



# Cuban Zarzuela: Performing Race and Gender on Havana's Lyric Stage

*Susan Thomas*

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On September 29, 1927, Cuban soprano Rita Montaner walked onto the stage of Havana's Teatro Regina, her features obscured under a mask of blackened glycerin and her body clad in the tight pants, boots, and riding jacket of a coachman. Standing alongside a gilded carriage and a live horse, the blackfaced, cross-dressed actress sang the premiere of Eliseo Grenet's tango-congo, "Ay Mamá Inés." The crowd went wild.

Montaner's performance cemented "Ay Mamá Inés" as one of the classics in the Cuban repertoire, but more importantly, the premiere heralded the birth of the Cuban zarzuela, a new genre of music theater that over the next fifteen years transformed popular entertainment on the island.

*Cuban Zarzuela: Performing Race and Gender on Havana's Lyric Stage* marks the first comprehensive study of the Cuban zarzuela, a Spanish-language light opera with spoken dialogue that originated in Spain but flourished in Havana during the early twentieth century. Created by musicians and managers to fill a growing demand for family entertainment, the zarzuela evidenced the emerging economic and cultural power of Cuba's white female bourgeoisie to influence the entertainment industry. Susan Thomas explores zarzuela's function as a pedagogical tool, through which composers, librettists, and business managers hoped to control their troupes and audiences by presenting desirable and problematic images of both feminine and masculine identities. Zarzuela was, Thomas explains, "anti-feminist but pro-feminine, its plots focusing on female protagonists and its musical scores showcasing the female voice." Focusing on character types such as the *mulata*, the *negrito*, and the ingenue, Thomas uncovers the zarzuela's richly textured relationship to social constructs of race, class, and especially gender.

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