

Christopher Winks



María Antonia

EUGENIO HERNÁNDEZ ESPINOSA

WRITTEN IN 1965 AND FIRST STAGED IN 1967, EUGENIO HERNÁNDEZ Espinosa's *María Antonia* has become a classic of modern Cuban drama, a status furthered by Sergio Giral's excellent 1990 film adaptation, now available on video. At the time of its premiere, however, this play aroused a great deal of controversy among the cultural authorities of post-revolutionary Cuba. Not only did it refuse an explicitly political orientation, it staged Afro-Cuban drumming-singing-dancing rituals as fully-integrated dramatic elements instead of exoticized sideshow entertainment. As well, its unadorned depiction of the privations of tenement life, while set ostensibly in the late 1940s during the Republic, did not fail to call the public's attention to the persistence of poverty and racism in Cuba notwithstanding the *de jure* abolition of racial discrimination following Fidel Castro's accession to power in 1959.

In his *Havana Journal* (Penguin, 1971), an impressionistic account of the 1968 Congreso Cultural de La Habana, the Jamaican writer Andrew Salkey describes attending *María Antonia* during its premiere run, in the company of C.L.R. James, Robert Hill, John LaRose, and their official government minder. While Salkey hailed the performance as "[b]y far the finest acted, most exciting and thought-provoking folk play I've ever seen" (143), his minder Marcos, depicted throughout the journal as a sober, orthodox Communist, expressed discomfort: "...the violence in the story doesn't make any sense now. It's destructive. It was then. It would be now" (144).

Behind Marcos's unease lay an entire complex of "revolutionary" attitudes toward Afro-Cuban culture that can be broadly summarized in terms of a disdain for its alleged backwardness and dependence on outmoded (if not downright "primitive") and potentially "reactionary" religious expressions like Santería or the Abakuá secret society. At the time *María Antonia* was playing in Havana, the most prominent revolutionary critic of this dogmatic (and ultimately racist) perspective, Walterio Carbonell, who openly insisted on the progressive contributions of Afro-Cuban culture and religion to the construction of a national consciousness (a viewpoint also reflected in Salkey's remark about Santería as "the ghetto's apolitical Black Power" [144]), had been marginalized and imprisoned. And although *María Antonia* enjoyed huge popular success, with 20,000 people seeing it during its

run, it vanished from the stage during the many years of intellectual repression in Cuba touched off by the arrest, jailing, and staged “confession” of the poet Heberto Padilla in 1971, and was not published until 1979.

Eugenio Hernández himself continued to write during that grim period, winning the Casa de las Américas prize in 1977 for his (unproduced) play *La Simona*. In the gradual (and relative) post-1980 thaw in Cuban intellectual life, his plays have for the most part returned to public performance on the island (*María Antonia*, for instance, was revived in the mid-1980s by the Teatro Irrumpe of Santiago, under the aegis of its original director, Roberto Blanco, himself a victim during the 1970s of the Cuban government’s anti-homosexual campaign). In 1989, a (far-from-complete) edition of his collected works was published by Letras Cubanas. Hernández Espinosa is now the director of Havana’s Teatro Caribeño, and his plays, many of which center on dramatic retellings from the treasury of Afro-Cuban mythology, are frequently presented both in Cuba and abroad.

María Antonia reflects Hernández Espinosa’s own experiences growing up in the 1940s and 1950s amidst the rich popular culture that flourished in the Havana working-class, multi-racial barrio of El Cerro, with its rumberos like the legendary Cheo Malanga and Manolo El Aguajista (immortalized in a *guaracha* and in a Hernández Espinosa play as “*Mi socio Manolo*” [My Buddy Manolo]) and its public Santería ceremonies (called “*güemilere*,” from a Yoruba term that literally translates as “to take part in the convulsions of the house of images”). But instead of resorting in his drama to the tried-and-true conventions of Cuban *costumbrismo*, wherein popular traditions were presented as merely colorful and folkloric, or to the customary stage depictions of Afro-Cubans borrowed from the comic stereotypes of the 19th-century *teatro bufó*, Hernández Espinosa brilliantly theatricalizes the poverty, violence, and racism that underpin the daily dramas of the street. (See the first, quasi-cinematic sequence of the scene translated here.) Moreover, photographs of Roberto Blanco’s stage production indicate a stark, almost Brechtian ambiance — a far cry from the “local color” purveyed by conventional realism.

Against this backdrop, the tragic heroine María Antonia fights to create an individual space for herself where her desires and dreams can be fulfilled against the predominant machismo. As a personage, she is both part of a long line of Cuban heroines — who include María Belén Chacón, the rumbera of Emilio Ballagas’s famous poem, María la O, the tragic-mulata protagonist of Ernesto Lecuona’s *zarzuela*, and the immortal Cecilia Valdés, the eponymous mulata heroine of Cirilo Villaverde’s great 19th-century “novel of Cuban customs” — and a break with that tradition, insofar as she is Black and is thus fully aware that, under the dominant color-complex that prizes light skin, even the possibility of social mobility is denied her. (It is worth noting that the original María Antonia, Hilda Oates, is a dark-skinned actress who was in her forties at the time of the premiere.) In her magnificent yet ultimately self-destructive rebellion against not only the social order but against the *orishas* themselves and their earthly representatives in the form of the Godmother and the

babalawo Batabio, María Antonia finds herself incapable of overcoming the power of her obsessive love for the aspiring boxer Julián, and by extension the destiny marked out for her by her *santo*, the love-goddess Oshún.

Hernández Espinosa's text is written in a vividly colloquial language that, instead of having recourse to facile dialectal representations or picturesque grammatical constructions, presents the speech of the barrio in all its poetry, by turns harsh and elegant. Since Salkey mentions the "startling crudeness of the Afro-Cuban Spanish dialect" (144), it can be assumed that in performance, the actors-singers-dancers inflected the script with their own "nation-language." The same practice could well be applied to future English-language stagings, which depending on their locations could be adapted according to the local nation-languages (Jamaican, Trinidadian, Black American). In my translation of the scene included here (which I hope to follow with a version of the entire play), I have tried to convey some of the flavor of the text, unavoidably North-Americanizing it, but not, it is hoped, to detrimental effect.

