



Giasselle Limery as Cadencia and Carmen Gutierrez as the Announcer Lady in *Cadence in Wonderland and her Friends from la Cochinchina* (2011) by Actores Unidos. Victoria Espinosa Theatre, Santurce, Puerto Rico. Photo: Jesus Joel Lopez.

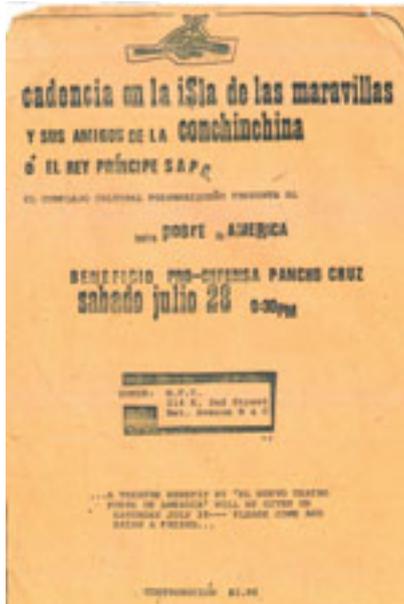
## **Pedro Santaliz Ávila's *Cadencia en el país de las maravillas y sus amigos de la Cochinchina* at the Victoria Espinosa Theatre**

Aravind Enrique Adyanthaya | Casa Cruz de la Luna Theatre

*Cadencia en el país de las maravillas y sus amigos de la Cochinchina*. Written by Pedro Santaliz Ávila. Directed by Carmen Gutierrez. Actores Unidos. Victoria Espinosa Theatre, Santurce, Puerto Rico. 24, 25 September 2011.

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Publicity flyer for a production of *Cadencia* in New York. Courtesy of Rafael Pagán.

In September 2011, Actores Unidos presented a production of Pedro Santaliz's *Cadencia en el país de las maravillas y sus amigos de la Cochinchina* (*Cadencia in Wonderland and her Friends from la Cochinchina*) at the Victoria Espinosa Theatre. It had been 39 years since the play premiered in New York City; 59 since the founding of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico; 35 since the publication of Manuel Ramos Otero's *La novelabingo* (1976); and a little more than two years since Puerto Rico's government approved Law 7, a step toward the privatization of public services that left thousands unemployed. These capricious coordinates—I could have selected a different set—echo the conception of the theatrical as an encounter of disparate epochs, stories, and registers that converge in the performance event to generate a texture of vital moments, poetry, and loose ends. Carmen Gutierrez's staging of *Cadencia* functions in this same way.

The text of *Cadencia* emerged from the stories and fables told by the young participants in workshops Santaliz offered in New York and Puerto Rico in the early 1970's. The play begins with the tale of a blind king and his three daughters, the youngest of which is named Cadencia Otero. Cadencia is wooed by a frog prince who sends her on a mission to look for the mountains of gold. This quest becomes a series of fantastic detours: the story of the fastest man in the world; the tale of the singing and dancing Moon and her adopted son, the Sun; an Afrocaribbean spirit-rising healing ceremony; a scene from Red Riding Hood; a portrait of a poor family in the Bayamón neighborhood of El Polvorín whose house is falling down; Catholic confessions; unemployment lines; drug raids; and much more.

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From left to right: Yan Christian Collazo, Ivania Zayas, Giasselle Limery, and Jorge Ivan Latorre.  
Photo: Jesus Joel Lopez.

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The Actores Unidos production of Santaliz's play facilitated agile flows and interconnections between these various stories. Simple painted flats served as the backdrop, leaving most of the stage free for the rapid succession of scenes—locations, as in Shakespearean theatre, were largely stated and described in the text. Black costumes used for group scenes contrasted with colorful ones used for mythic characters. Gutiérrez, in the role of the Announcer-Lady (*la Doña que Anuncia*), at times presented the action. Script in hand, she evoked a medieval *maitresse de jeu*, subtly orchestrating the performance. The audience area was extended, with a row of seats placed on the stage as a gesture toward immediacy and proximity. The evening began and ended with a joyful procession of the cast entering and exiting the theatre, singing and playing the musical theme of *Cadencia*, connecting the auditorium to the exterior world. During the play, actors, singers, and musicians switched and fused roles. The actors who played the picturesque characters in the blind king's court transformed into forest trees, into gossiping crowds, into the biggest bird in the world, into prostitutes and junkies. In this sense, a great achievement of the production was the formation of an ensemble that is both varied (multigenerational, multidisciplinary) and well integrated; a collaborative staging in which there were no weak links.

This production of *Cadencia* also incorporated a series of sequences that refer to Puerto Rican actuality, such as those dealing with the unemployment generated by Law 7 and with the “supertubo” project—a natural gas pipeline system advocated by Governor Luis Fortuño that poses ecological risks to the mountainous zones of the island. These added scenes conjured Santaliz's own conception of the script as a work-in-progress open to change; that is, as a sketch that each company adapts and reconfigures according to their capabilities and historical moment.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, the play becomes a living archive, containing data and traces of past performances, taking on the impression of each new production.<sup>2</sup>

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From left to right: Giasselle Limery as Cadencia and Carmen Gutierrez as the Announcer Lady.

Photo: Jesus Joel Lopez.

Gilles Deleuze, speaking about the notion of rhizome, writes: “unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature” (Deleuze 1993, 35). Considering a play as a rhizomatic archive entails viewing it as a map housing flight lines of different types of textual and performative materialities. In *Cadencia*, the mythical story of the quest has no lineal progression. It expands over a heterogenic terrain composed not only of fairy tales but also of songs and dances, of vignettes of Puerto Rican contemporary life, and of *jíbaro* life of the 1940’s. There is no narrative arc but rather a perpetual middle, as the plot vectors that move Cadencia continually shift, sending her in different converging and diverging directions: looking for the cure to her husband’s skin disease, for a brothel called Three Nuns, for fantastic amulets, for a better education for a son she dreamed of having, for English classes so that she may go to New York and become a secretary, and so on. Accordingly, Cadencia’s identity is unstable: she is a rich princess, a poor young girl, a mother, a girlfriend, a spouse to a husband who is in turn a prince, a frog, a barrio boy, a poet, a magician, and a car repairman. All the characters in the play—both, on the page and onstage—exist in a mode of fluid being, of becoming. Their languages and accents comprise a seamless navigation through literary Spanish, street Spanish, *jíbaro* Spanish, Golden Age poetry, cultural sayings, pseudo-German, pseudo-Latin, invented dialects, song lyrics, and English. No archival index or taxonomical guide is provided to order these flows in plot/language/character. Santaliz himself calls the play a “burundanga” or “mejunje,” a jumbled tasty mix and admits that he did not know how to stop the proliferation of stories, the excess, and interconnections that ultimately lead to no conclusion.<sup>3</sup>

As a rhizomatic archive, *Cadencia* resists the closure of a unified interpretation.<sup>4</sup> Like in Hans-Thies Lehmann’s concept of the postdramatic: “prescriptions, are no longer possible, merely partial perspectives and stuttering answers that remain ‘works in progress’” (Lehmann 2006, 25). The work in progress of *Cadencia* is also the work in progress of the construct of the Puerto Rican nation as presented through a process of deterritorializations and reterritorializations of time periods, social-economic strata, and a variety of spaces (inner city, mountains, island, mainland, fairy land) in the play. In a country that has lost a straight teleological route to independence, how does the constant need to

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move and to imagine function? Is Cadencia our daughter, our mother, our oppressor, our fantasy, our object of charity or our hope? As the blind king Toseconcho returns towards the end of the performance to address the audience, he declares: “in a nation of Puerto Ricans, the Puerto Ricans are owners.” Then adds (correcting himself): “in a nation of Puerto Ricans, the Puerto Ricans are Puerto Ricans and nothing more.” The public knows that the happy-ever-after finale the Announcer-Lady narrates is another flight line, and that the play is a non-place (an every-place) where memory, history, and reality can only take the shape of a ferociously rhizomatic burundanga archive that through its multiplicity, excess, and disorder struggles not to be possessed. Santaliz once said: “To decolonize inside the colony is very difficult [one must] “fight inside madness, with madness, from our madness.”<sup>5</sup>

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**Aravind Enrique Adyanthaya** is a Puerto Rican writer and theatre director; he is also the founder of [Casa Cruz de Luna](#) an experimental theatre based in San Germán, Puerto Rico. His works have been presented in the United States at the New Theatre Workshop, the Guthrie Theatre, Pregones, Theatre for the New City, HERE, Teatro del Pueblo, and Red Eye Collaboration. Since 2001 he has been developing a theatrical poetics based on the live production and projection of computerized writing, which he calls “writing act” (*escritura acto*). Adyanthaya is a graduate of the doctoral program in historiography at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Pedro Santaliz, “Letter to José Manuel.” Manuscript from the Center of Puerto Rican Studies Archives, Hunter College, New York. October 3, 1975; page 2 (of 2).

<sup>2</sup> In the Santaliz Collection at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies Archives, one can find multiple play sketches, which are often comprised of a list of stage directions and fragmentary dialogue: a reflection of both Santaliz’s process and his view of theatre as process.

<sup>3</sup> “Letter to José Manuel,” 1-2.

<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that also in 2011, a new edition of another rhizomatic piece from the 1970s, Manuel Ramos Otero’s novel *La novelabingo*, was released. Ramos Otero interpreted King Toseconcho in the 1972 production of *Cadencia*, a collaboration between el Nuevo Teatro Pobre de América and the Aspasganza theatre group.

<sup>5</sup> Pedro Santaliz, “To a Friend Who Told Me that my Theatre was a ‘Factory.’” Manuscript from the Center of Puerto Rican Studies Archives, Hunter College, New York. Dated December 31, 1975; page 2 (of 2).

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