

A Dangerous Little Beehive? by Rosa Miriam Elizalde

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Havana

The stage is nearly bare but suggests a dark attic in London where four mice wearing impeccable gray suits are retelling the story of Cinderella. They stay largely faithful to Charles Perrault's original plot, but we learn that the narrators--John, Paul, George and Ringo--grew up in Liverpool, love music and, when they call for help, they do so with the cry, "Help, I need somebody!" When Cinderella feels sad and forgotten in her vast, empty house, the Fab Four appear and one of them sings, "Ah, look at all the lonely people!"

The actors, whose ages range between 6 and 14, play their own instruments, often incorporating the lively rhythms of the Caribbean into familiar Beatles songs. They live in Havana and speak Spanish, but these children will perform the play entirely in English wherever they can. In recent years their company, La Colmenita (the little beehive), has appeared at some of the most important children's theater festivals in the world: the World Festival of Children's Theater, in Germany; the Hans Christian Andersen Children's Theatre Festival, in Denmark; the International Festival at the Auditórium Cervantes, in Madrid; the International Festival of Music and Folk Dance, near Granada; as well as at dozens of other venues in Latin America, Asia and Europe. They regularly tour Cuba from one end of the island to the other; between performing other works from their wide repertory, they are preparing to premier Cinderella before a Beatles-crazed Havana audience.

The one place they will not be performing is the United States. "US law makes it next to impossible for Cuban artists, regardless of age, to enter the United States to perform," explains Carlos Alberto Cremata, the 46-year-old director of La Colmenita, the largest children's theater group in Cuba. In accordance with the Immigration and Nationality Act--which authorizes the State Department to stop people whose entry would be "detrimental to the interests of the United States"--the US Consulate in Havana routinely denies visas to Cuban artists and academics. In 2004 George W. Bush increased the number of sanctions imposed on Cuba, and almost all artistic and cultural exchanges are now effectively banned. In 2004 the US government even refused a visa to Ibrahim Ferrer of the Grammy award-winning Buena Vista Social Club.

Recent American visitors to Cuba, including Danny Glover, Harry and Julie Belafonte, several senators and other well-known public figures – some of whom prefer to

remain anonymous, fearing reprisals from the Bush Administration – have expressed interest in supporting and financing a US tour by La Colmenita. The company has been invited to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry's annual meeting and to New York City's Shakespeare in the Park, where they were to stage a bilingual version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. "We haven't even started applying for visas," says Cremata, who is known in the Cuban theater world as Tin. "Every time the promoters try to organize a tour, they come up against a brick wall."

La Colmenita has its roots in La Colmena, a theater group founded and directed by Cremata in 1990 and made up of a dozen or so enthusiastic young amateurs, most of them former athletes and university students with little or no artistic experience. Cremata had studied at Havana's Instituto Superior de Arte de Cuba and later worked as a scriptwriter on the popular Cuban children's television series *Cuando yo sea grande* (when I grow up), which was directed by one of Cuba's best-known TV directors, Iraida Malberti, who also happens to be his mother. Generations of the Cremata-Malberti family have devoted themselves to the dramatic arts. Tin's younger brother is an actor, and another brother is a celebrated filmmaker.

But, says Tin, "the man who inspired us all was my father. He used to put on plays at home and in our barrio with the participation of our family and neighbors." The father, Carlos Cremata Trujillo, died October 6, 1976, on a plane bound for Cuba from Venezuela carrying seventy-three passengers, including a 9-year-old girl. As the plane was flying over Barbados, two bombs exploded on board. One of the masterminds of this atrocity was Luis Posada Carriles, a Cuban-born Venezuelan referred to by many as "the bin Laden of Latin America." Posada has recently been released from jail in Texas, where he had been charged only with immigration violations, despite the Venezuelan government's demands for his extradition or for his prosecution in the United States as a terrorist.

"We were totally devastated, but we were determined not to give in to hatred," Cremata says. "Theater became my resurrection."

The year Cremata helped establish La Colmena also saw the start of Cuba's so-called "special period" - the economic program intended to address the devastating impact of the collapse of the Socialist bloc in Europe and the intensification of the US blockade. The members of La Colmena would bicycle to working-class neighborhoods around the capital and to rural areas outside Havana, carrying with them their costumes and props for works by Tirso de Molina, Lope de Vega and Shakespeare. They performed Cuban plays as well as the classics of Spanish and English theater in small municipal parks, and because of the power outages that were rife at the time, they used rudimentary kerosene lamps that lent the stage a strange, spectral light.

Cremata's experience with *Cuando yo sea grande* led directly to the formation of La Colmenita. In 1994 the company produced its first show, *Meñique*, by "Cuba's national hero," nineteenth-century poet José Martí. The cast were the children of

members of La Colmena and child actors from Cuando yo sea grande. There were few resources, so the families made their own scenery and costumes with the help of the children. They had no recording studio, so they constructed one themselves lined with cardboard egg cartons. Today, whether they are performing Meñique or Cinderella, "Cubanized" versions of Hans Christian Andersen stories or a folkloric Caribbean piece titled La Cucarachita Martina (Martina, the little cockroach), the wardrobe is always the work of the "weaver bees," the mothers and grandmothers, who use old clothes to make costumes that transform the actors into rabbits, dogs, cats, exotic birds, butterflies or other tropical creatures. "At first, we did this because we had nothing," says Cremata, "but now it's become part of our methodology."

When they performed a Spanish version of Alice in Wonderland, set in present-day Cuba and featuring Cuban dance and music, at the World Festival of Children's Theater in Lingen, Germany, in 2002, Elisabeth Tondera of the Lingen Journal was astonished by this new Alice. It was the first time she had seen the role played by a black girl, Sahilys Cisneros Torres, who appeared on stage surrounded by, in Tondera's words, "all kinds of fantastic creatures and strange beings who stride across the stage on stilts." She continued, "The sheer dynamism of the acting, the clear staging, the bubbling comedy and infectious enthusiasm make the production a real theatrical experience."

Since April 2005, La Colmenita has had its own theater, the Teatro de la Orden Tercera, in the west wing of the Convento de San Francisco de Asis, an imposing seventeenth-century building in the heart of Old Havana. There, at what Cremata calls "central headquarters," eighty-five children form several groups, enabling them to have many plays in repertory at any one time while keeping up with rehearsals for Cinderella. But the company itself is much bigger than that. More than 5,000 children and 200 teachers have so far passed through eleven Colmenita chapters in three of Cuba's provinces. Taking part in the productions are children with physical handicaps, children who have visual or auditory problems and children with Down's syndrome, cancer, learning difficulties or cerebral palsy.

Bertha Martínez, an actress, a teacher at the Instituto Superior de Arte and winner of the Premio Nacional de Teatro, believes that La Colmenita has had a real impact on the larger world of Cuban theater. "It's the actors' sense of artistic solidarity, the evident care taken by all participants to find solutions to problems," she says. "Above all, it's the conscious awareness that each performance is a group enterprise and not just an opportunity for one person to shine."

Cremata explains that two words are key for the company: family (necessary in order to live) and play (necessary in order to create). "When people come to the theater and look up, we want them to see that the lighting technician has a child beside him and the sound technician too," he says. "That way, the company will be like a great big bubble that the children can truly inhabit."

"I've belonged to the group since I was 3," says 14-year-old Malú Tarrau Broche. She plays one of the mice in Cinderella and was a star of the film Viva Cuba, directed by Tin's brother, Juan Carlos. She is also the youngest person in the history of Cuban cinema to receive a prize for best actress in an international competition, which she won at the 2006 Chemnitz Festival in Germany. "La Colmenita has been like a family to me," she says. "It's been a really happy, unforgettable period of my life. I spend more time here than I do at home."

La Colmenita actually managed to visit the United States once. Following an invitation by Global Exchange in 2002 to perform in California, the company spent a year of intense work collecting funds and coordinating theaters, hotels and travel agents. But eventually they were faced with the fact that the tour, which had initially been organized for January 2003, would have to be canceled or postponed indefinitely. The State Department had simply created too many bureaucratic obstacles and failed to issue the necessary travel permits to the company members and accompanying adults in time. Fifty percent of the cast were children with disabilities, four in wheelchairs. From the start, US authorities refused to allow entry to any of the children's relatives or to any of the Cuban educational or medical personnel because, they said, the children would be able to find the help they needed in the United States. As a result of the delays, the tour sponsors lost hundreds of thousands of dollars.

In a press release at the time, a frustrated Ana Pérez, then director of Global Exchange's Cuba program, exclaimed, "The group consists of children, the director, the producer and other members of a group who put on performances of Cuban folk tales and works by Shakespeare. How can they possibly be a threat to our national security? These actors are not terrorists."

On March 6, just three hours before the company's flight was scheduled to depart Havana for Los Angeles, a limited number of visas were finally issued. Of the twelve adults who were to accompany the twenty-three children, only eight received visas. Among those who were refused was Ingrid León Vila, the assistant director and a former teacher at the Solidarity With Panama School for Disabled Children. The US Consulate said that if the director was going, then there was no need for an assistant director. The authorities knew perfectly well that she would also be going in her capacity as nurse to Mabel Cedeño, who was playing the main role in La Cucarachita Martina and who suffers from a grave congenital illness--osteogenesis imperfecta, also known as brittle-bone disease--and needs specialized care. Since Ingrid could not go and care for her, Mabel could not go either.

Once in the United States, the troupe played to packed houses. A resolution passed by the California State Senate thanked La Colmenita, "the first Cuban children's theatre to visit the United States in forty-five years," saying that the children had acted as "good-will ambassadors between the two countries" through an exchange program that aims to help prevent "juvenile violence and other social problems in California." Carlos Alberto Cremata was particularly touched that Cuban children who live on

either side of the Florida Straits were able to perform together. Four Cuban children who had emigrated with their parents and who had been members of La Colmenita in Havana were able to join the group for some of its performances. They have never met since. La Colmenita has never been back.

"We haven't given up hope of returning," says Cremata. "Along with our US and Canadian friends we are preparing a major event in the summer. Guess where? In Niagara Falls, Canada--right on the United States border."