

UA professor, actors to join Cuban production as part of exchange program

By Mark Hughes Cobb
Staff Writer

For his first non-Shakespeare exploration into researching the blend of Cuban and American performance styles at Havana's Teatro Nacional, Seth Panitch wavered between extremes.

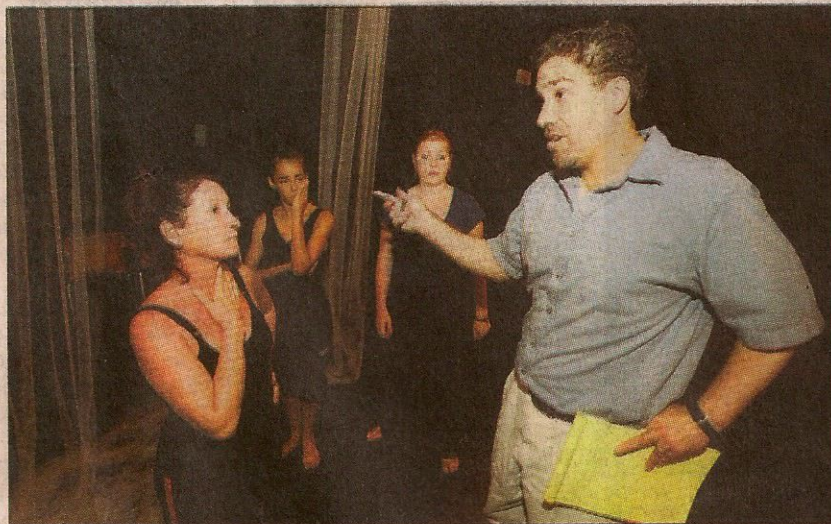
"I didn't go with Horton Foote, probably our most fertile writer," said Panitch, an associate professor of acting and head of the master of fine arts and undergraduate acting programs at the University of Alabama. Panitch is in charge of preparing a play to be performed in Havana on Dec. 6 that will use UA and Cuban actors as part of UA's Cuba-American Initiative. "And I didn't pick (Eugene) O'Neill, our strongest."

Instead, he went twisting down the middle with "Beyond Therapy" by Christopher Durang, picking "our most skewed view into American culture."

"Not only is it a bizarre American comedy, but it's set in the late '70s, early '80s. I think (the Cubans) will understand it better than some of the older classics," he said.

"Beyond Therapy" was a hit first off then on Broadway in the early '80s with John Lithgow, Sigourney Weaver, Dianne Wiest and a just-starting-out David Hyde Pierce. It's about a couple, Bruce and Prudence, who meet through a personals ad, and despite differences — he's an emotional bisexual; she thinks men shouldn't cry — create solace they can't reach with their respective therapists.

Panitch met with the playwright last year when in New York City for the annual showcase where UA faculty takes grad and undergrad students to the Big Apple to perform for producers, agents and others. Before that, he'd corresponded by email with Durang, known for comedies such as "Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You," "The Marriage of Bette and Boo," "Baby with the Bathwater," "Laughing Wild," "The Actor's Nightmare," "For Whom the Southern Belle Tolls" and dozens more. Panitch wrote his first letter to "Mr. Durang," to which he received the response: "If we're going to work together, you have to call me Chris."



STAFF FILE PHOTO

Seth Panitch, right, associate professor of acting at the University of Alabama, directs a rehearsal of "Un Sueno de Una Noche de Verano" ("A Midsummer Night's Dream") in 2009 in Tuscaloosa. Panitch's latest effort that also features Cuban and American actors is a play being performed in Havana as part of UA's Cuba-American Initiative.

"He is not at all divorced from something he had written 30-some odd years ago," he said. "He was especially concerned that Bob (Bruce's lover) not come off too flamboyant ... and he wanted to hear my one-liner."

The one-liner in this instance is the director's take on the play, which is, despite the hysteria, ultimately about love. Panitch takes guidance from a joke Woody Allen tells near the end of his film "Annie Hall":

"This guy goes to a psychiatrist and says, 'Doc, uh, my brother's crazy; he thinks he's a chicken.' And, uh, the doctor says, 'Well, why don't you turn him in?' The guy says, 'I would, but I need the eggs.' Well, I guess that's pretty much now how I feel about relationships; y'know, they're totally irrational, and crazy, and absurd, and ... but, uh, I guess we keep goin' through it because, uh, most of us ... need the eggs."

Durang wanted to fly to Havana for the Dec. 6 show, but work commitments stood in the way, so the production's being filmed for him.

Panitch will fly Tuesday to bring the Cuban actors, most of them Teatro Nacional veterans he's worked with before, up to performance speed. Several were among the crew who came to Tuscaloosa in 2009 for what was the first Cuban-American

theatrical production on U.S. soil in 50 years, "Un Sueno de Una Noche de Verano," the Cuban Spanish translation of "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

The production was performed in Tuscaloosa and then Havana, featuring 10 Cuban actors and 10 Tuscaloosa or UA actors. Alianne Portuondo, who played Hermia in that production, and Jorge Luiz Curbelo, who played Bottom, will take the leads in "Beyond Therapy" as Prudence and Bruce. Other Cubans from "Un Sueno" in "Beyond Therapy" include Rayssel Cruz and married couple Roberto and Vitica Soloman.

American actors will fill in

other roles, with grad student Jeff Horger, who is fluent in Spanish, taking the largest line load. In addition to Horger, Panitch is taking grad acting students Amy Handra, Stephen Brunson and Peyton Conley, with three undergrads, Michael Luwoye, Amber Gibson and Caroline Schmidt, as well as grad costume designer Tony Johnson. This will be the first Cuba trip for all these students.

The often in-flux regulations regarding educational exchanges between the U.S. and Cuba changed again fairly recently.

"The significance of this project is that we are now able to

take undergraduates back down for shorter periods of time, if the work is related to their degree or their coursework," said Carmen Burkhalter, Alabama-Cuba Initiative coordinator. "It used to be that, according to the regulations of 2004, undergraduates could only go if they could study for a minimum of 10 weeks."

Active since 2002, the Alabama-Cuba Initiative has seen research exchanges in academic and scientific fields from archaeology to photography to baseball to theater, with about 155 trips involving roughly 85 faculty members and 40 students, drawing from most of the

colleges on campus.

Other U.S. educational institutions have begun developing relationships with Cuba, but UA's is the most well-rounded in terms of faculty, grad and undergrad research opportunities, Burkhalter said.

Plans are still forming for a 10th anniversary celebration in 2012. Rodeno is working with the director-actor-writer on another Alabama-Cuba theater project, a translation of Panitch's own play "Alcestis Ascending," to be performed in Spanish and English, with possible productions traveling from Tuscaloosa to Havana and New York City.