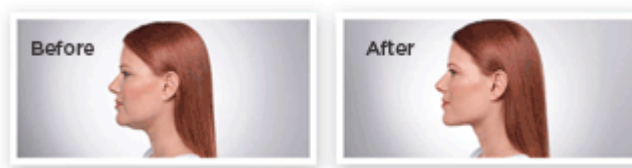


MIAMI New Times

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From Ports to *Puertas*

MIA LEONIN | **MAY 17, 2001** | **4:00AM**

Perhaps it's sheer coincidence, but it seems largely appropriate that the first **International Monologue Festival** began with a voyage and ended with an enigmatic door. The festival, which took place from April 27 to May 6, began with Teatro Mio's *Waiting for Odysseus* and closed with Teatro Buendia's *The Eighth Door*. No two works could be better bookends for a festival whose beginning initiated a groundbreaking cultural and artistic journey and whose ending undeniably opened doors long shut. The Spanish-language festival, a joint effort among Teatro La Ma Teodora with the University of Miami, Miami Light Project, and Florida International University, brought together talented artists and writers from Spain, Venezuela, Brazil, Mexico, France, and the United States -- as well as 22 more from Cuba -- to Miami's stages. Until the final hour the event was plagued by a lack of funding, bureaucratic delays in obtaining visas, and a general resistance and fearfulness by Cubans on both sides of the Florida Straits. But begin it did, and as Alberto Sarraín, artistic director of Teatro La Ma Teodora and director of the festival, observed, "Much more than a display of theater, the festival has been a door that has opened, a lesson in civil tolerance and peaceful coexistence...."

The International Monologue Festival made its political mark by being the first opportunity for actors from Cuba to perform in Miami, but it also broke new ground culturally and artistically. For the first time here, Cubans from the island were given a space to perform works that deal with their particular kind of exile -- exile from the friends, family, and loved ones who have left. This duality has been at the core of theater on both sides of the Straits for more than 40 years. "The diaspora crosses all of my work, and it is what really has made me a writer," Cuban playwright Alberto Pedro, author of *Waiting for Odysseus*, explained in an interview with *El Nuevo Herald*. Abilio Estevez, author of *The Dwarf in a Bottle*, added, "Many people in exile have told me that they felt alone, but I too have felt alone in Havana." In fact Estevez's *Dwarf*, one of the most stellar monologues, was written as a reaction to the departure of a fellow actor who left for Miami.

That play, brilliantly directed by Teatro de la Luna's Raul Martin and enigmatically performed by Grettel Trujillo, features a dwarf who has been trapped in a bottle for so many years that solitude has turned him into somewhat of a philosopher. As he contemplates the advantages and disadvantages of his isolation, he finally determines that he prefers to live in isolation because he

disadvantages of his isolation, he finally determines that he prefers to live in isolation, because he wouldn't know what to do with freedom. Estevez's ingenious metaphor is just one example of the unique characteristics that distinguish Cuban literature: the use of subtext as a way of speaking about the unspeakable.

Another striking aspect of Cuban theater that audiences were exposed to is its physicality. As Sarraín observed in an interview before the festival: "If theater were a matter of simply talking, it would be radio. Theater is physical. It is movement. In film the eye of the audience is determined by the eye of the camera (or rather the director), but in theater this is not the case. You have to be able to capture the poetic image and reveal it within a specific time and space. When you do that your life changes."

Veteran Cuban actress Adria Santana gave a fine example of this physicality in Abelardo Estorino's *Sorrows Know How to Swim*, which brought down the house. More than simply the portrayal of an actress reflecting on why and how she became an artist, audiences watched mesmerized as Santana seemed to drown her sorrows one moment and walk on water the next. Her vast range and impeccable emotional control took audiences on a theatrical roller coaster where love turns to hate and laughter can give way to tears with a single gesture or change of expression. Known as one of the finest actresses on the island, Santana has played this role, written for her by Estorino, all over the world for more than ten years -- and now, finally, in Miami. It is no surprise that the theatergoing public demanded a repeat performance, and the festival jurors named Santana and Grettel Trujillo as Best Actresses.

Midway through it occurred to me that the International Monologue Festival was not so much an international festival as a festival celebrating the rich tradition of Cuban theater on the island and in the diaspora. Part of this can be attributed to the fact that many of the non-Cuban companies lacked the quality and dynamic energy that those from Cuba displayed, and thus paled in comparison. An example is *Caraquito Morao*, written and performed by New York-based actor Pablo Garcia Gomez. Like Santana, Gomez portrayed an actor contemplating his vocation, but his performance was notably flat and the text predictable. By the same token, some of the Cuban performances were a mixed bag as well. Compania Teatral Hubert de Blanck's *Un Poco de Aire Frio* and Grupo Teatral Rita Montaner's *Omiyiero -- Remolino en Las Aguas* both seemed to indulge in a permanent state of lamentation that proved to be more tedious than theatrical.

But the overall success of the Cuban performers from Cuba, Brazil, and Spain made me hope for more of the same in next year's festival, with one notable and sorely missed component: the profound resource of Cuban talent that exists right here in Miami. Not one Cuban writer, actor, or director from Miami participated in the festival. Watching Cuban artists from the island embrace their equally talented counterparts from Miami after years of estrangement made me long to see these actors, writers, and directors performing side by side. Sarraín confirmed that the absence of actors from Miami indeed was a weak aspect of the festival: "One of the most disappointing things was that for different reasons [almost] none of the great talents we have here in Miami were able to participate." According to Sarraín the reasons were valid: "Some don't have time for theater because of their work and daily lives. Others were afraid or didn't believe the festival would really happen." He added, however, that several Miami-based actors already have approached him with ideas for next year's festival.

Although the festival has barely ended, Sarraín and other organizers, encouraged by the overwhelmingly positive public response and numerous standing ovations, already are thinking about next year's festival. "Next year I think we are going to expand the festival to works with more than one person, but still keeping a smaller format," says Sarraín. Although the festival will continue to be international, he points out that the notable presence of Cuban actors is related to the demand for Cuban performers, comparing Miami with other regions of the nation: "It's as if we were in Texas; the Mexican participation would have more weight."

Despite the absence of many talented Miami artists, the city was well represented by one artist, actor/writer/director Teo Castellanos, who performed a segment of a work in progress called *NE 2nd Ave*. The piece, also written by Castellanos, who was born in Puerto Rico and raised in Miami, was a theatrical feast of personas as Castellanos transformed himself into four distinct characters linked by the jitneys that travel up and down NE Second Avenue in downtown Miami. Using songs from Haitian folklore, *son*, hip-hop, and rap as transitions, Castellanos seemed to effortlessly morph into Jean-Baptiste, a Haitian jitney driver; Tey Tey, a young African-American male struggling through an identity crisis; Lan Quisha, a young African-American woman with hopes of escaping the streets through education; and Juan, a Cuban balsero turned self-proclaimed capitalist.

Castellanos began researching the characters after performing the Jean-Baptiste character for the Miami Light Project's Here and Now Festival in 2000, and that research has paid off. Besides giving a flawless display of the varied accents and diction of his characters, Castellanos uses his body as a prop, capturing the nonverbal language of each character to a tee. He puts his hand on his hip and flips his head with a Lil' Kim tenacity as the defiant Lan Quisha rebuffs a gold-toothed suitor's derogatory rap serenade by saying, "You did *not* just make up a rhyme undermining my potential."

Michael John Garces, a New York based writer/director/actor who recently directed Eduardo Machado's *When the Sea Drowns in the Sand* (which received critical acclaim at the prestigious Humana Festival), superbly directed *NE 2nd Ave*. Garces is debuting the world premiere of two new one-acts called *land*. and *audiovideo* with Juggerknot Theatre Company.

Castellanos's piece breaks new ground for Miami theater because it reminds us what it means to be a resident of Miami, not just part of one particular ethnic group living in Miami. Theatergoers will have the opportunity to experience the full-length version of this work, as Castellanos has been selected to be the featured performer at next year's Here and Now Festival in January. Also, owing to numerous petitions from the public, two monologues from the festival, *The Dwarf in a Bottle* and *The Album*, will be repeated.

The stage lights have dimmed, but the implications of what took place over those ten days is sure to be far-reaching.

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