

Teatro al Vacío Full of Life

By: Isabel Cristina

Among the joys of the ASSITEJ Congress was discovering the work of Teatro al Vacío through their workshops for early childhood. José Agüero and Adrián Hernández arrived in Cuba and settled in Centro Habana, one of the most popular and dynamic neighbourhoods in the capital. They prefer to take the pulse of everyday life and have been very happy among the residents of Centro Habana and their unique rhythms.

The workshops they conducted, perhaps by chance or intuition, were held in a Children's Circle in another popular neighbourhood. The children of Pequeños Mambises had the luck to enjoy the exchange with this creative duo, starting with the 3-year-olds and then with the 5-year-olds.

In the room of the younger children, the kids began sitting in their little chairs, curiously observing a mischievous hand or a crazy foot that appeared unexpectedly from behind a column. Without words, using only simple gestures and the sincerity that emanates from two trained bodies, they invited the children to join them. Gradually, in silence, the children stood up from their chairs and occupied the center of the space, creating together a universe of melodious and multi-coloured forms without words, using only their bodies.

The most exciting part for me as a spectator was recognizing in such young children the concepts of bodily intelligence and sensory memory. José and Adrián proposed a space of physical but also mental freedom, as the little ones deciphered the images and completed them in their own way, creating parallel stories. At one point, the two actors formed a bridge with their bodies, and the children intuited, without a verbal cue, that they could pass underneath. This same operation was repeated with other action sequences, some more elaborate, such as: one actor sat on the floor with crossed legs while the other placed chairs in a row behind him. The children immediately assumed it was a train and climbed on excitedly. It was incredible to see the connection formed between them and the children, who were only 3 years old.

The second workshop, conducted for the 5-year-olds, was completely different, though it started with a similar concept. When they began inviting participation, the children started running all over the space. They were given a physical cue, without words, and they responded with tremendous uproar and explosion of joy. This state of beautiful chaos lasted for a few minutes while José and Adrián explored through their movements, sounds, and gestures how to calm them down a bit.

After silently acknowledging the situation with clear energy and a serene rhythm, they managed to soothe the overflowing joy. Through sound, clapping games, and onomatopoeias, they got the children into another state of alertness and receptivity. Exploring coordination, musicality, and teamwork, they changed the initial cue, and the rest of the workshop involved less mobility, more concentration, and a lot of collective play.

Witnessing both Teatro al Vacío workshops confirmed for me the complexity of creating theater for early childhood. Each age is different. Even children of the same age have different abilities and rhythms. Seeing how José and Adrián kindly and professionally dealt with these complexities was admirable. I hope other Cuban children can enjoy Teatro al Vacío, so they learn how to fill silences with stories and emotions.