

# Offbeat play boosts Cuban American writer

Believable characters, plot in *Lady from Havana* crown the newest people's playwright

By DAISANN McLANE  
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NEW YORK — On this night, Luis Santeiro would fit right in at a party hosted by Oscar the Grouch, Ernie and Cookie Monster. A half hour before the curtain of his new play, *The Lady from Havana*, the Emmy-winning *Sesame Street* writer scoots around the lobby of off-Broadway's INTAR Hispanic American theater with the hyper energy of a cartoon character, greeting his friends with wide, Big Birdish hugs. Even though opening night was back a while ago, the Cuban American playwright still seems a bit anxious; he's probably anxious every night, you get the feeling. You wait to go over to him and smooth his feathers.

Then, right before showtime, the theater critic from The New York Times walks in.

He is blond, a head taller than Santeiro, has chiseled Anglo-Saxon features, and a waistline that indicates a life lived in utter ignorance of yuca, flan or *platanos maduros*. How will he react to Santeiro's sentimental, and very Cuban comedy about a feisty *abuela* (grandma) who reunites with her daughter in Miami after 20 years? Santeiro quietly slips into an empty seat in the back to await judgment.

But there's no problem. Luis Santeiro may draw his material from his Cuban American experience, but you don't have to be Cuban to understand his all-too-human characters. Or to get his jokes. By the end of the first act, the Times man, D.J. Bruckner, is leaning back and laughing with his mouth wide open. A few days later, he'll rave: "There is not a wasted line in *The Lady From Havana*, and the author's good humor and warm feeling for his characters suffuses the cast and flows right out into the audience."

The 43-year-old Santeiro is an established TV writer with several Emmys to his credit — three for *Sesame Street*, and one more for *¿Qué Pasa, U.S.A.?*, the groundbreaking bilingual sitcom for public television produced by Miami's WPBT-Channel 2, for which he wrote in the '70s. But he only made the move to writing for the stage in 1985. (His last play, *Mixed Blessings*, a Latinization of Moliere's *Tartuffe*, was commissioned by, and presented at, the Coconut Grove Playhouse in 1989. *Lady From Havana* ends its monthlong run today. There are no plans to bring it to South Florida.)

The New York Times' unabashed praise for *The Lady From Havana* is an important boost to his stature as a playwright, and a signal to the cliquish, super-competitive New York theater world that Santeiro is somebody to watch.

That has been known for some time by Santeiro's Cuban American colleagues in theater and film. "His growth from comedy writer to playwright over the last five years has been tremendous," enthuses INTAR's artistic director (and *Lady From Havana* director) Max Ferra. (INTAR stands for International Artistic Rela-



LUIS SANTEIRO: Play by Emmy-winning *Sesame Street* writer is well received in New York.

tions.) New York-based screenwriter/producer Manuel Arce adds, "He's going to do for our humor what Jewish-American playwrights did for theirs a generation ago. Luis Santeiro is our Neil Simon."

## Lovable oddballs

Santeiro's characters, much like Simon's, are lovable oddballs. They toss off one-liners while stumbling through improbable comic situations. Though they speak mostly English, they are quintessentially Cuban. Through these ethnic archetypes, Santeiro makes fun of his own culture, but with a gentle, sympathetic hand.

"Keeping it funny and light is what Luis does like nobody else," says Jose Bahamonde, who worked for four years with Santeiro as producer and writer of *¿Qué Pasa, U.S.A.?* "His humor is never demaning, and he lifts his characters beyond stereotype."

In his new play, "the lady from Havana" is Señora Beba, a grand Cuban dame pushing 80 who, with her maid Zoila, finally escapes Havana in 1980 to join her daughter Marita in Miami. From the moment Beba struts into Marita's living room with her walking stick, the comic clash of generations and cultures begins.

Beba is ravenous for chocolates, ice cream, milk, Jell-O — "After 20 years of ration cards, we did not come here to starve." But her Americanized daughter, battling the bulge, keeps a temptation-free fridge stocked only with Weight Watchers and Lean Cuisine.

Marita imagines that her restless, demanding mama will quickly settle down to an exile of *telenovelas* and sleeping till noon. The indomitable Beba, however, has other ideas. It seems that the real reason Beba avoided

leaving Cuba for so long is because she was the black market queen of Havana; she kept illegal milk cows in her backyard and was godmother to the neighborhood.

And now . . . Now she's itchy to turn her hustling talents loose in capitalist Miami. She wants to start a business. Marita, shocked, refuses to let her. Beba counters angrily, "I had more freedom in Castro's Cuba than I do in your house!" It seems at first as if stubborn mother and yuca (young upscale Cuban American) daughter will never reach an understanding, but after a series of witty, poignant episodes, they do.

In the second act, 10 years later, Beba is dead and three of her lady friends are holding the traditional all-night vigil at the funeral parlor. They gossip, pray, trade complaints and shopping tips, reminisce. And they exchange catty, telling remarks about each other, and Beba — whose life in exile, it turns out, was not an entirely happy one. In Santeiro's dead-on caricature of elderly Cuban women, every other line is a zinger — yet his characters never seem ugly or cynical. When the play ends with the three women singing the weepy Cuban chestnut *¿Y tú, qué has hecho?* ("And what have you done?"), there's an echo from the New York audience. Everyone who knows the song is singing along.

## Capturing reality

"I have a great affection for these people I write about," Santeiro says. Sitting in the living room of his warm, Oriental-carpeted apartment in midtown Manhattan, the playwright seems every bit as energetic as he was in the INTAR lobby. He speaks unaccented English to a Spanish beat, so fast that words practically bubble from his mouth. He explains that all of his characters are drawn from people he knows — Señora Beba, for example, is his grandmother.

"If it weren't for being Cuban . . . I don't know what I'd write about. I suppose if somebody gave me a commission, I could do something else. But it's not as interesting to me as exploring the whole psyche of this group who came over here and is still so obsessed with their identity of being Cuban."

Santeiro's ear for the pretensions and foibles of his fellow exiles has perfect pitch. He's a careful, balanced observer. He doesn't seem as bound up in the politics and emotions that color the work of so many other Cuban American writers. Perhaps that's because he left Cuba when he was 12 — old enough to have memories, young enough to leave them behind without pain.

"I write with humor and not with heaviness or meanness, and maybe it's because I have no hatred," he muses. "I'm at peace with my past."

He grew up in the fashionable Vedado section of Havana, scion of a well-connected, well-to-do family (his great-grandfather was Gerardo Machado, Cuba's president in the 1920s; his family owned the Crusellas company, a Cuban version of Proctor & Gamble).

"I lived a pretty sheltered existence," he says. "If I'd stayed in Cuba, my life would have been more bourgeois than here." In 1960, the family moved to Miami, where Santeiro finished his education at Columbus High. After graduation, perhaps inspired by his uncle, director Ramon Santeiro, who used to hang out at New York's Actors Studio with Marlon Brando between script assignments for the Crusellas-sponsored soap operas, Santeiro went to film school at Syracuse University.

Following graduation, he held down a series of odd jobs — documentary cinematographer, Miami parole officer, writer of a Spanish-language children's show for a Texas PBS station. Then, in 1975, he applied, and was hired for *¿Qué Pasa?*, which is still playing in reruns on many public television stations. More important than his Emmy, it was while working on *¿Qué Pasa?* that Santeiro discovered and honed his natural comedy talent.

## Beginning writer

When the show ended, Santeiro made the next logical move — to L.A. — and hit a wall. "The Hollywood attitude about Hispanics is 'Give me the downtrodden brown man.' And I was writing about middle-class Cubans. My Hispanics could be any average family, like the blacks on the Cosby show. But producers wanted the working class Chicano thing."

After writing an unsuccessful pilot for Norman Lear, Santeiro went back to New York to write for *Sesame Street* where he continues to work as a staff writer. This is how the playwright pays the rent.

"Luis has a wonderful, lopsided, bizarre humor," enthuses *Sesame Street*'s producer Lisa Simon, who has worked with Santeiro on the classic children's show since 1980. Simon describes one of Santeiro's most bizarre, nearly legendary *Sesame* bits — a comedy riff on the *Farmer in The Dell*. At the end, when "the cheese stands alone," *Sesame*'s Telly Monster, overcome with compassion for the lonely cheese, decides to befriend it and take it around town . . . For a cheesy haircut, out to buy a cheesy suit . . . Says Simon, "It was the strangest show we've run in 22 years."

Santeiro's empathy for children — who are, after all, exiles trapped in a world populated by grown-ups who don't always speak their language — soon earned him a place at the top of the *Sesame Street* writing staff. But he missed writing for adults, and that led him to Ferra's INTAR Hispanic American Arts Center in 1986.

On his spare evenings, Santeiro sat in on workshops and went to readings. After a few years of hanging out there, he brought Ferra a first draft of *Our Lady of the Tortilla*, a "generic Hispanic" comedy based on a true story. With Ferra's enthusiastic support, Santeiro worked for a year on the play. (It was finally produced in 1989 in Los Angeles.) Santeiro also began to write *Mixed Blessings*, which took up the themes and characters he'd begun to explore in *¿Qué Pasa?*

"Luis is a master of the characters who are the archetypes of our exile," says Ferra, who believes that if Santeiro had stayed in Cuba he would have become a master of the Cuban traditional slapstick comedy, the *teatro vernáculo*. "The *vernáculo* took typical, bigger than life Havana street characters — the *mulata*, the Chinaman, the Spaniard, the black man — and used them to make fun of society and its foibles," Ferra explains. "Luis does a similar thing, but with typical Miami Cubans. He's created a *teatro vernáculo* of our exile . . . Of course, when the exile ceases to exist, these characters will cease to exist."

What will happen then to Santeiro's cast of cranky *abuelas*, uppity yucas and feisty maids? Santeiro, eyes sparkling, says he's looking forward to watching the next act of the exile theater unfold — and that he'll be taking notes.

"It's going to be very interesting," he says.