

# Two Roads Converge

BY TERESA EYRING

**A**S THE LAST DECADE WAS WINDING DOWN, my travels ramped up and took me to a couple of artistically inspiring and gutsy locales. The first was a town of 2.1 million, the capital of a socialist Caribbean nation with crumbling, majestic mansions, food rations, late-night hangouts by the seawall, private homes with nightly room rentals, hundreds of theatres—and winter temperatures in the eighties. The second was a midwestern hamlet with a population of around 700, rocky bluffs, stately bed-and-breakfasts, a winding river, miles of bike trails, a top-notch theatre—and occasional below-zero temperatures.

My destinations, you may have discerned by now, were Havana, Cuba, and Lanesboro, Minn. When I embarked on these two journeys, I wasn't specifically searching for common threads. But in traveling from one place to the next, important similarities of artistic passion and purpose emerged. In conversations with Lanesboro leaders Hal Cropp and Eric Bunge at Commonweal Theatre Company, I heard echoes of conversations I had weeks earlier with members of the Havana arts community, including Flora Lauten, founder and longtime artistic director of Teatro Buendía; Raúl Martín of Teatro de la Luna; the documentary filmmaker Estela Bravo; and Helmo Hernández, president of the Ludwig Foundation of Cuba. The upshot: While both these communities have important natural resources and social attributes, the artistry of each place—and how that artistry connects with people—is what expresses the true soul and character of both locales. Artistry and its dynamic connection to community is what helps distinguish Havana and Lanesboro from any other places in the world.

In the words of Hernández: "Cuba isn't unique just because of its political history or its natural beauty or its old cars. It's unique because of the sophistication of its people—which is demonstrated and enhanced by their engagement with the wide-ranging arts scene here." I heard similar words when I hit Lanesboro and got to talking with local leaders about the role of the arts in that small community. "What truly differentiates this town is not its bike trails or its natural beauty, though all of those are important. It's the existence of the Commonweal Theatre that makes this place different from any other." Commonweal has clearly helped shape Lanesboro's identity—and also happens to be one of the top employers in the area.

What initially drew me to Havana was the opportunity to research the Cuban theatre scene and, specifically, to see *The Closest Farthest Away*, a groundbreaking hybrid work of film and theatre. The project was spearheaded by American artists Sage and Aleigh Lewis, working with a combined Cuban and American acting company and creative team. Featured on the schedule of the Havana Festival of New Latin American Cinema, *The Closest Farthest Away* is the story of a couple, an American scientist and Cuban doctor, who are

dealing with the challenge of living apart. The presentation incorporated a beautiful, nearly holographic interaction between Cuban actors on film and American actors on stage. It also explicitly demonstrated how theatre creates value not just by generating an end product that audiences and artists share together in a room; the value is also in the relationships that are woven along the way, forged through the process of problem-solving and pursuing a shared vision.

The project, three years in the making, faced seemingly insurmountable challenges. Due to economic embargos, Cuba suffers shortages of food, medicines, goods and amenities,

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not to mention theatrical supplies. The U.S. team for the show transported the bulk of the scenery into Havana piece by piece on a variety of flights. And at the end of the day, the team declared, "We are proud of the work itself. Most impactful for the artists has been the act of working on the piece of theatre together with our Cuban counterparts."

My trip to Lanesboro was to explore ways that small-town theatres are connected to a larger ecosystem of theatremaking and discourse. I spent a full day with the Commonweal ensemble, learning about their intensely focused mission and process. This is a group of big dreamers, with an inclination toward pursuing—and achieving—the seemingly impossible. The company's new theatre space is detailed in its expression and genuineness of its place, with seats that were reclaimed from the old Guthrie Theater space before the flagship theatre's new building opened on the banks of the Mississippi in Minneapolis. The installation artist Karl Unnasch created Commonweal's interior design with tiny scenes, tributes and references to the life and landscape of the region.

Everyone at Commonweal has a role to play, on stage and off, and company members are intensely active and connected within their community. Being the only professional theatre in town may bring with it an easy sense of clarity about competing opportunities for enjoyment and enrichment. Even so, this theatrical team evaluates its purpose with the rigor of the most sophisticated enterprises in the world.

This coalescence of experiences in two very different environments, in two very different nations, reminded me of the power of artists to inspire and build community, and to help further a unique sense of identity, while also blasting down walls, dissolving artificial boundaries and helping forge a strong sense of shared purpose. Or in the words of the new chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, Rocco Landesman, "Art works." 