THE ESCAMBRAY THEATRE...

A NEW WAY FORWARD FOR POLITICAL THEATRE IN AUSTRALIA

In 1978 Richard Fletcher was New Theatre's delegate to the 11th World Youth Festival in Cuba. This article is based on discussions held with the Escambray Theatre at that time, and on articles about the group translated by Dan O'Neill.

In 1968, almost ten years after the overthrow of the bloody Batista regime, a group of actors, musicians and directors left Havana for the mountains.

The group, which included some of Cuba's leading performers, set out to find a new style of theatre. For months, theatre workers in Havana had discussed the limited nature of their contribution to Cuba's development. While theatre had gained stability and a political orientation with the triumph of the revolution, it had remained traditional in form and was still focused on the cities.

But it was in the countryside that Cuba's immediate economic survival was being decided. The sugar industry and the diversification of agriculture were crucial to its survival. And it was in these zones that the most radical social transformations were taking place. The obvious place to practise their craft, then, was in the countryside.

They thought they would have the best chance of success in an area rich in contradictions, in the process of an important economic transformation, and relatively complex historically. They chose Escambray province: a mountainous underdeveloped region in the centre of Cuba. Although it had a few industrial centres, the majority of its 200,000 population were rural peasants.

It was here that the counter-revolutionaries had tried to establish a base after the revolution. While a battle raged between the revolutionary forces and the CIA-backed "bandits", the minifundios (small landowners) waited on the sidelines. Eventually, a majority decided for the revolution and the bandits were finished. But this was only in 1966, just two years before the Escambray group started.

The first step was research. For five weeks, in three teams of four, they covered the province interviewing groups and individuals, recording local stories, songs and patterns of speech. Every week the groups met to share experiences and plan their work. They had previously put their case to the National Cultural Council and then the regional party organisation. As a result, each of the groups was accompanied...
by a "guide" and a regional leader was present at each weekly meeting.

Finally, in May 1969 the group left Havana to set up permanently in Escambray. They took with them: one amplifier, four Chinese trumpets, a damaged tape recorder, a portable blackboard, some platforms and reflectors, tools, a Zil truck, and a burnt-out generator. When they eventually arrived in Escambray (the truck wasn't exactly new) they set up in the National School for primary school teachers.

During their research they had discovered both this school and its potential. When teachers became involved in the communities where they were placed, the group observed, they commanded enormous respect and were powerful opinion leaders. The school (the only one in the province) had 5,000 teachers in training and only a single music teacher for cultural activities.

The chance to influence so many future teachers (and through them so many communities) was too good to miss. As well, the administration of the school was sympathetic, so they renovated a small theatre building and made this their first base in Escambray. At the end of the school year, 1,000 students participated in performances seen by 7,000 people. As a result, a program was initiated to train cultural workers to organise performances and give classes in work centres and communities.

This continued and developed after the group had moved on and is known today as The Cultural Front. It involves many hundreds of instructors covering all areas of Cuba.

At the same time, four works were prepared to tour the province. During the preparation which involved presenting the shows to the students, teachers and workers of the school, four guiding principles were agreed upon. They were:

* All promotion should be done by the group ensuring control over the direction of the work and conditions.

* The group should collaborate closely with rank and file authorities.

The first works to tour the region were: Some Men and Others, a play in traditional form about the fight against the bandits; three medieval French farces adapted to accentuate their commentary on the position of women in marriage and society; Escambray Mambi, written by one of the group which attempted to confront the audience with and inform them about the participation of the people of the zone in the wars of the last century; a didactic talk on the history of the theatre illustrated with six pantomimes.

On their first trip they performed to 38,000 spectators, usually 200 to 300 at a time. They would stay in each village approximately ten days, spacing out their shows to allow time for discussion with villagers about the shows, and for further research. Just their presence in the village was enough publicity and a performance site, often a cattle grazing area or a street corner, would be arranged.

On the first night they would perform Some Men and Others, the most traditional work, followed by the talk on theatre with the pantomimes. A few days later they would perform the farces, and finally Escambray Mambi. Discussion of the issues raised in the plays was central to their concept of theatre assisting in the transformation of society. The group aimed to be a weapon in "the battle of ideas".

One idea the group addressed through its works was that of the equality of women.

"Changes in the economic structure do not mechanically imply changes in consciousness to the same depth. Prejudices, old moral conceptions, hereditary forms of thought, ghosts from capitalist and other societies still fly around in the stage of construction of socialism. Hence the problems which are still confronted in Cuba: the moral evaluation of women and the practical realisation of the equality of men and women."

From notes presented by the Grupo Teatro Escambray to the Congress of Socialist Theatre, Moscow 1975.

The three farces raised the issue of women's place in society. The humorous
treatment, and the fact that the couples in the play were bourgeois, allowed the audience to discuss the points made about women without feeling they were being lectured.

Although this format: performance then discussion, seemed effective in that it did raise issues, and it was popular, the group continued to strive for more powerful and effective forms of communication. On their second tour they found two very different avenues for more effective communication.

It wasn't until they had been in Escambray for some time that they recognised the strong approval given to those “who speak prettily”. They had brought from Havana, they realised, an attitude common in western theatre at the time: that words had become irrelevant. But they discovered not only a tradition of storytellers, especially in the lodging houses where men would spend a long time away from home, but a popular song form called Decimas. In these ten-line stanzas, accompanied by guitar, everything from romantic yearnings to political arguments (with two guitarists singing alternate stanzas) could be conveyed.

To participate in this tradition they produced a performance of stories. Without costuming or props, the story is told by a narrator as actors take the parts of the characters. One example: A campesino dies of hunger. When the relatives come to the house to bury him they notice that his eyes aren't closed. One by one, they try different methods to get him to close his eyes. Finally, one places a bowl of potato soup on the dead man's chest. In an effort to see what smells so delicious, he closes his eyes.

Each story ends with a Decima on the same topic. Often, by the end of the night, the performers are the audience for local storytellers. In this way their store of tales is constantly enriched.

The second avenue came through the production of La Vitrina, a play about the implementation of a development plan for the region. The plan involved the construction of schools, highways and villages of apartment blocks. To promote a dairy industry, land was to be reorganised into a system of state-owned and private ranches.

As the change-over was to be voluntary, the group was asked to estimate “the level of acceptance of the plan and the reasons for this”. They interviewed members of the national association of agricultural producers (minifundios), members of cooperatives, the commission of renting (who would decide rent rates), and 127 peasants whose land had been included in the plan.

In La Vitrina they attempted to reflect back to the peasants the contradictory attitudes and beliefs which they had gleaned through their interviews. As well, instead of leaving any discussion this might provoke until the end of the play, they included a parenthesis in the script where characters could address the audience directly and solicit opinions and arguments.

The effect of this audience participation revealed a new level of dialogue: not only did the audience become animated and very excited but they became committed to the outcome of the play as a collective solution to a problem. At first, the “outcome”, or at least the later development of the play, didn't depend on what happened in the parenthesis at all. After interacting with the audience, the play took its predetermined, rehearsed form. But to take advantage of this new level, plays were developed to facilitate a “collective phenomenon of communication”.

"It became possible to require that the spectator discuss and analyse the problem posed immediately, and take a position. Not individually, but collectively. This collective social deed implies an ideological growth in the person.”

2. El Teatro, un arma eficaz al servicio de la Revolucion by Grupo Teatro Escambray

The development of this method is evident in the way the group approached the problem of the Jehovah's Witnesses. The “Witnesses” enjoyed great influence under the Batista regime. With staunch supporters like Francisco Batista, the governor of Havana province (and the dictator's brother) the Witnesses gained converts throughout Cuba and especially in underdeveloped rural zones like Escambray.

After the revolution, they maintained an influence in these areas. They opposed military service at a time when assassinations and sabotage occurred regularly, and a direct armed invasion was
attempted (the Bay of Pigs). They also opposed development plans proposed by local authorities and all practices honoring “heroes of the Revolution". (The emulation of revolutionary heroes is an important part of political education in Cuba.)

The first play to attempt to counter the Witnesses was an adaptation of *The Guns of Mother Carrer* by Bertold Brecht. This is the story of the supposed neutrality of a Catholic woman during the Spanish civil war. In the adaptation, the play is set in a future Cuba invaded by a foreign army, making the parallels unmistakable.

Two years later a different approach was tried. In *Paradise Regained* a session of the Jehovah’s Witnesses is reconstructed (those joining the Witnesses were required to act out their lives before the congregation revealing the steps that had brought them to take the faith). In this ‘theatre within a theatre’ the manipulation of real life crises to gain converts to the Witnesses is ridiculed. At different times the audience is addressed directly, and responds, so that by the conclusion of the play they are part of the dismantling of the myths of the Witnesses.

A third and more developed method is evident in *The Judgment* by Gilda Hernandez (a member of the group). It begins by asking the audience to select, from among themselves, six trustworthy people to act as a jury. With the audience, this jury is asked to sit in judgment in the case against the Witnesses. The ‘evidence’ is acted out before the audience in the form of scenes, as in a traditional play, but at any point the jury or the audience can interrupt to ask questions or pursue a line of investigation. In the end the jury, in discussion with the audience, is asked to pass judgment on the Witnesses.

The result of giving the public the elements and facts necessary to ‘analyse and reflect’ on the problem collectively was to ‘raise to a rational plane, the intuitive impulse of class hatred and to achieve a wider comprehension of the need for measures against the Jehovah’s Witnesses’.

We start with the criterion, say the group,

that the great problems of our revolutionary development require collective discussions and collective solutions. In showing them an image of the reality of Escambray and of the people of Escambray we give to those people their right of correcting or rejecting that image.

They know that

the works will go on being modified or remade according to their assessments.

The risk of a paternalistic approach to a public that is artistically unformed — an approach that nearly always leads to populism — is avoided by the profound respect we have that our public merits from us; and by the awareness that we have that it is this public that is the principal protagonist of the revolution.

3. Participacion, comunicacion y estructura dramatica en el Teatro del Escambray by Gilda Hernandez.

The two latter appeared in El Teatro Latino Americano de Cacion Colective, compiled by Francisco Garzon Cespedes, Casa de las Americas.

Today, the Escambray group is one of the most respected theatres in Cuba and Latin America. It has influenced not only the formation of new groups, such as the youth theatre on the Isle of Youth, but the practice of other established, more traditional theatres.

All forms of theatre in Cuba are assumed to be fulfilling a need of some section of the population, so street theatre and circus as well as traditional theatre and opera are supported. (The Escambray Group receives approximately $200,000 a year. Actors’ salaries vary with experience but begin well below the national average salary.) An additional assumption is that workers in these areas of theatre are constantly striving to improve their work, both technically and politically. In the political sphere (serving the Revolution) the Escambray group has pioneered a model of relevance that has encouraged other groups to move their performances out into the streets and to make them more responsive to public criticism.

What the work of the Escambray group indicates is, I believe, a possible way forward for theatre in Australia: the potential of a political theatre group based either on an industry or in a specific region.
We already have regional theatre groups, of course. But they are all very conservative both in style (they have a theatre with a stage, props, lighting, etc.) and in the material that they present. They invariably cater for a small percentage of the population in the area with a taste for ‘the arts’. As yet, we have no industry-based theatres at all.

We also have established ‘political’ theatre groups in many states: The Pram Factory; Desperate Measures; New Theatre; The Popular Theatre Troupe, as well as several street theatre groups. (Feminist and black theatre I will come to presently.)

That these groups do important work is clear. However, they all differ from the Escambray group in an important respect — they do not present material related directly to a particular audience.

Whether they are presenting classic revolutionary plays by Brecht or Gorky, or plays written about contemporary issues like uranium or East Timor, they are still presenting general works — for virtually any audience. They are not producing works with reflect a particular group, complete with slang and local customs. So they cannot make a small audience of people who live in a particular area, or work in a particular industry, recognise themselves on the stage.

And this element of recognition is the driving force behind the search for solutions to the problems which make political
productions effective. It makes the audience want to ‘search for solutions in order to correct this image’.

However, we can see this process at work in other areas. Both the feminist and the black theatres have a particular knowledge of their audiences (when they are women and black respectively). They can provoke that “Oh yes, I recognise that from my own experience” reaction — a mixture of excitement and embarrassment — in an audience when they see some unrecognised aspect of themselves presented publicly.

When workers have impromptu shows mimicking one of themselves, the same dynamic is at work. But professional or amateur actors’ theatre groups don’t have this sort of knowledge of the people they are trying to reach. This is why so many of their attempts at political theatre look like stereotypes. The narrowest definition they can give to a character is ‘worker’ or ‘boss’. No wonder they seem wooden and simplistic.

The method used by the Escambray group of researching, then writing and performing and researching again, suggests a way to give left wing theatres this power to provoke the ‘search for solutions’. (Whether they should or would develop the participation methods of the Escambray group is a separate question.)

In selecting a target group to research, a major consideration would be its size. The group must be small enough to manage yet large enough to provide work and support for a theatre troupe. And they must have a lot in common. Industries such as power, railways, sugar, mining and steel are possibilities. The difficulties of funding, however, will probably necessitate theatres based on these industries but within a particular area, so that the theatre can serve a community rather than just an industry. Areas such as the Latrobe Valley, Wollongong, the sugar belt from Bundaberg to Cairns, and Port Pirie are possibilities.

A host of other factors like the attitude of the unions involved, the concentration of workers in an industry, the language problem and the turnover of workers would have to be considered.

And groups in Australia could not, of course, count on the backing of the regional authorities nor could they rely on workers recognising that “like them we are part of the revolution”. There are, however, other similarities between Escambray and, say, the mining area of the NSW south coast.

Although Australia is not in a post-revolutionary phase, we are in a stage of dislocation and transition (the onslaughts of the Fraser government, the restructuring of capital, etc). In all the industries mentioned, technological change is making the workers more redundant and more alienated. And it is precisely at the personal level of feeling redundant and alienated that the theatre can apply itself. Rather than dealing with epic themes about the meaning of life as traditional theatre does, or with the large-scale evils of unemployment or multinationals as many political theatres do, theatre can reflect the personal anxiety confronting workers in a particular situation.

The coal miner, for example, faces progressive deskilling as machinery such as continuous miners are introduced. At the level of these workers’ hopes and fears, trying to survive in a changing industry, a theatre in Australian coalfields could be just as relevant as the Escambray group in their province. The same would be true for sugar mills, railworkers and telephone exchanges.

One group has already started in Wollongong. Some theatre workers from Sydney’s New Theatre are interviewing members of the mining community on the south coast preparatory to launching a professional theatre company there next year. It will perform works based on the history and present difficulties of the coal mining area.

The goal, of course, is to have workers within areas and industries producing their own theatre, but waiting for this won’t help it happen. Industry-based theatre groups could give a timely push to political theatre in this country, just as it did in Cuba.

And the aims of groups here might well be identical with those of the Escambray group.

We don’t aspire to immortality with our works. We hope that they will be useful to those individuals in particular situations and that they may help them to make their conduct ever more human, more generous and more revolutionary.