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## U.S., Cuban artists stage a collaboration

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In *The Closest Farthest Away*, U.S. actors appear onstage while the Cuban cast, including this actress, are shown on video screens.

A groundbreaking multimedia theater performance created in an unprecedented collaboration between U.S. and Cuban artists was set to debut Friday in Havana.

*La Entrañable Lejania (The Closest Farthest Away)* is part of the Festival Internacional del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano, commonly called the Havana Film Festival, one of the island's biggest cultural events. It will have its U.S. debut at Miami Beach's Byron-Carlyle Theater in March.

The complex story of an American man in love with a Cuban woman, *The Closest Farthest Away* breaks ground artistically,

politically and technologically. American actors perform onstage while Cuban cast members are seen on large video screens, embodying the political separation between the two countries.

The show evolved over years of visits to Cuba and interactions with prominent Cuban artists by 30-year-old California composer Sage Lewis and his mostly California-based compatriots.

*Entrañable* was finally realized with the help of Miami's Ever Chavez, director of FUNDarte, and Beth Boone, artistic and executive director of the Miami Light Project, who specialize in U.S.-Cuba cultural projects. Chavez and Boone connected the creators with official Cuban sponsors and will present *Entrañable's* U.S. premiere.

The show comes to fruition as cultural exchange between the U.S. and Cuba, closed off during the Bush Administration, has begun to flow again. September saw rock musician Juanes' Concert for Peace draw more than a million people in Havana. Cuba's Septeto Nacional played in Little Havana last month, and Cuban singer Omara Portuondo is slated to perform at the Fillmore Miami Beach in March.

**'AGENTS OF CHANGE'**

“What I find significant about this piece right now, given the context of change, is that, as we’ve known all along in the arts community, art and artists are the most powerful agents of change,” says Boone.

“I think people who take the time to experience [*Entrañable*] will be able to see firsthand that artificially imposed political barriers are folly. Regular people have been making contact for years, whether physical or not, via telephone, the Internet and the making of art.”

Creator Lewis first visited Havana 11 years ago, and fell in love with the city and its culture. He returned a half-dozen times, making friends and playing music, and came up with the idea of using technology to overcome practical and political barriers to collaboration with Cuban artists.

“We were really interested in new media and video and digital media,” Lewis said by telephone from Havana. “It seemed like a really cool application to use some of these newer tools to figure out what we considered an impossible challenge -- to cross the Florida Straits and see if it’s possible to have a collaboration between citizens and figure out how to get to know each other better. . . .

“It’s about trying to understand each other rather than arguing about politics.”

Lewis e-mailed Boone for help on the project a year and a half ago, just as she and Chavez began to hear about *Entrañable* from friends on both sides of the Florida Straits.

## FINDING SPONSORS

Chavez, a theater producer who left the island in 2000, used his contacts there to secure three sponsors for *Entrañable*: the film festival, the Cuban government’s Performing Arts Council and Teatro Publico, the Havana theater company where he had worked.

Chavez says he pitched in (without pay, like many people connected with the project) because he believes strongly in connecting his adopted country and his homeland.

“These American voices are getting into Cuba and are going to speak directly to people, because art is another way to say what we think,” he says.

*Entrañable* is slated to show three times at the 1600-seat Teatro Mella, with tickets costing five Cuban pesos (about 20 cents).

Boone, whose Miami Light Project is presenting *Entrañable* here, brought the project to the attention of Olga Garay, former Miami-Dade College cultural chief, which led to a \$15,000 grant from the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs that Garay now heads. Boone also alerted a number of major U.S. presenters, who planned to see the project in Havana with an eye to booking more American dates.

Lewis and his colleagues traveled to the island using a U.S. government license for artistic and academic research. They cobbled together grants from various foundations, pro bono legal services, individual donations solicited online and audiovisual equipment brought to

the island by Pastors for Peace.

The project is exhaustively documented on the website [projectporamor.com](http://projectporamor.com), with videos, photos, biographies of participants -- even copies of legal documents and licenses.

The bottom threatened to drop out a few weeks ago when the Havana film festival and theater said they didn't have the equipment or financing to execute the complex project. Lewis rushed down and arranged for the necessary equipment -- one more step in the long struggle to bring *Entrañable* to the stage.

"The Cubans have taken on the giant burden of trying to move their system. . . . It became this endless chain of bureaucratic approval," he says.

But he was not discouraged.

"Our generation has a different point of view. We don't really want to ignore history . . . but we just want to go back and forth, make art, have a normal healthy relationship. That's why the title *The Closest Farthest Away*.

"We're so close geographically and have so much in common culturally, yet [Cuba] is the farthest country from the U.S., the hardest to talk to, to travel to. So it's this paradox."

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