

Our man praises 'Havana'



**BY
CLIVE
BARNES**

It is difficult to say which seems the more surprising — that the INTAR Hispanic Arts Center is now just starting its 25th anniversary season, or that Fidel Castro's revolution in Cuba is now rather more than 30 years old.

Luis Santeiro's very attractive and piquantly funny comedy "The Lady from Havana" commemorates both events — by marking the beginning of INTAR's silver jubilee season at its Mainstage Theater, and taking as its subject Cuban exiles in Miami Beach 30 years after the revolution.

Marita left Cuba, with her family, just after Castro took over, and now, with her grown-up children and recently separated husband, she has found a new life for herself in the United States.

But all this time she has been trying to persuade her mother — an aristocratic grand dame of a school so old it has had to learn new lessons — to leave Cuba and join her in Florida. The Cuban government — anxious to requisition her house — would, it seems, be only too glad to get rid of her, but, stubborn and willful, she has stuck it out.

Now at last she has given in, and come to live with her daughter, bringing with her, remarkably enough from Castro's Cuba, her personal, even if in communist terms, unofficial, maid Zoila.



FUNNY 'LADY': Olga Merediz portrays a Cuban exile.

OFF-B'WAY review

America is not quite what Mama expected — in Cuba she had become a sort of "queen of the black market," adept at survival, and acting as a "guardian angel" to all and sundry. Here she has no real occupation — except for the "three Ts" that have come to fill her life: the telephone, the television and the toilet.

Slowly — as the act ends — we can see the process of adjustment and assimilation, for both Mama and Zoila, beginning to assert itself. And in the second act — 10 years in the future — it is certainly over.

Set in a funeral home, at first (with all three of the original actresses assuming quite different roles) it seems as though it has nothing to do with what has gone before, until we realize that the

body in the unseen casket is none other than the imperious Mama — and we now have a replay of the last 10 years through fresh, if rather cynical, eyes.

The play's distinct charm lies in its six characters, and the way they explore family relationships and the perils, pains and joys of exile. These people, even if wildly accentuated for comedic purpose, ring true and ring beautifully absurd.

The play, with a simple setting in Florida-camp by Campbell Baird, has been neatly directed by Max Ferra, INTAR's artistic director, and the three actresses, Olga Merediz, Alina Troyano and, particularly Xonia Benguria as both the exiled grand dame and a cabaret singer at her funeral, are wittily convincing.

Mainstage Theater, 420 W. 42nd St., (212) 279-4200.