

LETTERS FROM CUBA

The Open Page 13

Maria Porter: Letter from Limbo
La Habana, Cuba
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My Darling,

Well here I am - at last in Cuba! I had to travel two days to get to a country that is about fifty miles from our southern-most border, but you were so right to encourage me to take the trip. Even though no one would sell me a ticket, I eventually came across a Canadian internet travel group that could not care less if it was illegal for me to travel here and sold me a ticket on Air Canada that Air Canada refused to sell me. Ah well. I have only been here a few hours, but I've learned many things, which is the point of taking a sabbatical, yes? Crossing the borders proved most interesting. I was treated better coming into Cuba than into Canada. The Canadian customs officer was suspicious about my supposed four-day stay in Toronto for which I'd packed two suitcases. If he had opened them and saw my summer clothes, I had prepared a clever story about meeting my lover in Canada and flying off for a romantic tryst in the US Virgin Islands. Why the Cuba travel guide? My lover is Cuban and I need to learn more about his culture. Alas, I didn't need the story, so I'll save it for the return trip.

My greeting in Havana was impressive. There was a lovely woman holding a large sign with my name on it, so I decided it would be good to follow her. I made conversation with her all the way through customs. She smiled at me, saying what I thought was "Veep Vinculo"- but since I didn't yet know how to say, "what are you saying?" in Spanish, I thought it wise to smile and nod. Well lo and behold I was escorted to the VIP lounge to meet an escort from the Ministry of Culture. Wow! I don't think the dean of my college knows who I am!

I stayed overnight in Havana in what I believe was the Ministry of Culture's safe house, where I was guarded by the kind Armando. I spent the evening watching volleyball with him while we chatted about Cuban culture and his recent visit to New York. No, darling, I don't speak Spanish, and he didn't speak English, but we seemed to understand each other perfectly. Besides, I brought "Spanish Grammar in 100 EZ Lessons" and I spent all of my free time learning masculine/feminine versions of adjectives, which I'm sure will come in handy.

The next day I learned what might be a very useful phrase, "quédate tranquila". Apparently when Cubans say that it you it means something is going to happen which will most likely really irritate you. This particular lesson came about when I was introduced to the Cuban concept of time. Our group got on the bus for Santa Clara first, and the journey was to take three and a half hours. We spent the first hour circling Havana picking up passengers and then mysteriously ending up precisely where we started - at the safe house! People got on and off the bus, then on again - and this process was repeated several times throughout the journey. Six hours later we arrived and I understood why everyone was carrying around packets of crackers and tissues - you never know when you'll get to where there will be food and a toilet.

The money here is complicated. There are two kinds of currencies, and we are mostly allowed to use "convertibles", but there are also things for sale in "pesos" - the other kind of money. However, there is no sign telling which money to use, so I bought what was a 50 cent piece of pizza for about 4 dollars. Belatedly I understood why it was called "peso" pizza. There is almost no signage at all - advertisements, road signs, store indications - you need to know someone here to understand where to find things. That is, however, unless you crave political inspirational quotes - there's no shortage of that!

The opening ceremony of the festival was beautiful with dancers and young performers from Santa Clara. Roxana, who has organised the festival, led us from place to place, and then a half hour later did her solo performance. I have a suspicion that Roxana might have cloned herself, or that she is one of a set of quintuplets, because I never saw her actually leave the ceremony. I'll report later when I have more info.

Well darling, it's true - not only are there two concurrent systems of currency, there are at least two systems of time and space. That is the only explanation behind how Roxana and her assistant Alejandro are able to be everywhere at once. I have never seen Roxana travelling - she magically appears at each venue, looking refreshed, enthusiastic, and often not wearing the same outfit. The same can be said for the actresses from the Dah Theater. While the rest of us are looking rather bedraggled from lack of hot water and vegetables, these women look as if they are at a resort! They're tanned, they know all the best beaches - and yet they attend all the performances. Remind me to consult them before I go to the next Magdalena! A curious thing happened today - we were told that we could no longer stay at the hotel we were lodged in. It wasn't clear why - we heard many different reasons: the military needed it, school children were coming for a camp - in any case we had to pack up and wait to be taken elsewhere. The bus came, and we loaded our luggage and proceeded to drive around Santa Clara picking up other festival participants from other hotels. We didn't know where we were going, or how the group was to be split, but Alejandro seemed cheerful and confident, so I was "tranquila". We got to the first new lodging, and we all got out, but only of few stayed. It was a bit like choosing teams for a sport: you, you, you - OK - the rest of you on the other team. Those of us not chosen for this hotel got back on the bus, picked up yet more festival participants, and went to another hotel. Again the same process - you, you, you - here. Then quite mysteriously, the bus returns to the first hotel and more people get off here. We've made a three-hour tour of Santa Clara and have returned to the same location. Darling, this is exactly when the "soy tranquila" mantra needs to be repeated. How lucky I learned it the first day!

The vegetarians in the group are looking quite peaky at this point. We have had rice and beans at least twice a day, and pork or chicken. Even when you order beef, you get pork. Apparently, here pork is considered part of the plant family, because at every meal our vegetarians are offered some. Thankfully someone discovered how to buy cheese, so hopefully these meals of lettuce on white bread that are veggie friends subsist on will end. The other day we took a trip to the Arts School to have a look at a folkloric dance class. Oh Darling, I would be fired on the spot if I conducted such a class! My, my. This style of dance is such a far cry from our Ballet and Modern offerings - it makes us look like Puritans straight off the Mayflower. I was told they would be guaranteed jobs as dancers upon graduation - although at a salary well below what we could exist on. However, when I think of all of us, young and old, working in New York; working during the day as secretaries, waiters, paralegals, nannies - and then when we can do theatre, which costs us money to do - I wonder who is more fortunate. And so many of us at home are on anti-depressants and other pharmaceuticals. If we all danced like this, we'd put Prozac out of business.

The festival came to a conclusion yesterday, and it felt as if we'd been there forever and hardly a day. We came to the last Round - a tradition of Magdalena festivals, in which the women participants sit in a circle and each says something briefly about her experience and wishes. In the several days leading up to this Round, I've spoken at length with the Cuban artists about their work here and what they are up against. Again, while I speak no Spanish, and several of them little English, our exchanges feel genuine and comprehensive. I can see clearly by their physical and vocal prowess that training and performance are serious business. I wish the young actors I work with could witness this for themselves. During the Round, it felt as if the Cuban women were standing on the shores of their island bidding us farewell and urging us not to forget them, to remember their efforts and struggles. It was as if the rest of us would go off to our respective countries but meet again soon, while they would remain fighting an uphill battle in order to make theatre. There was a sense of their collective, massive strength ebbing away.

They had been such an inspiration to me, and their force was 100 times mine, that I found it impossible to imagine it diminished to a level where their creative life would die out. However, I could see in some of the older ones who had been working for many, many years the fatigue and the releasing of hopes and possibilities. Sanya from Dah Teatar exhorted the Cubans to try to resist what had happened to Serbia after the war: to beware the influences of consumerism, commercialism and the dilution of their culture and traditions. Many Cubans asked me about our elections - hoping that we'd choose a more "enlightened" candidate, but I fear regardless of whom we elect, Cuba is a place ripe for exploitation, and that it is a matter of months, perhaps, before they get their first McDonald's.

When I crossed the border from Canada into New York, I had fully prepared myself once again for interrogation. I had the CDs I bought in my underwear, the pendants of Che in my shampoo bottle, and rehearsed the story of my lover and our tryst in the Virgin Islands. But when the dogs came sniffing down the aisles of the train, I felt a defiance - I almost wanted one of the officers to ask where I'd been - and I wouldn't tell the ridiculous fabrication I'd created, but of the impossible, extraordinary country I'd visited and of a theatre festival that happened almost in spite of itself. No one asked where I'd been, and after two hours at the border, they pulled off two Asian college students. I should have worn the pendant of Che.

And now, my dear, I am writing you from my hotel room where I can watch 122 channels of TV, take a half hour hot shower, flush paper down the toilet, and can choose from a menu of 100 items to eat. My children are excited to tell me about the latest Play Station that has come on the market. I feel lost; as if between two worlds and two realities. The reality I share with the people I've met is sourced in my daily efforts to maintain a theatre practice, often on my own. The reality I'll re-immense myself in doesn't pay much attention to these efforts, but I'll manage. However, I still have the image of all those Cuban artists standing on the shore - waving goodbye to me. I imagine after a few weeks home the image will fade. This evening, however, I find more solace and companionship in this image than I get from the TV, hot water, and rich food. Roxana and her 100 selves are living in me, and in this moment I will try very hard to return the gift they've given.

Yours ever,

Maria

MARIA PORTER (USA) is a teacher, director and actor from New York. She is a master teacher of the Suzuki method, and is the head of the acting program at CW Post/Long Island University. She has performed both in the United States and abroad, and recently created and directed her second original performance, *Third Child*, which premiered in Urbino, Italy. *Ennobling Nonna*, which debuted at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has just finished a run at the Perishable Theater in Rhode Island. Maria has worked extensively with Cristina Castrillo and Teatro delle Radici, where she collaborated on their recent performance, *Il Ventre della Balena*.