UNITED STATES OF BANANA: A POSTCOLONIAL DRAMATIC FICTION

Juan Pablo Félix Torres

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For Grace, my logos.
“I think the notion of dreaming in a time where we are told that it is foolish, futile or not useful is one of the most revolutionary things we can do. To have our lives determined by our dreams of a free world--instead of reactions to a state-imposed reality--is one of the most powerful tools of decolonization.”

— Harsha Walia, Undoing Border Imperialism

“Catholics, Muslims and Jews, we all used to live together in the middle ages in Spain—but some witchcraft broke the enchantment of camaraderie—and now we’re boiling in the cauldron of the dungeon of liberty”.

— Giannina Braschi, United States of Banana

I wish I had planned it all. I wish I had had any kind of control. There was so much doubt, however. So much chaos and creative hesitation. With such confidence our intuition guided us, that all I have now is public gratitude and a secret smile.

— Juan Pablo Félix
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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper wants to be a recollection of the process of staging the play “United States of Banana”, based on the original text written by Puerto Rican author Giannina Braschi. This work has been widely praised by academics both in and outside the United States and has opened new spaces to reflect on the ideas that concern the Latino population living in the US. These literary expressions are the sign of a vital community that is slowly assuming a historical role in the shaping of the most powerful nation in the planet.

Since I consider theater to be a social thermometer, I chose this play as my thesis project to testify about the state of affairs regarding the situation of Puerto Rico. Its lack of sovereignty and self-regulation constitute a metaphor about the foreign policy the government of the United States has exercised in many countries, but especially in Latin America. However, it is also time to set our own proposals over the table and abandon the paternalist model that justifies and supports our attitude of beneficiaries of the charities coming from the first world.

In this play, characters from Classical literature become symbols of entire races and populations to polish a gigantic mirror in which we can look at ourselves. Despite its scathing humor and harrowing critique, the text helped us create a performative event in
which we all, creators and spectators, shared a common responsibility: that of contributing to making a world that is fairer and a society that finds hope more easily.

The creative process was also the result of three years of education at the Graduate Program of Theater Directing at Columbia University. The ideas learned along this road were put to the test with relative success and validated not only the result but also the process itself.

I hope this work may inspire future directors to be as truthful as possible and talk about what they consider indispensable in their particular worlds, but, most of all, I hope they realize about the necessity to get back to the audience and do not forget about its particular needs and requests. Although it is vital to exercise self-expression, it is sterile and selfish not to consider the audience in the art production equation.
2. ANTECEDENTS: ALL ROADS LEAD TO UNITED STATES OF BANANA

At the end of the 2013 – 2014 academic year, I had chosen Aeschylus’ “Oresteia” to be the play I would stage as part of my thesis project. The “Oresteia” is actually a trilogy written around year 458 BC, comprised of “Agamemnon”, “The libation bearers” and “The Eumenides”. “Principal themes of the trilogy include the differences between revenge and justice, as well as the shift from practicing personal vendetta to a system of litigation”\(^1\). This idea seemed to be of particular importance, since it fit the current situation of Colombia, my country of origin, which had been going through a civil war since 1948. I had had the opportunity to be acquainted with the local political and social situation of many towns and villages in the country, where small brawls and fights over petty matters, as well as the precarious economic and cultural circumstances, became reasons to join either the guerrillas or certain paramilitary forces. This is especially true in remote areas of the country, like the Chocó region, where 82% of the population belongs to African – Colombian demographics and indigenous people constitute a 12%. The big majority lives on less than three dollars a day\(^2\). Having these facts into account, I thought that bringing this play to the region would contribute to a deeper analysis and reflection about their own situation and may make visible potential strategies to resolve these difficulties. The idea was to write an adaptation that adjusted to the local reality and then carry out casting auditions among native artists – actors, dancers and musicians- who would perform to their fellow countrymen and women. Also, local creators would execute the set, lighting and costume designs. Thus, at the end of

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\(^1\) https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Oresteia&oldid=676738442

September 2014, I travelled with a producer from Bogotá to Quibdó, the capital of the region and started approaching single artists as well as middle-range companies that had been working there despite some very difficult conditions. Very rapidly, they joined the project with much enthusiasm and optimism. However, national reality would soon destroy our illusions and our wishes to make the idea of an all-black cast and crew Oresteia in the middle of the tropical rain forest in Colombia a viable project. On November the 16th, the FARC guerrilla kidnapped Rubén Darío Alzate, a General of the Colombian Army, which prompted one of the most difficult situations in Colombia. The President suspended the peace talks happening in Havana, Cuba and he threatened to resume the military operations in the region. Obviously, this created an atmosphere of fear, caution and a deep sense of unease. Many of the local artists involved in the project contacted me and the producer, to let us know that, under those circumstances, they would prefer to not be part of a project that questioned directly the uselessness of armed violence and invited to a peaceful emancipation against armed forces, no matter their origin.

The idea of putting the performance off did not seem viable either and, as a chain reaction, supporters of the project started dropping out. I was devastated as were my team members. Three months of work had gone to waste by totally uncontrollable motives. However, when I informed my professors and the academic administration about what was occurring, they offered the support necessary to redefine the project, even if it implied a complete redo. The best alternative that we could envision was changing projects. It seemed the most appropriate, so I had to start all over again,

3 http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/southamerica/colombia/11238850/Farc-confirm-they-have-kidnapped-Colombian-general.html
choose a new play and from then on, build another plan. However, there was something I wanted to preserve. I could not define exactly what it was, but it had to do with the concept of a theatre that had a social impact, a piece that spoke beyond the academic boundaries, a process guided by a spirit of renewal and transformation and an experience to dig deep into my own principles as a Colombian and a Latin American creator.

I remembered that in one of our classes during the masters program, we had read “Marisol”, a play by Puerto Rican playwright José Rivera. This piece tells the story of Marisol Perez, “a young Latino woman, who is a copy editor for a Manhattan publisher. Although she has elevated herself into the white-collar class, she continues to live alone in the dangerous Bronx neighborhood of her childhood (...) Marisol is visited by her guardian angel who informs her that she can no longer serve as Marisol's protector because she has been called to join the revolution already in progress against an old and senile God who is dying and "taking the rest of the universe with him." The war in heaven spills over into New York City, reducing it to a smoldering urban wasteland where giant fires send noxious smoke to darken the skies, where the moon has not been seen in months, where the food has been turned to salt, and water no longer seeks its level. Alone, without her protector, Marisol begins a nightmare journey into this new war zone where a man attacks her with an ice cream cone demanding back pay for his extra work on TV. Marisol finds herself on the streets, homeless, where her many encounters include a woman beaten for exceeding her credit limit and a homeless burn victim in a wheelchair looking for his lost skin. The apocalypse is well under way and
as the action builds to a crescendo, the masses of homeless and displaced people join the angels in the war to save the universe.\footnote{http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/marisol-jose-rivera/1001797445?ean=9780822213741}

The story seemed fascinating, but I wanted to search for other authors and works. In the process, I started to identify some themes that, later on, would help me to pick a new play to stage: the dubiousness of religion, the own and collective responsibility for the future, female agency, a sense of obsolescence and reconfiguration of governing forces, a need for emancipation, Latin American humor and mixed elements of magic realism and the theater of the absurd. My question at the moment was where do these constituents come from?

I realized Rivera was part of what is called The Nuyorican Movement, “a cultural and intellectual movement involving poets, writers, musicians and artists who are Puerto Rican or of Puerto Rican descent, who live in or near New York City, and either call themselves or are known as Nuyoricans.”\footnote{Allatson, Paul (2007). Key Terms in Latino/a Cultural and Literary Studies. Wiley.} “It originated in the late 1960s and early 1970s in neighborhoods such as Loisaïda, East Harlem, Williamsburg, and the South Bronx as a means to validate Puerto Rican experience in the United States, particularly for poor and working-class people who suffered from marginalization, ostracism, and discrimination. The term Nuyorican was originally used as an insult until leading artists such as Miguel Algarín reclaimed it and transformed its meaning. Key cultural organizations such as the Nuyorican Poets Café and CHARAS/El Bohio in the Lower East Side, the Puerto Rican Traveling Theater, Agüeybaná Bookstore, Mixta Gallery, Clemente Soto Vélez Cultural Center, El Museo del Barrio, and El Maestro were some
of the institutional manifestations of this movement. The next generation of Nuyorican cultural hubs includes PRdream.com and Camaradas El Barrio in Spanish Harlem. Social and political counterparts to those establishments in late 1960s and 70s New York include the Young Lords and ASPIRA”⁶. I certainly felt that I was on the right track. There were several elements that this movement shared with my vision of what my thesis play could be.

When I did some more research, I found a writer that resounded very loudly in myself. Her name was Giannina Braschi, a Puerto Rican writer, credited with writing the first Spanglish novel “Yo-Yo Boing!” (1998), the post-modern poetry trilogy “Empire of Dreams” (Yale, 1994) and the philosophical fiction “United States of Banana” (Amazon Crossing, 2011). This particular work chronicles the Latin American immigrants' experiences in the United States. "For decades, Dominican and Puerto Rican authors have carried out a linguistic revolution", noted The Boston Globe, "and Giannina Braschi, especially in her novel “Yo-Yo Boing!” testify to it"⁷. She is considered an influential and revolutionary voice in contemporary Latin American literature⁸. Her work has been described as a "synergetic fusion that marks in a determinant fashion the

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⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuyorican_Movement#cite_ref-K_1-0.
⁷ The Boston Globe, "Spanglish is everywhere now, which is no problema for some, but a pain in the cuello for purists", by Ilan Stavans, 9/14/2003.
⁸ National Book Festival. Library of Congress. 2012. 'Braschi: one of the most revolutionary voices in Latin America today'
"About Giannina Braschi: Book Fest 12". National Book Festival Transcript and Webcast. Washington, DC: Library of Congress. September 2012. 'Braschi, a poet, essayist and novelist often described as cutting-edge, influential and even revolutionary'
Johnson, Hannah (May 26, 2011). "#BEA11: Books on Display, the Amazon Publishing Booth". Publishing Perspectives. 'Braschi is Puerto Rico's most influential and versatile writer of poetry, fiction, and essays'.
"About Giannina Braschi". University of Oklahoma: World Literature Today. September–October 2012. 'One of the most revolutionary voices in Latin America'.
lived experiences of U.S. Hispanics”

Written in English, Spanglish, and Spanish, Braschi's work seeks to capture the cultural experience of the 50 million Hispanics in the United States and also seeks to explore the three political options of Puerto Rico: Nation, Colony or Statehood. On the subject of the Island's lack of sovereignty, Braschi stated, "Liberty is not an option — it is a human right."

This last particular subject, dealt with in “United States of Banana”, seemed to resemble the situation of a country that is torn between several social and political destinies, and the roles that self-governance and a profound desire to emancipate from oppressing forces played along. Perhaps like the stage in ancient Greece, when people tried to overcome a system of vendetta and personal revenge and organize itself around the principles of the rule of law. Undoubtedly, I was very close to what I felt I needed to express as an artist.

I found that “United States of Banana” was published in 2011, ten years after the events of September 11th. “It is a postcolonial dramatic fiction book belonging to a mixed-genre work which blends experimental theater, prose poetry, and essay with a manifesto on democracy and American power in the post–September 11 world. The book narrates the author's violent displacement from her home in the Battery Park neighborhood that became known as Ground Zero on September 11, 2001 where she had moved earlier that year to study the Statue of Liberty. This fantastical and philosophical epic tackles

10 "Giannina Braschi". Pursuing Liberty: A Reading by Giannina Braschi. Eagleton Program of Immigration and Democracy, Eagleton Institute of Politics. February 1, 2012. 'Braschi explores the cultural and political journey of nearly 50 million Hispanic Americans living in the United States'
American politics of empire and independence, the post-9/11 psyche, and the migrant's experience of marginality and liberation\textsuperscript{12}.

In its story, Latin American immigrants obtain American passports, thanks to the efforts of iconic literary characters such as Hamlet, Segismundo, and Zarathustra, who co-mingle with 21st Century literary and political figures (including Braschi herself), and Puerto Rico is declared a free state. The theme is less about the oppressive legacy of colonialism, as the challenge to independence "constituted by the hegemony of world capitalism on which the narrator tries to persuade her fellow travelers to declare war"\textsuperscript{13}. The work provides a scathing critique of the false promise of meritocracy within the American Dream.

The first part—entitled "Ground Zero"—offers a poetic critique of 21st century capitalism and corporate censorship as it depicts New York City as "the Darwinist capital of the capitalist word" and the U.S. imperialism as doomed as "a chicken with its head cut off". The work unfolds through a reality-based, graphic collection of metafiction, short stories and lyrical essays on American culture since the collapse of the World Trade Center due to the September 11th terrorist attacks. Themes of artistic inspiration, spirituality, and creation are framed within scenes of mass destruction and obliteration. Narrated as an apocalypse, the opening lines deliver the book's first taste of sustained black humor:

\textsuperscript{12} Jacobson, Matthew Frye (September 15, 2012). "American Studies Association President's Overview: 2012 ASA Convention Archives" (PDF). ASA.

GIANNINA:

It's the end of the world. I was excited by the whole situation. Well, if everybody is going to die, die hard, shit, but what do I know. Is this an atomic bomb—the end of the world—the end of the millennium? No more fear of being fired—for typos or tardiness—digressions or recessions—and what a way of being fired—bursting into flames—without two weeks notice—and without six months of unemployment—and without sick leave, vacation, or comp time—without a word of what was to come—on a glorious morning—when nature ran indifferent to the course of man—there came a point when that sunny sky turned into a hellhole of a night—with papers, computers, windows, bricks, bodies falling, and people running and screaming.

The subsequent chapters catalogue the gory remains of the Twin Towers in the form of scattered body parts: the torso of a businessmen falling through the air in his bright white shirt, two severed hands nearly touching like the hand of man and the hand of God in Michelangelo's Creation of Man on the Sistine Chapel, and a head crowned by glazed donuts on the floor of Krispy Kreme.

In the second half of the work, called "United States of Banana", the structure radically changes from a collage of essays and fiction into fantastical experimental theater composed of dramatic and philosophical dialogues. Shakespeare's Hamlet and Nieztsche's Zarathustra join the author's alter-ego, Giannina, on a quest to liberate the Puerto Rican prisoner Segismundo from the dungeon of the Statue of Liberty, where he
has been sentenced by his father, the King of the United States of Banana, more than one hundred years prior for the crime of having been born. But when the king remarries, this time with Hamlet’s mother, queen Gertrude, he frees his son, and for the sake of reconciliation, makes Puerto Rico the fifty-first state and grants American passports to all Latin American citizens.

Inspired by Calderon de la Barca's classic drama Life is a Dream, the experimental play dramatizes the plight of so many Latino prisoners in the United States, Puerto Rico's position an American territory, and the author's struggle for liberty. By having the people of Puerto Rico vote on Segismundo’s liberty, the work satirizes the three political options of Puerto Rico, statehood, nation, and colony, as "Wishy, Wishy-Washy, and Washy." In this system of equivalences, "Wishy" represents Puerto Rican Independence, "Wishy-Washy" represents the Associated Free State or colonial status, and "Washy" represents Statehood. The plot to liberate Puerto Rico, with the financial assistance of Chinese dignitaries and the moral and military support of Latin American left-wing leaders like Lula da Silva, Fidel Castro, Hugo Chavez, Evo Morales, and Cristina Kirchner, takes on the absurdist qualities of “Ubu Roi” by Alfred Jarry and the philosophical declarations of “Thus Spoke Zarathustra” by Nietzsche, both sources of inspiration for this text. The essays and manifestos of Polish theater director Tadeusz Kantor and the play “Hamletmachine”, by the German experimental playwright and theater director Heiner Muller, also served as inspirational texts for Braschi. The prince of Denmark walks contemporary Europe in Heiner Muller's “Hamletmachine” and takes Segismundo prisoner post 9/11 in Giannina Braschi's "United States of Banana". 

After reading all of the material, I came up with the following questions:

What has happened in the post-colonialist American continent after 9/11? What role is the Latin American community playing in the shaping of the most powerful nation at the dawn of the twenty first century? How is transculturation happening? Is it even happening? How not to laugh and mourn at it?

Furthermore, there is the case of Puerto Rico as the backdrop of the plot. “The Puerto Rican case”: the only taxation without representation colony under the rule of the United States of America. This idea of “nobody knows what is happening with Puerto Rico, because it is irrelevant”.

The play deals with the archetypal figures of two, maybe three, different cultures. Hamlet, the quintessential Anglo-Saxon prince, heir to a doomed throne, a dead shark of a hero and Segismundo, the Polish prince, captive since birth by his king father as depicted in the greatest Spanish literature master play “Life is a Dream”. With them walks Zarathustra, the ancient Persian sage, who proclaimed the doing, thinking and speaking of good deeds, thoughts and words, 1300 years before Jesus Christ, and whose system of beliefs has not been as manipulated and hackneyed as the texts of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Giannina, her own alter ego accompanies them in their journey, as a self-conscious literary gesture, as the result of her studies on the matter and her postmodern vassalage condition. This text is a cry of freedom, or, as Braschi herself would say “a cry of feardom”.
It is convenient to remember and revisit, to make us reflect again, see again (such is the etymology of the word ‘respect’) events in our human history as part of our evolution. Let us believe it is to not make the same mistakes and then theatre is a marvelous tool to do so.

My personal process has also led me to question myself about a certain kind of identity. Perhaps it is not a national identity but rather a political one. How is our social participation as Latinos happening in a world of terrorism, information frenzy, ecological momentum and severe inequality?

After these considerations, I decided that I would try to get the rights of the work and make an adaptation for the stage. I had found my new thesis project.

One of the most outstanding characteristics of the theater audience in New York is its ample diversity. Tourists going to Broadway shows, local audience members going to almost all kind of performances, international demographics living in the city, or near, attending to pieces that speak about their traditions and countries of origin, the scope is very wide. However, very few of these people usually go to Columbia Stages productions, unless they have a kinsman or woman linked to the production. My idea was to appeal to that segment of the audience that was Latino, from a Latino descent or Hispanic. Our challenge then, was how to invite them to see and hear the play and how to generate the impact I was expecting?
We developed two strategies: create a publicity campaign that was oriented toward this audience, with the support of the marketing department at the School of the Arts and to reach out directly to our network of Latino and Hispanic acquaintances, friends and colleagues. According to an informal survey conducted during the posterior performances, about 60% of our spectators were Latinos. This proved the plan to have been effective.

Our goals, as a team, were to make visible (or to make memorable) the situation of Puerto Rico, to create awareness to develop any kind of actions oriented to reflect on these circumstances, to acknowledge that the relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico share similarities with the relationship between the United States and Latin America, to acknowledge that we, as Latinos, have a responsibility in the United States and to realize that this is a world issue that echoes the state of affairs of countries like China, Taiwan, Macao and Hong Kong, Serbia and Kosovo, France and the French Polynesia, the United Kingdom and the Islas Malvinas and the Netherlands and Aruba, Bonaire and Curacao, among others.

From the perspective of methodology, my research question was how to stage this text to make public the situation of Puerto Rico and extensively the situation of Latin America to open spaces of reflection and analysis about it?

Consequently, the general goal would be to stage and present a theatre play to open a space of discussion. Specific goals would be to describe in depth the director’s preparation to stage the play, to determine the ways of working with the set, lights and
costume designers and the dramaturg, to identify the skills required from the actors, to establish the ways to discern these abilities, to conceptualize the relationship between the audience and the play at its presentation (the event) and to reflect the forms by which the training received by the director at Columbia University is manifested.

3. THE PREPARATION

3.1 Bibliographical research

Since this play involves other texts, I had to revise the original works to find the elements it borrowed. I started re-reading “Hamlet” by William Shakespeare. Then, I studied “Life is a Dream” by Calderón de la Barca and lastly, I approached “Thus spoke Zarathustra” by Friedrich Nietzsche. Also, I read some other poetic pieces of the Spanish Golden Age like Lope de Vega and Tirso de Molina and poets from the English Renaissance (although the existence of an English Renaissance as such, is widely debated) like Thomas Wyatt and John Donne. I think that these readings put me in a ‘mood’ that later would prove necessary to direct United States of Banana.

A. The Spanish Baroque Literature

There are several similarities in the tone of the play and some characteristics of the Baroque period (approximately from 1580 to 1681), when Shakespeare and Calderón works were written. The opening of the book (cited before), as well as some other passages, serves well to establish a comparison to find many correspondences between the historical times and its manifestations. “The Renaissance had been not successful in
its purpose of imposing the harmony and the perfection over the world, as the humanists tried, and neither had made man happier; war and social inequalities continued; misery and calamity were common throughout Europe. An intellectual pessimism became more and more marked, together with a carefree character (of which the period's comedies and rogue narrations on which the picaresque novels are based) give testimony. We can set a parallel with some parts of United States of Banana:

GIANNINA:

_The sand and the era of the camel are back. The era of the difficult._

_Now you have to climb sand dunes of brick and mortar. The streets are not flat, but full of barricades, tunnels and caves, and you have to walk through the maze, and sometimes you’ll get lost inside, finding no end—and no exit—and you’ll fall into despair—but you’ll see a dim beacon of light—appearing and disappearing—and when it fades away—your hope will fade—and you’ll be amazed—because your pace will change._

This way, the text testifies about the presence of armed conflicts and social uproar along human history. However, I strongly believe that the reflection on these matters is the first step to overcome pessimism and the sense of being in a cul-de-sac. Another reason that made me choose this play. “As Renaissance ideals failed and, in the case of Spain, political power continued to ebb, disappointment grew and was manifest in literature, which in many cases recalled that of two centuries before. According to Quevedo, life is

15 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_Baroque_literature
formed by "successions of deceased": the newborn ones become them, from the diaper to the shroud. In conclusion, nothing temporal has importance"\textsuperscript{16}. This makes problematic for a generational renovation and social and political transformations to occur.

\textit{GERTRUDE:}

\textit{And we’ll be great forever again! We’ll marry Hamlet & Giannina, and Segismundo & Ophelia. To breed for us again! The stock of the populace—Segismundo who has been nurtured by the rabble of terrorists and beggars and bumps in the dungeon—and who has the pulse of the people—will marry an aristocrat—Ophelia—a blue blood in need of new blood—red and healthy—to energize our monarchy.}

Two other important characteristics of this literary period were the preoccupation about the passage of time (as in this earthly time needs to finish promptly, so we can begin living a worthy life) and the loss of confidence in the ideals of the Renaissance. The reactions of Spanish writers were very diverse and, in occasions, opposed. Whereas some of them recurred to ways to escape the surrounding reality, others mocked the regulations currently in force, complained about the lack of values or criticized this circumstance. To summarize, reactions oscillated between escapism, satire, stoicism and moralization. “The avoidance of reality, through singing past feats and glories, or through presenting an ideal world in which problems are resolved and order prevails”\textsuperscript{17}.

\textsuperscript{16} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_Baroque_literature
\textsuperscript{17} 18 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_Baroque_literature
A clear example of this were the plays by Lope de Vega, while other authors like Luis de Góngora, for instance, took refuge in the world of art and mythology. “Another group of writers chose to make fun of the reality, like Quevedo, Góngora on some occasions, and the picaresque novel. The greatest exponent of the complaints on the vanity of the world, the fleetingness of beauty, life, and fame was precisely Calderón de la Barca. He criticized the defects and vices, and proposed models of conduct in line with the political and religious ideology of his time, typified by the narrative and doctrinal prose of some of his contemporaries like Gracián and Saavedra Fajardo”

Here are some examples of Braschi’s work, resembling these characteristics from the Spanish Renaissance literature:

\textit{STATUE OF LIBERTY:}

\textit{I am the spirit of Joan of Arc. I liberated France from Anglo-Saxon freedom in the Middle Ages—and was burned at the stake. I came back to lead the French Revolution—and was sent to the guillotine. I reincarnated into the spirit of Napoleon. The French sent me to America as their horse of Troy. Under American surveillance, I’ve been the unhappiest woman on the planet. They turned me into the mausoleum of liberty.}

\textit{(…)}
GIANNINA:

You’ve become a symbol of the establishment but you were meant to abolish slavery—overthrow the status quo—blow winds—inspire change. Instead they bottled your essence so they could sell you. That’s why you have an expiration date. Products are meant to expire.

(...)

GIANNINA:

And I propose raising to this magnificent crown—divine madness that, like the oppressed everywhere, has been kept down—in submission, in seclusion, deprivation, and silence—and has been kept down by the antithesis of Divine madness, divine expectation, divine philosophy, and poetry—by the enemies of greatness and the lovers of entertainment who have spit in the eyes and slapped the cheeks of poetry and philosophy—with the cheapening of the heart—the cheapening of all that is high and noble—the cheapening of all the greatness, the magnificence, the beauty, the good, the noble, the suspension of the senses, the charisma, and the good energy that spells through our good will.

(...)

SEGISMUNDO:
But who is the poor? I give also to the poor who are the rich living in misery—because their higher standards of living don’t match their lower standards of expectation. When there exists so much poverty of spirit, misery—cheapening of our souls—how can you create great poetry? Anyway, I am so glad to see you, mi anagnorisis, my love.

With us—with you and me—(Rubén) Dario & Braschi—things start to shake up—and beans are spilled—let also the champagne spill—we are tacky—our strength is also in the tacky—but in the philosophical love of humanity.

B. Life is a Dream

Life Is a Dream (Spanish: La vida es sueño) is a Spanish play by Pedro Calderón de la Barca. First published in 1635 (or possibly early in 1636)\(^\text{19}\), it is a philosophical allegory regarding the human situation and the mystery of life\(^\text{20}\). The play has been described as "the supreme example of Spanish Golden Age drama"\(^\text{21}\). The story focuses on the fictional Segismundo, Prince of Poland, who has been imprisoned in a tower by his father, King Basilio, following a dire prophecy that the prince would bring disaster to the country and death to the King. Basilio briefly frees Segismundo, but when the prince goes on a rampage, the king imprisons him again, persuading him that it was all a dream. The play's central theme is the conflict between free will and fate. It remains one


of Calderon’s best-known and most studied works. Other themes include dreams vs. reality and the conflict between father and son\textsuperscript{22}. In United States of Banana, the original plot takes a turn:

\begin{quote}
SEGISMUNDO:

\textit{Time is relative. I’ve been here more than 100 years trying to break the manacles on my wrists—and the ball and chain on my ankles. The prison is overpopulated—and I am the oldest inmate—one of the originators—or primogenitors. I feel it will be soon. Too many of us are gathered here. Too many tribes wishing for the same. Portentous things are happening (...) So, why so much preparation for reflection—when at the end your reflection becomes the act of death? Soñemos, sueños, soñemos. Porque la vida es un sueño, y los sueños, sueños son.}
\end{quote}

The concept of life as a dream is an ancient one found in Hinduism and Platonism. Writers have explored it from Lope de Vega to Shakespeare. Key elements from the play may be derived from the Christian legend of Barlaam and Josaphat, which Lope de Vega had brought to the stage\textsuperscript{23}. This legend is, itself, a derivation of the story of the early years of Siddharta Gautama, the Buddha. Calderon de la Barca depicts this concept of life as a dream from the Catholic Church’s perspective: humans are on Earth just for a brief and fast test while the real and eternal existence is the one that begins

\textsuperscript{22} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Life_Is_a_Dream#cite_note-3.
with death as in the afterlife. In that sense, short eighty, ninety or one hundred years in this Earth cannot compare to the never-ending-infinite existence that begins in the afterlife; therefore this world is just some kind of fast and short “dream”\textsuperscript{24}.

The idea of a prince who is prophesized at birth to be doomed to cause a disaster, and his father the King attempting to avert that disaster, is similar to that of Oedipus killing his father. This idea proved to be of capital importance once the staging process started, as I will mention it later on this text.

“The concept of free will versus predestination is also widely discussed in religion and in philosophy. Catholic Spain's Counter-reformation (1545–1563) defined human will as able to choose the good (in cooperation with God's grace), while the Calvinist conception talked about the total depravity of the human will unless predestined by God to be renewed by grace. In Calderon's work, however, Catholicism is melded with "pagan" astrology, as Segismundo's horoscope, as interpreted by Basilio, becomes the cause of his incarceration. In the end, and favoring the Spanish, Catholic faith, Segismundo chooses pardon against the oracle"\textsuperscript{25}. Braschi takes this idea and transforms it marvelously:

\textit{BASILIO:}

\textit{The stars were wrong—they made obvious to me that Segismundo would be an enemy of the state—the way Hamlet turned out to be to the state of Denmark—and I used my magic power—preventive medicine. It won’t}

\textsuperscript{24,25} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Life_Is_a_Dream\#cite_note-GarciaReidy-18
happen to me—I won’t pamper my son—I will not do what my beautiful bride (like a virgin) did. I did what I had to do—raise myself and my people—and leave my son out of the picture. The stars had said—he would be a horror to the state—and the people of Puerto Rico had already proved that they are macheteros and terrorists—so I put him on hold—I checked on him everyday—I knew that one day I would elevate him to the crown. The occasion is now.

“One of the major conflicts of the play is the opposition between king and prince, which parallels with the struggle of Uranus vs. Saturn or Saturn vs. Jupiter in classical mythology\textsuperscript{26}. This struggle is a typical representation of the opposition in baroque comedy between the values represented by a fatherly figure and those embodied by the son\textsuperscript{27}. An opposition that may have biographical elements, in this case”\textsuperscript{28}. Queen Gertrude expresses the father and son opposition with these words:

\begin{quote}
GERTRUDE:

Basilio wants to marry me. What can I do? Two generations have different plans. Your generation thinks that the daughters and sons can replace the mothers and fathers. We will never be replaced. While you think you are here (she puts her hand at the level of her breast), we are here (she raises her hand to the level of her eyebrows). We will always be
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{27} Garcia Reidy, Alejandro. Op. Cit.
\textsuperscript{28} Parker, Alexander A. "The Father-Son Conflict in the Drama of Calderón", Forum for Modern language Studies, 2 (1966), pp. 99–113
on top of all of you children. We have a higher purpose than you. We will unite the Americas in the name of global warming. We will warm each other’s colonies in the name of old Europe. Not in the name of America. What you don’t understand is that these are our colonies—the colonies of England and Spain—and we want them back, not in the name of our sons Hamlet & Segismundo—but in the name of the father, the mother, and the Holy Ghost—in the name of Empire of the old.

“Motifs and themes derived from a number of traditions found in this drama include the labyrinth, the monster, the four elements, original sin, pride and disillusionment”29 30 31.

C. Hamlet

“The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, often shortened to Hamlet, is a tragedy written by William Shakespeare at an uncertain date between 1599 and 1602. Set in the Kingdom of Denmark, the play dramatizes the revenge Prince Hamlet is instructed to enact on his uncle Claudius. Claudius had murdered his own brother, Hamlet's father King Hamlet, and subsequently seized the throne, marrying his deceased brother's widow, Hamlet's mother Gertrude.

The story of Hamlet ultimately derives from the legend of Amleth, preserved by 13th-century chronicler Saxo Grammaticus in his *Gesta Danorum*, as subsequently retold by 16th-century scholar François de Belleforest. Shakespeare may also have drawn on an earlier (hypothetical) Elizabethan play known today as the “Ur-Hamlet”, though some scholars believe he himself wrote the Ur-Hamlet, later revising it to create the version of Hamlet we now have.

The play's structure and depth of characterization have inspired much critical scrutiny. One such example is the centuries-old debate about Hamlet's hesitation to kill his uncle, which some see as merely a plot device to prolong the action, but which others argue is a dramatization of the complex philosophical and ethical issues that surround cold-blooded murder, calculated revenge, and thwarted desire. More recently, psychoanalytic critics have examined Hamlet's unconscious desires, and feminist critics have re-evaluated and rehabilitated the often-maligned characters of Ophelia and Gertrude.\(^{32}\)

Although I could not find an English equivalent of the powerful and influential Spanish Renaissance movement, the inclusion of “Hamlet” in United States of Banana as one of the protagonists, offers a counterpart to the side heavily charged with Spanish allusions and references. This Anglo-Saxon counterweight examines the origins of certain practices, beliefs and behaviors, present in the North American society nowadays. In a twisted and very scathing approach, Braschi makes a critique about Hamlet’s inaction, precisely by making him the opposite of what he is in the original play. In a sense, United States of Banana is the second opportunity for every character that wants to be

\(^{32}\) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hamlet
redeemed. “The clearest alleged instance of existentialism is in the "to be, or not to be" speech, where Hamlet is thought by some to use "being" to allude to life and action, and "not being" to death and inaction.” Braschi seems to take this idea and develop it through a transformed Hamlet.

_HAMLET:_

_You can’t kill Oliver. I’ll kill him. You can’t kill your father. I’ll kill him._

_You can’t kill Astolfo—oh, please, I’ll kill him like I killed Laertes. I’ll kill Oliver like I killed Polonius. I’ll kill Basilio like I killed Claudius. I kill. Period. I act. I make your wishes come true._

“Some scholars have observed that revenge tragedies come from traditionally Catholic countries, such as Spain and Italy; and they present a contradiction, since according to Catholic doctrine the strongest duty is to God and family. Hamlet's conundrum, then, is whether to avenge his father and kill Claudius, or to leave the vengeance to God, as his religion requires.” With great humor and references to modern events, Queen Gertrude says to Segismundo in United States of Banana:

_GERTRUDE:_

_People who need people are not the luckiest people in the world. You need people to do everything for you. Why should your father have to support you at your age? I don’t like that of Hamlet either. Ophelia_

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33 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hamlet
34 MacCary (1998, 37–38); in the New Testament, see Romans 12:19: "'vengeance is mine, I will repay' sayeth the Lord".
and I used to talk about it. Why does he need us so much? Why
doesn’t he rely on himself? He is so needy he needs the ghost to
support his madness. Or he needs Horatio. Or he needs Laertes—or
me. And you are the same way. You are too needy.

“In the 1950s, Lacan's structuralist theories about Hamlet were first presented in a series
of seminars given in Paris and later published in "Desire and the Interpretation of Desire
in Hamlet". Lacan postulated that the human psyche is determined by structures of
language and that the linguistic structures of Hamlet shed light on human desire. His
point of departure is Freud's Oedipal theories, and the central theme of mourning that
runs through Hamlet. In Lacan's analysis, Hamlet unconsciously assumes the role of
phallus—the cause of his inaction—and is increasingly distanced from reality "by
mourning, fantasy, narcissism and psychosis", which create holes (or lack) in the real,
imaginary, and symbolic aspects of his psyche”35. This idea is beautifully transformed
in United States of Banana.

HAMLET:

Congratulations. What a blessing to you. That I don’t love you. I won’t
destroy you. Good for you, Ophelia, take it from this—my heart—to
these—your hands—good for you and for me—that we will not be able
to hurt each other. Get thee to a nunnery. It has made me mad. You say
that you don’t understand me—that I am mad. It’s not that you don’t
understand me—it’s that you know I caught you red-handed—not

stealing fire from the Gods—but stooping as low as a sponger, a monger, a weasel, a picker, a stealer. It’s not that you don’t understand me. It’s that I understand you all too well.

“Carolyn Heilbrun's 1957 essay "The Character of Hamlet's Mother" defends Gertrude, arguing that the text never hints that Gertrude knew of Claudius poisoning King Hamlet. Many feminist critics, combating what is, by Heilbrun’s argument, centuries’ worth of misinterpretation, have praised this analysis. By this account, Gertrude's worst crime is of pragmatically marrying her brother-in-law in order to avoid a power vacuum. This is borne out by the fact that King Hamlet's ghost tells Hamlet to leave Gertrude out of Hamlet's revenge, to leave her to heaven, an arbitrary mercy to grant to a conspirator to murder”36. This view has not been without objection from some critics”37. As expected, Braschi fabricates new circumstances with great humor.

GERTRUDE:

Nobody ever gave me anything. I had to earn my position in life. I had to marry. Twice. You do not make it happen. You depend on others to make it happen for you. And if they do not—you resent them. I do not want you to resent me—because I own your liberty. I do not expect gratefulness not even from my son—beggar that he

is—poorer in thanks than anybody. And cruel, like me, only to be kind.

“Ophelia has also been defended by feminist critics, most notably Elaine Showalter. Ophelia is surrounded by powerful men: her father, brother, and Hamlet. All three disappear: Laertes leaves, Hamlet abandons her, and Polonius dies. Conventional theories had argued that without these three powerful men making decisions for her, Ophelia is driven into madness. Feminist theorists argue that she goes mad with guilt because, when Hamlet kills her father, he has fulfilled her sexual desire to have Hamlet kill her father so they can be together. Showalter points out that Ophelia has become the symbol of the distraught and hysterical woman in modern culture”. Her despair finds a poetic voice in the play:

**OPHELIA:**

*To a nunnery—he said—get thee to a nunnery. And I went mad. (...) May I cut my veins? Can I sleep over? Can I sneak even closer—can I capture that breath—can I make it beat faster? (...) You are mine, mine as the sea and wind when both contend which is the mightier.*

I have taken these characters as focal points, since Braschi re-elaborates their personalities, adjusting them to the new circumstances created in the play. Later on this text, I will explain how their principal traits were, once again, transformed for the staged version.

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D. Thus spoke Zarathustra and the historical Zarathustra

According to the existing information, there exist two different Zarathustras; one corresponds to the historical figure of a prophet, founder of Zoroastrianism, one of the oldest monotheistic religions. The second one refers to the reconfiguration that Friedrich Nietzsche does to chronicle the fictitious journeys and discourses of the first one, in his master piece “Thus spoke Zarathustra”, published in Germany, between 1893 and 1891.

All data about the original prophet is surrounded by mystery and, in fact, there are no solid evidences about his real existence. One of the possibilities is that the word Zarathustra or Zoroaster speaks of a title given to a group of sages, and the name we often refer to, corresponds to the last one living of these men. Scholars often locate his birthplace in Iran, Afghanistan or Kazakhstan, between years 1,000 BCE and 600 BCE, although there are huge discrepancies about this. Apparently, Zarathustra arrived in the court of King Guhtasp, who ruled a tribe settled near to the actual Kabul in Afghanistan and convinced him to follow his beliefs. This way, Zarathustrism or Mazdaism was born. The name Mazdaism comes from the name of the deity Ahura Mazda, who is brought into conflict with his evil twin brother Angra Mainyu.

Zarathustra wrote the “Avesta”, a collection of sacred texts, which core is constituted by the Gathas, a series of religious chants, containing the essential principles of Zarathustrism. “In the Gathas, Zoroaster sees the human condition as the mental

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struggle between aša (truth) and druj (lie). The cardinal concept of aša—which is highly nuanced and only vaguely translatable—is at the foundation of all Zoroastrian doctrine, including that of Ahura Mazda (who is aša), creation (that is aša), existence (that is aša) and as the condition for free will. The purpose of humankind, like that of all other creation, is to sustain aša. For humankind, this occurs through active participation in life and the exercise of constructive thoughts, words and deeds. Elements of Zoroastrian philosophy entered the West through their influence on Judaism and Middle Platonism and have been identified as one of the key early events in the development of philosophy“\(^{40}\).

For considering them of special importance to establish conceptual parallels with United States of Banana, I allow myself to cite some of them. The following excerpts are from the translation by Humbach and Ichaporia\(^ {41}\):

**Zoroaster asks Mazda for guidance:**

*Where and which part of land shall I go to succeed? They keep me away from the family and the tribe. The community that I wish to join does not gratify me, nor do the deceitful tyrants of the lands. How shall I gratify you, O Mazda Ahura? (46.1)*

In United States of Banana:


GIANNINA:

I had to move from Ground Zero back to midtown again. (...) We were set to take a ferry to Liberty Island when the Twin Towers melted down. I thought: Am I melting? Where is my creative energy? Where is my progress? Where is Zarathustra? In what part of the city is Hamlet?

Zoroaster asks Mazda for blessings:

I approach you with good thought, O Mazda Ahura, so that you may grant me (the blessing) of two existences (i.e. physically and mentally), the material and that of thought, the blessing emanating from Truth, with which one can put (your) support in comfort. (28.2)

In Braschi’s words:

GIANNINA:

What we have here is a war—the war of matter and spirit. In the classical era, spirit was in harmony with matter. Matter used to condense spirit. What was unseen—the ghost of Hamlet’s father—was seen—in the conscience of the king. The spirit was trapped in the matter of theater. The theater made the unseen, seen. In the Romantic era, spirit overwhelms matter. The glass of champagne can’t contain the bubbles. But never in the history of humanity has spirit been at war with matter. And that is what we have today. The war of banks and religion.
Let good rulers assume rule (over us), with actions of Good Insight, O right-mindedness. Let not bad rulers assume rule over us. The best (insight), which purifies progeny for mankind, let it also be applied to the cow. Her, You breed for us for food. (48.5)

And its counterpart in the play:

**HAMLET:**

I thought the brain could rule over the legs. And I thought the brain was white and the legs were yellow or brown. And I thought I could rule with my brain—and even if I cut my legs off—I would find cheap legs in other parts of the world. But now I am a mutilated body. I lost my legs in Korea. I lost my arms in Vietnam. I lost my head in Kuwait. I lost my torso in the World Trade Center.

**Zoroaster to his own followers:**

Truth is best (of all that is) good. As desired, what is being desired is truth for him who represents the best truth. (27.14)

The person who is pure-in-heart towards me, I for my part assign to him the best things in my command, through Good Thought, but harm to him who schemes to harm us. O Mazda, thereby gratifying your will by Truth. Such is the discrimination made by my intellect and thought. (27.14)
In the play, these ideas are expressed in passages like this:

GIANNINA:

You are the whipper, cowboy. You whip and whip and whip—and attack, attack, and attack. Don’t you know how to cover your ass? The attacker is never prepared to cover his ass. And to be fucked up the ass. But you will be fucked up the ass because you have fucked up other nations too many times. Nobody knows you better than the one that you abuse. And I can talk. I know you well.

Zoroaster to the followers of the druj:

Brilliant things instead of weeping will be (the reward) for the person who comes to the truthful one. But a long period of darkness, foul food, and the word ‘woe’ – to such an existence your religious view will lead you, O deceitful ones, of your own actions.

(31.20)

In the play:

SEGISMUNDO:

After so many years living in the dungeon of liberty, (...) I can express my experience. How many of us have died down here without knowing that we ever existed—that our bodies changed from infancy to old age—and that we never experienced the change of seasons—nor the meaning of the word love or justice. That we awake in the morning—
These are the main ideas that I could extract from Zarathustra’s compendium of
principles and concepts, which differ from the ones exposed in Nietzsche’s “Thus spoke
Zarathustra”.

In this book, the author narrates “the fictitious travels and speeches of Zarathustra.
Nietzsche is clearly portraying a "new" or "different" Zarathustra, one who turns
traditional morality on its head. He goes on to characterize "what the name of
Zarathustra means in my mouth, the mouth of the first immoralist" (in the sense of not
functioning according to the traditional principles of morality). Zarathustra has a simple
characterization and plot\textsuperscript{42}, narrated sporadically throughout the text. It possesses a
unique experimental style, one that is, for instance, evident in newly invented
"dithyrambs" narrated or sung by Zarathustra. The text also contains the famous dictum
"God is dead", which had appeared earlier in “The Gay Science”\textsuperscript{43}.

“The phrase "God is dead" does not mean that Nietzsche believed in an actual God who
first existed and then died in a literal sense. Rather, it conveys his view that the
Christian God is no longer a credible source of absolute moral principles. Nietzsche
recognizes the crisis that the death of God represents for existing moral assumptions:
"When one gives up the Christian faith, one pulls the right to Christian morality out
from under one's feet. This morality is by no means self-evident. By breaking one main

\textsuperscript{42} Pippin, Robert. "Nietzsche: Thus Spoke Zarathustra". Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy,

\textsuperscript{43} Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. "How One Becomes What One Is: With a Prelude in German Rhymes
concept out of Christianity, the faith in God, one breaks the whole: nothing necessary remains in one's hands". Braschi takes this idea and explores it in her play:

**ZARATHUSTRA:**

*As much as I believe in God, I believe in Santa Claus. God is the enemy of philosophy. If God exists, why should I exist? If I exist it is to question the possibility of God. God is always trying to put a stopgap in my brain.*

“Another singular feature of Zarathustra, first presented in the prologue, is the designation of human beings as a transition between apes and the "Übermensch" (in English, either the "overman" or "superman"; or, superhuman or ‘overhuman’. English translators Thomas Common and R. J. Hollingdale use superman, while Kaufmann uses overman, and Parkes uses ‘overhuman’. Clancy Martin has opted to leave the nearly universally understood term as Übermensch in his new translation). The Übermensch is one of the many interconnecting, interdependent themes of the story, and is represented through several different metaphors. Examples include: the lightning that is portended by the silence and raindrops of a travelling storm cloud; or the sun's rise and culmination at its midday zenith; or a man traversing a rope stationed above an abyss, moving away from his uncultivated animality and towards the Übermensch. The symbol of the Übermensch also alludes to Nietzsche's notions of "self-mastery", "self-cultivation", "self-direction", and "self-overcoming". In the play, Zarathustra is in search of the overman. At some point, he thinks Segismundo is he:

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44 Nietzsche, Friedrich. trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale; Twilight of the Idols, Expeditions of an Untimely Man, sect. 5
STATUE OF LIBERTY:

Segismundo is not a terrorist, I assure you. He is a liberator.

GIANNINA:

He is a poet.

HAMLET:

He is a conqueror.

ZARATHUSTRA:

So, he is the overman.

“While Nietzsche injects myriad ideas into the book, a few recurring themes stand out. This idea of the Übermensch is an almost omnipresent concept in “Thus Spoke Zarathustra”. Man as a race is merely a bridge between animals and the overman. Nietzsche also makes a point that the overman is not an end result for a person, but more the journey toward self-mastery”45. Even if it means a certain dose of cruelty, because for Braschi, self-mastery implies a lack of compassion:

ZARATHUSTRA:

Maybe Segismundo should not be able to break out. Let’s keep him inside to prove that liberty exists. A statue is just a statue. But to have a man inside that statue—claiming he wants to become free—and

45 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thus_Spoke_Zarathustra#cite_note-5
never becoming free. If he can’t liberate himself—neither the crowd nor the police nor the firemen nor the army should liberate him. He has to do it himself. And if he grows old pushing the columns—and has no energy left to push, push, and push—and the media’s attention deficit disorder turns the spotlight on someone else and the crowds forget all about him—too bad for him.

“The eternal recurrence, found elsewhere in Nietzsche's writing, is also mentioned. "Eternal recurrence" is the possibility that all events in one's life will happen again and again, infinitely. The embrace of all of life's horrors and pleasures alike shows a deference and acceptance of fate, or Amor Fati. The love and acceptance of one's path in life is a defining characteristic of the overman. Faced with the knowledge that he would repeat every action that he has taken, an overman would be elated as he has no regrets and loves life. Opting to change any decision or event in one's life would indicate the presence of resentment or fear; in contradistinction, courage and a Dionysian spirit characterize the overman.”⁴⁶. Indeed, Segismundo is not the overman but he may have certain qualities to make him an unordinary man:

SEGISMUNDO:

After a while, you could lose the desire to live. But I had something inside my prophetic soul that kept me crawling between heaven and earth—like Hamlet—the only book you kept shoving under my nose—but other stories rained from the skies—and music—the music of the

⁴⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thus_Spoke_Zarathustra#cite_note-5
times seeped through the walls—as new prisoners of war came from other countries—and brought me thoughts and desires and an appetite to live.

“The will to power (*der Wille zur Macht*) is the fundamental component of human nature. Everything we do is an expression of the will to power. The will to power is a psychological analysis of all human action and is accentuated by self-overcoming and self-enhancement. Contrasted with living for procreation, pleasure, or happiness, the will to power is the summary of all man's struggle against his surrounding environment as well as his reason for living in it.

Many criticisms of Christianity can be found in “Thus Spoke Zarathustra”, in particular Christian values of good and evil and its belief in an afterlife. The basis for his critique of Christianity lies in the perceived squandering of our earthly lives in pursuit of a perfect afterlife, of which there is no evidence. This empiricist view (denial of afterlife) is not fully examined in a rational argument in the text, but taken as a simple fact in Nietzsche's aphoristic writing style”

E. Conclusions

After these exhaustive readings, I arrived to a series of conclusions that later would be transformed into actions, dialogue lines, movements, compositions and, or aesthetic principles to develop the staging of the play. These are:

47 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thus_Spoke_Zarathustra#cite_note-5](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thus_Spoke_Zarathustra#cite_note-5)
- Despite sharing certain kind of pessimism with the later stages of the Renaissance, our age also carries the possibility of optimism, in terms of the grade of visibility of social inequality, wars and other calamities. The awareness of the finiteness of natural resources has greatly contributed to this.

- However, political power continues to ebb and disappointment grows.

- The mocking of prevailing rules constitutes a powerful tool for social transformation and advancement.

- The tension between the concepts of free will and fate continue to be part of the contemporary debate. Other conceptual pairs include dream versus reality and father versus son.

- “United States of Banana” finds common grounds with Hinduism and Platonism. Some principles of these forms of thinking find their roots on Buddhism.

- Segismundo shares with Oedipus the oracle sentence. This indictment corresponds to a human interpretation.

- There is more human agency in the Catholic system of beliefs and less in the Calvinist conception.

- The labyrinth, the monster, the original sin (ambition), pride and disillusionment are motifs present in this play, like in some works of the Classical period and late Renaissance.

- Linguistic structures illuminate human volition.

- Human psyches can encompass real, imaginary and symbolic aspects.
- Female characters like Gertrude and Ophelia are multidimensional and their interpretations have changed through times.

- The truth is a cardinal concept of Zoroastrianism and constitutes the *sine qua non* condition for free will. This is achieved through active participation in life and the exercise of constructive thoughts, words and deeds.

- Elements of Zoroastrian philosophy influenced Judaism and middle Platonism.

- In our contemporary society, there is a confrontation between matter and spirit.

- We need to fight unjust governments.

- To arrive to a state of peace and justice, we will need to overcome periods of personal and social instability.

- The ideas of a Judeo Christian or a Christian God cannot be the justifications for leading a life based on the prize and punishment system. What we are is the result of how we act.

- Self-regulation is an exercise of what means to be human and the will to power is a sign of human struggle.

4. THE ADAPTATION PROCESS: FROM THE LITERARY TEXT TO THE SCRIPT

After contacting Giannina Braschi and her editor, Tess O’Dwyer, we agreed that I would do an adaptation of the book for the stage. Once they approved it, I would start the production process.
One of the challenges that the adaptation presented was choosing one of the multiple stories in the book. In fact, there are tens of stories about the victims of the September 11th attacks, before and after, stories about the political forces behind the attacks, intimate stories about the author’s feelings and thoughts, anonymous stories, historical stories and among these, the characters of Giannina, Hamlet, Zarathustra and Segismundo begin to appear, here and there, like ghosts from the past, followed by their cohorts, King Basilio, Queen Gertrude, Ophelia and some others, who take over the plot, towards the end of the book. My intuition told me that I could trace the main actions to sketch a first approach to a possible story. Chronologically, these actions were: the fall of the Twin Towers, Giannina’s displacement and consecutive reflection on the need to free Segismundo from the dungeons under the Statue of Liberty, the calling for Hamlet and Zarathustra to join her in this adventure, the beginning of this journey to liberate Segismundo, the arrival to Liberty Island, Gertrude’s arrival, the marriage proposal from Basilio, the wedding celebration, the grant of the royal pardon, Segismundo’s rebellion and everyone’s departure to Puerto Rico.

I began a very difficult process of ‘cleaning out’ a series of poetic images, historical data, random characters that appeared with no dramatic consequences; in short, literary accessories that I loved, but did not help the advancement nor the understanding of the plot. After six weeks of work and a couple of revisions, I sent the adapted version to Giannina and her editor. The response could not have been more dire. Apparently, there had been a misunderstanding and the agreement between the editor and Columbia University (which I was not familiar with) allowed editing and rearrangements, but no
new words, forbidding any additional writing. I was devastated, but I needed to figure out a solution very quickly, because I was four weeks away of the premiere.

Part of my preparation to get to this point, was attending the class ‘Visiting Directors’. As its title suggests it, we, as students, are visited by directors with successful professional careers. One of the most important ideas that were said in such class, was the need as directors to let go, to allow other people to intervene in the construction of a play, which is ultimately letting them do their job, but also, the need to not force the play, to not impose our own ideas, developing a criterion to make decisions, but never tyrannize the members of the production team. So, when I received a harsh communication from the editor, I tried to calm down and reorient my preoccupation towards a proactive goal: how to fix a new version of the play.

Soon, I reunited with Giannina and started working on a new version. However, her reception was very anguishing: “There is no need to tell a story”, she said and I panicked. What did she mean? What did she mean really? How not to tell stories if that is what we, directors, do? We tell stories. That is what I have been trained to do during the last three years in theater and fifteen years in cinema. Actually, how to negotiate this, if I did want to tell a story? ‘Let go’, I heard in my mind, ‘do not impose your ideas’ and we started working.

Interestingly enough, what came out was a huge lesson, because I found refuge in one of the books that professors Anne Bogart and Brian Kulick recommended us to read as we were entering Columbia University: “Post-Dramatic Theater” by Hans-Thies
Lehmann. In the book, Lehmann states that “post dramatic theater is not primarily focused on the drama in itself, but evolves a performative aesthetic in which the text of the performance is put in a special relation to the material situation of the performance and the stage. Thus post dramatic theatre is more striving to produce an effect amongst the spectators than to remain true to the text. Lehmann locates what he calls ‘the new theatre’ as part of ‘a simultaneous and multi-perspectival form of perceiving’; this, he argues is brought about, in large part, by a reaction to the dominance of the written text. This new theatre is characterized by, amongst other things, the ‘use and combination of heterogeneous styles’, its situation after or beyond dialogue and the incorporation of the notion of the ‘performer as theme and protagonist’” 48.

This reference came as a lifesaver. If the plot or the story was not what I could focus on, there were a series of images, relationships between the written words and the movement of the actors onstage, the effects we could create and their rapport with the audience members, the various perspectives to approach the action and the self-reference made by the actors as characters, but also as actors. There were now many very exciting possibilities. With these ideas in mind and the help of the author, I sat down to rewrite the adaptation and at the end of two days, I had a text that was satisfactory both for Giannina and her editor, and myself. There was something resembling the structure of a story, but full of images and semiotic elements. Giannina represented the new Puerto Rican population that is trying to overcome an eternal condition of vassalage. Hamlet represents the Anglo-Saxon world and its darker aspects of murdering, battling, kidnapping and coups d’état sponsoring. Segismundo represents

the Hispanic world, characterized by second-class citizens who threaten to act, but never do, as they put the blame (or the responsibility) on someone else. We had arrived to a play with symbols, rather than characters and we all accepted the challenge. A new stage of the process was about to begin.

5. THE ADAPTATION PROCESS: FROM THE SCRIPT TO THE STAGED VERSION

The first thing I did was invite theater person Grace Denoncourt to assume the production of the play. Together, we chose You-Shin Chen as a set designer and Michael McGee as a lighting designer. Grace herself could also work as the costume designer due to her experience in the fashion world. These members of the team had similar qualities in terms of being open, resourceful, and very precise workers in their respective areas, but most of all, professionals with a sense of humor. This last characteristic is essential in the way I prefer to work. Humor is a sign of intelligence and through it we can channel proactively many of the frustrations inherent to the theatrical universe.

Since Giannina herself was acting as a dramaturg, we agreed that we would meet once a week as soon as the rehearsals began to adjust our initial ideas regarding set, light and costumes design. This was a crucial decision, since we did not want to force the actors into a pre-conceived design, but we wanted them to be kind of unaware members of the design team. Responding to their impulses as we were staging the play was very important for me, because it encompassed principles of post-dramatic theater and
allowed them to imbue the mis-en-scene of truth and inject the information I gave them (my conclusions from the readings) naturally into their work. The main idea was that the play was a living being that would progressively express its own needs, to which we would respond from our particular fields of work and from our own capacities.

5.1 Set Design: Finding a place for the displaced

I had an initial vision of the space. Since two worlds were clearly defined in the play (Anglo-Saxon and Hispanic), I wanted to reproduce this concept spatially. A very early representation of the space consisted of a playing space flanked by the risers where the audience members would seat, as represented here in figure 1.

![Fig. 1. Initial spatial arrangement. Elaborated by J. P. Félix](image)

However, when Ms. Chen attended to one of the very first rehearsals, she suggested that there were actually three worlds or better yet, three different ways of seeing the world, three *Weltanschauungen* present in the adapted text: the Anglo-Saxon, the Hispanic and
the Middle-Eastern. This was absolutely fascinating. Since I also wanted to take some elements from the Spanish Renaissance, I proposed to her that we could replicate the structure of what was known at the time as *comedy corral*, a kind of small theater surrounded in three of its four sides by the audience. “Before the end of the 16th century there were no buildings devoted to theater in Spain. Representations of *comedias* were instead held in the courtyard of houses or inns, where a stage with background scenery was improvised along one of the sides. The three remaining sides served as public galleries to the wealthy, with the remaining spectators watching the play from the open courtyard. This structure was maintained in permanent theaters built for the purpose from the end of the sixteenth century, which used the open-air enclosed rectangular courtyard typical of a block of houses”49. So, we moved from conceiving the space as a two-sided one to a three-sided one, as shown in figure 2.

Fig. 2. Intermediate spatial arrangement. Elaborated by J. P. Félix and You-Shin Chen.

This spatial disposition created a very interesting challenge: composing for three points of view. Coincidentally, the leading roles in the play were three: Giannina, Hamlet and Zarathustra. This finding proved to be of capital importance, since it greatly helped us to convey ‘a simultaneous and multi-perspectival form of perceiving’, as proposed by Lehmann in his book.

This approach also set out a fantastic problem: what to do with the remaining fourth wall (which was the backdrop of the stage). The idea came from several of the conclusions I arrived to in my readings: the idea of the labyrinth, the space where father and son would reconcile, the space where all points of view would find a common ground. Ms. Chen then proposed to create an elevated platform, hidden by a big gate, as if it were the exit of a maze, but also served like the top of the crown of the Statue of Liberty, as it is suggested in the original text. The initial sketches made all of us very excited (fig. 3). Besides, the opening of the gate would allow us to reveal a new space in Act four, when everything in the story changes (fig. 4).

Fig. 3. Elevation. Elaborated by You-Shin Chen.
From my readings I extracted another idea that seemed defying: there would be no furniture at all. Perhaps a stool, at most, but one of the characteristics of theater in the Renaissance was that most events occurred outdoors. There was usually a street that divided two houses, or a garden or a square. It was very rather unusual that a set like the whole interior of a house, for instance, was utilized. The rectangle suggested by the disposition of the risers made me think of another elevated surface in the middle of this space. Another rectangle that resembled the ancient Greek altar, could serve different functions: it would be the altar where the dead bodies, victims of the Twin Towers attacks would be set down, it would be the deck of the ferry to Liberty Island, it would be the platform where the Statue of Liberty stood, it would be Segismundo’s prison cell and the wedding chamber of King Basilio and Queen Gertrude. This would be the ground plan (Fig. 5).
We also had the idea to extend a series of drapes of rubbery fabric to emulate prison bars, but later, in the work with the actors, we found that they seemed rather obstructive and posed significant problems for its removal when needed. This was also a great quality in the set designer, her ability to understand that the actors have certain prevalence in their assessments. That is to say that the impressions that come from their direct interaction with space, time, objects and between them has a predominance that we all acknowledged.

The horizontality of the space made us think of its verticality. The big gate in the background was an impressive, massive, mysterious element, but I had some concerns
about the space right above the rectangular elevated surface in the middle. Collaboration resolved this problem. Once again, a different department could help working out some difficulties that arose in another.

5.2 Light design: Threshold and visibility

The problem cited above was resolved by hanging a series of light bulbs of different colors that were suspended from the grid. Our light designer referred to them as “practicals” because of they were seen onstage and used as what they were, light bulbs. However, in my head they gained a symbolic value. They were the stars Segismundo and the other prisoners saw from their prison cell. A way to understand that time (the passage of time) was changing. The stars that were wrong when Basilio interpreted a dark future for his kingdom. They also served as the sparkling lights for the wedding celebration and the beacons the Statue of Liberty spoke about when talking about the world losing its course. They got to support some moments of the acting, since they created a very strong focal point for the actors. But those hanging lights were part of a wider proposal: they would not only work to illuminate the action, but to create atmospheres in an unnoticed way.

I agreed with Mr. McGee on creating a light that was at the service of the story. This benefited the understanding of the events, because it was a powerful clue for the audience to comprehend the shifting to different spaces in such a bare set.
With great patience, our light designer attended almost all rehearsals and took notice of the discoveries the actors were making. After each session, we met and sketched some ideas, at first on paper and later, using the actual fixtures present in the theater. Our main idea was to follow Lacan’s principle, which I have mentioned before, when talking about “Hamlet”: linguistic structures of “Hamlet” shed light on human desire (this idea was also mentioned by Professor Kulick in one of our classes). So, the play would progress from darkness to light, as the words in it were untangling the mystery of the plot. In Act I, we started creating a pile of corpses, victims of the September 11th attacks, under a threshold, suggesting the inability to see, to understand. Gradually and inadvertently (we had two or three-minute fades), we would raise the level and intensity of the light within each act. This way, Act I ended at Liberty Island, after the Statue narrated the whole matter about her and Segismundo in detail, so we started to see and acknowledge she had been his child minder and then become his accomplice. Act II started in the shadows again, when we were in the depth of the dungeons, entering Segismundo’s cell (a darker version of the Abu Ghraib prison corridors, but with the same neon-like characteristics) and ended with the shining light bulbs as stars, foretelling the possibility of a brilliant future. Act III began with the dubious deal between Anglo-Saxon and Hispanic forces, represented by the queen and the king in their pre-nuptial chamber and progressively moved to Segismundo’s proclamation of a new world. In Act IV everything changed: the big, tall door opened for the climax of the play, there was a high-key, celebratory atmosphere, filled with light and color. After all, hope was the finishing note of this blistering symphony, charged with the dullness that corresponds to dodgy political maneuvers. The light design had favored the actor and thus, the events, and thus the story. Humans can decide their future if the truth (aša) is
visible. There is no predestination different from what we harvest from the decisions sowed by our free will. Needless to say, this will has to be free. Really free.

5.3 Costume Design: the Baroque contribution

Since we had designed very sober and modest set and the lights, we decided that the costumes could be rich and flamboyant, to replicate the opulence of colors and textures of the Renaissance costumes. The other important idea was that each character would follow the fashion of his or her own period and location, without affecting his or her social condition. Thus, Hamlet, Gertrude and Ophelia would dress Elizabethan costumes. Basilio, the king and Segismundo, first prisoner, then prince redeemed, would dress in the Spanish Renaissance style. Zarathustra would have a traditional white dress, a *thawb*, or *alabiyyah*, an ankle-length Arab garment, usually with long sleeves, similar to a robe, with which he is often depicted. Giannina would dress in a contemporary, colorful way (very much like the real Giannina does).

“At the beginning of the Renaissance, clothing started to become rounder and fuller. Women’s clothing began with high waistlines, square necklines, and *finestrella* sleeves. However, waists continually lowered until they became extremely low, tapered, and v-shaped by the end of Elizabeth’s reign. Sleeves became rounder and had to be stuffed. Necklines remained square, though in the second half of the period they were often risen to the neck to accommodate the ruff. The farthingale was perhaps the biggest contribution of the Renaissance. When first used, it was conical in shape with wire hoops graduated in size (often called a “Spanish farthingale”). Needless to say, during
the entire Renaissance the desired female figure was shifting to a silhouette of wide shoulders, a long, narrow waist, a flat chest, and full hips, which was mostly modeled after the slight but ever so influential figure of Elizabeth I.

Men’s clothing began with accentuating the shoulders and chest. They wore tunics and doublets reaching the knee, belted at the waist and stuffed in the chest and upper sleeves. Usually jerkins, often fur-lined, were worn over. Shirts were cut full and gathered at the wrists and necks. However, by the end of the period, short, pumpkin-shaped trunk hose were worn with tight hose to show off a man’s legs and men began wearing corsets to slim the torso. They also acquired the v-shaped waistline as women did. Peascod-belly doublets became popular, as well as leg-of-mutton sleeves, short capes, and more vertical caps often decorated with feathers. Ruffs and matching cuffs were essential.

Overall, Renaissance fashions were characterized with a new scale of opulence and extravagance never quite reached in the middle ages.50

As mentioned before, all costumes changed for Act IV, making them more homogeneous and contemporary. All noble men would wear tuxedos, except for the prisoners, who would be in the traditional orange jumpsuits, worn in prisons like Guantánamo or some in the US. King and Queen would sport their crowns and, in

50 https://historyofeuropeanfashion.wordpress.com/category/renaissance-1450-1650/
general, some details for a celebration like medals, gloves, tiaras and necklaces would be added. Following, the preliminary sketches for most of the characters:

Hamlet  Giannina  Zarathustra
Segismundo  Queen Gertrude  King Basilio
Here are some images of the final results:
5.4 Sound and Music Design: The sounds of the desert

In the construction of the whole play as an event, it was clear the participation and influence of Anglo-Saxon elements on one side and Hispanic elements on the other. However, I felt it was necessary to emphasize on the Arab component of this set-up, so I found that music could be the perfect way to accomplish this idea. Doing some research, I found the beautiful richness of the Arabic music and the close ties it has maintained with the Spanish, Italian and Greek traditions. Besides, one of the most important qualities of Eastern music is the presence of microtones. These do not exist in Western music and somehow insinuated the importance of nuances in the sound. Palestinian composer and ethnomusicologist Habib Hassan Touma speaks about a “an Arab musical mentality, "responsible for the aesthetic homogeneity of the tonal-spatial and rhythmic-temporal structures throughout the Arab world, whether composed or improvised, instrumental or vocal, secular or sacred”51. This mentality has to do with the never-ending search for the truth, the improving of the relationships between human being and nature (self-regulation) and the acceptance of the designs of superior forces.

Thanks to the help offered by Giannina’s editor, Tess O’Dwyer, I got in contact with film sound editor Suzana Perić, who is one of the most experienced professionals in this area, having worked with directors like Roman Polanski, Peter Jackson, Jonathan Demme and Wes Anderson, among others. When we met, I realized what a wonderful artist she is. Empathy was immediate and we started creating a ‘sound track’ for the

play. We agreed on the possibilities that sound would give us, especially to contribute to the imagination (understood as completing the definition of spaces in the audience members’ minds) of places and times. The general concept was that sound effects would support the action and music would serve as hinges between acts, except when silence onstage had ‘to talk’ with another sound element. Thus, when Giannina, Hamlet and Zarathustra travel across the river to get to Liberty Island, when Segismundo talks to her fellow inmates or when the ceremony of the royal wedding starts, were moments that had the support of pre-recorded sound effects.

At the beginning, my intuition suggested that we could use a live voice with the characteristic Arabic timbre and the accompaniment of a traditional instrument like a Qanun, a Santoor or an Oud. Mrs. Perić proposed to contact Syrian singer Gaida Hinnawi (whose songs can be found here https://myspace.com/gaidamusic/music/songs). She was kind and generous enough to accept the invitation, but when she arrived to the last rehearsals, we realized that her voice was so strong and powerful that it was another character in the play and, unfortunately, we did not have the time to develop it and do it justice like we did with the rest of the characters. She recommended that we worked only with an oud player.

“The oud is is a pear-shaped stringed instrument commonly used in Arabic, Greek, Turkish, Persian, Jewish, Byzantine, Azerbaijani, Armenian, North African (Chaabi, Classical, and Spanish Andalusian), Somali and Middle Eastern music. Construction of the oud is similar to that of the lute. The modern oud and the European lute both
descend from a common ancestor via diverging paths”⁵². “The oud has a particularly long tradition in Iraq, where a saying goes that in its music lays the country’s soul. A ninth-century Baghdad jurist praised the healing powers of the instrument, and the ninth-century writer Muhammad Shihab al-Din related that it "places the temperament in equilibrium" and "calms and revives hearts." Following the invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of the secular Ba'athist regime in 2003, however, the increasing fervor of Islamic militants who consider secular music to be haraam (sinful) forced many oud players and teachers into hiding or exile”⁵³. In the end, the oud history shared elements with those of Segismundo, Giannina and Zarathustra.

Gaida’s brother, Adel Hinnawi offered to compose some melodies that helped the story to move forward as they were played live, from a semi-dark corner that was hardly visible for the audience. The music, audible but invisible, was almost like a scent, like a ghost, like Hamlet’s father, like a soul that comes from the netherworld to reclaim what is hers.

6. CASTING AND AUDITIONS: A NOT TOO SOLID FLESH

The casting auditions started as soon as the adaptation was finished. We decided to start with the lead roles, Giannina, Hamlet, Zarathustra and Segismundo during a first week and then try to narrow down the candidates through their work with potential actors who would be playing Basilio, Gertrude, Ophelia, Statue of Liberty and the prisoners.

⁵² Mottola, R.M. (Summer–Fall 2008). "Constructing the Middle Eastern Oud with Peter Kyvelos". American Lutherie (94, 95).
It is very difficult to list the abilities I look for in an actor because most of the times they are intangible. As Roland Barthes would say about human romantic relationships, it might be the movement of their hair, the way they stare into the void or the depth of their voices what attracts you, what makes them charismatic. However, I was clear on certain qualities that were essential to develop this particular process: political awareness, trained bodies and minds, density, musical sense, capabilities for deep listening or rhetorical listening, a fair knowledge about the original characters and their times, creativity, an ability to work in a team and lastly, be racially unmistakable.

In my opinion, political awareness means the conscience about the political force crossing our human becoming. It transcends the Aristotelian notion of that that is related to the affairs of the cities. It means certain mindfulness about two things: our ability to intervene and participate in the course of human history and our condition of freedom to do the latter. To identify this characteristic, we organized a very early reading with the last possible candidates, to hold a conversation about this politically charged play. We had a very healthy discussion, in which most of the actors expressed their personal opinions on matters like the US interventionist policy, the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and Vietnam, terrorism, world geopolitics (China-Taiwan, US-Puerto Rico, among others) and our potential contribution through the making of this theater play to a better understanding of these world phenomena. One of the actors decided to quit, due to his political objections. During this meeting, he said: “All the wars the United States have decided to go to… it has been with good intentions”. Although the entire group tried to respect his opinion, the disagreement was palpable and some days later he decided to leave. It was a pity, since I truly believe in the utility of what I call the
“necessary resistance”. He or she, who exercises an opposition and casts doubt, is really necessary to make the process advance. It is like the third force that breaks an unproductive equilibrium. On the other hand, the rest of the actors participated very actively in the debate and contributed to enrich our political views and appreciate the pertinence of the play.

During the auditions, we developed some theater games to establish the different levels of technique the actors had (they were very thankful for these ludic moments). Movement, voice, a sense of musicality (not related to singing or playing a musical instrument, but rather like a musical understanding of the space or the cadence of the words in the text or the possibility to intertwine silence, speed and gesture), all those aspects were taken into account, observed and evaluated.

Some stages of the auditions were open to all the participants. Roles were interchanged and different groups were formed. This particular strategy allowed me to find what I consider one of the most important features in an actor: density. It is very difficult for me to explain what I think it is, but I would summarize it by saying that density refers to the intensity of the characters’ thoughts. This is what I have also looked for in the auditions I have held for films. What is this character thinking about? How does this character think?

Attached to density, must coexist an indispensable ability: deep listening or what Krysta Ratcliff defines as rhetorical listening. In her article “Rhetorical Listening: A Trope for Interpretive Invention and a "Code of Cross-Cultural Conduct"”, she states “the
rhetorical listening that I am promoting is a performance that occurs when listeners invoke both their capacity and their willingness (1) to promote an understanding of self and other that informs our culture’s politics and ethics, (2) to proceed from within a responsibility logic, not from within a defensive guilt/blame one, (3) to locate identification in discursive spaces of both commonalities and differences, and (4) to accentuate commonalities and differences not only in claims but in cultural logics within which those claims function”. For me, this idea became like a compass with which to find the right cardinal points in the acting of this play. At many moments in rehearsal, I stood right in front of the actor who was not speaking, to check on the way he or she was listening. Oddly enough, I could see it in his or her eyes.

All the other abilities I could see them in our communal auditions, because I do not conceive them as secret, enclosed, testy examinations, but rather as open, participatory, playful, plural and non-hierarchical experiences. There is, in deed, a huge difference between an exam and an experience. I could see how they played off of each other, how they could have fun, how they could use their parallel thinking, how they could remember why they had chosen acting as an occupation and a principle of life.

Secondary abilities included having some knowledge about Renaissance theatre and languages like Spanish and French.

Once I had spotted the actors who had these general abilities, I started my work directing each one of the actors. This implied group work, but also individual work to
strengthen their positive attributes and attack (or learn how to live with) their weaknesses as individuals.

I have to say that the work with the actors was extremely agreeable and I enjoyed it greatly. In their own words, they had also delighted in working together.

7. THE LAST ACTOR: THE AUDIENCE

“There are two companies in a theatrical event: the company of actors and the audience” said once Professor Anne Bogart. Indeed, it is only when the rehearsed play becomes public, when theater assumes its real logos (understood as ‘the reason of being’).

The way I conceptualized the relationship between the event of the show, or the performance, with the attending audience members is the same as the one that exists between the attendants to a trial and the defense and prosecuting attorneys, the defendant, the witnesses and the judge. They go to court to get an idea of something that has occurred. They need to be creating images in their minds, trying to piece things together, collecting clues and testimonies and evaluating evidences, because they will have to report on them later. Their task is not to judge (although this might happen in a subliminal level), but to construct a new version of what is told, shown and said. On the other hand, each actor works in each character and each character has the task of defending a point of view. The various relationships between these coinciding or divergent points of view create the play.
An important characteristic of United States of Banana is that the people attending as spectators have a previous relationship with or is somehow related to the characters in the trial. Most of them are familiar with Hamlet, his circumstances and the other characters in the Shakespeare play. Some can recognize Segismundo, his father and the conditions that surrounded them in the original piece. Other audience members can acknowledge the situation of Puerto Rico as a colony. Some others feel identified with being far from their countries of origin, with having lost friends or relatives in the September 11th attacks or with questioning the injustices of our contemporary world. They are not alien to what is being exposed in the play. In certain way, the trial is also about them. That is why the characters in this play talk and refer directly to the audience members. There is no fourth wall. We are all together to analyze a situation and construct a critic with a multiplicity of perspectives. Characters are there to share their particular pathos, which, in the end, do not differ much from that one of the audience as a collective.

I remember one of the first things I asked from the actors was “please let us see ourselves in you”. According to what spontaneous spectators said after seeing the play (the verdict), they achieved it with great passion, technique and purpose.

8. THE REAR VIEW MIRROR: THE DIRECTOR AND HIS PREPARATION

I would like to dedicate these last paragraphs to reflect on the way my preparation at Columbia University is manifested in my work, both as a process and as a result. There
are so many factors that determine that precise moment in the rehearsal room when one feels that one has lived to arrive at that moment and everything one has experienced and learned takes him to that moment.

The first idea is linked to what Peter Brook mentioned in an interview in 1996: “A text may serve as a map but does not define the objective. The director must decide how to use the map and what route to take. Yet even then, only by trial and error, by probing one road and then another, does the destination come into sight”\textsuperscript{54}. During my studies, I could experience that the director is indeed, the one who leads the process of discovering the play. As the staging of United States of Banana progressed, it was very important that I could start a conversation with the cast and crew, in which ideas flowed back and forth. Sometimes, I did not know. Sometimes I had surmises, sometimes I was absolute and some other times, I did not have a clue. Whichever the sensation was, I could communicate it to the team, discuss it and move on. Both skills, being able to articulate ideas and arguments, and not feeling uncomfortable in accepting that I did not have every solution, reflected my training fairly.

The understanding that it was always a collective work kindly pushed me to rhetorical listening as well. I had to listen deeply as a director. I insisted on having everyone’s participation, although I knew some coworkers were advocating opposite ideas. From similar experiences during my academic education came my belief in what I mentioned before about ‘necessary resistance’. This situation manifests in diverse ways during the process. From taking in the negative notes of the author’s editor, to the physical

\textsuperscript{54} http://www.nytimes.com/1996/01/16/arts/for-peter-brook-hamlet-as-starting-point.html
impossibility of hanging a light, from the lack of a performing space to conflicting schedules or whimsical actors, the ‘necessary resistance’ represents the third component that creates an imbalance and as a result, the machinery starts to move.

Learning to understand concepts like composition, movement, voice, action and story made me capable of requesting the highest possible quality from them. In this process, I refined my criterion to decide what was really important and what was not, since directing is over all, the practice of editing.

I am aware of how my directing changed through the course of my studies and how many of the principles acquired can make the creative process a more fruitful one. The importance of specificity, the progression start, middle and end, the uselessness of micro managing the actors’ work, the necessity of contrast, surprise and tension are only a few of the guiding concepts I worked with during the staging of United States of Banana.

Nevertheless, I would dare to say that the most important conclusion is perhaps the most challenging: my professional journey as a theater director has only begun and it the many obstacles on the road will make me a stronger one.

9. CODA

Exactly seven days after the closing of “United States of Banana” at Schapiro Theatre, an article appeared on the New York Times on June 28th. Its title was “Puerto Rico’s
Governor says Island’s Debts are ‘Not Payable’”. The article finished with worrying statements from Governor Alejandro García Padilla: “Puerto Rico, as a commonwealth, does not have the option of bankruptcy. A default on its debts would most likely leave the island, its creditors and its residents in a legal and financial limbo that, like the debt crisis in Greece, could take years to sort out”. The article continued: “Still, Mr. García Padilla said that his government could not continue to borrow money to address budget deficits while asking its residents, already struggling with high rates of poverty and crime, to shoulder most of the burden through tax increases and pension cuts. He said creditors must now “share the sacrifices” that he has imposed on the island’s residents. “If they don’t come to the table, it will be bad for them,” said Mr. García Padilla, (...) “What will happen is that our economy will get into a worse situation and we’ll have less money to pay them. They will be shooting themselves in the foot”.
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