



Havana play bridges Cuban gap with Cuban-Americans

By **WILL WEISSERT / Associated Press Writer**

Posted Jul 18, 2010 at 8:00 AM

HAVANA — The Cuban-American playwright felt his eyes welling with tears, as he sat in on his first rehearsal.

“There’s this kid actor up there and he’s crying as part of a monologue,” said Jorge Ignacio Cortinas, who was born in Miami to Cuban exiles. “I’m sitting there, weeping, too.”

Cortinas’ play, “Blind Mouth Singing,” is running in Havana as “El Canto del Pozo Ciego.” It is directed by fellow Cuban-American Jorge Luis Cacheiro and performed by the island’s Rita Montaner Theater Company.

It was inspired by the writings of Reinaldo Arenas — once jailed by Fidel Castro’s government for being openly gay.

A play written and directed by Cuban-Americans, performed by a Cuban troupe and featuring themes of an author long banned on his own island had long seemed unthinkable.

“It’s a strange kind of dream,” said Cortinas, 43. “It feels impossible, but here it is.”

In 1998, a New York theater group traveled to Havana with a Cuban-American playwright’s work, “Revoltillo” or “Broken Eggs.” Three years later, “Parece Blanca” (“She Looks White”) was performed here, written by Cuba’s Abelardo Estorino, and directed by a U.S.-based Cuban director, Alberto Sarrain. That show featured actors from Miami who came to Havana to work with local actors. Still, “Blind Mouth Singing” represents the Cuban government’s attempts to put aside its ire for the exile community and “embrace the cultural productions of Cubans regardless of where they reside,” said Lillian Manzor, director of the Cuban/Latino Theater Archive at the University of Miami.

“These productions should not be unusual but they still are,” Manzor said. “They are extremely complicated, very time consuming, very expensive, very draining emotionally.”

Director Cacheiro, a theater professor at Montclair State University in New

Jersey, was born in Havana but left with his family at 4. He conceived of directing a play in Cuba in 1999 and chose one written by a Cuban-American so island audiences could immediately relate.

Tougher travel restrictions imposed in 2003 limited cultural exchanges between both countries, but the Obama administration has eased the rules.

"I was born here and the idea of not directing a play here, on a very personal level, was something that I couldn't even imagine," said Cacheiro, 53. "But the idea of actually doing it ... that hasn't hit me yet."

Cortinas' play has shown previously in Chicago and New York and runs here through Aug. 15. Opening night on July 10 drew a full-house at a cramped, 189-seat theater called "Basement Space." Tickets cost 5 pesos, about an American quarter.

The story takes place in an unnamed Caribbean country and features a mother, her sister Bolivia and her two sons Gordi and Reiderico, who has a secret friend, Lucero, who lives in a well.

Bolivia makes trips to a place called "city," where she secretly treats syphilis patients. Lucero persuades Reiderico to trade places with him and exposes the family's conflicts. At one point, Lucero tries to persuade his aunt to run away with him to "city," where he says he'd like to kiss a soldier.

She says that's "against nature."

"In city," he replies, "lots of things are against nature."

Cortinas was inspired by the works of Arenas, whose openly gay lifestyle landed him in a squalid prison from 1973 until 1976. Arenas went to the U.S., eventually contacted AIDS and committed suicide in 1990. His memoir, "Before Night Falls," was made into a film in 2000, starring Sean Penn.

Today, President Raul Castro's daughter Mariela is Cuba's top gay rights advocate and official attitudes have softened, but many of Arenas' works still aren't available here.

But Anaysy Gregory, an understudy for the character of Bolivia, said Cuban audiences are now accustomed to seeing artistic works of former government foes.

"You don't think 'this is the work of an exile, or this isn't,'" she said. "This is a sensual work, one of expression, one of love, one of liberation. Everyone in the world can understand that."

Though the Havana production is in Spanish, Cortinas infused his original English script with Cuban phrases and a permanent sense of longing. He first

visited Cuba in 1992 and has returned frequently, but all of his relatives have since left for the U.S.

“There’s a sense of nostalgia,” he said, “of wanting to leave and wanting to come back at the same time.”

Rehearsals lasted just 30 days in a country where directors usually work with actors for months. As opening night neared, some actors defected. The stage lights would be considered fire hazards in the U.S. and a CD-DVD player Cacheiro wanted to donate to the theater was impounded by Cuban customs. The theater’s neighbors had to donate some props, and a birdcage on stage was brought from home by an actor. Its normal occupant was banished to a bucket for the duration of the show.



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