it was here that the groundwork was laid for the First National Festival of New Theatre, to take place the following year. In December, 1978, most of the province of Villa Clara became the site of New Theatre work: 46 performances in eight municipalities, with 30,000 spectators, and a guest performance by the Grupo La Candelaria of Colombia, which had just completed a Cuban tour.

The eight days of the Festival were a wonder of energy, of good feelings, and of hard-working dedication, with a smooth organization of events, an amazingly efficient transportation system and excellent overall scheduling. Quality and artistic effectiveness seemed to be related to the level of professionalism rather than to the type of medium or the age of the group. In this context one should consider the groups which participated in the Festival according to three categories: geography/constituency, level of professionalism, and material and style of work.

At this point, there are New Theatre groups operating in at least half the provinces of Cuba. The constituency of these groups varies, however. Two of the most established groups work, respectively, in the widest area (the Grupo de Teatro del Escambray, founded in 1968, operates in a considerable number of towns and townships in the Escambray region) and in one of the densest population areas (the Cabildo Teatral of Santiago, founded 1973). Some of the younger groups (the Granma Collective and the Guantánamo Cabildo, both founded in 1977) have set out from the beginning to work at the provincial level, in two of the new provinces. Other groups, such as the one based in the township of La Yaya (1973) and the Cayajabos Group of the Agrupación Genética del Este (1974), work in new rural communities and have continued to work there thus far, without extending themselves geographically but intensifying their work within the community.

Three of the most noteworthy new theatre groups in Cuba have very specialized constituencies of a different sort. The Cubana de Acero Group (1977) is based among the 2,000 steelworkers of this Havana foundry. The Pinos Nuevos Group (1977), founded by young graduates of the National Arts School, is based on the Isle of Youth (Isle of Pines), where recent graduates and seniors of the Arts School work with the students of secondary and preparatory schools. The Teatro de Participación Popular (1970) has worked successively with mass organizations (the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution), the Lenin School, the dockworkers, and, more recently, with the urban community in a poor neighborhood of Havana. The Participación Popular group's contribution to the Festival was a collage of three of its main works, with a cast drawn from different constituencies with which the group had worked.

One of the groups with least specific functions seems to be the Teatrova of Santiago (1974), which presents mostly short pieces in schools, factories, courtyards and community centres as well as on television; on the other hand, the Juglares y su Peña Literaria (1974) usually perform in Havana's Lenin Park, introducing guests who range from artists and players to lecturers on geology or public health.

The level of professionalism varies within this movement. There are groups (such as the Escambray, the Cabildo Teatral, Pinos Nuevos, the Teatrova and the

Juglares) made up almost entirely of professionals, veterans of other groups, graduates of the Arts School, college graduates, interns from the Arts School, and actors and technicians who apprenticed with a professional group. There are those groups which, like Cubana de Acero, are made up of professionals and amateurs, in a healthy balance. And there are groups like La Yaya and the Teatro de Participación Popular, made up almost entirely of amateurs. It should be pointed out, however, that *all* these groups are directed by professionals, and that every group has advisors from the Ministry (in such areas as history, literature, dance, sociology, and psychology), but the technical skills of the amateurs in most cases still need upgrading.

The work method of the New Theatre groups coincides in several aspects, mainly in the fact that they are collectives and in the importance attached to research as a foundation for their work and as a tool for continuity and communication. Although collective creation as such is not, apparently, the norm in this theatre network, the creative process in almost all their productions is in fact collective, with texts attributed to one author. The process is on the whole a collective one, because of the close relationship between the artistic product and the research from which it springs. All the group's members usually participate in the research, not in an artificial or academic way, but rather naturally, as members of the community.

A scientific base and methodology accompany research of a historical, literary or sociological nature. But all research takes into account the human factor, whether this be through the recollections and personal experiences of an individual or a group, or through current problems as they are interpreted by fellow workers or neighbors at the C.D.R. or members of the Federation of Cuban Women. This subjective dimension contributes in a special way to the creation of characters and dramatic situations that answer the community's needs and fit into the context of its reality. The relative weight of the different types of research and follow-up varies from group to group according to the type of material (e.g., historical pageants or legends *vs.* contemporary social issues).

The creative process does not stop at some arbitrary time before the performance. The debates are often a part of the show itself, and the public can participate in the discussions and surveys that follow every performance. From its feedback the group can gather interpretations and suggestions which it later studies and uses in subsequent revisions, all an integral part of this dialectical process. What was shown at the Festival was in each case the most recent version of a piece, staged in a setting that resembled most closely the usual environment of that group. Thus, the Escambray Group was able to present its plays in its usual locations, and the first run of *La emboscada* was set in a beautiful natural amphitheatre outside a new township in the hills, with a full moon over palm groves and thick woods out of which one almost expected real reinforcements to emerge to help the bandits or the soldiers in the play.

The Cabildo Teatral of Santiago had the run of *plazas*, and the last night of the Festival saw the Santiago and the Guantánamo Cabildo groups perform their "teatro de relaciones" in four locations and join in the festivities of the colonial town of Remedios with a lively conga line led by the Cabildo's musicians. The Cubana de Acero group performed in foundries and factories, to an enthusiastic

response from the workers, and the Cayajabos workers found a similar enthusiasm at farming cooperatives. The younger players of the Guantánamo Cabildo, of Pinos Nuevos, of the Teatrova and of the Juglares went into the schools and the university. The Granma Collective took its epic on *Operación Carlota* (the Angola operation) to military detachments and the police academy.

But one of the most significant aspects of the Festival, if not *the* most significant, was the Conference or *Seminario*, where, through panel discussions and working groups, the bases were established toward the formalization of what had been a relatively informal network. Discussions took place within the study sessions and at the open conferences, on questions of dramaturgy, of research, of relationships with their audiences, and of technical factors (settings, environment, and props). The agenda for the Conference, as might have been expected of a first meeting on any subject, was overloaded, and the delegates barely managed to scratch the surface of some topics. But it is expected that a more complete and thorough analysis of all the topics can be completed in the next conferences, which will be held every two years.

The critics (scholars, journalists, writers) maintained a serious dialogue on several problems (such as the artistic quality of this movement) with the Festival organizers and the groups themselves. What became apparent was that criticism was serious, constructive, committed to supporting the efforts of the theatre groups, and especially frank and open. The resolutions brought forth at the plenary session by the various committees contained some answers to questions raised all along by the critics, and where no solutions or replies were readily available, the committees proposed immediate serious studies to help formulate such solutions. The committees' work can be seen as both descriptive and prescriptive. The reports and summaries describe characteristics common to all the groups that make up the New Theatre movement, under the headings of process, research, repertoire, environment, values and relations with the public and the community. The essential commitment of this type of theatre to rigorous research was stressed, as was the groups' commitment to living within, or very close to, their constituencies and to cooperating closely with the community organizations, which will continue to assist the groups in their work from within the base of people's revolutionary power.

The plenary session approved a series of resolutions which responded to critical input. Among these objectives: a greater concern with the correlation between quality and efficacy, and a resolution to continue a constructive debate; the incorporation of university graduates, in a more systematic fashion, into the research required by the groups; a more systematic ordering of artistic and sociological methods, based on a study of the accomplishments of all groups in this area; a reinforcement of the relationship between research and artistic creation, which is fundamental in terms of the reality of the regions and sectors in which they operate; strengthened bonds between groups and audiences, and further development of audience participation and of social and artistic values; a closer working relationship between the groups and instructors from art schools (which include theatre, dance, fine arts, music, and folklore).

Standing committees have been established, at the regional and national levels, to ensure a more efficient and productive contact and a better articulated type of

cooperation, both within the network of New Theatre groups and between these groups and the more traditional companies. The relationship between the latter, which continue working in a more traditional, orthodox or classical theatre, and those who go out in search of new environments, new audiences and new forms of expression, was at a fairly delicate stage at the time of the First Festival, and it was generally hoped that the balance between the two types of dramatic work would be re-established soon.

Perhaps some of the groups who stayed behind in the cities felt that the spotlight had shifted dangerously far from them, and the New Theatre groups were, in contrast, certainly exhilarated. By and large, however, the theatre community in Cuba is too much a part of a common artistic and political experience to accept an artificial split. Most are still bound to come together periodically and share common experiences and friendships, and several participants in the Festival expressed their concern, off the record, that an artificial divide might form, but the general feeling seemed to be that the optimism and energy of the New Theatre groups would spill over into the more traditional groups. Everybody was at the Festival with a purpose, in a way: to participate in the formulation of goals, objectives, methods, approaches, in the creation of a new relationship with the audiences (actual and potential). As at most conventions, new friendships were established and old ones strengthened or, in some cases, rediscovered; networking was going on, in a subdued sort of manner, and—probably because of the dominant optimism in the air—enmities too seemed subdued, and contempt and jealousies well-tempered.

The insularity of the artistic and intellectual communities in developing countries—particularly islands—makes them inbred, small and often intolerable élites. Cuba's core of professional cadres, college-trained intellectuals, artists and writers still represents a very small percentage of the general population, but the boundaries between this community and the mass of the population grow fuzzier every time a professional artist or writer moves out of the city or out of intellectual isolation to work directly with the people, and every time a new amateur group is formed under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture to work in handicrafts or theatre. Furthermore, artistic and intellectual circles in Cuba are burgeoning, growing, renewing themselves with the influx from different social classes, fulfilling their paradoxical mission of destroying their own élite functions. This process is quite obviously at work in the Cuban theatre, and both the concerns expressed at the Festival and the spectrum of participants seem to reinforce this view.

The New Theatre does, in a way, fit into the category of guerrilla theatre because of its mobility, its role in the artistic vanguard and its close relationship with the ideological vanguard. But where guerrilla theatre in capitalist societies operates from the periphery, in an antagonistic role, this *other* guerrilla theatre assumes, in a post-revolutionary society, a support role. In North America, in Europe, and in most of Latin America, this theatre, like the political and military guerrillas, attacks the institutions. Brecht, Italian comedy and popular cultural manifestations are weapons with which to combat the ideology of reaction.

Within a revolution involved in the process of institutionalization, radical theatre is a tool rather than a weapon. It is no less of a means for the trans-

formation of consciousness than it had been under capitalism. But within the institutional framework of a society whose stated objectives are to combat alienation and to liberate human consciousness, artistic media are no longer engaged in a constant struggle for their ethical principles, and can become involved, for all intents and purposes, in constructive tasks within the terms of the working masses with which they identify, and even through mass organizations. The First National Festival of New Theatre grants formal recognition to the importance of a revolutionary theatre, and marks, in a manner of speaking, the institutionalization of guerrilla theatre in Cuba.

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