

Review/Theater

Getting to Like Some Havana Fugitives

By D. J. R. BRUCKNER

Not exile, poverty, loneliness or age, not even death can defeat the indomitable women of Luis Santeiro's new comedy, "The Lady From Havana," at the Intar Theater.

Mr. Santeiro, who has won many awards for his writing for "Sesame Street" on television, first tried his hand at theater only three years ago, with a faltering comedy about a family finding the image of the Virgin Mary on a tortilla.

He has grown a great deal in a short time. There is not a wasted line in "The Lady From Havana," and the author's good humor and warm feelings for his characters suffuses the cast and flows right out into the audience.

Thirty years after the Cuban revolution a woman in her 70's finally escapes and arrives at the Miami home of her daughter, bringing with her a young woman who had been her maid before the old woman turned her into a subverter of good socialist order. It turns out, in a series of hilarious revelations, that this grande dame had become the queen of the black market in Havana. And, to her daughter's growing horror, she quickly learns how to adapt her royally larcenous methods to a capitalist society.

The Lady From Havana

By Luis Santeiro; directed by Max Ferra; set and costume design, Campbell Baird; lighting design, Debra Dumas; sound design, Fox/Perla Ltd.; musical arrangements, Fernando Rivas; hair and makeup design, Bobby Miller. Presented by Intar Hispanic American Arts Center, Mr. Ferra, artistic director; Eva Brune, managing director. At 420 West 42d Street.

Marita/Rosa..... Olga Merediz
Mama/Gloria..... Xonia Benguria
Zoila/Isabel..... Alina Troyano

Of course, mother and daughter find they have much less in common than they expected and they become formidable foes in family combat despite the former maid's tireless efforts at peacemaking. The playwright keeps all this lighter than air. The anger of the characters is real and so are their verbal blows, but Mr. Santeiro, keeping his eye steadfastly on the absurdity of the human condition, makes it all ridiculous.

Evidently enjoying that kind of challenge, he sets his second act in a funeral home. Ten years have passed. The old woman has died and three friends from Havana days who are also exiles in Miami have come to her wake.

This has to be one of the funniest funerals ever staged. As these women pray, take pokes at one another with mild and delicious malice, and complain about the air-conditioning — "the young ones make it a social occasion and just come and leave; it's the old ones who really love the dead and stay all night who get pneumonia" — their remembrances reveal a story that unfolds the one told in the first act and gives it depth. At the end their recitation of the rosary is overwhelmed by their memories and prayer gives way to a marvelous song they sing, about an old tree remembering a young woman who carved her name on it decades ago.

Max Ferra's direction of this fine comic piece is as taut and delicate as Mr. Santeiro's writing. And Olga Merediz, Xonia Benguria and Alina Troyano, each taking two roles, not only take obvious delight in their characters but set up a certain resonance by occasionally sharing with the audience their amusement in upstaging one another.

Ms. Benguria, who plays the lady from Havana in Act I and a friend who was once a nightclub singer in Act II, has a great gift for comedy. With a glance, a shrug, an arched eyebrow, the movement of a hip, the very slightest misstep, she can extort laughter, and her peeves and resentments are monumentally ridiculous.