CUBAN HOSPITALITY
BY ERICA NAGEL

WHEN OUR TOUR BUS PULLED over into the tall grass of the Cuban countryside, at first I thought: “Maybe we’re breaking down.” The road had become dusty and narrow as we’d left behind the Soviet-style bungalows in Cumanayagua. Moments later, our cohort of U.S. theatre folk was greeted by an enthusiastic parade of professional theatre-makers and community participants, led by José Oriol González, the founder and director of Teatro de los Elementos. Oriol (as he prefers to be called) wore a black T-shirt emblazoned with the English words “Dissent Is Patriotic.” Later, when we met with the ministry of culture in Havana, an official told us, “Oh yes. Oriol is very seductive. Soon he will have us all wanting to move to the countryside to live on his farm.”

Teatro de los Elementos was founded in 1990 in the tradition of Cuban Teatro Nuevo, based on principles of collectivism, social justice and of creative collaboration between professionals and amateurs. The most famous example of this genre is Teatro Escambray, founded in the 1960s by theatremakers who had trouble reconciling Havana’s professional scene with the revolutionary ideals of Marxism, including glorification of the guajiros, or farmers in the countryside. Like all professional theatres in Cuba, Teatro de los Elementos is fully funded by the Cuban government.

A little girl in an orange bathing suit blew a long note on a conch shell and our tour began. We followed a winding path deep into the farm, past children of local farmers posed like statues, some costumed as famous revolutionaries. We were charmed by an impeccably precise physical performer with a life-sized Charlie Chaplin puppet. We met designer Alfredo Sánchez, whose intricately découplés chairs and paintings of political and religious figures featured prominently in their current outdoor production of Uncle Vanya. We visited the on-site home, complete with chicken coop, of Yaine de Castro, the director of the company’s youth program, who told us, “Mi casa es su casa.” And we spoke with Oriol and performer Betsy Medina about the company’s history and repertoire, including a piece from the late 1990s that spurred policy changes to protect the civil rights of those living with AIDS. Later we saw Betsy and her colleagues practicing theatre games of mirroring and zip-zap-zap. A fellow delegate whispered to me, “Actor training is actor training.”

Our final stop was a thatch-roofed wooden structure, where the actors demonstrated the Playback technique they often use to make work, creating impromptu physical and sound-based pieces based on stories we shared with them about our trip. Afterward, we all shared coffee and fresh fruit juices, and we joined our hosts and local teenagers in a joyful dance party.

The visit to Teatro de los Elementos was a shining example of something I experienced repeatedly during my eight days in Cuba: exceptional, generous, and seemingly effortless hospitality to an audience. As our bus departed, I jotted down, “Mi casa es su casa. Let’s make that true for our audiences too.”

Erica Nagel is director of education and engagement at New Jersey’s McCarter Theatre Center. She traveled to Cuba in late March with TCG’s Cuba Exploratorium trip for World Theatre Day. Visit Teatro de los Elementos at www.teatroloselementos.cult.cu.