

performance. The alluring potential of an innately malleable form has pushed the question of *what* the theatre ought to be saying into the background. This is not just a problem for the avant-garde; *Cats* continues to pack them in and the settings frequently receive more applause than singers at the Met. Spectacle is in the ascendancy as theatre tries to hook a public weaned on MTV and Steven Spielberg. As long as audiences and artists are more beguiled by appearances than content, little will change.

### Notes

1. *Tamara* opened in Toronto on 3 May 1981 and in New York City on 2 December 1987. It is currently on an open run in New York.
2. Conversation taped by the author at *Tamara* performance, 10 July 1988.
3. All quotes from Eva Brenner are from an interview with the author, 22 October 1988.

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## PR, Propaganda, and Infotainment

Paul Evans

*Bananaland: A Central American Theme Park* is vaudeville propaganda, a guerrilla exercise of schtick engaged in sabotage. Conceived as a theme park, the work deploys surprise tactics to attack consumerism-as-imperialism. But salesmanship is just one of the targets hit by the piece co-authored by Ruby Lerner, former executive director of the Southeastern arts coalition Alternate ROOTS, and documentary filmmaker George King.

Wryly coopting the media ploy of "infotainment"—reportage tricked out as show biz—*Bananaland* dismantles the myth-making machinery of the U.S. empire. Cabaret, video, installation pieces, pirated texts, and puppetry tipsily coalesce into a "mockumentary" that undercuts the doctored objectivity, coy sobriety, and contrived reassurances that characterize news-bite history. Besides exposing specific political iniquities, the work reveals how the manufactured mix-up of news and advertising aggravates a blithe obliviousness, a "bananality" of evil.

The show's run, 7-24 July 1988 at Seven Stages Theatre in Atlanta, was set to parallel the larger circus of the Democratic Convention where presidential candidate Michael Dukakis would charm a demographic with snipety Spanish. It began fortuitously the week *Time* magazine, flourishing the headline "Magnifico!," played fast and Luce with Hispanic chic. Here we found an epithalamium honoring the season's tempestuous marriage (or marketing-brainstorm link-up) of Latino *sensibilidad* and gringo pop. Celebrated with equal zest were Nancy Reagan's big-ticket Adolfo gowns, Ruben Blades' emancipatory crossover dreams, and the reactionary funk of Miami Sound Machine. Although quavering with proper indignation about barrio poverty and waxing dramatic about this ripest ethnic "identity crisis," the general tone remained appropriately apologetic for the conqueror. Doting and conciliatory, ladling all manner of edge and diversity into the melting pot, *Time's* was a quintessential mainstream "feature" story—authoritative, affirmative, conclusive. And a quick and painless read.

Countering not only that message but its method, *Bananaland* marshals a "journalism from below"—subjective, fragmentary, personal, open to question. Against the summarizing "photograph" of gloss-reportage, the work presents an "action collage" of crossreferential moods and genres that resists closure, pat scanning, or comfy ingestion. And for the illusion

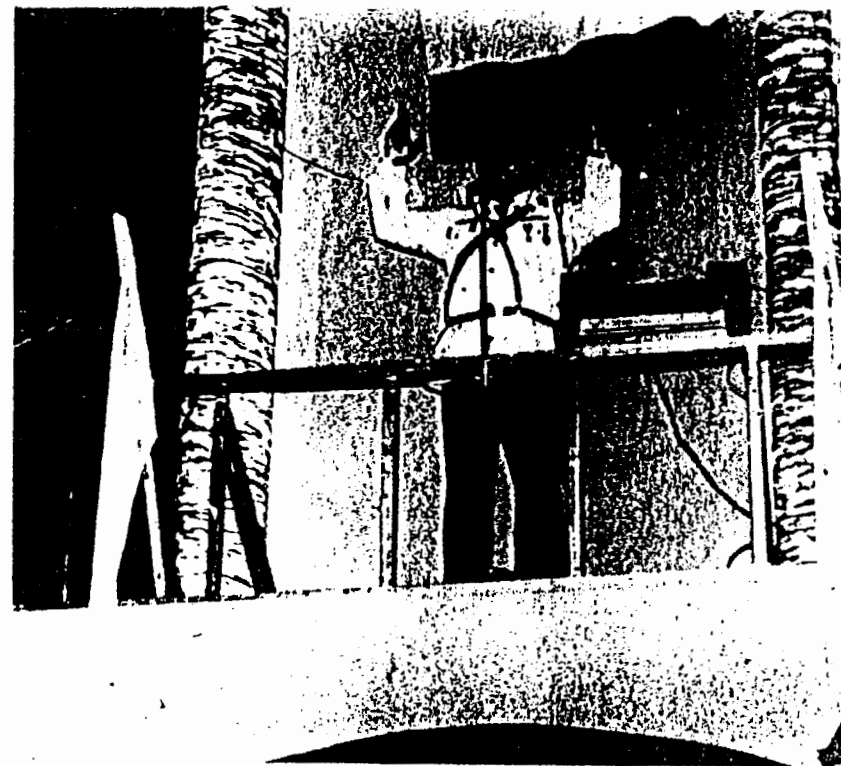


Marimba (Nita Hardy and her lackey accordionist Lenny Bellows) stroll through the fake palm trees of Bananaland plaza.  
Joe Lesterlove

of inevitability and solution inherent in quotidian journalism (and Aristotelian theatre). *Bananaland* exchanges a plotless ranging that arrests the implied "march of progress" of narrative form. A theatre of random epiphanies, *Bananaland* "hops more than it marches," as Voltaire said of an essay of Montesquieu's. And, suiting its assault on unbordered ambition, it does its work more spatially than temporally.

Certainly *Bananaland* invades its performance space. Taking advantage of Seven Stages' high ceiling and unobstructed floor, as well as the lobby and capacious auditorium, carpenters have put up partitions, booths, and tunnels to create a carnival maze [see *Bananaland* map, plate 5 in Steve Nelson's article, this issue]. The riotous Caribbean color scheme (yellow, red, green) and slapdash construction spoofs the manicured attractions of Disney World. Dimly lit passageways add tension and dread, a feeling of EPCOT becoming Inferno.

In a parody of imperialist appetite, the theatre is transformed into bananarama—the immense yellow fruit atop the marquee; George King, on the sidelines, in a T-shirt sporting Andy Warhol's banana artwork for the Velvet Underground's debut LP; a Gift Shop peddling Juicy Fruit kitsch, condoms, and *Bananaland*wear (Panama hats, touristy garb air-brushed with banana designs). A TV screen flashes the logo for Woody Allen's *Bananas*; banana smoothies are sold at a bar; a Carmen Miranda Bananabilia Collection displays an acre of ads for Dole, Chiquita, and United Fruit Company (or, as rendered Joycean by the firm's own PR, "Unifruitco").



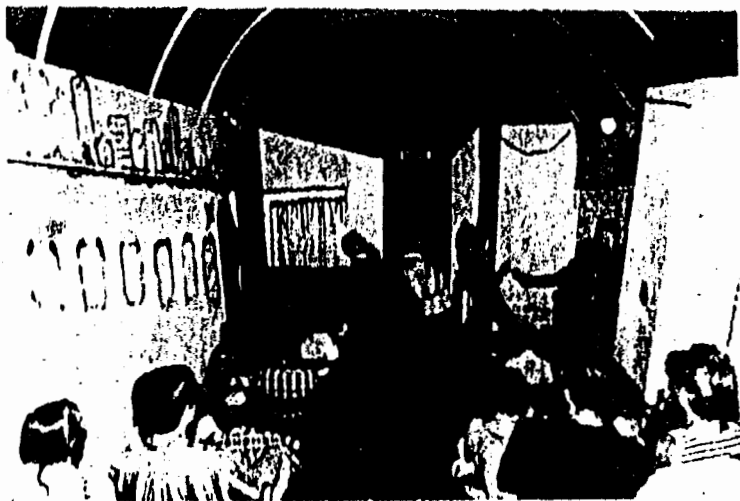
2. From the balcony of Bananaland (George King and Lenny Bellows) (Photo by Joe Lesterlove)

To the taped strains of one of the show's spunkier original tunes ("[H]ere at Bananaland / The jokes are cheap / The laughter's canned / It's more fun than Disney / Or Graceland"), the audience enters a Bananaland Plaza of fake palms and cabaña dreck. Banana-hatted Juanita Marimba and lackey accordionist Lenny Bellows (Nita Hardy, Rodger French) parlay nightclub rhumba and cocktail banter. From the balcony perch so dear to dictators, a lounge-act version of General Anastasio Somoza (George Nikas) toasts himself, pumped up by boombox applause, as "Senator for Life," "Promoter of Rural Electrification," "Ridiculous Parody of a National Leader," "The Main Enchilada," "Close Personal Friend of Richard Nixon." Sharkishly sportive in the kind of Ruritanian uniform Hermann Göring affected, Somoza, the evening's MC, drops names (Charro, Juan Valdez, Wayne Newton) and barks orders, dividing the audience into tour groups.

On a staggered schedule, the crowd takes alternately the Guatemala Tour and the Museum Tour, stopping for refreshment at Anastasio's Cafe (*el comandante dices bananas* with his machete) or Somoza e Hijos Bar Y Grill, before ending up at The Shades of Truth Pavilion. They can pause at the Library, which, as counterpoint to the crassly commercial gift shop, distributes tracts from such groups as the Atlanta Committee on Latin America, No Business As Usual Action Network, and the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador.

First up on the Guatemala Tour is a ride on Bananair, Flight 1954. The audience gathers in a narrow space, its plywood walls painted to suggest

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the interior of a cut-rate airliner. Passengers hear an announcement that rosaries will drop toward the seats in case of emergency, that prayer cards are provided, and that "iguana-on-a-stick" is available for snacks. Then "Operation Success," an "In-Flight Thriller Puppet Show," commences. Written by King, Lerner, and Jon Ludwig (of Atlanta's Center for Puppetry Arts), "Operation Success" is performed by airline crewmen (Jim Brooks, Neill Bogan) and a cast of golf trophies, *Ghostbusters* toys, and G.I. Joe figurines. It relates the rape of hope in the country whose per capita income stands at \$1,198. New Year's Day, 1954, a rare time of land reform and democracy, gives way to May of that year, when Ike's CIA and the United Fruit Company, Guatemala's largest landowner, conspire to nix popularly elected President Jacobo Arbenz.

After offering the role to Adolf and Benito (the two stooges of evil chirp "Nein!" and "Clao!"), Big Business picks an indigenous puppet, the monstrous Carlos Castillo Armas, to lead a faked revolution. Its outcome is predictable: the abolition of unions, the brutal "questioning" of suspects, book burning, and a return to vengeful private ownership. As they cater-waul doggerel political lyrics to Sam the Sham's "Woolly Bully" and hurl props and dolls, the flight attendants come to resemble demonic Cub Scouts, the undeclared war a sort of *Boy's Life* farce.

The flight concluded, next comes a trek through a darkened hall lit with exhibits by an ad hoc collective of visual artists—a warped Smithsonian of pillage and hidden persuasion. From a TV monitor, faded newsreel footage flickers: Secretary of State John Foster Dulles is rehearsing sincerity for a press conference to boost "benign" interference down South. A wall chart of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs chronicles a history of dubious intervention: An artwork, somewhat recalling the photo collages of David Hockney, makes of the banana a totem, numinous and detached. A blowup of a dictionary page lists, with deadpan overkill, words with the prefix "super." There's a Gallery of Dictators, garish busts of the Latino Neros painted metallic, their heads, as in the paintings of Arcimboldi, constructed of jumbles of found objects—toy soldiers, menacing bric-a-brac. Idols, Golden Calves, the pieces have a brassiness that sassily mimics the busts in *Playboy's* annually published pop star Hall of Fame.

chart bordered by corporate logos (AT&T, IBM, GM) and a wire figure crumpled in a pose of torture articulates anonymous suffering.

Turning the corner, there's Windows on the World, boxed tableaux of miniatures; logos with explanatory texts that reiterate the theme of corporate conquest, of ITT, Castle & Cook, and Firestone as a transnational, meddling brain trust.

The Museum Tour first takes the audience on a Plantation Train Ride. Mirroring Bananair's addled flight attendants, docents Helen and Betty (Taylor St. Clair, Kim Dixon) are neurotic Barbies. Brandishing beauty-queen grins, they're relentlessly fulsome ("Our most sanitary fruit comes carefully wrapped in its own sanitary container!"). Regaling the riders with banana trivia and conducting pop quizzes in "banana math," they shimmy at the marvel of "the money tree, the shekel shrub" and then usher the crowd into the Banana Theatre. There, a 1922 silent film from the Ford Educational Library shows Yanqui traders business-suited astride burros, and back-broken laborers as "men of the soil." It's creaky, Kiplingesque, and campy-scary.

Helen and Betty lead finally to the United Fruit Co. Museum, a shrine to the backhanded terrorism of big-league Capital. Company propaganda and photos of the founders line the wall, providing accompaniment to the docents' doubletalk delivery of Unifruitco history. There's a cotton-headed account of robber-baron land grabbing, tax-bracket shysterism, and high-stakes Monopoly (aside from its hold on Central American banana production, UFC so controlled transport centers and communication lines that it earned the nickname "the Octopus"). Supplementing the homily is a video show 'n' tell: Alistair Cooke loftily recounts the company's romance (courtesy of a substitute voice-over), a crummy "How-I-Spent-My-Vacation" film clip reduces an epic of corporate bravado to a yuck-fest of the sort coaxed by the "home movies" of early "Saturday Night Live." All polyester and errantly emphatic enunciation, a TV preacher (Levi Lee) lauds God's own fruit; a pair of pedants (Joe Feldman, James Taylor) dignify company lore with academic chat.

Sporadically, the boosterism gets undercut from within, as one docent can't help divulging the ghastly suicide of UFC bigwig Eli Black (who threw himself out a window), and a waxwork effigy of grizzled founder Capt. Alonzo D. Baker (Kent Whipple) springs to life to bellow blood and thunder.

Meanwhile, back at the Plaza, two labcoated imps (James Brooks, Neill Bogan), leering Groucho-like, lure audience members into a polygraph station bordering *Bananaland's* last stop: The Shades of Truth Pavilion. The mad scientists are The Doctors Mengele, and their polygraph a Rube Goldberg contraption. As the clinicians interrogate, the machine judges each victim by a skewed standard ("Lies Without Knowing" . . . "A Pack of Lies" . . . "A Relative Personal Truth").

Such casuistry is a mugged version of the Machiavellianism hyped by Edward Bernays (Kent Whipple). Bernays, a genius carnival barker of global hoodwink, was PR counsel to an astonishing range of clients—the Bank of America, GE, GM, Procter & Gamble, the U.S. Armed Forces, and Actors' Equity and the NAACP. Freud's nephew and author of two

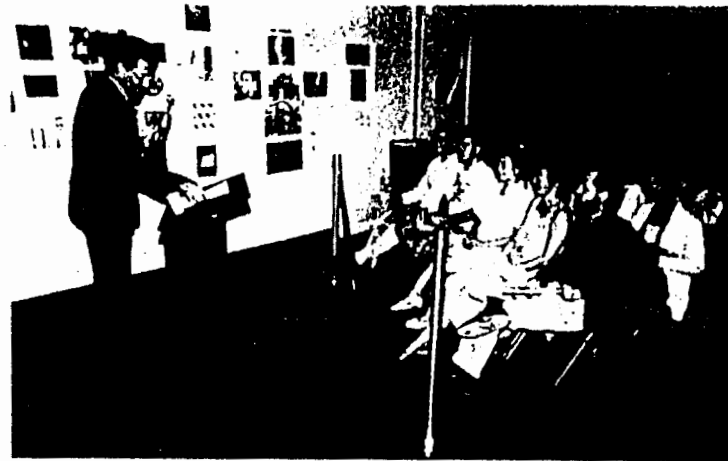
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(Joe Lesterlove)



portentous how-to's, *Propaganda and Public Relations*, he evolved his strategies from a central question: "If we understand the mechanisms of the group mind, is it not possible to regiment the masses according to our will without their knowing it?" Here Bernays delivers a lecture about the "engineering of consent" that reveals him as a master of deceit—Dale Carnegie turns out to be Satan. The character of Bernays is, in the context of the whole performance, underlit, unobtrusive. But as he talks, his voice inflected with icy professionalism and suppressed threat, he betrays himself as the sly Wizard of *Bananaland's* psychotic Oz.

And the work of Bernays' mindset forms the final exhibit—the Propaganda Maze. Dark walls make up a blackboard labyrinth wherein the wandering audience is confronted with signs posing mockingly provocative questions, absurdist brainteasers: "Are people in small communities more susceptible to propaganda than residents of large cities?"; "Is there a difference between advertising that provides information and advertising that is designed only to sell a product?"

Not only does the abrupt severity of the silent black maze jolt the audience, but the spare, meditative construct is so open-ended a symbol that it



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prompts a heady allusiveness (the "black box" retrieved from crashed jets; a Western Ka'bah; a test for human rats; the Vietnam war memorial; an alarming circus sideshow). It functions as a profane tabernacle of language—words in dramatic isolation contend toward unimaginable meaning; bouncing off walls, they provoke a dizzy, puzzled, desperate response.

It's precisely that engineered confusion—stirred up by the entire assaultive circus of *Bananaland*—that sets the stage for catharses which, if any take place, will probably happen outside the theatre. For so busy and thumping is the piece that it encourages a thirst for clarity, for a stillness within which to think the work out. *Bananaland* seems predicated on a kind of metaphysical, specifically existentialist trust: the performance not only leaves the ultimate hermeneutical discovery to the individual viewer, but its noise and brio seem primed for self-combustion—the most effective examination of the ideas it conveys is possible only after its packed static has been cleared away.

The apparent danger of this approach is either that the confusion will linger, or that any of a number of interpretations, not necessarily false, might compromise the work's density by sacrificing the whole to a part. For instance, reading *Bananaland* as a farce—which can almost be done, as its Barnum sometimes overwhelms its Brecht—can reduce the work to shaky comedy, its jokes inhibited by a straining toward consciousness-raising. On the other hand, any exclusive expectation of, say, a policy statement against colonialist intervention or a mourning for the corpses of conquest, will not be satisfied, either because the gags could seem to obscure the politics, or because the work, while obviously empathetic with their struggle, refuses the hubris of coopting the suffering of the Central Americans.

*Bananaland* eludes a reductive or "clean" reading exactly because its method and message are about confusion: the confusion of good intentions and perverse payoffs, progress and domination, truth and PR, art and propaganda, seriousness and humor, information and entertainment—even, theatre and theme park. In its critical function, the work attacks the evils of deliberate confusion—the hypocrisy and deceit that engender victimization, alienation, detachment, inertia, compliance. And yet the work's creative tension also acknowledges confusion as a state of possibil-

ity and expansiveness. Not only does *Bananaland* offer the stylistic pleasures of a jumble of genres and approaches, but it finds in its refusal of "certainty," in its insistence on polyphony, an ideology of openness. It seems to work not so sharply toward dialectic as toward a pregnant coalescence.

Such an ideology may find its source in the democratic ideal. And while we can read in it the somewhat touching, effusive desire to offer "something for everyone" (which *Bananaland*, remarkably, accomplishes), we can see further, in its very tentativeness, its critique of the ways power forecloses options. Cautioning against the Ugly Americanism of missionary manipulation and the disingenuous coercion of the melting pot, the work posits as corrective an ideal of manifold destiny.

That such an ideal remains a very (North) American dream seems only to underscore the honesty of *Bananaland's* creators. Resisting, as a subtle imperialism, the romantic agony of an artificial identification with Hispanic strife and culture, they yet realize their implication in both the American Promise and the American Machine. And it's from that insider's position of privileged knowledge that their sabotage draws its accuracy, confidence, and force.

Involving more than 20 visual, media, and performing artists, *Bananaland* took King and Lerner over two years to research. After poring over source material at the Tulane University Middle American Library and gamely taking junkets to Gator World, Citrus World, and the Tupperware museum, they managed to recapture the ambiances of both library/news room and theme park/circus. The near collision of these contradictory moods—brow-furrowing/side-splitting—keeps the audience intrigued and on edge. And since both library and theme park are places of control (the library a vault of "irrefutable facts," the theme park a mechanical funhouse), the juxtaposition builds tension. The Bergsonian release of tension through comedy is instantaneous. And yet, properly, the tension prompted by the information *Bananaland* uncovers and disseminates seems intended to continue beyond the theatre.

*Bananaland* emerges finally as a theatre of vigilance. By keeping its audience off kilter and on guard, it performs its sleight of hand—intellectual challenges spring out from behind its vaudeville screen. This is theatre that forces the eyes open, initially to the trickery of the performance itself, and then to the trickery of a larger theatre—the forces of the "real" propaganda, the disinformation networks of reductive analysis and "objective" news.

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*Paul Evans was, until recently, editor of Southline, a weekly journal of politics, art, and ideas.*

# China's Nuo Theatre

## Two Views

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Qu Liuyi      Huangpu Chongqing

*Ed. Note: What follows are two articles on nuo theatre in China. To some degree the articles overlap since they deal with some of the same materials. But their takes are entirely different. Qu Liuyi is interested mainly in the historical descent of nuo while Huangpu Chongqing details certain actual performances. We are printing both accounts to begin to familiarize TDR readers with the variety in contemporary Chinese performance scholarship. In future issues there will be more material from China (including other articles by Qu and Huangpu) exhibiting different styles of Chinese scholarship. The articles below were written before the events in China of May and June 1989.*

## The Yi Human Evolution Theatre

Qu Liuyi

Theatre in many regions of China originated in rituals aimed at driving away evil and welcoming happiness in the form of an abundant harvest. These performances are called "nuo," a term that appears very early in Chinese. In the eighth century BCE the *Analects of Confucius* record that the great philosopher saw "nuo in the countryside" near his home in what is now Shangdong province. Over the course of its long development, nuo absorbed into its practice elements of Taoism and Buddhism.

This "sacrificial ritual" was led by a "wizard"—a priest or shaman—and was usually done at the end of the year (January-February). During his performance, the wizard wore different masks made from leather, wood, or papier-mâché. These masks showed that the wizard represented different deities, that he was not himself but the god. When, at some point, the wizard also enacted different folk stories or historical events, he clearly became an actor.