

Letters from Cuba

1898

Letters from Cuba premiered at the Signature Theatre Company, 424 West 42nd Street, New York City, on February 20, 2000.

CAST

LUIS, Chris De Oni
 FRAN, Tai Jimenez
 MARC, Matthew Floyd Miller
 JOSEPH, Peter Starrett
 JERRY/GERARDO, Peter Van Wagner
 ENRIQUE, Rick Wasserman

Signature Theatre Company, *Producer*
 James Houghton, *Artistic Director*
 Bruce E. Whitacre, *Managing Director*

Maria Irene Fornes, *Director*

Donald Eastman, *Set Designer*
 Teresa Snider-Stein, *Costume Designer*
 Matthew Fry, *Lighting Designer*
 Kurt B. Kellenberger, *Sound Designer*

The play takes place simultaneously in New York City and Cuba. The dominant part of the set is an apartment in New York. The apartment is enclosed by two walls stage right and left. The stage right wall has two windows, and the stage left wall has a panel that appears to be a part of the wall but can open. There is a small alcove upstage center. The stage right wall of the alcove has a "doggie door"—the bottom half of the wall can open. There are two doors on either side of the alcove on the upstage wall. The stage right door leads to a hallway and the stage left door leads to an offstage bedroom. Between the alcove and the stage left door is an airshaft flanked by two windows. There are two Japanese-style futons on the floor, one against each wall stage right and left. There is a drafting table downstage left against the wall, and two chairs that flank the alcove.

Above the apartment is "Cuba." Cuba is a rooftop represented by a two-foot high wall extending across the stage above the apartment. Actors enter and exit via a staircase upstage left, so that they can be seen as they reach the top of the stairs. There is a rope ladder stage right that extends down to the stage floor behind the New York apartment. It is also possible to cross over the wall and walk onto the ceiling over the alcove in the New York apartment.

In the apartment, there is a breakfast picnic for three set up on a mat center stage.

Scene 1

As the lights come up, JOSEPH and MARC are onstage making final preparations for breakfast.

MARC: I was thinking ... how does one write a poem?

JOSEPH: Oh my God. How does one write a poem?

MARC: A good poem.

JOSEPH: You want to write a good poem?

MARC: Yes, wouldn't you?

JOSEPH: Yes.

Pause.

MARC: What is a good poem?

JOSEPH: I'll tell you what is a good poem.

“Sahara Dies”

Until the desert knows:
That water grows
His sands suffice.
But let him once suspect
that Caspian fact.
Sahara dies.

—Emily Dickinson

MARC: My God.

JOSEPH: I’ve been writing poetry. And I’ve been saying words in my head to see if word spirits would come, like move in, like to join other words that were there. If they would do that then, to see if they would come in to form a poem. I think that’s how poems get written. I think that’s how difficult things get done. We can’t really do them. We can’t do difficult things. We can do easy things. But the difficult ones come to us by themselves. It’s just that to learn to listen to them is difficult. We just have to learn to listen and to let them come in easy as if the words would come out by themselves because they want to make a poem. Because they desire to make a poem. As if words had desires, and they want to join other words to express something ... of beauty or longing or despair.

You’d like to write a poem.

MARC: Yes.

JOSEPH: Have you?

MARC: Yes. I tried.

JOSEPH: And ... was it good?

MARC: Yes, it was good.

JOSEPH: Can I read your poetry?

MARC: You want to read my poetry?

JOSEPH: Yeah, I want to read it.

MARC: I don’t know.

JOSEPH: You don’t know what?

MARC: No.

JOSEPH: Did you write one poem, or did you write many poems?

MARC: If you write one, you can write many.

MARC puts the rose in his teeth and dances as Cuban music begins to play. FRAN enters and the three sit down to breakfast as lights crossfade to Cuba.

Scene 2

LUIS sits on the wall and reads a letter he has written.

LUIS: Dear Francisquita,

In spite of my long silence, you’ve been in my mind. I have not written because nothing is very interesting in my life. I wrote you three weeks ago and then 15 days ago.

Each time I looked at the letter, I felt embarrassed.
I tried to be cheerful, but it sounded insincere.
Last week I visited Titi. She’s very well.

In your last letter, you told me that you went to the Metropolitan Museum with a friend and imagined I was there looking at the paintings with you. What a lovely thought. I wish I had been there with you.

Your loving brother,
Luis

Scene 3

New York. MARC, JOSEPH, and FRAN clean up the breakfast picnic.

MARC: I think we should value life.

JOSEPH: What did you say?

MARC: I was thinking there are two things. One first. Then the other. First there’s nothing. Then there’s life. Then, it stops. And that’s it. That’s death. It is nothing again.

JOSEPH: Too many people believe in the afterlife for it to be false.

MARC: Well, but has anyone seen it, been there? Have any of them been there?

JOSEPH: A lot of them have. They say they have.

MARC: I wrote a poem about life.

Death is a fact.
 First you're alive, then you're dead.
 You can't deny that because you can't.
 You value life because it's it.
 Be tender to it.
 Don't be demanding.
 Don't be clumsy with it.
 Be appreciative.
 Do the best you can.
 Don't go around saying
 that things are like this
 and things are like that,
 complaining.
 Worship it as one would worship
 an angel that comes in through the window
 and is sitting there in your room.
 Or sits on your lap.

Angels do sit on peoples' laps
 when they need to advise you,
 They sit quietly,
 so don't start getting up
 and doing something you think is important and is not.

Life is tender as an infant.
 It's like a newborn baby.
 Even tender like a newborn bird. As frail as that.
 We expect things from it.
 But it's us who have to take care of it.
 We ask it to do things for us.
 But we should do things for it.

JOSEPH: Yes.

MARC: That's what I think.

JOSEPH: Yes.

MARC: That's what I think.

JOSEPH: You're right Marc. One should value life.

Scene 4

LUIS reads a letter in Cuba. FRAN seems to hear his voice and gazes at him through the stage left window. After a few lines of the letter she exits through the bedroom door.

LUIS: Dear Francisquita,

Enrique Ferrara was born December 20th. Five and a half pounds and a little less than a month early. I must tell you he is the laziest baby in the world. He has been sleeping for ten days, paying no attention to anyone or anything around him. Ana and I may now try to leave the country with our newly born.

When I get to New York, we'll talk all night long till the sun comes out. I keep postponing making the decision to go.

FRAN appears at the top of the stairs in Cuba and reaches out for LUIS.

But I know there will be no end to the pleasure of being with you there and talking through the night. It is now three in the morning and Ana sleeps. She turns to me and says, "Did you finish the letter?"

Love,
 Luis

LUIS turns and reaches for FRAN as she backs down the stairs with her arm still outstretched.

Scene 5

Lights up in New York. JOSEPH sits in the chair stage right and plays the guitar, picking up the melody of the Cuban music that has just faded away. MARC lies on his futon. FRAN enters through the bedroom door and sees JOSEPH. He begins to play different music as she dances, then speaks as she continues to move.

FRAN: Martha Graham said Ruth St. Denis was a deeply religious being. And she was a performer. Once, while dancing an East Indian dance, she dropped a rose. At first Martha thought it was an accident, but it was planned.

Why did she decide to drop the rose ... ?

Martha was puzzled.

She learned that those moments in a dance can make it magic.

Scene 6

LUIS fans himself in Cuba.

LUIS: Dear sister,

It is 8 A.M., and already the heat is intense. We were told this summer would be unbearable. It is. Not even the afternoon siesta has protected us from the midday heat. At this hour, we usually feel a breeze, but nothing moves. I understand the word "siesta" is the object of mockery in the U.S.A. They attribute it to a laziness and lack of purpose. The siesta is the opposite. It is a way of resting when the sun is unbearable and returning to work when the heat relents. Our workday starts at 8 A.M. and again at 6 P.M.

Love,
Luis

Scene 7

As FRAN starts to enter the apartment through the hallway door, LUIS tosses a letter down to her. She catches it and enters the apartment, reading the letter as LUIS reads softly in the background, coming out onto the roof directly over the New York apartment.

FRAN/LUIS: Dear Francisca,

Awhile ago, Ana said to me, "Write a long letter to your sister Fran." And here I am now writing to you some of the many thoughts, ideas, and words I have spoken to you in my mind.

Last week, we received a notice for a package that was sent to us from New York. Ana and I were walking to the post office to pick up the package when we saw a woman walking in front of us. She was wearing gray stockings. Ana saw them and said, "I wish I had some stockings. I have no stockings. I would love to have gray stockings like that woman has."

We reached the post office and picked up the package. In it, there were stockings for Ana. Those stockings were in the very color we had just seen on the woman walking in front of us. How odd—there they were in that package. It was an impossible thing, and yet, there they were in that box coming from New York, the stockings Ana wanted.

Ana said, "I wish Francisca were here to give her a hug." The rest of the things we distributed evenly. We kept most of the dried soups. They were good for Ana's delicate stomach.

I saw Uncle Oscar. He had difficulty walking. I was concerned. Uncle Virgilio seems to be doing well.

Ana and I are trying our best.

Saludos,
Luis

Scene 8

Lights crossfade back to Cuba. It is dusk. LUIS and ENRIQUE are on the roof. They look up at the stars and enjoy the early evening breeze. Music plays.

ENRIQUE: Why is Mars red papa?

LUIS: You want to hear the fairy tale version or the real version?

ENRIQUE: I want to hear the fairy tale version and I also want to hear the real version. But I want to hear the fairy tale version first.

LUIS: The fairy tale version is that Mars blushed when he saw a very lovely fairy star.

ENRIQUE: Why did he do that?

LUIS: He fell in love.

ENRIQUE: He fell?

LUIS: No. When you fall in love, you don't fall, you fly and then you blush.

ENRIQUE: What is blush?

LUIS: You feel hot in your face.

ENRIQUE: Hot?

LUIS: Yes.

ENRIQUE: That hurts.

LUIS: It doesn't hurt.

ENRIQUE: Hot hurts.

LUIS: Not that kind of hot. That kind of hot feels good.

ENRIQUE: Are you sure?

LUIS: I'm sure. Love makes you feel good.

ENRIQUE: How do you do that?

LUIS: Feel good?

ENRIQUE: Blush.

LUIS: You don't do it. You blush when you're sensitive.

ENRIQUE (*Softly*): I'm sensitive ... I'm very, very sensitive ...

It's difficult.

LUIS: What is difficult?

ENRIQUE: I don't like difficult.

LUIS *ad libs* "What is difficult?"

(*Very loud.*) It's difficuuuuult!

Plaintive.

Why? oh, why? is life so difficult?

LUIS: It just is. It's difficult.

ENRIQUE: Let's not do difficult. Let's do happy!

LUIS: You like saying "let's not do difficult."

ENRIQUE: Yes, let's not do difficult. Now you say it.

Let's sing the Moon Song!

They dance and sing the song.

LUIS/ENRIQUE: How I love the moon's bellybutton.

Oh how sweet it was to sleep on her back.

How I loved the moon's bellybutton.

When she rocked by the light of the stars.

I loved to sleep on her eye.

I loved to rock at her side.

How I love the moon's bellybutton

When I go to sleep at her siiiiiide.

Scene 9

New York. MARC and JOSEPH asleep on their futons. JOSEPH is having a nightmare and is tossing and turning, making sounds that wake MARC. MARC goes to see what is the matter.

MARC: Joseph? Joe? Joseph?

JOSEPH pushes MARC away as he wakes up.

JOSEPH: Are you okay?

MARC: Yes.

JOSEPH: Good.

MARC: Where is Fran?

JOSEPH: She went out.

MARC: Where did she go?

JOSEPH: I don't know. I love Fran.

MARC: I love her, too.

JOSEPH: You do?

MARC: Of course.

FRAN enters through the hallway door, undetected by MARC and JOSEPH.

JOSEPH: I love her, though.

MARC: So do I.

JOSEPH: Not the way I love her.

MARC: Yes, I do.

JOSEPH: No, you don't understand.

MARC: Yes, I understand.

JOSEPH: No, Marc, I love her.

MARC: I love her.

JOSEPH: What do you mean?

MARC: I mean that I love her a lot.

JOSEPH: Not the way I love her.

MARC: I don't know how you love her, but I love her a lot.

The argument escalates into a pillow fight center stage. FRAN slams the door so MARC and JOSEPH will know she's there. They freeze, still holding their pillows.

FRAN: Hi boys.

MARC/JOSEPH: Hi.

FRAN goes to her room. Pillow fight continues. FRAN comes out of the bedroom having dropped off a few things and put on a jacket. The pillow fight stops.

FRAN: Bye.

MARC/JOSEPH: Bye.

She leaves.

MARC: She's beautiful.

JOSEPH: I think she's seeing someone.

MARC: Dating?

JOSEPH: Well, yeah.

MARC: You think?

JOSEPH: Don't you think?

MARC: Yeah? Oh no. She rehearses at night.

JOSEPH: That late?

MARC: What do you mean?

JOSEPH: She comes home late.

MARC: She works late.

JOSEPH: Hm. She used to come like straight home from work ... or from class if she had a class.

MARC: That's true.

JOSEPH: Yeah. (*Pause.*) She used to stay home more. She used to be more ... like closer to us ... you know? We used to spend more evenings here ... we cooked, and ate dinner together ... and we went out together—How long has it been since we went out together?

MARC: Yeah. It seems that we haven't been out together for some time. It's schedule, I think. We have different schedules.

JOSEPH: Yeah. That's true. Schedule can ruin things. Like sometimes I work in the morning and you work in the afternoon and she works Sundays, or yeah, that's what it is. It's silly, but well, it's true ... schedule can ruin relationships.

MARC: Well, I don't think it's ruined. I don't think our relationship is ruined. We still do things together.

JOSEPH: Like what?

MARC: Like what? We're together all the time.

JOSEPH: It doesn't seem to me that we're together all the time.

MARC: We see each other all the time.

JOSEPH: I don't think we see each other all the time.

MARC: Of course we don't see each other all the time. Are you talking about seeing each other all the time? Day and night? Every hour of the day?!

JOSEPH: Yes, I am talking about seeing each other every hour of the day!

MARC: I don't know if I want us to see each other every hour of the day.

Short pause.

JOSEPH: Well, I do.

MARC: What for?!

JOSEPH: Never mind, Marc. You don't understand.

MARC: What do you mean we don't understand each other? We understand each other.

You know something, friendship is more lasting than romantic love.

JOSEPH: I agree.

MARC: How come?

JOSEPH: It lasts longer. Romantic love starts faster. It burns faster. And it ends faster.

MARC: Romantic love can grow roots.

JOSEPH: Yes. They're tender though. Romantic love can be lasting. But the love of a friend is the most lasting. It is.

MARC: Isn't that something.

Scene 10

New York. There is a loud knock on the hallway door. The door opens and JERRY enters. He is carrying two parking violations, a Polaroid picture, and a letter.

JERRY: (*He waves a parking violation.*) Look at this. Take a look at this. Look at it.

JOSEPH: What is it?

JERRY: Look at it.

JOSEPH: What is it?

JERRY: Look at it, Joe. This is my answer.

"I am enclosing two Notices of Violation which I received unjustly on October 25th."

"This parking violation was left attached to the windshield wiper of my car. As you see in the photo,"

JOSEPH looks at the photo. JERRY continues reading.

"my car was two feet from the yellow line as witnessed by H.E.W. Jones—"

JOSEPH: Who is H.E.W. Jones?

JERRY: A neighbor, H.E.W. Jones, a friend who lives down the block. His name is H.E.W. Jones. And he witnessed the whole thing.

Reading.

"... who was present when I took the photos 15 minutes after receiving the second notice ..."

"Besides the falsehood of the statement of fault one can see the blatant disparity of the number of feet I was from the hydrant. In the first summons, written at 4:15 A.M., it is noted that the distance between the end of the yellow line and the back of my car is eight feet. And on the second summons written at 6:38 A.M. the distance is seven feet. Are you suggesting that I woke up sometime between 4:15 and 6:38 and moved the car one foot closer to the hydrant? Did the hydrant move closer to my car? Given the evidence it is my hope that you will cancel this summons. Yours truly, Jerry Corner. My address telephone number, driver's license number, etc."

How's that?

JOSEPH: That's good. I'm sure they'll honor that.

JERRY: Thank you.

Scene 11

LUIS reads a letter in Cuba while FRAN dances below in New York.

LUIS: Dear Francisca,

Let me tell you what I've been thinking. It's about love. I see it as a concrete thing. I think of it with a shape, weight, color, and movement. It's a sphere. The color is pearl gray. It floats, even if its weight is heavier than air. It takes shape at a distance from the beloved. When it reaches the beloved, it touches him lightly. Then, it retreats and remains at a certain distance, modestly and silently.

Last time you wrote was in August. You owed me a letter since March. I thought it was an eternity. Now I am answering you in July. I hope our writing records will improve.

Amor,
Luis

Scene 12

FRAN goes to JOSEPH, who is sitting in the stage left chair.

FRAN: Well some people understand words better than anything else. Other people understand color, other people understand sounds, I understand movement when I see things that I think other people understand. Music and movement.

The greatest gift a person can have is to be satisfied with the life they have. I want to feel satisfaction with the life I have. We should enjoy the life we have.

FRAN tweaks JOSEPH on the cheeks. He jumps up and she runs out through the bedroom door and he chases her out. She runs back in and runs around and out the stage right airshaft window. JOSEPH quickly follows and gazes out the stage left window.

Scene 13

LUIS reads a letter in Cuba.

LUIS: Dear Francisquita,

I hear it is possible to travel to the States through Mexico. I will attempt to do that. First of all, I need to get a Mexican visa. To get a Mexican visa, I must present a legalized birth certificate. To get this, I must have the date, volume, and folio of my registration and the number and address of the registry where it was filed. I must have all this on hand when I'm called to appear ... without this, I will not be able to travel. I hope the registration information is in one of the folders Mother keeps in her files.

Love,
Luis

Scene 14

Cuba. It is dusk. LUIS sits on the roof singing to himself.

ENRIQUE: (*Offstage, calling.*) Papa!

LUIS: (*Still inspired, he finishes the phrase.*) Here ... !

ENRIQUE: Where are you?

LUIS: Here!

ENRIQUE: Gerardo's here.

LUIS: What does he want?

ENRIQUE: Gerardo, what do you want?

GERARDO: What do you mean, "what do I want?" I'm just coming to say hello. Why does he ask what I want? Can't someone just come and say hello? What's the matter with him?

ENRIQUE: Papa, what's the matter with you?

LUIS: What's the matter with me?

ENRIQUE: Papa, Gerardo wants to know what's the matter with you.

LUIS: There's nothing the matter with me. What's the matter with him?!

ENRIQUE: There's nothing the matter with him. We're going to play baseball.

LUIS: Gerardo?! You're going to play baseball with Gerardo?!

ENRIQUE: Yeah. Gerardo's the pitcher.

LUIS: Gerardo?! The pitcher. You don't need him to play baseball. You can play baseball with me. What's the matter with you? You don't think your Papa can play baseball?! Come here.

ENRIQUE: What for?

LUIS: I'm going to teach you h-h-h-how to play baseball. Didn't you want to learn to play baseball? Come up.

ENRIQUE: What for?

LUIS: You come up, or I'll come down.

ENRIQUE: I don't want to come down.

LUIS: You come up then.

ENRIQUE: I don't want to.

LUIS: I'm coming down.

ENRIQUE: Oh my God, Papa, look down there.

LUIS: Look at what?

ENRIQUE: Down there Papa!

ENRIQUE appears on the roof as LUIS goes down the stairs.

LUIS: Come back here.

ENRIQUE: You come here.

LUIS: Spoiled brat.

ENRIQUE: Papa. Don't talk so loud, people will hear you.

LUIS: Come here.

ENRIQUE: Gerardito's here.

LUIS: Good afternoon, Gerardo. Come up.

There is a loud crashing sound.

GERARDO (*Off*):

Avemariapurisma!

Ouch—ouch—ouch.

I'm okay. I'm okay.

ENRIQUE (*Off*):

Oops! He tripped.

Are you okay, Herry?

Papa! Gerardito fell down!

LUIS: Enrique, get the Ben Gay.

ENRIQUE: Yeah, Papa. I'll get the Ben Gay.

ENRIQUE runs back down the stairs again.

ENRIQUE: Ben Gay! Papa, where is the Ben Gay?

LUIS: It's in the cabinet.

ENRIQUE: What cabinet?

LUIS: In the kitchen.

ENRIQUE: Okay.

To GERARDO.

Are you okay, Herry?

ENRIQUE helps GERARDO onto the roof. GERARDO wears a military uniform.

GERARDO grunts.

LUIS: You want to sit down?

GERARDO grunts.

LUIS: You want to sit down or not!?

GERARDO mumbling.

LUIS: Herry, what do you want?

GERARDO mumbling.

ENRIQUE: I got the Ben Gay.

LUIS: What happened, Herry?

GERARDO *mumbles.*

LUIS: Can you come up?

GERARDO *mumbles.*

LUIS: You want me to help you?

GERARDO *mumbles.*

LUIS: Help him, Enrique.

There are some sounds of pain as they are coming up. LUIS and GERARDO appear on the roof. GERARDO wears a Miliciano uniform.

GERARDO: Patria o muerte!

ENRIQUE: What does that mean?

LUIS: You don't want to know. Okay, sit down. How's your back?

GERARDO: It's better. (*He sits.*) Yeah. It's better.

LUIS: How's your pitching arm?

GERARDO: Not so good.

ENRIQUE *rubs Ben Gay into GERARDO's back.*

Scene 15

MARC sits in the stage right chair writing. JOSEPH is at the drafting table.

MARC: What's the matter?

JOSEPH looks at MARC. There is a moment's pause.

I thought something was wrong.

JOSEPH shakes his head.

JOSEPH: Why?

MARC: Because you looked odd.

MARC goes back to work. JOSEPH looks at the floor. They are silent awhile.

JOSEPH: I looked odd?

MARC: Yeah.

JOSEPH: How odd?

MARC: Well, odd.

JOSEPH: Odd? Like this?

He makes an odd face.

MARC: No.

JOSEPH: (*Making different odd faces.*) Like this? Like this?

JOSEPH continues making faces. Each time JOSEPH makes a face, MARC says "No."

JOSEPH: Like this?

MARC: Stop it.

JOSEPH: Like this?

MARC: Joseph, stop it.

JOSEPH makes one last face. This one has the air of one who is rejected. MARC looks at JOSEPH.

JOSEPH: Where is Fran?

MARC: ... I don't know ...

JOSEPH: She's not in? Where is she?

MARC: I don't know.

JOSEPH rests his head on MARC's knee.

JOSEPH: I'm cold.

MARC: What, Joseph?

JOSEPH: Have you noticed anything?

MARC: About what?

JOSEPH: Fran.

MARC: Does she know?

JOSEPH: I haven't told her.

MARC: You haven't told her?

JOSEPH: No.

MARC: Are you going to?

JOSEPH: I don't think so.

MARC: Can I tell her?

JOSEPH: Not just yet.

MARC: Why?

JOSEPH: Because it may spoil something.

MARC: What?

JOSEPH: Maybe friendship.

MARC: Hmm. The three of us.

JOSEPH: Oh no ... you think ... ? Oh I don't ...

Pause.

Except I don't know if she feels the same way. I know she cares for me as a friend. But does she love me the way I love her? Did you notice anything about that? Do you think she notices that I feel this way? That sometimes when I'm talking to you, I am looking at her?

MARC: No, I didn't notice.

JOSEPH: And sometimes when I look at her, I just stare. I always looked at her. Just thought I liked her. Until one day, it hit me. Like "bang." I love her. Oh, how I love her. Have you seen her dance? I know she loves me. But will she ever say it? Would she ever say, "I love you? I love you, Joe"? She loves me as a friend. But will she ever say, "I love you, Joe"?

Scene 16

Cuba. LUIS and GERARDO enter together and sit on the wall in silence. GERARDO holds a cup of atole in his hand. He eats the atole with a spoon. He is downcast.

GERARDO: Patria o Muerte.

LUIS mumbles.

GERARDO: Luis, everyone I knew is gone. Everyone but you.

LUIS: Hmm. Yes, Gerardo ... Most of the ones close to me are gone too ...

GERARDO: You may be leaving too.

LUIS: I don't know, Gerardo. For some it's harder to leave. Francisquita left. All my brothers and sisters left. Cousins, uncles, nephews. Some are ... fearful, or ... just not capable or starting ... starting anew ... maybe fearful of that separation ... what we know ... have always known ... where we have always been ... not capable of taking a step ... separating ourselves from what we know ... from what is familiar ... and close to our hearts ... not capable of starting ... starting to coexist with an unfamiliar world ... something inside fearful ... something that makes one ... like cripples ... sort of. The young are eager ... But for us, the eagerness goes. We prefer what is familiar ... and remember the past.

GERARDO: My parents worked hard. They saved and opened a feed store. They sold tools and seeds. I want to leave. I prepared my application to leave. I've done this many times. But I've never put it in. When you apply to leave, you lose your job. And your rations. And while you wait for a permit to travel, your family has to take care of you. And this is hard on them. But there is another reason why I haven't put it in. I came here when I was young. But I still feel if I left here, I would die. Because I belong here, and if I went elsewhere, I wouldn't recognize anything around me and I would die. So many leave and seem to be happy elsewhere. They write letters saying they are happy. In Miami, in Spain, in Mexico. But I don't know

that I could be happy in any of those places. So, I stay. As hard as things are here, I must stay. I know every building in this neighborhood, and every pothole in the streets. Half the people in the neighborhood were born when I was a young man. I saw them grow. I knew their parents, grandparents and their problems. And I went to their birthday parties. And if I leave, I would be among strangers all the time. And even if they are nice to me, I would not know who they are.

Scene 17

American big band music plays.

LUIS climbs down the rope ladder and enters the New York apartment through the hallway door. FRAN enters through the bedroom door and stands stage left. LUIS wanders slowly through the apartment looking at everything. He gently touches FRAN's picture on the wall. He exits through the hallway door then quickly reenters through the hallway door again.

He dances with FRAN.

Scene 18

New York. As American music plays, ENRIQUE enters New York through the doggie door and begins a little dance that ends with a big finish. He then notices the picture of FRAN on the wall and goes over to her.

ENRIQUE: My little Tía Francisquita—

Suddenly, the hallway door opens and ENRIQUE attempts to hide himself with the stage left futon. FRAN enters and retrieves her jacket from the hook upstage center. She starts to leave and ENRIQUE uncovers himself, thinking she is gone. She seems to remember something else and crosses to the drafting table. ENRIQUE quickly hides again. She retrieves a piece of paper from the table and continues gazing at it as she walks out the door. ENRIQUE gets up, now certain that she is really gone. He sits on the stage left windowsill and begins to talk to the picture.

ENRIQUE: Francisquita—

Do you remember when you came and brought us different kinds of food? Dry food, that was good once we soaked it in water, and food in cans. You apologized and said that food in cans was not as good as fresh food, but that you were not allowed to bring fresh food through customs. But it turned out that we loved food in cans. Mmmm.

At first you thought we were being polite to you because that was what you brought. But we really meant it. We liked food in cans. It had an American taste. A little taste of tin. When we ate it, we thought we were in the U.S. and spoke English to each other. We said, "Thank you." "Water, please." "How do you do?" "Good morning." "What is your name?" "Do you speak Spanish?"

But also, it was good because we could use the cans as glasses to drink water, or pots to heat water for coffee or containers to put food in and save it in the refrigerator. We could make holes in the bottom and turn them into pots for plants. We grew beans, not too many, because the pots were small. And we also grew coffee. We kept one (without the holes) to put on the roof to collect water when it rains. Mother likes to wash her hair with rainwater. I kept another in my room to hit with a spoon as a cowbell to use when I play music with my group. We also keep a candle in the sardine can. When the lights go out, Mama lights the candle. We thank you for the light.

When you came, we thought you may not like how we lost electric power so many times in one evening, and we told you we were sorry. You cheered us up and said, "Oh, no! Look how beautiful the light of the candle is when the room is dark." We looked, and we saw that you were right. We all looked elegant. You said, "This is how fancy restaurants are lit in New York and Paris also." That did cheer us up and made us understand the irony of it. At home, we get depressed when we have to eat in the dark, and in rich places where they have electricity, they turn the lights off and light candles to make it look more elegant. So you see how much we have learned from you.

ENRIQUE goes over to FRAN's picture and gives "her" a kiss. He then goes to pick up his ukulele and poses with it leaning against the wall.

ENRIQUE: I'm going to sing you a little song.

ENRIQUE sings "I Love a Piano" and accompanies himself on the ukulele.

JERRY enters simultaneously through the hallway door with MARC through the bedroom door to join ENRIQUE for the end of the dance. LUIS appears in Cuba dancing on his own with them. At the end of the dance, ENRIQUE turns upstage to LUIS.

ENRIQUE: Papa, I want to be in New York!

ENRIQUE exits through the window. MARC exits through the bedroom door and JERRY starts to follow him until FRAN enters through the hallway door.

Scene 19

JERRY: Good morning, Miss Fran.

FRAN: Good morning, Jerry.

JERRY: Am I too early for the class? Should I come later, or could I have my class now? Because I was on the block fixing a boiler ... and I thought, if I could come over now. Are you sure it's okay?

FRAN: It's all right.

They take positions opposite each other.

FRAN: Arms up ...

They perform a brief pas de deux with FRAN coaching JERRY as they dance. After a final wave to each other, JERRY exits the apartment through the hallway door.

Scene 20

Cuba/New York.

LUIS: Today is my birthday.

FRAN: Happy birthday!

FRAN exits through bedroom door.

LUIS: Thank you.

I am fine except for a little cold and now I've given it to Enrique. Other than that, everyone is fine. Enrique, too skinny—and there is a hurricane a few miles away and it's headed this way. I am listening to the radio to see if we'll have to take shelter.

In any case, I wrote to you a few weeks ago. We don't know if you got the letter. Nor do we know if this one will reach you.

We did receive your package with some clothes and a bottle with aspirins and some red pills. Some of the aspirins were crushed, but we can still use them. We don't know what the red pills are. I assume they are vitamins.

We will wait for your answer before taking them even if the mail takes forever to arrive.

Love,
Luis

Scene 21

JOSEPH and FRAN enter, FRAN through the hallway door and JOSEPH through the bedroom door. JOSEPH speaks as FRAN dances.

JOSEPH: It's very hard to dance the woman in red.
She has a curious form, a strange vulnerability.
She's breathless.
She's misunderstood.
It's her eroticism they don't understand.
She rocks from side to side
on and on.
A freeze in motion
A constant rediscovery.
Of a single moment.

FRAN and JOSEPH move toward each other as the lights crossfade to Cuba.

Scene 22

Cuba/New York. LUIS is on the roof. ENRIQUE's voice is heard from offstage.

ENRIQUE: Papi!

Papi, come.

I want you to come.

Papi, I want you to come.

Papi please.

I can't go without you Papi.

Papi, come.

Come, papi.

ENRIQUE leads LUIS into New York through the magic wall panel stage left.

LUIS crosses to FRAN. They embrace.

Lights fade.

Terra Incognita

A libretto for an opera



FOR ROBERTO SIERRA