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U.S.-Cuba production succeeds beautifully

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As dreamlike as the island and the separation that inspired it, the theater work *La Entrañable Lejania* (The Closest Farthest Away) arrived on this side of the Florida Straits on Thursday night. At Miami Beach's Byron Carlyle Theater, to be exact, where this theatrical collaboration between U.S. and Cuban artists had its U.S. premiere.

Inspired both conceptually and practically by the separation between the U.S. and Cuba, *Lejania* succeeds beautifully in evoking a surreal world of longing, memory and frustrated attachment that should be intimately familiar to many in Miami.

On its simplest level, the piece tells of two ocean-crossed lovers, the American marine biologist Amante (lover in Spanish), played by American actor Armando McClain, and Ana, a Cuban doctor played by Cuban actress Yipsia Torres Cuevas. He lives in Los Angeles, she in Havana. But while McClain is live onstage, Cuevas and the other Cuban performers appear in films, projected on various screens on the Byron Carlyle stage.

DRAMATIC MOSAIC

The films were a practical solution to the problem of *Lejania's* American creators Sage and Aleigh Lewis, director Chi-wang Yang, and their compatriots not being able to stay and work consistently in Havana. Onstage, as in the two years it took to create *Lejania*, the Cubans and Americans connect through technology.

The movies made by the Cuban creative partners become part of an intricate visual and dramatic mosaic. McClain moves amidst a shifting landscape of flickering images, talking to Ana on-screen -- it's as if she only appears in his mind or his memory. At one point, the couple stands "together" by the ocean, except that we see Cuevas from several angles, on several screens, with McClain in the middle -- she's everywhere and nowhere. The effect is eerily disorienting. We're so accustomed to the reality of movies, and when they're juxtaposed with a live actor it's hard to reconcile which is "real."

Both imagery and dialogue are layered with meanings. "Free?" asks Andrea LeBlanc, the only other onstage actor, playing a mysterious official interrogator who draws out Amante's story. "No, at this moment you are not free."

Not free to leave the interrogation, or to be with the woman he loves.

"Where would you like to be?" she asks him, as images of her on various screens encircle

McClain -- he's literally surrounded by questions and filled with them, since he can't decide whether to stay with Ana or give her up.

HELD BY PLACE

Sounds and pictures of the ocean that surround Cuba are constantly washing through *Lejania*. Place and how it defines you also figure heavily. Both Ana and Amante are held by place: She doesn't want to leave her aging father, and he doesn't want to give up his work and life in the States.

"Hello, are you there, talk to me, yes, I'm here, I'm here," McClain says into the phone at the beginning, though it's unclear where "here" is.

Lejania is filled with references to Cuba's strangenesses that drew knowing laughter from the audience. "What is this," asks McClain, as he meets a nuclear physicist forced to be a bus driver for 15 years. "An alternate reality where a nuclear physicist is a bus driver?" A bartender and childhood friend of Ana's tells her, "You're in the best bar in Havana, where the past is in the present and the future doesn't matter."

A SMALL SHOCK

There is some over-weighted symbolism in *Lejania*: a blank coin with loosely defined powers that Xavier Calderin, a mysterious, serenading figure, tells Amante "will take him wherever he ought to go" and "will buy you whatever can't be bought." Don Quixote and Sancho Panza appear on the Malecon, laughing about pursuing a dreamlike woman. And a few too many metaphors get piled on -- Romeo and Juliet "two lovers separated by an old fight", the migrating sea turtles that Amante studies, which, unlike the humans, always know where they're headed.

Towards the end of *Lejania* the Miami audience gets a small shock: Cuevas appears onstage. It's so unexpected that at first you wonder whether it's some kind of 3D projection. It's not -- her visa came through earlier this week, and her presence creates a shiver as she is finally, actually able to take McClain's hand. But the real story of *Lejania* is still one of separation, with Amante still shouting into his cellphone at the end, "Yes, I'm still here, I'm still here."

A here which is far away from the woman he loves.

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