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# Literature

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**10. CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE** In a review of Ives's plays, *New York Times* theater critic Ben Brantley makes the following point:

Mr. Ives's theories may owe much to the philosophical arcana of such dense thinkers as Einstein and Derrida, but he is no coolly detached academic. His obsessions with randomness and relativity are translated into revuelike sketches that percolate with comic brio and zesty bits of stagecraft.

Do you see evidence in *Words, Words, Words* that Ives is obsessed with "randomness and relativity"?

**Related Works:** "Accident" (p. 181), "Deportation at Breakfast" (p. 229), "Two Questions" (p. 556), "The Fun Gallery" (p. PS7), "Cinderella" (p. 866), "The Value of Education" (p. 892), *Hamlet* (p. 1605)

**MILCHA SANCHEZ-SCOTT** (1955– ) is a Los Angeles–based writer of plays that include *Dog Lady* and *The Cuban Swimmer*, both one-act plays (1984); *Roosters*, published in *On New Ground: Contemporary Hispanic American Plays* (1987) and adapted into the 1993 feature film of the same name; and *Stone Wedding*, produced at the Los Angeles Theater Center (1988). Also produced by the Los Angeles Theater Center was her play *Carmen*, adapted from Georges Bizet's opera of the same title.

Born in Bali, Sanchez-Scott is the daughter of an Indonesian mother and a Colombian-Mexican father. Her early childhood was spent in Mexico, South America, and Britain; her family moved to San Diego when she was fourteen.

Writing in *Time* magazine, William A. Henry observes that the visionary or hallucinatory elements in Sanchez-Scott's plays derive from the Latin American "magic realism" tradition of Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel García Márquez. For example, Henry notes that in *Roosters*, what seems "a straightforward depiction of the life of farmlands gives way to mysterious visitations, symbolic cockfights enacted by dancers, virginal girls wearing wings, archetypal confrontations between father and son."

In 1984, the New York production of *The Cuban Swimmer* was noteworthy for an ingeniously designed set that realistically re-created on stage Pacific Ocean waves, a helicopter, and a boat. According to the *New York Times*, "The audience [could] almost feel the resisting tides and the California oil slick . . . represented by a watery-blue floor and curtain." Jeannette Mirabel, as the Cuban swimmer, made an "auspicious" debut in the play, according to the *Times*: "In a tour de force of balletic movements, she [kept] her arms fluttering in the imaginary waters throughout the play."

**Cultural Context** In 1980, in the wake of numerous incidences of dissent and rebellion, Fidel Castro deported a large number of Cubans and encouraged many others to leave. In the resulting exodus, which became known as the Mariel boatlift, more than 120,000 undocumented Cubans arrived in Florida, placing tremendous strain on U.S. resources. In 1984, an agreement was made between the two countries that limited the number of Cuban immigrants to 20,000 per year. Over time, the United States relaxed this quota, but the resulting abundance of refugees prompted the U.S. government to reinstate the quota in the mid-1990s. In 1996, the Cuban Adjustment Act was passed, stating that Cubans who reached dry land would be allowed to become permanent residents of the United States, but those who were intercepted while still at sea would be returned to Cuba. In 1999, the plight of Cuban refugees was reflected in the story of Elian Gonzalez, a six-year-old boy who was found clinging to an inner tube but was later returned to Cuba in accordance with the 1996 act.

## The Cuban Swimmer (1984)

### CHARACTERS

<b>Margarita Suárez</b> , <i>the swimmer</i>	<b>Abuela</b> , <i>her grandmother</i>
<b>Eduardo Suárez</b> , <i>her father, the coach</i>	<b>Voice of Mel Munson</b>
<b>Simón Suárez</b> , <i>her brother</i>	<b>Voice of Mary Beth White</b>
<b>Aída Suárez</b> , <i>her mother</i>	<b>Voice of Radio Operator</b>

### SETTING

The Pacific Ocean between San Pedro and Catalina Island.

### TIME

Summer.

Live conga drums can be used to punctuate the action of the play.

### SCENE 1

Pacific Ocean. Midday. On the horizon, in perspective, a small boat enters upstage left, crosses to upstage right, and exits. Pause. Lower on the horizon, the same boat, in larger perspective, enters upstage right, crosses and exits upstage left. Blackout.

### SCENE 2

Pacific Ocean. Midday. The swimmer, Margarita Suárez, is swimming. On the boat following behind her are her father, Eduardo Suárez, holding a megaphone, and Simón, her brother, sitting on top of the cabin with his shirt off, punk sunglasses on, binoculars hanging on his chest.

**EDUARDO:** (*leaning forward, shouting in time to Margarita's swimming*) Uno, dos, uno, dos. Y uno, dos . . . keep your shoulders parallel to the water.

**SIMÓN:** I'm gonna take these glasses off and look straight into the sun.

**EDUARDO:** (*through megaphone*) Muy bien, muy bien . . . but punch those arms in, baby.

**SIMÓN:** (*looking directly at the sun through binoculars*) Come on, come on, zap me. Show me something. (*He looks behind at the shoreline and ahead at the sea.*) Stop! Stop, Papi! Stop!

*Aída Suárez and Abuela, the swimmer's mother and grandmother, enter running from the back of the boat.*

5 **AÍDA and ABUELA:** *Qué? Qué es?*

**AÍDA:** *Es un shark?*

**EDUARDO:** *Eh?*

**ABUELA:** *Que es un shark dicen?*

*Eduardo blows whistle. Margarita looks up at the boat.*

**SIMÓN:** No, Papi, no shark, no shark. We've reached the halfway mark.

10 **ABUELA:** (*looking into the water*) *A dónde está?*

AÍDA: It's not in the water.

ABUELA: Oh, no? Oh, no?

AÍDA: No! A *poco* do you think they're gonna have signs in the water to say you are halfway to Santa Catalina? No. It's done very scientific. A *ver*, *hijo*, explain it to your grandma.

SIMÓN: Well, you see, Abuela — (*He points behind.*) There's San Pedro. (*He points ahead.*) And there's Santa Catalina. Looks halfway to me.

*Abuela shakes her head and is looking back and forth, trying to make the decision, when suddenly the sound of a helicopter is heard.*

ABUELA: (*looking up*) Virgencita de la Caridad del Cobre. *Qué es eso?*

15

*Sound of helicopter gets closer. Margarita looks up.*

MARGARITA: *Papi, Papi!*

*A small commotion on the boat, with everybody pointing at the helicopter above. Shadows of the helicopter fall on the boat. Simón looks up at it through binoculars.*

*Papi—qué es? What is it?*

EDUARDO: (*through megaphone*) Uh . . . uh . . . uh, *un momentico . . . mi hija. . . .* Your *papi's* got everything under control, understand? Uh . . . you just keep stroking. And stay . . . uh . . . close to the boat.

SIMÓN: Wow, *Papi!* We're on TV, man! Holy Christ, we're all over the fucking U.S.A.! It's Mel Munson and Mary Beth White!

AÍDA: *Por Dios!* Simón, don't swear. And put on your shirt.

*Aída fluffs her hair, puts on her sunglasses and waves to the helicopter. Simón leans over the side of the boat and yells to Margarita.*

SIMÓN: Yo, Margo! You're on TV, man.

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EDUARDO: Leave your sister alone. Turn on the radio.

MARGARITA: *Papi! Qué está pasando?*

ABUELA: *Que es la televisión dicen? (She shakes her head.) Porque como yo no puedo ver nada sin mis espejuelos.*

*Abuela rummages through the boat, looking for her glasses. Voices of Mel Munson and Mary Beth White are heard over the boat's radio.*

MEL'S VOICE: As we take a closer look at the gallant crew of *La Havana* . . . and there . . . yes, there she is . . . the little Cuban swimmer from Long Beach, California, nineteen-year-old Margarita Suárez. The unknown swimmer is our Cinderella entry . . . a bundle of tenacity, battling her way through the choppy, murky waters of the cold Pacific to reach the Island of Romance . . . Santa Catalina . . . where should she be the first to arrive, two thousand dollars and a gold cup will be waiting for her.

AÍDA: Doesn't even cover our expenses.

25

ABUELA: *Qué dice?*

EDUARDO: Shhhh!

MARY BETH'S VOICE: This is really a family effort, Mel, and—

MEL'S VOICE: Indeed it is. Her trainer, her coach, her mentor, is her father, Eduardo Suárez. Not a swimmer himself, it says here, Mr. Suárez is head usher of the Holy Name Society and the owner-operator of Suárez Treasures of the Sea and Salvage Yard. I guess it's one of those places—

30 MARY BETH'S VOICE: If I might interject a fact here, Mel, assisting in this swim is Mrs. Suárez, who is a former Miss Cuba.

MEL'S VOICE: And a beautiful woman in her own right. Let's try and get a closer look.

*Helicopter sound gets louder. Margarita, frightened, looks up again.*

MARGARITA: *Papi!*

EDUARDO: (*through megaphone*) *Mi hija*, don't get nervous . . . it's the press. I'm handling it.

AÍDA: I see how you're handling it.

35 EDUARDO: (*through megaphone*) Do you hear? Everything is under control. Get back into your rhythm. Keep your elbows high and kick and kick and kick and kick . . .

ABUELA: (*finds her glasses and puts them on*) *Ay sí, es la televisión . . .* (*She points to helicopter.*) *Qué lindo mira . . .* (*She fluffs her hair, gives a big wave.*) *¡Aló América! Viva mi Margarita, viva todo los Cubanos en los Estados Unidos!*

AÍDA: *Ay por Dios*, Cecilia, the man didn't come all this way in his helicopter to look at you jumping up and down, making a fool of yourself.

ABUELA: I don't care. I'm proud.

AÍDA: He can't understand you anyway.

40 ABUELA: *Viva . . .* (*She stops.*) *Simón, cómo se dice viva?*

SIMÓN: Hurray.

ABUELA: Hurray for *mi Margarita* y for all the Cubans living en the United States, y *un abrazo . . . Simón, abrazo . . .*

SIMÓN: A big hug.

ABUELA: *Sí*, a big hug to all my friends in Miami, Long Beach, Union City, except for my son Carlos, who lives in New York in sin! He lives . . . (*she crosses herself*) in Brooklyn with a Puerto Rican woman in sin! *No decente . . .*

45 SIMÓN: Decent.

ABUELA: Carlos, *no decente*. This family, *decente*.

AÍDA: Cecilia, *por Dios*.

MEL'S VOICE: Look at that enthusiasm. The whole family has turned out to cheer little Margarita on to victory! I hope they won't be too disappointed.

MARY BETH'S VOICE: She seems to be making good time, Mel.

50 MEL'S VOICE: Yes, it takes all kinds to make a race. And it's a testimonial to the all-encompassing fairness . . . the greatness of this, the Wrigley Invitational Women's Swim to Catalina, where among all the professionals

there is still room for the amateurs . . . like these, the simple people we see below us on the ragtag *La Havana*, taking their long-shot chance to victory. *Vaya con Dios!*

*Helicopter sound fading as family, including Margarita, watch silently. Static as Simón turns radio off. Eduardo walks to bow of boat, looks out on the horizon.*

EDUARDO: (to himself) Amateurs.

AÍDA: Eduardo, that person insulted us. Did you hear, Eduardo? That he called us a simple people in a ragtag boat? Did you hear . . . ?

ABUELA: (clenching her fist at departing helicopter) *Mal-Rayó los parta!*

SIMÓN: (same gesture) Asshole!

*Aída follows Eduardo as he goes to side of boat and stares at Margarita.*

AÍDA: This person comes in his helicopter to insult your wife, your family, your daughter . . . 55

MARGARITA: (pops her head out of the water) *Papi?*

AÍDA: Do you hear me, Eduardo? I am not simple.

ABUELA: *Sí.*

AÍDA: I am complicated.

ABUELA: *Sí, demasiada complicada.* 60

AÍDA: Me and my family are not so simple.

SIMÓN: Mom, the guy's an asshole.

ABUELA: (shaking her fist at helicopter) Asshole!

AÍDA: If my daughter was simple, she would not be in that water swimming.

MARGARITA: Simple? *Papi . . . ?* 65

AÍDA: *Ahora*, Eduardo, this is what I want you to do. When we get to Santa Catalina, I want you to call the TV station and demand an apology.

EDUARDO: *Cállete mujer! Aquí mando yo.* I will decide what is to be done.

MARGARITA: *Papi*, tell me what's going on.

EDUARDO: Do you understand what I am saying to you, Aída?

SIMÓN: (leaning over side of boat, to Margarita) Yo Margo! You know that Mel Munson guy on TV? He called you a simple amateur and said you didn't have a chance. 70

ABUELA: (leaning directly behind Simón.) *Mi hija, insultó a la familia. Desgraciado!*

AÍDA: (leaning in behind Abuela) He called us peasants! And your father is not doing anything about it. He just knows how to yell at me.

EDUARDO: (through megaphone) Shut up! All of you! Do you want to break her concentration? Is that what you are after? Eh?

*Abuela, Aída, and Simón shrink back. Eduardo paces before them.*

Swimming is rhythm and concentration. You win a race *aquí*. (Pointing to his head.) Now . . . (to Simón) you, take care of the boat, Aída y Mama . . . do something. Anything. Something practical.

*Abuela and Aída get on knees and pray in Spanish.*

Hija, give it everything, eh? . . . *por la familia. Uno . . . dos. . . .* You must win.

*Simón goes into cabin. The prayers continue as lights change to indicate bright sunlight, later in the afternoon.*

## SCENE 3

*Tableau for a couple of beats. Eduardo on bow with timer in one hand as he counts strokes per minute. Simón is in the cabin steering, wearing his sunglasses, baseball cap on backward. Abuela and Aída are at the side of the boat, heads down, hands folded, still muttering prayers in Spanish.*

**AÍDA and ABUELA:** *(crossing themselves)* *En el nombre del Padre, del Hijo y del Espíritu Santo amén.*

**EDUARDO:** *(through megaphone)* You're stroking seventy-two!

**SIMÓN:** *(singing)* Mama's stroking, Mama's stroking seventy-two. . . .

**EDUARDO:** *(through megaphone)* You comfortable with it?

5 **SIMÓN:** *(singing)* Seventy-two, seventy-two, seventy-two for you.

**AÍDA:** *(looking at the heavens)* Ay, Eduardo, *ven acá*, we should be grateful that *Nuestro Señor* gave us such a beautiful day.

**ABUELA:** *(crosses herself)* *Si, gracias a Dios.*

**EDUARDO:** She's stroking seventy-two, with no problem. *(He throws a kiss to the sky.)* It's a beautiful day to win.

**AÍDA:** *Qué hermoso!* So clear and bright. Not a cloud in the sky. *Mira! Mira!* Even rainbows on the water . . . a sign from God.

10 **SIMÓN:** *(singing)* Rainbows on the water . . . you in my arms . . .

**ABUELA and EDUARDO:** *(Looking the wrong way.)* *Dónde?*

**AÍDA:** *(pointing toward Margarita)* There, dancing in front of Margarita, leading her on . . .

**EDUARDO:** Rainbows on . . . *Ay coño!* It's an oil slick! You . . . you . . .

*(To Simón.)* Stop the boat. *(Runs to bow, yelling.)* Margarita! Margarita!

*On the next stroke, Margarita comes up all covered in black oil.*

**MARGARITA:** *Papi! Papi . . . !*

*Everybody goes to the side and stares at Margarita, who stares back. Eduardo freezes.*

15 **AÍDA:** *Apúrate*, Eduardo, move . . . what's wrong with you . . . *no me oíste*, get my daughter out of the water.

**EDUARDO:** *(softly)* We can't touch her. If we touch her, she's disqualified.

**AÍDA:** But I'm her mother.

**EDUARDO:** Not even by her own mother. Especially by her own mother. . . .

You always want the rules to be different for you, you always want to be the exception. *(To Simón.)* And you . . . you didn't see it, eh? You were playing again?

**SIMÓN:** *Papi*, I was watching . . .

20 **AÍDA:** *(interrupting)* *Pues*, do something Eduardo. You are the big coach, the monitor.

**SIMÓN:** Mentor! Mentor!

**EDUARDO:** How can a person think around you? *(He walks off to bow, puts head in hands.)*

ABUELA: (*looking over side*) *Mira como todos los little birds are dead. (She crosses herself.)*

AÍDA: Their little wings are glued to their sides.

SIMÓN: Christ, this is like the La Brea tar pits.

25

AÍDA: They can't move their little wings.

ABUELA: *Esa niña tiene que moverse.*

SIMÓN: Yeah, Margo, you gotta move, man.

*Abuela and Simón gesture for Margarita to move. Aída gestures for her to swim.*

ABUELA: *Anda niña, muévete.*

AÍDA: Swim, *hija*, swim or the *aceite* will stick to your wings.

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MARGARITA: *Papi?*

ABUELA: (*taking megaphone*) Your *papi* say "move it!"

*Margarita with difficulty starts moving.*

ABUELA, AÍDA AND SIMÓN: (*laboriously counting*) *Uno, dos . . . uno, dos . . . anda . . . uno, dos.*

EDUARDO: (*running to take megaphone from Abuela*) *Uno, dos . . .*

*Simón races into cabin and starts the engine. Abuela, Aída and Eduardo count together.*

SIMÓN: (*looking ahead*) *Papi, it's over there!*

35

EDUARDO: Eh?

SIMÓN: (*pointing ahead and to the right*) It's getting clearer over there.

EDUARDO: (*through megaphone*) Now pay attention to me. Go to the right.

*Simón, Abuela, Aída and Eduardo all lean over side. They point ahead and to the right, except Abuela, who points to the left.*

FAMILY: (*shouting together*) *Para yá! Para yá!*

*Lights go down on boat. A special light on Margarita, swimming through the oil, and on Abuela, watching her.*

ABUELA: *Sangre de mi sangre, you will be another to save us. En Bolondron, where your great-grandmother Luz Suárez was born, they say one day it rained blood. All the people, they run into their houses. They cry, they pray, pero your great-grandmother Luz she had cojones like a man. She run outside. She look straight at the sky. She shake her fist. And she say to the evil one, "Mira . . . (beating her chest) coño, Diablo, aquí estoy si me quieres." And she open her mouth, and she drunk the blood.*

40

Blackout

SCENE 4

*Lights up on boat. Aída and Eduardo are on deck watching Margarita swim. We hear the gentle, rhythmic lap, lap, lap of the water, then the sound of inhaling and exhaling as Margarita's breathing becomes louder. Then Margarita's heartbeat is heard, with the lapping of the water and the breathing under it. These sounds continue beneath the dialogue to the end of the scene.*



AÍDA: *Dios mío*. Look how she moves through the water. . . .

EDUARDO: You see, it's very simple. It is a matter of concentration.

AÍDA: The first time I put her in water she came to life, she grew before my eyes. She moved, she smiled, she loved it more than me. She didn't want my breast any longer. She wanted the water.

EDUARDO: And of course, the rhythm. The rhythm takes away the pain and helps the concentration.

*Pause. Aída and Eduardo watch Margarita.*

5 AÍDA: Is that my child or a seal. . . .

EDUARDO: Ah, a seal, the reason for that is that she's keeping her arms very close to her body. She cups her hands, and then she reaches and digs, reaches and digs.

AÍDA: To think that a daughter of mine . . .

EDUARDO: It's the training, the hours in the water. I used to tie weights around her little wrists and ankles.

AÍDA: A spirit, an ocean spirit, must have entered my body when I was carrying her.

10 EDUARDO: (*to Margarita*) Your stroke is slowing down.

*Pause. We hear Margarita's heartbeat with the breathing under, faster now.*

AÍDA: Eduardo, that night, the night on the boat . . .

EDUARDO: Ah, the night on the boat again . . . the moon was . . .

AÍDA: The moon was full. We were coming to America. . . . *Qué romántico.*

*Heartbeat and breathing continue.*

EDUARDO: We were cold, afraid, with no money, and on top of everything, you were hysterical, yelling at me, tearing at me with your nails. (*Opens his shirt, points to the base of his neck.*) Look, I still bear the scars . . . telling me that I didn't know what I was doing . . . saying that we were going to die. . . .

15 AÍDA: You took me, you stole me from my home . . . you didn't give me a chance to prepare. You just said we have to go now, now! Now, you said. You didn't let me take anything. I left everything behind. . . . I left everything behind.

EDUARDO: Saying that I wasn't good enough, that your father didn't raise you so that I could drown you in the sea.

AÍDA: You didn't let me say even a good-bye. You took me, you stole me, you tore me from my home.

EDUARDO: I took you so we could be married.

AÍDA: That was in Miami. But that night on the boat, Eduardo. . . . We were not married, that night on the boat.

20 EDUARDO: *No pasó nada!* Once and for all get it out of your head, it was cold, you hated me, and we were afraid. . . .

AÍDA: *Mentiroso!*

EDUARDO: A man can't do it when he is afraid.

AÍDA: Liar! You did it very well.

EDUARDO: I did?

AÍDA: *Sí*. Gentle. You were so gentle and then strong . . . my passion for you so deep. Standing next to you . . . I would ache . . . looking at your hands I would forget to breathe, you were irresistible. 25

EDUARDO: I was?

AÍDA: You took me into your arms, you touched my face with your fingertips . . . you kissed my eyes . . . *la esquina de la boca y . . .*

EDUARDO: *Sí, sí*, and then . . .

AÍDA: I look at your face on top of mine, and I see the lights of Havana in your eyes. That's when you seduced me.

EDUARDO: Shhh, they're gonna hear you. 30

*Lights go down. Special on Aída.*

AÍDA: That was the night. A woman doesn't forget those things . . . and later that night was the dream . . . the dream of a big country with fields of fertile land and big, giant things growing. And there by a green, slimy pond I found a giant pea pod and when I opened it, it was full of little, tiny baby frogs.

*Aída crosses herself as she watches Margarita. We hear louder breathing and heartbeat.*

MARGARITA: Santa Teresa. Little Flower of God, pray for me. San Martín de Porres, pray for me. Santa Rosa de Lima, *Virgencita de la Caridad del Cobre*, pray for me. . . . Mother pray for me.

#### SCENE 5

*Loud howling of wind is heard, as lights change to indicate unstable weather, fog and mist. Family on deck, braced and huddled against the wind. Simón is at the helm.*

AÍDA: *Ay Dios mío, qué viento.*

EDUARDO: (*through megaphone*) Don't drift out . . . that wind is pushing you out. (*To Simón.*) You! Slow down. Can't you see your sister is drifting out?

SIMÓN: It's the wind, *Papi*.

AÍDA: Baby, don't go so far. . . .

ABUELA: (*to heaven*) *Ay Gran Poder de Dios, quita este maldito viento.* 5

SIMÓN: Margo! Margo! Stay close to the boat.

EDUARDO: Dig in. Dig in hard. . . . Reach down from your guts and dig in.

ABUELA: (*to heaven*) *Ay Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, por lo más tú quieres a pararla.*

AÍDA: (*putting her hand out, reaching for Margarita*) Baby, don't go far.

*Abuela crosses herself. Action freezes. Lights get dimmer, special on Margarita. She keeps swimming, stops, starts again, stops, then, finally exhausted, stops altogether. The boat stops moving.*

EDUARDO: What's going on here? Why are we stopping? 10

**SIMÓN:** *Papi*, she's not moving! Yo Margo!

*The family all run to the side.*

**EDUARDO:** *Hija!* . . . *Hijita!* You're tired, eh?

**AÍDA:** *Por supuesto* she's tired. I like to see you get in the water, waving your arms and legs from San Pedro to Santa Catalina. A person isn't a machine, a person has to rest.

**SIMÓN:** Yo, Mama! Cool out, it ain't fucking brain surgery.

15 **EDUARDO:** (*to Simón*) Shut up, you. (*Louder to Margarita.*) I guess your mother's right for once, huh? . . . I guess you had to stop, eh? . . . Give your brother, the idiot . . . a chance to catch up with you.

**SIMÓN:** (*clowning like Mortimer Snerd*) Dum dee dum dee dum oops, ah shucks . . .

**EDUARDO:** I don't think he's Cuban.

**SIMÓN:** (*like Ricky Ricardo*) Oye, Lucy! I'm home! Ba ba lu!

**EDUARDO:** (*joins in clowning, grabbing Simón in a headlock*) What am I gonna do with this idiot, eh? I don't understand this idiot. He's not like us, Margarita. (*Laughing.*) You think if we put him into your bathing suit with a cap on his head . . . (*He laughs hysterically.*) You think anyone would know . . . huh? Do you think anyone would know? (*Laughs.*)

20 **SIMÓN:** (*vamping*) Ay, *mi amor*. Anybody looking for tits would know.

*Eduardo slaps Simón across the face, knocking him down. Aída runs to Simón's aid. Abuela holds Eduardo back.*

**MARGARITA:** *Mía culpa! Mía culpa!*

**ABUELA:** *Qué dices hija?*

**MARGARITA:** *Papi*, it's my fault, it's all my fault. . . . I'm so cold, I can't move. . . . I put my face in the water . . . and I hear them whispering . . . laughing at me. . . .

**AÍDA:** Who is laughing at you?

25 **MARGARITA:** The fish are all biting me . . . they hate me . . . they whisper about me. She can't swim, they say. She can't glide. She has no grace. . . . Yellowtails, bonita, tuna, man-o'-war, snub-nose sharks, *los baracudas* . . . they all hate me . . . only the dolphins care . . . and sometimes I hear the whales crying . . . she is lost, she is dead. I'm so numb, I can't feel. *Papi!* *Papi!* Am I dead?

**EDUARDO:** *Vamos*, baby, punch those arms in. Come on . . . do you hear me?

**MARGARITA:** *Papi* . . . *Papi* . . . forgive me. . . .

*All is silent on the boat. Eduardo drops his megaphone, his head bent down in dejection. Abuela, Aída, Simón, all leaning over the side of the boat. Simón slowly walks away.*

**AÍDA:** *Mi hija, qué tienes?*

**SIMÓN:** Oh, Christ, don't make her say it. Please don't make her say it.

30 **ABUELA:** Say what? *Qué cosa?*

**SIMÓN:** She wants to quit, can't you see she's had enough?

ABUELA: *Mira, para eso. Esta niña is turning blue.*

AÍDA: *Oyeme, mi hija.* Do you want to come out of the water?

MARGARITA: *Papi?*

SIMÓN: *(to Eduardo)* She won't come out until *you* tell her.

35

AÍDA: Eduardo . . . answer your daughter.

EDUARDO: *Le dije to concentrate . . . concentrate on your rhythm. Then the rhythm would carry her . . . ay, it's a beautiful thing, Aída. It's like yoga, like meditation, the mind over matter . . . the mind controlling the body . . . that's how the great things in the world have been done. I wish you . . . I wish my wife could understand.*

MARGARITA: *Papi?*

SIMÓN: *(to Margarita)* Forget him.

AÍDA: *(imploring)* Eduardo, *por favor.*

40

EDUARDO: *(walking in circles)* Why didn't you let her concentrate? Don't you understand, the concentration, the rhythm is everything. But no, you wouldn't listen. *(Screaming to the ocean.)* Goddamn Cubans, why, God, why do you make us go everywhere with our families? *(He goes to back of boat.)*

AÍDA: *(opening her arms)* *Mi hija, ven, come to Mami. (Rocking.)* Your mami knows.

*Abuela has taken the training bottle, puts it in a net. She and Simón lower it to Margarita.*

SIMÓN: Take this. Drink it. *(As Margarita drinks, Abuela crosses herself.)*

ABUELA: *Sangre de mi sangre.*

*Music comes up softly. Margarita drinks, gives the bottle back, stretches out her arms, as if on a cross. Floats on her back. She begins a graceful backstroke. Lights fade on boat as special lights come up on Margarita. She stops. Slowly turns over and starts to swim, gradually picking up speed. Suddenly as if in pain she stops, tries again, then stops in pain again. She becomes disoriented and falls to the bottom of the sea. Special on Margarita at the bottom of the sea.*

MARGARITA: *Ya no puedo . . . I can't. . . . A person isn't a machine . . . es mi culpa . . . Father forgive me . . . Papi! Papi! One, two. Uno, dos. (Pause.)*

45

*Papi! A dónde estás? (Pause.) One, two, one, two. Papi! Ay, Papi! Where are you . . . ? Don't leave me. . . . Why don't you answer me? (Pause. She starts to swim, slowly.) Uno, dos, uno, dos. Dig in, dig in. (Stops swimming.) Por favor, Papi! (Starts to swim again.) One, two, one, two. Kick from your hip, kick from your hip. (Stops swimming. Starts to cry.) Oh God, please. . . . (Pause.) Hail Mary, full of grace . . . dig in, dig in . . . the Lord is with thee. . . . (She swims to the rhythm of her Hail Mary.) Hail Mary, full of grace . . . dig in, dig in . . . the Lord is with thee . . . dig in, dig in. . . . Blessed art thou among women. . . . Mami, it hurts. You let go of my hand. I'm lost. . . . And blessed is the fruit of thy womb, now and at the hour of our death. Amen. I don't want to die, I don't want to die.*

*Margarita is still swimming. Blackout. She is gone.*

## SCENE 6

Lights up on boat, we hear radio static. There is a heavy mist. On deck we see only black outline of Abuela with shawl over her head. We hear the voices of Eduardo, Aída, and Radio Operator.

EDUARDO'S VOICE: *La Havana!* Coming from San Pedro. Over.

RADIO OPERATOR'S VOICE: Right, DT6-6, you say you've lost a swimmer.

AÍDA'S VOICE: Our child, our only daughter . . . listen to me. Her name is Margarita Inez Suárez, she is wearing a black one-piece bathing suit cut high in the legs with a white racing stripe down the sides, a white bathing cap with goggles and her whole body covered with a . . . with a . . .

EDUARDO'S VOICE: With lanolin and paraffin.

5 AÍDA'S VOICE: *Sí . . . con lanolin and paraffin.*

More radio static. Special on Simón, on the edge of the boat.

SIMÓN: Margo! Yo Margo! (Pause.) Man don't do this. (Pause.) Come on. . . . Come on. . . . (Pause.) God, why does everything have to be so hard? (Pause.) Stupid. You know you're not supposed to die for this. Stupid. It's his dream and he can't even swim. (Pause.) Punch those arms in. Come home. Come home. I'm your little brother. Don't forget what Mama said. You're not supposed to leave me behind. *Vamos*, Margarita, take your little brother, hold his hand tight when you cross the street. He's so little. (Pause.) Oh, Christ, give us a sign. . . . I know! I know! Margo, I'll send you a message . . . like mental telepathy. I'll hold my breath, close my eyes, and I'll bring you home. (He takes a deep breath; a few beats.) This time I'll beep . . . I'll send out sonar signals like a dolphin. (He imitates dolphin sounds.)

The sound of real dolphins takes over from Simón, then fades into sound of Abuela saying the Hail Mary in Spanish, as full lights come up slowly.

## SCENE 7

Eduardo coming out of cabin, sobbing, Aída holding him. Simón anxiously scanning the horizon. Abuela looking calmly ahead.

EDUARDO: *Es mi culpa, sí, es mi culpa.* (He hits his chest.)

AÍDA: *Ya, ya viejo . . .* it was my sin . . . I left my home.

EDUARDO: Forgive me, forgive me. I've lost our daughter, our sister, our granddaughter, *mi carne, mi sangre, mis ilusiones.* (To heaven.) *Dios mío,* take me . . . take me, I say . . . Goddammit, take me!

SIMÓN: I'm going in.

5 AÍDA AND EDUARDO: No!

EDUARDO: (grabbing and holding Simón, speaking to heaven) God, take me, not my children. They are my dreams, my illusions . . . and not this one, this one is my mystery . . . he has my secret dreams. In him are the parts of me I cannot see.

*Eduardo embraces Simón. Radio static becomes louder.*

**AÍDA:** I . . . I think I see her.

**SIMÓN:** No, it's just a seal.

**ABUELA:** (*looking out with binoculars*) *Mi nietacita, dónde estás? (She feels her heart.)* I don't feel the knife in my heart . . . my little fish is not lost.

*Radio crackles with static. As lights dim on boat, Voices of Mel and Mary Beth are heard over the radio.*

**MEL'S VOICE:** Tragedy has marred the face of the Wrigley Invitational Women's Race to Catalina. The Cuban swimmer, little Margarita Suárez, has reportedly been lost at sea. Coast Guard and divers are looking for her as we speak. Yet in spite of this tragedy the race must go on because . . . 10

**MARY BETH'S VOICE:** (*interrupting loudly*) Mel!

**MEL'S VOICE:** (*startled*) What!

**MARY BETH'S VOICE:** Ah . . . excuse me, Mel . . . we have a winner. We've just received word from Catalina that one of the swimmers is just fifty yards from the breakers . . . it's, oh, it's . . . Margarita Suárez!

*Special on family in cabin listening to radio.*

**MEL'S VOICE:** What? I thought she died!

*Special on Margarita, taking off bathing cap, trophy in hand, walking on the water.*

**MARY BETH'S VOICE:** Ahh . . . unless . . . unless this is a tragic . . . No . . . there she is, Mel. Margarita Suárez! The only one in the race wearing a black bathing suit cut high in the legs with a racing stripe down the side. 15

*Family cheering, embracing.*

**SIMÓN:** (*screaming*) Way to go, Margo!

**MEL'S VOICE:** This is indeed a miracle! It's a resurrection! Margarita Suárez, with a flotilla of boats to meet her, is now walking on the waters, through the breakers . . . onto the beach, with crowds of people cheering her on. What a jubilation! This is a miracle!

*Sound of crowds cheering. Lights and cheering sounds fade.*

*Blackout*

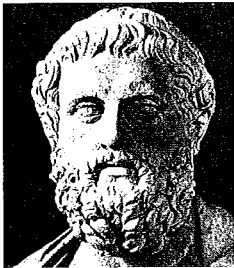
## Reading and Reacting

1. What lighting and sound effects do the stage directions specify? In what way do these effects advance the action of the play? How do they help to communicate the play's theme?
2. Although most of the play is in English, the characters frequently speak Spanish. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this use of Spanish? How does the mixing of English and Spanish reflect one of the play's themes?

3. What function do the voices of Mel and Mary Beth serve in the play?
4. What conflicts develop among the family members as the play proceeds? Do you think these conflicts are meant to represent the problems of other immigrant groups?
5. In what sense is Mel's final comment "This is a miracle!" true? In what sense is it ironic?
6. Could this play be seen as an allegory? What is the value of seeing it in this way?
7. During much of the play, Margarita is swimming in full view of the audience. Suggest three ways in which a director could convey this effect on stage. Which way would you choose if you were directing the play? Why?
8. As the headnote to the play explains, the 1984 New York production of *The Cuban Swimmer* had an extremely realistic set. Could the play be staged unrealistically, with the characters on a raised platform instead of a boat? How do you think this kind of set would change the audience's reaction?
9. **JOURNAL ENTRY** Are you able to empathize with Margarita's struggle? What elements of the play make it easy (or difficult) for you to do so?
10. **CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE** In a 1998 article in the *New York Times*, theater critic Brooks Atkinson said, "Nothing is better for good actors than a stage with no scenery."

How do you interpret Atkinson's comment? Do you think this remark could be applied to the staging of *The Cuban Swimmer*?

**Related Works:** "Snow" (p. 177), "The Secret Lion" (p. 197), "Deportation at Breakfast" (p. 229), "Two Kinds" (p. 777), "How to Write the Great American Indian Novel" (p. 871), "Baca Grande" (p. 889), "Harlem" (p. 924), "Post-Colonial Studies" (p. 1026)



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**SOPHOCLES** (496–406 B.C.), along with Aeschylus and Euripides, is one of the three great ancient Greek tragic dramatists. He lived during the flowering and subsequent decline of fifth-century B.C. Athens—the high point of Greek civilization. Born as Greece struggled against the Persian Empire and moved to adopt democracy, he lived as an adult under Pericles during the golden age of Athens and died as it became clear that Athens would lose the Peloponnesian War. Sophocles was an active participant in the public life of Athens, serving as a collector of tribute from Athenian subjects and later as a general. He wrote at least 120 plays, but only seven

have survived, including three plays about Oedipus: *Oedipus the King* (c. 430 B.C.), *Oedipus at Colonus* (411? B.C.), and *Antigone* (441 B.C.).

*Oedipus the King*, or *Oedipus Rex* (sometimes called *Oedipus the Tyrant*), was performed shortly after a great plague in Athens (probably in 429 or 425 B.C.) and as Athens was falling into decline. The play opens with an account of a plague in Thebes, Oedipus's kingdom. Over the years, *Oedipus the King* has attracted impressive critical attention, from Aristotle's use of it as a model for his definition of tragedy to Freud's use of its power as evidence of the validity of the "Oedipus complex."

**Cultural Context** During the period in which *Oedipus* was written, the Greeks were especially interested in the relationship between greatness and *hubris*, the excessive pride and ambition that leads to the downfall of a hero in classical tragedy. They were fascinated by the idea that hubris can bring destruction: that the same traits that can elevate a person to greatness can also cause his or her ruin.