



BACK IN TIME

by Tony Beckwith
tony@tonybeckwith.com

Beyond the Footlights

I was twelve in 1957 when The Montevideo Players recruited me for a part in a play called “Simon and Laura.” I was thrilled for this chance to hang out with a bunch of older people, most of whom I considered incredibly cool, and was delighted when my parents also showed an interest and joined the group. My father discovered his inner actor, and my mother and brother liked working backstage, so it became a family affair and we were all involved in most of the productions for many years after that.

Working as an actor so early in life introduced me to the existential idea of “otherness” that was very much in vogue at the time. Playing different roles on stage gave me a sense of diversity within myself, a feeling that there was more than just one of me. This fueled my curiosity about my own identity, prompting me to delve more deeply into the question of who I was and where I fit in the scheme of things. I wasn’t the only one who felt that way. Most of the Players, who had ordinary day jobs of one kind or another, loved being part of something so utterly different from their usual routine. My father explained that acting allowed him to step outside of himself and said that, in his opinion, inhabiting other realities gave us a broader understanding of the world around us—a perspective I agree with to this day.

The Players were a pretty easy-going lot, as one would expect. They tended to be informal and not overly concerned with some of the stricter social conventions observed by the British Community as a whole. Producing plays took a lot of work that involved getting one’s hands dirty and baring one’s emotions in public. Inhibitions were loosened in that process, and there was an egalitarianism and broad mindedness that set the group apart from other clubs in town. Or so it seemed to me. Though liberal in that sense, the Players were not at all political; they were nowhere near as left-wing as the local Uruguayan theatre companies, whose members were far more politically engaged—and sympathetic to the revolutionary mood of the day—than ours. We certainly had impassioned discussions in our clubhouse bar that sometimes lasted well into the night, but there was nothing seditious about those conversations. We were just a bunch of middleclass *ingleses* who liked hanging out together and putting on plays. But we had connections to that other, more shadowy milieu that, unbeknownst to

us, were deemed very valuable in certain quarters.

And so it came to pass that an American couple joined the Players in the late 1950s. His business had brought him to Uruguay, but his passion was the theatre, and he and his wife became enthusiastic supporters of the group. There was an influx of foreigners in those days. Some were attached to an embassy, some had been posted by a company back home, some were with military missions of various kinds. They all had plausible reasons for being there but were, in fact, with the CIA or some other country’s intelligence services. Their real job was to monitor and infiltrate local subversive networks and thwart the efforts of their cold war opponents. Those were complicated times in Latin America. The two world wars had blunted Great Britain’s longstanding influence and the United States was now the power broker in the region. The Soviet Union was challenging the new order and throwing its support behind leftist insurgencies in almost every country. All eyes were on the Cuban Revolution, and nervous governments turned increasingly to Washington for help in this ideological struggle for the soul of the continent. This geopolitical drama somehow filtered down to the Players, whose newest member hoped to glean useful information from the dissident artistic and intellectual crowd to which he now had access.

Some fifteen years later a disaffected CIA officer wrote a tell-all book about the agency’s operations in Latin America and blew the covers used by some of his ex-colleagues, one of whom turned out to be our fellow thespian. He was long gone by then, and older members of the Players were left to wonder. Some had always had their suspicions, or so they said. Others were amazed. A few took the rather jaded view that all was fair in love and war, but on the whole, there was a sense of betrayal, of having been used. One of the group’s great virtues was that members could trust each other enough to be open in ways that were not always easy, to reveal aspects of themselves they never showed anywhere else. There was a willingness to embrace a certain vulnerability that now felt naïve and sullied. It’s all in the distant past, of course, and we’ve all moved on. But in retrospect I feel I should acknowledge that our American friend was a far better actor than we ever realized.

