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Theater: 'Cuban Thing'

Revolution's Impact on Liberal Family Shown

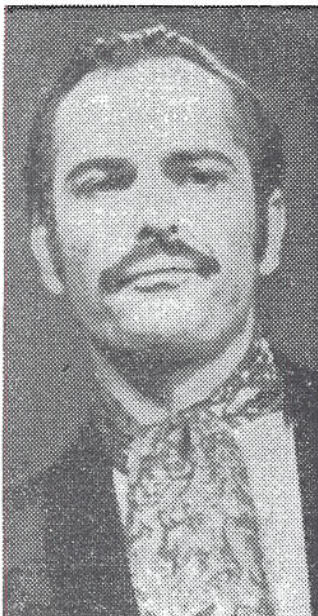
By CLIVE BARNES

THERE was more excitement outside Henry Miller's Theater Tuesday night than inside when Jack Gelber's play "The Cuban Thing" opened to the vociferous displeasure of anti-Castro demonstrators. It was a tribute to American freedom that a pro-Castro play should be produced in New York; unfortunately, Mr. Gelber's work proved less of a tribute to the American theater.

A polemicist cannot afford to bore, but this was a luxury that Mr. Gelber permitted himself through most the evening. The writing was stilted, the situations unlikely and the mood of the play—caught between the comically serious and the seriously comic—uncertain.

Mr. Gelber's intention was interesting enough. He sought to show the impact of the Cuban revolution upon a prosperous, liberal-minded Havana family. Its wavering transition from radical support of Castro—the father sent money to him in the hills—through varying stages of disillusionment until it finally comes to terms with the new regime, might well have the stuff of drama in it. But Mr. Gelber very effectively ensured that it did not get out.

Mr. Gelber appears to be an astonishingly untidy writer. The members of his family, well-bred and enlightened, are first seen amusing themselves and their friends with obscene movies. It is possible that in decadent Battista days such a family would amuse itself in such a way. I presume Mr. Gelber knows his Cubans better than I do. However, to expect any American audience to accept the likelihood of a proud father's showing his daughter (educated at Sarah Lawrence, no less) stag movies is to strain its credulity to the point of ridicule.



Bert Andrews

Rip Torn

The Cast

THE CUBAN THING, a play by Jack Gelber. Staged by Mr. Gelber; settings by Robin Wagner; lighting by Jules Fisher; costumes by Patricia Quinn Stuart; sound by Val Peters; documentary film by Lee Lockwood; production supervisor, Richard Scanga; film sequences by P.G.L. Production; production stage manager, Roger Johnson Jr. Presented by Ivor David Balding & Associates, Ltd., associate producer, Samuel Bronstein. At Henry Miller's Theater, 124 West 43rd Street.

- Roberto Rip Torn
- Barbara Jane White
- Alicia Maria Tucci
- Juan Harold Scott
- Mamma Jenny Egan
- Chan Raul Julia
- Carlos Michael Wager
- Paco Robert Fields
- Appleby Conrad Bain
- O'Hara Harry Packwood
- Ray Richard Steele-Reed
- Daisi Rose Gregorio
- Billi Carla Pinza
- Cuqui Jeanne Kaplan
- Angel Henry Proach

The characters all lacked the life-blood of likelihood. And the story, jumping spasmodically from 1958 to 1964, very often twitched quite incomprehensibly. A mysterious journalist, claiming to be from the New York Times, turns up in one scene; in a later scene he is supposed to be a television commentator. Presumably he is an anti-revolutionary spy of some kind, but we never find out as he merely drifts out of the story.

This same carelessness in the writing is seen also in smaller instances. At the end of a scene in 1962, the cast breaks up a lot of glass and china ornaments. During the next, set a year later, some of them are busy gluing the pieces together. Likely? I think not.

Such things would not matter a row of beans if the play were better, but in the circumstances they become symptomatic. Equally symptomatic is the shoddy quality of the writing—such as when one whore informs another that "Your dreams are made of toilet paper."

Perhaps Mr. Gelber would claim that he was writing a fantasy rather than a factual account, but this would not explain why he keeps on trying to make political comments that the rickety struc-

ture of his play cannot even saggingly support.

What has happened in Cuba is fascinating, and it would be possible to make quite a number of plays, both objective or, to one side or the other, polemical. But this was flat, stale and unprofitable stuff.

Mr. Gelber himself directed, which was almost certainly a mistake. Another director might have played down at least some of the play's high spots of bathos and might also have persuaded the author to be less self-indulgent in the writing. Yet with only one or two exceptions the acting was markedly better than the play.

Rip Torn brought depths of seedy authority to the radical businessman cut adrift by the revolution he himself sought, Jane White was sensibly larger than life as his wife, and Maria Tucci all tender idealism as the daughter—it made one proud of Sarah Lawrence. But these performances were imposed upon the play rather than arising out of it and, revealingly, all three were in different styles, from the conscious exaggeration of Miss White, to the flamboyant elegance of Mr. Torn and the reticence of Miss Tucci.

In the intermission the theater management kindly provided its besieged customers—for the police lines controlling demonstrators would not let anyone leave—with, for what was claimed the first time in the American theater, free orangeade. Looking back, I think it might have been luckier with free Cuban rum and Havana cigars. And it shouldn't have waited until the intermission.

The play closed after one official performance.