

# Tribute to Love and Strength

Rogelio Montesinos  
Political activist  
Havana, Cuba

That warm December afternoon the Premio Tolerancia Plus 2002 award was given to famous actress and teacher Elvira Cervera (Las Villas, Cuba, 1923) was witness to one of the most merited acts of justice for someone who has given her life, talent, and energies to teaching, the dramatic arts, and the struggle for equality and respect among human beings.

This woman of humble origins, but infinite sensitivity and unstoppable drive, had to have honesty and strength, tenderness and limitless determination to walk a long life path that was plagued by incomprehension and challenges. Yet, this still did not make her feel forced to abandon the conviction or immense love with which she imprinted all her work, projects or struggles for over six decades of incessant battle.

In love with the dramatic arts from a very early age, she knew how to overcome enormous difficulties, leaving her personal and professional mark on Cuban radio and television, theater and film. There are not many actors who have been able to develop masterful and successful careers in all four of these performative spaces, but Elvira Cervera has done it with the naturalness and charm that so characterize her.

As a Doctor of Pedagogy, and efficient director of projects and undertakings that she always came to by way of having shown

her own merit and capability, and despite difficult obstacles, Elvira is the teacher who traveled from the humblest rural school to the loftiest theater conservatory, always with a tireless love and dedication with which only the chosen few are blessed.

Her long professional career, a model of quality and dedication to tasks with enormous social impact, more than serves to reserve her a distinguished place in the last century's cultural history. Yet, Elvira is much more than an excellent actress or master teacher: she is a woman of profound convictions, who devoted her life to boldly and directly struggling against the disdain that black actors have suffered, as well as the image of black Cubans in the Cuban media and art world. Elvira Cervera goes down in history not only for her professional career, but also because for decades she was the strongest and continuous voice—almost always alone—to speak in favor of black actors. She, herself, is the best example of blacks in Cuba's dramatic arts.

Elvira initiated various projects and programs whose goal it was to promote justice and equity in the training and participation of black actors. In her autobiography, *El arte para mí fue un reto* [Art was a Challenge for Me], she offers extraordinary testimony of the ignorance, omissions, rejections, and injustices that she and others suf-

ferred in commercial, capitalist artistic spaces as well as in the old Communist Party's radio station and post-revolutionary, state-controlled cultural spaces. Her life experiences and evaluation of them reveal the backward prejudices and patterns that have kept cultural spaces from accurately and consistently reflecting the inherent diversity of the Cuban nation. These experiences also transcend all historical eras, political leanings, and ideological visions, and have become a reference and framework that are now practically fixed and unchangeable in the eyes and minds of those who design and control symbolic, artistic, media presentations and performances.

With regard to everything else, this woman should be admired. She should be emulated, since for many years she has firmly faced the injustices and omissions without the slightest grudge or resentment. Her entire life is a model of loving and sensitive humanity.

### *The glaring absence*

Many of us Cubans share the discomfort and heartfelt pain that moved Elvira Cervera for so many years. It is hurtful to see film after film, soap opera after soap opera, in which what is obviously missing is Cuban blacks. Despite the authorities' constant egalitarian rhetoric, the national film and television industry continues to be guided by past patterns of the oldest, racially hegemonic kind; the kind that makes blacks invisible, or 'disappears' them, invokes disdain for non-white actors, and systematically trivializes contributions and traditions of African cultural origin.

It is difficult to acknowledge that black Cubans are more excluded and unknown in the media than in other

spheres of social participation. The presence of blacks in prominent or leading roles in Cuban cinema is limited to those *negro metrajes* [black-themed films] that deal with the slave period, such as Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's magnificent *La última cena* [The Last Supper] (1976), and films by the now exiled Sergio Giral: *El otro Francisco* [The Other Francisco] (1974), *Ranchedador* [Slavehunter] (1975), *Maluala* (1979), *Plácido* (1986), etc.

I also must mention the ill-fated director Sara Gómez, whose memorable film *De cierta manera* [One Way or Another] (1974) dared to take a profound and realistic look at marginality in Havana, that part of our reality that so seldom has been dealt with by our film and television industry in that last few decades. I have been told that deep in some forgotten drawers at the headquarters of the Cuban National Film Institute (ICAIC) there are a number of valuable works by this filmmaker, tucked away where no one can find them. They contain a clear and uncommon view of our complex social reality. The economic crisis of the nineties forced the Cuban film industry to seek collaborative co-productions in order to survive. Somehow, only certain kinds of stories and plot lines that further established the marginal and sporadic presence of black Cubans on the big screen got filmed after that.

National television persistently reproduces the same storylines and taboos that distort the place and role of black Cubans in history and now in Cuban cultural life and coexistence. What one finds is the continued absence of blacks from leading roles, black couples in a romantic involvement, or in scenes of

interracial love plagued by a cartoon-like, undignified, or degrading treatment of black characters, which is in stark contrast to the benevolent or positive way in which other characters are portrayed, even if they are in clearly negative roles.

The racially hegemonic view that for centuries has kept the dominant classes in symbolic and cultural spaces of representation is an imposed reflection of the whitening they dreamed of imprinting on our Cuban society. To make invisible and denigrate that fundamental but undesirable part of our society in performative and expressive cultural spaces (so important in the creation of social values) has been a fitting complement for the closing of the historic cycle of the marginalization and exclusion of black Cubans.

From the nineteenth century on, the so-called *bufo* theater (assumed even by black and mestizos, despite the fact they play ridiculous and denigrating roles in it, which serves as a paradigm of the artistic representation of national traditions) established these conceptual and till now unchangeable underpinnings, which have always presented black Cubans as inferior beings constantly spouting banalities and lacking qualities to emulate.

Fifty years after the supposed change of all of society's structural

underpinnings and, above all, the elite's rhetoric, we watch with great pain but no surprise how common patterns that exclude the social and historical contribution of blacks and mulattoes to Cuba and its culture are all too frequently reproduced. All the decades of egalitarian and emancipatory rhetoric have not managed to translate to the film and television screen a positive and balanced view of this essential part of society. With dread, we watch as the multi-centuried history of struggles, rebellions, heroics, talent, and successes of many black Cubans, who with great effort have tried to make their way amongst the thick and twisted warp of marginalization, exclusion, and disdain with which the elite have tried to guarantee a social division that affirms their hegemony, has never made it to film and television screens in Cuba.

Much has been debated on the subject; many have been the questions. But there has been little change in the way the presence and contributions of blacks to cultural and social development is so undervalued, which reaffirms a need for the public and intelligentsia to double their demand for blacks to be accurately and respectfully represented in the Cuban media, so that justice is done and Elvira Cervera's dream becomes a reality that can make us all proud.