

Witnessing Cockfights in Puerto Rico

by Richard Kostelanetz (August 2017)



Fighting Cocks, Sir Robin Philipson



For decades, perhaps, I'd noticed a building with a sign reading "Cockfights" in English along the main drag between the highway and the beach in Isla Verde, next to the San Juan airport; but none of my Puerto Rican friends—academics mostly—would ever take me there. Some claimed not to know where it was, even though a branch of their favorite Cuban restaurant, Metropole, sits next door.

Entering on my own one Saturday evening, I found a venue different from what I expected. A precipitously sloped theater

in the round with six rows of seats. At the bottom of the seats was a circular floor perhaps fifteen feet in diameter. The seats and floors were well-scrubbed, almost antiseptic. It stank far less than the live poultry store down the street from me in Ridgewood, Queens, incidentally, where edible animals are killed before your eyes.

Nearly all the one hundred or so spectators were male, as the most visible women were spiked-heeled waitresses serving food and drinks, scarcely noticed by middle-aged men otherwise focused on the circular floor. (I suspected that, even though matches ended soon after 9 pm, many of these guys weren't getting laid on Saturday night.) Nearly all were Caucasian or light tan in skin color. This last observation reflects not color prejudice but the fact that cockfights are more common in the hilly Puerto Rican interior than down by the coasts favored by darker-skinned Latinos.

High on the theater's entrance level were several dozen clear cages, each housing a single agitated rooster, which could be examined visually in advance of his fight, much like horses in their stalls before a race. Beside these cages was a metalsmith fabricating sharp spurs resembling long nails that were visibly affixed to each bird's feet. I later learned that, especially in cultures less respectful of integrity, these armed roosters are watched carefully to make sure that no one tries to poison or to injure them. "Several steps are taken before the fight to assure adherence to regulations," one book tells me. "Each rooster is examined before the fight to assure that the feathers have not been coated with substances that may give him an unfair advantage over its adversary."

At the beginning of each announced match, two birds at a time are placed on both sides of a clear box that goes on a fixed track along the theater's ceiling until descending by ropes to the arena's floor. Two young handlers then remove the roosters individually, holding them by their necks, and putting them in bags to be weighed from both sides of a simple balance scale. (I guess there must be weight classes, as in human boxing.) Taken with one human hand from the bags, the cocks were then warmed up, so to speak, by pecking at a rooster doll in the handler's other hand. While still held in their handler's hands, they touch noses, much as human boxers touch gloves. Some roosters looked well-coiffed for their performance.

Then the cocks are put into two sides of a Lucite contraption that had already dropped from the ceiling to the floor. Once in his compartment, each could see each other but not yet touch. Once the bottomless contraption is raised by ropes suspended from above, their bout begins. Their basic move is pecking while jumping into the air and expanding their fluttering feathers to hit with their armed feet. To quote the distinguished anthropologist Clifford Geertz, from his classic *Notes on the Balinese Cockfight*, collected in his book *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), "The cocks fly almost immediately at one another in a wing-beating, head-thrusting, leg-kicking explosion of animal fury so pure, so absolute, and in its own way so beautiful, as to be almost abstract, a Platonic concept of hate." However, whereas Geertz's appreciation of a Bali cockfight is finally about symbolism, I witnessed only a dance that the anthropologist also identifies as an "art form—for that finally is what we are dealing with."

Quite various are the matches. Some end in less than a minute with one rooster quickly wiping out the other left lying on the floor. In another match, one rooster lay down on his back

for a few seconds, only to pop back up and continue to fight. In yet another, the winning rooster appeared blinded by the ordeal, simply spinning around frantically at the end. A fourth match was so boring I dozed off twice. My favorite rooster simply ran around the edge of the rink, even climbing up the rim separating the floor from its audience, only to have spectators push him back into the rink. What makes these gamecocks more interesting than human boxers, say, is that they are at once more stupid and yet intelligent.

As a virgin spectator I found that usually the roosters looked so alike I couldn't by eye tell them apart. Only small bands on a single leg, one blue and the other white, visibly distinguish them. Though feathers fell haphazardly, I didn't see much blood. Unlike thoroughbred racing, which has long pauses between matches, I guess for more talk and drink, the program at the Coliseo Gallístico de Puerto Rico moves zippily through 40 bouts. A website tells me that, "Each fight is regulated by a *juez de valla*, who supervises the fight and whose decisions regarding the details of the fight are final. A cock is deemed to have lost if it dies, flees from its opponent rather than facing it, refuses to fight, or fails to stand on two legs for sixty seconds.

Once either rooster lies on the floor, the supervisor started a second digital clock that gives the fallen bird sixty seconds to rise. He also repeatedly intones a word I could not understand. When the match ends after the regulation fourteen minutes, this second clock continued counting, I guess to give the fallen bird a chance to stand up for a draw. More than once I saw a fallen bird, sometimes down for many seconds, come back to win.

All through the match men were betting not against the house, as in a horse race, but with each other, pointing with hand signals that apparently indicate how much money was being wagered. And here, unlike a horse race, they could bet after the match begins, sometimes with improvised odds. Especially the front row, whose seats are more expensive, men were screaming at each other and at the birds, I guess hoping that those they raised would understand encouragement. How the hell the bettors could evaluate these birds, not only before the match but during it, utterly mystified me.

I was told that some of the aficionados are drug dealers with cash to launder (and squander), as no financial recording takes place. I was told as well that it's a "gentleman's sport" because all bettors deliver on their promises. If anyone here had a gun I didn't see it. While there was a large man at the entrance, there wasn't any electronic security scrutiny we've come to accept on the mainland. Nor was there a uniformed cop present similar to those, say, customarily invited into a NYC afterhours joint to prevent it from being robbed. I suppose an armed gang invading this venue, if they dared, could have hauled away a load of cash.

Anyway, once a fight ends, the birds both dead and alive are brought to *the juez de valla* who clips off their spurs and then deposits them in dark bags that are given to their handler/owners. While the loser might have some gamey meat to eat, I doubted if most winning survivors would ever fight again. As wagering monies changes hands, the floor is promptly vacuumed. And the next pair of roosters could be seen moving onto the scene from their clear cage under the ceiling. As I left, the man in front of me had two dark bird bags draped over his shoulders. Whether his charges were dead or alive, I could not tell. How classically Roman it all seemed.

Cockfights didn't seem brutal or unacceptable to me. Though they are banned on the U. S. mainland, police discover some now and then in Bronx basements, to the shock of some gullible journalists. In my New York Puerto Rican neighborhood (in Ridgewood-Bushwick, New York) were pop-up fights supervised by an elderly neighbor until one night, just after his bird won, he suffered a heart attack and died, the roosters apparently disappearing with him. Cockfights will continue to be legal in Puerto Rico as long as it doesn't become a state. Whenever fighting roosters are confiscated by some smug lawmen, pleased to pose before cameras, I doubt if the birds will survive much longer in government shelters than they would with their loving owners.

Cockfighting is common and usually legal in some domains, mostly tropical, including the Philippines, Martinique, the Dominican Republic, South Sea islands, and some parts of Spain. An anthology edited by Alan Dundes, *The Cockfight: A Casebook* (1994), documents how the rules and procedures are roughly similar around the world and perhaps always have been. In that anthology, is an 1899 report from Puerto Rico describing a scene scarcely different from what I observed more than a century later. Nonetheless, authoritarian governments, especially if "revolutionary," try to ban it, along with much else enjoyed by common people. Purported animal advocates advocate its prohibition as well, while failing to consider what might happen to birds (whose lives are short anyway) or the natural predispositions of gamecocks.

In barnyards around the world gamecocks fight with each other; that's what they naturally do. Denying them their innate instinct is the sort of man-made conceit that many of us would judge priggish and unacceptable if raised to apply to other issues. Even a group of hens establish a pecking order, as it

is commonly called, albeit less ferocious. I recall seeing a field of more than thirty roosters short-leashed to decrepit automobile tires lying flat on the ground, each bird strategically out of range from the others to which each would nonetheless scream. In his classic *Cockfighting Is Here To Stay* (1950), reprinted in *The World of John Lardner* (1960), the author recalls a singularly dumb Ohio sheriff who, after arresting a cockfight, put all the confiscated birds into a single cell. "In the morning, he found them all dead but one. This one happened to be the winner of a bout that had ended just before the sheriff made his pinch. He still had a gaff on; but even he was not in very good shape." Any claim to cure gamecocks of this instinct reminds me of claims to cure gays of homosexual sex. Fuhgeddaboutit.

What I didn't understand in Puerto Rico was the possible intelligence behind betting and the hand- signals of guys freely betting with each other, rather than, say, against the house. Had I spotted another gringo there, I might have asked him. No one volunteered to educate me, even though Puerto Rico is generally a friendly place. As an audience more focused than most, they were watching the fights and, of course, betting.

One theme of my experience is that seeing a cockfight turns out to be quite different from imagining one. I was reminded by 1980 book-art by Sol Lewitt, *Cock Fight Dance*, which offers a photographic sequence likewise antiseptic. Indeed, as Lewitt implicitly understood and Geertz knew, these bouts epitomized to me choreography in the great alternative tradition of Merce Cunningham and Elizabeth Streb. In my considered judgment as a veteran critic of performance art, cockfights represent the greatest and truest Puerto Rican theater not only because it can't be so easily witnessed on the mainland.

My second thought was that this neat venue with its small stage and precipitous slope, otherwise empty all week, could be used for other kinds of performance, say solo dance or chamber music. Since some of my Puerto Rican friends are composers and theater artists, I advised them to check it out. They might be as surprised as I was.



Richard Kostelanetz recently completed a book of previously uncollected critiques, *Deeper, Further, and Beyond*. Individual entries on his work in several fields appear in various editions of *Readers Guide to Twentieth-Century Writers*, *Merriam-Webster Encyclopedia of Literature*, *Contemporary Poets*, *Contemporary Novelists*, *Postmodern Fiction*, *Webster's Dictionary of American Writers*, *The HarperCollins Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature*, *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, *Directory of American Scholars*, *Who's Who in America*, *Who's Who in the World*, *Who's Who in American Art*, NNDB.com, Wikipedia.com, and Britannica.com, among other distinguished directories. Otherwise, he survives in New York, where he was born, unemployed and thus overworked.

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