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A bridge over the sorrows of Cubans from Cuba and Miami

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It started barely two weeks ago, and it lasted for 10 days.

The Herald wrote three articles about it, and yet it never raised an eyebrow among those who only a short time ago could have torn it asunder.

It drew crowds, but the only loud voices heard were bravos. It was a cultural event that turned into a masterful stroke of diplomacy. It was an unforgettable and touching experience, not for what it presented on stage but for what transpired before and after each play.

Twenty-two Cuban actors, directors and authors came to Miami to present their art at the International Festival of Monologues. Cubans from Cuba. More than a baseball team; more than a soccer team. And Cubans in Miami cheered. Including me, who after 40 years away from the island found myself with a gulp in my throat and watery eyes as the wonderful actress on one of the plays took a standing ovation that wouldn't stop.

She had tears in her eyes, too. Cuban Miami, the community that the Castro government calls "worms" and "the Cuban mafia," was extending a warm, embracing welcome to her.

In that brief moment, when emotions took the best part of her and me, I realized how far we have come, and how, right under the eyes of both governments, the invisible barrier that has separated our communities for four decades is crumbling.

Leave it to the arts to be the hammer that deals that fatal blow to this political conundrum. For these brief days in May, Cubans from both sides of the Florida Straits bonded. As if the ones from over there were saying, "Look at me, I am not so bad for having stayed behind." As if the ones from over here were begging to be recognized as open-minded and inclusive.

It was clear that some in the audience knew the Cubans from before. At the Florida International University theater, where the opening weekend took place, a young man, perhaps in his mid-20s, emotionally embraced a white-haired woman, probably in her 60s. He was living here; she had been his theater teacher in Cuba, where she still lives. Their affection for each other was evident, as was

the lack of rancor and finger-pointing.

It was a scene repeated often during the festival. Former colleagues, peers, students and teachers reconnected with a warmth that made me jealous of not having a friend in the Cuban group. New friendships were cast.

Something I never do, on the fourth day of the festival, I approached the actress who had impressed me so and introduced myself as The Herald critic who had reviewed her performance. Timid at first, she extended her hand, and wanted me to meet the author of the play, too. The author, a small, white-bearded 70-something man who looks like a figure in a Greco painting, kissed me on the cheek and told me they had gathered several issues of The Herald to send to Cuba so that their friends could read the review. We all kissed when we saw each other in subsequent performances.

Here you have, on one side, the Cuban government denying visas to Herald reporters, and on the other, a short article in the inside pages of the paper making its way to Cuban readers. I teamed that the festival was adding a performance of the play I loved so much. A friend in Miami had received an e-mail from a friend in Cuba who, of course, was told by a member of the Cuban troupe in Miami. Repressive measures can't stop this flow now.

After 10 days of kisses, embraces and emotional tears, what struck me most about the theater event is the banality of trying to keep our communities split. I could see the image of the two aged leaders -- one fictional, Uncle Sam, the other very much alive, Fidel Castro -- pointing fingers at each other. And while they continue to argue, Cubans there and here warming up to a full reunification of our divided peoples.

Theater did just that. And as much as both sides refuse to build a bridge between our two shores, the title of the play I loved says it best: Las penas saben nadar (Sorrows know how to swim).

So does reconciliation.

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