Performing International Plays

The Concert: The Dreams of Nowhere Men

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Social and Historical Context

On December 8, 2000, José Villa's sculpture of John Lennon sitting on a bench was unveiled in Havana's Menocal Park, now John Lennon Park. Fidel Castro, then President of Cuba, shared the following words at the event: "What makes him [John Lennon] great in my eyes is his thinking, his ideas. . . I share his dreams completely. I too am a dreamer who has seen his dreams turn into reality."[2] A few days later, Lennon's glasses were stolen. This simple event – the stolen glasses-- served as inspiration for Ulises Rodriguez Febles' *The Concert*. The play was written between 2002 and 2004 as part of the first Royal Court Theatre Cuban workshop and eventually won the 2004 Virgilio Piñera Award, Cuba's most important playwriting prize. Set in 21st century Cuba, though "[*i*]*t may seem at times to be somewhere else in the world, and in the end, in many ways, it is …*"[3] The play has many elements characteristic of Rodríguez Febles' playwriting. It is a political play, though not in a pamphleteer way, set in a particular time in the present, and uses a specific event to revisit often untold past episodes representative of social, cultural, and political turmoil in Cuban history and their traumatic effects on individuals.[4]

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[1] My reading of *The Concert* is informed by two essays in Spanish on Ulises Rodríguez Febles' playwriting techniques. José Luis García Barrientos, "Claves de la dramaturgia de Ulises Rodríguez Febles." *Análisis de la dramaturgia cubana actual*. La Habana, Ediciones Alarcos, 2011, 177-202; and Amado del Pino, "Los cruzados vuelven a cantar." Ulises Rodríguez Febles, *El concierto y otras obras*. La Habana, Letras Cubanas, 2007, 5-26.
[2] Ella Morton, "The Story of the John Lennon Statue in Havana, Cuba." Slate at atlasobscura.com. JAN. 10 2014
[3] Ulises Rodríguez Febles. 2004. *The Concert*. William Gregory Trans. London, Nick Herns Books, p. 2. Future quotes from the play come from this edition and are included in the text.
[4] For a related analysis of the Beatles and Cuba see Nelson P. Valdés, "Cuba, the Beatles, and Historical Context." *Counter Punch*, March 29, 2008. https://www.counterpunch.org/2008/03/29/cuba-the-beatles-and-historical-context/

Frederic Jameson has said that the sixties started in 1959 with the triumph of the Cuban Revolution. Led by a group of young, bearded men with long hair – Fidel Castro (leader of the 26 of July Movement), Ernesto Che Guevara, Ernesto Cienfuegos, Huber Matos, members of the Student Revolutionary Directive, and many others—the Revolution was a sign that the dreams of social justice and economic and political sovereignty could be pursued in the context of the Cold War in the Americas. For the rest of the world, it was "a palpable demonstration that the revolution was not only a historical concept or a museum piece, but something real that could be achieved."[5] The Revolution served as a precursor of those future radical transformations not only in the political realm but also in the social and cultural spheres.

In those early years of utopic impulses, Havana became the capital of the Caribbean and of the Americas. The societal changes brought about by the Revolution completely invigorated Cuban society and, for the first time in the 20th century, the role of culture and the arts was prioritized. Culture was seen as a way to educate and actively mobilize the masses. The National Council for Culture was founded in 1961 and one of its first tasks was to ensure that the artists' material conditions were privileged and to create the means to make cultural production available to everyone. It is in theater where these radical, revolutionary changes can be seen best. Cuban playwright Virgilio Piñera expressed this very early on:

> The Revolution knocked on all doors and among them that of the theater. That door, which was kept ajar for more than forty years, opened all of a sudden, and automatically a whole complicated machinery was put into motion. We went from the meager pocket-theaters to occupy the great theaters; from the single night performances we went to hundreds of performances which played in theaters for weeks; from precarious stagings we passed to great productions; from the author who before was not able to publish any of his plays, we went to editions paid for by the state and to the payment of copyright on said editions (…) In a word, the conditions were created.[6]

[5] Fredric Jameson. 1988. *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971-1986*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, p. 182.

[6] Virgilio Piñera, "No estábamos arando en el mar." *Lunes de revolución*. Reprinted in *Tablas*, 2, Apr-Jun 1983, 36-46.

These first few years were, indeed, the golden age of Cuban theater. Playwrights saw their plays staged throughout the island and for more than one night. Between 1959 and 1962, the plays canonized as the most important plays of Cuban theater were premiered or had important new productions.

An emblematic project of this early, utopic period of the revolution is the foundation of the National Schools for the Arts (Escuela Nacional de Arte – ENA). The old Havana Country Club, a space previously open exclusively to the bourgeoisie, was transformed into a City for the Arts, where revolutionary and innovative architectural design went hand in hand with pedagogical innovation in the arts. It was a utopic project: "the world's most beautiful art school"[7] for Cuban youth from all of the island's provinces as well as for students from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The school was partially built between 1961 and 1965. Although only the school of plastic arts and modern dance were completed, instruction in all areas of the arts started alongside the construction of the five schools. Students would play their instruments and danced for the workers and, at times, also helped in the construction. The schools for dramatic arts, ballet and music remain an unfinished project to this day although the whole complex was named a national monument in 2010.

In 1965, the construction of the City of the Arts was halted due to economic, political and ideological reasons illustrative of the radicalization of cultural policies by the mid 1960s. There were questions surrounding the cost of its construction, the architectonic style used, etc., "a bitter example of revolutionary enthusiasm knocking up against partisan ideological clashes over opposing ideas of functionality, usefulness, and art."[8] Those debates were present from the very beginning of the Revolution, alongside debates around the issues of freedom of expression, the function of art and literature, as well as the role of the artist within the socialist revolution. All of these disputes and their dire consequences are representative of the divergences and clashes among

[7] Fidel Castro Ruz, "Palabras a los intelectuales." 1961.
http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1961/esp/f300661e.html

[8] Rachel Weiss. "To Defend the Revolution is to Defend Culture, But Which Version? *Art Margins* 61.1, 2017, 64-82. For more information, see the documentary, *Unfinished Spaces*, directed by Benjamin Murray and Alysa Nahmias, Bullfrog Films, 2011.

politicians, revolutionary ideologues, artists, and intellectuals, as well as of generational conflicts at the core of the struggle for control of the cultural sphere.

By 1965, however, cultural policy became more dogmatic, dictating that an artist's fundamental task was to support the ideological ideals of a socialist revolution. The National Council for Culture was controlled by the Popular Socialist Party, the orthodox and pro-Soviet faction of political power. Artists and intellectuals were expected to be active agents of cultural change. They were recognized and supported but they were also given greater responsibilities. They were to be leaders of the cultural transformation of society, as well as in the formation and dissemination of new social ideals: they were supposed to be revolutionary artists, like the "new man" (*nuevo hombre*), guided by ethical, as opposed to material concerns.

Indeed, by the mid 1960s, the critical debates surrounding the role of the revolutionary artist practically were silenced as the US ideological attacks towards Cuba increased after the CIA-sponsored attack of the Bay of Pigs (Playa Girón / Bahía de Cochinos) in 1961 by 1500 armed Cuban exiles. The artist was supposed to respond to the imperialist economic, political, and economic aggressions of the US and form part of a collective "we," those with cultural values based on resistance. A hyper-ideologized, hypermasculine, and militaristic model of the revolutionary artist/intellectual was consolidated and those who did not respond accordingly were placed outside of that epic discourse as traitors or weak. After that initial honeymoon, theatrical production suffered a "slow decline that ends precipitating into an abyss."[9]

The National Council for Culture openly declared itself against homosexuals. The Cuban youth who shared counter cultural attitudes and tastes typical of the 60s – long hair or Afros, fans of the Beatles and rock music, tight pants - were considered hippies, antisocial elements, outcasts because of their supposed bourgeois, American taste; they were often accused of ideological diversionism. Theater groups were closed; thousands were expelled from the university or their workplace and sent to labor camps called Military Units to Aid Production, commonly referred to as UMAPs, an acronym for its Spanish name. Between November 1965 and July 1968, there were

[9] Rine Leal, *Breve historia del teatro cubano*. La Habana, Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1980.

over 40 of these camps established in the eastern province of Camagüey, and more than 35,000 internees, mostly between 18- and 27-years old. It has been argued that the UMAP sought to "reeducate" the youth who exhibited improper masculinity, Afrocubans and others classified as religious, counterrevolutionaries, in addition to hippies and homosexuals. Raul Castro, then Minister of the Revolutionary Armed Forces, stated

> In the first group of compañeros who have been part of the UMAP, some young people who had not had the best behavior in life were included, young people who, due to poor training and influence of the environment, had taken a wrong path before society and have been incorporated in order to help them find a successful path that allows them to fully incorporate themselves into society.[10]

The history of this "social hygiene project," as Abel Sierra Madero has aptly qualified the UMAPs,[11] and the understanding of the internees' trauma have been absent from Cuba's official historiography.

The above measures came as a surprise first, then as shock and horror in Havana's cultural and artistic milieu. Unfortunately, they preceded what will be known as the "gray quinquennium," 1971-1976. The event that set it all off was the 1971 Congress of Education and Culture where it was established that homosexuals could not work in the areas of education or culture. Ambrosio Fornet, who coined the term "gray quinquennium," pointed out that "Just as we cannot forget that in a permanently besieged square to insist on discrepancies and disagreements 'arms the enemy', it is important not to forget that the pacts of silence are supremely risky because they create a climate of immobility, a simulation of unanimity that makes it impossible to assess the real magnitude of the dangers."[12] Once the UMAPs closed, the Centennial Youth Column was created aimed at providing manpower for cutting sugar cane.

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[10] Raul Castro, in Manuel Zayas, "Mapa de la homophobia." Cubaencuentro.com, Jan 20, 2006. https://www.cubaencuentro.com/cuba/articulos/mapa-de-la-homofobia-10736

[11] Abel Sierra Madero, "Academia para producer machos." *Letras Libres*, Jan 21 2016. https://www.letraslibres.com/espana-mexico/politica/academias-producir-machos-en-cuba

[12] Ambrosio Fornet, "El quinquenio gris. Revisitando el término." *Casa de las Américas*, 246 (Jan-Mar 2007), p. 4.

Officially, they argued that was the original aim of the UMAPs, distorted by the officials in charge of them. When the Column became part of other military units, they added the Youth Labor Army under the Revolutionary Armed Forces in 1971. Although their aim was primarily economical –to provide a workforce for the sugarcane harvest— officially, it also has an educational component: “It contributes to the youth’s patriotic, military, civic, sport and cultural education and formation.”[13] Although there is very little literature about this Youth Labor Army, in the 1970s it also had a rehabilitative component similar to the UMAPs; youth who were considered delinquent or pre-delinquent were forced to enroll in them instead of serving in the obligatory military service.[14] The 70s was, indeed, a very difficult decade for culture in general and for theatre in particular. The traumatic legacy of this period also remained unaddressed in Cuba’s historiography until 2007.

Cultural policies became more cultural and less political with the founding of the Ministry of Culture in 1976 and the appointment of Armando Hart as its Minister of Culture. That same year, the Cuban government established the University of the Arts of Cuba (Instituto Superior de Arte -ISA).[15] Both institutions strongly shaped the 1980s, probably the revolution's highest point economically as well as culturally. Many artists who were pushed out of the cultural sphere during the Gray quinquennium returned to professional life along with the first generation of graduates from the University of the Arts. Playwrights and theatre collectives, along with visual reconsidered the relationship between theatrical language and content. There was a theatrical renovation which transformed theatre into a public forum for an audience that felt "marginalized": young people. These young people, having lived through the achievements of the revolution, demanded a form of expression that was different from that characteristic of the "official voice of the Revolution." The heroic posture of the “new man” began to be questioned. Thus, the cultural spheres of theatre and visual arts became sites of critical

[13] “Ejército Juvenil del Trabajo. Cuba Defensa. Ministerio de las Vuerzas Armadas. http://www.cubadefensa.cu/?q=ejercito-juvenil&b=d2

[14] Information provided by Cuban historian Abel Sierra Madero. Personal correspondence, December 2020.

[15] For an analysis of Cuba’s artistic educational system see Luis Camnitzer, *New Art of Cuba*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2007.

rearticulation contesting the state and placing artists and their audience at the center of debates.[16]

The 1990s, known as the Special Period in Times of Peace, was Cuba's decade of greatest material scarcity due to the fall of the Soviet Union and its negative economic impact on Cuba. During this decade, however, there was a strong artistic public sphere which overlapped with state institutions and the international art market.[17] Artists travelled and participated in international festivals relatively often. By the new millennium, however, the generation that grew up during the Special Period became dissatisfied and expressed its discontent by listening to hard rock and heavy metal, wore long hair and black clothing, and gathered outdoors along G street. They are called "frikis" and are ostracized in ways not dissimilar to the "hippies" of 1960s Cuba.

The Play

Theatre played and continues to play a central role in the revolutionary process. I have always said that theatre in Cuba is a socio-political thermometer; it measures and performs what is happening, what the people feel, though it does not necessarily do it in a realistic manner. *The Concert* is a prime example. It is a political play in Jacques Rancière's sense of the political. The play brings to the stage those 1960s dreamers who were outcast, who suffered the legacy of the Draconian cultural policies of the mid 1960s and 1970s, along with the *frikis* of the new millennium, subjects who have no place within the distribution of the sensible in contemporary Cuban cultural politics.[18] It is precisely in this bringing to the center of those erased and ostracized individuals and the dialogues the play can generate that I read the political impulse in this play.

Ulises Rodríguez Febles has said the following about his playwriting:

[16] For an excellent analysis of theater during this period see Randy Martin, *Socialist Ensembles: Theater and the State in Cuba and Nicaragua*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1994.
[17] See Sujatha Fernandez, *Cuba Represent! Cuban Arts, State Power, and the Making of New Revolutionary Cultures*. Durham NC, Duke University Press, 2006.

[18] Jacques Rancière. *Política, policía, democracia*. Translator María Emilia Tijou. Santiago de Chile: LOM, 2006.

> I write about what surrounds my life, because I need to express myself through questioning, through the inquiry into reality and that of the human beings who live with me. I am interested in addressing what I call submerged memory, that of the more immediate past and that which today in the present is a reality and tomorrow will be our hidden and disappeared memory, but that it is necessary to illuminate it, to demystify it from a personal, diverse perspective, and always with an ethical consciousness.[19]

Submerged memory in *The Concert* comes to surface through a cast of outsiders, four rock musicians who suffered multiple forms of harassment and persecution. Johnny, the protagonist, refuses to abandon his dreams from the 1960s in spite of accusations from his parents that he has refused to grow up and from his band members that he continues to leave in the past. Obsessed, according to his mother, he continues to pursue his dreams and is willing to take them to their final consequences. He holds on to his artistic name, Johnny, and does not want his mother to call him by his real name, Manuel. One could say that he is very much like Lennon's "Nowhere man." Even though he may demonstrate "lack of direction, selective blindness ('Just sees what he wants to see'), and missing perspective ('doesn't have a point of view')"[20], the play makes clear that, as a consummate dreamer, these are not a problem for him.

Scorpion, the drummer of the band, is typical of those who have adapted completely to the revolutionary system. He does not want to remember those past days and is now busy with reports, meetings and inspections. For him, "the sixties were a messed-up time. . . You know what crisis they were having in those days about preserving Cuban identity. . . We were young, it was a phase. A nice phase, I don't deny it. But when all is said and done, how do I put it…? Ephemeral" (29). His secret is that he was sent to the Youth Labor Army --which Johnny was able to escape because of his father's connections-- where he was re-educated. In his own words: "they knocked the militancy out of me and sent me to cut sugar cane, but I got up back again. I always

[19] Ventura de Jesús García. "Jonrón en la escena (Entrevista con Ulises Rodríguez Febles)." *Granma* 6 Sept 2008. http://www.granma.cu/granmad/2008/05/30/cultura/artic06.html

[20] Jim Beviglia. *Counting Down the Beatles: Their 100 Finest Songs*. Lanham, Maryland, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2017, 162.

worked hard. I never missed out when they mobilized, when they harvested the coffee. And look where I am: I've got a good job and do what I want" (31).

Ironically, history repeats itself. Scorpion's son, whom he named Ringo, is also a drummer, dresses as a *friki* and wants to play in a heavy metal band. In the play, his son is the character Young Man. And the character's name is important. He represents those countercultural Cuban youth who, in the 21st century, express their rebellion against the system through tattoos, long hair, and punk outfits. Like his father in the 60s, Young Man is a dreamer who believes in what John Lennon represents. But unlike his father, he is unwilling to comply with the status quo. Indeed, there is a certain complicity between the Young Man and Johnny.

The Butcher is the only character in the play named after what he has become. He buried his band name Zombie a long time ago. He studied Economics and worked at a bank but did not make enough money to even buy himself a much-needed pair of shoes. He is probably the one who suffered the most because "of the place where they took [him] (12), a place that Johnny was spared because he was "daddy's little-boy." It is not until the second meeting with Johnny that Butcher can actually name the place: the UMAP. The trauma caused by that experience he still carries with him: "That won't wipe away people's wounds. (*Long pause*) . . . And I can't forget the price I paid for the rest of you (12).

The Leader is exemplary of those artists who apparently opted for survival from within the system. He kept his love for music and took advantage of his musical training but adapted them and opted to continue in a military band. This allowed him to continue playing; his musical career gave him financial stability and allowed him to travel the world with his wife who eventually abandoned him in the airport in Paris during one of their travels. Her abandonment is typical of many of her generation who, during the 90s, opted for "the velvet exile," revolutionaries who left the island during the Special Period.

The Leader has suffered a stroke and is inert on his wheelchair throughout the play. At the moment when Johnny goes to visit him and shows him a photograph of the band, a tear rolls down his eyes and he tries to make a small movement with one of his hands.

It is the only small gesture he can make. The other important character in the play is the statue of John Lennon which at the end of the play gets up and walks away applauding in an important symbolic gesture. We could say that the Leader is John Lennon's counterpart; he is practically an immobile statue, a victim of the system, a live person but dead inside who can never get up and walk away. Whereas John Lennon, although a sculpture, is a dead man who continues to be alive because of what he represents not only to the 60s generation but to future ones, such as Young Man.

When Rodríguez Febles wrote the play in 2004, there were several published books of fiction which referred to the Beatles. However, the legacy of the UMAP, of the Youth Labor Army, and of the harsh cultural policies of the 60s and 70s in Cuba were absent from the public sphere. *The Concert* addresses for the first time that painful legacy and the broken or truncated dreams of the 1960s and 1970s. However, Rodríguez Febles is not interested in rewriting history or in finding and naming culprits. Rather, he looks into the conflicting emotions that socio-political conflicts generate in the individuals who lived them and survived. Always careful not to hurt anyone, he brings out the pain and highlights his characters' humanity.

That traumatic legacy is unveiled in the play progressively; it is as if the play itself, through its very structure, is modelled by the recovery process of trauma. At first, the reader/audience only hears about painful past events somehow related to John Lennon and the Beatles. Johnny's mother, for example, says very early on: "Have you forgotten what happened between you? . . . Do you not remember what happened to your life because of John Lennon; to their lives? (p. 8) The unspoken pain, the ghosts from the past reside, at first, in the many ellipses in the play, in the long pauses. As the play advances, they are slowly unveiled and eventually are given a name. They are also present, metaphorically and prophetically, in the play's didascalia at the end of several scenes, all of them referring to ominous sounds: the sound of the knife sharpening at the end of Scene 3 evokes bloody hands; the Leader's slow and final sharp tap at the end of Scene 5; the incessant barking of the dog and the end of Scene 7 encapsulates the intolerance towards those who dare to voice a different point of view; the squeal of a stabbed pig, "like a litany" at the end Scene 8 invokes the scream of that generation; and the music ("Nowhere Man") that fills the space deafening everyone at the end of

the play suggests that there might be another way out, a different ending after all that hidden pain is named.

The Concert slowly guides the audience to revisit their past in order to try to understand their present. It offers a human story. A story that can open our minds in a non-threatening way through actors on stage. A story that we share with others in the audience, regardless of our background. Because the very specific, local histories and stories of each of these characters speak not only to a Cuban audience but to any audience that has seen their dreams truncated by absurd politics, to anyone who has found him/herself fighting against their parents and society for what they want and believe, to anyone who has lived in a society that attempts to bury a painful past, to citizens of any country that has created outcasts and eventually erases them from historical memory. Most importantly, the audience recognizes that it is a story that is created and, as such, it can be changed. Herein lies the power of this play, the power of good theatre: a very local story with protagonists that are almost character types speaks to the very core of our humanity. *The Concert* allows us and the characters to go back. Each performance strokes our faces, a caress that touches our sensibilities and intimate wounds, pushing us toward places that are hidden within us. It creates a space of shared experience through which we can revisit the past and, in so doing, open the possibility to move forward. Intimate and private probing leads to public reflection. This may be the reason why in Cuba the audience would end up on stage singing the last song.[21]

Memory becomes a space for critical thinking. In those local and ephemeral moments of a performance, "intervals of political subjectivation" can occur: those moments in time that are formed in between identities, in between spaces that can be appropriated in defiance and recognition of the places that have been assigned to them. The play opens a window onto Rancière's political being: "the political being-together is a being-between: in between identities, in between worlds."[22] In a society where politics is manifested through a language of "siege" and "battles," of "us" versus "them," *The*

[21] For the different productions of *The Concert* in English and *El concierto* in Spanish, see the production pages in *Cuban Theater Digital Archive* – http://cubantheater.org
[22] Rancière, 71.

Concert creates a space for conviviality and transforms it into a place where being-together and imagining a different politics and future is possible.

The Translations

My first contact with *The Concert* was through William Gregory's excellent translation at its first staged reading at the Royal Court theatre, which was part of the *Cuba Real* program in 2004. At the time, I thought the band name, The Crusaders, aptly captured the spirit of these four dreamers immersed in the countercultural spirit of the 1960s in Cuba and the world. Gregory's translation maintains the time and space of Cuba and clarifies through short footnotes the UMAPs, the Youth Labor Army, and a few Havana landmarks for those unfamiliar with the Cuban context. It also successfully captures the spirit and the feelings evoked by Rodríguez Febles' words in the didascalia as well as the characters' language through their dialogues.

When the published translation came out in a bilingual edition, and I eventually read *El concierto* in Spanish, there was one word that I thought was a missed opportunity: "los bitongos" was translated as bourgeois. This came as a surprise given Gregory's impeccable attention to linguistic nuances. In Cuba the adjective is used to refer to children who have everything because of their parents' influence or privilege. Considered spoiled and showoffs, the previously well-to-do youth became symbols of the worst of bourgeois values in 1960s Cuba and were persecuted along with homosexuals and hippies. Fidel Castro himself called the *bitongos* "degenerate carriers of the petit-bourgeois ideology, putrid and stinking ... carriers of the worst bourgeois diseases" such as "effeminacy" and "existentialism."[23] In this context, "bourgeois" misses the negative, pejorative charge denoted by *bitongo*.

After reading the Spanish version, I also concluded that The Crusaders did not quite capture all the meanings in the Spanish *Los Cruzados*. Although, literally, the word means crusaders, the adjective also means "crossed," "vexed." In addition to the characters' rebellious nature in the 1960s, the four were indeed also crossed by ideologies and the intolerance of the period. Gigi Guizado's translation into American English takes into account these two points as well as others. She situates the present

[23] "Unos 'liberados' atados a las peores lacras del pasado." *Mella* 219 (1963): 3.

of *The Concert* in Little Havana where the characters reside after leaving Cuba. The translation naturally uses Spanglish and code-switching typical of bicultural subjects. Using references from rock music lyrics, she chose, for example “fortunate sons'' to suggest the privilege some of the characters had that allowed them to finish their studies. I am not suggesting that one translation is better than the other, but I am underscoring the creative possibilities *El concierto* offers for translations and adaptations. Guizado’s choice to place *The Concert* in Little Havana is clever and plausible. After all, there are many crossed ones who now live there. Her option opens up the play and situates it in Greater Cuba, that cultural space beyond geographical borders that can accommodate Cubans on and off the island, a space in which these four fictional characters and real citizens also have to reckon with all the ghosts from their past.

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