

Cuba's young poets, who meet on a Havana rooftop, are finding a common voice in a state that nurtures its young until they start making demands. ELIZABETH HANLY traces a quiet revolution on society's margins. Pictures by JUAN CARLOS ALON

Revolutionary fight for poetic licence

EARLY every evening at dusk a group of young poets gather to talk and work in the living room of a small house built on top of a flat roof in Havana. From here you can see much of the broken filigree of what may still be the last city on the world.

Havana was made for pleasure, but from here you can see the food lines that crisscross the neighbourhood, as hunger becomes real on the island and the revolution wrestles with its claims of "socialist legality." Ordinarily at dusk everybody in Havana reaches out for one another and these days the chatter and romancing still continues. But it's booming amidst that effervescence which is so Cuban now verges on hysteria. One of the young poets on the roof turns from the scene below, "If it this juncture," he says, "we don't try to find out what it really means to be Cuban, we're lost."

It was another poet who brought this group together. It's the white-washed rooftop entrance, the one that the lover managed to build for themselves on the Havana sky. That all of them now call home. It becomes a bit of a metaphor in the city.

Reina Maria Rodrigues is hardly well known outside the island, though some perceive her as "a key figure in the emerging post-Soviet Cuba." After nearly 25 years in which much important Cuban writing has occurred in exile, Reina Maria Rodrigues and the young poets gathered on her rooftop may finally be turning that around. Several of the group have won prizes in Spain and Mexico. And now, what is arguably the most authentic literary movement seen on the island in decades may be on the verge of becoming the first legally-recognized autonomous cultural association to exist since the 1959 revolution. "If that status is granted, a small publishing imprint will be included within its purview and we'll have broken the state's monopoly on Cuban literary life. Whatever happens on Cuba who has published the state thus far. For the last 15 years we've had an ancillary system that doesn't clearly the works of those who meet together at Reina's library. The results of the political mobilization of the past—One



Three amigos... Amelino Fornaris, Sánchez Mejías and Antonio Ponte, who says: "The task this generation has set for itself is to try to pin down an island born out of so much imagination"

tries to shake itself free of politics. This new literary generation looks to José Lezama Lima as their spiritual father. One of Latin America's literary giants, Lezama was Cuba's most classic writer, the island's James Joyce. He died in 1970, accused by the revolution for his political apathy as well as for his homosexuality.

According to Antonio Ponte, aged 26, "the task this generation has set for itself is to try to

modern style. His work is full of Wittgenstein. "Perhaps we are not able to see God because we are not able to see the light with which we see," he writes. Amelino Calderón Fornaris, 26, is here too, a librarian and science fiction fan, whose poetry is full of mad somersaults.

Another participant in the group is Víctor Pérez Cavada, aged 31, a rather loudly eccentric school teacher. One of the most privileged of the

preoccupied with loneliness, more apocalyptic or more hopeful than Reina. And, in spite of herself, she's become a celebrity not only on the island but throughout much of Latin America and Europe. Her poems have been translated into six languages and published in over a dozen countries. "I'm from Reina's roof you can't wear the sound of drums. There's so much drumming in Cuba, drumming itself

cerned with memory than popular culture," says Sánchez Mejías. "As a people, we Cubans have had little respect for memory—or history. It seems we might have something to gain from developing that, no?" The language that the young poets are after, he says, has rarely existed in Cuba—even before the revolution. He refers to a "mixing language" where poetry meets philosophy, especially metaphysics—in the

Yet despite the constant of political repression in Cuba, the revolution wasn't always so suspicious of its poets and their poetry. Even with all their ideological stirrings, the sixties in Cuba were a cultural Golden Age," says Omar Pérez. "All the poets were being published. Esteban, Alpo Carpentier, Virgilio Piñera, Felisberto Arreola." It is that era "the magazine of the Casa de las Américas (a pan-

precedented period of self-censorship from which Cuba has yet to recover. During the 1970s, Virgilio Piñera and José Lezama Lima tried to go on as before, but none of the late work of either writer was published in Cuba during their lifetime.

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brought out the deep contradictions of the revolution," says Omar Pérez. "The powers that be in Cuba do love talent; they're even obsessed by it," says a poet who prefers to remain anonymous. "The institutions of the regime have done a great deal to foster it. They nurture the young—until of course the young outgrow the space the revolution intended them to have. They start making demands; those demands are read as political; then the trouble starts. It happened here over and over."

Why did the state ever allow Reina's group to become so strong? "It couldn't have happened in the seventies," says one of the young poets. "By the time the revolution swung conservative again in the late 1980s, Reina's reputation was international."

For a long time, says a young painter, "the powers that be underestimated the independence of her will. She was considered a charming eccentric, good fit for the revolution's tolerance." Besides, says another poet, "the revolution has often shown itself to be a creature in net harming those they regard as safety valves."

And in trying to contain the chaos of the 1990s, the state has moved carefully—no fire to inflame, but to contain. "What sort of future would these poets choose for themselves?" It's hard to say, says Antonio Ponte. "Ideas are changing too quickly." One of the group, long silent, speaks up. "The revolution wasn't just repression," he said. "Under Fidel, those in the countryside became people instead of animals."

He pauses. "We all fought to be Che Guevaras when we played together as children. Yet the asceticism of Che and the Party attacked the grace and the very heart of Cuba, especially the Cuba of the cities. What makes it all the sadder is that that grace had been available to a substantial proportion of the population." Still, the work of the generation of young poets is full of a quiet romance with the ideas of the revolution, not the idea of believing that something was cut short, unredeemed, will haunt Cuba in the future.

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