



Eunice Riverón in Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas's *El canto del pozo ciego* at Rita Montaner Theater Company in Havana; set by Erick Grass.

1986: I AM GROWING UP IN MIAMI. I'VE NEVER

seen a play performed live and am decades away from writing one. But I am beginning to think playwrights must be incredibly important people, judging from the latest scandal to grip my hometown. Dolores Prida's play, *Coser y Cantar*, has been dropped from a local theatre festival after Miami's radio stations discover that years earlier the playwright had visited Cuba and come out in favor of ending the U.S. embargo. Cuban-born and New York-based Prida, and those brave enough to defend her right to have her play staged, are accused of being Communist agents and receive death threats. When the script is finally given an unpublicized staged reading at Miami-Dade Community College, police dogs must first check the auditorium for bombs. After years of hearing about the limits of freedom of expression in Havana, I am given a sharp lesson about the limits that exist in Miami. This is the '80s: Cuban-American playwrights are allowed to pine after Havana; they just aren't allowed to go there.

JANUARY 2001: As an adult, I leave Miami, end up in New York and begin visiting Cuba repeatedly, intent on getting to know that half of my family that stayed after the 1959 revolution. This year, though, is the first time my visit is organized around my capacity as a theatre artist. The playwright Andy Bragen has brought me down, along with the playwright Maria Irene Fornés and novelists Junot Díaz and Achy Obejas. The goal is to conduct writing workshops and to participate in informal meetings with our Cuban

counterparts. I meet lions of Cuban playwrighting like Abelardo Estorino and Gerardo Fullea León. They are warm and gracious, if a little bemused by this strange phenomenon of people calling themselves "Cuban-American writers." What, they all want to know, is that?

They correct my accented Spanish but open their eyes with delight when I demonstrate fluency in Cuban literature, including familiarity with their own plays. Fullea, it turns out, runs a small theatre company called the Rita Montaner that is known for producing new plays by Cuban playwrights. One afternoon he says to me, with a casualness that belies the content of his sentence, "Why don't you send me one of your plays so we can see about producing it here?"

Theatres in Cuba have rarely produce a play by Cubans living outside of the national territory, much more rarely the work of Cuban-Americans. Since the revolution, Fornés and Caridad Svich each had a play that was performed in Cuba. And in 1998, the New York-based company Repertorio Español was allowed to tour a Spanish-language version of Eduardo Machado's *Broken Eggs*. These productions have always been logistically, emotionally and politically difficult to pull off and run contrary to the grain of post-revolutionary theatrical work. Official discourse holds that once Cuba threw off U.S. imposed imperialism in 1959, Cuban art became more authentic, more deeply Cuban, more robust and free. Cuban-Americans, by our very hybrid existence, pose a challenge to this taxonomy. We write in English. Our plays have the bad habit of trafficking in issues that are taboo



Actor Carlos González and playwright Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas outside Rita Montaner in Havana.

in Cuba, like immigration or the plight of political prisoners. We are well-versed in the work of authors, like Reinaldo Arenas, who are banned in Cuba, and that influence shows in our work. We seem to treat governments in Havana and D.C. with equal ambivalence. We are what an apparatchik might call unreliable.

All of this runs through my mind that afternoon as I sit speaking with Fullea. I thank him for his offer and then immediately put it out of my mind.

2003: Miami-based scholar Lillian Manzor calls me with a proposal: Will I allow one of my plays to be translated into Spanish and published in Havana? The most important theatre magazine in Cuba, *Tablas*, wants to edit an anthology of plays written by Cubans and Cuban-Americans living in the U.S. They want to include one of my plays, *Tight Embrace*, along with the work of Fornés, Svich, Nilo Cruz and Dolores Prida. I e-mail Manzor a script and think to myself, "Well, that will never happen."

It does happen. The audaciously titled anthology, *Teatro cubano actual: Dramaturgia escrita en Estados Unidos (Contemporary Cuban Theatre: Plays Written in the United States)*, is published in Cuba and well received. By publishing in Havana, my colleagues and I seem to be suggesting that cultural life on the island matters, that our counterparts there are worth paying attention to and engaging with. Hard-liners in Miami don't waste time in making their displeasure known—anything connected with post-revolutionary Cuba should be boycotted, they maintain. Cuba doesn't produce literature anymore, anyway, just propaganda. Cuban-born Juan Abreu,

writing for the Miami-based *Diario de las Americas*, wonders how much my colleagues and I were paid (nothing, in case he's reading this) and accuses us of complicity with censorship in Cuba. This time there is no violence, nor any threat of it. But once again theatre artists who seek to circumvent barriers between Cubans living on and off the island find they are subject to attack from

those incapable of imagining anything but the bitter status quo.

2008: Fullea hasn't given up on me yet. He manages to get word to me that he is still eager to get his hands on one of my plays. I measure the investment in work needed to hire and supervise a translator against the cost of missing an historic opportunity because of my skepticism. I decide to do what playwrights always do: I'll proceed as if the impossible was actually going to happen.

JULY 2009: Translating the play into Spanish should have taken a year. Agreeing on the title alone takes some weeks before we settle on *El canto del pozo ciego* (the English title is *Blind Mouth Singing*). Incredibly, my translator Rodrigo Vargas finishes the entire job in six months—just in time for the first informal reading of the script in Fullea's living room in Havana. The actors read the script off a dim computer screen. The Ministry of Culture is experiencing a paper shortage and is unable to make copies.

JANUARY 2010: Rehearsals for the play are

rocky. The idea is to start working with the actors early, take a break, and then begin again in the summer. Cuban theatre companies often rehearse a play for six months, and we are *trying to strike a compromise* between that decidedly non-capitalist custom and the abbreviated processes we have been forced to accept in New York. But just when we think we have a cast, two of our younger actors emigrate. Then the Ministry of Culture announces new austerity measures. Actors who begin daytime rehearsals for a play while they continue to perform in another play at night will no longer draw two salaries. With no economic incentive to work double shifts, two more actors leave the project. We request lumber to build the set and are told none is available. The director of the production, Jorge Luis Cacheiro, is used to conditions at Montclair State University in New Jersey and is beginning to worry. Fullada shrugs off his concerns with a Buddha-like smile. These problems are minor, he says.

JULY 5, 2010: Rehearsals in Havana have started again, and I have returned to Cuba in time for the final week of rehearsals. The

actors are explaining to me how invested they are in the project, how much it means to them. “Why?” I press them. “What’s so special about this project?”

The actors, in effect, tell me: Look, our country has a population of 12 million. Two million Cubans live in the U.S. That’s not counting all the Cubans who live in Madrid, Quito, Mexico City. The diaspora is so large that every Cuban knows someone living abroad—a cousin or a neighbor. We miss them. Working on this play is a way for us to feel closer to them.

I had arrived thinking this project was going to be more important to me than to the Cuban nationals. I realize now that the nostalgia and longing my parents’ generation *bequeathed to me* has a parallel in Cuba. What I felt growing up in Miami and what the actors feel in Havana are two sides of the same rupture. When the run-through of the play begins, I sit in the dark theatre and listen to the opening monologue. It’s delivered by Arnaldo Galbán. He’s 18, not even in university yet. The relaxed vowels of his accent, the rhythm of his speech—it all feels familiar, even if hearing my actual

play in Spanish is a new sensation. Galbán starts to weep, and I worry he might be overplaying the moment—until I realize I’m weeping as well.

JULY 6, 2010: Making theatre anywhere is an uphill struggle against lack of resources, malfunctioning technology and too little time. Yet the material scarcity that theatremakers in Cuba have to deal with still astonishes me. We had hoped for wood to build the set but have now resigned ourselves to *using rope instead*. We need a birdcage and end up borrowing one from a neighbor. The pet bird, sadly, is exiled to a bucket for the duration of our run.

JULY 8, 2010: It’s not uncommon for plays to run in Havana without a printed program. The names of the cast might, for example, be read over a speaker before the show starts. But the ministerial bureaucracy has made a special effort on our behalf. So two days before opening, a box of programs is delivered to the theatre. One of the staff members is grinning conspiratorially. That staff person takes me aside and directs my eye to one line of text tucked away on the second page of the

COME BACKSTAGE WITH **TCG**

Society for the American Theatre

BECOME A
FOUNDING
MEMBER

Help Theatre Communications Group celebrate 50 years of service to the field. Don't miss this exclusive opportunity to become a part of TCG history.

For more information visit www.tcg.org or email SAT@tcg.org



Anaysy Gregorio Gil and Jorge Enrique Caballero in rehearsal; Carlos González and Caballero rush to switch clothes in *El canto del pozo ciego*.

program: "This play is dedicated to Federico García Lorca and Reinaldo Arenas."

We look at each other. Lorca is a hero in Cuba. It's the second name that surprises.

The work of Reinaldo Arenas has long since disappeared from bookstores and libraries in Cuba. If you try to enter the country with one of his novels it will likely be confiscated. Venerated as one of the giants of 20th-century Cuban literature, the late Arenas has in effect been banned in his own country. Unbeknownst to me, the staff at the theatre submitted the text for the program with the dedication (drawn from my script) included. They fully expected it to be removed without explanation. This sort of cat-and-mouse game with Cuba's opaque system of censorship is routine. This time the fleeting reference made it through. "Congratulations," I tell my friend. "And to you" is the response I get.

JULY 9, 2010: Time for a run-through. I knew going in that the big aesthetic challenge was going to be taking a play engineered for downtown New York actors and giving it to Cuban actors. Cuban acting is gestural; at its best it is almost athletic. The actors excel at oratory; they enunciate every syllable and deliver the text not to the other characters but to the audience. The volume is often high. My play was written in a quieter, more confessional vein. It requires a kind of coarse lyricism that alternates with bemused irony. I'm enough of an optimist to believe there is, somewhere, a staging solution to this aesthetic conundrum, but as I watch the run-through I fear this production hasn't found it. The pace is frantic. What was a two-hour piece in New York is down to an hour and 20 minutes in Havana, and yet it feels longer. The story has survived, but the lyricism and dark wit have been amputated.

I wonder if any play can survive translation and a trip across national contexts. What in the world have I been experiencing when I receive Chekhov or Strindberg in English, and from the mouths of North American actors? I have no way of knowing, of course. I look around at others who are watching the play—they seem to be attentive. What, I wonder, are they seeing?

JULY 10, 2010: About two hours before

opening, people begin queuing up for tickets. Theatre in Cuba costs five pesos, about 20 cents in U.S. currency. Everyone can afford that, and so everyone comes. When the auditorium fills to capacity, the staff has to turn away about 50 people. Estorino is there, and so is the previously censored, now rehabilitated, Antón Arrufat. Even the foreign press has gotten wind of the cultural aperture this production represents and the Associated Press, the Agence France-

Rose Bruford College
of Theatre & Performance

Study at London's International Drama School.

MA Ensemble Theatre
Be part of a resident and touring professional training company as an actor, director, playwright, dramaturg, scenographer or technician. One year full-time.

MA Theatre for Young Audiences
Advanced professional practical study and placements in association with the world-renowned Unicorn Theatre in London. One year full-time.

Undergraduate BA programmes:
Acting, Actor Musicianship, American Theatre Arts, European Theatre Arts, Costume Production, Creative Lighting Control, Lighting Design, Performance Sound, Scenic Arts, Stage Management, and Theatre Design.

Full-time and study abroad opportunities available.

Theatre Studies and Opera Studies
By distance internet learning.

MPhil & PhD Study
In collaboration with Goldsmiths, University of London.

Auditions and interviews for all programmes in New York, Chicago and Washington DC.

Contact us about autumn and spring audition dates:
+44 (0)20 3308 2640
internationalsenquiries@bruford.ac.uk
or visit our website: www.bruford.ac.uk

Principal: Professor Michael Earley

Set in beautiful landscaped grounds the Rose Bruford campus is located just 20 minutes from the heart of London.

A University sector institution, partner of The University of Manchester and a member of the Conference of Drama Schools. **CDS**



Presse and the *New York Times* have all sent representatives.

I follow my tradition of not watching opening-night performances. I hang out outside with the house manager. He smokes, I pace. Then we hear the applause. The doors of the house swing open. The crowd pours out, and the rest of the night is a blur of kisses on both cheeks and rum without ice. Someone asks how much longer I'll be in Havana and before I can answer he interrupts me: "No, no, don't tell me. Tonight we are celebrating."

JULY 13, 2010: After two flights and a day of travel I arrive at John F. Kennedy airport close to midnight. The line at immigration control is long. When I finally reach the counter, I present my passport and wait for the dreaded question.

"Which countries did you visit?"

"Mexico. And Cuba."

The border agent gives me a tired look. Why, his expression seems to ask, did I pick his line? He rifles through the pages of my passport. I know what he's looking for.

"The Cubans didn't stamp it. They don't usually stamp U.S. passports."



Jorge Enrique Caballero and Carlos González run lines in a sunken patio outside Rita Montaner.

When the agent takes my passport and disappears into a back office, the passengers in line behind me audibly sigh.

Twenty minutes later the custom agent returns, and I brace myself. Invariably I know the law better than the border agents. The trick is to explain it to them in a way that doesn't make them defensive.

Am I carrying a license for my trip?

From the U.S. Treasury Department?

"I traveled to Cuba under the general license permitted to scholars." My day job at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pa., comes in handy here, and I offer to show him a letter from my department chair. But I don't have any specific paperwork from the Treasury Department. In my case, it's not required.

"So you have the license with you?"

"Well, in my case—"

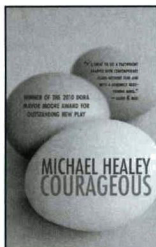
"Maybe it's in the luggage you checked?"

I give up. I know he wants me to give him a simple yes. I take pity on him and comply. Yes. He stamps my passport.

I don't trust that I've made it back until I settle into the sticky vinyl seat of a yellow cab. Having to deal with the details of how the embargo is policed always deflates me, but I remind myself that the momentum is on our side. My colleagues and I have pulled off a difficult collaboration between Cubans and Cuban-Americans living on both sides of a highly political divide. And the same week my play opened at the Rita Montaner, the Havana-based troupes El Publico and Teatro Buendía opened shows in Miami and Chicago, respectively. It feels like theatre artists on both sides of the Florida straits are already rehearsing our post-embargo future. We've come a long way from the bomb threats of the 1980s. Our governments might not be ready, but we are.

☐

Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas is a playwright. The original, English-language version of his play *Blind Mouth Singing* appears in the fall 2010 issue of *TDR: The Drama Review*.

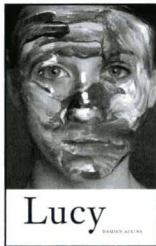


COURAGEOUS

MICHAEL HEALEY

"Healey combines a keen observational eye and a finely honed wit with a love of the English language that is as dazzling as it is rare."

—Toronto Sun



LUCY

DAMIEN ATKINS

"A fascinating new play... complicated and thoughtful... an intellectual and emotional knockout."

—nytheatre.com

AVAILABLE FROM WWW.TCS.ORG

PLAYWRIGHTS CANADA PRESS

