

# A Theatrical Haven for Spanish Art

By GEORGE GENT

The INTAR Spanish theater could hardly be less imposing. Tucked away in a condemned tenement on West 53d Street, between 10th and 11th Avenues, it appears to defy its audience to come and find it amid the darkened garages and warehouses that line both sides of the street. Yet, increasingly they do come — from Spanish Harlem, the South Bronx and Brooklyn — to share, many for the first time, a theatrical experience and to become acquainted with a culture many of them rightfully claim but have never known.

"This is our biggest problem — that so many Spanish-speaking people here do not know who they are and are not proud of being Spanish," said Max Ferra, the theater's 36-year-old Cuban-born artistic director and co-founder. "They are the products of two cultures and they are nowhere. It is important for everyone to know that he belongs someplace. This is what we are trying to do — to show to New York's Spanish-speaking people that they have a rich culture and a history and have much to be proud of."

## Seeking an Audience

With that in mind, INTAR (for International Arts Relations, Inc., the theater's corporate title) has sprouted into a full-blown Spanish cultural center. The center has now attracted enough outside support, including funds from foundations and private sources, so that for the first time since its founding in 1966 the center can offer its programs to the public without charge.

"This has brought us criticism from one of the city's other Spanish theater companies," said Mr. Ferra, whose theatrical experience before 1966 had been limited to some university courses. "They felt we were offering unfair competition by giving free performances. They don't understand that we only want to create an audience for Spanish theater."

The slim young director, an avid admirer of Peter Brook, explained that, prior to this year, the theater's classical and contemporary productions had attracted small audiences, sometimes as few as six persons. "New York-born Hispanic Americans," he said, "have no tradition of theater and many are too poor to pay. If we can develop an audience, then, who knows, perhaps they will be willing to pay \$2 to see productions at other theaters."

The remodeled tenement



Max Ferra, artistic director and co-founder of the INTAR Spanish theater, in his office

and garage at 508 West 53d Street, which has been provided to INTAR temporarily by the city's Urban Renewal Management Corporation, now offers a complete range of cultural attractions from September through June. These include four major dramatic productions a year; theatrical workshops in make-up, voice and diction, history of drama, yoga, body movement and acting; film festivals; art and photography exhibitions and weekly poetry and song meetings.

## Lorca Work Planned

This season the theater, which performs on Friday and Saturday evenings at 7:30 and on Sunday afternoons at 4:30, has presented Lopé de Vega's "Fuenteovejuna" and is preparing a production of Lorca's "La Zapatera Prodigiosa" ("The Shoemaker's Prodigious Wife") for a Feb. 2, opening. Later this season it will present Ionesco's "Exit the King."

INTAR, whose productions have been well received by the critics, is only one of more than 16 Spanish-language theatrical troupes that have sprung up in recent years to meet the cultural needs of the city's more than one-and-a-quarter million Hispanic Americans.

These include the Spanish Theater Repertory Company, which performs at the Gramercy Arts Theater at 138 East 27th Street, and Miriam Colón's Puerto Rican Travel-

ing Company, at 124 West 18th Street, which is primarily a summer street-theater group.

Like many of these, INTAR could not exist in its present capacity without funding. This year, with a budget of \$54,000, INTAR has received a total of \$42,000 from the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, the Chase Manhattan Bank and other contributions. The balance must be met through voluntary contributions.

With a year-round program, INTAR's production budgets are pared to a sliver by the theater's Puerto Rican executive director, Mrs. Elsa Ortiz de Robles, who doubles as one of the company's leading actresses and is one of its co-founders. "Performers," Mrs. Robles said, "are paid \$5 a performance."

"I am ashamed to pay them so little," interjected Mr. Ferra, "and deeply grateful to them."

"Workshop teachers," Mrs. Robles continued, "many of whom are professionals in their native countries, are paid \$10 for each session. Max and I, the only full-time members, are supposed to receive \$125 a week, but we are still waiting to be paid."

Through this kind of dedication, one of last season's major hits, a presentation of Friedrich Dürrenmatt's "The Visit," which employed 24 actors and 14 technicians, was produced for \$7,000.

The diversity of Spanish accents among the theater's actors had been a problem, but, Mr. Ferra said, with time and exposure, both cast members and the audience have come to accept the mixture of Cuban, Puerto Rican, Mexican and other Latin-American accents with the same composure that New York audiences accept mixed English and American casts in performances of Shakespeare.

## Own Style Sought

Nevertheless, Mr. Ferra, who came to the United States 15 years ago and recently became a citizen, believes that INTAR must develop its own style.

"I don't know if Hispanic culture will survive or go the way of the other immigrant cultures of the past," he said, "although it seems possible that, for the first time, New York will become a city with two languages. This I do know—that we must develop our own style if we are to survive."

What will that mean?

"I can't say at this point," he said. "Next year we will introduce children's theater and will hold a contest for Spanish-language plays by New York authors. We are all obsessed with material things. I dream of a theater that will create a balance between the material, the body and the spiritual. That is why I have introduced yoga. We are moving toward a style but have not yet arrived."