



METRO

“Sarraín has a kind of quiet courage. He’s a quiet giant.”

Fair Weather Freedom Fighters

The Latin Grammys got the headlines, but brave and bruised theater director Alberto Sarraín got the honors

BY CELESTE FRASER DELGADO

The recent press conference announcing Miami as the site of this year’s Latin Grammys was a star-studded celebration of the community’s newfound respect for the First Amendment. Michael Greene, CEO of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences (NARAS), led Latin-music-industry luminaries in calling on Miami “to be a tolerant example to our neighbors, who we

also pray someday will have those same freedoms and those same rights.” Emilio Estefan, Pablo Montero, José José, Luis Enrique, and Shakira joined the chorus extolling freedom of expression. Even Miami-Dade Mayor Alex Penelas and Jorge Mas Santos, chairman of the Cuban American National Foundation, chimed in.

But none of these influential locals stepped up for freedom of speech last year when the first Latin Grammys ceremony went west to Los Angeles. Instead they waited in the wings while the American Civil Liberties Union represented three arts groups (Miami Light Project, GableStage, and Teatro La Ma Teodora) and two music impresarios (Debbie Ohanian and Hugo Cancio) in a challenge to the county’s so-called Cuba ordinance. The ordinance, which prohibited the use of county funds or facilities to present Cuban artists and their affiliates, was the legal obstacle that kept the Latin Grammys out of Miami. On May 16, 2000, U.S. District Judge Federico Moreno temporarily suspended the county’s requirement that arts groups sign an affidavit foreshadowing any direct or indirect commerce with island nationals as a condition for receiving county funds or using county facilities. One month later the U.S. Supreme Court struck down similar legislation in Massachusetts aimed at prohibiting business with the authoritarian government of Myanmar, formerly Burma. At that time Mayor Penelas told the *Miami Herald* he was “disappointed with today’s decision.”

While the media and NARAS continue to cite the Supreme Court’s Massachusetts ruling as the action that doomed the county’s Cuba ordinance, John de Leon, president of the ACLU’s Greater Miami Chapter, strongly disagrees. “Had it not been for the ACLU challenge on behalf of the plaintiffs in [the Miami-Dade] lawsuit,” he says, “the Latin Grammys would not be in Miami this year.” The local law, de Leon explains, would not have been rescinded automatically as a result of the Supreme Court decision. “The ordinance would have been still on the books and in effect until somebody challenged it or until the county attorney would have taken the initiative to strike the ordinance,” he says. It was

necessary for Judge Moreno, presiding over the ACLU challenge, to enter an order declaring the Cuba ordinance unconstitutional. “Can I make it any clearer?” asks de Leon emphatically. “Had it not been for [ACLU lawyers] Bruce Rogow and Beverly Pohl’s challenge brought by these plaintiffs, the Latin Grammys would not be in Miami.”

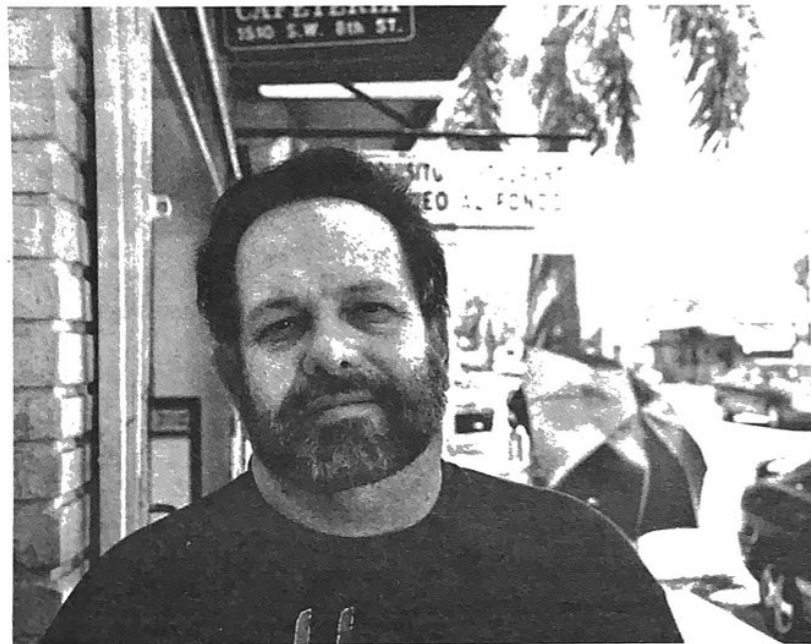
Although the Miami arts groups and promoters who brought suit have not been recognized by local media for their role in opening the city to the Latin Grammys, on March 23 a respected human-rights organization named one of those plaintiffs, Alberto Sarraín, a winner of the 2001 PEN/Newman’s Own First Amendment Award. The PEN award honors “an individual who has fought courageously, against adversity, to safeguard the First Amendment right to freedom of expression as it applies to the written word wherever it may be threatened.” For the past nine years, the First Amendment award has been presented by the PEN American Center, one of 129 autonomous centers in 90 countries affiliated with PEN International, an organization founded in Europe in 1921 specifically to safeguard freedom of expression and the flow of the written word across national borders. PEN International has been instrumental in freeing from prison intellectual heavyweights such as Arthur Koestler, Vaclav Havel, Irina Ratushinskaya, and Wole Soyinka.

With the First Amendment Award, the PEN American Center also recognizes people they call “ordinary heroes.” This year Sarraín, director of Teatro La Ma Teodora, shares the honor with Deloris Wilson, a Louisiana high school librarian who refused an order to remove all books with sexual content from the school library.

Sarraín was nominated by the ACLU, singled out from the other plaintiffs in the Cuba ordinance case because, as a Cuban-exile artist, he has suffered the gravest consequences for his part in the litigation. Most notably, as a result of the court challenge and his plans to present a drama by a Cuban playwright, he was ejected from the Manuel Artime Theater in Little Havana, a City of Miami facility where Teatro La Ma Teodora had performed since 1995. (Sarraín was given the boot by Pedro Pablo Peña, who leases the theater from the city.) “All the plaintiffs are champions,” says de Leon, “but Sarraín has a kind of quiet courage. He’s a quiet giant.”

El Nuevo-Herald columnist Belkys Cuza Male was less impressed. In an April 1 column titled “Prizes and Hatred,” she complained: “The PEN Club is awarding Alberto Sarraín for his best production, the one where the director of La Ma Teodora assumes the role of **continued on page 15**

Alberto Sarraín challenges Miami to be more than simply tolerant



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victim. The correct thing to do is applaud and laugh at this comedy." The widow of Heberto Padilla, a renowned poet whose exile from Cuba was facilitated by PEN International, Cuza Male expresses surprise that PEN could also promote Sarrain's freedom to present works by Cuban playwrights. "What heroism can there be," she wonders, "in litigating against the county in order to overturn the ordinance that prohibits giving funds to those who promote artists from Cuba?"

By contrast Larry Siems, director of the PEN American Center's Freedom to Write programs, sees the two struggles as inextricably linked. In a letter responding to Cuza Male's column NOT YET PUBLISHED, Siems describes PEN American Center's ongoing efforts on behalf of 24 writers currently being persecuted in Cuba. "In our advocacy work," Siems says from his New York office, "we are always maintaining that if Cuba is violating that right, it puts us in a difficult position if we are seen as not fully abiding by that principle ourselves. It's seen as inconsistent to

"The First Amendment exists to protect minority points of view even in the face of strong consensus to the contrary."

send the message that in Cuba you can't persecute certain artists, but here in the United States our government can decide who will be funded based on the content of their art." Siems goes on to say that the right to freedom of expression must be protected, especially in cases where it is not a dictator but the sentiment of the majority in a community that opposes free expression. "The First Amendment," he notes, "exists to protect minority points of view even in the face of strong consensus to the contrary."

Soon after being recognized at a PEN American Center gala in New York City on April 23, Sarrain will challenge the local consensus once again. While many of Miami's Latin-Grammy boosters are gambling that no Cuban artists will actually perform in this year's show, Teatro La Ma Teodora is bringing 23 Cuban artists to Miami to participate in the First International Monologue Festival. Sarrain believes the appreciative audiences La Ma Teodora has drawn to plays by Cuban authors over the past five years bodes well for the reception the community will give to this first-ever encounter of thespians from across the Cuban diaspora. "The exiles in Miami were more tolerant than we had thought," he observes. "I mean tolerance not as weakness but as altruism. There is a space where the people from here and the people from there spoke in the same language."

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