



**José Triana** *an interview by Ricard Salvat*  
*introduction and translation by Joanne Pottlitzer*

## Introduction

### José Triana: Integral Poet

I first met José Triana in 1968 in Havana. Cuba was the second stop of a six-week trip to Latin America with Richard Schechner to meet with theatre people. The Cuban visa, which we were finally granted in Mexico, had been difficult to obtain. So when we knocked on the door of Casa de las Américas,<sup>1</sup> a surprised Haydée Santamaría (Casa's founding director, to whom I had written from New York) greeted us with, "What are you doing here?" Since we were on her doorstep, she graciously agreed to arrange a meeting for us with a group of Cuban theatre artists—among them, José Triana.

Two years ago, when I visited him in Paris, Triana asked me to read the following interview, which his good friend Ricard Salvat had conducted in 2003 in Barcelona. I was struck by Triana's candor as he revealed in vivid detail a deeply personal story. He describes his experiences in Cuba between 1959 and 1980—from the time he returned to Cuba from Spain to participate in the Revolution to the year he went into self-imposed exile.

Through Triana's recollections, we begin to see the gradual encroachment of a dictatorial system—counter to what Cuban intellectuals had expected from the Revolution—and the effect it had on the lives of the artists and intellectuals. We learn of an unwitting denial by many in the theatre community of what was happening in Cuba, and ultimately their victimization by, or complicity with, the course the country was taking. We learn, from someone who was on the inside, how politics manipulated and influenced the theatre scene.

Triana also pays homage to the talents of his theatre colleagues, some of whom still live and work in Cuba. And from his particular historical perspective, he chronicles the development of Cuban theatre from the 1930s until the time of his departure in 1980.

Triana's first play, *El mayor general hablará de teogonía* (The Major General Will Speak of Theogony), written in 1957 while he was living and studying in Spain, reflects a preoccupation with power structures in societies and in families—a theme that appears in much of his

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1. Casa de las Américas was founded in 1959 as a government center for research on, and the promotion of, South American and Caribbean cultures and literatures. It also sponsors the annual Casa de las Américas Literary Prize, a prestigious award for distinguished Latin American writers. Among its publications is *Conjunto*, a quarterly cultural magazine started in 1964.

*Figure 1. Lalo (Giorgos Dousis), playing his mother as a bride, in José Triana's La noche de los asesinos (1964), directed by Yannis Petsopoulos. Polymichanoi Theatre Group, Athens, Greece, 2004. (Photo by Tasos Sklbounos; courtesy of Polymichanoi Theatre Group)*

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Figure 2. Angela Wynter as Maria in Talawa Theatre Company's production of *Medea in the Mirror* by José Triana. Written as a call to recognize the problem of racism in Cuba, the play re-created Afro-Cuban ritual. Maria, a young woman of mixed-race heritage, takes revenge on her white lover Julian, who has abandoned her. Directed by Yvonne Brewster at the Brixton Shaw in London from 27 June to 27 July 1996. (Photo by Richard H. Smith; courtesy of Talawa Theatre Company)

later work. That same year, Triana also started to write *La noche de los asesinos* (Night of the Assassins, or the Criminals), the play for which he is best known internationally.

Triana returned to Cuba in 1959 with an enthusiasm and optimism about the new Revolution that was shared by most Cuban artists. Triana was one of several artists, some of whom he mentions in the interview—playwrights Antón Arrufat, Abelardo Estorino, and his mentor Virgilio Piñera—who held official cultural posts at the beginning of Castro's regime. Among other projects, Triana helped organize Unión Nacional de Escritores y Artistas Cubanos (UNEAC; National Union of Cuban Writers and Artists) in 1961.

Triana's first play after returning to Cuba was *Medea*

*en el espejo* (*Medea in the Mirror*), produced in 1960 in the small Prometeo Theatre in Havana. Triana's version of Euripides' tragedy is rooted in the traditions of *teatro bufo*<sup>2</sup> and the Cuban variation of the Spanish *zarzuela*,<sup>3</sup> and incorporates poetic elaborations on Afro-Cuban ritual with lyrical paraphrasing of the Yoruba language.<sup>4</sup>

A high priority of the new government was integrating Afro-Cuban culture into mainstream Cuban society in an effort to obliterate racism, a concern that Triana shared. His *Medea* is María, a *mulata*. In the play, Julián, who is white, marries the daughter of a white local political underworld boss who owns the tenement building where María lives. The mirror image in the title, besides being the obvious metaphor of reflecting Cuban society and politics—and a racist Cuban audience—also refers to some Afro-Cuban religions that use a mirror “to locate the whereabouts of a missing person” (Ortiz 1973:113).

2. *Teatro bufo* was a controversial genre of blackface comic theatre that emerged in Cuba during the mid-19th century. It satirized three social/ethnic groups of the newly forming Cuban nation: *el negrito*, *la mulata*, and *el gallego* (the white Spanish immigrant). The form popularized images of Africa and of the Afro-Cuban and, at the same time, secured prevailing racial hierarchies.

3. *Zarzuela* is a genre of Spanish light opera that alternates between spoken and sung scenes. The Cuban version of the *zarzuela*, which appeared in 1927, would focus on 19th-century themes and borrow from the *teatro bufo* characters, who largely fulfill their expected roles: the mulata entices, the Spaniard fumbles, the white woman acts virtuous. The *negrito* character, however, underwent a fundamental change. Although the comic *negrito* of the *teatro bufo* was still a secondary character in the *zarzuela*, a new vision of the black man appeared as the *negro trágico*, whose origins were not in comedy but in the abolitionist literature of nineteenth-century novelists.

4. The 1996 London production of *Medea in the Mirror* by the Talawa Theatre Company (translated by Gwynne Edwards and directed by Yvonne Brewster; staged at the Brixton Shaw Theatre) adapted the Afro-Cuban experience to other Caribbean islands, especially Jamaica and Haiti.

But the play that decidedly marked the beginning of Triana's national and international resonance was *La noche de los asesinos*, which has been translated into more than 20 languages and continues to be performed throughout Europe, the Americas, Africa, and Asia.<sup>5</sup> The first version of the play, written in 1957, was more literal than Triana's 1965 rewrite. The play's political metaphor—children plotting the murder of their parents—referred to the Batista regime, and all the characters that were only alluded to in the revision appeared onstage. When Triana rewrote *La noche*, he reduced the number of characters to three (sisters Cuca and Beba, and their brother Lalo)—children portrayed by adult actors. The siblings take on the roles of all the other characters, as they play their cruel game of planning the murder. Triana obscured the Batista metaphor and reverted to the abstract, nonrealistic style and the use of ritual<sup>6</sup> for which he has become known.



Figure 3. *Perico Pidera Fina* (Dominic Letts, foreground) in *Medea in the Mirror* by José Triana. Directed by Yvonne Brewster, Talawa Theatre Company, at the Brixton Shaw, London, 27 June–27 July 1996. (Photo by Richard H. Smith; courtesy of Talawa Theatre Company)

Scholars have often written about the influence of Antonin Artaud in Triana's work, especially in this play. At the beginning of the published text of *La noche*, Triana himself cites Artaud: "this human world enters into us, participating in the dance of the gods, without turning round or looking back, on pain of becoming, like ourselves, crumbled pillars of salt" (1991:65). The title of a later short play, *Abí están los tarahumaras* (There Are the Tarahumaras; 1993), is a direct tribute.

*La noche de los asesinos* was awarded the coveted Casa de las Américas Literary Prize in 1965. The following year, after surmounting a series of obstacles that postponed its premiere,<sup>7</sup> the production of the revised *La noche* was awarded the El Gallo de Havana Prize. In 1967, the play was part of the Theatre of Nations Festival in Paris, which Triana attended. The production went on to the Avignon Festival, while Triana traveled to England, where the play was in rehearsal at the Royal Shakespeare Company.

5. In 1967, the Royal Shakespeare Company produced Adrian Mitchell's adaptation of *La noche de los asesinos*, titled *The Criminals*, under the direction of Terry Hands. In New York, the play was done at LaMama in 1969, directed by Aldo Greenberg and Steve Bono, and in 1970 at the Promenade Theatre, directed by David Wheeler, who at the time was the artistic director of The Theatre Company of Boston.
6. Triana uses different forms of ritual in his plays. In *Medea en el espejo*, he uses his interpretation, or re-creation, of African and Afro-Cuban religious rituals. In *La noche de los asesinos*, he uses the rituals of daily life, such as ordering a household, game playing, and role-playing. At the end of the first act, for example, Lalo plays the role of his mother on her wedding day (see fig. 1), signaling his presence in her womb on that day, a degradation that he allows to impact his life.
7. *La noche de los asesinos* opened in Havana on 4 November 1966 at Teatro Estudio, under the direction of Vicente Revuelta.

When he returned to Cuba at the end of 1967, Triana thought that international recognition would benefit him. It did not. As time went on, Cubans began to interpret the play as a metaphor for the flaws of the Castro regime, where the “children” fantasize plotting the murder of their oppressor to attain their freedom. Triana gradually became ostracized from the Cuban theatre community until he was no longer able to have his plays produced. Though he was told more than once by friends and official emissaries that the situation would improve for him, he finally left the country in 1980 and went to live in France with his wife Chantal, who had earlier followed him back to Cuba after they met in Paris at the 1967 Theatre of Nations Festival. They married in 1969.

Among the manuscripts Triana took with him was an early draft of a play he had adapted in 1979 from the popular novel *Las honradas* (Respectable Women; 1917) by Miguel de Carrión, which Triana called *Diálogo para mujeres* (Dialogue for Women). When the Royal Shakespeare Company expressed interest in producing the play in 1986,<sup>8</sup> Triana reworked it and titled it *Palabras comunes* (literally, Common Words), paying homage in part to Ramón de Valle-Inclán’s classic play *Divinas palabras* (Divine Words), and alluding to familiar idiomatic expressions or words, such as “honor” and “respectable,” that take on layers of meaning within the ethic of a society.

Arguably, *Palabras comunes* is Triana’s masterwork. A large and complex play set in Cuba between 1894 and 1914, from the prelude of the Spanish-American War to the eve of World War I, its form is a long flashback screened through the fragmentary memory of Victoria, a member of the landed middle class. Influenced by a repressive childhood in Cuba and a confusing, upsetting adolescence in New York, Victoria returns to Havana in 1900, falls in love, marries, takes a lover who abandons her, returns to the arms of her husband, has a child, and withdraws into herself, old at 26.

Triana dramatizes a bourgeois, racist society unable to recognize its own self-righteousness and rigidity through the story of a family, especially its women—their fears, frustrations, and the inequities they endured. Victoria’s struggle to destroy society’s hypocrisies is set against the impending war and its effects on a family in danger of losing its way of life. Cuba’s struggle for freedom against Spain, the politics of foreign trade interests versus national concerns, the role of the United States in that struggle, the ambiguous definitions of “liberal” and “conservative,” freedom from political and sexual repression, and oppression that becomes accepted by society as a whole are all issues addressed in the play. Through vital language and powerful imagery, Triana successfully blends the epic and the intimate, the universal and the specific. History and its tidal effects on the lives of a family are rendered with great theatricality and compassion.

One of the play’s 59 scenes is published here, a very personal and emotional confession by Victoria to her good friend Graciela, revealing Victoria’s depth of passion and deep-seated racism (see box).

Each of the play’s 19 characters lives in a small, enclosed world. Most find themselves trapped, as Triana’s characters often do—by society, by a government, by their own inability to break free. When his plays do provide a means of escape, his characters do not see it, or they are incapable of seeing it—except in *Palabras comunes*. Although the play’s focal point is the character of Victoria, it is her brother Gastón who finally is able to achieve freedom—by leaving the country, as Triana did. In a recent conversation with me, Triana said:

In *Palabras comunes* my story interweaves with the story of the country. The play corresponds to a 20-year period in Cuba’s history, which I play against the period I lived

8. The play was produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-upon-Avon (at The Other Place) in 1986, and in London (at The Pit) in 1987, with the English title *Worlds Apart*, directed by Nick Hamm. Janet McTeer played the main character, Victoria. (Triana rejected the official RSC adaptation by the company’s dramaturge, Peter Whelan, and will not permit it to be produced, published, or circulated.)

there from 1959 to 1979. In theatrical form, I try to analyze 20 years of a person's life, with a certain innocence and a certain sophistication. In this play, it's the vision of a woman with all her contradictions. *Palabras* is the consensus of my sense of theatre, of poetical life, of fragmentation. It is about honorable people and dishonorable people, about revolutionary people and nonrevolutionary people, about good and evil, about false morality. It's about the cyclical nature of history. (2006)

Leaving Cuba in 1980 was a wrenching experience for Triana, even though he was no longer allowed to practice his craft there. Although he would resettle with his wife in her native France and has made Paris his official residence for over 26 years, Triana continues to write about Cuba and maintains his cultural identity. His passion, his temperament, his relationship to Caribbean music, food, and art remain absolutely Cuban: "I always feel very identified with the Cuban, with his mask, with his shadow" (in Vasserot 1997:41).

That said, Triana's broad scope of knowledge and profound understanding of human frailties and fears bring a universality to his work that allows it to be understood across the world. Above all, José Triana is a poet, a master of language. Every piece of dialogue is nuanced with layers of meaning, carefully sculpted in countless rewrites, yet always allowing space for choices and interpretation—for freedom.

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RICARD SALVAT: What effects did the Cuban Revolution have on theatre? Seen from Spain—and later I was able to corroborate it in my first visits to Havana—from 1960 to 1968, Havana was a splendid international theatre center, a place of experimentation, in film as well. I remember the impact of the visits of [Otomar] Krejca, of [Manfred] Wekwerth, of the people from the Berliner Ensemble.

JOSÉ TRIANA: When you say, "from 1960 to 1968, Havana was a splendid international theatre center, a place of experimentation," I can confirm that that was what we were fighting for; that was our greater aspiration. It's very likely that listening to our conversations, our desires, and seeing a production of the National Guignol Theatre,<sup>9</sup> you would come to that conclusion.

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9. *Translator's note:* The Teatro Nacional de Guíñol (National Guignol Theatre), a 240-seat theatre, was inaugurated in Havana by the Consejo Nacional de Cultura (National Cultural Council) on 14 March 1963 in recognition of the work of Cuban puppeteers. The company—founded by Pepe Carril, Pepe Camejo, and Carucha Camejo—had been functioning since the 1950s, but without a permanent venue. Using puppets and actors, some of its productions were geared toward children; others were conceived for adult audiences. In 1970 the group began having difficulties with the Castro government. It finally closed its doors in 1972.

But we did not meet our true potential. It was bogged down by fear, bureaucratic corruption, internal rivalries. Creative and experimental discoveries were made—of course they were made against wind and sea. An example is the National Guignol Theatre, which achieved an artistic freedom that I still remember: *Don Juan Tenorio* [by José Zorrilla, 1965<sup>10</sup>], *Farsa y Licencia de la Reina Castiza* [Farce and License of the Blue-Blood Queen, by Valle-Inclán, 1964], *Ubú Rey* [Ubu Roi by Alfred Jarry, 1964], *La Corte del Faraón, a zarzuela*, [The Court of the Pharaoh; with music by Vicente Lleó and book by Guillermo Perrín and Miguel de Palacios, 1968], etc. And the Teatro de Guiñol Provincial [Provincial Guignol Theatre] with *El Maleficio de la Mariposa* [The Butterfly's Evil Spell, by Federico García Lorca, 1963]. There were also exceptional productions by [actor and director] Vicente Revuelta: *El círculo de tiza caucasiano* [The Caucasian Chalk Circle, by Bertolt Brecht, 1961], *El alma buena de Se-Chuan* [The Good Woman of Sechuan, by Brecht, 1961], *El perro del hortelano* [The Dog in the Manger, by Lope de Vega, 1964], full of invention, humor, and depth. And productions by Julio Matas: *La verdad sospechosa* [The Truth Can't Be Trusted, by Juan Ruiz de Alarcón, 1963] and *La lección* [The Lesson, by Eugène Ionesco, 1960].

Otomar Krejca directed a brilliant production of *Romeo and Juliet* [in the early '60s]. And that was it. The Berliner Ensemble and Bertolt Brecht were talked about up to our necks. To be frank with you, I prefer Brecht's larger plays like *Galileo Galilei*, *Saint Joan of the Slaughterbouses*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, *The Good Woman of Sechuan*, *The Threepenny Opera*. I like *Mother Courage and Her Children* less. I know that I fail in my appreciation, but I detest his didactic theatre.

The old dream of having a national theatre crystallized when the “*barbudos*”<sup>11</sup> rose to power. It was created by governmental decree. Batista had begun construction on the National Theatre building in a plaza to be dedicated to José Martí,<sup>12</sup> which would later be named Revolution Plaza. Waiting for the completion of the building, groups of actors, directors, and technicians of the 1940s and '50s became the deans of the movement and continued energizing the youth, who in 1959 initiated an atmosphere of creativity and experimentation. The “revolutionary” bureaucracy knew how to take advantage of them and developed amateur theatre movements throughout the island, as well as festivals, like the Festival de Teatro Latinoamericano sponsored by Casa de las Américas,<sup>13</sup> and the creation of the Casa de las Américas Literary Prize and the UNEAC Prize, along with theatre publications of UNEAC. The Escuela de Arte de Cubanacán<sup>14</sup> was established as well as the Teatro Universitario de Oriente; the Teatro Nacional de Guiñol, directed by Pepe Camejo, Pepe Carril, and Carucha Camejo; the Teatro de Guiñol Provincial, directed by Osvaldo Pradere; the Conjunto Dramático Nacional; Teatro Estudio; Teatro Rita Montaner; Taller Dramático.

10. Dates indicate when the play was produced by the Guignol, not when it was written.

11. *Translator's note*: Literally, “the bearded ones,” referring to the leaders of the Revolution—Fidel and Raúl Castro, Ché Guevara, and others who wore beards.

12. *Translator's note*: José Martí (1853–1895), Cuban poet, essayist, and journalist, became the symbol of Cuba's struggle for independence from Spain. Because of his political activities, he was not welcome in Cuba or several other countries. In 1881, he moved to New York, where he worked as an editor, journalist, or foreign correspondent for several magazines, including the *New York Sun*. In 1894 he founded the Cuban Revolutionary Party and organized much of Cuba's independence movement from New York. He returned to Cuba in 1895 and was killed on 19 May of that year in one of the revolution's first battles.

13. *Translator's note*: Government center for the research and promotion of South American and Caribbean culture and literature, founded in 1959 by Haydée Santamaría, and directed by her until her death in 1980. Subsequent directors have been Mariano Rodríguez (1980–1986) and Roberto Fernández Retamar (1986–). The center also sponsors the annual Casa de las Américas Literary Prize, a prestigious award for distinguished Latin American writers. Among its publications are the *Casa de las Américas* magazine, started in 1960, and *Conjunto*, a quarterly cultural magazine, started in 1964.

14. *Translator's note*: Escuela de Arte de Cubanacán was renamed Instituto Superior de Arte when the Castro government was installed in 1959.

Virgilio Piñera sponsored a play-publishing program in the Erre Collection of the newspaper, *Revolución*; the Consejo Nacional de Cultura [National Cultural Council] printed volumes of plays by Gertrudis Gómez Avellaneda, José Jacinto Milanés, and Joaquín Lorenzo Luaces; and the Editorial Nacional de Cuba [National Publishing House of Cuba] published international classic playwrights. The world of the footlights became widely available.

The changes that were made, from my perspective now, were harmful to the theatre and to the country in general, because they interrupted elements that affected their natural growth, their evolution. And a sentiment of “turbulent waters,” of repression, set in. From the beginning, the trials and killings of known and suspected Batista supporters were televised. Fear, terror, desertion followed.

The idea of change was valid in that it would allow an equitable advance in building the strengths of the economy and solving social problems, to diminish and ultimately eliminate existing inequities through democratic means. But the opposite occurred. The revolutionary force created a rupture and the capricious excesses of an absolute power—or rather, we suffered a violent fall. The consequence was a discrepancy between what was said and what was done. The public was not prepared for that, nor were the intellectuals, who began to resent the breakdown and living in emergency situations, trying to work in that turmoil, struggling for a means of survival, entering the world of double-talk, demagoguery, slander. Those elements had been operating under the surface of our society (they are part of human nature), but they now acted as masters of ceremonies and occupied top positions on the national scene. Batista’s coup d’état of 1952—a tragic impediment, we thought—sprang to life again and intensified.

Internal conflicts among theatre groups soon appeared and deepened as the weeks and months passed, allowing leaders to meet with actors, directors, and authors under the aegis of revolutionary principles. Gradually they abolished private initiatives, controlled what was written and produced, and analyzed the political consciousness and the sexual attitudes and activities of the artists, distorting them with “morality.”

So the Castro government dedicated its economic resources to supporting an image of confidence and spreading propaganda on an international scale—“the first socialist revolution of Latin America,” pushing aside the Mexican Revolution of 1912—to ensure the continued seduction, the exportation of subversive ideas and arms to third world countries, and the inroads of guerrillas in Latin America and Africa, to name two places where that practice was common, while scarcity and shortages were decried throughout the national territory. Which invited visitors to Cuba—even the most stubborn of them—didn’t leave convinced that the Revolution was offering absolute comfort to the people, the artists, and writers? Well-chosen guides and interpreters adept at magnifying the victories and virtues of the regime would show them around.

If I allude to that moment from a political, socioeconomic point of view, I do it to show the general situation that confronted the nation. As far as our position—that of the writers, artists, and intellectuals who opted to stay—many of us saw the catastrophe coming. But we wanted to close our eyes and utter consoling phrases, hoping that things would right themselves through a sleight of hand.

Hidden behind this, no doubt, were our boundless artistic ambitions, our weaknesses, and our fears. We entered into a Machiavellian dance, a ride on a seesaw, a sinister game of cross-purposes. How many times did I hear myself repeating, like a parrot, obsolete ideas that I didn’t believe in, so that they would leave me alone—or, in my naïveté, so they would allow me to do things that might deviate from the party line, thinking that a creative act was worth it, that it would rise above political commitment and would be respected, that a poem was created in sacrifice and poverty. Stupid me.

I knew full well that I was alone, surrounded by enemies, that I didn’t have a guardian angel to baptize me, that my life was hanging by a thread, a fine spider web; that such a declaration

would certainly act as a boomerang, and that I would continue being who I was, a leaf caught in a whirlwind of petty contradictions. How many times did I remain silent? How many times did I use a smile as a means of escape, or play the idiot? I'm not trying to imply a mea culpa. I did it, I did it, and I don't regret it. It was a miserable way (I admit that I don't have the stuff of heroes) of avoiding jail, madness, or suicide. Besides, I considered it a lesser evil. When an occasion arose to defend an artistic principle, I took it on with all its consequences. Like my defense of *Los siete contra Tebas* [Seven Against Thebes]—Antón Arrufat's adaptation of Aeschylus' play—at the 1968 UNEAC awards.

A dispassionate balance sheet would show that privately funded theatre (which meant the creators themselves took the reins of the productions and permitted themselves the luxury of producing the plays they wanted) disappeared, and young actors and directors formed part of officialdom. Therefore, it was a theatre that followed the lines determined by the leadership—a political theatre, because it served government interests, in this case Marxist-Leninist interests. This, in a way, explains the unfortunate fate of the Camejos and Pepe Carril of the National Guignol Theatre, who ended up in jail, in work camps, and then in exile, when the leadership demanded that its artistic and intellectual criteria be imposed.

SALVAT: What happened in 1968, and what do you think led to the UNEAC Prize being awarded to Antón Arrufat?

TRIANA: The problem of 1968 began in 1965 when Casa de las Américas awarded its literary prize (with a “no” vote from Bernardo Canal Feijó<sup>15</sup>) to *La noche de los asesinos* [Night of the Assassins]—and then in 1966, when the production was unanimously awarded the El Gallo of Havana Prize.<sup>16</sup> No other play, even today, has shown a no-frills version of Cuban life, its violence, and the sharp and cruel sense of humor (within a closed, almost asphyxiating frame) of easily identifiable people. Each of the three characters could be the child of any neighbor. Also, the play transcended politics and became a metaphor—and as with all metaphors, it lent itself to different levels of interpretation, which, as always, were based on reflections that had remained unspoken, about questions of power, questions of what is a revolution. Is it an upheaval followed by the installation of a utopia?

Or is it a confrontation with the conflicts of a country, with an evolutionary resolution as its objective? Is it breaking with the past and starting over with a clean slate? Or is it a lengthy exercise of analyzing tradition and the present, the positive and the negative, the intertwining of the two, the deceptions and the demagoguery implicit in human activity, and the new ideas that are applicable without threatening the conglomerate of national interests? Do radicalization and excess engender an imbalance that inevitably leads us toward collective schizophrenia?

When the published text [of *La noche de los asesinos*] fell into the hands of diverse readers, the fallout of disoriented and deranged opinions dropped like husks of corn. “A masterpiece,” some said. “Unproducible,” others said. “A blatant copy of Genet's *The Maids*.” “Unquestionable technique, but where does it lead? To nihilism or catastrophe?” “Whom or what does it identify with? With the revolution? No, never! With the counterrevolution? Do you think so?” “Obviously the father is Fidel, the mother is Cuba, and the three children are the young people who want a change, or the delinquents!” “Why does it celebrate a trial where no defense lawyer intervenes? Does it want to stick a finger in the wound? He [the playwright] is a sniper not to be trusted! A dirty queer! The whole queer lot! Off with their

15. *Translator's note:* Bernardo Canal Feijó (1897–1982), a noted Argentine poet, historian, sociologist, philosopher, and folklorist, had been invited by Casa de las Américas to serve on the jury of its 1965 literary prize competition.

16. *Translator's note:* El Gallo de la Habana Prize is awarded annually by Casa de las Américas to the best theatrical production in Havana.

heads! Who the hell believes him! It's subversion!" In that atmosphere, Juan Larco's<sup>17</sup> review appeared, at the instigation of Roberto Fernández Retamar, who had a score to settle with me for a disrespectful review I wrote of his book of poems, *En su lugar la poesía* [Poetry in its Place], in the *Casa de las Américas* magazine in 1963. Larco considered *La noche de los asesinos* a dangerous play, pure ideological deviation.

The struggle against the *bandidos* [bandits] in the Sierra del Escambray intensified in 1965.<sup>18</sup> Entire villages of the region were moved to remote hamlets in the provinces of Pinar del Río and Camagüey: Work camps—real concentration camps dedicated to agricultural projects—were created under the UMAP [Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción (Military Units to Aid Production)] program, with the objective of cleaning up and eradicating the corrupting influence that certain sectors were having on society. People sent to those camps included large contingencies of Jehovah's Witnesses; the clandestine "old combatants" against Batista, who argued against the course the Revolution was taking, contrary to the principles for which they had fought; members of the Socialist Party who maintained critical positions; displaced youth who abandoned the rural areas or the provincial towns for lack of work and swarmed into the city of Havana with no work or benefits; "intransigent" Catholics, scorned for not accepting the orders of the Revolution; homosexuals; wayward students who let their hair grow, listened to the Beatles or the songs of Bob Dylan, and wore tight or bell-bottomed pants, for being contaminated by the virus of the imperialist enemy; and, finally, homosexual or "lazy" writers, actors, and directors who had been subjected to interrogations behind closed doors in their workplaces.

That same year, 1965, two of my poems, published in the *Casa de las Américas* magazine, caused a scandal in our small literary world, poems, which I'll read, that form a small section of a book of poems called *Project of Forgetting*:

### Definition

I am you and you are  
 my shadow, my body, my eyes  
 I cannot hide without recognizing you.  
 In mirrors  
 And on the street I talk to you  
 and it is I who responds.  
 I see my soul in the depths of you  
 and think that it's your soul.  
 You are in me and I am  
 your shadow, your body, your eyes.  
 I think about you and it's you who  
 envisions me.  
 Heaven and Hell translate into  
 one and the same.

17. *Translator's note:* Juan Larco, a Peruvian playwright who had worked with the Berliner Ensemble, went to Cuba during the first years of the Revolution.

18. *Translator's note:* In 1959, some Cubans who had fought side by side with Castro began to take up arms against the new government, first in the most western province of Pinar del Río, and then in the Escambray Mountains and in the old province of Oriente. The Cuban government labeled them "*bandidos*" and waged a war against them called "*Lucha Contra Bandidos*" [War Against Bandits]. The insurgents, mainly people from the provinces, were supported by the U.S. government and the CIA. Castro ultimately won the war when the last band of insurgents was located and destroyed in December 1965.

### [Definición

Yo soy tú y tú eres  
mi sombra, mi cuerpo, mis ojos.  
No puedo ocultarme sin reconocerte.  
En los espejos  
hablo contigo y en la calle  
y soy yo quien responde.  
Veo mi alma en el fondo de ti  
y creo que es tu alma.  
Tú eres en mí y yo soy  
tu sombra, tu cuerpo, tus ojos.  
Pienso en ti y eres tú quien  
me piensas.  
El cielo y el infierno traducen  
una misma cosa.]

### Message

Convulsing and confused.  
Burning in disasters,  
jails, in urinals,  
blights, brothels of memory  
and in the smile of a child.  
Bewildered by a crime or a burst of laughter.  
Repeating some name  
—tell me if it's possible to find you  
in my body. Beauty  
holds a fascination  
that imposes its incessant reign.  
Tell me if it's possible,  
because it was necessary to die  
for beauty to be bestowed on me  
in Compostela, at 30,  
between sheets stained with excrement and  
spasms.

### [Envío

Convulso y confundido.  
Ardiendo en los desastres,  
en las cárceles, en los urinarios,  
en las caries, en los prostíbulos de la memoria  
y en la sonrisa de un niño.  
Deslumbrado por un crimen o una carcajada.  
Repitiendo algún nombre

—dime si es posible que te encuentre  
 en mi cuerpo. La belleza  
 ejerce una fascinación  
 que impone su dominio incesante.  
 Díme si es posible,  
 porque fue necesario morir  
 para que la belleza me fuera entregada  
 en Compostela, a los 30 años,  
 entre sábanas manchadas de excrementos y  
 espasmos.]

Days after the poems were published, Haydée Santamaría<sup>19</sup> called me into her office to discuss something that was bothering her. As I entered, she already had the magazine open to the pages of the poems, and without much ado, directly attacked:

—“I’m reading your poems. Sit down!” With apprehension, I obeyed. “What do you think about them?”

—“I don’t know,” I responded, frightened and acting the fool. “One doesn’t know what one writes, I mean, its value.”

—“Yes, well, I’m not convinced of that.”

At that moment I heard knocks at the door, which opened, and, ipso facto, “Chucho” Montané’s<sup>20</sup> head appeared.

—“Please, come in, Chucho. I’m talking to Triana about these poems.”

Chucho, theatricalizing, approached us and sat in an easy chair near mine.

—“Have you read this?” Chucho, disturbed, said no, and she handed him the magazine. “Read them!”

While Chucho read them, she said to me in an aggressive tone:

—“I don’t want this to happen again. What does ‘I am you and you are / my shadow, my body, my eyes,’ mean?” reciting the lines by heart. “What sentiments are you expressing? I have never had such an idea! Please, Triana. And then when you end the other poem with ‘between sheets stained with excrement and spasms.’ Don’t you think that’s disgusting?! What kind of acts do you practice? And *that* printed in an issue of the *Casa de las Américas* magazine! My God! This is upsetting, it’s inconceivable! What will the intellectuals say? The poets?! No, Triana!”

Chucho read the poems and placed the magazine open on the table.

—“What do you think, Chucho?”

—“Haydée, they’re poems.”

—“Poems? But, Chucho, let’s keep our wits about us.” And she looked at me, and I saw in

19. *Translator’s note:* Haydée Santamaría (1922–1980) was one of two women who participated in the armed attack on the Moncada army garrison led by Castro on 26 July 1953—the event now celebrated as the beginning of the Cuban Revolution. She was an avid supporter of the arts and founded Casa de las Américas in 1959, which she directed until 1980 when she committed suicide.

20. *Translator’s note:* Jesús “Chucho” Montané, member of the central committee of the Communist Party of Cuba, was one of the few survivors of the 26 July 1953 attack on the Moncada army garrison. From 1959 until his death in 1999, Montané played a leading part in the Revolutionary government. His roles included governor of the Isle of Pines, director of prisons, subdirector of the National Institute of the Tourist Industry, and Minister of Communications, a post he held from December 1963 to January 1973.

her eyes a kind of cruelty mixed with tenderness, and examining Chucho, again she sprang the question on him, “What do you think, Chucho?”

—“Yes, Haydée, Triana is a sensitive and timid man. From what I know, there is more violence in many contemporary poems, though I’m not an expert.”

—“Triana, this cannot happen again. I admire you and I think you’re a good person, and you live here. If it were not for that, I’d burn this issue of the magazine, I assure you. Unacceptable, Chucho!”

She stood up, and I knew the reprimand was over. Two days later, Antón Arrufat, who was head editor [of the *Casa de las Américas* magazine], was fired.

As fate would have it, *La noche de los asesinos* was to have been part of that year’s [1965] Festival of Latin American Theatre, but it was not staged: one, because the board of directors of Casa de las Américas felt that it should be done at a more appropriate time; two, Vicente Revuelta, to whom I had given the script days after receiving the literary prize—“If you like it, do it when you can,” I told him—had been suspended from the board of Teatro Estudio by order of President Dorticó because of a conversation the two of them had where Vicente openly asked if, given the current political orientation, he as a homosexual could direct a theatre within the frame of the Revolution. The immediate response was to relieve him of his duties. Vicente’s position corresponded to the chaotic situation already created by the UMAP. And having trustworthy information in his hands about writers, actors, and directors who had been accused [of homosexuality] and sent to the fields to do forced labor, if he did not speak honestly and frankly, he would end up communing with a millwheel.

Then the unforeseeable happened, which was decisive: News arrived from Colombia, Chile, and Poland about productions of *La noche de los asesinos* and the enthusiastic critical and public response in those countries. In Mexico a glowing review appeared in the magazine *Siempre*.

According to some friends, the [Vicente] Revuelta situation was resolved due to the intervention of people in high places, like Raquel Revuelta, Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, and Juan Marinello, who was visiting the island.<sup>21</sup> And during the first days of March of 1966, Vicente called me and confirmed that he loved the script and that he would direct it, if Casa de las Américas would allow it, and he named the actresses he wanted to work with. I agreed with his choices. At the end of April, he informed me that, following the read-through stage, he cast a group of young actors who would allow him a certain distance from the production, and I assumed that the decision to do the play was Haydée Santamaría’s. I never asked him about, nor was I interested in, the conversations he had with her to obtain her approval.

He invited me to visit the rehearsals. I talked with Vicente and the actors and with Wanda Garatti, the artistic and intellectual consultant, and worked with them on the final rehearsals in areas where Vicente had certain problems. Opening night, from beginning to end, it glided along like a pool of water over oil. It was something magical and emotional. The audience response was incredible. For 15 minutes, the entire theatre gave a standing ovation to the work of the actors and director.

The following day, Marcia Leiseca and María Angélica Álvarez<sup>22</sup> appeared at my small room in Old Havana. The international jury of the Festival of Latin American Theatre wanted to meet me, and when I went to meet them, I was staggered by the discussions that took place. They awarded First Prize to the production of *La noche de los asesinos*, Second Prize to the

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21. *Translator’s note:* Raquel Revuelta, Vicente’s sister, one of Cuba’s most renowned actresses, president of Teatro Estudio, and member of many literary juries in Cuba and abroad (died in 2004); Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, former Deputy Prime Minister of Cuba (died in 1997); Juan Marinello, a prominent writer and Permanent Delegate to UNESCO’s Cuba Arte (died in 1977).

22. *Translator’s note:* Marcia Leiseca was secretary to Haydée Santamaría; María Angélica Álvarez was secretary to Alejo Carpentier, who was president of the Editorial Nacional.

National Guignol's production of *Don Juan Tenorio*, and Special Mention to the dramatized version of the short stories *Los años duros* [The Difficult Years] by Jesús Díaz, with the title *Unos hombres y otros* [A Few Men and Others], directed by Liliam Llerena, who complained bitterly about the First Prize play [*La noche*].

Despite the unforeseen solidarity of eminent theatre critics who supported me in the press, praising the virtues of the piece and its significance in Cuban culture, I was crushed and felt a huge sense of loss. Instinctively I felt the need to be invisible, to distance myself from everything. I was both frightened and moved. I knew that a “May 20th”<sup>23</sup> was upon me and I needed to take that in.

Invitations arrived from the Theatre of Nations Festival in Paris, and my enemies made them their own. The play would go to the French capital, but I would remain in Cuba for not having met the required revolutionary conditions—or because they had reduced the budget, or because the scandal of the poems would be evoked. Rumors were running rampant until Haydée Santamaría called me to her office again and read me the letter [of invitation]. She would support me as long as I behaved like an official representative of the Cuban Revolution. She said she trusted me and wished me a good trip.

In Paris, the play had the same reception it had on opening night at Teatro Estudio. The French press named the three best plays presented that year [1967] at the Theatre of Nations Festival: *La noche de los asesinos* (Cuba), *I Giganti della Montagna* [The Mountain Giants, by Pirandello] (Italy), and a dance group from India. At the end of the festival, they invited Vicente and the group to Avignon. I went to London, where the play was in rehearsal, directed by Terry Hands at the Theatre Aldwych of the Royal Shakespeare Company. Then we visited Switzerland, Italy, and Belgium. In Milan, I met with José Tamayo, who was preparing presentations for us in Madrid and Barcelona that would end with a tour of the Spanish festivals. I called Haydée to inform her of the details of the project, and she told me that it was impossible because I was expected back in Cuba for the opening of the National Theatre Seminar, the most important [cultural] event programmed by the Revolution in all those years.

We were received with great fanfare at the José Martí airport [in Havana] on the morning of 9 December 1967. And immediately I communicated with José Lanuza and Lisandro Otero<sup>24</sup> that I would participate in the National Theatre Seminar. I soon realized that I was falling into a trap.

Different teams were created to discuss the problems that Cuban theatre was confronting in general and in particular, presided over by renowned playwrights, among whom I found myself, alive and kicking. Each team was to prepare a paper, a kind of synthesis of the discussions held during the days of the seminar that would be read at the closing.

As a result of this seminar, a national cultural policy would be decided upon and put into vigorous practice. The picture had been calculated beforehand: a simple game, a masquerade, that would be a cover for the bureaucracy to eliminate what it considered a corrupt residue of contemporary theatre, the theatre of the absurd, the theatre of cruelty—and thus, all those who were proponents of such theatre. Now, which of our plays can be considered theatre of the absurd or theatre of cruelty as it is done in Europe? None. Virgilio Piñera, in *Electra Garrigó* [1941], and later in *Jesús* [1948], borders on the nonsensical, in situation and dialogue. The same thing happens in the plays by Arrufat, Nicolás Dorro, and me—to take

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23. *Translator's note:* On 20 May 1925, Gerardo Machado, a liberal, was elected President of Cuba. What began as a hopeful and progressive change became a dictatorship when in 1927, a pro-Machado Constitutional Assembly extended presidential terms to six years and invited Machado to accept a new term in power.

24. *Translator's note:* José Lanuza was Minister of Education, and Lisandro Otero was in charge of the cultural section of the ministry.

the most talked-about examples—and before us, in colloquial theatre, and even before that, in the 19th-century *sainetes*,<sup>25</sup> and in the plays of the Alhambra Theatre [in Havana] at the beginning of the 20th century. The absurd, the cruel, the surreal, the dreamlike or apparently formless qualities that can be seen in our plays are vague reflections of what is readily transparent in daily Cuban life: our roundabout way of saying things, our wild digressions, our ranting. A stridency and a sometimes undecipherable game of subtleties are constantly finding their way into our conversations and our behavior, at times to the point of creating an absurd and cruel pandemonium. To try to express those characteristics is the task of a playwright or writer. For those of us who did it with acceptable works, the disgrace of being followers of the theatre of the absurd or of cruelty became a tombstone. We were stigmatized, infamous, agents of the “rotten and decadent societies of Western Europe and the United States.”

Going back to the National Theatre Seminar, the team that I chaired included Virgilio Piñera, Abelardo Estorino, Antón Arrufat, Vicente Revuelta, Humberto Arenal, and Armando Suárez del Villar. I can't be concrete about how the other teams were formed. I knew that they included Nicolás Dorri, Sergio Corrierri, Flora Lauten, Liliam Llerena, Héctor Quintero, etc.

The closing of the event was celebrated at the Teatro Mella, packed to the rafters with participants from all the provinces. All the teams were onstage. After the presentation (and after showing her satisfaction), the mistress of ceremonies, Liliam Llerena, announced that the team I chaired would read its summarizing paper, which, along with the other papers and a summary of the theatre policy, would be published soon. Since I don't have the paper, I can only summarize what I remember. Some of the members of the group probably have a copy of the paper, and the seminar may have been filmed and kept in a secret archive of ICAIC [Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos]. We did defend an openness to all the ways and possibilities of contemporary theatre (without forgetting our own romantic tradition and our colloquial theatre), condemning demagoguery and populism.

I approached the dais of microphones and was given an ovation. Moved, I began to read. I hadn't read half a page when Liliam Llerena interrupted me, proclaiming her revolutionary indignation and removing me from the dais:

—“*Compañeros, compañeros*, this passes the limits of ideological deviation! I feel ashamed, humiliated to have to listen to such trash.”

The initial ovation mutated into violent catcalls and a mishmash of “Get him out of here!” “Counterrevolution!” And they started clapping with “Long live the revolution.” “*Gusanos*, out!”<sup>26</sup> “We must cut off the heads of the *gusanos*!”

Trembling, not knowing what was happening, I left the improvised dais, and from that moment on, I have no idea what happened. I do know that it was there that the Teatro Escambray group was given the stamp of officialdom with the objective of teaching rural people to read and write and create in them an ideological consciousness. With the same intention, but directed to urban people, the Teatro Político Bertold Brecht was formed, which would be housed in the Teatro Mella, and theatre groups were organized to work in the field with the construction and army brigades.

25. *Translator's note:* The *sainete* is a genre that appeared in Spain in the 14th century. In the 18th century it replaced and took on the characteristics of the *entremés*, a short and comic theatrical performance written in verse, usually played during the interlude of a performance of a long dramatic work in the 16th and 17th centuries in Spain. The usual characters were the common people; the plot usually satirized the customs and the occupations of the characters, subjects that couldn't be treated in the dramatic works. Later the term “sainete” took on the meaning of a minor form of the zarzuela.

26. *Gusanos*: “worms,” a term commonly used for anti-Castro Cubans, especially those in Miami.

I should also mention that while I was touring Europe with Teatro Estudio, the controversy over Heberto Padilla erupted.<sup>27</sup> At Lisandro Otero's beach house in Varadero, Otero and several friends were discussing with Heberto the merits of the novel *Tres tristes tigres* [Three Trapped Tigers; 1966] by Guillermo Cabrera Infante.<sup>28</sup> The discussion took a disastrous turn when Heberto defended the linguistic virtues and rewards of the novel, and Lisandro defended the pillars of revolution, denying the possibility that a writer outside the country could write something of value. Tempers rising, they threw such violent insults at each other that Heberto left the house and declared a split in their friendship and a war unto death. The poems that Padilla published in the *Gaceta Literaria* [Literary Gazette] and in the magazine *Unión* gathered momentum and became the book, *Fuera del Juego* [Out of the Game; 1968]. A controversy between friends turned into an ideological crossroads.

I've tried to synthesize all these things that culminated in the UNEAC Prize of 1968 being awarded to Antón Arrufat's *Los siete contra Tebas*. A crucial and decisive point. I still wonder why they invited me to be on the jury of that competition. Did the authorities want to confirm which position I would take? Did they think that fear would soften me, that I'd bow my head like a little lap dog, that I'd adapt and go along with what Raquel Revuelta and Juan Larco had up their sleeves? That would be dreaming. Did they think that they would terrorize me by sending Ambrosio Fornet to me as a messenger, telling me that if I didn't make concessions, there would be lightning flashes? Fornet and the people of the Ministry of National Security were wrong on every count.

In defending *Los siete contra Tebas*, I knew that I was defending the noble cause of the theatre. First of all, it is not a perfect play. What human play is? We know that it unloads its verbiage during the exposition and throughout the text, which, as in the original Greek, does not hinder moments of exalted beauty, something rare on the Cuban stage. But this is no copy; it is a re-creation, the virtuoso exercise of a creator. Then there is the riskiness of the theme: to state, in no uncertain terms, the critical situation of a country polarized by the tyranny of an obstinate man who believes he possesses the absolute truth, when what really exists is a relative truth. Not black, not white, but gray—or infinite shades of chiaroscuros.

Arrufat, as all playwrights who pride themselves in being such, goes deeper into the marrow of the tragic aspects of history, and of the citizenry of the *polis*, and shows beautiful rituals that a prudent production would fully vindicate. The worst thing about the play: its aesthetic baggage, the slick work of the actors and the direction. Nevertheless, I insist on its essential veracity. Here I go back to an old idea of my youth, repeating an affirmation by the Dutch

27. *Translator's note:* Heberto Padilla is considered one of Cuba's most distinguished poets. His book of poetry, *Fuera del Juego*, won the UNEAC Prize in 1968, although UNEAC added an appendix criticizing it as counterrevolutionary. In 1971 at UNEAC, Padilla gave a reading of poems from his new book, *Provocaciones*, which led to his being interrogated for a month by the security police. His predicament became an international scandal when, on 20 March 1971, he was arrested with his wife, both accused of "subversive activities." After 38 days, they were released, largely because of protests made by international writers. After several attempts to leave the country, Padilla called on Robert B. Silvers, editor of the *New York Review of Books*; Bernard Malamud, then president of the PEN American Center; and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who requested the help of Senator Edward Kennedy. On 13 March 1980, Kennedy was informed by the Cuban government that Padilla could leave the country and travel via Montreal, Canada, to the United States, where he died in September 2000 at the age of 68.

28. *Triana's note:* Ambrosio Fornet and Edmundo Desnoes told me about this discussion in the presence of Guido Llinás and my wife Chantal in an open-air restaurant in Paris. Later, in Cuba, I confirmed the details of the story.

*Translator's note:* Guillermo Cabrera Infante (1929–2005)—legendary Cuban novelist, essayist, and critic—lived in exile in London from 1965 until his death. He is best known for *Tres tristes tigres*, which was translated into English as *Three Trapped Tigers*. Ambrosio Fornet (1932–)—editor, critic, essayist, and screenplay writer—is currently prominent in the Cuban publishing world and as a Latin American literary critic. Edmundo Desnoes (1930–) worked for the official Cuban newspaper, *Revolución*, was editor of art and literature of the Editorial Nacional de Cuba and the Instituto del Libro, and was a member of the editorial board of the *Casa de las Américas* magazine. Guido Llinás (1923–2005), is considered one of the major figures in Cuban painting during the second half of the 20th century; he worked and lived in Paris from 1953 until his death.

essayist Johan Huizinga: “In every emerging, living culture, and especially in archaic cultures, poetry performs a vital, social, and liturgical function.”

If Huizinga applies this to emerging and archaic cultures, why not apply it to contemporary cultures and especially to our theatre, whose strongest aspiration would be a clearly vital, social, and liturgical function. We opted for the rare pearl, Salvat: *Los siete contra Tebas* was the best play presented at the UNEAC competition that year. That’s why I took up the battle on its behalf.

SALVAT: Are you aware of what has happened and what is happening in theatre in Cuba since you left?

TRIANA: After I left in 1980, I know that José Milián has written, published, and mounted plays of national impact. So has Abelardo Estorino (with his seasons at Repertorio Español in New York City), Nicolás Dorr, Carlos Alberto with his play *Manteca* [written in the 1990s], Abilio Estévez, and Héctor Quintero. Carmen Duarte and Joel Cano give continuity to the tradition of inventiveness and experimentation. The official groups have dissolved, and young directors and actors—those who remain—have taken the destiny of Cuban theatre into their own hands, achieving a certain autonomy or semi-officialdom. I’m unable to speak firsthand. I don’t know the internal mechanisms that have sprung up with the new generations.

SALVAT: How do you see the current French theatre? Who are the authors and directors that interest you?

TRIANA: Perhaps I’m wrong, but theatre in France today does not have the impact of the work of Jacques Audiberti (*Le Mal Court* [1947], *Quoat-Quoat* [1946]), of Marcel Pagnol, of Albert Camus, of Jean Genet, of Samuel Beckett, of Eugène Ionesco, nor of Roland Dubillard. The mundane is cultivated: J.L. Bacri and Agnès Jaoui, or *théâtre de gare*<sup>29</sup> à la Didier Kaminka and Josiane Balasko, or the affected marginal reflections of Nathalie Sarraute, Yasmine Reza, and Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt—playwrights who are sustained by a faithful audience. I myself judge them to be a lot of noise and much ado about nothing. This year [2003] we had the pleasure of seeing a *Phaedre* by Racine, directed by Patrice Chereau, acted by Dominique Blanc, who had a supporting cast of sensational actors. This doesn’t happen all the time. There was a production, done with subtlety and grace, of Luigi Pirandello’s *Each in His Own Way* with the unforgettable actress Gisela Casadeus and the excellent actor Gerard Desarthe. At the end of the season Claude Rich toasted us with an adaptation of the splendid novel *Embers* by the Hungarian, Sándor Márai.

So, theatre has its surprises, but in the last few years in France, it seems to be slumbering for lack of inventive writers.

SALVAT: What was it like for you to be in the Spain of the ’50s? Talk to us about what happened during those years, for example, with Antonio Buero Vallejo or Luis Escobar.

TRIANA: As I’ve always said, my stay in Spain during the ’50s gave me training and discipline. I had the opportunity to know a people who, in spite of a fratricidal civil war with all of the economic problems, the hardships of living, and ideological conflicts, maintained an admirable dignity and generosity.

During every minute of the four and a half years I lived in Madrid, I knew I was not alone. The first people I met were Dora Varona (a poet from Santiago [Cuba], a fellow at the Institute of Hispanic Culture, and with a mention in poetry from the Adonis Prize) and Angel Lázaro (poet, playwright, and theatre critic of Spanish origin, who had lived in Havana). They helped me enroll in the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid and introduced me to several poets, among them Rafael Montesinos and Ramón Garciasol, who took me to publication parties of *Insula* magazine, where Carlos Bousoño would appear now and then.

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29. *Translator’s note:* Theatre of little literary value, a “sub” theatre. The term refers back to *gare* (French for train station) tabloid publications.

**from Palabras comunes**

*José Triana*

Part 4, Scene 2

Time: 1908

Place: Havana

*(A sunny morning. Paulita [a servant], onstage, straightens the furniture and prepares the breakfast cups. Graciélita enters, Victoria follows in a bathrobe. Outside, announcements are being shouted.)*

VICTORIA: When I heard that, I froze.

GRACIELITA: I can imagine.

VICTORIA: He was right! Back then, I didn't know how to respond the way I should have; all I could do was kiss him and tell him I had a headache, that some other time, that a woman...

GRACIELITA: Poor man!

VICTORIA: Are you going to have breakfast with me?

GRACIELITA: I've already eaten!

VICTORIA: Come, join me! It's so unpleasant to eat alone... I'm lucky at least to have Paulita here... She's a jewel!

PAULITA: Victoria child, save the sweet talk...it's too early for that!

VICTORIA: I mean it...what would I do here all alone and dejected? I'd crawl into bed, pull the sheets over my head and never see the light of day... *(To Graciélita)* You know, it's terrible! Sometimes I'm tempted to lie there...as though I were dead... week after week...

PAULITA: Victoria, what a thing to say!

VICTORIA: *(To Graciélita)* Do you want toast and butter? *(Takes a piece of toast and covers it with butter.)* It's a habit I picked up in the United States... Here's some coffee! *(She pours a cup of coffee.)*

GRACIELITA: I already had two cups before I came over... And my nerves get...*(moves her hands)*... like this! Pedro Arturo tells me: You're wired! And it's true! *(Takes a piece of toast and covers it with butter and bites into it.)* This is fattening, dearie!

VICTORIA: You're so vain!

PAULITA: Do you children want anything else?

VICTORIA: Are you leaving?

PAULITA: To clean up the kitchen.

GRACIELITA: Stay with us!

VICTORIA: She's always like that, she never stops... From the time she gets up until she goes to bed. *(Paulita smiles proudly)* A real fireball!... Do the plants need watering...do the windows need...the dust...the cobwebs...nonstop! She does everything and thinks it's nothing... A husband would be in heaven with her! The ideal woman!

PAULITA: Victoria! I'm too old and decrepit to be thinking about that! Like Miss Carmen says!... Well, I'm going to disappear. Young ladies should have their girl talk to themselves...

VICTORIA: You're making me beg you!

PAULITA: *(To Graciélita)* Would you like a soft boiled egg? *(To Victoria)* Graciélita eats like a bird.

GRACIELITA: Paulita, you're spoiling me! *(Negative gesture. Laughter.)*

PAULITA: If you want anything, let me know... *(Exits)*

GRACIELITA: What a delightful woman!

VICTORIA: Loyal to the death! So, about what we were saying, Joaquín refuses to understand that I...

GRACIELITA: That you, what?

VICTORIA: That I'm...

GRACIELITA: Like all women! The same problems! The same predicaments!... Our education, Victoria!

VICTORIA: That's not it!

GRACIELITA: Then, what is it?

VICTORIA: It's just that I...I...

GRACIELITA: What are you hiding?

VICTORIA: Hiding?

GRACIELITA: Yes! You reacted the same way your sister did a few years ago... You told her she was hiding something... *(Another tone)* You're hiding something, too. That story about the summer resort, for instance. I couldn't believe it when you started talking about it at your wedding reception! "Now, that's very strange," I said to myself. "Why now?" *(Gestures to Victoria)* I'll never judge you, Victoria! I'm simply making an observation! *(Another tone)* I know that story backward and forward. You told me as soon as you came back. The panic! The lack of control! The fear! And it was no chubby adolescent boy chasing after Luisa... It was a mulatto who had made an impression on you...isn't that right? *(Another tone)* You're hiding something, Victoria!

VICTORIA: *(Fast, sincere)* I swear that what happened with Joaquín...I'm not hiding anything!

GRACIELITA: *(Fast)* What if I had hidden my romance with that boy from Santa Clara from you...the doubts, the self-consciousness, the agonies of the first experience...the pain and the pleasure...

VICTORIA: Not with Joaquín! *(Another tone)* With him, yes... There's more...much more...

GRACIELITA: Of course there's a whole lot more!



Figure 4. Victoria (Janet McTeer) sexually rejects her husband, Joaquín, and cuckolds him with her lover, Fernando (Henry Goodman), in the Royal Shakespeare Company's production of José Triana's play, *Palabras comunes*, renamed *Worlds Apart*. Directed by Nick Hamm, staged at *The Other Place*, Stratford-upon-Avon, 1986. (Photo courtesy of Joe Cocks Studio Collection © Shakespeare Birthplace Trust)

VICTORIA: (*Eerily*) I knew, and I wanted it! I wanted it! (*Another tone*) I hate to think about it!

GRACIELITA: Forget it!

VICTORIA: No! Now that we've opened up the subject, it's better to tell you.

GRACIELITA: My dear, never force yourself to talk about something... Maybe another time!

VICTORIA: Graciélita, please...I need to tell you. (*Eerily*) He haunts me... He appears and he won't go away... He just stands there, relentless... Even in my dreams! And he changes and sometimes he fills my thoughts and excites me and I push him away and I think...I'm on the verge of madness...

GRACIELITA: Be patient, my friend. Why do you always think the worst?

VICTORIA: To have such illusions!

GRACIELITA: Try to keep disaster at arm's length... If you beckon, it will come!

VICTORIA: I try, dear friend, I try! But there are times when I can't and I'm a hunted animal...back and forth, back and forth, like this...oh!...drifting, worse than sleepwalking...and I see that naked body, gleaming, in the moonlight... (*Another tone*) I had seen him on the street like you see thousands of people... A face in the crowd!... I was indifferent...I swear! And the day we went to the resort—Mama, Papa, Alicia, Gastón, Luisa, and I...a Sunday, I remember... Suddenly, like a bolt of lightning, my heart jumped when I saw him...and I got very nervous...and I said to myself, "Victoria...what are you doing? A mulatto, for God's sake. It's horrible...Victoria...be careful!" He was one of the servant men...he was 24 or 25... And I ran off with Luisa...and in little while, there he was right in front of us...and he looked at me and I shrank from his look... I was afraid and disgusted...a mulatto! How dare he!...and at the same time I felt flattered, strangely flattered...and I started to joke with Luisa: "That mulatto is looking at you." "Me?" "Look at him!"...and Luisa, nothing shy or backward about her, she waited until we were alone and asked him some stupid question, and he answered very properly, nothing else...and I was intrigued, full of curiosity...maybe it was my imagination!...but I felt there was something indefinable and disturbing... (*Pause. Another tone*) And as we were leaving...we bumped into him...and we caused a quite a commotion. "The mulatto." "Look at him, he likes you." "Yes, he does." "No, he doesn't." Kid stuff!... And that was when Mama and Papa intervened: "That dirty nigger! Half-breed! Rapist! Lynch him!" And then all hell broke loose, people started shouting...and I don't think he even knew what...it was our fault...innocence!

GRACIELITA: Or perversity, Victoria!

VICTORIA: No, Graciélita! I almost...without even realizing...

GRACIELITA: You were attracted to him, my dear! (*Victoria smiles. Pause.*) That's what you told me!

VICTORIA: It was pandemonium, bedlam! "Lynch him. Lynch him!"

GRACIELITA: The fall of Troy!

VICTORIA: I was perfectly calm...even though I was blubbing like a baby... Papa had been so indignant, so violent... I'd never seen him like that before...

GRACIELITA: Fathers are always... If it were my daughter or yours...what would we have done?

VICTORIA: They had no cause!...Graciélita, it was crazy...and the man disappeared through the crowd like a lynx... (*Another tone*) Two or three months went by... When you're young, you think time is infinite. I had forgotten the incident! One afternoon I was taking a walk, in September, it was almost dusk...I remember it clearly...I was in the orchard, alone...and, suddenly, I heard a noise, there, at the edge, where they used to

toss the garbage and broken glasses...and something moved... I was about to run and scream...and then I saw it was him... Him! There he was! He smiled at me and looked at me...and I was fascinated... "Is this real? Am I dreaming? Damned mulatto!..." And his eyes had a strange expression...hungry, gentle, passionate... And I knew, and I wanted it!...and he was repulsive to me, too, but I couldn't move from that spot... (*Another tone*) Slowly, he started to undress... Oh, it was the first time! I was frozen with fear and curiosity, in a way...it was so bizarre!... and I heard him breathing hard, naked, and he didn't touch me, or maybe he did, he fondled my breasts...and I felt him crush me...and yet...he was far away, about 15 or 20 feet, leaning against a tree that I thought had no roots, suspended in air...and time passed and I heard voices calling me...and I couldn't move, in the distance...couldn't talk... I only had eyes for that body... I would have run away with him, killed for him!... Nothing mattered to me!... It lasted a few moments, a few hours, an eternity...

GRACIELITA: And did he...?

VICTORIA: (*Totally sincere*) No, nothing. (*Another tone*) When I returned to the house, I was reeling with fever... (*Another tone*) It was a few weeks before we left for the United States... (*Another tone*) I never told anyone about it! Nobody ever knew! (*Another tone*) When I recovered, Mama had all the trunks and grips packed for the trip...we were in the garden... Someone came by to say goodbye and told us that the resort had been captured by the Mambisa troops and that among the dead they found a mulatto... And do you know what I did? I started singing, singing...singing...as though I was thanking the invisible, as though I was liberated from the weight of a curse, as though that man represented the image of my dishonesty...of my weakness...of my disgrace... I was free! Yes, free! A respectable woman! (*Pause*)

GRACIELITA: (*Sarcastically*) Now that poor creature is responsible for what's happening to you with Joaquín...and Joaquín is responsible for that man's existence!

VICTORIA: (*Indignant*) Do you think I'm that stupid? Don't be silly!... That has nothing to do with it, I know it doesn't! (*Another tone*) But it doesn't stop him from coming to me in dreams and tormenting me... Incredible, with a mulatto! It's horrible!... He should have died!

(*Paulita is heard talking offstage.*)

GRACIELITA: That's crazy talk!

VICTORIA: (*Sobbing wildly*) A respectable woman can't, she should erase it from... She can't, she can't!

GRACIELITA: (*Gently*) Victoria, Victoria...

PAULITA: Victoria!

GRACIELITA: Just a minute!

(*Victoria quickly wipes her tears.*)

—translated by Joanne Pottlitzer

During that time, I visited the eminent poet Vicente Alexandre at his house in La Sierra, through the recommendation of José Rodríguez Feo. What can I say! What more can a boy from the Cuban provinces want than to be surrounded by poets he visited in his dreams, have the opportunity of talking to them on a personal level, and have some of his poems published in the magazine *Cidón*?!

After a year, I left the University and enrolled in some theatre courses at the Escuela de Bellas Artes [School of Fine Arts]. And there my path opened up. The professors who taught me the tools that I would use later were able to maintain, one way or another, a critical position with respect to the regime. To dwell on my various adventures and activities during that time would fill a large and weighty tome.

In summary, I worked in the company of a friend, Beatriz Aguirre, revising translations of scripts for the dubbed version of an American TV series starring Cesar Romero; I helped Trino Martínez Trive with props for his productions of Ionesco's *The Chairs* and *Jack or the Submission*, *Family Reunion* by T.S. Eliot, and *Monsieur Bob'le* by [Georges] Schéhadé; I codirected the production and wrote the program notes for *El divino Narciso* [The Divine Narcissus] by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, which was performed in front of the Cathedral of Toledo by José Moraleda and Aitor de Goroicelaya's independent group, Escena.

It was with the Escena group that I met Antonio Buero Vallejo in 1956 during the rehearsals of *La Perrera* [The Kennel] by José de Jesús Martínez. Buero Vallejo had just opened *Hoy es fiesta* [Today Is a Holiday] with great success at [Madrid's] Maria Guerrero Theatre. Kind and shy, he had the virtue of zeroing in on the right word or giving precise solutions during a rehearsal. In conversations at the Café Gijón, after the opening of his play *Las cartas boca abajo* [Face-Down Cards], if someone would interrupt him, he would smile and respond to the question with no sign of being annoyed by the impertinence. An air of tragedy and humor slipped into his observations.

I remember Luis Escobar's work, especially his *La Celestina* with Irene Lopez Heredia [1958?]. Watching him work during the rehearsal period was inspiring to me—the way he could change the dispositions of the actors onstage and examine the variety of registers of a scene, the intonations, the articulation and clarity of expression, how to use ascending and descending inflections and pauses, the need to get rid of useless tensions, the meaning and the logic of the plays, how memory and dreams are fountains of creativity, how to shift a given situation without damaging it, how to use the lightness of the body, the plasticity of movement, the time and rhythm of movements and language, sense memory and the turn of a phrase, the importance of subtext, etc. He discovered elements that would later facilitate my work as a playwright and as a writer in general. And I've benefited from the work of other directors, including you, from your staging of *Cruzando el puente* [Triana's play, *Crossing the Bridge*, 1991; staged by Salvat in Valencia, Spain in 1992].

SALVAT: What is your opinion of the Teatro Estudio and Vicente Revuelta? And the theatre group Escambray? What Cuban directors or theatre groups interest you most?

TRIANA: After the disappearance of Teatro Prometeo and Sala Arlequín, I believe that Teatro Estudio concentrated and developed the best Cuban theatre from 1958 to 1972. Then, with the Sovietization of politics defined in the National Theatre Seminar, the polemic created around *Los siete contra Tebas*, and the Padilla case, plus the long blacklists where writers and actors were evaluated and some accused of ideological deviation or homosexuality, and the fragmentation that Vicente created when he founded [his theatre company] Los Doce [in 1967]—the group did what it could. Armando Suárez del Villar staged the Cuban romantics; Abelardo Estorino created shows of songs and poems; Héctor Quintero opened a comedic sainete; Berta Martínez decided to direct and restage *The House of Bernarda Alba*. There was a kind of uncertainty, malaise, impotence. Up until the time of my departure in 1980, the group was barely surviving.

To be fair, I think that Vicente Revuelta is the country's greatest actor, along with Miriam Acevedo and Ernestina Linares, for combining intelligence, sensitivity, intellectual training, and a fabulous stage presence. Having seen several productions of *Galileo Galilei*, interpreted by different actors, including the Berliner Ensemble and an exceptional London production in 1960, Vicente's stature as an actor is unequaled. I should also underscore that when he is inspired, he creates extraordinary mise-en-scènes.

The Teatro Escambray functioned as a demagogue for a while, and then became fractionalized.

SALVAT: What was Cuban theatre like before the Revolution?

TRIANA: Theatre during the '30s and '40s sounds to me like drivel—though writers like Luis Alejandro Baralt (also a director with his memorable production of *Jeanne d'Arc au Bûcher* [Joan of Arc at the Stake] by Arthur Honneger [1943], and *Joan of Castile* by Hans Rothe, among others) with *La luna en el pantano* [The Moon in the Marsh; 1936] and *Junto al río* [Beside the River; 1938], and José Antonio Ramos with *Tembladera* [Quagmire; 1917] and *La recurva* [The Hairpin Curve; 1941] gave signs of true creative talent. The explosion of young writers like Eduardo Manet, René Buch, Rolando Ferrer, Ramón Ferreira, Niso Malaret, Matías Montes Huidobro, Fermín Borges, Gloria Parrado, and Rine Leal created a strong space that would be called “Cuban” and is most recognized in the figure of Virgilio Piñera with *Electra Garrigó* and *Jesús*.

From the mid-'40s into the '50s, theatre was given a decisive impetus with Ludwig Shajovicz's productions of the Greek classics in the Teatro Universitario (Shajovicz was a disciple of Reinhardt) and the appearance of the groups Theatralia, Patronato del Teatro, ADAD [Academia del Arte Dramática], Talía, Farseros, Teatro Prometeo, Teatro Las Máscaras, and Teatro Arlequín, which offered the best and most varied of world theatre. The visits of the companies of Louis Jouvét, María Tereza Montoya, Francisco Petroné, Eugenia Zuffolli, Carlos Lemus, Magda Haller, María Fernanda Ladrón de Guevara added to the momentum, as did the promotion of directors trained in Havana and perfected in the schools of Piscator, Stanislavski, Stella Adler and the Actors Studio of New York, and an impressive group of actors of that time. Then there were the touring companies of Marta Muñiz and Cuca Forcade, the colloquial theatre of Carlos Pous and Sindo Triana, the work of the popular comic duo, Garrido y Piñero, and other comedians of great relevance: Leopoldo Fernández (Pototo), Anibal de Mar (Filomeno), and Mimí Cal (Nananina). Set designers, lighting designers, makeup artists, costume designers, and painters worked together as disciplined and well-established creative teams.

The repertory in Havana embraced the English, French, German, Russian (Chekhov), Spanish, and Catalán classics, romantics, and contemporary plays. North American and French theatre had broad play; a play produced on Broadway or in Paris was immediately mounted in Havana. Cuban plays that received awards from the annual competitions promoted by the groups were shown two or three times, depending on public demand. The only [Cuban] playwrights who had box office success were Virgilio Piñera or Ramón Ferreira.

Among the excellent productions, apart from those of Luis A. Baralt, I'll mention those of Andrés Castro (*Yerma* by García Lorca, *Cándida* by Bernard Shaw, *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller, *Picnic* and *Dark at the Top of the Stairs* by William Inge, *Summer and Smoke* and *Sweet Bird of Youth* by Tennessee Williams, *The Cocktail Party* by T.S. Eliot) and those of Francisco Morín (*Electra Garrigó* by Virgilio Piñera, *The Maids* by Jean Genet, *Caligula* by Albert Camus, *Crime on Goat Island* by Ugo Betti, *South* by Julien Green, *The Shoemaker's Wife* by García Lorca, *Green Blood* by Silvio Gioveninetti, *Requiem for a Nun* by Faulkner and dramatized by Camus).

Vivacity and curiosity were in evidence among our theatre people, who didn't shrink from venturing into the territories of research and experimentation. It was a theatre of searching, risk taking, and passionate creativity.

SALVAT: Who were your mentors? Could Carlos Felipe<sup>30</sup> be considered one of them?

TRIANA: To say that I was a disciple of Carlos Felipe would be a lie. I knew him late, when he was a total critical and audience success with the musical *De película* [Like a Film; 1963]. He was a genuine Cuban writer who had to struggle for his work to be produced in a hostile environment—in spite of it or against it. His themes touch the depths of our sensibility.

Carlos Felipe's work belongs to what could be called the Republican period, starting in the '40s, or rather at the end of 1938. Plays that had an impact on the Havana theatre scene had the misfortune of being seen only on opening night, or perhaps two additional performances, for the educated bourgeois and petit bourgeois audiences, but that was the extent of their runs. Felipe's plays, *El Chino* [1947] and *El travieso Jimmy* [Naughty Jimmy; published in 1959], give us the image of a playwright who wants to break with provincialism, the dominant style of that time. Full of technical and theatrical skills, and observations of our idiosyncrasies, they are also full of rhetoric that rings false. Characters drawn from the heart of the working class and from the bourgeoisie go back and forth between what they want to say and what they don't say. A kind of asphyxiating cloud drifts among them. Something else happens in *Requiem para Yarini* [Requiem for Yarini; 1959]. That play is, without a doubt, a magnificent example of his work.

My mentors in theatre (I think I've said this somewhere before) were the colloquial Cuban theatre [artists], the Greek tragedians, William Shakespeare, Calderón de la Barca, Lope de Vega, Jean Genet, Samuel Beckett, T.S. Eliot, Ionesco, Ramón del Valle Inclán, Jardiel Poncela, Miguel Mihura, and Virgilio Piñera. Unfortunately, I became acquainted with the Romantic Cuban authors—wonderful playwrights—when I was already formed. I'm talking especially about Gertrudis Gómez Avellaneda, José Jacinto Milanés, and Joaquín Lorenzo Luaces—forgotten or little appreciated authors who should have been in the National Theatre's repertory, and whom Armando Suárez had the courage to stage during the '60s at Teatro Estudio.

SALVAT: It would be good if you talked about your experience in film. How many screenplays have you written and how many have been done?

TRIANA: My experiences in film have not been very fortunate. I wrote my first screenplay in 1961 in collaboration with Tomás (Titón) Gutiérrez Alea, based on a story that Fernando Ortiz told in his book, *Una pelea cubana contra los demonios* [A Cuban Struggle against the Demons; 1959]. The film has the same title. We worked on it for a year, discussing all the twists of plot, the intrigues, the motivations, the character traits. We tried to follow dramatic rules. When we finished, Titón felt that the character of Juan Contreras had gotten away from us. He considered it too violent, that the character said things he shouldn't say, that we should rewrite it, polish it, etc., etc. My position was clear. If the priest has a well-defined and uncompromising religious, ideological position, Juan Contreras is his opposite, and what he says and does establishes a conflict. Juan Contreras is the desire for change, for social evolution. We had interminable arguments, and finally he decided to change the character. I called Vicente Revuelta and Miguel Barnet to help him. He maintained the priest without making a single change, and he insisted on ruining Juan Contreras. The film suffers from that incongruence.

My second screenplay, *En la neblina* [In the Fog; 1986], came about unexpectedly, in a way. I wanted to prove to myself that I could do it on my own. My contract with UNESCO [as a translator] ended in 1983 and was not going to be renewed. I saw Chantal leaving the apartment at eight in the morning to go to work for little money and returning at eight at night, tired and worried about me. So I decided to occupy my time. Perhaps much of my desperation and the nightmares of exile are in that screenplay.

30. *Translator's note:* Cuban playwright, 1914–1975.

In *Rosa La China*, the third screenplay, I wanted to pay homage to the American, French, and Mexican *cine noir* from the '30s to the '50s—Howard Hawks, John Huston, Samuel Fuller, Joe Dassin, Maurice and Jacques Tourner, Marcel Carné, Jean Duvivier, and Emilio Fernández. Valeria Sarmiento had wanted to work with me since we met, and in 1985 she asked me to write a treatment. During my youth, I had attended many performances of Spanish and Cuban zarzuelas, and one of them especially interested me—for its music, perhaps for its ambiance of the lower depths of Havana, something indefinable. *Rosa La China*, the zarzuela with music by Ernesto Lecuona and libretto by Gonzalo Sánchez Galarraga, opened during the '30s in the Teatro Martí, I think. And in the early '70s, I saw it again and thought the story was a disaster, or rather, absurd, but I thought it could take on a tragic intensity if the writing were reworked and intensified. Valeria loved the idea. I worked on the manuscript for several months, and I think it was of interest. Raul Julia, Rita Moreno, and José Ferrer wanted to do it. Financial problems stopped the project. Finally Valeria Sarmiento made the film in Cuba last year [2002]. Instead of handling the text well, she cut it, deleted things, simplified it, substituted the historical context—in a word, she massacred it without adding a single image of note. And, in spite of the efforts of the art designer, Carmen Arias, the result to my mind was lamentable.

After the failure of *Rosa La China*, I tried again and wrote *Una casa, un jardín* [A House, a Garden; 2003]. The story goes back to the years of my childhood. A house, surrounded by a beautiful garden, inhabited by a woman I hardly saw, with two servants, a chauffeur, and two gardeners. Hundreds of anecdotes were told and written about the woman: that her father and mother had a fortune and died in an accident, that in her youth she had traveled as a pianist, that the earth swallowed up her husband one day (which had overtones that he had been murdered), that her son studied at an American university, that the only person who visited her now and then was her mother-in-law. From all that, I put a puzzle together: a war to the death between two women in a territorial dispute over a house. Perhaps I was inspired thinking about Robert Wise's film, *The Haunting* [1963], and Luis Buñuel's film, *El* [1952], about a mansion. I hope it gets produced!

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