



STEAMING IN CUBAN

BY ED MORALES

THREE PLAYS ABOUT CUBA INHABIT MANHATTAN ISLAND

For more than 40 years, the mystery that is Cuba has spurred impassioned debates between islanders and exiles. While most of these discussions have been rhetorical, sometimes the ideological battle gives way to an argument over the human condition, and is best

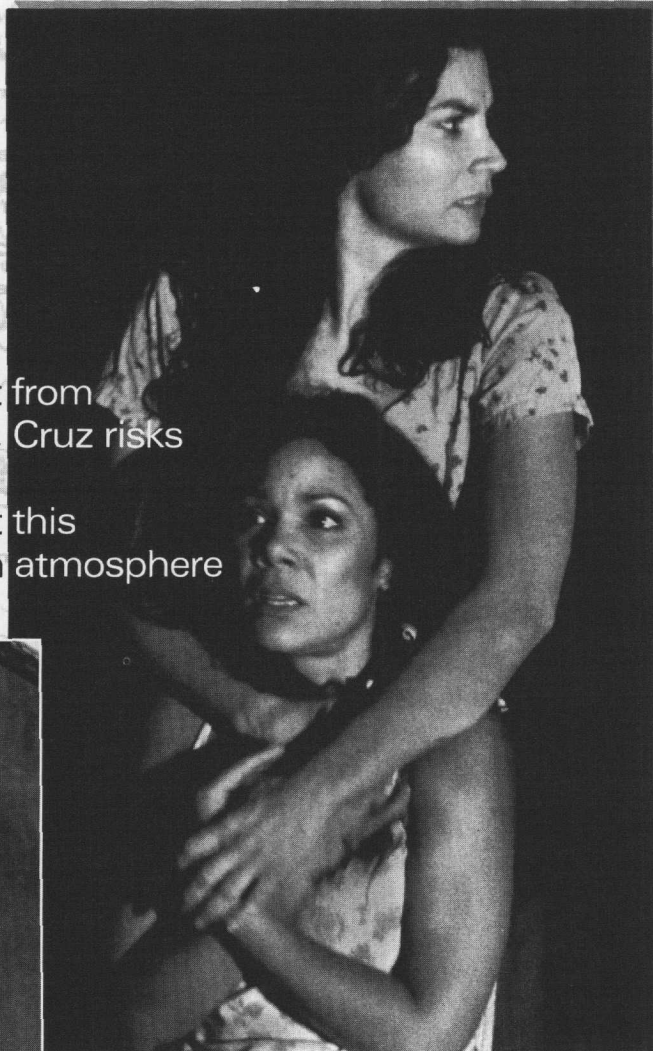
taken up by the arts. For a poignant moment this spring, three plays about the Cuban experience were playing at the same time in Manhattan, and the raised voices of the bully pulpits were softened into the poetry and dance of the stage.

Two Sisters and a Piano, a hauntingly staged, highly emo-

tional drama by Nilo Cruz, was performed at the New York Shakespeare Festival's Public Theater; *Letters from Cuba*, the first play by experimental theatre legend Maria Irene Fornes to deal with her Cuban roots, climaxed a retrospective of her work at the Signature Theatre Company; and *Baños Públicos, S.A.*, a satire

by Havana resident Esther Suarez-Duran, continued a cultural exchange between Repertorio Español and the island. Despite the sharing of the "letter" motif between Cruz's *Two Sisters* and Fornes's *Letters*, the three plays are vastly different in form and content. The way they vary in perspective is the story of how Cuba itself is viewed, and how the island's political experiment has manifested itself in wildly contradictory ways, making it a kind of surreal subject.

Cruz's play works on several levels. Through the use of neo-colonial costuming and mid-century "classical" Afro-waltzes, written by master composer Ernesto Lecuona, the play establishes the idea that Cuba's ossifying revolution has frozen the country in time. Originally conceived as a radio play, *Two Sisters* is driven by a melodramatic plot that touches on themes like the unconscious eroticism between a prisoner and her captor, and how the bond between two sisters resembles a marriage. As Sofia and Maria Celia, Daphne Rubin-Vega (the original Mimi of *Rent*) and Adriana Sevan



A country frozen in time: Adriana Sevan (top) and Daphne Rubin-Vega in *Two Sisters and a Piano* by Nilo Cruz (left).



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MICHAEL DANIEL

adroitly conveyed a wonderful mixture of physical chemistry and poetic oration, navigating the crisis in their relationship as well as their halting involvements with their captor, Lieutenant Portuondo (Paul Calderon), and a quirky piano tuner named Victor Manuel (Gary Perez).

Two Sisters has a rhythm of speech and a visceral insistence that provokes its audience in the best theatrical tradition. Alternately swaggering and pleading, Calderon creates an aura of menace with his interrogation and seduction of Maria Celia. "So your mother, she was a revolutionary?" he shouts at the sisters, under house arrest in Havana. "Maybe not the kind you would like," murmurs Sofia. Cruz's play uses a true story of a dissident Cuban writer who was dragged into the street and literally forced to eat her own words as a "jumping off point" for his story. The original account, which was printed in a manifesto called *Criterio Alternativo* (*Alternative Criterion*), called for political changes in Cuba to reflect the ones occurring in Eastern Europe as a result of *perestroika*.

Even though Cruz's play stands on its own dramatic merits, and is one of the most breathtakingly realized visions of Latin America to appear on Off-Broadway stages for many years, its overall effect has polemical overtones. By selecting this dramatic moment, which occurred almost 10 years ago, to represent what happens to artists in Cuba, Cruz risks sending audiences home thinking that this sort of Orwellian atmosphere is routine. Yet the writer's main point is that he is ambivalent about the revolution.

"In the '70s it became very Stalinist," said Cruz, who emigrated to the U.S. from Cuba in his teens. "I remember going from Matanzas to Varadero and seeing all these trenches along this beautiful coast that were dug just in case the enemy came. I thought, Oh my god, what a paradox. My characters say they never believed exile was the answer, but what can they do? They're not

the type to go to Miami. They want to stay in that system, but they want it to change."

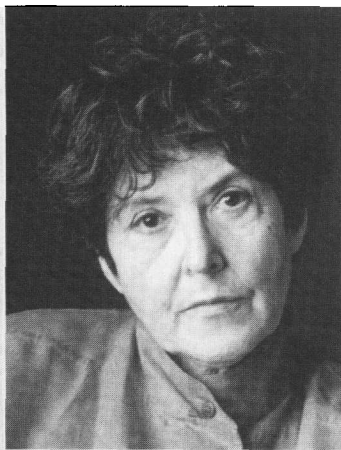
Esther Suarez Duran's *Baños Públicos, S.A. (Public Bathrooms, Inc.)*, performed in Spanish in a theatre that focuses on New York's Latino community, is about the change that has occurred in

Cuba over the last few years. Suarez, who writes plays for adults and children and is also a theatre critic, says she is a sociologist by trade and is quite comfortable discussing economics. She insists that Cuban playwrights are free to express themselves. "In Cuba there are authors who have the tone of Nilo's work," she declares. "One of last year's biggest hits was *Si Vas a Comer, Espera a Virgilio* (*If You Want to Eat, Wait for Virgilio*)—it talks about the '70s and is about how this writer, Virgilio Pinero, was repressed. He talks about the fear and persecution."

Suarez's play is a satire about a recent Cuban law, designed to spur the economy, which allows citizens to use part of their households to make a small business profit. The Cuban residents flown to New York to perform—Corina Mestre, who played a woman stubbornly loyal to the revolution, and Carlos Padrón Montaya, who performed a W.C.-Fieldish citizen intent on poking

holes in any political argument—mixed bathroom humor with compelling philosophies of life. While Suarez agrees with Jon Lee Anderson's recent *New Yorker* piece suggesting that the Cuban economy is growing slightly, she successfully conveys the idea that Cubans would rather see a macro increase in their consumptive power than a micro-economic, small leap forward.

When I suggested to Cruz that the economy may be growing in Cuba and that, in view of recent plays like *Strawberry and Chocolate*, repression of artists on the island is easing, he wasn't



Breaking through a wall of repression: Tai Jimenez in *Letters from Cuba* by Maria Irene Fornes (above).



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MARTIN REYNOLDS

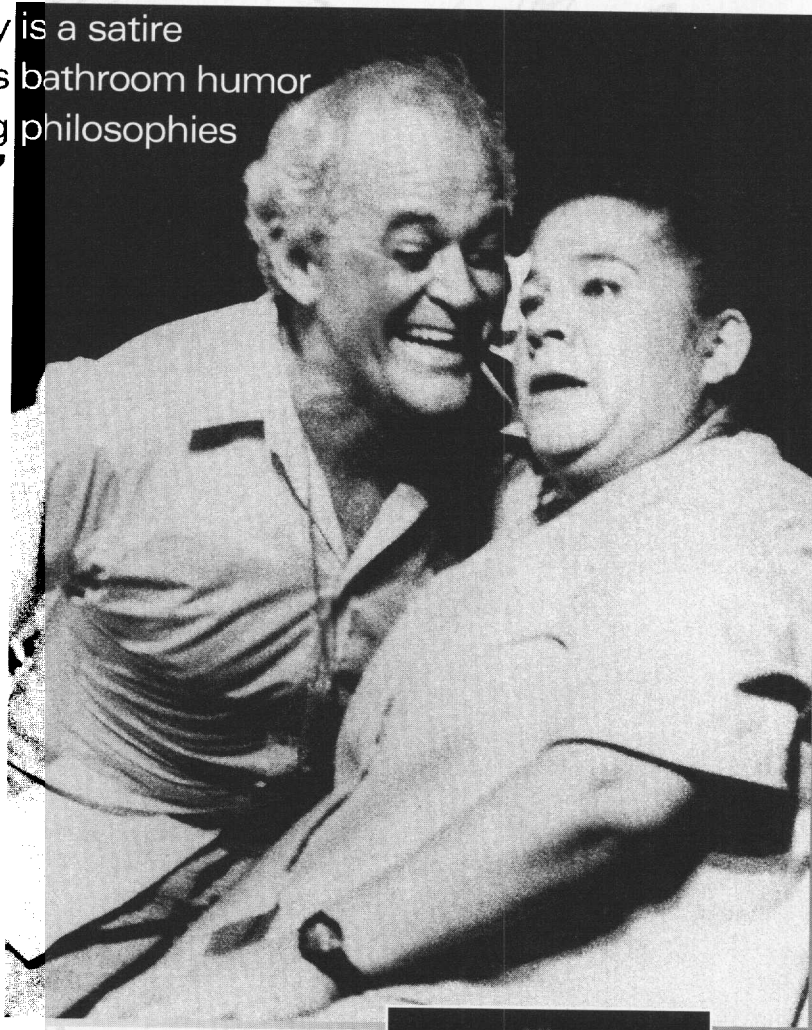
“Suarez’s play about Cuban economic policy is a satire that mixes bathroom humor with compelling philosophies of life.”

moved. “Laws are constantly changing in Cuba,” he said. “They give you something, and the next day they take it away from you.” If Cruz had never left the island, he wouldn’t have had the opportunity to study under Maria Irene Fornes, who, according to Suarez, isn’t discussed much there.

“I remember reading her plays when I was living in Florida,” said Cruz. “I thought, ‘Here’s a Cuban-American writing plays.’ She gave me permission to do the kind of work I did. I felt that it’s such a blessing that my teacher was from the same background that I was from. It allowed me to embrace the world of playwriting.”

Fornes’s *Letters from Cuba* has the stark beauty that characterizes much of her work. It inhabits a dream space carved out by roaming, angular language. Tai Jimenez, last seen by this reviewer in George Wolfe’s Broadway production of *On the Town*, played Fran, Fornes’s alter ego, a dancer wanting to break through a brick wall of repression. Fran is a typical downtown girl in love with a painter, but she happens to be Cuban and lives in a subconscious world through the letters she receives from her brother, Luis (Chris De Oni).

“I started from wanting to write about creative anxiety,” said Fornes. “I was thinking about a dancer I knew who committed suicide by dancing out the window of an apartment right around the corner from where I live in Greenwich Village. Then a thought came to save me from this feeling of despair. I thought about my brother’s letters from Cuba, and then the play became a dialogue between an artist in New York and my brother, who



Powers of consumption: Carlos Padrón and Corina Mestre in *Baños Públicos, S.A. (Public Bathrooms, Inc.)* by Esther Suarez Duran (right).



is an artist in Cuba.”

Letters from Cuba confronts the divide between Cuban and exile gently, with soft reminiscences, physical comedy and nostalgia. Fornes’s relationship to the island is entirely different from both Cruz’s and Suarez’s: She emigrated 15 years before the revolution and was dabbling in painting in Paris while Fidel was still in law school. But even though she claims an emotional distance, the sadness of her separation from her brother—who, like her father, was devoted to the arts—is so achingly elicited in this play that at the end of the performance I saw, De Oni came back for a bow in tears.

“I could never go back and live in Cuba because I would suffocate from the tradition and the what-would-the-neighbors-say thing,” said Fornes. “But I would say that in my consciousness I’m half-American and half-Cuban.”

As we speak, Cuba is still growing as a tourist haven for Europeans, and multinational corporations and venture capitalists alike are trying to muscle in on the action. It seems to depend on the perspective of the observer as to whether there is a revolution, naked tyranny or a

slowly crumbling welfare state in Cuba today. For now, these three plays gave New York a wealth of perspective, illuminating a place and a people perhaps frozen in time, yet looking forward to a future of cultural interchange—and intent on dragging the rest of us along with them. **AT**

Ed Morales writes about culture and the arts for the Village Voice and other publications.

STUARZ: DURAN: FREDDY PEREZ/DEL DIARIO LA PENSA