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Alabama-Cuba Initiative gives rise to new play at UA

'Alcestis Ascending' to preview July 1-5 at Allen Bales Theatre

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Although many things have changed since 2009, when Frank Egusquiza was last in Tuscaloosa as part of the Cuban-American research exchange that became "Un Sueno De Una Noche De Verano," the familiarity of the city's faces and places outweighs its differences.

While warming up for a run-through of the new play "Alcestis Ascending," greeting friends new and old with hugs and brilliant smiles, he looked around and searched for the right words in English.

"I feel like I am home," Egusquiza said.

It is the fourth project of the

Alabama-Cuba Initiative to wind through translations of text and movement, a fusing of the spirits of U.S. and Cuban styles of performance, to result in one theatrical moment: "Alcestis Ascending." It will feature more than a dozen Cuban scholar-actor-dancers, joined by some University of Alabama students, and will be performed in Tuscaloosa July 1-5, before moving to an off-off-Broadway run in New York City, then down to Havana to open a theater there.

But it's only the second of such projects for which Seth Panitch, the UA professor who directs and oversees this facet of the program, was able to bring the Cubans to Tuscaloosa for study and rehearsal. Several of those who worked on "Un Sueno De Una Noche De Verano" (a Cuban-language translation of Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream") are back, including Egusquiza; assistant director William Ruiz; Alianne Portuondo, playing one of the leads as Alcestis; Jorge Luiz Curbelo; Rayssel Cruz; Diana Hernandez and married couple Roberto Salomon and Noelvis Perez.

But there is a whole new group of Cuban scholars coming along this time from the MalPaso dance company, one of the first private dance companies started in Havana, led by Osnel Delgado, who is choreographing "Alcestis Ascending."

"The ones who've been here before slid right back into the routine," said Panitch,



Michelle Lepianka Carter | Tuscaloosa News
Scholar artists rehearse Friday in the Allen Bales Theatre on the University of Alabama campus for "Alcestis Ascending."

who also wrote the script for “Alcestis Ascending.” His plays “Dammit, Shakespeare!” and “Hell: Paradise Found” have been produced from New York to Los Angeles, and he also has a couple of screenplays under option in Hollywood. “The ones who came here for the first time expect everything in America to look like New York City, so there's a period of adjustment.”

The connection began several years ago when Panitch flew to Havana to study. By the end of 2008, he'd arranged to bring six UA graduate students to join with Cuban performers, among the top professionals in their country, for a Spanish language production of “The Merchant of Venice,” the first Shakespearean play to be performed on the island in 11 years, at the Sala Teatro Adolfo Llauradó in Havana. Setting his sights higher, Panitch created the 2009 production, which took place in Tuscaloosa before moving to Havana. In 2011, Panitch moved into the Teatro Nacional to unveil Christopher Durang's “Beyond Therapy” to the Cuban performers, showing them “our most skewed view into American culture.”

To prepare for this summer, he attended a dance rehearsal for Danza Contemporanea de Cuba, from which Delgado would soon split to form MalPaso.

“They put me in a chair right on the stage about an inch away from 20 of the most incredible dancers I've ever seen,” he said. “Particularly with the shared weight and contact improvisation, it was some of the most theatrical dancing I'd ever witnessed. So I tried, for this time, to come up with a project that would interest a Cuban dance company.”

Panitch and Delgado met to hammer out a plan.

“I thought the best fit would be something that was very theatricalized, something with a sort of mythic undertone. So this was one I'd always wanted to write. I'd outlined it back in college, from part of the myths of Hercules.”

In Greek mythology, Alcestis is the devoted wife of King Admetis, who with help from Apollo, avoided many fates, but not the Fates, who tell him he will die if he cannot find another person to die in his place. When no one steps up, Alcestis volunteers. In the myth, Hercules then travels to the underworld to save Alcestis from the god Hades.

“When his wife offers, Admetis accepts so quickly he doesn't think of the ramifications,” Panitch said. “And for the myth and Admetis that's basically where it ends, because Hercules goes down and brings her back.”

But in Panitch's play, Admetis wrestles with his ego and shame and travels to the underworld with Hercules, who takes on Cerberus, the three-headed hellhound, while Admetis frees his wife.

Inspired by the fluid creativity of the dancers, Panitch began to envision teams of horses, demons pulling souls down to Hades and a three-person Cerberus who could do stage combat with Hercules. He began crafting the script about two years ago as he was adapting the Marx Brothers' “Animal Crackers” for the UA mainstage season. About a year ago, Panitch traveled to Havana again, meeting with Delgado and Ruiz to cast the dancers. In December, he flew down again to work on the largest dance pieces: the horses and the Cerberus fights.

Even with the months of preparation, adaptations had to be made; smaller movement pieces were set in Tuscaloosa. Because the Allen Bales Theatre, where they are rehearsing and will perform in July, doesn't fit the dimensions of the New York City stage, the set has been turned to an unusual angle.

As with previous Cuban-American productions, guitarist and composer Tom Wolfe, who is also an associate dean in the UA College of Arts and Sciences, is creating an original underscore, drawing on Pink Floyd-like dreaminess for some moments and raucous Hendrix-like rock for others.

The warm-ups alone leave even the toned dancers breathing heavily.

“Just like in the U.S., there's a real separation between dance and theater in Cuba,” Panitch said. “So the dancers have needed extra work (in this process) to move into the show. But it's great now to see how excited the dancers are to act and the actors are to move like the dancers. The dream is to move them toward another and form a new kind of company.”

But even the actors in Cuba seem more like dancers.

“Their training is so physical. They have very little intellectual training, very little time with text,” Panitch said. “Most of theirs is movement-based. Guys like Rayssel and Frank, they're very comfortable with very aggressive movement styles; our actors are less trained in that.”

Still, the cultural exchange is paying off. Samuel Hardy, a undergraduate acting student who played Iago in Panitch's spring “Othello,” has incorporated the more extreme body language into his role as Hades, and recent graduate acting student Abby Jones is bending it into her performance as one of the Fates.

“By the time this opens, I hope to see the Americans moving more toward the Cuban style,” Panitch said. “For us to find relevance in a modern world means we're going to have to find multiple levels of expression. No matter how gorgeous and expressive the text line is, that's not enough to keep the attention of a modern audience.”

Movement, poetry, music: all three working together are going to captivate audiences, he said.

“Shakespeare knew that; he had fights and music and songs in his shows, as well as beautiful text,” Panitch said.

Some of the American style of absorbing and focusing more on text is burrowing into the Cubans as well. This “Alcestis Ascending” is a bilingual play, with actors moving from one language to another, often within the same scene. It's been structured so there is repetition, to help audiences follow, and actors speaking English bounce off those speaking Spanish. Jeff Horger, another recent graduate acting student, is playing Admetis because he also speaks fluent Spanish and can easily pick up on Portuondo's cue lines.

“We're going to reverse that when we go down to Havana, have some of the Americans speaking Cuban,” Panitch said. “The Cuban actors want to speak more English, always. I told them to find more moments to bring it in, on funny moments or story points. Every time Frank curses, he tries to curse in English. Every time

Rayssel has a funny line (Hercules has back problems, among other things), he goes for it in English. They love the chance to learn, even if it's just quick, fun stuff.”

“Alcestis Ascending” will preview at 7:30 p.m. July 1-5 at the Allen Bales Theatre in Rowand-Johnson Hall on the UA campus. To see video of rehearsals and more at www.alcestisascending.com. For tickets to the Tuscaloosa preview, email spanitch@ua.edu or call 205-348-3845.

From Tuscaloosa, the show travels to the Harold Clurman Theatre in Manhattan from July 9-21, and then for two weeks in Havana for the grand opening of the Raquel Revuelta Theatre. The Alabama-Cuba Initiative was created in 2002 to develop academic and scientific exchanges with UA's counterparts in Cuba.

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