

# New multimedia show hits old Havana

• The moving force behind the artistic and political breakthrough "The Closest Farthest Away" is Minneapolis-born composer Sage Lewis.

By LINDA MACK  
Special to the Star Tribune

HAVANA - The excitement was palpable outside Havana's Teatro Mela two weeks ago as a crowd waited for the doors to open. "The Closest Farthest Away," an unprecedented collaboration between Cuban and American artists, was premiering at the prestigious Festival for New Latin American Cinema.

The driving force behind this artistic



Lewis

venture: 30-year old Minneapolis-born composer Sage Lewis.

In the production, American actors appear live onstage with filmed Cuban actors in a story that unpeels the Romeo-Juliet relationship between Amante, an American scientist, and Ana, a Cuban doctor.

"We're not star-crossed lovers. We're ocean-crossed lovers," says

Amante.

Amante can't leave his job and American way of life to live in Cuba. Ana can't leave her aging father — although her nosy neighbor says she should.

Video projections on three screens plus a TV monitor that shows onstage action create mesmerizing visual layers. Music by Lewis and Cuban musicians enlivens the story. At one point, the scene shifts from two rappers on a bench in Los Angeles to Latin America's popular hip-hop group Doble Filo performing in a Havana alley.

Lewis continues on E11 ▶



ADRIANNE KOTEEN • Project Por Amor

Actor Armando McClain gets a virtual hug in "The Closest Farthest Away," a Cuban-U.S. production that melds live and film action.

# New multimedia show hits old Havana

## ◀ LEWIS FROM E1

Lewis' love affair with Cuba began when he studied jazz piano and drumming there 11 years ago. In 2005, he founded Project Por Amor with his Minneapolis friend Peter Jensen, his fellow Oberlin student and future wife, Aleigh, 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 production people, 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."

### Hurdles 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 — screens, 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 13th 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 premiere.

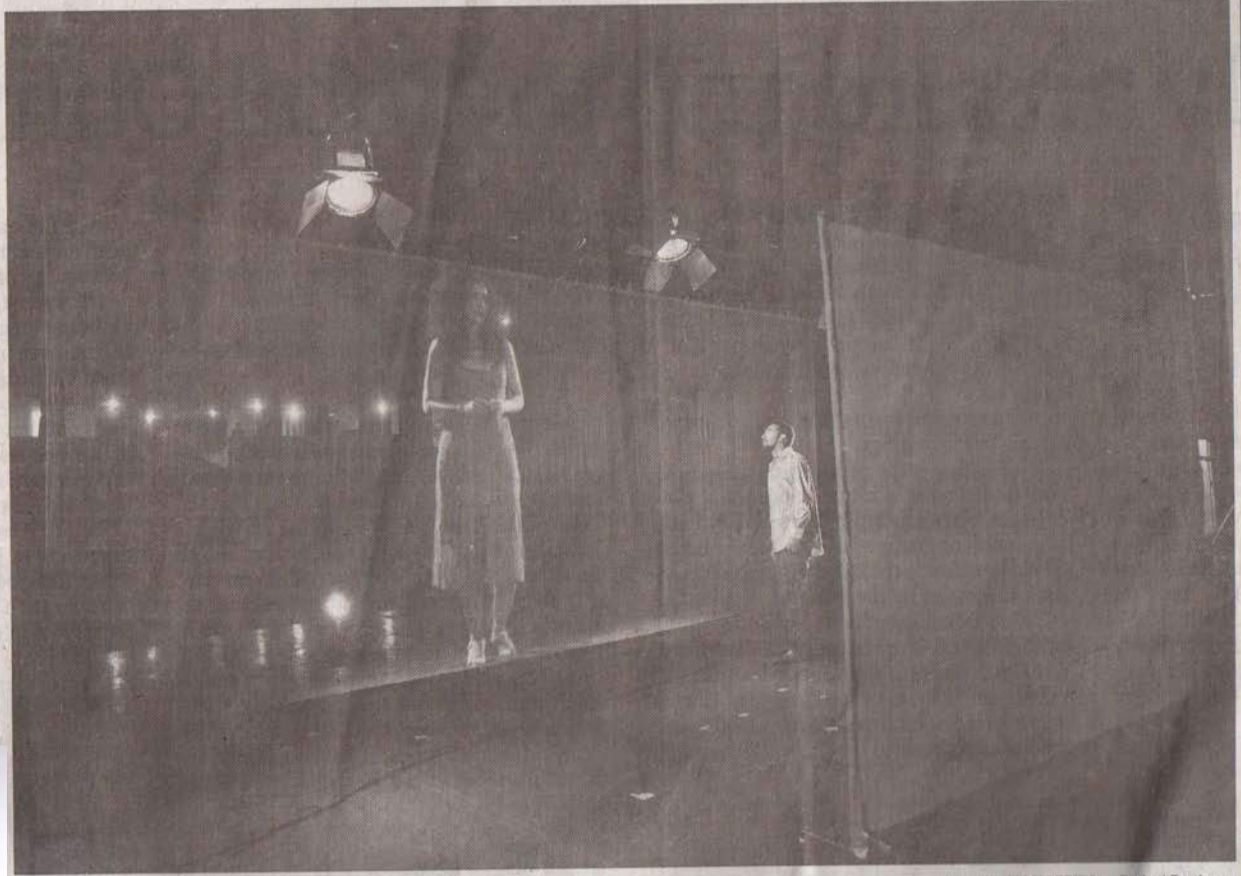
In the actual performance, the live dialogue had to be synched with that already on film, and English or Spanish subtitles had to be projected at the right moment.

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

The nadir 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



ADRIANNE KOTEEN • Project Por Amor

Actor Armando McClain interacts with a filmed Yipsia Torres Cuevas in "The Closest Farthest Away."

composed music, and Diane Rodriguez of L.A.'s Centre Theater Group, which gave Lewis its 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 Cárdenas 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 Yrak Sáenz said he is living the story portrayed: He is Cuban but his wife lives in Miami with his children. "Sometimes we have to meet in Mexico," he said.

The final comment came from noted Cuban filmmaker Enrique Piñeda Barnet, whose most recent film, "La Anunciación," explores similar themes.

"This is an extraordinary and historic moment," he said in Spanish as Lewis translated. "Five or six years ago this could not have been performed in this theater. We're becoming part of an important new bridge that's being built — a bridge that goes above all our differences."

"The Closest Farthest Away" will be shown by the Miami Light Project March 11-13. For more information and video and music clips, check the Project Por Amor website: [www.projectporamor.com](http://www.projectporamor.com).

### SAGE LEWIS

**1979:** Born in Minneapolis.

**1998:** Graduated from Southwest High School.

**1998-99:** Studied jazz piano and drum in Cuba. Traveled and worked in Central America.

**2004:** Graduated from Oberlin College and Conservatory.

**2004:** Founded Project Por Amor with Minneapolis friend Peter Jensen, fellow Oberlin student Aleigh Bracken and Cuban arts administrator Daisy Diaz.

**2008:** Earned MFA in music composition from Cal Arts.

**2006-9:** Worked on creative and funding sides of "The Closest Farthest Away," which premiered in Havana in December 2009.

**2010:** First U.S. performance of "The Closest Farthest Away," March 11-13, in Miami.

LINDA MACK