Blind Mouth Singing
by Jorge Cortinas
Directed by Amanda McRaven
April 25 - May 10, 2014
Players Theatre

AUDIENCE GUIDE
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CHARACTER LIST

Reiderico – Young boy who lives with his mother, aunt, and brother. Imaginative and naïve.

Gordi – Reiderico’s older brother. Wants to be seen as a man, rather than a boy.

Mother of the Late Afternoon – Mother of Reiderico and Gordi. Practical and sharp-tongued.

Bolivia – Reiderico and Gordi’s aunt. Encourages Reiderico’s imagination.

Lucero – Reiderico’s friend, who lives in the bottom of the well. Others do not believe he exists.

CONVERSATION WITH THE DIRECTOR

Interview with Amanda McRaven, conducted by Caitlin Bryson

Caitlin: Starting off – as far as Blind Mouth is concerned, obviously there’s kind of a balance between the realistic aspects of the show and the more magical aspects. Is that something, as you’re directing, that you’re taking into account both aspects of it? Where is the balance between that, and how are you incorporating those different elements in the show?

Amanda: I think the real aspects are the way the actors are connected to each other, and the truth, the story-telling. So I guess the unrealistic or the “magical” ones would be, just really a sense of realistic staging, realistic physicality, just letting it live in a place of magic in terms of how the body’s moving. We don’t have a real well, so we’re creating a well and the topography really, the whole landscape, it’s just sort of a stage with a ladder. So we’re creating that through the body. So I would say that it’s bodies creating images on a larger scale than you might see in a more “realistic” play. So I’m not concerned with balancing those elements. I’m always demanding that actors are real in their interaction with each other, so that has to stay true. But otherwise, shaping the story is just freeing it from realistic constraints, which is great. It’s great that we don’t have a lot of set pieces.

C: As far as the cast goes – last semester you did Penelope, which was the Cal Rep show, and now you’re working with the undergrads. Have you seen a difference between working with the graduate Cal Rep actors versus the undergrads, are there different aspects of it that come out more? What has the transition been for you there?

A: It’s completely different. I find, with younger actors, there’s a real boldness. There’s maybe less technique, but there’s a lot of bravery, and that’s always true. And that’s true in general, not really compared to Penelope. The biggest thing is, Penelope was a small cast show, but it was a big show – physically it was a big show, and it was at the Queen Mary. And emotionally it was a big show. This is emotionally – it’s a fable, so there’s of course an emotional weight to it, but it’s
a much lighter piece of storytelling. So it’s just been a totally different journey. It’s far less cerebral than *Penelope*. So I can let these guys really play physically and let the story start to come out.

C: As they’re coming in and forming those characters – you have in the show a lot of really strong characters, a lot of contrast between specifically the Mother and Bolivia, and there are a lot of options for strong character choices. What has the process been like helping them come to terms with those characters, working with these characters that have such a strong presence onstage?

A: Well, I fixed that in the casting. I cast strong women with good presence, so I don’t have to work on it. It’s there, it exists. There’s some stuff like making sure that Bolivia is always grounded in her body, but I don’t have to teach her how to be strong, because she is already. So I am very much a believer in casting the exact right people you want in the room, and if you can’t see that strength in the audition then you have to do something else. So I was lucky with casting, these guys are an awesome ensemble. They’re really wonderful.

C: Without giving too much away – the significance of the storm. Has that been something that you’ve been able to play with or incorporate – obviously it’s a part of the show, but just the overall thematic significance of it, how do you see that relating to the play as a whole?

A: It’s a turning point. The storm makes a switch in the action that’s pretty critical for how the story moves forward. And it’s also significant in the terms of the setting, that these are people that cling to the edge of something, and they just know how to deal with the elements. And there’s also this wonderful – after the storm, the women are like, “That was a big storm. Yep, it sure was. Must have been the biggest storm we’ve had in a long time.” You know, there’s just that joy of talking about the weather that’s kind of delicious. That’s the thing, that’s the big thing, is the storm.

C: If you could have audience members walk out with one overarching thought in their heads as they’re leaving the theatre after the show, what would you want that theme or idea to be?

A: I always want the audience to leave with images. I want them to leave with pictures of the play in their mind. I always try to work to Peter Brook’s Acid Test, which says that we can’t hope to remember what the play was about, but someday, years and years from now, you’re going to remember the images that you saw, that got burned into your mind. It’s definitely my mantra. If I was to say one thing that drives me as a director, it’s Peter Brook’s Acid Test. Because all stories are about the same themes, all stories have the same messages. There are a set of messages and a set of themes. But it’s how you tell that. I want audiences to leave saying, “Wow, what was that?” That they’re breathless. So I don’t like intermissions because they
deflate. So to drive through, so the images are building, so it’s very visceral for the audience. They’re surrounded by sound and light and color, and bodies, and in the Players Theatre everything’s very close to you. So I want the audience to leave with a feeling that they just experienced something magical that they could never have seen on TV, or on their iPhone or on Youtube. In terms of theme, I want them to think more about identity, and the choices we make about our lives, and fear, and bravery. But I want them to leave saying, “Live art is really awesome.” Because that’s what I do, my life’s in the theatre. That’s a crazy choice to make for your life, unless you’re going to really do something about it. So my mission as a director is to make people feel a liveness that they don’t get anywhere else, and to crave it and to want to come back.

C: So it sounds like you’re really enjoying the Players as a space then. Can you talk a little bit more about what it is that you like about having that space to work in?

A: Well, I love the intimaecy. It’s tiny. But you can’t avoid the intimaecy, which is lovely. We’ve got this ladder as the main set element, which I LOVE, because we often don’t use vertical space well enough, in the theatre. So it’s become a playing area, a light playing area so we don’t have a big balcony, but it’s vertical space that’s very light and airy. So I’m loving that, and I’m loving that the entrances can come from anywhere. And our set is almost like an installation that will be also over the audience’s heads. So the audience is in the world, they can’t escape it.
PETER BROOK’S ACID TEST

Quoted from *The Empty Space*, written by Peter Brook:

“I know of one acid test in the theatre. It is literally an acid test. When a performance is over, what remains? Fun can be forgotten, but powerful emotion also disappears and good arguments lose their thread. When emotion and argument are harnessed to a wish from the audience to see more clearly into itself – then something in the mind burns. The event scorches on to the memory an outline, a taste, a trace, a smell – a picture. It is the play’s central image that remains, its silhouette, and if the elements are highly blended this silhouette will be its meaning, this shape will be the essence of what it has to say. When years later I think of a striking theatrical experience I find a kernel engraved on my memory: two tramps under a tree, an old woman dragging a cart, a sergeant dancing, three people on a sofa in hell – or occasionally a trace deeper than any imagery.”

Director Amanda McRaven has said that this test is one of her primary motivators as a director – the idea that images created onstage can linger in someone’s memory long after most of the play has been forgotten.
MAGICAL REALISM

Merriam Webster Definition:
“A literary genre or style associated especially with Latin America that incorporates fantastic or mythical elements into otherwise realistic fiction.”

The following adapted from http://postcolonialstudies.emory.edu/magical-realism/:

Magical Realism
Magical realism is characterized by two conflicting perspectives, one based on a so-called rational view of reality and the other on the acceptance of the supernatural as prosaic reality. Magical realism differs from pure fantasy primarily because it is set in a normal, modern world with authentic descriptions of humans and society. It aims to seize the paradox of the union of opposites; for instance, it challenges binary oppositions like life and death. The presence of the supernatural in magical realism is often connected to the primeval or magical “native” mentality. Magical realism offers a world view that is not based on natural or physical laws nor objective reality. However, the fictional world is not separated from reality either.

Background
The term “magical realism” was first introduced by Franz Roh, a German art critic, who considered magical realism an art category. To him, it was a way of representing and responding to reality and pictorially depicting the enigmas of reality. In Latin America in the 1940s, magical realism was a way to express the realistic American mentality and create an autonomous style of literature. Yet, magical realism is not confined to Latin American literature alone, for many Latin American writers have influenced writers around the world, such as Indian writer Salman Rushdie and Nigerian poet and novelist Ben Okri.

Characteristics of Magical Realism
Hybridity: Magical realism is illustrated in such opposites as urban and rural and Western and indigenous. The plots of magical realist works involve issues of borders, mixing, and change. Authors establish these plots to reveal a crucial purpose of magical realism: a more deep and true reality than conventional realist techniques would illustrate.

Irony Regarding Author’s Perspective: The writer must have ironic distance from the magical world view for the realism not to be compromised. Simultaneously, the writer must strongly respect the magic, or else the magic dissolves into simple folk belief or complete fantasy, split from the real instead of synchronized with it. The term “magic” relates to the fact that the point of view that the text depicts explicitly is not adopted according to the implied world view of the author.
**Authorial Reticence:** Authorial reticence refers to the lack of clear opinions about the accuracy of events and the credibility of the world views expressed by the characters in the text. This technique promotes acceptance in magical realism. In magical realism, the simple act of explaining the supernatural would eradicate its position of equality regarding a person’s conventional view of reality. Because it would then be less valid, the supernatural world would be discarded as false testimony.

**The Supernatural and Natural:** In magical realism, the supernatural is not displayed as questionable. While the reader realizes that the rational and irrational are opposite and conflicting polarities, they are not disconcerted because the supernatural is integrated within the norms of perception of the narrator and characters in the fictional world.

If magical realism interests you, you should consider looking up these other prominent authors who are associated with the genre:
- Isabel Allende
- Gabriel García Márquez
- Salman Rushdie
- Ben Okri
- Jorge Luis Borges
- Gloria Naylor
- Louise Erdrich
- Angela Carter
INTERVIEW WITH THE PLAYWRIGHT
Interview conducted by Adam Szymkowicz on Dec. 3, 2009

Q: What are you working on now?

A: I'm getting my play BLIND MOUTH SINGING ready for a production in Havana. A talented Mexican writer by the name of Rodrigo Vargas handled the translation into Spanish. Even translating the title was hard. We came up with CANTO DEL POZO NEGRO. This is the first time that a Cuban theater company is producing a play by a Cuban-American playwright and I'm very pleased. I see the production as part of the ongoing process of strengthening ties and relaxing tensions between Cubans who live on the island and Cubans who live outside the island. The fact that we're able to do this today owes a lot to the bridge building work done by Cuban-American artists as varied as Ana Mendieta, Dolores Prida and Achy Obejas. I'm walking in their footsteps.

Q: Do you find there are different challenges when writing fiction than writing plays? Which comes easier to you?

A: Both genres are exacting for a writer. With fiction, well, getting it out into the world is less work of course. Sometimes it feels great not to have to explain a text to, I don't know, yet another designer. But other times I feel very lucky to be able to get a text out of my head and into an actor's body. It feels less lonely. Sometimes I think that's the biggest advantage that writing plays has over writing novels, the playwright gets to hang out with actors. But ultimately I believe genre chooses the material, not the other way around. This is maybe why adaptations always make me a little sad. When I sit down to write, a mood or tone establishes itself and that almost always seems to insist on its ideal genre. Interiority, reflection, the confessional impulse - all of that seems best suited to the page. Playfulness, affection, ghosts, history -- to me that seems better suited for the stage. It depends on the material. Interestingly though, I've never had a question about where a particular text belongs. That always seems obvious. The text insists on the genre it needs. The rest of it, the differences in process between publishing and staging, those are just the lucky consequences.

Q: Tell me a story from your childhood that explains who you are as a writer or as a person.

A: María Irene Fornés once asked me if I played with dolls when I was a child. When I told her I, in fact, had not, she looked at me with wonder and asked, “Then how did you ever learn how to write plays?” I remember this incident fondly because it speaks volumes about Irene's wondrous, idiosyncratic methods but also because it confirms my general allergy to trying to understand art by examining the childhood of the artist who created it. If you really want to pursue this line of inquiry I'd be happy to send you my father's mailing address (he's serving time in a federal penitentiary in Indiana and likes to get mail). And let me know what theories he comes up with, I'm curious.
Q: What kind of theater excites you?

A: The surprising kind.

Q: Is it true you make your playwriting students read books on architecture or visual art before they even start talking about theater?

A: It's true. Those terrible books on how scripts should be written have done such a successful job of shrinking the vocabulary of our theater. There is a certain kind of well educated, middle class student who comes to theater with all of this baggage, all of these rules. Conflict, psychology, the moral of the story, the most reductive ideals about symbolism. Stuff they learned by watching the Sundance channel or listening to too many post-show talk backs. But what I also find is that those same young people have this other vocabulary around mood, environment, spatial relationships, a more visceral relationship to art that they've experienced when listening to music, walking through great buildings, falling in love or even traveling. And so part of what I try to do is get young people to see that all those other ways they have of describing experience or thinking about art, all those more mysterious and idiosyncratic insights they don't think apply to theater, well, they apply.

Q: What advice do you have for playwrights just starting out?

A: Remember that you aren't competing against anyone, that's the beauty of art. If you like competition, try Wall Street. Be fearless. See everything. Try everything. Stay up late. Kiss people. Of both genders. Commit an act of civil disobedience in defense of a cause you care about. Make as many friends outside of the theater scene as you can. Live the kind of life that gives you something to write about -- even if that means you spend your twenties living dangerously and fully and with no time to write.
BLIND MOUTH SINGING IN CUBA

Art on the Hyphen Goes to the Homeland:
Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas takes Cuban-American Theatre to Havana
Written by Coco Fusco, published in The Drama Review, Vol. 54, Number 3, Fall 2010
Adapted by Caitlin Bryson

In July of 2010, Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas's Blind Mouth Singing will be produced in Havana. Last staged in New York by the National Asian American Theatre Company in 2007, this strange and rarified play will be performed at El Sotano (the basement) theatre in El Vedado, the city's cultural hub. The tiny but highly respected venue is the home of the Compañía Teatral Rita Montaner. Founded in 1956, the company is well known for championing works by young Cuban playwrights and for its strategic approach to social critique. These attributes classify the group as daring in Cuban terms.

Theatre, generally speaking, is a politically cautious art form in Cuba. Its dependence on state subsidy makes open dissent extremely risky, and the dominance of narrative form and naturalistic acting styles facilitate narrow sociological readings by those who look for controversy in order to savor or suppress it. Thus, directors tend to favor palimpsest strategies to allude to local problems, using foreign plays set in distant times and places as thinly veiled allegories about their own context. For example, in response to the quarantining of HIV-positive Cubans, the group staged Australian Mary Morris's play Dos semanas con la reina (Two Weeks with the Queen), which explores a family's response to the life-threatening illness of one of its members.

Blind Mouth Singing is about a teenage boy - with a friend living at the bottom of a well outside his house - who is trying to release himself from his stifling mother's clutches. Although “blind mouth” translates into Spanish as boca ciega, which is also the name of a tiny beach community east of Havana, Cortiñas's tale unfolds in a dreamscape that is studiously detached from any particular locale: it is remote and rural, not exactly modern, and subject to hurricanes, but the language is devoid of idiomatic markers that would anchor the drama in a specific time and place. While the presentation of authoritarian family relations often serves as a veiled critique of centralized state power in Cuban film and drama, it is quite remarkable that the group was willing to risk bringing Blind Mouth Singing to the Cuban stage because the play's author is Cuban-American, raised by Cuban-born parents in Miami. How to interpret the significance of this factor is a complicated question. No other dramatic work by a Cuban-American has ever been produced by a Cuban company on the island. While Cuban-Americans have been invited to fine art and literary events on the island sporadically, the stage has been off-limits to them up to now. And this production of Blind Mouth Singing is far from being an underground or unsanctioned affair - the Compañía Teatral Rita Montaner is a prominent state-subsidized company and its director Gerardo Fulleda Leon, in addition to being one of Cuba's most established playwrights, is the president of the Dramaturgical Section of the Cuban Artists and Writers Union. Thus, the production would seem to mark a critical moment of cultural rapprochement between Cuba and the Cuban diaspora.

In 2005, an anthology entitled Teatro cubano actual: Dramaturgia escrita en Estados Unidos, (Contemporary Cuban Theatre: Dramaturgy Written in the United States) was published in Cuba.
by Ediciones Alacos. The book was co-edited by émigré director Alberto Sarraín and émigré writer Lillian Manzor who is a professor at the University of Miami. Not coincidentally, Sarraín had previously won a PEN/ Newman's Own Award for challenging a Miami-Dade County ban on art funding for cultural organizations that produced works by artists living in Cuba. He would subsequently return to Cuba in 2007 to stage Cuban playwright Anton Arrufat's translation of Aeschylus's *The Seven Against Thebes*, which had been suppressed since it received a Casa de las Americas award in 1968 because of the presumed parallels in the Spanish version between fratricidal conflicts in Ancient Greece and the struggles among Cubans. The anthology brings together plays by Cuban-born Fornés, Dolores Prida, and Nilo Cruz, and plays by the American-born Caridad Svich and Jorge Cortiñas. *Teatro cubano actual* breaks ground by suggesting that theatre written in the US by people who weren't even born on the island could be considered Cuban, and in her introduction, Manzor explicitly draws strategic comparisons between the essential hybridity of Cuban culture in Cuba and the hyphenated cultural condition of Cubans in the United States. She also draws parallels between Cuban cultural expression produced in exile before and after the Revolution.

In an interview I conducted with Jorge Cortiñas, he recalled that when a *Miami Herald* reporter questioned him about the anthology, he suggested that the selection of works avoided controversy by sidestepping overtly Cuban subject matter. His own play *Sleepwalkers* (1999), about the extreme hardships of the Cuban Special Period of the early 1990s, had been passed over in favor of *Abrázame Fuerte* (Tight Embrace; 2005), which explores the psychological relationship between a kidnapped woman and her two captors. After his comments appeared in print, he received word that Cuban officials were displeased. Fortunately, that alleged displeasure has not prevented the plans for the Cuban production of his play from moving forward. This in itself could be seen as a sign of liberalizing tendencies prevailing in the Cuban theatre scene.

For Cortiñas to have made a direct political comment about Cuban affairs is unusual, since he publicly acknowledges that he retired his politically engaged self in the mid-1990s, when he began writing plays. This came after several years of intensive involvement in AIDS activism in the Bay Area, where Cortiñas studied public health at UC Berkeley. His activism and experience in the health field led to his first visit to Havana in 1992, when he went to conduct research on treatment of HIV-positive Cubans as part of his graduate study. Once there, he worked for the Ministry of Public Health and organized the first gay male HIV-prevention support groups. Cortiñas recalls that the men were pleasantly surprised to find themselves gathering publicly for something that was not a party or a trip to a bar. The Ministry allowed the men's groups to continue for some time after he left. Cortiñas notes that gay men and women at this time began to meet independently, despite the fact that independent civic organizing in Cuba is forbidden. However, that group was forced to disband and many of its members have since emigrated. In recent years, Cuban President Raúl Castro’s daughter Mariela Castro Espín has officially implemented educational campaigns in support of LGBT rights in Cuba.

It is highly unusual for a Miami-raised Cuban-American to seek out ways of engaging with Cuban culture on the island. Social pressure in Miami to condemn everything about Cuban society as an expression of the Castro regime remains quite potent, even after five decades. Nonetheless, Cortiñas claims that his return was, politically speaking, relatively unremarkable to his family:
I had already tortured my parents so much by coming out, by being repeatedly arrested in acts of civil disobedience, by ending up on the front page of *The Miami Herald* talking shit about Ronald Reagan...At that point, their response to my traveling to Cuba was, 'Oh of course you are going to Cuba. Of course you are going to torture us with that.' (Cortiñas 2009)

That directness is also uncharacteristic of his approach to cubanía as a dramatist. The hyphenated quality of his creative endeavor is better understood as formal rather than sociological. Cortiñas viscerally rejects the demand placed on many ethnic playwrights in the US to reiterate the narrative of immigration *ad infinitum*, and stay within that subject matter. In our interview, he also lamented what he sees as an unfortunate tendency in Cuban theatre toward highly physical acting styles that "leave no room for minimalism, for playing with flatness." Cortiñas is open about his attraction to a certain element of the Cuban modernist literary tradition, what he calls the "mythical" symbolic space that Cuban writers Alejo Carpentier and Reinaldo Arenas create with their dense and stylized prose. "Arenas achieves an X-ray of a cultural psyche," says the playwright, claiming that he sought to create an English equivalent in *Blind Mouth Singing*. "We get lost in the excess of psychic space." To Cortiñas, the classification of these writers as magic realists is inappropriate and misleading-he describes their approach to language as intentionally odd, evocative of archetypal structures that underlie Cuban culture. "It offends me that this aspect of my Cubanness was something that the downtown theatre scene in New York had no place for," he confessed. "They couldn't read it, or if they did, they'd treat it as a lesser Isabel Allende."

Cortiñas has maintained an attitude of constructive engagement with contemporary Cuban culture on the island and in the diaspora while refusing to limit the scope of his artistic interests to chronicling the Cuban exodus or romantically dwelling on the country's past. *Blind Mouth Singing* does not reflect current or past social conditions in Cuba so much as it evokes an emotional state that is shaped by isolation and displacement-which could be experienced by anyone anywhere. Cortiñas's interest in Cuban culture is at once deeply personal and profoundly analytic. Traveling to Cuba and meeting the relatives who stayed, he explained in an unusually sentimental moment in our conversation, enabled him to understand what he might have become. "It suddenly hit me when I got there that everybody and everything was Cuban-and how weird that was," he recalled. "I realized that I'm hopelessly North American-I need my Kurt Cobain records." But taking his work to Cuba does not for Cortiñas mean that he has to translate it into something identifiably ethnic or regional. He has chosen a Mexican translator for the Havana production of *Blind Mouth Singing*, he explained to me with a wink, in order to avoid having to work with a Spanish text that is peppered with "*¿Que bola, asere?*"-Cuban slang for "What's up?" or "How's it going, buddy?" He is currently working with the director and actors to retune musical elements so as to avoid the local. "There is a bolero in the English-language version that was played on a ukulele," he explains, "because no one in the US would recognize that sound as Cuban. In the Cuban version we can't use that song. We're looking for something like Tom Waits. It's got to sound strange and old."
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Think about Peter Brook’s Acid Test. What images from shows you have seen this semester have stayed in your mind? Why do you think those images remained?

2. What separates magical realism from “normal” realism? What effect does the addition of magical elements have on the reader/audience?

3. Have you read or seen examples of magical realism before? How do they compare to Blind Mouth Singing?

4. When asked what kind of theatre excites him, the playwright said, “The exciting kind.” What would your answer be?