

# Spanish Theater Seeking a Foothold

By ALFONSO A. NARVAEZ

The other day, Frank Robles locked the door of the furniture store he manages and hurried to the subway. He was on his way to the theater—to rehearse for three strenuous hours.

His wife, Elsa Ortiz de Robles, also hurried from her job, at Trans Caribbean Airways, to rehearse the female lead in the same play, "El Sepillo de Dientes" ("The Toothbrush"), by Jorge Diaz, a Chilean playwright.

The Robles, who are Puerto Rican, together with Max Ferra and Antonio Gonzales Jaen, two Cuban actors, are the founders of Agrupacion De Arte Latinoamericano, or ADAL (The Latin American Art Group) at 682 Avenue of the Americas.

Their group is one of several now functioning whose purpose is to promote Spanish theater in New York. Their presentation of "El Sepillo de Dientes," beginning Sept. 25, will mark the inaugural of their fourth year together here.

## 'Oxcart' a High Point

This is not the first time Spanish-speaking theater has sought to gain a foothold in New York. Spanish theater is generally considered to have had its beginnings here in 1922 when the Compania Teatro Espanol presented "El Genio Alegre" ("The Happy Spirit") by the Quintero brothers at the defunct Princess Theater.

The Spanish theater came spasmodically to life over the years in small groups of actors who performed occasional plays. By 1953, the Nuevo Circulo Dramatico (New Dramatic Circle), a group of young Puerto Rican artists, was founded and performed Rene Marques's "La Carreta" ("The Ox Cart") at the San Sebastian Theater on East 24th Street. Miriam Colon, later to play opposite Marlon Brando in two movies, was in that group.

Now, in lofts, basements, storefronts or almost anywhere a stage can be set up, groups are rehearsing plays

by Latin Americans and trying to bring theater, as it exists and is developing in Latin America, to New York's large Spanish-speaking public.

The ADAL is part of this growing movement in the city. It hopes to offer weekend performances through June of four plays in Spanish.

"We wanted to let the public know what was going on in the theater in Latin America and to give exposure to authors and actors from these countries" Mr. Ferra said recently. "Plays are a reflection of what is taking place in a country and we felt the American and Latin public here should know what was going on."

There are now 15 actors in the group, and their 74-seat theater has \$2,000 worth of professional lighting in it. The theater is in a converted factory loft and all the refurbishing was done by the actors themselves — from cleaning the loft to the carpentry and electrical work.

Miss Colon, who has appeared in 17 plays, five major Hollywood films and numerous television shows, made her debut as a director last month with "The Golden Streets" by Piri Thomas, produced by her Traveling Theater. The theater has 25 actors who are all members of Actor's Equity. It is also performing Federico Garcia Lorca's "El Maleficio de la Mariposa" ("The Evil Spell of the Butterfly") in Spanish. Both plays are being done in the streets and playgrounds of slum areas.

The company manager for the Traveling Theater is Gilberto Zaldivar, who, together with the late Frances Drucker, founded the Greenwich Mews Spanish Theater in 1969. They have 30 Latin American actors and are planning this season around three plays—"La Difunta" ("The Dead Wife") by Miguel Unamuno, "Cruce de Vias" ("The Railroad Crossing") by Carlos Solozano and "Las



Max Ferra, a founder of Agrupación De Arte Latinoamericano, before posters announcing some forthcoming plays.

Pericas" ("The Parrotts") by Nicolas Dorr.

Miss Colon founded the Puerto Rican Traveling Theater in 1966 and her production of "The Ox Cart" played in poverty areas of the city.

"For many it was the first live show they had seen," she said. "The impact is tremendous. The audience has not been preconditioned to the theater and children come up to touch the actors to see if they are real."

Another group, which is performing in a more primitive setting, is the Duo Theater. In a converted storefront at 522 East 12th Street, two Cuban exiles, Malagy Alabiu and Manuel Martin, direct and act in plays by Latin playwrights. While most of the plays are done in Spanish, they are experimenting with English translations and perform for bilingual audiences.

Miss Alabiu, who works during the day as a teletype operator for TAP Portuguese Airways, added that the very limited space in their theater—it seats 35 persons on metal folding chairs—had hampered them at times but was an asset for some productions where the actors were required to walk through the audience and thereby involve them more intimately in the action.

Duo Theater opens its season on Sept. 10 with "La Noche de Los Asesinos" ("The Night of the Criminals") by José Triana, Cuban playwright. The group, which consists of 15 actors, also has a workshop for directors. Last year 12 plays were performed, with runs limited to six weeks, so that as many

actors and directors as possible could try their skills.

Another group that is bringing the theater to the people is the Puerto Rican Ensemble, which operates at 440 East 138th Street, under the direction of William Nieves. The ensemble offers skits, street vander songs and poetry readings in Spanish.

The Dume Grupo Estudio (Dume Group Studio), composed of eight actors and actresses, practices in a basement theater at 437 West 46th Street and is rehearsing "Requiem Por Yarini" by Carlos Felipe, which it will present on weekends, starting Nov. 6.

On a less professional scale, but with no less enthusiasm and dedication, are the Latin American Theater Association, under the direction of Paulita Iglesias, and the Teatro Pobre de America (The Poor Theater), under Pedro Santelice. They work with youngsters who are learning the rudiments of acting, and perform plays and skits in Spanish.

The Teatro Moderno Puertorriqueno (The Puerto Rican Modern Theater) under Edwin Marcial has 25 actors. The group, which was started a year ago, is rehearsing "Music, Whiskey and Fun," a bilingual play by Juan Torren of Argentina.

The Puerto Rican Heritage Theater Workshop, established in 1964 by Robert L. Cox and the South Bronx Community Action Theater, under the direction of Fred Daris, have also opened the theater to hundreds of youngsters in schools in slum areas of the city.



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Vira Colorado, left, and Magaly Alabiu in rehearsal with Manuel Martin for "La Noche de los Asesinos," by José Triana, due Sept. 10 at Duo Theater, 522 East 12th Street.