

EMISFÉRICA

Contemporary Cimarronaje: *Teatro del Milenio's Kimbafá*

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Kimbafá is not one story but many. It is the story of the traveling food vendors that one encounters on dense, high traffic *limeño* streets. It is the story of the *cobrador*, the urban master of ceremony in Peru's ubiquitous public transportation system who sings street names and bus routes while dangling from the open doors of *combis*. Such informal actors, so familiar to limeños in their everyday pursuits, are the stars of *Teatro del Milenio's* latest play, *Kimbafá*.

Throughout the city of Lima, one is everywhere confronted with public forms of performance. In a scene most representative of this, Milenio's lead *cajón* player Catalina Robles portrays an *anticuchera*, standing in front of her food cart ready to sell late night skewers. Petronila, another *cajón* player in the group, is a *mazamorrera* who offers the popular purple corn-based dessert to passersby. Using the ends of ladles, metal domed lids, and cups of water, they create different pitches and timbres of metallic percussion. An *emolientero* drums on bottles of herbal flavoring for the hot drink to chime out different pitches. They reconstruct the competitive playfulness of the *pregones* (Colonial street vendor calls) that are a customary inclusion in Afro Peruvian performance repertoire, but provide a more modern take as urban *ambulantes*. Instead of the vocal callings laid over a lively bass line of *pregones*, these vendors engage in a back and forth, seemingly improvised game of competitive percussion.

By choosing music and dance as the primary vehicles for piecing together its plays and by referencing the choreographic repertoire of groups like Peru Negro, Milenio has earned itself a place in a controversial genealogy of Afro Peruvian performance. This legacy, while central in promoting Afro Peruvian identity and culture also continues a decades-long performance tradition that has recently fallen out of popularity with younger Black musicians and dancers. *Kimbafá* is Milenio's attempt at waking up a new theatrical technique that moves away from this style, and the opening scene represents this awakening.

A smoky light drapes the stage, and the set is sparsely equipped. Three young men lie on beds hanging from the ceiling. The first character to awaken beats a cadence on his body, using his hands to drum on his thighs, his chest and his head. The three then engage in a dialogue of rhythmic yawns, grunts, and foot stomping. The harsh sounds of pounding and clanging against the musical accompaniment of a live electric guitar are the antithesis of the organic, wooden timbre of the *cajón* and the *cajita* that would usually provide the musical backdrop to one of Milenio's shows.

This scene, like the rest that follow, is an abrupt departure from the group's previous works. Milenio's *teatro negro* (black theater), up until *Kimbafá*, relied heavily on the performative legacy of an earlier generation of Black musicians and dancers that showcased folklore to speak of the Black experience in Peru. Beginning in the 1960s, Afro Peruvian artists became invested in the rescue of local Black traditions that were on the verge of being forgotten, and began staging and promoting dances such as the *samba malató*, or washerwoman dance, as a staple of the Afro Peruvian canon. Similarly, up until now, Milenio's images of blackness were rooted in scenes of slavery.

While *Kimbafá*'s use of humor, familiar imagery, and a contemporary urban setting have gained Teatro del Milenio wide popularity and, consequently, an audience for its *teatro negro* that it may not have attracted before, the group finds itself pushing for more reflection among its audiences. Lucho Sandoval, the group's artistic director, recognizes a gap between the group's objectives and its reception. In an earlier play called *Karibú*, for example, the group offered a critique of the *peña* (live music venue featuring Afro Peruvian song and dance) in a scene that resembled an exaggeratedly festive blackface version of the lively Afro Peruvian *festejo*, performed to lyrics that speak about the hardships of slavery in Peru. This scene has often drawn applause and uproarious laughter from crowds—not quite the response the group had in mind when it conceived of the piece.

Milenio responded to this predicament by adding an element of theater to the purely choreographic canon of Peru Negro – allowing its characters to express regret, anger and love, to become more human. In all of the group's plays—such as the didactic *Por una pagina de la historia*—the *cimarron*, or runaway slave, is a recurring theme. The presence of *cimarronaje* as both a historical and contemporary condition allows *Milenio*'s characters to move back and forth between the historical contributions of Afro Peruvians and a new urban black actor that takes on the challenges of the city. In response to audience and peer critique of Afro Peruvian folklore, then, *Kimbafá*'s version of *cimarronaje* speaks to the contemporary Black condition by escaping the images that had confined Afro Peruvian performers to a narrative of slavery and work.

If *Kimbafá* is the story of what has been excluded from history books and what has been marginalized in the metropolis, the play also makes a performative argument that what is marginalized is also what is ubiquitous. The lengthiest scene in the play begins with a sort of “Greased Lightning” auto workshop musical number in which men in blue jumpsuits assemble a combi before it hits the streets to collect a variety of characters that one commonly encounters in Lima. The first is a female ambulante who loads an overweight basket onto the bus as she concludes her day's work. The next is a man who repeatedly declares his dissatisfaction with the state of the country, as he sings “*este país nunca progresa!*” (“This country refuses to move forward!”) to which the rest of the passengers on the combi reply in time with the rocking of the bus, “*saca tu visa, saca tu visa.*” (“Go get a visa. Go get a visa.”)

The combi—perhaps the most emblematic of all the symbols chosen in *Kimbafá* of Lima’s diversity, its violence, its simultaneous antiquity and postmodernity—gets the loudest reaction from the audience. While the play resorts to typecasting for laughs, the characters that ride in *Kimbafá*’s combi, although distinct, ride to a unifying rhythm that permeates every corner of the city of Lima.

Kimbafa highlights blackness as a unifying presence throughout the city as if to argue that limeños might take a lesson from a page in Afro Peruvian history on how to deal with the isolating effects of city life. Their message is less abrasive than the peña critique in *Karibú* because it is delivered rhythmically, with humor. Whether or not this message is big enough to transcend the decades-old Afro Peruvian archetypal images of blackness ever-present in the performance canon is unclear; but the work argues that, in Lima, rhythm is everywhere, everyone is a character, and Afro Peruvian stylings are a principal influence over the sounds and scenes of city life. With *Kimbafá*, Milenio moves away from the tendency of Afro Peruvian performance troupes to showcase folklore as the only vehicle for speaking about the Black experience, and in doing so, the play sends a powerful message about the foundational, everyday place of Afro Peruvians in contemporary Peru.