

THE THEATRE

MUSICAL REVOLUTION IN CUBA AND OHIO

“Buena Vista Social Club,” at Atlantic Theatre Company, and “How to Dance in Ohio,” on Broadway, were adapted from documentaries, with varying success.

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December 18, 2023



The songs in “Buena Vista” symbolize a society responding to a changing world. Illustration by Edel Rodriguez

 Save this story

here’s nothing in music—nothing, really, in the entire world of sound—like 1

T “Buena Vista Social Club”—a new musical, directed by Saheem Ali, for Atlantic Theatre Company, with a book by Marco Ramirez and music by the eponymous award-winning musical collective, the subjects of the 1999 documentary by Wim Wenders on which this show is based—draws its fun, its exuberance, and its occasional moments of emotional depth from its focus on how voices come together to change societies, or to convey their sicknesses. After a vivid opening number, the story begins in a recording studio in Havana, Cuba, where a young musicology student and bandleader, Juan de Marcos (Luis Vega), has come to ask a life-changing favor of the legendary singer Omara Portuondo (Natalie Venetia Belcon). He thinks that Cuban music hasn’t got its due, that it’s more than fit fare for tourists, that a voice like Omara’s and the history she symbolizes shouldn’t go unrecorded. He’s assembled a band and booked studio time; all she has to do is show up.

Belcon’s queenly Omara—modelled on the actual Omara Portuondo, who is showcased in Wenders’s film—is spiky, remote, set in her ways. She’s lived through the history that de Marcos can evoke only nostalgically in reference to the songs he loves. Those songs remind Omara of real people and real events, political interludes whose senselessness and brutality have left unmusical lacunae in her life. Now she’s curt and uncollaborative—perhaps the best indication of her current state of mind is that she sings not with a live band but over a prerecorded track. She’s not a musician to make friends. Not anymore.

Once she agrees, very tentatively and with a handful of qualifications, to work with Juan and his band, her mind goes roving into her personal history. She finds Compay (Julio Monge), a guitarist and singer she used to know, and enlists him as a backup musician. They do what singers and old souls do: rhapsodize about the past. The rest of the show plays out in two strands, like a pair of friends singing in tight thirds: in the present, there’s the recording project; in Omara’s youth there’s so much trouble, so much musical and political ferment.

In the old days, Compay took Omara to a club in a tough neighborhood called the Buena Vista Social Club. Omara (played as a young woman by Kenya Browne) had no business being there—she was a member of a singing group with her sister Haydee (Danaya Esperanza), playing respectable joints like the Tropicana Club, where Black musicians had to perform from beneath the stage, working their magic unseen. Color is a key logic of this show, a cruel fiction that drives a canyon between people whose fates are twinned but who can't see past skin. The young Omara watches a busboy, Ibrahim (Olly Sholotan), singing onstage, a number called “Bruca Maniguá,” which makes frank, plangent overtures to Black liberation. It reminds Omara of a lullaby that her grandmother used to sing. It also reminds her that at her glossy gigs at the Tropicana nothing as politically troubled as this song—nothing so real—would ever make it to the stage.

The fires of revolution are licking at these people's heels. Precise politics are never openly discussed—a flaw in a show whose premise is that music is politically consequential, that it can alter the historical outcomes it later renders in song—but, in fact, at the time Fulgencio Batista's government was being overthrown, and comfortable, relatively wealthy families like Omara's were being labelled as traitors by Fidel Castro's revolutionaries, giving them an incentive to flee the island. Compay has a small-time hustle running cases of rum through the club—what he doesn't know is that these cases also carry revolutionary weaponry.

This may sound like a lot of story to wade through, but the plot points are more like pretexts for song. Most of the two-hour running time of “Buena Vista Social Club” is taken up by full-length renditions of tunes arranged by the band for which the show is named. That's a good thing, because the band assembled here is wonderful, and the songs themselves—their open sorrows, their clear laments, their insistence, via so much percussion, on their Afro-Cuban roots—contain more social content than the show's dialogue allows. The club scenes are lit with seductive, low-lidded color; they might remind you of a joyful, sexy work by the painter Ernie Barnes. There are excellent

dancers, set loose in long numbers choreographed by Patricia Delgado and Justin Peck. Belcon and Monge and Mel Semé (playing Ibrahim in his older days) sing beautifully, especially when they join up and surrender to harmony.

The singing I liked best, though, comes in call-and-response moments, when the horn players drop their instruments and sing, in unison, in answer to what's happening with the leads. That's a symbol of the sound of an entire society calling out in response to a changing world as it rolls forward unimpeded. As much as I liked the song-heavy orientation of "Buena Vista Social Club," I do wish it had brought more of that world in. A documentary about musicians on the comeback trail might well be justified in letting politics live subtextually, but to slightly fictionalize the same material and render it as narrative makes context crucial.

Ramirez does an admirable job of showing how the system of color and caste in Cuba affected a dark-skinned kid like Ibrahim, who, later, has accrued a life filled with missed opportunities because of his color. But, for a scene set in late-fifties Cuba, to have color be the clearest takeaway is to have failed to consider something huge about the afterlife of colonization, the alchemy of revolutionary rhetoric, and the troubling hemispheric influence of the United States, which, in this show, is vaguely gestured at but never named. It wouldn't matter so much if the songs themselves—all specifics, right there in the choruses and the solos, in the grain of the voices—didn't make their own requests. The show is an amazing time. I would have stayed longer to hear its darker side.

The new Broadway musical "How to Dance in Ohio"—at the Belasco, directed by Sammi Cannold, with a book and lyrics by Rebekah Greer Melocik, music by Jacob Yandura, and choreography by Mayte Natalio—is based on a Peabody-winning documentary of the same name, about a group of young people, in their late teens and early twenties, who are on the autism spectrum and share a support group. At the beginning of the show, Desmond Luis Edwards, Amelia Fei, Madison Kopec, Liam Pearce, Conor Tague,

Ashley Wool, and Imani Russell approach the lip of the stage, letting the audience know that they are autistic people playing autistic parts—a powerful gesture that reverberates through a show whose ultimate point, pronounced loudly, is that the work of representing autistic people should start from within that community, not from some condescendingly interested gaze from without.

They're getting ready for a dance concocted by the leader of the group, Dr. Emilio Amigo (Caesar Samayoa). They've all got their worries. Drew (Pearce) is debating where to go to college, here at home or away at the University of Michigan. Marideth (Kopec) loves the safety of “facts,” preferring them to the more ambiguous realm of one-on-one interaction. Remy (Edwards) is trying to get his TikTok channel up and running.

The show's great strength lies in its specifics: it reveals just how hard it can be to leave the house, to establish routines, to arrange one's face in a way that invites the world in. The production doesn't allow its songs—competent fare, deftly arranged—to tempt it to convey mere impressions rather than giving us the real article, and outlining how individual lives meet the world and contribute to its turning. ♦

Published in the print edition of the December 25, 2023, issue, with the headline “Musical Revolution.”