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# *Max Ferrá, a Trailblazer for Latino Theater, Dies at 79*

By **Richard Sandomir**

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Max Ferrá, a founder and the first artistic director of the Intar Hispanic American Arts Center, an innovative Off Broadway theater company that nurtures and produces the works of Latino playwrights in English, died on Feb. 4 in Miami. He was 79.

His life partner, Winston Gonzalez, said the cause was pneumonia.

Mr. Ferrá, who left Cuba in 1958, had a sixth-grade education and little theatrical experience when he and seven colleagues started Intar, or International Arts Relations, in the mid-1960s. For about a decade, they produced plays in Spanish. But Mr. Ferrá then had a change of heart that reflected shifts in American culture and demographics.

“I realized there were a bunch of young Latino playwrights coming of age who were writing plays in English that had a Hispanic essence,” he told The New York Times in 2004, “but there was no arena for them.”

The playwrights who have had their works produced at Intar include the Nobel laureate Mario Vargas Llosa, Manuel Puig, José Rivera, Luis Santeiro, Migdalia Cruz, Caridad Svich, Carmelita Tropicana, Eduardo Machado and Nilo Cruz, whose play “Anna in the Tropics” won the 2003 Pulitzer Prize for drama. For many years, Intar has also had a laboratory to develop playwriting skills.

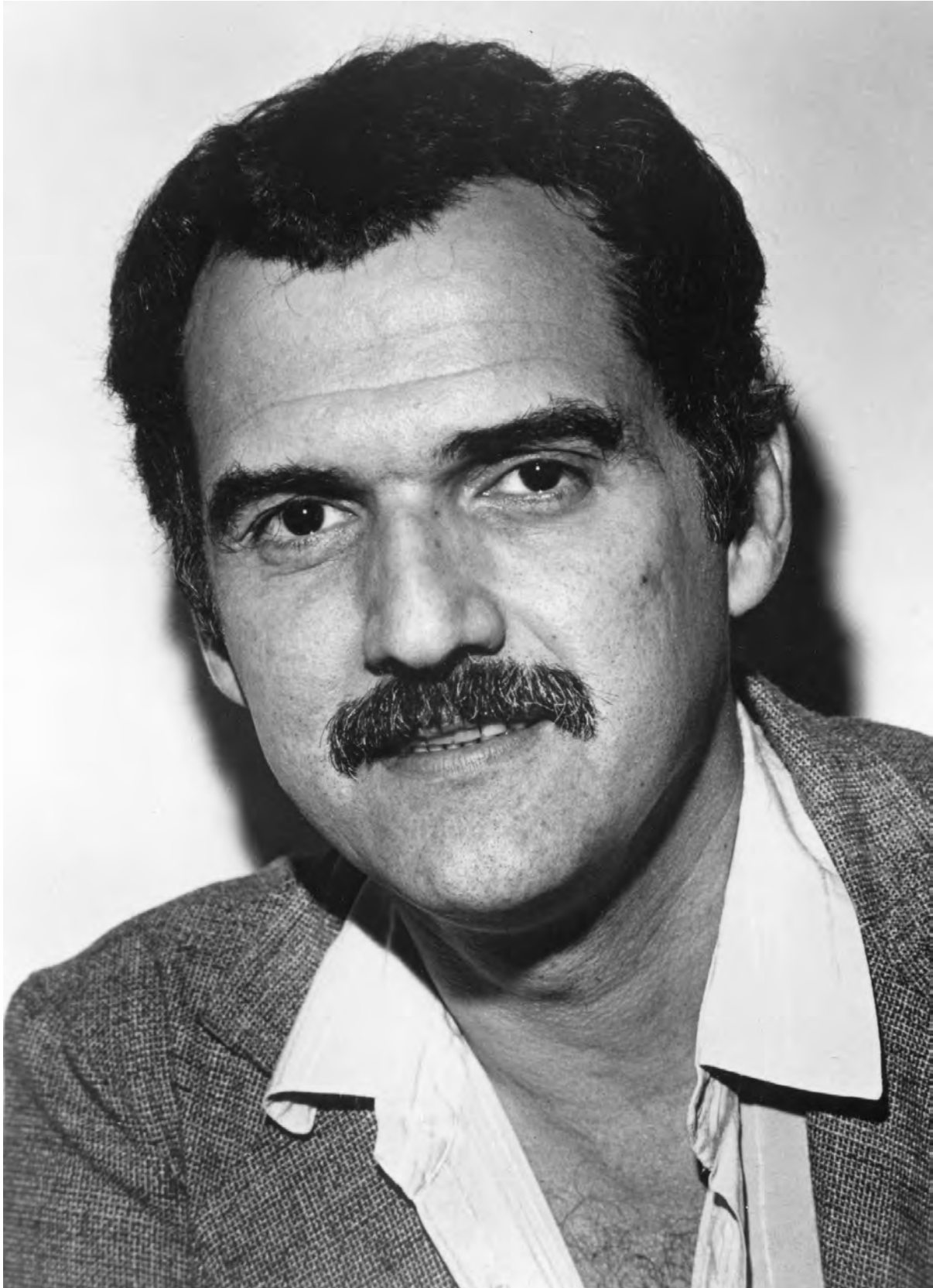
“We have created the Latino playwright in this country,” Mr. Ferrá declared in 2004. “They exist, they have a voice.”

Mr. Machado, whose play “The Cook” was produced in 2003 at Intar, and who succeeded Mr. Ferrá as artistic director of the theater in 2004, said in an interview that Mr. Ferrá provided the welcoming atmosphere Latino playwrights did not always receive at other theaters, where “you have to explain yourself.” And, he added, Mr. Ferrá’s recognition of the need for Latino writers to express themselves in English was a critical decision.

“We would have been disenfranchised if we hadn’t started writing in English,” Mr. Machado said. “If not, we would have been on the fringe forever. Many of us didn’t want to write in Spanish. I wanted to write in English. I am an American.”

Mr. Ferrá directed about 80 plays at Intar and tried to imbue actors with his passion.

“He wasn’t gentle or imperious,” said Michael John Garcés, a Cuban-American writer, director and actor who worked at Intar after graduating from the University of Miami. “But he could be hard on actors. He would push actors to commit fully. He was bored with small choices, so he would push you hard but get out of your way if he saw that you were committed.”



Max Ferrá, in an undated photograph. Intar

Mr. Ferrá was born in the city of Camagüey in central Cuba on July 14, 1937, to Maximo Ferrá, a cabdriver, and the former Graciela del Risco, a homemaker. He learned English while working in a tourist shop in Havana and left Cuba, alone, a year before Fidel Castro's overthrow of Fulgencio Batista in 1959.

His parents and his sister, Teresa Lopez, eventually emigrated to America. His sister and Mr. Gonzalez survive him.

Mr. Ferrá worked in a recording studio in Midtown Manhattan and then for an airline before he and his colleagues founded Agrupación de Arte Latinoamericano, or Association of Latin American Arts, which turned into Intar.

"We realize we wanted more than a 9-to-5 existence here in the United States of America," he told The Times as he looked back at Intar on its 20th anniversary. "We wanted to create something on our own."

Mr. Ferrá's desire to showcase new works led him to ask the Broadway choreographer Graciela Daniele, "What would you like to do?" In an interview, she said: "Nobody had ever asked me that. It was like opening a huge window to a world I never knew of before."

The result was "Tango Apasionado," a 1987 musical adaptation of stories by the Argentine master Jorge Luis Borges that she directed, choreographed and helped adapt. The show was presented by Intar but staged at the Westbeth Theater Center in Lower Manhattan.

"How could I forget this man?" Ms. Daniele said. "His passion, his energy, he was like Don Quixote fighting windmills. He would just keep on going if he believed in something and if it helped Latino artists."

Mr. Ferrá retired from Intar in 2004 and moved to Miami but continued to direct. After directing a play there, he received and accepted an offer to run the Actors Arena, a theater program at Miami Dade College, where he also taught acting.

Last fall, for the Actors Arena, he directed his final play, "La Bodeguita de Hialeah," an adaptation of a comedy by the Spanish playwright José Luis Alonso de Santos about the robbery of a bodega in Hialeah, Fla.

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