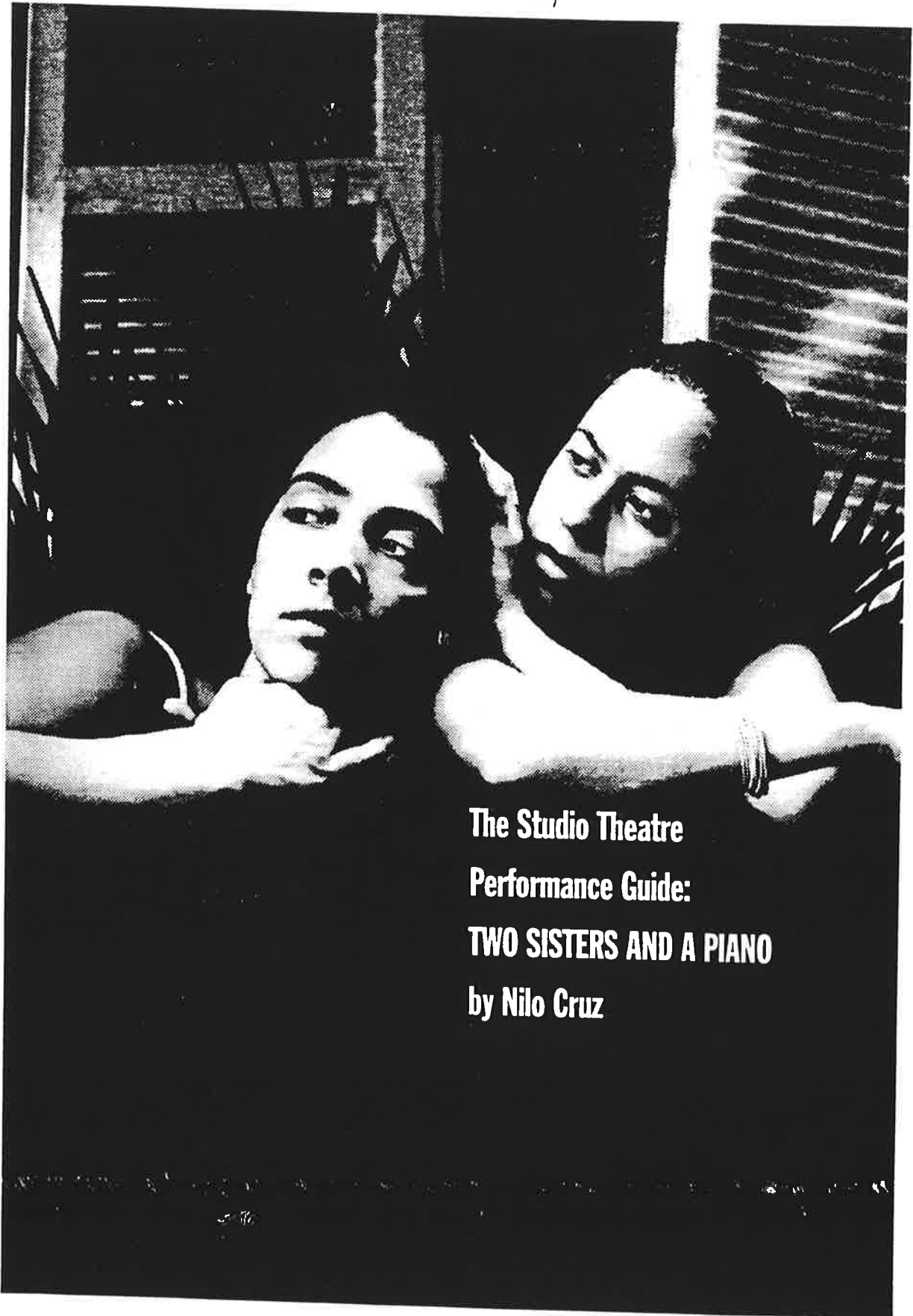


CRITICAL ESSAY IN Program Guide
THE STUDIO THEATRE, W.A. D.C. 2000-2001



**The Studio Theatre
Performance Guide:
TWO SISTERS AND A PIANO
by Nilo Cruz**

The Studio Theatre Performance Guide:
TWO SISTERS AND A PIANO by Nilo Cruz
2000–2001 Season



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Oswaldo Salas. Roberto Salas. Photographers. Fidel's Cuba, a Revolution in Pictures



Oswaldo Salas. Roberto Salas. Photographers. Fidel's Cuba: a Revolution in Pictures.

Plot Summary

By Michelle Hall

Act I

August 1991: the Soviet Union is on the verge of collapse and change seems imminent even in Castro's Cuba. After spending two years in prison for writing a manifesto advocating perestroika-type reform in Cuba, the Obispo sisters are placed under permanent house arrest in their Havana home. A brooding, handsome Lieutenant is assigned to interrogate them. A musician moonlighting as a piano tuner pays a state-approved visit to tune their decaying family piano. In a swirl of sexual tension, forbidden music, secret codes, and erotic storytelling, the sisters and their keeper confront the limits of love imposed by a repressive regime. All of this is underscored by the moving compositions of Cuban piano virtuoso Ernesto Lecuona.

Prologue: The Search

The scene opens with the Obispo sisters' horrific interrogation. In quick passage of time, we discover them two years later under house arrest. The state inventories their personal possessions, while the women can only watch and wait. Maria writes one of her many impassioned love letters to her exiled husband, whom she longs desperately to join.

Scene 1: The Man Downstairs and the Lost Letters

Sofía imagines erotic fantasies about the mysterious man downstairs. The two sisters bicker about the way they each choose to pass the time, when Lieutenant Alejandro Portuondo arrives to interrogate Maria about her overseas correspondence. Maria demands to have her mail, which the state has confiscated, returned. The Lieutenant reveals that he knows her husband is sending illegal mail via a French alias, Andre Lamont, in hope of helping her flee the country. He makes Maria an offer, he will read all her lost letters to her if she consents to share her latest writing with him.

Scene 2: The Bedspreads of Desire

The sisters knit bedspreads, which they sell to earn a living. Since they have very little food, Sofía begs Maria to ask the Lieutenant for assistance. Sofía rails against their oppressed existence, but is terrified of returning to prison. Maria comforts Sofía with her latest love story. The piano tuner Victor Manuel arrives to tune the sister's decaying family piano. Maria suspects he is an informer, which he denies. Since they have little money, Sofía offers Victor their father's shoes in exchange for his services. Lonely for company, Sofía asks him to return. The Lieutenant arrives surprised by Victor's presence. Unnerved, Victor soon leaves, but promises Sofía he will return. The Lieutenant has brought food and books for the sisters. Maria and the Lieutenant complete the bargain. In a passionate scene, the Lieutenant reads some of her husband's sensual letters, and Maria recites him some of her love story. After he leaves, Maria asks Sofía not to ever leave them alone together.

Act II

Scene 1: Waiting for Him on Top of My Roof

Maria composes another letter to her husband, telling him how desperately she misses him and how deprived they are of basic necessities. The two sisters are dressed up and eagerly waiting for Victor Manuel to visit for dinner. In good spirits, they play music and dance. The Lieutenant arrives unexpectedly and begins to question them. He has brought them some rum to toast the Pan-American games, which the island celebrates. The sisters begin to relax around the Lieutenant, and they all share stories about their past. Sofia leaves the two alone. The Lieutenant interrogates Maria again about her husband's letters, but he ends up confessing that he wants to help her, even though it is a political and personal risk. They agree to meet again and continue their bargain. The Lieutenant leaves, and Sofia returns, more upset than ever about her imprisoned plight.

Scene 2: Her Husband's Letter for a Story

The Lieutenant returns and reads Maria another passionate love letter from her husband, and the chemistry between them continues to grow. Sofia plays Lecuona's music, before leaving the two of them alone. Maria continues her highly-charged love story, and overcome by the moment, the two make love. Sofia, left alone, disguises herself like a man and attempts to go outside in the middle of the night, but Maria catches her. The sisters fight and Sofia runs outside. Maria asks the Lieutenant to keep Sofia's escape a secret.

Scene 3: Counting the Lost Stitches

The Lieutenant returns the next morning and begins to interrogate Sofia about her escapade. Sofia turns on the two of them, and the Lieutenant leaves in a rage. Sofia explodes over her helpless fury about her wasted life and accuses Maria of being blind to the Lieutenant's real motives regarding them. Then Sofia shares the news about revolution in the Soviet Union. Maria is stunned.



Greta Sanchez-Ramirez and Nancy Rodriguez

Scene 4: After the Soviet Coup

After continually trying for three days, the Lieutenant returns again and demands to see Maria. Sofia taunts him about the Soviet difficulties. Maria finally agrees to see him, but the romance has worn away between them.

Epilogue: Twining our Lives

Maria writes to her husband again and tells him that their piano has been taken away, and that they are on a hunger strike to protest. Maria pretends to listen to the man downstairs to humor Sofia who is mentally unstable. The Lieutenant knocks on the door, but they ignore him and continue to listen downstairs.

A Cuban Chronology

- By Gregory Tozian, *Fidel's Cuba: A Revolution in Pictures* (Thunder's Mouth Press and Beyond Words Publishing, 1998)
- | | | | |
|---------|--|------|---|
| 1492 | Christopher Columbus lands in Cuba, declaring it the most beautiful spot on earth. | 1898 | Treaty of Paris is signed relinquishing Spain's control of Cuba to the U.S. |
| 1493 | The Pope gives Spain control of Cuba. | 1901 | The U.S. grants Cuba its independence, but retains the right to intervene under the Platt Amendment. |
| 1515 | Santiago de Cuba becomes the island's capital. | 1925 | The first Communist Party is founded. |
| 1519 | The city of Havana is established. | 1926 | Fidel Castro is born. |
| 1521 | Ponce de Leon, who discovered Florida and searched in vain for the fabled "Fountain of Youth," dies in Cuba. | 1933 | Fulgencio Batista begins his reign after overthrowing the Machado dictatorship. |
| 1548 | Sugarcane becomes a commercial crop for the first time. | 1934 | The Platt Amendment is repealed by President Franklin Roosevelt. |
| 1558 | Havana becomes the official Cuban capital. | 1959 | The Cuban Revolution: Batista, Cuba's dominant military leader for over 25 years, concedes power to Fidel Castro's rebel forces. |
| 1580 | Cuba's world-famous tobacco industry begins. | 1960 | The U.S. embargo begins. |
| 1700s | Tobacco becomes the main export. | 1961 | Castro declares Cuba a socialist state and pursues close ties to the U.S.S.R.; the U.S. breaks off diplomatic relations with Cuba; tensions between the two governments peak during the abortive "Bay of Pigs" invasion by anti-Castro Cubans supported by the U.S. |
| 1808 | Thomas Jefferson tries unsuccessfully to buy Cuba for the United States from Spain. | 1962 | The Cuban Missile Crisis threatens world peace for seven days. John F. Kennedy orders a total trade ban with Cuba, depriving Castro's government of \$35 million in annual income. |
| 1848 | U.S. President James Polk attempts unsuccessfully to buy Cuba. | 1930 | Cubans storm the Peruvian embassy in Havana seeking political asylum, resulting in the "Mariel boatlift," a wave of Cubans departing for Miami from the port of Mariel. |
| 1853 | José Martí, Cuba's most famous patriot, is born. | | |
| 1854 | U.S. President Franklin Pierce attempts unsuccessfully to buy Cuba. | | |
| 1868-78 | First war of independence from Spanish control. | | |
| 1895-98 | Cuba's second war of independence from Spain begins; revolutionary leader José Martí is killed in battle. | | |



Oswaldo Salas. Roberto Salas. Photographers. Fidel's Cuba, a Revolution in Pictures.

- 1989 The Union of Cuban Artists and Writers awards Maria Elena Cruz Varela a National Award for Poetry.
- 1990 The collapse of the Soviet Union deprives Cuba of \$5 billion in annual subsidies.
- 1991 The 11th Pan American Games are held in Havana.

The Union of Cuban Artists and Writers expels the poet Varela.

Varela's anti-Castro group, *Citirio Alternativo*, publishes a manifesto denouncing Castro and calling for economic and democratic reforms. Lured by friends, Varela is dragged from her home into the street where she is taunted by a mob that forces her to eat the pages of her manifesto. Varela is convicted of "association for unlawful purposes and libel" and sentenced to two years in prison.
- 1992 The Cuban Democracy Act punishes overseas subsidiaries of U.S. companies that trade with Cuba, further strengthening the trade embargo.
- 1994 Another mass exodus of Cubans makes headlines when more attempt the perilous and illegal journey to the U.S. on rafts, but are forced to turn back.
- 1995 Castro allows small businesses to operate, including produce markets and independent restaurants.
- 1996 President Clinton signs the Helms-Burton Act whose provisions include tightening enforcement of the U.S. embargo against Cuba.

Amnesty International estimates that 600 Cubans are in prison on charges related to their attempts to peacefully exercise their rights of freedom of expression.

Two private planes piloted by Miami-based Cuban exiles on a "rescue" mission to the island are shot down by the Cuban Air Force.
- 1998 The Cuban government criticized the U.S. initiative to send humanitarian aid to Cuba while maintaining the 36-year-old economic embargo.
- 1999 40th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution.

Critical Essay

Nilo Cruz



Photograph by Michael Daniel

At the Junction: *Nilo Cruz Between Cuban and American Theatres*

➤ By Teresa Marrero,
University of North Texas
professor and co-editor of
*Out of the Fringe:
Contemporary Latina/Latino
Theater and Performance*
(Theatre Communications
Group, 2000).

Writing about Nilo Cruz's work necessarily places the critic at the junction of two theatrical traditions: the Cuban and the American. As a Cuban-born artist, Nilo profoundly identifies with the Island and its socio-historical context. As a U.S. Latino, Nilo's work embraces a universal perspective that goes beyond the ethnic-specific. *Two Sisters and a Piano* is a case in point. Specifically located in post-Revolutionary Cuba, the fundamental theme of personal integrity under duress exceeds national boundaries to connect with the human experience through the ages. His style of mixing the specific with broader themes has earned him numerous productions and success. For example, Cruz's *A Park in Our House* also deals with a specifically Cuban situation (a Soviet visitor's influence/disruption on a Cuban family). *A Park* received numerous awards and was produced at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco and at the New York Theatre Workshop. *Dancing on Her Knees*, a beautifully haunting play, was produced at the Joseph Papp Public Theatre as part of the Shakespeare Festival. One of his smaller gems (I say smaller because the two main characters are pre-pubescent children), *Night Train to Bolina*, recreates a non-specific Latin American contest whereby two children try to find their way on their own in an absurdly cruel world. *Night Train* was recently published in *Out of the Fringe: Contemporary Latina/Latino Theatre and Performance* (Theatre Communications Group, 2000) of which I am coeditor. Nilo's corpus of work includes *Graffiti*, *A Bicycle Country*, *Of Storks and Angels*, *Dancing on Her Knees*, and *Drinking the Sea*. While *Two Sisters and a Piano* emerged originally as a radio play, I think you will find its images haunting.

What is it then that makes Cruz's work so unique? I think it is that junction between the specific and the universal. From Aristotle's Poetics to Brecht's radical theatre, master craftsmen – playwrights, directors, and actors—have endeavored to touch their audiences emotionally and intellectually portraying specific human experiences that can move us. But where within this long and eloquent Western theatri-

cal tradition can we place the work of such a young and talented Cuban/American playwright?

Modern Cuban drama begins in the 1940's with one pivotal dramatist: Virgilio PiZera. The author of *Electra Garrig*, *Cold Air*, and *An Empty Shoe Box*, his absurdist tendencies anticipated those of Ionesco and Bequet. Squarely rooted in the Cuban sense of the *choteo*, a type of humor that takes the darkest moments in stride and focuses on the absurd, PiZera and others who succeeded him, elevated a street-wise attitude to a deeply philosophical Cuban worldview of juxtaposing pathos with laughter. Other Cuban writers whose work belongs among the great contemporaries include Carlos Felipe, author of *Requiem for Yarini* (a rendition of Afro-Cuban cultural traditions), and José Triana, whose internationally acclaimed *The Night of the Assassins* portrays an allegorically deeply dysfunctional Cuban family—the nation?—in the wake of the Cuban Revolution. In this tradition, Nilo's *Two Sisters* battle between a deeply dark circumstance and one whose absurdity enables them to survive, sometimes with humor and always with grace.

While Latino theatre generally claims its contemporary roots with the work of the California ensemble, El Teatro Campesino and the Chicano theatre movement of the 1960's, there are two great Hispanic women with whom to contend. In 1967, Miriam Colón was busy founding the Puerto Rican Traveling Theater in New York City with a grant from then Mayor John Lindsey. The company's first production, *The Oxcart/La Carreta* by Puerto Rican playwright René Marqués, featured the late and now legendary actor Raúl Juliá whose acting training is owed to the Puerto Rican Traveling Theater (PRTT). The PRTT is considered to be the first professional, bilingual contemporary Latino theatre company in the United States.

Designed to promote Hispanic talent, in the 1970s New York's INTAR Playwrights in Residence Laboratory was conceived and until recently directed by Cuban-born playwright and director María Irene Fornés, another grand lady of the contemporary American stage. Ms. Fornés first play, *Tango*

Palace appeared in 1963. Other of her well-known titles include: *Promenade*, *Fefu and Her Friends*, *Mud*, *Sarita*, *The Danube*, *Abigdon Square*, and *The Conduct of Life*.

Among Chicano and Latino theatre experts, Fornes's influence over the past thirty years warrants that her playwright's laboratory trajectory be reckoned with as the generator of a "Who's Who" in contemporary Latino dramaturgy. Since the 1980s, a strong body of Latina/o talent has emerged from the INTAR Lab such as: Nilo Cruz, Dolores Prida, Eduardo Machado, Milcha Sanchez-Scott, Ana María Simo, Ella Troyano (film-maker) and her sister Alina (a.k.a. the performance artist "Carmelita Tropicana"), Caridad Svich, Luis Alfaro, Cherrie Moraga, Josefina López, Edit Villarreal, Migdalia Cruz, Oliver Mayer, Octavio Solís, and Denise Chávez among others. This is an important point to highlight because most of the Latina/o theatre being produced in mainstream (non-Hispanic) U.S. theatres since the late 1990s have gone through, at one time or another, a María Irene Fornés workshop.

In 1996 Jorge Huerta, a well-respected Chicano theatre expert, stated that:

In the early days, when the agitprop actors were the norm, I could refer to the "Valdezian collective" influences; today, I can also refer to the "Fornesian" inspiration in the style of many of our playwrights. We've come from the Valdezian collective to the Fornesian individual vision ("An Overview of Chicano Dramaturgy since Zoot Suit" in *Ollantay Theater Magazine*, 1996:98).

While it is accurate to distinguish between this difference in aesthetic, I believe that Fornes' vision cannot simply be categorized as "individual." It is individual if juxtaposed in a binary opposition to "collective" creation. Rather, I would like to suggest that Fornes' technique (and unique contribution as a teacher) be thought of a fluid process, rather than as a static type. During a UCLA workshop to which I was privileged to attend in 1998, she was generous in expanding her vision of theatre and playwriting in particular. Her perspective is character-driven and the focus is finding those characters'

Oswaldo Salas, Roberto Salas, Photographers, Fidel's Cuba, a Revolution in Pictures.



humanity and motivations, which can be accessed by a writer through contemplative states, observation, and visual imagery:

For a playwright, she has to construct speech that sounds real, and structure it like a painting and then the whole thing has to have heart. I do feel that the way to go about it is through visualization. That you go very near the character, and you allow them to say things that have nothing to do with what you want to do. Maybe then they start telling you things that you find interesting. Visualization is the way to learn how to concentrate. (Notes from the Audrey Skirball Kennis Workshop, UCLA June 23, 1998).

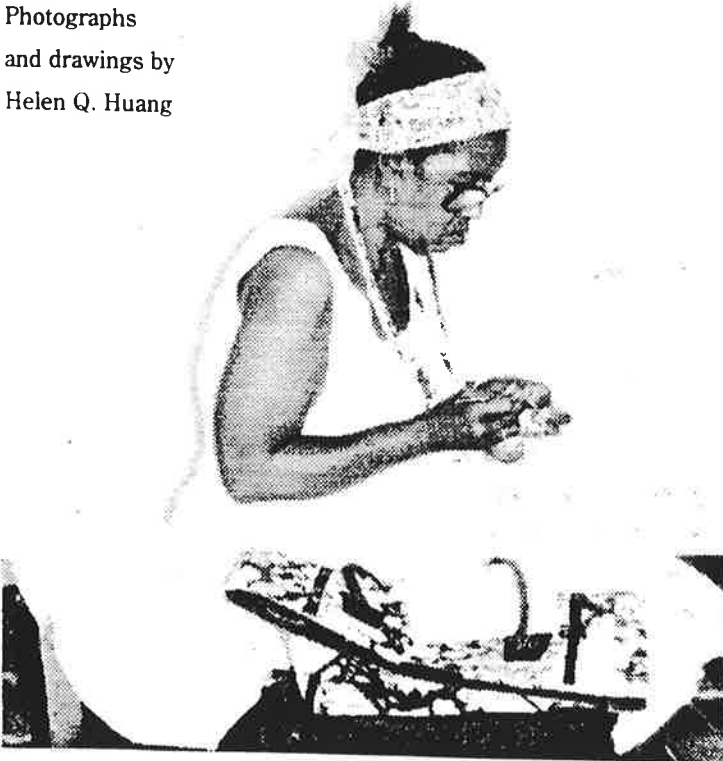
It is important to underline the magnitude of Fornes' contribution to the thematic expansion and quality of the works of those whose lives she has touched. I think Nilo Cruz's work is a fine example of the way a talented writer emerges out of two strong theatrical traditions to create his own vision: a vision that remembers its roots while allowing the spirit to soar, without restrictions and without nostalgia.

TERESA MARRERO was born in Cuba and has lived in California and Texas. She has a Ph.D. in Latin American literature, with a specialty in Latino/a theatre and performance (University of California, Irvine, 1992). Her co-edited anthology, *Out of the Fringe: Contemporary Latina/Latino Theatre and Performance* was published in 2000 by TCG. Her articles have appeared in the journals *TDR* (The Drama Review), *Gestos*, *Latin American Theatre Review*, and *Ollantay Theatre Magazine* and in the anthologies *Latinas on Stage* (Third Woman Press, 2000), *Tropicalizations* (University Press of New England, 1997), *Bridges to Cuba* (Michigan University Press, 1995), and *Negotiating Performance* (Duke University Press, 1994). She teaches at the University of North Texas.

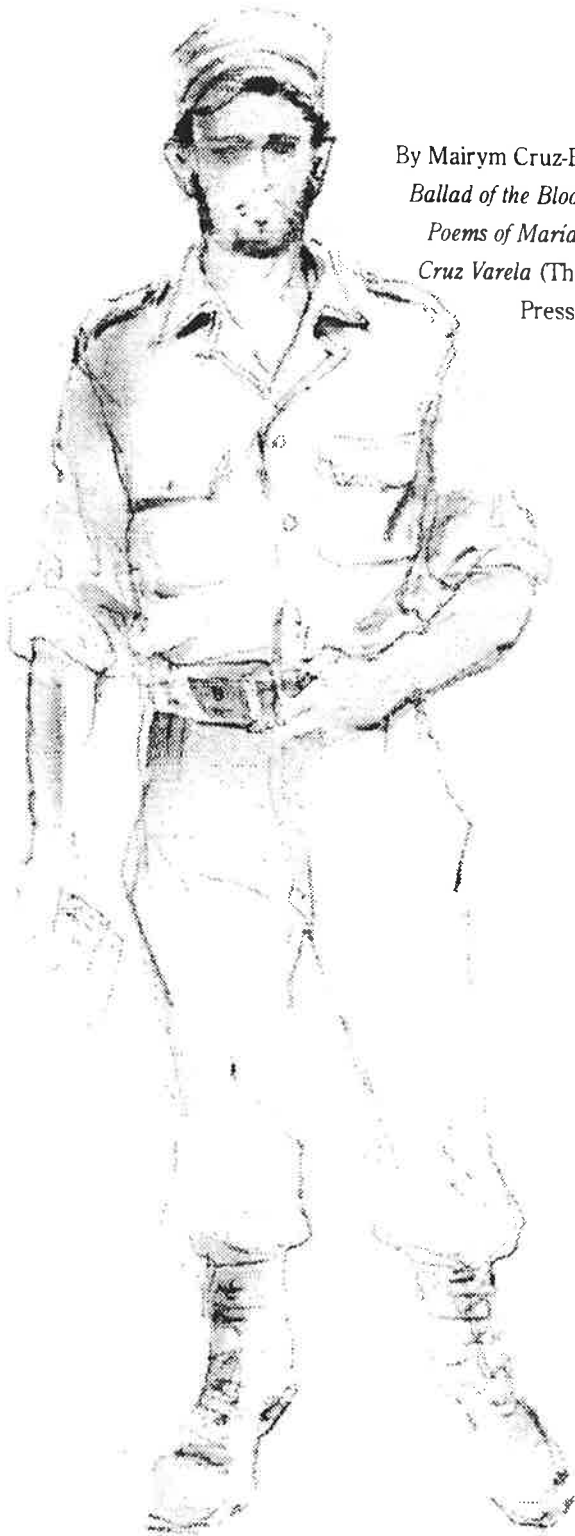
Costume Research



Photographs
and drawings by
Helen Q. Huang



Marina



By Mairym Cruz-Bernal,
*Ballad of the Blood: The
Poems of María Elena
Cruz Varela* (The Ecco
Press, 1995)

Interview with the Poet: María Elena Cruz Varela

The first night I stayed at María Elena's house in Havana, she told me in vivid detail an account of November 21, 1991. Friends were used to make her open her door, and when she did, she was pushed face first into the wall, her arms pinned behind her. Her intruders dragged her down the stairs and into the street. In public view, the *Brigadas de Acción* tried to force her to eat the manifesto she had written, signed, and distributed the previous day, a manifesto that echoed a document she had submitted a year before to the president of the State Council. María Elena had composed the document to reflect the feelings of the *Criterio Alternativo*, an intellectual opposition group to which she belonged. The document was sent on November 15, 1990, the day marking the thirty-first anniversary of the Cuban Revolution:

Because I am a rational being, conscious of my individuality and prudent of mind I absolutely refuse with the only weapon at my disposal the only weapon that interests me and that I consider effectual: The Word to participate in what I consider to be a "closed system of impossibilities," a system that recognizes submission to a crude ideology, in which antagonism has the upper hand as its only alternative. The noun "dead" is used far more frequently than its antonym "life": the same holds true for war and peace, hate and love...Like the responsibility one has when writing books that are evaluated and read by others. I feel responsible for the "role" I willingly assume at this historical moment. My stand point is: NO. I DO NOT AGREE. Experimenting with the lives of millions of people must be stopped. This is my manifesto.

María Elena described to me how, refusing to open her mouth, she clenched her teeth until she could taste her own blood, could see it flow onto her shirt. But as her accusers cursed and beat her she remained silent. Six days after her arrest, a closed trial was held: the official charges against her, "illegal association and libel."

María Elena's accounts of the arrest blurred with stories of her subsequent imprisonment, blurred with her cellmates' stories, some of which would later find their way into her poems, and some that would not—among them a fellow inmate's dispassionate report to María Elena that she had strangled her newborn because she couldn't stand the sound of the crying. María Elena recalled her own fourteen-year-old son's first visit to see her. Soon I would learn from the poet's family that our initial meeting marked the first time María Elena had spoken to anyone of her two years in prison. As yet a stranger to her, I had become the person through whom she could, as she later described it, exorcise the demons of her memory. "The Poet saved me," said María Elena.

I had arrived in Havana on Sunday, September 19, 1993, and met María Elena shortly after. I had never known anyone like her. Her intensity made me drunk. I couldn't follow her eyes, the movements of her head, the energy of desperation with which she spoke. As I listened to her I felt she might fly to the window and jump. I found myself studying the windows' sizes and proportions. Many times I nearly stood close to them, although the humidity was overwhelming. Then I wanted to close the windows with my eyes. I was suddenly a believer in magic.

The woman who sat with me now in the close heat of a Havana night wore no makeup, no high heels. An extraordinarily sensual woman, she wore a yellow blouse opened down her back. Three ribbons, one below the other, gathered her shirt at her waist. As she spoke, the shoulder of her blouse would fall down her arm. "I didn't decide to be a woman or a Cuban or a poet. I only chose to be a mother twice," she repeated. "It's been twelve years since I wrote my first verse, a tacky verse! But I have always, always lived like a poet, like this, the way you see me, the way you feel me."

María Elena repeated those words and phrases as if she were reteaching herself the truth, as if the language itself must be intensified, hammered and hammered out, made lyric. I remember her words, her precise diction, so much that was said during our first hours together. Chronicled here, the white space of the page around her words fragments her speech and frustrates me, frustrates all that was forced by her passion and her intelligence and her need.

She said,

You don't know how happy I am that you came here because of my poetry...

I am not leaving Cuba because I feel historically obliged, because as a poet I have to stay here, with my people. I don't believe in exile for me. It exists, but not for me...

There are opponents that do not oppose, I am not one of those, but I don't judge them either...

I am imprisoned by a system that gives me no alternatives...

I belong to my people, not toward the history of a hundred years from now, but in the history of the moment we live today...

María Elena Cruz Varela was born on a farm called Laberinto Labyrinth in Colón, a province of Matanzas. Her parents were *campesinos*, and her education, therefore, is entirely self-taught. The two years of her imprisonment merely suspended a long struggle for this young Cuban poet who had, by the time I met her, already authored three books of poems. The first two *Mientras la espera el agua* (*While the Water Waits for Her*, 1986) and *Afuera está lloviendo* (*It's Raining Outside*, 1987) had been published in Cuba by Letras Cubanas. Nothing remains of the former, the copies have been confiscated and destroyed. A third book, *El Angel Agotado* (*The Exhausted Angel*), was published in Spain in 1991 and sold in Miami, though María Elena never saw any of the proceeds, royalties, or reviews.

During the years before her imprisonment, however, her work had not gone unnoticed. In 1989 she received an award from the National Union of Cuban Writers and Artists (NUCWA) for her, as yet unpublished collection of poems *Hija de Eva* (*Daughter of Eve*). But that organization threw her out in 1991. Prior to the Pan-American Games in Havana in September of that year, to prevent her from talking to the international press, she was placed under house arrest. In spite of her incarceration, and just before the Fourth Party Congress, María Elena did meet with foreign journalists and she spoke out for social and economic changes in Cuba. The following day the *Brigadas de Acción Rápida*, a group of civilians recruited by the government to hold spontaneous demonstrations in front of the homes of dissidents, broke into María Elena's home.

Throughout the centuries, writers and artists have confined themselves in different way—Ovidio's exile, Proust's cork-paneled rooms. Poets, by trade, are introspective and such introspection can become merely self-imposed isolation. In María Elena's case, however, that isolation was rigorously imposed by others, and she would explain to me that such censorship produced in her a suffocation, a scream she

could not hold any longer. She told me of her experiences as a condemned poet without self-pity. Hers was a narrative out of the mouth of an angel, a terrible angel. María Elena spent one year and eight months in prison. Then, "I left the small-prison to enter the big one." She had just turned forty.

On the second day of our meeting in Havana, María Elena gave me her entire work, a manuscript including many unpublished poems, exquisite poems. Later, reading and rereading those poems in my own hotel room, I'd look up to the windows that overlooked the Atlantic, open my eyes wide to face the magnitude of the ocean, its blues and violets and greens. Between the poems and the sea, I thought I had encountered *el paraíso*. María Elena's poems written and preserved against censorship, humiliations, beatings, and imprisonment, constitute *Ballad of the Blood*, now given to the world. The survival of this work is evidence of what can happen to the imagination during times of extreme adversity, and evidence that in spite of adversity, the universal spirit seeks freedom. María Elena's poetry indeed, was the only place she could be free. As she said during our first hours together, "*The Poet saved me.*"

Now the world has begun to recognize and celebrate these poems. María Elena has been adopted as an honorary member of the eight P.E.N. organizations and has been admitted into the International P.E.N. Club. IN 1993 she was awarded the Poetry International Prize in Holland. She was granted permission to leave Cuba in May of 1994 to visit Washington, D.C., where she received the Liberty Prize from Liberal International. María Elena Cruz Varela now lives temporarily in Puerto Rico with her daughter. She lives not as an exile, but as one granted permission to work as Visiting Poet at the Inter-American University of Puerto Rico. Her son remains in Cuba.

Two Sisters and a Piano is loosely based on the life of María Elena Cruz Varela.

The Poetry of María Elena Cruz Varela



María Elena Cruz Varela

Bajo el paso del fuego

Digan que estoy cansada, que soy buena
que he vendido en subasta me agonía
que se gastó la sal en mis arenas
y que pongo a secar la vida mía.

Digan que la humedad me tuvo muerta
que es muy triste bañarse con cenizas
que regalé las flores de mi huerta
y el último botón de mi camisa

Y díganle también que se suicidan
objetos personales en mi cama
que destilo la luz por las heridas
y escribo est papel sobre la llama.

Under the Passage of Fire

Say that I am tired, that I am good,
that I've sold through auctions my agony,
that there are no more salts on my sands
that I put away my very life.

Say that the humidity found me dead,
that it is sad to bathe with ashes
that I have away my garden flowers
and the last button on my shirt.

And say to him also that on my bed
personal objects are committing suicide,
that I distill light through my wounds
and that I write this poem over the fire.

Balada por la sangre sin pretexto

Melisma era la sangre. Diagrama cardinal en el prontuario
Rito de sangre. Ausencia. Es decir: sin presente.
Era la sangre. Hermano. La sangre de dolernos.
Crucifixión de coágulo. La sangre yerta. Tisica. Hecha vapor.
Hartándose sedienta sobre el barro. Lamiendo el horizonte
sin cansarse. Una vez. Otra vez. ¿Hasta cuándo?
¿Hasta cuándo será rojísimo el festín? Salpicadura cruel
la de este charco. Sangre. Sangre. Sangre que sume el párpado.
Enceguece. Maceración perpetua de cartílagos.
Inútilmente evoco el trino de mis pájaros.
¿Qué se han hecho mis pájaros? Entonces. Sin remedio.
He perdido mis verdes. Mis azules. Ya nunca serán más
que distantes. Distintivos. Lavados por la sangre
de un rojo sin amparo. Era la sangre. Hermano.
La sangre en espiral batiendo su abanico.
Su don de ubicuidad. Su salto. La piel con su vertiente
en dos orillas perfectamente claras. La tierra calcinante.
Bebiéndome a zarpazos. ¿Dónde dejó me aliento?
¿Dónde empiezo a doblarme de rodillas?
¿De dónde llega el eco del último disparo?

Ballad for the Blood without Pretext

Melisma was the blood. Cardinal diagram in the compendium.
Ritual of blood. Absence. I mean: without presence.
It was the blood. Brother. The blood of hurting ourselves.
Crucifixion of the clot. The stiffened blood. Tubercular.
Made vapor. Feeding up thirsty over the clay. Licking the horizon
without tiring. Once. Again. Until when?
When will the feast be red? Cruel splash.
the one from this puddle. Blood. Blood. Blood that submerges
the eyelid. It blinds. Perpetual maceration of cartilage.
Hopeless, I evoke the warblings of my birds.
What's happened to my birds? Then. Without remedies.
And I have lost my greens. My blues. They will never be anything
but distant. Distinctive. Washed by the blood
of a red without refuge. It was the blood. Brother.
The spiral blood beating its fan.
Its skill for being everywhere. Its jump. The skin with its
wounds.
two perfect clear edges. The burned earth.
Drinking me in one gulp. Where was my breath?
Where did it begin bending me to my knees?
From which direction comes the echo of the last shot?

Resources for Further Research

Compiled by Annalisa Rosmarin

Writings of Maria Elena Cruz Varela

The following are the most current works by Maria Elena Cruz Varela:

El Angel Agotado

Plaza y Janes Publisher, October 2000

Maria Elena Cruz Varela, exiled poet, presents us her most poignant biography:

Balada de la Sangre: Los Poemas de María Elena Cruz Varela/ Ballad of the Blood: The Poems of María Elena Cruz Varela, by Maria Elena Cruz Varela,

Translated and edited by Mairym Cruz-Bernal with Deborah Digges, The Ecco Press, 1995

Mientras la Espero el Agua, 1987 and *Afuera Esta Lloviendo*, 1989 which are currently out of publication.

Film

Cuban Women: Branded by Paradise.

Mari Rodriguez Ichaso. 1999. 80 minutes.

In Spanish with English subtitles.

The first documentary to deal exclusively with the effect the Cuban revolution has had on women. *Branded by Paradise* explores the lives of dissident Cuban women in exile. The film interweaves interviews with women from many different social backgrounds who have left the island, each with her own story of the hardships (in some cases including imprisonment, torture, and execution) that her family has endured in her absence. Fidel Castro's daughter, Alina; acclaimed novelist Zoe Valdes; and Madrid-based poet Maria Elena Cruz Varela are just some of the women profiled.

Resources for Further Reading

Angel Cuadra: The Poet Socialist in Cuba

By Angel Cuadra, Warren Hampton (Editor)

University Press of Florida, February 1994

Angel Cuadra's text offers a first hand account of the Castro regime's squashing of independent artists and forcing Cuban art and Culture into the narrow confines of Castroite ideology. This anthology samples work of Cuban activist poet Cuadra Landrove (b.1931). Trained as a government lawyer, he attacked Batista's corrupt regime and, when Castro's reformist revolution turned into a dictatorship, joined "fringe writers" underground. Tried for conspiracy and sentenced to 15 years (1967-82) in prison, released and now in exile in Miami, he has received many international writers' awards. There are poignant letters and poems (with Spanish versions) written from jail to Juana Rosa Pita, an expatriate Cuban poet; a preface to a 1977 book of poetry; a condensed version of an unpublished polemical essay (1963) about Cuban politics; and an enjoyable monograph, "Writers in Socialist Cuba" (1985), with reminiscences of fellow writers and a lovely evocation of "the stones of old Havana."

Years of confinement and ostracism impart to Cuadra's distinctive poetry of protest a deeply felt dignity. An informative introduction by editor Hampton provides background to Cuadra's career and other works. —Frank Allen, West Virginia State College, Institute for *The Library Journal*

Before Night Falls

By Reinaldo Arenas, Dolores M. Koch (Translator)

Penguin USA, October 1994

A New York Times Best Book of 1993.

This shocking personal and political memoir from one of the most visionary writers to emerge from Castro's Cuba recounts Arenas' stunning odyssey— from his poverty-stricken childhood through his suppression as a writer and imprisonment as a homosexual to his flight to America and subsequent life and death in New York.

Blessed by Thunder: Memoir of Cuban Girlhood

By Flor Fernandez Barrios

Seal Press Feminist Publishers, August 31, 2000

Barrios was a small child in 1959 when the revolution led by Fidel Castro radically changed the politics and economics of Cuba. She witnessed the temporary confiscation of her grandparent's farm by soldiers and the anger and resentment of her parents, unable to control their lives or buy enough food and clothing. Her family's lack of enthusiasm for the revolution earned them the scrutiny and distrust of some neighbors. At 11, Barrios joined thousands of schoolmates at rural work camps, where they put in two years of hard labor helping Cuba overcome the U.S. embargo. In 1970, her family was among those who left Cuba for the U.S., where Barrios began the process of becoming Americanized. Years later, a visit from her grandmother recalls memories of her Cuban and African heritage and a reconnection to the healing powers she learned from her grandmother and an Afro-Cuban nanny. Barrios' evocative memoir conveys a sense of enduring family bonds and cultural connections. –Vanessa Bush, *Booklist* June 1, 1999.

Bridges to Cuba: Puentes a Cuba

By Ruth Behar

University of Michigan Press, February 1996

Bridges to Cuba is a collection of art, poetry, personal essays, and fiction written by Cubans on both sides of the straits of Florida.

"Ruth Behar's anthology represents one of the most important and moving bridges yet published on contemporary Cuba and its condition as the island that is still absent from the Western world. *Bridges to Cuba* is an extraordinary example of the faith and ability of Latin America intellectuals to cross true bridges, bridges of solidarity."

–Marjorie Agosin, Wellesley College

Conversations with Cuba

By C. Perter Ripley

University of Georgia Press, November 1999

A long time Cuba watcher discusses his love affair with this proud, passionate, troubled nation, from his romanticized high school observances of Castro's revolution to his six illegal trips to the nation between 1991 and 1999. *Conversations with Cuba* is a street-level pilgrimage through a revolutionary society in transition. Not about politics or personalities, this is the story of a passionate, struggling, sometimes discouraged but always proud country, told by citizens whose confidence in their revolution is both enduring and conflicted. –From the foreword by Bob Shacochis author of *The Immaculate*

*Cuba Through the eyes of an Exiled Generation/
Cuba a Travas de los Ojos de Una Generacion de Exilados*

By Ricardo Aguilar

Envision Productions Inc., May 1999

This photographic book details the journey of one Cuban-American back to his homeland, after 27 years in exile. His award-winning black and white photographs depict the Cuba of today. His moving images and insightful writings in Spanish and English, help bridge a gap between the older generation of exiles and the younger more bicultural generation living in the United States and in other parts of the world.

"I was born in Havana, Cuba in 1966. At the age of two months my parents exiled to the United States and settled in Hialeah, Florida. As a Cuban-American I grew up loving the U.S. and also yearning to know more about my birth land. Returning to Cuba at the age of 27 gave me an opportunity to feel the great passion the older generations of exiled-Cubans have for their native country. Upon returning to the States, I wanted to share with my generation of Cuban-Americans and all those of Cuban descent my experience of returning to our birth land and remind them of our Cuban roots. It does not matter where we live, Cuba belongs to us, and we belong to her." –Ricardo Aguilar

Diary of a Survivor:

Nineteen Years in a Cuban Women's Prison

By Ana Rodriguez with Glenn Garvin

St. Martin's Press, New York, 1995

A touching, compelling story of Ana Rodriguez, a young medical student arrested by Cuba's state security police in 1962 for her role in the anti-Castro movement. In prison, despite beatings, starvation, confinement to blackout cells, and other abuses, Rodriguez and a handful of other women withstood all attempts at political intimidation, re-education, and rehabilitation. During her 19 years as a political prisoner, she broke out twice, organized other prisoners against injustices, and fought the brutal prison administrators with astonishing courage and unshakable belief in her convictions. Rodriguez (with Miami Herald reporter Glenn Garvin) weaves a breathtaking, spellbinding documentary of Cuban prison life. *Diary of a Survivor* is not only a fascinating and well-written memoir but also a testament to human strength and dignity in the face of shocking human-rights abuses.

—Kathleen Hughes, *Booklist*

Out of the Fringe:

Contemporary Latina/Latino Theatre and Performance

Edited by Caridad Svich and María Teresa Marrero

These writers represent an exciting and dynamic new era in American theatre. The fact that they are all Hispanic is only one of the elements that makes their voices vibrant and important. The quality and sophistication of their writing suffice to make this book rate high among anthologies. —Maria Irene Fornes

With *brio* and *con pasión*, the playwrights and performance artists represented in this collection demonstrate the continuing maturation of Latina/o performance and theatre. As both breakers and makers of codes, these artists display the intimate connection between aesthetic and politics that connects them to concerns of the larger Latina/o community, while each of them simultaneously carves out a space for themselves with an individual edge. —Adam Versenyi, Dramaturg, PlayMakers Repertory Theatre; Associate Professor, UNC-Chapel Hill

Real Life in Castro's Cuba

By Catherine Moses

Scholarly Resources, November 1999

This book is a first-hand, grassroots look at life in Cuba, including very vivid descriptions of its people and places. *Real Life in Castro's Cuba* illuminates the human face of Cuba, which over the years has largely been hidden in the shadow of Fidel Castro. Written by Catherine Moses, who lived and worked in Cuba as a press secretary and spokesperson for the United States from 1995 to 1996. This compelling, compassionate portrait contains personal observations about the Cubans' struggles, triumphs, hopes and daily compromises to survive.

"In a thoughtful smoothly, written narrative, Catherine Moses tells a moving story of the Cuban people tangled in the web of a dying revolution. For anyone weary of the feud between the Cuban and U.S. governments and eager to know about the lives of ordinary Cubans, this perceptive book should be required reading. —Robert A. Pastor, Professor of Political Science, Emory University and Former National Security Advisor on Latin America

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