

Theater: Americas Festival Opens

By RICHARD EDER

TWO vastly different works have opened the Theater in the Americas Festival in New York. Each in its own way accomplishes what a festival play should do: showing us something we do not know and can benefit from.

One of these, "Macunaima," by the Brazilian theater group PAU, is a splashy, sometimes startling four-hour-long use of folkloric themes to conduct an impressionistic meditation on the character of Brazilian society. The other, by the ICTUS Company from Chile, is an astutely written and acted play about a group of Chilean intellectuals trying to deal with the oppressive political conditions of their country.

"Macunaima," which opened at the La Mama Annex but will be playing mostly this week at the Intermedia Theater, is something like the Amazon jungles in which it is partly set — too large, that is, empty for stretches, but crisscrossed by creatures with odd and lovely plumages.

Its 18 performers, dramatizing a work by Mario de Andrade, act out the legend of an innocent. He is Macunaima, a character in Indian myth, used by Andrade to represent a kind of Brazilian Everyman.

The first act shows his birth and young manhood. Innocent and sly at the same time, exuberant, lecherous, kind and quite helpless against the forces that control his life, he wanders through a series of enchantments. He kills his mother by mistake, battles a two-headed monster, marries an Amazon princess who dies, and becomes a star — others in the play also become celestial bodies, and the hero ends up as the Big Dipper — and loses a magic talisman.

The next two acts take place in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, where Macunaima and his two brothers go to try to regain the talisman from an evil sorcerer masquerading as a capitalist.

There are all kinds of comic and dramatic adventures as the primitive soul — he starts out virtually naked and steadily acquires clothes — bobs up against the forces of contemporary society. Eventually, Macunaima goes back to his jungle, but finds he has lost his ability to live there.

The theme of a state of nature deformed by alien influences — a basic theme in third-world culture — holds "Macunaima" loosely together. So does the agile and appealing central figure played by Carlos Augusto Carvalho, whose innocent eyes, mobile mouth and general air of expecting things to turn out well carry him through four hours of transformations.

Four hours is too much. Furthermore, though the work is packed with incidents, many of these are not set apart visually or dramatically; they are sketchily related. The strongest portions are in the city scenes, where the comedy and the visual anecdotes become most striking.

It is not lavishly staged, except for a frequent lavishness of imagination. The women and men use their bodies, often naked or half-naked, spectacularly and with not a trace of vulgarity; they paint dramatic pictures with them. "Macunaima" begins slowly, yet after the first hour, its charm begins to grow on one, and its supple wit and visual originality display themselves with a frequency that more than compensates for its empty stretches.

The style of "How Many Years in a Day?" by the ICTUS Company could not be more of a contrast. It is a play about the pressures on a news team in a Chilean television station as the repression of the 70's supplants the free and experimental spirit of the 60's. The play is conversation among the intelligent and frightened people; it was developed by members of the company. It is agile and amusing, and it has the strength and conviction of first-hand experience.

The play does not deal with the ex-

tremes of repression of the Pinochet Government. There are no arrests or threats of arrests among this group of newscasters, cautiously liberal or leftist, whom we see during a day's work in their studio. There is the threat of being discharged; throughout the play, several of the characters are called to the station director's office, where they wait to be summoned by a Kafkaesque system of bells and buzzers.

Nothing very bad happens, though; what does happen is internal. As the characters, all well intentioned, talk about the new frustrations of their jobs, the limiting of freedom and the tightening directives, what we see is the slow pollution of an atmosphere. The play is a debate, a fascinating, moving and finely acted debate — as to whether it is better to quit, emigrate or try to remain and accomplish what is possible. It inclines, without assertion, toward remaining.

All the performers are fine, but Nis-sim Sharim, as the leader of the news team, and Delfina Guzmán, as a middle-aged journalist, are outstanding. Mr. Sharim and Miss Guzmán were among those who helped write and direct this illuminating play in Spanish.

"Macunaima," in Portuguese, and the Chilean play, whose run has ended, make a fascinating beginning for this festival, organized with great difficulty to bring Latin American and two Canadian groups to New York. The festival continues through this week with works by Argentine, Mexican, Venezuelan and Canadian companies. The program can be obtained by telephoning 475-7710.

Nassau Forum to Assist Artists

The Nassau Forum for the Arts has been created by the Nassau County Office of Cultural Development to help the county's artists. The group plans to publish a directory of professional artists working in the county, begin a newsletter, compile an arts calendar and offer workshops. For information, call (516) 484-9333.