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CUBAN THEATER IS THRIVING- IN MIAMI

By KERRY GRUSON

MIAMI Every Friday and Saturday night and twice on Sunday the silver screen at the Teatro La Comedia I comes down and the curtain rises for what has been one of the most popular evenings of original language theater in Miami.

The success of the play on stage there - "Mi Hijo No Es Que Parece" ("My Son Is not What He Seems to Be") - is evidence that this town is not only the political headquarters for anti-Castro Cubans, it also has become the exile's cultural center. "Mi Hijo" has run for four years in a town not overly friendly to theater in any language.

Further proof is a proliferation of Cuban-owned movie houses which, like the Teatro La Comedia I, convert to live theater on weekends. There are now five such shows relying on political and social satire as well as light comedy. All are heavily loaded with sexual innuendo to lure an audience which, in many cases, has never been to the theater before. Another play, this one a comedy laced with political satire, "Se le Fue por el Mariel Hasta El Sentero de Fidel" ("Even Fidel's Witch Doctor Has Left on the Boat List for Mariel"), closed last weekend after an 11-month run, a record for a show with political content.

The plays are based on current events in Cuba and Miami. The characters, real and imaginary, are drawn from everyday life as well as from pre-revolutionary Cuban folklore. Of course, in order to fully appreciate the humor a knowledge of Spanish, of recent Cuban history and of slang is a must.

Plays focusing on political issues began appearing two years ago when Ernesto Capote, who now owns six movie houses, put on a comedy by Mario Martin called "Me voy para Cuba, Fua" ("I am Going to Cuba, That"). At the time, Cuban exiles living in the United States had just been allowed back to see their relatives. "Me voy" in part poked fun at the way visitors tried to smuggle in food and other items in their clothing.

The format worked. So Mr. Capote agreed when playwright Alberto Gonzalez approached him with a proposal to stage "No Hay mal que Dura Cien Anos ("Ni Pueblo Que Ello Resisto"), its title taken from the Spanish proverb which translates as "There is no evil which lasts 100 years, nor people who can stand it." This show satirizing Mr. Castro's bureaucracy ran nine months.

The idea is to broaden the appeal of the theater beyond the usual play-going elite and keep alive the spirit of Cuban nationalism among the exile community, says Mr. Gonzalez, who left Cuba in 1961. He is one of the most prolific local playwrights.

Over the last two years Mr. Gonzalez has had as many as five shows running concurrently. "We have opened the theater to the general public," he says. "We believe in messages which are very simple."

The message is anti-Communism, explains Claudio Gonzalez, a freshfaced 23-year-old, who handles public relations for his father's production company, Producciones Fenix. "My father is using comedy to fight Communism," he adds. "Through the theater we have a good weapon."

Alberto Gonzalez knows that the theater above all must entertain. His plays are bawdy celebrations. Adultry, impotence and, in the heavily macho Latin culture, homosexuality are always good for a laugh. "Mi Hijo" draws laughs from the confused sexual orientation of a dress designer's son.

However, Mr. Gonzalez's biggest audience is not in any theater. At 11:30 weekday mornings and again at 11:30 P.M., Latins all around town tune in to WQBA, the Spanish-language radio station, to listen to "La Silla Caliente" ("The Hot Seat").

The highly eccentric cast of interviewers on this mock talk show includes Nanito who works for the fantastical newspaper "Veinte Anos no es Nada" ("Twenty Years or Nothing" -an oblique reference to Castro's regime, which has been in power for little more than 20 years). Nanito's part is spoken by Armando Roblan, an actor who is a favorite of Latin theatergoers here. Displaying a versatility common in the local Cuban theater community, Mr. Roblan has also written a play, "Ni la Vaca de Fidel esta de Acuerdo con El" ("Not Even Fidel's Cow Agrees With Him").

Mama Cusa, another interviewer on "La Silla," is a gossipy spinster who, while insisting on her viginity, represents a periodical titled "La Ultima Noche que Passe con Tigo" ("The Last Night I Spent With You"). Luis Echegoyen has been Mama Cusa, a stock Cuban character, for the last 30 years. Along with Hector Tarvieso, a soap opera star from Puerto Rico, Mr. Echegoyen has written a comedy titled "Mama Cusa" centered around his character. It is currently in performance at the Teatro Habana, which is leased by Mr. Gonzalez.

The person chosen for the mock interview on "La Silla" depends on the news of the day, though Mr. Gonzalez has a number of old favorites such as Fidel's brother Raul renamed Raul Rastro. He recently started another radio show "Como Esta la Sauesera" ("What's Going On in Little Havana") which makes light of the problems of daily life on Southwest Eighth Street, the heart of Little Havana.

Mr. Gonzalez has been accused of poking fun at the "Cuban question." In his defense he says, "It is precisely the role of the humorous to take things seriously which are not serious because that brings you closer to the things that are serious." Mr. Gonzalez, who had spent 14 years in Puerto Rico before moving to Miami, says he came here because "in Miami you breathe the Cuba we left behind and the Cuba we hope to reconquer."