

ALCESTIS ASCENDING // A ROCK MYTH GOES TO NYC

ALCESTIS ASCIENDE



SETH PANITCH, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR of theatre at The University of Alabama, will take his play "Alcestis Ascending" on the road this summer to New York City, Havana and Alabama as part of his participation in creative research with the actors and dancers from UA and the Cuban El Instituto Superior de Arte.

The exercise in creative research is part of UA's College of Arts and Sciences Alabama-Cuba Initiative.

Alcestis Ascending will be performed off-off Broadway at the Harold Clurman Theatre on Theatre Row in New York City from Tuesday, July 9, to Sunday, July 21. Thereafter, the play will run for two weeks

in Havana for the grand opening of the Raquel Revuelta Theatre. In addition, the play will preview at 7:30 p.m. Monday, July 1, through Friday, July 5, at the Allen Bales Theatre on the UA campus.

Through text, movement, and live rock-infused music, *Alcestis Ascending* spins a thrilling tale of fate, self-absorption, sacrifice, and the redemptive power of love. King Admetus and his wife Alcestis see their picture-perfect lives shatter when news arrives that Admetus' thread has run out on the wheel of Fate. If the King can find a willing replacement to take his place, he lives; if not, he dies. Admetus' initial relief gives way to terror as, one by one, every option fails.

The veneer of his life strips away, revealing the tenuous, conditional "love" around him, and the seething cowardice within—a narcissism so powerful, he doesn't blink when Alcestis offers to take his place. Realizing his grave mistake, the King sets out to rescue his wife with his dim, hunky friend Hercules to battle the bony specter of Death, Cerberus the three-headed hound of Hell, and the dark lord Hades himself. Ultimately, Admetus is left to combat the most terrifying force in the Universe—his own crippling self-absorption.

"As the Cuban actors are so physical in their approach," Panitch explained, "I wanted to create a production that incorporated dance and movement as well as text, to provide a stage to utilize the greatest advantage Cuban performers possess—absolute freedom of physical expression," Panitch said. "I think the combination of that eloquent physicality with the specificity of American text work will be thrilling for an audience."

Osnel Delgado, Artistic Director of the Cuban dance company, Ebony, and former principal dancer with Danza Contemporanea de Cuba joins HavanaBama as both a performer and choreographer for the production, and Kennedy Center/USIA Jazz Ambassador Tom Wolfe has composed and will perform the live score. The production also stars Alianne Portuondo, Rayssel Cruz, Frank Egusquiza, Roberto Salomon, Noevis Perez, Diana Hernandez, and Jorge Luis Curbelo.

Dr. Panitch, when asked about the unique initiative between UA and Cuba,

said, "The only way Cuban Theatre Artists are allowed up here is if they are scholars as well as actors and if the work is created in the name of research. Our research is Performance, so the only way we can go about it is through producing live performances together. We don't ever make any money off it (as if there is any money in Theatre regardless), so the only outcome is the work itself, which actually makes the entire process a little purer, even across cultures. Bringing them up here is a 6 month process, believe it or not. There must be at least a dozen people who have assisted me in the Dean's office, as well as a Cuban political consultant that advises the University about the workings of Cuban Visas, and a score of people working on the other side in Havana to make certain we are pursuing these licenses correctly and legally. It oftentimes feels like you are competing in a Decathlon- wearing a wetsuit and a blindfold- while someone lights you on fire."

Company HavanaBama has the support of UA's Office of the Provost, the Office of the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, The College of Arts and Sciences' Alabama-Cuba Initiative and the UA department of theatre and dance.

Seth Panitch's most recent production Off Broadway was *Hell: Paradise Found* at the 59E59 Theatres in 2012. The New York Times called *Hell* "simultaneously nutty and witty, with a philosophical message that never gets in the way of the laughs," and *Backstage* called it "wickedly funny... Panitch's screwball metaphysical comedy has an undeniable huckster charm." Seth has worked as a director in Havana, Cuba (becoming the first American to direct a professional production through the CNAE), in multiple Off Broadway venues in New York, Los Angeles and regionally at the Texas Shakespeare Festival. In 2005, Seth was hired to head the Acting programs at the University of Alabama's Department of Theatre and Dance. His New York directing credits include *Dammit, Shakespeare!* at Urban Stages, *Measure for Measure* at Raw Space, and *The Hypochondriac* at Samuel Beckett Theater. He has three official Comendations for Directing from the Ministry of Culture in Havana, Cuba.

Alcestis Ascending marks the fourth production of Company HavanaBama, a theatrical collaboration begun by Erich Cartaya and William Ruiz of CNAE, and Seth Panitch of the University of Alabama's College of Arts and Sciences Cuba Initiative in 2007. Company HavanaBama performs with the generous support of El Consejo Nacional de Artes Escenicas, the Office of the Provost of the University of Alabama, the Office of the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, CARSCA, and the Department of Theatre and Dance.

To buy tickets for the New York production or the Tuscaloosa preview runs, go to alcestisascending.com, or contact Panitch at spanitch@ua.edu or 205.348.3845.

