

Plays by Neighbors North and South: Theater of the Americas

By JOANNE POTTLITZER

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Mateo Gomez and Elizabeth Peña play Romeo and Juliet in the production that opens the Festival of Theater in the Americas at Repertorio Español on Tuesday.

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After playing a week at the Kennedy Center in Washington, seven theater companies (five from Latin America and two from Canada) will arrive in New York on Tuesday to join local Hispanic theaters in a city-wide Festival of Theater in the Americas through June 23.

New York's Repertorio Español (138 East 27th Street) will launch the festival on Tuesday at 8 P.M. with its production of "Romeo y Julieta," Shakespeare's play as translated by the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. The following evening at 7, Chile's Grupo Ictus will present a collective work, *Cuántos años tiene un día?* ("How Many Years in a Day?") at La Mama ETC (74A East Fourth Street), where the seven visiting groups will perform during the next two weeks. English synopses of all the plays will be available.

This festival brings together for the first time theater people from the entire hemisphere to perform and to work together. After New York, the companies will go to the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Waterford, Conn., with 120 other theater people from all over Latin America, the United States and Canada for a week of workshops. Some of the United States artists who are involved in the project and who will participate in the workshops at the O'Neill Center are Edward Albee, Arthur Miller, Estelle Parsons, Irene Fornes, Peter Schumann, Joseph Chaikin, Miriam Colón, Zilda Fichandler and Douglas Turner Ward. The various performing spaces have been donated to the festival, which is supported by government funding from Canada and some Latin American countries as well as from public and private sources in the United States.

Why all this attention to the Americas? Well, as the director of the festival, I'm naturally prejudiced in its

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favor, but also, I think, well informed. So, let me try to answer my own question. A Latin theater festival in New York is necessary simply because we don't know each other! We all live in the same "New Hemisphere" and yet we know more about Europe, Japan, China and the Soviet Union than we know about the people and the culture of our own Americas.

We in the United States are not the only ones who are ignorant of our continent's culture. The cultural isolation among the Latin American countries themselves is shocking. A Mexican theater person, for example, knows little or nothing about what is happening theatrically in Brazil or Peru. Talk to a Chilean about theater in Bolivia or even Argentina, Chile's immediate neighbor, and the conversation won't go far. As for Canada, most of us in the rest of the hemisphere have difficulty defining that country culturally.

This absence of knowledge was made especially apparent last summer at the National Playwrights Conference at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center. Eight Latin American theater people spent a week at the center planning the workshops that will take place there later this month. One afternoon the participants were asked to speak briefly about the theater in their respective countries. As each person gave his talk under the spreading limbs of a huge tree on the center's grounds, I noticed the listeners nodding their heads enthusiastically and laughing as though they identified with what was being said. I was surprised but glad that there were United States theater people at the O'Neill who were genuinely interested in what the Latin Americans had to say.

After the talks, some people in the audience came up to us and said, "We want more discussions. We're from Canada and we know exactly what you're saying because we have such similar experiences in Canada." The Latins were surprised to learn that the theater in Canada had so much in common with their own. Problems such as the search for a national identity, isolation of one part of the country from another, colonialism, and economic domi-

nance by the United States were familiar themes.

Theater in Latin America, in particular, is closely related to the socio-political realities of its countries, many of which live in political turmoil and most of which are under military dictatorships. In an interview conducted for this article with Osvaldo Dragún, the Argentine playwright whose *Historias para ser contadas* ("Stories to Be Told") will be performed at La Mama on June 19 and 20, the playwright said, "We in Latin America don't have the luxury of creating theater only for esthetics as you do here in the United States. Our theater is an integral part of the society and politics of our countries, and that's what makes it so vital. What our theater can offer the United

States is that vitality. Ours is not an intellectual theater, it is alive and graphic. Sometimes it expresses itself like a dream, a distortion of reality that the audience has to synthesize and put back together in its mind."

A dream-like expression is evident in Grupo-Pau Brasil's production of "Macunaima," to be staged at La Mama on Friday and Saturday and at the Entermedia Theater June 19-23. A full-scale spectacle packed with visual images that bombard the audience for three-and-a-half hours, "Macunaima" has been described in Brazil as the first play in eight years that is truly Brazilian. Its theme is common to the cul-

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"THE MADWOMAN OF CENTRAL PARK WEST"—Phyllis Newman stars in the one-woman musical comedy she wrote with Arthur Laurents. The show, staged by Mr. Laurents to the music and lyrics of a number of composers, opens Wednesday at the 22 Steps, 200 West 48th Street.

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Gerry Goldstein

Continued on Page 16

Theater of the Americas

Continued from Page 7

tures of Canada and Latin America, and is also familiar to Hispanics in the United States: the search for national identity.

One scene is unusually effective. Fifteen actors, huddled together, dressed in colorful Carnival costumes, dance with controlled steps across the stage singing a Carnival samba so low-pitched that it can hardly be heard. A sense of pent-up frustration is created in the audience, who want them to burst into the full song and dance associated with the rhythm and excitement of Carnival in Brazil, but the release is never given to the audience and we are left with the feeling of a thwarted possibility. It is an extraordinary theatrical moment. Is it political? "There is no political theater," Mr. Dragún states. "There are audiences who make a play political or not political depending on the circumstances. A play can be political in Chile and not political here in the United States. A play can be political in Argentina and not in France."

The seven productions from Canada and Latin America were selected for this festival for their representative content and visual qualities, so they can be appreciated and understood by a non-Spanish or Portuguese or French-speaking audience. The plays were also selected to represent a range of styles, from the traditional style of Chile's "How Many Years in a Day?" to Toronto's Factory Theater Lab experiment with film and light in "Lucky

Strike," from Montreal's one-woman musical comedy about the life of a diva to street theater from Colombia, from Brazil's collective saga to Mexican director Juan José Gurrola's voluptuous updated adaptation of John Ford's "Tis Pity She's a Whore."

Mr. Gurrola has been directing in Mexico for 20 years. His career began in the early 1950's with a theater group, *Poesía en Voz Alta* ("Poetry Out Loud"), headed by Octavio Paz. That group produced some of the most imaginative directors in the hemisphere, doing exciting experimental theater work long before the wave of "new" theater hit this country in the 60's. And yet when Mr. Gurrola, whose round face and sizable paunch give him the look of a Buddha and who sweeps into rooms with his floor-length cape, was in New York last October to conduct an acting workshop at the Center for Inter-American Relations, it was not easy to find professional actors to participate. Estelle Parsons, who had met Mr. Gurrola at the O'Neill Center last summer, was one of the few to participate.

Knowing people is what this festival is about — knowing them personally, on a stage, in a conversation, by working together. Now a significant number of American theater people will have a chance to do exactly that. And New York theater-goers, Hispanic and non-Hispanic, can get to know Latin America and Canada on a human, social, direct level and be entertained at the same time.

For schedules and further information about related activities, call 247-7117. ■