Children’s Theater in Cuba: Play and/or Politics?

**The Special Period**

In 1989 with the fall of Berlin Wall and the end of the Soviet Union, Cuba lost 75% of its trade. The Cuban economy was in turmoil and the government had to figure out in what ways it was going to create connections with other countries. Because of the hardships of this time period, and the necessity for adaptation the 1990’s are known as the special period. Castro feared that the introduction of trade with non-communist nations would obliterate Cuban culture. He took preventative measures with the “Massification of Culture” initiative. Part of this initiative included doubling artists’ salaries with the idea that they would create art affirming the Cuban identity. While one could view this as indoctrination, it is essential to remember that all works of art have a political agenda, no matter if that agenda is consciously or unconsciously acknowledged. An important critic of children’s theater in Cuba, Freddy Artiles, said that there is no denying that kids are influenced by imported first world products and this can lead to forgetting their own national identity. Globalization has led to the homogenization of culture and it in order to affirm a national culture and identity the government promotes artistic industries.

**Results of ASSITEJ Conference in Havana (1993)**

As an industry children’s theater is particularly important in molding the youth’s understanding of their identity and community. However with the onslaught of globalization and the availability of less culturally distinct forms of media, those working in children’s theater have had to develop methods to compete with these forms of media and reach the youth. In 1993 the eleventh congress of ASSITEJ (l’Association Internationale de Théâtre pour les Enfants et les Jeunes) met in Havana to discuss how to adapt children’s theater to contemporary times. One of the key issues was how television changes the theater’s role. Theater is not solely about entertainment, and to compete with television it must emphasize its other aspects; human activity, spontaneity, proximity, and participation.
Another result of globalization is the increased amount of knowledge children have access to. Kids watch TV and are well informed. They can see news and more adult realities. Maurice Yendt, an attendee from France posed the question “if theater presents images which are totally sweetened, and even censored, it seems to me that we might ask ourselves, what is happening?” through TV kids in urban areas can know more about metropolitan areas: New York, London, Paris, etc. than they know about their own community or national history. Penina M’Lama discussed the African theater tradition of pitting colonialism as the enemy in theatrical productions. She posed the question of how this paradigm can be reworked to provoke the new thematic debate between development and underdevelopment, the free market economy, and democracy. Taking these two quotations together we can see the importance of engaging kids in meaningful debates. In many affluent capitalist countries kids are valued mostly for their catalytic action on adult spending, and the media directed towards them reflects these superficial values. In the United States children’s television programs and movies promote products that are linked to those shows, like action figures and dolls. This kind of acting which catalyzes kids’ roles as consumers is condescending in that the creators are aware of how they are manipulating kids.

People used to understand acting as a kind of lie. But today I think it’s going to change. And if people are really acting in their social life, we must say that they act honestly, we must say that they act sincerely, and we must catch how do they act in that way. And I think one, of the important ways of the theater in the world is to behave theater in this world, the way you act theater in this life to create, to improve the sense in the whole society.

While this last citation was made by a Canadian, Tamer Levent, who was attending the conference it has a lot to do with the socialist understanding present in Cuba of how theater can teach children to be socially responsible. Viewing all life as a performance demonstrates that you understand your “role” in society and your “audience” of fellow citizens. Through participatory performances children can learn how to “act” with respect to their peers. In many places audience members can remain isolated from one another, but participatory performances reflect the solidarity that Cuban society has.
Socialist Values in Children’s Theater

This solidarity was particularly crucial during the Special Period, when people could not always get their necessities and so depended on their neighbors heavily. People lost faith in their institutions, and turned to the black market for many of their needs. In her article, *Anthropology and Post-Modernity in the Theater*, Magaly Muguercia refers to the “confusion of values,” during this time and the difficulty in separating personal and social. This is also referenced in Maria Isabel Dominguez Garcia’s article on youth during the special period. They lived in the present, hedonistic tendencies ensued, and there was a lot of tension between solidarity and individual competition. There were many theories on how identity should be perceived. Is identity collective? Ephemeral? Are you born with your identity? Do your parents bestow it upon you? Is identity a performative act? Does one’s identity hide behind all the toing and froing, the daily chores we must accomplish? Establishing an identity is vital for children’s development, and through participatory theatrical exploration kids were pushed to define themselves.

**Fluidity of Identity**

A production of Pauline Moll’s, *Hello Monster*, was performed in Havana and it revolves around a search for the identity of the protagonist. The audience of children were expected to partake in this sort of verbal scavenger hunt, emphasizing group participation, while instilling the idea of a fluid identity. While it is not a Cuban play, the performance of it indicates the Cuban values of participation and exploration of identity.

**Critical Eye for Upbringing**

Rene Fernandez’s *Disfrazes la poetica del juego* shows the audience a range of parent like characters. This exposes kids to familial arrangements outside their own, and promotes criticism and evaluation of adults. The idea of criticizing adults is almost frighteningly progressive. This is something J.K. Rowling has been commended for in the Harry Potter series. Because of the insularity of the nuclear family, being able to understand and critique your own upbringing is something most of us cannot do until we leave home. Instilling this critical eye at such a young age is revolutionary indeed.

**Participation**

The play *Para un principe enano se hace esta fiesta*, performed by the group La fiesta de los Dragones, is set outdoors rather than in a theater. However performed is the
wrong word, it is played outside with kids participating and motivating the action of the story. Again this draws from the idea of anthropological theater, where through performance we can understand how people act in experimental situations. It shows how we are conditioned by culture, and attempts to make connections between our roles today and our cultural origins. This theatrical tendency (anthropological theater) is not distinctly Cuban, but is present in most socialist countries. It emphasizes what Tamer Levent referred to as “acting theater in this world,” the idea that if we modify how we portray our culture we can change our culture itself.

**Exposure to Unpleasant Realities**

Freddy Artiles reviews a visiting one man show from Sweden, which was actually presented in Swedish and, as stated before, by one man. The show was a dramatization of a classical children’s tale and was understood by the audience through the actor’s physicality. The story included a murder and attempted suicide. Not the typical topics for children, and yet, it is important for kids to confront these topics. And is it not better for them to do so in the security of a theater, rather than being traumatized when they encounter these things in real life?

**Acceptance of African Culture**

These examples reflect the way in which identity is constantly changing as a reaction to the situations we encounter. While we may think of identity as a fixed status, altered only by lived experiences, children’s theater in Cuba reflects the way in which identity can be molded by exposure to different situations through theatrical participation. This is one aspect of the Cuban cultural identity that is expressed through the theater. The other key cultural aspect deals with the discussion raised by Penina M’Lama as to the new thematic debate between *development* and *underdevelopment*, the free market economy, and democracy. The Cuban theater rallies around the African identity as a symbol to be juxtaposed with colonialism, development, and the free trade economy. I call it a symbol, because anyone who is marginalized in some way can identify with that. Children’s theater in itself is resisting the hegemony of age, and that is just the beginning of how the theater embraces subaltern groups.
Yoruba Roots in Cuba

It is quite common to rework classic stories, or myths in children’s entertainment. This practice shows what the traditional values/practices of the society are, and can simultaneously question those values by the tone the story is told with. In the case of Cuba these revitalized classics are frequently hybrids of Spanish stories and Yoruba folklore. The public performance of Yoruba liturgy can be traced to the 1800’s and the carnival celebrations of Dia de los Reyes. Slaves would parade in costumes with ritual dolls on sticks, this doll on a stick is called Anaquille. While historians equate the emergence of puppets in Cuba with marionettes coming from Europe, I am inclined to believe that their use in the theater is derived from the Anaquilles of carnival celebrations. Regardless of their roots, dolls/puppets (munequitos, literally little dolls) are deeply integrated into Cuban theater.

Dolls as Actors

The play Patakin is based on two stories about dolls; Jose Marti’s La muneca negra and Historia de una muneca abandonada by Alfonso Sastre. However it is performed by real people and not puppets. Many of the characters have been transformed into Yoruba deities. This giving of life to inanimate objects is a good way to illustrate role playing, and allude to Yoruba culture. Besides the afore mentioned Anaquilles, the Santeria religion also uses dolls to represent their owners, and the state of the doll reflects the state of the owner.

The children’s theater group Papalote (kite) in Matanzas, Cuba also performed many hybrid stories involving Yoruba culture, and actual puppets. One such story featuring twins, who are children of Chango and Ochun is reviewed by Freddy Artiles. The story is of a devil, who the twins manage to trick, because he does not realize they are twins. All the while the audience is aware, and is invited to mock the devil. Once again the theatrical performers invite participation, while reminding kids about Yoruba culture.

The theater is vital in asserting a national identity, and much of what is being asserted points to a greater acceptance of marginalized groups. Children in many societies easily become marginalized, Yoruba culture in Cuba, and African culture worldwide is often subordinated to the dominant culture. Even puppets are marginalized
within theater, but in Cuba they are a common an expected theatrical technique not limited to children’s theater. Children’s theater demands a lot from its public in terms of actively participating in the questioning of societal roles and static identities.

**Bibliography**


Artiles, Freddy “Teatro y Ninos: Interrogantes.” *Tablas* No. 4 1993


Mugercia, Magaly “Antropologia y Posmodernidad.” Tablas. No. 1 1993
Ortiz, Fernando.  La antigua fiesta afrocubana del "Dia de Reyes." La Habana: Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Departamento de Asuntos Culturales, División de Publicaciones, 1960.


Rodriguez, Jorge Rivas “Patakin de un teatro callejero.” Tablas. No. 4 1993


