

HISPANIC THEATER FEST DRAWS 6,000

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While this year's Hispanic Theater Festival did not make national headlines the way last year's did, it offered some encouraging signs for the Miami theatrical community.

In its second year, the festival was better organized, it established a link between the English- and Spanish-speaking theater communities, and it introduced new authors.

And what controversy there was revolved around an artistic issue rather than politics.

Throughout May, an estimated 6,000 people went to see eight plays in five different playhouses during the festival, organized by the umbrella group Acting Together. Audiences were enthusiastic.

"I think the festival's caliber was enhanced this year by inviting groups that do not belong to Acting Together and groups that staged Spanish plays in English," said Mario Ernesto Sanchez, director of Acting Together. "Invitations for next year's third festival should be state- and nationwide in scope."

Interestingly, one of the festival's most important and culturally significant plays was the only one staged in English -- an American group's production of a work by a prize-winning Cuban-American playwright.

South East Alternative Theater's production of *Mud*

underscores the positive effects a festival of this sort can have as a unifying force in our multicultural society. The author of this Obie-winning play is Maria Irene Fornes, whose work previously had been unknown in Miami. Nilo Cruz, the director, is a young Cuban from Miami. The cast included two Americans and a Cuban.

"Being part of the festival was very good for us because it exposed us to a new audience; we had far more Hispanics than we normally attract to our shows," said Richard Gross, SEAT director.

The production was so successful, SEAT plans to repeat it next season -- and to continue participating in the Hispanic Theater Festival.

Another festival highlight, from the standpoint of theatrical quality and community value, was the premiere of a

play by the late Virgilio Pinera, the leading Cuban playwright.

The first Hispanic Theater Festival touched off a political furor when objections were raised to the inclusion of a play by Dolores Prida, a New York-based Cuban-American accused of pro- Castro sympathies. The play was withdrawn under pressure, amid debate over freedom of expression.

This year's controversy was of a different nature and did not reach the English-speaking community. Pinera's *An Empty Shoe Box* was adapted by director Alberto Sanain. This adaptation added gross anachronisms, alien to the historical period covered by the author.

Since it was the festival's first offering, the adaptation could be viewed as an attempt to smooth things in light of last year's troubles. This was wholly unnecessary, for the play is ideologically defined and a denunciation of repression.

"I think the controversy surrounding (*Shoe Box*) was positive, sound and constructive," Sanchez said. "People began reading about the author and about theater. Different opinions were voiced. As opposed to last year's controversy, it was a step forward in our local environment."

"The controversy surrounding Pinera's work taught us that we can focus on artistic rather than political issues," emphasized Aida Levitan, festival publicist.

The production of a Spanish play, *Orchids and Panthers*, at the Coconut Grove Playhouse also was significant. It marked the first time a work by a Spanish author was staged in English in that theater. It introduced to Miami theater audiences a previously unknown Spanish author.

Other theater productions were exponents of the Cuban mannerist genre. There were three short pieces by budding local authors presented by the International Arts Center. This type of play has an established audience in Miami, where for years they have been the main fare at Hispanic light theater houses.

Prometeo, MDCC's bilingual company, put on a good student show. Grately, one of Miami's oldest cultural associations, staged a Pirandello drama; last year its selection was a zarzuela. Andromaca produced a play by a leading Venezuelan author, and Chicos offered a children's performance.

The uneven artistic quality of the works continues to be one of the festival's main flaws. The way works and groups are selected should be modified. That, however, is easier said than done because all groups belonging to Acting Together are entitled to participate.

"We've got to work on improving quality," Levitan said. "We need more money."

The balance sheet for this second festival is quite positive. Sponsored by local entities, this year's festival raised more funds than in the past, a total of \$25,000 used for advertising and hall rentals. Each group paid for its own productions.

The event's future -- and the future of Spanish theater in Miami -- possibly depends on the youth, new ideas, the enhancement of freedom of expression and the upgrading of the technical training of authors, directors and players.

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