New multimedia show hits old Havana

**LEWIS FROM EII**

Lewis’s love affair with Cuba began when he studied jazz piano and drumming there 30 years ago. In 2005, he founded Project Per Amor with his Minneapolis friend Peter Jensen, his fellow Oberlin student and future wife, Athel, and Cuban arts administrator Daisy Diaz. The goal was to develop a Cuban-American collaboration that would leap political boundaries.

Lewis recruited fellow Cal Arts graduate students, American and Cuban writers and artists to the ensemble, and support from American foundations and the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs to get the idealistic project off the ground.

The Miami Herald called the production groundbreaking “artistically, politically and technologically.”

*Hudles and frustrations*  

“What we’re doing is challenging in the U.S. — and Cuba is the most low-tech country,” Lewis said as he stood onstage after the premiere. He and others had to lug more than 1,000 pounds of equipment — scores, projectors, computers — to Cuba. At their hotel, a power blackout put the elevator out of service, and everything had to be hauled up stairs to the 19th floor.

They didn’t bring a TV, figuring they could find one in Havana. They did, but it took five people a week to do so. Blackouts in the theater shut down their work twice on the day of the première.

In the actual performance, the live dialogue had to be synchronized with that already on film, and English or Spanish subtitles had to be projected at the right moment.

“Every single part of the project, at every level, was frustrating,” Lewis said.

The hassle came two weeks before the premiere when the Cuban sponsors unexpectedly announced they were canceling it. Lewis bought an overnight ticket from Los Angeles, his home base, and talked the authorities into going forward.

“They knew there was this delegation coming from the U.S.,” Lewis said. “That was crucial.”

Among those who came: Teresa Eyring, former managing director of the Children’s Theatre in Minneapolis who now heads the Theatre Communications Group in New York; Mark Murphy, director of REDCAT, Los Angeles’ avant-garde performing-arts theater, for which Lewis has composed music, and Diane Rodriguez of L.A.’s Centre Theater Group, which gave Lewis his 2009 Sherwood Emerging Artist Award — the first time a composer had won it.

Technical glitches did occur the first night but didn’t obscure the triumph of the performance. The actors — two Americans and six of the Cubans, including young dancer Ivan Francisco Cadeñas and Yipsia Torres Cuevas, who played Ana — proudly took their bows.

A question-and-answer session after the last performance, on Sunday evening, revealed the audience’s emotional reaction.

“This play makes my heart beat very fast,” said one audience member, who explained that he had applied for a visa to move to the United States but after two years finally decided to stay in Cuba. “I don’t know what I missed, but I am very grateful for what I didn’t miss,” he concluded. The audience applauded.

Hip-hop artist Yaki Sienz said he was living the story portrayed: He is Cuban but his wife lives in Miami with their children. “Sometimes we have to meet in Mexico,” he said.

The final comment came from noted Cuban filmmaker Enrique Plévedo Barnet, whose most recent film, “La Anunciació,” explores similar themes.

**SAGE LEWIS**

1979: Born in Minneapolis.

1998: Graduated from Southwest High School.

2005: Studied jazz piano and drum in Cuba. Traveled and worked in Central America.

2004: Graduated from Oberlin College and Conservatory.

2006: Founded Project Per Amor with Minneapolis friend Peter Jensen, fellow Oberlin student Athel Bracdon and Cuban arts administrator Daisy Diaz.

2008: Named MFA in music composition from Cal Arts.


LINDA MACK