

## Hispanic Theater Discovers Strength In Ethnic Diversity



The New York Times/John Solo

A scene from "Pasos y Entremeses" performed by the Spanish Theater Repertory Company at the Gramercy Arts Theater

The Hispanic theater is flowering in New York City, where five major companies and 10 smaller ones are serving a diverse community that is growing each year.

The performances are sometimes in Spanish, sometimes in English, sometimes in both languages. There is amateur and professional theater. It is played in regular theaters, in lofts, any place in which a stage can be erected.

But while the situation of Hispanic theater today seems promising, the future depends on a number of variables.

There are questions about whether the community will assimilate into the English-speaking culture or whether it will retain its identity, including such cultural expressions as the theater. There are worries over finances and the building up of audiences.

Yet, what is going on is impressive. For instance, at a recent Friday night at the Gramercy Arts Theater, home of the Spanish Theater Repertory Company at 135 East 50th Street, the cast included a Puerto Rican, a Paraguayan, a Panamanian, a Cuban, a Mexican, an Ecuadorian and a Uruguayan. The Spanish that came from the lips of those in the audience bore the accents of Argentina, Santo Domingo and Puerto Rico.

The plays, four one-act comedies, were from the Golden Age of Spanish literature, two each by the 16th-century writers, Lope de Rueda and Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, the creator of the lanky, amiable figure of Don Quixote.

The basic elements constituted a cultural evening that could be duplicated in a number of locations in a city where the Hispanic community, according to Federal

estimates, numbers 1.2 million people in a total population of 7.5 million, and is growing at the rate of 27,800 newcomers a year.

"I think this is the moment," said the Cuban-born actor and director Max Ferra, whose award-winning INTAR (International Arts Relations) Theater is the oldest Hispanic company in New York. "It is very much a thing of today," said Mr. Ferra, who remembers the 1966 beginning days of his group in its loft at 508 West 53d Street. The audiences then were often no more than two or three people.

The enthusiasm over what is happening is reflected on both sides of the footlights.

### A Family Affair

Juan Rodriguez Muñoz brought his daughters, Kristina, 4, and Klarisa, 2, to an INTAR performance recently. Like most persons in the audience, he had been attracted to the show by word of mouth.

"I like to bring them to any activity that will strengthen our Puerto Rican heritage," said Mr. Muñoz, who arrived here 20 years ago to attend graduate school at New York University and stayed.

Johnny Robles is a 29-year-old Puerto Rican who was reared in New York and drives a taxi for a living. He is also an actor and performs at INTAR for the nominal sum of \$10 a show.

"I like acting, all of it," he said. "When I first started I wasn't too interested in this, but as time went on I said to myself: 'When is the Puerto Rican going to get his break and let the world recognize that we have talent, too?' Then I felt I wanted to be part of it."

Spanish-speaking theatergoers come from the South Bronx, Brooklyn, East Harlem, New Jersey. Sometimes they are joined by students who want to hone their fluency in Spanish.

### Uncertainty About Spanish

For the five professional companies that were created in the city between 1966 and 1969, the ones that represent the major thrust of the new theater movement, there is a problem of which segment of the diverse community it should appeal to.

Gilberto Zaldivar, of the Spanish Theater Repertory Company, tried one solution to start. The company offered a mixture of universal works translated into Spanish and Spanish classics, for which there is always an audience, and then slowly

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# Hispanic Theater Emphasizes Diversity

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moved its emphasis to Hispanic writers.

The Hispanic theater in New York dates back to 1922 when the Compania Teatro Espanol presented "El Genio Alegre" ("The Happy Spirit") by the Quintero Brothers at the now-defunct Princess Theater on 39th Street.

But it was not until the mid-1960's that it began to develop professional producing companies that presented full seasons of performances. This reflected a rise in ethnic and cultural awareness among second-generation Puerto Ricans on the mainland and also the significant impact of arrivals from Cuba, Santo Domingo, Ecuador and elsewhere in Spanish-speaking America.

## Variety of Productions

The companies in New York stage productions are based on Spanish classics, including those by such latter-day playwrights as Jacinto Benavente and Federico Garcia Lorca, and those of New World names like Isaac Chocrón of Venezuela, Rene Marques of Puerto Rico and Ricardo Talesnik of Argentina.

All of the Hispanic companies survive on a combination of voluntary contributions, donations from public sources such as the New York State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts and from foundations and businesses.

The budget of INTAR, for example, amounts to \$51,000, nearly all of it from an Arts Council grant. Next year, INTAR and all other theaters face the prospect of a one-third cutback in financing because of new apportionment procedures planned by the Arts Council.

## Audience in the Streets

Among the five major Hispanic companies, which include INTAR and the Spanish Repertory Company, is the Puerto Rican Traveling Theater. Founded in 1967 by Miriam Colon, it plays mostly during the summer to street audiences in Hispanic neighborhoods.

Another one is the Dumé Spanish Theater, at 409 West 44th Street, established by Herberto Dumé. It presents works by his fellow countrymen from Cuba as well as classics of world literature.

The fifth one is the Duo Theater, 94 St. Marks Place. It concentrates on new works and theatrical forms. Manuel Martín, its director, has just completed an original creation called "Rasputin."

It has all come a long way from the days when the cast often outnumbered the audience. Mr. Zaldivar, of the Spanish Theater Repertory, put it optimistically, if tentatively.

"I sort of get the feeling,"

he said, "that we are on the verge of something that is happening and that the moment is now."