

Theater:

Puerto Rican Traveling Theater Shows Vigor and Purpose

By HOWARD THOMPSON

Say this for the city-endorsed Puerto Rican Traveling Theater. They do things with vigor and purpose. The actors skillful vitality last night was entirely contagious as they officially unveiled their dramatized anthology of 10 short stories by outstanding writers of Puerto Rican origin.

Twenty-eight strong, strong and gifted, the company vivified the various texts, some of them fascinating and none of them dull, on their lighted portable stage set up before a sizable crowd on chairs and grass at Riverside Park, Riverside Drive and 103d Street.

The mixture of stories, translated into English, worked well indeed, with the troupe using the most skeletal of sets, a level of bleacher ramps at stage rear, to simulate everything from a horse ride to a bullfight and a New York ghetto. And the New York vignettes, as perhaps they should, came off best.

With the robust playing, under Pablo Cabrera's keen direction, even such broadly amusing romps as "Compadre Baltasar's Feast" and

"The Ladies' Man" had a picaresque-island tang. And, fortunately, in the case of each playlet, a sideline narrator, moving center, clearly conveyed the author's flavor and content. And for this, we have to thank the adaptation of Miriam Colon, the company's mastermind.

The most poetical writing was in Enrique A. Laguerre's "Patchouli," the reunion of a teacher and a shattered old friend; and "Black Sun," a tragic vignetette of a deaf village drummer by Emilio Diaz Valcarcel; and José Luis Vivas Maldonado's "Interlude," the most mystical chapter of the evening. This one, about an old man on a garbage dump, was a gripper.

"El Josco," Abelardo Diaz Alfaró's richly worded story symbolizing a Puerto Rico menaced from without, was exotically highlighter by two young men as bulls warring in dance pantomime.

But four stories of New York locale held the simplest, sharpest impact. In Pedro Juan Soto's "The Innocent," a mentally retarded ghetto boy is led away. The whole company is on stage for Jose Luis Gonzalez' "The Lead Box That Couldn't Be Opened." The box is the coffin of a dead Army veteran of Vietnam, returned to his mother in a tenement. The finale is a slashing scene with pickets protesting the "lies" of "yellow journalism" in New York.

Our favorite was Jesus Colon's "Kipling and I," as a poor boy braves the cold city with the sole comfort of the poem. "If."

With such a large, consistently good cast, it would be hard to single out all the performers who deserve the same. And good as they were, the evening was absolutely free. That's good news, indeed.