

CALENDAR

Los Angeles Times

OCTOBER 16, 1994

Cuba, From His Rear-View Mirror

Playwright Eduardo Machado relives his journey from Havana to Woodland Hills. Just don't expect his drama to toe the multicultural line.

By Jan Breslauer
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ESSAY

Stanley Crouch on race in Quentin Tarantino movies: He's one director who gets it right. Page 5

COMEDY

And then there's the one about Shecky Greene. But this time, it's no joke. Page 7

MOVIES

Three filmmakers, two kids and a basketball: It's the stuff "Hoop Dreams" are made of. Page 8



PATRICK DOWNS / Los Angeles Times

Exile on Main Stage

Eduardo Machado's plays have earned him a respected place in today's multicultural landscape. But make no mistake about where his heart lies: He's an artist, not an activist.

By Jan Breslauer

Give this man a Cohiba cigar. He has what you call timing.

Eduardo Machado began writing "Floating Islands," his story of Cuban emigration, 14 years ago, around the time of the Mariel boat lift.

But Cuba hasn't been as topical since.

So it's a stroke of *fortuna* that the island nation is back in the news now, right as his drama is set to open at the Mark Taper Forum. Now performed in two parts, "Floating Islands" bows next Sunday, directed by Oskar Eustis. The saga about half a century in the life of a Cuban family that ends up in Woodland Hills has never before been presented in its entirety.

Cuban-born Machado, 41, who based "Floating Islands" on his family history, grew up and forged his artistic identity in Los Angeles. As one of the few Latinos whose work is produced regularly by mainstream regional theaters, he's one of the rising stars of a newly diversified talent pool.

Machado's appeal comes from the fact that he is interested in exploring cultural roots, but his work is not doctrinaire. In this age of multiculturalism, he is one of a growing group of writers moving beyond race politics to emphasize craft and storytelling.

He certainly has fans in the right places.

'The minute you say "we're doing Hispanic theater, we're doing Chicano theater" is the minute you feed stereotypes. I'm not doing any of that: I'm doing theater.'

"Eduardo is extraordinary," says John Hart, veteran co-producer of "Guys and Dolls," "Tommy" and the upcoming La Jolla Playhouse revival of "How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying." "He addresses a wide range of subjects, [and the work's] always brilliantly character-driven."

Machado also gets kudos from his fellow Cubans. "Eduardo is a special artist whose voice as a writer has great resonance and eloquence," says actor Andy Garcia, who,

like Machado, was born in Cuba and came to the United States as a child.

But even Machado didn't figure on "Floating Islands'" synchronicity. "It's interesting politically that these plays are happening now, when Cuba's back at such a political point in its history where everything's going to turn around again,"

Machado says. "That has influenced me in thinking of these plays as something that is quite alive.

"[They] can say something to the problem of the moment—that [the United States] makes people immigrants by your policies [toward Cuba] and then you don't want them to come here," Machado says. "Because the United States has had an embargo for 35 years, the situation in Cuba is that, since they lost the Russian support, they are in the middle of deterioration and

starvation.

"And at this moment," Machado continues, "the United States government, instead of dropping the embargo for humanitarian interests, is rejecting people who are risking their lives on rafts to emigrate to this country. The U.S. policy seems cruel."

"Floating Islands," however, is not explicitly about U.S. foreign policy. It views social turbulence through the prism of a family. "It is my personal epic, the struggle of my life to get these plays to work," Machado says. "But I'm past thinking that writing is only a personal thing. As you get older, you can take a step back and see it within the dimensions of the culture."

□

The stylishly black-clad Machado is seated on an overstuffed couch in a Taper office, answering questions during a rehearsal break. He is affable but soft-spoken, almost shy, and given to the occasional fidget.

Machado takes his time, weighing thoughts about his life and art carefully

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ensemble cast, and is to be produced by Hart.

Yet while Machado has emerged as a writer simultaneous with the vogue for multicultural theater, he forged his artistic identity apart from that trend and rejects it. "The minute you say 'we're doing Hispanic theater, we're doing Chicano theater' is the minute you feed stereotypes," he says.

"I'm not doing any of that. I'm doing theater. If I was concerned with the struggle of people coming over the border, I'd better be over at the border doing something about it. I'm concerned about my art."

Machado definitely doesn't wear his agenda on his sleeve, as many doctrinaire multiculturalists do. "The problem with theater right now is that it's not enough about theater," he says. "It's too much about a social agenda that theater artists are not equipped to solve. Going on just to [fulfill] a social agenda is ultimately tedious."

Machado also rejects one of the favorite styles of multiculturalists: magical realism, a genre most frequently associated with the writings of Gabriel García Márquez, which juxtaposes the everyday with the fantastic and is characterized by the liberal use of poetic symbolism.

But Machado thinks it's a style

that's peculiar to its Latin culture of origin. "I believe magic realism in Latin America because it is an internal part of [people's lives]," he says. "Magic realism in the United States is something that people have added on for theatricality."

Machado offers instead a world view that is culturally specific, but much more catholic about notions of community identity. "He's political in the way that Chekhov is political, writing about real people caught up in history," Eustis says. "He won't let anybody off the hook and onto a soapbox."

The emphasis on craft is something Machado learned at the Padua Hills Playwrights Festival and Workshop. From 1979 to 1986, he participated in the annual gathering, first as an actor and later as a writer.

At that respected writers' enclave—associated with such talents as Sam Shepard, Maria Irene Fornes, John Stepping, Jon Robin Baitz, David Henry Hwang and others—Machado fell under the particular influence of Stepping, Padua Hills founder Murray Mednick and Fornes, who is also Cuban.

Stepping cast Machado in several of his plays during the early 1980s. "Eduardo was a wonderful actor, a singular talent," Stepping recalls. "I don't think he believed in his own talent as an actor as

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Machado

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before he answers. But when he has found his response, he looks directly at you. Machado's dark eyes are as insistent as they are penetrating, yet not without a trace of little-boy-lost.

Perhaps it's the emotional fallout of having been uprooted as a child.

Born in Havana on the day in 1953 that Fidel Castro landed in Cuba, Machado grew up in a large, comfortable household filled with relatives. But shortly after the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, he was shipped off to live with young relatives in Miami, where he got his first taste of poverty.

The next year, his parents moved the family to L.A. But it wasn't until Machado got to Van Nuys High School that he discovered true sanctuary in the make-believe of theater.

"Floating Islands" is a version of Machado's own journey. The four-play work—which includes "The Modern Ladies of Guanabacoa," "In the Eye of the Hurricane," "Fabiola" (seen in L.A. in an earlier version in 1985) and "Broken Eggs"—begins in a middle-class Cuban home in 1928. The second and third play are set in the pivotal years 1960 and 1961, and the fourth, in 1979 Woodland Hills.

The story revolves around the experiences of a comfortable Cuban family, displaced by political upheaval, who land in a United States that regards Latino immigrants primarily as fodder for menial labor. The tone is often lightly comic, but there are also times when it hovers near the purple emotions of *telenovela* (Spanish soap opera).

"Floating Islands" is more than just a case of choosing the right topic at the right moment, though. Despite his relative youth, Machado, who has written more than two dozen plays and translations to date, exemplifies a breed of playwright on the rise.

Characterized by an attitude toward ethnicity that's less strident than what was the norm only a couple of years ago, Machado and writers like him embrace their heritage, but see themselves first and foremost as artists rather than activists.

Machado may be Latino, but he doesn't define himself primarily in such terms. "I can only really identify myself as a playwright," he says.

In fact, the politics of Machado's plays are seldom overt, and that approach seems to be serving him well. "He does not adhere to any ideological line," Oskar Eustis says.


The prolific Machado has indeed made inroads. Unlike most non-Anglo writers, he can claim multiple productions on such mainstream stages as Long Wharf, Actors Theatre of Louisville, Ensemble Studio Theatre, American Place Theater, the Magic Theatre and the late Los Angeles Theatre Center company.

He's set to direct his first film from his own screenplay, "Exiles in New York," in 1995. The movie, which contains three separate stories all set in the Big Apple, will feature Whoopi Goldberg in an

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mental illness is hard to detect. It's not like a broken leg. But we never lost our sense of humor. As a wife going through all this, I said, 'I'm not going to give up.'

Then they heard of Gershman, a pioneer in drug rehabilitation therapy who had opened a methadone clinic in Watts in 1977 and was director of alcohol and substance abuse at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center from 1984 through 1990.

Gershman, a youthful-looking 46 and dressed in jeans and casual shirt, carefully placed Greene's case history folder on the living room coffee table in his Brentwood home. He spoke from memory, occasionally running his fingers along the edge of the folder, talking first about Greene's treatment and psychological background and then about how the entertainment profession makes vulnerable people even more so.

"Shecky came to me in October of 1989 and I admitted him to the clinic in November," Gershman said. "His chief complaint was Xanax dependence. He was severely depressed. He had panic disorder, depressive disorder and agoraphobia. He was completely dysfunctional. He'd been through a whole lot of medications.

"It's not that they don't work, but you can't just throw pills at people. Depressions happen. Regardless of what underlies them, there's always treatment. But medication doesn't say anything about who you are or why you're depressed. It's just something that deals with brain chemistry, a tool to help you get off the floor.

"Shecky was typical of the actor-entertainer who grows up in a family where he had a distant, cruel father and a manipulative mother. His sense has been to take care of the world to gain its love. He's been brilliantly successful, but he never gets what he wants:

his mother to say, 'You're a good boy, Shecky.' Even as his life grew more and more out of control, he took care of his mother, father and brothers. When the appreciation didn't come, it only made him work harder and feel more enraged. He looked for acceptance in applause."

Gershman has worked with entertainers for a good portion of his career and recognizes in the industry itself and in the people attracted to it a continuous potential for individual disaster.

"I've had Academy Award-winning actors sit in front of me terrified that they'd never work again. A lot of them go into show business for approval; if the whole world doesn't love them, they feel like failures. When you become famous and wealthy, you have this complex network to deal with—managers, agents, studio executives. Most actors don't have the tools to manage anything so complex. They don't have particularly good skills for conducting normal lives. Much of the time, they feel theirs out of control.

"Freedom is when one's existence isn't dependent on other people's opinions. If you have to filter your identity through an image, you're leaving a large part of yourself in the dark," he said, jerking his head in the direction of the O.J. Simpson mansion, only a few blocks away.

Gershman treated Greene initially by prescribing Klonopin ("a slow-acting benzo that doesn't create a high") in gradually reduced doses; he then put Greene on Zoloft. He also began what he calls "the therapeutic alliance," which at first consisted of having Greene make golf his first priority—at least over working.

"I think psychiatry got lost when it tried to fit patients into a theoretical framework," Gershman said. "I don't believe in creating a mystique, in infantilizing the pa-

tient by hiding your technique. The therapeutic alliance takes a lot of time and consists of listening and being credible. If you tell them what you're doing, they get better faster."

Greene has recently, and cautiously, begun a return to performing after 6½ years. Starting slowly, he's played Kutcher's in the Catskills, the Desert Inn in Las Vegas, Atlantic City and Chicago.

"I found out if you can be honest with an audience, they'll accept anything," he says. "So many people are touched by these situations, or else they understand that emotional illness is as serious as cancer or alcoholism. It can't be hidden. It has to be treated." On Monday, he'll play himself on TV's "Northern Exposure," and on Nov. 11 and 12 he plays live at the Wilshire Ebell Theatre.

Gershman has great affection for Greene, and some concern as well: "Shecky's one of the most just, kind and compassionate people I've ever met. I think his comedy genius is based on being sort of the common man. People understand he's struggling to survive, like everyone else. Audiences trust him to tell them the truth; he can take them anywhere. Now he's going back into the lion's den. Will the same old forces push the same old buttons?"

No one can tell, including Greene himself, whether his return and its churning up of deep currents will set an old self-destructive cycle back in motion again. But odds are that the moment he takes the stage he'll be met by a wave of residual gratitude and warmth for an entertainer who's given a lot of pleasure for a lot of years. □

Lawrence Christon is a Times staff writer.

Machado

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much as other people did, though."

Indeed, Machado never found acting completely satisfying. "When I was in John's plays, my job was to create this other person that had little to do with my instincts," he says. "And because I wasn't playing Latins, I was expressing less and less of myself."

He felt a need to convey more of his personal history. "There was this world that I wanted to express—being Latin and Cuban—and there was no literature for me to express [it]," Machado says. "Because of that I stopped acting."

He began to write, but Machado didn't find his voice as a writer right away. "I was writing because John Stepling was a writer," he recalls. "Also because I found myself surrounded by writers: Irene, John and Murray. But I was an actor surrounded by writers who did not welcome me into the world of writing for a long time."

Stepling, who also has a family connection to Machado (Machado's ex-wife is the grandmother of Stepling's son), continues to criticize Machado's writing. "Ed's plays don't speak to me politically and emotionally," he says.

"He writes old-fashioned plays—in their devices, narrative

structures and even the dialogue," Stepling continues. "I feel like I'm reading a play from the '40s sometimes. I suspect he knows that and it's just what he prefers. Politically, we probably are not terribly close."

Stepling is not alone in his opinions, although other colleagues—particularly those in the Latino community—were not willing to speak on the record about it. The most common remarks are that Machado tends to be aesthetically conservative, politically noncommittal and given to easy laughs.

Machado has taken such criticisms to heart. "It took me a long time to get over that, because when you admire people as writers, it's hard when they don't admire you," he says. "I would have loved my plays to be like John's or Irene's, but they weren't. It was hard to accept that I was writing a different kind of thing."

Even he knows that he was too dependent on jokes in his earlier efforts. "I started thinking 'laughter is great' but you have to earn it," he says. "I could have become [a] Neil Simon, because I know how to do that rhythm thing. That's a trick. It's not real."

Before he moved to New York 11 years ago, Machado wrote one short play that ultimately became part three of "Floating Islands." It

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LISTINGS

COMEDY

Compiled by Jon Matsumoto. Send listings to Comedy Listings, Calendar, Los Angeles Times, Times Mirror Square, Los Angeles 90053.

CONCERTS

SATURDAY

Richard Jeni (Ventura Theatre, 26 S. Chestnut St., Ventura, (805) 648-1888, 8 p.m.).

CLUBS/THEATERS

Acme Comedy Theatre (5124 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood, (818) 753-0650). "The Sunday Show Rides Again," today, 7:30 p.m. "Thursday Show," Thur., 8 p.m. "Acme Genuine Draft," Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m. "Improv at the Acme," Sat., 10:30 p.m.

Comedy and Magic Club (1018 Hermosa Ave., Hermosa Beach, (310) 372-1193). Jay Leno, today, 8 p.m. Kathleen Madigan, Lewis Black, Chris Broughton, Tue.-Thur.,

8 p.m., Fri., 8 and 10:30 p.m. Sat., 7:30 and 10 p.m.

Comedy Store (8433 Sunset Blvd., (213) 656-6225). Main Room: "Best of the Comedy Store," Fri.-Sat., 9 p.m. Original Room: stand-up comedy, today-Thur., 8 p.m.; Fri., 9 p.m.; Sat., 8 p.m. Belly Room: "Lobeknockers," today, 9 p.m.; "Gay and Lesbian Comedy Night," Wed., 8:30 p.m.; "Jokin' the Beat," Thur., 8:30 p.m. "Rachel's Romance, Therapy and Comedy," Fri., 8:30 p.m. "Latina de la Noche," Sat., 9 p.m.

Groundling Theatre (7307 Melrose Ave., (213) 934-9700). "Starsky and Sunday," today, 7:30 p.m. "Cookin' With Gas," celebrity alumni show, Thur., 8 p.m. "Groundlings Good & Twenty," Fri., 8 p.m.; Sat., 8 and 10 p.m. "Completely Different Late Show," Fri., 10 p.m.

Ice House (24 N. Mentor Ave., Pasadena, (818) 577-1894). Stand-up comedy, today, 9 p.m. Steve McGrew, Tue.-Thur., 8:30 p.m.; Fri., 8:30 and 10:30 p.m.; Sat., 7, 9 and 11 p.m. Annex: stand-up comedy, today, 7 p.m.; Fri., 8 and 9:50 p.m.; Sat., 8 and 9:50 p.m.

Igby's (11637 W. Pico Blvd., West Los Angeles, (310) 477-3553). "All-Pro Comedy," today, Tue.-Thur. 8 p.m. "All Headliner Comedy," Fri., 8 p.m.; Sat., 8 and 10 p.m.

Improvisation (8162 Melrose Ave., (213) 651-2583). Stand-up comedy, today, 8 p.m.; Mon., 7 p.m.; Tue.-Thur., 8 p.m.; Fri.-Sat., 8:30 and 10:30 p.m.

L.A. Cabaret Comedy Club (17271 Ventura Blvd., Encino, (818) 501-3737). "Funniest Person in Valley Contest," Tue., 7:30 p.m. Stand-up comedy, Mon., Wed.-Thur., 7:30 p.m.; Fri., 8:30 and 10:30 p.m.; Sat., 7:30, 9:30 and 11:30 p.m.

L.A. Connection Comedy Theatre (13442 Ventura Blvd., Sherman Oaks, (818) 784-1868). "Rock 'n' Roll Rookies," today, 5:30 and 8:30 p.m.; Fri., 7:30 p.m. "Z-Z-Zat's Improv," today, 7 p.m.; Fri., 10:30 p.m.; Sat., 7:30 p.m. "Thursday Night Live," Thur., 9 p.m. "Attack of the Killer Connection," Fri., 9 p.m.; Sat., 10:30 p.m. "Absurdity Required," Sat., 9 p.m.

Laugh Factory (8001 Sunset Blvd., (213) 656-1336). Stand-up comedy, Mon.-Tue., Thur., 8 and 10 p.m.; Fri.-Sat., 8 and 10 p.m. and midnight.

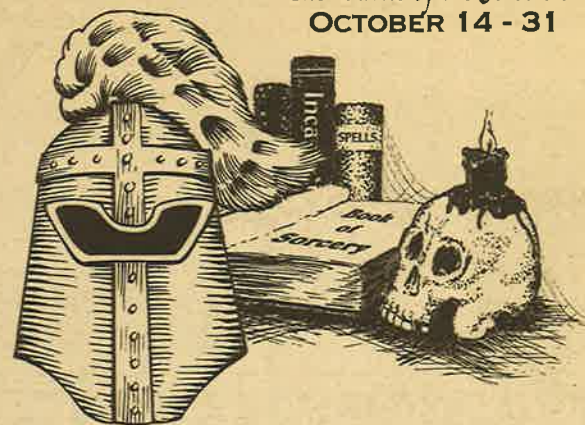
Theatre at the Improv (8156 Melrose Ave., (213) 852-7099). Second City Alumni Players, today, 8 p.m.

Upfront Comedy (123 Broadway, Santa Monica, (310) 319-3477). "Second City Alumni Show," Thur., 8 p.m.; Fri., 10 p.m. "Spolin Players," Fri., 8 p.m.

Wildside Theatre (10945 Camarillo St., North Hollywood, (818) 506-8838). "TV Spotlight," Wed., 8 p.m. "The Instant Show," Thur., 8 p.m. "Improv We Trust," Fri., 7:30 p.m. "On the Spot," Fri., 9 p.m. "Between the Lines," Fri., 10:30 p.m. "Cheap Laughs," Sat., 8 p.m. "House Blend," Sat., 9 p.m. "On the Double," Sat., 10:30 p.m.

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Machado

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was given a reading at the Ensemble Studio Theatre, when the New York company had an outlet here. Yet it wasn't until Machado moved to New York at age 29—primarily to take advantage of teaching and production opportunities—that he began to write in earnest.

Machado, who has continued to spend a substantial amount of time in L.A., writes work that ranges from a satiric comedy of manners to knock-down-drag-out melodrama; the emotionally brutal family fight looms large. "He has a real sense of drama, almost bordering on the melodramatic, which is appropriate for the Cubano experience," says producer Hart. "He's a young Tennessee Williams."

Machado has been likened to Luis Buñuel and others, particularly in the way he skewers middle-class mores. But he also belongs in the company of contemporary Cuban writers such as the acclaimed C. Cabrera Infante and non-Cubans such as Milan Kundera, with whom Machado shares an ironic take on the sweep of history.

But for all of its jokes—call it the "unbearable lightness of being Cubano"—there are other even darker aspects to Machado's writing. Like the late Cuban novelist Reinhold Arenas—who was imprisoned for his homosexuality under Castro and left the island via the Mariel boat lift—Machado laces his stories about the immigrant experience with pained eroticism.

Pedro: *I did it with my brother.*

Mario: *You are disgusting. That's why Cuba is rotting because of people like you!*

(Pedro kisses him. Mario hits him. Pedro is out of breath.)

We worked to make this country something. . . . And you punks wasted it all.

—from "Fabiola"

The four-part "Floating Islands" epic was inspired by Machado's family history, but that's only the starting point. "It's still based on the fact that my grandmother cut her hair in 1929 and she thought it was a big rebellious act, that my grandfather lost his bus company when Fidel nationalized . . . and that I lived in an extremely alcoholic family," Machado says. "But of course it's my re-imagining of all these things."

Rather than documentary, Machado calls his work "truth of imagination." "The truth is not necessarily what actually happened," he says. "The truth is what these people were thinking and feeling."

Yet those who would know also find veracity in "Floating Islands." "I know the characters. They're members of my family," says cast member Marissa Chibas, whose Social Democrat father, Raul, fought with Castro and whose uncle, Eduardo, had been considered a front-runner for the 1952 presidential elections until he shot himself during a 1951 radio broadcast. (Eduardo Chibas' suicide is talked about in "Fabiola.")

"The conversations are conversations I have had with my parents," says Chibas, who was born in New York in 1961, the year after her father left Cuba. "These families are greatly influenced by the politics of the time."

"Floating Islands" can also be taken as a case study in rendering the personal political. "They're essentially family plays—incredible intricate and recognizable portrayals of dysfunctional people just like us—and yet Eduardo's able to tell an overall story about Cuba and, by extension, about the Americas in the 20th Century," says director Eustis.

New York Times critic Frank Rich said of a 1983 production of Machado's "The Modern Ladies of Guanabacoa," "there's no question that he has talent" and compared his work to "the lighter comedies that Luis Buñuel made during his Mexican exile."

Of the earlier version of "Fabiola" staged in L.A. in 1985, The



ROBERT GABRIEL / Los Angeles Times

CUBA BEACH: Machado's "A Burning Beach" was staged at LATC in 1989 with, from left, Robert Beltran, Christine Avila and Ellen Barber.

Times' Sylvie Drake said it was "important work, not just because it is written well, but also because few plays, if any, have dealt with the immigrant experience of the mid-20th Century."

More recently, however, Rich found a 1992 New Haven production of Machado's "Once Removed" (1992) "a linear, realistic play that can seem Americanized to a fault."

For Machado, however, the goal, particularly with "Floating Islands," is to show that Cuban families come from somewhere too. "These people have political, emotional, intellectual and religious lives," he says. "The killer of living in this country as a Latin person is the perception of there being no historical context to you except people trying to get over a border to get menial work."

"The worst kind of prejudice is the assumption that Latin America, Central America and the Caribbean do not have sophisticated cultures," Machado continues. "If there's anything that makes my plays in any way radical, it's that I show that there's a complex culture having to do with the intellect there."

But Machado does not always write about Cubans. His 1990 play, "Stevie Wants to Play the Blues" (seen at the L.A. Theatre Center in 1990), tells the post-World War II story of a woman who cross-dresses as a man to make it as a jazz musician, à la Billy Tipton.

He has also translated José Ignacio Cabrujas' "El día que me quieras" (The Day You'll Love Me), a Chekhovian comedy seen at the Taper, Too in 1989.

While "Floating Islands," "Stevie" and the majority of Machado's other plays are works of realism, the playwright has also made forays into more experimental terrain.

"A Burning Beach" (1989), for example, is an abstract political drama set in a 1895 Cuba that focuses on four female characters who represent different aspects of a culture in transition, with the figure of patriot poet-in-exile Jose Marti. It was staged at the American Place Theater in 1988 and the Los Angeles Theatre Center in 1989.

Machado didn't intend "A Burning Beach" to be as stylistically venturesome as it seemed. Both New York and L.A. stagings were too close to magical realism for Machado's own comfort—although that was partly due to a misunderstanding that the playwright sees as paradigmatic of what's wrong with multiculturalism.

It began seven years ago, with a South Coast Repertory reading of a draft of "A Burning Beach." In cahoots with others, Machado decided to pull the audience's leg, telling the stage manager "that at the end of the play the dresser starts bleeding and it covers everything onstage with blood."

Machado got a surprise in return, though, when his script was sent out. "I get this call from American Place Theatre (in New York) that they want to do the play," he recalls. "I go in there and they [begin talking about] that amazing moment of magic realism when the dresser bleeds.' I say, 'Oh no, that's a joke.' And they say, 'No, you're wrong.' So we make this compromise [and have the] set go red at the end instead."

When it came to LATC, however, Machado's prank came back to haunt him. Once more, he insisted that the direction was a joke, only to be told, yet again, that he was the one who was mistaken.

And therein lies the moral. "Every night I would have to see this dresser bleed and I would just die. I would be so embarrassed that this dresser was bleeding," Machado says. "But I know that that play would not have gotten two productions if the dresser hadn't bled."

This kind of focus on gimmicks is what troubles Machado about magical realism American style.

"I'm in an interesting position, having been young in a Latin country and [yet] not wanting to write about magic realism, which I think is false," he says. "Consciously or subconsciously, writers put it in because it's what the marketplace is looking for. That's an easy way to have something be exotic. That's the ultimate in being fraudulent."

Machado has also had other en-

counters with knee-jerk multiculturalism—as recently as "Floating Islands."

Pressured to cast only Latino performers in the Taper production, Machado found himself at loggerheads with prevailing attitudes. "Because I wanted to cast people with names like Olympia Dukakis in a few of the parts in these plays, I have been treated like a turncoat to my community," Machado said during a panel discussion at a conference in June.

"I've gotten phone calls, and I've been called a racist and a turncoat and a sell-out to the white man," Machado continued. "The only community that I am supposed to be loyal to, now that I have gotten to a point where my work is widely seen, is the community of people who have names that sound Spanish."

Yet now Machado says that, although he didn't know that it would be the case when he made the above statements, things worked out in a way that pleased everyone involved. "When we started working on these plays, there was a big hoopla here because I said I was going to hire the best people for the job," he says.

"This time, the best people for the job all turned out to be Spanish," he continues. "I didn't know that in June, when I made the remark about Olympia Dukakis. I didn't change my mind."

Save for such clashes, though, Machado's career learning curve has been impressive. "You have to get over your conceit about what works about your work, and what worked about my work was that it was funny," he says. "Strangely enough, 'A Burning Beach' was the beginning for me of being willing to have people be bored and to let go of laughs. "Laughter is an opiate in the theater, because it means that you are engaging [the audience] and being accepted," he says. "To be a writer, you have to be willing to be someone that a lot of people don't like. Silence is tough."

"I can sit in a theater where people are silent when they're watching my plays now and I don't think I could have five years ago," Machado continues. "When I was young, I couldn't sit through a run-through or preview of one of my plays without taking two Valiums. Then it took two shots of whiskey and I could sit through a play. And slowly it became less and less and now I can just sit through it."

So too, perhaps, have the past five years allowed Machado to close the book on the writing of his personal epic. "I've been living with these characters for 14 years and they have a life of their own," he says. "They've never stopped talking to me. I really want to shut the door on them." □

■ "Floating Islands," Mark Taper Forum, 135 N. Grand Ave., Oct. 23-Dec. 11. (Call for complete schedule of both parts). \$28-\$35.50 (each part), \$56-\$71 for both parts. (213) 972-0700.

Jan Breslauer is a Times staff writer.

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