

Fe, sin fe, Naufragio de la Fe.

2004 was one of those special years for me, those you remember for life.

I had just taken my short film to Cannes film Festival and it was a great success.

On my way back to London I was invited to the Royal Court Theatre for a series of readings of works by young contemporary Cuban playwrights.

I couldn't resist the temptation and off I went.

The authors had been invited to London to work along some of the Royal Court's pupils for the English translations – some of which were absolutely appalling.

All in all the readings went well, though some of the work was better than other.

Amongst the work, I was definitely taken by the delicate and dignified story told by this young couple, showing the repercussions of the phenomenon of Cuban exodus during the Special Period; the text was clear, the tone passionate and intimate. The play was called 'Naufragio de la Fe', a beautiful and subtle insight of the socio-economics of Cuba.

I made a mission to meet the author, Lilian Suzel Saldivar and to no surprise, she was exactly like her play: humble, passionate and dignified. We became friends instantly, I could definitely feel an emotional connection to this 'underdog' of a writer.

In 2005 I decided to go to Cuba.

I was totally ignorant of its story – apart from the obvious notions of Che Guevara, the Revolution and the Socialism – and I was ready to learn, as much as I could, about its people, its culture, its multi-faceted personality. I guess it's just my second nature, considering my job as an ethnographic documentarist.

As soon as I arrived I fell in love with the island, it didn't take that long. There is no other way to explain what I felt.

A strange, intriguing vibe impregnated every inch of it.

Cubans embraced me as one of their own and so I started my journey.

During my stay I managed to meet several people, artists of all different trades, which I interviewed in order to compile a feature documentary (The Silent Voices of Cuba) exploring the problems of freedom of expression in such climate. Little by little my knowledge gaps became smaller and smaller. I left wanting to know more.

So I went back again in 2006 to continue my work on the documentary and by then Cuba felt just like home. Its people were my people. My friends' families were my family.

At some point I managed to have a meeting with Mr Fullada, artistic director of the theatre El Sotano, part of the National theatre circuit. He offered me the chance to direct a play in his theatre as a 'Director Invitado' (invited director) and I immediately said yes. My only condition was that the play should be Lilian's Naufragio.

We got to an agreement and it all sounded incredibly exciting.

A few months later I received a call confirming the invitation which made me incredibly happy.

I literally dived into the play, meticulously preparing for rehearsals.

First thing first, I decided to slightly change the nature of the play; it was meant to be a story for a single couple, two young people facing separation.

But my impression was that in Cuba everyone's got some kind of experience with separation: one way or the other, everyone in Cuba has either a sibling, a family member, a friend or a partner who left them behind and fled the Island. I knew I had to make of this Play something more universal, that could talk about the far too many separations.

I came up with the idea to divide the script in five sections and for each section have a different couple. But all couples would be playing the same characters, picking up the text from where the previous couple had left it. The text wouldn't get cut nor interrupted, but simply shared by the five couples. The different actors would somehow morph into each other without the need to create any disruption. I didn't want the audience to have the time to think about the change of 'faces'. The audience had to keep following the script as it was recited.

I even scribbled down a rough design of the stage: two scantily furnished rooms divided by a separation wall in the middle. And the precious trick was going to be hidden in the separation wall: I imagined it as some sort of pyramidal section, slightly wider towards the back of the stage, giving enough room for actors to disappear without being noticed. On the left hand the back wall was going to be made of a see-through material, in order to create particular effects when lit the right way, revealing either stills from the play or the singer's intermissions.

I'd send my notes to Lilian and she'd respond with comments, critiques or approvals. It was a real team work and I was loving every second of it.

The months went by and I got ready for my trip: bought the ticket, rented a flat in La Habana only minutes away from the theatre, so I could be there first thing in the morning, loaded my camera and when the day came I flew over.

At my arrival I found 10 actors, chosen for me from various theatre companies, a few technicians, Lilian and an empty theatre.

We had a first meeting, where I told the actors and the crew we would be on stage in three weeks time. A couple of them called me 'loco' and 'capitalista' and stormed out of the theatre ranting away. I found it amusing and disturbing at the same time. I was told in that occasion that in Cuba the average time for preparation of a play can vary between 6 and 9 months... Now I could understand their shock!

But I knew I would win them back, little by little, persevering and working hard.

I paired up the actors – I needed 5 couples - and we began the rehearsals.

I used my very own particular method, which I call 'mnemonic space awareness', where the actors are told to learn their lines and at the same time they're shown the movements on stage as they rehearse, pointing out certain key positions corresponding to precise key words, creating special and durable mental connections.

Doing so the actors unconsciously linked their movements to their lines, leaving barely no room for mistakes.

After only one week they were already reciting the whole play, back to back, movements included. They couldn't believe it: they came to me with apologies and words of appreciation for such novelty way of doing theatre.

I was ever so happy that they could finally see the light, I knew I had to keep my faith alive!

Another contentious point came from the duration I fixed for the play. Since the very beginning I told them the show should last no more, no less than 70 minutes. They looked at me as if I was bipolar... But I did explain to them that as I transferred the playwright on Final Draft, the software I use to write my films, I knew exactly how long the play would have been; so I kept a stopwatch during rehearsals timing each single performance, in order to make sure they wouldn't slow down or even simply change the rhythm established by me.

The work was advancing incredibly well, the actors were by then my best friends: I managed in a very short time to gain their respect and they were nothing but happy to work with me.

I got a musical director involved, a very special and talented musician, Bertha Elena Solrzano; with

her and a great singer, Beverly Mojena, I spent nights in recording studios preparing the music score for the play. I also spent time with both the scenographer and the lighting technician in order for everything to be perfect. They came up with incredible idea on how to recreate a typical Cuban studio apartment with... well, practically nothing! We had not received any help so far. We kept looking for materials as we went. Everyone was working at full steam.

But it was not all gold... Obviously each day was a struggle for me: having to put up with Cuba's limits is not easy for someone used to the 'western' way of life, obsessed with punctuality and time frames. Soon I discovered the completely random concept of Cuban time and the impossibility to respect deadlines: people do not own a vehicle, public transportation is practically non-existing, only half of the households have a telephone, making simple communication rather impossible... Well, I learnt the hard way that I needed to relax and go with the Cuban flow.

When all seemed to proceed at speed, suddenly I started receiving strange, unsolicited visits in the theatre: people would come in to check on what I was doing, carefully observing my work, in all its details. I decided to pay no attention and kept working.

But I knew a little storm was brewing and my gut feelings were right: one day one of the actresses decided to pull out. I spoke to her and her reasons to leave were vague and suspicious. By then I knew someone was trying to sabotage us. And I also knew who it was... Just like in all the respectable thrillers, the murderer is someone from the family, he strikes in the dark, stabbing you in the back. But we didn't let it bring us down and quickly the actors managed to find a great replacement. We kept going like nothing ever happened. The new actress was a true star: I spent extra time with her and she learnt her part like a true pro and managed to get to speed with the rest of her colleagues.

But I knew the nightmare wasn't over yet, we all know that in all good thrillers the back-stubbing keeps going for a while till the protagonist is dead... More blows were about to come my way. At first the very person who invited me in the first place, came to me saying that my style wasn't really at standard with Cuba's theatre... Somehow he managed to say I was making TV trash on a stage... He said he should have never invited me in the first place.

The following day I was told, always by the same person, that my invitation never went through and that I shouldn't be there at all.

I honestly thought I was the victim of a prank.

Two weeks in, almost ready to go on stage and such news were broken to me.

The whole team was in shock. But I'm a fighter at heart and I decided I should keep fighting.

So I went to see the director of the National Arts Council.

Apparently she was told, by the spying observers, that I was preparing a reactionary piece, against the Revolution and its dogmas. They even told her I was 'bribing my actors', by buying them breakfast in the morning... I thought it was just an act of affection from my part towards my team but obviously I was terribly wrong...

I needed to explain myself: I was there at my own expenses, I wasn't giving anyone any money, I was there because I loved Cuba. I was there in peace, not war. I simply couldn't let them ruin so easily what I worked so hard for. Besides, my experience as an ethnographer taught me the importance of showing people the facts as they are, in all their complexity, without influencing, letting the audience make up their own mind in the end, without any prejudice.

I decided to go ahead. The actors obviously were with me: I have never seen such a bunch of gutsy, tough, courageous people in my life. We kept working as hard as we could, day and night, weekends included. We became a family: I knew their stories, their backgrounds, their dreams, their fears... It all became a big fat challenge and we all felt compelled to take it on.

We strongly opposed to the veto but they were too strong to defeat and unfortunately all we could get was a permission to show it to friends and families in a very private function. For one night only. At that point the challenge became real: we decided to invite the whole of Cuba's finest from the theatre world, we designed and printed flyers, we spread the word as quickly as we could. All done secretly, but we were confident people would be there to support us. We were all filled with adrenaline: that's what really kept us going.

Over the last week I decided to start filming rehearsals, as I needed to make sure all this hard work would go somehow onto records. Then it was time for the performance.

I was nervous to say the least. I prepared a speech, a polite and passionate one, that I gave from the stage before the show. I told everyone the reasons why I was there, the incredible experience we had. The fact that I was working voluntarily and free of charge – I even cited famous words from Che's famous speech. I told them of my love for Arts and Theatre. I told them about my love for Cuba and its people.

I also told everyone in the audience that no exchange of money ever took place with anyone involved. That in that theatre I found my friends, my new family, my artistic soul mates.

The theatre was packed, I could hear the rumble from behind the stage. The actors were emotional. The tension could really be cut with a knife.

So the play began. One couple after the other gave the best performance they could and the audience responded amazingly well. The music, the drums, the singer... It was a triumph! And I felt ever so happy for the team: that night, that 'stolen' lonely performance for what we called 'la obra fantasma', repaid all of us for a month of suffering and struggle, fighting for our freedom of expression, for our love of Theatre.

Some of the people in the audience came to congratulate us and I could see the pride in the way they talked about it: everyone had a very personal story to tell, everyone had experienced first-hand someone escaping abroad. The Play told the story of each individual present in the Theatre that night and they all re-lived the struggle of such experience, each in their own way.

To our greatest surprise, the very next day the news of our Play spread quickly on Cuba's Intranet. People couldn't stop talking about it. The rumours of what happened during that month were becoming a favourite topic for many.

I eventually left Cuba and said my goodbyes to my friends.

In the months that followed I learnt a few things that really filled me with joy: on the back of the show (even though in theory never happened) Lilian was awarded a few more credits by the Arts Council and eventually managed to graduate: her salary would now be increased, allowing her to treat her daughter to an ice-cream at Coppelia every now and then. But it wasn't all: her Play, 'Naufragio de la Fe' was awarded a very prestigious 'Virgilio Pineda' prize as best newcomer. I was very happy for her, she deserved it. Without her Play I couldn't have had such an intense, crazy, beautiful experience that forever changed my life...

Alex Madia Levi

