

THEATER

The Playwright Rewriting Latino Theater

By Liesl Schillinger

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For Eduardo Machado, the new artistic director of the Hispanic theater company Intar, the best thing that could happen to Latino playwrights is that they no longer be considered Latino playwrights.

"When they did 'Raisin in the Sun' decades ago, it was considered a black play, but now it's just an American play," Mr. Machado explained. "That's what I want for Latino playwrights. That's where I want to go, and that's why I took over this theater: To be part of this culture without being in the corner."

Mr. Machado, 51, is already one of the country's leading playwrights and he heads the graduate playwrighting program at Columbia. Now, as the artistic director of Intar, the only company in the United States explicitly devoted to developing and producing plays by Hispanic playwrights, he has the opportunity to broaden his influence on the American theater.

Since taking over in July, Mr. Machado has revived Intar's once legendary playwrighting lab, created a group of "Intartistas," or artistic associates, and added eight new members to the board, including the actors Ed Harris and Amy Madigan.

Two plays -- "Blues for a Gray Sun" by Nilaja Sun, and "With What Does the Cockroach Sit?," by Carmelita Tropicana -- are currently in repertory. Next month, Intar will present a workshop production "Deep Song," a new musical about the Spanish Civil War and flamenco dancing, which Mr. Machado wrote. And in May, he will present a new play called "Tight Embrace," by Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas, about a woman who is kidnapped by terrorists in Latin America.

"The plays we put on have to be by Hispanic Americans," Mr. Machado said, "but the actors, the lighting designers, the associates, everyone else -- we want the world. If a Latino writes a play about Southerners, and there's not one Latino in it, I will run it."

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Mr. Machado's path was broken by Max Ferrá, Intar's founder and longtime artistic director. "By the late 70's, I realized there were a bunch of young Latino playwrights coming of age who were writing plays in English that had a Hispanic essence," Mr. Ferrá said, "but there was no arena for them."

"We have created the Latino playwright in this country," he continued. "They exist, they have a voice."

Oskar Eustis, the newly named artistic director of the Public Theater, agreed: "There's scarcely a Latino artist in America who hasn't been supported or trained or produced by Intar."

Mr. Machado began writing his first play, "The Modern Ladies of Guanabacoa," in the same room where he now works as Intar's director. He had been an actor for nearly a decade, but had tired of playing waiters with accents, and when Maria Irene Fornes founded a playwrighting lab at Intar, he joined the first class.

"It's funny, I became an actor because I wanted to express myself as a Latino in America," Mr. Machado said. "A Latino who lives in Latin America knows that he has a culture, that he belongs in the country where he lives. But us, living here, we are still looking for a culture, and for a place to belong. But it was in writing, not acting, that I found I could express who I am."

"The Modern Ladies" became the first part of a tetralogy called "The Floating Island Plays," which was performed at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles in 1994 and directed by Mr. Eustis. "Eduardo is one of the most talented artists and playwrights of his generation; and that is not bounded by ethnicity," Mr. Eustis said in a telephone interview.

"His history and his family have given him the position of being both in a culture and one step outside the culture," he added, referring to Mr. Machado's status as a Cuban exile. "That's the historic position of the greatest artists."

Two years ago Mr. Machado returned to Havana for a visit. One evening he walked into a paladar, a restaurant in a private home (one of the few businesses Cubans can legally own). "I had gone to Cuba to write a play, but I didn't know what about," he said.

"The cook at the paladar made the best lobster in tomato sauce and the best lemon-lime mousse that I had ever had in my life," he continued. "As I was eating, thinking, 'What am I going to write?' I noticed a picture on the wall of a blond woman. I asked the cook, 'Did you work for her?' And she said, 'Yes, this used to be her house.'"

When Mr. Castro toppled the Batista regime in 1959, the mansion's previous owner fled to the United States just as Mr. Machado's family did. "I went back to the place where I was staying, and started writing, longhand," Mr. Machado remembered. He imagined a fancy holiday party, thrown by a society hostess on the night of Batista's flight -- and of her own. He set the play in the kitchen where her cook, Gladys, was preparing food for the guests (including that lemon-lime mousse).

By the end of the piece, 38 years later, the kitchen belongs to the servant: she has turned it into a paladar.

The play, "The Cook" -- his 43rd by his own count -- was produced at Intar and helped attract new audiences to the company, which still has not recovered from the decreases in government and foundation grants that began to afflict the arts in the 1990's.

"Financially we're in trouble, but artistically, were stronger than we've ever been," said Lou Moreno, who has been affiliated with Intar for 15 years, and directed "Blues for a Gray Sun."

Mr. Moreno recalled the day when Intar announced Mr. Machado's appointment in late June, after the final workshop performance of "Gray Sun." "I remember when Eduardo sat there on that stage, with three generations of Intar around us: Max Ferrá, Maria Irene Fornes, and us," he said. "The forward energy was palpable."

Before Mr. Machado was appointed, though, the search committee had been troubled by one thing: considering his other commitments would Mr. Machado have time to lead the company?

"I don't sleep," he told them.

Now, he quickly added, "I have lots of fun in my life." He likes to cook (chicken and rice is a specialty) and frequently drops by piano bars with friends. But "when I'm at Intar, I just think about Intar," he said. "When I'm at Columbia, I just think about teaching, and when I'm writing I just think about that.

"It's like the other world doesn't exist until I'm there."

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