Review Articles

Cuba in the Balance

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Laurie A. Frederik, *Trumpets in the Mountains: Theater and the Politics of National Culture in Cuba*. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2012. xxii + 336 pp. (Paper US\$ 29.95)

Katherine Miranda (ed.), *Cuba Global/Global Cuba: Perspectives from the 21st Century*. Sargasso 2012–13, I & II. San Juan: University of Puerto Rico, 2014. xii + 219 pp. (Print and Web)

The December 2014 “Obama accords” between the governments of the United States and Cuba significantly alter the travel and trade policies that have been enforced for the past five decades. They also foreshadow a potential dismantling of longstanding ideological debates that have too often framed external critical appraisals of creative art and culture in Cuba. The root issue of the U.S. economic blockade continues to affect Cuba’s social development. Yet it will come as no surprise that the impact of any change, whether economic, ideological, social, or cultural, at first at least, will not be equally shared by urban and rural populations.

In *Trumpets in the Mountains*, Laurie Frederik opens an often obscured window on rural life, culture, and art in contemporary Cuba. The book documents her experiences working with four theater groups—one in the central Escambray Mountains and the remaining three in Oriente, which Peter Hulme terms

“Cuba’s Wild East.”¹ The remote and mountainous far eastern tip of the island figures significantly in Cuba’s political history: two wars of independence in the late nineteenth century, an agricultural uprising in the 1930s, Fidel Castro’s rebel army hidden in the Sierra Maestra Mountains in the 1950s, and the Guantánamo Bay U.S. Naval Station made infamous after September 11, 2001.

From the late 1960s to the 1980s, the Escambray Mountains became the site for the development of the celebrated “New Theater” movement that sent leading professionals to the countryside to create theater for, and with, the rural peasant or *campesino* population. The results were exceptional. The groups Teatro Escambray and Teatro La Yaya assume a legendary character within the history of the modern Cuban theater. But during the Special Period in the 1990s, with its negative economic growth and severely reduced access to consumer goods and services, the effects of the U.S. blockade of international trade with Cuba became increasingly marked. It is in this context that Frederik studies the Teatro de los Elementos, in the Escambray region, and three theaters in the province of Guantánamo—La Cruzada Teatral, El Grupo Realengo 18, and the new Laboratorio de Teatro Comunitario.

The study focuses strictly on rural populations that remain isolated from the metropolitan cultural center in Havana. Adapting Gayatri Spivak, it asks: “Can the *campesino* speak?” Or were they spoken *for* [Frederik’s emphasis] in spite of the best intentions of the Revolution and of revolutionary arts?” (p. 20). But these are loaded questions with ideological as opposed to anthropological underpinnings. Frederik’s method is experiential. She literally lives with the groups as they develop their performances. The experience with the Teatro de los Elementos provides the most poetic rendering of both the method and the aesthetic process. In 1958, a man-made lake inundated the town of Sigüanea to build the Hanabanilla Hydroelectric Plant. Much of the land belonged to the *latifundista* Pepillo Hernández and the town was sold to the Dallas-Telcom company at the behest of Hernández’s friend, Fulgencio Batista. Forty years later the play *Ten mi nombre como un sueño* (“Remember my name, as if it were a dream”) was created, using testimonials by former Sigüanea residents, photos from the 1950s, and inventories of the properties and possessions left behind by those displaced. The theater group floats on the lake in a rowboat to understand the underwater topography of the town, its streets, houses, and cemetery, et cetera, and visits the area of the hydroelectric plant (which does

1 Peter Hulme, 2011, *Cuba’s Wild East: A Literary Demography of Oriente* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press).

not supply power to the displaced *campesinos*). In 1999 the play opened before a local audience in the theater of Cumanaygua, the town closest to what had once been Sigüanea. Apparently the play script has not been published.

In 2000, Frederik accepted an invitation to join the Cruzada Teatral's annual trip through the "most isolated mountain regions of Cuba," Guantánamo to Baracoa. The two-month-long journey incorporated members of four theater groups and other independent artists—a clown and a magician—from the city of Guantánamo (population roughly 270,000 but still structured as a town). Beginning on January 28, José Martí's birthday, the group left the city to perform in towns and especially in small off-the-road communities with little or no communication ("zones of silence") with the rest of the province of Guantánamo or Cuba in general. Traveling in an old flatbed Russian truck, on horseback, on foot, or even by rowboat, they crossed dirt roads, footpaths, and lakes to arrive and perform children's theater and puppet shows during the day, plays for students in the afternoon, and out-of-doors performances for adults in the evening. Along with candles and kerosene lamps, the group functioned with one spotlight run by a small generator. Audience size varied from ten to two hundred. The group of roughly twenty actors camped outside and, whether traveling or performing, worked from early morning to late evening. Their play in 2000, *La muerte juega al escondido: Una leyenda guajira* ("Death Plays Hide and Seek: A Guajira Legend"), transformed a Don Quixote tale into a local comic satire with *jineteras* (prostitutes) and gold coins with U.S. dollar signs in the hands of the Devil. A simplistic approach, perhaps, but one that addressed issues critical to the Cuban nation, if not necessarily to the daily lives of the more isolated rural population.

Frederik also records the additional months she spent in Guantánamo with members of the Cruzada working with the newly formed Laboratorio de Teatro Comunitario. The project sought to encourage the local population to "speak" and literally "self-represent" themselves and issues of their everyday life through theater. Working on the basis of intensive interviews, they developed a play entitled *Guajiros a los cuatro vientos* ("Guajiros from Every Direction") that could be taken back to the community, rehearsed with great difficulty using nonprofessional local residents as the actors, and finally performed before an audience of their peers. However, as Frederik reports, the discussion after that initial performance was dominated by a local official who effectively silenced the hoped-for grassroots response.

Another form of *campesino* self-representation appears in Frederik's briefer encounters with the amateur Grupo Lino Álvarez de Realengo 18, a theater group with a history extending back to the "Tierra o Sangre" ("Land or Blood") land reform protests of the 1920s and 1930s. The "*realengos*" were squatter

parcels without specific owners that large landholders—much like Pepillo Hernández in Siguanea—wanted to force smallholders to leave in order to accumulate the land as part of their holdings.² Álvarez used theater, fiestas, and other cultural activities as part of the politically driven *realenguista* rebellion. Later, after Álvarez's death in 1953, the group performed for Fidel Castro's armed insurgents in the Sierra Maestra. According to Frederik, the once well-known amateur group that created and staged its own plays slipped from official view for a number of decades only to be criticized by the Havana-based theater establishment when they were rediscovered and presented their work at a conference there in 2000.

The value of *Trumpets in the Mountains* resides in recording the work from 1999 to 2001 of these four groups. Remarkably, even with the severe conditions imposed by the Special Period, theater professionals maintained their meager salaries and received limited support from the Cuban government to continue the project of making and performing theater with and for the isolated and marginalized rural population that had virtually no other access to artistic and cultural events. Frederik wants to tell readers that this constitutes "Option Zero Theater," but seems unwilling to recognize the uniqueness of the situation: groups of paid professionals creating and performing plays among and for isolated and estranged small town, rural, and agrarian populations. What other states, large or small, developed or developing, facilitate theater activity at this level? Comparisons with other similar rural community theater projects throughout the Caribbean and Central America would prove helpful in this regard.

A fuller analysis of the creative methods employed by the Teatro de los Elementos, the member groups of La Cruzada, and the Laboratorio de Teatro Comunitario would prove useful. The text references practitioner-theorists such as Eugenio Barba and Augusto Boal, performance theorist Richard Schechner, and anthropologist Victor Turner, but the work it describes conforms, at best, only peripherally to the methods they proposed or wrote about.

The ethnographic reports on theater-making practices in Escambray and Guantánamo constitute one thread of the book's proposed goals—to study the work processes of state-sponsored artists in rural contexts, asking "can the *campesino* speak?" The other closely entwined thread attempts to relate Frederik's in-the-field experiences to the politics of national culture and identity to show how the Special Period "led to an ideological crisis that transformed

2 See Hulme, *Cuba's Wild East* for a particularly lucid portrait of the movement and its leader, Lino Álvarez.

notions of *cubanía*” and, through art, explore reinterpretations of “what it means to be a revolutionary and socialist at the beginning of the twenty-first century.”

Starting from its prologue, *Trumpets in the Mountains* lurches toward the quagmire that stalls and often engulfs many studies of contemporary Cuban culture—revealing subjective biases of being pro- or anti-Cuban Revolution or, perhaps more troubling here, projecting an attitude of a normative “us” and an aberrant “them” that calls into question the reliability of the experiential fieldwork. An opening anecdote reports on a performance by the clown Tío Tato, the meanings of colors, and especially the color red: the children shout “Sangre!” (blood) but the clown corrects them, “No, no, not blood. Red stands for the Caribbean culture.” Frederik’s intervention follows. “Watching ... and listening to the reactions of the children and their parents ... revealed the extent to which politics and metaphors of the Cuban Revolution had infiltrated the consciousness of the population, even those without electricity, television, and radio.” She then tells us that for “little American [meaning U.S.] children” red might mean “red apples and Mom’s apple pie (honesty, security, love), or red cherries and Washington’s cherry tree (‘I cannot tell a lie’)” (pp. xxi–xxii). So begins the ideological process of “metaethnography” (p. 23).

On occasion, Frederik reminds readers that Cuba is “such a small nation,” a “small island nation.” Seen from Puerto Rico, the smallest of the Greater Antilles, Cuba, the largest, seems not small but large. Seen from virtually any point in the Lesser Antilles, it might appear huge. Even from littoral Central America, Cuba’s size impresses as far more than a small dot on the horizon. Attitudes toward geographical size are relative, as are attitudes on what constitutes notions of time, space, and mobility or levels of normality, comfort, and luxury (as well as the percentage of the population that enjoys them). The study develops no comparative Caribbean or Central American context to evaluate the political, economic, social, and cultural conditions of Cuba in 1999–2001. The normative always seems to be the world’s richest nation, regardless of its vast pockets of urban and rural poverty, rather than nation states of more comparable size, population, and economic status.

Old and largely debunked ideological arguments—an example is the Heberto Padilla case—reopen here without historical contextualization. The narrative surrounding “little Elián” González receives space, but the U.S. trade embargo, the international sore eye of inhumane living conditions and torture at the U.S.-held GTMO Naval Station, Cuban political prisoners held in U.S. jails, CIA-backed destabilizing efforts and assassination attempts, and the powerful propaganda mechanism wielded to shape the attitudes and beliefs of U.S. Americans toward the Cuban Revolution find limited or no space.

Many views presented in *Trumpet in the Mountains* are subjective, partial, and ideologically charged. Everyone's baggage is different, as are their experiences, but the notions revealed in the text often parallel those of many U.S. visitors and researchers in Puerto Rico—a kind of big island/small island gaze that probably cannot discover whether or how the *jíbaro* (Puerto Rico) or the *guajiro* (Cuba) speaks.

A reading of *Cuba Global/Global Cuba, Perspectives from the 21st Century* (Sargasso 2012–13, I & II), which focuses on a different Cuba, can provide a somewhat better sense of intercultural balance. It is more internationally focused and deals more with urban, digital, and electronic media—the Cuba that Beyoncé and Jay-Z vacationed in, the Cuba where HipHop and Reggaetón (as addressed by writer and artist YOss—a.k.a. José Miguel Sánchez Gómez) assume local form, and blogger Yoani Sánchez makes controversial cybernetic waves. It includes an essay on “suicide” films such as *Viva Cuba* (Juan Carlos Cremata Maalberti, 2005) and *Juan de los muertos* (Alejandro Brugués, 2012), an interview with filmmaker Aram Vidal, and critical analyses of unorthodox novels such as Margarita Mateo Palmer's award-winning *Los blancos manicomios* (2008) about real and metaphorical insanity and Pedro Juan Gutiérrez's exploration of social marginality in *Triología sucia de La Habana* (1998). The issue includes reflections on the international Rumba Craze of the 1930s and 1940s and a photo essay by photographer and blogger Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo, as well as poems, a dramatic text, and book reviews.

The section entitled “Yuxtaposiciones/Juxtapositions” (in both English and Spanish) may best characterize the issue's approach. In it, a distinguished Cuban-American sociologist (Jorge Duany), a younger Cuban writer (Ahmel Echevarría), a senior editor (Vivian Martínez Tabares, *Conjunto*), who is also the director of the theater department of La Casa de las Américas, and a literary critic in the United States (Emily A. Maguire) are asked: “What critical question concerning twenty-first century Cuba is infrequently or insufficiently addressed in your field of expertise?” The answers vary, but Maguire summarizes the majority of the comments when she writes:

the social and economic forces currently shaping Cuban society—the tourist economy, the pressures and hardships of economic diaspora, the contribution of global capital to the island economy—are characteristics also shared by the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, as well as by many other Caribbean nations. By considering Cuba an “isolated” island, a unique case, we fail to see the ways in which these patterns are repeating, and we lose an opportunity to see what these literatures—in chronicling this changing, globalized world—have to say to each other.

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Both Frederik's *Trumpets in the Mountains* and *Cuba Global/Global Cuba* preceded the current changes in Cuban-U.S. relations. Taken together they represent the tensions as well as the promise that accompany "normalization" in both nations and throughout the region.