

CASA CRUZ DE LA LUNA: BETWEEN COMMUNITY AND EXPERIMENTATION

(PERSONAL FRAGMENTS AND COMMENTS ABOUT PERFORMANCE IN PUERTO RICO)

Hi. First I want to reiterate my thanks to Marina, Joanne, Rebecca, ESCALA, and all the people who have made my travel from Puerto Rico possible. It's really an honor and a joy to be here.

Puerto Rico is proverbially a 35 by 100 mile island, in kilometers 56 by 161. Its smallness, though, contains an intricate performance arts field that is further complicated when considering Puerto Rican academicians and practitioners in the United States mainland and those throughout the world.

The flourishing of performance art in Puerto Rico in the decade of the 1990's (its so called "Golden Age") was marked by a strong rooting in contemporary dance exemplified by the work of Viveca Vázquez –who at the moment has the first big retrospective of her work at the Puerto Rico Museum of Contemporary Art– and her company Taller de Otra Cosa. Among her collaborators, Teresa Hernández, Javier del Valle and Eduardo Alegría, over the years have individually developed a strong body of work exploring questions of identity, gender, race, social stereotyping and violence through performances centered on movement, discontinuous narratives, the projection of the artists in different characters or personae, multimedia, and, in Alegría's case, also original music.

Transgender visual artist Freddy Mercado transforms his body in three dimensional plastic visions that range from iconic Puerto Rican women, such as San Juan legendary mayor Doña Fela, to East Indian gods; while queer academician Larry La Fountain as Lola von Miramar mixes, in his live performances and youtube videos, melodramatic readings of Puerto Rican canonic literature with workshops on how to make traditional food such as tostones or plantain fritters.

Experimental music and vocalization provide the founding ground for the work of Ivy Andino and the vulnerable sound and gesture acrobatics of Ivette Román.

Closer to the notion of the happening are Nelson Rivera's public actions (which draw equally from chance theory and political transgression). While Bernard Tort's visceral, often illegal, performances explore elements common with body art.

The artists I have mentioned (from a so called older generation) are still active and share the field with an interdisciplinary new generation of performers among them: Awilda Rodríguez Lora (who often travels between Puerto Rico and the U.S.), Eury G. Orsini (who comes and goes from Barcelona), Kairiana Núñez (who is in Argentina this year), Mickey Negrón (who is, simultaneously with this conference, moderating a performance panel in Puerto Rico), and Marina Bary (who is here with us today) .

As a parenthesis, even though I am using a sort of familiar taxonomy as a general organizing tool, classifications are in no way rigid. Working across disciplines is common. For instance,

Awilda Sterling whom you are going to see shortly via skype in her piece, "Vejigante Decrépito," in addition to being a renowned dancer, performer and choreographer, is also a graphic artist, a theatre actor and has even participated in a soap opera, "Don Amor." Worth noting, is that even in these more traditional functions, Awilda does not altogether shed her performative self. In Sylvia Bofill's play "Oh natura," presented last month, she played a children's old caretaker but at the moment of the death of one of her protégées, she improvised a mourning ritual based on African Caribbean folk dances which brought to the stage her own personal and performing history.

Within this ambit of performance in the Island, I wanted to talk a little about Casa Cruz de la Luna, a cultural center and experimental company and laboratory. The project which I began with various collaborators in 1998 is eccentric, or off-centered, in various ways, the first being its location. Whereas the Puerto Rican performance world revolves mainly around the capital, San Juan, Casa Cruz de la Luna is housed in the structure of a 19th century building located in San Germán, a small town in the Southwest.



Figure 1. Casa Cruz de la Luna, 67 Luna Street in San Germán, Puerto Rico (picture provided by the author)



Figure2. Casa Cruz de la Luna, inside the theatre during a performance of "La Mano," 2010 (picture provided by the author)

Another distinguishing point is that even though the house has been a meeting point for artists of different disciplines, our resident group defines itself as a theatre company. Practitioner and academician Nelson Rivera, talking about the performance art scene in Puerto Rico, once described it as a "ghetto." Critic Rosalina Perales when introducing a collection of essays about Puerto Rican theatre in a special issue of *Ollantay* magazine, exposes the division of theatre makers and followers in the island into different cliques or closed, mutually exclusive groups. I would argue that performance itself as conceived in Puerto Rico in the last decades of the twentieth century curiously amalgamated characteristics of both, ghetto and clique, something at the same time exclusive, elitist, and underestimated, confined, marginalized, sometimes derided. Nowadays, however, I feel this paradigm is changing through the work of younger practitioners who are increasingly creating open performance events and through the

emergence of performance art classes and workshops that connect performers of different levels of experience.¹

Even so, talking about “performance-theatre” is still particularly suspect on the island. Used by critic Lowell Fiet to describe the work of Casa Cruz de la Luna and of the group Aspaviento, the term “performance-theatre” carries, as applied here, some of the connotations Elinor Fuchs first attached to it back in 1996 in *The Death of Character*: a resemblance to conventional theatre in the use of visual, lightning, sound effects and as well as an ensemble of actors, yet, like performance art, exhibiting a continuous reflection upon itself as a discursive act, and a resistance to be re-staged or appropriated by any other artist or group given its particular nature.

Partaking of the Lehman’s rubric of the postdramatic and Bailes’ conception of a theatre of failure, our group engages in stagings in which no conclusions are reached, time often working in non-linear, spiral, fractured ways.² Our pieces are explorations of flows: flows of materialities (animals, carcasses, dressed, hyperdressed and naked bodies, puppets, objects, machines), flows of sites (domestic, architectural, historical, intimate, virtual), flows of identities (quotidian, scripted, automatic, mediated) and flows of different planes of lines of communications.

For instance, the workshop that I facilitated this morning here at the university pertained to “escritura acto” the study of the production and perception of projected digital writing onstage.

Among the “escritura acto” traits that we usually explore are: "disjunction" (writing one text while saying another), “precognition” (the ability to anticipate what will be written), call and response with the audience, kinetic responses of bodies to the shapes and rhythms of the writing, and chains comprising different acts of translation, dictation, copying and transcription.



Figures 3 and 4 (left to right). Escritura acto in Casa Cruz de la Luna's productions "The Marquis de Sade is Afraid of the Sea" at the Cayey University Theatre (2009) and "Garuda's Glove" at the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Juan (2012) (pictures provided by the author)

From these practices our company has attempted to engender the performance space as a field of movement between the Stanislavskian magic if (the presupposition of the stage as fiction) and the immanent presence of the performance artist, a motion that also encompasses other realities (allegoric, oneiric, demonstrative, digital).

Examples of the workings of this notion of fluid realities are the reactions of the public to two of our works: "Night 4 a.m." and Pepe Liboy's "El piano." In the first piece, many audience members insisted on the fake nature of the blood coming out of a vein in my arm through a catheter. In the second, some persons thought I had killed a chicken onstage, even when shown

the mechanisms of the magic trick (and the hidden live chicken). Fluid reality resides in the variances of perception as much as in the dynamics of its production.

Here's a collage of moments of one of our pieces, "The Marquis de Sade is Afraid of the Sea".

(See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xCn9LFaW5x0>)

I wanted to show this clip, taken from a performance at the square of the town of Mayagüez, also in the Southwest of Puerto Rico, to highlight our attempt to link experimentation in the arts to community integration and outreach. The audience demographics at our theatre in San Germán are completely mixed in terms of age, education, and socio-economic status. Members of the public range from our neighbors to performance art followers from San Juan who travel three hours by car to see our shows and then three hours back.

The composition of our company is also mixed, comprising professional artists and also students and people from town who often initially come to us as participants in the workshops. The clip mainly showcased students from the University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez and was a product of an intensive performance and technology workshop.



Figure 5. Deborah Hunt (with Jesús Miranda) in a live face cast demonstration, Casa Cruz de la Luna, 2013 (picture provided by the author)

Here is master puppeteer Deborah Hunt in a mask-making workshop at Casa Cruz de la Luna where she was in residency this January. You will see this afternoon a video of her piece "El Paquete." Deborah is really one of those wonderful artists who combine creative daring and community building. For years she was in charge of the Yerbabruja Studio Theatre at the urban center of Río Piedras, one of the freer creative spaces in the island, recently lost as a result of strategies of gentrification of the zone. Deborah's work ranges from large scale pageants based on world myths to street protest performances against corporate takeovers of neighborhoods and experimental takes on theatre classics (she has equally tackled Punch and Ubu Roi). Here we see her as her character "Misión Educativa" ("Learning Mission") rallying the audience against the capitalist bull of Wall Street.



Figure 6. Deborah Hunt as Misión Educativa in "Occupy" at the Titeretada 2012, Yerbabruja Studio, San Juan (picture provided by the artist)

Another artist whose work I want to comment on is that of La performer Awilda Rodríguez Lora, who recently premiered the piece "El velorio de la Comay" (or "La Comay's Wake"). La Comay is a popular T.V. character: the puppet of a woman who is controlled by a man while another man provides its voice. La Comay, is infamous for her slanderous gossip; for her own claims of being a seeker of public justice and a champion of women's rights; and for her homophobia. During the show, Awilda enacts the wake and the funeral procession of La Comay. Although we do not see La Comay's death, we see her ghost, as always, projected as a T.V. presence around the life of a woman, the performer, the victim of an abusive relationship. The violence in the performance develops through a series of repetitive extreme vocal and physical sequences in which Awilda plays the role, both of victim and aggressor. We see her keeping her body in a plank position over the sharp blade of a machete, until her muscles begin to tremble and the lights slowly fade. This is the space in which "El Velorio de la Comay" took place in

March, two weeks before the performance: a pile of rubbish. In the background is the living area of a homeless man. In a massive effort, Awilda, together with helpers from the neighborhood, members of the grassroots organization CAUCE, her production team and the homeless man, cleaned and transformed this abandoned roofless lot. As the sound from televisions out of the apartments next door invaded Awilda's very personal (and paradoxical) mourning for the ambivalent societal standards and ossified mores represented by La Comay, they also heralded the emergence of a rescued performance space, another artists' house in a country where these are very few and where formal theatres are each day more performance-phobic.



Figure 7. Abandoned space in Río Piedras where "El velorio de la Comay" would be presented (picture provided by the artist)



Figure 8. Awilda Rodríguez Lora's "El velorio de la Comay" in Río Piedras, 2013 (picture provided by the artist)

Preparing myself to perform "Prometheus Bound" today, it made me think of the physical house of Casa Cruz de la Luna, the place where I first performed it in Puerto Rico in 2002, "Prometheus Bound" being the older piece in my repertory. It made me think about how I position myself in terms of younger and older generations, in terms of the theatre-performance divide, in terms of agent (performer) in some of my pieces versus director (authority) in others, in terms of producer of actions (artist) versus perceiver

and sometimes critic of other (inter)actions. It made me think of the politics of in-betweenness in Puerto Rico, the contested (but potentially liberating) politics of the flow.

¹ Examples of recent open performance activities in the island include the series "Cabaré" and "Tesina." Performance classes are offered at the University of Puerto Rico in Río Piedras by professors Lowell Fiet at the Interdisciplinary Studies Program, Migdalia Luz Barena at the Art Department and Viveca Vázquez at the Gender Studies Program. Individual artists and groups also give performance workshops, among them: Teresa Hernández, Mickey Negrón, Beliza Torres and Casa Cruz de la Luna.

² The notions of postdramatic theatre and theatre of failure are presented in Hans-Thies Lehman's *Postdramatic Theatre* (English edition, Routledge, 2006) and Sara Jane Bailes' *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure* (Routledge 2010), respectively.