

Juan Carlos Cremata Malberti
**Condemn Us, It
Does Not
Matter: Art Will
Absolve Us**

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Condemn Us, It Does Not Matter: Art Will Absolve Us

First off, I apologize for speaking in the first person.

I usually do not respond, at least publicly, to any critic or spectator regarding the details of the “machinery” of our productions. I have always thought, like García Marquez, that what I have tried to say can be found in what I did. Instead, I learn much more by listening to the different interpretations of what I do, which at times is the result purely of artistic intuition or craft, based on the experience of numerous collective works that I have been involved with over the years. Above all, I insist that there should be a plurality of readings of what I pursue or dream of, and of my obsessions and inspirations as an artist, thinker, and human being.

I am very fond of Pablo Picasso’s idea that rather than searching for things, one finds them in the course of making art. That is why I am much more passionate about aesthetic origins than the completion of a creative work. I always try to use the modest plural as opposed to the more frequent and excessive “I” that has become habitual and abundant in the discourses that for so long have inundated every branch of thinking in our country – mostly in the arts, and especially politics.

But I am compelled to respond to a “hasty” review¹ (read “induced,” “commanded,” or “dictated,” which explains its “hastiness”) of the opening performance, this past July 4, of the play *Exit the King* by Eugene Ionesco, performed by our group El Ingenio:

Dear Andy Arencibia Concepción,
cc: All who may feel alluded to

I applaud your seriousness in investigating my work, and I admire the respect you afford me, despite the fact that, evidently, you are struggling, like the rest of your handlers, to maintain your employment situation – in other words, “to keep your job.” I understand you.

If I remember correctly, you were present at the meeting in which I was obliged to appear in front of the “top brass” of the National Council of Live Arts to be told about the cancelation of the season. And now, I have no doubt that many of the opinions found in your article are those expressed, although through much harsher epithets like “treason” and “political pamphlet,” by none other than Gisela Gonzalez, the president of National Council of Theater Arts in Cuba.

I do not know which came first: hers or yours.

In any case, your deep and speedy study sheds more light than the the absurd and unintelligible note that suddenly appeared in *CUBARTE* about the changes in programming at the Tito Junco stage of the Bertolt Brecht



Cultural Center, which did nothing but try to hide gross censorship. Instead, you are more intelligent and sane. Your analysis is respectable although conditioned.

I am, believe me, more than grateful for your effort to shine some light on that indecipherable nebula of what we try to create. I am also grateful for your praise, your compliments, and your superlatives, to which I hope to respond with humility.

Nevertheless, your article is at the same time slightly unjust and inexact, even though you have the right as a critic – but not as a researcher – to comment in such a closed-minded and categorical way on an artistic phenomenon while only taking into account its opening function.

In art, as in any other subjective matter, or even in medicine (which is backed by science), what seems good for you does not have to seem good for others.

If you had gone to the Sunday show, you would have found a moment that, although in essence the same, was different from that of the opening on Saturday. I usually tell my friends that it is better to attend the last shows, in which the actors and the crew have already tested, and more than savored, an experience that gains

richness and cohesion with every performance.

This is all the more true when the work our group develops depends so much on that interaction with the audience that your comment refers to, and in which there is more than the “choteo” that you diligently point out. There is also the manifest intention to rescue a very Cuban way of performing – almost lost or misplaced-censored-by-force-for-more-than-fifty-years – that used to characterize all of Cuban vernacular theater, with its practice of employing political satire to comment on what goes on in the country.

Obscene, excessive, irreverent (not to be confused with disrespectful), iconoclastic, rebellious, and sometimes vulgar or crass language floods our countryside and cities – I’m not sure if you pointed this out. Indeed this seems to be the language generated by the “new man” who is forged in this chaotic society that is imposed on us.

Theater is a life event, as is well known. It is catharsis, commotion, tremor, and disturbance, above all in its relation to the spectator. Whether it is for or against. It would be worse to go to a show and return as if one had never gone. Is that what you were looking for? Gallant and constant praise of the status quo? A pretty, naive, and

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inoffensive musical? Criticism of that which is allowed to be criticized? An interpretation of our history without questioning our present and much less our future? Restricted independence? Rationed freedom?

Which stamp in the rationing book sets me free? How much emancipation do I get this month?

They are selling free will! Hurry, it's almost gone!

We could point out that, a few years ago, the same Council of Theater Arts – shielded behind an alleged “respect for a change in programming” – suppressed our immensely successful production of *La Hijastra* (The Stepdaughter) by Rogelio Orizondo, even though many of the Council members had never even seen it. The Council cited disproportionate, frustrating, and malicious comments made about the play – comments that were silenced immediately when a few months later, Raúl Castro himself pointed out the same social indiscipline in the country that the play had criticized.

Raúl can say it in a speech, but the theater cannot. We were not authorized to expose it. Raúl was applauded, of course. Who dares contradict him?

We were condemned to exile from the same stage to which we returned four years later, only to experience exile again – the same punishment, with same sentence, with the same penance.

And even worse.

We did fourteen performances of *La Hijastra*. We were only able to put on two of *Exit the King*. Previously, there was a tiresome scandal regarding our production of *El Frigidaire* by Copi.

It is their third attempt to silence us. And the third time's the charm. This time, the decision is final. The offense to the powerful is now beyond salvation. No more, that's it! You shall not pass! You have gone too far!

You cite a number of theater groups that you regard as dignified and paradigm-setting (you should have also mentioned the excellent Argos Teatro, Teatro de las Estaciones, Teatro de La Luna, and Teatro Tuyo, among a very few other examples). In contrast to these groups, one could cite the work of more than a dozen other theater groups in which metaphor and artistic poetry are nowhere to be found – work that walks toward the radiant poverty that one of our more media-friendly leaders was bragging about.

What can be said about a nausea-inducing profusion of senseless events whose only objective is to sell our art abroad? Or about the hundreds of genuine “political pamphlets” we have to endure daily in real life and on television?

Or about the thousands of massively wasteful public demonstrations in which bad taste, inefficiency, falseness, and senselessness are promoted?

Not long ago, an admired and recognized Cuban writer, also harassed from time to time, pointed out how badly educated we Cubans of today are when it comes to the practice of tolerance.

The most important part – and I know you will agree with me, although you will do so silently, since you cannot express it openly – is that the National Council of Live Arts has every right to express its objection to a production within its jurisdiction. But this does not exclude the fact that its ruling in this case is immoral, medieval, and incomprehensible, for it will never have a valid explanation, no matter how many arguments, “technicalities,” and fancy words they use. It is the abusive use of absolutist power wielded in the cruel exercise of vile censorship.

I silence you to make myself heard. And only me. Me. Me. And me. And nothing else shall be heard.

This is behavior typical of a kingdom, a dictatorial regime, or simply a “chieftainship.”

Blatant nepotism. Open and shameless arbitrariness.

Where is the possibility for others to express their opinions? Who has the right to decide what others must think, create, or feel? What right does anyone have to dictate how others think?

These are different times, my dear colleague. A pandemic of freedom floods our senses. If someone disagrees with what we do, there is no worse response than condemnation and forced muteness, than penance by ostracism, than the purging of all knowledge and the elimination, in one single blow, of our artistic freedom of expression, of our right to make mistakes, of our will to argue and even dissent – which does not mean, although it could, opposition.

Our intention with this production was to talk about resistance to change – about the very scathing obstinacy that shows itself in the Council's erratic decision.

It is not absolutely and unconditionally true that we intended to refer to a monarch or leader at all. We consciously tried to avoid doing this, although we knew quite well that the contemporary sick reading of the piece would go in that direction. The actor playing the role of King Berenger I deployed the gestures of the great French comedian Louis de Funès to embody him, instead of researching characters closer to our everyday life.

You can say and state what you want. You can do so because you have all the means to

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control and broadcast it. You read the work and took the risk. You neglected the staging. However, what is not sensible or judicious, and what goes against the sensibility of the century in which we live, is the useless effort to silence others, to decree or dictate a persistent and stubborn silence.

There exists no absolute right to do this. You can only impose it by force. And when there is force, reason wanes. It is helpless against terror.

In the name of “national socialism” we are restricted, repressed, punished, gagged, trampled, and hidden. This is an all-powerful fascism. Pure, absolute, and comprehensive. It is the same force that burned books and stigmatized races, sexes, colors, and even thoughts. It is also apartheid. As Fassbinder would say: “fear eats their soul.”

It is very clear to me – as I have learned since birth – that to be a revolutionary is to not be obedient, to not abide by the letter of everything that comes from “above.” That is to be a sheep. In other words: that is to be “sheepedient.”²

From above come the things of God, and you don’t even pay attention to them. May He forgive you all.

Our reason for being is to create. And we will continue doing it, even if you try to clip our wings. You will never be able to subdue thinking.

Your rule has been based on mutilating, suspending, silencing, stopping, paralyzing, stagnating, limiting, impeding, depriving, and even causing death.

Our nation is culture. Long live art!

Everything else is cheap and empty politics.

And enough with the hypocrisy that not even you yourselves believe.

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Translated by Ernesto A. Suarez

All images of Juan Carlos Cremata Malberti’s production of *Exit The King* a play by Ionesco, censored earlier this year in Cuba.

Juan Carlos Cremata Malberti is a Havana-based film and theater director. A recipient of numerous international awards, his 2005 feature film *Viva Cuba* won the Grand Prix Ecrans Junior at the Cannes Film Festival and his 2001 feature *Nothing* opened at the Quinzaine de Realisateurs at the Cannes Film Festival.

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1

The review, in Spanish, by Andy Arencibia Concepción:
<http://www.cubarte.cu/es/articulo/notas-apresuradas-part-ir-del-estreno-de-el-rey-se-muere/28152>:

2

The original says *ovediente*. The Spanish play on words between *oveja* (sheep) and *obediente* (obedient) is lost in translation.

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