

## CASEBOOK: *The Closest Farthest Away*



# Bridging the Florida Straits & Beyond: U.S.-Cuba Theatre-Making

By Caridad Svich

**Photo 1:** Teatro Mella (2009). Ana (Yipsia Torres Cueva) and Amante (Armando McClain) remember their love for each other.  
Photo: Adrienne Koteen

**M**editations on the complex historical relationship between U.S. and Cuba have been fuel for a wealth of novels, short stories, plays, performance pieces, musical collaborations, and films before and since the Cuban revolution. In the last fifty years this rich, fertile dialogue has been made problematic due to the strained political and economic relationship between the U.S. and the island. In mainstream media, Ry Cooder's successful and highly visible 1996 interventionist collaboration with the musicians and singers of the Buena Vista Social Club reanimated a resurgence of interest in the possibilities that could exist for cross-cultural collaborations between the neighboring countries. In theatre, where the practical logistics of joint rehearsals and time-intensive dialogue are central to the process, collaborations have been limited in recent years.

In 1997 the late Gilberto Zaldivar, cofounder and executive director of Repertorio Espanol, initiated the first cultural exchange between the two countries that involved theatre with the program Cubateatro, which began with the presentation of Teatro Estudio's production of Abelardo Estorino's *Vagos Rumores* (*Obscure Rumors*) in New York City. Cubateatro's significance as a program is not to be underestimated historically since it was enacted

at a time when the U.S. had an economic embargo against Cuba through the Helms-Burton law, officially called the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity (LIBERTAD) Act of 1996. However, it's useful to bear in mind that since the 1992 passage of the Cuba Democracy Act, the U.S. State Department has promoted "people-to-people" exchanges. In 1999 and 2000, an experimental exchange entitled the U.S.-Cuba Writers Conference facilitated the bilingual, bicultural pedagogical exchange among U.S. and Cuban writers in theatre, poetry, fiction, travel writing, and memoir genres. The exchange was short-lived for any number of practical and financial reasons but the impetus to sustain an independent, non-institutionally based dialogue amongst artists was part of a desire for not only collaboration but also for the documentation of work that bridged the cultures.

Ohio State University, University of Alabama, and other universities have been engaged in one-off exchanges to encourage cultural conversations. Of course, there is the parallel legacy of Cuban-American artists creating a vivid body of work here in the U.S. in response and reflection to their own heritage, ancestry, and inherited memories of the island. For many years playwrights such as Maria Irene Fornes, Eduardo Machado, Nilo Cruz, Rogelio



Martinez, Jorge Ignacio Cortinas, Alejandro Morales, and many more have sought to encounter the island from realistic, mythic, and pluralistic political, emotional, and imagined perspectives. They have created an exciting, vital counter-narrative to an existing and ongoing narrative of Cubanismo in arts and letters.

On International World Theater Day in March 2010, The University of Miami Center for Latin American Studies (CLAS) and Florida International University's Cuban Research Institute presented a conference that brought together for the first time in over forty years Cuba's most important living playwrights from the 1960s—Anton Arrufat, Carucha Carnejo, Abelardo Estorino, Eduardo Manet, and Matias Montes Huidobro. Their conversation examined the history of post-Castro revolution Cuban dramatists but also their impact and collaborations with visual artists and theatre designers. The conference was organized by Dr. Lillian Manzor, Director of University of Miami's Latin American Studies Program and the Cuban Theater Digital Archive; Dr. Uva de Aragon, Associate Director of FIU's Cuban Research Institute; Alberto Sarrain, theatre director of La Ma Teodora; and Dinorah Perez Rementeria, art critic and UM graduate student.

The conference is part of an extraordinary multimedia archive initiated by Dr. Lillian Manzor, one of the U.S.'s most esteemed Latina theatre critics and scholars. The Cuban Theater Digital Archive went live on the web in January 2006. CTDA is a digital cultural heritage initiative that focuses, in its initial phase, on both written texts and live-art performance by theatre practitioners in Greater Cuba; that is, on the island, and in Ana Lopez's usage of the term, the diaspora. The CTDA's mission is threefold: it is a resource for teaching, learning, and research in Cuban theatre and performance and related fields; a digital repository for important Cuban theatrical materials little known outside the island; and a forum to foster scholarly communication in this field. As such, the CTDA participates in a virtual culture that allows communication and exchange to take place between communities that are often politically separated. In addition to artists in Cuba and the U.S., the archive (<http://scholar.library.miami.edu/archivoteatral>) works in close collaboration with the Cuban Heritage Collection at the library; they contribute content to the digital archive from its 23 collections of the papers of theatre companies, playwrights, directors, stage designers, and actresses, including INTAR theatre and the costume designers Randy Barcelo and Leandro Soto.

Lillian Manzor states:

Historically, in this first phase, the goal is to digitally preserve and document Cuban theatrical production from 1959 to the present. We are starting with the older material which is the most fragile right now and in risk of disappearing with its creators. We are also actively involved in performance documentation both in the U.S. and

in Cuba. Our goal is to have and make accessible a filmed Cuban theatre collection like the Lincoln Library's Theater on Tape Collection. With very little funding, we have created robust pages with digital still and moving images for about 10 theatre artists. In Abelardo Estorino's page, we have previously unpublished photographs done by famous Cuban photographer Raul Martinez. We have filmed over 50 productions in Cuba and in the U.S., including 3 Equity productions. There is a lot of misunderstanding on both sides about each other. The failed policies that have been in place for over 50 years have separated two countries that had been geographically and historically very close neighbors. Art, in general, and theatre in particular is one of the best ways to start a dialogue because everyone is working together in a common project, with a common goal, without any ulterior motives. Regardless of the end result, through the collaborative process of theatre and of performative research we prove that Cubans from different shores and U.S. Americans are capable of working together despite the fact that our governments have refused to do so for the last fifty years.

Manzor's archival work and active presence in the U.S. and Cuban and Latin American theatre scene are a testament to the passion and resourcefulness necessary to navigate the still-fragile terrain of documentation and collaboration between U.S. and Cuba, in particular, in theatre. Project por Amor, a young grassroots collective of artists, cultural organizations, and other supporters across the order and the Florida Straits, is another example of the kind of quixotic stick-to-it-ive-ness integral to making collaborations possible.

**Caridad Svich** is a U.S. Latina playwright, translator, lyricist, and editor whose works have been presented across the U.S. and abroad at diverse venues including The Women's Project, 59East59, Theater for the New City, McCarren Park Pool, Walkerspace, ARTheater-Cologne, and Edinburgh Fringe Festival/UK. Among her key works: *12 Ophelias*, *Alchemy of Desire/Dead-Man's Blues*, *Iphigenia...a rave fable*, *The Tropic of X*, and *The Booth Variations*. She has edited several books on theatre and performance including *Trans-Global Readings* and *Divine Fire*. She is an alumna playwright of New Dramatists, founder of theatre alliance & press NoPassport, associate editor of Routledge's *Contemporary Theatre Review*, and contributing editor of *TheatreForum*. She is a member of PEN American Center, The Dramatists Guild, and is featured in the Oxford Encyclopedia of Latino History. She holds an M.F.A. from UCSD.