Cuba, From His Rear-View Mirror

Playwright Eduardo Machado relives his journey from Havana to Woodland Hills. Just don’t expect his drama to toe the multicultural line.

By Jan Breslauer
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Stanley Crouch on race in Quentin Tarantino movies: He’s one director who gets it right. Page 5

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And then there’s the one about Sheeky Greene. But this time, it’s no joke. Page 7

MOVIES
Three filmmakers, two kids and a basketball: It’s the stuff “Hoop Dreams” are made of. Page 8
Exile on Main Stage

Eduardo Machado’s plays have earned him a respected place in today’s multicultural landscape. But make no mistake about where his heart lies: He’s an artist, not an activist.

By Jan Breslauer

ive this man a Cohiba cigar. He has what you call timing.

Eduardo Machado began writing “Floating Islands,” his story of Cuban emigration, 14 years ago, around the time of the Mariel boat lift. But Cuba hadn’t been as topical since.

So it’s a stroke of fortuna that the island nation is back in the news now, right as his drama is set to open at the Mark Taper Forum. Now performed in two parts, “Floating Islands” bows next Sunday, directed by Oskar Eustis. The saga about half a century in the life of a Cuban family that ends up in Woodland Hills has never before been presented in its entirety.

Cuban-born Machado, 41, who based “Floating Islands” on his family history, grew up and forged his artistic identity in Los Angeles. As one of the few Latinos whose work is produced regularly by mainstream regional theaters, he’s one of the rising stars of a newly diversified talent pool.

Machado’s appeal comes from the fact that he is interested in exploring cultural roots, but his work is not doctrinaire. In this age of multiculturalism, he is one of a growing group of writers moving beyond race politics to emphasize craft and storytelling.

He certainly has fans in the right places.

‘The minute you say “we’re doing Hispanic theater, we’re doing Chicano theater” is the minute you feed stereotypes. I’m not doing any of that: I’m doing theater.’

“Eduardo is extraordinary,” says John Hart, veteran co-producer of “Guys and Dolls.” “Tommy” and the upcoming La Jolla Playhouse revival of “How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying.” “He addresses a wide range of subjects, [and the work’s] always brilliantly charac-ter-driven.”

Machado also gets kudos from his fellow Cubans. “Eduardo is a special artist whose voice as a writer has great resonance and eloquence,” says actor Andy Garcia, who, like Machado, was born in Cuba and came to the United States as a child.

But even Machado didn’t figure on “Floating Islands’” synchronicity. “It’s interesting politically that these plays are happening now, when Cuba’s back at such a political point in its history where everything’s going to turn around again,”

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And at this moment,” Machado continues, “the United States government, instead of dropping the embargo for humanitarian interests, is rejecting people who are risking their lives on rafts to emigrate to this country. The U.S. policy seems cruel.”

“Floating Islands,” however, is not explicitly about U.S. foreign policy. It views social turbulence through the prism of a family. “It is my personal epic, the struggle of my life to get these plays to work,” Machado says. “But I’m past thinking that writing is only a personal thing. As you get older, you can take a step back and see it within the dimensions of the culture.”

The stylishly black-clad Machado is seated on an overstuffed couch in a Taper office, answering questions during a rehearsal break. He is affable but soft-spoken, almost shy, and given to the occasional fidget.

Machado takes his time, weighing thoughts about his life and art carefully.
ensemble cast, and is to be produced by Hart.
Yet while Machado has emerged as a writer simultaneous with the vogue for multicultural theater, he forged his artistic identity apart from that trend and rejects it. "The minute you say 'we're doing Hispanic theater' is the minute you feed stereotypes," he says.
I'm not doing any of that. I'm doing theater. If I was concerned with the struggle of people coming over the border, I'd better be over at the border doing something about it. I'm concerned about my art."

Machado definitely doesn't wear his agenda on his sleeve, as many doctrinaire multiculturalists do. "The problem with theater right now is that it's not enough about theater," he says. "It's too much about a social agenda that theater artists are not equipped to solve. Going on just to [fulfill] a social agenda is ultimately tedious.

Machado also rejects one of the favorite styles of multiculturalists: magical realism, a genre most frequently associated with the writings of Gabriel Garcia Márquez, which juxtaposes the everyday with the fantastic and is characterized by the liberal use of poetic symbolism. But Machado thinks it's a style that's peculiar to its Latin culture of origin. "I believe magic realism in Latin America because it is an internal part of people's lives," he says. "Magic realism in the United States is something that people have added on for theatricality."

Machado offers instead a world view that is culturally specific, but much more Catholic about notions of community identity. "He's political in the way that Chekhov is political, writing about real people caught up in history," Eustis says. "He won't let anybody off the hook and onto a soapbox."

The emphasis on craft is something Machado learned at the Padua Hills Playwrights Festival and Workshop. From 1979 to 1988, he participated in the annual gathering, first as an actor and later as a writer.
At that respected writers' enclave—associated with such talents as Sam Shepard, Maria Irene Fornes, John Stepping, Jon Robin Baitz, David Henry Hwang and others—Machado fell under the particular influence of Stepping, Padua Hills founder Murray Mednick and Fornes, who is also Cuban.

Stepping cast Machado in several of his plays during the early 1980s. "Eduardo was a wonderful actor, a singular talent," Stepping recalls. "I don't think he believed in his own talent as an actor as he does now."
Gershman, a youthful-looking 46 and dressed in jeans and a casual shirt, carefully placed Greene's case file folder on the living room coffee table in his Brentwood home. He spoke from memory, occasionally running his fingers along the edge of the folder, talking first about Greene's treatment and psychological background and then about how the entertainment profession makes vulnerable people even more so.

"Sheeky came to me in October," Gershman admitted. "He had admitted himself to the clinic in November," Gershman said. "His chief complaint was Xanax dependence. He was severely depressed. He had picked up a disorder, depressive disorder, and agoraphobia. He was completely dysfunctional. He'd been through a whole lot of medications.

"It's not that they don't work, but you can't just throw pills at people. Depressions happen. Regardless of what underlies them, there's always treatment. But medication doesn't say anything about who you are or why you're depressed. It's just something that deals with brain chemistry, a tool to help you get off the floor.

"Sheeky was typical of the actor-entertainer who grows up in a family where he had a difficult, cruel father and a manipulative mother. His sense has been to take care of the world to gain its love. He's been brilliantly successful, but he never gets what he wants from his mother to say, 'You're a good boy, Sheeky.' Even as his life grew more out of control, he took care of his mother, father, and brothers. When the appreciation didn't come, it only made him work harder and feel more isolated. He looked for acceptance in applause."

Gershman has worked with entertainers for a good portion of his career and recognizes the way that a star protects itself and in the people attracted to it a continuous potential for individual disaster.

"I found out if you can be honest with your audience, they'll accept anything," he says. "So many people are touched by these situations, or else they understand that emotion is not just for the sake of theatrical or alcoholism. It can't be hidden. It has to be treated." On Monday, he'll play himself on TV's "Northern Exposure," and on November 12 he'll play live in the Wiltshire Ebell Theatre.

Gershman has great affection for Greene, and some concern as well. "Sheeky's one of the most just, kind and compassionate people I've ever met. I think his comedy genius is based on being sort of the common man, the Jew from the Bronx. He's struggling to survive, like everyone else. Audiences trust him to tell them the truth; he can take you right into the core of things. Now he's coming back into the lion's den. Will the same old forces push the same old buttons?"

"She's never lost his first love, his first major love, the one he called 'the therapeutic alliance' which at first consisted of having Greene help him get his first priority - at least work."

I think psychiatry got left when it tried to fit patients into a theoretical framework," Gershman said. "I don't believe in creating a mystery, in infantilizing the patient by hiding your technique. The therapeutic alliance takes time and consists of listening and being credible. If you tell them what you're doing, you get better faster."

Greene has recently, and cautiously, begun a return to performing after 6½ years. Starting-Saturday night at Lookingglass's in the Catskills, the Desert Inn in Las Vegas, Atlantic City and Chicago.

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"No one can tell, including Greene himself, whether his return, and its churning up of deep currents will set off a self-destructive cycle back in motion again. But odds are that the moment he takes the stage he'll be met by a wave of residual gratitude and warmth for an entertainer who's given a lot of pleasure for a long time."

Lawrence Christie is a Times staff writer.

**LISTINGS**

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The four-part "Floating Islands" epic was inspired by Machado's family history, but that's only the starting point. "It's still based on the fact that my grandmother cut her hair in 1929 and she thought it was a big rebellion act. That my grandfather lost his bus company when Fidel nationalized it and I lived in extremely alcoholic family," Machado says. "But of course it's my re-imagining of all these things.

Rather than documentary, Machado calls his work "truth of imagination." It's necessarily what actually happened," he says. "The truth is what these people were thinking and feeling.

Yet those who would know also find veracity in "Floating Islands." "I know the characters. They're members of my family," says cast member Mariela Chibas, whose Social Democrat father, Raul, fought with Castro and whose uncle, Eduardo, had been considered a front-runner for the 1952 presidential elections until he was shot by revolutionaries in 1953.

"Eduardo Chibas's suicide is talked about in "Fabloa.""

"The conversations are conversations I have had with my parents," says Chibas, who was born in New York in 1961, the year after her father left Cuba. "These families are greatly influenced by the politics of the time." "Floating Islands" can also be taken as a case study in rendering the personal political. "They're essentially family plays... incredible intricate and recognizable portrayals of 20th century historical people just like us—and yet Eduardo's able to tell an overall story about Cuba and, by extension, about the America in the 20th Century," says director Bustin.

New York Times critic Frank Rich said of a 1985 production of Machado's "The Modern Ladies of Guanabacoa," "the stage set is so real that it's as if you're looking at the world itself." And indeed, the show is "the lighter comedies that Luis Bunuel made during his Mexican exile."

Globeproducer version of "Fabloa" staged in L.A. in 1985, The CUBA BEACH: Machado’s “A Burning Beach” was staged at LATC in 1989 with, from left, Robert Beltran, Christine Avita and Ellen Barber. Times’ Sylvie Drake said it was "a sinfully stylish and sensual Garrick-style reading of "A Burning Beach" in cages with others, Machado decreed to pull the audience's leg, letting the stage manager "that at the end of the play the dresser bleeds and it covers everything onstage with blood." Machado got a surprise in return, though, when his script was sent out. "I get this call from American Place Theatre (in New York) that they want to do the play," he recalls. "I go in there and they begin talking about 'that amazing moment of magic realism when the dresser bleeds.' I say, 'Oh, no, that's a joke.' And they say, 'No, you're wrong.' So we make this compromise and have the set go red at the end instead." When it came to LATC, however, Machado's prank came back to haunt him. Once more, he insisted that the direction was a joke, only to be told, yet again, that he was the one who was mistaken.

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When it came to LATC, however, Machado’s prank came back to haunt him. Once more, he insisted that the direction was a joke, only to be told, yet again, that he was the one who was mistaken. And therein lies the moral. "Every night I would have to see this dresser bleed and I would just die, would be so embarrassed that this dresser was bleeding," Machado muses. "But I know that that play would not have got two productions if the dresser hadn’t bled."

This kind of focus on gimmicks is what Machado calls out about magical realism American style. "I'm in an interesting position, having been young in a Latin country and [yet] not wanting to write about magic realism, which I think is false," he says. "Concretely, I just didn't put it in because it's what the marketplace is looking for. That's an easy way to have something be exotic. That's the ultimate in being fraudulent."

Machado has also had other encounters with knee-jerk multicul- turalism—as recently as "Floating Islands." Pressured to cast only Latino performers in the LATC production, Machado found himself at loggerheads with prevailing attitudes. "Because I wanted to cast people with names like Porfiro Dukakis in a few of the parts in these plays, I have been treated like a turncoat to my community," Machado said during a discussion at a conference in June.

"I've gotten phone calls, and I've been offered a drink and a farro, and a sell-out to the white community," Machado continued. "The only community I am supposed to be loyal to, now that I am gotten to a point where my work is widely seen, is the community of people who have names that sound Spanish."

Yet now Machado says that, although he didn't know that it would be the case when he made those statements, things worked out in a way that pleased everyone involved. "When we started working on these plays, though, there was a big breathing space because I said I was going to hire the best people for the job," he says.

"I got people who are on the top of the game all turned out to be Spanish," he continues. "I didn't know that in June, when I made the remarks about Dukakis, I didn't change my mind."

S
ave for such clashes, though, Machado's career curve has been impressive. "You have to get over your concept about what works about your work, and what worked about my work was that it was funny," he says. "Strangely enough, 'A Burning Beach' was the beginning for me of being willing to have people be bored and let them go laugh."

"Laughter is an opiate in the theater because it means that you're engaging [the audience] and being accepted," he says. "To be a writer, you have to be willing to be this, that a lot of people don't like. Silence is tough."

"I can sit in a theater where people are silent when they're watching my plays now and I don't think I could have five years ago," Machado continues. "When I was young, I couldn't sit through a run-through or preview of one of my plays without taking two Valiums. Then it took two shots of vodka black and I could struggle through the play. And slowly it became less and less and now I can just sit through it.

So too, perhaps, has the past five years allowed Machado to close the book on the writing of his "Floating Islands." "I've been living with these characters for 14 years and they have a life of their own," he says. "They've never stopped talking to me. I really want to feel like they're behind the door on them."