

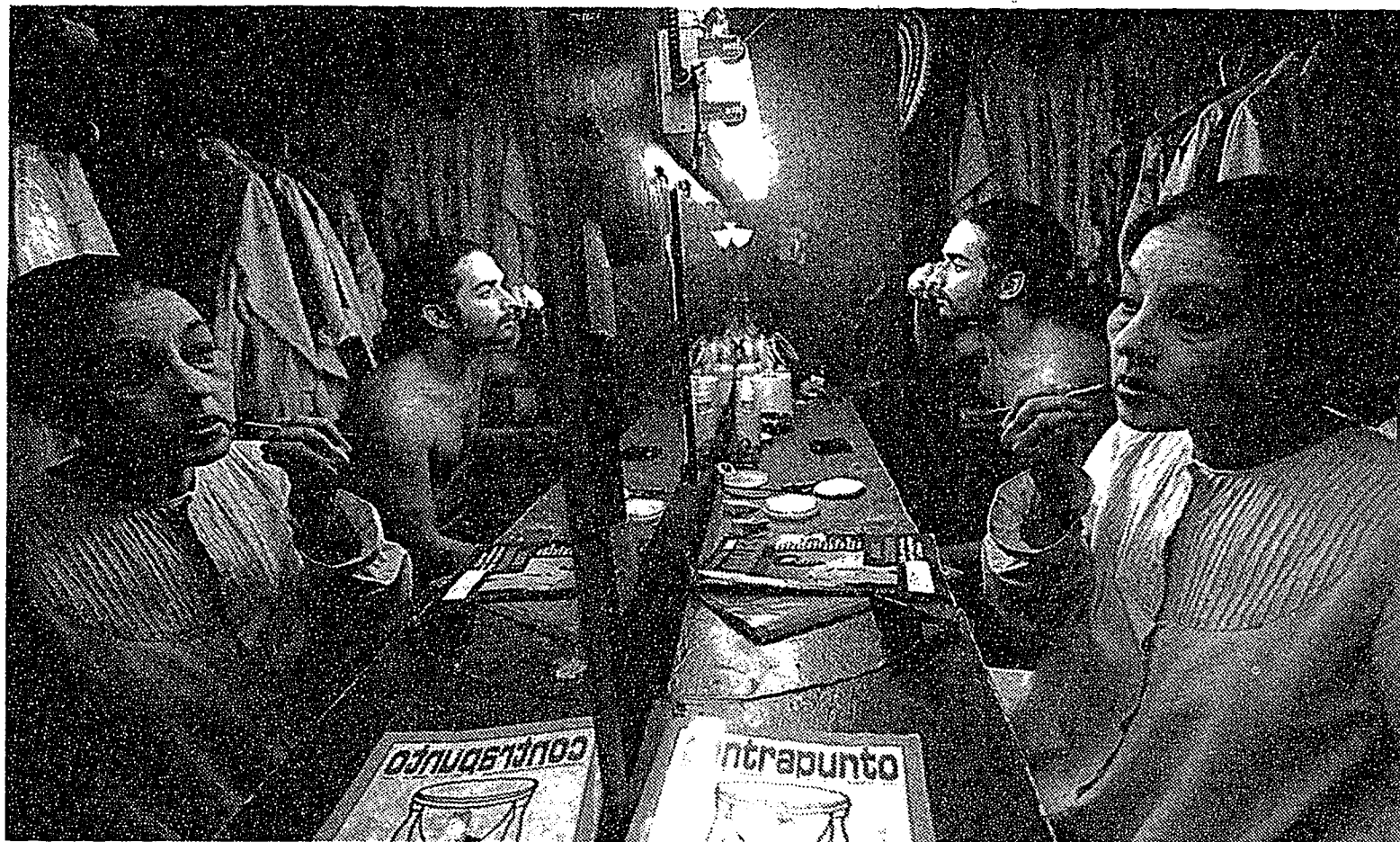
Cuban Artists Abroad Straddle Two Worlds: Ideological Pressure ...

By MIRTA OJITO

New York Times (1923-Current file); Oct 27, 1996;

ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2009)

pg. 35



Blocked due to copyright.
See full page image or
microfilm.

Photographs by Philip Greenberg
for The New York Times

At left, Adria Santana, foreground, and Alfredo Alonso apply their stage makeup before a performance. Above, Mr. Alonso, in dark sweater, welcomes a friend at Newark Airport. Below, René Losada and Miss Santana onstage at the Gramercy Arts Theater.

By MIRTA OJITO

They dance on New York's most famed stages and organize the latest downtown art exhibitions. They perform in respected tiny theaters and play their music in big outdoor spaces. They are young and talented and they are Cuban. Unfailingly, they draw big crowds.

Yet when the curtain comes down and the show is over, these Cubans go home.

"Some of the people I know think I'm crazy for wanting to return," said Alfredo Alonso, 29, the lead actor in "Vagos Rumores" ("Vague Rumors"), a Cuban play at the Gramercy Arts Theater. "They are betting I won't return, but I will."

Mr. Alonso, who plays a 19th-century Cuban poet who was critical of slavery and Spain's domination but who refused to go into exile as many of his compatriots did, says he would not have come to the United States if it had meant leaving Cuba for good.

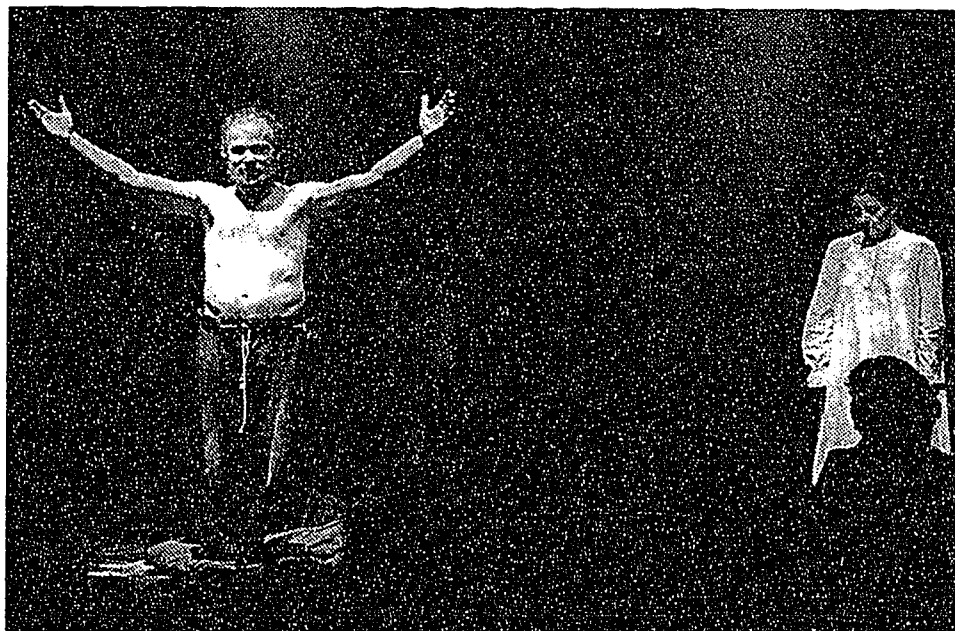
The artists' desire to go home, and the fact that the Cuban Government allows them to, sets them apart from hundreds of thousands of Cubans who in the last 37 years have had to renounce country and family to work in the United States.

But the privilege comes at a price: they must straddle an ideological fence in a politically charged situation that for almost four decades has demanded clear definitions.

"The first thing people want to know when they hear I come from Cuba is am I or am I not against the Cuban Government," said Juan Carlos Cremata, 34, a

Cuban Artists Abroad Straddle Two Worlds

Ideological Pressure Intrudes on Acclaim



film maker who lives in Manhattan and plans to return soon to the island after five years of world travel. "All these questions are unnecessary."

And the answers are seldom clear.

At a time of increasing tension between the two countries, brought about by Cuba's downing of two United States planes in February and Washington's swift reaction to tighten travel and trade with the island, the artists stand on uncharted terrain. Neither government spokesmen nor government critics, they walk an ideological fine line.

"If you have been here too long and return to Cuba, people think you are C.I.A.," Mr. Cremata said. "And if you've been in Cuba too long and then come here, people think you work for the state security apparatus. There is paranoia everywhere."

Adding to the artists' balancing act is a troublesome fact: rejection by members of the Cuban exile community, who assume that a decision to return to Cuba is an implicit statement of support for Fidel Castro.

For Cuban artists working in the United States, openness about their intentions could cost them performance contracts and clients. A Miami concert by the Cuban singer Rosita Fornés was recently canceled after exiles threatened mass protests outside the theater. In New York, where the singer performed for four nights in July at the Gramercy Arts Thea-

Continued on Page 36

For Cuban Artists Abroad, Ideology Intrudes on Acclaim in Visits to the U.S.

Continued From Page 35

ter, some 60 exiles staged demonstrations the first two nights outside the theater and local Spanish-language papers carried scathing editorials. But the show went on.

Protests have not held back New York audiences, who flock to see these artists precisely because they live in Cuba and, some believe, bring with them the more authentic sounds and rhythms of the island.

But there are political reasons as well that draw certain audiences to Cuban art, particularly those who advocate closer relations between the two countries. After decades of cold war tension, these artists are the only bridge over the chasm that divides the two countries.

Foundations and nonprofit organizations that bring many of the artists here say they relish their groundbreaking role. "We see this as a very positive experience," said Holly Block, executive director of Art in General, an alternative nonprofit art organization in TriBeCa that has brought four artists from the island in less than a year and plans to bring five more soon. "It foments dialogue, it creates discussion and it helps to clear some of the stereotypes about what's going on in Cuba."

In the last few months alone, New Yorkers have been exposed to an onslaught of Cuban artists.

Jose Manuel Carreño, a principal dancer with American Ballet Theater, danced to rave reviews in the spring and will tour with the company early next year. The musician and composer Chucho Valdés packed the Village Vanguard every night a few weeks ago. Gerardo Mosquera, an art critic, is a curator at the New Museum in SoHo. Two members of a trio called Los Carpinteros (the Carpenters) participated in a recent TriBeCa art exhibition.

Earlier this year, Alexis (Kcho) Leyva Machado had a well-received one-man show at the Barbara Gladstone Gallery in SoHo. And Grupo AfroCuba de Matanzas, a music and folkloric dance group, gave summer concerts at Lincoln Center, at the Apollo Theater in Harlem and at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The concept of artists living and working abroad, particularly in the United States, after 35 years of embargo against the island, is relatively new in Cuba. Before 1990, the Cuban Government allowed few artists or performers to visit here.

Observers of Cuban affairs say that things began to change rapidly as the country's economic crisis deepened after the loss of cash subsidies from the former Soviet Union. No longer able to support its artists — or, some say, looking to squelch growing dissent among the intellectual and artistic elite who expected Cuba to democratize as Eastern bloc countries did — the Government began to relax the exit-permit rules.

"If we can no longer provide materials and perks for them, it's unfair for us to ask them not to seek them elsewhere," said Roberto Robaina, Cuba's Foreign Minister, during a recent visit here. "So we have to let them go and do their own thing, wherever their work takes them."

Their work takes them throughout the world, from Buenos Aires to Caracas, Madrid to Istanbul, but the United States is their country of choice. And New York, with its thirst for art and new talent, is the city of their dreams.

"This is where I always wanted to dance," said Mr. Carreño, 28. "I love New York."

In 1995, the State Department issued travel visas to 84 Cuban artists, entertainers and professionals of "extraordinary ability"; 23 of them came as temporary workers, State Department officials say. In 1989, only 4 Cubans received the same type of visa.

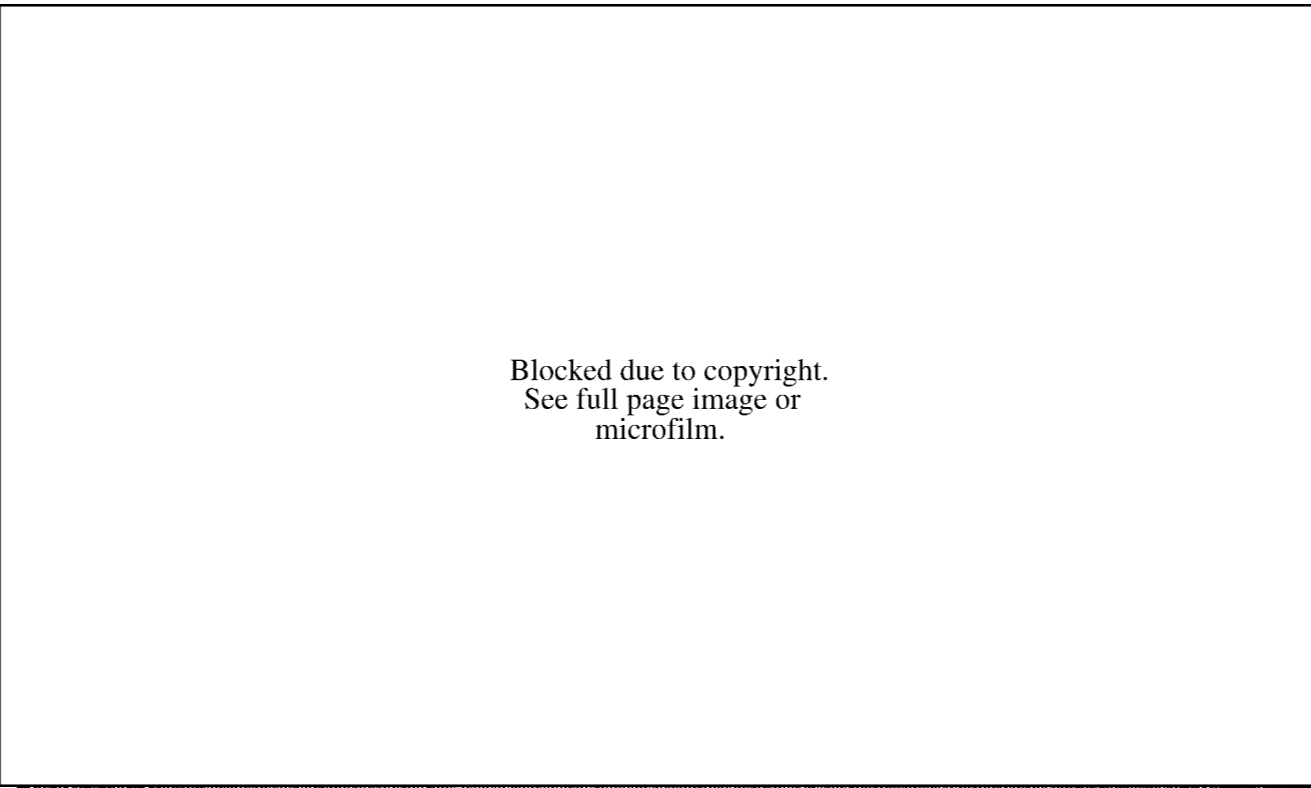
"They are coming in droves," said Manuel González, a corporate curator in Manhattan. "It's a free-for-all."

Yet it is never an easy journey. Because of embargo restrictions, Cuban professionals who wish to enter the United States must seek special visas and their sponsors must secure a license from the Treasury Department to pay for everything from plane tickets to salaries.

Most of the artists receive just a modest per diem. Each of the six members of the theater company that brought "Vagos Rumores" to Manhattan, for example, receives \$56 a day for food and transportation from Repertorio Español. If they eat frugally, they have money left over to please their whims.

"I may not be able to eat for the rest of the month, but I'm going to see a Broadway show," said Adria Santana, 48, the female lead in "Vagos Rumores."

These much-sought-after trips offer a rare chance to earn dollars and



Blocked due to copyright.
See full page image or
microfilm.

Arturo Cuenca, a conceptual artist, is critical of Cuban artists who try to straddle both worlds: Cuba and the United States. Mr. Cuenca, who defected in 1991, is shown in his New York studio with some of his work.

Norman Y. Lono for The New York Times

buy scarce products, from soap to leather shoes, and they also provide the artists with an opportunity to expand their knowledge and create new markets for their art. The art-

ists, who say they shun politics and are here for professional reasons only, are careful not to jeopardize their travel privileges by insulting the political sensitivities of their

hosts and audiences and of the Cuban Government, which controls exit visas. They measure every word, especially to strangers.

"You never know if the person

next to you likes the Cuban Government or not," said a painter who recently came to New York and flew briefly to Miami to seek new clients. Speaking on condition of anonymity, he insisted that he was "a free man" who refused to be manipulated by other people's ideologies. But remember, he said before he left, "I don't want this story to ruin the Miami market for me."

Mr. Cremata, saying he is tired of demagogy on both sides, declines to discuss politics. His father was killed when anti-Castro terrorists blew up a plane over the Caribbean in 1976.

"I saw the beginning of the movie and I want to see how it ends," he said when asked why he wants to return to Cuba, using an apt metaphor for a film maker but saying little about his feelings toward the Cuban Government. "And there's also my family; I don't want to leave them behind."

Aside from ties to family and friends at home, the artists working here also say they have sound business reasons not to put roots down in New York. Without support from the sponsors who brought them here, they would have to compete for jobs on the open market, a difficult skill to acquire for artists who have been government trained and supported.

"I know actresses who are working as clerks during the day in some stores and don't get a chance to perform," Ms. Santana said. "I don't want that kind of life. In Cuba, no matter how difficult things are, I can do what I love to do."

Arturo Cuenca, a conceptual artist who defected in 1991 after two years of playing the role his colleagues are now assuming, is critical of their on-the-fence position, calling it comfortable but dishonest.

"It's very easy to let the Cuban Government back your career. It's a lot more difficult to go at it alone," said Mr. Cuenca, 40, adding that his career suffered after he defected, because he lost the cachet of being a Cuban living in Cuba. "Once you become an exile and make statements against the Cuban Government, the doors of the art community, for the most part, are closed."

The artists, who know they lead a privileged life, are taking advantage of their newly found quasi-freedom.

Ms. Santana has traveled to three countries with "Vagos Rumores" and to 10 more with a monologue she will also perform here after the play closes in November. Mr. Carreño has danced in Europe, Asia and the United States for six years. Mr. Cremata has traveled through Europe and Latin America thanks to a 16-minute black-and-white experimental film he made in 1990.

"Every time my film gets selected for a festival anywhere, I have to go with it," he said. "I will not send the film alone. That little film has allowed me to see the world. People ask us to choose, but why should we?"

"We are opening a door," Mr. Cremata said. "And my job as an artist is to open doors, not to close them."