

A Guide to the Theatre of Abelardo Estorino



By Ileana Fuentes

Introduction

This booklet is your introduction to Repertorio Español's production of four plays by one of Cuba's eminent living playwrights, Abelardo Estorino (b. 1925, Union de Reyes, Matanzas). Two of them are historical in nature: *Parece blanca*, inspired by Cirilo Villaverde's 19th century classic novel *Cecilia Valdés*; and *Vagos rumores*, based on the tragic love-life of Matanzas-born poet, José Jacinto Milanés (1814-1863). The other two plays are purely existential: *Las penas saben nadar*, about a middle-aged actress still hoping for stardom; and *El baile*, the story of an elderly widow haunted by the ghosts of her late husband and a former lover.

We are certain that the materials collected here will convince educators to bring their classes to see these two insightful, entertaining and challenging plays. We hope that teachers who do bring their classes can use this Study Guide to prepare themselves and their pupils for the experience. And, because students have always been a vital audience to Repertorio Español, we especially hope this booklet will enable them to have a much richer theater-going experience.

For each play, the Guide includes a synopsis of the story, in English; representative scenes from the play in the original Spanish, critical commentary; an overview of socio-historical topics raised; and a page of study questions. The booklet includes biographical information about Mr. Estorino (pp.5-6), an overview of 19th and 20th century Cuban history (pp.22-27); a section featuring brief details about historical and literary figures alluded to in the plays (pp.32-36); and a general description of slavery and social prejudices that characterized Cuban life during the 19th century and which, to some extent, are still relevant today (p.28).

In 1998, Repertorio Español launched CUBATEATRO, a special three-year project funded by The Arca Foundation and The Rockefeller Foundation, which will stage Cuban-American theater in Cuba, and present Cuban theater artists and playwrights in New York. In September, 1998, the first stage of CUBATEATRO was completed, with the unprecedented, and highly acclaimed four-city Cuba tour of *Revoltillo* (Broken Eggs) by Eduardo Machado, and the U.S. premiere of two of Mr. Estorino's plays. The project continues throughout 1999 - 2000 with the full Estorino program, and the guest appearance of actors from the island on the stage of Repertorio Español.

Abelardo Estorino: A Profile

He is slender and slightly grey, a soft-spoken and gentle man who has lived through historic moments and personally difficult ones. Abelardo Estorino is Cuba's foremost living playwright. In 1997 he was awarded the coveted Guggenheim Fellowship, bringing him to New York and to the warmth of old friends and colleagues.

He was born in 1925 in Unión de Reyes, Matanzas province, which is located just east of Havana, a few miles southwest of the famed Varadero Resort. He remembers clearly the traveling circus that performed every year in his hometown, and which always brought with it a small theater troupe. Once gone, he would re-stage versions of the productions with his neighborhood friends. It was with Eloísa Alvarez Guedes' amateur theater group that Mr. Estorino first performed as a teenager in Unión de Reyes.

"I got used to the circus visiting our town, the exotic animals, the acrobats, the fire-eaters, and the unforgettable vaudeville act with its hot mulata, the cheating negrito, and the humiliated gallego, always tricked by his friend into paying the bill. That was my first experience of theater. Later I would come to know the works of Jacinto Benavente and other authors who were regularly staged by the town's aficionados. The rest has been incessant reading, and keeping memories in hidden drawers, so as not to have to make up stories, but simply to re-live and transform them: my family's move to an uncle's house because father had lost his job; my cousins' womanizing with virgins and whores; a relative committing suicide for reasons I couldn't understand back then..."

The family moved to the City of Matanzas, the birthplace of poets José Jacinto Milanés and Plácido, the adopted hometown of Domingo del Monte, where Estorino first saw the ocean. "My father took me and my brothers to see the harbor, which a century earlier had been immortalized in the verses of the mad poet (Milanés)". In Matanzas, Estorino finished high school and, as he put it, learnt to walk on the cobblestones of Cuba's history.

In Havana, he studied dentistry, one of several professions guaranteed to provide financial stability and social standing - a universal expectation among Cuba's rising middle class, of which his family was no exception. But his early love for theater would win in the end. Most of his friends came from the university's theater group, Teatro Universitario. He frequented every theater in Havana, where he met the most prominent teatristas of the moment, among them Rolando Ferrer, who became his first real mentor.

"Rolando passed down to me everything he knew. He gave me books to read, the essential theater manuals; he shared the secrets of the trade with me, and handed me every page he wrote, hot out of his Underwood, to read."

In Havana he also met painter Raúl Martínez, founder of Grupo de los Once, the Group of Eleven (abstract expressionists) that revolutionized Havana's galleries in the 1950's. Their association would last a lifetime, until Martínez's death in 1995.

"It was Raúl who found me sitting at the typewriter one afternoon. I was writing **Hay un muerto en la calle** a piece that has never been staged. Raúl was like a Muse to me. The intensity with which he painted motivated me to write with the same passion. It's the reason I have written so much."

That was in the fifties. Things would change after 1959. The plays written in the early years of the Cuban Revolution confronted new values and old attitudes. In 1960, his play **El peine y el espejo** debuted in Havana, and the next year his **El robo del cochino** received the National Prize for Drama awarded by Cuba's Casa de las Américas. It was "Move over, señor dentista, the playwright has arrived at last". In 1962 his **Las vacas gordas** and **Las impuras** were premiered, and in 1964 he received an honorable mention from Casa de las Américas for **La casa vieja**.

In the years that followed, he would write as well as direct, sometimes his own plays, sometimes the works of other playwrights. He wrote **Los mangos de Cain** (1965); **El tiempo de la plaga** and **La dama de las camelias** (1968); **La dolorosa historia del amor secreto de José Jacinto Milanés** (1973); **Ni un sí, ni un no** (1980); **Pachencho vivo o muerto** (1982); **Morir del cuento** (1983), which received the Cau Ferrat Award at the Sitges Festival in Spain in 1985; **Que el diablo te acompañe** (1987); **Las penas saben nadar** (1989) **Vagos rumores** (1992) and **Parece blanca** (1994).

Estorino's later works have adopted the more traditional structures of narrative and representation, drawing from history and from memories. Many of his plays, as well as their productions, have won awards in Cuba and abroad, where they have also been staged. But no distinction has been so meaningful as the 1992 Cuban National Prize for Literature, an honor seldom bestowed to a dramatist. Estorino commented on this in a 1995 interview:

"To the Cuban literati, literature is narrative and poetry. They consider theater as something else, something that has to do with entertainment, something apart from literature. This is amusing, for these same people speak of Calderón [de la Barca] and quote **La vida es sueño**; they mention Shakespeare and think of **Hamlet**. We had to fight it out with the Union of Writers because they wanted to exclude playwrights from membership. I have always advocated for theater as literature, and I labor over my texts as much as poets do over theirs."

That discipline enabled him to endure the years of censorship - what he calls "los años jodidos", the hard years — during which he was listed among forbidden authors, in the company of such greats as Ionesco, Pinter, Sartre, de Beauvoir, Vargas Llosa and Sontag. It also has been crucial in allowing Estorino to search for the authenticity of ideas that causes human beings to act a certain way, and to portray the essence of conflict and contradiction, that audiences may recognize their own predicaments acted out in front of them. This is true of **Parece blanca** and **Vagos rumores**, where the struggle for human dignity and freedom in 19th Century Cuba finds its way back from the past. Instead of thinking about retirement, Estorino thinks about going into production. We are so very lucky, for when Piñera, Ariza, and Leal summon his presence for a heavenly café con leche, Estorino will leave Cubans — and mankind — a rich literary legacy groomed to the last minute by his expert hand. But relax, that isn't happening any time soon. Abelardo Estorino is staying with us for a long time.

Vagos Rumores: Synopsis

SETTING:

An imaginary time travel which takes the deranged poet and playwright, José Jacinto Milanés, to his native Matanzas, to Havana, through eternity and through his personal hell, revisiting relationships, life, and historical events.

CHARACTERS:

Milanés (referred to as Pepe by his sister) -- the famous 19th Century Cuban poet who was insane during the last twenty years of his life.

Carlota -- Milanés' sister, who dedicated her entire life to caring for him, and who becomes other women in the course of the play: their Aunt Pastora; their mother; Lola, the fiancée of a decade.

Mendigo, the Beggar-- takes the poet on his journey, and who also becomes different characters: Ximeno, the stingy uncle and Isa's father; Milanés' mentor, Domingo del Monte; the poet Plácido; and a slave.

PLOT:

Accompanied by Mendigo, the character of the Beggar he himself created for his poem, "El Baile", the young poet and playwright José Jacinto Milanés embarks on a journey to his very private hell. Step by step, the trip takes him to his unhappy childhood, where he re-lives the years of poverty and humiliations suffered by his family. He meets his sister Carlota, and together they play theater games and re-enact scenes from Shakespeare's Anthony and Cleopatra.

We meet his Aunt Pastora, a sexually inhibited woman touched by religious fanaticism, whose fixation with cleaning both the dirt and the sins around her affect Milanés during his life. The poet meets his mother, and remembers asking her if he can get an education in Havana. She reminds him that they are poor, that she has fifteen children to raise, but offers a solution: to ask his uncle and godfather Ximeno for assistance.

We meet Ximeno, a stingy Spanish merchant who carries his accounts book everywhere. He complains that an education costs an arm and a leg, and offers to find him a clerical job, instead. When the mother worries about Havana being a dangerous city, Ximeno dismisses her fears, saying it will be good for him to go out into the world to become a real man and perhaps forget his poetry nonsense.

Milanés and his Beggar then find themselves in Havana, where there is a cholera epidemic. The trip is like a nightmare, and they find themselves surrounded by corpses, including a young woman whom the Beggar identifies as Plácido's beloved. Milanés encounters Plácido later in this journey.

They return to Matanzas, where his sister and the Beggar stage a big welcome. They sing to nature, recall past events, and praise the City of Matanzas, themes which will make their way to his poetry. His devoted sister tells him how she has kept busy in his absence reading his poems over and over again. Her feelings for her brother, which are more than fraternal, betray her.

Since the story does not progress in linear time, we only learn those things which the Beggar wants Milanés to remember. Now, the Beggar becomes Domingo del Monte, the wealthy socialite whose literary circle Milanés and the most prominent intellectuals of the time, frequent. They discuss cultural issues as well as the political situation. Cuba's dependence on the Spanish Crown, and the slave trade, to which they are opposed. Under del Monte's guidance and patronage, Milanés stages his first play, **El conde Alarcos**; it's an overnight success, and he becomes famous.

The same success does not transpire in the love department. The Beggar and Carlota bring back all the women in Milanés' life. There is Lola, his fiancée of ten years, who is utterly humiliated when he breaks off the engagement, and never finds another suitor. Milanés carries a guilt trip over this affair. Then there is his cousin Isa, whose father -- Milanés' uncle -- will not allow the relationship, saying that he will not have his daughter marry "un loco que hace versos", a crazy, penniless poet.

When he cannot have Isa, and he learns that her father plans to marry her off, Milanés goes mad. It's a combination of things: the loss of Isa, the social and political situation, a bit of heredity. He spends the rest of this life - twenty years - in absolute silence, during which time his sister Carlota will take care of his every need, day and night. She tries to guess what goes through his absent mind. In the scenes that follow, Milanés is already ill. From within his malady, he meets Plácido, the **mulato** poet who was executed as a result of the **Escalera Conspiracy**. It's a conflictive meeting, for each has a different concept of life and art. They speak from their present perspectives - death and delirium - and finally, at Plácido's suggestion, they agree to preserve the image with which History remembers them.

Carlota then takes the stage in an excruciating monologue. She recounts a life of sacrifice at the side of her deranged brother, having renounced every pleasure and private dream for his sake. The personal conflict she reveals tells of her passion for him.

The Beggar wants to get to the end. Milanés awaits the hour of his redemption. A step ladder, symbolic of the torture ladder of the conspiracy, serves as background for a last encounter between Milanés and Domingo del Monte, his mentor. They have gone their separate paths, and the meeting is full of recriminations. They will never see eye to eye, ever again.

We return to the beginning. Milanés has reconstructed his life and now is dressed formally, the way he appears in literature books. He sits next to his sister, and the Beggar ties a rope around them. They are bound together for eternity. We are told that perhaps this journey has reconciled him with history and with its contradictions. Maybe. Maybe not.

Vagos Rumores: Scenes

The Beggar becomes Simón, the rich and stingy Spaniard who is Milanés' godfather and Isa's father; Carlota is the poet's Mother. The scene illustrates the family's frustration with poverty and the impotence at not being able to afford Milanés education in Havana.

MILANES: ¡Qué tortura! Yo quería estudiar. Nada más.

MENDIGO: ¿Quién te lo impedía?

MILANES: ¿Quién podía pagarme los estudios? Padrino, sólo Padrino.

MENDIGO: Sí, don Simón, el padrino de todos, el tío político, el padre de Isa, don Simón: todo cariño, todo cuñado, todo parentela, todo generosidad, todo trabajo, todo onzas, todo negocios.

MENDIGO (As godfather): Mi padre, Joseph Matías de Ximeno, era bilbaíno. El hombre se hace fuerte luchando contra la naturaleza y esas provincias del norte de España son muy frías. Aquí, con este calor, las gentes se acuestan en las hamacas y que se hunda el mundo. Mi padre trabajó muy duro y lo que tengo se lo debo a él, a él y a mi tenacidad. Aquí está reflejada la historia de mi familia: onza que entra se asienta en una columna; onza que sale en la otra. Mis hijos aprenderán de mí esa tenacidad vizcaína... Ustedes también han tenido suerte. Pepe es un muchacho trabajador y... ¡qué letra! ¡primorosa! Me siento muy orgulloso al enviar cartas escritas por su mano.

CARLOTA (As mother): De eso queríamos hablarle, Ximeno.

MENDIGO: Estoy muy satisfecho con su trabajo. Si se olvidara un poco de la poesía . .

MILANES: ¿Qué?

MENDIGO: No tengo a mal su afición a los libros. Mis hijos también leen. Pero lo de este muchacho es una obsesión. ¡Qué cosa! Se va a volver loco. Y después a correr. Padrino, Pepe está muy mal. . ." Y allá va el tío y suelta las onzas que acumuló con sus despreciables negocios.

MILANES: Nunca le pedí nada.

MENDIGO: No me hagas hablar.

MENDIGO: ¿No estás contento en mi oficina?

CARLOTA: Pepe está en edad de decidir su destino. Y yo no quisiera que terminara su vida haciendo cartas comerciales.

MENDIGO: Yo no puedo ofrecerle otra cosa. Tal vez podríamos mandarlo a La Habana.

CARLOTA: ¿Será posible? Si Pepe pudiera estudiar.

MENDIGO: ¿Estudiar? Eso cuesta un ojo de la cara. Y ustedes... Yo hablo de un destino. ¿Ve esta columna? Aquí está anotado lo que me cuesta el colegio de José Manuel. Un ojo de la cara. Pepe podría trabajar. En La Habana tengo relaciones... Con su letra y su formalidad se abrirá paso.

CARLOTA: ¿Pero en La Habana no es peligroso?

MENDIGO: ¡Ah, peligro! Que luce solo, se olvide de la poesía y se haga un hombre. Mentor and protégé argue. Del Monte (the Beggar) tells Milanés he is too much of an idealist who expected too much from the white intelligentsia regarding abolition of slavery; in turn, Milanés virtually calls del Monte a hypocrite and a traitor to the cause.

MENDIGO: Milanés, no seas impío, es locura y orgullo lo que haces.

MILANES: Ah, Domingo, ahora apareces. Te busqué por todas partes, registré todos los rincones y grité tu nombre.

MENDIGO: Estaba lejos.

MILANES: Sí, tan lejos que hubiera podido quedarme ronco gritando.

MENDIGO: Me dijeron que tenías accesos de delirio.

MILANES: ¿Delirios? Estamos en el círculo más profundo del infierno. Todos me dejaron solo. Necesitaba un amigo y tú te fuiste.

MENDIGO: Tenía que salvar a mi familia.

MILANES: Y mientras tu barco se alejaba, la Isla entera se convertía en un cañaveral incendiado y mi ciudad en una ergástula donde los lamentos y la sangre me impedían respirar.

MENDIGO: Y qué podía hacer? Yo estaba más comprometido que tú.

MILANES: Yo me quedé, aterrorizado, pero me quedé. Tú podías irte, tenías medios para vivir en París o Madrid. ¡Ay, Domingo, qué gran pesadilla te perdiste!

MENDIGO: No iba a quedarme en este país que podía ser reducido a cenizas por una raza salvaje.

MILANES: ¡Raza salvaje! ¿Pero no habíamos hablado de la misión del poeta? Yo cumplí mi misión: escribí sobre el despotismo y la esclavitud. Habíamos dicho que la raza negra era el minero de nuestra mejor poesía. ¿Y ahora es una raza salvaje? No puedo comprender....

MENDIGO: Cálmate, Milanés, estás alterado.

MILANES: No. Asqueado. Es muy cómodo incitar a los demás, hablar de sacrificarse por una causa social y después...¡adiós, palmas!

MENDIGO: Eres injusto conmigo.

MILANES: Hay cientos de negros amarrados a una escalera.

MENDIGO: ¿Y qué debo hacer?

MILANES: Estar aquí, aquí. Amarrado a una escalera.

MENDIGO: ¡Ah, Dios, qué frágil es la mente!

MILANES: Sí, ahora todos dicen que estoy loco. Se asombran de mi mutismo....¿Qué puedo decir? Nada tiene sentido.... Si había que estar por la abolición, había que estar hasta el final.

MENDIGO: Una cosa es estar por la abolición, y otra entregar el país al salvajismo.... Yo proponía eliminar la trata, y propiciar la inmigración blanca para convertir esta isla en un país civilizado.

MILANES: No, no podemos hablar. Ya no nos entenderemos nunca. Hay algo que nos diferencia.

MENDIGO: Demasiado idealismo de tu parte, Milanés.

MILANES: Me siento traicionado.

A delirious Milanés calls out to Isa, his beloved; his sister Carlota and the Beggar (as Simón, Isa's father) ponder upon this impossible love while Milanés rages about it.

CARLOTA: Pepe, no abras la ventana.

MILANES: ¡Quiero verla!

CARLOTA: Cierra el postigo, cierra los ojos, ciérrale tu corazón para toda la vida.

MILANES: Carlota, necesito verla. Búscamela. Tú me la escondes.

CARLOTA: Cálmate.

MILANES: Sin ella no tengo calma....

MENDIGO (as godfather): ¿Qué se ha creído ese loco? ¿No está viendo que es una niña?

CARLOTA: Usted puede darse con un canto en el pecho. Ahora es don José Jacinto Milanés, respetado en todas partes.

MENDIGO: No es más que un vagabundo. He tenido que conseguirle un trabajo y me hace quedar mal. Porque me lo han dicho, que sigue perdiendo el tiempo con sus versitos.... "Ay, mi tórtola, mi tortolita". Mejor me callo.

CARLOTA: En La Habana lo respetan mucho.

MENDIGO: ¿Quiénes? Los que se buscan problemas criticando al gobierno: esa turba de abolicionistas a los que hay que salir a defender a cada rato.

CARLOTA: ¿Y qué quiere para la niña, un duque?

MENDIGO: Un hombre. No un depravado.

CARLOTA: Es una infamia.

MENDIGO: Casi treinta años y todo el mundo sabe lo que hace: se encierra en su cuarto y solo, como los muchachos...

CARLOTA: Usted no tiene ningún derecho a decir esas cosas.

MENDIGO: Le tiene miedo a las mujeres.

CARLOTA: Diga la verdad, la pura verdad: que somos pobres que no tenemos un real.

MENDIGO: Mal agradecidos. Yo les he matado el hambre toda mi vida.

CARLOTA: Quiere venderla. Usted aspira a casarla con un rico.

MENDIGO: No puedo permitir que mi hija ¡mi hija! se muera de hambre con un loco que hace versos.

MILANES: Yo soy José Jacinto Milanés, poeta. Autor de **El conde Alarcos**, estrenada en el teatro Tacón, elogiada en Madrid. Soy honrado, culto, de una familia intachable.

¿Dónde está mi mancha? Y a ellos, ¿dónde les vienen su linaje? ¿Dónde está los títulos, los castillos y los pergaminos? ¿Qué tienen? ¿Onzas, sólo onzas relucientes escondidas en arcas de madera... Y ella me ama. Lo supe mientras le leía un poema. Me sonreía con las mejillas ardiendo de pudor por mi presencia. Pero la han encerrado en el último cuarto para impedir que me vea... la atormentan, la torturan de noche y la azotan, la atan a las rejas de la ventana y la azotan hasta que sangra y viene a mi cuarto con el vestido blanco manchado. ¿Dónde está mi mancha?...

Milanés talks to the ghost of poet Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés, better known as Plácido. They compare notes about racial prejudice, the abolitionist movement, and the repression

that resulted from the **Escalera Conspiracy of 1844**. Plácido was among the victims of that repression. The Beggar is Plácido.

MENDIGO (as Plácido): Odio a la gente que goza azotando a un negro.

MILANES: Yo también.

MENDIGO: Lo sé. Por eso puedo hablar contigo. No estoy tan envilecido.

MILANES: Perdóname.

MENDIGO: Te perdoné hace tiempo.

MILANES: Escribí aquel poema irritado contigo. ¿Cómo podías dedicarle aquellas odas a un político corrompido, cantar el cumpleaños de una niña tonta, ensalzar a un viejo gordo cargado de dinero? Y lo que es más humillante, tú, el poeta, de pie, mientras todos ellos, los mediocres, se hartaban a la mesa del banquete. No puedo entenderlo.

MENDIGO: Es muy simple. Tenía ruidos en la barriga y había que llenarla o el estruendo cubriría la Isla. Y podían acusarme de subversivo. Infidencia, es la palabra exacta.

MILANES: Yo tampoco era rico.

MENDIGO: Pero eres blanco.

MILANES: Había que ser inflexible, no ceder ante la corrupción.

MENDIGO: No, no, Milanés, había que vivir. La Isla entera convidaba a vivir. Tú lo sabes: mucho azul y mucho verde y el aire embalsamado de las madrugadas.

MILANES: Vivir con decoro o enloquecer.

MENDIGO: Tú pertenecías al mundo: un mundo blanco.

MILANES: En ese mundo blanco yo no pude estudiar, en ese mundo blanco fui rechazado por mis parientes, en ese mundo blanco sentí tanto asco que prefiero mi silencio.

MENDIGO: Pero en ese mundo blanco tú tenías la posibilidad de elegir. Yo no. Yo era rechazado porque mi padre había sido un mulato cuarterón. Y ellos decidían qué yo podía ser: carpintero, peinetero o músico. Los oficios que ellos despreciaban. Tantos prejuicios tenían que rechazaban el arte. De todas maneras, además de ser peinetero, yo decidí ser poeta. Y ya ves, se la cobraron. No les gustó que yo eligiera. "Qué atrevimiento el de ese mulato que quiere igualarse a nosotros y usar el idioma castellano, blanco, como si fuera el suyo. Y además lo emplea bien, y el pueblo lo admira, lo busca, repite lo que dice. Es demasiado atrevimiento." Y ese mundo blanco, descubrió una conspiración fantástica para aplastar al mundo negro.

Vagos Rumores: Study Questions

Some of these study questions are based on the Vagos Rumores synopsis, scenes, historical essay, *Who's Who*, and the *Bits and Pieces* provided here. Others will become more relevant after students have seen the production.

1. The young Milanés asks his mother: "¿Y no podré estudiar en La Habana?" Why Havana? How did race and gender determine a person's access to education and work choices in Cuban society?

2. "La Habana está siempre despierta," says the Beggar to Milanés. How was life in Havana around 1840 described in the play?
3. We hear conflicting views about the character of poets. Example: Domingo del Monte lectures Milanés: "El poeta, antes de considerarse poeta, debe considerarse hombre." What do other characters in the play think about poets?
4. Lola, Milanés' fiancée of ten years, protests that he left her "Sola, en una ciudad donde nadie me miraba como posible esposa." His sister Carlota isn't very happy, either: "¡Ay! ¡Qué vida estéril, sin disfrutar el horror del pecado!" Discuss traditional roles of women in society. Discuss Lola and Carlota as **solteronas**, i.e. spinsters.
5. Ximeno, Milanés' uncle, hates to spend money. "¿Estudiar? Eso cuesta un ojo de la cara." Out of greed he forces his daughter, Isa, to marry a rich man she doesn't love. In what ways does Ximeno's greed affect Milanés' life?
6. **The Escalera Conspiracy of 1844** was a national tragedy. Describe the events, the treatment of Blacks, the torture methods. Attempt to build a model of a **garrote** and imagine dying in that fashion. Discuss capital punishment and methods of execution, past and present.
7. Plácido reminds Milanés that, as a colored man, he could not make choices the way Milanés, being white, could. What were the options available to a "son of a **mulato cuarterón**" like Plácido? To Pimienta in Parece Blanca?
8. Domingo del Monte was Milanés' mentor and friend. Yet Milanés parts company with him. "No podemos hablar. Ya no nos entenderemos nunca. Hay algo que nos diferencia." What came between them?
9. What was del Monte's opinions about Blacks in Cuba? How did events in Hispaniola (later Haiti) influence racist attitudes? Why do you think Cuban slave owners favored annexation to the U.S.?
10. Find a few poems by Milanés, Manzano, and Plácido. Read them in class; compare their styles and themes.

Parece Blanca: Synopsis

SETTING: La Habana, 1840's. The stage becomes the site it needs to be for each scene: a street, a church, the Gamboa residence, Cecilia's house, a ballroom. A book stand located at the proscenium holds a copy of Cecilia Valdés, Cirilo Villaverde's novel.

CHARACTERS:

Cecilia - a Caucasian-looking **mulata** who is in love with Leonardo Gamboa, the heir of a wealthy family.

Chepilla - Cecilia's dark-skinned grandmother.

Charo - Cecilia's lighter-skinned mother.

Cándido Gamboa - Leonardo's father, a slave trader.

Rosa Sandoval - Leonardo's mother.

Isabel Ilincheta - a rich young woman betrothed to Leonardo.

Pimienta - a **mulato** musician and tailor who loves Cecilia.

Nemesia -- Pimienta's dark-skinned sister and friend of Cecilia who also loves Leonardo.

Tandó - a soldier.

PLOT: The characters from Cirilo Villaverde's novel **Cecilia Valdés** meet on stage to re-enact the story. The action begins with the assassination of Leonardo Gamboa by José Dolores Pimienta. Rosa asks Cándido to consult the book (the novel) to learn about the circumstances which forced Pimienta to assassinate Leonardo during his wedding to Isabel. We are taken through the various relationships in the story. Rosa is talking with Leonardo, whom she spoils rotten, and gives him money for a Swiss watch he is bent on having. She has turned him into a selfish and frivolous young man, in spite of her husband's demands that she raise him differently.

Chepilla, Cecilia's grandmother, scolds Cecilia for going out too much, but at the same time encourages her dream to marry a white man. Such marriage is the only way for a **mulata** to move up in a racist society. Cecilia complains about Cándido Gamboa's influence over her grandmother, who replies by explaining how he cares and how he contributes to their livelihood. Cecilia has visited the Gamboa mansion, and is spellbound by the wealth, the mirrors, the silver dinnerware. In order to tighten Cecilia's reins, Chepilla tells her the story of a man who becomes Satan and throws young girls in the well.

Then we see Pimienta and his sister Nemesia, in their shop, sewing the last details on a jacket for Leonardo Gamboa. Nemesia makes fun of her brother's love for Cecilia, and dreams about one day marrying a white man who will provide for her and hire slaves to wait on her. Leonardo's arrival for a fitting kindles Pimienta's jealousy even more, and he leaves the shop, where Nemesia flirts with Leonardo. At the ball, Pimienta plays the clarinet, while Leonardo and Cecilia dance passionately, fueling his jealous anger and that of his sister Nemesia. When Cándido finds out what has happened at the ball, he visits Chepilla to ask that she forbid Cecilia from seeing Leonardo. Chepilla reminds him that Cecilia is as stubborn as Charo, her mother, that there is no stopping a woman who feels so free. She suggests that Cecilia should be told the truth, but Cándido orders her to keep silent and not to utter a word.

Charo reads about herself in the book. Isabel Ilincheta refuses to wear the wedding veil. She does not want to marry Leonardo. Nemesia and Cecilia fight over the veil; Cecilia wins, and wraps herself in it, dreaming about her wedding to Leonardo. Chepilla tells her to forget this man, and Cecilia blames Cándido for her grandmother's attitude. While Isabel and Leonardo dance, Rosa and Cándido are conniving about holding a wedding right away, hoping a new bride will help him forget the **mulata**. Rosa thinks that Cándido's objections to Cecilia must mean he wants the young woman for himself, and she sides with her son.

Nemesia resolves to win Leonardo's affections, and traps Cecilia into an embarrassing situation with Leonardo and Isabel. A jealous Cecilia turns around and starts dancing with Pimienta, who is fooled into thinking that he can win Cecilia's love. Back from the dance, Cecilia finds her grandmother at the verge of death. Chepilla asks God for a few more minutes so she may tell Cecilia the whole truth, but she dies before she can say a word. Leonardo and Cecilia have an erotic **rendezvous**. She complains to him about his father's attitude. He tells her there are rumors about their being brother and sister. But that doesn't stop them from a passionate affair.

Leonardo asks Cándido to act out a particular scene. They discuss the differences between mainland Spaniards and island **criollos**, and suddenly Leonardo accuses Cándido of hiding terrible things from him. The old man laments not being able to tell the truth because of the way the novel is written. He then proposes to "move" to another novel, perhaps a work by Balzac, a motion which Rosa seconds. They discover that such a dream is impossible, that they are condemned to living in Villaverde's novel. Cándido orders Tondá to arrest Cecilia.

Nemesia informs Leonardo of Cecilia's incarceration. He begs his mother for money to bribe the prison guards. Rosa complains about being a fiction character who cannot decide her own destiny. She suspects that Cándido has acted out of jealousy, and gives Leonardo the money. Leonardo frees Cecilia and takes her to live with him, in a house furnished, according to Nemesia, with great luxury.

Nemesia's monologue follows, where she rants and rages against Cecilia's selfishness, about her ability to "pass for white", and demands to be treated as a main character in the novel, and to be remembered with the same passion.

Cecilia has a daughter by Leonardo, who has become cold in their relationship. Cecilia recriminates him, and uses Pimienta to make Leonardo jealous. When Rosa demands an answer from Cándido about his attitude toward Cecilia, Cándido breaks down and tells her the whole truth: his relationship with Charo, the birth of Cecilia, who is also his daughter. He begs Rosa to help him get Leonardo away from Cecilia, away from his sin. Leonardo, Nemesia and Pimienta discuss the conflicts they face. Leonardo, who is no longer in love with Cecilia, accuses her of using him to climb socially. An enraged and frustrated Pimienta defends Cecilia, but Leonardo mocks him. Nemesia gives her brother

a pair of scissors, and tell him to advance to chapter seven in the book, to the murder scene.

Using Leonardo's jacket, Cecilia invokes magic to solve her situation and stop Leonardo's wedding to Isabel. She asks Pimienta to help her; holding the scissors in his hand, he assures Cecilia that he will take care of things.

Rosa helps Isabel with her wedding gown, and they are both scared about the way the novel ends. They complain that every time the book is opened, this story of crime and treason is reenacted, over and over again. But they must go on, and get ready for the wedding.

Pimienta and Cecilia approach the atrium of the Church of the Angel. Cándido warns Leonardo that Pimienta looks dangerous, but Leonardo reacts with his usual arrogance and humiliates Pimienta, who takes out the scissors and stabs him. All the while, Cecilia is heard screaming "Not him, not him, **kill her...**". She comes up to Pimienta and curses him. She goes up to her mother for the first time, and implores the author to release her from having to play this tormented role for all eternity.

Parece Blanca: Scenes

Cecilia's grandmother, Chepilla, explains the advantages of "passing for white" and warns Cecilia that her dreams of a better life as wife of a rich, white man cannot be fulfilled with Leonardo. Cecilia is angry at Chepilla's respect for Cándido, who, she feels, is after her.

CECILIA: Me quiere, lo sé. No sólo porque me lo dijo sino por la forma en que me miraba. Se le humedecieron los ojos. Su voz me acariciaba y sus manos en mi cintura ardían. Me quiere, sí, y lograré que se case conmigo.

CHEPILLA: Mírate: la piel blanca, la nariz fina, y el pelo bueno. Pareces blanca.

CECILIA: ¿Por qué no se va a casar conmigo si me quiere? Viviremos juntos en una casa como la suya: con pisos brillantes y cortinas en las ventanas. Yo me vestiré de muselina blanca y encajes. Y tendremos una hija que sacará su piel, las mejillas rosadas y el pelo lacio. Sí, me quiere. ¿Qué me pasa? Me quiere, me quiere, me quiere, me quiere.

CHEPILLA: Olvida esos sueños. Tenías que olvidar esos sueños.

CECILIA: No podía. Desde niña soñaba con otra vida, otro barrio, otra casa, otros amigos, sí, otra vida que nada tenía que ver con esta casi ni estos muebles. Tú, tú misma metiste esas ambiciones en mi cabeza.

CHEPILLA: Pero con otro hombre.

CECILIA: ¿Y ése, por qué no?

CHEPILLA: Por tu bien y tu tranquilidad.

CECILIA: Todo es por mi bien: no salgas, no lo veas, no bailes. Tantos "no" me convertirán en una momia, vieja y seca. ¿Por qué no quiere que vaya al baile esta noche?

CHEPILLA: No te conviene.

CECILIA: ¿Se lo dijo él, no? Ahora mismo me visto y arranco para la calle.

CHEPILLA: Suelta ese túnico... No vas a ninguna parte. No permitiré que te pierdas por un capricho.

CECILIA: Usted obedece a ese hombre como si fuera su esclava. Usted es libre.

CHEPILLA: Ese hombre se desvela por ti como un padre.

CECILIA: Hay que oírlo: como un padre. Mamita, no sea ingenua. ¿No es muy raro que sea tan generoso con nosotras, un hombre que no es pariente suyo ni mío?

CHEPILLA: Pues nos ha ayudado siempre. Y en cuanto sabe que tienes un antojo corre a complacerte.

CECILIA: Y es lo que más me asusta. Quiero saber por qué lo hace.

CHEPILLA: De ti no espera otra cosa que gratitud y respeto.

CECILIA: ¡Santo Dios! Un hombre rico, y además blanco, y usted se empeña en hacerme creer que sus regalos no ocultan otras intenciones. ¿Quién puede esperar eso de un extraño?

CHEPILLA: ¿Un extraño?..... Te conoce desde niña.

CECILIA: No tiene mi sangre. Y nadie gasta sus onzas en una mulata si no quiere sacar una buena tajada.

Cecilia and Leonardo discuss the attitude of Leonardo's father, Cándido, toward their relationship, and the rumors about their being half brother and sister. Leonardo speaks of Cecilia's resemblance to his sister Adela, and reaffirms his lust for Cecilia's "ardent Blackness", even if it means incest.

CECILIA: Tu padre me persigue.

LEONARDO: Lo he visto. Cuando menos lo espero me topo con él.

CECILIA: Dicen que me quiere como un padre.

LEONARDO: Mi padre no quiere a ninguna mujer como un padre.

CECILIA: ¿Entonces qué quiere tu padre?

LEONARDO: Quitarle la comida al hijo.

CECILIA: ¡Qué mal padre!

LEONARDO: ¡Y qué buen hijo!

CECILIA: A veces me asusta.

LEONARDO: Hace todo lo posible por separarnos: habla con mi madre, no me da dinero.

CECILIA: Chepilla pretende lo mismo. Me rompe los vestidos para impedir que te vea. Se oponen a que te bese así. . . . Sospecho que tú y yo vamos a ser los protagonistas de una gran historia de amor.

LEONARDO: Somos los protagonistas de una gran novela. ¿No sería mejor con música?

CECILIA: Sí, con música. ¡Me encanta!

LEONARDO: Una ópera.

CECILIA: Nuna he visto una ópera.

LEONARDO: Cuando nos casemos te llevaré al Teatro Principal y cantarán un dúo de amor que te recordará este momento.

CECILIA: ¿Te vas a casar conmigo?

LEONARDO: (en broma) Por nada del mundo...¿Casarnos? ¡Qué sacrilegio! Todo el mundo lo comenta. Somos hermanos, dicen.

CECILIA: ¿Y tú lo crees?

LEONARDO: De mi padre creo cualquier cosa. Adora la canela.

CECILIA: (le enseña la piel) Mira, nácar.

LEONARDO: Por fuera. Por dentro tienes fiebre. Sangre negra, y me encanta. . . . Te pareces a mi hermana. . . Trato de explicarme qué pasa, descubrir qué se oculta detrás de tu sonrisa, la misma sonrisa de Adela cuando me mira. Y hay algo que se me escapa y me turba.

CECILIA: Tu guajira me confundió con ella.

LEONARDO: Yo salí a mi madre: saqué sus ojos y su sonrisa. Tú saliste a mi padre, como Adela. Y eres la hermana más linda que tengo.

CECILIA: Tengo miedo. Me erizo.

LEONARDO: Te erizas. De placer. Me encantaría que fuéramos hermanos, así hubiéramos crecido juntos, jugando siempre. Y todo lo que ahora hacemos lo hubiéramos hecho de niños debajo de la cama, jugando.

In this soliloquy, the other mulata in the story, Pimienta's sister Nemesia, complains about her own invisibility, and about Cecilia's selfishness and unhappiness in spite of all the advantages she derives from her "whiteness". She demands that the audience acknowledge her existence and her feelings.

NEMESIA: Tú lo tienes todo. Y te quejas. Nadie está satisfecho con lo que Dios le da. Salimos juntas y no hay hombre que se fije en mí, tú los vuelves locos: vamos a una fiesta y al momento tienes diez proposiciones para bailar; te tiras encima un trapo y parece un túnico de París. Y te quejas. Leonardo te ha puesto casa. ¡Y qué muebles! Cama de caoba, cómoda de seis gavetas, espejo hasta el suelo. ¡Un lujo! Me lo has robado todo. ¡La belleza, y la gracia y el hombre que me gusta ¡ladrona!. Y hasta el cariño de mi hermano que se va a desgriar por quererte. Cuando éramos niñas y chancleteábamos por las plazas, te gustaban las groserías que te gritaban los varones y dejabas que te manosearan por unos panales. Nunca has dado un golpe: el viejo Gamboa te ha mantenido siempre: a tu abuela y a ti; mientras yo me acabo los ojos cosiendo. Pero la niña se antoja de una manta nueva . . . ¡Caprichos de una mulatica que parece blanca! Sí, parece, parece nada más. Porque tu bisabuela, que en paz descansara, era prieta, prieta como un carbón. Vuelve a quejarte y te doy un soplamocos que ruedas por el suelo como una pelota. ¡Desconsiderada, inconforme! ¿Qué más quieres? Escribieron una novela con tu nombre y un siglo después abren el libro y los hombres sueñan contigo como si alguna vez hubieras existido. ¡Y no existes, chica, tú no existes! Y nunca se fijan en mí. (Grita) ¡Nemesia, la hermana de Pimienta se llama Nemesia! No lo olviden. Yo también soy un personaje en la novela y me enamoro, y trabajo y quiero a mi hermano y tengo derecho a que los lectores me recuerden. Pero estoy a tu lado caminando por el callejón de San Juan de Dios, gris como tu sombra, ausente como una muerte. Nada más. Sólo tu sombra, casi imperceptible. Nada más.

Leonardo's parents, Rosa and Cándido, discuss Leonardo's obsession for Cecilia. Rosa thinks her husband is jealous of their son; she reproaches Cándido for his past infidelities with the town's mulatas and slave women. Cándido, who feels entrapped by imminent tragedy, reveals the truth about Cecilia.

ROSA: ¿Qué enredo formaste con esa mulatica que vive con Leonardo?

CANDIDO: Ojalá fuera un enredo.

ROSA: Lo sé todo: sacaste a esa muchacha de su casa y lograste que la encerraran.

CANDIDO: Tu hijo ha cometido el mayor de los errores. Quería evitarlo y como tú no permites que lo toquen, no me quedó otro recurso que tocarla a ella.

ROSA: ¿Y por qué tanto interés?

CANDIDO: Para impedir que Leonardo cometa una verdadera infamia.

ROSA: ¡Qué palabras tan terribles! ¡Infamia! Cualquier muchacho de su edad le pone casa a una querida.

CANDIDO: Esta querida no es una muchacha cualquiera.

ROSA: No. Dicen que es linda. ¿Por qué te alteras?

CANDIDO: Porque soy responsable de su conducta ante Dios.

ROSA: No te hagas el santo. Siempre te comiste el bocado que más te gustaba.

CANDIDO: Durante años has acumulado ese odio contra mí y utilizas a Leonardo para vengarte. Pero ahora no puedo permitirte.

ROSA: ¿Tánto te gusta la mulatica?

CANDIDO: Déjame terminar. No sabes el trabajo que me cuesta lo que voy a decirte.

ROSA: Así serán tus pecados.

CANDIDO: Tengo sobre mi conciencia el abismo en que se hunde mi hijo. ¡Dios!

ROSA: Cándido, no conviertas una simple aventurilla amorosa en una tragedia.

CANDIDO: Es una tragedia. Estamos representando una tragedia y tú no lo sabes.

ROSA: ¡Ay, qué maldición ha caído sobre esta casa! . . . ¿Qué te pasa?

CANDIDO: Nada. Estoy cogido en una trampa y no sé cómo soltarme. Esa muchacha . . . es hija de una traición. ¡No! Del amor, hija del amor. Te lo confieso: hija de una aventura, de un amor de juventud. ¡Sí!, de una traición. A ti y al matrimonio: es mi hija.

Parece Blanca: Study Questions

Some of these study questions are based on the **Parece Blanca** synopsis, scenes, historical essay, Who's Who, and the Bits and Pieces provided here. Others will become more relevant after students have seen the production.

1. "Mírate: la piel blanca, la nariz fina, el pelo bueno. Pareces blanca," says a protective Chepilla to her granddaughter Cecilia. In the context of 19th Century Cuban society, how are these characteristics an advantage to Cecilia?
2. "Mi padre no quiere a ninguna mujer como un padre," explains Leonardo to Cecilia. What are the incestuous implications of such a statement? Find other instances where Cándido is accused of womanizing. Find other hints of incest. Morality aside, is incest treated in this play as a social concern?

3. "Tú lo tienes todo, y te quejas," complains an angry Nemesia to an imaginary Cecilia. How is Nemesia different from Cecilia? In what ways is she more disadvantaged than Cecilia? How do their lives differ?
4. "Estoy cogido en una trampa," cries Cándido to his wife Rosa, speaking about the relationship between their son Leonardo and Cecilia. What is the nature of his entrapment?
5. "Blanco no es un color," says Cecilia to her friend Nemesia. In the context of the time, explain what this means.
6. Describe how the women in this play view marriage. Identify what Chepilla, Nemesia, Rosa, Isabel and Cecilia say and feel about it. How is the marital "destiny" of the colored women in the play different from that of the white women?
7. Leonardo arrogantly defines Pimienta's feelings: "No hables de odio. Habla de celos." Describe the various aspects which may comprise the animosity between them.
8. In the context of this play, what elements constitute a mulata's dream? A white man's dream?
9. Think of the parenting roles and models in this play. How is the Black father-figure portrayed? The Black mother-figure? The rich white father? The rich white mother?
10. Isabel's soliloquy reveals a frightened young woman. What is Isabel afraid of? Why does she refer to herself as "una buena yegua" (a healthy mare)? Is her financial independence an advantage? Why does she feel entrapped?

Sex, Race & Politics in 19th Century Cuba

The ethnic panorama that Christopher Columbus found in Cuba in 1492 was one of peaceful native **Tainos** going about their lives in fear not of pale-face strangers wearing funny armor and bearing arms, but of more mundane things, like the sporadic attacks from mainland **Caribe** tribes (from today's Venezuela and Orinoco delta), and the devastating anger that the evil god **Juracán** displayed during certain times of the year. (Now you know where the word "hurricane" comes from!) Hard labor and disease soon annihilated the **Tainos**. Then someone had the idea that African slaves should do the hard work. It was actually a priest, Father Bartolomé de las Casas who proposed the introduction of slavery. When the first shipment of Africans reached Cuba in 1595, the island's ethnic profile changed forever.

The slave trade in the Spanish colonies became a booming business. The demand for this type of indentured and cheap hard labor was fueled by the rising sugar economy, which could not prosper without a massive work force. If at first the Spanish took the **tainas** for their sexual gratification, they would soon switch to the slave women, whom they

raped and appropriated at will. Such were the beginnings of racial "integration" in Cuba, not in the romantic manner that white historians have told, but instead in a brutal display of power.

Cuba, especially Havana (the country's capital since 1607), was also an obligatory stop for Spanish ships which travelled back to Spain across the Atlantic carrying their loads of gold and silver and other goodies from Perú and Colombia. The ships gathered in convoys, to protect their merchandise against pirate attacks. (Everyone, as you know, was in the business of pillaging, in one way or another). So when those sailors docked in Havana and other ports in the island, they went looking for the Black women and the **mulatas** without fail. Also, large numbers of soldiers and construction workers were brought to Cuba by the colonial government, to protect the island against foreign attacks (mainly from the English) and to build fortifications and roads.

All this human traffic brought thousands of sex-hungry seamen and single male travelers to Cuba, where they stayed for weeks and sometimes months. Remember that women were not allowed to travel very far in those days. The business of sexual "tourism" grew in the island; the brothels were filled with women of color. Between visitors and locals, the Spanish diversified the skin color of the inhabitants of Cuba, and made up strict racial categories to keep the haves from the have-nots well separated. (Refer to Racial Chart, page 17)

It was common for a Spanish man of average to upper social standing to marry a white woman, and procreate his white children with pride and legitimacy. But at the same time, there was a Black slave woman or a freed **mulata** kept hidden somewhere in the background, with her multi-color family living in poverty, namelessness and shame. Even with the exceptions of white men who did marry their Black mistresses, and even taking into account those who took responsibility for their illegitimate children, the races mingled at the expense of colored women and their families.

Small wonder that there was a saying in Cuba, as cruel and vulgar as racism itself, which went something like this: "To be white is a profession; to be **mulato**, a cherished dream; but to be black is as common as a common piece of shit." In that context, one must feel great admiration and respect for those white men and women who became abolitionists, who went against their class and group to fight for racial equality.

In Cuba, when this sentiment sparked into action in the early 1800's, it produced two kinds of abolitionists: those, like José Antonio Saco, Francisco de Arango y Parreño, and Domingo del Monte, who wanted an end to the slave trade because there were too many Blacks in Cuba already, and the white population was becoming a minority; and there were those, like Félix Varela, the poet Plácido, and José Jacinto Milanés who weren't thinking of statistics, but of the human condition and the injustice of slavery. International economic interests, more than philanthropic ideals, changed the reality of slavery in the 19th Century. In 1805, the British Parliament approved the first measures

prohibiting the trade, and in 1817, Ferdinand VII of Spain aligned himself to this position. But in the case of Cuba, this was a measure on paper, not in practice. The sugar mill owners were not about to risk their fortunes, for the use of the steam engine, which could replace much of the human labor force, was not generalized. Cuban slave traders kept at it for decades, on the lookout for the British, and willing to throw overboard an entire shipment of slaves in the middle of the Atlantic if necessary.

Four major factors marked the outcome of 19th Century Cuban politics: the independence movement in the other Spanish colonies; the founding of Haiti as the first Black republic in the continent, in 1804; the defeat of the American South in the Civil War; and the onset of slave rebellions in Cuba. The wars of independence, led by Simón Bolívar and José de San Martín, forced upon the island of Cuba the physical presence of thousands of soldiers that Spain mobilized for the continent. Cuba became Spain's fortified stronghold. No less important was the influence of the enlightenment, which had many followers among the Cuban upper classes.

Then there was the American trump card turned sour, the one Cuba's annexationists hoped would favor them by guaranteeing admission of Southern backed Cuba to the American Union as a slavery state. Lastly, the slave victory in neighboring Hispaniola nurtured the fear among wealthy Cubans about a similar outcome at home. Even Bolívar would write to Saco advising caution, let not another Haiti happen in Cuba, and darken (literally) the profile of the newly founded South American republics.

But freedom was already ringing hard in Cuba. There were many freed Blacks and **mulatos** who had access to world news, who knew about Haiti, who had access to education and ideas. Everyone in Cuba knew how England was fighting to enforce the ban on the slave trade, and to abolish slavery. In 1812, Aponte's Rebellion takes place, the first major slave uprising in the island. Although it was aborted, and Aponte and his men hung, the rebellion set the wheels in motion, and awakened many **criollo** intellectuals to its cause.

By 1841, slave and freed Blacks made up 58% of the population. In 1844, a major conspiracy - **la Escalera** - was suppressed. The repercussions of these events in Cuba reached as far as Madrid, for it was not just **the power of the landed Cuban criollo** aristocracy that was at stake: it was the power of the Spanish Crown over its last major colony in the Americas, and the income it derived thereof. What transpired during the rest of the 19th Century in Cuba can best be defined as the failure of diplomacy and the triumph of insurrection.

Cubans went to war against Spain in 1869. Now that the hope of becoming an American state was gone, annexationists joined the independent cause to insure for themselves full mercantile authority in Cuba's trade with the United States. Slavery was not an issue in this war, although freed Blacks fought in it. It is no wonder that the Peace Treaty that ended the war ten years later, included nothing about its abolition.

When Cubans re-grouped again for war in 1895, after years of searching for alternative solutions that ranged from colonial reform, autonomy within the Spanish government, and annexation to the U.S., it was a whole different ballgame: slaves had been emancipated and now made up much of the rebel army; a rising middle and upper class of **mulatos** and Blacks joined their white brothers in the struggle; the sugar economy was purposely set ablaze and destroyed by the insurgents in order to choke the economic power of Spain and its Cuban lackeys; and this time, with white, Black and **mulato** generals at the helm, there would be no turning back.

The U.S. entered the war on the side of Cuba and helped win it. Although American occupation tarnished the sweet glow of victory, and the Platt Amendment to the Cuban Constitution conditioned Cuban sovereignty to U.S. interests until 1934, Cuba became an independent Republic in 1902.

What a Century! Cuba since 1902

From reading the previous essay, you should have a general idea of what the situation was like in Cuba throughout the 19th century. This information was meant to broaden your understanding of **Parece blanca** and **Vagos rumores**, the historical plays. In the present essay, we wish to give you a similar overview of Cuban life between independence and the onset of the 1959 revolution (1902-1959), and about a totally transformed [not necessarily for the better] Cuba after the revolution. This should help you understand the lives of the characters in **Las penas saben nadar** and **El baile**.

After the definitive three-year war of independence (1895-1898), Cuban society was left practically in shambles. The war effort succeeded with the help of the U.S. military - Teddy Roosevelt's RoughRiders - who came to Cuba's rescue at the request of the insurgent Cuban army and the government-in-arms. The Treaty of Paris settled all claims, but Cubans were not asked to the negotiations. The U.S. and Spain decided the outcome, one of which was that the Americans would remain in Cuba to guarantee safety.

When the military intervention was brought to a close with the raising of the Cuban flag at El Morro Castle on May 20th, 1902, and the new republic was proclaimed, a lot had changed in the horizon. During its occupation, the U.S. did establish a semblance of orderly management and began developing an infrastructure of services - sewer, public health and sanitation, as well as education - that lay the foundation for a national recovery. Most experts agree that without U.S. human and financial resources, that recovery would have been much slower. It's also true that deployment of such humanitarian assistance did not require a military force, or the paternalist rider to the Cuban Constitution known as the Platt Amendment. This amendment gave the U.S. the right to intervene in the political affairs of Cuba when it deemed necessary for keeping law and order in the island.

Needless to say, this was a source of hostility between Cubans and its northern neighbors until the amendment was repealed in 1934. To this day, the Platt Amendment lingers in the collective Cuban mind as a reminder of early American imperialism toward Cuba. In fact, since the revolution of 1959, the term *platista* has been used to describe a person or position deemed friendly to the U.S. Contrary to popular opinion, Cubans in the early republic had a positive attitude toward the U.S.; anti-American sentiment was a result of the political upheavals of the 1930's.

The year 1934 was important not only because of the revocation of the Platt Amendment, but also because on February 3rd of that year, women's suffrage was signed into law after three decades of struggle on the part of suffragists, feminists and progressive male politicians. Those first thirty years of the Cuban republic were difficult, but stable. The U.S. reluctantly intervened between 1906-1908, and again in 1917. Also, in 1912, about five thousand Cuban blacks were massacred in the Santiago de Cuba area, thus aborting a racial civil war.

The growing pains brought their share of corruption and caudillos, the most notorious being of whom was General Gerardo Machado, who was president between 1925-33. Although widely admired for his nationalism and for his plans to industrialize Cuba, Machado let power go to his head. He extended his term beyond four years, and that caused political havoc. The opposition forced him to step down in August of 1933, but not before many activists were imprisoned or forced into exile, rivals killed, and terrorism and political upheaval swept across the country. This chapter is known in Cuban history as the revolution of 1933.

Finally, on September 4th, days after Machado's ouster, Sargent Fulgencio Batista staged a military coup backed by Machado's university-based opposition. Batista led the political factions to the worktable, and in 1939, a Constitutional Assembly was charged with drafting a new constitution. The most eminent Cuban minds of the period - including three women - drafted the 1940 Constitution, a document that, by all standards, was among the most progressive and civil rights-oriented in the world. With a new constitution - and no Platt Amendment - free and democratic elections were held in 1940, and Batista was elected president.

The 1940's and 1950's were decades of prosperity and growth for Cuba, in economic and social terms. Batista (president 1940-1944), as well as his two successors, Ramon Grau San Martín, a physician (1944-1948) and Carlos Prío Socarrás, an attorney (1948-1952) -- both veterans of the anti-Machado struggle -- encouraged social and economic progress. By 1953, Cuba's literacy rate was 78%, and the country was third (in Latin America) and fifth (in the continent) in development indicators, faring better than even some European countries.

In 1952, then Senator Batista overthrew President Prio Socarras months before scheduled elections. Many analysts feel that, had there been no dictatorship, there would

have been no guerrilla, and certainly no forty years of socialism in Cuba. Be that as it may, Batista rose to the presidency in 1952; on January 1st, 1959, with guerrilla warfare in the hills, and urban terrorism in Havana, Batista fled, thus clearing the way for Castro to rise to power.

The euphoria of 1959 - just about everyone supported change and had faith in the revolution - soon gave way to discontent. When Castro announced in 1961 that he was a Marxist-Leninist, most people were shocked. That had not been the revolution they wanted. Nonetheless, with the Bay of Pigs [U.S.] invasion in 1961, Castro consolidated power, and placed all his eggs in the Soviet basket.

With the revolution came nationalization of private property. Land owners, farmers, small business operators, merchants, private industry, and foreign concerns..... everyone's property passed into State hands. Many entrepreneurs that had built family businesses from scratch - like **El baile's** Conrado - lost everything, some without indemnification, in the name of social justice and equality. Early exiles came from middle and upper classes whose hard-worked past and prosperous present the revolution took from them. Later exiles -- from the 1980 Mariel exodus to more recent balseros (boat people) -- have come from the only class there is in Cuba, the working class. The typical balsero weeps for time wasted and for a future denied. Twelve percent (about 1.5 million) of the population of Cuba (about 12 million) is in exile today. Both the Cuban and the U.S. governments estimate that thousands of Cubans have drowned in the Florida Straits trying to leave socialism behind.

There have been accomplishments in culture, sports, education and public health. The arts, for instance, have received an overwhelming support from the government, although its critics point to how strongly the authorities cater to foreign artists and writers, at the expense of local talent. The one major drawback is that artistic freedom - as is freedom of expression - is legally curtailed by the 1976 socialist constitution. The constitution states that "no art can be created if it is in contradiction to the goals of socialist society." Castro himself gagged artistic freedom as early as 1961, when he stated at an Intellectuals Congress: "The rights of artists are as follows: within the scope of the revolution, every right; outside the scope of the revolution, no rights."

The Cuban people have sacrificed plenty in exchange for reading, rumba and rubella shots. Contrary to official propaganda that states these social services are free, Cubans indirectly pay for education and medical care through un-itemized deductions the State has withheld from workers' paychecks since 1964. They also pay by living with shortages, lack of consumer goods, and the obligatory ration card, instituted in 1961 (!) -- that barely puts food on the table. Since 1995, when Castro legalized the use of dollars in the island, the already low standard of living plummeted. Crime and prostitution are on the rise, and peso-earning professionals are giving up their careers to drive taxis, perm hair, and sell hamburgers to tourists in order to earn American dollars.

A new wave of capitalism is part of slow economic reforms. But only foreigners are allowed to invest. Some Canadian companies pay as much as US \$10,000 per worker annually to the Cuban government. In turn, the government pays Cubans who work in those companies roughly US\$30 a month. That is equivalent to 600 pesos, a fortune when compared to a doctor's monthly salary of 250 pesos. The government thus pockets about US\$9,500 per worker per annum. Cubans who wish to engage in self-employment either do it illegally, or they must pay outrageous license fees they can't afford. Tourism development is the number one priority these days, resulting in a tidal wave of sexual tourism that is so alarming it's a topic of discussion at various levels in the United Nations.

So, the "Titos" of the world head for Miami, by plane or by balsa; the "Conrados" commit suicide or die of heart attacks; the "Fabrizios" continue to flee in order to avoid arrest and imprisonment; the "Ninas" scrounge for dollars and await their letters of invitation; and Actresses who face unequal opportunity escape into French monologues and threaten to destroy the world's stages.

(What do you suppose the 21st century will bring?)

¿Y tu abuela, dónde está?

RACIAL CLASSIFICATION

Racial Classification in 19th Century Cuba was such an issue, that categories were arbitrarily invented to identify the percentage of white and of color that a person had in his or her genes. Before marrying, people had to show proof of "blood purity", another name for "racial purity", before the marriage could be officiated, to ensure that no white man or woman - especially woman - would unknowingly marry a "mulato" passing for white.

And so, the old saying "Where is your grandma hidden?". Someone being asked that question is being told in no uncertain terms that it's no use trying to hide the Black ancestors. Grandma, in this saying, is always "colored"; for the daughters or granddaughters to pass for white, she would have to be hidden away in the kitchen with the help, where she belongs. Although almost untranslatable, here is the colonial racial chart, to illustrate the point:

Casos y Cosas - Bits & Pieces

APONTE REBELLION

The Aponte Rebellion of 1812, led by free **mulato** José Antonio Aponte, himself a carpenter and wood carver, a trade assigned to people of color in 19th Century Cuba. Under Aponte's leadership, the conspiracy drew support from one end of the island to the other, in the sugar plantations of Guanabacoa and Jaruco, in the West, and as far East as Puerto Príncipe and Oriente. It was the first national call to violence, and Spanish authorities crushed it with a

vengeance, invoking the right to protect Cuban Society from a Black take-over similar to the one in Haiti ten years before. Aponte and his supporters were hung.

ESCALERA CONSPIRACY

The Escalera Conspiracy occurred in June 1844 under Captain General O'Donnell's rule. It was the most notorious abolitionist conspiracy against Spain's power, organized mostly by free **mulatos**. Much of the intellectual Black and **criollo** elite supported it. Its name derives from the torture method used to make slaves and Blacks suspected of conspiracy confess to their involvement and reveal the names of others: they were tied, hands and feet, to a step ladder (**escalera**, in Spanish) and whipped until they talked. Many of the accused, in fact, had not been directly involved, as was the case of Plácido, who was a victim of this terror at age 35.

HAITI'S REBELLION

Haiti's liberation began in 1794, shortly after the French Revolution of 1789. Under the leadership of Toussaint L'Overture, known to Haitians as "The Precursor", slaves were set free. The French moved to recapture their Caribbean colony in the island of Hispaniola, as it was called, and in 1802 L'Overture was captured and sent to prison in France. But the spirit of independence proved to be irreversible, and under General Jean Jacques Dessalines, the colony was finally freed in 1804, the name Haiti adopted officially, and Dessalines proclaimed emperor. This meant that the first independent Black "republic" had been established in the American continent. Throughout Spanish America, the leadership of the independence movements, including Simón Bolívar, deplored the situation, and advised Cubans to delay their own independence until the balance of slaves and whites tipped considerably toward the latter, for fear of another "savage" Black republic in the Americas.

CEPO: the stocks used for punishment of slaves and criminals, made up of two wooden planks which open to allow placement of the head, arms and sometimes the feet of a person, and that once closed down, holds the person prisoner.

GARROTE: was the Spanish instrument of torture and also execution, most used during the 19th Century. It consisted of an iron collar with a giant screw, which when tightened around the throat would strangle the person to death.

TEA: is any piece of wood covered with resin that when lit, becomes a torch. "La tea" was the name used by Cubans during their armed insurrection against Spain - also by abolitionists against the power of the white slave owners - to describe the burning of sugar cane fields as a strategy to bring down the slave economy that kept Spain's colonial rule financially solvent.

LOS QUINCE

Quince is the Spanish word for fifteen. The quince party is the traditional Hispanic celebration of a young woman coming of age. It's the equivalent of the "sweet sixteen" in the U.S. The quince celebration can be as simple as a party, in the girl's house to as lavish an event as a debutante ball. (This is what **El Baile** represents, Nina's quince party, which was an all-out bash). How fancy the quinces are depends on how much a family can afford. Needless to say, it's the one event through which people "keep up with the Garcías." In Cuba, the quinces tradition is so strong that, in spite of its bourgeois origins and capitalist trappings, forty years

of socialism have not lessened its importance. Parents will do anything to ensure that their daughters have a quince party. Cubans in the U.S. maintain the quince as a tradition, which at the very least will find the quinceañera garbed in a rented gown to have her studio portrait taken by a professional photographer; and at its very best, involves expensive catering halls, choreographed waltzing, videotaping, and even parading the young girl on specially designed mini-floats.

SPANGLISH

Spanglish is the slang that results when an English-language word is phonetically turned into a Spanish-language term. (We hear some Spanglish in Tito's letters to Nina, written from Miami). Most Hispanics in the U.S. use Spanglish to some degree. Words like **lonchar**, from the word "lunch" to which an "ar" verb ending is added, have become widely used. **Lonchar** has displaced the Spanish word "almorzar". Technical terms easily fall into Spanglish by a phonetic pronunciation: **el maicroueif**, from the English "microwave", for microwave oven; **beismen**, from the English "basement" for "el sótano"; **rufo**, from the English "roof", for "la azotea." Spanglish has its detractors and its defenders. The former take the purist perspective, saying that U.S. Hispanics will eventually speak neither Spanish nor English correctly if they keep mixing the two. Those who defend Spanglish see the addition of Anglo terms as enrichment, much like the influence of Arabic hundreds of years ago -- *almorzar* and *azotea* both stem from the Arabic -- and that of African and Native American languages. Yoruba, Congo, Quechua, Arahua, and other non-European languages have given Spanish words like *huracán*, *henequén*, *canoas*, *bohío*, *bembé*, *cacao*, *ñame*, and thousands more.

NUESTRO VINO ES AGRIO

Cuban patriot, poet and journalist José Martí (1853-1895) wrote countless essays and articles about a variety of subjects. His most eloquent writings, however, were about freedom, and about Cuba and its independence from Spain. A nationalist and pan-americanist at heart, he penned many works to inspire Cubans to be proud of their heritage and potential as a nation. "**Nuestro vino es agrio pero es nuestro vino**" is one such phrase, which roughly translates to mean "Our wine is sour, but it's our wine."

CARTA DE INVITACIÓN

Cubans who live in the island are not allowed to travel freely abroad, not even as tourists. Travel to the U.S., a most common practice before the 1959 revolution, is very restricted, because Cuba and the U.S. have had no diplomatic or trade relations since 1961. Cubans who have come to the U.S. since 1959 have done so as political refugees for the most part. More recently, Cuban-Americans have been allowed to invite relatives and friends to visit the U.S. A letter of invitation -- *la carta de invitación* -- is required. The prospective visitor in Cuba must go to the U.S. Interest Office located at the Swiss Embassy in Havana, and once there state their wish to visit the U.S. and request issuance of a visitor's visa. Many requests are turned down, especially when U.S. immigration authorities in the U.S. Interest Office fear the applicant might have reason to extend his/her visit and stay in the U.S. for more than a year, after which the Cuban national is permitted to adjust his/her status under the Cuban Adjustment Act, and stay in the U.S. legally. When a visa is approved, then the relative in the

U.S. must send the letter of invitation. Filing the invitation with the Cuban authorities costs US\$ 175, which the relative in the U.S. must provide, along with the money for the Cuban passport and the roundtrip airfare, in U.S. dollars! In **El baile**, Nina has received an invitation letter from Tito, but due to mistakes in it, she asks him for another. Taking into consideration that Nina's children and grandchildren are in the U.S., and that she is a widow, do you suppose she will be granted the visa?

MANGOS BAJITOS

Mangos, that delicious, bittersweet, tropical fruit you don't see often in American supermarkets grow on luscious mango trees. The branches usually fan outward, and the trees are not very high. Since the fruit is heavy, a branch holding several mangos droops to within arms' reach, and the mangos can be picked quite easily. Thus, **mangos bajitos** -- low-hanging mangos -- are synonymous of easy catch. The phrase applied to a person's predicament points to that person's vulnerability, his/her being taken advantage of, or being prey to someone else's designs.

(What do you suppose the 21st century will bring?)

Who is Who - Quién es quién

DOMINGO DEL MONTE

Domingo del Monte (1804 - 1853) lived in Matanzas, Cuba, where he met José Jacinto Milanés. He graduated from Law School and started his law practice in 1827. He was a pivotal force in Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País. He and José Antonio Saco shared the same abolitionist thinking: stop increasing the slave population and bring in more civilizing white Spaniards. He befriended Milanés and Francisco Manzano, and promoted their works. During the cruel repression that followed the Escalera Conspiracy of 1844, he moved to Paris. From there he went to Madrid, where he died in 1846.

JUAN FRANCISCO MANZANO

Juan Francisco Manzano (1797-1854) was born a slave. Early in life he showed a talent for writing. In his autobiography he describes in detail the compassionate as well as the cruel treatment he received from various masters. In 1827, his first book of verse was published. Under the initiative of Domingo del Monte, the money required to purchase Manzano's freedom from his owner was raised, and in 1837, the poet became a free man. He was accused of joining the Escalera Conspiracy and was imprisoned; however, his life was spared and he was released in 1845. He continued writing until his death.

JOSÉ JACINTO MILANÉS

José Jacinto Milanés (1814-1863), the protagonist of **Vagos Rumores**, was born in Matanzas. A white man from a poor family, he was admired by Domingo del Monte, who brought him into his literary circle, and gave him guidance and encouragement. Milanés wrote only between 1836 and 1843, barely seven years, and spent the last twenty years of his life in a state of insanity. He had fallen madly in love with his young cousin, Isabel Ximeno. But her father had plans to marry her off into a rich and powerful family.

Milanés went mad, literally, and but for brief periods of health during which his family took him on trips abroad, he never recovered. His complete works were published in 1846, when the poet was already ill.

GABRIEL DE LA CONCEPCIÓN VALDÉS

Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés (1809-1844), better known as Plácido, was born in Matanzas. He was a **mulato** who dared to go beyond the "place" assigned him in racist Cuban society, that of being "a carpenter, a comb-maker, or a musician" -- to become a poet. His first book of verse was published in 1838. At first his poetry was laudatory of the powers around him; but in 1843 he published "El hijo de la maldición" (Son of damnation) which left no doubt of his opposition to slavery and colonialism. He was arrested during the Escalera Conspiracy of 1844, although it is widely believed that he was not part of it. Regardless, he was charged with sedition, and executed, at age 35.

JOSÉ ANTONIO SACO

José Antonio Saco (1797-1878) was among Cuba's foremost thinkers of the early 19th Century, a disciple of Father Varela and close friend of Domingo del Monte. An educator and economist, Saco was the leading abolitionist of his time. But what he wanted to abolish was the slave trade, not slavery per se. He was not so much concerned about the rights of Blacks to be free. Instead, Saco was a white supremacist, like Domingo del Monte and so many others in his time, who feared that any further increase in the slave population would tip the scales in favor of a slave rebellion and eventual Black takeover, much like it had occurred in neighboring Haiti at the turn of the century.

FÉLIX VARELA Y MORALES

Felix Varela y Morales (1788-1853) was Cuba's foremost thinker of the 19th Century, a liberal who inspired four generations of Cuban intellectuals to fight for freedom. A priest and prolific writer, he was the first **criollo** to speak of a Cuban national identity, which is why it is said that Varela taught Cubans how to think "as Cubans". He was an ardent abolitionist and advocate of human rights. Among his followers were Domingo del Monte, José Antonio Saco, Cirilo Villaverde, Francisco Manzano and José de la Luz y Caballero, clearly, the Cuban intelligentsia. But his influence reached beyond his death to influence those who would bring Cuba to independence in 1898, after two devastating wars against Spain, the last of which (1895-1898) we know as the Spanish-American War. Father Varela lived in exile most of his life, and left his mark in New York City and in St. Augustine, Florida, where he died.

CIRILO VILLAVERDE

Cirilo Villaverde (1812-1894) was a lawyer, but his great passion was writing. He belonged to the literary circle of Domingo del Monte, and became Cuba's most famous 19th Century novelist. His Cecilia Valdés, published in New York in 1882, is considered a masterpiece of Cuban **costumbrismo**, i.e. works that portray real life. Villaverde and his wife, educator and activist Emilia Casanova, were staunch abolitionists and supporters of Cuban independence from Spain. After being sentenced to death for

alleged sedition, he escaped to the United States. In 1858 he returned to Cuba under a general amnesty, but soon was back in New York, where he and his wife founded a school and continued writing, all the while working for Cuba's independence. He died in exile without seeing that dream come true.

MANUEL DE ZEQUEIRA Y ARANGO

Born in 1764, Manuel de Zequeira y Arango was one of a handful of Cuban writers from the late 18th Century who favored the definition of a Cuban identity. In Vagos Rumores, the Beggar says to the poet Milanés: "Toma el sombrero de Zequeira. ¡Desaparece! y oye lo que dice la gente. Hablan de ti maravillados. Tienes el poder de la palabra que pasa a la posteridad". (Take Zequeira's hat and disappear into the multitude. Listen to what people are saying. They speak wonders of you. You have the literary gift that will take you into posterity).

VIRGILIO PIÑERA

Considered by many to be the greatest Cuban playwright of the 20th century, Virgilio Piñera was born in 1912 in Matanzas province, the very year Cuba came close to a racial civil war. He moved to Havana, where he obtained a degree in philosophy in 1940. He lived in Argentina for fourteen years during the 40's and 50's ; there he published his novel **La carne de René** (1952) and his **Cuentos fríos** (1955). He was prolific with poetry, and wrote several novels. He returned to Havana in time to join author Guillermo Cabrera Infante and the staff of *Lunes*, the cultural weekly journal of the newspaper *Revolución*. But the honeymoon between Castro's government and intellectuals was short-lived. Unlike many of his colleagues that went into exile, Piñera chose to remain in Cuba. Of his many plays, the best known are **Aire frío** (1959), his masterpiece, and **Dos viejos pánicos** (1968), the last work he wrote before being cornered into a long period of ostracism and silence that lasted until his death in Havana in 1979.

GERTRUDIS GOMEZ DE AVELLANEDA

Tula, as she was dearly called, was born in Camaguey in 1814. By far the leading female literary figure of the [Cuban] 19th century, and at the top of the list when it comes to naming Cuba's most talented writers, La Avellaneda was a child prodigy who wrote poetry at age nine. In 1836 she left Cuba for Spain with her mother and stepfather; she did not return until twenty-three years later. But who can doubt that Cuba remained in her heart. In Spain she became a prolific and brilliant writer, publishing not only poetry -- for which she is best known -- but also prose (her novels **La mano de Dios** and **Sab**, for instance), and theater (**La hija de las flores**, **Baltasar**, among others). A feminist deep down, and an abolitionist -- her critics in the chauvinist literary circles of Europe felt she was "too much like a man" -- she returned to Cuba in 1859, with her second husband, a Spanish government bureaucrat who died in Havana in 1863. She returned to Madrid, where she remained until her death in 1873.

LUISA PÉREZ DE ZAMBRANA

Although most of her work was published posthumously, Luisa Pérez de Zambrana's entire life was spent in literary circles. Her home in El Cobre, where she was born in 1835, as well as those in Santiago de Cuba and later in Havana, were meeting places - *salón de tertulias* - for writers and intellectuals of her time. She published her first poem at age fourteen. In 1869, she published a collection of poems titled *Poesías*, while she continued to write for several literary magazines. She married another important author, Ramón Zambrana, who died in 1866, leaving her and their five children in a vulnerable financial position. Her life was tragic in that not only did she become a widow young, but also in that she saw every one of her children die in a matter of years. Thus inspired by the death of her loved ones, she became the elegiac poet par excellence. Pérez de Zambrana lived a very long life, experiencing Cuba's wars of independence, the founding of the republic, and initial reform for women's rights. She died in 1922, at the age of eighty-seven.

El Baile: Synopsis

Angelina Zaldívar - Nina - is an elderly widow who lives with Simon, and her demented sister, Amalia, in the Vedado suburb of Havana. The ghosts of her husband Conrado, and a lover from her youth, Fabrizio, come to life in the house, as Nina faces the difficult decision of having to sell a valuable pearl necklace, a family heirloom. It's 1995 on stage. In real life, the worse year of Cuba's Special Period. (Refer to [What a century! Cuba since 1902](#) in this Guide.) People's purchasing power in Cuban pesos has been demolished by the government's recently approved dollar policy. Nina has a potential buyer who will pay dollars for the necklace. She is torn between her need to generate money and that of preserving memories.

She has already sold some furniture and other possessions, but it is difficult to part with the necklace. It has been in the family for three generations. It belonged originally to her grandmother, was passed down to her own mother, and then worn by her the night of her debutante ball, the night of her quinces. That was the night she met her young lover, the one and only time she danced with him. The necklace, therefore, is also tied to that illusion.

The phone rings as Nina arrives from running errands. It's a wrong number, but in the process she realizes there is no dial tone. As she talks to herself about Simon's habits, and the pros and cons of names like Delia or Sarah, an apparition walks across the stage. The phone rings again; it's a friend, and she asks her to report the phone. "I can get calls, but I can't dial out." The man's voice is heard in the background. It's Conrado, her dead husband, who lingers around the house watching her every move. Now, through reminiscences and reproaches, we learn about their unhappy marriage. As Nina moves through the room, she discovers a young man waiting in the shadows. He wears a Panama hat. She opens an old jewelry box, pulls out the pearl necklace, and ties it around her neck. As she dances with the young man, she becomes young again.

The music ends, the young man disappears, and Nina approaches Conrado. "Help me take off the necklace. I have never been able to do it by myself." He obliges, showing a bit of resentment toward the jewel. In spite of the pain, they will recreate their story. He wants explanations to her coldness and aloofness, although he already knows the answer: all the time they were married, Nina remained in love with the memory of the young lover.

They rehash the story of their lives. Conrado had an unhappy childhood, never having met his dad, and losing his mother very early. After her death, he went to live with Yoyo and Yayo, twin brothers who owned a carpentry shop. They took him in and taught him the trade. He inherited the shop from them, and made lots of money. He was happy making furniture.

Conrado wants to help her. She says it's useless. He realizes her unhappiness and wants to console her. "If only I had been at the dance that night, I would have spared you the mirage." It was no mirage to her, but a real experience, as real as her memory of him. She still feels the lover's warmth, his eyes staring at her. "He still makes me hot" she tells Conrado. The prospective buyer calls. She still has not come to a decision. Her family history is in every link. The young man approaches her, passionately. We learn he is a painter; his love of art was greater than any feelings he might have had for Nina. "I am tired of dreams, of illusions; I want us to be real." But her request goes unheeded. "They are after me, my life is in real danger. I cannot stay. If I never come back, don't believe what they say. I will remember you."

Nina sits down to write a letter. "Havana, December 14, 1995. Dear kids..." Nina and Conrado's children have left Cuba, and now live in Miami. They talk on the phone every so often, and she imagines their lives through photographs she has received. Now they have sent her a letter of invitation so she may go to Miami for a visit - or perhaps to stay permanently - but her date-of-birth is listed incorrectly. She needs advise about whether to sell the necklace, and must ask for another letter. As she waters her plants and complaints out loud about nieces and nephews who want to take over her house, Conrado watches and listens. "You have plenty of rooms here, lots of bathrooms and patios. One should be generous, Nina" he suggests. "It's easy for you to say 'cause you are not here, you are dead!"

Conrado observes her sadly. He knows the young man is never coming back. She excuses him: "He was dedicated to a cause, he could have been shot any day. But he was the most passionate lover. If I scream it's because I lust for him..." Conrado feels humiliated. He wants her to forget him, to re-think their marriage. But he knows it's no use.

The phone is working again, and she places a call to Miami. Her children are not home. She must talk to them about a second letter. Memories come back again, this time of her

sister, their childhood. She picks up the family photographs, and starts having second thoughts about leaving Cuba. "I can't leave Amalia here, and she is too weak to travel. Who will take care of her?" She calls out for Conrado. "You've been spared all this living pain. Everyone is leaving." Conrado agrees they should. There is nothing left in Cuba, everything has been altered. He is happy the children are creating "a life of their own" in another land.

Conrado then reminisces about his own life: The death of Jesús, then the death of Manuel (Yoyo and Yayo); his taking over the carpentry shop; the day he saw Nina for the first time. He puts on a suit, splashes on some cologne, and becomes a young man again. The same happens to Nina. We witness their meeting, the beginning of their courtship, the wedding day. But Nina breaks the spell: "Twenty five years of marriage, two kids, and a monotonous life. It couldn't have been any other way." She turns to the imaginary lover, who appears again: "You broke your promise and betrayed my expectations. You even sent me a postcard. Wasn't it a signal?" Conrado pulls her back, telling her she cannot continue this way. "You are only a carpenter, so don't start playing psychologist with me! Wasn't your own illness a form of suicide?"

Conrado picks up a newspaper. He is back in the early 1960's; his business has been confiscated. "My heart can't take it. I was always a good employer, an honest businessman. Now they call me a thief and an exploiter of workers. Forty years of hard work has turned to dust." Nina anguishes over something else entirely: who will take her of her deranged sister Amalia if she dies first? She gets an anxiety attack and rushes to take her medicine. It's time for Amalia's injection. "To think I have no one to say good night to at the end of the day!"

The phone rings. It's the children calling from Miami. Nina tells them she needs a new letter of invitation, celebrates the photographs and talks about the grandchildren. "I'll be 76 in January! Why don't you come to visit?" In the midst of the conversation, time runs out.

The young man appears again. This time he addresses the audience. "My name is Fabrizio, a romantic name from the nineteenth century." He is back in the 19th century, during the Cuban wars of independence. A bit later, he'll be in the 1930's, speaking of revolution and the prospects of being shot to death. He reminisces about the debutante ball, and his dance with Nina. "In times of war, people have always kept on loving, enjoying love, suffering from love, killing for love." He dances with an imaginary Nina in the form of a pink wedding veil. "Nina was mine from the very first moment." While living in Manhattan, he sent her a postcard of Van Gogh's Sunflowers. He never contacted her any more.

Conrado has been listening. "You speak with such frivolity, I could wring your neck." They argue about what they have and don't have in common. Conrado has spent a lifetime hating someone he had never met. Now, he is face to face with his ghost, with

the culprit of Nina's unhappiness, and his own. They come close to a fistfight, but the phone rings. Nina answers, but there is no one there.

Nina sits down to read a letter from her son. "Dear mother . . ." They have been abroad for a year now. Life in Miami is wonderful. They have a nice apartment, hot water, a refrigerator, and a microwave oven. He is holding two jobs and was having problems sleeping. Supermarkets, bars and flower shops have the same names they had in Cuba. But Miami is not like Havana. He remembers the patio and the mango tree. But he also remembers the pro-government mob that attacked him because he wanted to leave Cuba. "Take care of my aunt, and take care of yourself. What's important to me is that we can be together again."

Nina falls into a dream-like trance. She is in a dilapidated room where you can hear the Merry Widow's Waltz. Dancers move as if in slow motion. She is wearing her string of pearls. People are staring at the pearls, with such intensity that the necklace breaks and the pearls scatter. Everyone tries to pick up some pearls, and they trip and fall and laugh. A black bird comes through the window, and picks up a pearl with his claws. She flies after him and realizes in mid-air that she doesn't know how to fly. She falls to the ground, screaming. No one is there. She is sweating. Bells ring. It's the phone.

Nina calls on Conrado to ask for his advice about whether to sell the necklace. He feels she should sell it, as long as they are real pearls. She jumps to defend her family's honor. "My grandfather wouldn't buy fake pearls, just like he would never tell a lie." Conrado has a different opinion: "More people aren't named Zaldívar because your grandfather didn't recognize all the illegitimate children he left behind." If it's lies they are going to talk about, Nina retaliates, then how about Conrado's lover, a mulata. He feels it's unimportant: Nina was the first to be unfaithful, if only in her dreams. Angrily he tells her to keep the damned necklace as a symbol of the only important day in her life: the day she met the lover back in 1935.

Nina now consults Fabrizio. He doesn't remember the necklace, or saying to Nina that her eyes sparkled more than the pearls. "We Cuban men are always making things up to please women. If the necklace means something to you, keep it. If I owned a Van Gogh, I would never sell it." The phone rings. It's the prospective buyer. The price he offers is way too low. She is insulted. "They smell need, and want to take advantage." She turns the offer down, wants more money. "I am not selling pearls, I am selling moments in time that will never be repeated." She finally settles on a price, and tells the buyer to hurry before she changes her mind.

Conrado comes close to her and caresses her hair. Nina is embarrassed for Conrado has witnessed the bargaining, a cheap move in her opinion. Fabrizio is gone. As it turns out, Conrado had seen the sunflower postcard, and had torn it apart. Nina regrets their mistakes. He assures her that the clocks will go crazy and the hand of time will turn back.

He will always live in that house, close to her, to re-invent the past. They remember the coffee aroma in the mornings. The phone rings. Nina picks up the receiver.

El Baile: Scenes

Conrado's ghost and Nina speak of their unhappy marriage. She is wearing the pearl necklace, and asks Conrado to undo the lock. He hates the jewel, for it reminds Nina of an unfulfilled love that stood between them throughout their marriage.

CONRADO: Todo el tiempo que viví a tu lado viví triste. Trataba de adivinar qué pasaba por tus ojos y tú bajabas los párpados y esquivabas mis preguntas. Busqué otro refugio, un rincón donde guarecerme de tanta indiferencia. Tú lo negarás, dirás que no fue así. El día de mi muerte te asustaste. Descubrí en tus ojos el miedo. Mientras la muerte me ofrecía su mano, me dí cuenta de que siempre habías rechazado mi devoción. Y desde entonces la casa...

NINA: Quitame el collar. Nunca he podido zafar el broche sola. Es tan complicado.

CONRADO: Tú lo complicas todo. Todo. ¿Ves? Ya está. Tu tesoro. Yo puedo regalarte sortijas, broches, pulseras, un camafeo traído de Egipto y nada te interesa. Sólo el collar.

NINA: Me lo regaló mi papá.

CONRADO: Lo usaste en el baile.

NINA: Me lo regaló para que lo usara en el baile.

CONRADO: Y eso lo convirtió en una reliquia.

NINA: ¿Celos de papá?

CONRADO: Nunca he tenido celos de nadie.

NINA: (Suelta una carcajada)

CONRADO: Tantos años juntos y no me conoces.

NINA: No se conoce a las piedras. Piedra sobre piedra y se construye una esfinge.

CONRADO: Una pirámide. El sepulcro de los muertos.

NINA: Voy a guardar el collar. ¿Tú estabas en el baile?

CONRADO: No sé.

NINA: Tenemos que saberlo. Si no, ¿cómo armar la historia?

CONRADO: A veces pienso que no existo. Algunos pensamientos, una frase, un reloj de bolsillo: piezas de un rompecabezas.... Tú ya tienes nombre, alguien te llama por teléfono. ¿Qué soy yo? Una sombra que te observa mientras bailas con él.

NINA: Te obsesiona el baile.

CONRADO: ¿Y a ti no?

The ghosts of Conrado and Fabrizio meet. The lover claims Nina fell for him the minute she saw him. The husband curses his frivolity and cowardice for having ran away from Nina. They have nothing in common except their respective relationship to Nina. Conrado threatens Fabrizio, angered by the realization that through his entire life he has hated a man he had never known.

FABRIZIO: Desde el primer compás, Nina estuvo presa en mis brazos. Y nada pudo romper las cadenas que la ataron a mí, ni la nostalgia, ni la fugacidad del tiempo. Me fui,

tuve que escapar, la situación era imposible. Viajé mucho, trabajé mucho, hice de todo: fui modelo para pintores, y chofer para directores de empresas. Pero una vez... ¿cuándo fue? Vivía en Manhattan y salí con un roommate que compartía mis criterios sobre el arte. Entramos a un museo y de pronto descubrí unos girasoles fulgurantes. Yo, al ver la explosión de amarillos recordé a Nina y a la salida compramos una postal, le escribí unas líneas y la eché al correo. Nunca supe si la recibió.

CONRADO: Lo oigo hablar con esa frivolidad que pretende ser ingeniosa y siento un encabronamiento que tengo que aguantarme para no retorcerle el pescuezo como a un pollo.

FABRIZIO: ¿Y usted de dónde sale, señor?

CONRADO: De la misma noche que nos revive. Y descubro, con rabia, que tenemos mucho en común: un pasado que nos une, una mujer que nos separa y una historia que contar juntos.

FABRIZIO: ¿Usted pinta?

CONRADO: Barnicé muebles.

FABRIZIO: ¿Le gusta la pintura?

CONRADO: El olor del aguarrás.

FABRIZIO: ¿Conspiró contra Batista?

CONRADO: No me interesa la política; prefiero aprovechar el tiempo.

FABRIZIO: Ah, un conservador. No existe ningún punto de contacto entre nosotros.

¿Qué historia nos une?

CONRADO: Su nombre convirtió mi matrimonio en un fracaso.

FABRIZIO: Cada vez entiendo menos. ¿Nos hemos visto antes?

CONRADO: De haberme tropezado alguna vez le hubiera retorcido el pescuezo como a una gallina.

FABRIZIO: ¡Vaya hombre! Vive obsesionado con retorcer pescuezos.

CONRADO: El rencor. Saber que usted existió y dejó una huella me llena de rencor.

FABRIZIO: Me perdona. No le encuentro ningún sentido a esta conversación.

CONRADO: Formalidades conmigo, no. Mándeme al carajo y le entro a patadas aquí mismo.

FABRIZIO: ¡Basta ya! Diga claramente qué le pasa o no le aguanto otra insolencia.

Usted me confunde con alguien o está loco de atar.

CONRADO: Sí, sólo un loco se pasa la vida odiando a alguien que nunca conoció.

Nina must decide whether or not to sell her pearl necklace. Conrado tells her to do it, to get rid of it. Fabrizio tells her to keep it if it's that precious to her, to do what he would do if he owned a Van Gogh. But she needs the money, and she will sell the jewel to the best bidder.

CONRADO: ¿En qué puedo servir a la señora Angelina Zaldívar de Puig?

NINA: ¿Ese es tu apellido?

CONRADO: Mi madre era catalana. No soy Pérez.

NINA: Así que decidiste... Bueno, ya no importa. Tú, tan práctico siempre, aconséjame.

¿Qué hago con el collar?

CONRADO: Véndelo. ¿Para qué quieres un collar que no te sabes poner ni quitar?

Olvida que existió alguna vez, olvida todos los cuellos que adornó, olvida dónde lo

compraron y cuánto costó. ¡No! No olvides nunca el precio de las cosas; terminarás arruinada. Véndelo, Nina, y sanseacabó.

NINA: Tú también. No te importa un comino que me deshaga de algo tan valioso.

CONRADO: Primero asegúrate que las perlas no son falsas.

NINA: Mi abuelo jamás hubiera comprado perlas falsas, como jamás dijo una mentira.

CONRADO: Nina, el apellido Zaldívar no se difundió más porque tu abuelo nunca reconoció a los hijos que iba regando por donde pasaba.

NINA: ¿Cómo puedes hablar así? Una vida de mentiras es la tuya. Siempre supe que tenías una querida ¡mulata, por supuesto! En ese pueblucho donde aprendiste a ganarte la vida a martillazo limpio.

CONRADO: Tú, no. Tú jamás volviste a mirar a otro hombre. Siempre fiel. Te lo agradezco. Sólo hay un problema: tampoco te diste cuenta de que yo respiraba a tu lado. Conserva ese collar, pónitelo cada noche, vístete de rosa y baila con él. Sólo una noche tiene importancia para ti, la noche del 23 de enero de 1935, cuando bailaste con ese payaso que te llenó la cabeza de mentiras y desapareció.

FABRIZIO: No lo oigas. Toda esa ironía apunta contra mí.

NINA: ¡Fabrizio! Ayúdame. Necesito el consejo de alguien capaz de admirar el valor del collar.

FABRIZIO: ¿Qué collar?

NINA: El que usé en el baile.

FABRIZIO: ¿Tenías puesto un collar?

NINA: Tú mismo lo celebraste: dijiste que mis ojos brillaban más que las perlas.

FABRIZIO: ¡Los cubanos! La vida entera inventando piropos para halagar a las mujeres. Si lo dije, significó algo para ti. Guárdalo en tu corazón como una joya.

NINA: ¿El collar?

FABRIZIO: No, el piropo. Si el collar tiene algún valor para ti, guárdalo también.

El Baile: Study Questions

1. Nina lives practically alone in her Vedado house, with memories of the living, as if they were already dead; and memories of the dead, as if they were still living. Where do Conrado, Fabrizio, Amalia, Simón and Tito fit within those memories?
2. Conrado complains that, in all the years he was married to Nina, he was like a stranger to her. She says he was made of stone. Were they in love? How would you rate their relationship? Why did they stay married? Discuss how marriage is different today.
3. Discuss the different reasons why the necklace was so important to Nina. Was Conrado jealous of the necklace's origin, or did he have other reasons for detesting it?
4. Why was January 23, 1935 a memorable date to Nina? Discuss the importance of the quinces, the Hispanic debutante celebration.

5. What is the nature of the rivalry between Conrado and Fabrizio? Did Fabrizio love Nina, or was he just a frivolous heartbreaker?
6. Revolutions have been an ongoing reality in Cuba's history: in the 1930's against dictator Gerardo Machado, overthrown in 1933; in the late 1950's against dictator Fulgencio Batista, overthrown in 1959. How did both events affect Nina's life?
7. Conrado's prosperous carpentry business, which he worked all his life to develop, was confiscated during the first years of Fidel Castro's revolution. How did it impact on Conrado's life? If anyone in your family or among your friends owns a business, how would a similar situation impact them? Their family? Their life?
8. Nina is torn between duty to her children in Miami, and duty to her sister Amalia who lives with her. Explain her predicament, and how she feels. Since women are the traditional caregivers, do you think they are more prone to feeling stressed than men are? How are Nina's health and state of mind affected by her guilt feelings?
9. Nina will turn 76 on her next birthday, and can't get around very much. How important is the telephone to her? Discuss the telephone as luxury versus basic need. What is it for the elderly?
10. Conrado having a mistress, a mulata, angered Nina. Look for similar circumstances in *Parece blanca*. Read the socio-historical essays in this Guide, and discuss the nature of Nina's anger, the invisibility of the mulata as mistress, and the implications of social destiny for white and black women in the context of a racist and sexist society.

Las Penas Saben Nadar: Synopsis

An actress comes on stage, carrying a small table and a bag, inside which is a telephone. She has arrived for an audition she originally missed. But she doesn't care: she will audition, **now!** She is tired of being passed over time and time again; tired of taking orders, of sticking to the rules, of following current orientations. "Aren't we supposed to have equal opportunity in this country?" she cries out, "this country" being Cuba, of course. She has finally found the perfect setting to shine on her own: a monologue festival. A monologue means she'll be on stage alone; no competition from mediocre male co-stars; no over-decorated sets; and definitely no lighting designs that cast shadows on actors' faces.

She exits and returns with a glass of rum in her hand. "Just a little sip, to lift my spirits." As she prepares to do the part, she rages and reminisces about her career, a succession of failed auditions for leading female roles. She adores Greta Garbo, has seen all her films, and knows every one of her characters, like Ana Karenina and Madame Bovary. "Why don't Cuban directors take on such classics, instead of rehashing our local **Cecilia**

Valdés?" she asks. "No one knows **Cecilia Valdés** in Cannes; besides, no language beats French for drama." Which is why she has chosen Jean Cocteau's **The Human Voice** for the festival. "Alo, alo! Please hang up, I am on this line. Our wires must have crossed!" As she gets ready, she gulps down another shot of rum. She would prefer whiskey, her favorite drink, or gin and tonic a la Meryl Streep. No matter, it's just for relaxation, a pause between anecdotes, a shot of self-esteem and courage. Hers is a narrative between remembrance and self-deprecation. A famous Cuban playwright promised to write her a monologue for the festival, but did not deliver. Who cares! What's a Cuban monologue compared to a classic like **The Human Voice**.

She needs a chair, and gets it from a member of the audience. She goes on and on about different plays, different scenes, classifying them into mundane and superb. She jumps from García Lorca's **La Casa de Bernarda Alba**, to Dustin Hoffman in **Midnight Cowboy**, in one breath. "We are surrounded by mediocrity" she complains, while she tells about her experience with theater directors. There was one who failed to cast her in a leading role in **Bernarda Alba**; then there was the foreign guest who got to enjoy visitor's privileges, and picked a Black, thirty-five-year-old actress for the role of Juliette, opposite her opportunist pal, Kiko, in the role of Romeo.

She has had it with directors, with actors, with producers. Now with the prospect of Cocteau's monologue, no one will interfere with her childhood dream of being a great actress. For this is not just a career, it's a vocation. Her mother always encouraged her as a child, although she was scrawny and everyone laughed at her. "And now, the skinniest star in Hollywood!" someone would announce. Their mockery only strengthened her will. She made it through acting school, overcoming the haunting memories of ridicule. She had systematized the act of positive thinking, a mixed bag of numerology, superstition, folk legend, and Afro-Cuban symbols like the color white, all of which, when arranged in the right order, in the right position, in the right place, would bring her luck. Another shot of rum, and she seems ready to start the monologue. "Imagine me a platinum blonde, like Jean Harlow, and an art deco set, all metal and aluminum, with lots of mirrors, the way artists imagined the future back in the 1930's" when Cocteau and Harlow were alive and famous. But no, she goes off again, this time to announce that her next career move is the big screen. Movies can make an actor famous. A movie star is recognized everywhere, and is rewarded with all kinds of material goods, like modern apartments and cars. And besides, such fame will be the envy of all her colleagues. Once she is on the big screen, she can turn everyone down who ever rejected her. And she'll be able to see her estranged daughter and take her on weekends to Varadero beach. All of a sudden, she lets out an agonizing howl and starts crying. She will never make it in the movies, or on the stage. "There will be no cars, no **Bernarda Alba**, no Juliette, no love...." She reminisces about a love affair with a Brazilian terrorist named Joao Coutinho. "You don't die of love, you agonize from love while you are still alive" Theirs was a hot affair; she was still married to Riki, a Cuban hippie who insisted on having long hair when the government still harassed guys with long hair. Riki fathered her daughter Linda, "a pretty little girl whose name is Spanish for "pretty", whom she left with her mom

when the toddler was two. "Riki left the country; Joao went back to Brasil; my daughter lives with my mother. And I am all alone, like Robinson Crusoe."

She gulps down the rest of the bottle, and starts raging. "I have been in this company for twenty years, and that son-of-a-bitch will have to cast me in the leading role! I have a right to play the lead!" She goes on about the power of clics: the writer's clic, the directors' clic, the critics' clic, "a bunch of degenerates nobody knows, not in Paris, not in Moscow, not even in our own backyard." Another drink and she calms down. She reminisces about playing the role of Nora, in Henrik Ibsen's **A Doll's House**, "a good part, for which I even studied the history of Norway, and took baths in ice water so I could relate to the coldness of snow." On opening night, everyone in the cast, except her, got standing ovations.

"Mother, I am a bad actress, a piece of shit. Let the laughter begin." She is tortured by failure, by the insignificant roles she has had to play. God, "that inept ruler" is to blame, for he dispenses perfection and talent among his creatures arbitrarily, not equally to his image and liking. "I will destroy all the theaters in the world!" she threatens, but suddenly calms down and returns to Cocteau. "Where is the telephone?... **Aló, aló, aló**.... Lady, please hang up, our wires are crossed. I was on this line first... Alo, alo...." She gives up, and announces she will continue tomorrow. "Yes, tomorrow. Let's see, if I count to twelve while holding this glass on my head, I will do well in the festival. I'll win First Prize. If I leave now, and go through that door, I will be a great actress one day... a great actress...." She exits, holding a shoe up in the air, like a trophy, and balancing the glass on her head.

Las Penas Saben Nadar: Scenes

The Actress considers the advantages of doing French classics, for who knows about Cuban literature in Europe? French is best. Not that she is prejudiced: how could she be, when her mother was a mulata?

I. Actriz: ¡Ay, si a un director cubano se le ocurriera filmar La dama de las camelias! Pero no, hacen Cecilia. Un personaje que nadie conoce en el mundo. ¿Quién, ustedes me quieren decir, quién ha leído en Cannes Cecilia Valdés? En Cannes o en Moscú, o en San Sebastián. ¡Y para qué hablar de Venecia! Pero La dama de las camelias, Madame Bovary, Crime et Chatiment... Sí, en francés, me gusta leer a Dostoievski en francés. Porque una vez leí un artículo sobre la semántica, la semiótica, la novela y la traducción y aclaraba que el idioma ruso no tenía equivalencias rítmicas con el español, y que los ritmos que lograba Chejov en el diálogo jamás se lograrían en español. Y sin embargo había una traducción de Las tres hermanas al francés en que el ritornelo de Irina "a Moscú, a Moscú, a Moscú" sonaba con la misma musicalidad que en el original. Y yo me dije ¿entonces por qué leer a Dostoievski en español si puedo leerlo en francés? Y conste que yo creo en nuestras raíces. ¿Cómo no creer en nuestras raíces si mi abuelo era un gallego que se puso a vivir ¡sí, a vivir!.... Porque el ambiente de teatro es desprejuiciado.... Ay, en el

pueblo donde yo nací jamás mi madre hubiera dicho que ella era hija de una relación ilegal entre un gallego y una mulata. Pero aquí.

The Actress remembers being mocked as a little girl by relatives and neighbors every time she played theater games. Only her mother had kind words of encouragement, but that was a greater embarrassment, for they were said out of pity.

Actriz: Sí, yo me sentía actriz desde que jugaba con muñecas, desde que vi por primera vez unos artistas de una mala compañía que recorría los pueblos y llegó hasta Guasanimar donde yo nací. ¡Qué cosa! Donde todo era guasa y no animaban a nadie. Al menos a mí nadie me animó cuando quise leer libros serios, quise oír música seria, hacer teatro serio. De niña yo sentaba a mis muñecas como si fueran el público y yo actuaba. Hacía una escena que había visto en esa compañía, una escena de Marianela, una obra donde había un ciego y una muchacha que era fea y el ciego se enamoraba de ella porque no la veía, pero cuando operaban al ciego y el ciego veía, confundía a Marianela con su prima, que era linda, rubia, elegante con los ojos azules; y dejaba a Marianela que era fea, pecosa, prieta, con los ojos negros, pobre y sin zapatos. Los ricos rubios, los pobres prietos. Una ley básica de la dramaturgia. Y yo por supuesto, era fea. No tenía ni una sola peca, pero era flaca. Y cuando le decía a mis parientes, tíos, primos, hermnos, y hasta a mi propia madre, cuando les decía "Yo voy a ser artista", había un coro de carcajadas. Las carcajadas eran violentas, subían de tono, cambiaban de ritmo, subían, bajaban, sonaban como la banda municipal. Mi madre, toda piedad, toda lástima, toda conmisericordia por la hija más flaca del mundo, me abrazaba y decía: "Sí, mi pelusita, no les hagas caso, tú vas a ser una gran artista", con un tono de lástima que me humillaba más que el coro de carcajadas. The actress is overwhelmed by her loneliness. Everyone who has meant something to her is far away from her. She remembers Joao her lover, the Brazilian terrorist, who never loved her.

Actriz: Todo se fue y todo fue eso: los tragos y la cama. Y después te fuiste tú. Siempre lo dijiste: que no era más que el breve encuentro de dos seres desesperados. Que no podía ser más. Tú habías tenido que huir desesperado de Brasil, la guerrilla urbana estaba quemada... Pero en algún momento debías regresar. Aquella era tu tierra, tu deber, tu bandera, tu obligación, tu destino. Tenías que volver a cumplir tu destino. Yo también estaba desesperada, pero no formaba parte de tu destino. ¿Dónde estás, Joao? Contigo yo no quería fama, ni Shakespeare, ni Lorca... Adiós, Joao. Ya te dediqué un tiempito esta noche. No pidas demasiado. ¡Egoísta! Nunca me diste demasiado....Contigo engañé a mi marido, al padre de mi hija perdida, al hombre que mantuve durante dos años porque usaba el pelo largo y se había quedado sin trabajo. Riki el hippie....El matrimonio fue un fracaso. Yo no podía mantener a Riki toda la vida....Se fue a vivir a otra parte, Joao se fue a vivir a otro país, Linda vivía con mi mamá, y yo estaba más sola que Robinson en la isla porque yo no tenía un Viernes, ni siquiera un triste Martes. ¡Coño, qué sola estoy! ¡Qué casa en silencio, qué timbre que no suena, qué cama tan grande, qué cocina tan fría, qué manos tan vacías, qué boca sedienta, ojos inquietos, noche negra! No hay nada que hacer....

The Actress has a reality-check fit. She reviews all the minor roles she has played, and demands justice, respect and dignity. She blames God and all the gods that surround her, for her lack of talent and opportunity, and threatens to destroy all the theaters in the world.

Actriz: Soy una mierda, una mala actriz... No soy una artista, mamá, no valgo nada. Que empiece el coro de carcajadas. Porque todo lo que estudié, los personajes que me aprendí, los libros que leí no me han servido de nada. Siempre estoy al final de los repartos: la prostituta vestida de rojo, la vecina número 2, la lavadora 4, una vendedora... Dios, tú tienes la culpa. Tú, gobernante incapaz que no sabes dotar a todos tus hijos con el mismo talento. Hay que hacer una revolución para tumbarte de ese trono. Si no eres capaz de darme lo que derrochas en los otros, tú no sirves. Por eso estoy contra ti, contra tu manera de hacer el mundo, contra la forma en que distribuyes tu imagen y semejanza. Un mundo poblado de dioses, pero donde algunos somos menos dioses que otros. Oyelo bien, yo no soy una ameba, yo soy un ser humano con orgullo y sentimientos y deseos y necesito brillar en el mundo que tú hiciste. ¡Injusto! Voy a destrozarte los teatros del mundo entero.

Las Penas Saben Nadar: Study Questions

1. Talent versus favoritism, a theme that runs through the entire play. How much talent is wasted because of unfair systems of selection? Discuss the importance of fairness and equal opportunity. Is the predicament of the Actress a common one? A familiar one?
2. The Actress wants to do a monologue because it's an opportunity to be alone on stage at last. Yet, she is disheartened at being alone in life. Discuss loneliness as accident and as choice. Is it lonelier at the top (or on the road there) for men or for women? How? Why?
3. We know that childhood experiences influence our lives. The Actress was constantly being laughed at as a kid, her career dreams ridiculed. Discuss the concept of "self-fulfilling prophecy" and how it applies to the Actress. Discuss situations where support and encouragement (or their absence) have influenced the life of someone you know.
4. Some historians maintain that Hispanic culture has been debased as a result of centuries of hostility between the English-speaking world and Spain. They call it the Black Legend. (Refer to the Suggested Readings). As a student of Spanish language and literature, have you heard it said that French or German are more difficult and challenging than Spanish? Why does the Actress prefer French literature, French translations? Why would Madame Bovary be more universal -and therefore better known- than Cecilia Valdés? Why Cocteau and not [Cuban author Virgilio] Piñera? Discuss Eurocentrism, cultural diversity, multi-culturalism.
5. The Actress complains about the director who gave a Black woman the part of Juliet in Romeo and Juliet. Is she solely frustrated as an actress, or is she racially angry as well? Comment on other instances where "Black" is demeaned or portrayed negatively, in this play or elsewhere.

6. The Actress tells us that her mother was born of a mulata and a Spanish man. What is she, according to the racist "racial chart"?

7. Make a list of phrases that reflect negatively on the concept of "Blackness". Example: el futuro está negro. Do the same for English. Which language seems to codify a greater bias?

8. The Actress complains about how it's been men in positions of power - directors, designers, actors, and playwrights - who have obstructed her career. In real life, how does this manifest itself, whether in business, the arts, the professions, and the work place? Is the Actress a victim of "the boys' network", or is she just not talented enough?