

## CASEBOOK: *The Closest Farthest Away*



# APPROACHING THE CLOSEST FARTHEST AWAY

By Joy Tomasko

**Photo 1:** Havana film shoot (2007). Camera assistant Gerardo Rufinelli shoots footage of Quixote (Ivelio Ferrer) and Sancho (Jorge Diaz). American actor (Raphael Sznajder) plays a stand-in for Amante while boomman (Sage Lewis) records sound. Video artist Aleigh Lewis watches.  
Photo: Aleigh Lewis

I met Sage Lewis in February 2006 in a grant writing class at the California Institute of the Arts. We were both getting our M.F.A.s, me in Writing for Performance, Sage in Music Composition. That first day of class, I noticed what would soon become a familiar image: Sage leaning forward, with an engaging gaze and an eager grin. When it was his turn to present his proposal, Sage talked about Cuba. He talked about his work on a project in which American and Cuban artists in drama, film, dance, and music were collaborating to create an innovative, interdisciplinary, international piece that he wanted to tour. He talked about the financial, political,

and process challenges in pulling off this feat. He talked about the importance of having Cuban and American artists communicate, and he had a conceptual structure of a performance that had yet to be carried to fruition. The Cuban scenes would be filmed. The Cuban characters would speak in Spanish. The sole American actor would appear live onstage and speak English. He would interact with the Cuban films projected on one screen. The screen would create an illusion that all of the performers are actually onstage together, a physical impossibility due to the legal restrictions between the two countries. This impossible collaboration would bridge and essentially dissolve the

borders between two “enemy” countries through love. These topics would always dominate the talk of the actual story, which was to be a love story. He was planning to return to Cuba that summer and continue to work with his friends in Havana. The original piece was called *Por Amor*. Years later this would become the name of the company of Cuban and American artists who collaborated through the embargo, and their first performance ultimately became titled *The Closest Farthest Away/La Entrañable Lejanía*.

Sage first traveled to Cuba the year after he graduated from high school in Minneapolis. While in Havana, he took private music lessons from pianists and drummers, and the sound of Cuban drums mixing with an American drumset can often be heard during the performance of *The Closest Farthest Away*. Encouraged by its dynamic art scene, Sage continued to return to Cuba. His passion spread to friends including Aleigh Lewis (née Bracken), whom he met during undergraduate studies at Oberlin College and married. Aleigh originated the concept with Sage and also serves as an overall project producer for CFA. She is also the video artist, video editor, and the live, onstage cinematographer.

In August 2006, Sage e-mailed me while I was in Rwanda for Arts in One World/The Center for Genocide Studies, led by Erik Ehn. I was travelling with a group of artists, including Shannon Scrofano, who three years later would join *The Closest Farthest Away* as the scenic and co-video designer. Sage wrote to say that *Por Amor* was “taking many twists and turns” and “almost went off a cliff.” We exchanged a few emails and then met in September when I returned briefly to Los Angeles before moving back to New York City. It was then that I met Aleigh for the first time. She’s fiery, direct, and a crisp complement to Sage’s more laid-back fluidity. They explained how their first attempt at pulling off this binational production had failed. But they saw so much potential in their ideas and relationships that they didn’t want to quit. They still wanted the piece to be a love story, and they still had their overall vision and a passion to show Americans aspects of Cuba they don’t often get to see, but they needed a new team and a new script. At this point, I joined the project as a writer.

It is both inspiring and challenging to join a project that already has drive and history behind it. You get swept up in the current but at the same time you are running to catch up, learning an already established language, figuring out how to swim alongside but with your own voice.

*The Closest Farthest Away* evolved over three and a half years, with creative contributions from over 90 artists, equally split between the U.S. and Cuba. With the addition of each person and their experiences and specialties, the process, the story, and the resulting production were altered. New individuals entered into the mix weeks, even days before

the world premiere in Havana in December 2009 and the U.S. premiere in Miami in March 2010. Each collaborator wore many hats and each has been highly influential. It was often hard to know the hierarchy, the rules, and the format, as the project didn’t follow the usual creative process for making either film or theatre. Each “job” often had more than one individual attached; indeed the objective was to have both an American and a Cuban in all areas. These pairings weren’t consistent. Individual artists were sometimes replaced because of scheduling problems or artistic differences. Others joined in the middle and even late in the process. Sometimes collaborators would leave and then return later to work in a similar or completely different capacity. Therefore, an artist was often “running to catch up” and the rest of the team would then need to wait. With so many cooks in the kitchen and the colliding of minds, there were amazing discoveries as well as huge disappointments. The credits page that accompanies the script gives some specificity in terms of roles but doesn’t go into much detail regarding “hat sharing” (mostly because the document would become pages long). It also leaves many individuals out, including those with incredible logistical, financial, and/or moral support.

Chi-wang Yang, a fellow CalArtian, whose uniquely layered performances Sage, Aleigh, and I greatly admired, joined the project as the theatre director and co-video designer a few weeks after I did. His M.F.A. is in Theatre Directing and Integrated Media, an incredibly useful symbiosis to conceptualize this hybrid performance and actually bring it to life onstage. As the project continued to expand he became the unifying voice and vision.

There were many elements that are still present in the piece that were discovered in those early days of Fall 2006 and Winter 2007. One of these is a film sequence with a young boy dancing accompanied by three drummers. He represents the Orisha, Eleggua, the deity that opens doors, and specifically opens pathways between the U.S. and Cuba. This became one of my favorite scenes in the production.

As is the case in many stories, every character’s name in *The Closest Farthest Away* has meaning. The two main characters in CFA are Amante and Ana, an American

man and a Cuban woman. The name Amante contains “a man.” Sometimes his identity is stripped down and that’s all that he is left with, an existential being. But translated into Spanish, Amante, is “the Lover.” This is his fuel—his desire for union in a physical world, one he is denied throughout most of the play. Ana receives a more specific, grounded name, one that is pulled from her home, the city of Havana. The city she cannot and does not want to leave behind.

While the decision to make Ana a doctor was made very early on, I struggled to find an occupation

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for Amante. We kept wavering between layers of meta-theatricality. We played with making him a musician, reflecting Sage's experience, but we were wary of clichés. We felt that we were walking a fine line from day one, with an American man/Cuban woman love story. When Esther Maria Hernandez, a Cuban-American dramaturg (and our official script translator), joined the project in February 2009 (post-film shoot and CalArts workshop), she wisely suggested that Amante could be a marine biologist. Following migrating turtles is a job that would allow him to travel legally between the U.S. and Cuba. It would also complement our sea metaphors. Chi-wang, along with co-writer and fellow CalArtian Jane Pickett, worked to then weave Amante's vocation into the play.

The earliest drafts of the script began with Amante saying, "I was waiting for the bus." This would later become an action. The bus and the bus stop, which could be in the U.S. one moment and Cuba the next, were quickly established as integral components of the storytelling. We wanted these locations to be a bridge between reality and a more dreamlike space that would signify loneliness, longing and waiting. As the piece developed, it was decided that Amante would be from Los Angeles. In a city so obsessed with cars, it would seem absurd that waiting for a bus would help launch his unusual journey but this interruption to his routine leads him to find a strange coin in a puddle and arrive in Cuba without boarding a flight.

In Winter 2007 the film producer, Yasef Ananda

Calderon, was the next collaborator to join, and he was the first of the new Cuban team. Yasef is a master negotiator, and he worked tirelessly to obtain visas and approvals. He also assembled the Havana team, including Agnieszka Hernandez Diaz, who became my Cuban counterpart and co-writer; Boris Gonzalez Arenas, the film director and also a co-writer; Raul Perez Ureta, a renowned director of photography; and Laura Vitier, the assistant director and the most gracious of hosts when the American team traveled to Havana. As I write all this, I think of so many vivid memories of Laura who passed away on 21 August 2010. She had a beautiful, youthful spirit that battled illness for a long time. We were all blessed with her countless contributions to *The Closest Farthest Away*.

In April 2007, I flew to Los Angeles for a long weekend to meet with Chi-wang, Sage, and Aleigh. While writing on this cross-country flight, I discovered the character of the Interrogator, who would be performed by a second, live onstage actor. The Interrogator's gender was not specified but Andrea LeBlanc was cast for the premieres and she brought a strong, feminine tension to the dynamic. Chi-wang, especially, responded positively to this new character and I was relieved. I had been struggling for months with the limitation of only one live actor and one screen. A year later, during the CalArts workshop in March 2008, multiple screens, ranging from traditional scrims to television monitors to torn and folded pieces of paper, would be integrated into the performance. Sage and Aleigh's original



Photo 2: Teatro Mella (2009). Mime (Lázaro Batista) walks across an arbor in Havana park. Photo: Adrienne Koteen

Photo 3: Havana film shoot (2007). Ana (Yipsia Torres Cueva) and Flavia (Susana Lidia Ruiz) sit on the Malecón. Photo: Aleigh Lewis



intention was to make the performance compact. There is economy in this, but the growing visions of the project called for more ambitious juxtapositions.

When Agnieszka joined the project in June 2007 as cowriter we began corresponding about the script by email, but I was largely unavailable for several weeks because a play of mine was being presented in the Summer Play Festival in NYC. Then in August I flew alone to Cuba. In early critiques of the script, Yasef, the film producer, made it clear that the script would benefit from my concrete experience in Cuba, and now that was finally happening.

Agnieszka and I worked side by side together for almost three weeks. We were often cursing time but found opportunities to laugh and connect as friends and collaborators and also teach each other cultural references. She spoke some English; I didn't speak any Spanish. We literally combed through the script, working word by word, adding concrete specificity and deepening the Cuban characters. We decided we wanted there to be three generations of Cubans featured in the film, those who came of age before the Revolution (Ana's father, Madrina); those who came of age after (Ana, Alejandro); and those who came of age after the 1990's when Cuba fell into a severe economic depression following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Flavia, Tiago).

My time in Cuba is a story in itself. Yet, if you talk to any collaborator, each has stories within stories, which is part of the beauty of this project. So much of *The Closest Farthest Away* evolved through the synchronicity and personal experiences of the over 90 contributing artists. Agnieszka shared many similarities with the character of

Ana. Some coincidentally existed before she joined the project but others came from our discussions. When the character of Madrina talks to Ana about the colors she should wear to honor Yemaya, her Orisha, this is an experience from Agnieszka's own life. Neither Ana nor Agnieszka follow Santeria, but are aware of its practices. I did have a consultation with an Espirista while I was in Havana, and Sage and Aleigh also visited with one on each trip. (While there were many chickens in cages in the room, I was not asked to sacrifice any. My recommended offerings are what I'd call benign and involve the color white.)

When Agnieszka and I finished a scene, she would need to smoke a cigarette. This inspired Amante's memory of Ana smoking the local Hollywood brand of cigarettes. Once, when Agnieszka had run out, we went to buy some and then sat by the Malecon. We talked to a fisherman who was counting the waves to study the tides. This inspired the role of the Fisherman. During the audition process for the film shoot, the Fisherman transformed to also represent the character of Quixote. Boris, the film director, was inspired because he cast two actors who had just finished playing Quixote and Sancho in a theatre production. These characters/actors would also transform again to play the Ushers at The Theatre of the Sea.

We had intended that Ana would hear what was referred to for a while as "the song of my life" as she rode the bus. When Xavier Calderin auditioned for the role of Tiago he performed a song he had written. The team loved it, he was cast, and he performed this song in the bus scene on film. Likewise, on one of their pre-CFA trips, Sage and Aleigh

encountered the ninety-eight-year-old musician Angel de la Cuesta. His character, who sings Ana's favorite song in Alejandro's bar, was written especially for him. He performs a personal interpretation of the classic Cuban bolero, "Lágrimas Negras" (*Black Tears*). The collaboration of the hip hop groups Doble Filo from Cuba and The Click from the U.S. also came through interactions with Sage. Through Yrak Sáenz of Doble Filo, we were introduced to his wife, Beth Boone, executive and artistic director of Miami Light Project and Ever Chavez, the director of FUNDarte. Beth and Yrak would especially find resonances in the love story.

Agnieszka and I corresponded by email with Sage, Aleigh, and Chi-wang during our intensive Cuban writing period in summer 2007, but they did not arrive in Havana until preproduction, which had been delayed until late October 2007. Boris, the film director, took on the task of further adapting the script as locations and more actors came into focus. For example, Ana's mother became Ana's father through a necessity of casting. Chi-wang spent many sessions with Boris, sometimes fighting to keep the nuances from getting lost in translation. Boris and I would finally meet two years later and have an amazing conversation on my last night in Cuba following the Havana premiere. We talked on Laura's patio about the process, the script, the production, the work that still needed to be done, and our own personal lives as artists and the fear and insecurities we feel when writing. He talked about how he loves collaborating with Yipsia Torres Cuevas, how they have a wonderful shorthand, and the depth of commitment she gave the role of Ana and the project. We talked about parts that were cut and why, parts that were added and why and lines that were our favorite, including the Bus Driver's "people like you make me late to pick up people like you," which I had written the first week of January 2007.

By mid-December 2007, the filmed portion of the script was completed, and therefore fixed. It could be cut up, rearranged and manipulated dynamically on multiple screens, but it could no longer be otherwise changed. Although, in November 2009, the week before the Havana premiere, additional scenes were filmed of Tiago at the bus stop and Ana at a waterless fountain in a park. After even more last minute reshoots of the final Interrogator scene, in which Ana appears in the television monitor, Yipsia and Armando McClain (who played Amante) were finally able to work and rehearse together. They found greater nuance and natural ways of responding, something they both found satisfying.

Throughout the process there were issues with time, money, resources, and space. It was incredibly challenging to determine how the story, acting, and technical elements came together. There was little space for experimentation and rehearsal. The CalArts workshop in March 2008 allowed for a brief opportunity to start to understand the intersection of film, music, and theatre but a year and a half passed before the full design team could be added and auditions held for the American actors. The video and structure of the piece was

still being edited when Nathan Ruyle, the sound designer, began postproduction on what we realized was a feature-length film. He then had to balance it with live actors performing onstage with microphones. Jeannette Yew, the lighting designer, arrived in Cuba to find an amiable crew with no tools, not even wrenches. It's not surprising that there was a blackout in the theatre a few hours before the Havana premiere.

Every collaborator has made significant sacrifices and has either not been paid at all due to legalities, or the limited funding went towards plane tickets and production resources. Only minimum fees were doled out to actually run the show during performances. Unfortunately, this is a familiar experience in theatre and independent film. And money is naturally a presence in a story that intersects the U.S. and Cuba and we live with it in the piece in several ways. We approached it metaphorically through the coin of the sea, directly as in conversations Ana has with her father, and absurdly, as the character of Flavia plunges into a speech of exaggerated worldwide economic collapse. Miranda Wright, the U.S. theatre producer who joined the project in November 2008, continues, along with the creative team, to actively seek and secure future productions.

Near the end of the play, Ana and Amante are finally united, briefly, on stage. They meet at The Theatre of the Sea, a place that exists as Ana says "in an imaginary point between your ocean and mine." Then she goes on to say, "it is not enough." During the final talk back after a Havana performance, audience member and celebrated Cuban filmmaker Enrique Pineda Barnet made the closing comments. "I cannot leave my seat without adding my own grain of sand to The Theatre of the Sea. Five years ago, it would not have been possible to present this here in this theatre." He continued to talk about how the moment is "extraordinary, extremely important, and historic." He complimented the acting, the technique, and the fascinating process. He encouraged the continuation of the work because "this project is creating an opportunity to transcend that we cannot lose. We are becoming part of a construction of an enormous bridge, and we are asking from both sides, as artists and citizens." Yes. Amante ends the play saying, "Todavía estoy aquí. I'm still here."

I think about stories I heard and stories I experienced, some very private, some very public. So many things—the flood, the blackouts, the hurricane, the broken cabs, the broken equipment, the lack of equipment, searching for a pool hose and chlorinator in Long Island, an epic holy journey of a donated Mercedes Benz, mailing project videos to and from Cuba via Japan. There were the cigars, the rum, the poetry, the songs, the sleepless nights, the late night phone calls, the instant messages, the video conferencing, the inbox/outbox filling emails, the rewrites, the cancellations, the last minute flights, the concerts, the tear gas, the trysts, the reports that Castro had died, the reports that Castro was still alive, the Republican President, the Democratic President. There was "the Billboard War" in Havana that

Photo 4: Havana film shoot (2007). Flavia (Susana Lidia Ruiz) poses for the camera after filming a scene.  
Photo: Adrienne Koteen



started in early 2006, in which 138 black flags on 100-foot-tall flagpoles blocked the twenty-five windows of the Times Square-like ticker tape messages from the U.S. Interests office, which we could see out the windows of the building where we stayed, and the sound as these flags beat like batá drums in the wind, and then in Summer 2009 the ticker tape was shut off and the black flags were replaced with white. There was the angry flight attendant who ripped up the plane tickets because she claimed there wasn't the proper visa, and then the arguing in French, English, and Franglais at six in the morning to eventually be let on that flight. There was the denial of exit stamps to clear Cuban customs, the review of arrival videotapes by Cuban authorities, the correct paperwork and fees paid, a rebooked flight and customs cleared the following day and visa approvals (especially for Yipsia to perform in Miami), and censor approvals for the script, and the lawyers, the laws, the loans, the fundraisers, the grant applications, the generous donations, the crew at the Teatro Mella, the crew at the Byron Carlyle Theatre, the nicknames, the photographs and documentation of the productions and process, the dancing on the Malecon, the dancing in bars in Havana and in Spring Break infused Miami, the sunrise swim, Laura's balcony with the awe-inspiring view of the Havana skyline and how this sky mingled with the ocean at sunset and sunrise. And stepping into a theatre, transforming it into The Theatre of the Sea, in order to create a bridge between two countries which are separated by only eighty-six miles.

**World Premiere in December  
2009 at Teatro Mella in Havana,  
Cuba.**

Presented by El Festival  
Internacional del Nuevo Cine  
Latinoamericano  
and  
Teatro El Público.

**Followed by a US Premiere in  
March 2010 at the Byron Carlyle  
Theater in Miami, FL.**

Presented by Miami Light Project,  
FUNDarte,  
and  
El Centro Cultural Español.