



Contigo Pan y Cebolla
Study Guide
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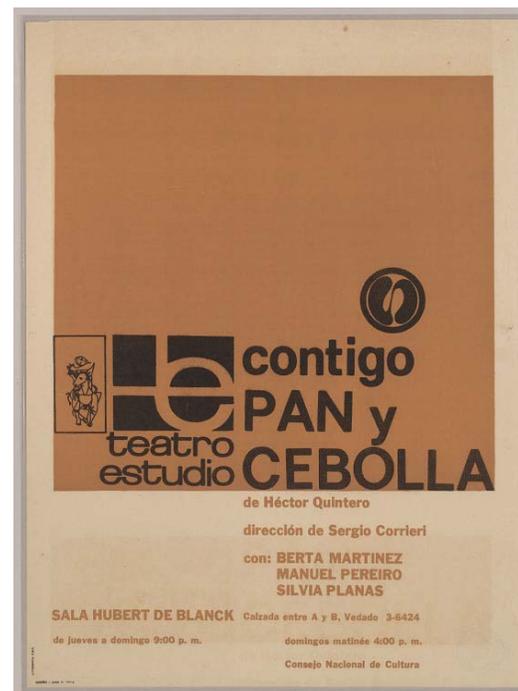
Contigo Pan y Cebolla
by Maddie Riley

Contigo Pan y Cebolla

The comedy *Contigo Pan y Cebolla* was written in 1962 by a young Cuban playwright, Hector Quintero. The play has been incredibly successful, both in Cuba and abroad. In 1963 it received honorable mention for the Casa de las Américas Prize, a Cuban literary award. One year later, the play premiered in La Havana, directed by Sergio Corrieri. Sergio Corrieri belonged to Teatro Estudio, a group dedicated to running plays that exposed Cuba’s social problems. An English-language version of the play, “Rice and Beans,” was produced by INTAR theatre in 1979. The play was directed by the organization’s founding artistic director, Cuban-born Max Ferra. *Contigo Pan y Cebolla* was turned into a movie directed by Cuban director Juan Carlos Cremata in 2014. The film was brought to Miami, and was selected for the 2014 Havana Film Festival and the 2015 Chicago Latino Film Festival.

The play takes place in pre-revolution La Havana, Cuba in the late 1950s. It follows a middle-class family living in a small apartment. Only the father, Anselmo, is employed, and so money is a little tight. That said, they can still afford to send their children to private school and to buy certain electronics, like a telephone and radio. The central conflict of the play is the mother’s desire to buy a refrigerator. Although the family has no real need for it, Lala wants it for social reasons. She wants the neighbors to see that her family is wealthy enough to afford a luxury like a refrigerator. Lala is endlessly frustrated by her family’s inability to afford a refrigerator and nicer food. She wants things to be different for her family, although she has no real plan for change. All she can do is hope that her husband gets a raise, hope that things get better.

Contigo Pan y Cebolla is set in the years immediately preceding the end of the Cuban Revolution. The ambitions of its main characters reflect Cuba’s unique political situation at this time. Although many Cubans were uninvolved in politics, the push for change was all around.



A brochure for Teatro Estudio’s version of *Contigo Pan y Cebolla*, from 1965

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Pre-Revolution Cuba

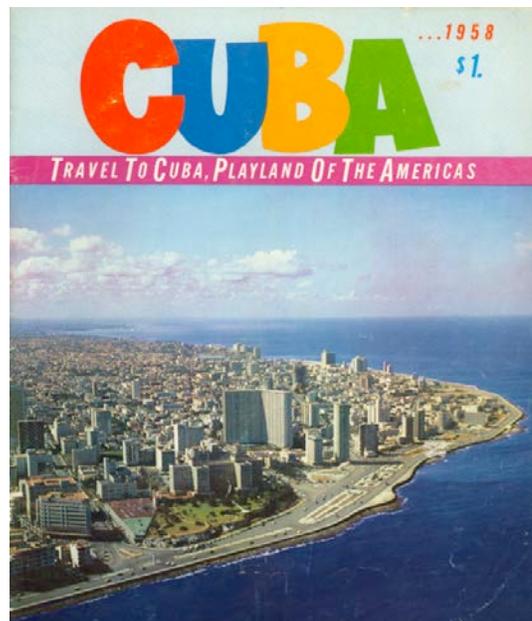


A political cartoon from Spain in 1896 criticizing United States imperialism in Cuba

Christopher Columbus first landed in Cuba in 1492. About twenty years later, Spaniards returned to the island, this time with conquest as their goal. Cuba's first Spanish governor founded La Havana in 1514, after four years of warfare with the indigenous peoples. African slaves were introduced to the island in 1527, leading to a long period of violence and rebellion. Spanish governors continued ruling Cuba for over three hundred years. Cuban-born farmers and wealthy natives led an unsuccessful independence war from 1868 to 1878, followed by a second uprising a year later. José Martí, a Cuban leader who rallied behind independence, harnessed revolutionary spirit and inspired much of the spirit behind the Spanish-American war in 1898. The United States joined Cuba in its battle against the Spanish. The war ended with the Treaty of Peace

in Paris in December 1898, at which point Spain renounced control of the island.

The revolutionary spirit remained strong after Cuba gained independence from Spain. So strong, in fact, that Cuban leaders had a hard time establishing control after the war. PBS reports, "No leader had the power to harness the passions and ambitions unleashed by independence." The United States' influence in the country further undermined the Cuban government. The Platt Amendment, passed by US Congress in 1903, declared the United States' right to intervene militarily in Cuba in order to protect its economic interests. The US military did, in fact, occupy Cuba between 1906 and 1909. In 1933 a nationalist coalition rebelled against Cuba's fifth president, but the leader was quickly unseated and replaced by Fulgencio Batista. A corrupt democracy held up for the next 12 years until a coup in 1952 that put Batista back in power. Although many Cubans were indifferent to this power shift at first, Batista quickly lost popularity as it became clear that he was primarily interested in amassing his fortune. In 1953, Batista turned to police brutality in an attempt to scare the population into blind obedience. Many young men in big cities were kidnapped and tortured, and university students began to rebel in 1957. Although many elites in La Havana were politically unaware, there was no way to completely ignore the political strife. In May of 1957, an underground bomb in the city center shut down La Havana's electricity and telephone lines for 48 hours. Gradually, Fidel Castro's opposition forces gained strength as the Cuban population turned against Batista. By 1958, even the educated professional class in La Havana had turned against Batista. Cubans were beginning to crave freedom and change.



Cuban travel magazine from 1958



A picture from LIFE Magazine's February 6, 1950 issue. The caption reads, "Eight of Cuba's loveliest society girls gather in Havana garden to compare notes on their new clothes, most of which came direct from Paris". The following article includes a comment on materialism in La Havana: "Wealthy Havaneses feel that \$5,000 is not too much to spend on a children's party and upward of \$10,000 seems justified for a successful debut. They dress their daughters in the latest Paris fashions and expect women to appear in minks and sables in the hottest weather."

unlikely site of socialist revolution" (26). La Havana's international reputation as a place for parties and music overshadowed for many the very real problems that the country was experiencing.

La Havana's success stood in stark contrast to the poverty rampant in rural Cuba. Education and health programs did not reach farmers and rural workers, which made up just under half of Cuba's population. Furthermore, Cuba's black and mulatto citizens (27% of the population in the 1950s) suffered debilitating social and economic discrimination. Although the elite in La Havana felt little urgency for change, most other Cubans felt differently. Historian Thomas Wright explains, "The poor, the dark, the nationalists, the disenfranchised—among them, the majority of the Cuban population—were attracted by talk of change and improvements in their lives" (7). Those who *were* politically aware recognized that Batista was an undesirable leader for the country. He was uninterested in helping the country's poorest citizens, and violently suppressed any signs of dissidence. The cries for change in Cuba

Throughout this period of political instability, La Havana underwent great economic development. Between independence and the revolution, La Havana grew as Cuba's sugar economy boomed. By the 1950's, La Havana was a "glittering and dynamic city." It was a hotspot for tourism by American celebrities and the entertainment industry thrived. The United States exerted great influence on Cuba at this time. Tourism and foreign investment changed La Havana's cultural landscape. Despite Cuba's political unrest, many people in La Havana were living quite well. In the decade before Fidel Castro took over, Cuba boasted the fifth highest per capita income in the hemisphere, third highest life expectancy, the most TVs per capita, second highest in car and phone ownership per capita, high literacy rates and affordable healthcare. La Havana's middle class (only 10% of Cuba's population) was thriving. Those who could afford it sent their children to private schools or abroad. Author Robin Moore points out, "Cuba was undeniably one of the most affluent Latin American countries in the 1950s, and North Americans were not alone in considering it an



A poor family in rural Cuba in 1944.

remained strong underneath the highly visible and vibrant middle class culture.

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Latin America in the Era of the Cuban Revolution by Thomas C. Wright

Music and Revolution: Cultural Change in Socialist Cuba by Robin Moore

Fidel's Cuba

On January 1, 1959, Fidel Castro's forces came into La Havana and Fulgencio Batista fled the country. Castro took over as president in July that same year. Cubans had been so dissatisfied with Batista that any change was welcome. Because of this, Castro enjoyed great popular support in the early



Fidel Castro and his forces entering La Havana in January 1959

years of his regime. In fact, the day that Batista fled the country, Cubans destroyed and looted Havana's casinos, which stood for the greed, elitism and foreign influence that Batista supported.

Castro was deeply dedicated to solidifying the support of the working class and rural farmers. He confiscated much of the upper class' wealth and channeled the money into health and education programs for the poor. Unemployment dropped almost 9% in the first two years of Castro's regime, and per capita income for rural workers grew. Fidel Castro resented the influence the United States had traditionally held over Cuban politics, economy and culture and blamed capitalism and foreign influence for many of Cuba's problems. In the first few years of his regime, he nationalized all American businesses and banks. American tourism to Cuba dropped significantly just within the first few years after the end of the revolution, in part due to the United States' growing intolerance of Castro's communism and ties with the Soviet Union.

In comparison to the countryside, La Havana was neglected by Castro's regime. Castro essentially halted all private real estate activity and nationalized construction. He refrained from redeveloping the city center, though added in some new structures and repurposed old ones. Perhaps most importantly, he banned speculative development. As a result of these policies and decreased American tourism in Cuba, the city's rapid development before the revolution came to a halt. Author Belmont Freeman writes, "Were it not for the revolution in 1958, it is a certainty that the Malecón would be lined with high-rise towers, Avenida del Puerto replaced by an elevated highway, the garden district of El Vedado built over, and the surrounding countryside devoured by suburban sprawl...Havana

has suffered grievously from fifty years of neglect, but at least the city’s rich architectural legacy and historic neighborhoods were not erased by urban renewal or rampant profit-driven development.” Before the revolution, La Havana was flourishing and growing. This development came to a standstill in 1959. Cuba’s elite – namely, the upper class in Havana – deeply resented Fidel Castro’s sweeping reforms. Many of them had made their fortunes in the tourism industry, which suffered greatly. The money used to fund Castro’s new social programs came directly from the hands of the wealthy. Feeling targeted by the new regime, many upper class Havana natives fled Cuba for the United States.



A policeman shoots at people looting a casino in Havana on January 1, 1969

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Women in Cuba

Woman in Cuba gained many legal rights decades before Fidel Castro took over in 1959. They received the right to vote in 1934, and the guarantee of equal rights in the workplace in 1940. However, these laws were not strictly enforced and often ignored. Women made up 13% of the Cuban workforce in 1953 – a rate higher than many other Latin American countries at the time. Girls from middle or upper class families were educated at almost the same rates as boys. In fact, 45% of university students in 1956 were female.



A Cuban debutante ball from 1955

Despite these achievements, the principles of machismo still reigned in the home. Women were expected to be wives and mothers, and tended to receive an education that would prime them for those roles. An employed woman was assumed to be experiencing extreme financial need. We see this attitude reflected in *Contigo Pan y Cebolla*. Although machismo dictates that men dominate the household, Lala is actually a very strong female role. She seems to have equal sway within the family to her husband Anselmo,

if not even more. Lala buys the refrigerator despite her husband’s objections, and stands her ground

once he finds out. However, Lala has very particular, gender-based expectations for her daughter Lalita. She insists that Lalita take a wide selection of extracurricular classes, because a young lady “should be able to do everything” (83). Lala later insists, “I haven’t worked this hard to educate you so that you date some boy who doesn’t have a penny to his name, or not even a degree. I want you to at least marry a doctor or a lawyer” (112). Lalita’s lessons are a huge point of contention between mother and daughter. Lalita resents having to take classes in subjects she cares nothing about, and is uninterested in marrying for money. That said, she does predict marrying and having children, instead of pursuing a career.

Castro’s government began to tackle women’s issues in 1960 with the formation of Federation of Cuban Women (FCW). The organization became the voice for Cuban women and fought to rally women behind the revolution. Gender equality was not one of the organization’s stated goals at its formation, though female equality was taken on officially in 1974. At this point FCW shifted its focus to sex education, political participation for women and fighting gender discrimination in the workplace. FCW lost momentum in the 1990s, and progress has largely stagnated since then.

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La Havana for the Prietos

Contigo Pan y Cebolla features a middle-class family living in an apartment in La Havana. They enjoy many luxuries, though are still financially limited. The Prietos are the only family in the apartment complex with a telephone. Their children study in private schools. These purchases (and Lala’s purchase of the refrigerator) put enormous strain on Anselmo, the only employed family member. The family is restricted to cheaper food, and yet spends money on nonessential things, such as the phone and Lalita’s lessons. This discrepancy reveals the impact consumerism and materialism had on La Havana’s middle class. The Prietos also show us the influence of the United States on Cuba, an impact that Castro fiercely



A still from Cremata’s version of *Contigo Pan y Cebolla*

countered when he came to power. Lala buys the refrigerator from a US-based company. Lalita listens to American rock and roll (Bill Halley and the Comets) and studies English, because her mother wants her to find work at an American company.

Juan Carlos Cremata, the director of the movie version of *Contigo Pan y Cebolla*, notes the significance of a refrigerator as the object of Lala’s desire: “It’s the need for fresh air, not just in terms of weather, but in every facet of life, including of course Cuba’s

failed politics, both domestically and internationally.” The Prietos – Lala especially – desperately want things to be better. They crave newness. Each of the family members expresses frustrations throughout the play about the other family members’ expectations of them or financial strife. The play takes place between 1955 and 1958, the years just before Castro took power, and yet politics are not mentioned a

single time. The family is separated from the poverty in the countryside, yet still experiences discontent. The Prietos all want change, but don't relate that desire to political transformation.

At the time the play was written (1962), Castro had been in power for three years. Many of Castro's most sweeping communist reforms were already in progress. Businesses had been nationalized and a partial trade embargo was in place between the United States and Cuba.

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Hector Quintero

Hector Quintero was born in 1942 in La Havana, Cuba. He studied both accounting and stage performance in his youth, and then later graduated from the University of La Havana with a degree in Language and Hispanic Literature. Quintero was a member of multiple theater groups in La Havana, including Milánes, Conjunto Dramático Nacional and Teatro Estudio. He wrote his first play, *Contigo Pan y Cebolla*, in 1962 when he was only twenty years old. The play enjoyed international success, as did his next play *El Premio Flaco*. He wrote and directed many other plays, all of which were run in Cuba and abroad. Quintero also directed and produced a number of musicals (composing musical scores himself), and wrote and directed a Cuban television series that won multiple awards. He died at 68, in 2011 in La Havana, but is remembered by many as the most popular playwright in Cuban history.



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