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HOTEL DE VAGABUNDOS: REVIEWING AFRICAN AMERICAN THEATRE  
JOURNEY

By

Manuel Francisco Viveros  
B.F.A, Universidad del Valle, 2008  
M.A., Universidad ICESI, 2015

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Colleges of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Arts

Department of Theatre Arts  
University of Louisville  
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2020

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A Thesis Approved on

April 9, 2020

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By the following Thesis Committee:

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Thesis Director, Professor Sidney Monroe Williams

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Dr. Janna Segal

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Dr. Derek Goldman

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family, especially to Mariela, Marlene, and Manuela Viveros.

Next, I want to dedicate my thesis and process to all the professors of the Department Theater Arts at UofL and my colleagues and professors of the Theater Program at the Universidad del Valle in Cali and Buenaventura.

Finally, I want to dedicate to all those who crossed my path during my stay in Louisville, especially to my classmates, who always teach me something new.

I dedicate this thesis to my friend Diego F. Burgos

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To my classmates Kala Ross, Xavier Harris, and Mutiyat Ade-Salu. We made it

## ABSTRACT

### HOTEL DE VAGABUNDOS: REVIEWING AFRICAN AMERICAN THEATRE JOURNEY

Manuel Francisco Viveros

March 25, 2020

This analysis examines how *Hotel de Vagabundos*, a play written by a black playwright from Colombia, fits into the core of definitions of Black Theatre in the United States. I will examine six documents I consider relevant to shape the idea of Black Theatre in the US from 1900 through 2005. The author's experience in New York during the 1940s inspires *Hotel de Vagabundos*. The author navigates the globalized ethos idea unleashing clashes about identity to criticize aspects of American culture about immigrants, poor people, and internalized racism within African American and Black diasporic communities. The play “like a country’s metaphor” shows tensions between cultures in hotel rooms continuously. My objective is to draw connections between *Hotel de Vagabundos* and notable African American plays to redefine Black Theatre to include playwrights like Manuel Zapata Olivella.



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## INTRODUCTION

I am trying to assert that this play written by an African Colombian playwright classifies as part of the African American Theater universe. *Hotel de Vagabundos* is a testament from an immigrant African descendant in New York during the 1940s. The story is a snapshot of the time period and a 70-year-old reflection on globalization. The objective of this study is not only to situate the script as an African American play; it is also to reconfigure the African American aesthetic to connect the author's thought with the problems of the American society of the moment. This study reviews the premonitory capacity of Manuel Zapata Olivella regarding difficulties of racial integration between Afro-North American and Afro-Diasporic communities in *Hotel de Vagabundos*.

Like Manuel Zapata Olivella, I lived an experience in which, for the first time, someone questioned something in the United States that is obvious in Colombia—my ethnic ancestry. From there, I used theater to understand the racial dynamics that surrounded me and how my Afro Latin identity fit into these dynamics. I hope this documents widens the view about what defines Black performance; and, as Jill Lane argues, “prompt us to attend to the constitutive relation of the North and South (Lane 457). As a performance study, this thesis aims to get closer to the concepts of African American Theatre with other African Diaspora proposals through *Hotel de Vagabundos*. In Chapter One, I review some manifestos and proposals about Black Arts and Black Theater in the United States from 1920 until 2005, highlighting some of its triumphs and shortcomings. The goal is to try to define how the idea of Black Theatre in the U.S. was

shaped and compared with Zapata's African Colombian ideas and thoughts. In Chapter Two, I propose an analysis from *Hotel de Vagabundos*, the author's motivations, and his ideology asking to find commonalities with the U.S. black artists and scholars who promote and defend Black Theatre. Also, I will present some lines and scenes that broaden the author's concept of *Teatro Popular Identificador*<sup>1</sup>. I will emphasize through scene analysis how themes as race and interculturality appear in the play in Chapter Three. I explore questions like: who writes an African American play, to whom, and what an African American playwright writes? Chapter Four presents my conclusions that clarify the limits (or erase them) between Black Theater in the United States and other theatrical products within the diaspora. I propose alternatives to grow the communication between African communities in Colombia and the U.S.

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<sup>1</sup> Popular Theater Identifier

CHAPTER I  
REVIEWING BLACK THEATRE

African American leaders, academics, and artists understood the impulse in appearance and recognition that the Black community received on theatre after the Civil war to strengthen the image and representativeness of the Negro in the culture of the United States. For this reason, throughout the twentieth century different documents appeared that tried to gather concepts about the concerns of the African American community, trying to shed light on the most effective way to represent their culture. I will explore some of those documents here. The following Literature review intends to revisit six text that delineated the construction of the Black Theater and or Black Expression<sup>2</sup> in the United States of America. These voices help me to understand the evolution of the Black Theater paradigm in the U.S. from the Harlem Renaissance to the early 2000s. I compare the meaning of the Harlem renaissance with the Golden Age of the Black literature in the U.S. and my understanding of August Wilson's plays as the shift in Black Theatre towards a new century.

There were initiatives to do theatre by African Americans in the U.S. before 1900. The Harlem Renaissance raised the visibility of an ideal in the U.S. African American Theater and U.S. African American Community. In the words of Professor Randolph Edmonds, "During the period from 1865 to 1920, the efforts of Negroes were directed

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<sup>2</sup> One of these documents, *Characteristics of Negro Expression*, not only talks about theatre but gathers performing black shaping.

largely towards adjusting themselves to the newly acquired freedom and getting a basic education" (Edmonds 82). This period strengthened a collective Black thought. This analysis revisits *The Krigua Players Little Negro Theatre*(1926) published by W.E.B. DuBois, *The Characteristics of Negro Expression*(1934) by Zora Neale Hurston, *The Revolutionary Theatre*(1965) by Amiri Baraka, *Redefining Black Theatre*(1979) by Margaret Wilkerson, *The Ground on which I stand*(1997) by August Wilson and *The New Black Math*(2005) by Suzan Lori-Parks. These documents represent an effort to explain, summarize, inspire, and reflect on the Black Theater in this country. At present, there are different compendiums of African American theater and academic texts that analyze the role of Black Theater in the culture of the United States<sup>3</sup>. These selection here can serve as a view of the journey of Afro-American theatrical thinking in a timeline that begins with the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s until the beginning of the present century, helping to understand the core of the Black thinking in the twenty first century and the challenges this philosophy deal with today. The study aims to recognize coincidences and differences, essential elements as theme, relationship with the audience, and the artist's objective and how these elements appear in *Hotel de Vagabundos*.

This analysis refers only to reflective artistic manifestos and not to plays that reflect these guidelines. A play can serve as specific examples of a theme or author. Manifestos enclose the essence of a thought that appears in various ways in the scripts and artistic products of a period. I propose here to define some dramatic themes and then confront them with *Hotel de Vagabundos* by Manuel Zapata Olivella. The purpose is to

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<sup>3</sup> For this purpose, I will support some of my ideas on *The Cambridge Companion to African American Theatre* and *African American Performance and Theater History*.

verify if the play's themes relate to the ideas inside the studied texts and connect Zapata Olivella's script with the African American Theater thought. This literary approach does not pretend to compare plays but recognizes the global transformation of African American stage thinking which is moving from the self-view to the recognition of the Black Diaspora. *Hotel de Vagabundos* is considered an early Zapata's play (Velez 62), the script won the Espiral Prize given by an editorial with that name in 1956. It has not been studied in Colombia, perhaps because the plot happens in New York and talks about the problems of the most disadvantaged people of the U.S. 1940s: immigrants and blacks. It was not common that in the 1940s, that a Latin play would narrate the experience of an Afro-Latin in New York. The play also portrays in some scenes the difficulty of the Afro identity as a foreigner in the United States, scenes that become contemporary when it reveals immigrants' struggles then the same as they happen today, as difficulty getting jobs, or health services.

### **U.S. Black Theater Philosophy.**

Probably the most recognized and formal document related to Black Theatre is the article published in *The Crisis*, the official publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and attributed to W.E.B. DuBois. There, DuBois presents his troupe goals, "The Real Black Theater," based on four principles:

One: *about us*. That is, they must have plots that reveal the black life as it is. Two: *For us*. That is, they must be written by black authors who understand from birth and continuous association what it means to be black today. Three: *for us*. That is the theater that should mainly attend the black audiences and be supported and approved by their entertainment and approval. Four: *Close to us*. The theater must be in a black neighborhood near the mass of ordinary black people. (Players).

The idea of a new and plural theater that accurately represents the Black community's reality will be present from now on. Zora Neale Hurston posits that theatre should be exploited, "The black universal mimicry is not so much a thing in itself as evidence of

something that permeates his whole being” (Hurstun 49). Langston Hughes recognizes in 1926 that after “Our folkloric music, which has achieved world fame” (Hughes 2), is the time of a Black Theater uprising. He refers to a theatre that is done by us, the black community. Hurstun and Hughes claimed to *enact* the "Black Identity" properly, to represent the U.S. African Descends image *out* of the wrong white view. This image cannot take shape if "the white thought is not removed even from the black artists” (Hughes 1). Hughes says that “the duty of the youngest black artists is ... to change through the force of their art the old whisper of "I want to be white," hidden in the aspirations of their people, to “Why should I want to be white? I am black and beautiful” (Pg3). It is possible to conclude that those ideas laid the foundations for the consolidation of African descendants’ pride in the United States?

Amiri Baraka agrees with Hughes and Du Bois in his statement: “The Revolutionary Theater must EXPOSE! Show up the insides of these humans, look into the black skulls” (Baraka 1). Baraka does not make a direct allusion to the Black Theater, but it is clear that it seeks a revolution in the form of representation of Black culture from the arts. Baraka insists for opportunities to depict the reality outside the unreal construction of the White commercial theatre. In the words of Abiodun Jeyifous, “Baraka dominated the cultural aspect and, in his own peculiar style, emphasized its political nature” (Jeyifous 40). Margaret Wilkerson expands the limits of Black Theater, pointing out that “Black theater tolerates a broader spectrum of materials even than mainstream theater accepts” (Wilkerson 35) and concludes that the black theater is live art that serves as a laboratory to talk about “human interactions” (35). Wilkerson, in turn, talks about the Black community but does not define whether it is within the United States or refers to

the African Diaspora as a whole. Then, according to both Baraka and Wilkerson, Black Theatre embrace those plays which depict black life in the United States, but also plays interested in transforming the minds of people making them aware of inequity, talking about human activity. They wish to produce this change by meeting the audience with the staging of their own experience, seen and narrated from the black community itself.

At this point, it could be useful to say that *Hotel de Vagabundos* has four characters defined as African Descendants born in the U.S. and two Latin characters defined as mulattos<sup>4</sup>. The first thing to note here is, that among this massive list of characters, Manuel Zapata Olivella puts emphasis on the African descendants because gravitates around them the final conflict and several reflections about life. In Merriam-Webster and The Spanish Royal Academy of Language dictionaries, the word *mulatto* has the same definition, but in English, that word could be offensive. It is not clear if Zapata was aware of this offensive meaning. August Wilson defends the use of theater as a tool to express North American culture. Although Wilson's position accepts and understands Black Theater as part of a vast Pan-African universe, he bases his speech on the cultural distinction of Black America and White America. Wilson calls for spaces that reinforce the Black Theater, understanding that North American culture “is made up of an amalgamation of races from all parts of the globe” (Wilson 494). Wilson acknowledges society changes like Suzan Lori-Parks and tries to integrate both the idea of African Americans as African Global. Suzan Lori-Parks goes further and says that all plays are

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<sup>4</sup> *A person of mixed white and black ancestry.* “Mulatto.” Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mulatto>. Accessed 27 Feb. 2020.



Black plays. Although Wilson opens the door to a binding vision of culture, it is Suzan Lori-Parks, who states that everything has been a cultural whole in the United States.

Parks like Wilson understands that a Black Play nourishes by the experience of other cultures but does not stop denouncing the problems of the relationship between races in the U.S. In response to the interest of other writers on the Black Culture, Parks says:

A black play is written by a black person.  
A black play has black actors.  
A black play is written by a white person and has white actors.  
A black play does not have anything to do with black people. I'm saying *The Glass Menagerie* is a black play.  
SAY WHAT?  
EXCUSE ME?!?!  
Cause the presence of the white suggests the presence of the black. Every play that is born of the united states of America<sup>5</sup> is a black play because we all exist in the shadow of slavery. (Lori-Parks 580)

Both Parks and Wilson recognize the disjunctive of race within the cultural system of the United States. We will see how Manuel Zapata Olivella acknowledge that fifty years before them. It could be as a result of the differences in the relationship between black and whites in Latin America. These relationships are similar to the United States in terms of disadvantaged social and economic opportunities. But they are different in acceptance and recognition of cultural contributions. For example, in Colombia people acknowledges Black influence in the cultural identity of the country, that is something that August Wilson claims in his speech, and Parks makes visible when she refers to *The Glass Menagerie*. As Zapata understood that differences, he focusses his research in the popular culture and folklore after his trip though the U.S.

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<sup>5</sup> Parks says the name of this country because of its experience it has probably been the recognition of black heritage in other Black-diaspora countries. It does not mean there are better conditions for black people but acknowledge the culture values out of the US.

## **Stereotypes and discrimination.**

The common concern in the U.S. about Black Theatre in the century's first half focused on finding ways to make a difference between two types of representation of the Black experience. The common denominator was to lay the foundations of a theater opposed to the image of the Black minstrel among the population of the United States to transform the existing misrepresentation models related to the Black People (Players). These Black Theatre Companies confront the American standardization that threatened the characteristics (Hughes) and shows particularities of the cultural expression itself (Hurston).

In *Early Black Americans on Broadway*, Monica White Ndounou reviews the participation of the U.S. African descendants community in "The Great White Way" (White 59). White Ndounou presents the evolution of the first manifestation of what can call African American theater as a recognized institution. This process is viewed from their appearance in the United States mainstream stage, specifically the Broadway movement. This evolution helped to transform the narratives about U.S. African descendants' people as an artist on stage. In her study, White tries to elucidate a path that allows us to follow the footprint of those who opened the doors to Broadway for future African Americans actors like George Walker and Robert Williams. Walker and Williams made an accurate study of the theater environment in their time to fight against the stereotypes which distort the features of African American personality. That allows them to use the white theatrical resources to present their point of view of what must be an African American theater. Artists like Walker and William, later Langston Hughes and others, assume the responsibility to build the representation of their own identity from the

stage. Monica White comments that "the first wave of Black American playwrights, Hughes among them, did not arrive on Broadway until the 1920 and 1930s. These Black American theatre artists understood the historical constructions of blackness" (White 61). I suggest that it helps to catapult later the Harlem Renaissance as a movement collective that reflects successfully about the U.S. Black Descendants condition. White analyzes the role of George W. Walker and Bert A. Williams in the rise of the image of the Black in the collective White imaginary. Walker and Williams's achievement is the beginning of a "re-appropriation" (White 64) of the Black image from a new perspective of Black representation. This process of appropriation generated a reflection in artists, creators, and the audience about the value of Black's description outside the economic sphere. Consequently, *Hotel de Vagabundos* presents U.S. African Descendants characters who are trying to adjust in a time when they have not yet mentally emancipated. Meanwhile, it exposes them in a geographical space amid immigrants who continually make them reflect on who they are and how they look before others.

In *Hotel de Vagabundos*, the black characters are continuously reflecting on who they are and what they perform in society. Unlike the others, black characters are fighting against the system that condemns the skin color. Manuel Zapata Olivella also arrives in the United States with the idea of getting into the Hollywood environment, but he discovers the complex system of a racist society. Hence, he presents diverse black characters to expose racism in different ways. But Zapata doesn't stop there. He is not only interested in showing in the play how Black community is a victim. In scenes 4 and 5 of Act II, when the characters discussing who is black or not, Zapata denounces how the system causes a repetition of attitudes of separation towards the different even within

the Black community. This process to shape an African American Theatre identity moves this way: 1) the re-appropriation of the identity which disappears in the slavery process; 2) the study of the white theatrical mechanism to use it as an affirmation of citizens with rights and capacity to create; and 3) develop performances which represent not only the experience of Black American, also can imagine a new generation of Americans, as happened with *Mulatto* by Langston Hughes. Zapata Olivella coincides with Hughes in the search for a miscegenation narrative. He presents *Hotel de Vagabundos* as his first reflection about what Black American thought must be. For that, Zapata sets views smartly from blacks, whites, Latin, European, and white Americans into the same space.

For the second half of the last century I selected manifestos from leaders who work for the necessity to analyze Black Theater in a broad dimension or advocacy for Black Theater and the Black plays as valuable manifestations of American culture. In that sense, Margaret Wilkerson makes clear that Black Theater's basic level of humanity makes it a fundamental element in the construction of a future vision of the Black people (Wilkerson 33), and August Wilson and Susan Lori Parks, as theater practitioners, uncover specific problems within the cultural system such as the inequity in institutional support (Wilson 500) or the deep-rooted habit of labels, which do not unify but classify, reify and separate all artistic manifestation. All three agree on the idea of a theater that encompasses other possibilities, other experiences, perhaps other blacknesses. Most of the authors agreed the value of the Black community's cultural qualities were underestimated. Either because like Wilkerson explains: The Black Community itself never has the opportunity to participate in the cultural construction of the United States of America, or as Hurston thinks because white people were out of concern of the correct

elements of Black Expression. Hughes has his view: for the eagerness to please the White audience. They gravitate around the relationship between African descendants and White and the value of blackness in the culture of the United States.

I conclude that all authors studied here, raise the obligation to review, reevaluate, reconfigure the participation of the Black Community in the cultural construction of the United States. The main goal in the first half of the 20th century for Black Artists in the theatre was to gain space, representation, and recognition within the mainstream and the White Community in general. Zapata's merit is that he is already warning of the need to fight together to face the system that isolates us. His way of doing it is presenting the fissures between blacks from different backgrounds. Based on my experience in the United States, in 2017, we still have to educate some North American Black communities so that they do not see their brothers in the African diaspora differently.

It is not until 1990 when Wilson speaks explicitly of the need for a global vision that will help solve the new emergencies of the world (and the United States of America as a country of immigrants). Suzan Lori-Parks puts it this way: “cause the presence of the white suggests the presence of the black. Every play that is born of the United States of America is a black play because we all exist in the shadow of slavery” (Lori-Parks 580). As the leading power in the contemporary world, the United States is a magnet that attracts migrations from all over the world, especially from the majority of the Afro-diasporic world, since they share continental and coastal territory. So, it is worth asking, what happens today when several Afro-diasporic presences (experiences) coexist and converge? Although they have a clear consensus regarding the historical and cultural participation of the Black Community in the United States of America, there are no

strong references about the involvement of other Afro-diasporic communities or their recognition within the Black movement itself. The analysis from *Hotel de Vagabundos* could help to understand this United States African descends isolation and its repercussions for African-Latin in the '40s.

Then, it is necessary to broaden the vision and recognize other Black expressions within the Black Theater in the United States as Amiri Baraka raised it. Perhaps his mistake was he could not explain it with his idea of revolutionary theater when he proposes to shake looking "into black skulls" (Baraka). I am sure he is not referring only to the U.S. African Descendants skulls, but to look inside all the transatlantic African descendants' skulls to find cultural expression links in the diaspora. Wilkerson confirms, "Black Theater shares a vision. Their differences are mostly superficial, and their diversity is an expression of creative choice" (Wilkerson 34). The value of *Hotel de Vagabundos* is that it fits into W.E.B. DuBois's thinking. It is *about us* describing the Black experience in NY; *by us*, as a Black descendant writes it; *for us* being a critic to North American Black Community unawareness related to other Black identities, and finally, widens the *near us* spectrum. Therefore, publishing the play in Colombia brings the Black Community of the USA and Colombia closer. Applying Hughes' consciousness of the Blackness and the ability to reinterpret everything that Hurston proposes at Zapata's play, I conclude that *Hotel de Vagabundos* is a product of the author's questioning about his Black identity in a new environment, the U.S. This notion of identity confronts those that he considered his equals because they share their race, but they do not see him the same. Then, Manuel Zapata Olivella follows Hughes and Hurston's thoughts, and he uses his experience to reorder his vision of the world through

the play. I could define the circumstance of the Black community in the U.S. theater in three stages: 1) to gain opportunities of recognition and participation in the theater as a community to express by itself its own experience. 2) focus on a profound reflection on how to represent and describe U.S. African Descends life and reality or what African American theater is and or isn't; and, 3) to understand and face the challenges of a global world. This last one confronts what is called African American identity with other diaspora identities through the globalization process.

### **Theatre in Colombia**

Rodrigo Vélez quotes Cajiao to explain that before 1940 it is difficult to propose an idea of Colombian theater (Velez 76). The theater in Colombia is not a "public domain" activity before the 1940s. Rodrigo Velez, in his study on Afro-Colombian authors, quotes Fernando González Cajiao, claiming that the theater "suffers isolated from the public, an inevitable setback to literature pure: it begins to be more read than seen" (72). Velez interprets Cajiao to explain that in Colombia, theatrical activity carries out in the academic field for the most part. In my opinion, this discouraged the birth of a movement of authors, producers, and practitioners needed to a theatrical movement of commercial and social nature. Of the few vestiges of own creations, the outstanding model repeats models form European plays influenced by a lyrical beauty inspired by Spanish poets. It has been a mark in Colombia; we keep looking to the outside. Thus, while in Colombia, they looked outward to imitate a theater in the United States, they looked outward to rebuild their own theater.

After the decade of the 1930, the political situation (fanaticism) causes a convulsion in Colombian society from which the theater, which used to predominate in

classical forms, could not be saved. This revolution generated the detachment of traditional ways by some national authors. Among this group of authors, Rodrigo Vélez mentions Manuel Zapata Olivella who proposes a "Colombian theater that" talks "especially" with "himself" (78). This sounds a bit strange. In 1930, Manuel Zapata Olivella had not visited the United States, yet. However, his proposal for a theater that communicates with himself may be in line with the thinking we saw at the Black Theater in the United States between the years 1920 and 1950. If we believe in the fact and not the date, it is essential to say that perhaps after his trip through Central and North America, Manuel Zapata Olivella transmitted the ideas of the theater that he was trying to do with and for the Afro-descendant community in the United States. At the end of the 1940s, the radio theater that performs the National Broadcasting Radio begins to create an audience that, although it was not aware of the visual value of the theater, began to be interested in the scenic art from the word. While performed the European plays on stage, radio stimulated national creation, which bore fruit when moving from the radio to the stage to an experimental form of theater in Colombia. Vélez cites Cajiao to deduces that from the creation of the company Experimental Theater by Bernardo Romero Lozano in 1946 (Vélez 74), the foundations for a theater-style of his own are placed. With the appearance of schools and universities with theater training programs in Bogotá (District Theater School) and Cali (Departmental Theater School, Popular Institute of Culture) begins an exploration of a theater that is called avant-garde. This labor court theater could perform anywhere with a reasonably fortunate attendance, "the first presentation of Artists of the People of the play *Las convulsiones*, by Luis Vargas Tejada, took place in the Municipal Forest of Cali, before a popular audience of five thousand spectators" (84).



This type of idea is what Manuel Zapata Olivella tries to specify in his *Teatro Popular Identificador* (85). Although Zapata did not refer only to a theater in the city, his vision of theater involves above all the peasant populations, far from the canons established by the intellectual cities. According to Vélez, Zapata as a few authors of his time that recognize and include the performative value of "the ancestral rites of the communities and traditional festivals of the people" (85). *Hotel de Vagabundos* appears in 1955 amid this spectrum of experimental, public, communitarian, own, and experiential theater. It is similar to the theatre proposed for Langston Hughes, or the theatre described for Baraka and Zora Neale Hurston.

All this happened in the urban centers. Colombia is a geographically uneven country, and the bulk of African Colombian descendant communities lived on the national geographic periphery, that is, on the coasts. It could be because of weather, or a trace of the slavery period and the proximity to the ports. This distance between center and periphery generated a differentiated development of cultural manifestations. So, while in the center of the country and large urban centers, the theater had space, although small and of an elitist or academic type on the coasts predominantly populated by Afro-communities the performative manifestations were more related to dance and music. Related to folkloric dance, Alberto Abadía defines that as "spontaneous and free choreographic performances and interpretations carried out by a people, without paying attention to the order of the rhythmic figures, omitting some or repeating others." (Abadía 158). In the Afro-Colombian community, the expressive possibility is free and spontaneous, the narrative of their black experience is close to that of the Afro-

descendant communities in the United States since both materialize their yearning for freedom from their cultural production.

Zapata met Hughes personally. If Hughes confronts what he called “white world” (Hughes 4), before his trip through the U. S., Zapata confronts the society in Bogotá at the center of the country with its “racial prejudices” (Velez 68). Unquestionably, he tries in his work to follow the proposal of Hughes, as a descendant of Africa in America, to be responsible for his identity and write from what he knows and what he lives. Manuel Zapata Olivella was one of those lucky ones who could move from the coast to the center of the country, being able to reflect on the need for a change in the artistic and cultural production of the time.

### **Afro- Colombian Theatre**

In social terms, Colombia abolished slavery officially in 1851. Still, it is not until 1991 that the political constitution is modified, and the richness of the country's cultural variety is recognized, that is, the creation of policies that accept, promote, and seek to preserve Afro-Colombian and indigenous cultural heritage. (Colombia 2). This institutional step is taken in response or following the national cultural reality that approves, recognizes, and takes advantage of the contributions of all ethnic groups present in the Colombian territory. Here there is a profound difference with the United States of America. The institutional recognition of the cultures that live in the country comes a little late concerning the time of civil rights in the United States; however, from my experience within cultural praxis in Colombia, cultural miscegenation is much more profound there. This recognition has no impact on the theatrical issue in Colombia. For example, entities such as the Colombian Ministry of Culture have not created specific

lines that promote theatrical creation in remote regions. Except for laboratories such as the Young Creators Workshops held on the Colombian Pacific coast between 2002 and 2010 that led to the opening of the first undergraduate degree in Theater for the territory of the Pacific coast in Buenaventura. Before that, the initiatives for the construction of an Afro-descendant theater have been scattered and confusing. Colombia does not have a history of African Colombian theater, or even a theater called Afro-Colombian.

According to Rodrigo Velez, although there are still missing data to collect, “*Chonta*, written in 1937, written by Gerardo Valencia, is the first Afro-Colombian theater play” (Velez 70). In this regard, he quotes Gonzalez Cajiao saying that “it is, as far as we know, the first work written in the twentieth century to address the problem of the identity of the black slave, who is no longer African, but American, who is not really black, but a club or mulatto” (70). Here it is important to highlight two points:

1) although it is a late reflection about African Colombian man on his situation, there is an awareness of his new nature as a man of the "new world "and his knowledge of the product of miscegenation. We will see later how Manuel Zapata Olivella does not consider himself as Afro-Colombian but as an Afro-Indo-European Colombian.

2) in *Hotel de Vagabundos*, Zapata Olivella adds to that reflection the problem of the relationship with other cultures and the African American in his experience concerning other African diasporic realities.

The contemporary visions of Black Theater define it as a mixed theater (Lori-Parks), remembering that there is not a single vision, nor an only Black experience (Garret Shannon). *Hotel de Vagabundos* helps to understand in light of these ideas the evolution of the Black Community. The play reveals the position of its author about his

experience as Black in the United States in the mid-'40s and precisely what he thinks about North American Black identities. Questioning the ethnic identity of the play is accepting the label game in which everything is submitted in the United States of America or making justice for a text that has remained in a blurry territory since its publication in the 50s, and it makes us understand the contemporary migration realities. Amiri Baraka, with his Black Arts School, aims to become "a cultural institution that championed black art aesthetics" (Zygmonski 145), and Manuel Zapata configures the Colombian Foundation of Folkloric Studies to as he says: "express the rebel feeling of freedom" (Zapata Olivella 58). In both cases, they help to celebrate and enjoy their own identity.

### **Teatro Popular Identificador**

*Teatro Popular Identificador* is a proposal by Manuel Zapata Olivella to develop theater that fits into the reality of the Colombian (and Latin American) community in the 1960s and 1970s. Manuel Zapata Olivella recognizes the formative role of the theater in shaping social and collective thinking in society. One of the main pillars of this concept is folklore as a style modeler. Zapata differentiates two types of theater in Latin America in the 1970s, one for sociological speculations and another for authentic expressions, one led by elites, and another by empirical peasants (Zapata Olivella 57). Zapata gives value to these representations made by empiricists since they represent much more than the common man; like Amiri Baraka who differentiates a "popular white man's theater" from "shows tired white lives" (Baraka 2). Zapata proposes the use of cultural anthropology as a tool for the study and creation of artistic manifestations from the community, because "this science demonstrates daily that only popular and traditional art, only the anonymous creation of the masses, are the unique and authentic spokespersons for feelings, desires,

and struggles of the people" (57). This thought linked directly with previous documents of Black Theatre because of advocacy for an original representation of those who are undervalued, in this case, Black people. According to Zapata, it is essential to study behavior patterns in different regions of the country, and then confront them helps to find attitudes that are not usually recognizable. Zapata individualized 17 traditional patterns in which are visualized the spirit that animates the stories and dances, expressions intimately linked to what could be considered a popular theater complex: mime, dance, recitation, music, and costumes (58). Some of these features connect with Zora Neale Hurston's concepts from *The Characteristics of Negro Expression* such as will to adorn, dancing and negro folklore<sup>6</sup>.

The playwright of *Hotel de Vagabundos* points out the carnival as an essential element because "it fulfills a need for the collective expression" (59), so similar to what Black Theatre seeks with the audience based in DuBois, Hughes, Hurston or Baraka concepts. There is always a collective awareness of identity. The *Teatro Popular Identificador*'s purpose is to take advantage of folk forms to "stimulate the creative forces of the people. When he sees himself acting as a character within his own social situation, he will identify his positive and negative values, and consequently, he will try to overcome them" (60). Zapata then proposes a creative model that transforms society from the inside, oriented to "overcome mental inertia that occurs in the community when faced with new values that imply changes in their traditional molds" (60). Like Black Theatre proposals, the idea of change comes from inside the art process; transforming this way to understand art and its relationship with the society is

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<sup>6</sup> See Appendix Table.

transforming society from inside. To achieve this goal, there must be an awareness of who is doing the art? Who is receiving the art piece? What is the responsibility of the artists we have? What the art piece represents to the audience? Or Which method used to approach a creativity process? Zapata's proposal seems in connection with his awareness of Black Americans, as some of the Black artists read before. In his proposal, he proposes a constant exercise of self-evaluation and confrontation, to continually review the results obtained against the proposed objectives. Besides, it is necessary to listen to representatives of the community they belong to hear "their concepts about those who represent their arts, what intentions they have, what they denounce, what they claim." (61), as Hughes said, being "not afraid to be himself" (Hughes 2). In both cases, there is a call for a strong identity. This proposal of Colombian theatre does not call to race to be shaped but connects with most of the features of Black Theatre in the U.S.

I must say there is a space of 20 years between the writing of the *Hotel de Vagabundos* and the *Teatro Popular Identificador* proposal. The play belongs to the first reflections of Manuel Zapata Olivella as an explorer, author, and researcher. However, it seems relevant to review the principles of it because it is the proposal that Zapata presents in an organized way after his experience in the United States when he returns to Colombia. My interest is to unveil that thought seed in *Hotel de Vagabundos* and its relationship to the proposed Black Theatre un United States as a reaction to the same feeling: the creation of an African cultural identity in the United States and Colombia. The value of this document, then, is in the analysis of a play that compromises racial discourse in the United States, the condition of the black man concerning other afro conceptions in the diaspora and the advanced questioning of the social structure failures

of a multicultural country as is the United States. In the next chapters, I will analyze some specific scenes in *Hotel de Vagabundos* and its proximity to the ideas presented here.

## CHAPTER II

### HOTEL DE VAGABUNDOS

A play can be analyzed in several ways, from the dramatic composition, the conflicts, characters, and more. My experience as an actor, formed by professors who studied in Russia, makes me closer to the Stanislavsky last year's model of interpretation and analysis. Approach dramatic text relies on the work of prior analysis as a source to understand the play from a practical and philosophical level.<sup>7</sup> Although this system of analysis evolved into what will later be known as the "Physical Actions Method," I will use it as an original entry to understand the play as a whole.

After my experience at the University of Louisville (UofL), I want to express my surprise about the perception of the Stanislavsky system in the MFA program. This model is recognized as the seed of several modern schools of acting in my country; however, I perceive it, at least in this academic experience in Louisville as something obsolete or unknown. My attitude has been to receive and know these other interpretive forms and ways to approach to the script. As an actor and director, I recognize that there is no perfect model that leads to an accurate interpretation of theatrical texts. This

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<sup>7</sup> The Moscow Art Theatre initiated the practice of starting rehearsals with meticulous table analysis, where the play's entire ideological and artistic structure exposed to scrutiny. This process pretends to encompass all the internal motives, implications, relationships, characters, through-action, and super-objective of the production. Thomas, James. *A Director's Guide to Stanislavsky's Active Analysis* (p. 87). Bloomsbury Publishing. Edición de Kindle.



experience in the United States has allowed me to expand the interpretive, analytical, and practical overview of the theater craft. To engage *Hotel de Vagabundos* and advance my proposal, I will return some of the postulates that as an actor I learn in my country and combine my two experiences in this document. I will use the analysis learned in my previous training through the readings I have found most relevant within this experience in the African American Theater program at UofL. I return to the analysis practices that I easily recognize to answer the following questions: What was Manuel Zapata pursuing as a playwright with this play? How do the atmosphere and events at *Hotel de Vagabundos* connect with the thoughts of Du Bois, Hughes, Hurston, Wilkerson, Wilson, and Lori Parks? How does this analysis allow me to recognize all authors' proposals and concerns to answer the question of whether or not the play belongs to the inventory of the Black Theater in the United States? I will revisit some of the postulates that Maria Osipovna Knebel mentioned in her book *The Last Stanislavsky*. Knebel was a Stanislavsky's and later Michael Chekhov's student. In her work, she places particular emphasis on the process called "active analysis" that focuses on the work made to understand the play in context from the rehearsal process. Knebel explains that Stanislavsky sought table analysis "develop what he considered the passivity of the actor, which instructed the director responsible for creating that path" (Knebel 14). She further explains that although the director must study and know the play in-depth, it is during the rehearsal process that actors and directors achieve a perfect communion. She explains that because the actor is who represents the interpretation of the ideas of the author. I am interested in the director's work about Knebel's vision since she says that the director must "know in the name of what the play is staged or done,

becomes active to the fullest" (15). This statement means to understand the author's universe, of his ideas into the play. I believe that his awareness is a social, political, ethical, aesthetic, artistic and human commitment, and can help to answer the questions above.

As a social and political interpretation, it is essential to remember that Manuel Zapata recommends the use of cultural anthropology<sup>8</sup>. From this point of view *Hotel de Vagabundos* can be an attempt to study and understand the complex American society in the 1940s and the implications of racism within different African descendants' groups. My perception as a foreigner and African descendant is that nowhere have, I been more aware of race relations than in the United States of America. I think Zapata felt it the same and embodies it in his play. Returning to the texts of DuBois, Hughes, and Baraka, I deduce that there is an obligation in this country to be aware of the race. In Park's words, "Black people know there is a war going against our blackness, and somehow we've been enlisted to fight on the front lines" (Lori-Parks 581). As an African descendant and Latin in the U.S., I need to analyze and balance how to relate with others because of cultural differences but race differences, too. It is a constant practice to analyze the environment to know how to interact within. Maybe Zapata proceeded like an ethnographer who moves away to generate a reflection in favor of one's identity, in this case, the black identity. Furthermore, Zapata tries to explain certain behaviors he sees in the African American community in the United States and tries to replicate them in his play. So,

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<sup>8</sup> Cultural anthropology is the comparative study of human ways of life. Cultural anthropologist tries to explain why these ways of life -Culture- take the form they do and what they mean to the people who follow them. (Welsch y Edincott)

Zapata responds to DuBois' concern, talking about *us*, and maintaining his responsibility as a black artist (identity in Hughes). As Zapata says cited by Beatriz Rizk, “it's not about us being the other side of the white ... but that we are our own blackface” (Rizk 86). In this play, Zapata risks talking about the blacks born in the United States, his dreams and problems, but also his ignorance of other blacks outside of Africa.

From the aesthetic and artistic view, it is not free for Zapata Olivella to propose his play in a Hotel in New York. Like the authors mentioned above, he talks about his experience, but he transforms it by talking about New York as a microcosm reflected in that hotel. Here then, he goes ahead of his time connecting with August Wilson being both global and local. The play fits into Wilkerson's idea that Black Theatre because “Black Theatre accepts: plays by authors of various ethnicities” (Wilkerson 35) , hence the Mills Hotel in *Hotel de Vagabundos* is the “laboratory of human interaction” that she refers (35). I move forward this idea: to Zapata, the play is a mirror to describe New York City as a laboratory where Black Theatre blossoms.

I choose Knebel's analysis proposal because of, 1). I consider this analysis helps the actor and director to connect with the play from inside and discuss the author's ideas and environment study such as culture approach, close to anthropological research. It is an answer to the industrial theatrical system the actor just has to memorize lines, being a submissive worker in a field that supposed to promote creativity; in addition, I will focus on three elements: Given circumstances, Events, and Super task. Frequently these elements are analyzed inside the play as motivations to trigger actions, reactions, and choices to the actor. On the other hand, using them in the director's vision, these elements help to set a deep meaning of the play and connect with the author's idea.

Maria Knebel refers to them as “the facts, the events, weather, daytime, the place, the living conditions, the movement ...” (29). Undoubtedly, Zapata expresses his experience in New York in this text. It is difficult to define how much truth and how much imagination around his play. Olga Arbeláez states that “Although (Hotel de Vagabundos) is a fiction script. Its characters and scenes were inspired by episodes of his [Zapata] life and by the people he met when he was staying at the Mill's Hotel in that American city” (Arbeláez 15). However, we cannot deny that the problems and environments that nourish the plot coincide with the reality that he lived at the Mills Hotel. References to events of his time confirm that this work has a biographical scope and that information becomes valid in the study of the given circumstances. For Olga Arbelaez, the play took place in 1946 (26).; the setting is a hotel for the homeless where women are not allowed. Although it is not a specific situation in the big cities during that time, there are still many restrictions for the descendants of enslaved Africans. New York City was not what we consider in Latin America as "The Big Apple," but it was a magnet for immigrants and tourists. The place (Hotel Mills) was a space where converge different cultures and experience. There are European, Asian, and Latino immigrants, war refugees, disowned family members, and even a war veteran of the United States. Arbelaez says that apparently, "none of them they have nothing in common" (26). I say that they united by the impossibility imposed by the social structure to develop as citizens with rights and opportunities fully. Do these details make it a Black play? Suzan Lori Parks responds in *New Black Math* "A black play is mixed" (Lori-Parks 577). Then this global environment created by Zapata is also a Black play. But it is not only that continuous interrelation of diverse characters that make the play enter the inventory of

the black theater. This plot reveals the adversities of each cultural niche in their process of adaptation to American life. Being more precise, Zapata as a self-recognized black-indigenous-Latin American uses this cultural rainbow, to explain the closeness of the Afro-descendant community with other cultures through the social problems that afflict them.

There is an atmosphere of inequality, poverty, ethnic discrimination, and ignorance in that hotel. The criticism that Zapata makes as playwright and character within the show points out the fantasy that takes shape on "the land of opportunities." His *American dream* decreases to get something to eat, being on time to reach a room to sleep like all those who live in the Mills Hotel. Frequently, this lack of the basics to live and identity forces the characters to fight each other for a piece of bread, a little whiskey, or an opportunity. When I referred to the Black Theater and its evolution, I made mention of its development from a more proper way to the global, the collective. This play is Zapata's invitation that connects with the words of Baraka, Wilson, and Parks. This situation of continuous individual crisis contrasts with the end of the play, where the collective feeling enhances a demonstration of humanity that unites them. Olga Arbeláez quotes the words of Manuel Zapata in *He Visto la Noche*<sup>9</sup> When he remembers that in that situation, he and the others were forced to "find warmth in ourselves" (25). The final union of hotel guests for defending an innocent (from a false accusation hence victim of the system) will cause an excessive reaction of the establishment. The system will always repress those who dare to challenge it.

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<sup>9</sup> *I've seen the night*. A short novel about Manuel Zapata Olivella's journey through the U.S. in the '40s.

Their dream has not only faded; they have become victims of their situation. The play raises that problem presenting various characters living the difficulty of building their future, emphasizing the issue of race as a transversal axis of the situation and trigger of the final event. This theater becomes revolutionary because says how we all are victims; in the words of Amiri Baraka, this play “accuse and attack anything that can be accused and attacked. It must accuse and attack because it is a theatre of Victims” (Baraka 2). Zapata then talks about his experiences as black, Latin, unemployed, and poor man in the play. Finally, to make a modern reference for the Hotel’s ushers in the text, they are responsible for checking that everyone has their document to be in place. In this regard, it is enough to review the onslaught of the immigration police since 2017, in this *Hotel de Vagabundos* is also relevant. The ushers and the covered policeman in the story know which characters are evil, whom they have to follow, and whom they have to capture—Black people.

According to Knebel, an event is an “active fact, with its consequences and interactions. After knowing that, the actor appropriates more wide layers given circumstances that form the life of the play” (37). I want to add more since it has been useful in my acting practice saying that an event is something that affects in some way (modifies, reinforces, transforms) the relationships within a scene or work as a whole. *Hotel de Vagabundos* is not a play full of dramatic twist and transcendental events if we refer to the number of situations or actions that change relationships; however, the play orbits in several thoughts about life as deprived people. Because of it I consider the play as a descriptive play. Relationships are not strongly affected; however, the characters always think about that. Zapata Olivella places the reader as witness to an environment

that does not change. The characters do not have big dramatic twists, maybe none, but they always question the reason for their status. That continuous reflection is not free in the play. Zapata exposes to the viewer what in DuBois' words is "a plot which reveals Negro life as it is." Zapata understands "from birth and continual association just what it means to be a Negro today" (Players 4), and his play argues about his trip through the U.S. Now, the play moves its limits. Being written by an author who is on the border between Afro and Latin, this experience expands and goes beyond the skin color conditions. In other words, Zapata opens a discussion on the racial, political, linguistic, and geographical aspects of *Hotel de Vagabundos*.

Furthermore, the play is also a criticism of the Western religious conception; more specifically, that which divides the world into two halves, good and bad, or black and white. A philosophical conversation about the role of man in the world and its relation to divinity ends the first act. It has an association with the Priest Scott, who opens the play inviting "endure unto the end" (Zapata Olivella 9). He asks to suffer from dignity, and not to be active against the social, economic, and personal they are living. I conclude that Zapata tried to capture as many details as possible of his Black experience showing both sides.

The major event is McAllister's death close to the end of the play. The wealth of this character was emphasized at the beginning of the play. Perhaps it is a premonition; McAllister offers to present his ties to Marcus, who will be accused of murder at the end. They both are connected. When one dies, the other dies too. McAllister, a White man, is killed because of his money, and Marcus dies because he is Black and poor. Somebody must die to balance that loss. The system will find a Black man to sacrificed because a

White man has died. Parks resume that when she says the presence of one (White) suggests the presence of the other (Black). The end of the play reminds us that both races are firmly tight for good or bad in this continent. The metaphor of this relationship between Marcus and McAllister, and the play in general, is that there cannot be a real social balance and at the same time, an economic gap between Blacks and Whites. Mill's hotel, as a world's representation, shows that although McAllister tries to share some of its wealth, there is no balance of opportunities for the Black community at that time. This metaphor goes even further. That dares to assure, as it happens at the end of the play, that the tragedy will be present as long as that racial relationship between Blacks and Whites is not balanced. Zapata raises that relationship from Marcus's point of view. Marcus is aware of his difficulty as a Black person to access the spaces of White people. He fears even looking like a white "Marcus: You know that if a poor black man like me is dressed well, everyone will take him for a thief" (12). In concordance with Black leaders we read before, this is an invitation to change the way the society in the United States addressed their relationships. Most of the characters make decisions about what they are and what they were after the search of McAllister's murderer.

This is a crucial point in Knebel's analysis proposal. She quotes Stanislavsky saying: "Super-task and transverse action are the essences of vital arteries, nerves, the pulse of the play. The super-task (desire), the transverse action (aspiration), and its execution (action) shape the creative process of the experiences." (Knebel 52). The supertask links with the author's desire. In this case, has been repeatedly pointed out that Zapata's interest is to talk about what he lived as a foreigner and as an African descendant at the Hotel Mills in New York. Here is a connection with all the authors studied in



chapter 1. All of them have the desire to express their experience. To do, each one presents different tools and elements that the Black Theater must-have in the United States. If everyone desires to express in theater their experience as descendants of Africa in the United States, Is *Hotel de Vagabundos* another story in this universe of the Black Theater? By the nature of its author, it allows an analysis not only of the difficulties experienced by the descendants of Africa but a critical look at the relationship between Black people from diaspora.

### **Scene Analysis**

*Hotel de Vagabundos* is divided by Acts, Stage, and Scenes. Stages are subdivisions within Acts that encompass a specific topic. This section focuses on Act II, First Stage, more precisely in scenes 4 and 5. Act II of the play covers several significant themes of the human condition, raises views related to migratory problems, and refers to the suffering of those who yearn to return to their country. I focus on the racial issues of the play and specifically how African American characters relates each other. I will present the extract and translation of Act II, Stage one, scenes 4 and 5. In these scenes, the author describes his encounter with other Afro-descendants in the United States and links with some of my personal experiences as Afro-descendant Latino in Louisville.

#### *ACT II - Stage One*

*OSCAR Approaches a few steps and see that there is no place around the table, Manuel approaches.*

*MANUEL: (To his friends). Here is the South American journalist. (To -Oscar). Come on, sit with us. (Fernandez stands to give up his chair). Isn't it true that you write in Spanish and English?*

*OSCAR: (Approaching and leaving a machine on the table in front of the position that Fernández has vacated). I barely understand English. I only write Spanish.*

*Gino, Marcus, and Joe approach Oscar.*

*JOE: I had already told you that he is not black.*

*OSCAR: Of course, I'm black; at least that's what my passport says.*

*MARCUS: (Addressing Joe). You see, it's black like us.*

*GINO: He can't be black because he speaks Spanish.*

*JOE: And to be black you need to speak only English! It will be a simple nigger.*

*OSCAR: (Confused). What is the difference between a black and a nigger?*

*MARCUS: A lot. Me and Joe, we are black, but Gino is a nigger.*

*OSCAR: I don't see the difference; you three are black.*

*GINO: (Pedantry). How? I'm different from those! I'm smart; I have noble blood; my parents are Moroccan! Besides, I don't dislike being a beast of burden like these. (Shows Joe and Marcus). I like to give orders.*

*JOE: That's it, a nigger. A black who didn't want to be black. Instead, we are proud to be. Isn't that right, Marcus?*

*MARCUS: (Rubbing his neck). Sometimes I like being Black, but sometimes I don't. When they put a rope around my neck to lynching me in Georgia, I would have given anything to turn into white. Have you ever seen that lynched a white?*

*JOE: But one day, blacks will lynch whites, not one but everyone (Laughter).*

*MANUEL: Then they will lynch Che, Fernández, and even me. They would only leave the journalist and the Cuban alive.*

*JOE: (Reflecting) Because you are not white Americans, but Latin. In your countries, they do not discriminate against black.*

*ARGUELLES: In Chile no.*

*CUELLAR: In Argentina, either.*

*JOE: Well, then, we wouldn't lynch you.*

*CUELLAR: In la Havana for a black worth what a white has to do as ten of these!*

*FERNANDEZ: In Panama also discriminates, but only Canal Zone the gringos says what to do.*

*MARCUS: And lynch blacks?*

*FERNANDEZ: That never.*

*JOE: Then, there is no discrimination.*

*OSCAR: It always discriminates.*

*JOE: There can be no discrimination because there are no blacks. In their countries only Spanish is spoken, isn't it?*

*OSCAR: Yes, only Spanish.*

*JOE: Then there are no blacks,*

*MARCUS: But you don't see that they are black like us? (Put his wrist next to Cuéllar to observe color similarity).*

SCENE 5

*MANUEL: (Addressing to Eugenio who is standing reading a book, lying on the shelf). Eugenio, come and explain to us. (Eugene approaches). Isn't it true that only those who speak English are black?*

*EUGENIO: (Smiling at Oscar). You surprise about the racial concept that boys have? As you can see, black here in the United States has no opportunity to illustrate.*

*OSCAR: It seeks to keep them into ignorance.*

*EUGENIO: Exactly, hence they are surprised that there are blacks who speak languages other than their own.*

*OSCAR: When they say that some are black and other niggers, they refer, instead, to economic differences.*

*EUGENIO: Every black American try to become economically independent as far as possible, but always finds the barriers of the whites.*

*MARCUS: They just want to own money.*

*EUGENIO: Black tries to overcome himself above all to honor his race.*

*JOE: I aspire to be a movie actor.*

*GINO: I have nice fists. I will be a boxing champion.*

*EUGENIO: (Withdrawal). As you see, it is necessary to replace in their minds the cult of the record for the science.*

*While Oscar begins to write, Pierre appears on the mezzanine balcony, in flannel, and with his soapy beard.*

*PIERRE: Hey, Bastien, throw me an incunable that I have done with Balzac.*

*Everyone pays attention to Pierre's words.<sup>10</sup> (Hotel de Vagabundos 47-49)*

First, I infer that the author presents himself in the play as the character Oscar. In *He Visto La Noche*, Zapata narrates that he entered the United States with a journalist visa. Oscar is a journalist who comes from South America and only writes in Spanish. He says he does not have good English. Based on his short novel, Zapata spent around a year in the United States. After that, there is a conversation about race, language, and Afro identity. This parallels part of my experience in Louisville. Zapata encounters people that define race from its place of origin or its language. Zapata points out in this scene, the ignorance of some Blacks about Africa's relationship with the American continent. I

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<sup>10</sup> Translated by Manuel Viveros.

speak of the process known as the Middle Passage, in which millions of people were forcibly brought into slavery not only to the United States. I do not think he did it just to demonstrate that lack of information from his race brothers. He does it to clarify the first challenge the Black community had then, is to unite as descendants of a community that suffers looked down upon as human beings.

According to Margo Anderson and Stephen Fienberg, the concept of race has been a difficulty in the United States even officially. In 1787 for the first census of the United States, the value of a slave is of three-fifths of a whole person (Anderson y Fienberg), demonstrating that even institutionally from the beginning has been an interest by undervaluing the humanity of Black people. They assert that "the classification of race and ethnicity in the census and more broadly in the federal statistical system reflects both the history of discrimination in the larger society, efforts to redress that discrimination, and the newer subjective claim to self-identification" (Anderson y Fienberg). The way the character's language identifies somebody connects with the authors' issue in their article. When a community has been historically undervalued, it is most likely that it feels less than others and is unique in its disgrace. In *Black Psychological Functioning and the Legacy of Slavery*, William Cross Jr. explains that slaves in their process of adaptation to life on the new continent, and as a system to defend and protect themselves, "embraced the more "race-neutral" aspects of European-American culture" (Cross 389). That means that in some cases Black communities assumed and inherited the way of perceiving others according to the North American white hegemonic gaze. So, if the official vision separated blacks from any other ethnic group, American blacks assumed that they were the only blacks other than people living in Africa.

If so, it makes sense that Zapata Olivella and I have been taken for Latinos and not Blacks, just because we speak Spanish. Manuel Zapata questions the universality of Black as a subject. In scenes 4 and 5, it raises the problem of the representation of a person from his race and the challenge of ethnic universalism. My perception of western-White view it is interested to define others and group them. It looks like in this white point of view there is only one kind of blackness. I think that both the author and the other characters realize that there is no one concept of a Black man, Unfortunately, neither the characters nor the author knows how to solve this situation. While everyone agrees that discrimination based on race is a reality, Zapata, as a result of his experience at the Mills Hotel, perceives that racial discrimination manifests itself in different ways. Racial discrimination is part of the structure in the American continent, but compared to Latin America, it seems that in the United States, it is more hostile. To explain it, Zapata talks through *Fernandez*<sup>11</sup>, who explains that the problem extends to all areas where the United States has direct influence abroad as well as the Panama Canal.

Black Theater had moved its gaze from inside out. According to the analyzed manifestos, there is no the main goal to recognizing or connecting with other Blacknesses before 1950. Based on the author's experience in the mid-1940s, *Hotel de Vagabundos* emphasizes this need to identify and connect with other Black communities by going ahead to a global Afrodiasporic vision proposed by August Wilson or Suzan Lori-Parks around the 2000s.

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<sup>11</sup> Fernandez: A male character in *Hotel de Vagabundos*. He is from Panama. The play does not specify his race, but probably he is a mulatto.

I interpret the super-task that troubled Zapata Olivella at the time of writing *Hotel de Vagabundos* as such: the author critiques from several points the weaknesses of the American dream. He dedicates particular care problems of the offspring African descents in the United States, and the challenges faced in society. Additionally, the lack of knowledge in front of other possibilities of afro identity in the African diaspora. As a performer, I am interested in finding a super-task that affects all the characters to some extent. Returning to Knebel, she says: “The main task of actors and directors consists, from the point of view of Stanislavsky, in demonstrating the ability to convey to the scene the playwright ideas and feelings who have made him write the play.” (52). I always look for any idea in the play that affects the characters, confronts them, gathers them away, puts them in question, or throws them into an inevitable destiny. *Hotel de Vagabundos* openly talks about the difficulties faced by those people marginalized in the first world. It does not distinguish them by race, nationality, language, or age. Specifically, the slave descendant communities have been the least favored in the western world. It is the same Black Theater fight in the U.S. and the vision that Manuel Zapata will propose in his *Teatro Popular Identificador*.

Among other things, I think the play is ahead of its time when draws the nostalgia of refugees outside their land by giving them a voice with the group of French and Spanish. Zapata raises the similarity of European refugees with Afro-descendant communities due to nostalgia for their mother continent. Also, as descendants of Africa in a new land, we were forced to create new realities in America. In the United States, following the trace of African origin is easier because of the affected records. In Colombia and many parts of Latin America, people of different backgrounds where

brought as a method of preserving internal division in the slave community and making the yoke easier. The play also exposes abuses of authority with the characters of the ushers, who behave like tyrants fearing a collective rebellion. I relate this example with the rise of police brutality cases against Black community members. And finally, shows a sort of ignorance about other Afro-diasporic identities in the African American community.

Zapata tries to awaken the conscience that Baraka appeals to in *The Revolutionary Theater*. He presents problems that we deal with today, like drug addiction, racism, abuse of authority against Afro-descendants, poverty, unemployment, and migration. This experience shaped Manuel Zapata Olivella into the researcher he became and radically influenced his identity as an African descendant. Zapata agrees with Baraka because he proposes a theater that channels “popular creativity in its fight to obtain better levels of social well-being” (Zapata Olivella 60). That sounds similar to Baraka, who proposes a social theater that moves us in life “understanding of what the world is, and what it ought to be” (Baraka 2). Both of them, have more than a fight for equity, there is a responsibility as a black artist, as Hughes and Dubois propose. Zapata again, is aligned with these thoughts.

The idea of a surprise has configured in the encounter between these different Afro-descendant experiences. That surprise is a product of the influence of the environment. Zapata, like me, felt that strangeness and reflected it in his text in the scenes mentioned, in addition to continuing his general criticism of the way the system classifies us according to the origin, race, and economic status. The given circumstances, events, and super task behind the script *Hotel de Vagabundos* invite us to think about the

condition of Black people in the United States in the '40s. Although the play has no main characters, it does raise the idea of a description of African American life with other cultures and other blackness in NY. Based on his experience, Manuel Zapata Olivella makes global the panorama of racial, social, and economic discussion in the middle of the last century in the United States. The Black theater in the U.S., like the ideas of Zapata Olivella's Teatro Popular Identificador, is influenced by the social conditions of their environment. In both cases, it is a theater that is political and social. Its central idea proposes a discussion on how we relate and invites us to question our reality about transforming it. As an actor, director, and researcher, I infer that the play's supertask links with that Black thought that promotes change and fight for mental, social, and economic advance. Also, expose the different possibilities of resistance into a system that divides and oppresses the black man, the poor, and the immigrant as well. That system reduces and minimizes anyone who is not part of the hegemonic model where the white man is at the top of the human species. For in addition to addressing the global problem in *Hotel de Vagabundos*, the author manages to criticize the ethnic group to which he belongs.



## CHAPTER III

### QUESTIONS ABOUT THE PLAY

To move this conversation between *Hotel de Vagabundos* and the texts reviewed before, I place myself in three fundamental questions in which all the authors seem to agree and which are transversal to the concept of Black Theater. The first one of them centers on the author; the second focuses on the main idea or objective; and the third focuses on the recipient or reader, the audience. From this point of view, I will try to understand Zapata's personal and historical motivations and his relationship with the other authors.

**Who writes?** Manuel Zapata Olivella was born near the Caribbean coast in Colombia in Lorica, Cordoba. He moved to Bogotá, the country's capital, to do his undergraduate studies in medicine. Zapata decided to start this journey from Colombia to the United States at 23 years old, and just before finishing his medical studies. This play, along with the novel *He Visto la Noche*<sup>12</sup>, are the products of the author's experience from his trip through Central America and then the United States. Like the other Black artist from the U.S., Zapata has questions about race and identity. That motivated him to go looking for answers among the people. This trip is also the consequence generated by the cultural shock when he arrives at the Colombian capital being a man of the province.

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<sup>12</sup> I've seen the night.

He also leaves Colombia because of his interests to know how black man is perceived and represented in other cultures. As he says at the beginning of *He visto la noche* “They were the first glimpses of the forced collective, massive, overwhelming, today anti- racist movements. They all, extremists and conciliators, religious or political, join today in the claim of a universal right of man: to identify with himself” (Zapata Olivella 5). Back in Bogotá, Zapata organized different activities to promote Black identity and Black pride. Finally, he establish with his sister Delia Zapata the Fundación Colombiana de Estudios Folclóricos<sup>13</sup>. There he tries to apply his idea of *Teatro Popular Identificador* after traveling through Central America and the United States. Zapata's work contributes to African consciousness in the Diaspora; however, his short theatrical production is almost unknown. The young Zapata as DuBois, Hughes, or Baraka felt attracted by this fight to change the way Black people were depicted. Since his theatre proposal of *Teatro Popular Identificador*, Zapata directs the attention to the artistic process, but the intention behind the piece of art. *Teatro Popular Identificador* is not a technique but rather a sort of philosophy. The effectiveness of this proposal is also related to Maria Knebel's ideas because it works in any theater-style or genre. In both cases, the responsibility moves to the way performers conceiving author’s idea on stage while keep in mind their personal references and experience.

Most of the authors analyzed in chapter one created their writings based on the need to establish a parameter concerning the way they represent their identity as African descendants in the United States. To think about who writes is to consider where the story comes from. Especially to W.E.B. du Bois and Langston Hughes, they both had to clarify

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<sup>13</sup> Colombian Folklore Studies Foundation.

the borders of their theater in the United States. They did not want to create a racial division in the theater because it already existed. The gaze of the white man conditioned everything performed, to whom and from what points of view. Black people represent something to make fun of it. These authors turned their attention to who is the one who writes. W.E.B. DuBois proposes in the *Krigua Players* manifesto that every black man and woman in America must tell their story because it is their right. That goal links with Soyica Diggs Colbert, who explained: "The drama that emerges demonstrates the inherent value of black life through storytelling and political advocacy" (Diggs Colbert 87). That is a right denied for so long. To identify and recognize the Black author as the generator of the story is an action that legitimizes the truth of the speech. In DuBois and Hughes's time, it was necessary to give voice to Black people because, as they say, in the real Black Theatre, who writes is the one who knows the experience.

The period known as the Harlem Renaissance not only made visible the Black art but endorsed the validity of an artistic African descendant discourse. "While folk plays seek to depict the experiences of black people, propaganda plays have a specific political purpose: to end the racial oppression of black people" (87). I am referring to the political position acquired by collective Black Theatre dramas in the U.S. that, in the beginning, focus on exclusion by skin color (Hughes and DuBois) and are extended to the exclusion by poverty, immigration, war, or language in *Hotel de Vagabundos*. In both cases, Du Bois and Hughes think it necessary to clarify that a true testimony is possible if it arises from within the African descendant community. Although Zapata does not want to create a new statement, his play speaks about different levels of social isolation, and how they all coincide in a collective tragedy. Olga Arbeláez defines it this way: "It is the

collectivity of the displaced, the homeless people who inhabit the hotel, the protagonist” (Arbeláez 24). In aesthetic terms, it is hard to locate *Hotel de Vagabundos* in a specific period inside of the Colombian theater or American Black Theater. But it is easy to recognize the author's interest in writing about his experience, which resembles several Afro-Latinos who arrived in the United States and could not find an economic, political, and less racial space. This experience in the United States marked its path because it stimulated its subsequent interest in the forms of representation of black in the African diaspora. Zapata asserts in his proposal for a *Teatro Popular Identificador*<sup>14</sup> that theatre objective “would not be to provide simple recreation but to create a conflict of ideas between current and new behavior patterns that could arise from the community reality” (Zapata Olivella 60). Like Hughes and DuBois, Manuel Zapata Olivella, as an African descendant, proposes a conversation about the representation not only of the African descendant in the U.S. but of the Afro Latin as a victim of a system that classifies by language, skin color, immigration status, or economic stratum.

***What to write?*** Manuel Zapata Olivella comes to the United States by the idea of brotherhood with their race equals. However, Zapatas’ disenchantment is notorious when he discovers the lack of knowledge of his African American brothers about the reality of the African diaspora. *Hotel de Vagabundos*, does not only raise the problem of socio-economic conflicts in New York and the brand-new capitalist world. The author is concerned with presenting how inequality and lack of opportunities affect different people equally; he uses the text to exposes the situation of the African descendant man in the U.S. specifically. When Zapata shows the hard conditions of these men in the Hotel

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<sup>14</sup> Popular Theater Identifier.

Mills, he wants to denounce the way in which the economic and social system oppresses the Black man. First in *He visto la Noche* Zapata described New York as a city that “first degenerates the man and then devour him” (105) to later Eugenio expresses: “Every black American tries to become economically independent as much as possible, but always finds the barriers of the whites” (49). The author places particular emphasis on how this system is ruthless with the black man and promotes his ignorance. This economic system limits his opportunities, and treat blacks as criminals who only deserves death. In the play, the ushers and the policemen who represent the institutions have clear about who they should submit, who they should suspect, who to accuse, incriminate and sentence: The Black man.

Zapata also shows different options that the black man assumes in front of this system. He introduces Marcus, a black man who has escaped from lynching in Atlanta and who clearly understands all the stereotypes for which Blacks endure. The author adds Joe, who worked at Empire State as an elevator operator on behalf of the generation of black men who are finding some way to survive working. Joe also seduce white women; Joe represents the African pride that persists in each descendant. Zapata also introduces Gino, a man who denies his reality by disconnecting from his direct offspring as the son of enslaved ones; Gino considers himself the son of Moroccan princes. Finally, the play presents Eugenio, a university student who is the only one aware that the most effective way to overcome the system in which they live is through academic preparation. He knows Black men need to transform their mentality. Even though Zapata presents four different ways of facing life as a Black in the USA, their destinies are affected by the same outcome: a false accusation and subsequent execution of a Black man, one like

them. Here Zapata clearly states that although access to opportunities is equally painful for any person not belonging to the dominant white model, it is against the Black man and woman whom that system becomes fierce. Zapata wants, like Amiri Baraka, to denounce that the regime persecutes and penalize the Black men. Zapata Olivella approaches what Langston Hughes says in the idea of the responsibility of the Black artist to move away from the stereotypes of the White universe but goes into detail describing different views of Black in New York in the 1940s. However, *Hotel de Vagabundos* have not in-depth exploration of the modes of expression of the Afro community, Manuel Zapata Olivella suggests that later with his proposal of the *Teatro Popular Identificador*. August Wilson reviews the influence of the 60's turbulent environment on his awareness as an African descend in the U.S. In *The ground on which I stand*. Wilson explains that he mentions that because it is difficult to separate "the theater from the concerns" of his life as a black man, he cannot "dissociate one part of his life with others" (Wilson 4). *Hotel de Vagabundos* is a creation born from its author concerns about his experience as Black in the U.S. August Wilson also is aware that his artistic work is part of a global community. In this play, Zapata agrees with Wilson when he mention of the ideals of Marcus Garvey in defense of the notion of Pan-Africanism, saying that "Race is an important part of the American landscape, as America is made up of an amalgamation of races from all parts of the globe" (Wilson 5). In *Hotel de Vagabundos* the idea of Black Theater is proposed by the concept of global connection. Zapata understands the global disconnection. Because of it he writes about the human being and his difficulties regardless of nationality or race but retains some scenes to question the situation of the Black man in the United States.

Zapata's vision goes beyond his time because, in *Hotel de Vagabundos*, he proposes ideas that are mentioned almost 40 years later by August Wilson. Zapata claims equal spaces for the Afro-descendant community in the theater of the United States. But his speech can be applied to all areas of society and throughout the western hemisphere. Zapata connects his play directly with the “us” of DuBois in *Krigwa Players*, the “themes derived from life” referred to by Hughes in *The Mountain Race*, the idea of denunciation proposed by Amiri Baraka in *The Revolutionary Theater* and the personal experience of Wilson. We will make a real change understanding that it is not only one Black experience, and we must work together, transforming our minds.

***Who do we write for?*** The title of the play has the clue. The word “vagabond” as a quality element that defines the place and those who inhabit the site. Olga Arbeláez specifies that, although the term refers to people without a fixed place of residence, it is clear that “none have a vague or nomadic vocation” (Arbeláez 26). The hotel’s inhabitants suffer because they have not been able to establish where they are, or wish to find a place, or wish to return to the place where they come. That is the real tragedy of the African descendants on the American continent. We have been fighting for a long time to be allowed to occupy a significant space in society, and at the same time trying to understand our relationship with the continent of our origin. When Zapata writes *Hotel de Vagabundos*, the African descendants in the U.S. lived amid the community but were not yet a substantial part of society. This metaphor of the play is explained by Olga Arbeláez when she refers to the irony of living “in the financial heart of the country” (Arbeláez 26) and being socially isolated at the same time. The Hotel Mills is an allegory of the hegemonic White male world where the least favored are pushed to the boundaries. The

multinational and multicultural atmosphere of the hotel represents the historical reality of a society hegemonically White and patriarchal (misogyny). The play helps today to understand as a spectator the history of marginalization and continuous displacement of the other, the different.

This essential recognition is mentioned in Baraka when he proposes to transform minds. It is also said by Wilson, who points the importance to a broader vision. In Lori-Parks, who denounces that there can be no real support for White identity; meanwhile, Black is not accepted as her counterpart, his complement as well. Then, *Hotel de Vagabundos* brings together in one place different personalities and cultures to raise actual questions as: Is this a fair system? What happens to those outside the establishment? How are other black identities perceived among African Descendants in the United States? Which and how have the ideals of the Black community in this country been transformed? Zapata, as an author, intended to invite reflection from his own experience, and this play promotes a conversation about it. If the play questions how our human quality faces an extreme situation, scenes 4 and 5 Act II are accurate and interrogates our knowledge, perception, and acceptance of other African identities, specifically how we relate to that other different blackness? And, are we able as a community with the same origin to fight together to achieve real equity?

Zapata wrote his experience in the United States because that made him understand that he was not alone in his struggle for recognition of the African descendant community as co-creator of modern America<sup>15</sup> This theatrical text invites us to rethink

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<sup>15</sup> The whole continent.



the way we are divided against an oppressive and racist economic and social system. Zapata, in scenes 4 and 5, exposes his point of view regarding how the systematic attack against the African descend community has been throughout the continent (exclusion), the consequences of this systematic separation (ignorance), and his proposal to overcome is to difficulties (education). This play recounts from an Afro Latin experience the problems and the inequities that promote and sustains the economic and ethical system. Zapata uses New York reality as a metropolis of the world (not only the US) and goes beyond to present a problem that is contemporary with us: intercultural difficulties posed by globalization, eager capitalism, and war.

This document has analyzed artists' viewpoints that have shown the human side of the Black Theater and find its possibilities to connect with other identities. Some of them express the importance of interaction with other ethnic realities. Langston Hughes proposes a change in hegemonic narratives for ones that involve miscegenation (White). August Wilson corroborates it speaking of the broad vision that the theater needs, and Suzan Lori-Parks confirms it by saying that one ethnic reality cannot exist without the presence of the other. Manuel Zapata gathers different cultures under one roof to say that our level of humanity should unite us against an unfair system that attacks Black people just for being Black. The plus with his play is that he makes it global to criticize us as Black, to invite us to overcome ignorance in which we are sometimes as ethnic community. As a black and Latino, I have witnessed some attitudes of African Americans born in the United States against other Afro descendants of the diaspora.

Black Theatre in the U.S. seeks to create a different theater that attacks the misrepresented image of the African American community in the United States of

America. This type of theater specifies in detail of its own culture, exploring and accentuating different kinds of self-expression, undoubtedly prejudiced within the Anglo-Saxon white collective imaginary. Its experience has mostly inspired the Black Theatre and is an account of the Black practices in the United States. That is, it wants to represent a testimony historical-artistic of the North American culture development in general and African American Culture in particular. Black Theatre advocates for the human because it defends equality between human beings either by denouncing the abuses, describing the suffering, or spreading the joy of those dispossessed. Across the time, Black Theatre in the U.S. has understood that there is not a single history post-Middle Passage. This theater has realized that other elements affect the African descend community and should be exposed, even those that denounce attitudes into the African diasporic community. Black Theatre in the U.S. is an artistic response of an isolated community that seeks in this activity over the years, a transformation of its representation as individuals. From this point of view, it is a theater of denunciation and encouragement for its audience.

Earlier authors reevaluate the participation of the African American community in building this country. In that sense, Manuel Zapata Olivella wonders where in this process, the struggle for recognition has promoted an ignorance of other possibilities of representation besides the binary colored habitual. This author wonders if this system of benefits has created the internal divisions between African descendants. William Mina says that Manuel Zapata Olivella “conceived culture as a dialogue of meetings based on equality and sincerity to listen to the other and put himself in his place” (Mina Aragon 249). In that sense, Zapata in *Hotel de Vagabundos* sets different nationalities and cultures in the same geographical space sharing the same marginality to make explicit a

global vision. It is valuable to ask: Had the U.S. failed as a nation to recognize the contribution of other cultures to their formation as a country and especially African American culture? How much of this bicultural tradition survives today in relationships that cause people to classify others based on skin color, language, and country if you are not an American? Suzan Lori-Parks mentions the presence of Black as a complement to white in the United States and points that it is impossible to talk about one without talking about the other, they complement each other, they need each other, and the ideal is that they move forward together. Zapata's experience at the Mills Hotel in front of the African American community is reflected in scenes 4 and 5 of the Second Act. There, the author exposes other black identities in the United States, other race problems, and other discriminations. Like Lori-Parks, Zapata understands the question of the race between Black and White but emphasizes the attitude of the American Black man against other blacknesses of the diaspora.

The play, and specifically the previously analyzed scenes, unveils problems that Zapata, as a Black man, had to face himself among those who he considers sharing his race. Zapata like me sometimes, was met with a level of ignorance from some part of African descendants in the U.S. This document is not to criticize that ignorance, I recognize like Manuel Zapata Olivella, that there is still much to do to gather African descendants in this continent, not only in the U.S

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSIONS

During my stay at the University of Louisville as a Teaching Assistant, I had the opportunity to teach some theater courses in English and Spanish and lecturer in other classes. The admiration of several citizens of this country and more African descendants when listening to my nationality surprised me a lot. I felt I need to highlight not only my Colombian but my American origin. As happened to Oscar in *Hotel de Vagabundos*, who is surprised at the value of the racial concept in the United States, I have tried to understand the roots of that dilemma. This study of documents on Black Theater has helped me understand it. First, because by tracking black theatrical thinking in the U.S., I have understood the close relationship between art and the community. All art is political, and the struggle of these thinkers of the African descendant community in the U.S. it is not only focused on artistic actions; their actions intend to transform society, which is also political activism. Then, because of the continuous comparison with my reality has allowed me to assume my identity within North American society and the world.

Just as a person who was born in Italy is as European as one who was born in Sweden or Greece, anyone born in Argentina, Cuba, Colombia or Canada has the right to be called American. If this person has any offspring (cultural, racial, or DNA) with victim ancestors of the slave process, that person has the right to consider her/himself

African American<sup>16</sup>; hence, all production from an African descendant in this continent belongs to the universe of African American productions. The complex issue arises when political, cultural, and geographical boundaries appear. They promote the isolation of communities that share a territory, in our case, the American continent. It follows, then, that the author does not ignore the historical suffering carried by people of color and the constant struggle of the African-descendant people throughout the continent for equality and a better quality of life. If Manuel Zapata Olivella is aware of something, it is the suffering of his brothers and sisters in the United States, who have the “still confusing aspiration to be considered a citizen without having to fade their skin” (5).

If W.E.B. DuBois sets the urgency for a theater created *for us* (Players) and he refers to African descends, Zapata is one of those *us*. His life experience, concerns, and motivations are the same as those of African descendants in the United States. It is not a coincidence that both are aware of the historical debt to the descendant community of Africa on this continent. In *Hotel de Vagabundos*, both the play and the author relate to the African American<sup>17</sup> experience. *Hotel de Vagabundos* is the materialization of the author's instinctive reaction to the condition of the Black man in the United States and the diaspora, as well. Manuel Zapata Olivella is aware of his responsibility as a representative of his race in the field of art. According to Hughes, that responsibility is to avoid the stereotypes imposed by the White gaze. Zapata had entered the United States

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<sup>16</sup> I state that because it is necessary to clarify that Manuel Zapata Olivella is African-descendant and Colombian, then he is African American too. The complexity lies in that, African American can mean descendant of Africa born in the United States and at the same time Descendant of Africa born in the American continent.

<sup>17</sup> For this document, the term African American refers to all African descendants on the American continent.

intending to present his script for a movie to a producer in Hollywood<sup>18</sup>. That illusion died when he understood that the script would never be accepted. Zapata coincides with Hughes understanding that the fundamental Black artist's role is to safeguard the African diasporic culture to transform the racial temples of tomorrow using “all elements of the black drama and all forms of expression black” (Hughes). Hence, I consider that *Hotel de Vagabonds* as the first Zapata’s product with a global African diasporic consciousness. On the one hand, the author wrote texts about the social and economic condition of Black communities in Colombia and Central America; and on the other, *Hotel de Vagabundos* raised other questions in the African descend community as, how do we see each other? What are our concerns and desires as Black in America? How do we see other blacks? How does the system work to judge us and eliminate us by just our skin color? Miscegenation was a major theme in many of Langston Hughes' production, such as *Mullatto*. Zapata mentions the same in this play but does not go as deep. Although the presence of women is not admitted at the Hotel Mills, the only female presence (this is a hotel for men only) that appears in the play is a black woman who has a relationship with a European man. She will travel to Europe with her partner. Is that a metaphor for how the close relationship between Europe and Africa materializes in America? Or a direct criticism of the interracial ban in the United States at the time?<sup>19</sup>. Zapata answer us with not only one character but three:

Che: I will also take a black woman to Buenos Aires

Gino: (with contempt) You have no brain, And I thought you were a gaucho!

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<sup>18</sup> Zapata wrote a script for a film based on a black hero.

<sup>19</sup> Zapata will answer these questions later in his production when he defines himself as Afro-Indo-European Colombian. See *Hotel of Vagabundos* Act III, scene 3.

Joe: Whoever would believe it, married Betty, not all whites are the same.<sup>20</sup>

A Latino wants to marry a black woman anyway, but not in the United States; he understands that this is not a place to do it. Gino, the black who denies his race, disapproves of the union, and Joe believes he may have a different future because “not all whites are created equal.” In Zapata’s work, curiously, no North American white thinks.

In his approach of *Teatro Popular Identificador*<sup>21</sup>, Zapata uses terms such as social or cultural anthropology to refer to in-depth exploration in the cultural manifestations of a community. He also Zapata proposes the systematic study of folk forms in Colombia. This proposal could be an expanded version of the points Zora Neale Hurston refers to in *The Characteristics of Black Expression*. Zapata takes elements that Hurston recognizes as typical of the African heritage in the United States, such as the expressive visual and sound elements (will to adorn), the transformation of spaces, the relationship with the environment, thermology, and themes of representation and includes them in his theatrical proposal. He readapts to the Colombian culture by adding, after his experience at Hotel Mills, a broad vision that appreciates the amalgam of cultures within a nation. It is no easy to recognize the effort to bring to the play the idea of *words of action* (Hurston 49) in the Black characters, probably because Zapata’s English level was not enough to describe that in the play. It could be a prominent question mark because of his lack of gender inclusion; the play only has a female character that appears once. The reason is that The Mills Hotel does not admit women because it offers its services to

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<sup>20</sup> Hotel de Vagabundos PG. 71

<sup>21</sup> Popular Theater identifier

working men.<sup>22</sup> Although this absence of women could happen because of the cultural sexism existing throughout the continent, it is worth saying in favor of the author that in other of his few theatrical plays, there are more female characters with active participation.

In *Hotel de Vagabundos*, Manuel Zapata tells us his life experience. Hughes explains that the real Black artist writes “derived from the life I [he or she] know[s]” (Hughes). Zapata and Hughes met in 1946, and they exchange ideas through letters and books. Zapata says that Hughes “was a very strong influence” (Jahannes), so the reason this play tends to be more descriptive than narrative is that he follows the guidelines of Hughes: to avoid stereotypes with the production of the real Black artist. The play becomes visionary as it approaches the 1960s idea of humanizing from the theater (Baraka) and denounces injustices of the American social and economic system in the 40s. Furthermore, the plot develops in a multiracial and multinational scenario. Zapata already presents some of the problems we have today as a consequence of globalization. They lack knowledge about other cultures, immigration issues, isolation of veterans, abuse of power, and the abuse of institutional power against the Black community. Like August Wilson and Susan Lori-Parks, Manuel Zapata Olivella raises the need for a broad view of what Blackness is. Among other things, it embraces the idea that most of the African descendants in America face the same challenges, most of them related to inequity and poverty. Wilson claims in recognition of American society as an amalgam of other cultures, and Lori-Parks also highlights the need to discuss issues between races in

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<sup>22</sup> *The Mills Hotels, A Charity that Helped Men to Help Themselves*. **Fuente especificada no válida.**, and *Where Working Men May Live Cheaply and Well* **Fuente especificada no válida.**



the United States. These scholars encourage a vision for theater as a space to expose, review, and propose ways to talk about us as humans and as a society.

*Hotel de Vagabundos* is not the first African Colombian theatrical text, nor is it the first play to explore the issues of the Black man in Colombia<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, it is the first stage product that arises from the vision of an African-Colombian, the problem of race in the diaspora. So far, it is difficult to find a play produced by an African Colombian whose themes crosses the borders of the regional or national level and dares to pose identification problems among the African-descendant community itself. Consequently, *Hotel de Vagabundos*' plot developed in New York, and was inspired by the experience lived by the author as African-descendant and Latin in the United States at the same. Although it does not have established leading characters amongst the cast, there are African American characters. One of them is accused and prosecuted. The outcome of this descriptive play revolves around the accusation on Marcus by the death of Mc. Allister. The Mills Hotel's community gather to defend the accused; they forget their differences in a demonstration of humanity. This is related to Baraka's idea to promote the audience to identify with the victims, to discover they are "blood brothers" (Baraka 2). The play wants us to gather, too. Zapata wants to show us not only that it is the descendant of Africa in America who is punished. It means that afterward, they will come for any of the others because there is no justice for the weak unless they unite and take

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<sup>23</sup> Rodrigo Velez makes a recall about the difficulty to trace an African Colombian Theatre; however, comments about *Chonta (1937)* and *Kaiyou (1942)*. Kaiyou sets in Haiti.

action. In the play, it is too late, and not only an unjustly accused man dies. The question remains, how long will it take us to take action?

What gives a play or an author validity? The first answer is that its creations are staged continuously in theaters or that its production keeps as a reference for study and analysis. Updating *Hotel de Vagabundos*, it can be a homeless accommodation in any city of an actual first world country. The issue of migration, for example, has gained validity in recent years and became similar to the Black community. In addition to the increase in police brutality against dark-skinned people, there is a constant onslaught against undocumented immigrants in first-world countries. The establishment always reminds us that this is not our place, and then where it is? Black theatre became more empathetic in the U.S. with other problems such as unemployment, identity, and economic decisions<sup>24</sup>This play also fits into the contemporary definition of Black theatre in the U.S. field because of its variety composition of characters origin and race and the argument about being Black blurry their boundaries. In this regard, I conclude that Manuel Zapata Olivella, DuBois, Hughes, Hurston, Baraka, Wilson, Lori-Parks, and many others criticize the system to promoting change and thinking about the consequences of migration, forced or not, into the culture of the countries. The Colombian theatre scholar Rodrigo Velez comments that Manuel Zapata Olivella proposes his *Teatro Popular Identificador* as a reaction to Colombian playwrights who “aligned political content, who oriented their creative features towards a theater with a more ideological than aesthetic project” (Velez 87). Particularly in *Hotel de Vagabundos*,

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<sup>24</sup> Review *Slave play* by Jeremy O. Harris, *White Noise* Suzan-Lori Parks, *Fires in the Mirror* by Anna Deveare Smith, or *Radio Golf* by August Wilson to bring some examples.

the author warns of the fear of the establishment to see those who are dispossessed and oppressed working together. In the scenes studied in previous chapters, Zapata clarifies that the problem is not our attitude towards the system, but the lack of knowledge of us as a community that shares the same territorial origin (Africa). An example of a connection could be my experience as a translator of texts by Diaspora authors and their editing for Afro-descendant populations in Colombia. Through this, we must observe, analyze, and analyze problems that afflict us as an undervalued community. As a student, I have promoted the visit and exchange of teachers and artists to my country. I also wish to continue developing and disseminating information about my culture.

As African descents, how much we know from other African descendants' communities in our continent? How much know in U.S. about Blacks in Peru or Colombia? In scenes 4 and 5 of Act II, Zapata expose the problem of the center's gaze towards the periphery. In that view, it is the periphery that is interested (by obligation) in the center, because the center only looks at itself. It is easy to understand why in the scenes mentioned above, African descendants in the U.S. do not acknowledge about the existence of other black communities, in South America for example. As Lori-Parks says about a Black play, it must to "... help those in those countries to identify themselves as black" (Lori-Parks), Zapata pretends to invite those who read his play to wonder how far do we take our condition as Blacks. In contemporary terms, does our blackness have any limits? Are those limits based on our geographic, politics, or economic rules? Sandra Garret Shannon says that it is no easy answer if the playwright's race or culture helps to define a Black play. I think as her that the main point is that "there is no single Black Experience" (Garret Shannon 603). Zapata's text presents us with four different Afro-

American views or experiences with Gino, Joe, Marcus, and Eugenio, but it also brings other experiences such as Oscar and Cuéllar. At *Hotel de Vagabundos*, there are more than one African descendant experience. If we understand that there are multiple Black experiences, we can open the setting so that countless stories have space in the theater of the United States and other countries. Giving a racial connotation to an artistic product should only serve to understand it in its origin, but for nothing else. Continuing with this classification only divides and, as happens with *Hotel de Vagabundos*, condemns the artistic object to disappear since it crosses racial, geographic, and social borders. This script, is almost impossible to stage due to the number of actors it requires: 1) is little analyzed in Colombia because its plot takes place in New York (geographical border); 2) it is also little analyzed in the United States because it is in Spanish (language border); 3) it is not considered African-American theater because its author is not called Negro (identification border), and 4) is not even in this country (immigration border). However, there it is, and we present all the points analyzed in this document.

Zapata defends that the theme around his whole literary production is “tries to show the situation in which the poor people [in my country] live” (Jahannes). *Hotel de Vagabundos* is his first play, and there he talks about poor people from a different origin in New York. The play questions those of us who come from the periphery economic, geopolitical, and Afrodiasporic to ask ourselves about our need to find a benchmark of identity and where located it. At the same time, he questions the limits of blackness in the United States in the 1940s. This is a voice that since 1945, has been calling our attention to the divisions and lack of knowledge of us as a community that shares origin and

situation. When somebody asked if I was Black or Latino, I felt that Zapata's call was still valid.

*Hotel de Vagabundos* represents a challenge for North American Theatres. The amount of characters and their slow and descriptive rhythm probably does not help to captivate the audience today, who likes more speed and vertigo. However, it serves as the subject of study and document that proves an early vision of the urgent union of the descendant people from Africa. Scholars as Sandra Garrett Shannon, Eliza G Rizo, Anita Gonzalez and Thomas DeFrantz are working in a new vision of Black Performance and other Black identities in theatre in the U.S. We can limit the scope to say whether or not it is a play that represents the African American theater and forget the coincidences presented here. We can also assume the transformations that the African American theater has according to its society in this time (not the market) and accept that “every play written in the United States is a black play” (Lori-Parks). *Hotel de Vagabundos* demonstrates the different narratives that black experience can have in America (the continent). In this case, from and outsider looking in, but written by an African descendant who also shares other cultural roots. This theatrical text can be an invitation to rethink the meaning and limits of what is considered an African American Theater such asking about other voices not born in the United States that pictured the U.S. Black experience in theatre. According to the documents cited here, the play invites to reflect on the evolution of the African American concepts and its implications in the 21st century as who is the playwright origin, what is the goal of plays and the legitimacy of the Black experience. We can limit the idea to a matter of territorial limits, nationality limits, or

language limits and thus deny the possibilities of analysis of the text. Still, in that case, we would go against the opportunity that art offers: its universality.

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## **Appendix**

### **Hotel de Vagabundos' Plot summary.**

In the mid-1940s, a hotel for men lived in New York with more than 30 tenants of various races and nationalities who had to leave their rooms during daylight hours. Most are unemployed. Among them are African Americans, French and Spanish war refugees, Latinos from different countries, Yugoslavs, Hindus, gays, a war veteran, thieves, and a wealthy older man. They spend the day in the hotel library where they meet and allocate the money or food that we have managed to get working or stealing. The wealthy older man has brought liquor and \$ 1000 in cash from his daughter. In the collective celebration, someone steals your wallet. The thieves are discovered and kicked out of the place. The next day in the library, they meet by affinity groups, and some tell how he got to the United States, while they prepare the filming because he has obtained a boxing fight that can generate all income. The French refugees announce to return their country. One of them has married a black woman with whom he plans to travel, before his departure, she arrives at the hotel and all are surprised by her extreme beauty. The Filipino has lost to K.O.; he is unconscious now. They make a collection to buy medicine and food. Two detectives arrive at the hotel. The older man has been killed, interrogates several, and Marcus, an American black man, is arrested, although he pleads not guilty. Nobody says anything. Seventy-two hours later, they rioted at the hotel to demand the release of Marcus. As they listen to the radio for Marcus's extra-fast execution, some argue over water at the hotel and discover the older man's real killers. The work ends with the entry of gases and noise in all doors.

### **Hotel de Vagabundos' Highlighted lines**

Introduction:

*Before raising the curtain, PRIEST SCOTT comes to the proscenium, open the Bible and read the following paragraph: But the person who endures to the end will be saved<sup>25</sup>. St. Mathew. (Zapata Olivella, Hotel de Vagabundos 9)*

## ACT I

• Tabloid 1. In the Hall of the Mills Hotel in NY lives a varied group of men (women are not allowed). One of the tenants is Mr. McAllister, apparently a wealthy old man who left his family because of his alcohol problems. The rest tenants are poor, immigrants and blacks, some are delinquents. The Ushers collected towels and keys from the rooms, it's time to be out of the rooms. A few characters are easily recognized like Sam who is a drug addict; Lander who is a Jewish doctor with syphilis; Eugene a young black man who studies chemistry [at Columbia University] and Marcus who is a black man who came from Georgia, fleeing from dying hanged in a racist attack.

*MARCUS. Once put a rope on my neck in Georgia, they wanted to lynch me for supposedly wooing to white women. Since then, I do not use clean clothes, do not go "they" to imagine that I am presuming White" (19).*

In addition, there is a group of war French refugees; there is also Gino, a proud black who says he distinguishes himself from others.

*GINO. I have noble blood; I descend from Moroccan princes. I speak perfectly in Spanish and French. As you can see, I am valued here and in South America. (20)*

There are also two homosexuals in the hotel and a group of Latinos. One of the Latinos is a marijuana dealer. They talk about the lack of legal documents.

*FERNANDEZ. Do not despair guy, your remedy is get you to the US Army.*

*ANTONIO. And after a year, you will be a US citizen. (23)*

There is also an American war veteran who is crippled (Salomon). They, the tenants, are separated by groups.

*SALOMON. And I gave my legs for my country and nobody discriminates against me. Am I black or Chinese? I am American! (26)*

In addition to the presentation of the characters, the central theme of the tabloid is money (due to their absence) and food; In general, the main goal to everybody is to think about how to survive.

• Tabloid 2. In the Hotel's Library, they have met again by groups. There is a Norwegian cartoonist [Kovist] who paints the face of one of the bums on

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<sup>25</sup> In Spanish is more specific because literal translation is "But those who suffer to the end". The author talks about suffering from the beginning.

the site. Some of them are playing cards; others sneak whiskey; McAllister arrives with money (one thousand dollars) and liquor, he has visited his daughter. Some approach the group to ask for money and liquor; a dance scene is formed with homosexuals. One Usher wants to evict a tenant. That starts a fight there is confusion and somebody steals McAllister's wallet with money. They find the thieves who return the stolen and then be kicked out of the place. A symphony sounds and that ends the dance. A conversation about what music and beauty are, what is a man and what is his position in the universe.

*KOVIST. But don't you see the difference of notes, of inspiration?*

*VINKA. (smiling) The notes are just simple molecules in vibration, man combines them and accommodates them to his peculiar way of feeling. (38)*

The Usher returns announcing that it is time to return to their rooms.

## ACT II

- Tabloid 1. Same Library of the previous act. Divided by groups some of them sleep; others play dice; others [the French] write letters to their country; others share bread and some walk. Eugenio is looking for a book in the library, complains that the library has only classic literature. One of the Latin immigrants wants to learn Spanish well to become a writer, they recommend knowing well the parts of the sentence. The Usher returns asks for payment receipts and announces that it is allowed to read until 4 o'clock. As the journalist is black and Latino there is a conversation between African Americans about who he is and who is not black, what is needed to be black.

*JOE. I had already told you that he is not black ...*

*GINO. He cannot be black because he does speak Spanish. (47)*

Some of the immigrants clarify the matter in addition to explaining what happens to blacks in their countries, different forms of discrimination, but not as in the United States. Eugenio says that is because of the White man barriers. Some of them have been stealing book papers to sell them as fish wrappers. They talk about Tom's morphine addiction. The doctor was robbed of the Bismuth he used for his syphilis and they discover that Sam was injected because he had no more morphine.

*KOVIST. [To Sam] Tom's disease is less dangerous than yours. Morphine infects souls. (51)*

Argues themes are What's worse? Hunger? To suffering? The illness? The alcoholism? The drug addiction?

- Table 2. Same place. The Spanish explain how they left their country. The Filipino has managed to get a boxing match, everyone believes that it can help them financially. Another philosophical

conversation about religion, existence, and misery between the priest Scott and Zakin.

*ZAKIN. They all want to be better, they want to be men again, but their rights are denied. (59)*

Juan [Latin immigrant] is studying English for a job opportunity. They discuss their jobs in their places of origin and the tragedy of being discriminated against [concept of citizens?].

*JUAN. You're right, we've come to relieve blacks. (60)*

A new immigrant from Puerto Rico arrives. He is an independentist and is secretly followed by an undercover agent. Farewell to the Filipino who goes to his fight.

### ACT III

- Table 1. Same place. Reflection of Ling [Asian immigrant]. Everyone carries a receipt in their hands [the right to be]. Everyone teases the war veteran and his medals. The Usher takes out at Chico as he has paid. They bring the Filipino, he has been knocked out in combat, he not only lost, but he is injured. They cannot do anything because the producers have paid him with a check, they make a collection to help Filipino. Marcus went out to find some oranges to help him. They talk about the boxing business; they move the Filipino to another room. Enter Edward (undercover agent) with two policemen, a crime occurred the night before. McAllister has been killed. While Edward describes each one, they are interrogated. Argue on citizenship, language, etc.

*DETECTIVE 1. You abuse the US citizenship we grant you.*

*JUAN. Conversely, you keep us to make your dishwasher. (84)*

Marcus arrives and the policeman takes him as a suspect, although he shouts that he is innocent.

- Table 2. Same place. They have been in a hunger strike for 3 days.

*STAGE DIRECTION: When the curtain rises, Eugenio perched on of Zakin and Kovist shoulders finish writing an inscription that says: "Miserable judges, when you manage to penetrate this enclosure you will only find our bodies as a protest for your crime" (89)*

They have written signs in favor of Marcus. They fight for water and for food. Some are sick. They discover the true McAllister murder. Scissors [real killer] hanged himself.

*ZAKIN. (Enraged, he looks out the door and shouts) Shoot, murderers. You have killed Callister. You criminals who force us to crime! (95)*

They want to denounce it, it's time for trial, they listen to the sentence and the execution, they protest.

*A VOICE IN THE KITCHEN. Black has paid his crime. There is nothing left of the fierce black beast but a pile of ashes, black, like his soul. (95)*

Before entering the police kill Luca and Filipino. In the end, the police or law enforcement enters amid gases.

**Table 1** Hurston and Zapata concepts

<b>Zona Neale Hurston</b>		<b>Manuel Zapata Olivella</b>	
<b>Characteristics of Negro Expression</b>		<b>Teatro Popular identificador</b>	
Drama	<i>Words of Action</i>	Expressive Elements	<i>(plastic and craftsman)</i>
Will to adorn	<i>Figurative, grotesque, and/orate language.</i>		<i>Representative (Performance) Emotional (dance and music)</i>
Angularity	<i>Angle, use of space</i>		<i>Emotional (dance and music)</i>
Asymmetry	<i>Freedom of structure and form (presence of rhythm but and lack of symmetry)</i>		<i>Oral (Poetry, story, sayings, riddles)</i>
Dance	<i>Dynamic suggestion. The inviting movement.</i>		<i>Expressive (Masks, dresses, ornaments, canes, shoes)</i>
Negro Folklore	<i>Ability to adapt everything around you. Transform it, give it its own style.</i>	Scenarios	<i>squares, courtyards, beaches, etc.</i>
Originality	<i>Reinterpret. Ability to modify the ideas. A particular way of being and</i>	Ceremonies	<i>Rituals, burials, baptisms, processions,</i>

	<i>conceiving the world.</i>		<i>competitions, festivities.</i>
Imitation	<i>Internalize the outsider, natural empathy. The art of imitating is of appropriating each other's characteristics and, at the same time, not losing their essence.</i>	Dynamics and sense of traditional theatre in Colombia	<i>Forms and content of the theater made in the country.</i>
Absence of the concept of privacy	<i>certain kind of spread? Lack of filter when talking?... it's a form of support within the community, "I'm because we are"</i>	Argument and Theme	<i>Man (human being), in the face of nature, destiny, society.</i>
The Jook	<i>Meeting place, pleasure house. Musicality. It is the place and the action of poetizing and musicalizing everything.</i>	Sense and Functionality of dances	<i>Choreographies, characters, and costumes of the dances. The history behind the dances.</i>
Dialect	<i>pronunciation, proper way of speaking.</i>	Carnival dances	<i>Popular holidays and Festivals in Colombia</i>
		Features of folklore theatre	<i>Identity, Fatalism, magical religious sense, satire, denunciation, traditional characters, sacred, etc.</i>

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