

| **THEATER** |

# New Roots to Travel

**MIA LEONIN** | **SEPTEMBER 28, 2000** | **4:00AM**

The literary canon is spinning, the hyphen that binds so-called multicultural fiction -- Asian-American, Hispanic-American, African-American fiction -- will not hold. Nor should it. Any thought-provoking work on ethnic identity must offer audiences a real look at the themes young playwrights are likely to undertake. In its inaugural performance, Miami's newest theater company, Oye Rep, sets out to defy and redefine the hyphen that both joins and divides *Cuban* and *American*.

It is only appropriate that the first two works presented by Oye Rep cofounders John Rodaz and Carlos Orizondo explore different facets of *Cubanidad* (Cubanness) in radically different formats. Oye Rep's double bill presents Michael John Garces's *Agua Ardiente* and Rogelio Martinez's *Arrivals and Departures*, two works illustrating that, while the longitude and latitude of distance may seem clear-cut, our routes and our roots are not so easily defined. Rodaz, who was artistic director of Miami Beach's Area Stage throughout its ten-year stay on Lincoln Road, and Orizondo are striving to fill a major gap in the South Florida theater scene -- the production of new works written in English by emerging Hispanic playwrights. Oye Rep is not only filling a niche, it is setting an important precedent for socially relevant theater that is also high-quality theater. Opening at the Little Stage on South Beach, *Agua Ardiente* and *Arrivals and Departures* share the same set (a once-distinguished, handsomely furnished but now rundown study), and both plays deal with themes of lost memories and the complexity of cultural identity in distinct ways.

In *Agua Ardiente* (a play on the word *aguardiente*, liquor made in the Andes) Garces explores the virility and verity of memory as seen through the eyes of a young man who is part Cuban, part Colombian, and part American. Through the reconstruction of his grandfather's memories and his own memories of his grandfather, Garces dismantles the deceptively simple tag *Cuban American* with humorous, passionate, and provocative language. The one-man show is both soliloquy and *son*, monologue and dialogue; it is an ode and a diatribe, a rant and a meditation. Garces's mastery of various poetic styles (language poetry, beat poetry, and spoken word) and his strong theatrical foundation make *Agua Ardiente* not a grab bag of forms but an organic and energetic piece of drama.

Although he utilizes spoken-word stylings (the repetition of specific sounds, word lists, and the dominance of the music of language over its meaning), Garces does not lean too heavily on the genre's verbal gymnastics. His superb characterization, economical use of space, and elaborate gestures give the piece substance. By occupying a relatively small amount of space, he forces the audience to focus its attention on him and gives the performance more intimacy. Combined with his almost athletic use of movement -- jumping, dancing, gesticulating -- the effect is feverish and mesmerizing.

Drinking double-fi sted and sporting a guayabera, Garces stares out at the audience and asks, "Why do we drink?" This question disappears and reappears throughout the piece like a refrain or jazz variation opening a Pandora's box of personas and moods, from sarcastic to lusty to joyful. Garces storms, he slouches, he refl ects, he jokes: "Why do we drink?"

"Because we do."

"To erase 40 years of shark-infested waters."

"To forget."

"To fi nd what there is to find."

Use of the refrain gives the piece cohesion and provides a growing tension, along with the rhythm and music that crescendoes and reaches resolutions (a strength of spoken-word and beat traditions).

At times mocking his own *Cubanidad* (or lack thereof), Garces has a talent for deconstructing myth while at the same time celebrating and preserving it. For example, on the subject of the macho Latin male, he ascribes a string of accolades to his grandfather, including *player*, *ladies' man*, and *heartbreaker*, then says, "He was an old man with a sad smile." Whether the subject is Catholicism or race, he throws an unexpected perspective into his portrayal.

The way Garces incorporates Spanish and English into the script is also refreshing. Neither language represents "the other." Unlike the string of Spanglish that sometimes characterizes contemporary Hispanic-American theater, Garces uses the two languages like very different musical instruments. It was no surprise that the house stood up to cheer this energetic piece. Garces's acting is so energetic, at the end of *Agua Ardiente* you feel exhilarated, like you've traveled the Florida Straits via Greenwich Village, Havana's Chinatown, and Calle Ocho.

Early on in the first act of Rogelio Martinez's *Arrivals and Departures*, we find Celin (Oscar Isaac) walking around his now deceased father's study blindfolded. He insists, "I won't stop until I can walk around this room without hurting myself." The desperate attempt to reclaim something lost (in this case, the memories of childhood) dramatizes the essential conflict between two brothers over their national and familial identity. The play takes place in 1985 -- several years before the fall of the Soviet Union and Cuba's famed "special period" -- when the brothers reunite in Cuba after twenty years. Both are writers, and both have left the small town where their sister, Margarita (Tanya Bravo) still lives, one to Havana and one to New York. Their meeting unearths their long-time sibling rivalry and dramatizes the struggle for identity. Who has the right to the childhood memories? Who can call himself a writer? Who can claim to be Cuban?

The antagonism between Celin, who stayed in Cuba, and brother Miyito (Carlos Orizondo), who left, serves to explore the contrasting values, trade-offs, and ideologies of a capitalist versus communist society, and the two actors deliver the script's innumerable potshots efficiently. Playwright Martinez has managed to avoid the most obvious and perilous pitfall of such a play: drama as a mouthpiece for politics. This is no small feat, considering the material. But though the premise of *Arrivals and Departures* is intriguing, at times, especially early on, the actors seem to strain against the too neatly polarized definitions of their characters. This can be largely attributed to the script, the language of which is quite ordinary and sometimes mundane. At one point Margarita says to her brother Celin: "Why don't you write a movie?" and he replies, "Life is not black and white." Her response, almost a punch line -- "Shoot it in color then" -- is not the kind of humor you expect from a black comedy.

Fortunately, from the third act on, the dramatic tension picks up, and the personalities of Miyito and Celin become a little more ambiguous and therefore more interesting. The energy between Isaac and Orizondo begins to jell. Orizondo hovers above the old typewriter, shifting his weight from one foot to the next like a prizefighter, while Isaac sprawls out in a chair letting his legs dangle lazily over the edge. Like so many fraternal conflicts, the archenemies transform into conniving accomplices for the sake of a higher good. It turns out a publishing house is paying Miyito \$100,000 to write the story of his childhood, and he agrees to give his brother half. Cutthroat comments give way to brotherly camaraderie as they make plans to go off to Mexico and write screenplays. This and the surprising transformation of Margarita's character add dimension and momentum to the play. Bravo's portrayal of Margarita stands out as the most intriguing and sophisticated of the evening. She gives her character an understated steadiness that blossoms first into eccentricity and later into alienation, making this character the most believable.

TV and movies, unfortunately, have taught us to look for resolution in exaggerated physical endings (the car explosion that kills the bad guy, the kiss that reunites the estranged couple) instead of through more subtle yet substantial means such as character development. *Arrivals and Departures* has both kinds of endings. One is disappointing and predictable, the other closes the show on a more lyrical note. We see Margarita's blackened face and dark eyes fade into the background like a creature in the woods, insinuating a childhood far more enigmatic than that of her brothers.

On the whole it's a solid start to Oye Rep's inaugural season. These dynamic new works prove the five feet between the audience and the small stage, like the 90 miles of treacherous waters between the United States and Cuba, are an ever-changing, emotionally charged conduit of politics and rhetoric, blood and spirit.

