

The Miami Herald

Posted on Tue, Mar. 09, 2010

Piece aims to bridge the gap between U.S., Cuba culture

BY JORDAN LEVIN

jlevin@MiamiHerald.com



Scene from multimedia piece *La Entranable Lejania*.

A groundbreaking U.S.-Cuban theater collaboration that launched in Cuba crosses the Florida straits to Miami this week. *La Entranable Lejania* (*The Closest Farthest Away*), a bilingual, multimedia tale of frustrated love that brings together U.S. actors with their Cuban counterparts via technology, had its world premiere at the Havana Film Festival last December. Now it will play the United States for the first time Thursday at Miami Beach's Byron Carlyle Theater.

After a hair-raising debut in Havana's Teatro Mella, including a flood that almost destroyed its equipment, and two power outages on opening

day, the producers of *Lejania* are pinning many of their hopes for the show's future on its debut here.

"There are a lot of potential performances pending after Miami, but a lot depends on how it goes there," says Sage Lewis, the Los Angeles-based composer who created the work with his wife, filmmaker Leigh Lewis. "It's a really great piece for audiences in Havana and Miami, where people understand Cuba and all the metaphors and themes. Whereas if you leave those cities, a lot of people don't know much about Cuba at all."

Lewis, who fell in love with Cuba and its culture on his first trip there 11 years ago, began working on *Lejania* several years ago. The show tells the story of Amante (Spanish for "lover"), a American marine biologist played by Armando McClain, who is in love with Ana, a Cuban doctor played by Yipsia Torres. Separated by their two countries' differences, they meet via technology -- Amante is physically onstage, while Ana only appears in films shown on multiple screens set up onstage, so that the piece literally embodies the separation between the two countries.

Other Cuban performers also appear only in films, telling various stories of being stranded between two countries. The only other live performer is a shadowy official called The Interrogator, played by American Andrea LeBlanc, a representative of an indeterminate government who questions Amante about his story. The Interrogator is hostile at first, then sympathetic.

The show's creators also had to straddle physical and political barriers. The writers, the sound, lighting and production designers and the director, Chi-wang Yang, were based in the United

States, many of them graduates of the California Institute of the Arts, where Lewis studied. The creative team for the films, including director Boris Arenas and the film actors, were in Cuba. The filmmaking and creation of the show took two years of travel and negotiating with government bureaucracies, with Lewis raising money through grants and individual donations online.

Lewis says the Havana audience, about 600 people at each of the three performances, was deeply moved by *La Entrañable Lejania*. In a pre-show discussion seen on video, a Cuban man in the Teatro Mella audience recounts how he struggled with indecision when he got a visa to leave Cuba for the United States in 1995, and finally decided to remain on the island. "If you leave, you won't ever know what you will lose," he says. "But I will never know what I missed out on."

Ever Chavez, director of FUNDarte, which is co-presenting the show's Miami Beach premiere with the Miami Light Project and the Centro Cultural Español, says *La Entrañable Lejania* marks an important step in a cultural exchange between the United States and Cuba that has opened up rapidly in the last six months. FundARTE and Miami Light helped produce the show in Havana, connecting Lewis and his collaborators with the directors of the Film Festival and Teatro Mella, where *La Entrañable Lejania* was shown.

"It's important for a Miami audience to have this personal experience with the artists who performed [in Cuba] just two months ago," Chavez says. "After the show we will have a discussion with the performers, and we will see how the Cuban people react and how the Miamians react to a piece performed there. But it is only about love -- how two neighbors can get together without any political obstructions."

Lewis is hopeful that the Miami performances will help *Lejania* further transcend the distance between Cuba and the rest of the United States. "In other cities, it would be more of an educational piece because there are all these things they don't know because there is this distance," he says. "But that's part of the purpose, to help people understand more about Cuban culture."

© 2010 Miami Herald Media Company. All Rights Reserved.
<http://www.miamiherald.com>