

# The Cuban National Lyric Theater: From Institution to Company, Contracts to Contacts, Collective to Small, Selective Group

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Just as in the case of the Matanzas Lyric Theater, the national one is in danger of disappearing after having celebrated festivals with participation from presenters of internationally known genres, performances in plazas and public spaces (the Cathedral, the Palace of the Captains General), and well as with events such as the Ibero-American Summit (1999) and Habanos 2000.

What will happen to those who gave their lives to keep this institution going, who from their youngest years to old age have given up everything for the stage? Why this decadence and decay? Why has it ceased being an institution? When did this happen? There are lots of question, but very few answers.

In over fifty years, we can examine the years during which it was great and the reason for its great success. The answer is unique: its direction. Many have served in that coveted position: singers, actor-singers, and orchestra directors. Yet, the best years were under this last kind of direction.

If earlier there were 50 soloists who worked in the productions of any or all of the Opera or Zarzuela companies, or the Lyric Comedy, and not ignoring the 60 exceptional choir voices, or the internal rivalries that exist, as in all companies, their quality was constantly acknowledged by the large audiences' ovations

at the end of every presentation. This was and will always be the greatest measure of success.

Today, the quality of these presentations is totally different, and both quantity and quality of soloists has declined considerably: all this due to a lack of principles, and a sense of belonging and responsibility. This creates loads of mediocrity and diminishes attendance at performances; presentations few and far between, and with a stale cast, which is not always as good as the characters demand, causes many of the spectators to end up being family members, who applaud to be polite. Yet, they are the audience. Sometimes there is even more personnel on the stage than in the theater seats.

Hallway conversation reveals that this reality is criticized in public and even the press; but there is a cautious desire to continue destroying the genre's image, despite having been a famous, national, cultural institution. Today, it can be seen collapsing—like a house of cards—under a youthful and cynically forceful assault against what was the prestigious National Lyric Theater of Cuba only yesterday. It is the only cultural entity that writes contracts with soloists and singing actresses and actors in July, choral singers in December, while it continues signing new choir singers from the island's provinces.

How will this destructive enterprise end? The objective is to conveniently contract those who support the interests of the Artistic Council and Director, if they can be called so, since the designations were mysterious and imposed. No fruit, much less young person, can mature—no matter how talented—after revealing a lack of competence for a role that requires not only knowledge of orchestra direction, but also of lyric art and execution. These are not skills that can be learned solely through training or readings. Instead, they require experience with reality.

One must be modest to be able to seek out those who have had the fortune of presenting in great works and have valuable experience, people like Maestro and Orchestra Director Roberto Sánchez Ferrer. One needs a person who does not mix relations with friends and family with work; someone with a clear vision who is willing to push a company forward and prevents the hiring of inept or inappropriate personnel.

Uncertainty spreads like a plague and affects not only the artistic cast, but also administrative staff. Who will be left to carry out these tasks when there is no work?

In the midst of this depressing scenario, the worst effect of all this—as is almost always the case in Cuba—is on the Afro-descendant company members. As has already been said, although not enough, black lyric singers exhibit talent, but quite often have had to find work elsewhere, outside the country, or given up on their careers. Even those who have had successful careers in other countries have garnered very little recognition from the cultural authorities in Cuba. There are now more than one in seven company members who are black, a shortage which created a need to search the streets for talent for a production of *Porgy and Bess*, which was a great hit in Europe.

A company's direction can change, as can its structure and methodology. This can cause its artistic delivery to suffer. But, what has not changed is the disdain for the talent and effort of dark-skinned singers. They have never been seen or appreciated as material for main roles or soloists, with the few exceptions being when directorial needs and interests were concerned. This is just like the milieu of indolence and injustice that the work of great filmmaker Sara Gómez confronted 45 years ago, when she made the documentary *La otra isla* [The Other Island], containing the painful and frustrated testimony of a young, black singer who had a brief and traumatic stint with the company.

This is what we artists today suffer, upon seeing years of work and sacrifice crumble. Despite the fact that many of this permanent situation's victims will not dare protest, it is a terrible shame that black artists like Vicente Escobar, José White or Brindis de Salas received more recognition in colonial Cuba than we can aspire to now, with the current government, which presents itself as a guarantor of the fullest social equality.

How long will we have to endure this affront? Who will take up the reins on this situation with dignity? Who will be designated the head of Performing Arts next? Hopefully, this time they will choose someone who is truly interested in salvaging the memory of refined, sacrificed and lowly valued art. They should not forget that just as there should be no unemployment in this socialist society, an imprudent decision will leave an entire company of artists unemployed at a time when it is best equipped to perform its profession, and in which many have not served even half the time required to opt for retirement. Thus, one of the problems that the revolution proposed to solve upon its triumph remains a threat. We are demanding sense and, above all, respect for this genre.