

Lewis Named Sherwood Award Winner



Sage Lewis

SAGE LEWIS, Sherwood Award Winner, recently discussed the challenges he faced during the production of his piece, *The Closest Farthest Away*.

Center Theatre Group (CTG): What were some of the challenges you encountered when mounting *The Closest Farthest Away*?

Sage Lewis (SL): *The Closest Farthest Away* is an act of high artistic, cultural, and political risk-taking filled with fascinating challenges that are usually not part of the art-making process. Politically, we have had to walk a fine line along the Cuba-U.S. border to not anger either side of a highly charged political war. We have faced the risk that either government would not grant us permission to conduct this collaboration, or even shut our project down in its process.

Also, we have not been able to pay Cuban artists for their work. To compensate them, we got a Mercedes Benz donated that we filled with film equipment donations from Hollywood companies that was "shipped" to Cuba on the 2007 Pastors for Peace Caravan. When we have needed to transfer other materials, the lack of normal mail delivery between the two countries has been another obstacle to overcome. So, we first sent the material to a friend in Japan who would forward it to Cuba and vice versa.

Culturally we have brought together artists who speak different languages, who live far away from each other, who are from different cultures, and who practice different disciplines (film, theater, and music) to engage with each other in creating an original work of performance and new media. Our structure has been very collaborative and non-hierarchical. The work was generated by ongoing conversations throughout years of email and internet chatting. The two sides of the collaboration never met each other until the film production. These challenges, although very difficult at times, were also very exciting and fun and we learned a lot from each other. A piece of them will always remain with us and part of us will always live within them.

Artistically, we have had to figure out how to put Cuban and American actors together on the same stage to perform a play, even if it has to be done virtually. Our solution involved a large video production and a theater production thereby taking on twice the financial size and risk of an average project.

CTG: Why is it important for you to foster the creation of art between these two cultures?

SL: When I first went to Cuba at age 19, I learned about the fascinating history our two countries share. It was a history of excessive business exploitation, political domination, Mafia control, disparity, racial hierarchy, and American tourism.

However, inside these relationships lived a vibrant tradition of artistic and intercultural exchange.

After the Cuban Revolution in 1959, both governments decided, for better or for worse, to remove themselves from the other's society. Exactly 50 years later we now find ourselves stuck in this same fight, with almost no exchange across the Florida Straits.

As artists, my colleagues and I feel a duty to develop an exchange between the two cultures through art. Art and culture is perhaps the most pure form of expression with the power to create a context for conversation and action. If politics ever change and Cubans and Americans are allowed to integrate our two societies once again, then someone will need to lead the way. Before the politicians start signing agreements and before the citizens start doing business and vacationing on each others beaches, I hope that the world of art and culture will already be far down the road toward better understanding each other.

CTG: As a classically trained composer how do you think music composition can be used in a theatrical piece?

SL: I hope the future of music composition will further incorporate extra musical qualities into the concert setting. By collaborating with theater artists, composers can be stretched into this domain. I hope that some day the distinction between 'concert' and 'theatre' will become more ambiguous so that musicians regularly use ideas of the theatre and vice versa.

As the composer of *The Closest Farthest Away*, I was playing with elements such as distance and proximity, the meeting of two cultures, the transcendence of political blockades through new technology, and the emergence of a new generation of Cubans and Americans who will inherit the future relationship of our countries. So, I am creating a concert work for an orchestra of children from the U.S. and Cuba that will be performed at our World Premiere at the Havana Film Festival in front of an audience of Americans, Cubans, and other Latin Americans.

Yet through the act of playing music an exchange will occur between Cuban and American children, two demographics of people who previously might not have been aware of the other's existence. This small group of people will learn to overcome international boundary differences of language, culture and class. And through their performance, a symbolic triumph over the past will be created and presented to others, one that our parents and our grandparents did not achieve. My definition of theatre is simple: Theatre is a stage and an audience and anything is possible.