

CREATIVE LOAFING

Theater Review - Sleep With the Fishes

Sleepwalkers examines deprivation and desperation in Cuba

By Curt Holman

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Despite the tropical pleasures of Cuba's music, food and weather, *Sleepwalkers* offers a sharp reminder of the suffering Cubans endure under the Castro regime. Produced at the Alliance Theatre's Hertz Stage, Jorge Ignacio Cortinas' play examines the institutional Catch-22s and personal yearnings of a deprived nation, like you'd find in art of the Eastern Bloc before the Berlin Wall fell. Sharing the spirit of something by a Milan Kundera or a Vaclav Havel, *Sleepwalkers* nevertheless has trouble making emotional connections.

Developed at the Alliance's GroundWorks program for new plays, *Sleepwalkers* takes place in Havana during the 1993 drought. We meet university dropout Tito (Nick Bixby) and his hustling friend Charley (Rafael Sardina) as they fill dishpans from their neighborhood's only working faucet. As the buckets fill up, they're visited by the Skinny Woman (Michelle Rios), who's been abandoned by her husband and suffers from insomnia: "I can't remember if I slept last night."

Tito's father (Mateo Gomez) is a world-weary veteran of the war in Angola, while his stepsister (Sophia Salguero) has been indoctrinated to embrace Communism without question, as shown by her colorful uniform. We follow the various characters as they try to sell blood, buy meat, watch forbidden television broadcasts from America and generally hope for a better life.

Of all the play's characters, Sardina's Charley is the only one who seems wide awake, demonstrated by his tendency to punctuate his sentences with snapping fingers. In one monologue he chats up tourists on a boardwalk, playing on the vanity of some ("Are you an actress?") and the sympathy of others ("How many hours would you have to work to earn those tennis shoes?").

As the Skinny Woman, Rios reveals a remarkably affecting and throaty voice. Her delivery isn't particularly loud or musical, but it conveys a quiet suffering and longing for simple needs. Your heart goes out to her whenever she utters a sentence. In a surreal scene later in the play, Rios speaks poetically of her efforts to sleep while a pool of water spreads at her feet and takes up more and more of the stage.

Scott Spahr's scenic design, which features a wide platform with no curtains or backdrop, permits intricate water effects that support the text's evocations of Havana's beach, the characters' pressing need for water and the mythic 90-mile ocean trip to America. In a later sequence the entire platform is flooded, and frequently during the course of the play director Ruben Polendo conveys the effect of a dream shared by all the characters.

Commendably, none of the actors speak in accents. But Bixby's Tito has the self-conscious delivery of an ironic American, making the character seem even more out of place than the role is written. Even more perplexing is the casting of brunette bombshell Sophia Salguero, who could be twice the age of the 12-year-old schoolgirl she portrays. Salguero has stage presence to spare, but the age discrepancy makes little sense, even as an artistic "choice" about burgeoning sexuality.

Over the past several years, the Alliance Theatre has presented a Latino-themed play every season, and more power to them. But *Sleepwalkers*, like productions such as *Cloud Tectonics* several years ago, has an overly cerebral, sterile quality that makes a striking contrast to the earthy humor and family ties of the theater's African-American productions.

With *Sleepwalkers*, the whole may be greater than the sum of its parts, as the individual scenes lack the strength of the play's cumulative effect. The production's watery stage devices are unforgettable and help build to a haunting resolution (or lack thereof). But much of *Sleepwalkers* leaves you feeling restless.

Sleepwalkers plays through May 19 at the Alliance Theatre's Hertz Stage, Woodruff Arts Center, 1280 Peachtree St. Tues.-Sat. at 8 p.m. Sun. at 2:30 and 7:30 p.m. \$24-\$30. 404-733-5000.??

