

CHAPTER 34

Staging the Revolution: Cuba's Theatrical Perspectives

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Abstract: This paper explores the ways in which two Cuban plays, Carlotta Corday by Nara Mansur and Charenton, by Raquel Carrió and Flora Lauten, examine recent and ongoing transformations on the island. The investigation is grounded in a discussion of the changing meaning(s) of "revolution", as a historical, social and political concept contemplated by contemporary theater practitioners and others. The plays expose how vestiges of revolutionary spectacle continue to inform key relationships in Cuba as the playwrights resituate revolution as a global struggle against power, rather than for possession of it.

What precisely does a revolution entail? Is it political? Social? Both? A single event or ongoing? Are the changes it causes destructive as well as constructive? Is the term "revolución" still applied as it was in 1959? In 1975? In 1990? Nearly half a century after the defeat of Cuba's previous government, is Cuba still "revolutionary?" What do recent changes mean for Cubans and non-Cubans, especially since Fidel Castro resigned in February? Many Cuban theater practitioners contemplate the vast implications of the "concept" of revolution in general, as well as specifically within Cuba. The Special Period has rendered these self-assessments imperative, significantly molding the identities portrayed on stage. This paper investigates how two recent Cuban plays reflect these transformations. Artists Nara Mansur, Flora Lauten and Raquel Carrió question how vestiges of revolutionary spectacle continue to affect key contemporary problems on the island. Their plays pointedly refocus the discourse of revolution by situating it as a worldwide struggle "against" power, rather than for possession of it. After investigating the meaning(s) of revolution, I will explore how two theatrical pieces, entitled *Carlotta Corday* and *Charenton*, engage these ideas.

The Webster's Dictionary of the English Language defines "revolution" as: "1. a complete and forcible overthrow of an established government or political system, 2. a radical and pervasive change in society and the social structure, esp. one made suddenly and often accompanied by violence, 3. a rotation with a return to a point of origin. The *Diccionario de la lengua española* (Dictionary of the Spanish Language) defines "revolución" as an "abrupt or violent change in the social or political structure of a state" or as "a total and radical change." In general, modern uses of the term "revolution" share three basic elements: they are intended to signal a new era in history, they imply violence/disorder/disruption that leads to (or is part of) upheaval, and they often have greater than national relevance.

The use of the term revolution to describe widespread changes in economic and social developments, such as an industrial, scientific or technological revolutions, extend the word's meaning even further. Scientific historian Thomas Kuhn observes that both political and scientific revolutions are generated by a growing sense that existing frameworks no longer sufficiently engage contemporary problems. He points out that it is these failures that lead to crises. The scientific revolution began with ideas from earlier leaders (just as Castro has always cited José Martí) and it indicated a modern outlook because it "incorporated," rather than disregarded, ideas from the past. Hence, Kuhn defines a scientific revolution as:

...a consequent shift in the problems available for scientific scrutiny and in the standards by which the profession determine[s] what should count as an admissible problem or as a legitimate problem-solution.(6)

This emphasis on history and re-vision illustrates science's desire to understand the historical integrity of its own advances. Yet once a scientific theory has become paradigmatic, Kuhn insists it can only be discarded when a viable alternative is available to replace it. "To reject one paradigm without simultaneously substituting another is to reject science itself," (79) he claims. Is this also true for social and political movements? Does rejecting one system automatically mean "accepting" another? Is any shift in paradigm automatically progressive? A new paradigm can resolve a recognized problem in a way no other option can, yet it is also expected to preserve, challenge, or further the achievements of its predecessors.

Kuhn suggests that even a seemingly localized incongruity can evoke profound change far beyond the local or national level. The global assimilation of international circumstances or ideas can create crises outside of the community that directly experiences the changes. In other words, revolutions have reach. “The Cuban Revolution has had a profound and enduring influence upon world politics,” writes historian Geraldine Lievesley, “an influence which belies its status as a small, poor Third World country” (9). Just as envisioning the world as round instead of flat altered all possibilities, the Cuban Revolution illustrated that a modern, successful revolution with minimal bloodshed was feasible in Latin America. This was a major shift in paradigm. A paradigm shift does not merely add to the scope and precision of a field, but “reshapes what is possible,” thus modifying (often essentially) a world view.

In the last fifteen years, the economic deterioration of Cuba and communism’s global retreat have often eclipsed the Cuban Revolution and its accomplishments. The decline on the island has proven to some that Cuba never really achieved sovereignty by escaping U.S. dominance, but rather exchanged one master (America) for another (the Soviet Union). How might Cubans answer Lievesley’s contention that, “The question... during the Special Period was whether the socialist character of [Cuba’s] political and social system would be subsumed by its insertion into the world economy” (162)? While foreign capital has been the means of the island’s sustenance for nearly two decades, its long-term effects on the country’s ideology remain unclear. The most important issues facing Cubans today involve their future—their economic survival, as well as their ideological and political status beyond the Castro brothers. How long can Cuba’s situation still be considered a “revolution” and does this designation matter, currently or historically? How will the paradigm shift if, half a century after its revolution, Cuba undergoes a political transformation?

Plays by Cuban playwrights have represented more than 75% of the country’s theatrical repertoire over the last decade. Despite logistical challenges, Cuba’s national stages remain important sites of critical and ideological debate in Cuban society and among its foreign audiences. Plays like *Carlotta Corday* by Mansur and *Charenton* by Lauten and Carrió incisively trace the contradictions and complications of revolution in myriad intricate and paradoxical ways. Both plays use the French Revolution

as a metaphor. They offer revisions of Cuba's own revolutionary history as viewed in hindsight, from the current state of contemporary Cuba. These postmodern, transitory, hyper-imaginative theater pieces reveal how recent obstacles, like power outages, have engendered thoughtful ingenuities and unique dramatic ironies on stages in Havana. *Carlotta Corday* and *Charenton* fashion new worlds before the eyes of audiences, new worlds that incorporate an ongoing dialogue between revolutionary reality and history, between spectacle and lived experience.

In Nara Mansur's recent "dramatic poem or monologue" entitled *Carlotta Corday*, the playwright uses Charlotte Corday's French Revolutionary history to comment on the myths of revolution and their effects on contemporary Cuban life. It's important to note that the historical Corday was not a counter-revolutionary, but a committed Girondist who didn't like what the French Revolution had become. Soon after 1789, the radical Jacobin party initiated mass atrocities and beheadings known as the Reign of Terror. When dozens of loyal Girondists were guillotined, Corday began plotting to kill Marat. Cuban playwright Mansur asserts that by killing Marat, Corday paradoxically turned him into a martyr and gave his supporters an excuse to execute even more dissenters.

Like Marat's insurrection, the Cuban Revolution has often changed course and has been highly contested for doing so. Continually citing Peter Weiss' ground-breaking play *Marat/Sade* and the French Revolution itself, Nara Mansur constructs a complex pastiche of art and history that uses Charlotte Corday to critique revolution while presenting her in a way that is revolutionary itself. Mansur creates the modern "character" (there are no delineated "roles" in her dramatic poem) who can be understood as a present-day Corday or possibly the poet Mansur herself. The play makes it clear that, as Sidney Parnum writes, "The similarity of the actual histories is less important than the similarity of the ways in which they are perceived." Theater scholar Una Chaudhuri explains that in *Marat/Sade*, "a 'there and then' is rendered as a 'here and now'.... Everything occurs in the present tense, before our eyes." The opening of *Carlotta Corday* is set in 1990, with a girl attending her grandfather's funeral. Mansur grounds the play in contemporary times, but immediately refers to the Revolution and her grandfather's participation in its national literacy campaign in the 1960s. Both eras become the backdrop for Mansur's

views. The archetypal conflict between history and myth emerges as the revolutionary past is blended with the theatrical present.

Carlotta Corday reiterates the rupture found in Weiss' play-within-a-play; it therefore incorporates not only our historical knowledge but also our theatrical knowledge of France's heroine and revolution. Chaudhuri suggests, "...Multiplicity is not merely a fact of [*Marat/Sade's*] stage history... or even of its textual history; rather it is a property of the play's meaning, structured into its text in the form of a complex system of historical and psychological layering." I would argue that by subsuming Weiss' work into her own, Mansur manipulates this multiplicity and adds another intriguing layer to it. Because a reader produces a play as much as the play itself operates on the reader, a Cuban audience reading *Carlotta Corday* must question boundaries when playwright/poet Mansur, an educated female within a revolutionary system, writes about an educated female who murders a revolutionary in an attempt to better her beloved country. France is hardly the society evoked when this character poignantly tells the public, "we are the inventors of the revolution but we still don't know how to use it" and advocates "the revolution of the revolution of the revolution." Furthermore, troubled subjectivity is reflected in *Carlotta Corday* when the character remarks:

I'm an assassin
But this is not an identity
As if something were an identity
In reality, I was born in Latin America
I ate a lot of magic beans since I was a girl (8)

Unfixed subjectivity is precisely why this character must emerge before the audiences' eyes, in the present. She, like the Revolution, can never be completed, but instead develops an identity throughout time. This text's dynamic relationship to *Marat/Sade* and to Cuba's particular revolutionary history make it essential to read *Carlotta Corday* for its slippages in meaning.

In September of 2005, at the International Theatre Festival in Havana, I saw Teatro Buendia's production of *Charenton*, an adaptation of Peter Weiss' *Marat/Sade* by Flora Lauten and Raquel Carrió. The piece begins with actors sitting all over the playing area at dressing tables, partially visible in vanity mirrors. The year "1793" and the setting, an asylum full

of inmates, are announced while the cast remarks that “great revolutions change the world” and that “history repeats itself.” Is the Cuban Revolution repeating itself? Is it repeatable? Or is repetition somehow inspiring change? Jean-Paul Marat is then introduced and the inmates decorate his body with yellow paint, depicting the cheese-like affect of his skin disease. Much like the myth of Fidel Castro, the people create Marat, even paint on his skin color. The inmates complain to Marat about the injustices in their city, like the ridiculously long bread lines, conditions all too familiar to contemporary Cubans. They claim that the revolution should’ve brought them “food” and not “bread,” should’ve nourished them rather than merely fed them. They argue that the rich have “goods” while they have “illusions,” a common theme on the island where dollar stores abound for tourists, but Cuban pesos buy less and less.

The Marquis de Sade quickly enters the fray, snidely insisting that a real revolution inspires the liberation of individuals, not the proletariat. He eagerly describes the deaths occurring in the city as the inmates create images of heads being separated from bodies. This separation illustrates the enormous divide between ideas about revolution and their tangible, bodily consequences: ideology and implementation are portrayed as being at odds with one another. De Sade mockingly insists that he himself is “the revolution,” that personal desires, not what is best for the whole population, will prevail. The ongoing conflict between individualism and socialism that anchors the production echoes the struggle of post-Soviet Cuba.

The question of when a revolution is completed is invoked by the narrator, who implores Marat, “And after?” Marat’s simple response is that there is no “after.” If Fidel is the Cuban Revolution and the Revolution is Fidel, what might come after him? Can his revolution continue without him? Soon a blindfolded Marat defeatedly laments that “the revolution was possible.” Was? A newspaper seller enters, calling out a headline that reads, “We saved the revolution.” Is “we” the people of Cuba? Could the remark be sarcastic? The inmates now scream their demands at Marat, complaining, like Cubans, about “inflation” and access to “food.” The crowd grows hostile, accusing Marat of changing the discourse, an accusation often levied at Fidel Castro. The inmates undress Charlotte, who finally asphyxiates Marat only when she has been stripped of everything she has.

Yet it is after this violent act that the play takes its greatest risk. As Charlotte tries to take a knife from De Sade to finish Marat off, the narrator intercepts the weapon and offers it to the audience, suggesting we participate in this murder. Then he calmly places the knife downstage. It is as if he is waiting for the public to act, waiting for the people to get involved and violently remove their leader. The knife hauntingly remains center stage throughout the rest of the piece. The nervous narrator soon shuns responsibility by insisting that the play is only a representation, explaining that the inmates are actors, not politicians.

The play then transforms its own theater. The curtains covering the back wall of the stage open, revealing the exterior service door of the stage itself. The narrator boisterously throws the huge rear doors open and exits the asylum (or does he?) out into the Havana street, repeating Marat's speech about unifying the people. Everything is transformed - the world outside is now visible and the theatrical space has been extended into Havana and into oblivion. The play, and its challenges, spill over into the city.

The characters in both *Carlotta Corday* and *Charenton* are profoundly manipulated by the myths, assurances and realities of revolution. Historical and actual violence (metaphoric, physical and emotional) permeate their experiences, and change, or continual revolution, is virtually guaranteed. Both pieces warn against the institutionalization of revolution and question formulations of the nation state; Mansur even suggests the end of nationalism itself. These artists indicate that it is now the *revolutionary* framework that no longer sufficiently engages contemporary problems. Their works are dialectical and have a profound largess precisely because they span decades, continents, theories and characters. Do these plays, like one basic definition of revolution, signal a new era? Solicit one? Demand one? Because Cuba's revolutionary society has persisted for nearly fifty years, its ideals have often been reconfigured or reconstructed—they revolve and evolve, unhinging definitions. The Revolution floats, yet is fixed; it repeats (as Benitez-Rojo noted) and adjusts. It engages the world while retreating from it, participates while isolating itself, and somehow engenders hope without proposing a specific future. Has the Cuban Revolution made a “revolution” and come full circle? These perceptive, innovative plays artfully evoke these complications and

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contradictions, refracting them back to audiences for intense consideration.

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