

Cuban Zarzuela And The (Neo)Colonial Imagination: A Subaltern Historiography Of  
Music Theater In The Caribbean

A dissertation presented to  
the faculty of  
the College of Fine Arts of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

Henry W. MacCarthy

November 2007

This dissertation titled  
Cuban Zarzuela and the (Neo)Colonial Imagination: A Subaltern Historiography of  
Music Theater in the Caribbean

by

HENRY W. MACCARTHY

has been approved for  
the School of Interdisciplinary Arts  
and the College of Fine Arts by

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Marina L. Peterson

Assistant Professor of Interdisciplinary Arts

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Charles A. McWeeny

Dean, College of Fine Arts

## ABSTRACT

MACCARTHY, HENRY W., Ph.D., November 2007, Interdisciplinary Arts

Cuban Zarzuela and the (Neo)Colonial Imagination: A Subaltern Historiography of Music Theater in the Caribbean (168 pp.)

Director of Dissertation: Marina L. Peterson

Zarzuela is a musical theater genre in which alternating sung and spoken text do not rupture the dramatic action. It originated in Spain during the seventeenth century primarily as a form of court entertainment, however it soon became an effective tool for the consolidation of Spanish colonial power in the Americas. While many of the former Spanish colonies developed native zarzuela genres, Cuba was the only American territory to develop a solid and prolific zarzuela culture with an extensive repertoire.

Cuban zarzuela developed and flourished in Cuba between the 1920s and 30s, a few decades after the Spanish relinquished control of the Island. This historical period was marked by pronounced shifts in the country's political, economic, and cultural sectors. As the country began to define itself as a nation, artists turned back to the colonial experience in search of a national identity. Hence, from its inception Cuban zarzuela has been part of a nationalist project. Even though its structure follows closely that of its Spanish counterpart, Cuban zarzuela is an independent musical theater genre, differentiated from the former by the inclusion of Afrocuban, European and Indocuban performance practices that circulated throughout the Island until the early twentieth century.

I position Cuban zarzuela and the themes it explores in the context of what Diana Taylor has labeled ‘scenarios of discovery’ to designate a research paradigm that decenters European modes of knowledge production and transmission in the interpretation of cultural phenomena in the Americas. In doing so, I frame my analysis by locating and exploring the gaps within and among the histories of the Spanish *conquest*, and the subsequent trajectories of the scenario in the diaspora. My objective is to localize the ways in which zarzuela has been an active participant in discourses of Cuban national identity construction. I conclude my analysis with an exploration of the relationships between zarzuela, cultural memory, and identity formation.

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_

Marina L. Peterson

Assistant Professor of Interdisciplinary Arts

## DEDICATION

*A mis padres: solidarios, incondicionales, jodedores.*

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

The development and completion of this work would not have been possible without the support of many individuals. I am grateful to Marina Peterson, whose advice, dedication, and insights were crucial to this project. Likewise, the distinguished members of my committee, Dora Wilson, William Condee, and Keith Harris have graciously assisted me at various levels during this process.

I am equally indebted to Karen Kornweibel and my colleagues in the School of Interdisciplinary Arts in particular my gratitude extends to Heather Pinson, Daisy Wang, Cari Massey, Jason Hartz, and Ovgu M. Gokce R.

Last, but not least, I am very grateful to Gini Gorlinski. Her advice and support at the early stages of this dissertation paved the way for its subsequent development.

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## INTRODUCTION

If anyone is still under the illusion that questions of culture  
can ever be discussed free from and outside questions of power,  
you have only to look at the Caribbean to understand how for centuries  
every cultural characteristic and trait had its class, color, and racial inscription.  
Stuart Hall

The term zarzuela was originally employed to designate a seventeenth century Spanish court theater form in which short dramatic pieces accompanied by music entertained the King and the aristocracy. Later, during the second half of the nineteenth century zarzuela reappeared in Spain as a fully formed musical theater genre, in which characters embodied stories drawn from Madrid's everyday life to the rhythms of popular musics, improvisation, and dance. Zarzuela was the Spanish response to the musical theater genres addressing European nationalisms during the nineteenth century. Embedded in the articulation of Spanish identities the genre became an important tool in the consolidation of the Empire's colonial power, as such zarzuela traveled to the Americas leaving its footprint in the performance practices of the *discovered* territories. Generally, the genesis of zarzuela has been linked to other European musical theater genres such as the British and French music hall and operetta (Hearney 2005, Stein 1993, Webber 2002) while ignoring the American contributions and borrowings during the genre's trajectories throughout the colonies. My project entails an intervention in the historiography of zarzuela from its inception to the genre's journeys to the so-called New World, and the development of native forms of zarzuela, specifically in Cuba. I argue that in order to understand Cuban zarzuela, one must first understand Spanish zarzuela. While Spanish zarzuela is indeed influenced by European musical theater, its contact with and



throughout the Americas was crucial in the gestation, consumption and development of the genre. To this effect, I delve into the history of Spanish zarzuela in chapter one, and position the genre within the context of cultural and artistic traffic between Spain and the Americas, specifically within the Caribbean, with a particular emphasis on Cuba. In order to explore the cultural transactions that emerged from the Spanish invasion I pay special attention to the events immediately following the arrival of Columbus, the objective is to frame my analysis within the traumatic consequences of the *encounter*. This approach responds to my conviction that all artistic production in the colonial and neocolonial Caribbean remains entangled in the trauma produced by the so-called *discovery*.

Cuban zarzuela emerged during the late 1920s, just a few decades after the Spanish crown relinquished its control of the Island. This historical time—known as the first Republic, or most effectively the neocolonial period—was marked by a series of pronounced shifts in the country’s political, economic, and cultural sectors. Yet, as the country struggled to define itself as a nation; artists began to explore the colonial past in search of a national identity. However, etiological endeavors in the Caribbean context have always proved futile, Stuart Hall asserts that “it is impossible to locate in the Caribbean an origin for its people” (1995: 4), due to the accelerated extinction of the indigenous groups right after the arrival of Columbus, which, Hall contends, is the first trauma of identity in the Caribbean. Consequently, the postcolonial imagination has turned back repeatedly to the scenario of discovery in order to construct a simulacrum of historic beginning. This historic rupture has been labeled “the most dramatic encounter with the Other in our history” (Conquergood 7), and permeated all moments of

recollection and cultural memory in the collective consciousness of Caribbean identities. Eventually the simulacrum, following Baudrillard, stands on its own as a copy without a model, nurturing the cultural amnesias that plague our understanding of the Caribbean, and its people.

In chapter two, I explore the genesis of Cuban zarzuela. Through an analysis of the contributions made by the various ethnic groups residing in the Island, I explore the elements that defined Cuban performance practices during the Spanish colonial period and the subsequent American occupation. Concurrently, I explore how Cuban zarzuela functioned as a performance of cultural memory in the construction of the Cuban past, while participating in the articulation of twentieth century Cuban national identities.

Significantly, among the characters that populate Cuban zarzuela plots, drawn from indigenous theater forms, the mulata figures prominently as the recurring lead around which the stories evolve. Embraced as an allegorical symbol of the Cuban nation, celebrating the African and Spanish heritage that permeated collective identities in the Island, the mulata has been commodified in apparently unproblematic ways. For example, nowadays in the area known as Habana Vieja (Old Habana), a historical municipality in the city of La Habana enclosed by baroque and neoclassical monuments among Spanish colonial buildings, tourists cram the street markets in search of authentic Cuban material culture. Dozens of small vendors offer small clay figurines of anatomically impossible mulatas, with colorful rumba dresses and miniscule Cuban cigars attached to their prominent red lips. A few blocks into the center of the municipality, right in front of the Cathedral of La Habana a group of Cuban women

embodies the figurines. Dressed in traditional mulata attire these women perform the fetishized myth, while tourists pay for the opportunity to capture in a photograph their momentary experience with the legendary symbol. In this amusement park-like transaction, colonial desires and fantasies are, once again, negotiated and satisfied.

Cuban zarzuela presents the mulata in ways that problematize the traditional modes of consumption of the legendary symbol. While maintaining her status as an object of desire, zarzuela plots focus on her inevitable demise, revealing racial, ethnic, gender, and class tensions that distinguished the complexity of Cuban identity formation. In chapter three, I address these issues in the context of zarzuela's performance conventions and through textual analysis.

Shortly after 1940, Cuban zarzuela began to lose popularity, and it continued its decline all the way into Revolutionary Cuba. With the mass exodus from the Island in the early 1960s Cuban zarzuela experienced a revival in the diaspora and again played a key role in negotiating what it meant to be Cuban, this time in exile. Focusing on the large Cuban and Cuban American community residing in Miami, Florida, I draw upon the history and construction of the *exilio* through the social, political, economic and cultural exchanges that defined the architecture of the Cuban diaspora, and the roles played by zarzuela in the circulation of neocolonial values.

In chapter four, I explore the relationships between collective memory and nostalgia in the performance of Cuban zarzuela in the diaspora. I argue that zarzuela played a crucial role in construction of the *Cuba de ayer* (Yesterday's Cuba), through a transformation of the genre's performance practices. In addition, I trace the active role

played by Cuban cultural organizations in Miami, and how through zarzuela, they supported and contested the exilic experience. Finally, I explore how the effects of the genre's (trans)location and (trans)formation shaped zarzuela's performance and reception in exile.

While musical theater genres in the Americas that emerged and developed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have garnered a significant following and general public attention, such as the American musical, "they do lack effective advocacy within the academy" (Knapp xvii). This situation is particularly troubling considering the scarce scholarship on Cuban zarzuela. To date there are only two full length studies dedicated to the genre, and none that focus on Cuban zarzuela in the diaspora.

Enrique Rio Prado's La venus de bronce: Hacia una historia de la zarzuela cubana (2002) published by the Society of Spanish and Spanish-American Studies, is considered "la primera obra seria que enfoca la historia de la zarzuela cubana" (Beardsley 155) (the first serious work that focuses on the history of Cuban zarzuela).<sup>1</sup> Rio Prado, a Cuban music historian residing in La Habana, chronicles the performance history of the genre from its inception until the late twentieth-century, excluding the genre's circulation in the Cuban exile. The first chapters describe the trajectories followed by native forms of Cuban *teatro bufo* (comic theater) from the late eighteenth-century to the last decades of the nineteenth-century followed by a catalogue of premieres, venues and titles performed between 1926 until 1931. However, Rio Prado's most valuable contribution resides in the transcription of newspaper and magazine reviews, to which this study is greatly indebted.

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<sup>1</sup> All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

Additionally, the book includes a series of comprehensive appendices, most notably a listing of performances at the Teatro Martí between 1931 and 1936.

Although Susan Thomas' doctoral dissertation *Lo mas femenino de los generos: Gender, Race, and Representation in the Cuban Zarzuela, 1927-1944* (2002) remains unpublished, her study is the only comprehensive musicological analysis of the genre. Thomas examines the historical period covered by Rio Prado, however, her study focuses on the relationships between music, gender and race, through a survey of canonical works. Her contribution details the links between various modes of gender and racial representations on the zarzuela stage and their corresponding musical language.

In addition to a few articles,<sup>2</sup> cursory attention has been paid to Cuban zarzuela in studies published within the last decade. Maria Teresa Linares and Faustino Nuñez' *La musica entre Cuba y España* (1998) devotes a chapter to Spanish zarzuela in Cuba and the development of Cuban musical theater. Linares and Nuñez venture beyond zarzuela into other musical theater manifestations including, but not limited to, the *sainete lírico*<sup>3</sup>. In addition, the authors chronicle the instances in which both musical cultures borrowed from each other.

The role of zarzuela in the Cuban diaspora in the United States has been briefly studied only by Janet Sturman in *Zarzuela: Spanish Operetta, American Stage* (2000).

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<sup>2</sup> Mainly, Ana V. Casanova "Oliva's María, Cecilia y Amalia: Análisis dramático musical de tres zarzuelas cubanas" *Revista Musical de Venezuela*. 36 (1998): 109-27. And, Angel Vázquez Millares' *De la zarzuela española a la zarzuela cubana: vida del género en Cuba*. *Cuadernos de Musica Iberoamericana* 2-3 (1996-97): 439-49.

<sup>3</sup> The *sainete* is a one-act humorous farce with musical accompaniment that emerges in Spain as early as the eighteenth-century following closely the structure of the Golden Age *entremés*.

Sturman's focus is Spanish zarzuela, however, in a short chapter entitled "A Side Trip to Cuba: Costumbrista Attitudes toward Lyric Theater," Sturman presents a brief summary of the history of Cuban zarzuela and its relationship with Cuban popular culture. Even though her contribution positions Cuban zarzuela as a subgenre of its Spanish counterpart, it is one of the few available publications in English that acknowledge the existence of the genre in Cuba, and the diaspora. Likewise, Christopher Webber's survey of Spanish zarzuela, appropriately titled The Zarzuela Companion (2002) includes a brief section with a short list of Cuban zarzuela's canonical works. While both works do not claim to be studies about the Cuban genre they are valuable references for English speakers interested in learning about musical theater in the Americas.

Scholarship on Cuban popular music and theater has gained an increasing interest in the United States, and the study of Cuban popular culture has occupied an impressive place in the Academy considering the little attention received by other Caribbean and Latin American nations outside of Mexico and Brasil. Nonetheless, the scarcity of scholarship on Cuban zarzuela points, not necessarily to a lack of interest, but rather to the difficulty in locating archival documentation, which is further complicated by the scarcity of live and recorded performances.

In addition, the consequences of the profound political changes experienced as a result of the Revolution, mainly the US imposed economic embargo and the recent surge in travel restrictions to Cuba, complicate the access to libraries and museums in La Habana, which house the few documents available on the genre. Furthermore, once a scholar manages to do fieldwork on the Island, she soon discovers that locating archival

documentation is a daunting task. The restrained economic conditions in Cuba, have forced libraries and museums that hold the original scores to maintain irregular operation hours, and the material is often moved around the different locations, which further deteriorates the already poor conditions of the manuscripts. Invariably, the few scholarly publications on Cuban zarzuela, both in and outside of Cuba invoke Rine Leal's prologue to his seminal work on Cuban theater, La selva oscura (The Dark Forest) in which he justifies his choice of title to describe the research process that eventually led to the publication of his work: "Durante cuatro años y medio he vivido en una selva oscura" (9-10) (During the past four and a half years I have lived in a dark forest). If the lack of information and dispersed resources are an unavoidable obstacle for Cuban theater scholars, as Leal points out, this situation is further problematic for those of who pursue the study of Cuban zarzuela, since not only the scores remain unpublished, but a significant number of the manuscripts are now lost (Vázquez Millares).

This work aims to be a contribution that expands and builds upon previous zarzuela scholarship. By reframing the trajectories of Cuban zarzuela through the lens of subaltern studies, I focus on the social dimensions of the genre as a (trans)national performance practice that has actively participated in the historical narratives of (neo)colonial and exilic identity formation. Complementing the existing musicological analyses on Cuban zarzuela, this study is an invitation to consider the multiplicity of musical theater manifestations, and to challenge the insistence on western focus research, so that we may speak of a scholarship of musical theaters.

## Chapter 1

### (Dis)Covering (In)Visible Worlds: The Rhetoric of Conquest

Zarzuela is a musical theater genre in which alternating sung and spoken text do not rupture the dramatic action. It originated in Spain, and differs from other forms of Spanish musical theater in that “it has survived and flourished beyond the later seventeenth century” (Stein 1993: 258) first in Spain and later in its colonies, where native forms of the genre emerged during the twentieth-century. While many countries in the Americas developed their own zarzuela genres—Brasil and Venezuela, among others,<sup>4</sup> it was only in Cuba that the genre evolved through a series of borrowings from *teatro vernaculo* (vernacular theater) and Afrocuban musical traditions. In this chapter, I trace the history of the Spanish colonial endeavor and Spanish zarzuela from its inception, and its subsequent revival in the nineteenth century, and finally its arrival in the Americas. The colonial history is of utmost importance to this study for several reasons. First, since colonial identities in the Spanish-speaking Americas have developed through a system of values and symbols originally imposed, and later subverted within the colonial endeavor, it is imperative to tackle this issue at the very core of the original transaction: the conquest. Second, through a study of colonial exchanges between Spain and Cuba, points of intersection between the metropolis and its colony are revealed, including the trajectories of the zarzuela genre. And finally, as I aim to demonstrate throughout this study, to ignore the causes and consequences of the Columbian invasion

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<sup>4</sup> The Philippines also developed its own form of zarzuela, performed in tagalog and called sarsuela.



in the production of Cuban cultural capital is a reductive and simplistic approach that divests the Cuban experience of its rich, complex and often contradictory heritage.

### *The American Holocaust*<sup>5</sup>

Explorations that seek to (re)imagine the Americas before the Columbian invasion, and the structures of conquest that prompted this endeavor have proliferated throughout the twentieth century and beyond. Although such efforts may be perceived as the byproducts of the five hundredth anniversary of the arrival of the Europeans, they are far more than responses to commemorative anxieties. The Spanish colonial rule in the Americas did not end until the twentieth century, at least as a geopolitical force, and it was not until then that discourses of national identity outside the Iberian vocabulary sprung as a widespread hemispheric practice. In turn, the departure of the Spaniards created a space in which it was possible to ask fundamental questions concerning the concept of America as an independent, self-contained, pre and trans-European entity.

Embedded in these questions is a tacit need for empirical evidence, an underlying need for narratives of proof. Consider the efforts made to determine the numbers of native populations that existed before 1492. The calculations have varied significantly. Such figures range from up to 50 million people in the entire American continent—widely accepted by the 1920s—to the Berkeley School's mid-century groundbreaking report of 25 million people in central Mexico alone and 8 million people for Hispaniola. Shortly after, in the 1960s calculations reached as far up as 112 million inhabitants. David Stannard, who has surveyed the various population estimates concludes:

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<sup>5</sup> I borrow the term from David Stannard's The American Holocaust: Columbus and the Conquest of the New World. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

few informed scholars any longer contend that it was not at least within the general range of 75 to 100,000,000 persons [...] with some of the more outstanding scholars in the field have begun to suspect that the true figure was even higher than the highest end of this range (Stannard, 268).

In Cuba, estimates of the Indoamerican population by the arrival of Columbus have fluctuated between 16,000 to 600,000 with current calculation of approximately 112,000 (Pérez L 14). Yet, with the aid of scientific technology, it has been determined that the territory known today as Cuba was settled at least 6,000 years ago—the exact date given is 3160 B.C.E. (Moreno Fragnals 17). To set this figure in contrast with the 500 plus years since the arrival of Columbus, certainly problematizes the use of the term *New World*.<sup>6</sup> That the history of the Americas, and the Caribbean in particular, has traditionally ignored or silenced what happened in the remaining thousands of years since the existence of Cuba is, to say the least, quite problematic. How do we understand the history of a people when we choose to construct a historical narrative based on a miniscule portion of their experience? Furthermore, how do we negotiate the maintenance of such *narrative*? And, if we manage to do so, what should compel us to keep it circulating? As Diana Taylor asserts, “most, perhaps all, of our efforts to understand and interpret present and past events are based on unidentified sources, insufficient information, nonexistent originals, and limited perspectives” (Taylor: 356,

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<sup>6</sup> José Rabasa has employed the term “New World” in the context of colonial desires, and suggests that New World as a concept should be “understood, not solely as the imaginary geographic space that emerged in the European wish-horizon of ideal landscapes in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but also as the constitution of the modern conception of the world” (Rabasa, 3)

2004). The problem lays, I submit, in the inescapable possibility to construct and nurture fractured histories that selectively privilege certain parts of the stories over others, but above all in the uncritical validation of supposedly *legitimate* evidence.

It is not my intention to reduce the critique of the colonial endeavor to the ontological primacy of the Americas, instead I am concerned with the prevalence of discourses that seem to obliterate it. Anne Norton has argued that:

the establishment of empire requires the colonization of time, the rule of memory. The empire extends itself into the past, sometimes erasing the accomplishments of previous orders, sometimes assimilating them to developments in the metropole, sometimes reading the precolonial as a prefiguration of the colonial (Norton 453).

In the case of Cuba, the five millennia or so that precede the Columbian invasion have been rendered invisible, proving that, as Taylor asserts, the discoverer is the one who *sees* (Taylor 2003), and simultaneously, I should add, the one who decides what is not to be seen. Nonetheless, that which is not seen is not just unproblematically left outside our field of vision, instead it requires concealment, for its unveiling will reveal the colonial order a simulacrum.

A case in point is the way history has constructed the destiny of Indocubans. It was not until the late twentieth century that the prevalent belief that by 1550 the Indocubans had been completely exterminated, was challenged:

It may surprise many social scientists that nestled in the mountains of the Oriente region (eastern Cuba), from Baracoa on the southern coast all the

way to the Pico Turquino, the highest mountain in Cuba, there are numerous caserios, several barrios, and at least one community of more than a thousand Indian people. They were called Cubeños by Father Bartolome de Las Casas, who helped some of their communities to survive, and are ancestors of the original Tainos who met Columbus (Barreiro 1989).

Led by Cuban Anthropologist Manuel Rivero de la Calle, a group of scientists challenged Fernando Ortiz' Indocuban extinction theory, which is widely accepted by the Cuban and International academics, hence problematizing the currently held notion of Cuban identity as one solely framed in Afro-Iberian constructions of selfhood and nation. Jose Barreiro has championed Rivero de la Calle's work in the past decades, providing compelling evidence from primary sources that attest to an Indocuban population, throughout colonial Cuba and beyond. However, Barreiro does not seek to depart completely from Ortiz, rather his aim is to add yet another ingredient—the contributions of the native populations of Cuba—to Ortiz's *ajiaco*.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Fernando Ortiz (1881-1969) coined the term transculturation to describe the particular process of Cuban identity construction, resulting from a series of “extremely complex transmutations of culture” (Ortiz, 1987). He equates the process to the *ajiaco*, a traditional stew made with many different ingredients, ironically of Taíno origins, in which each ingredient maintains its own flavor, not by itself, nor by melting with other flavors, rather by contributing to the overall taste. As is, transculturation differs from multiculturalism and assimilation. Many scholars has revisited the theory of transculturation since its inception, most recently Diana Taylor has tested its use in the context of the performing arts, specifically in theater. For Taylor, the issue of transculturation “is not only one of meaning (what do symbols mean in different contexts). It is also one of political positioning and selection: which forms, symbols or aspects of cultural identity become highlighted or confrontational, when and why” (1991: 91).

Barreiro's work points to, among other things, the fragility of what was rendered invisible and visible simultaneously by the act of discovery. Furthermore, it begs speculation, first, about what is at stake now, and has been at stake since 1492, and second, how much of our interpretation of the world relies on the choices made by Columbus. If, what holds the idea of Western civilization together as an overarching cultural force and concept is its reliance on a shared and accepted etiological narrative, which links our experience of the world through Greco Roman epistemologies, the *discovery* of the so-called *New World* subverts the core of Western anxiety by suggesting the potential of a distinct and different experience. In other words, the existence of this experience exposes the supremacy of the West as an incoherent idea, by proposing the possibility of an alternate order.

Therefore, the Columbian vision—i.e. concealing the five millennia that precede the invasion—was, and is, a strategy necessary for the perpetuation of the so-called *Great Western Tradition*. Yet it may be argued that the impulse to conquer, which propels the act of discovery, is grounded on anything from noble principles and plain European naiveté, and as such it has the potential to redeem itself as a *natural* activity of humans. I propose that regardless of what constitutes the desire to conquer, it is not an act free from intentionality, after all Columbus was aware of his role as discoverer, and hence, his responsibility to conceal. Nowhere in the texts left by Columbus is this clearer than those pertaining the first expedition. During his second voyage upon discovering Cuba, he declared it part of the mainland. When the more experienced crew members doubted him,

Columbus made all of them sign a document attesting that Cuba was, in fact, a peninsula of the Asian mainland. Cevallos-Candau explains that defining the Americas as an entirely new body of land, would have contradicted the deeply rooted belief that “the world as the island of the earth, [is] formed by three contiguous land masses that perfectly mirrored the Holy Trinity” (Cevallos-Candau 2).

Embedded in the (ad)venture of discovery then, is a project of concealment. Thomas Nagel has framed the necessity of concealment as a condition of civilization suggesting the need to police disclosure in order to safeguard not only what is *discovered* but, the act of discovery itself (Nagel, 1998). Moreover, this policing suggests control and ownership, but most important, the reorganization of what is *discovered* into the visible and the invisible, notwithstanding, the multidimensionality of the materialization of the (in)visible. It was (in)visible to the European by way of selective concealment, as I have explained above, but for the Americans the familiar was made foreign, and ultimately unrecognizable (Taylor 1991).

Moreover, in the case of Latin America and the Caribbean, Columbus describes what he sees in terms of a western literary tradition, and Cuba becomes for the first time a projecting screen for European images, an act of cultural transformation into Paradise, albeit a colonial version of paradise. Further, his descriptions are inscribed in a Spanish language that assumes its own transparent and universal validity (Taylor: 355, 2004). Through technologies of exoticism, which are not limited to colonial designs, Columbus presents these images to the King and Queen of Spain first, but to an audience of soon-to-

be Paneuropeans as well, describing what is *ours* in the unfamiliar, while simultaneously making the unfamiliar a commodity (Ette 43).

This is particularly true in the case of Cuba since its geographic location in the context of the Americas, sets the Island as one of the most important ports between the two continents.<sup>8</sup> The island was also known as “The Fortress of the Indies” and “The Key to the New World” revealing that “control of Cuba was vital for the control of the new World” (Pérez, L. 1). The Spanish capitalized on Cuba’s unique location and named one of its cities, San Cristobal de La Habana, a Principal Port—which meant that all ships returning to Spain had to route via La Habana. In this sense, the Spanish had identified that “the struggle for mastery over the Caribbean was first and foremost a struggle for control of Cuba” (Pérez, L. 9). As such, it became not only the home of many Spaniards associated with the Spanish authorities, but also a site for the circulation of commerce and culture, including the flow of peoples from different areas of the Americas and Europe. With this exchange, the ethnic and racial composition of the Island became significantly diverse, as well as the variety of languages, musical ideas and performance practices that at one point or another passed through the Cuban territory some of its influence we may not even know, and others made a permanent mark on the lives of those who inhabited the Island. This is the case of Spanish zarzuela.

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<sup>8</sup> “Cuba’s strategic location at the entrance of the Caribbean and subsequent access to the vast resources of Mexico, the United States’ Gulf Coast, Central America and the northern coasts of South America kept it in the eyes of the major world powers from the time Spain first colonized the island in the sixteenth century” (Foreword by Kyle Longley in Paul Dosal’s Cuba Libre: A Brief History of Cuba).

### *Genealogy of Spanish Zarzuela*

By the sixteenth-century the incorporation of music in the *teatro breve* (short theater pieces) was a well established convention in Spain. It began with the inclusion of musical numbers during theater performances. Before the inclusion of musical pieces that were originally composed to accompany theater performances, these numbers were part of musical compositions intended to be performed on their own.

While, theater practitioners had control of what music would be played, they followed standard conventions that dictated the placement of the musical sections within the entire performance. Before the beginning of the play, a *canto a cuatro voces* (Song for four voices) would inaugurate the evening.<sup>9</sup> The main purpose of the *loa* was to honor the dedicatee, although sometimes it included a brief summary of the plot. After the *primera jornada* (first act) there was an *entremés*<sup>10</sup> for comic relief, then the *segunda jornada* (second act). Before the third act, a dance took place, and once the play proper ended, was a *mojiganga* or *fin de fiesta*.<sup>11</sup>

There were musicians and actors, but also musician-actors. It was not uncommon for an actor to play an instrument and/or sing; or for a musician to perform a role. This performer/musician convention, certainly not an exclusive Spanish phenomenon, served as fertile ground for the gestation of a musical theater tradition in the Spain of the late

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<sup>9</sup> Later, the *canto a cuatro voces* came to be known as *tono*, and instead of a four-voice arrangement, it was sung and performed by the instrumentalists.

<sup>10</sup> An *entremés* was a brief comic sketch performed in between acts of a longer piece.

<sup>11</sup> There is no literal translation for the word *mojiganga*, however it is important to note that Spanish and Cuban scholars have long disagreed about the word's etymology. Most significantly, Fernando Ortiz, one of the most important Caribbean intellectuals of the twentieth-century, suggests that the word *mojiganga* had its origins in the Americas. Needless to say, his suggestion has been rejected by Spanish scholars.



fifteenth-century. This tradition emerges from a performance based practice rather than a dramaturgical one. At first, the music employed by the performers was not exclusively composed for the early texts but, was taken from popular and local musical expressions. Later, once playwrights began to write the text of these songs, the composer was seldom, if at all acknowledged—as it is evident in reviews and chronicles of the time.

With Felipe IV (1621-1665) the arts in general, and the performing arts in particular gained favor among the Spanish nobility. Primarily, there was a noticeable interest in *comedias de tramoyas*, spectacles accompanied by stage machinery and special effects, similar to the Machine Plays developed at the same time in France, which coincide with the evolution of opera. Although opera per se was gaining popularity in Italy and France, the Spanish Royalty's economic crisis did not attract many opera companies to Madrid. However, it is important to remember that the influence of opera cannot be measured just by the performance exports from Italy. On one hand, as Louise Stein argues “the revolution in musical thinking (and dramatic traditions) manifest in the development of opera in Italy also affected other, non-operatic genres of the European musical stage” (1993:132); however, Stein reminds us that such influence, with the exception of the two operas created by Calderon, is primarily one of production practices, and dramaturgy to a lesser degree.<sup>12</sup> Italians that worked in the operatic scene traveled abroad and secured posts in European courts that were looking for experienced personnel in the emerging genre. The Spanish monarchs, some quite fond of music and spectacle, employed the services of various Italian theater *ingegneri* (engineers), who were in

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<sup>12</sup> Such as the poet and librettist Giulio Rospigliosi, see Louise Stein's Songs of Mortals page 133.

charge of the *mise en scène* of the court entertainment, introducing performance practices that fused with local entertainment and developed distinct musical theater traditions. One of these “imports” was Cosimo Lotti who played an important role in the development of what became the first Spanish opera, as evidenced in the following excerpt from a correspondence between the Tuscan Ambassador to Spain and the Medici Court Secretary:

For this reason, he [Cosimo Lotti] is eager for a chance to show what he can do and now the King wishes to see a musical play in the manner in which it is done over there [in Florence]. Lotti is therefore organizing the sets and the special effects at the Casa del Campo on 18 August for the birthday of the Queen of Hungary [Infanta María Ana de Austria]. This should turn out well, since almost on his own and without much expense he will create a little something that might be considered pleasant enough over there [in Florence] but will stun people here, since it has never before been done and will thus appear a marvel. [...] It is certainly an advantage to him that the King loves music and is so knowledgeable that he can even compose in counterpoint and play the bass viol with ease. Every evening the King and his brothers [Infantes Carlos and Fernando de Austria] set aside an hour to play violas together, all three of them, with the Master of the Chapel [Mateo Romero] and Filippo Piccinini, an Italian who is one of His Majesty’s personal musicians. This has made the King curious to hear the recitative style, which is so new in these parts that even the Master of

the Chapel, who is otherwise very accomplished, knows nothing about it. Piccinini has therefore undertaken the music. Lope de Vega, a famous poet, has written the words in Spanish and goes into raptures when he hears his verses set to music of this kind. [...]The King can't wait to hear the play and is already amusing himself by singing and performing the music.

The piece was titled La Selva sin amor (The Forest without Love) and premiered in Madrid in 1627.<sup>13</sup> It is considered the first Spanish opera, although there is much debate about the origins of the composer, and the assignation of the term “opera” to the work. Shirley Whitaker reminds us that the instruments were concealed and, yet the music itself is presented as an organic component of the totality of the story, a totality that is able to stand by itself not as theater, nor music, and reveals the innovative character of this emerging genre never heard before by the court, anticipating the appearance of a native musical theater genre that eventually would become zarzuela.

So far, I have outlined some of the characteristics that determined the development of various forms of musical theater in Spain. However, locating the differences between such musical theater pieces as designed by specific genres becomes more complicated, and I will explore only those that concern zarzuela.

Seventeenth century zarzuelas are not totally sung, they were always

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<sup>13</sup> The music (Filippo Piccinini and Bernardo Monanni) is now lost, (for more on *La Selva* see: Pedrell, F ‘L’eglogue La forêt sans amour de Lope de Vega, et la musique et les musiciens du théâtre de Calderón’, *SIMG*, xi (1909), 55–104; Whitaker, Shirley. ‘Florentine Opera comes to Spain: Lope de Vega’s *La selva sin amor*’, *Journal of Hispanic Philology*, ix (1984), 43–61; and above all Louise Stein’s *Songs of Mortals, Dialogues of the Gods: Music and Theatre in Seventeenth-Century Spain* (Oxford, 1992)

intended as court entertainments, divided into two acts, but most important, they consistently involved a rustic or pastoral setting and characters, and were less serious in tone and dramatic content than the strictly mythological court plays [...] the zarzuelas seem to have included more comedy than other court plays (Stein1993: 261).

What remains constant throughout the history of zarzuela is its propensity to ratify its own hybridity from the first known zarzuela, Calderon's El Laurel de Apolo (1657)<sup>14</sup> to American versions of the genre as I will describe in later chapters. Sometimes, this ratification is self reflexive, as in the case of El Laurel de Apolo (1657), in which during the introduction, a character named Zarzuela, described as a "rustic style beauty"<sup>15</sup> arrives on stage to interrupt four separate choirs representing Spaniards, Jews, Moors, and American Indians. This clear separation of the ethnic and racial groups that populated Spain, along with the gendering of the genre, accomplished by the description of the character Zarzuela as a woman, and qualifying her body as beautiful, but not just any kind of beauty, but a *rustic* kind, where *rustic* is understood as someone "from the country," implies not just a geographical origin, but a class designation as well.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, Calderon has framed zarzuela as a genre in which it is possible to speak about the *people* even if it is done through allegorical characters, and not just mythological figures or the monarchy. I do acknowledge that this was one of the subtle roles of the pastoral,

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<sup>14</sup> The music for *El laurel de Apolo* is now lost.

<sup>15</sup> The phrase "rusticamente bella" foreshadows the recurrent distinguishing feature of the lead female characters in Cuban zarzuela, as we shall see in chapter 3.

<sup>16</sup> According to the *Diccionario crítico etimológico de la lengua castellana* (1957) the term "rustico" was first employed during the Middle Ages, and its use was common in popular theater from the fifteenth century on.

which has been prevalent before zarzuela's time, but Calderon emphasizes the difference by delineating the characteristics of the new genre in the response given by the character Zarzuela, when asked what type of performance she has prepared: "It is not *comedia*, just a little fable, in which in imitation of Italy, one sings and acts."<sup>17</sup>

Hence, the formal structure of zarzuela differs from the pastoral, and as Louise Stein reminds us: "Calderon's acknowledgement of an Italian influence refers to the alternation between sung and spoken dialogue, so the Florentine ideal of *rappresentar cantando* (to act while singing) has been subtly perverted" (Stein, 1993: 263).

Furthermore, this distinction not only emphasizes the main difference between the two genres, i.e. the role attributed to the interpretation of the story through a combination of sung and spoken text, but simultaneously situates zarzuela within a larger continuum of genres that problematize the boundaries between performance modes. Ultimately, zarzuela was not merely an alternative to opera, it was anti-operatic, and, as the genre of court theater that was easier to produce and enthusiastically cultivated by Calderon's contemporaries, it was ultimately more visible on the court stages of the later seventeenth century than either opera or semi-opera (Stein, 1993: 297).

In addition to El laurel de Apolo, Calderon contributed other titles to the emerging repertoire of musical dramatic Spanish works, including La púrpura de la rosa (The Blood of the Rose), subtitled *fiesta cantada* (sung feast).<sup>18</sup> The original production had

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<sup>17</sup> *No es comedia, sino solo una fábula pequeña, en que a imitación de Italia se canta y se representa*

<sup>18</sup> Also translated as "The Color of the Rose." For more about the details of how *La purpura* arrived in Lima, see Louise Stein's *De la contera del mundo: Las navegaciones de la ópera entre dos mundos y varias culturas* in *La ópera en España e*

music by Juan Hidalgo and later for its American premiere by Tomás de Torrejón y Velasco. *La púrpura* was the first Western musical theater piece to be presented in the Americas, in 1701 in Lima:

The exploitation of standard Hispanic song types (*coplas*, *tonos*, *tonadas*, *estribillos*, and small sections of *recitado*) facilitated performance by actress-singers who were largely untrained in music and who learned their roles by rote, just as it allowed the opera to speak to a broad public through a conventionally expressive musical language widely known in Hispanic culture (Stein, 1999: xxiv).

This culture extended to the Americas via the Spanish settlers and the emerging *criollo* class of Spanish ancestry. Consequently, zarzuela, from its early stages, circulated through American stages. The presence of Spanish zarzuela in the colonies was possible, on the one hand for the presence of musicians and interested audiences residing in major cities and ports across the Americas, and because of the available infrastructure capable of holding performances and adjustments to performance conditions.

After the Lima performances other productions in the Americas followed shortly thereafter. The second performance took place in Mexico in 1728, again authored by Calderón, titled Celos aun del aire matan (1660) (Jealousy, Even of the Air Can Kill). Further evidence to support the traffic of Spanish and western music and musical theater was found in 1996, when a bundle of unbound sheet music was found in Sucre, Bolivia.

Among the findings, various opera arias, including works by Paisiello and Cimarosa were located.<sup>19</sup> The sheet music was accompanied by concert programs, detailing the pieces and performers for each event. This finding unveils how most Spanish, and hence western music theater, arrived in the Americas, but above all represents an established tendency, by Spaniards and *criollos*, to favor European musical theater genres, over the development of NeoAmerican musical theater cultures. Alejo Carpentier among others, has reflected upon the general preference of the foreign in musical taste in the Americas, and how it was read by the Spanish to signify “progress” (Carpentier 1977).

By the last third of the eighteenth century, cities like Lima and México had opera seasons, opening a new space dedicated exclusively to secular music (Illari, 348). Even in other cities, such as Cusco, which did not have regular opera performances, we see an incursion in musical theater that speak about the local. Such is the case of Venid, venid deidades (Come, Come Deities) subtitled an “opera serenade” composed by Fray Esteban Ponce de Leon. However, the consolidation of a musical theater tradition in the Americas does not occur until the nineteenth-century. First, with the arrival of complete opera vocal-piano scores, and later with the presentation of full titles in cities beyond Lima and México.<sup>20</sup>

In Spain musical theater led the cultural life during eighteenth century (Garcia and Regidor 25), from the welcoming ceremonies for Felipe V, and the subsequent court

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<sup>19</sup> See Bernardo Illari’s “Un fondo desconocido de música antigua de Sucre: Catalogo comentado” *Anuario del archivo y biblioteca nacionales de Bolivia*, 2 (1996) 377-402

<sup>20</sup> For a detail exploration of the trajectories of opera in the Southern cone see Susana Salgado The Teatro Solis: 150 Years of Opera, Concert, and Ballet in Montevideo. Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2003

celebrations, zarzuela became the official Palace spectacle throughout the War of Spanish Succession ending in 1714. To this extent, zarzuela played an active role in the social and political consolidation of the monarchy, which went beyond the courts ascertaining Spain's colonial power. However, with the rise to power of the Bourbons after the war, Italian opera arrived in Spain via the monarchy. The Bourbons did not favor spectacles in Spanish, since they could not speak the language. From this moment on, the tensions between opera and zarzuela would lead to interesting reforms in both genres, and influence Spanish musical theater culture, an approach that ultimately would transfer to the Americas.

With the arrival of the Bourbons and the subsequent consolidation of *opera seria*<sup>21</sup> as the court's favored entertainment, the genre would flourish among Spanish nobility, allowing music and State affairs to commune in perfect harmony. Only in Spain were singers made statesmen (Lamas 42).<sup>22</sup> Yet, in order to support the lavish and numerous productions of opera, the King had to open the theaters to the general public, as an alternative source of income to subsidize the high costs involved in the production of extravagant spectacles. Nonetheless, the court's decision backfired:

When *opera seria* was popularized, it surrendered somewhat to the aesthetic preference of the public, which were, after all, financing the performances. The opposite of what the Bourbon king had hoped for

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<sup>21</sup> The term *opera seria* is attributed to Italian opera with heroic and/or tragic themes during the eighteenth century, characterized for its dramatic predictability, in which the score was considerably more important than the libretto.

<sup>22</sup> Rafael Lamas reminds us of the famous Italian castrato Farinelli, who enjoyed the King's favors and actively participated in court decisions.



happened: rather than the cultured universal and elitist ideal, what began to take root was a form that reflected the blossoming nationalistic feelings of Madrilenian society. After Carlos III became king in 1759, and particularly after the Esquilache riots of 1766, Madrid's audience began to be suspicious of Italian political and cultural influence, thereby increasing the impetus to incorporate elements of the Spanish musical traditions into *opera seria* (Lamas 43).

Consequently, and throughout the eighteenth century, the boundaries between zarzuela and Italian opera were tested, composers invariably described their works as opera or zarzuela, problematizing the distinction between the two genres, but more often than not, the terminology suggested a hybrid or amalgamation of both. Yet, by the end of the century it is clear that a proto-nationalist discourse had permeated Spanish musical theater culture. Responding to this crisis, Carlos IV decreed by Royal Order in 1801 that all foreign operas had to be performed in Spanish:

Se prohíbe en los teatros de España representar, cantar y bailar las piezas que no sean en idioma castellano y actuadas por actores y actrices nacionales o naturalizados en estos reinos

In the theaters of Spain it is forbidden to sing and dance in any piece other than those in Spanish language, and performed only by either Spanish actors and actresses or residents of the Spanish empire (Le Duc 3)

The decree was ratified in 1807 in the *Reglamento de Teatros*. However, at first the King's attempt perpetuated the popularity of Italian opera, French *opera comique* and

operetta, instead of nurturing a native genre, the foreign titles remained on stage with the only difference that the libretti were translated, which did not necessarily involve significant plot or stylistic changes. On the other hand, it did provide Spanish singers with more access to performing spaces than in previous decades, laying the foundations for a solid performance tradition that translated in the creation of training schools for new generations of performers. Among these new training centers, the first Spanish Royal Music Conservatory was created in 1830 under the initiative of Queen Maria Cristina.<sup>23</sup>

By the late 1700s, zarzuela had become quite popular among the urban residents of Madrid, however the term zarzuela was not employed to describe these pieces.<sup>24</sup> This “anti-zarzuela” prejudice emerged in part to the accelerated interest by musicians and the cultural elite to create a national opera. “La existencia de una opera española era considerada entonces, como una cuestión de decoro, de dignidad nacional, de civilización y de justicia” (Le Duc 4). (The existence of a Spanish opera was considered at the time a matter of decorum, of national dignity, of civilization, and justice) In other words, zarzuela was not deemed appropriate to fulfill this goal, mainly because it was considered a minor genre, incapable of measuring up to its Italian and French counterparts.

The first Spanish musical theater piece of the nineteenth century was produced at

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<sup>23</sup> Maria Cristina from Naples, paradoxically wanted to copy the model of the Conservatory at Via San Sebastiano where Bellini, among other famous opera composers, has trained, curiously the conservatory’s curriculum did not include singing coachings in Spanish)

<sup>24</sup> It is important to point out that the term zarzuela per se was not employed to designate these pieces, musical theater pieces followed a nomenclature, sometimes modeled after the Italian and French musical theater jargon, that function more as a description than any particular effort to set a title under a specific genre.

the Royal Conservatory in 1832, followed by increasing numbers of apparently isolated performances of new titles. Other developments in musical theater during the mid-nineteenth century include a brief, yet important appearance of opera parodies in Spanish, that would later be titled zarzuela *parodias* (parody zarzuelas) in which Italian operas successful in Spain were immediately appropriated and *transformed* by introducing a new plot into the original music—more often than not, the Italian storyline was ridiculed. The zarzuela *parodias* created a space in which Spanish music theater subverted Italian opera's dominance of the lyric stage. Later, in the twentieth century, Cuban musicians and performers would also employ the parody approach to subvert Italian opera. While banking on recognizable stereotypes allowed zarzuela parodies to succeed, it also opened a new space to comment on nineteenth-century Spanish anxieties, which as I will explain, remained intrinsically linked to the colonial project. Among the titles, one particular piece is of concern to this study: El ensayo de una opera (The Opera Rehearsal) (1848) by Juan del Perál with music by Rafael Hernando and Cristobal Oudrid. The plot centers around an opera rehearsal and a zealous *prima donna*. The parody is an imitation of an Italian opera by Mazza with a libretto by G. Rossi titled La prova de una opera-seria (1845)<sup>25</sup> (Le Duc 15). Following the original title in Italian, the zarzuela opens during the final dress rehearsal of the opera Las sacerdotizas del sol, ó los españoles en el otro mundo (“The Sun Priestesses, or the Spaniards in the Other World”). The music by Hernando and Oudrid was drawn by Del Perál from their own piece entitled Las sacerdotizas del sol, which had been a great success and prompted its authors “to create a

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<sup>25</sup> Mazza's piece was revised in 1903 and retitled *El Maestro campanone* by V. Lleo.

type of Spanish comic opera in imitation to French opera which they would label ‘zarzuela’ as these type of performance were called in the seventeenth century” (Avella 40). The piece then, is not only a parody of opera production but also a testament to the currency of Spanish fantasies of, and desires for, American exoticism, ascertaining colonial desires.

The chorus appears in the opera within the zarzuela, as soon as the curtain opens, dressed as Sun Priestesses, dagger in hand. Through this initial image, the audience is reminded of Priestesses status as savages, and led by the director the chorus of Sun Priestesses is encouraged to act enraged: “No hay que perder de vista que sois salvajes, Al descorrer el telon tendreis puñales en la mano...y os mostrareis muy enfurecidas...como que se trata de matar a todos los españoles” (Peral 12) (You cannot lose sight that you are savages. When the curtain opens you will have daggers on your hands—and you must look furious—as if you were going to kill all the Spaniards).

During the first scene, we are introduced to the character of the librettist, singing one of the three arias in the piece. Don Crispin describes the tribulations of his career as a poet, as well as his creative failures: “Ciento y tres librettos he compuesto [...] y ciento y dos han sido silbados” (Peral 4) (I have composed one hundred and three libretti [...] and one hundred and two have been *boo*). Yet, his self-deprecation vanishes once the composer (Signor Carlini, an Italian) comments on the poor quality of the libretto:

Poeta: Dichoso fue el Signor Carlini en hallar un libretto como el mio para su partitura [...] No es menester mas que arrojar notas sobre mis versos, y se cantan ellos solos (Peral 5)

Poet: Signor Carlini was fortunate to find a libretto like mine for his score  
 [...] It is only necessary to “throw” a few musical notes, and the verses  
 practically sing themselves out

Literally this is a description of parody manufacturing, in which the verses are composed and then musical notes need only to be thrown at them, since they are compelling enough, to the point that said verses “sing themselves.” that they do not necessarily need the music. The second aria is performed by the leading lady Adelina Remolaci—Remolaci being a play on the Spanish word *remolacha*, meaning turnip, grammatically altering it to evoke an Italianized last name.<sup>26</sup> During her aria, the soprano, portrayed as stereotypical prima donna, describes the joys of being a leading lady. She is Italian, and her dialogue is flavored with Italian phrases incorporated into the Spanish text. Through Adelina, Peral, makes explicit his concern with humor as an element of parody. Implicitly, however, is a concern with constructing what could be perceived as a legitimate operatic rehearsal, even if this is mostly accomplished through stereotypes in stock situations.

Following the diva’s aria, there is a discussion between her and the poet, in which she insist on a text change. She refuses to sing the phrase “Yo tengo celos” (I am jealous), based on the assumption that a *lady* would never pronounce those words in public, this justification is later contrasted to a jealousy attack the singer has on stage

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<sup>26</sup> Adelina Remolaci precedes the real opera singer Adelina Patti, born in Adela Juana Maria Patti on February 19, 1843 in Madrid. Both of her parents were Italian and worked in opera, at a very young age they family moved to New York, where Adelina, as she came to be known, began an international career on the musical theater stage that would expand many years, singing in the most important opera houses in the world. It seems that stories of the Spanish of Italian origin that flourished in the Americas abound.

when the director arrives arm in arm with the other soprano. Needless to say, her request for a change of text is greeted with reproach by the poet, to which the poet responds, on an aside: *El demonio de la italiana cree que se hacen buenos versos lo mismo que buñuelos*, (The devil with this Italian who thinks that making good verses is similar to making *buñuelos*.)<sup>27</sup> This exchange could be read as an embodied confrontation between opera and the zarzuela genres.

The problems of incompatibility only grow from here on, up to the end of the zarzuela, after the departure of the Italian *prima donna*. Her exit occurs during the opera rehearsal proper. Adelina reenters the stage wearing her costume—described in the piece as a “traje Americano” (American dress). She thanks the director for having assigned her such a beautiful garment. However, her enthusiasm is soon shattered by the *altra-prima* (the soprano of lesser importance) who appears wearing the same costume. By the end of the piece, and under the guise of a play-within-a play format, the Poet announces the cancellation of the opera: “Respetable público, por una grave indisposición de garganta de la prima donna, no puede ejecutarse la ópera anunciada, en su lugar presentaremos “nombre de la opera anunciada” (Perla 18) (Respectable audience, due to a severe throat indisposition of the *primma donna*, the announced opera would not be performed, instead we will present “insert here the opera title”).

While the macaronic nature of the pastiche reveals yet another strategy through which zarzuela parodies the operatic genre, it is through language that the parody proves effective. Since the music follows traditional operatic models (composed by Oudrid), the

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<sup>27</sup> *Buñuelos* are a variety of round-shaped pastries

subversive act is enacted in the libretto. However, as the ending clearly suggests, the “The Opera Rehearsal” functions as an introduction piece, a sort of intermezzo that functions as an introduction to the “real” performance, reflecting zarzuela’s overall condition during the first half of the nineteenth-century, relegated to the supremacy of opera.

Although other zarzuela subgenres emerged, in addition to the parodies, among them the zarzuela *andaluza*, mainly in the stages of Madrid, which employed popular well-known songs with some original musical numbers alternating in the body of a theater piece, the production of native repertoire did not materialized. After the civil war, during which musical theater productions were scarce at best, the legacy of French operetta and an overwhelming favoritism for Rossini and the *bel canto* composers, brought by Fernando VII ruled the Spanish stages.<sup>28</sup> Since this repertoire had to be performed in Spanish, and by Spanish nationals, a tradition in which audiences were able to experience musical theater in their native tongue was solidified, resulting in an increased need for vernacular musical theater, which occurred during the second half of the nineteenth century, both in Spain and in its colonies.

By 1851 two significant events marked the beginning of a new era for Spanish musical theater. First, the creation of the *Sociedad Artística del Teatro-Circo*, a group of composers and dramatists concerned with the development of national music. And, second, the premiere of the first Spanish zarzuela in three acts, by the composer

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<sup>28</sup> For a detail analysis on the musical legacy of the Independence war, see Maria José Corredor Álvarez’ *Aportaciones musicales de la Guerra de la Independencia a un nuevo género nacional: la zarzuela* in Cuadernos de musica iberoamericana V.2-3 1996-97, 51-56p.

Francisco Asenjo Barbieri titled Jugar con fuego (To Play with Fire), sponsored by the *Sociedad Artística del Teatro-Circo*. The premiere marked the beginning of modern zarzuela. Jugar con fuego was the most performed zarzuela in Spain during the 1850s and 60s (Espin Templado, 58). Hosted at the newly created Teatro de La Zarzuela (1856) the *Sociedad* would sponsor many other productions that eventually would reach the Americas.

Even though the majority of the three-act zarzuelas still relied on translations of French and Italian texts the consolidation of an eminently Spanish music drama materialized a few decades later in the 1870s with the emergence of the *Teatro por horas* (Theater by the Hour), which consisted of shorter length works. The *teatro por horas* proved a an economic success to entrepreneurial impresarios, since its short length permitted the presentation of several performances in the course of a day, and allowed the audience to enjoy the performance without having to spend the entire evening in the theater. The *teatro por horas* pieces were very popular among the urban working class, who could see themselves reflected in the stories. With the rise in popularity of the *teatro por horas* the three-act zarzuelas, known as zarzuela *grande*, dissapeared, albeit temporarily returning it in the early decades of the twentieth century. The *teatro breve* zarzuelas, were grouped under the term *genero chico* (small genre), to be differentiated from their longer counterparts or zarzuela *grande*. It is important to note that the trajectories of both genres, and their transformations were localized in Spain as well as in the Americas, specifically in Cuba where the production of zarzuelas of the *genero chico* were quite successful.



### *Spanish Zarzuela in Cuba*

The first reference to zarzuela performances in La Habana dates back to the last quarter of the eighteenth century at the Teatro Coliseo (later known as Teatro Principal). In a 1792 colonial report requesting funds for the renovation of the Teatro Coliseo it is stated that since its opening in 1775 the Coliseo had hosted presentations of zarzuelas, among other performances. However, there is no information regarding the titles and dates of these presentations. Aside from the report, the first zarzuela title to be registered is El alcalde de Mairena by Joseph Fallotico in 1791. The first performance of an opera, on record, was Metastasio's Dido abandonada in 1776.

We have very little information about Joseph Fallotico. His presence in the theater scene of the late eighteenth century is rapped around the fantastic: “after the premiere of his zarzuela, he offers performances of a ‘mechanical statue’ that sings opera arias and is capable of providing answers to any questions” (Vázquez Millares 440). The construction of Fallotico, as the envoy of musical innovation conjures images of traveling shows in which foreigners will woo natives with *modern* inventions, anticipating Garcia Marquez's magical realism. Beyond the references to Fallotico, there is documented testimony of the prevalence and popularity of Spanish zarzuela in La Habana, although very little detail is provided, since most of the information comes from newspaper reviews. In addition, to cursory mention of zarzuela titles, most of which are now lost, performances are recorded in the Catalogue of productions of the Teatro Tacón, the premiere venue for zarzuela performances in nineteenth century Cuba. The lists of titles

provided in the Catalogue, reassert the continuous presence of both *zarzuela grande* and *genero chico*.

Much like in Spain, *tonadilla* and Italian opera were the prevalent musical theater offerings during the first half of the nineteenth century in La Habana. After that, zarzuela performances outnumbered any other type of musical theater productions:

En la temporada de 1853, se estrenaron en el Tacón 18 zarzuelas [...] A partir de esa fecha hast alas primeras decadas del siglo XX, la zarzuela española mantuvo una constante presencia no solo en los teatros habaneros (Tacón, Albisu, Villanueva, Irijoa, Payret...) sino tambien en los teatros de las ciudades de provincias y tambien en los liceos y sociedades filarmonicas de la Isla (Vazquez Millares 443)

During the 1853 season, 18 zarzuelas premiered at the Tacón [...] from this date until the early decades of the twentieth century Spanish zarzuela maintained a constant presence not only in La Habana's theaters (Tacón, Albisu, Villanueva, Irijoa, Payret....) but in provincial theaters, schools, and philharmonic societies in the Island.

It is very important to point out that those eighteen zarzuela titles included many of the "nuevo tipo" (new type) in reference to the three-act format. The prompt arrival of those titles and productions from Spain, attests to the interest in and popularity of the Spanish genre in the Island: "No hubo zarzuela que se estrenara en España que al poco tiempo no viniera a Cuba a cosechar nuevos aplausos" (Diaz Vazquez, 17). (There was not a single

zarzuela that shortly after it premiered in Madrid, would not come to Cuba to much acclaim).

Yet, the presence of Spanish music theater in Cuba had begun as early as 1810, when a Spanish company dedicated to performing *tonadillas escénicas* and operas, operates in the Island for twenty two years (Diaz Ayala in Molina: 1998). Touring Spanish Companies performed in Cuba throughout the nineteenth century, even during the Ten Years War (1868-78) a time when “the great Gaztambide’s zarzuela company arrives in La Habana, having so much success that performances are repeated indefinitely” (Molina 210).

Performing in Cuba offered many advantages to Spanish zarzuela companies, among such benefits was the guarantee of a profitable enterprise, good native musicians—in case the orchestra pit had to be completed with local talent, as it often occurred—and outstanding venues that came to be recognized throughout Spanish speaking America as zarzuela stages, such as the Teatro Albisu, known as the “Zarzuela temple” (Molina 1998). Cuba was “tanto para compositores e interpretes constituia un lugar obligado para las giras artisticas” (Diaz Vazques16) (for both composers and interpreters, a mandatory stop for the touring companies). In this manner, Spanish touring companies would introduce zarzuela to the colonies. As early as 1855 there were already two resident Spanish zarzuela companies in La Habana, and two other in the provinces (Cotarelo y Mori, cited in Bissel, 232). The establishment of the genre in the island, in both the metropolitan areas and its provinces, would flourish throughout the second half of the nineteenth century captivating audiences and critics throughout Cuba. In the next

chapter, I examine the conditions that made this possible and set the groundwork for the development and proliferation of a native musical theater genre that came to be known as Cuban zarzuela.

## CHAPTER 2

### The Birth of Cuban Zarzuela

The *conquistadores* did not bring theater to Cuba, they brought *their* theater.

Rine Leal

The history of Cuban zarzuela is yet to be written

Enrique Rio Prado

Cuba's unique historical, geopolitical, social, and cultural position among the Spanish colonies, contributed to set forth the conditions for the development of a musical theater culture that reached its peak with the advent and flourishing of Cuban zarzuela. During the eighteenth century, Cuban artists developed and consolidated a set of performance practices that included an eminently Cuban theater form, inseparable from native musics. The plots described comedic situations that engaged the relationships between archetypal characters that roamed Cuba's contemporary urban landscape, in which music actively complemented the quotidian. While the role played by music was complementary to the dramatic action, its presence was unavoidable, and both performers and audiences embraced the hybridity of the national form. The hybrid nature of Cuban performance was, and is, accentuated by the existing preconditions inherited from ethnic traditions, in which the boundaries between the various artistic crafts are constantly subverted, consequently the resulting product of a given creative process did not entail a compartmentalization of the contributions made by its creators. The success of this endeavor was supported by the creation of an infrastructure that guaranteed, more or less, the presence of various performing spaces throughout La Habana. In this chapter, I explore how these conditions, which ultimately led to the articulation and subsequent

development of Cuban zarzuela, mapped the trajectories of the genre as a result of the transculturation of African, European and Indocuban performance practices<sup>29</sup>.

### *Amerindian Blueprints*

I would like to propose that the hybridity inherent in zarzuela has its roots in the Indocuban performance practice known as *areito*. The word *areito* describes a performance by Indocubans that employed song, dance and storytelling simultaneously for celebratory, ritual, and entertainment purposes (Arrom 1967). From the Arawak word *aririn* meaning, “to rehearse or recite,” the *areito* was a collective creation that functioned “no sólo una ceremonia sacropolítica, sino también un espectáculo coreográfico y cohesionador de la comunidad” (Leal 10) (not only as a sacropolitical ceremony, but also as a choreography of spectacle that brought the community together). Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo (1478 – 1557), the official Court Chronicler of Carlos V until 1532, was one of the first Spaniards to provide written information regarding the *areito*. From his writings, we have one of the few descriptions available today in which the performance of the *areito* is described as a collective artistic practice:

Tenían estas gentes una buena y gentil manera de memorar las cosas pasadas y antiguas, y esto era en sus cantares y bailes, que ellos llaman areyto, que es lo mismo que nosotros llamamos bailar cantando... Cuando

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<sup>29</sup> In my use of the term transculturation here, I echo what Diana Taylor states in her analysis: “It is essential to emphasize from the outset that transculturation is not a theatrical phenomenon but a social one. The existence of theatrical hybrids (such as Peter Brook’s *Mahabharata*) does not necessarily represent the deeper and more global shifts of transculturation in a society. Transculturation affects the entire culture; it involves the shifting of socio-political, not just aesthetic, borders; it modifies collective and individual identity; it changes discourse, both verbal and symbolic” (*Transculturating* 90-1).

querian haber placer, celebrando entre ellos alguna notable fiesta, o sin ella, por pasatiempo, juntábanse muchos indios e indias, algunas veces los hombres solamente y otras veces las mujeres por sí; y en las fiestas generales, así como por una victoria o vencimineto de los enemigos, o casándose el cacique o rey de la provincia, o por otro caso en que el placer fuese comúnmente de todos, para que hombres y mujeres se mezclasen...

Y uno de ellos tomaba el oficio de guiar (ora fuese hombre o mujer), y aquél daba ciertos pasos adelante y atrás, a manera de un contrapás muy ordenado, y lo mismo, y en el instante, hace todos... Y así como aquél dice, la multitud de todos responden con los mismos pasos y palabras y orden y en tanto que le responden, la guía calla, aunque no cesa de andar el contrapás (Fernandez de Oviedo qtd. in Arrom 9).

These people have a good and gentle way of remembering things past and ancient. Accomplished through their songs and dances, called *areyto* by them, similar to what we call sung dances...when they looked for pleasure, either celebrating among themselves with or without a memorable feast or just to pass time, large groups of male and female Indians gather. Sometimes, the men by themselves, and others the women alone. During the general feasts, as well as in those celebrating a victory over enemies, the marriage of a local cacique or king, or just for general entertainment, during which men and women would come together... One of them would take the leading role, either male or female. The leader

would take a set of steps to the front and to the back, as if performing a very well organized *contrapás* (counter step), which was repeated by all, immediately. Similarly, whatever the leader uttered, the crowd would respond with the same words and steps, during which the guide is silent, but continues to perform the steps.

I am cognizant that Fernández de Oviedo's chronicle is inscribed in colonial rhetoric; after all, the recorded history of the Americas in the sixteenth century was a Spanish invention. Nonetheless, while Fernández de Oviedo's job was to document the *discoveries* for the Spanish King, and for posterity, it is possible to read his observations as a starting point to understand, at the very least the format and context of the described performance.

The *areito*'s musical component included instruments and voice, while both the vocal and instrumental sections were performed by dancer-actors. Unfortunately, Fernández de Oviedo's passage, along with other descriptions, including those by Bartolome de las Casas, are all the documentation that is left for us to study the *areito*. Although, as I explained in the previous chapter, most scholars, including Fernando Ortiz and Juan Jose Arrom, have argued that shortly after the Spanish invasion the entire population of Indocubans was exterminated, and there were no traces left of their artistic production, I am suspicious of their assertions, in light of the recent findings by Jose Barreiro. However, even though Barreiro has identified settlements of Indocuban communities that trace their ancestors to Cuba's Precolumbian populations, I have not found any evidence that links their current artistic practice to what we know today about



the *areito*. It is impossible to provide facts that substantiate the contributions of Indocuban performance practices to Cuban artistic production, as much as it is to provide evidence of no Indocuban influence at all. Yet, from its imminent communal nature, and based on the descriptions provided by colonial writers, a set of traits relevant to Cuban performance, and specifically Cuban zarzuela can be extrapolated. First, the performance of *areito* functions as an active site for the transmission of cultural memory in which history repeats itself across the body—both the individual and the collective body. Second, from a western perspective, the multifaceted nature of the *areito*, which incorporated song, dance, instrumental music and drama reminds us of musical theater aspirations in the West, where the idea of consolidating an unified totality of the arts through performance was not articulated until the nineteenth-century.

Formally, Fernandez de Oviedo describes what resembles a *call and response* structure that is more often than not singled out as an African originated practice, which, as I stated earlier is also influential in the gestation of Cuban performance practices. The *areito* was not performed in what we would call today “traditional performance spaces,” as was the case in other regions of the Americas, such as Mexico, Guatemala and Peru, where specific spaces were built and destined exclusively for performances. Instead, *areitos* were performed in plazas or at wide hallways in houses, among other spaces, which attests to the fluidity of the form. This is not to say, however, that performance was an impromptu occurrence, on the contrary, the leader, as I have described above *directed* the performance. This person-in-charge known as *tequina*---maestro, artisan or

expert—must have served as creative leader as much as regulator of the *areito*'s form and length, both initiating it and culminating a performance.

Since the *areito* offered an opportunity for reinforcing community values, organization, and resistance, it was considered threatening by the Spaniards, because it offered a space in which Indocubans could come together and potentially threatened the apparent stability of the colonial order. Hence, the Spanish authorities prohibited the *areito* practice in Cuba shortly after the initial years of the invasion:

El 27 de Diciembre de 1512, apenas comenzada la conquista, los areitos fueron prohibidos por una de las leyes de Burgos, aunque seis años mas tarde, completada la ocupacion de la Isla, se pensó en utilizar las danzas y cantos corales como un estimulo al trabajo esclavo (Leal 12).

On December 27, 1512, just as the early stages of the conquest, some laws from Burgos forbid the *areitos*. Even though six years later, once the occupation of the Island was completed, the decision was reconsidered, thinking of the value that dances and choral songs would have to stimulate slave labor.

Eventually, the *areitos* were dismissed by the Spaniards as a superstitious practice, and since most, however not all, of the native population was massacred or removed from urban centers, their cultural practices no longer threaten the Crown's control over the Island. The problem, of course, lays in what Christopher Balme calls "an intentional non-recognition of a cultural text" (Balme 4) derived in turn by privileging *a priori* those cultural traditions and knowledges that were grounded—if not bound to—a written

document. In addition, since the Spanish *understanding* of Indocubans was framed by exotic fantasies, and the conquest was a political endeavor with an unequivocally expansionist agenda, the merely *exotic* would quickly exhaust itself, giving way to the economic benefits of natural resources exploitation propitiated by the trade of profitable sources, mainly gold, augmented even more by the advantages of free, yet forced labor. Consequently, the Spanish paid little attention to further efforts to document the lives and cultural outpour of Indocubans.

In contrast to the sparse information we have about Indocuban performance, evidence of both Spanish and African traditions is substantial. As expected, colonial rule guaranteed the traffic of Spanish cultural production, and while music and theater from the metropolis dominated the performing arts in Cuba throughout the colonial period, African performance managed to survive in the social periphery thanks to a unique set of circumstances that distinguished Cuban slave societies from other enslaved communities in the Americas. In the next sections I explore how each of these traditions developed in Cuba, and ultimately how both of them, along with Indocuban performance, contributed to the development of Cuban musical theater culture.

### ***Spanish Performance***

Since the early colonial chroniclers that reported the presence of the *areitos* in Cuban, European, and above all Spanish performance dominated the artistic life of the Island until the late nineteenth century. According to Rine Leal, the foremost authority in Cuban theater history, the first reference to an European performance in the Americas took place in Cuba in 1520: “un tal Pedro de Santiago hizo una danza en Santiago de

Cuba, por la que recibe poco más de 36 pesos (Leal 13) (Someone named Pedro de Santiago performed a dance in Santiago de Cuba, for which he received approximately 36 pesos). Other non-secular performances related to the festivities of Corpus Christi, c. 1570—proselytizing was an integral part of the ideological agenda of the invasion—soon became a popular event in Cuba. Needless to say, these performances were regulated and authorized by the local Bishop and military authorities. Yet, there is very little information regarding such performances since the registers (*actas capitulares*) before 1555 have long been lost. Nonetheless, Leal concludes that these performances involved a significant amount of native participants, as not only talent, but also primarily as backstage laborers in the complex production machinery necessary for the staging of the Corpus performances. Hence, their participation entailed the construction and perhaps designs of costumes, sets, and stage effects as customary in similar festivities throughout Europe. Since the *negros libres* (free blacks) and native Cubans, along with European immigrants were employed for these chores, the rehearsal-production process must have resembled the prevalent power structures, reaffirming colonialist agency, while simultaneously *Americanizing* European performance.

In addition to Corpus performances, it was common to see *entremeses*, farces, and *fiestas de carros*, *auto sacramentales*, dramas and comedies. The first full title that we have a record of took place in 1659, Competir con las estrellas (To Compete with the Stars) of unknown authorship. The play was not well received, perhaps due to the

controversy that arose between the text and the performing space: a secular comedy inside a Catholic church<sup>30</sup>

Como la comedia no era de corte religioso, “a lo divino” esto provocó la protesta de los curas franciscanos, en pugna con otras órdenes religiosas y contra el recién estrenado Obispo, a quien acuisan de asistir a tales comedias nada cristianas (Leal 15).

Since the comedy lacked a religious theme *a lo divino* its performance sparked protests by the Franciscan priests, which were embattled with other religious orders, as well as against the recently ordained Bishop, who was accused of attending such non-Christian comedies.

Yet, this seems to have been an isolated event since performances, for the most part, took place outdoors and were linked to popular celebrations. The incident at the church of San Agustín sparked a debate that culminated two decades later, when secular performances were no longer allowed inside churches, and for a short period, profane comedies were completely forbidden in the Island. Among other incidents of censorship, the participation of women in the Corpus Christi related performances were forbidden.

The secular repertoire of Corpus related performances consisted primarily of texts by Lope de Vega, Calderón and Moreto. Leal considers Santiago Pita’s El príncipe jardinero (The Gardner Prince) the first Cuban play (33). Pita’s play is modeled after *siglo de oro* comedies. Indeed, El príncipe jardinero has nothing that would differentiate it from the Spanish plays being performed in La Habana during the early eighteenth

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<sup>30</sup> The church in question is the Iglesia San Agustín.

century. Moreover, the text does not reflect contemporary Cuban society, and with the exception of the servants, all other characters and situations in which the action develops could very well have taken place in Spain.

The first in La Habana was built amidst the rising popularity of the performing arts among the elites, and an increasing population of emigrants and *criollos*. The Coliseo Theater opened its doors in 1776.<sup>31</sup> The inaugural season included some Italian opera titles, most notably Metastasio's *Didone Abbandonata*. As expected, performance aesthetics and repertoire selection mirror those of Spanish theaters. Cuban titles were not seriously considered as indicated by performance advertisements published in *the Papel Périodico de la Havana* during 1791 in which one out of eighty six performances was authored by a Cuban national (Arrom 1943). Performance in Cuba followed closely the structure of performance in Spain

Al igual que en España, consistía la función en una comedia. En el primer entreacto se solía presentar un divertido entremés, y en el segundo se cantaban y bailaban alegres seguidillas, tiranas, tonadillas y otras composiciones musicales en boga (Arrom 65).

As in Spanish theaters, the performances were *comedias*. Between the first and second act it was customary to present a light *entremés*. After the second act, and before the third, performers sung and danced seguidillas, *tiranas*, *tonadillas* and other popular musical compositions.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> The Coliseo was destroyed by a tropical storm in 1846.

<sup>32</sup> Tonadilla is the diminutive for *tonada*, a short and satirical Spanish tune or melody. It appears in Spain as a response to the Italian opera dominated stages in the Madrid of

Likewise, following Spanish customs, evening performances were in vogue, and the Coliseo became a space for social interaction, a playground for the economic and political elites. Once the theater had established itself as a center of cultural and political transactions, patrons did not hesitate to contribute large sums of money when it needed extensive repairs, a little over a decade after its opening. In 1803 the theater reopened under a different name: El Principal, the quality of which according to Leal, surpassed any of the theaters in the United States territory, a reflection of the growing economic power of the Cuban oligarchy.

However, Cuba was yet to see its most important theater. The Teatro Tacón was inaugurated in 1838, and still stands today in La Habana—renamed Garcia Lorca Theater in 1961. The Tacón’s history and its structure “reflects the social macrocosm” of Cuban society (Leal 21). In other words, when the emerging *criollo* class benefited of the economic conditions in the island, their monetary contributions to the Tacón were generous, as evidenced by the constant upkeep and renovations performed in the structure, in contrast, during times of recession the maintenance of the building suffered considerably. To this extent, the culture of the theater building functioned as a barometer of the social and economic conditions of the Island, well into the twentieth century.

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Felipe V and Fernando VI. The seguidilla also of Spanish origin was both a short song and a dance (spelled in the plural when it was just a dance), described as a provocative street song and dance accompanied by loud strumming of the guitar. While the Tirana, of Andalusian origin, is a faster tempo seguidilla.

Shortly after the opening of the Teatro Tacón, Cuba enjoyed an impressive economic growth, due in part to the Haitian revolution;<sup>33</sup> markets were opening up for Cuba, and the Island became one the wealthiest of the Spanish empire (Moore, 1997). In order to sustain the economic growth, more cheap labor was necessary; Cuba began importing slaves at unprecedented levels, and by mid century more than half of all Cubans were either black or mulattos (Paquette 1988). During the nineteenth century, free slaves were allowed inside theaters in standing room only, which made very little difference since the ticket prices were quite high by Cuban standards, only the wealthy could attend. The repertoire, much like that at the Teatro Coliseo consisted of Italian opera, Spanish zarzuela and drama, performed only by Spanish companies. In the early twentieth century, under the United States economic control, the Teatro Coliseo was privatized and purchased, ironically, by the Galician community, only to be transformed into a movie house a few years later. Today, the theater stands open to the public, awaiting long overdue repairs that do not seem to be coming any time soon due to the economic embargo.

Other theaters appeared in the early nineteenth century, attracting limited attention because of their location on the outskirts of the city, and very limited information about them is available. However, the tradition established by the Coliseo, Principal and the Tacón theaters built the foundations for Cuban theater culture in the

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<sup>33</sup> In 1791, Saint Domingue—now Haiti—the richest European colony in the Caribbean, underwent a successful slave rebellion in which “500,000 black slaves took up arms against their white owners, brought the threat of ‘Revolution’—the subversive message from Paris after 1789—to Cuba’s doorstep” (Gott 44). The displaced French merchants who had settled in Saint Domingue moved to Cuba along with their wealth which greatly benefited the economic conditions of the Island.



early twentieth century. This is quite relevant for the purpose of this study since theaters were also identified with specific genres, and each safeguarded its artistic identity without trespassing generic boundaries. To this extent, the life of a particular performance genre was intrinsically related to its performance venue; this was the case with zarzuela, as I explain later in this chapter, and other musical theater genres after the Spanish left the Island.

### *Africans in the Caribbean*

Robin Moore explains that in Cuba during the first half of the nineteenth century, “the African population remained significantly larger than the European, with a proportionally central role in artistic expression” (Moore 16). Nonetheless, Moore is quick to remind us that due to a lack of interest in African and African derived arts, along with the isolation of African populations in the sugar fields, the amount of information collected does not quantitatively match the artistic production. Significantly, the obliteration of information regarding African and African derived cultural production was not limited to Spanish racism, but was also motivated by the racist tendencies of the Cuban oligarchy, based, in part, on fears and anxieties inspired by the Haitian slave revolution of 1791, which forced the evacuation of the colonial authorities, as well as that of the *criollo* elite. Racism among *criollos* in Cuba, even among separatists, sustained the emergent nationalist discourse as a fundamentally white nation, in which Afrocubans were not part of the emerging Cuba, and where Afrocuban performance practices were considered a threat to national culture (Moore). Correspondingly, a counterdiscourse arguing for an Afro-inclusive nation, emerged in the 1830s centered around literature, of

which Juan Francisco Manzano's "Autobiography" (1835) is considered the foundational text (Williams). The tensions between concepts of racial identity that underscore nineteenth century Cuba outline the overall conception of nationhood in the Island, and as such permeate every aspect of vernacular artistic production.

Even though the colonial structure privileged European aesthetics, cultural production in the Island was profoundly influenced by African and African derived traditions. Interestingly, things *African* permeated all facets of performance as much as the sanctioned and sponsored *European* artistic product. Such was the case in the many dance orchestras that played in and around La Habana where racial interaction in orchestras had proven to be a fertile ground for cultural traffic. As early as the late sixteenth century, dance orchestras were sites in which black and white musicians could perform together, although for a mostly white and *criollo* audience. "By the 1830s Afrocubans had become part of middle-class music life both by joining integrated groups and by forming their own" (Moore 18). Significantly, the pattern established by these orchestras would remain constant through the twentieth century, and certainly influence the way zarzuela companies structured their casts, orchestras and production teams. While welcoming Afrocuban performers on stage and in the pit, zarzuela audiences remained mostly white and *criollo*.

In addition to the dance orchestras, there are two important conditions that set the stage for the preservation and transmission of African performance within and beyond the enslaved communities that populated the Island, that concern the way it influenced Cuban zarzuela. First, the African population always knew which part of Africa they came from,

and were allowed by colonial authorities to organize social groups based on region of provenience. This organization was devised by white settlers based on the Spanish traditional fraternal societies or *cofradías* (guilds). The African groups were known as *cabildos de nación*. While the Spanish “considered this to be a benevolent form of social organization that would help different tribes of Africans to adjust to the special circumstances of Cuba, while retaining something of their local customs” (Gott 47), it was also the Spanish way of maintaining control over the tensions between slaves and slave owners. For Africans the *cabildos* served multiple purposes: community support, places of gathering for religious worship, and above all the *cabildo* provided a space for the cultivation and transmission of cultural practices.

The second aspect concerns the unique ethnic and religious composition of the African communities in Cuba, which set them apart from the rest of most of the enslaved communities in the Americas:

The African peoples forcibly brought to Cuba carried with them the forms of theater prevalent in their home societies at the time of enslavement, and preserved them in the hostile new environment for their own self-knowledge and cohesion [...] the theatre is religious in its context, ritual in form, is organically merged with the other art forms of music and dance, and serves a communal function (Pereira 13).

The organic fusion reminds us of the Indocuban *areíto*. African performance in Cuba did not present the need for recognizable boundaries between the performing arts because

performance was not conceived in terms of dance, or theater, or music, but instead as an organic whole.

Finally, the theater of *relaciones*, which developed primarily in Santiago<sup>34</sup> as early as the eighteenth century is another significant artistic manifestation of the Afrocuban community. It was structured as drama by blacks for a black audience in the form of carnival skits accompanied by music, which continued to be an integral part of the carnival in Santiago up until the 1950s (Pereira). Its influence in Cuban theater and zarzuela in particular is contained in the development of comedic characters, which were later caricatured by white playwrights.

The direct relationship between Afrocubans and western musical theater traditions began in the pit:

As musicians the blacks integrated the orchestras which opera companies used to assemble for tours in the Island [...] and thus coalesced a process of mutual relations between that which the blacks brought to such music, and that which the European musicians performed (Martinez Fure 29).

From this moment forward the “mutual relationships” would further consolidate, even though the collaborative process would accentuate prevalent racial tensions.

### ***The Birth of Cuban Theater***

Cuban theater post-Columbus was set to begin with Francisco Covarrubias (1775-1850), a very popular actor and playwright, responsible for transposing Cuban customs

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<sup>34</sup> Santiago de Cuba is the second largest city in the Island, it was the capital of the Oriente Province until the government draw new regional boundaries in the 1970s. Today it is the capital of the province known by the same name.

and traditions to the Cuban stage. A very prolific writer and performer whose acting career spans almost half a decade, he was active on the stages of La Habana from 1801 until 1847 (Rio Prado), with over fifty plays to his name, out of which none has survived but the titles. Covarrubias considered the father of Cuban theater, known for his black face performances remains, to this day, an icon in Cuba, and his name graces one of the performance spaces at the National Theater complex in La Habana. His theater defined the stock character types that would populate Cuban zarzuela in the twentieth century.

His main contribution is the introduction of the *negrito* character, a grotesque caricature of Africans in the island, performed in blackface by white Cuban actors for a white audience. Covarrubias' first *negrito*—the first ever in Cuba—appeared on stage in 1812, already a decade into his career and with a considerable following. The *negrito*, as a caricature and archetype was further popularized by Spanish born Bartolomé Crespo Borbón (1811-1871); writing under the pseudonym Creto Gangá, he created the *negrito bozal*, an African born slave who had not mastered the use of Spanish, that was presented as an obedient caricature “the inoffensive, inferior being that suited the *esclavista* ideology” (Pereira, 14). Evidently, the linguistic patterns of the *negrito bozal* differed significantly from the Spanish spoken by *criollo* and Spanish characters, thus highlighting the boundaries between racial and social divides both on and off stage.

The *negrito bozal* gave way to the *negro catedrático*; a character popularized in Francisco Fernández Vilaros play Los negros catedráticos (1868). The *negro catedrático* was:

A mock professor or aristocrat, a sham literati, a pretend duke or duchess, and foremost a species of Cuban malaprop, spouting no end of learned prose in a most questionable performance of intelligence or social wit. Strutting about in a tattered rendition of fine coat tails, top hat, and pointed European shoes, consumed with race, class, and colonial envy, pontificating in faux Latin or French on any useless subject, or silly dancing a pompous minuet (Lane 13).

Underneath the comic relief function, attained through grotesque caricaturization, the *negro catedrático* standardized onstage whitening anxieties, which reached their peak in zarzuela, with the introduction of the tragic Cuban mulata. The onstage mulata's whitening impulse, already disclosed in nineteenth century literature, is on display in zarzuela for a primarily white audience during the 1920s and 30s. While the black presence is "conspicuously underrepresented" from performance (Pereira 15), the mulata takes center stage, and thus renders the inefficacy of the black/white dichotomy, to the extent that national identity began to be articulated in terms of *mulates*.

Although none of Covarrubias' plays have survived, a draft of the plays' structures can be reconstructed based on reviews that appeared in local newspapers; from this information Leal points out that it was customary to include popular music and dance in the performances (Leal 1980). Consequently, Cuban theater, before the proliferation of the phonograph and the appearance of the recording industry, played a major role first in the dissemination of popular music, and later as a catalyst for new musicians that

ultimately consolidated a space for stage music and cultivated native musical theater genres.

According to Leal, “Covarrubias no solo cubanizó el sainete español, sino también la tonadilla” (Leal 35) (Covarrubias not only cubanized the Spanish *sainete*, but also the *tonadilla*) Leal’s assertion points to an appropriation model that later, in the early twentieth century, would produce Cuban zarzuela. Yet, what does it mean to *cubanize* a Spanish genre? The idea of *cubanizing* presupposes the existence of a sufficiently coherent set of cultural traits that defined the *Cuban*, or at least identifiable to propose something that would be clearly different from that which was *cubanized*. Why, then, was a *cubanization* process necessary? If there were enough cultural traits to create Cuban, as opposed to *cubanized*, theater, why did it not happen? Part of the problem lays in the displacement of Latin American performance by the conceptual limitations imposed by Western definitions of theater, and their continuous perpetuation of classical notions of mimetic representation. Diana Taylor asserts that such definitions reduce *theater* to the staging of texts for an exclusive audience (i.e. those who [can] pay the tickets, those who *sit* in the theater, etc.), presupposing an economic component that alienates most of the theater produced in Latin America, past and present, where the mechanics of production and consumption of art in general, fluctuate at unimaginable rates. In addition, colonial values then, and market forces today, continue to privilege the Western canon, perpetuated by the insistence of the primacy of Classical epistemologies. This is evident in the excruciating difficulty of finding printed editions of Guatemalan theater in Guatemala, while copies of Shakespeare’s plays are readily available for purchase

(Taylor 1993a). It has certainly been my experience in various cities across Latin America and the Caribbean, including La Habana, where until the *periodo especial*<sup>35</sup> extensive collections of Latin American plays were published. Taylor argues that “mientras que críticos del llamado “primer mundo” se dedican a analizar “tropes of visibility,” nosotros, desde los márgenes oscurecidos, estamos intentando salir de la invisibilidad” (51, 1993a) (while critics in the so-called “first world” are dedicated to analyzing “tropes of visibility”, we, from the obscure margins, attempt to get out of invisibility). Necessarily, Taylor’s assertion renders phrases such as Leal’s “cubanized Spanish *entremes*” quite problematic, and even ineffective. If, following Stuart Hall, the Caribbean is the first diaspora—meaning that the area is populated by displaced peoples—and Cuba, following Ortiz, is the result of a process of transculturation, it is a contradiction to use the term “cubanization” when describing Cuban performance in relation to Spanish theater before the twentieth century, because the Spanish product is, in part, present a priori in the “Cuban” of Cuban theater. In other words, “cubanization” must be understood as the articulation process, and not the end result.

Technically, Spanish formats, more so than genres, influenced Cuban theater. The Spanish *sainete* and *tonadilla* provided an accessible paradigm within which the African, Indocuban, and even Spanish cultural traditions could converge outside Spanish dominated and imposed cultural production. Since the amalgamation of these diverse

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<sup>35</sup> The *periodo especial*, or special period is the term designated by Fidel Castro to identify the years of economic depression after the fall of the Soviet Union. It began in 1991 and lasted until the end of the decade. In addition to the deficit created by the lack of aide from the Soviet Union, the United States embargo established in 1961 was further strengthened in 1992 and 1995 further complicating an already critical moment for the Cuban nation.



elements was informing more than mirroring the society that produced it, the resulting hybrid was, perhaps inadvertently, articulating the traits and characteristics of Cuban identity.<sup>36</sup> Following Homi Bhabha, who asserts that nations are narratives that arise from hybrid interaction of contending cultural forces (Bhabha, 1990), the emerging Cuban theater propelled narratives of Cubanidad,<sup>37</sup> or rather, articulating ideas of Cuban identity. Francisco Covarrubias' success was rooted precisely in his ability to intersect the Spanish format, through a performance mode that was only possible through the combination of text, music, song, and dance. His training, trajectory, and recognition as an actor, writer, producer, and opera singer,<sup>38</sup> along with his interest in popular music, positioned him as an active agent of cultural change. In particular, Covarrubias is significant to this study beyond his leading role in defining the Cuban stage, because his artistic endeavor included not just an experiment in cultural transculturation, but an exploration into musical theater formats, in which popular musics not sanctioned by the Spanish and *criollo* cultural elites, along with familiar archetypes that populated the streets of La Habana—and not just the respected salons and mansions of the city—entered a space and a conversation that had been dominated by Spanish epistemologies:

Covarrubias transformó los típicos personajes de la comedia española en los tipos criollos más populares de entonces, como guajiros, monteros, carreteros, peones y otros de menor tipicidad. También con gran

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<sup>36</sup> In this case my employment of the term hybrid has its premise in Gilbert and Lo's assertion that it "stresses the productive nature of cultural interaction as positive contamination" (Gilbert and Lo, 7), thus, allowing the hybrid to assert itself as both autonomous and in constant flux.

<sup>37</sup> In this context the closest translation of Cubanidad would be akin to Cubanness.

<sup>38</sup> "cantaba operas con su hermosa voz de bajo" (Tolon: 12, 1973).

sentido teatral y cubano introdujo la música popular de nuestra tierra, comenzando por su forma más sencilla, las canciones y tonadas de sabor campesino, en lugar de las boleras, las seguidillas y los villancicos, que servían de marco a los personajes hispánicos, dando así entrada en esa forma a la música cubana (Tolon 12).

Covarrubias changed the usual characters in Spanish comedia for the most popular contemporary *criollo* characters, such as guajiros, monteros, carreteros, peones and others of less popularity. Likewise, he included our own popular music with great theatrical and Cuban sensitivity. He allowed Cuban music to enter the stage, beginning with the most simple of forms: songs and *tonadas* with rural flavor in lieu of *boleras*, *segudillas*, and *villancicos* all of which framed the Hispanic characters.

In addition to songs and *tonadas*, he included many others, such as the *guaracha*, *puntos guajiros*, *habaneras*, and *rumbas* among others. Among these the *punto guajiro* is of particular relevance because it destabilizes the primacy of the urban center as the locus of cultural production, since the *guajiros* were countryfolk that inhabited rural areas sustained by agriculture and farming, their musical practices did not partake nor did they undergo as many transformations as those that developed in the urban centers. Although, after its introduction in the Cuban stage, the *punto guajiro* traveled to Spain where it was very popular, and came to be known as *punto habanero*. However, among these musical genres, the habanera became the fundamental element in the Cuban musical relationships with Spain in particular, and the rest of the world in general (Linares and Nuñez), both

instances ascertain the multidirectionality of the cultural traffic generated by the transculturation process.

Covarrubias' shaping of the colonial dramatic forms continued after his death, when new generations of artists engaged with the stage further explored Spanish performance traditions. The appearance of companies of *bufos cubanos* inaugurated the *teatro bufo* (comic theater) in Cuba. According to Rine Leal the *bufos cubanos* were modeled after the *bufos madrileños*, in turn modeled after the *Bouffes Parisiens*. However, Enrique Rio Prado has recently contested Leal's position. He argues that the *bufos cubanos* evolve from the theater conceived by Covarrubias and his *sainetes costumbristas* and from minstrels in the United States that had been touring Cuba since the early 1860s. Rio Prado explains that since the first performances by the *bufos madrileños* took place in August 1868, over three months after the *bufos cubanos* had presented their repertoire in Cuba, there is not a realistic chance for the Cuban troupe to be a direct byproduct of the Spanish. Other than, the use of the term "*bufos*," Rio Prado asserts that the *bufos madrileños* had no influence on the Cuban company. In contrast, he cites the direct influence of French *opéra-bouffe*: "la opéra-bouffe francesa que nos llegó con Trombalcazar (1862), Les deux aveugles y Les violoneux (ambas en 1865), primeras obras de Offenbach estrenadas en Cuba" (9). (The French *opéra-bouffe* that first arrived with Offenbach's Trombalcazar (1862), Les deux aveugles y Les violoneux [both in 1865] were the first performances of Offenbach in Cuba). Since most of the characters that populate zarzuela plots are either inspired or directly transposed from the *teatro bufo*, Rio Prado's assertion is quite relevant to this study. On one hand, it decenters the Spanish

contributions as the only European influence in zarzuela by recognizing the role of French musical theater, but most importantly, it exposes the contact and influence of other performing practices in the Americas. On the other hand, Rio Prado singles out musical theater and performances that relied on musical accompaniment as the main source of foreign influence in the *teatro bufo*. Under such circumstances, music played a pivotal role in the structural dramaturgy of *teatro bufo*'s characters, facilitating their cross over to zarzuela.

The *bufos cubanos* institutionalized the format of *teatro bufo*'s performance sequence, which consisted of several seemingly independent sections that would not necessarily relate to each other. The performances included an opening by an *orquesta criolla* (*criollo* orchestra) followed by three distinct short parodies (including parodies of Italian opera arias, *romanzas* from Spanish zarzuelas, or Spanish *entremeses*), culminating in the highlight of the session, a *sainete de costumbres*, which included live music and singing. The *sainete de costumbres* followed the Spanish model, but its characters and situations were drawn from Cuban urban life. The *teatro bufo* would closely follow this pattern through the second half of the nineteenth century (Rio Prado 4). After *teatro bufo*'s success in La Habana, it swiftly spread across the Island (Guanabacoa, Marianao, Regla, and Santiago de Cuba), and gained a substantial following among Cubans, especially those that did not sympathize with the Spanish colonial rule, thus opening potential sites for national resistance and subversion.

Formally, *teatro bufo* resists traditional labor divisions in the creative process, because the *bufo* genre “rompio la división entre escritores y hombres de escena, y

asumieron el teatro como un producto final en que ellos tomaban parte como directores, actors, músicos, cantantes, bailarines y empresarios” (Leal 158) (broke the division between writers and performers, while assuming the theater as a final product in which performers took over as directors, actors, musicians, singers, dancers, and impresarios). Perhaps influenced on one hand by Indocuban and African performance traditions, and the scarcity of economic support on the other.

The lack of economic resources is evident in the challenges faced by the *bufos*. For example, the *sainetes de costumbres* found significant obstacles when competing for a space within the national cultural production, since theaters were reserved for mostly Spanish-authored spectacle. The *bufos* began to emerge in alternative spaces that subverted and potentially resisted colonial rule by appropriating and transforming the Spanish dominated space for the arts in the Island. These alternate spaces were often located in the outskirts of the city, and although the life span of these improvised theaters was very short, the *bufos* managed to maintain an active presentation schedule.

The strategy of appropriating the Spanish format to disguise vernacular production would prove to be a successful one throughout the nineteenth century. After the Ten Years War, more *bufo* companies appeared throughout the island, and by the early 1900s, Cuban theater had already become an independent genre embraced by most of the *criollo* population. Simultaneously, Cuba had already cultivated a musical theater tradition sustained by non-stop exposure to foreign musical theater genres, as well as its own explorations by way of the *sainete*, and the *revista* which included archetype

characters performing in local dialects while interpreting popular dance music and song, setting the stage for the transformation of Cuban zarzuela.

In addition to the *sainete de costumbres*, championed by the *bufos cubanos* Rio Prado considers the *apropósito*, *revista*, *parodia*, and zarzuela as other subgenres of the *teatro bufo*.<sup>39</sup> Within this division, Rio Prado defines zarzuela as a subgenre in which the lead roles are not played by *bufo* characters. While it is true that in zarzuela comic relief is limited to secondary characters involved in circumstances tangential to the main plot, the classification of musical theater composed by Cubans during the nineteenth century has long been an area of debate between musicians, scholars and general audience. Though some maintain that zarzuela per se does not emerge until the twentieth century (most recently Susan Thomas), others argue that the term zarzuela encompasses all forms of musical theater genres that appear in Cuba during the nineteenth century and beyond (most recently Rio Prado). I subscribe to the former because, as I have explained so far, other forms of both native and foreign performance, crucial to the formation of zarzuela, such as *teatro bufo*, did not mature until the end of the century, and Cuban zarzuela emerged from the amalgamation of those forms. This is not to say, however, that Cuban musical theater genres did not exist before the twentieth century.

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<sup>39</sup> The *sainete* is defined by its short length format, comic and popular content, and occasional music. The *apropósito* is a *sainete* that deals with a current event or issue that relates to contemporary society, hence its name *a propos*. The *revista* is a series of accompanied musical and dance numbers linked by either a nonlinear argument or a series of unrelated dramatic vignettes characterized by its propensity for spectacle. The *parodias* are “festive imitations of works or artistic styles” “*imitación festiva de obras o estilos artísticos*” (Rio Prado, 10).

### *The Theaters in La Habana*

By 1900 the Teatro Alhambra had begun a project that eventually would transform it into the foremost venue for *teatro bufo* with its resident composers, conductors and librettists. The theater was characterized by an extensive repertoire, most of it requiring performers with excellent improvisation skills, hence the resident company was made up of talented performers. The Alhambra was well known for its lavish sets and costumes along with impressive special effects. The repertoire was catered to a male audience, *hombres solos* (“single men”), and at times its productions were labeled “pornographic.” This made the Alhambra a forbidden space for “respectable” audiences. However, in more than one occasion the productions garnered so much success that “revised” versions were presented in other theaters, usually the Teatro Nacional and the Teatro Payret. The presentations of the Alhambra outside the Alhambra were quite popular, and equally profitable. The owners of the Payret were able to pay for a significant part of the theater’s mortgage thanks to the Alhambra, while the rest of the money came from the performances of Count Koma, a well-known Japanese Jui-Jitsu master (Tolón, 1973, 39). The Alhambra was without a doubt a commercial enterprise.

Parallel to the Alhambra period, other companies with similar aesthetic and artistic styles appeared sporadically, among them Arquimedes Pous’ company. Pous was both impresario and librettist, and followed the model of *teatro bufo*’s holistic artist. He is credited with developing an operetta tradition following the French model (Aredondo). His work consisted of the creation of libretti for operetta parodies set to music adapted or composed and conducted by Jaime Prats, and Eliseo Grenet.

It is important to note that the composers/conductors of the Alhambra period were going to have a profound influence in the development of the zarzuela repertoire, most of them eventually becoming the composers of Cuban zarzuela's golden age. From Arquimedes Pous' Company Rodrigo Pratts conducted the premiere of the Cuban zarzuela Maria La O (1930); his son Rodrigo's zarzuela María Belén Chacón (1934) is one of the most staged titles of the zarzuela repertoire. Eliseo Grenet, also from Pous' company collaborated with Ernesto Lecuona in the zarzuela Niña Rita (1927). Likewise, the musical staff of the Alhambra included Jorge Anckermann "el compositor más fecundo del arte lírico cubano" (Rio Prado 327) (the most prolific composer of Cuban musical theater),<sup>40</sup> and Manuel Mauri, composer of the opera La esclava, along with many zarzuela titles, to name a few.

The Alhambra period also produced very influential librettists, among them Federico Villoch, labeled the "*criollo* Lope de Vega" (Robreño, Rio Prado), Mario Sorondo, who introduced the *revista* genre, and José Sánchez Galarraga who wrote the libretto for the zarzuela Rosa la china. In addition, the Alhambra also introduced native operetta, inspired by the popularity of Viennese operetta, and continued the tradition of presenting parodies. The *parodias* (parodies) functioned as staged commentaries of recent events in the Island. For example, after Sarah Bernhardt's 1918 performances in La Habana of Alexandre Dumas, fils La Dame aux camélias (1852), Villoch and Anckermann composed La dama de las camelias. The importance of the *parodia* is that it

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<sup>40</sup> Rio Prado uses the designation *arte lírico*, which literally means "lyric art." It is the common term in Latin America to describe musical theater genres considered "high art" as opposed to popular musical theater.



promoted collective circulation of social critique from an eminently Cuban perspective, and it did so primarily through humor. When the Catalan actor Margarita Xirgu visited La Habana with Miguel de Unamuno's translation of Sophocles' Electra, the Alhambra presented its own version titled Electrica ("Electric"). Hence, the *parodias* subverted not only canonical authors and titles, but also contemporary performers and authors, and by doing so, *parodias* transgressed an entire cultural agenda. The list is quite long, including Bayard Veiller's The Trial of Mary Dugan, presented in Cuba as El proceso de Mario Cuban; Alberto Insúa's El negro que tenia el alma blanca (The Black Man with White Soul) to the Cuban version La blanca que tenia el alma negra (The White Woman with Black Soul). From these titles, it is evident that race and gender played a crucial role in the interplay between construction and reception of the *parodias*.

Furthermore, the Alhambra was not only subverting the cultural agenda of the West, but at times it played an important role either with the opposition, or in support of the puppet governments established by the neocolonial power exercised by the United States, which controlled the economic and political discourse of the Island after the departure of the Spanish colonial authorities. In addition, the repertoire at the Alhambra seems to have been composed mostly of new works. In this sense, we can speak of the first repertoire of Cuban performance both in form and in content: "Las obras siempre estuvieron aderezadas por un hablar y sonar en cubano y creadas por autores y músicos que eran buenos conocedores de las costumbres del pais" (Eli 76). (The pieces were always flavored with Cuban speech and sound, created by authors and musicians that knew very well the country's costumes). Through the repertoire at the Alhambra, the

Cuban public accessed information regarding both domestic and international political, social, cultural, and economic conditions.

The Alhambra played a dual role, first as the most important center for musical theater performance in the Island during the first three decades of the twentieth century, staging works that laid the foundations for a musical theater tradition that would define the future of musical theater in the Island: “Hablamos del teatro Alhambra pero en realidad debemos referirnos a una forma de hacer teatro musical cubano” (Díaz Ayala 173). (We speak of the Alhambra Theater, but in reality, we are referring to a form of Cuban musical theater creation). To the extent that the theater’s productions are grouped under the term *periodo Alhambresco* (Alhambra period), thus defining not only a style, but also a historical period of the performing arts in Cuba. Second, the Alhambra’s occasional social commentary, whether or not it went beyond the mere presentation of social satire, allowed for a presentation of a critique from a Cuban perspective, and it did so through humor. This is crucial because humor is an integral component of Cuban idiosyncrasy and as a strategy for political commentary has proven to be an effective tool for social change both in Cuba, and the rest of the Caribbean.

After the Alhambra had nurtured the development of Cuban theater and two of its archetype characters the *negrito* and the *gallego*, the Teatro Regina promoted the zarzuela genre and its tragic mulata. Unlike the Alhambra, the audience members of the Regina were mostly *criollo*, upper and upper middle class women. The Regina opened on September 23, 1927, named after Regina Truffin, wife of Clemente Vázquez Bello, then President of the Senate (Rio Prado 43). Ernesto Lecuona assumed the artistic direction of

the Regina, along with Eliso Grenet (Musical Director) and Enrique Lacasa (Director of Productions).

The first performance at the Regina was the zarzuela La Niña Rita o La Habana en 1830, (Miss Rita or La Habana in 1830) with music by Lecuona and Grenet to a libretto by Aurelio Riancho (who was also the company's prompter) and Antonio Castells. La Niña Rita is a crucial title in the repertoire of Cuban musical theater for reasons that go beyond the inauguration of the Teatro Regina. First, it included the first "white" female and male aristocratic young leading characters, perhaps catering to the social and ethnic composition of its audience. This was a departure from the casting structure prevalent at the Alhambra, which included *tiples* (lead singer-performer) and actors (leads with occasional singing) heading the talent hierarchy followed by "*guapas muchachas* (*beautiful girls*) known as *vicetiple*" (Rio Prado). Second, the cast of La Niña Rita brought to the stage a group of female performers that had only been seen on the concert stage before. Since the theater was for the most part a forbidden arena for middle class women, which most of the new performers were, Lecuona had to convince the cast, their families, and the performers' husbands that the Regina was quite different from the Alhambra and other theaters in Cuba. Third, Lecuona introduced the leading tenor to Cuban lyric theater, as well as the *caballeros del coro* (Gentlemen of the chorus), while the comic characters from *teatro bufo* were integrated into the plot in secondary roles. Opening night was a success and launched the career of Rita Montaner, one of the most

important performers of the Cuban stage.<sup>41</sup> Her rendition of the *tango-congo* *Ay Mamá Inés* from the zarzuela La Niña Rita o la Habana en 1830, performed in drag and blackface since her character was a *negrito*, was so popular that it remains to this day one of the most performed musical numbers of the Cuban repertoire. The number of performances of La Niña Rita reached forty-five in less than three months, an unprecedented number in such a short period of time, which until then was only attainable by the type of shows produced at the Alhambra, and specially those that included so-called *desnudo estético* (aesthetic nude) (Rio Prado 50). In the context of a musical theater idiom, that embodies a Cuban aesthetics, La Niña Rita:

es tomada como punto de giro hacia una nueva etapa en la lírica, caracterizada por la composición de zarzuelas donde los elementos formales y dramáticos alcanzaron más desarrollo. Este desarrollo no sólo competía a una dimensión mayor en el ámbito formal, sino a la definición de un contenido musical y argumental capaz de identificarse con los rasgos de identidad nacional. (Eli and Alfonso 49).

is taken as a turning point towards a new state in the lyric theater, characterized by zarzuela compositions in which formal and dramaturgical elements are highly developed. This development, however, was not limited to formal elements, but also to a musical and thematic content that was reflective of national identity traits.

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<sup>41</sup> For more on Rita Montaner, see Fajardo, Ramón Rita Montaner: testimonio de una época. La Habana: Fondo editorial Casa de las Américas, 1997.

Following the success of La Niña Rita, the Regina was host to many new titles including El cafetal (1929), and Maria La O (1930) both by Lecuona, and to this date part of the standard repertoire. Consequently, the work by Lecuona, Grenet, and the Teatro Regina remain forever linked to the development and flourishing of zarzuela.

The innovations that were taking place both inside and outside the Regina during this period, and at all levels of the creative endeavor in zarzuela productions, made possible a clearly identifiable music theater genre that had found what Adorno has labeled the sound of *us*. Critics had begun to notice, and at the untimely death of set designer Pepito Gomís, responsible for designing, among other titles, Lecuona's El cafetal the press, covering his funeral noted that he

Renovó el arte, la escenografía, en Cuba, no ya siguiendo la nueva técnica europea y norteamericana, sino creando efectos sorprendentes con tanta habilidad e ingenio como con buen gusto [...] un verdadero colaborador del autor (El Mundo, July 28, 1929 8p. in Rio Prado 65).

Renewed art and set design in Cuba, not by following the new European and North American techniques, rather by creating surprising effects with as much efficacy and creativity as good taste [...] a true collaborator with authors.

Throughout this period of burgeoning zarzuela compositions and performances, which begins to decline after 1936, we witness a clear shift from foreign genres and parodies to productions that aim to articulate a national lyric theater. Interestingly, this happens

beyond the shadow of the colonial legacy and the neocolonial domination, and aims to follow the example of other Latin American nations:

La República Azteca y la República Argentina, los países de nuestra raza, tienen compañías de arte nacional que ofrecen representaciones de cuadros de su vida lo mismo de sociedad que de callejera. ¿Por qué no hemos de tener nosotros por lo menos una organización semejante? [...] Una compañía de arte nacional formada por artistas cubanos con repertorio cubano, obras y decoraciones, tendría no solo el apoyo de todas las instituciones que se interesen por nuestro arte, sino la ayuda decidida y franca de la prensa y la sanción entusiasta del público (Heraldo de Cuba, June 16, 1931 6p. in Rio Prado 76, 79).

The Aztec Republic and the Republic of Argentina, countries of our race, have national art companies that offer representations of the urban and domestic life. Why could we not have, at least, a similar organization? [...] A national company for the arts, formed by Cuban artists and Cuban repertoire and sets, would not only enjoy the support of all the institutions interested in our artistic manifestations, but the decisive and frank assistance of the press, and the enthusiastic approval of the audience.

Both Mexican and Argentinean companies had already visited La Habana in various occasions, and it must have been evident, at least to the artistic community, the sentiments expressed in the news article cited above, since a few months later a national lyric theater project materialized.

In 1931, the Teatro Martí opened its doors, under the direction of Gonzalo Roig and Rodrigo Prats.<sup>42</sup> During the five years that followed the opening, the Martí became the home of the national lyric theater fostering and nurturing Cuban zarzuela, staging the most representative titles of the national genre. In terms of quantity and quality of zarzuela productions, the Cuban stage has yet to see similar outpouring of musical theater. Under the direction of Gonzalo Roig, the seasons at the Martí included, among many others: Rosa la China (1932), Lola Cruz (1935), both by Lecuona; María Belén Chacón (1934), Amalia Batista (1936) both by Rodrigo Prats, and Gonzalo Roig's Cecilia Valdés (1932) the most popular of all, which I examine in the following chapters.

Although some of the early productions at the Martí followed the content and production values of the Alhambra, these were isolated presentations. Nonetheless, those who were still suspicious of the reputation of theater in general, and of a national theater in particular, found sufficient ammunition to continue to distrust any effort that claimed to be an alternative form of theater to the Alhambra. Eventually the press began to notice the uniqueness of Cuban zarzuela including the sophisticated inclusion of popular nineteenth-century music, as evidence in this review of La perla del Caribe (The Caribbean Pearl), with music by Rodrigo Prats and libretto by José Sánchez Arcilla:

La perla del Caribe es, por todos conceptos, una magnífica producción del género criollo, con la que autores y artistas han dado un mentís rotundo a quienes afirman que en nuestro teatro no puede andarse más que entre

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<sup>42</sup> Significantly, the producers chose to name the theater after José Martí, the Cuban patriot that symbolizes the founder of the nation across borders of time and space for twentieth century Cubans

gente del hampa, merodeando por escenas chabacanas y calcando tipos caricaturescos [...] La partitura de La perla del Caribe es algo de gran importancia en la que la técnica y la inspiración van hermanadas y para la que el maestro ha sabido amalgamar lo mejor de nuestros ritmos desde los tiempos más remotos, haciendo verdadera obra folklórica. El prelude y el primer cuadro, constituye [sic] todo un exquisito poema siboney del que se destacan la romanza de la tiple, de serias dificultades (Juan Bonich. El Mundo October 17, 1931 in Rio Prado 83-85).

La perla del Caribe is a magnificent production of the *criollo* genre, with which artists and authors have silenced those who think that our theater is for criminals who enjoy vulgarity and easy laughs [...] The score of La perla del Caribe is of outmost importance, since technique and inspiration go hand in hand, under the leadership of a Maestro that knows how to combine the best of our rhythms from the past and present, resulting in a true folkloric piece. The prelude and the first scene constitute an exquisite Siboney poem, from which the difficult *tiple's romanza* stands out.

In addition, the nationalist discourse was highlighted during the finale of La perla de Caribe, which included intertwined musical sections of the Cuban national anthem. The performances were quite successful and continued the stylistic development of zarzuela that began with La Niña Rita.

The surge of zarzuela titles and the genre's consolidation in the realm of national musical theater was possible in part to the uniformity of themes during the first years of



the genre's brief history. These zarzuelas responded unanimously to the needs of an emerging nationalist movement. The response was articulated by a deliberate exploration of the colonial past, partnered with adaptations of nineteenth-century *novelas antiesclavistas* (antislavery novels). This interpretation of the past was tailored for twentieth century Cubans, and remains alive today primarily in the exile community, thanks to the sparse, yet continuous performances of a handful of titles from the repertoire.

By the early 1930s there had been such a recurrent emphasis in setting the zarzuelas in the 1830s, that in 1932, just a few years after the first performance of La Niña Rita, in an interview given by librettist Antonio Castells about his most recent work, his response was introduced by the following comment: Siempre pensé [...] escribir una obra cubana de corte antiguo, pero sin remontarse a la época ya trillada de 1830 (El Mundo, August 11, 1932, 6. in Rio Prado 106) (I have always thought of writing a Cuban work set in the past, but not in the overdone period of 1830. Castells' piece, with music by Rodrigo and Jaime Prats, was set in the 1890s, and if there is any reason to believe that this represents a trend to depart from historical themes, the title La Habana que vuelve (La Havana that Returns) should suffice to dispel such claims. Although there are some exceptions, zarzuela is fundamentally a genre concerned with historical themes in the nineteenth century Cuban context.

Building upon the innovations cultivated at the Teatro Regina with the introduction of La Niña Rita, it is possible to outline a set of characteristics that define zarzuela as an independent genre, differentiated from other genres of musical theater. In

addition to the incorporation of the tenor in leading roles, zarzuela employs the characters made famous in *teatro bufo*, but in secondary roles. While characters such as the *negrito* and the *gallego* maintain the same pattern of dramatic development and remain at the periphery of the main action, zarzuela explores innovative ways of presenting the mulata, which until then had appeared mostly as a comedic character in the *teatro bufo*, transposing the character to a central position around whom the entire plot evolved. Likewise, her love interest will no longer be the *negrito* or the *gallego*, but rather the white *galan*. Along with the mulata, but mostly in supporting roles, tragic black characters also emerged. Thematically, the zarzuela repertoire was standing on uncharted territory. While, the tendency to privilege double entendre and erotic infused situations was central to the Alhambra repertoire, and the *teatro bufo* had mainly focused on the depiction of poor urban characters and their situations, zarzuela distanced itself from such paradigms by including the upper classes and the *criollo* aristocracy entangled in melodramatic situations, thus opening a new field of dramatic arguments that had attracted little attention in the music theater stage until then.

Furthermore, the musical elements and the amalgamation of musical traditions and styles were more sophisticated in zarzuela than in other musical theater genres prevalent in Cuba, such as the *revista*. Although zarzuela remains loyal to traditional Cuban rhythms, it employs lyric forms that are closer to western opera than to popular music. This is quite evident in the vocal delivery, especially of the leading roles, and it was often used to demark social, racial, and ethnic boundaries. To this extent the music that accompanied white, wealthy *criollos* and Spanish characters privileged more lyrical

and European influenced melodies, while the characters of color developed in popular and specially Afro-Cuban musics. Finally, music, libretto and production values are of equal importance, at least theoretically in the overall conception of new works, a departure from the Alhambra style, where scenery and visual rhetoric dominated the creative endeavor.

Zarzuelas followed a standardized organizational structure in which musical and dramatic ideas are carefully scheduled into a quasi-formulaic pattern that remains more or less constant throughout the history of the genre. While there are some recurrent characteristics, I will explore some common traits based on a close reading of titles, and commentaries from other scholars. Throughout the last section of this chapter, I outline the three most important formal devices common in the genre: the *salida*, the love duet and the *romanza*.

Of particular importance among performance conventions is the *salida* of the leading lady, usually the tragic mulata. The *salida*—literally meaning “exit” onto the stage—occurs early in the piece “en un ambiente festivo y es aprovechado por el compositor en la utilización de ritmos bailables (danza, guaracha, etc.). La mulata es aclamada por el coro—tanto masculino como femenino—con vivas y otras frases admirativas. (Rio Prado 153) (In a festive atmosphere in which the composer utilizes dance rhythms (*danza*, *guaracha*, etc.) The mixed chorus acclaims the mulata with *vivas* and other celebratory remarks that show their admiration for her).

Susan Thomas has defined the *salida* as a public performance in which the mulata performs her identity (47). She calls it the mulata’s “calling card” where her ‘mulataness’

is expressed and explored” (49). At the same time, however, this performance convention is also the space where the mulata’s instability as an object of stereotype is exposed, for her performance reveals her as a character that is hard to place, that is in constant flux. The entire *salida* is divided into various sections that flow seamlessly while the mulata is introduced to the audience, building into a grand finale in which the character is accompanied by the entire chorus, during which she is meant to marvel both on and off stage audiences with her looks and vocal acrobatics. It is an understatement to say that this is a show stopping number, more so it is the most important section of the entire zarzuela.

The *salida* begins in the middle of an on-stage celebration, such as a birthday party, with an introduction that may be accompanied either by the chorus or in the form of an orchestral fanfare, or both, immediately followed by the appearance of the mulata, who enters amidst cheers and greetings from those present in the onstage celebration. Invariably, the first words sung by the mulata address her identity and serve to name her. The chorus echoes the words of the mulata in the same manner of a call and response structure similar to the areitos interspaced throughout her solo sections.<sup>43</sup> The *salida* functions as a display mechanism for the exhibit of the mulata. Her body, gendered, sexualized and racialized is presented as an exotic commodity to be desired but not readily available, at least not for everyone.

However, the first encounter we have with the mulata has occurred before her entrance. Often the chorus and secondary characters would have commented about on her

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<sup>43</sup> Call and response pieces were mostly present in large numbers assigned to secondary characters, such as the slaves.

earlier during the on-stage celebration building on to her entrance, much in the same way that regular zarzuela audiences would behave before a performance of a well known zarzuela diva. The celebrity status of the female leads with cult following and devoted fans was not uncommon in Cuba. Many of these performers went on to have successful film careers and performance engagements all across the Americas and Europe (such as Caridad Suarez and Rita Montaner). The dividing line between the admiration and objectification of the performer and the mulata was constantly in flux, more so in such cases where the performer herself was a mulata such as the case with Rita Montaner.

There is always one love duet between the leads. Located towards the middle of the piece the duet usually allows the characters to explore the love they have for each other, with issues of jealousy and/or infidelity surfacing throughout. Since all of the characters in zarzuela are defined, both musically and dramaturgically, based on their race, gender and social status, the duet highlights above all the composer's capacity to synthesize the various musical traditions that converge in zarzuela, while revealing the tensions between the cultures that produce them.

The term *romanza* was borrowed from Spanish zarzuela, and defines a solo piece sung through. Leads and some secondary characters perform the *romanza* in Cuban zarzuela. Although, it originally included a brief moment of declamation in which the character reflected on her/his condition to an instrumental background, the spoken section has been completely dismantled. It is performed towards the end of the zarzuela before the denouement, at the moment of highest dramatic tension.

Rio Prado affirms that it is often tempting to assume that the structure, forms, and devices employed in zarzuela are copies of Italian opera; after all there is still a prevalent perception that musical theater was invented in the west, and opera as well as opera-derived forms are the sole proprietors of performance traditions that incorporate music and drama simultaneously. It is, of course, impossible to deny the influence of the musical theater genres cultivated in the West. This influence is not limited to the legacy of Spanish cultural expansionism, but also brought on by organic cultural appropriations in which cultural transactions took place between artists engaged in an exchange that was characterized by mutual consent motivated by creative enquiry. Such is the case of the many Cuban composers who went to study in European conservatories, or the exposure to Western music that innumerable Cuban musicians had while on tour throughout many parts of the West. In addition to the propagation of recording and visits of touring companies to La Habana and other sections of Cuba, it would be impossible to disregard Europe's influence on zarzuela. Yet, to imply that zarzuela is the Cuban response to opera is misleading. Cuba had been producing its own opera, modeled directly after Italian opera, and although the production of Cuban opera was limited to a handful of titles, it was a separate and different genre from zarzuela.<sup>44</sup> Instead, I propose that Cuban zarzuela is influenced by western musical theater genres in as much as it gave Cuban composers and librettists the opportunity to explore their own artistic idiom. In other

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<sup>44</sup> Although Cuban opera is not the focus of this study, I make a few references to the genre in the following chapters, for a thorough investigation see González, Jorge Antonio *La composición operística en Cuba*. Letras Cubana: La Habana, 1986 and Tolon, Edwin and Jorge A. González *Operas cubanas y sus autores*. Ucar, García y Cía: La Habana, 1943).

words, the influence was not limited to borrowing certain formats and structures but to the construction of a national musical theater idiom by way of explorations of alterity. Encoded in those explorations are the intricate constructions of national identities that would come to define Cuba for both Cubans and the rest of the world. In the next chapter, I delve into the repertoire's canonical works, performance practices and staging conventions, and trace the trajectories of the genre from neocolonial to exilic spaces.

## CHAPTER 3

### **The Invention of Havana: *Soy mestiza, y no lo soy***

The golden age of zarzuela lasted under two decades, roughly between the 1920s and 30s. During this period, venues in La Habana hosted numerous productions of new musical theater titles, four hundred and forty-nine at the Teatro Martí alone between 1931 and 1936. Unfortunately, only a handful were ever published, and the majority of the manuscripts are now lost.<sup>45</sup> Even the most popular and critically acclaimed have never been published. Yet, those that were performed with most frequency continue to revisit the stage today. These manuscripts have been moved from storages and between libraries across La Habana, their deterioration is evident and further accentuated by the damages caused to the city's infrastructure as a result of the many natural disasters that have swept Cuba since the 1980s. Consequently, the few surviving titles have achieved canonical status within the genre, not just for merit alone, but also because there have been no additions to the zarzuela repertoire since the late 1930s. This is not to say that Cuban musical theater ended with the downfall of zarzuela. In addition to the political and social changes generated by the events that led to the Revolution and its aftermath, post-zarzuela composers have been more concerned with the articulation of a national operatic idiom, as opposed to the expansion and growth of what had been accomplished by the single generation zarzuela composers and librettists.

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<sup>45</sup> Some of the libretti were published in limited editions at the time of the premieres. In this analysis, I use those libretti, and other copies that I have obtained of sections of hand-copied piano-vocal scores drawn from different productions in various parts of the world. Some *romanzas*, duets, overtures, and occasionally chorus numbers have been published separately however, these are exceptions.



In this chapter, I explore the most significant characteristics of the genre through an analysis that draws examples from two zarzuela: Cecilia Valdés and María La O. These titles remain the most performed works of the repertoire equally successful since their premieres their respective stage lives have surpassed that of all other zarzuelas. In addition, the plight of the Cuban mulata positioned as a symbol of Cuban national allegory and the main theme in the zarzuela repertoire is at the core of both works, as it was in other artistic manifestations inescapably engaged in a national preoccupation with race and ethnicity. Although my study does not intend to be all encompassing, nor a survey of representative works, my aim is to build upon the historical contexts proposed in previous chapters to address the social, political and cultural milieu that produced Cuban zarzuela, and above all, the role played by the genre in the articulation of Cuban identities. Consequently, my reading of Cecilia Valdés and María La O will focus on the genesis of both works, and the relationships between text, performance, and reception, based on close readings of the libretti, several versions of sections of the scores, performance reviews, and interviews with performers, directors, and promoters of the genre.

Bruce Kirle has argued that musicals are an open and fluid product of the particular cultural moment in which they are performed.<sup>46</sup> Although Kirle's attention is directed at the American musical, it is fruitful for this analysis to reposition zarzuela and explore its trajectories from this perspective. Kirle proposes that what takes place between page and stage attests to the state of constant flux inherent in the mechanics of

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<sup>46</sup> See Kerle, Bruce Unfinished Show Business: Broadway Musicals as Works-in-Progress. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005.

production, in addition to the many variations that occur between different stagings of a particular title. The technologies of production associated with musical drama in general presuppose the necessity for constant authorial and performative flexibility. Authors, performers and audiences have acknowledged this fact. For example, western opera composers, among others, have employed the term *come scritto* to mark a specific part of the score that must be performed “as written,” demanding that the interpreter perform exactly what is written in the musical text. While this authorial device can be understood as guarantor of a specific idea in the composer’s score, it simultaneously acknowledges that what is in the score is not necessarily what will end up on stage. Since zarzuela scores remain unpublished, emphasizing the futility of a primary text, Kirle’s proposal has especial resonance with the Cuban genre. Indeed, the lack of published material, and limited portability of the manuscripts—zarzuela composers were very protective of their works, and many such as Gonzalo Roig, seldom granted production rights unless they were directly involved in the production—underscored the obliteration of an übertext, becoming a permanent feature in the production of zarzuelas. Composers, librettists and performers explored the stories and the manner in which they were told quite differently from one production to the next. These variations, or different readings, were not only necessary, but expected.

Furthermore, influenced by Spanish zarzuela performances, Cuban zarzuela audiences directly participated in the shaping of the story, and the way it was performed. In Spanish zarzuela audience members have traditionally participated by either joining in singing their favorite chorus along with the characters on stage, or applauding a particular

musical number to the point that it requires an immediate reprise, independently of the dramatic sequence of events. Cuban zarzuela audiences honor this tradition by cultivating their role as cocreators of the performance.

While the space between page and stage is critical to creative process in any performance practice, it existed as a precondition in zarzuela productions. Hence the scope of readings between various performances of a single title is quite significant. For example, the finale of Maria La O has at least five different endings that have been document so far: (1) Maria La O kills her lover Fernando. (2) Maria La O wants to murder Fernando, but José Inocente, who is in love with her, convinces her not to do it, and by the end of the zarzuela Fernando is alive. (3) Maria La O wants to kill Fernando, but José Inocente does not let her commit the crime, instead he kills Fernando. (4) Maria La O asks José Inocente to kill Fernando, and he obliges. And, (5) Maria La O asks José Inocente to kills Fernando, and when he is about to commit the murder, she intercedes and implores José not to kill him, because she is pregnant with Fernando's baby, and does not want the baby's father to die (Rio Prado, 173). Reading these different endings in the context of spoken drama may seem that the above are five different versions of the zarzuela. This observation reveals not only the inappropriateness of the tools and terminology employed for the analysis of spoken drama when applied to musical theater but above all it renders futile the misconception of a fixed authorial voice in zarzuela performance.

Roland Barthes' insistence in the death of the author is particularly relevant to the zarzuela context (1977). Following Barthes' assertion, performers, directors, conductors,

and designers act as cocreators, generating as many different artistic products as there are productions. Again, since zarzuela scores were never published the cocreating process is not optional but, rather, imperative. Consequently, the existence of a definitive performance that dictates authorial supremacy of a particular production is impossible from the outset.

Notwithstanding, there are thematic ideas that remain constant—as is the case with performance conventions such as the *salida*—not just throughout the various productions of a particular zarzuela across time and space, but among the canonical works in the repertoire. Among these, the most important and recurrent theme centers around the vicissitudes of the Cuban mulata engaged in a love triangle against the backdrop of colonial values. In this chapter, I analyze the primacy of this theme in the context of the narratives deployed by zarzuela, and the tensions that it generated through the circulation of discursive practices that mapped class, gender, and ethnoracial identities in the creation of the Cuban nation.

### ***The zarzuela mulata***

As stated earlier the mulata has been, and continues to be, at the core of Cuban artistic and literary production. Zarzuela in particular has been almost exclusively dedicated to the exploration of the Cuban mulata, who always appears as the lead character in canonical works such as Rosa La China (1932), María Belén Chacón (1934) and Amalia Batista (1936), among others. My study will draw from two titles Maria La O (1930) and Cecilia Valdés (1932) for several reasons. First, based on critical reviews and audience reception, they are the most successful titles of the entire repertoire. Second,

their productions outnumber any other zarzuela since the inception of the genre. Consequently, it is not surprising that both titles have been recorded at least twice, which is quite an accomplishment considering that there have only been a few complete recordings of the zarzuela corpus.<sup>47</sup> Finally, since Cecilia Valdés and María La O continue to be performed both in and outside Cuba, while the remaining repertoire receives only sporadic productions, it was feasible to search and locate the libretti and sections of the score of both zarzuela, necessary for this study.

Undoubtedly, the most popular of the two zarzuelas is Cecilia Valdés, with music by Gonzalo Roig (1890-1970) and libretto by Agustín Rodríguez (1885-1957) and José Sánchez Arcilla (1903-?). The premiere took place at the Teatro Martí on March 26, 1932, with a record of 147 performances in a span of five years. According to Rio Prado the zarzuela has received over 2,000 productions across the globe, including all of the former territories of the Soviet Union, as well as in most of the Americas and Europe (246). Most recently, it was produced in Toronto and Bogotá, and a new production in La Habana scheduled for November 2007.

Gonzalo Roig was involved with stage music since the early stages of his career as a piano player in a popular movie house in La Habana. Thirty-four of his musical theater pieces premiered at the Teatro Martí, which was under his musical directorship. These included zarzuelas, *revistas* and a variety of lyric comedies.

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<sup>47</sup> Two of the three recordings of Cecilia Valdés were conducted by its composer Gonzalo Roig in 1948 and 1961. The most recent was recorded in 1981 by Cuba's national Recording company EGREM. María La O has been recorded twice, first in Spain in 1955, with a Spanish cast and orchestra, and most recently in La Habana in 1991 by the Empresa de Grabaciones y Ediciones Musicales (EGREM) Cuba's national producing, distributing and recording entity.

María La O premiered in the 1930 season at the Teatro Payret. Composed by Ernesto Lecuona to a libretto by Gustavo Sánchez Galarraga. There were 56 performances between its premiere and 1936. Like Cecilia, it has been produced around the world. Since Lecuona went into exile after the Revolution, his zarzuela has been performed quite often in cities that hold large populations of Cuban dissidents. Recent performances include a 2005 production in Miami, FL.

Ernesto Lecuona is better known outside of Cuba for his compositions for piano, orchestral work, and film music, which includes an Oscar nomination for the Hollywood film Always in My Heart (1942). His international career, both as composer and pianist, made him one of the most recognized names in Cuban music throughout the world, crossing over to mainstream popular entertainment including appearances in the Ed Sullivan Show. As it is the case with world-renowned figures, the value of his legacy has been under scrutiny:

For the devotees, Lecuona was and is Cuban music's quintessential representative; for the detractors, he was and is a composer of great natural talent who sold out to commercial music—as can be seen through his association with popular music orchestras, mainly as an ally and confederate of Xavier Cugat and as an arranger and composer for Metro Goldwyn Mayer—and who never wholly developed his enormous pianistic and creative abilities. For those caustic critics, Lecuona's music remained always anchored to an amiable frame of reference, and was, by its own nature, simplistic and outmoded, never evolving beyond the level

of mere salon music and never going further than an oversimplified lyric theater mired in nineteenth-century Romanticism. (de la Vega 106)

On the other hand, Gonzalo Roig's oeuvre has not enjoyed equal exposure, and his name remains significantly obscure outside of the zarzuela repertoire and Cuba. In part because—unlike Lecuona, who emigrated before 1959—he remained in La Habana after the Revolution.

Even though different librettists and composers authored Maria La O and Cecilia Valdés they share remarkably similar plots, as is the case with the majority of zarzuelas. The main argument evolves around a love triangle with recurring characters: the *galán*, a wealthy young *criollo* from a prestigious local family of Spanish descent; an ingénue, the female counterpart of the *galán* who eventually wins the young lover's heart; and at the center of the conflict, the mulata, always poor and beautiful, desired and rejected. The subplot involves a secondary male character or *mulato trágico*, a man of color who admires and loves the mulata but alas cannot win her favors. His main role is to avenge the mulata by punishing the *galán*, which often is accomplished through murder. Cecilia and María La O are one and the same, they reappear at the center of the drama throughout the repertoire.

At the margins of the main plotline, an array of characters populate the stage, mostly drawn from *teatro bufo*, with altered traits to fit the new narratives, while retaining their *bufo* nature. The function of minor characters, above all, seem to fulfill local color, grounding the story to reflect local customs and depict recognizable domestic situations and urban geographies. All zarzuelas are set in La Habana, and invariably

emphasize the city as tragic locus in which the action develops, using settings such as La Habana's Cathedral as epicenters of the story. While the comedic situations are secondary to the plot, and are generated by secondary characters exclusively, such as the *negrito* and the *gallego*, the dramatic and melodramatic events take primacy, and are developed by the love triangle between the mulata, the *galán* and the ingénue—with the aid of supporting characters, such as the *mulato trágico*.

There are two sources for the libretto of Maria La O. The first is based on a real mulata that allegedly lived in Santiago de Cuba sometime during the mid nineteenth century. Edwin Tolón, a theater impresario and close friend of Lecuona, who presented the original production in La Habana, relates an anecdote, in turn taken from oral narratives collected in the Annals of Santiago de Cuba:

[...] en esos años residía en esa ciudad un notable músico catalán llamado Juan Casamitjana. Estaba él recostado en la baranda de la ventana de la casa en que vivía cuando vio venir una numerosa comparsa que dirigían dos famosas mulatas de rumbo, una era Maria La O y la otra Maria de la Luz, que cantaban y bailaban una música electrizante. Impresionado el compositor pore se baile fue al piano y repitió de memoria los compases de dicha música anónima pasándolos después al papel pautado (49).

[...] around those years in that city, there lived a Catalan musician named Juan Casamitjana. While leaning in the window of his house, he saw a large comparsa directed by two famous *mulatas de rumbo*, Maria La O and Maria de la Luz, singing and dancing an electrifying music. The



composer was impressed by the dance and repeated the anonymous melody by memory in his piano, later transcribing it to music paper.

The story behind the popular mulata circulated throughout Cuba in the form of *guarachas*, dances, *contradanzas*, *hanbaneras*, and many other musical theatrical manifestations, including *teatro vernaculo*. By 1930, when the zarzuela premieres, the historical mulata was already part of popular culture.

The second source of the libretto for María La O is shared with, and is the only source of Cecilia Valdés. I am, of course, referring to Cirilo Villaverde's novel Cecilia Valdés o La loma del angel (Cecilia Valdés or The Angel Hill) first published in La Habana in 1839—the final, revised version was published in New York in 1882. The novel is considered one of the most important works of nineteenth-century Cuban and Latin American prose, and has placed Villaverde among the most accomplished writers of the nineteenth century *novela antiesclavista*. By the time both zarzuelas premiered, audiences were already familiar with Villaverde's novella, generating substantial anticipation leading to the opening night performances. In the case of Roig's zarzuela, which is two years apart from Lecuona's, the producers certainly took advantage of the novella's popularity, and included references to Villaverde's story in the original promotional materials 'La obra cumbre del teatro cubano' ("The most important work of the Cuban theater"). While María La O is regarded among the best in the genre, Cuban critics and scholars have labeled Gonzalo Roig's rendition of the mulata's story as "*el más alto exponente de nuestro arte lírico*" ("the highest exponent of our lyric art") (Rio

Prado 246), and it was most recently declared a National Patrimony by the Revolutionary Government.

The novel has received several stage versions, most notably Abelardo Estorino's Parece blanca (1998) (She looks white). Other versions include a film adaptation in 1950, directed by Jaime Gallardo; a six-episode movie/TV version directed by Humberto Solas; a ballet with music by José Ramon Urbay, and even a *telenovela* (soap opera) that captured the attention of Spanish speaking audiences all around the world. Likewise, it has inspired a series of literary works, perhaps most recognizable is Reinaldo Arenas' La Loma del Angel, and recently Daina Chaviano's La isla de los amores infinitos (The Island of infinite Loves), in which the original characters of the novel appear along side Villaverde and other historical figures. In the last few years it was made into a puppet show which was very successful in Cuba.

Nonetheless, the zarzuela versions remain among the most popular readings of the novella, even though María La O and Cecilia Valdés depart from the original in that the main focus shifts from its treatment of the city and its people, to the mulata's tragic love triangle. Scholars have described the novel as a mimetic historical representation; indeed, in many respects, Villaverde's novel has created nineteenth-century Cuba. Even though Villaverde affirms in the prologue that the events described in the text are historically accurate, and he claims to celebrate Cuban women (the piece is dedicated to *las cubanas*) there are significant conflicts between the novel and other recorded historical documents. Nonetheless, for the purposes of this study, what is relevant is that Villaverde creates, or rather invents, with Cecilia Valdés nineteenth-century Cuba. Furthermore, since the

zarzuela readings of the novel are embodiments of Villaverde's invention, they readily expose the internal contradictions and anxieties of Cuban colonial identity, but they do so in the context of twentieth century Cuba. To this extent, if the novel invents Cuba's colonial past, the zarzuelas invent Cuba's neocolonial present, both in the early decades of the twentieth century and for posterity.

### *The Whitening of Cuba*

The premieres of Cecilia Valdés (1932) and Maria La O (1930) took place in a Cuba that was undergoing very special social transformations. This period was known as the *machadato*, named after Cuba's dictator Gerardo Machado, who assumed control of the island in 1924. Machado was a typical caudillo who sought to calm civil unrest by implementing an authoritarian style government, which won him the title of "tropical Mussolini."<sup>48</sup>

Soon after Machado rose to power, he took control of the congress and implemented drastic policies to increase his control over the Island. Among these policies, he banned new political parties, kept a tight leash in the few existing ones, and gained control and support from the higher army commands. Backed by the United States, the new police state followed the management pattern of other *caudillo* heads in Latin American nations. To counter the economic crisis and high levels of unemployment he embarked on massive building projects, including highways and a new government building modeled exactly after the United States Capitol, which still stands in La Habana insinuating the US pervasive presence.

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<sup>48</sup> The phrase was coined by a popular communist student leader, who was later killed in Mexico by orders of Machado (Gott).

The surge of government surveillance guaranteed the safety of well to do American settlers. Much was at stakes for wealthy Americans residing in La Habana, including the 13,000 who had acquired land in Cuba since 1905 (Gott, 115), as well as countless of tourists coming from the United States, who, distraught by the prohibition in their home country found in La Habana an oasis of alcohol and prostitution. Cuba had established itself as the playground of the Caribbean, and legitimized what Robert Young labels in other contexts the “illicits acts of union” with its new colonial ruler (23). Embedded in this illicit union is the ever present colonial desire, which encompasses the attraction of the Other through fantasies of crossing into it. These acts of transfer which ranged from the appropriations of cultural products such as the *Hollywoodization* of Cuban popular music, to the contractual arrangements by regular American tourist with Cuban prostitutes, created a new cultural landscape called Havana.

The *machadato* regime, however, encountered unprecedented opposition from the Cuban people. Countless organized and semi-organized groups emerged across the Island, from all sides of the political spectrum. These counter-government organizations were established underground, since the formation of political groups had been outlawed, and they privileged violence as the main tool for social change. While most of the white criollo upper classes aligned themselves with the foreign tourist, the government also found an ally in the large population of Spanish settlers.

After the Spanish withdrew from Cuba, more Spaniards came to the Island in the first three decades of the twentieth century than in the four centuries of Spanish rule

(Thomas, C 295, qtd. in Gott 119). They represented a powerful economic and cultural force that permeated all facets of society:

Cuba remained a typical settler society with the white colonists still in charge, similar to many of the European colonies in Africa. Politics was left to the Cuban-born, but Spaniards controlled commerce and industry and the retail trade and were well represented in the professions as well as in schools and newspapers (Gott 119).

Spanish dominance perpetuated the colonial normative grid, including ethnoracial, economic, and cultural identities established by the Spanish throughout the nineteenth century. The continuous migrations from Spain lasted until the Cuban Revolution of 1933, and by the end of the Spanish Civil war, Spaniards began migrating to Mexico instead.

Against this backdrop of political unrest, economic uncertainty, and violent upheavals, the project of whitening Cuba that had begun after the Haitian Revolution in the nineteenth century continued in full force throughout the neocolonial period. Laws were passed forbidding the importation of foreign workers, specifically Chinese, but the law extended to cover blacks from other parts in the Caribbean. Likewise, the whitening project included the suppression and prohibition of Afrocuban artistic manifestations, such as banning the use of African drums and other instruments in public meetings (Moore 69). In contrast, a port was built to welcome white settlers in the harbour of La Habana. Tricornia, as it was called, was built by American forces to resemble Ellis

Island in New York, and its purpose was to encourage white settlers from Spain (Gott 118).

Music and dance remained popular forms of entertainment during the *machadato*, perhaps as escapism to counter the violence and economic crisis of the period. However, under these deplorable conditions, who was attending the theater? And, most importantly, why were the stories of the tragic mulata and the colonial past being performed with such urgency and frequency? I suggest that in the embodiment of the mulata, required in theatrical representation, lays an effort to bracket non-white identities for the purpose of both safeguarding and transgressing the nation building project, which excluded populations of color. Zarzuela, as a public platform for the display of *mulates*, guaranteed both its fixity and its fluidness. While Robert Young asserts that “fixity of identity is only sought in situations of instability and disruption, of conflict and change” (4), such as the case in Cuba during the 1930s, ethnicity is the necessary place or space from which people speak (Hall 184). Hence, zarzuela exposes the ambiguity of the mulata’s role in society, both as a symbol of Cuban identity and a racial marker of an illicit encounter that was considered shameful and, therefore meant to be kept out of sight. However, the “hiding” renders itself ineffective, since the act of disappearance simultaneously guarantees what Diana Taylor calls “the paradoxical omnipresence of the disappeared” (2003: xvii).

The ambiguity inherent in zarzuela’s mulata has its origins in the sources of its narratives in the nineteenth century and subsequent performances during the 1930s. The sources, as stated earlier, are drawn from the Villaverde’s novel, and from accounts of

popular street performance, in the case of Maria La O, from *comparsa* performances. In other words, zarzuelas employ both the archive and the repertoire to create the mulata. Taylor defines the archive as a set of supposedly enduring materials, mainly texts, documents, architectural structures, and bones among other artifacts. On the other hand, the repertoire, she suggests, is contained in embodied practices such as the spoken word, performance, gestures, movement, rituals, and other so-called ephemeral records. While the archive has been privileged for its apparent resistance to change, Taylor debunks its monopoly as the sole reliable source for creating, storing, and transmitting knowledge. First, she points to the archive's need for mediation—archival artifacts are arranged and framed from the point of view of the one that establishes it—and second, the supposedly unchangeable nature of the classification and stability of the archiving process is subject to change, since artifacts “might mysteriously appear or disappear from the archive” (19). The repertoire requires embodiment, and as such is prone to change, “although its meaning might very well remain the same” (20). Consequently, both archive and repertoire have the flexibility to travel, as they do with zarzuela, where the mapping out of the trajectories takes place simultaneously in the libretti and the performances, however, in doing so the apparently static differentiation between archive and repertoire is subverted.

As stated earlier, the Catalan musician Juan Casamitjana, *archived* his impressions of the *comparsa* led by Maria La O in the nineteenth century. A *comparsa* is a large, parade-like street performance that involves dance and singing. *Comparsa* performances in Cuba are rooted in Africuban traditions,

becoming an established part of colonial life soon after the *cabildos de nación* by colonial authorities. The Afrocuban carnival groups of past centuries were often organized by social or ethnic group rather than by neighborhood (Moore 64).<sup>49</sup>

The *comparsas* were meant to be performed on King's day, and were financed by government authorities and members of the middle class. While on the one hand they presented an opportunity for blacks to organize outside the *cabildos*, they were meant to be an spectacle for the white audience on the other hand. This inherent voyeuristic nature of the *comparsa* gave license to Casamitjana as well as Maria La O to recognize each other. However, it is Casamitjana's account that transcends the event itself, as all *comparsa* descriptions collected by white observers in the nineteenth century, where performances are characterized as "horrifying," disregarding any artistic value, and considered nothing more than vulgar entertainment.<sup>50</sup> Since he is able to transfer by memory the melody that accompanied the dance of María La O and María de la Luz, it becomes part of the archive. As such, Casamitjana's transcription sustains the longevity of Maria La O, but as a "horrific" object that is both desired and condemned.

Although Villaverde's text belongs to the archive, he claims that it is based on actual people and events. Hence, the zarzuela sources further problematize, or rather confirms, the fluidity and efficacy of the differentiation between archive and repertoire in

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<sup>49</sup> Robin Moore points out that while twentieth century *comparsas* were organized according to districts, it was the marginalized black neighborhoods the ones that participated (64).

<sup>50</sup> An account collected by a white observer in 1866, describes a *comparsa* as "the rabble is immense, its aspect horrifying..." (Perez Zamora, qtd. in Moore, 65).



the Cuban context. Instead, what it seems to prove is that Cecilia Valdés and María La O, draw not just from the archive and the repertoire, but from the spaces in between, where the archive and the repertoire overlap. Perhaps, the hybrid nature of musical theater in general and musical theater of the Caribbean in particular, presupposes a multivocal genesis. In the case of Cuban zarzuela, as a project of transculturation that is actively deploying colonial and neocolonial values, neither the archive nor the repertoire alone suffice to understand the genre. This multivocality of sources is also evident when Casimatjana's recorded document is compared to some elements of the *comparsa* performance. The text describes both *comparsa* leaders as *mulatas de rumbo*, a denomination assigned to a stereotype of the mulata considered "'loose' woman of the street" (Moore 49) also extended to Cecilia.

The story of Cecilia and Maria La O are one and the same, as much as Cecilia and María are the same person. Their past, as I mentioned earlier, can only be traced to that colonial illicit union. Their names bear that stigma, Cecilia carries the Valdés surname, because it is the same surname assigned to all fatherless children born in the children's hospice (*casa cuna*) (Lopez Cruz, 60), and María carries the designation "La O" which in no way unveils any genealogical significance. Their story is the story of the Cuban mulata. An invention of the nineteenth century *costumbrista* movement, which "established a visual and rhetorical system whose codes continue to be recognizable" (Fraunhar 161).

Zarzuela's insistence with the plight of the mulata has to be understood in the context of a national preoccupation with race and ethnicity, centered around the

(in)visibility of Afrocubans in the constructions of Cuban national identities. This phenomenon permeated throughout Cuban society by way of literary and artistic production, and adopted several names according to the specific genres and artistic manifestations; however the movement they created was grouped under the umbrella term *Afrocubanismo*. Led by the exploration and propagation of African musics in the Cuban context, *Afrocubanismo* was a visible force throughout all forms of cultural production towards the end of the 1920s:

In the sphere of art, the nationalist current that Victor Manuel began at the end of the twenties also included the Images of black people, for example La negrita, Frutas tropicales, and even to a certain extent his famous Gitana tropical, from 1929, which shows a mixed-race madonna whom he would paint again many times in his work. [...] But in the twenties, the painter who approached *negrismo* most obsessively was Eduardo Abela, who between 1926 and 1928 painted La compana, La casa de María la O , Los funerales de Papá Montero, and, above all, El triunfo de la rumba y El gallo místico, which are probably his best works with Afro-Cuban themes (Benítez-Rojo and Maraniss 182)

In literature, Afrocubanismo was represented by poets such as José Zacarias Tallet, Ramón Guirao, and above all Nicolás Guillén who published Motivos del son in 1930, and Sóngoro Cosongo in 1931.

The term *Afrocubanismo*, however, involves more than just race and ethnicity; the “*cubanismo*” (cubanist) part implicitly entails a nationalist project. Robin Moore,

following Argeliers León's history of Cuban artistic nationalism, asserts that it was during the decade after 1923 that black artistic production "grew increasingly central to national culture, at least as somewhat abstract source of inspiration" (116). In part, this was accomplished by the progressive acceptance of black popular culture and street artistic manifestations, inherited from nineteenth century Cuban black culture, into mainstream artistic manifestations. Part of the problem, acknowledges Moore, had to do with the resilience of criollo artists to create a product that was Cuban, while "distancing it from black and working class expression, of which they did not approve" (117).

Alternatively, other identitarian movements emerged, although none succeeded. Most notably, *Indigenismo* or Indigenous nationalism, in which the *Siboneyes* and *Arawaks* were exalted as the founders of Cuban culture. Claims that supported *Indigenismo* contributions, especially in the origin of musical instruments such as the *clave*, as well as popular urban dances such as the *contradanza* and the *danzón* were directly influenced by Indocubans (Moore). Yet, the presence and acknowledgement of African and Spanish influence trumped over any other contribution in the formation of a Cuban national identity. While in other Spanish American territories such as Mexico where the Aztec heritage embodied the Mexican nation, in Cuba the mulata was the reigning symbol *cubanidad*.

Nonetheless, it is worth noting that in Cuban musical theater there are distinguishable, yet isolated, examples of Indocubanism. Ernesto Lecuona's zarzuelas La flor del sitio (1929), which includes "Canto indio" ("Indian Chant), La tierra de venus (1927) includes de famous "Canto Siboney," which is one of his zarzuela selections that

crossed over into mainstream culture and beyond Cuba. Likewise, some opera composers explored Idocuban themes early during this period. Most notable are the operas of Eduardo Sánchez de Fuentes' Yumurí (1898) and Doreya (1918). Both libretti describe, yet another, illicit encounter, this time the love affair between a Siboney Princess (Yumurí and Doreya) and a Spanish soldier (Alonso and Manfredo). While the Spanish are presented as the civilized white invaders, the *Siboneyes* are described as “a savage and superstitious race, vengeful and cruel” (una raza salvaje y supersticiosa, vengativa y cruel)<sup>51</sup> (González 426).

The similarities between the above mentioned operas and the zarzuelas I have been discussing is evident. The recurrence of the theme depicting the undoing of the female racialized Other in the hands of the white wealthy colonizer, and the manner in which it was developed suggests a scenario that repeats itself throughout Cuban musical theater. Following Diana Taylor's seminal work The Archive and The Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas, I suggest that we look at the theme of the tragic mulata in zarzuela, as an embodied practice that stages histories that, while perpetuating colonial and neocolonial values, offer opportunities for political intervention.

The recurrence of the Cuban mulata in zarzuela plots is inscribed in the scenario of discovery, and to this extent, it has shaped the history of conquest in the Americas. Taylor argues that interpretation of cultural phenomena in the Americas could, and should, be accomplished by shifting the way we have traditionally frame our foci of study

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<sup>51</sup> These are the last words of the in the libretto of Doreya.

from narratives to scenarios. Specifically, she suggests that “the colonial ‘encounter’ is a theatrical scenario structured in a predictable, formulaic, hence repeatable fashion [...] it starts the same white male protagonist-subject and the same brown, found ‘object’” (2005:13). The staging of the scenario of discovery admits no outcome variations, and its performance is by no means limited to the Americas. The Spanish explored the scenario of conquest frequently, from Cervantes’ Numancia and Lope de Vega’s Arauco domado to Zorrilla’s Numancia cercada and Numancia destruida over a century later. The recurrence is not “an indication of slavish imitation on the part of late baroque writers. Rather, they document the persistence of discourses which simultaneously demonize the object of conquest and also romanticize the other” (Simerka, 5), and thus confirm that like performance, scenarios also travel.

Zarzuela’s *mulata* is a construct that has emerged out of both nineteenth century archives and repertoires, and as I explained earlier, from the spaces in between. These sources, I should point out, are the resulting amalgamation of both archival and repertorial contributions that maintain, simultaneously, their own methodological integrity while creating new ones. Because zarzuela depends on a musical and written text (archive) that, as already established, is *unfinished*, the performance (repertoire) and what leads to the performance is, in part, that “moment in between.” My aim is to locate this moment in a couple of instances described in reviews of the premiers as well as in textual modifications which are moments that easily fluctuate in the periphery of the archive, which, as with any historical performance, is what we have available. In this sense, I read the reviews and text modifications as experiences of the performance.

On the one hand, it is quite transparent how the mulata in zarzuela follows the pattern of the scenario of discovery. The mulata is made visible by the white, wealthy, criollo of Spanish descent. He, much like the conqueror, discovers her. Invariably, his attraction for her is embedded in colonial desire, through which her persona is reduced to a beautiful body of exotic color waiting to be *discovered*. This idea has special resonance in zarzuela since the mulata in Cecilia Valdés has been described as *la Virgencita de bronce* (The little bronze virgin), a description extended to all mulatas that transforms them into an object of desire that is simultaneously racialized, gendered and sexualized. Invariably, the *galán* succeeds and *conquers* the body of the mulata. Again, this is made clear from the very beginning of the zarzuela. In Cecilia Valdés, Leonardo tells Cecilia during their first dialogue: “*Tú sabes que eres todo para mí*” (You know that you are everything for me). The “*todo*” in the sentence is easily exchanged in performance for “*toda*” which changes the meaning of the phrase “*Tú sabes que eres toda para mí*” (“You know that you are all mine”). While in María La O, the performance of the scenario of discovery is also evident, it is accomplished at a different level. María’s *salida* is not a solo performance like all other *salidas* in the repertoire. She enters the space with the *galán*. In performance he is leading her on stage, holding her, asserting his control before she has uttered anything at all.

Scenarios as embodied practice are also spaces for political resistance. Even though the demise of the mulata is necessary in zarzuela to sustain the scenario, she has the potential to subvert it. Both María and Cecilia are aware that their ticket out of invisibility is to marry the young wealthy criollo. As mulatas they acknowledge that even

though they may pass for white, they need the criollo to be treated as one, because class and race in Cuba are deeply intertwined. Nonetheless, the mulata asserts herself by exposing her ethnoracial identity, as shown in Cecilia's *salida*, after the chorus has introduced the mulata. "Cecilia" is repeated twice, first by the female chorus, and then by the male section of the ensemble and then "Cecilia Váldez" is sung in unison by all. She appears on stage and sings:

CECILIA. Si, yo soy Cecilia Valdés

CHORUS: Del barrio del Angel el alma es,  
Cecilia es su nombre, Cecilia Valdés (Rodriguez and Sánchez-Arcilla,13)

CECILIA. Yes, I am Cecilia Valdés

CHORUS: She is the soul of the Angel *barrio*

The section that follows, in the tempo of *habanera*, is also directed to the audience on stage, gathered for Mercedes' birthday party. It is worth noting that the partygoers have been expecting Cecilia:

CECILIA. Hierve la sangre en mis venas,

soy mestiza, y no lo soy.

Yo no conozco las penas,

yo siempre cantando voy.

Siento en mi alma cubana

la alegría de vivir.

Soy cascabel, soy campana.

Yo no sé lo que es sufrir,

yo no sé lo que es sufrir  
 yo no conozco las penas  
 Siento en mi alma cubana  
 la alegría de vivir (Rodriguez and Sánchez-Arcilla 13)

CECILIA. Blood boils in my veins

I am mestiza, and I am not  
 I do not know sorrow  
 I am always singing  
 I feel in my Cuban soul  
 the happiness of living.  
 I am rattlesnake, I am a bell.  
 I don't know what it means to suffer.

This section of the *salida* is marked by an operatic style lyricism in which the performer has the opportunity to show off her vocal agility. The verse “Soy mestiza y no lo soy” (I am mestiza, and I am not) asserts the mulata’s identity as both fluid and static. In the stage directions she is described as a “mestiza que puede pasar por blanca pura sin ningún esfuerzo” (13) (“a mestiza that can pass for a pure white, effortlessly”). The detailed physiological characteristics emphasize the authors’ inherent racism in their construction of *mulataje*: “Pelo casi liso” (13) (Almost straight hair). The framing of her physical persona, nonetheless, and her recognition of her own identity as a mulata, allow her to fluctuate musically and dramatically throughout the zarzuela. She is the only character that can perform musically and textually in European and Afrocuban musics, and



between *proper* Spanish and street jargon. It is for this very reason that the character has to be punished, and has to be erased from society at the end of every zarzuela. The mulata's attempts to subvert the status quo prove futile, at least to a certain extent.

It has been argued that with the death of the *galan*, his family lineage comes to an end—he is always the only son, inheritor of the family's fortune in charge of sustaining the family name for posterity—and symbolically, this death represents the end of black domination of mulatas and black women by white criollo men (Luis 1998). Similarly, it could represent the end of Spanish power, thus positioning the mulata as the symbol of the emerging Cuban nation. However, as I explained earlier, the *unfinished* nature of the genre does not guarantee the death of the *galán*. In addition, if the *galán* does die, it is only at the expense of the mulata. His death does not redeem her. What this seems to indicate, following the metaphoric correlation of mulata equals nation, is that the creation of a Cuban nation can only be accomplished at the expense of Afrocubans, in line with the white middle class criollo aspirations. This, however, is not an isolated incident in which zarzuela seems to be coparticipant in the whitening project.

Out of the four singers that performed Cecilia in the inaugural production, and the three years that the title remained in the repertoire, Rita Montaner (1900-1958) was the only mulata to sing the role. Audiences were accustomed, and expected to see performers in blackface, following a tradition that had become standardized in the nineteenth century. That black characters were expected to look black did not imply that the performer's identity had to be black. With Cecilia Valdés blackface tradition was subverted, because it transferred onstage racial legibility to a different context. One of the opening night

reviews explains that Elisa Altamirano, the first Cecilia, and a Mexican import, had such an asserted conception of the character that “no creyo necesario el “make-up” para denunciar su mestizaje. Fue mulata no por el color, sino por la música que es serlo más” (Rio Prado 210) “she did not believe that ‘make-up’ was necessary to denounce her *mestizaje*. She was mulata not by the color, but by the music, which is still much more authentic.” This comment leads the same reviewer to conclude that “Todo drama blanqui-negro, como ‘Cecilia Valdés’, es, por tanto, drama musical” (210). (“All black-white drama, consequently is a musical drama”), implying the efficacy of zarzuela as a conduit for the framing of racial relations. Indeed it has been pointed out that the representation of the ethnic space occupied by *mulates* became the mainstay of the hybrid genre of zarzuela (Camara 123). This hybridity is evident during the second part of Cecilia’s *salida*. She performs solo sections alternating with the entire chorus, while the music draws from nineteenth century *guaracha*, a musical form that was associated with the *mulata de rumbo*, in which “the *mulata* appears above all as the object of sexual desire, the epitome of wanton carnal pleasure” (Moore 49):

CECILIA. Mis amores  
 son las flores  
 que perfuman mi jardín.  
 Y mi risa cristalina,  
 y divina  
 es un eterno tin-tin  
 Cecilia Valdés me llaman;

me enamora un bachiller;

mis amigas me reclaman...

Y algo debo de tener.

Yo soy bailadora fina

¡Un verdadero primor!

La danza a mi me fascina;

soy bailando la major

¡Cecilia Valdés!

Mi nombre es

precursor de la alegría.

Yo canto y bailo a porfía...

¡Yo soy Cecilia Valdés! (Rodriguez and Sánchez-Arcilla,13)

CECILIA. My lovers

are the flowers

that perfume my garden

And my laughter, crystal clear

and divine,

is an eternal *tin-tin*

they call me Cecilia Valdés

a student courts me

my girlfriends protest,

but, it must be something I have...

I am refined dancer  
 A true beauty!  
 Dance fascinates me  
 I am the best dancer  
 Cecilia Valdés!  
 my name is  
 precursor of joy  
 I sing and dance everywhere...  
 I am Cecilia Valdés!

There are two instances in this final section of the *salida* that I would like to point out.

First, it is important to note that musically there are alternating European and Afrocuban rhythms accompanying this section. They serve to accentuate the mulata's assertion "soy mestiza y no lo soy" (I am mestiza and I am not), while simultaneously reasserting the ambiguity of the statement.

Second, throughout the second part of the *salida* Cecilia flirts with the on and off-stage audience, presenting herself as a free-spirited beauty revealing her outstanding qualities. In one of the many performances, the initial verses: "Y mi risa cristalina y divina es un eterno tin-tin" (And my laughter, crystal clear, and divine, is an eternal *tin-tin*) has been substituted with "No hay en mi jardín una solo flor que no sea de amor. Y los hombres van siempre tras de mi, aspirando el rico olor de la flor. Ah!" (There is not one flower in my garden that is not a love flower. And, men are always following me, inhaling the aroma of the flower. Ah!), thus, emphasizing the character's role as an object

of desire exclusively. Much like in western opera, where there is a history of female characters whose roles have been reduced to nothing short of ornamental jewels, “perpetually singing their eternal undoing” (Clément, 5). Suggesting that the mulata must operate from the confines of, and against, her racialized and gendered body in order to move outside poverty and invisibility.

Again, this takes us back to “Soy mestiza, y no lo soy” (I am mestiza, and I am not), where the duality is trumped by “no lo soy” (I am not). Unlike discussions that have emerged from similar scenarios in other contexts in the Americas, such as Nella Larsen’s Passing (1929), where racial ambiguity serves to either reinforce or disrupt hegemonic norms of race, in zarzuela the potential for disruption is minimized since the *mestizaje* is unveiled a priori. However, since passing “is also about the boundaries established between identity categories and about the individual and cultural anxieties induced by boundary crossing” (Ginsberg 2), shifting the arguments away from the subversive/reinforcement binary, zarzuela unveils how passing problematizes the ontology of identity categories in Cuba, from their construction during the Spanish colonial period to their normalization in neocolonial Havana.

Finally, it is important to note that even though zarzuela’s rendition of the mulata did not propose a fundamental shift in the ontology of racial stratifications during the neocolonial period, it did bring the mulata to the forefront of Cuban performing arts along with other communities of color. “Al dotar de voz a la mulata, al menos en el escenario, la zarzuela impulsó un desplazamiento del estereotipo al mito en la concepción estética predominante” (Camara 124) (By giving voice to the mulata, at least on stage,

zarzuela propelled the displacement of the stereotype and instituted the mulata as a mythic figure among predominant aesthetic conceptions). Myths travel, and so does performance. In the next chapter, I examine the trajectories of the genre and the mulata it purports to celebrate.

## CHAPTER 4

### **Zarzuela, Diaspora, and Collective Memory**

“Exile is the impasse of existing  
between an anticipatory and incomplete present and a past,  
the worth of which is dependent upon its absence”  
Dylan Trigg

The practice of exile has been deeply rooted in Cuban consciousness since the nineteenth century. By the 1870s, Cuban communities had been established in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, New Orleans, and Key West (Harper 1996, Pérez 186). Likewise, during the late 1880s, Cuban cigar workers began to move into the newly founded Ybor city in Florida.<sup>52</sup> Cubans in exile have always played an important role in the historic, political, economic and cultural mapping of Cuba, leaving their footprints in constructions of nationhood throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Major political and cultural shifts such as the war for independence from Spain, the war against Batista, and the Revolution were in part orchestrated by Cubans in exile. Forcing a constant redefinition of boundaries, Cuba has been caught between a space that enforces the continuity and projection of Europe, whether imperialist or communist, in the Americas, and an independent nation state that has subverted capitalist ideology. Much of Cuban cultural capital has been produced within these fluid boundaries and borders, simultaneously generating and suppressing knowledges. For example, the final edition of Cirilo Villaverde's novel Cecilia Valdés was completed and published in New York. In this chapter, I analyze how zarzuela, its characters and narratives, have circulated, and

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<sup>52</sup> In 1886 the first Cuban cigar factories opened in Ybor (Perez 127).

simultaneously cocreated those borders and boundaries that redefine Cuba throughout the twentieth century.

### *The Creation of the Cuban Diaspora*

The flourishing Cuban-American communities that had been established since the nineteenth century welcomed the mass migrations that immediately followed the Cuban Revolution of 1959. The first group of Cubans to leave the Island after 1959 was mostly made up of Batista supporters and government officials. Over 40,000 people left in the first two years after Fidel Castro took power.<sup>53</sup> Once the Revolution's communist agenda was announced, a larger group of Cubans left for Miami. Commonly this group has been described as mostly wealthy, white and educated Cubans, however, as I will explain later in this chapter, the group was much more diverse than it was originally thought. Significantly, this group of approximately 140,000 people left Cuba "in the sure knowledge that they would soon return" (Gott 212).

In 1965, Fidel Castro, now in full control of the nation, announced that participation in the Revolution was strictly voluntary, meaning that those who did not want to partake could leave Cuba, leaving their property and belongings to the government (Gott 213). Because direct flights to the United States had been cancelled since the missile crisis, a departure point was established in the Port of Camarioca. Hundreds of small boats from Florida picked up thousands of Cubans at Camarioca. The enterprise proved to be quite dangerous and reflected poorly on the United States, since the many boats leaving from US ports flooded, resulting in the death of dozens of

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<sup>53</sup> The numbers vary according to the different sources, the data I provide in this study are based on Richard Gott's appreciation of the various sources available to date.



Cubans. Consequently, under President Johnson and in negotiations with Castro, the “Freedom Flights” were established in December 1965, with two daily airplanes departing from Varadero to the United States. Around one quarter of a million Cubans arrived to the United States through the “Freedom Flights.” The program lasted until 1971, when President Richard Nixon cancelled the air operations.

Although most of the immigrant population claims to have left Cuba for the same reason (antagonism towards the Revolutionary political system) the composition of the Cuban diaspora is far from homogenous. While the mass exodus implied a loss of professional and skill workers from Revolutionary Cuba, “it lessened the capacity of those politically disaffected from the revolution to undermine it. In externalizing dissent, the Cuban government in effect controlled it. As a result, the revolution grew stronger” (Pedraza-Bailey 7). Claims of a monolithic, uniform Cuban diaspora are often supported by the distinct socioeconomic composition of the members of each migration wave. As such, the first wave of immigrants is said to have been comprised of white, wealthy Cubans, mostly departing in 1960 after the nationalization of industries (Pedraza-Bailey 9) which had already established ties in the United States, either through family members, business associates, or economic investments:

These executives and owners of firms, big merchants, sugar mill owners, manufacturers, cattlemen, representatives of foreign companies, and established professionals, were those most acquainted with the United States’ political and economy guardianship of Cuba under which they had

created or maintained their position (Amaro and Portes 1972:10 qtd. in Pedraza-Bailey 10)

Richard Gott points out that exiled Cubans in Florida contributed around \$1 billion to the local economy (215). Yet, in addition to the wealthy and professional, this first wave included laborers, clerks, farmers, and fishermen as well, whose economic power and cultural capital was limited.

The mass migrations that followed also came from various sectors of society, including different economic, racial, and cultural background. In other words, the social structures prevalent in neocolonial Cuba perpetuated in the microcosm of the diaspora. This was particularly emphasized after the 1980 Mariel boatlift, a mass migration of Cubans that departed from the Mariel harbor between April and October, which brought around 125,000 Cubans to the United States (Pedraza-Bailey 4; Pérez 127), out of which, approximately 40% were black<sup>54</sup> (Bach 1980; Croucher 1996). The Mariel boatlift, which lasted several months, also included Cuban citizens that were considered undesirable by the governing officials, including criminals, homosexuals, and mentally ill persons. However, B.E. Aguirre has cogently argued that, even though some of the *marielitos* were in effect considered social outcasts “there was a remarkable heterogeneity in the demographics of the migrants, with the ‘deviant’ categories accounting for a very small portion of the aliens.” Furthermore, Aguirre sustains that there is no empirical data to prove that previous migrations from Cuba to the United States had less amount of so

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<sup>54</sup> For a study of racial variables in settlement patterns and geographical mobility of *marielitos* see Skop, Amily H. “Race and Place in the Adaptation of Mariel Exiles” International Migration Review.35:2 (Summer, 2001) 449-471.

called “deviant” immigrants (155), and, that the media and government bureaucracy along with special interests groups magnified the ‘deviant’ numbers within the Mariel population. Nonetheless, images of detention camps filled with *marielitos* sprung on prime time television, newspaper covers, and mainstream media. Consequently, a profound change of perception of the sociocultural status of the Cuban immigrants took place, “they ceased being the ‘golden’ political refugees and became undesirables, in the often-repeated phrase ‘bullets’ metaphorically shot by Fidel Castro into the very heart of the American Republic” (157). Indeed, originally the official title of political refugee was not granted to those who arrived during the Mariel migration period, because their departure from Cuba was, according to US authorities, motivated by economic rather than political considerations. By the time their status was changed, the overall moral perception of the Cuban American community had changed, both to the rest of the country, as well as within the immigrant community.

Finally, in 1994 Castro opened the ports for any Cuban wishing to depart the island, prompting thousands of Cubans to emigrate by sea. According to a study released in 2006 by the Pew Hispanic Center—a nonpartisan research organization supported by The Pew Charitable Trust—the characteristics of the *balseros* (emigrant rafters), follow the social and ethnic pattern of the *marielitos* (those who arrive during the Mariel wave) and include “virtually every segment of Cuban society” (2).

Although Cuban Americans have gained political and economic success “more

rapidly than other contemporary migrant populations,” (De Sipio, 2007),<sup>55</sup> the benefits certainly do not extend to all Cuban immigrants. Furthermore, there is a clear correlation between economic disparities and migration patterns. For example, “among foreign-born Cubans, those who arrived before 1980 have the highest median income (\$38,000). However, those who arrived between 1980 and 1990 have a lower median income compared with those who arrived in 1990 or later (\$30,000 vs. \$33,000)” (Pew, 4). The economic disparities are also evident according to geographical location even though Cubans have lower poverty rates than other Hispanics, statistics point out that Cubans outside Florida have a higher median income than those who reside in Florida, somewhere along the lines of \$44,000 vs 33,000 (Pew 4).

Significantly, but not surprisingly, Cubans are “far more likely to identify themselves as white when asked about their race. In the 2004 Census data, about 86% of Cubans said they were white” (Pew 3). Similarly, another poll conducted in 2004 by the Institute for Public Opinion Research and the Cuban Research Institute at Florida International University found that 92.5% of Cubans identify as white, while 3.4% identified as mulatto, and 1% as black. The Pew Hispanic Center’s survey “suggests that Hispanics see race as a measure of belonging, and ‘whiteness’ as a measure of inclusion, or perceived inclusion”(Pew 4). As opposed to other Hispanic immigrant communities, which had been subjected to racism upon their arrival to the US, the first wave of Cuban immigrants maintained a distance from their Hispanic counterparts. Fred Burke points out

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<sup>55</sup> For an analysis of the role played by the Cuban interest groups in American politics see Haney, Patrick J. and Walt Vanderbush “The Role of Ethnic Interest Groups in U.S. Foreign Policy: The Case of the Cuban American National Foundation” International Studies Quarterly 1999:44, 341-361.

that Cubans, after their arrival, were quickly aware of the questionable racial status attributed to Puerto Ricans, and thus avoided proximity to them for fear of being grouped under the same racial umbrella (Burke 170).

Nonetheless, in the particular case of Cubans and Cuban Americans, the acknowledgement and perception of whiteness as a marker of privilege is not a phenomenon that developed in exile. On the contrary, as I have explained in the previous chapter, racial stratification before the mass exodus propelled by the Revolution had already positioned whiteness at the top of the social hierarchy. The *reidentification* with whiteness that characterizes the Cuban diaspora not only reinforces aspirations of inclusion in the context of American society, but also distances the diaspora from the Cuba left behind. This preoccupation with difference accentuates the rupture with the homeland while simultaneously underscoring its presence. Indeed, the connection to “homeland” is pivotal since it resists erasure through the normalization process of forgetting, assimilation, and distancing (Clifford 310).

Notwithstanding, whiteness as a potential measure of inclusion does not imply that Cubans who self identify as white gained access to American society with the same privileges given to “non-Hispanic whites.” Moreover, whiteness and its byproducts when examined in the context of Hispanic communities in the United States are inseparable from other factors, including language. While the portability of race seems effective in transnational identity construction, it is insufficient when performed in a language other than English. Hence, the term “Hispanic white” while designating a racial identity and national origin or ancestry is never “white” enough to guarantee inclusion and

acceptance. What it does, however, and quite effectively, is to establish ethnoracial boundaries not only between Hispanic whites and whites, but also between and within Cuban Americans and other Hispanic populations and minority groups. In addition, this practice also sustains what Paul Gilroy describes as alternative public spheres and forms of community consciousness, that Clifford assert “maintain identifications outside the national time/space in order to live inside, with a difference” (308).

In comparison to other Hispanic communities, Cubans’ sociodemographic profile is quite unique. The majority is female, middle age and elderly, with lower fertility rates and somewhat higher socioeconomic status (Pérez 126). However, socioeconomic and education levels remain significantly lower than those of white Americans. Nonetheless, the social class structure prevalent in pre-1959 Cuba has tended to be reenacted in exile. This has been evident since the early stages after the first exodus when, for example, “those who had belonged to the five most exclusive yacht and country clubs in Havana founded another in Miami, in nostalgia dubbed ‘The Big Five’”(Pedraza-Bailey, 18). Sheila Croucher points out that during the 1990s of “126 townships that existed in pre-Castro Cuba, 114 are represented by municipios in Miami” (366).

I should highlight, however, that the “golden” status attributed to Cuban émigrés has been, in part, a carefully constructed ideal that has circulated since the first exodus.<sup>56</sup> Croucher has successfully argued that images of a homogenously successful Cuban immigrant community are “not well-grounded in an objective, empirical reality, but do

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<sup>56</sup> And, in turn has been perpetuated and questioned by Cuban Studies scholars (Arguelles 1982; Jorge and Moncarz 1987; Pedraza Bailey 1985; Portes and Jensen 1989; Portes and Manning 1986; Perez 1986).

reflect the historical interplay of power and politics locally, nationally, and internationally” (351). Furthermore, Croucher maintains that from the onset Cuban émigrés in Miami represented all sectors of Cuban society, with varied economic, political, social, and racial background. The emphasis on perpetuating a discourse that emphasizes narratives of an “ideal immigrant community” responds to and supports many factors. On the one hand, it facilitated the anti-communist political agenda of the US government during the Cold War, thousands of Cuban fleeing the tyranny of a communist regime in search for freedom:

Many of the claims about Cuban immigration were issued by officials, organizations, and agencies associated with US federal government. These claims conveyed sympathy for the plight of the Cuban refugees, and portrayed the US as a safe and willing haven for those fleeing persecution. Irrespective of the level of sincerity underlying the claims, this discourse reinforced a number of political objectives of the US government. The positive portrayal of Cuban immigration cannot be understood in isolation from the Cold War ideology that characterized US politics from the 1960s to the 1990s (Croucher 369).

While there have certainly been many émigrés that have left because of political reasons, there is also a significant number of Cubans whose primary reason for departure has been motivated by economic factors. Yet, on the other hand, the “golden immigrant” discourse contributed to acceptance and advancement of the Cuban émigrés in their host country.

With the mass mobilization that took place over a period of several decades, Cubans have certainly contributed to the urbanization and growth process of South Florida. In Miami alone, which during the 1960s was undergoing a major economic downturn, the influx of Cuban immigrants revitalized the economy and many areas of the city, including a desolated downtown. Although the “Little Havana” neighborhood has been emblematic of Cuban influence in the region, the entire Southern part of the State has a distinct Cuban flavor, with plenty of *cafeterias*, *bodegas*, and the sounds of Spanish with Cuban accent sprawling throughout the metropolis. Although Cuban popular music had already crossed over into mainstream American popular culture before the Revolution, the settlement of Cuban artists and subsequent generations of Cuban Americans have significantly contributed to the Latino cultural production in this country. However, with few exceptions, the circulation of Cuban performing arts, including zarzuela, have been rather discreet and their popularity in the context of Latino and US artistic production minimal. This is particularly alarming because it limits our understanding of the Cuban diaspora.

### ***Zarzuela in the Diaspora***

The most important organization in charge of producing and promoting zarzuela, including Spanish zarzuela in the diaspora, and one of the oldest Cuban exile cultural institutions in Miami, has been Pro Arte Grateli, which in part owes its name and its agenda to the original Pro-Arte Musical created in Cuba in 1919. Pro Arte Musical functioned at the now disappeared *Teatro Auditórium* in Vedado, a popular area of La Habana, where it ran “la mejor escuela de ballet de Cuba” (the best ballet school in Cuba)



(Casanova 22). Among its productions, Pro Arte Musical's training programs presented student performances, which were open to the public, every three to four months. Among its distinguished alumni figure such names as Alicia Alonso, who began her dance training at Pro Arte Musical's ballet school (Casanova, 1990). In addition to ballet, Pro Arte Musical's education programs included theater and classic guitar classes. Similar to the members of Pro-Arte in Cuba who "ascribed to conservative nationalist goals tempered by elitism, promoting both the performance of Cuban music as well as the 'elevation' of public taste" (Moore 123), Pro Arte Grateli, in Miami, has catered to Cuban exiles emphasizing zarzuela from Cuba and Spain, along with western opera, plays, and concerts. The organization was founded in Miami in 1967 by Miguel De Grandy II, Marta Pérez, Demetrio Menéndez, and Pili de la Rosa, whose mother was a member of the original Pro Arte Musical in La Habana. Grateli, as it is usually known, stands for *Gran Teatro Lirico* (Grand Lyric Theater).

The history of Grateli is embedded in popular mythologies propelled by the exilic imagination, actively participating in the invention of Cuba in Miami. It began with two of the organization's founders, Pili de la Rosa and her husband Demetrio Menéndez, who were members of the Catholic Institutions of Hialeah, a charity group affiliated with the Catholic Churches attended by Cuban exiles, located in a predominantly Cuban area of Miami (Hialeah). Pili de La Rosa staged a series of vignettes titled "Añorada Cuba" (Cuba Remembered), with sets by Demetrio Menéndez. In "Añorada Cuba" young Cubans (13 to 18 year olds) performed traditional music, including zarzuela, to the recordings of famous Cuban singers. Some of the best known performers that were in

exile attended the shows, including the famous Cuban soprano Marta Pérez. When Miguel De Grandy proposed to organize a zarzuela production with the many Cuban singers that had arrived during the first mass exodus in the early sixties, Marta Pérez suggested Pili de la Rosa and Demetrio Menéndez organize the production. With this effort Pro Arte Grateli was born forty years ago.

Although Grateli was, and still is, the only organization with regular productions of zarzuela since the exile began, other Cuban-made theater in Miami was mainly drawn from the *teatro bufo* repertoire, with its recognizable stock characters. By 1969, the theater company “Las Máscaras” became the first Cuban theater company in Miami to have its own performing space, thus legitimizing Cuban performance within the arts community in Miami. In addition to these performing outlets, other Cuban-made productions included Latin flavored musical reviews, popular in Las Vegas and several Caribbean destinations. Overall, with the exception of Grateli and a couple of other organizations, these were commercial endeavors. Despite these opportunities most playwrights, actors, designers, musicians, and producers had to find alternate sources of income, since ticket sales barely covered production costs. Some found employment with the CIA. The agency had devised a series of programs that were transmitted to Cuba and the Americas via the USIA (United States Information Agency) and “La Voz de América” radio station (Voice of America). The programs were dramatized stories describing the violations that were taking place in Cuba during the early years of Castro’s government. They were created to counter the immense popularity of the Cuban Revolution, “explicando qué tales atropellos no eran producto de los desmanes de un

tirano improvisado sino tácticas establecidas del comunismo internacional, necesarias para el establecimiento de un régimen socialista en Cuba” (Casanova, 65) (explaining that such violations were not the product of abuses perpetrated by an improvised tyrant but, rather, established tactics of international communism, needed to establish a socialist regime in Cuba). In a studio located in Miami Beach, many Cuban artists found work with the USIA’s sponsored programs. Indeed, many of them received extensive training at the CIA, and went on to work in similar broadcasts destined to other communist-threatened regions around the world, including Vietnam:

Por suerte, yo encontré trabajo enseguida de llegar a Miami. También eso, gracias a una amiga actriz. La CIA estaba entonces grabando unos programas de “contra adoctrinamiento” dirigidos a Cuba, que se transmitían desde una planta montada en la isla de Vieques. Loly Rubenstein era la voz de los mensajes y ella fue quien me recomendó para que yo los escribiera. Me presenté y aclaré que yo estaba muy dispuesta a hacerlo, pero que yo no sabía nada de política. Tendrían que instruirme (Casanova 62-63).

Luckily, I found work as soon as I arrived in Miami. In addition to my good luck, I was assisted by a good friend, who was an actress. At the time, the CIA was recording a series of ‘counter indoctrination’ programs, transmitted from a plant at the Vieques Island. Loly Rubenstein, who was the voice of the programs, recommended my name to be the writer. I

showed up and made it clear that I was very eager to do it, but I did not know anything about politics. They would have to train me.

And the training did occur. María Julia Casanova, a producer and set and lighting designer with a long established career in Cuba before migrating to the United States, worked for the agency for many years, writing various programs aimed at countering the spread of communism.

Notwithstanding, from the majority of Cuban artists that arrived in the United States since the first exodus, a significant number of those who, like María Julia Casanova, had an established career in Cuba, found their first performing engagements in local community arts groups founded by their peers. Pro Arte Grateli, which began its activities in 1967, has been the obligatory stop for emigrant zarzuela performers. The group began with an \$800.00 budget, and set out to bring Cuban and Spanish zarzuela to the Cuban community in Miami. “There was a Cuban public eager to see professional theater here,” affirmed Marta Pérez, “The zarzuelas come directly from the mother country. We see them as our roots.” (Niurka 20A). Pérez’s comments attest to the popularity of zarzuela among recent immigrants, but simultaneously beget the questions of which “mother country” is she referencing?

Traditionally, in Latin America the marker “la madre patria” (“mother country”) has been associated with Spain. Spaniards have always gendered their country; although “España” is grammatically female, I suspect that cultural discourse precedes grammatical construction. Yet the “seal of approval” by the *Real Academia Española*—the official institution in charge of policing the Spanish language—certainly legitimizes the country

as a female entity, but not necessarily a female nation since “*madre patria* becomes mother of the fatherland and, ultimately, mother of the nation” (Cruz-Janzen 177).

Likewise, Cuba, the island, is also gendered, although this occurs precisely because it is an island, and in Spanish, island is always a feminine noun. The question, then, is not which “mother country,” but whose “mother country” is Marta Pérez allegedly claiming? I will return to this question later in this chapter.

Although Pro Arte Grately’s longevity is due to its persistence in fostering the zarzuela genre, much of its success lies in the credibility that its founders brought to the organization. Miguel De Grandy II, came from a prominent artistic family in La Habana, his father Miguel De Grandy (1909-1988) had sung the leading *galan* roles in the inaugural productions of the most important zarzuelas, including Cecilia Valdés, María La O, Amalia Batista, and María Belén Chacón among others. Equally accomplished on the opera stage, he performed in Spain, Puerto Rico, and the United States where he migrated in 1968, after renouncing his post of Director of operas and zarzuelas at the Cuban National Theater (Niurka 20A). While in the US he maintained a singing career, and became Pro Arte Grately’s stage director. His son followed his footsteps and led the organization, singing Leonardo Gamboa in the first US production of Cecilia Valdés. Indeed, the De Grandy family continues to be active in the production of zarzuela’s in Miami. De Grandy II, continues to perform, and recently celebrated sixty-five years on stage in a production of the Spanish zarzuela La rosa del azafrán, produced by Pro Arte Grately, accompanied by his granddaughter Verónica Cancio De Grandy. The De Grandys’ contributions have made them an institution within the exile community,

evident in a recent newspaper article promoting La rosa del azafrán: “Estados Unidos tiene a los Barrymore. México, los Soler. Cuba definitivamente tiene una dinastía de actores en la familia De Grandy” (Diario Las Americas 03/08/2007). (“The United States has the Barrymore; Mexico, the Soler, and Cuba has definitively a dynasty of actors in the De Grandy family).

The other founder of Pro Arte Gratelli that enjoyed a prominent performing career was Marta Pérez (1924 - ), a mezzosoprano who achieved notoriety for being one of the first Cuban singers to perform at La Scala in Milan, Italy. In addition, she sang the title role in the first recording of Cecilia Valdés conducted by the composer. Among her other zarzuela credits, she performed Maria La O in the zarzuela’s premiere in the United States in 1946, where she immigrated in 1960 and continued to perform standard western repertoire, including Spanish zarzuela, and again sung the role of Cecilia in various Pro Arte Gratelli’s productions; her career on stage soon vanished, but she continued to work behind the scenes along with the organization.

During its beginning Pro Arte Grateli produced zarzuelas every month, although today the amount of productions has been drastically reduced. This is primarily due to the overwhelming costs associated with mounting the large cast and orchestra titles, and the high fees charged for musical transpositions; since very few of the original scores were taken out of Cuba, for the most part they had to be reconstructed from memory and the few available recordings.<sup>57</sup> While at the beginning box office income was donated to

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<sup>57</sup> In 1988, modifications to the Trading with the Enemy Act eased the restrictions on the exchange of cultural materials—in the case of music, allowing the distribution of material

charity and used to assist recent Cuban immigrants, the organization's revenue from ticket sales has never covered entire production costs. Hence, Grateli explored other alternatives, settling for less expensive ways to produce performances, that included plays, musical reviews, chamber Spanish zarzuelas, and above all concerts and anthologies presented with piano accompaniment. Indeed, Cuban zarzuelas, after the early years of Grateli, account for a small number in their overall production history, even though they have produced the largest selection of zarzuelas outside of Cuba. Even for special occasions such as their fifteenth year anniversary and, most recently, in 2007, when they celebrated forty years of uninterrupted work, the titles chosen to commemorate the events have been Spanish zarzuelas and Viennese operettas, emphasizing titles that are guaranteed to attract a larger number of audiences, such as Emilio Arrieta's Marina in 1983 and La viuda alegre, a Spanish translation of Franz Lehár's Die lustige Witwe. Indeed, Spanish zarzuela has, since the beginning of Grateli occupied an important place in the company's repertoire.

Significantly, the first production staged by the company was the popular Spanish zarzuela La verbena de la paloma by Tomás Bretón. The production was revived in 2000, and the local press called Bretón's zarzuela "una suerte de niña mimamda para la Sociedad Pro Arte Grateli" (Perez, E 2C) (A sort of pampered little girl for Sociedad Pro Arte Grateli). The piece has been stage by the company many times. Pili de la Rosa, one of the company's founders, and today the head of the organization, has acknowledged

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recorded in Cuba and permitting Cuban musicians to perform in the United States. (Pacini Hernandez, 111)

that “es una pieza muy querida para nosotros” (“it is a very dear piece for all of us”) (Perez, E. 2C).

The pervasive presence of Spanish zarzuela in Grateli’s productions brings us back to the relationship between Cuban zarzuela and the Spanish genre. “The zarzuelas come directly from the mother country. We see them as our roots.” (Niurka 1983, 20A). Marta Pérez’ statement, in light of the constant cohabitation of both genres, reveals the ambiguity of the term “mother country.” To declare alignment with the “mother country” where “our roots” are located, confirms, first, the transnationality of Spanish zarzuela, as a cultural production cocreated in Spain and Cuba—as well as the Americas—making it equally accessible to Spanish and Cubans. Second, since Spanish zarzuela emerged from colonial transactions in which the Spanish sought to impose their own artistic values to sustain continuous dominance over the colonies, the popularity of the genre within Cuban musical theater audiences today points to the multidirectionality of power relations, and the effectiveness of hybrid genres such as musical theater to subvert apparently rigid structures. Indeed, Spanish zarzuela is alive in Miami thanks to Cuban zarzuela producers, performers, and audiences, who while understanding the differences between the two genres, claim them both as their own, and in this process the abstract “mother country” becomes as hybrid as the genre itself.

By the 1980s Pro Arte Grateli had 1,200 subscribers, consisting of mostly “older, nostalgic audiences” (Niurka 20A), while today, their regular subscribers has significantly lower to approximately 800.<sup>58</sup> The Miami Dade County Auditorium

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<sup>58</sup> According to an interview with Pili de la Rosa on July, 10, 2007



(MDCA), a 2,429-seat performing space in the heart of Miami, has been Grатели's home for the past decades. Until the recent opening of the much larger Carnival Center for the Performing Arts, Grатели shared the MDCA with Florida Grand Opera, Florida Philharmonic, the Concert Association of Florida and the now extinct Greater Miami Opera. While the age of their audiences has had a significant effect in the amount of Cuban zarzuelas that are performed, along with costs, as explained earlier, and a languid economy that has affected all the arts organizations in the United States, Grатели has turned to comedies and dramas in an attempt to gain new audiences. For example, in 2006, they staged the Broadway musical Man of La Mancha in Spanish; the production was well received by audiences and critics, and sparked interest among the new generations of Latina/o theater goers in South Florida.

Zarzuela as a genre has not undergone many significant changes in the diaspora, in part because no new titles have been composed, nor lesser known works produced since the genre's golden age in the 1920s and 30s. Interestingly, while zarzuela remains an important part of Grатели repertoire, and, I would like to emphasize that the company has produced perhaps the largest amount of zarzuelas outside of Cuba, in the past two decades the list of full length staged titles has been significantly reduced to one title every other year, at best. Instead, Grатели has kept the genre alive in the form of *antologias* (anthologies), semi-staged concerts of selections from various zarzuela titles sometimes grouped under a common theme, with piano accompaniment. The selection of pieces that comprise an *antologia* reveals how the canon has remained static since the golden age of the genre. For example, in a 2003 *antologia* at the Miami Dade County Auditorium, titled

“Las heroínas de las zarzuelas cubanas” (“The Heroines of Cuban Zarzuela”) the repertoire included *romanzas* from María La O, Rosa la China, El Cafetal, Lola Cruz, Amalia Batista, and of course, Cecilia Valdés. With the exception of Amalia Batista (Rodrigo Prats) and Cecilia Valdés (Gonzalo Roig), the other titles are all by Ernesto Lecuona. In addition to the *romanzas* the program included a couple of duets performed by a guest tenor. The director of the *antología*, Gonzalo Rodríguez, explained how the music was distributed to various sopranos, but saving Cecilia Valdés for the end:

Sin duda alguna, la obra maestra del teatro lírico cubano, no sólo por la música, sino por los cimientos intocables por el tiempo, que es la novela de Cirilo Villaverde [...] Por eso quise compartirla entre todas, es el premio mayor de la noche, no quería simplemente dárselo a una sola soprano [...] Una locura creativa para rendir tributo a una de las máximas figuras del teatro lírico cubano, un momento histórico para las personas presentes (Connor 6D).

Without a doubt the most important oeuvre of Cuban lyric theater, not just because of its music, but for its roots, untainted by time, is Cirilo Villaverde’s novella [...] That is why I wanted to share the role with all of the sopranos, it is the biggest prize of the evening, and I did not want to just assign it to one soprano [...] A creative adventure to honor one of the most important figures of Cuban lyric theater, that signified an historical moment for the audience.

Rodríguez' commentary not only confirms the much deserved status of Cecilia Valdés within the repertoire, but the homogeneity of the mulata theme in Cuban lyric theater. The placement of Cecilia's *romanza* at the end of the *antología*, performed by all the sopranos who had interpreted the other leading mulatas, is a testament to the singularity of the tragic character, who is/are one and the same. By assigning vocal multiplicity to Cecilia, the minor plot differences between the selected titles vanish, and again accentuate the centrality of the scenario of discovery, articulated through the struggle of the mulata trying, unsuccessfully, to overcome the colonial normative structure of racial, gender and class constructs. Moreover, the framing of the scenario provided by the *antología* underscores the familiarity of the stories, since titles are not produced in their entirety the *antología* assumes that audiences are familiar with the plots. Yet, this familiarity is not necessarily rooted in the knowledge of the story lines alone, rather it bespeaks of the longevity and currency of the scenario they reenact. The climax of this *antología*, however, reaches its peak when Marta Perez, the famous Cuban singer and cofounder of Pro Arte Graceli, enters the stage and sings a couple of verses Cecilia's *romanza*, a role that she had successfully interpreted in pre 1959 Cuba. Hence, the final number not only bridges two generations of Cubans and Cubas, but in doing so, makes visible the trajectories of displacement. The enactment of nostalgia becomes *sine qua non* to the performance of zarzuela in the diaspora.

Nonetheless, the *antología* format has invigorated the genre. On one hand, it is an economically feasible vehicle to present zarzuela to avid audiences, while giving the opportunity to directors and musicians to (re)visit the repertoire. On the other hand, since

the repertoire that is not performed runs the risk of being forgotten, the *antologia* gives new generations of singers the chance to learn and perform the canonical works. Many of the singers have moderately successful operatic careers and often include Cuban zarzuela selections in their own concerts and recitals, thus taking the repertoire to new audiences both in the United States and abroad.

Yet, what is at stake in the *antologia*'s imminent fracturing of the stories and histories of complete zarzuelas? Beyond the integrity of the works, I would like to suggest that the *antologia* purports a cleansing of the scenario. Diana Taylor has successfully explained performance's effective role in the transmission of trauma in an analysis of the protest performances of H.I.J.O.S. (Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia, contra el Olvido y el Silencio, "Children for the Identity and Justice against Forgetting and Silence), a group of Argentinean guerrilla theater that targets the "undeclared 'war' by the military dictatorship, which lasted from 1973 to 1983, that 'disappeared' 30,000 civilians" (151). Taylor holds that despite the celebratory and rowdy nature of the carnivalesque performance of H.I.J.O.S. the atrocities committed by the military are made visible, along with the lasting trauma of the mothers and children whose relatives "disappeared." This exposure of trauma through performance holds true to zarzuela. As I have argued, at the core of the zarzuelas is the suffering of the tragic mulata in her invariably failed attempts to subvert the social grid which sustains the (neo)colonial order, the (complete) performance of her story through canonical works makes her trauma visible. Simultaneously, it underscores the active role played by white Cubans in the downfall of the mulata. This is further accentuated in zarzuela performances in the

United States where on stage racial representations are subjected to cultural specific sensitivities. Hence, the *antologia* format masks the mulata's trauma through a selective process that permits the obliteration of overt racist epistemologies.

I should clarify that the *antologia* format is not new in the performance of Iberoamerican music. Whether under the name of "gala," "festival," or *antologia*, it has been, and continues to be a common practice. Most notably, however, in Latin America and Spain are Spanish zarzuela anthologies, where the Spanish form is far more popular than its Cuban and local counterparts. Not surprisingly, the *antologias* produced by Pro Arte Grateli often incorporate Spanish zarzuela numbers among Cuban selections. Indeed, as I explained earlier, Pro Arte Grateli has produced an outstanding number of Spanish zarzuelas, and remains as committed to the Spanish form as it is to Cuban zarzuela. Hence, the inclusion of Spanish selections among Cuban *romanzas* is by no means an issue of conflict, and to some extent it is expected by *antologias'* audiences. The apparently unproblematic coupling of the two genres may respond to Pro Arte Grateli's agenda of catering to a larger audience, in addition to Cuban and Cuban Americans who like most Latin Americans grew accustomed to the Spanish genre. Yet the cohabitation of both genres on stage, attests, once again, to the transnationality of Spanish zarzuela, not only because it was part of the colonial endeavor, but because of it, as explained in chapter one, Spanish zarzuela was created in Spain and the Americas, simultaneously.

Another significant change in Cuban zarzuela in the diaspora, and perhaps more discreet than the introduction of *antologias*, has taken place in the production readings

given by those who began to work as directors in exile. Heading this effort is Gozalo Rodríguez, whose innovative productions of both zarzuelas and *antologías* have become familiar to Pro Arte Grateli's audiences. Although widely accepted by critics and spectators, his first works stirred quite a controversy. In 1993, Rodríguez staged Cecilia Valdés in Miami, backed by an acclaimed cast headed by Miguel De Grandy II singing the *galán*, a role that had been performed by his father in the zarzuela's first production in La Habana. In a recent newspaper article, Rodríguez remembers sharing his concern about the potential controversy with De Grandy II before opening night:

Recuerdo que el primer día de ensayo casi no me salían las palabras para explicarle lo que quería ya que estaba hablando no sólo con el hijo del primer Leonardo de Gamboa, el legendario Don Miguel De Grandy, sino que ya para ese entonces Miguelito se había convertido en el más sabio de nuestros directores de zarzuelas, combinando la experiencia de la 'vieja escuela' con la visión de un artista moderno y vigente. Notando mi nerviosismo, se me acercó y me dijo: 'Gonzalo, ésta es tu 'Cecilia', tu enfoque. Defiende lo que has creado. Yo estoy contigo al cien por ciento. Mi padre la estrenó en Cuba y yo siento un gran orgullo de 're-estrenarla' aquí, de tu mano. Si los que no la entiendan nos quieren matar el día del estreno, entonces serán dos los cadáveres'. Felizmente no nos mataron. Una mitad (los retrógrados) quiso hacerlo, mientras la otra mitad (los abiertos de mente y amantes del arte en todas sus expresiones) quería erigirnos un monumento por

rescatar a la zarzuela cubana de la Edad Media.

I remember, during the first day of rehearsal, having trouble finding the right words to explain to him what I wanted; after all, I was not only talking to the son of the first Leonardo Gamboa, the legendary Don Miguel De Grandy but, by then, Miguelito had become the wisest of our zarzuela directors, combining ‘old school’ experience with the vision of a modern and current artist. Noting that I was nervous, he approached me and said: ‘Gonzalo, this is your “Cecilia,” your vision. Defend what you have created [...] If those who do not understand it wish to kill us on opening night, there will be two dead bodies.’ Happily they did not kill us. Half of the audience (the retrogrades) wanted to do so, while the other half (the open minded ones, the ones that love the variety of artistic expressions) wanted to built a monument in our honor for rescuing Cuban zarzuela from the Middle Ages.

The production of Cecilia Valdés directed by Rodríguez was controversial because his staging was allegedly more theatrical than musical. By placing an emphasis on production values and plot development at the “expense” of the score, according to the “retrogrades,” Rodríguez changed the way zarzuela had been staged until that moment. Of particular interest were the “innovative” sets and multiple uses of lighting. Indeed, reviews of more recent works by the same director, seem to emphasize his appeal for spectacle:

Bajo la dirección general de Gonzalo Rodríguez, que hizo 324 cambios de luces para crear el ambiente de magia que rodeó toda la representación, ideó el vestuario de la época del siglo XVI y concibió la escenografía que Demetrio puso en práctica, en cada nueva escena, todas continuas, nos esperaba una sorpresa. Hubo hasta un caballo blanco, Rocinante, sobre el escenario<sup>59</sup> (Connor, 6D)

Under the general direction of Gonzalo Rodríguez, who had 324 light cues, to create a magical atmosphere throughout the play, he created the XVI century costumes, and came up with the set design built by Demetrio. Scenery changes were made without black-outs and a surprise awaited us at every change. Even a white horse, Rocinante, appeared on stage.

I had the opportunity to interview some of the audience members that attended Rodríguez' production of Cecilia Valdés. Although now they appear to have embraced his ideas, when asked what exactly made the production so controversial, the general response was: "it was very theatrical," and, when pressed for specific examples, they all seemed to remember the exact same scene. Throughout the production Cecilia is followed by two black female slaves in chains. The function of these characters was intended to be metaphorical, and remind the audience of Cecilia's ancestors, thus constantly underscoring her racial identity, and the history of racism Cuba.

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<sup>59</sup> (From a review of Pro Arte Grati's production of El Hombre de La Mancha, a Spanish version of Dale Wasserman's musical The Man of La Mancha, that has been successfully produced in Spanish speaking countries, hence the reference to Rocinante, Don Quijote's horse.



I would like to consider that the audience's discomfort is rooted in issues that go beyond the "very theatrical." In a similar instance earlier in the zarzuela, yet another Afrocuban character is reinterpreted by Rodríguez. Following the libretto, Dolores Santa Cruz, a black woman who roams the street of La Habana, begging for money, interrupts the zarzuela's opening number (Mercedes' birthday party) just before Cecilia's entrance. During her brief and only intervention in the zarzuela, the character, according to the stage directions, crosses the stage from left to right, and performs a short piece in which she describes her situation:

*Aquí está Dolore Santa Crú*

*Aquí está*

*Que no tenga dinero*

*Ni tenga pa comé*

*Toitico lo abogao*

*Le robaron toitico cuanto tiene*

*Le quitaron toitico cuanto tiene*

*A Dolore Santa Crú*

*Aquí está Dolore Santa Crú*

*Aquí está*

*Here is Dolore Santa Crú*

*Here she is.*

*To think that she has no money.*

*And nothing to eat*

All the lawyers  
 Steal everything she had  
 They took everything she had  
 Took it from *Dolore Santa Crú*.  
 Here is *Dolore Santa Crú*  
 Here she is.

Although her words are quite powerful and presumably describe how, by attempting to purchase her freedom, the character was ruined and ultimately loss her sanity and was left to wander the streets of La Habana, the intervention is minimal. Interestingly, her brief *romanza* is characterized by the use of fractured Spanish (marked in italics), reminiscent of *bozal*, a mixture of Spanish and African languages spoken by *negros de nación* (African slaves in Cuba) and it stands in direct contrast with Cecilia's use of proper Spanish, thus further exposing Dolores Santa Cruz's African heritage. What Rodríguez does is to extend the life of the character onstage by incorporating her into a tableau divided in three sections, at the center Cecilia and Leonardo appear as children—underscoring the incestual relationship between them. To their left the zarzuela's present time Cecilia and Leonardo stand together and Dolores Santa Cruz on the right completing the triptych. The image as a whole suggests Cecilia's future. Significantly, the name Dolores Santa Cruz roughly translates as "Wounds of the Holy Cross." Rodríguez's choice suggests the inevitable outcome for Cecilia as a future Dolores Santa Cruz, condemned to "carry the cross" of her ancestors.

Even though the tragic history of the mulata is at the heart of zarzuela plots, overall, the works are framed in a celebratory and festive atmosphere supported by comedic situations in the libretti and dance rhythms in the score particularly evident in most sections performed by slaves and Afrocuban characters. I suspect that the presence of two slaves in shackles constantly following the zarzuela's leading character, must have been perceived as an anticlimactic disturbance to the general festive atmosphere but, beyond that, I am interested in pointing out two issues. First, how do Rodríguez's staging choices unveil racial tensions within the Cuban diaspora in Miami, and, second, how might these metaphorical images reveal how the Cuba left behind is constructed in exile.

Audiences' disapproval of what Rodríguez makes visible in his production reflects how black women in Spanish colonized territories in the Americas are perceived, mainly as representations of "mirrors that most Latinos would like to shatter because they reflect the blackness Latinos don't want to see in themselves (Cruz-Janzen, 168). Eva Hoffman asserts that the homeland for exile communities "becomes sequestered in the imagination as a mythic, static realm. That realm can be idealized or demonized, but the past can all too easily become not only a foreign country but a space of projections and fantasies" (52). Hence, the two slaves following Cecilia disturb the pre-revolutionary Cuban social order constructed in the exilic imagination, and simultaneously subvert the idealized mythical Cuba that exiles long for. While the staging choices made by Rodríguez infuse alternate ways of reading zarzuela, controversies around staging practices that challenge traditional productions have long been a mainstay of certain musical theater genres, such as western opera. What it does, however, is to expose the role that zarzuela plays in

Cuban nostalgic imagination, as it projects racial anxieties negotiated through utopic fantasies.

Notwithstanding, I need to restate that among Cubans in Miami, zarzuela has served as a cohesive factor, along with other cultural capital, in the structuring of a Cuban diasporic community. The neocolonial period, during which zarzuela enjoyed its golden age, is the Cuba left behind by the immigrant community. Although all diasporas invoke a nation “left behind” in their construction of remembrance, the Cuban diaspora, at least during the early years of the Revolution, expected to return as soon as Castro was overthrown. Unlike other communities that emigrate for economic reasons alone, and more often than not have the option of returning to the homeland, the Cuban trauma resides in the inability to return. Thus, the sense of loss and longing are mitigated by fantasies of a constructed past that is distorted by nostalgia. Indeed, zarzuela has played an important role in sustaining and constructing this invented past, which is “figured as a utopic lost homeland” (Muñoz 76).

In a newspaper review of yet another *antología* presented by Pro Arte Grateli, the headline read “*Antología* Equals Nostalgia,” The article begins with the following sentences: “For many older Cuban exiles, La Antología de la Zarzuela is more like La Antología de la Nostalgia.” (Horn 13G). Indeed, the *antología* acts as a performance of nostalgia which, Svetlana Boym reminds us, is “a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy” (xiii). While the first full title productions staged by Pro Arte Grateli had original zarzuela stars—most of whom had already retired from

performing, yet became avid audiences in the diaspora—and their presence, albeit off stage, sparked standing ovations as tangible reminders of the golden age of zarzuela, or better yet, of pre-communist Cuba. Recent audiences lack legitimizing “proof” to connect performances with pre-Castro Cuba. This phenomenon is further problematized since channels to transmit the legacy of zarzuela have not been created by the generation that grew with the genre, and experienced it in the Island. This void in cultural transmission may be due, in part, to the consequences of the trauma of exile, and the subsequent acculturation experienced by first generations of Cuban Americans. Indeed, since the original emigrants expected a prompt return to the Island, there was not an imminent preoccupation with the survival of the genre. To this extent, zarzuela performances were consumed as entertainment, although they actively participated in the cohesion of the diaspora.

In addition to the trauma of exile, the producers of zarzuela had to deal with the lack of scores and libretti. Since none of the original or copies of manuscripts were brought by Cuban emigrants, most of the scores and libretti had to be rendered by memory. Overall, the plots were inscribed in the collective memory of the generation that performed them, and their audiences, but the musical and textual transcriptions depended on the few recordings that had previously been produced in Cuba, and the recollections of artists that had participated either in the pit or onstage. The reconstruction of the spoken dialogue sections was particularly problematic, since none of the few recordings include these sections, similar to other musical theater recordings that usually bypass spoken text. Hence, the zarzuela productions presented in/by the diaspora, are less the product of

rewriting and more of a textual and musical transformation. Nonetheless, this process initiated a revival of the genre in the diaspora, sparking interest from Cuban musicians who had secured positions in local orchestras, music schools, and artists interested in continuing their performing careers.

This reconstruction effort of (re)writing zarzuela scores and libretti was part of a larger attempt to validate the emigrant community in their new setting. As Paul Connerton has argued, "our images of the past commonly serve to legitimate a present social order" (3). When Pro Arte Gratei began to present zarzuelas in 1967, the Cuban community in Miami had to confront the idea, for the first time, that a longer, perhaps permanent settlement in the United States was imminent. The Missile Crisis, and the resulting pledge of the US not to invade Cuba in 1962, along with the suspension of commercial flights between Cuba and the US in 1965, had made the prospects of return almost impossible; Castro's granting exit permission to Cubans with relatives in the US in the same year solidified familial bonds that had been broken as a result of the hasty exodus, and hence lessened the traumas of separation as well as intensifying the immigrants' disconnections with the Cuba under Castro.

Nonetheless, Gratei has nurtured the possibility of "return," not only through the exposure it gives to pre-Castro Cuba through their zarzuela productions, but above all through the discourses that frame such presentations. In addition to the material culture exhibited and consumed around their performances—Cuban coffee and *mojito*

cocktails are served in the theater during intermission<sup>60</sup>—the motto of the organization is “Dios y Cuba viven en Grately” (“God and Cuba live in Grately”). Catholicism, inherited from the forced conversion during the colonial endeavor was the mainstay religion in Cuba before the Revolution, and describes the moral values embraced by most sectors of (neo)colonial Cuba, especially the *criollo* upper and middle classes, which Grately aims to preserve by cultivating cultural capital. In another instance, which occurs every time Grately celebrates the anniversary of key exile institutions, such as the Diario Las Americas, a Spanish language newspaper almost entirely staffed and directed by Cuban exiles and Cuban Americans of strong conservative leanings, Pili de la Rosa is often asked to share a few remarks with the audience, invariably concluding her address with the following sentence: “Y si Dios quiere el año entrante estaremos en Cuba.” (And God willing, next year we will be in Cuba).<sup>61</sup> Her comment is part of a general consensus among Cuban exiles that insists on what Ricardo L. Ortiz has described as the persistent “toasting to a ‘next year in Havana’ which never comes” (63). Ortiz asserts that by so doing

the culture clearly marks itself within, and according to, the contours of a historical paradigm that both promises return and staves it off by virtue of its structural reliance on the indefinite deferral of that return.

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<sup>60</sup> While these zarzuela presentations were intended primarily for Cubans, there is no data regarding the composition of the audience yet a small number of Latin Americans residing in Miami might have attended as well. In addition, since the city of Miami has attracted temporary visitors in search of warmer climate and other attractions, there is a possibility that ethnic tourists might have attended Grately’s performances.

<sup>61</sup> Personal interview with Pili de la Rosa

In this sense the toast exhibits the double edge of any performance of the historical via a precedent model: it may assert a historicity in that performance, but it also marks the assertion of historicity as performance, and as performative (63).

In this sense, nostalgia plays an intricate role in the construction of history. Hence, zarzuela productions presented by Grateli function not only within the cultural preservation project in exile, but as detonators of nostalgic performance, because they trigger collective memories ignited before, after, and between the zarzuela proper, and it is through this process that nostalgia is enacted. After all, “nostalgia in the Cuban case, is felt as a community trait, a shared experience” (Rubio 15). These experiences, I submit, create a nostalgic space for Cuban exiles that is unique to zarzuela, in which trafficking in and of the past is live, and not optional—unlike other media such as film, recorded music, and the fine arts—demanding a visual, aural, and embodied engagement within the on and off stage duration of the event. The issue, however, is that the Cuba invoked by zarzuela and constructed by the first generations of exiles, has clashed with the Cuba of recent immigrants and the Cuba of younger Cuban Americans. At the heart of this encounter lays zarzuela’s potential to remain effective in its role as detonator of nostalgic performance.

### ***The End of Memory***

The first Grateli audiences had experienced a rich performing arts culture in Cuba in the decade preceding the Revolution. There was a prosperous theater life between 1950 and 1959 in La Habana, and the future emigrants enjoyed a series of new



performing spaces spread throughout the city, overseen by the “Asociación de Salas de Teatro” (Theater Association). The new theaters included “Sala Thalia” (which belonged to Patronato del Teatro), “Sala Hubert de Blanck,” “Teatro Las Máscaras,” “Teatro Prometeo,” Sala El Sótano,” “Teatro Arlequín,” Teatro Idal,” and “Teatro Farseros.”

María Julia Casanova, one of the founders of the *Asociación*, and General Director, and designer of the Sala Hubert de Blanck, describes in her memoir some of their accomplishments:

Logramos que el gobierno de Batista nos concediera exención [sic] de impuestos; que el ‘*Diario de La Marina*’ nos dedicara una página entera de fotograbado todos los domingos para nuestras fotos de publicidad; que la mas importante tienda de La Habana, ‘El Encanto,’ dedicara todas sus vidrieras una vez al año a exhibir fotos y maniqués que anunciaran las obras que estaban poniendo en las salas de teatro; que pudiésemos instituir el ‘Mes del Teatro Cubano’ (47).

We managed to get a tax break from the Batista government; a full page in the ‘*Diario de La Marina*’ every Sunday with our publicity photographs; a yearly exhibition in all the display windows of ‘El Encanto’ the most important retail store in La Habana; we were able to institutionalized the ‘Cuban Theater Month.’

However, since more Cubans preferred to attend cinema houses, rather than theaters, and popular entertainment was the domain of television and radio, the theater had to draw from such media. Theater artists were able to support themselves by working on radio,

television, and film in order to have a parallel career on the stage. The increasing number of recognizable screen and radio celebrities participating in live performance attracted audiences to theaters, along with lower ticket prices that matched film's entrance fees. The first generations of Cuban exiles to arrive in the United States had an established tradition of attending live performances, and once Grateli began producing zarzuelas their audience was guaranteed. This audience was composed of zarzuela fans, including Cubans who had experienced the golden age of zarzuela in the island, and their relatives. Even those who had not seen live performances had access, and were certainly exposed, to the music and plots of canonical works through other media and popular culture. In addition, as stated earlier, the experience of attending a Grateli performance went beyond the performance itself; instead the event reinforced a sense of community in a space that was simultaneously constructed on stage and its periphery, in which intimacy and distance harmonized. Zarzuela—like souvenirs—played a double role “to authenticate a past or otherwise remote experience and, at the same time, to discredit the present” (Stewart 139).

However, for subsequent generations of emigrants, and, above all, those that arrived since the Mariel period and grew up in post-1959 Cuba, zarzuela does not figure as a prominent part of their past, in part because other genres were deemed better equipped to translate the cultural goals of the Revolution. In an analysis of Cuban cultural production in the exile, Ricardo Ortiz describes how generational differences shape nostalgic performance through an analysis of Albita, a popular singer and song-writer who defected from Cuba to the United States in 1993:

After almost forty years of a general but no less compulsive mourning, Cuban nostalgia is no longer so intoxicating, and much more likely than not quite sobering. For as recently-exiled a person as Albita this may make some sense, if only in that the Cuba she mourns in some respects still exists; Albita cannot, like those Cubans exiled since 1959, mourn yesterday's Cuba, 'la Cuba de ayer,' which has become an increasingly abstract concept (74).

Indeed, the conflict at the heart of zarzuela's diminishing role as detonator of nostalgic discursive practices lies within intergenerational differences. On one hand, as Ortiz points out, the Cuba left behind by those who migrated during the first exodus is drastically different from later generations of exiles. The equation is quite simple as zarzuela circulated in the former, and was practically extinguished during the later.

Although Pro Arte Grateli has sought to produce Cuban zarzuela in the diaspora, their overall mission does not include an active education program for new audiences, including younger Cuban Americans. That, according to Pili de la Rosa and other Cuban exiles interviewed for this study, is up to the parents, who have not "promoted a love for the theater among their children."<sup>62</sup> In addition, the different Cuban exile organizations across the globe in charge of producing zarzuela have worked in isolation from each other. For example, Grateli does not have any communication with other Cuban cultural organizations outside Miami; while Cuban zarzuela is sporadically produced in other regions around the globe with large numbers of Cuban immigrants, Grateli has focused

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<sup>62</sup> Personal interview with Pili de la Rosa.

its work on South Florida, and does not contemplate expanding its reach in the future.

What is at stake here is that the genre will inevitably drawn further into obscurity since its primary role has been relegated to maintaining the mythic “Cuba de ayer” (“yesterday’s Cuba”). Even though the myth has the potential to transcend its creators, what remains will be narratives that have the potential to circulate easily among global consumers. In other words, once zarzuela audiences pass away, and they are leaving us at alarming rates, the “Cuba de ayer” will survive in recognizable characters that have been marketed through popular media, such as Desi Arnaz like characters, the mambos of Perez Prado, and other popular musical rhythms, along with the memorable image of the mulata. However, the mulata that will transcend within the myth will not be the mulata *tragica* created in zarzuela that became emblematic of the genre itself. The surviving mulata is reminiscent of the mulata in *teatro bufo*, which like its zarzuela counterpart necessitates the beautiful dark skinned woman to be both desired and rejected, but unlike zarzuela’s, she is not allowed to subvert her objectification, she must remain complacent and eternally available. The availability of zarzuela’s mulata is limited, and further problematized by the genre’s need to unveil and present her struggle. This precondition of the character is to some extent understood within the circles of those initiated in the genre; however, in order to survive as part of the mythic Cuba it must be sanitized, as it happens in the *antologia* format. Since the myth of the “Cuba de ayer” is positioned in direct contrast to Revolutionary Cuba, it entails a cleansing of the symbolic values of the elements upon which the myth is constructed as a utopic space of/for longing. This distorted view of the constructed past, subjected to collective amnesia, sustains the hopes,

aims and aspirations—abstract or pragmatic—of return and reinvindication, and while it has proven effective so far in the construction of Cuban exile and Cuban American identity, it has done so at the expense of the product it claims to celebrate.

## CONCLUSIONS

Musical theater is a hybrid genre, and its hybridity resides within and beyond the intersections between music and theater. The impulse to share a live performance through song, dance, and spoken text simultaneously, presupposes, I submit, a perceived insufficiency in the ways each individual genre is experienced. This insufficiency does not occur within the boundaries of the artistic manifestations per se, rather in the ways we create, perform, and consume the narratives presented on stage. How do generic structures shape the conception and outcome of a particular narrative in live performance? In the case of Cuba, this issue is a matter of translations. The inherent hybridity of musical theater facilitated the cohabitation of the country's drastically diverse populations and histories. To this extent, Cuban zarzuela succeeded in its ability to sustain the differences across time and space between the different *languages* that performed Cuba. Yet, these translations remained entangled in discourses that privileged dominant social hierarchies and some ideological alliances over others, and inevitably shaped zarzuela's insistence in performing (for) the present masked as the past.

Cuban zarzuela is as much of a product of the West as it is of the original inhabitants of the Island, of neocolonial Cuba and the Cuban diaspora. Cuban zarzuela today has the inprint of its many journeys, colonial histories, armed conflicts, ethnic and racial anxieties, linguistic ambivalences, and through these trajectories the genre acknowledges its imminent condition as a transnational performance practice. While Cuban zarzuela borrowed from various traditions rooted in African, Indocuban and European performance practices these borrowings were not limited to aesthetic

transactions instead they actively participated in the articulation of Cuban identities by explorations of alterity. In doing so, the genre continually exposes the ontology of racial, ethnic, class, and gender categories first created during the colonial period, later perpetuated during the Republic, and today performed in the diaspora. It remains to be studied how zarzuela engages with Revolutionary Cuba, and other Cuban diasporas around the globe.

The themes explored in the zarzuela repertoire reveal the anxieties generated by the plurality of histories, bodies, and cultures that frame the Cuban experience. While remaining considerably uniform, zarzuela narratives expose Cubans' preoccupation with the fluidity of boundaries between the categories that define national identities. The circulation of zarzuela has complemented and problematized this anxiety. In this sense, zarzuela is also about displacement and relocation, and a constant attempt to return to a past that remains alive on the stage as much as it does in the (neo)colonial imagination.

Even though the genre's repertoire includes a comprehensive list of titles, a comparatively small group has achieved canonical status. Performances occur with less frequency as we move further away from zarzuela's *golden age* during the 1920s and 30s. In part due to the inexistence of published scores and scarcity of recordings, as well as the limited traffic of musical theater in Spanish, which has prevented the cultivation of mainstream audiences and venues.

While zarzuela's themes remain anchored in love triangles centered in the character of the tragic mulata, staging practices in the diaspora have selectively revised the genre's format and narratives in order to cope with the trauma of exile by nurturing

fantasies of return. Significantly, the circulation of zarzuela in the Cuban community of South Florida has occupied a prominent role in the cohesion and maintenance of Cuban Miami. During the past decades framing of zarzuela productions outside traditional staging conventions has allowed for a brief, albeit invigorating revival of the genre. The reinvigoration of zarzuela in Cuban Miami is bound to generational boundaries. On the one hand, only those with direct contact with the genre's golden age have been concerned with the production and promotion of zarzuela. Their initiative scapes the active participation of younger Cuban immigrants and Cuban Americans, who for the most part lack the referential experience of pre-Castro Cuba, and unlike their parents and grandparents, are not invested in the construction of the *Cuba de ayer*. In this process, zarzuela participates in the attempts to define the diasporic experience, unfortunately at its own cost.



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