

# Navigating the Cuban Blockade

U.S./Cuba collaborations are using technology as a bridge

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Theatre Day, the University of Miami Center for Latin American Studies and Florida International University's Cuban Research Institute presented convened some of Cuba's most important living playwrights from the 1960s—Eduardo Arrocha, Anton Arrufat, Abelardo Estorino, Eduardo Manet, Rafael Mirabal, Jesús Ruiz and Matias Montes Huidobro. The conversation on that occasion examined the history of post-revolution Cuban dramatists and their impact on and collaborations with visual artists and theatre designers. The conference was part of an extraordinary, ongoing archival project initiated by Dr. Lillian Manzor, director of University of Miami's Latin American Studies Program and the Cuban Theater Digital Archive (<http://scholar.library.miami.edu/archivoteatral>), which went live online in January 2006.

"In this first phase," Manzor states, "the goal is to digitally preserve Cuban theatrical production from 1959 to the present. We are starting with the older material, which is at risk of disappearing with its creators. We are also actively involved in performance documentation. Our goal is to make accessible a filmed Cuban theatre collection like the New York Public Library's Theatre on Film and Tape collection. We have filmed over 50 productions in Cuba and in the U.S., including three Equity productions."

Manzor continues, "The failed policies that have been in place for over 50 years have separated two countries that are geographically and historically very close neighbors. Art in general and theatre in particular can serve to start a dialogue, because

everyone is working together in a common project, with a common goal, without any ulterior motives."

Manzor's archival work and active presence in the U.S. and Latin American theatre scene are a testament to the passion and resourcefulness necessary to navigate the still-fragile terrain of documentation and collaboration between the U.S. and Cuba. Project por Amor, a grassroots collective of artists, cultural organizations and other supporters across the Florida Straits, is a vivid example of the quixotic perseverance integral to making collaborations possible.

Los Angeles-based composer Sage Lewis says he fell in love with Cuba and its culture on his first trip there 11 years ago. Over the past few years, he began to create a performance piece with his wife, filmmaker Aleigh Lewis, entitled *La entrañable lejanía* (*The Closest Farthest Away*)—a bilingual, multimedia love story that unites U.S. actors with their Cuban counterparts via technology. It premiered at the Havana Film Festival in December 2009 and this past March was presented at Miami Beach's Byron Carlyle Theater by Miami Light Project, FUNDarte and the Centro Cultural Español. Though it looks deceptively simple on stage, the visually arresting piece is a labor of love by a cadre of artists across physical and political boundaries. The writers, designers and director Chi-wang Yang are based in the U.S. (many of them met as students at the California Institute of the Arts). The creative team for the mediated, filmic components of the piece, including director Boris Arenas and the film actors, are in Cuba.

"We were inspired by taking on seemingly impossible challenges of collaboration," explains Lewis. "Cuba is the one nation we cannot travel to freely as Americans. It is almost entirely off America's grid."

*La entrañable lejanía* debuted in Havana amid two power outages and a flood that nearly destroyed its equipment. For the U.S. premiere, the collective sought its lead Cuban performer to perform live in the final scene. Lewis recounts: "We started at the end of January to get a U.S. visa for actress Yipsia Torres Cuevas. It's only in the past year that Cuban artists are starting to get permission again from the U.S. government to travel here to perform. Yipsia's performance in the final scene was significant, because she is among the first wave of Cuban artists to perform in the U.S. since Bill Clinton was president. We were the first cultural project of Cuban and American artists to perform in both the U.S. and Cuba in 10 years. When the audience saw Yipsia walk onstage at the end of our piece, after the two characters have been separated via media for the entire show, the audience gasped. The walls between us and Cuba are so thick that when you finally do penetrate them, something magical happens." 



Armando McClain, left, and Yipsia Torres Cuevas (on screen) in *The Closest Farthest Away*.

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