

Vivian Martínez Tabares

Journey into Criticism

Text was surely my first link to theatre, since it was certainly my first link to knowledge. My mother, daughter of illiterate immigrants from the Canary Islands, only went to secondary school as an adult, but she was determined to teach me to read and write before I began school. This earned me a reputation as a "gifted" child, which was later confirmed when I skipped a year in school.

Afterwards I had my father's library at my disposal. It was rich in Russian and Soviet literature - I remember Turgeniev, Gorki, Polevoi and Sholokhov - but also included works of very diverse origin: Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, which was the first book printed by the Imprenta Nacional, founded by the revolutionary government under the direction of Alejo Carpentier, and illustrated with Picasso's famous images; North American short stories by Poe, Faulkner, Bradbury and Capote; or the novel about prison, *Hombres sin mujer* (Men without Women), by Carlos Montenegro, that I read stealthily for fear of being discovered. I devoured heaps of books and I spent many hours imagining the worlds behind the texts, discovering all the nuances of a precise word and the soul stirring power of a good metaphor, whilst most other teenagers preferred the regular Saturday parties that parents organised for their daughters once they became fifteen, including their choreography and rehearsal sessions.

I am also reminded of my childhood discoveries of sophisticated play texts, such as Macchiavelli's *The Mandrake*, in the 1963 edition, with a red cover with the title in black and white, published by the Editorial Nacional of Cuba, which I still have although it lost its cover a long time ago; or *Mother Courage and Her Children*, published by the Teatro Popular de Biblioteca del Pueblo collection in 1961, with a black and white picture of a woman doubled up by the weight of the cart she is pulling. I cannot see if the woman is Helene Weigel or Teresa Giehse since the book - one of a hundred thousand copies intended to reach the most isolated areas of the country, printed on cheap paper

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that today has a pungent smell - gives no credit for the photograph, although the traces of the notes I made in red ink more than thirty years ago are still visible.

As a child, I frequented a puppet theatre in Old Havana, and there I discovered, through those objects animated by invisible hands, the magic of theatre. Later I was fortunate enough to see the last comedies with elements of "buffo" at the Teatro Martí, and subsequently the productions that the Teatro Popular Latinoamericano presented in that same venue. It was there also that I saw Florencio Sánchez's *M'hijo el doctor* and *Barranca abajo*. His was the sad face on the big posters outside the theatre on the street that I walked along every day on my way to the high school where I studied those same Uruguayan plays. It was some years before I learned that Manuel Galich, the excellent Guatemalan playwright and intellectual, with his deep Latin American roots, who was founder of the *Conjunto* magazine that I direct today, was the theatre adviser to the group that introduced me to the performances of those plays.

Little by little, my contact with the stage began to reveal to me how much there was to discover and enjoy beyond the interplay of the words, in the unique magic of each performance, the tone of a particular actor, the design solution or a specific movement.

Today, when I strive to teach my students at the Instituto Superior de Arte to discover for themselves how text is only one of the many components of theatre language, or when I am fascinated by intelligent performance dramaturgy where the actor's body is an inexhaustible bearer of meaning, or when I become weary of the rhetorical or pedestrian language of a simple play, I have to acknowledge that for me at the beginning it was the text that mattered. This is surely logical for me as I belong to a Western culture that is centred on the word.



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Text was also my first link with my vocation as a critic. When I read *For Whom the Bell Tolls* I was fascinated enough to memorise the John Donne lines that Hemingway quotes as a kind of epigram for the deeper meaning of his novel. The quotation still has a special value for me, reinforced by the difficult times in which we live:

No man is an Island, intire of it selfe; every man is a peece of the Continent, a part of the maine; if a Clod be washed away by the Sea, Europe is the lesse, as well as if a Promontorie were, as well as if a Mannor of thy friends or of thine owne were; any mans death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankinde; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee.

When I entered adolescence, still without a clearly defined vocation, I read on the back cover of a novel a critical assessment of its contents. Without knowing why, I typed out every word of that luminous text on a fresh sheet of paper with my "modern" Remington Rand. I kept that piece of paper like a precious object. Years later, I understood that my destiny had been decided in that

moment. I intended to write similar texts myself one day - about plays and performances created by others, in order to establish a dialogue capable of working in two ways: with the creators of the artistic work and with those who, like me, had been their audience.

Written text, much more than speech, has been my main form of professional expression and also the means to approach and learn about theatre theory. It has enabled me to structure my system of thought and to build my discourse.

Critical texts, that are almost always born on a blank page or an illuminated screen in a laborious delivery ending in deep pleasure, are the indelible tracks through which we can follow the evolution of a path and, particularly, its consequences; they provide the opportunity to review analytical discoveries and prove whether they endure, to judge whether the intelligent and beautiful sentence arises simply from an accidental grouping of more or less well chosen words. These texts have a unique tone, revealing personal taste in balance and tension with judgement, in relationship to something similar to a canon, or, at the optimum, with an Utopia, looking ahead for a paradigm of the theatre of the future.

All forms are possible. I have mostly written for specialised magazines such as *Tablas*, the journal of Cuban theatre, and then in *Conjunto*, that belongs to the Theatre Department of the Casa de las Américas. In both I have enjoyed a privileged, measured and ample space to build an editorial dramaturgy of articles, interviews, notes and librettos, maintaining a curve of interest, tension and expectation, while doing one of the things that I like doing most.

On occasion, I also delight in writing critical reviews that dialogue with the artist during the creative process and I envy those

who exercise this approach regularly from their newspaper columns. With just the necessary amount of subjectivity, they give the theatre artists intelligent feedback on their production that at the same time favours the intellectual, but also the emotional and sensorial access to the shows for the spectators.

Once, while researching *boricua* theatre at the University of Puerto Rico, a Caribbean *Godot* directed by Rosa Luisa Márquez, made me choose the old form of letter writing to transmit my joy in the face of an out-of-this-world experience in that context.

... consciously Utopian as I am, I believe in the utility of theatre and of criticism... Seeing Godot, I travelled mentally through the Puerto Rican culture I have come to know in these months of living together... Reviews are not usually as sparkling as scenic discourse. Words without body and gestures can be insufficient and one thinks that it is necessary to invent new languages. When I manage this, I will let you know...

On another occasion (a cool evening in La Havana, after the unique birthday party given by Vicente Revuelta on the patio of Teatro Estudio's large house, with the title *Café Bertolt Brecht*), I was unable to write what is usually considered a review, so I quickly translated my immediate impressions and sensations into words and wrote them down instead.

... The master of ceremonies leans on a peeling column to say a poem and creates an endless game of mirrors... "What are we doing here?" they ask themselves, me, us. Nobody has explicit answers and when they have played at trying to throw me out, I asked again...

Texts and more texts around me: books, manuscripts of unpublished plays, articles in

process, photocopies of magazines that are hard to find, and used pieces of paper and envelopes with almost illegible writing.

I live surrounded by my own and other people's texts that invade my physical space in an apparent chaos that only I am able to decipher.

I store heaps of small notebooks. Some of them are beautiful, given to me as presents; others are more ordinary. All of them are full of notes that I have jotted down day after day, here or there, during an enforced delay or in a theatre space in the dark, during a public debate, while on a trip or reading a book. Quotes on dramatic theory, sayings, and fragments of songs may coexist with my observations on a recently discovered place, or with almost telegraphic sentences that eventually will become a critical review. They are the logbooks of my journey into criticism.

Some academics believe they have come up with an earth shattering idea when describing theatre studies as the new way to approach theatre.

Certainly theatre studies have been useful in overcoming the exclusive focus on text, but this is what we have always called teatrology.

A note from Rio de Janeiro, July 2000

Translated from Spanish
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