

Encuentro in L.A.: Challenging, probing theater from Colombia and Cuba

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Caleb Casas and Waldo Franco in *10 Millones* from Argos Teatro, Havana, Cuba / Manolo Garriga

LOS ANGELES—The L.A. Latinx theater festival *Encuentro de las Américas* currently in progress includes works by Cuban and Colombian companies. Very different from each other, both are focused around GLBTQ themes. Social consciousness in Latin America has indeed come a long way. It is reassuring to see that the pieces from their national repertoires that they chose to bring to L.A. touch on sensitive and, possibly for some, controversial material.

Let's go to Cuba first (quickly, before Trump's new travel restrictions go into place!). Havana's Argos Teatro production of *10 Millones* (10 Million) by playwright Carlos Celdrán (who also directs and is responsible for the scenic design) takes place over several decades, the 1960s to the 1990s, and actually beyond, but centers around the 1970 sugar harvest and Fidel's goal of a record 10 million tons. In fact the harvest that year did not reach the target, although through enormous popular mobilization a Cuban record was set. The goal was over-ambitious, and in the effort to achieve it, other sectors of industry and agriculture suffered.

Not that much of the almost two-hour-long, no-intermission play deals directly with this episode, but the title serves as a metaphor for the kind of single-mindedness the Cuban Revolution applied to its project, the total involvement—some might say manipulation—of the population in pursuit of the government's program. Internally, amongst the highest circles of society, some differences of thought might have been usefully permitted, but for mass consumption

there was a definite line, with appropriate motivating slogans, to be followed and even enforced.

Others might take issue, but personally I am convinced that if the Cubans had acted otherwise, with more dissent allowed, U.S.-style “free elections” and “bourgeois rights,” the Revolution would not have lasted long enough to become the beacon to the world in terms of healthcare, education and international solidarity, that it is today. In time the Cubans admitted they had been rather harsh, perhaps unnecessarily. In some cases leaders have apologized and moved forward.

One sign of ideological reform came in the 1993 film *Strawberry and Chocolate*, which announced to Cubans and to the world that the era of rigid opposition to any “alternative” sexual expression had now ended. It’s not coincidental that Cuba was by that time in its “Special Period,” reeling from the disappearance of the USSR and the supportive socialist bloc. Cuba no longer had to conform to rather backward Soviet views on sexuality, and in this, as well as in the arena of religious expression, Cuban society opened up. If Cubans had to tighten their belts because of economic and food scarcity, at least the leadership could compensate by tossing aside some of the former strictures that no longer really served a useful purpose.

And it is the gay question which, though unnamed in so many words, *10 Millones* (seen Nov. 5) is about. It bears mentioning, as well, that the population of Cuba is approximately 10 million, so the play title may equally refer to the history and evolution of the country itself. *10 Millones* debuted in Havana in 2016, and early in 2017 played in both Miami and New York. It has received critical praise and various literary and acting prizes.

A namesless man (Caleb Casas), who was a young teen at the time of the 1970 harvest, has a mother (Maridelmis Marín) who is not only a fervent adherent to the Revolution, but a “*capitana*,” a political leader who is driven to succeed in what has up to then been a mostly man’s world. Her commanding manner is brusque and dictatorial, triangulating her son’s thinking and emotions against his father. Early on she realized her mistake in marrying the man who would become the boy’s father (no one has a name). They soon divorced. Their mutual antagonism is prodded by the father’s disinterest in politics: He (Waldo Franco) is apathetic toward the Revolution (reminiscent of the great 1968 Cuban film *Memories of Underdevelopment*) but loving toward his son, with whom he gets to spend only one month a year over the summer in his rural town. A fourth actor, Daniel Romero, plays a host of ancillary roles.

Early on it’s clear the boy is not as macho as the Revolution expects him to be. He’s sent to a series of boarding schools to “butch him up,” but these efforts are unsuccessful. The play is a coming of age tale in which he must learn to acknowledge his own feelings, resist peer pressure, discover his own interests in life, come to terms with the intoxicating power of mass psychology, understand and forgive his parents, overcome shame and fear, and finally accept himself.

The opening statement by the factotum Daniel Romero indicates that the play emerged out of a writers’ workshop the playwright took in New York in 2001, strongly implying an autobiographical inspiration.

Celdrán is a leading figure in Cuban culture today. It’s not clear from the play whether or not the son character ever fully embraces his gayness, or how closely the character is modeled on the author’s own life. In any case, *10 Millones* is a powerful example of the freedom Cubans now enjoy to ruminate honestly on their own history, the mistakes and wrong turns of the Revolution, and yet also the commitment to remain and make things better.

This is highly recommended not only as a triumphant theatre experience, but as a wide-open window into the way Cubans are facing both present and future without regret and with a hard-earned optimism.

Beautiful butterflies burst from Colombian cocoons

From the Compañía Nacional de las Artes in Bogotá, Colombia, comes a somewhat more abstract, dreamlike work, *Las mariposas saltan al vacío* (“The Butterflies Jump to the Void”) with seven actors crawling and stomping all over a set with scaffolding and numerous platforms.

It's not entirely clear where we are: The program says we're in "*un camerino ruinoso*," a run-down dressing room. My Spanish dictionary doesn't have "*camerino*" but gives "*camero*" a specifically Colombian definition as a "highway," so if I'm not stretching a point, a *camerino* might conceivably be a metaphor for the little highway of life.

Several of the characters, whose love lives overlap with one another, identify themselves as "sero-positive," a polite way of saying HIV (if not AIDS), which are not mentioned as such. Are we in some kind of sanatorium, a group home or holding cell? Several characters present sickly symptoms such as coughing and fainting. It doesn't quite seem as though the characters are entirely free to come and go at will. "How long have we been here?" someone asks, as though we have dropped into a kind of purgatory for actors.

Perhaps the key is in the title: This world and this life that we know are like existing in a cocoon. Does the larva inside know it's shortly to become a brilliant South American butterfly? (And the corollary: Is the butterfly conscious of its past life in the cocoon?) The Marilyn Monroe-lipsyncing impersonator Lavinia la Selvaje ("the wild") performs just to know she's alive: What happens after we jump into the unknown next stage of life will simply have to be dealt with then.

In that sense the play seems profoundly existential and dialectical at the same time: "I confess, something is changing inside me," Lavinia says. "Another me is inside me," and it will not be long before we see it. The old society is dead and the new one is waiting to be born. The point is to live with meaning. "Oblivion is like being buried alive."

Other male characters run the gamut between the leather-clad macho and supposedly straight Gresil and acrobatic circus performers. One character is the excitable stage manager, somewhat

reminiscent of Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town*, but who he's working for is unclear; he later turns out to be a past lover of Lavinia. There is one female role in the play, La Gorda, unlucky and desperate in matters of the heart: The immature, unfaithful Gresil is one of her past flames. Nevertheless, we are assured, in one of many aphorisms that dot the unruly script, "Love is never insignificant."

As actors, even if tacky ones, the characters stage mini-versions of telenovelas in what may be the funniest passage of the play, as they perform the scenes as Mexicans, as Cubans and as Colombians—a little gentle but pointed hemispheric humor. "Mediocrity is contagious."

The hyperactive *Mariposas* wears the veil of fable and allegory, and as such is doubtless open to multiple interpretations. If we are to make sense of the lot we've been handed, it might help to remember, "God and the Devil exist but we shouldn't look for them outside ourselves." Marxists are pretty sure God doesn't exist but know full well that capitalism is the Devil; nevertheless, what we think, what we believe, what we do as the agents of our own lives is what we must focus on.



Las mariposas saltan al vacío ("The Butterflies Jump to the Void"), Compañía Nacional de las Artes, Bogotá, Colombia / courtesy of the artists

The proceedings in the antic *camerino* take place on the night of a full moon, which perhaps adds to the craziness on stage—and offstage as well insofar as it shone so brightly (on Nov. 3) that it was challenging to read the too-faint English supertitles just above it. I brought that to the producers' attention so perhaps it has been corrected now.

The festival program booklet is sketchy on details, so it's difficult to identify anyone by role. The seven actors are André Torres, Nicolás Ibáñez, César Morales, Nelson Celis, Alejandro Gómez, Cjhrstian Caína, and Martha Lazcano (La Gorda obviously). Scenic and lighting designs are by Jorge Cao, costumes by César Morales. The play has no intermission.

Performances continue at The Los Angeles Theatre Center, 514 S. Spring St., Los Angeles 90013 through Nov. 19. Go to www.thelatc.org to find a schedule.

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