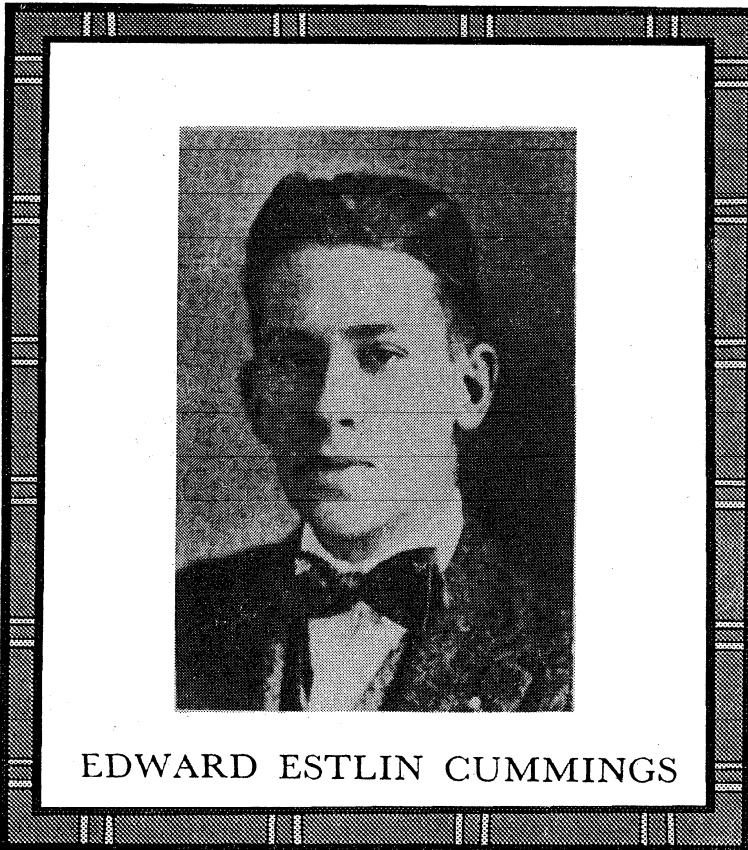


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STEPHEN R. SCOTTI

VIVA CUMMINGS! ON THE ROAD IN SOUTH AMERICA
(April 1992)

"Te doy Gracias Dios por Tan Emocionante Dia." When the cast of *VIVA CUMMINGS!* sang this line at the end of the show, how it would drive the audience to its feet and with what great bursts of applause. I got the idea to translate Cummings' greatest line of affirmation "i thank You God for most this amazing/day:" (*X aipe* [1950]:# 65) into Spanish when we were flying to Caracas from Kennedy Airport at the start of our trip to bring him to South America in song, movement, and voice. In my musical setting of this poem I bring back that opening line at the very end once again as a reaffirmation and as a musical device. I decided to use six different musical tones in the setting of this line to mark the six days of creation as written in the Bible, with the last tone to be a repetition of the first (at the octave or unison), to be held to mark the Seventh Day on which the Creator rested. Well, the South Americans who heard the show got it, and it worked beautifully with the opening line sung in English and the closing line (the repeat) in Spanish.

The whole enterprise of bringing *VIVA CUMMINGS!* came about because a representative of the IXth Theatre Festival in Caracas had scoured New York City in 1991 looking for a new show to invite to the festival and to represent the United States's offering in this world wide event. They came to see *VIVA CUMMINGS!* while we were performing it at the Mazur theatre in the Upper East Side in October of 1991. After what we felt was a successful two-week run at the Mazur, we were disappointed that no notices appeared about the production in any newspapers or magazines. In fact, except for the review that appeared in *SPRING* by David Forrest, we could have come and gone with nary a trace or remembrance that we ever appeared doing this work in the city. The invitation to perform this show in Venezuela for two weeks in April of 1992, with a chance to see and hear other theatre productions from around the world, was met by the entire Blue Heron Theatre troupe with a resounding YES! We didn't suspect that it was going to be even more exciting than we could have imagined.

"U.S. citizens are warned against travel to Colombia until further notice"— State Department travel advisory issued by the U.S. Embassy in Bogotá. Blanket warnings also appeared in newspapers out of Florida at this time, but here we were, the Blue Heron Theatre troupe, checking into the

Travelodge in Bogotá in April of '92 to perform *VIVA CUMMINGS!* for a week in that city. How did this come about?—"...listen:there's a hell/of a good universe next door;let's go" (*IXI* [1944]: XIV). In the case of Venezuela vs. Colombia, the operative word in the Cummings quote is "hell ." It seems that Colombia was hosting its own international theatre festival at the same time as Venezuela, and many of the companies cancelled their appearances because of 'La Violencia' that was going on in Bogotá at this time. So the director of the Colombian festival called her counterpart in Venezuela for help. We had already performed our show in Valera, which is a small town outside Caracas, and the word had started to spread about our show being a success; so with a little coaxing, our schedule of performances was changed to include a week in Bogotá. We were told everything would be fine and all precautions would be taken for our safety— even an unmarked bullet-proof van would be used to cart us back and forth, and as long as we travelled as 'Il Grupo' and not individually, we would be fine.

Ah yes, "fine," but since I'm of Italian heritage, the word "fine" has a different connotation to me. I seemed to be the only one in our troupe that had reservations about going to perform in Bogotá. Maybe it was because I like to read the small print in newspapers as well as the large. Maybe it was because Noriega had been found guilty in a court in the States and the news was plastered all over every newspaper in Colombia. And I knew that Panama was once a part of Colombia and that the United States army had invaded this country twenty-one times during the twentieth century and that sometimes things do come to a head. Like maybe this week.

We were guests, that first evening in Bogotá, of the U.S. Embassy and the dinner they offered us was quite pleasant until they started to talk to us about the kidnappings that were going on there. There were four different guerrilla groups in the hills around Bogota, and one of the principal techniques for revenue-enhancement was the kidnapping of North Americans and Europeans for ransom. Two thousand a year was the current rate. Did they know that one of the performers in our show, Maggie Simpson, was the niece of Alan Simpson, a U.S. Senator from Wyoming? Why the sudden barrage of information about our safety, when none of this was told to us in the comfortable confines of the Anaucó Hilton in Caracas where we had every need attended to with care and concern? And why did the directors of the Colombian festival suddenly change the *place* where we were to perform in Bogota from the TEATROLIBRE CENTRO to the infamous TEATRO LA

CANDELARIA, which is in the most run-down and dangerous section of this city? (There were guards with tommyguns posted at the entrance to this theatre every night we performed.) I don't know if you get the big picture of this situation that we were in, but our pictures were on the inside pages of their newspapers, with large print signifying that we were from *Estados Unidos*, while on the front pages were pictures of Noriega and his debacle in the courts of our country.

An interesting sidelight to this tense time for me was the solving of an old Zen riddle that had bothered me for years. "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" Well it's an audience in the Candelaria section of Bogotá, listening to an eclectic musical show of settings of a North American poet's work, played out by North Americans. In reality, a great many in the audiences in the Candelaria seem to be missing an arm or a leg or some other appendage in the darkened theatre. Even the grand piano they gave me to play on was missing one of its legs and needed to be propped up. The other major problem we all encountered was getting used to the high altitude of this mountaintop city. A tank of oxygen was a necessary item in the wings of the theatre, where the actors could get a quick fix before they did their big numbers. All well and good for them but bad for me, as I had to sit at the piano or the squeezebox all evening, hoping I could make it through the night.

Even in the poorest section of Caracas (which is known as *La Vega*) we did not have to deal with any of these problems. A perfectly tuned German Steinway Grand piano was provided for me in every theatre we performed in during our stay in Venezuela. Though the wiring needed some attending to in these poorer sections of Caracas, at least the electricity was constant through the day and night in their theatres, which was not the case in Colombia. It is important to memorize your music when playing there, as one never knows when the lights are going out.

How foolish it now seems that we were talked into a sightseeing bus ride to the outskirts of Bogotá one sunny day, where we were stopped by a military man with a machine gun for some time on the side of the road. Not knowing what was going to happen, I had 'Il Grupo' sing a chorus of "the boys i mean are not refined" (*No Thanks* {1935}: #44) to alleviate the tension that was spreading rapidly, as it was getting late and the sun was going down. I think it may have helped, for Mr. Tommy Gun seemed pleasantly amused, and the grimace that he seemed to carry changed to a wide toothy grin. I felt

relieved when he let us go on our "unrefined" ways and thankful that, when I set that once unprint-able poem of Cummings' to music, I decided on a Latin-American type of rhythm, adding (and I hoped Cummings would forgive me) an "Olé" at the end. The rhythmic accompaniment was easily accomplished for this song because the bus we were in was quite old and battered (is there anything in this country that isn't?), so there were loose parts that one could pick up and bang together, or on the seats or sides or roof.

I learned early the trick of using song to divert the possibility of hostile action from a gangster type in my days of playing piano in hotels and burlesque houses in old Scollay Square in Boston in the late forties and fifties. It has seemed to work for me when I encountered similar situations in places as diverse as "Dirty Nellie's" in Ireland or the old bus in Bogotá. I have a different slant on that "music soothing the savage breast." Give the bastards what they want in song!

There was one review that I think caught the essence of *VIVA CUMMINGS!*. It strangely enough appeared in a Colombian Newspaper:

"The Blue Heron is a theatrical Company that works to awaken the imagination. *VIVA CUMMINGS!* is an unconventional musical spectacle which is notable in its simplicity."

El Espectador, Bogotá, April 16, 1992

Other reviewers were equally enthusiastic:

"A young company and an animated and brilliant musicalization mark the work *VIVA CUMMINGS!*... The Blue Heron Theatre Company emphasizes the irony, the humor, the love, the grace and turns of phrases that Cummings' poetry always has. The adaptation includes poems that show the various *feelings* OF THE POET. In the staging, between the fantasy, choreography, and music, a man tells a story of love and sorrow through his poems."

El Tiempo, Bogotá, Columbia April 13, 1992

and:

"With *VIVA CUMMINGS!* language was not an impediment...We human beings understand one another with a mere gesture. The audience was utterly pleased with *VIVA CUMMINGS!*...the acrobatics of of the cast as well as their voices...was a skillful act of joining vocal and bodily expression. The singers beautified the language of the poems in a whimsical and playful lyric composition. It was a clear and sensational message conveyed by the actors' bodies and voices with music emanating from their souls."

El Tiempo, Valera, Venezuela April 7, 1992