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Ricardo Barber, Cuban Actor Who Succeeded in New York, Dies at 81

By **Neil Genzlinger**

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Ricardo Barber, a stage actor who left Cuba after spending time in a forced-labor camp during Fidel Castro's rule and became a core member of the Spanish-language troupe Repertorio Español in New York, died on Dec. 17 in Manhattan. He was 81.

The theater company announced his death. No cause was given.

Mr. Barber was establishing himself as an actor in Havana when Castro came to power in 1959 in a Communist revolution that was hostile to many things, including homosexuality. Mr. Barber was gay, and in the late 1960s he was placed in one of Castro's "military units to aid production," the agricultural labor camps known by the Spanish acronym UMAP, which were, as The New York Times put it in 1974, "for petty criminals, homosexuals, 'pre-delinquents' and other 'potential dissenters' — people who were not guilty of any wrongdoing, but had been sent to the camps because of their 'attitude.' "

The camps were abolished after a few years, but the experience changed Mr. Barber's feelings toward his country.

"I wasn't the same," he told The Times in 1998, when he and other Repertorio actors made an emotional return trip to Cuba. "I no longer believed in the revolution, and I began to see the bad in everything."

He left in the mid-1970s, going first to Spain and then, about four years later, settling in New York, where he soon joined Repertorio Español. He was a member of the company from 1981 until his retirement in 2014. Among the numerous productions in which he appeared was "The Feast of the Goat," an adaptation of Mario Vargas Llosa's novel about the Dominican despot Rafael Trujillo. Mr. Barber played Trujillo.



Mr. Barber with Graciela Lecube in “Te Juro Juana, Que Tengo Ganas,” one of his earliest American appearances. Repertorio Español

“As the dictator, Mr. Barber, often in military regalia and crowned by a white-plumed hat, seems both scarily on the edge of madness and yet capable of consciously using that part of himself as a mode of intimidation,” Bruce Weber wrote when he reviewed the production for *The Times* in 2003. “His eyes blaze in his drawn face, both the swelling self-importance and the challenge to all usurpers evident in every pose.”

But — evidence of the versatility for which he was known — Mr. Barber also performed a second role in that production, which was directed by Jorge Ali Triana: a Trujillo adviser who had fallen out of favor.

“By creating the dual role for Mr. Barber,” Mr. Weber wrote, “Mr. Triana is making the point that Trujillo’s control of the nation depended on gutless collaborators, and in his performance Mr. Barber makes vivid the wages of despotism, for a nation and for a man.”

Ricardo Fernando Barber was born on June 5, 1937, in Placetas, Cuba. His father, José, was a school principal, and his mother, Maria del Carmen Rodriguez, was a homemaker. When Ricardo was about six years old, the family moved to Cojimar, near Havana.

He studied optometry and theater arts at Havana University, graduating in 1961. He was part of several theater groups, including Teatro Estudio, led by Raquel and Vicente Revuelta, a sister and brother who were part of an illustrious Cuban theatrical family.

His assignment to the labor camp led colleagues to protest on his behalf. One fellow actor, Ana Molinet, is said to have waged a personal campaign seeking his release that included slipping a note to Castro.

Mr. Barber, far right, with José Cheo Oliveras and Ana Margarita Martínez-Casado in “Revoltillo,” about a Cuban-American family. Mr. Barber’s performance was praised as “a fine piece of comic torment.” Repertorio Español

Luis Mallo, a nephew, said one family story is that while in the camp, Mr. Barber formed a theater troupe and put on a play that was critical of the Castro regime.

“While he was there!” Mr. Mallo said by email. “It shows his determination and his belief, I think, that art had a moral duty and should be used to create change when necessary. A bit idealistic perhaps, but nevertheless courageous and optimistic.”

Once in the United States, Mr. Barber made a quick impression with Repertorio Español.

“Ricardo Barber, as the ambitious and prim young teacher, is a slim, sallow and hilarious performer whose outrageous and nimble mugging is one of the show’s highlights,” Richard F. Shepard wrote in The Times in 1982, reviewing “Te Juro Juana, Que Tengo Ganas” (“I Swear to You, Juana, I Want to ...”), one of his earliest American appearances.

Another opportunity to display his comedic abilities came in the late 1980s, when the company staged Eduardo Machado’s “Revoltillo” (“Broken Eggs”), about a Cuban-American family.

“Ricardo Barber’s Osvaldo is a fine piece of comic torment,” D. J. R. Bruckner wrote in his review in The Times. “Mr. Barber’s sense of timing, along with an ability to express emotions with only his eyes and mouth, lets Osvaldo turn barbs from his father, mother-in-law, ex-wife and children back on them. In a play that is a battle of one-liners, this Osvaldo has effective silent defense weapons.”

It was this play that the company took to Cuba in 1998, an entourage that included more than half a dozen Cuban-American actors and toured four cities.

Mr. Barber is survived by two sisters, Rosa Barber and Violeta Barber.