

# Building a Bridge, a Theater Troupe From the U.S. Is Embraced by ...

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## Building a Bridge, a Theater Troupe From the U.S. Is Embraced by Havana

By MIREYA NAVARRO

HAVANA, Sept. 28 — The veteran actors from Repertorio Español had performed the play "Broken Eggs" dozens of times before, in New York City, but on Sunday they took the stage here with the nervousness of beginners. One feared that she would become so emotional she would lose her concentration. Another said he was terrified that he would open his mouth and nothing would come out.

But when the lights finally came on, the actors managed to keep their composure as an audience of 300 people applauded each time a familiar face came on-stage, shrieked with laughter at lines like "Do you remember when we used to think Fidel was sexy?" and sprung to their feet for a final standing ovation.

In a show that had the quality of a special, almost stolen moment, Cuba welcomed the first Cuban-Americans invited here since the two countries severed relations in 1961, some returning to the same stage where they worked before their exile.

Of the company's nine actors,

### A special moment in Cuba as exiled actors return.

seven are Cuban-Americans. Among them is a singer-actress returning to the island for the first time in 38 years, a gay actor who was among those labeled "undesirable" and sent to farm camps in the 1960's, a television actress who fled on the 1980 boatlift from Mariel and two young American-born actors discovering the homeland of their parents.

And in the audience were relatives and strangers, friends and old colleagues who knew some of the actors from work in Cuban theater and radio half a century ago. Some said they recognized as their own the idiosyncrasies in "Broken Eggs," a nostalgia-filled comedy about a three-generation Cuban family living in California.

"Cuba is their land and is always present in their lives," said Georgina Almanza, 65, an actress who walked out of the theater sniffing.

"Broken Eggs" ("Revoltillo" in Spanish) opened here in a cultural exchange that underscores how a rapprochement that has been elusive in the political arena is being accomplished through the arts.

The exchanges are allowed under

the American economic embargo as "people to people" contacts, which American officials favor as a way of exposing Cubans to a democratic society, and the Cubans to foster goodwill in hostile territory. They have become increasingly common, although more Cubans have crossed over to the United States than American counterparts to Cuba. In the first seven months of this year 183 Cuban artists visited the United States but only 9 Americans visited Cuba, mostly to explore future exchanges.

While American theater groups have come here in the past, and a major New York City producer is expected soon for talks about bringing a hit Broadway musical to Havana next year, most recent contact has been through Repertorio Español, a 30-year-old nonprofit company in Manhattan. The company is led by Gilberto Zaldivar, its co-founder and producer, who returned to Cuba in 1995 after a 34-year absence and epitomizes the more conciliatory stance many exiles adopt toward Cuba after renewing old ties.

Although Mr. Zaldivar was drawn here by the illness of two uncles, that visit led to contacts in the theater community and the first cultural exchange — Cubans working with Repertorio Español in New York in 1996. Others Cuban performances in New York followed before the group won permission from both Governments to bring here, by invitation from the Union of Writers and Artists, what Mr. Zaldivar and his associate producer, Robert Weber, consider the best play by the Cuban-born playwright Eduardo Machado.

Mr. Machado, who left Cuba when he was 8, has scheduled his own return on Tuesday, when the company is scheduled to play in Matanzas as part of a 10-day, three-city tour.

"It's only natural that this takes place," Mr. Zaldivar said. "It's logical, normal and human that these two Cuban communities communicate. We can significantly help create the climate for future relations."

The pioneering exchange came at a cost, however: one of Repertorio's Cuban-American board members resigned in protest, and there have even been death threats from those who favor isolating the island to cause its Government's downfall.

Much of the anger focused on Ana Margarita Martínez-Casado, a well-known actress from the 1970's American television sitcom "Qué Pasa, U.S.A.?" who lost an advertising contract with a Miami hospital over the Cuba visit.

Ms. Martínez-Casado, who started her career here as a soprano on television, left in 1960 with her 2-



Repertorio Español is the first Cuban-American artistic group to be invited to perform in Cuba. One member, Ana Margarita Martínez-Casado, who left Cuba in 1960, examined family pictures with her brother Manuel.

year-old daughter, never returning from a job in Puerto Rico after the man who was then her husband warned her from Cuba that the political situation was getting worse. She lived in Mexico, Miami and now New York City, and saw her mother only when she visited Mexico once. Her father died in 1989, followed by her mother two years later, without ever seeing her again. "For many years we thought, things will change soon, and the years kept passing by," she said, citing political, economic and work-related reasons for not coming to Cuba before now. "There comes a point where one asks, 'Why not go?'"

Last week, at Havana's airport, she held the two brothers she had not seen in 38 years in a tight embrace. "You look just like Papi did when I left," she told one brother, Luis, 64, a Cuban diplomat, through tears. "And you, who used to look like him, now look more like my mother," she told Manuel, 63, a beer company salesman whose own daughter and two sons have also left Cuba and live in Miami.

Manuel Martínez-Casado, calling her Chuchi, an endearing nickname she had not heard in a long time, told her, "I want to hear you sing."

As Ms. Martínez-Casado was driv-

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en through old haunts she barely recognized — past revolutionary slogans on billboards and posters of Pope John Paul II on Old Havana's front doors, through the time warp of Chevrolets and Fords from the 1940's and 50's and with a cemetery stop to bid a belated goodbye to her parents — troupe members like Ricardo Barber, 61, got reacquainted with once inseparable colleagues.

At a welcoming reception by the artists' union, Mr. Barber chatted with Ana Molinet, 56, an actress who once waged a three-month campaign, including slipping a note to Fidel Castro during a public appearance, to get Mr. Barber released from an agricultural camp for homosexuals and other victims of political persecution.

Mr. Barber spent a year cutting cane from dawn to dusk before he was released and went back to the theater, but he chose to leave Cuba for good in 1977. His first visit back

was in 1995, with Mr. Zaldivar. "I wasn't the same" after the forced labor, Mr. Barber said. "I no longer believed in the revolution and I began to see the bad in everything."

While the arts have flourished under Communist rule, benefiting from Government sponsorship and a national system of specialized schools, the Cuban-Americans have found an artistic class hobbled by the economic problems of the country, despite the privileged status of a few. Television programming has been cut back to conserve energy. Films are limited to two or three a year, often co-productions with other countries.

And many theaters have closed, while those that remain are often shabby and inadequately equipped.

Still, tourism and travel have created new opportunities for artists, and officials consider those who tour abroad to be ambassadors who "foment understanding, make us known and favor dialogue," said Ismael González, a deputy minister of culture. Artists who travel internationally are also an important source of revenue (although exchanges with the United States are governed by embargo restrictions on both earnings and spending), but individuals' allegiances to the Government vary. "Most of them keep quiet and

make art," a Western official here noted. Carlos Padrón, a playwright who presides over the 1,600-member Association of Stage Artists, said the exchanges mostly answer to a yearning for knowing how the other side lives. "Six of 10 Cubans have family in the United States," he said. "People want to see what really happens, to people over there, how they insert themselves in North American society, to what extent they maintain their identity."

Repertorio members have been the toast of the town here, enjoying favorable press coverage, welcoming receptions and a quick sellout of shows (tickets have sold for the equivalent of 25 cents). But a company member's cousin was arrested and briefly detained for staying overnight in the relative's hotel and another Repertorio member on a beach outing had to talk a traffic officer out of arresting a friend suspected of being an unauthorized chauffeur. Cubans are not allowed in hotels as guests, and vigilance appears heightened since last year's hotel bombings.

Reluctant to delve into politics or criticize their hosts, some Repertorio members instead talked about their hope to create bridges for eventual democratic change in Cuba, and at times seemed in awe of their compatriots.

"Their spirit of struggle fascinates me," said René Sánchez, 71, who had an acting career here before leaving in 1966. "How they invent things, how they try to figure out a better living, how they don't allow themselves to collapse even in the worst of times."

The last could also be said for Repertorio members. Hurricane Georges and immigration problems delayed the arrival of some of the actors and caused the cancellation of the two first Havana shows this weekend. Then, for the first of two scheduled performances on Sunday, the actress Tatiana Vecino got sick and a Cuban actress, Adria Santana, stepped in to read the role.

By evening, the Teatro Hubert de Blanck filled up again for the second show. Ms. Vecino recovered and returned to her role. But at intermission it was announced that the rest of the performance would be canceled. An electric transformer on the street had shorted out and the theater was forced to shut off its power.

The theatergoers were told more performances would be added next weekend, and many had already seen enough to come back for more.

"It was thrilling," said Osmara Velázquez, 54, a cousin of Mr. Zaldivar's. "Incredibly, culture has ended the separation."