

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Kate Raines, Plate3 Photography

¡Bienvenidos Todos! Welcome everyone!

by Barbora Píhřodov

In a quest to reach new audiences for performing arts in Philadelphia, [Theatre Philadelphia](#) and [thINKingDANCE](#) are joining forces and exploring how dance writing and discourse can provide new perspectives on theatre. Beginning May 2018, tD writers will be lending their varied backgrounds, interests, and approaches to criticism to professional works of theatre in Philadelphia. Let us know what you think in the comments!

¡Bienvenidos Blancos! or Welcome White People! is a collectively-devised theater performance by Team Sunshine Performance Corporation, led by Alex Torra. Inspired by Torra's experience of hyphenated identity (he is a first-generation Cuban-American), the performance dissects the highly problematic Cuban-American relationship since the 1959 Revolution.

Opening with live music by [TIMBALONA](#), a percussion collective focusing on folklore and popular music from the Caribbean and Latin America, the show is divided into four "chapters" (Cuba Wow!; Let's Make a Deal; Departures/Arrivals; Fantasy). The multilayered composition of this dynamic performance corresponds with the complex socio-political relationship between the two countries. Interweaving Spanish and English, spoken and written word (supertitles here play a big role) with personal stories, it combines theatrical genres with oral tradition. Boisterous, spectacular, and parodic scenes alternate with contemplative, intimate images of poetic beauty and a scene of Afro-Cuban dance. All this is orchestrated by five formidable performers/creators from Cuba and the United States.

The performance contains a number of rich moments that offer critical insight into the topic. It opens with two apathetic bureaucrats, Inez and Milady (Idalmis Garcia Rodriguez and Lori Felipe Barkin), and an old janitor (Jorge Enrique Caballero Elizarde) killing their time in a sleepy office of tourism. The arrival of a couple of North-American tourists, Preston and Julia (Benjamin Camp and Jenna Horton*), hungry for beach, culture, and some "old time Socialism," suddenly transforms the scene into an image of exotic "Cubanness" composed of stereotypical references to Cuba's "flavor:" sensual dance show, clich phrases ("I want to see Cuba before it changes"),

and the island's projected reputation as a "paradise of sin." Even the simple and thoughtful set (by Efren Delgadillo, Jr.), an interior of a colonial building with bright colored walls and a photo of Che Guevara, refers to a generic image we have about Cuba. The Cubans' quick transformation for the tourists suggests the reciprocal exploitation between the two sides: the foreigners looking for the "authentic Cuba," and the locals ready to fulfill the outsiders' fantasy in exchange for some dollars.

In the same chapter, Inez and Milady teach the North-American couple Spanish. In this hilarious and subversive frenzy, the Cuban women turn the tourists into human puppets, leading them to release their repressed desires in a foreign tongue. The couple is clumsy with both their language and their bodies, molded into ridiculous positions and exploited by the manipulation of their teachers. This scene climaxes with Preston portraying Fidel Castro. Costumed with a fake beard, a cigar, and the iconic military uniform, he unconsciously mocks the revolutionary propaganda by repeating phrases that Inez dictates to him.

The performers carry the piece with infectious energy, smoothly slipping in and out of their different roles. Jorge Caballero especially stands out, morphing between the old hunched janitor shuffling around with his mop, a warped soldier, and the highly charismatic dancer/story-teller. Caballero lowers his center of gravity, softly bounces his head and limbs, and in an instant he becomes Elegua, a mischievous boy-deity in the Afro-Cuban Santeria religion. This is one of the performance's most sublime moments.

With all the potential richness, the performance also runs risks. During the Saturday matinee, two ladies left in the middle, hissing "¡Que viva la Revolución, coño!" [Long live the Revolution, damn!] Fantasy, the chapter that caused this anger, sums up the life story of Eugenia, who, when young, compares her excitement about getting engaged to the hope she felt during the Revolution. But as time goes by, and with several members of her family persecuted by the government, she sees through the illusion and decides to emigrate, leaving her husband behind. This scene is staged as a parody of Latin American soap opera with its archetypal characters and excess of emotions. As someone born in Czechoslovakia whose heritage includes the Communist past, I feel uneasy looking at these caricatures: am I supposed to laugh at them? Is this really all we can say about the complex experience that has affected generations of people, turning many lives into tragedies? *Why* did those people become infatuated with the idea of the Revolution in the first place? Unfortunately, the show does not really ask these questions, leaving us with the all too comfortable but flat narrative of naïve fools who fell for the "evil" of the Revolution, and only opened their eyes too late.

In the finale, Torra himself steps up on the stage, humble, almost timid, speaking in Spanish, a language, he explains, he doesn't feel so comfortable in. Looking into his notes every once in a while, he gives a brief story of his family (who emigrated to Miami in the 1960s and never returned), and he talks about the feeling of gradually losing his 'Cubanness' and turning more 'white.' That is why he made this performance, he says, and it is difficult.

This is a powerful concluding gesture, rendering the performance as a bold attempt to *work through the mess*, with all the risks involved. *¡Bienvenidos Blancos!* is a genuine invitation for further conversation. I have no doubt that this conversation is absolutely crucial now, in the time of heated debates over immigration, and in a time when Philadelphia theatre community questions its own ability to include diverse identities.

[*¡Bienvenidos Blancos! or Welcome White People!*](#), Alex Torra & Team Sunshine Performance, FringeArts, Apr 18-28 www.postshow.fun

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By Barbora Píhlová
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