NTQ Reports and Announcements

DOI: 10.1017/S0266464X03210368

Ian Herbert

Havana Daydreaming

Report on the eleventh Havana International Theatre Festival, held from 18 to 28 September 2003.

THIS FESTIVAL is held every two years, and sets out to show a wide variety of Cuban theatre work, from prizewinning plays, dance, and musicals to street theatre, children's theatre, and puppetry – the last a strong tradition in the island. Its eleven intensive days of performances in and out of the theatre were coupled with meetings, conferences, and workshops. But its international component is dependent on those companies who can pay their own way to this cash-strapped outpost of socialism.

The Cubans love their theatre. From the ornate and beautiful opera house, the Gran Teatro in central Havana, to tiny halls in the suburbs, all the city's performing spaces can expect packed houses, with young people in the majority. Some of this enthusiasm can be explained by the fact that tickets (except for the opera) are very cheap, usually the equivalent of 20 American cents (though when you recall that the average wage in Cuba is no more than US $10 a month, they don't seem quite so cheap).

The quality of Cuban acting is good, perhaps reflecting the fact that actors who graduate from the institute of scenic arts are guaranteed a salary. Productions are of variable quality, with a number of established groups playing in their own theatres, others having to search for spaces. All are funded on a project basis, with most of the work being centred on the capital – some regional areas boast little or no theatre, in spite of state-set targets for cultural activity.

In six days of the festival I saw something of the range of Cuban theatre and dance, though not necessarily its quality – Buendias, the country's leading group, were away on tour, and several major shows happened outside the time of my short visit, while another was cancelled due to injury to its leading actor, and an eagerly awaited premiere was postponed because the scenery was not yet ready. My first exposure was a visit to the National Theatre, a large Soviet-style building housing several performance spaces. A favourite among actors, I was told, was this one, the Ninth Floor, which turned out to be the National's rehearsal room, approached only by the theatre's capacious goods lift (safety officers, cover your ears) or in real emergency by nine floors of totally unlit stairs. Argos Teatro's revival of Bernard-Marie Koltès's *Roberto Zucco* (see poster opposite) featured a young and talented cast, moving easily on Alain Ortiz's clever sets. Carlos Celdran's strong production added its own shabby glamour to Koltès's dark world by dressing many of the play's onlookers as hookers and pimps, but succeeded admirably in conveying the blunt amorality of this disturbing piece.

Later in the week I made two return visits to this space, the first for a performance by two actors from Puerto Rico of *Quintuplets,* a play by the state's leading playwright, Luis Rafael Sanchez, about the Morrison quins. It made a useful showcase for Idalia Perez Garay, playing three of the sisters in succession, but I suspect I would have warmed more to the group in their other offering, *Ay, Carmela.* The second was to a rehearsal by the Cuban Contemporary Dance Company of their full-length piece, *Compas*, remarkable for its imaginative use of a full troupe of two-dozen dancers, filling the stage with whirling movement – and breaking off to teach some of it to the audience!

At the Teatro Mella, an attractive and modern thousand-seater with a little of the art deco cinema about it, I saw the result of an interesting experiment: a number of Havana's non-professional street performers were given the opportunity to develop works for the stage and present them for a half-share of the box office. *La Divina Moneda*, from (believe it) the Centre for the Promotion of Humour, is a bawdy satire on the power of the dollar played out by a cast in suits reminiscent of the Greek satyr plays, complete with huge phalluses and matching vaginas (which are put to graphic use as detachable puppets in a ribald moment of simulated intercourse). The evening's content was hardly sophisticated, but the performers' skills in music and circus arts endeared them to a very enthusiastic local audience. The other play I saw in this space was a considerable contrast, as the Pan Asian Repertory Company did very well to convert the production of *Rashomon* which they had staged in a New York 70-seater to the open spaces of the Mella stage.

Pan Asian Rep would have been more at home in the Sala Llaurado, a comfortable little theatre in the elegant suburb of Vedado, where *El Zapato Sucio* (*The Dusty Shoe*) was played, an example of new Cuban writing from Amado del Pino. A variant on the story of the prodigal, its chief invention lay in the two dream figures who bring the past to life as background to this father-son confrontation; but its undoubted star was the live cockerel passed from hand to hand throughout the action.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X03220364 Published online by Cambridge University Press

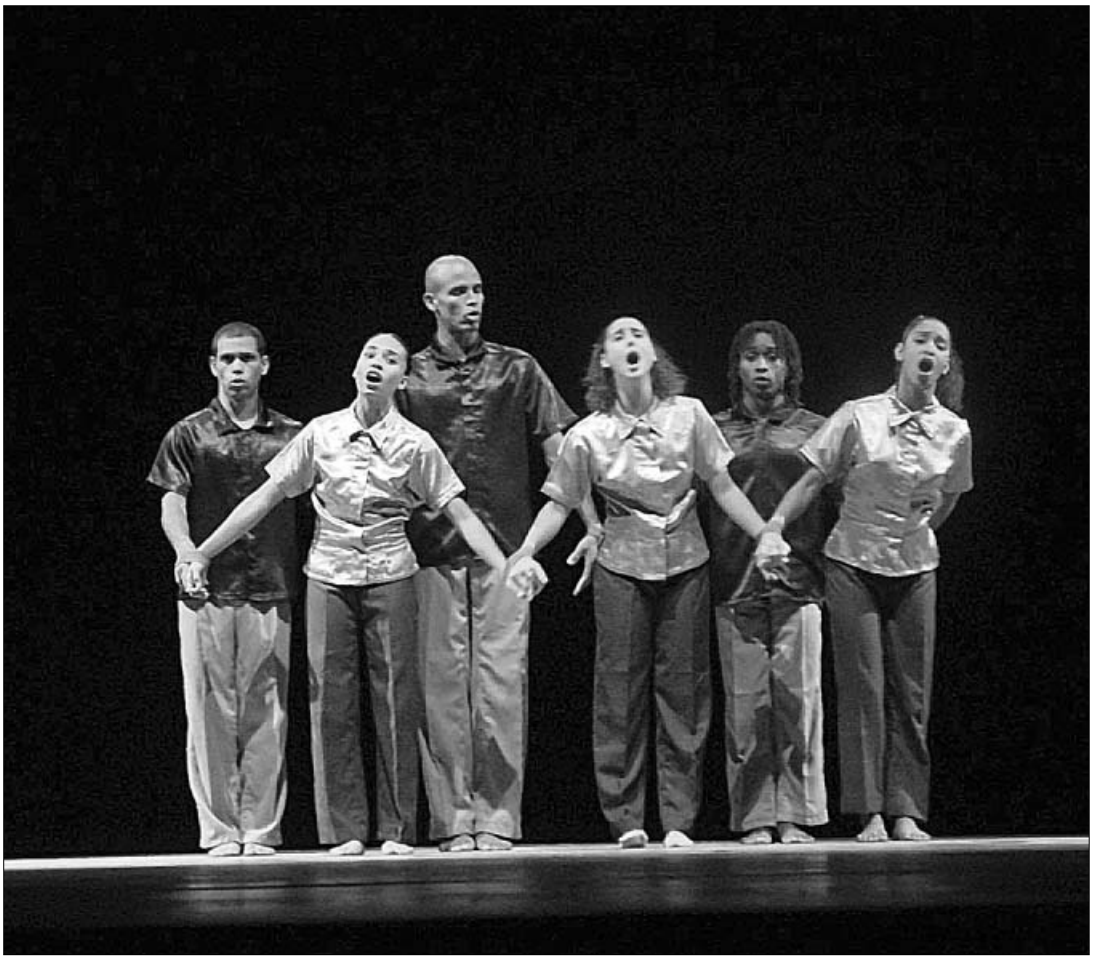


Two other Cuban shows I caught were decidedly fringe events in terms of their venues, but valuable contributions to the panorama. In the ironically named City Hall, a small, semi-derelict cinema far enough from the city centre to have the only half-full house of my visit, Miriam Munoz from the provincial city of Matanzas led her own production of Egon Wolff's *Paper Flowers*, with a fine performance on a terrific set by Rolando Estévez. In neighbouring La Villa, I crammed into the town's even tinier theatre to watch a group for tomorrow, the actor-puppeteers Palpito, play to an enthralled group of schoolchildren, the audience of tomorrow.

Even more exotic was the setting for a staged reading devoted to the life and works of José Marti, Cuba's great writer-rebel, by Teatro Escambray. This long-established regional touring group continues an old Cuban tradition in which factory workers are read to as they work. In the Partagas cigar factory, I was as much absorbed by the audience, a hundred or more highly skilled folk rolling Romeo y Julietas and Monte Cristos, as with Escambray's earnest effort, which for that morning replaced the more usual readings from the daily press.

Many of the international shows in the Festival (more than a dozen countries were represented) were street theatre, and several suffered from a series of violent tropical storms that played havoc with schedules. Hyun-Jang came from Korea to overcome the weather with *Chuibari*, a work that

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Danzabiertas, probably Cuba's leading contemporary dance company, who recently toured Wales with their award-winning *Chorus Perpetuus*, here seen in rehearsal during the Havana Festival.

displayed high production values in its use of traditional masks, costumes, and musical accompaniment, but sadly low aims in putting them to the service of childish anti-capitalist satire.

Back indoors, they were hanging from the rafters of the Café Bertolt Brecht, where a successful local conflation of Bert's *Mahagonny* and *Threepenny Opera* was followed by one of the stranger international moments – Apsara, a company purporting to be Swiss, with its lead actress speaking impeccable Spanish, in *Dolores en La Major*, an indifferent show redeemed only by the performances of an excellent local backing band.

At a time when Cuba's relations with Europe were to say the least fragile, it's perhaps not surprising that the continent's representation in the Festival was not of the highest. Portugal's contribution was from a young actor who performed a kind of reverse striptease, starting nude and dressing himself as he recited a few thoughts on the meaning of life, a blessedly short performance which nevertheless half-emptied the theatre of the Fine Art Museum where it played.

In these circumstances it's pleasing to report on a couple of UK-related initiatives beyond the festival: the Royal Court has been conducting a very popular workshop with local writers and actors, the fruits of which may be seen in London in the spring of 2004, while Danzabiertas, probably Cuba's leading contemporary dance company, are at the time of writing in the middle of a tour of Wales with their award-winning *Chorus Perpetuus*, which I saw in rehearsal in Havana.

This is a fascinating piece, notable for the fact that its six talented dancers also sing *a capella* throughout. The three-man, three-woman group spends much of the hour-long work bound together at the wrist, and their manoeuvres to break free make for not only some very creative movement but also one of the few, heavily veiled pieces of political comment that I saw in this very full week.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X03220364 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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Roxana Avila and David Korish

Intensive Actor Training in Costa Rica

Report on 'Learning to Live', an Intensive Actor Training Workshop for Central American actors, held in Costa Rica from 19 June to 10 July 2003.

TEATRO ABYA YALA, a Costa Rican independent theatre company, recently organized an historic Intensive Actor Training Workshop for Central American actors. Convinced that the region lacks exposure to serious and disciplined actor training techniques, Abya Yala, with the support of the Dutch non-governmental organization HIVOS, invited three world-renowned theatre professionals to the cloud-forested mountains of Los Angeles of Costa Rica: the actor Tage Larsen, member of the Odin Teatret of Denmark; the voice specialist Richard Armstrong, founding member of the Roy Hart Theatre, and currently on the faculty of the Experimental Theatre Wing of New York University; and Luis de Tavira, one of Mexico's leading teachers and directors. This encounter, the first of its kind in Central America, proved to be personally and professionally transformative for the fourteen actors and actresses who participated.

Tage Larsen

Concrete Action

Tage Larsen's workshop was divided between physical and vocal training exercises and the composition of a score of physical actions, which would later be linked with a spoken text. The principle driving this line of actor training is to forge the actor's commitment to the concrete in order to acquire an awareness of how our body/mind must be wholly engaged when in action. The training included, among other forms: *The Wind Dance*, a training form developed by Odin colleague Iben Nagel Rasmussen that incorporates physical action within a specific rhythmic structure; *Poles*, a line of work Tage learned from the Chinese Opera, in which we manipulate a large, two-metre pole in a variety of fluid patterns; and a series of exercises based on the give and take of the weight of the participants. This training teaches us to bring our entire self to bear on what we do as actors in a place of real work – concrete work with weight and balance, with an object, with a rhythm – so that when we are asked to perform an action within the context of a fiction, we make it concrete and real.



The *Poles* exercise, with Tage Larsen using a two-metre pole in a variety of fluid patterns (photo: David Korish).

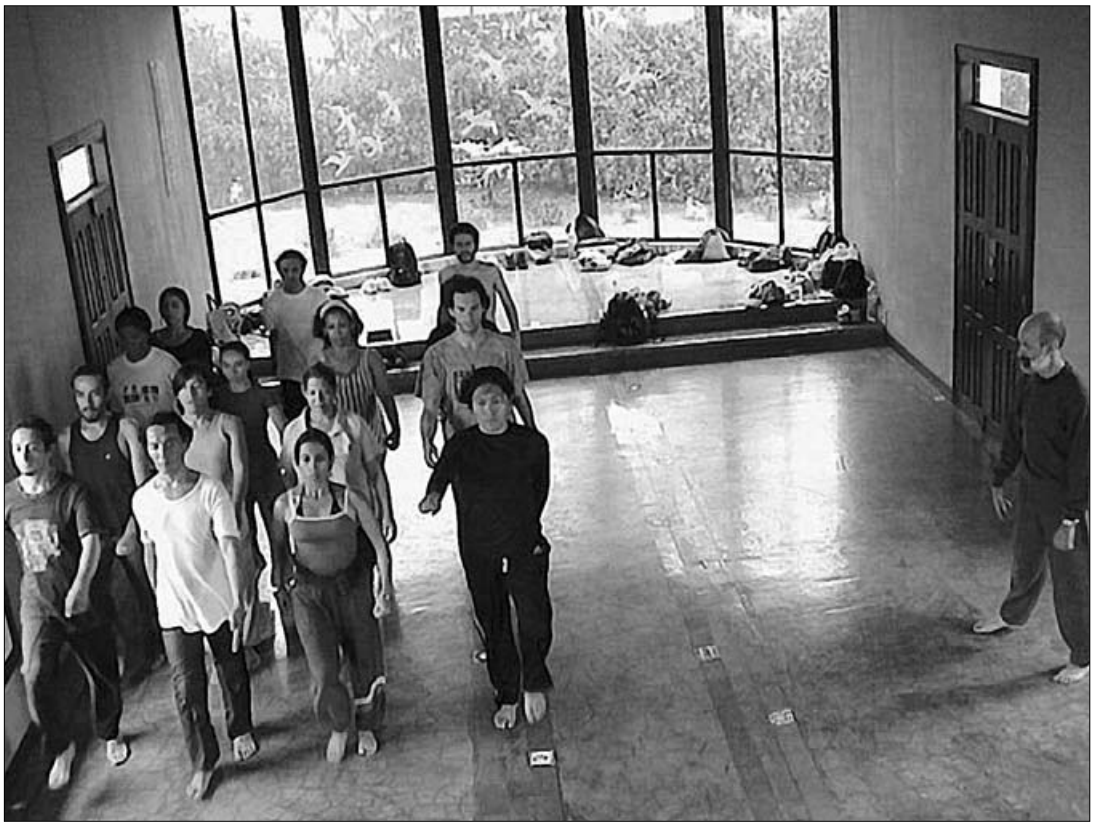
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This page, above: Tage Larsen working with participants on physical composition (photo: Marvin Caravaca). Below: participants during a Richard Armstrong workshop (photo: Denise Duncan). Opposite page: Luis de Tavira working with the actors (photo: Gina Monge).



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Work on physical score is the other branch of Tage's workshop. Developing first a sensitivity to the principles of composition of physical action – the use of the spinal column, balance, opposition – the participants must extract fragments from a series of exercises and link them together in a specific order, creating a repeatable score of physical actions. This score is then yoked to a previously learned text. The result, which can be used as a monologue or in dialogue, creates what Tage calls a kind of 'spontaneous drama' as the often conflicting material of the body and the voice speak to each other in ways that would be impossible to develop logically or rationally.

The approach to training reflected in Tage's workshop and this development of performative material – the unforeseen dramaturgy of yoking a physical and vocal score – have become one of the principal legacies of Odin Teatret in Latin America as actors search for ways to challenge and transcend the physical and psychological illustration of the written dramatic text.

Richard Armstrong

The Voice is the Muscle of the Soul

A work session with Richard Armstrong, as many know, becomes an encounter not with the voice but rather with the self through sound. 'Sound is the manifestation of the internal condition', he says at the outset of the session; and he proceeds to break down the myriad of dams that block the actor from expressing his/her inner wealth. By creating a working environment of remarkable trust and protection, so that in no moment does anyone feel judged or even critically observed, the participants grow willing to break through to the sound of the world within.

If 'sound is a story', as Richard says, the nature of the sound, of the story, is directly related to the nature of the breath that produces the sound – 'the pre-story' in Richard's imagery. Much of his approach is designed to foster the connection between what goes in and what comes out. This relationship between breath and sound is explored in a variety of exercises, particularly one which illuminates the dual meaning of the word 'inspiration' – the physical inspiration needed for the breathing cycle as well as the creative inspiration needed for the sound to emerge.

As we commit to a specific 'point of inspiration', first a place in the room and later a place on the body of someone else, we are in touch with both the physical and the creative need at the same time, and the sound that emerges is deeply 'inspired', in both senses of the word. 'It is not the exercises, it is the experience', Richard reminds us;

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and as the participants – for the first time encountering a vocal training experience of such sensitivity, clarity, and depth – grow more confident of their abilities to reflect in sound their internal experience, they begin to astonish themselves with the richness and range of the vocal journeys that Richard takes them on.

Luis de Tavira

A Mental Operation

'Acting is a mental operation' is the premise that drives the work of Luis de Tavira, and a working session with him is as mentally provocative as it is physically exhausting. The actor's work is primarily to make that which is fiction real, and this, de Tavira insists, is a mental exercise. To train this ability, the actor must sharpen the ability to be wholly present in world of fictional stimuli; and so the practical sessions of Luis de Tavira focus on developing an intense commitment to the present, the here and now, and the fluid, dynamic reaction to fictional stimuli within this heightened state of physical and mental presence.

Walking is the bedrock of the the practical session of Luis de Tavira. A believer in the peripatetic school of thought, de Tavira asserts that as long as the body is in motion, the mind will accompany it. What Stanislavsky identified as organicity – *perezhevanie*, the mind giving orders to the body – de Tavira takes to its logical conclusion through walking. First, simply – 'I walk and think that I walk' – and later more complicated through swift changes of directions, orientation, quality, the walking ultimately crosses the threshold into the fictive – an imaginary point before you, a boat rocking us all – as Luis brings the actors to the frontiers of the relationship between mind and body, between the fictive and the real.

Whereas with Tage we were confronted with the real through the commitment to the concrete physical action, with Luis de Tavira it is the mind of the actor that governs the intensity of this commitment and it is therefore the mind of the actor and its ability to be wholly present and physically provocative and reactive that is the essential work of the actor.

Craft and Profession

The three approaches to actor training were as varied as the professional backgrounds of the master-teachers themselves, and the three workshops back-to-back-to-back created an unexpected dramaturgy to the whole session. From the body of Tage's work to the heart of Richard to the mind of de Tavira, we were placed in direct contact with the deepest of methodologies, reflecting not only the richness of each approach but also the profound significance that each approach, and the connections between them, can have on an actor's work.

Learn your craft before you practise your profession: we were taught that years ago. Learn your craft. We organized this workshop for a simple reason: the practice of theatre in Central America suffers from acute depriviation of craft, and consequently often demonstrates a profound mediocrity and lack of professionalism. The workshop experience with Tage Larsen, Richard Armstrong, and Luis de Tavira was the easy part; now the participants must return to their countries and share with their colleagues that which is shareable and continue to work themselves on that which is not. Only by transforming this experience into the ongoing commitment to concrete tasks – in body, mind, and spirit – will we be able to develop the craft necessary to practise the most profound of professions.

Participants

Guatemala
Gustavo Santos, Jorge Hernández Vielmann, Luis Otoniel Morales

Honduras
Damario Reyes

El Salvador
César Pineda, Egly Larreynaga, Jenniffer Q. Valiente

Nicaragua
Alicia Irene Pilarte

Costa Rica
Janko Navarro, Marco Guillén, Natalia Chacón

Panama
Mariela Aragón Chiari, Roberto Quintero, Teresita Mans

Organizers

Teatro Abya Yala, directed since its founding in 1991 by Roxana Avila and David Korish, is an independent theatre company based in Costa Rica and dedicated to creating original theatre work. In addition to making performances and maintaining a commitment to actor training and theatre investigation, Abya Yala has been active in the field of production and promotion of artistic and cultural activities in the sector of independent art in Costa Rican and Central American arts.

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