

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

New York, New York
July, 1973

535 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10017

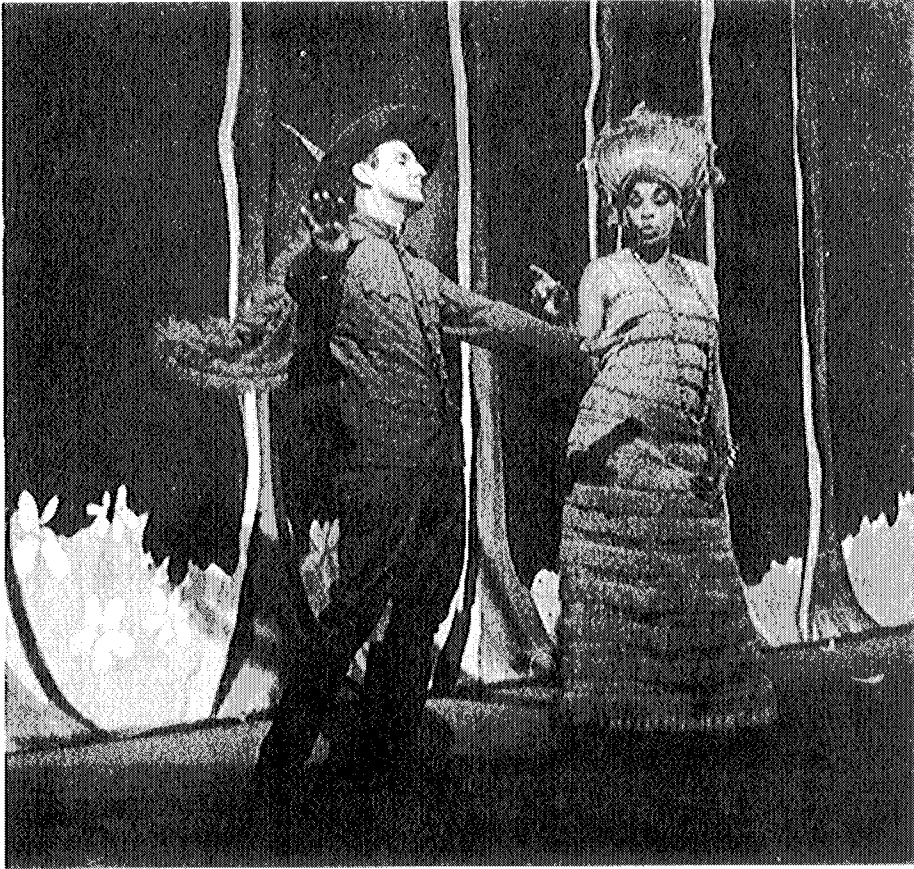
FJM-40: Report from a Cuban Prison X
Lisa*

The Libre was jammed with foreigners: Swedish ballerinas, newsmen from the Dominican Republic, Bolivian union leaders, politicians from Uruguay, North Korean diplomats, Chinese basketball players, all gathered for the July 26th celebration. I had to wait ten minutes for an elevator and then weave through a crowded lobby in order to reach the street outside. Then again on La Rampa, I confronted more crowds. It seemed that the whole city had gathered in front of the hotel to see the light show. This year, the work crew had spent a week hanging thousands of lights onto the facade of the Libre depicting a Cuban soldier holding a rifle at arm's length. From the barrel, white lights streamed forth flashing the word "MONCADA" on and off. It was a beautiful spectacle that attested to the Cuban's wonderful sense of color and design.

Meanwhile, across the street, other Habaneros were forming a line at the Rialto, one of Havana's largest movie houses where "Cool Hand Luke" was playing. A large queue was also forming at the Copelia ice cream parlor, across the street, just at the point where I was going to have to wait to catch Number 32, the bus Hebert told me to take to reach Miramar. We had arranged to meet at La Tropicana, where the University was sponsoring an outdoor dance in honor of the Moncada attack.

It only takes a few weeks in Havana to learn that there is a special technique to boarding one of the crowded red and blue Leyland buses ("guaguas") that are the only means of transport for most. (Officials, Army officers and remnants of the old middle class are the only ones fortunate enough to have cars.) As the bus approaches the idea is to look casual while estimating about where the bus is likely to stop. Then be in the right position when the front door swings open. If you can get one foot onto the first step success is assured because someone behind will act as a human stapler. By grabbing the two steel bars that run down the inside of the doorway, he will give a gentle shove and you're in! According to regulations, the bus driver is not supposed to leave the curbside until the front door is completely closed. But nine out of ten times that never happens. Because of the jam, the bus usually rolls away with one or two bodies half-dangling out the front end.

*Names and circumstances have been altered in this series. The conversations are reconstructed from notes.



A PERFORMANCE OF TEATRO MUSICAL'S
"PATO MACHO" . below: TWO OF THE
BETTER ACTRESSES FROM TEATRO
ESTUDIO PRESENTING A SCENE FROM
LA DESCRETA ENAMORAD.



AN OVERVIEW OF CUBANACAN



That night it was particularly bad, but I managed to squeeze onto the second number 32 that passed and finally arrived at the party, wandering in alone about 10:30. I bought a beer at the stand underneath the trees and began circling the edge of the band shell looking for Hebert. He was nowhere in sight.

Bored and self-conscious, I sipped beer out of a large wax container and watched the dancers for a while. Dressed casually in jeans and sports shirts, everyone seemed relaxed and very young, probably because 80 percent of the faculty is in their late twenties. It's a future-oriented society.

I started to stroll again, still clutching my beer like a security blanket, when suddenly an attractive green-eyed girl stopped me and asked if I wanted to dance. Too surprised to understand what she said, I asked her to repeat it. She looked at her friend, another lovely, open-faced woman, and laughed. "I said, do you want to dance with me?" Then making a circle with her arm, she repeated it in French, presumably thinking I might be French.

I replied that of course I'd like to dance and after a quick "permiso" from her friend, we walked onto the dance floor. That, happily, was how I met Lisa, an actress working with a group called Teatro Estudio, one of nine theater groups operating in Havana. Making conversation, Lisa explained that each group had a specialty. Her's was called "Estudio" and performed classical plays or Spanish and Cuban epics, though before they had done Brecht and Albee. "Tecer Mundo," another theatre group, presented political drama. "Teatro Marti" was concerned more with comedy, and presented the popular shows Cubans call "Bufo." "Musical" presented musical comedies and dance. "Dansa Moderna" had worked out a very innovative modern dance repertoire. "Acuje" was a serious group like Estudio and presented classical work for the moment. And finally an experimental theatre group, called "Rita Montaner," had recently been formed. We talked some more about the theater as we danced, then joined Lisa's group for a house party that eventually led us to initiate a friendship that night that deepened as the months went by.

At 26, while too young to be among those that made the Revolution, Lisa still considered herself a child of the Revolution. She had been born and raised in Oriente Province where her father had a small farm. Her grandfather, she said, had settled it as an immigrant from the Canary Islands. Lisa was still in high school when Castro came to power, but the family showed its faith in the Revolution when her father and mother gave her permission to join the Literacy Campaign in 1961.

She left home and lived for a year with a campesino family, teaching them how to read and write. Afterward, she won a scholarship to study drama and art at Cubanacan, the Revolution's most prestigious school of art, music, drama and dance. It is located in Havana in what used to be the Mirimar Country Club.

Cubanacan is lovely, a complex of wide arching, round domed buildings set in ten acres of lawn and flowers. We walked there, Lisa reminiscing and indulging herself with long forgotten stories. "The rules were so strict here, and I didn't get along with the head mistress who hated me. I used to sneak out at night to visit friends. Once I got caught. They tried to expel me but in the end they didn't; four years was long enough. My class numbered 120 when we started but only half of them finished."

Graduated after four years of serious study in dramatic arts, Lisa was then channeled directly into Teatro Estudio where she's been ever since. Life now is an 18-hour round of rehearsals, performance, voluntary work in the countryside, UJC meetings, and of course, militia duty.*

Somehow, in spite of all this activity we managed to spend a great deal of time together. Often after a meeting or a performance, we met at the theater across from the symphonic hall and, if there wasn't a movie we thought worthwhile, or a gathering of friends, we would take a walk along the Malecon, or just go to the Copelia for ice cream. It was a simple but delightful way to pass an evening.

Lisa's friends were bright, energetic and loved either to troupe together for dinner at an open air restaurant or to gather for drinks and dancing at a group member's home. At a

*Lisa was head of the Union of Young Communists in her theatre group. In order to join or be accepted into the UJC, the method of selection is severe though not so demanding as selection is for the Party itself. Seven steps are involved: (1) one is chosen as an exemplary student or worker, usually selected by the student body or co-workers in open process. (2) An interview follows called the "couple" with two other UJC members who question the proposed student. (3) Research is done into the candidate's life by the UJC itself. (4) A public session with the candidate is held involving both auto and group criticism. (5) Acceptance or rejection at regional level by the regional bureau of the UJC. (6) Acceptance or rejection at national level. (7) Presentation of the selected or rejected candidate to the student body, at which time if he or she is selected, UJC card is presented.

party, someone would be placed in charge of slicing the platanos (plantan), a potato-like vegetable that looks very much like an unripe banana. Sliced thin, they would fry quickly and with salt be the perfect accompaniment for the rum, sugar and lime juice that despite the ration, we always seemed to have in abundance. Inevitably, high on rum and platanos, Anna (a buxom comic with Teatro Estudio) would start to dance for us, laughing and shaking her hips to "Cuba Va." "Mucho moviemiento eh, mucho moviemiento!" She was always gay, the one to make a grand entrance every time, embracing each man, though never staying too long with any of them. Once at the Libre, she tried to tell a clever but skeptical reporter from the Dominican Republic how Cubans didn't care about money any more. He scoffed. Exasperated at this, Anna made her point by ripping up a twenty peso note and distributing the four parts to each of us. "When we meet again like this, and we each produce a portion of that bill, let us be as happy then as we are tonight," she said.

Roque Dalton and Miriam would also be there, close friends of Lisa, who were a bit more reflective than some of the others. Roque was a forty year old poet, who looked twenty, having been exiled from San Salvador after being jailed as a Revolutionary. I could never understand how anyone could think Roque was violent or dangerous, but he had spent the last 25 years moving from Guatemala to Mexico to Czechoslovakia to Cuba where finally he had settled for the time being. By then, he had managed to produce a half dozen books of poetry and some short stories. One of the works, Tabernas y Otoros Lugares, was awarded the Casa de las Americas Premio for Poetry in 1969. He was also a direct descendant, he said, of the Dalton family, the same that produced the infamous Dalton gang. One of the brothers from that outfit was supposed to have escaped to San Salvador with enough money to start a business, Roque's grandfather, if all accounts are true.

Miriam was a boyish looking actress with Teatro Acuje, one of the groups hit by the CNC for having a homosexual as its director. Miriam was hoping to leave Acuje and form an experienced group of theater people to travel from factory to factory training the workers to develop their own theater. If that failed, she said, she was determined to join Sergio Corriero in the Escambray Mountains where he and 30 others were doing essentially the same thing, only with compesinos.

One Saturday evening after dinner, the four of us-- Roque, Miriam, Lisa and I--decided we would visit a posada on the way back into Central Havana. The posadas are reconverted hotels or houses the Revolution has established for couples who want privacy when they want to make love. There are at least 30

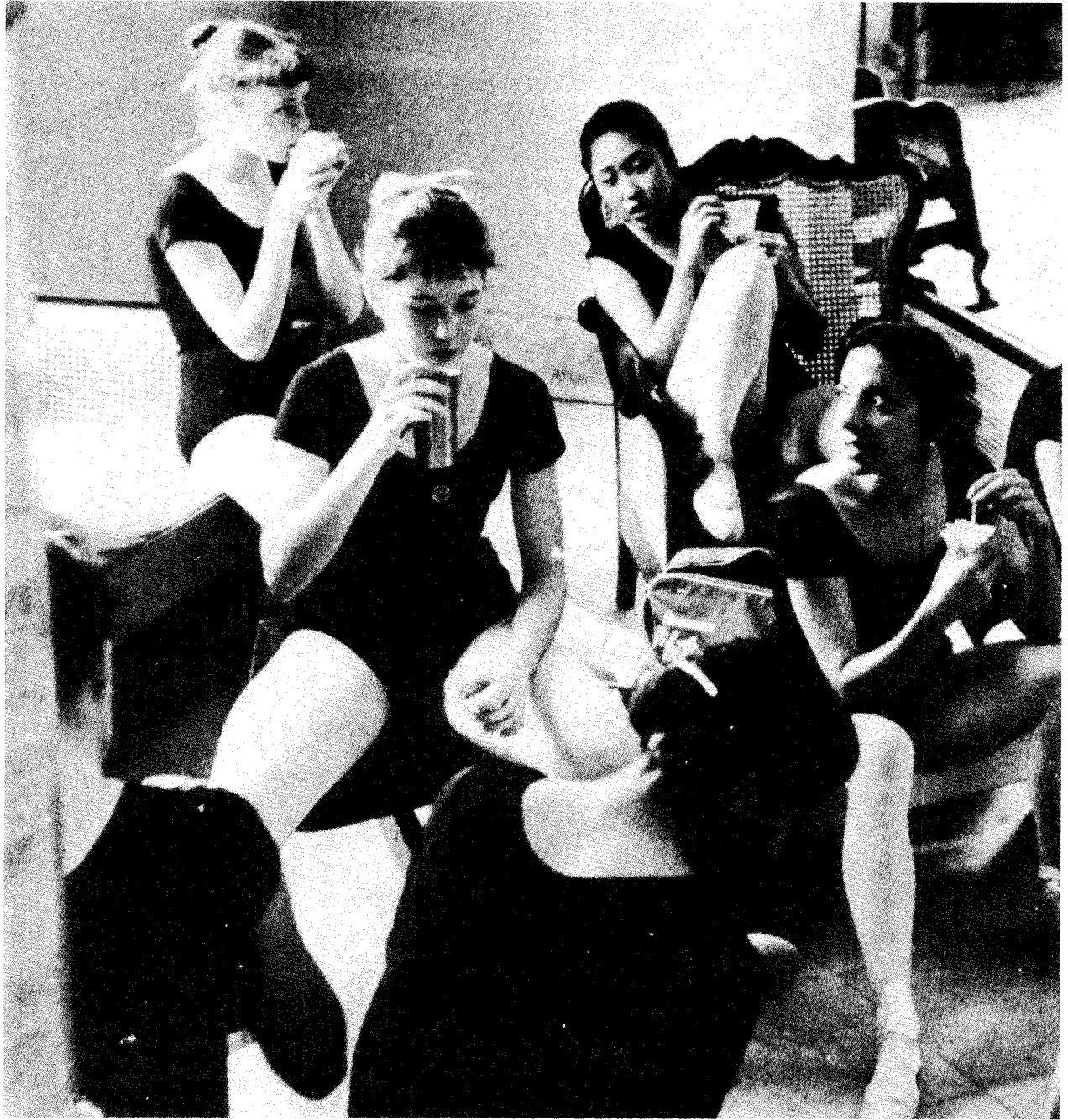
in Havana, although the best ones are supposed to be on the outside of the city proper. Usually clean and quiet in secluded neighborhoods, the posadas offer bed, bathroom, radio, bar and other no-questions-asked services, all for 7.50 pesos. It's best to avoid weekends because of the crowds. We found one on the edge of the Havana suburb, Mirimar, quite close to Cubanacan. There were no lines, just a walk-in, pesos on the table, registration by checking off a square on a blackboard indicating room number 10 occupied, and that was it.

Despite our intended purpose, we got into a conversation about the emergence of the new cultural environment in Cuba, what Lisa called the Cuban way of making a cultural revolution. And that in turn led to an argument after I had expressed doubts about the new directives emanating from the powerful Consejo Nacional de Cultura. A Commission had been formed to evaluate the political attitudes of the people involved in the theatre; homosexuals were being fired from positions of responsibility; a rigidity regarding ideological content had set in; European playwrights like Brecht were no longer being produced; and, in fact, there had been a freeze placed on any new work by the Commission until it had determined what the Revolution's line on who should produce what came down from the top. Sitting on either side of the bed, the argument went on despite its inappropriateness. "The truth of the matter is," Lisa said, "that the changes taking place, particularly during the last two years, since the Cultural Congress convened in April of 1971, are for the best. It was affirmed that culture is for the masses, not something reserved for actresses, poets, film makers and artists. It's called the 'mass line'. . ."

"Which means. . .?"

"Which means two things. Before the Congress, too much influence or authority was being exerted by two few people, mainly intellectuals, over the cultural scene here. They established themselves as the spokesmen for what was or wasn't good theater. The other point is that these same people were too oriented to a European conception of what culture was. Most of them had lived or worked in Europe and didn't understand the need to develop a Cuban culture, a revolutionary culture of our own. That, for example, was the problem with Padilla. He assumed that because he was idolized in Europe he had a right to some sort of special position here. Both these tendencies were discussed openly at the Congress and they decided that our notions of what culture was had to be changed. That's when we heard about 'the mass line.'"

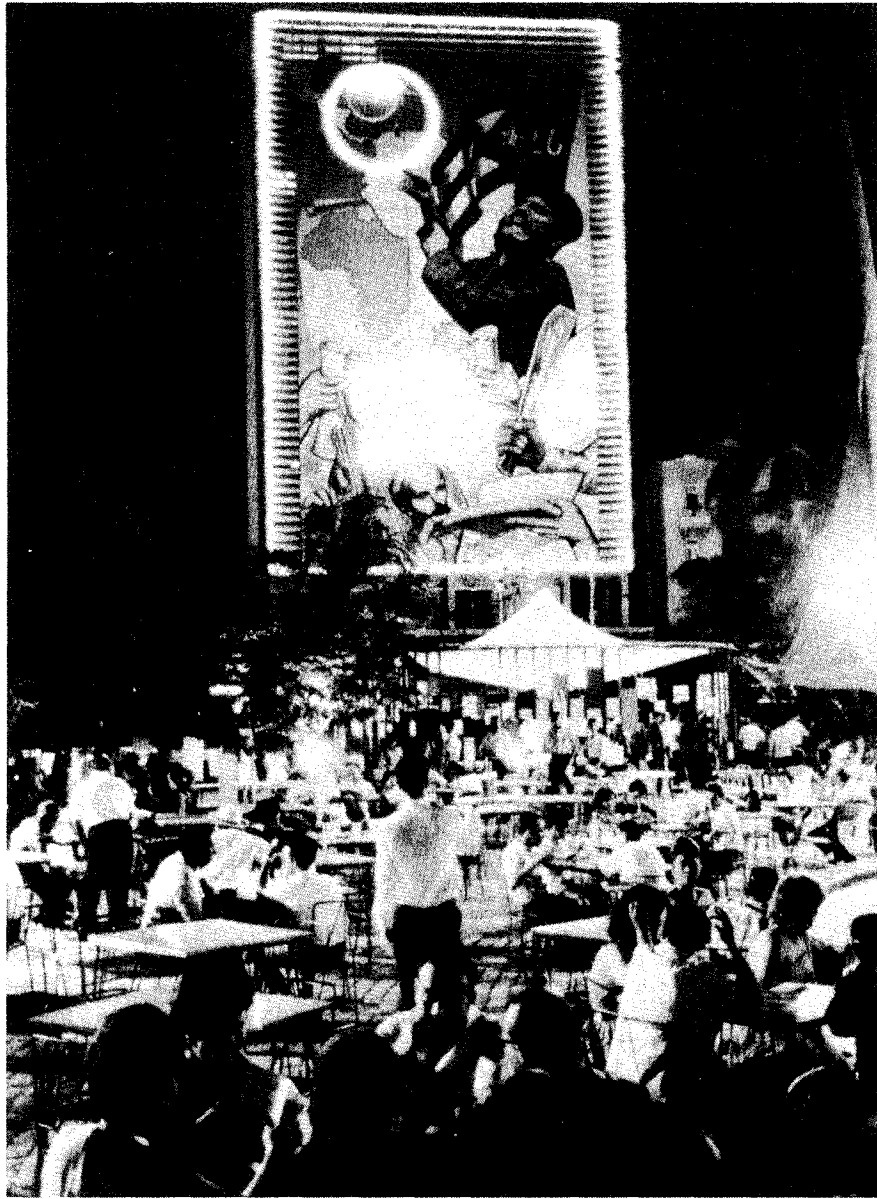
"Yes, but doesn't the 'mass line' really mean that now fewer have a greater say than before. I mean that before, you



MERIENDA FOR THE BALLET NACIONAL DE CUBA



FERNANDO ALONSO, DIRECTOR GENERAL OF THE NATIONAL BALLET SCHOOL.
HE IS DRESSED IN HIS MILITIA UNIFORM.



AN OUTDOOR CAFE LISA AND I FREQUENTED .
photo by Lockwood.



may have had this cultural or intellectual elite dictating taste and forming ideas, but now you have a political elite doing the same thing. Isn't it the same or worse?"

"For the time being, yes, simply because the leaders of the Revolution have placed a great deal of power in the hands of the CNC. But in time, through the Mass Organizations like the Federation of Cuban Workers, or The Federation of Cuban Women and the National Association of Agricultural Producers, new energies will be released and there will be a high degree of mass participation in cultural activity. Every farmer, every worker in the factory will be able to contribute what he has. And you can be sure it won't be a culture that is imported from Europe or worse, the United States."

What Lisa had said about the imposition of imported ideas, sounds and influences may have been true; but it was also enough to cut short our visit to the posada. When Lisa and I left, Roque and Miriam were still locked into number 11. That, as I recall, was the last posada I saw.

While we were together, Lisa introduced me to the magic and bounce of Bola de Nieve's piano; to the tradition of the Trovas and the plaintive lyricism of Sindo Garay's guitar; to the talents of Rita Montaner, Danzon and Son. I also accepted her judgment that these were individual personalities who had managed to break through a blanket of imported cowboy films, "I Love Lucy-type" television shows and music that was produced, packaged and sold from New York or Miami. Even in spite of the stress on Cubanization today much of what passes for popular entertainment is, like the lingering smell of dead fish, 1950's-styled canned culture imported from the United States, and Grade B at that.

Contradictions like this abound in Cuba. While Padilla is arrested and castigated as being too Europeanized, popular entertainment that reflects the same influences, mainly North American, is passively accepted. Sitting in the Torquino bar of the Havana Libre Hotel one evening and watching some singer do an unconscious imitation of Julius LaRosa, I tried to point out the contradiction to Lisa. I asked her why there was a crackdown on intellectuals but not on popular entertainers who manifested the same "disease."

Again not looking very pleased with me, she wrinkled up her nose, a sure sign of impatience. "It's like I said once before, you realize that ideas filter down from the top. If you have an intellectual elite who express imported or counter-revolutionary ideas, they're going to have a great deal of influence on the people. That's one of the reasons why intellectuals who represent that tendency have been criticized. But there is

another reason for chastening them. The people have got to get rid of the notion that art is produced by artists. That's not true! Art must be produced by the people. Music must be made by the people. The same is true of theater and film. That's why we have started taking our group to the factories and into the countryside this year. Very much like the Teatro Escambray. You know Sergio. (Sergio Corrieri, one of Cuba's most popular movie stars, played the lead in "Memories of Underdevelopment," acclaimed in Cannes as one of the most original films to come out of Latin America.) Well, he's an example of what a vanguard artist should be. There he was at the top of his profession, adulated by Cubans as well as Europeans. But then he decided that with 10 or 20 others, he would make theater a part of the lives of the campesinos in the Escambray Mountains. They just don't present a play either. They have the people write, produce and act in the play themselves. If there is an issue relevant to the lives of the people in that particular region, the play is written and produced to center on that problem. For example, the latest play they produced was about the difficulties encountered by a family moving from the countryside to a newly built pueblo erected by the Revolution. That's what I'd like to be doing myself."

"But that still hasn't answered my question about the apparent contradictions evidenced in a system that castigates the intellectuals while leaving the popular entertainer to carry on imitating North American standards, and the worst ones at that."

"Don't blame me for that," Lisa said. "In time, it will change. In time the new ideas will filter down. After all, if you change the thinking at the top, eventually it will spread through the consciousness of the people as a whole, Right?" I nodded agreement, but then suggested that maybe the changes that were being enforced at the top, while being made perhaps in the name of the people, were instead creating an atmosphere that calcified creativity, or worse. It couldn't be called anything less than repressive. "I don't agree with you, but then I don't agree with everything that's authorized by the Revolution either," she graciously admitted. "Most of us are worried about our place in theater. There is a Commission composed of the Directors of each group plus representatives from the CNC who are going to decide who will continue acting and who will not. Political attitudes, morality and work performance are being considered as criterion for selection-- and in that order. So, for example, if one is a good actor, works hard and is sincere it may be that it won't be enough. Especially if he is a homosexual. That's what morality means essentially. It means you can't be a homosexual. And already,

as you know, several directors have been fired for that reason alone.

"But I must explain that there are reasons for that policy," Lisa continued. "We don't work in a vacuum. We live the same as any worker in Cuba, eating the same food, wearing the same clothes, taking the buses, doing voluntary work in the countryside. These are the realities. But we are, in a sense, separate from the people because they have a notion that cultural activity is for us, not for them. As I said before, that will change. But one of the factors is the reality of 'machismo.' If eighty percent of the dancers in Dansa Moderna are homosexuals, do you suppose the factory workers are going to want to learn how to dance? The same is true, say, of our group. Less so; but still a good number of the actors are homosexuals. That creates a barrier between the masses and the performers, no matter how you try and change the mentality of the people."

"But what about that day in the baseball park," I asked, referring to a Monday morning Lisa and I and dozens of others from various theater groups worked landscaping the new baseball stadium under construction in Havana. We'd gotten up at 5:30 in the morning and met at the Party headquarters on Linea. Boarding a truck we were all taken to the baseball stadium where by six, we were digging together with thousands of other volunteers to erect a stadium in time for the Amateur Baseball World Series that was held in December, 1971. "You remember how well everyone got on. Pablo, for example, is a homosexual, and he and the Cederistas from the construction brigade became integrated and worked together with no problems at all. That was one of the most encouraging signs I've seen."

"The problem is not with the individuals," Lisa said. "It's the mentality, the general perception of the people that culture is for the 'Maricon'. If we want to create a culture that inculcates the people's energies fully, it may be necessary to enforce morality laws in the theater. Now I'm not for that, but I'm just trying to explain it."

"But wouldn't it be better to educate the people to the fallacy of their notions about homosexuality, to eliminate the ignorance about the issue?"

"Of course. But do you think that hundreds of years of machismo or the Latin's perception about homosexuality, or the influence of the Catholic church is going to allow us to change overnight? Hardly!"

Early in our relationship we had dozens of conversations like this. Beginning in the late fall, however, things began to change, like they had with Hebert, Sola, and other friends. Somewhere an empty space was beginning to enclose around me. I didn't know why or what it was then, but I could feel it. With Lisa, it manifested itself in reservations I had never seen before. Perhaps, I thought, it was my imagination. Deep in her I knew there were places that I couldn't reach: frustrations, sadness, a sense of incompleteness. Incorrectly, I thought it might be that all Lisa wanted was a child and a home; though asking her one day, she told me that if she wanted a child, she would just have one. "That would be absolutely no problem," she assured me. "I have no inclination to get married to anyone; but I would like to have a child some day because I enjoy children. Then I'll pick a man, someone I'm very fond of, maybe even in love with. But we don't have to be together, living together even."

"Yes, I understand, but what about taking care of the child, not having its father around?"

"Oh, that's the last thing I'd worry about. There are the circulos, day care centers that most mothers who work can use. After that, schooling, food, clothing, recreation and everything else is taken care of. No, the decision to have a child doesn't depend on material considerations. As for the father. Well, most of my friends have been divorced and it seems to me that marriage is not a very good way to depend on keeping a man anyway. In the end, it depends on me, and my readiness to have a child mentally and emotionally."

If it wasn't maternal instinct then, I thought, it must have been the day to day frustrations of living in Cuba, of participating in the Revolution. Maybe Lisa was kidding herself about the Revolution. Perhaps the small cramped room she lived in (a one-room bed sitter that once was used as a storage room for the apartment complex nearby) was too closed in. Or perhaps it was the day to day fatigue of crowded bus rides, having to eat at public restaurants or at the home of friends. It can be exhausting when there is so little privacy, so many obligations, so little in the way of material gain to be had. And yet she never complained, never seemed bitter about the conditions of her life. Only once did she ever suggest that she was angry about the room she was forced to live in. "For a year now, I've been trying to change this place for a small apartment. But it's impossible. The housing authority just keeps putting me off, telling me there isn't sufficient room for everyone yet, and that I'm lucky to have a place of my own instead of living with some family. They promised me when I joined the Group, that we would have a place to live. But

for actors and actresses, priorities are not that important. The factory workers get the first crack at new housing, and I don't want to resort to sociolismo (cronyism) to solve the problem, as some I could name have." Such criticisms were rare, however. I had to press Lisa to complain about things.

Then I considered the possibility that she didn't trust me for some reason. Indeed, once Lisa asked me if I was a spy--it was the second time we met--as she had heard, she said, that there were so many Americans who did spy for the CIA. We had arranged to take a walk that afternoon along the seashore in front of the Hotel Nacional, a famous old building that fronts the main harbor in Havana where the late Sumner Welles once lived when he was the ambassador to Cuba for the United States in the 1930s. I remembered the Nacional from the year before with all its opulence--one of the two grandiose hotels in Havana-- and its inlaid enameled marble in every corridor. The hotel has three dining rooms, two swimming pools and is usually crammed with guests of the Revolution lighting up cigars after a delicious meal. To Lisa's question, a bit paranoid myself, I assured her impatiently that I wasn't working for the CIA.

"But, how would I know," she said, "if you were an agent? You certainly wouldn't admit it, would you?"

"A good question, but one impossible to answer. How can someone prove he isn't a spy. You can't prove a negative, something you aren't."

"But then you may be an agent after all. How do I know?" she teased.

I grew impatient. "Well, I'm not!"

We were watching carnival floats go by, lining up in preparation for that night's gigantic parade. It began to rain and we headed for the shelter of the Nacional.

"Well, would you tell me if you weren't?" she pressed.

"Weren't what?"

"Were not an agent?"

I looked at her and then she laughed. She knew I wasn't good at taking her teasing. Since then we'd never talked about it. Still, as other friends around me began to withdraw, I became paranoid and increasingly edgy with Lisa. Perhaps she was being friendly only to watch me. After all, she had met me,

I hadn't met her. Immediately, however, I rejected the notion as insane, sure that our relationship had always been based on an open and honest exchange of ourselves, limited only by that tiny, strange void I found whenever we talked too seriously about politics.

Eventually though, my concern about the subtle way in which I was being isolated (two friends had suddenly been called away and I was convinced in reality arrested) worked its way into our friendship and I became increasingly defensive with Lisa. She didn't say anything, though, and we continued to see each other. But I always tried to find ways to occupy us without outside activity so as to avoid conversation.

Four days before my arrest, we arranged to see a movie that was playing just off the Paseo Drive. At four o'clock that afternoon, in front of the theater, we met and walked to the cinema, only to find out that the picture wasn't about to start until six that evening. I was exasperated and suggested that we walk to the Paseo and wait there.

Lisa was quiet, knowing that I was in one of my moods and that it would do no good to talk. So we walked to the middle portion of the drive without saying a word and sat down on one of the cement benches that permits a view of the harbor a mile away. We talked a little, mostly small talk about her performance at the matinee the Group had just presented that afternoon. Soon, however, I lost interest. Instead, I became obsessed watching a couple of men standing around an Alfa Romeo, apparently waiting for someone to come out of one of the nearby houses that bordered the avenue where we were sitting. Their presence goaded me and I began to complain about the way a friend had been arrested for treason simply because he had been indiscreet with one of the foreigners he had been guiding. "How can they be so stupid as to consider him a CIA agent? No one is more devoted to the best your Revolution represents; and yet they came and took him at six in the morning. For what? Because he had fallen in love with a woman he was supposed to be watching. . . ." I didn't realize I could have been talking about myself.

Lisa just sat there, silent. I was taking out my bitterness on her and she knew it. Then as she started to say something I told her not to bother. "I don't want to hear about it." She looked startled and then turned away from me, stood up and without another word walked away, down the Paseo toward the harbor. I thought to follow her, even started walking after her between the trees that lined the drive. But then I stopped. Perhaps this is the way it should end, I thought. It was the last time I saw her.

Frank McDonald

Received in New York on August 10, 1973.



above:
A SCENE FROM TEATRO ESCAMBRAY'S BASILIA DE
CABARNAO, A PLAY ABOUT AN AMERICAN AGENT
(TRENCH-COATED FIGURE) WHO REPRESENTS
SYMBOLIC AGENT OF IMPERIALISM. below:
SERGIO CORRIERI, DIRECTOR OF THE TEATRO
ESCAMBRAY.

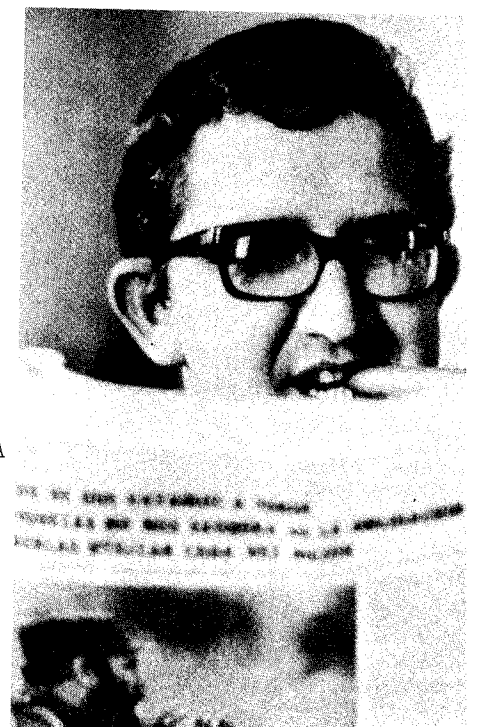




ABOVE: STEPS OF THE UNIVERSITY
THE TALL MAN IN THE CENTER IS
THE UNIVERSITY'S STUDENT LEADER



LEFT: CARTOON
RIGHT: H. PADILLA



FIDEL ADDRESSING THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE NATIONAL CONGRESS OF CULTURE

