

Trickle of Arts Exchanges Builds on Cubans' Bonds

Nation's Diaspora Reaches Out on Stage

By VICTORIA BURNETT

HAVANA — The venue is undistinguished: a cramped theater tucked beneath a downtown apartment block. Tickets cost just five Cuban pesos, or 23 cents. The set, for want of wood, is a beautiful creation of string.

Yet in the world of Cuban theater, the production of "Blind Mouth Singing" — written and directed by Cuban-Americans — is a rare and momentous event. Only a handful of artists from the Cuban diaspora have staged plays here on the island since the United States severed ties with Cuba in 1961.

"It's difficult to overstate the emotional impact it's had on me and the symbolic importance it has for relations between Miami and Havana," said the playwright, Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas, who was in the Cuban capital for the opening at the 182-seat Basement Theater this month.

Despite little apparent progress in diplomatic relations between Cuba and the United States since President Obama took office, members of the Cuban arts community say more musicians, artists, actors and writers are traveling between the two countries than during George W. Bush's presidency.

In June, Silvio Rodríguez, the Cuban songwriter, played a concert at Carnegie Hall, 30 years after his last visit to the United States; and Alicia Alonso, the legendary director of the National Ballet of Cuba, visited New York as part of celebrations for her 90th birthday.

Things have picked up, too, in the theater community. Two Cuban theater groups, Teatro Buendía and Teatro El Público, are performing this month in the United States as part of theater festivals in Chicago and Miami. In March, a group of Cuban playwrights and designers attended a Cuban theater conference at the University of Miami.

The exchanges follow a lull in cultural swaps that began around 2003, when the Bush administration tightened restrictions on travel to Cuba and permits for cultural and educational encounters became elusive.

Lillian Manzor, director of the Cuban Theater Digital Archive at the University of Miami, said visas for cultural purposes were flowing once more. "Cubans from the island are coming to the U.S. easier — not only musicians, but whole theater groups, and academics also," she said. "It's a cause for optimism."

"Blind Mouth Singing," the play being performed here, is set deep in the fecund but ruthless Caribbean countryside. Reiderico, the teenage protagonist, has an imaginary friend, Lucero, who lives down a well but wants to escape and live in the capital. Reiderico is bullied by his bitter mother and boorish brother, but has an ally in a sweet, restive aunt named Bolivia.

The play deals with familiar Cuban themes: painful longing, fractured identity and ambivalence about leaving to seek a new life. It is dedicated to Reinaldo Arenas, the barred, gay Cuban writer who fled to the United States in 1980, and it is inspired by his first novel, "Singing From the Well," about a child who escapes the torment of his brutal family through fantasy.

Mr. Cortiñas, who was born in Miami, writes his scripts in English with a poetry drawn from his mother tongue. "Blind Mouth Singing" has also been produced in New York and Chicago.

"The idea of parting, of seeking new horizons, that's very Cuban," said Henry Labrada, 18, a dance student who saw the play here this month. "Theater is the perfect medium for us to understand that being from here, being from there, we share the same sensibility."

Ms. Manzor said collaborations like "Blind Mouth Singing" nurtured a growing consensus across the Florida Straits that the diaspora's cultural output formed part of the Cuban scene.

For decades after the 1959 revolution that swept Fidel Castro to power, the official canon shunned the work of Cubans who left the island. But that position has gradually shifted.

"Every work by a Cuban dramatist, no matter where in the world it is done, forms part of Cuban theater," said Gerardo Fullea León, head of the Havana-based Rita Montaner Theater Company, which produced the play. "A person's transitory circumstance is not what defines



Yanell Gómez, a Cuban actress, rehearsing "Blind Mouth Singing" in Havana this month. The bare-bones play was a rare Cuban-American production in Cuba.

rehearsing a play, had four weeks. Two actors defected to Europe before rehearsals began, and another left the theater to become a practitioner of Santería, a religion popular in Cuba.

A DVD player that was part of the sound design was seized by Cuban customs. There was no wood to build the house that is the centerpiece of the set, so it was redesigned at the last minute using string that Mr. Cacheiro had brought from the United States.

But Mr. Cacheiro cannot wait to do it all again. "These processes are vital," he said. "For me, they're steps towards ending the embargo."

He and Mr. Fullea have plans to bring an all-American play to the Cuban capital. He is confident that, this time, it will not take a decade. "We are living in different times, and I think projects like this will happen much more quickly," Mr. Cacheiro said. "There's a change in the wind."

their identity. The same applies with art."

The process of producing "Blind Mouth Singing" began in 1999, when Mr. Fullea invited a Cuban-American director, Jorge Luis Cacheiro, to put on a play.

For years, the project stalled because Mr. Cacheiro could not get financing in the United States.

Then in 2008, Mr. Cacheiro received about \$7,500 in grants for travel expenses from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the

Theater Communications Group and Montclair State University in New Jersey, where he teaches.

Even with the money in place, putting on the show was no picnic. The Cuban cast, which would normally spend several months