

TOLA FESTIVAL

by ABBY WASSERMAN
Theatre Critic, Washington Star

The six-day festival of Latin American and Canadian theatre in Washington's Kennedy Center sounded risky from the first. (*Editor's Note: The Festival moved on to New York, playing at various theatres around the city.*) The city has a large Spanish-speaking population — but was it interested in theatre? No one knew. And would French speakers — who had turned out in droves for the Comedie Francaise run in May — be interested in a French-Canadian monologue? As for Portuguese: until the moment many Washingtonians took their seats for Grupo Pau-Brasil's MACUNAIMA, they thought Brazilians spoke the same language as their neighbors.

The actual attendance caught the Kennedy Center unawares. The Musical Theater Lab, which seats 110, overflowed each night, while the more spacious Terrace Theater was underutilized. The Canadian plays drew the smallest audiences. The festival, sponsored by Theater of Latin America (TOLA) was meant to let us know what's going on in theatre to the north and south of us — and it did, to a point. There was good theatre and mediocre theatre, and it's hard to know how representative of the respective countries these productions were.



MACUNAIMA, a runaway crowd pleaser, launched the festival. It is an epic, a fairy tale, inventive, touching and often beautiful. It is at once audacious and innocent, like the title character. It went on for nearly four hours, but its kaleidoscopic visual effects held my attention. Director Antunes Filho works a little like Robert Wilson with strings of stunning images. MACUNAIMA juxtaposes Indian myth with modern urban problems. It is an exploration of Brazilian heritage and directions.

Mexico's Teatro Repertorio Unam presented another visual stunner: Juan Jose Gurrola's adaptation of 'TIS PITY



SHE'S A WHORE. Gurrola lavished attention on this 17th century bit of grotesquerie as though there were no tomorrow: red costumes (with occasional touches of blue, black or white), tableaux vivants to open each scene; a spare, multi-tiered set; a hodge-podge of moody music (from electronic to string quartet); and an atmosphere heavy with eroticism. The play may be a director's dream to stage, but it told me nothing about modern Mexico (John Ford's vision of Italy adapted for Mexico). The actors had trouble projecting to the back rows of the Musical Theater Lab. Vera Larrosa (a Botticelli beauty) was exquisite as Annabella, but inaudible. What the production lacked in vocal projection it made up in opulent imagery.

The loud music in LUCKY STRIKE, by Toronto's Factory Theater Lab, drove people out of the theatre. I stuffed paper in my ears; some stoics (disco regulars, no doubt) endured. The characters were one-dimensional, their actions repetitive to the point of delirium. Director Hrant Alianak is obviously infatuated with movies, gangster movies at that, and imposes film techniques on theatre. The characters move jerkily, as if they were under a strobe light. Flickering images — played backwards and forwards. The story is simple: a gangster lurches into a mid-eastern basement storeroom, on the lam, and with the goods in a suitcase that keeps flying open. He's wounded, but seems to forget that fact. His girlfriend and a look-alike friend/rival, identically dressed, thunder in. Repeat action. The play (anti-play) seemed to anger people, but it was full of intriguing theatrical notions. The music compensated for the actors' deliberate detachment. It surrounded the audience, making escape (outside of leaving the theatre) impossible. I was reminded of those horrid loud buzzers of Richard Foreman's, combined with arid scenarios.

Montreal's Theatre d'Aujourd'hui should have kept its monologue — play, THE UPS AND DOWNS IN THE LIFE OF A DIVA, at home. It was too long, too talky. Nicole Le Blanc gave spunky energy to her character, but who needs all those words and no action?

CANDELITA'S PALS, performed by Teatro Taller de Colombia, was a mediocre example both of street theatre and children's theatre. It's a gentle tale about hard times in a circus and the value of friendship, but better Colombian theatre could have been found. There is no room for mediocrity in a festival like this. We see so little from Latin America and Canada that we have no basis for comparison. The productions appeared to represent the best these countries had to offer — but the assumption is false. The Colombian play was developed in Uruguay. A number of the productions were neither topical nor new.



Chile's courageous and moving HOW MANY YEARS IN A DAY? was an exception. Developed collaboratively by Grupo Ictus, the play deals directly with the issue of political and artistic repression. Seven Chilean journalists debate the pros and cons of staying in Chile over the last decade. They resist an attempt by station managers to limit their freedom to question. They have stayed, and continue to stay, because they believe that change can be effected from within. The audience reacted intensely. Not surprising: many were Chilean expatriates.

Osvaldo Dragun's STORIES TO BE TOLD is a sad, funny, shocking surreal voyage into a world where men change into dogs while monkeys become men, where people will make any compromise to survive. It was lively and entertaining story theatre, but raised a question: is all Argentine theatre as couched in metaphor? Dragun's play is 22 years old. What is happening now?

The festival whetted my appetite for more knowledge of Latin American and Canadian theatre. It provoked questions and stimulated dialogue. That was its strength.