

American Theatre

BANANA PICKING AND FOREIGN POLICY

By Steve Murray

Remember back in '54, when the CIA overthrew Guatemala's democratically elected government?

You don't?

That's what George King and Ruby Lerner were afraid of. And that's why they decided to jog some memories with *Bananaland: A Central America Theme Park*, opening this July at Seven Stages in Atlanta, just in time for the Democratic Convention.

An environmental performance employing actors, puppets, mock-museum exhibits, sideshows, original music, video and lots of bananas, the production takes a critical if comical look at American intervention in Central America—and takes its form from that quintessentially U.S. phenomenon, the theme park.

To get the details right, King and Lerner drove to Florida and braved the cheerful tour guides of Gator World, Citrus World, the Tupperware headquarters and EpCot Center. How's that for grueling research?

"What we're aiming for is an information theme park," says Lerner, "or, as I heard it used to refer to evening news, 'infotainment.'"

In a canny move, King and Lerner appropriate not only a popular entertainment form, but the popular way we get information these days: in bits. Which makes *Bananaland* highly entertaining and truly subversive.

It's taken more than two years for *Bananaland* to find its final form. The piece, originally known as *The Banana Project*, began when King (a British-born documentary filmmaker) and Lerner (the former executive director of the Atlanta-based arts coalition Alternate ROOTS) realized they didn't really know what was going on in Central America.

"We felt that if we didn't understand, our friends probably didn't understand either," says Lerner, "and we decided it was important to try to rustle up some information." So they launched into extensive research, burrowing into the stacks at Tulane University's



The Bananaettes— from left, Carol Mitchell-Leon, Janet Metzger and Elise Witt—croon tropical melodies in a staged reading of *Bananaland* at the Alternate ROOTS Festival in Atlanta last September.

Middle American Library, a library endowed, ironically, by the prime subject of their scrutiny, the United Fruit Company.

What King and Lerner found out was startling. It seems that in 1944, excited by the model of democracy exemplified by F.D.R., the Guatemalan populace led a revolution against their authoritarian dictator. In his place they put a man who'd been exiled in Argentina; in 1952 he was succeeded by one of his lieutenants, named Arbenz. Under Arbenz, a new constitution was drawn up, including provision for land reapportionment. "Unfortunately," King says, "his land reform involved large amounts of land owned by the United Fruit Company—UFC was the largest landowner in Guatemala."

What happened next strains the imagination. A man named Edward Bernays was hired by the UFC to stir up propaganda stateside (in fact, Bernays wrote a book called *Propaganda*, and came to be known as the father of American public relations). Lobbying the Eisenhower government and spurring Op Ed columnists, "Bernays created a climate of American public opinion that would accept U.S. inter-

vention," King says.

"Eventually, Eisenhower agreed that the CIA would orchestrate a coup. It's one of those stories you just can't believe—what they succeeded in doing was taking over a country without really firing a shot."

The CIA managed this by controlling pirate radio stations in the jungles, filling the airwaves with pop tunes and reports about the revolution—a revolution that didn't actually exist. The most soldiers the "revolutionary" army ever tallied was 150, King says; its leader and mercenaries were hired by the U.S.

The Arbenz overthrow is only one among dozens of Central American invasions by the U.S. in this century. Given such a precedent, "You just have to wonder what's going on in Nicaragua today," King says. With *Bananaland* King and Lerner hope to spark the same concern in their audiences' minds—but not through didactic drama.

"We decided the way into that story for us would be through bananas," Lerner says. In its first phase, *Bananaland* was a relatively formal script, read last summer at the annual meeting of Alternate ROOTS. A vaudeville tone worked