

A Playwright Who Thinks Out Loud

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Theater in contemporary Cuba is becoming a place for debate, a space in which identities, the politics of difference and memory are negotiated. There is a sphere of Cuban theater enjoying very good health, in which veteran playwrights like Abelardo Estorino, Eugenio Hernández Espinosa and Gerardo Fullea León shine, as do the young vanguard of notables like Carlos Díaz, Abel González Melo, Norge Espinosa, Alberto Curbelo, etc. Each and every one of them delves into that politics of memory to find justice for the forever marginalized: women, blacks, homosexuals and handicapped people. Each one of them thinks about this reality out loud.

The most noteworthy plays in Cuban dramaturgy today are by Eugenio Hernández Espinosa (Cuba, 1936), as well as his black colleagues Gerardo Fullea León and the deceased Tomás González. Hernández Espinosa is not only one of Cuba's most important playwrights; he is just that important to the whole Caribbean, too. His exploration of ambiguous identities and blackness put his work on a plane with that of Aimé Césaire (from Martinique) and Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott (from St. Lucia).

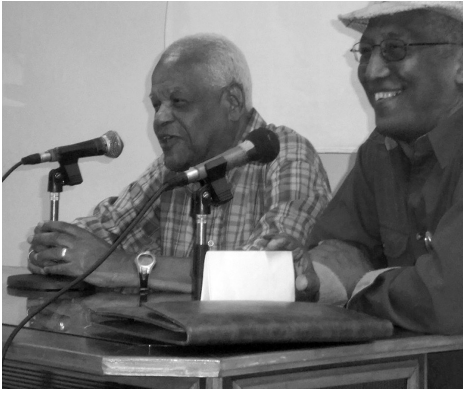
His is a theater of ideas taken to the stage. The issue of race is one of his obsessions, as it is with his colleague, Fullea León, the latter of whom has never negotiated with skin. His

theater seems closer to that of Abilio Estévez, Héctor Quintero and Abel González Melo—all of them white Cubans.

Eugenio is a man who has not stopped shouting out or broadening his ideas. His entire *oeuvre* is a space of resistance, empowerment and cimarronaje. He is a gentleman of the stage who continues fighting for the true emancipation of the black subject. He is greatly pained by the tattoos his Island of the Skin—Cuba—bears. Racism and *machismo*, as well as homophobia, are permanent tattoos on the corporal identity of the Cuban nation.

His work is a point of departure for understanding the communicating vessels between race and nation. A poetics of otherness serves as its principal tools. He is a man with one, singular purpose who has taken up the rhetoric of the marginalized—with conscience and honesty. For Hernández Espinosa, it has become his destiny to defend this point of view.

He unmasks truths and proposes a sharp look at little explored zones of our reality. Shaking up official spaces from time to time has left on him some wounds, scrapes that have delayed in healing. Tomás, Gerardo, Eugenio, and others, were victims of a parametrization designed by orthodox, anti-intellectual, revolutionary policy. The problems they faced were greater than those of their white colleagues;



Eugenio Hernández Espinosa (left) and Gerardo Fullea León

they navigated turbulent waters and felt the sting of marginalization. Today, they continue their work with a heightened sense of caution, restoring fissures, illuminating ashes, and reviewing pending tasks.

Cuba and the black subject are always present in their work. Their stories confer dignity and humanity on the world of the marginalized. Women, blacks, homosexuals and poor whites are the protagonists of their plays—men wounded by humiliation, limitations and prejudices, but inspired by a will to fight a battle they will never win.

Hernández Espinosa considers himself to be an activist for integration. Like playwright Alberto Pedro Torriente (Habana, 1954-2005), Ernesto's work is markedly political. For him, racism is a political conflict. He is known for looking inward, as do all playwrights of African origin. They look inward to create a necessary theater; a theater necessary for exorcising the nation, transcending the limits of silenced shouts, excluding nothing.

The past, with its traps, is within our reach. Yet even so-called, strange characters

are also protagonists in the work of these writers. After the fall of all revolutionary utopias, their protagonists feel as though they have too few alternatives. Each and every one of their words celebrates otherness and difference. They have put the world of the marginalized on the map. The unique María Antonia, Calixta Comité, La Simona, Lagarto Pisa Bonito, Emelina Cundeamor, Tibor Galaraga, the emigrant Niurka in *Chita no come maní*, and Suchel, are some of the celebrated protagonists that come to life on stage. Yet, we could find any one of them in any corner of the island—the tenement yard, shanty town, or ghettos found anywhere there is poverty.

Just like these characters in a play, many blacks feel as though they are still anchored to society's gutter. They feel that it is not difficult to be a man, but rather to be black. Hernández Espinosa's work reminds us that *black is beautiful*, even if the whip's sting keeps lashing and scarring us. Neither does it ignore the religious universe of African origin that has for so long been silenced to condemnation and disdain.

For one to understand the complex weave of Cuban culture, one must know Eugenio Hernández Espinosa's work. He is a man who continues to examine unknown lives with considerable success, and finds in them solid and expressive arguments. His work is choral in nature; it seduces one and offers one free reign to interrogate it. He jars and totally reveals phenomena still anchored to our intimacy. He has the freedom to alert us and not allow us to be confused by power elite's demagoguery.

Just like Masiguere, the crazy character in *María Antonia*, Eugenio is calling for lots more light in so much darkness. This giant of the stage has left his guts—his heart and soul—in each play of his that has reached the stage.