

One way to approach the Cuban Revolution is to see it as theatre. To me the Revolution seems to express itself as a kind of life theatre in which truth is measured by balancing passion and histrionics, candor and facileness:

-- In a field at Pedro Pi an agricultural worker named Alejo described to me with undisguised passion how his life had changed since the triumph of the Revolution.

-- Coming back from the beach at Santa Maria a bus hit our truck. Both drivers stopped to exchange threats which became vehement to the point where our own driver leaped from his cab flashing a long machete at the driver of the bus. The latter responded melodramatically by prostrating himself on the highway in full view of passing traffic.

-- At the Escuela de Letras, University of Havana, a student said to me: "Your Revolution is aimed at the Establishment. The target is clear. What you don't want, above all, is for the university to produce cogs to fit into the economic machine. But that is just the point of our studies here. We need socialist 'cogs'. For us, making the economic machine we have now work better, is a question of survival. What we have to sacrifice in the bargain is a critical university but what we get in return is a revolutionary one."

-- One of our Young Communist hosts at the agricultural project introduced himself to me on the first day by flashing his voluntary work coupons (one thousand hours worth) as if there were little more to be said (there wasn't, as it turned out) and then spoke of the Revolution in slogans, punctuated by cliché winks and well-timed raspberries.

From an observer's side the Revolution seems to consist of such dramatic patterns as these. It is as if it were a play with a complicated plot, and a disconcerting range between reality and pretense and between truth and the exaggeration of truth for its own sake.

It is scarcely surprising that the work being done in the theatre itself corresponds to the moods of the Revolution. It is both energetic and tentative, consciously exploring the surrounding social landscape. Cuban theatre takes its inspiration from the revolution by seeking its integral development as a creative and revolutionary art form.

There are numerous acting companies active in Havana building up repertoires they will take to those working in the countryside for the 1970 harvest. Requel Revuelta, for example, Cuba's most famous actress, has spent most of her time in the last few years coaching a company called Grupo Teatro Estudio. Her ambition is to create a broad-based national theatre.

"We can never develop a Cuban theatre," she explained, "while we are as yet unable to integrate with this theatre the life of the nation. I believe the way of achieving this is in searching out our classical roots. Only from that point can we arrive at an honest idea of ourselves."

Searching out classical roots demands more than presenting classical plays. Teatro Estudio therefore, continues to include in their repertoire contemporary playwrights whose works deal directly with problems of the new society in relation to the old. While I was in Havana they were preparing a piece by Raul Macias, a young writer I found to be especially sensitive to the problems of alienation in a socialist society.

I met Macias in a Havana synagogue where he was working as artistic advisor to a young group of actors called Joven Teatro. We spoke together for a long time about what it means to be an actor or a playwright in a revolutionary socialist society.

The greatest effort of the Revolution, he reminded me, is in the agriculture and in the economy. But that situation by no means diminishes the importance of an artist's role.

"The basis of our activity," he said, "is to entertain. This year, perhaps the most difficult of any we have yet had, we will bring theatre to people who otherwise would have few opportunities to see any kind of spectacle at all."

Macias' idea of an entertaining play is one which confronts the Revolution.

"Even the successes of a revolution like ours," he admits, "brings problems. These must be seriously explored. The play we're doing now, for example, *Procecion a San Lazaro* (Jesus Abascal) is about Cubans who have religious hangups because they want to make a revolution in which religion ultimately disappears. It's a problem of alienation even in countries as successfully socialist as Cuba."

I asked him whether he thought himself more a social critic than a positive revolutionary.

"Well," he replied, "the important battle in Cuba now is for the mind. We are doing man over again. There have been over fifty years of socialist revolution in the world and no 'new man' yet. At least I haven't seen one. To me that means there are problems in the process which need time to be worked out. Our theatre -- Teatro Pobre -- adds to the solving of these problems. So we think of ourselves as a positively revolutionary group. That does not mean, of course, that we make revolutionary propaganda. What I write, for example, stems from the fact that I am not completely comfortable in the Revolution. There are tough problems of a non-political nature to work out."

"Why do you call your kind of theatre Poor Theatre?" I asked.

"'Poor Theatre' has to do with the needs of our people. As I said before, we aim at a problematic development of individual situations within the Revolution. This is what people come to see: their own situation in one form or another. And remember too, that Cubans are agitated, exhorted and otherwise politically bombarded about 22 hours a day. So the two hours left for the theatre must be entertaining. Problematic, yes, but necessarily entertaining. This is a very important need right now."

"How sportive can you get in regards to sex?" I asked. "I know of some very good European films that have been definitely excluded from Cuban theatres because of their sexual content. Do campesinos or perhaps officials in the Writer's Union get uptight about skin on stage?"

"Again you must remember," Macias replied, "that our whole outlook, compared to that of North America, is different. We have a different set of problems before us. I feel that in the U.S. they have gone too far with sex so that now it is a gimmick that everyone resorts to. Another form of Coca Cola. Here we don't try to attract people to the theatre by shocking them."

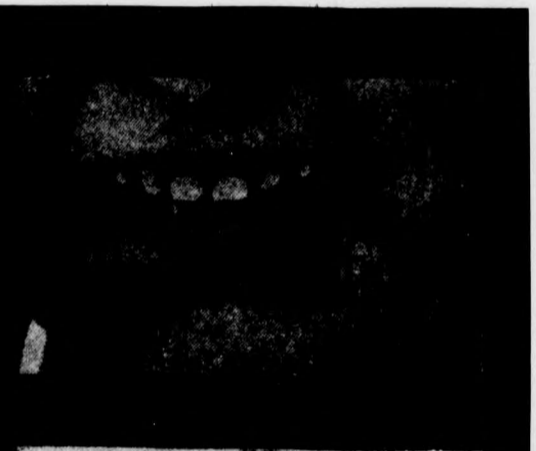
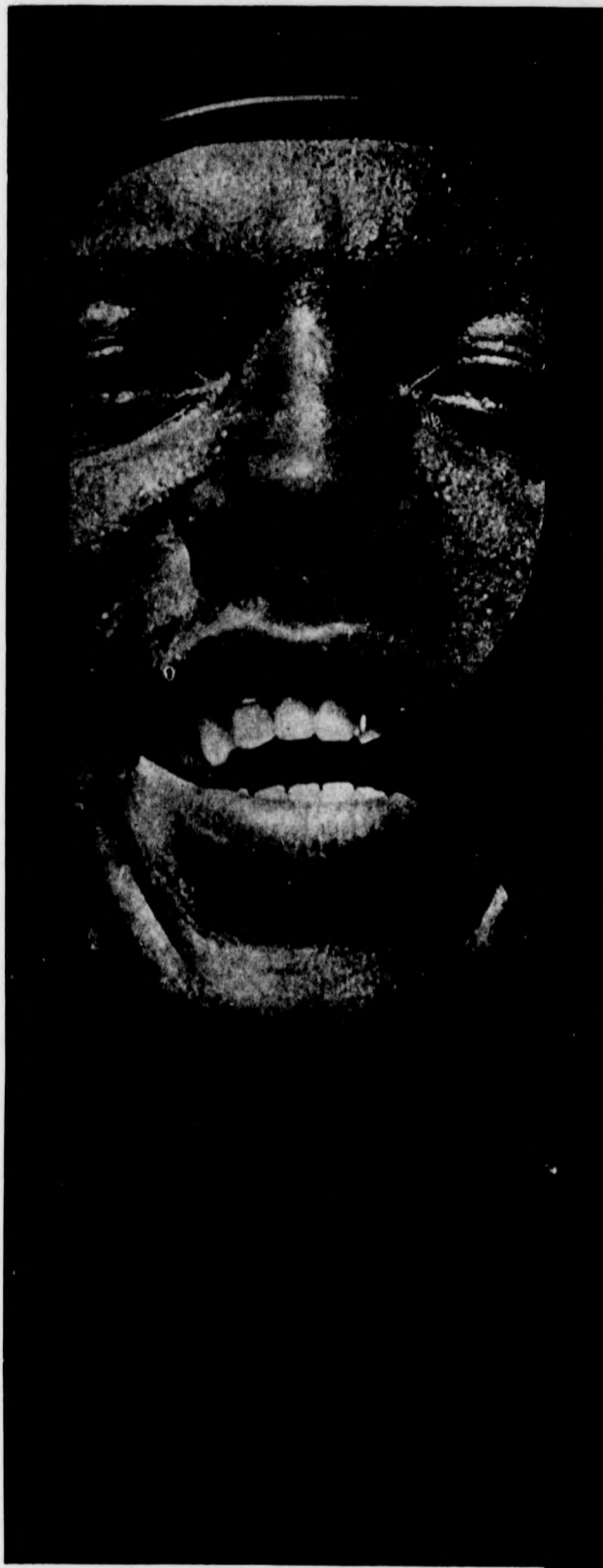
"As for the question of writer's freedom, if there is any censorship in matters of sex it is largely theoretical since we are striving for something other than being able to screw on stage. It is not in spite of, but thanks to, the Revolution that we are able to deal with these important problems."

"In Cuba you can do anything you want within the range of what is materially possible, so long as it is not counter-revolutionary. Since we are all revolutionaries in Joven Teatro we have never felt those pressures on our work."

CUBA!

Three: theatrical revolution

By Jack Seaton



*'We are not rehearsing
final gestures; we want life
and we shall defend it'*

- Che Guevara

"I never find it necessary to censor myself in my own writing. What I say I say from within the context of the Revolution. I criticize it to make it stronger and I write about the lives people have to live within the socialist scheme."

My talk with Macias impressed upon me that the Revolution, despite the simplicity of it as a total and integral political fact, has been a strenuous thing to adjust to. As the hero of one Cuban film puts it, everything in Cuba is "sunk in underdevelopment. Even our feelings are underdeveloped; joy and sorrow are primitive and direct here, they haven't been elaborated and worked over by the culture. The Revolution is the only complicated thing that has hit Cubans over the head." (from *Memories of Underdevelopment*)

It is characteristic of Cubans to approach life in the same way an actor comes to the stage. As revolutionaries, both deal with the complexity of the Revolution by first accepting its terms and acting out what follows from them. Through their respective activities, the Revolution and the theatre ultimately express the idea of Cuban society. It is a society I felt to be far less estranged from the authentic possibilities of life than our own. Cuban socialism has reached a viable level in just 10 years and I think it is mainly because the objective conditions of life in Cuba encourage this integral development between what people accept as truth and the social activity that truth inspires.

At times this development is less ingenious than at others, as in the cases of the personalities I described briefly at the beginning. But usually there is a workable and continuous relation between perceiving society and acting in it. In general this relation is a consonant one whereas in our own situation, it is in general a dissonant one.

Being a part of the Revolution changes the nature of the activity of the theatre. Whereas in North America we tend only infrequently to allow the terms of real life to undermine the construction of pretense, in Cuba the opposite is true.

The same tendency is operative in the fields and in the university, where the continuity of belief and action are equally apparent. Being a part of the revolution fundamentally changes the nature of these activities and practically guarantees an authenticity to personal achievement which we in Canada must envy.