Luis Santeiro: The Influence and Development of a Cuban-born Playwright

I organized myself to study Luis Santeiro’s collection in a specific way, working with his oldest-written play first, *Our Lady of the Tortilla*. I made this decision for two reasons. On the one hand, I believed that, being his first play after having worked as a script writer for *Sesame Street*, Santeiro was not going to create a controversial piece and would, instead, focus on creating a very commercial play that would eschew controversial themes and a complex dramatic plot. Also, by choosing his earliest work, I reasoned that I would create the necessary foundation to assess and evaluate the evolution of Luis Santeiro as a playwright in his ongoing career. My hypothesis on the fundamental nature of his early play, *Our Lady of the Tortilla*, proved to be correct, offering an ideal point of departure. The play is very light. It is a comedy that does not touch explicitly on controversial themes, either political or socioeconomic. In this respect, it is very similar to the ¿Qué Pasa USA? sitcom, which Santeiro script wrote for. I believe that this was a consciousness decision made by Luis Santeiro in order to attract an eclectic audience to his first work as a playwright. In order to do this, I believe Santeiro chose not to include potentially contentious themes, and instead decided to show the difficulties faced by a “typical Cuban family” in New Jersey in the late 80’s through an amusing, comical form.

Nevertheless, this is not to imply that Santeiro does delineate very important themes in his play *Our Lady of the Tortilla*. If one disassociates him or herself from the comedy and studies the play critically, one sees an elemental theme relating to Cuban emigrants. Through the
character of Nelson Cruz, Santeiro outlines the internal conflict of young emigrants, in terms of their identity. Nelson, a young man of twenty years of age, appears in the play as a very insecure character, who has not yet defined his identity – which may seem typical for his age – but his frustration is not as simple as it may appear at first glance. Of the two brothers in the play, Nelson is the “typical American boy,” while his brother Eddy, the elder, is a stereotypical Cuban “latino” (Santeiro). That his to say, he is a “macho” womanizer, with a firm conviction of his Cuban identity. In contrast, Nelson has only one girlfriend; he is in love with a young American girl named Beverly, and when the time came for Beverly to finally meet his family, Nelson attempts to conceal everything that would indicate that he and his family are not “American.”

The comedy of the play stems from this conflict; despite his unyielding effort to hide the quintessential distinctiveness and mannerisms of his family – he goes so far as to store away all the objects in the house that he fears would intimidate Beverly (among other things photos and religious figures) – Nelson is beset by a series of circumstances in which all his plans are shattered and it becomes impossible, despite all his efforts, to hide reality from Beverly. Nevertheless, the denouement of the play is joyful. Interestingly enough, Beverly does not become frightened by Nelson’s family. In fact, she is imbued with interest in meeting this intriguing family who cannot escape its Cuban identity. At the same time, Nelson begins to accept that, despite his wishes, he too has been influenced by his family and their customs. He too is Cuban and, perhaps most importantly, at the end of the play this no longer perturbs him.

Observing his beginnings as an early playwright in Our Lady of the Tortilla, I constructed the necessary framework to study the development of Luis Santeiro in his more contemporary work. After enjoying his first play, I was very eager to continue his work. I chose a play that was written in the middle of Santeiro’s career as a playwright, one which solidifies changes in his
writing and the representation of emigrants in the United States. The Lady from Havana was written in 1992 and was produced by the same company that had endorsed his first play, INTAR Theatre Company in New York under the direction of Max Ferra. As I read the early pages of the script, I immediately recognized an author who had matured, who despite his illustrious dexterity and use of comedy, was not limiting himself in presenting controversial themes. Luis Santeiro had unchained himself from the monotony of creating a light play for a public who is only looking to laugh and walk away from the play without thinking critically about what they had seen. In The Lady from Havana, Santeiro explicitly mentions contentious subject matter, including both political and contemporary themes. Santeiro does not present a “static” and unchanging Cuba, the Cuba of the early 1960’s, the Cuba which served as the backdrop for the development of the characters in Our Lady of the Tortilla and the sitcom “¿Qué Pasa USA?”. The reader, or the audience, is situated in Miami in the year 1980, and immediately sees that the Cubans who continue to live in the island have not been left in historic limbo in this play. In fact, one sees how Cubans in the island have adapted to the Cuba of the present, where the black market is king and where Cubans endure by means of their ingenuous improvisation and doggedness.

Beba, a presumptuous woman in her 70’s and Zoila, “Beba’s servant” who is in her 40’s, have just arrived to Miami to live with Marita, daughter of Beba and a “modern woman near the age of 50” (Santeiro). After the initial ecstasy produced by the overwhelming amounts of foods and commodities she saw, Beba, the “queen of the black market in Cuba,” the “saint” who illicitly had coffee, wheat, bathroom tissue, mosquito nets, and medicines to sell and distribute when they were impossible to find anywhere else in the island, becomes disillusioned with the lack of time, the incessant need for work, the loss of customs and manners, the pervasiveness of
drugs, and, mostly, with the futility and lack of purpose as an older woman living in the United States. Beba comments that her life has degraded to such an extent that her day consists of choosing from one of three tasks, the three T’s as she says: speaking on the telephone, watching television, or using the toilet. Therefore, the United States is not what Beba had anticipated. Given the circumstances she now found herself in, together with the importance she had back in Cuba – which derived from the paradoxical fact that she was responsible for administrating the black market in Havana – Beba concludes that she might have been better off staying in Cuba than coming to live with her daughter in the United States. This is a very radical assertion by the character of Beba if one considers that the most Cubans at the time were not as privileged as she and would prefer living in the United States, yet it is not unfounded. The author skillfully presents the argument that, for older individuals, emigration to the United States can perhaps commence a process of degradation which may not be preferred over a life of poverty in Cuba. The question is left open for the audience, or reader, to contemplate. What is preferable, a degradation of the self or of the material wealth?

Santeiro finishes the first act by presenting these conflicts through the character of Beba and develops other periphery issues in the plot. As the second act begins, the audience realizes that ten or so years have passed and the setting has shifted. The audience finds itself in Beba’s funeral, where three of her close friends are mourning her death. These three new characters are critical to the play, as they are used by Santeiro to create comic relief, at the same time, to inculcate and outline the conflicts he had developed in the first act. Santeiro achieves this task expertly. *The Lady from Havana* is exemplary in regards to the analysis of the development of Luis Santeiro as a playwright. Despite the fact that Santeiro no longer treats Cuba as static, the author consciously diminishes the importance of the controversial themes and questions posed in
the play through a retreat in comedy in the second act. This shows a writer who uses his overriding amount of talent in comedy to continue writing for a very commercial audience and who decides shift his emphasis at the end of the play away from the politics between Cuba and the United States, away from the relationship between emigrant and those who live in the United, back again to comedy. However, there is more to be said. This play is perfectly situated as a certain middle point in the work of Santeiro as a playwright. Yes, he ends the play through comedy, converting the three women in the second act to the most memorable characters of the play – according to more than once critic. But as a whole, the work is very well written. It was made to engage the audience on issues which Luis Santeiro had hitherto not ventured to write about. Whether or not the comedy of the latter part of the play is viewed as destructive to the nature of the play would, in my opinion, rely on the direction given to the play. That is to say, it would be the result of a director’s intentions for the play. This phenomenon may not be true of his latter play, Praying with the Enemy, however, which I chose for the consolidation of my analysis of Luis Santeiro in terms of his merit as a playwright, as well as his unique ability to present the circumstances of Cuban exiles living in the United States.

In Praying with the Enemy, Santeiro places his audience in Havana, Cuba, in 1998, during the visit of John Paul II to the island. Taking advantage of the pope’s visit, Arturo Soto – fifty years of age, workaholic, a man who has become very successful in the American exile after leaving Cuba when he was fourteen – and his wife Adriane Villareal del Soto – a woman of forty, who is described by Santeiro as a “Cuban princess,” daughter of a prerevolutionary Cuban bourgeois family visiting the island for the first time since her departure when she was nine – decided to visit the island as tourists. Cynthia Wallace, a young, attractive reporter in her 30’s is also in Cuba at the time, as she has been assigned to inform the American public of the Pope’s
arrival. Nevertheless, her desire to become a first-class reporter, combined with her curiosity, leads Cynthia to abandon her task and to focus on what becomes the principal drama of the plot: the Soto family has decided to visit the homes they left behind in the island by taxi, and Adriane’s old home is now being occupied by the family of the taxi driver who has picked them up! In addition, the taxi driver’s wife is a true “daughter of the revolution,” and considers herself the “unequivocal voice” of the same, which stands as a stark contrast to the political views of both Adriane and her husband (Santeiro). Adriane, who seemed very firm in her respect for the rights of Cubans who had stayed in the island at the time of the Revolution, is so distraught by the reality of this coincidence that her disposition transforms entirely, she converts into the nine-year-old whose house, whose life, and whose dreams had been stolen by the Revolution. Indignant, she announces that the house must be returned to her! For Cynthia, the sudden scandal merits more attention than the filming of the arrival of the Pope to the island of Cuba. After having established the principal conflict, the play incorporates various subthemes, including the extremism of both the Cubans outside of the island and those who had stayed with the Revolution. It also incorporates other themes, including the hypocrisy of “Revolutionaries”, who, despite their firm ideological beliefs, need the dollar – especially through the influx of tourism from abroad – in order to survive in the island. This play, despite its widespread use of situational comedy, is scathing and it is not ashamed of being so. There is comedy, yes, but the comedy does not conceal the controversial themes that the author chose to present. Thus, in this play Luis Santeiro merits recognition as a matured and distinguished playwright, an individual who is unafraid, who places his unique dexterity for comedy as a supplementary to his work, not as its essence. That is to say, for the first time, Luis Santeiro’s talent in creating a play that is
funny does not shackle the play; rather, it gives emphasis to the excellence of the writing, done
by a playwright who is not subdued, who does not shy away from controversial political themes.

Many a time I found myself laughing at the brilliant circumstances that Santeiro puts his
characters in and I mention this because I find the most important aspect of Santeiro’s work to be
the ease with which he is able to explore the dynamic of what it means to be an immigrant
successfully – both commercially and critically– because of his use of comedy. As a Cuban
immigrant, I found that I could relate to almost each and every one of his characters in some way
or another. I saw remnants of my own identity crisis sketched out in writing. As I read, I asked
myself, Am I truly Cuban, am I Cuban-American, am I an American, can I assert any of these
identities, and if so should I assert them? Should I be ashamed of my heritage, like Nelson in Our
Lady of the Tortilla. Can I even appropriate my heritage outside of Cuba? It was amazing
working with Santeiro’s material because I too faced an identity crisis and many a hardship when
I came to the United States. But, work such as Santeiro’s allows us immigrants, to claim or even
find an identity. It allows us to see that other immigrants also faced many obstacles. And that
offers us some comfort, especially if it’s through comedy.

Also, I can see why Santeiro was so successful at doing this. He too must have faced
these hardships. In fact, I am certain he faced these hardships. When he arrived to the U.S. he
lived in a cramped house with his six brothers, his grandmother, his aunt, and a child whose
parents were in prison in Havana. Moreover, his father sold encyclopedias to support them.
Therefore, the pleasure I found in working with this material derived not only from the
connection I had to his work, but to the author himself. And this is exactly why Santeiro is a
great playwright and script writer. People—feel—this same attachment. They connect with his
work, they find answers to their struggles, and they continue, as his later work shows, to question
the interactions with their home country, as well as their place within the United States. I arrived at the conclusion that both of the forms exploited by Luis Santeiro, television and playwriting, are successful in achieving this. If it is true that in the ¿Qué Pasa USA? Sitcom Luis Santeiro avoids key issues and treats Cuba statically, as was suggested by Yeidy Rivero in her lecture "All in the Cuban-American/Sit-Com Family: ¿Qué Pasa USA? at the Cuban Heritage Collection on the 29th of January, 2010, it must also be said that this decision allowed for a more broad audience and following of a show that touched the lives of many and offered emigrant families a niche where they could come together and appreciate the fact that they were foreigners living in the United States, a circumstance that beset them with both tangible and inner difficulties. Luis Santeiro is brave and ingenuous, as he has allowed entire generation of Cubans, especially younger emigrants, to begin to recollect, find, and affirm their identity, without a fear that they are in some ways different from North Americans. Their differences, they learn through Santeiro’s work, is not mutually exclusive to American culture.