

ARTIST EMBRACES CUBAN ROOTS

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It seems inappropriate that director Alberto Sarraín's most ambitious theatrical project would be a monologue festival.

Sarraín, after all, has always been a proponent of multiple points of view - especially where Cuba is concerned. And his first International Monologue Festival, which begins Friday and runs through May 6, will reflect that philosophy, featuring 43 playwrights, actors and scholars from the Spanish-speaking world - including 23 from Cuba - in shows and seminars at the University of Miami, Florida International University, the Miami Light Project and South Beach club The Living Room.

Sarraín has set several goals for the festival, including presenting experimental, feminist and Afro-Caribbean themed works. But one of his primary motivations is to foster a cultural dialogue with the island that is central to him as an artist.

"I have forgotten what happened to me in jail in Cuba," said Sarraín, 52, who spent three years in a Cuban jail after being caught trying to leave the island. "There are more important things than recreating my hatred for the rest of my life. I want to recreate love for my country and my culture. Because you can't forget your roots.

"Apart from the politics of Cuba, there are people that I love and respect there, and a great theatrical tradition. I cannot negate that part of me. It has nothing to do with being communist or agreeing with the political system in Cuba, but with a way of seeing art and the world."

Sarraín eventually made it to Miami in 1979, and worked as resident director at Teatro Avante here as well as in Latin America, twice earning a Fulbright Scholarship.

After spending a year working with Cuban refugees in Guantanamo Bay, he founded La Ma Teodora in 1995, which presented works by exile and Cuban playwrights in Little Havana. Last year he was one of five parties to the lawsuit challenging Miami-Dade County's so-called Cuba ordinance, which prohibited arts groups funded by the county from presenting Cuban artists.

Along the way he has been both punished and rewarded for his efforts.

His involvement in the lawsuit resulted in his troupe being evicted from its Little Havana space last year. But last weekend he was one of two people to receive the Freedom of Expression Award from the PEN American Center, the human rights group, for his efforts in the lawsuit.

Lilian Manzor, an associate professor of foreign languages and literature at the University of Miami and co-director of the festival, says the Cuban plays should prove illuminating.

"Cuban theater nowadays is questioning many things that are going on in Cuba as well as in the Diaspora," says Manzor, who has attended conferences on the island. "For these reasons it's important for them to come to Miami."

Other exiles say they cannot endorse an event that includes artists supported by a system that persecutes many of its authors.

"As exiles. . . our primary interest is the Cubans that in Cuba suffer repression from a totalitarian regime - writers who are jailed, persecuted, marginalized and excluded from the official culture," members of the PEN Club de Escritores Cubanos en el Exilio, an affiliate of PEN, said in a statement.

Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas, a Miami-raised writer who lives in New York and whose Carbonell Award-winning play *Sleepwalkers*, set in Havana, had an extended Miami run in 1999, says that presenting Cuban plays is not the same as supporting the Cuban system.

"Cuba has no hope unless Cubans learn to disagree with each other, and just because that cannot happen in Havana does not mean it should not happen in Miami," says Cortiñas, who will participate in a panel entitled *Cuban Theater Encounter from Two Shores*.

Originally, the festival was to take place in a handful of Little Havana arts spaces that form the nucleus of a lively Bohemian scene there. But when Teodora received only \$2,500 of the \$25,000 Tourist Development Grant they applied for from the County's Cultural Affairs Council, Sarraín went to the University of Miami and FIU for help with production costs.

Sarraín says he is not discouraged.

"I believe there are many people who feel as I do," he says. "Artists are always against the system, but that is how they influence the

culture."

IF YOU GO

The First International Monologue Festival, Friday through May 6, with events at FIU's Wertheim Performing Arts Center, 11200 SW Eighth St., Miami; the University of Miami, Koubek Memorial Center, 2705 SW Third St., Miami; the Miami Light Project, 3000 Biscayne Blvd., Miami; and the Living Room, 671 Washington Ave., Miami Beach. Tickets are \$10. Information: 305-227-6681.

- Caption: color photo: Alberto Sarraín (a)PEDRO PORTAL/EL NUEVO HERALD BYGONES: Alberto Sarraín spent three years in a Cuban jail after being caught trying to leave the island.

- Memo: See IF YOU GO at end of text

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