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Against Conventional Harmony: An Interview with the Cuban Theatre Company El Ciervo Encantado

Mariel Martínez Alvarez

El Ciervo Encantado is a Havana-based company founded in 1996 by Nelda Castillo, a director and teacher whose trajectory is well known locally and internationally. The company is one of the most groundbreaking initiatives in the current Cuban theatrical landscape for their focus on the actor's body, the experimental use of sound, the constant fight for redefining the urban landscape, and the imaginative use of language. They explore themes of scarcity, migration, violence, memory, and belonging in the context of post-Soviet Cuba.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the economic networks of solidarity between communist countries, Cuba entered a period of economic scarcity whose end was never officially announced. Some of the racial, economic, and cultural dynamics extended beyond the more acute economic crisis into the twenty-first century. Nowadays, the theatrical companies strategically move between the dual currency, the state support, and the regulatory measures regarding the content of artistic productions to stage disruptive plays that push the boundaries of Cuban national theatre. In addition to the performances at El Ciervo Encantado theatre space, they had presented what they call "public interventions" (off-stage performances), which are rare in the Cuban context due to the high regulation and supervision of the public spaces.

El Ciervo Encantado's name derives from an allegorical short story by Borrero Echevarria called "El ciervo encantado," which tells of an imaginary island and its fight for sovereignty. The company envisioned itself as an exploration of Cuban identity through unconventional theatrical language, and the *ciervo* (deer) became a symbol of these efforts. In the words of Nelda Castillo, "El Ciervo Encantado symbolized freedom, the need to hunt a deer that did not want to be hunted—a very difficult deer to hunt, a symbol of liberty and also, for us, of identity. . . . We took it as a premise, as the basis of the group's meaning, and as a concept for the group: the hunt for identity. We started out with that particular hunt."[1] Theatre critics such as Amarilis Pérez Vera (2013) have noticed the Cuban neobaroque aesthetics in El Ciervo Encantado's creations in relation to simulation, carnivalization, choteo, parody, and camouflage, among other distinctive performance styles. Nevertheless, their cultural specificity has not been an obstacle to international appreciation. They have performed in different countries around the world, such as Canada, the United States, Mexico, Ecuador, Perú, Brazil, and Italy.

This interview was conducted in El Ciervo Encantado's theatre in Havana, located on 18th St between Línea and 11th St, on May 14, 2019. While drinking coffee in the empty theatre, Nelda Castillo talked about the company and Mariela Brito—the actress in the plays *Departures*, *Arrivals*, *Rhapsody for the Mule*, and *Triunfadela*.[2]

Mariel Martínez Alvarez is a PhD candidate in Spanish at the University of Michigan who works on Latin American literary and cultural studies.

Mariel Martínez. In El Ciervo Encantado performances, the voice of the actor is central for understanding the meaning of the play. In your opinion, why is the relationship between voice and body on stage so important?

Nelda Castillo. In Cuba, we normally train both things separately. One professor teaches you diction and another one teaches you corporal expression. Nevertheless, the voice and the body are essentially the same thing. You cannot train both things separately. It would be like playing the guitar with the strings removed from its wooden body. Every wooden body is different, and it is not possible to separate both things because the body contains our memory. The body is the place where memory dwells. Consequently, the voice links the body with all of that past from which memory is built. It is necessary to abandon those imperatives towards the voice as something that should be "beautiful." We often hear that someone sings "lovely." Those ideas do not promote artistic exploration.

M. M. Could you provide a couple of examples where El Ciervo Encantado uses the sound of the voice in relationship with memory?

N. C. Yes. El Ciervo Encantado has two plays about migration: *Departures* and *Arrivals*. It is a diptych, and they are both based on testimonies. *Departures* is the first part. In order to create the play, the actress [Mariela Brito] asked her friends, family, and acquaintances: "Why did you leave Cuba?" Later, on the stage, the actress reads the letters with the testimonies of all these people combining them with her own personal story. The testimonies belong to different historical moments of the island. Consequently, the spectator hears about why people from different generations left Cuba, and why they keep leaving. It is very relevant because this memory has been erased and it is somehow lost.

In this play, the actress's delivery is clear and precise. Here, we don't find vocal explorations, nor do we highlight the theatrical dimension of the voice, no. Her voice is sober, very precise, and charged with meaning more by what is not said than by what is.

Arrivals is the second part. Again, to create the play, we contacted our friends living outside the island and we asked them to send us a recording of their voice listing the things they bring to Cuba each time they return. All intellectual, socioeconomic distinctions are erased in the moment of preparing the suitcase. All the Cubans that return are united at this moment.

Arrivals performance. Image reproduced with permission of Cubanet.

M. M. In this play, we see the actress packing on stage while we hear the recordings. By the end, the audios are superposed. Would you say that that acoustic superposition is related to this commonality?

N. C. Yes, to this commonality, to this community, they are united in this same voice that is saying what they need to bring to the island. Although the lists are very personal.
Let me tell you an anecdote about this. One of our friends was delayed in sending his recording. He was travelling, he had problems, and he couldn't send it. He only sent the written text and we said, "Ok, we'll include it." First, I read it as if it were my list, and it sounded so bad, fake, it didn't belong to me at all. Even though we had similar items on the list, it was something strange for me. Then we tried with an actor. It didn't work. Then, somebody else. It was impossible. We contacted our friend and told him, "Look, we are not going to include your list in our play." Finally, he sent the recording with his own voice. And through this recording you can hear how he is defending his items; you can notice the deep connection he has with his own list. Because when people return, they all have a list, and they all defend it.

M. M. The voice and its singularity in *Arrivals* seem like a contrast with *Rapsodia para el Mulo*, a performance where you only have one sentence towards the end of the play.

N. C. Only one sentence: "Y por fin Cuba en qué paró?" People living outside the island sometimes wonder, so, after all, how did Cuba end up? Nevertheless, when this question is coming from the mule, you realize that he is absolutely disconnected from the right to exist as a

Cuban. He is marginalized, he is far from reality, he is an animal. It is as if he were no longer human, fully human, and, of course, no longer a Cuban.

M. M. It is very different from *Triunfadela*, where the main character keeps producing these enthusiastic rhythms: "¡Pam-param-param Pam Pám Pam! ¡Pam-param-param Pam Pam Pám!" sometimes without articulating words.

N. C. That is the Cuban press from the seventies to the present. Those rhythms, those tones which are very triumphal. Everything is fine, everyone is united, the future, the production, the young people, the hope, etc. That's why this performance is entitled "Triunfadela": it refers to the triumphal city, the triumphal space.

Nevertheless, these tones are produced by a character that is crazy. He is dressed in rags, with a spoon in his nose. He carries his own two microphones and his own podium. This character has some echoes from *King Ubú Roi*, Alfred Jarry's play, where the discourse of power is a grandiloquent and pompous discourse. Our character is completely alienated since reality follows one path and the press follows the other.

M. M. For your company, what is the difference between sound and noise?

N. C. I think that you cannot say that noise is something inharmonic and, consequently, something that is not beautiful, and something that can bother you.
If you can create meaningful relations between the noise and what is happening on stage, that noise can have a sense, a meaning, and it can even be harmonic and beautiful. I think the sounds don't need to be beautiful, pleasant, nice. Sounds shouldn't be correct and proper. It is necessary to discover all the possibilities of sound since they have unusual and mysterious potentials.

I think theatre, that theatre which is able to create, needs to be in a state of discovering and not in a state of searching. When you search, you are looking for something you already know, and you are following paths that will lead you to those things you are searching for. But these paths do not lead to discovery.

Theatre needs to be in a state of openness. We need to have our senses open. We need to stop searching for what is beautiful, what is proper, what is "harmonic." We need to be in a state of discovering and not of searching. That is the place where what is new appears. Maybe the public will find this unpleasant because it is something they don't know, but this is the way in which the unknown can emerge until it becomes necessary.

M. M. I often think about El Ciervo Encantado with the world incalculable.

N. C. Yes, you must be available for what you don't know, for what is not calculable. Because if you are searching, you are calculating, but if you are discovering, then the incalculable can appear.

El Ciervo Encantado blurs the distinctions between harmony and dissonances, sound and noise, speech, and silence. It allows for an exploration of issues of ownership, belonging, memory, and resistance. Moreover, these aesthetic ruptures allow the emergence of belonging and commonality in a society profoundly marked by discourses of national unity and homogenization.

Notes

1. The full text can be found here: https://ciervoencantado.hemi.press/chapter/chapter-2/.

2. Some performances are housed in the digital archive of the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics.

Reference

Pérez Vera, Amarilis. *Elementos neobarrocos en los espectáculos de El Ciervo Encantado*. Havana: Ediciones Alarcos, 2013.