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Diplomacy through Drama: Cuban Actors Will Perform Shakespeare in U.S.

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The Obama administration's decision to let 12 Cuban artists enter the United States for the production marks a midsummer milestone of sorts for greater U.S. openness toward the Communist-ruled island nation.

It's opening week for a new act in U.S.-Cuba relations: A Spanish-language version of Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" is beginning a three-day run at the University of Alabama, starring professional actors from Havana.

Anyone up for "Un Sueño de Una Noche de Verano"?

"This is beyond uncommon. No musician or performing group has been allowed in this country like this from Cuba since 2003," said Ned Sublette, a performer and composer from New York who has studied and written about Cuban music.

With nearly three weeks of rehearsals complete, the troupe of 10 Cuban actors and two managers are turning the Bard into a modern-day diplomat. They will perform Thursday through Saturday in a joint production with nine University of Alabama students and a Tuscaloosa-area actor.

The drama within the drama: the Cubans speak little English and the Americans, no Spanish. But together they are memorizing lines in Spanish to stage the 400-year-old romantic comedy about young lovers, fairies and an enchanted forest.

"None of the American actors speak Spanish," said the director, Seth Panitch, an assistant professor at the university who helped the Americans learn dialogue and even when to take their cues in a foreign language. "It's terrifying for the Americans."

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Panitch compressed about 2½ hours of Shakespearean dialogue into 90 minutes of Spanish-language drama.

Alianne Portuondo Olivera, 23, said the communication gap hasn't been too wide. The Cuban actress portrays Hermia, who is loved by two different men.

"We can communicate with each other by physical actions and emotions," she said through a translator. "The American actors we are working with are always aware of the work of the Cubans, and the Cubans are always taking care of the Americans."

The play, to be staged in a small campus theater at \$5 a ticket before a mostly English-speaking audience, comes amid what advocates of more U.S. openness toward Cuba see as a string of encouraging events.

Last week, American actors Bill Murray, Robert Duval and James Caan visited Cuba on a research trip, and U.S. has agreed to let the New York Philharmonic perform in Havana later this year under an exemption to travel restrictions to Cuba.

And last year, Panitch traveled to Cuba to direct another Shakespearean play, "The Merchant of Venice," under the university's Treasury Department license to conduct research with Cuba.

This year, Panitch sought to bring Cubans to Alabama for a production, not knowing whether a history of strained relations between the two countries would thwart his plans. Travel between the countries is tightly restricted.

The play was cast in January with actors Panitch knew from his work in Havana, and the Cuban government granted permission in late June for the actors and managers to travel.

Despite some tense moments, the U.S. government approved the visas in July, days before the Cubans were scheduled to leave for Alabama. "Getting them here was very difficult because there were so many days when we didn't think it would happen," Panitch said.

For now the Cubans are under a busy rehearsal schedule while living in a university dormitory. But they've managed to do a little sightseeing in Alabama, touring Birmingham, cruising a local river and sampling Southern barbecue.

Following their run in Alabama, the Cubans plan to return home to perform "A Midsummer Night's Dream" in Havana with Cuban actors filling the roles performed by the Americans in Tuscaloosa.

Advocates for greater cultural exchanges say there were a burst of them under Bill Clinton's presidency in the 1990s and for a few years into the George W. Bush administration.

Whether there will be more Cuban arts and cultural groups allowed to visit the U.S. is an open question.

In Washington, the Obama administration hasn't issued new policies on U.S.-Cuban cultural exchanges. But State Department spokesman Andy Laine said the government "continues to review our policy with Cuba."

"The president wants to ensure that we are doing all we can to support the Cuban people in fulfilling their desire to live in freedom," he said.

Cuban officials in Havana did not return messages seeking comment.

Louis Head, executive director of the Cuba Research and Analysis Group, is anxious for the next act: "What we're waiting to see is something more of a definitive policy change out of the Obama administration."

Source: AP

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