

HISPANIC VOICE OF AMERICA

Max Ferra's INTAR has lasted 25 years, bringing Latino playwrights' work to life

By **DON NELSEN**
Daily News Staff Writer

Founding an Off-Off-Broadway theater is a singular act of faith. You light your candle and pray fervently that no one will blow it out.

The candle-snuffers may be an audience that doesn't like what you do; landlords who, now that you have refurbished their run-down lofts and brought playgoers into a run-down neighborhood, suddenly find other urgent uses for your space; or a government or corporation that finds you are no longer worth supporting.

If you survive 25 years, it's a blessing if not a miracle.

Example of either one: Max Ferra's INTAR — formally, International Arts Relations, Inc. but known as INTAR Hispanic Arts Center — has reached the quarter-century mark and Ferra has produced about 100 plays and directed more than 40 under its banner.

The Cuban-born Ferra, who arrived here in 1959 with \$5 in his pants, begins his 25th season next Sunday with Luis Santeiro's comedy "The Lady From Havana" at his



THE CAST of "Lady from Havana," INTAR's new production, (l. to r.) Olga Merediz, Ali Troyano and Xonia Benguria

99-seater on Theater Row.

Unlike, say, the Puerto Rican Traveling Company, which offers bilingual versions of the same play within the same week, Ferra presents all his productions in English. Wait. This sounds as if he's losing a lot of Hispanic-speaking audiences.

"We don't produce plays in Spanish," says the producer-director, "because our mission is basically the development in the United States of Hispanic playwrights. We must develop [in English] this voice, which I consider the new voice in the U.S."

It's true that most Hispanic authors in the U.S. write in English. But what if the plays are written originally in Span-

ish by authors outside the U.S.? Ferra remains unfazed.

"We translate them," he says simply. "What we do is to commission a playwright from Spain or Latin America. Then we also commission one of our local playwrights to do the translation. It's all with the Spanish voice."

Apparently, playwright approval of the translation isn't

Ferra pauses a moment or two. "The voice. And I have the feeling that the biggest problem with INTAR is that our subject matter is so specific. The Hispanic voice is still not a power in this country."

Santeiro, also Cuban-born but Miami-bred, is a seven-time Emmy winner long associated with "Sesame Street."

"People ask me why I don't write in Spanish if I am writing about Hispanics. Well, I want to reach people in general but I also think that most young Hispanics, people in their '20s and '30s, speak English. If you do something in Spanish they're not likely to come, nor is the general population likely to see what you've done. If you're trying to build in this country the reality says that you have to write in English. Look at Neil Simon. He may be writing about growing up in Brighton Beach in a Jewish milieu but if he wrote in Yiddish, he wouldn't get anywhere."

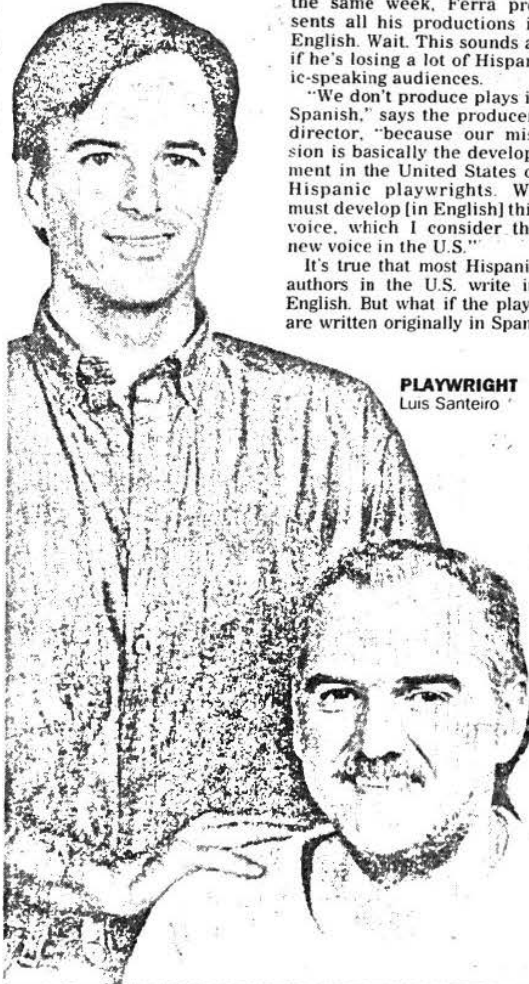
travel with it all over the U.S. I think INTAR is the source of this Hispanic voice in America and we should not end it with a little run on Theater Row."

Once you get Ferra's fire burning, you can't put it out.

"I half hope," he declares, "that in 10 years we could fill out a 1,200-seat house on Broadway. I really do have hope. What do you think? I'm in this business without hopes?"

"The blacks did it. Now you have a black play — 'The Piano Lesson' — that won a Pulitzer with black actors, black subject matter. Can you imagine the chances we have? We keep trying. Just like the President of the United States someday may be a Hispanic. At some point we're gonna be part of — I hate the word mainstream because it always sounds so commercial — someday we're gonna be part of the decision-making power in this country."

If you are going to hope, hope big.



PLAYWRIGHT
Luis Santeiro

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MAX FERRA

a barrier. Even the most famous authors defer to Ferra's judgment.

"Some of these Hispanic playwrights do not speak English, so how can they approve (the translation)?" Ferra asks without a hint of condescension. "I guess they just have to trust me. We've done a couple by (Fernando Arrabal, who doesn't speak enough English to know if it's a good translation. Even when we commissioned Mario Vargas Llosa he asked me if it was a good translation. I said yes, it's good. They really take my word for it. It's basically the voice of the playwright that to me is important."

PRODUCER
Max Ferra

CHECK IT OUT

GOOD LAUGHS

Charity doesn't always begin in the home. Tomorrow night, for instance, it begins at 8 p.m. at Caroline's at the Seaport — where a benefit for Citymeals-on-Wheels, which provides hot meals for elderly shut-ins, will be staged. "Saturday Night Live's" Kevin Nealon, "Batman's" Robert Wuhl, HBO's Bob Nelson and the Comedy Channel's Susan Kolinsky will perform. Tickets are a tax-deductible \$25 and are available by calling the club at (212) 233-4900.

— Hank Gallo