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BPE-14
THE AMERICAS

Paige Evans is an Institute Fellow looking at Cuba through the lens of its performing arts.

Portraits of Two Artisans As Elderly Men

HAVANA, Cuba

October 16, 1999

By Paige Evans

PART I: THE MODEL-MAKER

My husband Ariel and I first met Ramon del Rio Rodriguez, aka "Pipio," while visiting the neighborhood of San Salvador's *parrandas* warehouse in September of 1998. On a Sunday afternoon, Pipio — a gaunt, bald man with deer's eyes, who exudes a quiet confidence — was alone in the dilapidated warehouse, molding vast chess pieces for San Salvador's *carozza*, or *parrandas* float. That December, the *carozza*, with its ALICE IN WONDERLAND theme, emerged the undisputed (if unofficial) victor in Remedios' reveling rivalry; and several of Pipio's meticulously crafted papier-mache models were canonized in the town's *Parrandas* Museum.

When we appear unannounced at his house almost a year later, Pipio is again working on a project for Remedios' Christmastime festival. He hastily rolls up his sketches for this year's *carozza* (thus maintaining the requisite secrecy for *parrandas* projects) and invites us inside. Like all of Remedios' colonial houses, Pipio's has impossibly high wooden ceilings and extends to a large, open-air patio out back. But Pipio's home is in far better condition than most I've seen here: its walls are freshly plastered and painted, and its furniture is well-maintained and abundant.

Pipio offers us seats in a narrow foyer crammed with a jumble of chairs, an upright piano and a coffee table laden with porcelain figurines, and settles into a rocking chair himself. When his grandson, Cesar, toddles in, Pipio fondly rolls a wheeled centipede toward him across floor. Cesar's mother trails him, carrying a tiny infant, and ushers the boy into the bedroom next door. After they exit, Pipio explains — in a surprisingly matter-of-fact way — that his grandsons' father left recently for the United States, without plans to return to Cuba or send for his wife or children.

"He went over on one of those boats that leave from Caibarien," a neighboring port from which motorboats smuggle Cubans to the United States at about U.S.\$8,000 a head. "When the boat landed in Florida, he phoned the police right away. Legally, people who reach the shore can stay there, if they alert the police immediately when they arrive." Pipio gives an amiable shrug. "I am an old man. My family is what matters to me, and they are in Remedios. But I might go, too, if I were younger. What is there for a young person here? This year, many Remedianos have left for other countries. It has gotten very difficult to survive in Cuba."

When Cesar reemerges, pushing a battered toy truck, our conversation

shifts to the *parrandas*. Pipio recalls: "I started working for the *parrandas* as a young boy, because I liked it. At first, I assisted in making *faroles*," or Chinese-style lanterns. "It was simple work. Gradually, as I learned more, I started doing other things. Over the years, I have worked on almost every part of the festival. I made fireworks as an adolescent. For the past thirty years, I have worked on *carozzas* — as a carpenter, a decorator and a model-maker.

"I like model-making the most. It is hard work, and it is dirty work, working with clay and plaster and papier-mache. Many people do not like it. But I am captivated by it. To make models, you must be creative: one year you do one thing, and the next year you do something altogether different. And you must be persistent. Often, a model does not turn out the way you had hoped. You must keep trying. Anyone who says he knows all there is to know in this line of work is a fool. I am constantly learning.

"Everyone learns empirically with the *parrandas*. None of us has taken art classes. We simply start young. There are children in Remedios who are already designing projects. If a child is interested in a particular kind of work, he seeks out a person he can learn from. A boy who wants to be an electrician does basic work for an electrician. The next year, he might do something slightly more complicated.

"Often, skills are passed down from father to son. My son, for example, also started working for the

parrandas as a young boy, helping out with whatever he could. Now he works with me, as a model-maker. But he does not care for it as I do." Pipio's brow knits. "There may not be anyone to carry on my work after I am gone. Each time I find a good assistant, he leaves for the United States." He thinks for a moment, then shrugs resignedly. "What can I do?" Cesar reaches up his arms to his grandfather, and Pipio takes the boy onto his lap.

"We must be very inventive in working for the *parrandas*. Over the years, we have invented all sorts of things. We made an oven with very hot light bulbs — to dry the models in case it rains, and they cannot dry in the sun. It uses a great deal of electricity. Luckily, the state has never restricted the amount of electricity we can use for the *parrandas*. We just have to pay for what we use.

"In 1991, at the beginning of the special period" — the years of extreme economic hardship in Cuba following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of its massive subsidies — "the state suspended the *parrandas*. This had only happened twice before in one hundred and seventy years. Afterwards, we still did not have access to many things — like wood, screws and paper. We had to be very inventive. El Carmen stole wood from the local funeral home! They replaced it eventually, of course. But they did take it for a while.

"We always try to use materials from the year before. Sometimes we can use lightbulbs or electrical cable a second time. But most things, we cannot. I have never been able to use models more than once. No two projects



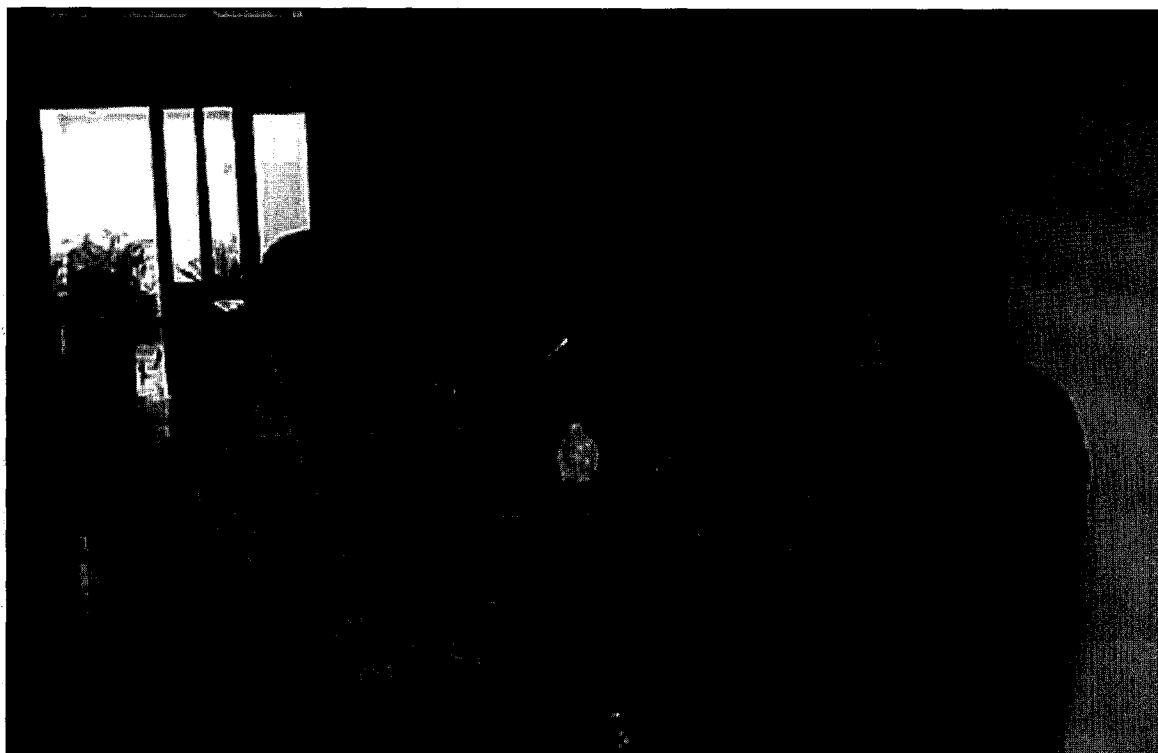


Photo: Ariel Diaz

Pippo at home with friend Alberto.

have exactly the same-sized figures, set in exactly the same positions. This is both good and bad. It requires more materials and therefore is more expensive," Pipio grins shyly. "But if the models did not change, I would not have work!"

Unfolding his lanky limbs, he rises, ambles into an adjoining room and reappears carrying a bulging, battered copy of the acclaimed Cuban cultural magazine "Bohemia." Sketches, photographs and intricately detailed drawings are stuffed between the magazine's pages. Pipio combs through this makeshift portfolio, glancing appreciatively at its varied images. Holding up a photo torn from *National Geographic* of an East Indian woman with a bright orange sari and an intense stare, he exclaims: "What a wonderful magazine this is! I found a number of copies on the street one day. Someone had thrown them away. Unfortunately, it is in English. I cannot read it. But its photographs are extremely beautiful. I use them for inspiration. If I am not sure how a person or animal should look, I can sometimes get an idea from these photographs."

I ask Pipio why he works for San Salvador when he is allied with the Carmen neighborhood. There is an uncomfortable pause, then he explains in a measured tone: "I left El Carmen nine years ago, over a problem with its Directive," or governing body. "My uncle happened to be Directive President at the time... A carpenter was working on a *carozza* for me, and we had different ways of looking at the project. We argued a great deal about it. I complained to the Directive, but

they insisted we continue working together. So I left.

"For two years, I worked on the *parrandas* in Zueleta" — a little town nearby. "San Salvador kept asking me to work with them. At first, I said no. I did not want to work for either neighborhood in Remedios. Then I thought: why not? There was a time when people allied with one neighborhood never worked for the other. But that has changed. Now, anyone can work for either neighborhood. As long as they do good work, it does not matter.

"It is rare, though, that someone sides with one neighborhood, then changes his allegiance. Once you belong to a neighborhood, you stay with that neighborhood. I have never said I am from San Salvador. I have always been from El Carmen, and I always will be." I ask Pipio where his loyalties lie on the night of the competition, and he deflects my question: "On the night of the *parrandas*, all I want to do is sleep."

Pipio works on *parrandas* floats year-round, both in Remedios and other towns in the province of Villa Clara, 17 of which now have *parrandas* of their own. "None of their celebrations is as impressive as the *parrandas* in Remedios, of course. Ours is the original, and it is the finest. But they pay well enough. Plus, I enjoy the work. I feel very lucky in that respect. I love my work. It is essential to me." Pipio says the transient nature of his creations — the fact that he works for months on something fully displayed for only one night — doesn't bother him.

Remedios' local government and the neighborhoods'



Photo: Ariel Diaz

Octavio Carrio, wife Luisa and their, dog Pichichi

Directives feel differently, however: this year, they'll try to preserve both neighborhoods' *carozza* and *trabajo de plaza* for the week following the *parrandas*. The week after Christmas is peak tourism time in Cuba, and the town's governing bodies hope to use the floats to draw visitors to Remedios in the wake of the *parrandas*.

To this end, staff from Remedios' *Parrandas* Museum will lecture local schoolchildren on the ills of vandalism and the necessity of encouraging tourism, and both neighborhoods will hire guards to watch over their floats — as they do in the days leading up to the *parrandas*, when the floats are being assembled in the town's main square. It's difficult enough for guards to protect the floats from destructive adolescents before the festival; it should prove almost impossible afterwards, when hordes of townspeople eagerly grab at the floats for mementos. As Pipio puts it: "The morning after the *parrandas*, most people have had too much rum, and they attack the *carozzas*." Rather than disturbing the *carozza*'s chief artisan, this thought seems to tickle him. "For me, as a craftsman, there is satisfaction in that: everyone wants a piece of my work."

* * *

Luisa Carrio proclaims with a sunny smile: "Lift a stone in Remedios, and you will find a *parrandas* artist." An aged sliver of a woman in a deeply stained red house dress, Luisa pets her scraggly mutt *Pichichi* (an affectionate nickname meaning "little penis") and defers to her less lucid husband, Octavio, who has been endlessly recounting stories of his exploits as a *parrandas* artist. Celia, Director of Remedios' *Parrandas* Museum, told Ariel and me beforehand that Octavio made *faroles* for the *parrandas*; but he's mostly been reminiscing about mak-

ing models for the *carozzas*. Over the years, *faroles* have become a less important part of the festivities, so Octavio's memory may have selectively shifted his role.

"I am eighty-two years old. I was born on the saint's day of the Virgin Candelaria. One night, years ago, I had a vision of her. A beautiful vision. She asked me why I do not use her name. When I looked again, she had disappeared. Ever since then, I have always used my full name: Octavio Candelario Carrio Nunez. Please publish my full name in your article."

Octavio's dentures slip and clack when he speaks. "As a younger man, I wore a suit every day. No matter how hot the weather was, I always wore a tie. It was a point of etiquette."

Octavio nods disapprovingly toward Ariel, who's dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. "What the youth wears now, I would never have left the house in that." Digging through a shoe box packed with yellowed photographs, he shows me several shots of himself as a dapperly-dressed young man. The pictures' stylish images contrast starkly with the baggy, zipperless trousers and grimy shirt Octavio is wearing today.

"Before the Revolution, I was a successful shoe manufacturer in Havana. I lived and worked in Havana for forty years. I brought money from Havana to Remedios and promoted Remedios' *parrandas* all over the island. And I always took my vacation in December and came back to help with the *parrandas*. I did not miss a single year. I formed a group in Havana called the Absent Remedianos.

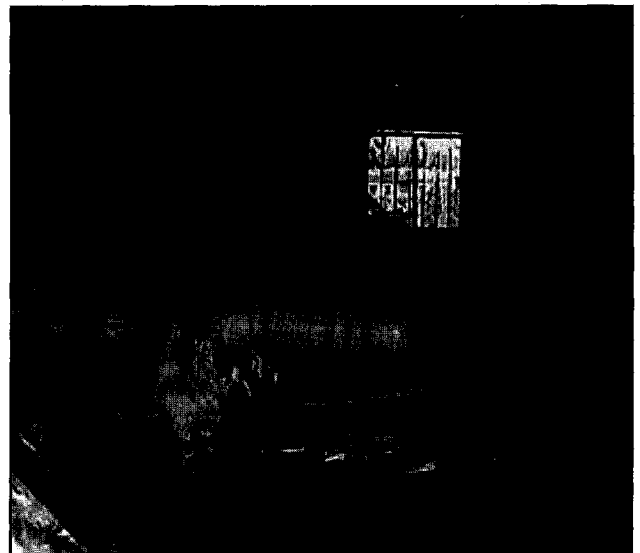


Photo: Ariel Diaz

A view of San Salvador's mascot, the rooster

We used to meet and reminisce about our home town. Now there is a special train that carries Remedianos from Havana to Remedios for the *parrandas*."

Luisa, who has been lovingly stroking Pichichi's belly, adds: "I always worked with Octavio on the *parrandas*, as a volunteer." Celia told Ariel and me earlier that Octavio was a notorious womanizer as a younger man, and that this had caused problems between him and Luisa. I assume Luisa's volunteer work during the long, pre-*parrandas* nights didn't stem solely from dedication to the festival. "We never had children, just our dogs and parrots. So our not being at home at night was never a problem."

Evidence of Octavio's passion for the *parrandas* is everywhere in his decaying colonial home: miniature roosters (San Salvador's mascot) perch on countless flat surfaces; a dusty, decades-old *papier-maché* robed goddess from a *carozza* dominates the bedroom; and the couple's cherished, ancient parrot, whom Octavio says is no longer in peak form, squawks San Salvador's polka "hymn" from the patio. Octavio even had a portrait of himself painted, to be hung in Remedios' *Parrandas* Museum after he dies. It hangs on the living room wall, waiting.

When Celia mentions the hymn of her neighborhood, El Carmen, Octavio leaps up, snatches a rooster from atop the television set and tauntingly dances it around her head while chanting San Salvador's hymn. Once finished, he clutches the rooster to his chest, stands before



Photo: Ariel Diaz

Pipio's workshop at San Salvador's nave

me and, in a voice quivering with emotion, recites what he can remember of a lengthy poem about the *parrandas*. It's both a touching and embarrassing display, and I'm relieved when he's finished.

Octavio questions whether I'll side with San Salvador during the *parrandas*. I tell him I'm impartial — something I've had to reiterate over and over while observing preparations for the festival. Otherwise, I wouldn't be allowed to enter the rival neighborhoods' warehouses or to see the top-secret projects for this year's competitions. Otherwise, I'd be viewed as a spy.

I ask Octavio how the *parrandas* have changed over the years. His normally ashen face reddens, and he stabs at the air with his knobby forefinger. "There is no discipline today! All discipline has been lost! Everyone rushes around, setting off noisy fireworks! There are too many explosions! The neighborhood Directives are to blame! They buy louder fireworks every year! It is dangerous! Many people have been killed from them!"

Luisa shakes her head sadly. "Before the Revolution, when fireworks were made privately, the pyro-technicians signed every firework. The fireworks today do not have anyone's name on them, and they are sloppily made. The state employees do not feel responsible for their work. I do not even go to the *parrandas* anymore. I am too afraid."

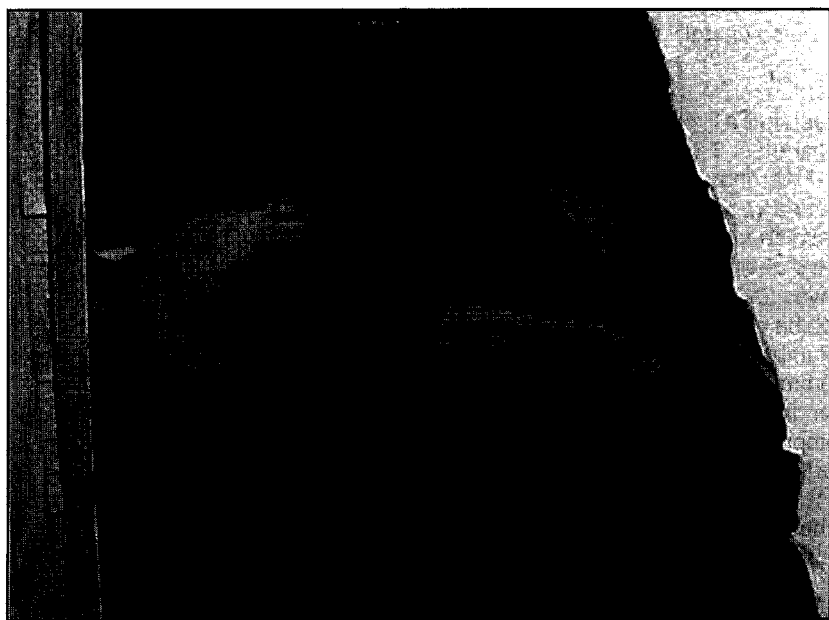
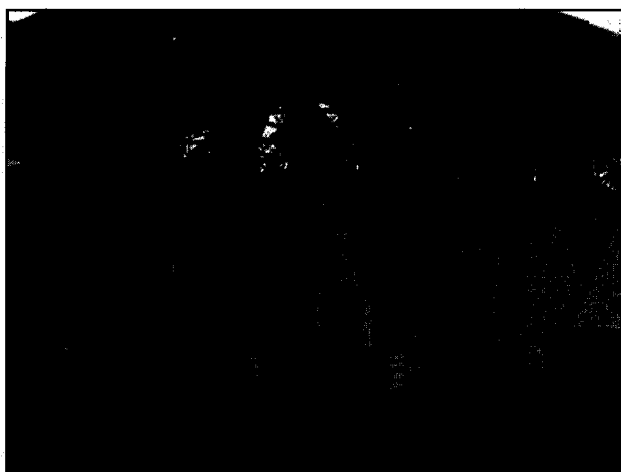


Photo: Ariel Diaz

Models by Pipio from another town's parrandas

I've heard many similar com-



*Alice in Wonderland figure from last year's
San Salvador carozza*

plaints about the fireworks in latter-day *parrandas* celebrations: that the explosions have grown so dangerous, children and elderly people cannot view the celebration from the main square; and that vendors can no longer sell food and drinks there. But in contrast to the recent changes brought by the escalating arms race, many *parrandas* traditions have been assiduously maintained for decades.

Whether begun two years or almost two centuries ago, the festival's rituals provide Remedianos with a tie to their ancestors and a civic pride that transcend the troubled politics and economic conditions of present-day Cuba. Driven by this passion, masses of townspeople dedicate their time, energy and material resources to a yearly competition that offers no concrete victory and lasts less than 12 hours. □

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