



Introduction

Dramatic Discomforts

Sometimes going to the theater can be uncomfortable. There are lines and congestion as the entire audience moves similarly to the rhythms of spectating. Once seated, depending on the theater and one's position in it, a spectator may have to adjust and readjust in order to privilege her view while respecting the viewing rights of her neighbors. Spectators are close together, touching even, and all this usually happens before the work even begins; spectators' bodies are supremely apparent, even when their presence is supposed to be secondary to what takes place on stage.

In Havana's theaters this is also true, and perhaps even more so. The country is in a lingering economic depression, and despite the state's repeated allowances for individual entrepreneurship, there is little to no money for institutional repairs. In one theater a good view is hard to come by because the seats were recycled from another theater that had a differently sloped floor, requiring spectators to perch on the edge of their seats in poses of uncomfortable anticipation. In another theater, many of the prime seats are lost because the chairs are irreparably damaged, and in another performances are often canceled because the air conditioner repeatedly breaks. In still another, it is a known fact that the air conditioner is broken, but the show goes on anyway, with dripping actors performing admirably before drowsy audiences. These material limitations—evident in Cuba's theaters, but also everywhere on the island—mean that

spectators inevitably perceive their own bodies as much as they do the ones on stage.

This material lack leads one to take notice of how one's body feels—not only from excessive heat and strangely angled seats but also from being hungry. When one enters a theater to see a work performed, one expects to shed the outside world to a certain degree. Dimmed lights, dark colors, softer fabrics, and controlled temperatures help to usher in the difference of the theatrical space that the audience inhabits during the performance from the noisy, rough, and hard cityscape outside. In contrast, theaters that have broken, ripped, or poorly oriented seats require constant self-readjustment on the part of the spectator, and ones without air-conditioning require self-fanning in order to stay awake in the heat. If, in addition, the doors must be left open to increase circulation, then outside lighting and noise also affect the transition from street to stage. The material lack in Cuba, then, has the effect of bringing the city—and the city's problems—into the theater, whether it is wanted there or not.

This book concentrates on how theatrical spaces connect bodies of actors and spectators while focusing on how spectator proximities can counteract pressures for imposed similarity. By examining how queer bodies are theatrically represented on the Cuban stage, this study reevaluates the role of categorization as one of the state's primary revolutionary tools. The performances studied here concentrate on an aesthetics of fluidity, and thus upset traditional understandings of performer and spectator, as well as what constitutes the ideal Cuban citizenry. Additionally, I suggest that new affective modes are produced when performing bodies highlight—often in uncomfortably intimate, grotesque, or raw ways—the unavoidability of spectators' bodies, as well as their capacity for queerness, and that the imagining of new continuities and subjectivities can lead to a reconfiguration of forms of Cuban citizenship.

Several of the central questions that guide this book are: How is Cuban theater agile in its critiques considering the state's limitations on expression? How do queer performances allow for new understandings about the effects of the state's failing socialist utopian contract with its citizens? And, can Cuban bodies that come together in queer ways reimagine Cuban citizenship? What this book claims is that connectedness—as audience, or as uncomfortable bodies in close proximity to one another in shared (national, theatrical) experiences—must be made problematic in

order to deepen our understanding of contemporary Cuban identity and to identify strategies for making differences visible.

In terms of interpersonal relationships, the act that brings bodies closest to each other is sex, while undesired proximity to others who are engaged in sex has the potential to produce discomfort. The uncomfortable feelings that arise out of those sexually charged proximities are what I am concerned with in this book. Specifically, I focus on the capabilities of queer sexual intimacies that are produced by sex, the possibility of sex, or the proximity to sex (or its suggestion) in spite of and because of their tension with the state's ideologies. These intimacies have the potential to create affective energies that, in my view, can inspire new understandings about queerness and artistic expression in Cuba.

The term queer in the context of this project comes out of a need to consider how gay bodies function politically in Cuba, but the critiques that this examination will offer, I hope, can be applied to other identities that are considered to be alternate to established systems of power. Most of the relationalities explored in these plays deal with queer sex or its possibility, proximity, or suggestion. Because I see that queerness is founded upon fluid concepts of belonging, as compared to the Cuban state's project of masculine heteronormativity, I consider it to be structurally more adept at breaking down rigid definitions employed by controlling entities. Furthermore, the queer bodily connections examined here are relevant because queer Cubans have long been targets of state control. Consequently, many Cuban artists who articulate queerness in their work often avoid obvious representations of that queerness. Thus, Cuban cultural representations of queerness are often coded. Uncovering these codes is part of recognizing discomfort as a necessary strategy for rethinking contemporary Cubanness, but also for hedging against too much visibility.

Making visible that which the Cuban state considers to be intolerable in terms of cultural production is daring. This is especially true for street performance, which is, practically speaking, banned in Cuba. Although 2014 saw the reestablishment of U.S.-Cuban relations, it also ushered in the imprisonment of performance artists Tania Bruguera and El Sexto. Bruguera's performance, titled *Yo También Exijo*—a retooling of 2009's *Tatlin's Whisper*—was to take place in the Plaza de la Revolución and consist of an open and amplified microphone available to anyone to speak freely and openly. Bruguera seemed to consider the plaza—the state's

preferred site for official discourse—as a space ready for new interventions. She was swiftly detained, her passport revoked, and then spent the next eight months in and out of jail cells, enduring police interrogations, or under house arrest.¹ El Sexto (Danilo Maldonado)—an artist with less international cachet than Bruguera and with a decidedly less ambiguous message—was not so lucky. His *Animal Farm* performance was to consist of two pigs covered in green paint—with “Raúl” and “Fidel” written in red—to be released into the Parque Central in the middle of Havana. Arrested on his way to the park, El Sexto was never formally charged, but was imprisoned for ten months, apparently for the crime of “disrespect” (“Cuban artist El Sexto”).

The intolerability of otherness—and of the potential for voiced and embodied critique—is often too much for the state. Not surprisingly, performance—especially public ones like these—continues to be one of the most repressed forms of art in Cuba today. The undeniable quality of the body in person behaving in unpredictable ways threatens the continuity of control. Finding disruptions, then, is a necessary part of undoing the state’s hold on the public sphere, and upon the bodies that perform and/or publicly represent otherness. The performing body, the queer body, and especially the queer performing body threaten univocality and uniformity.

By examining these theatrical representations of queerness by theorizing the energy that might emerge from audience members’ experiences, I argue that we can articulate the role of theater in times of crisis. The crisis that I am outlining involves the state of theater in Cuba, to a degree, but more importantly, concerns the continued pressures on the representations of queer visibilities that challenge the state’s hegemonic goals. Queerness in *Staging Discomfort* stems from queer sexual intimacies, but expands to include a queer sensibility that is adjacent to the sexual, and includes energies experienced via performances that challenge audience members to reconsider how they engage with cultural production. Specifically, the works included here exhibit a queerness of intellectual engagement that relies upon presence but that intersects with other forms of identity (disability, afro-Cuban, non-procreative) that challenge the white, male, hetero-, revolutionary ideal.