



Theatre Professor Becomes First American to Direct Play in Cuba since Revolution

By Sarah Colwell

*Seth Panitch, assistant professor of acting in the department of theatre and dance, directed *The Merchant of Venice* in Havana.*

Panitch and his students' work is a part of the UA Cuba Initiative that is spearheaded by the College of Arts and Sciences.

The show was so successful that not only did it have several sold out evenings, but the Cuban ministry of culture is developing a tour of the production to travel throughout Cuba.

That success, however, did not come without some challenges, according to Panitch.



The Cuban production of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* was directed by UA theatre professor Seth Panitch.

It wasn't until the performance's second night that Panitch began to breathe.

"I was sitting there in the back of the theatre watching Cubans respond to a 400-year-old piece of theatre that was being directed by an American and being performed by professional Cuban actors and American student actors in Spanish, and I realized that we were making history," Panitch said. "I looked at the results of four years of work and was amazed because I never thought it could get to this level.

In December, Panitch directed *The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare at the Sala Teatro Adolfo Llauradó in Havana, Cuba. According to the theatre division of the Cuban ministry of culture, Consejo Nacional Artes Escénicas (CNAE), it is the first time an American has directed a play in Cuba since 1959.

Additionally, UA graduate students filled some of the roles in the play for one week in December, acting alongside professional Cuba actors from the four acting companies in Cuba. Professor Tom Wolfe, associate dean in the College of Arts and Sciences and guitarist, performed the music for the play. The play ran from Dec. 17, 2008, to Jan. 4.

Seth Panitch, assistant professor in the theatre and dance department, directing professional Cuban actors for a Cuban production of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*.



of UA student actors spoke little to no Spanish despite the fact the play was in Spanish.

"The play was our translator," Panitch said in a Tuscaloosa News interview.

Second, Panitch's directing style and work pace clashed with the Cubans – Panitch is accustomed to putting on a show, start to finish, in about two weeks; the Cubans, on the other hand, were used to rehearsing a play for about a year before opening and taking two to four months just to block a performance.

"When I told them I was going to block the show in a week, they laughed," Panitch told The Tuscaloosa News. "When they realized I was serious, they were terrified."

Additionally, Panitch had a hard time finding a venue for the play where there wasn't a hole in the stage and finding consistent cast members. On opening night, Panitch only had six of the 12 Cubans he originally cast, and only three

of those were in their original roles.

"There were only about three or four rehearsals where we had the whole group together," Panitch said in The Tuscaloosa News interview. "When I lost my Portia (the lead female role in the 'Merchant of Venice') four days before opening, I was on the ropes."

all the work that has been done behind the scenes to put on a 90-minute show in the middle of Havana."

The beginnings of the play started four years ago as a research project for Panitch to investigate and learn more about Cuban acting styles. Through that research project, he was introduced to the assistant minister at CNAE who offered to help Panitch in his research. Panitch made a request to direct a Shakespearean play in Cuba in Spanish.

In addition to Panitch and the UA students learning a lot from the experience, Panitch said several of the professional Cuban actors said they gained much from the experience as well.

"One of the actors told me he turned down two jobs with local soap operas so that he could continue to work on the play with us," Panitch said. "He said he turned it down because he was learning so much and wanted the opportunity to work with an American director and perform Shakespeare. He decided to forgo money for a great experience; I wonder how many American actors would do that."

Panitch and Wolfe conducted their creative activity research under a general Department of Treasury license that allows individuals doing professional research in their professional areas to travel to Cuba. Graduate students worked under a special license to UA that provides opportunities for graduate students to conduct research in Cuba as part of their curriculum. Since 2002, UA has received academic travel licenses from the U.S. Department of the Treasury that permit travel to Cuba for specific academic activities. ●

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