



STAFF PHOTOS | MICHAEL E. PALMER



For video of the Cuban actors, visit www.tuscaloosaneews.com.

Noelvis Caridad, top, and Jorge Luis Cuerbello rehearse a scene from "A Midsummer Night's Dream" at the Allen Bales Theater on Friday on the University of Alabama campus.

Familiarity helps erase barriers for Cuban actors

Last year's theatrical collaboration set stage for quick work on play

By Mark Hughes Cobb
Staff Writer

Many things about this summer's Cuban-American joint theatrical production are similar to last year's: The same director, Seth Panitch; many of the same Cuban actors; the same fast and passionate process.

But other things are different. This year it's in Tuscaloosa, not Havana. The cast is working together, start to finish, rather than last year's setup, when the Americans flew down just for the final two weeks.

And the Shakespeare being created is a romantic comedy, "A Midsummer Night's Dream"/"Un Sueno De Una Noche De Verano," not the weightier "Merchant of Venice" of 2008.

Familiarity among Panitch, a University of Alabama theater professor, the Cubans and the mostly student American cast, is helping ease language and time constraints.

"We are more used to one another. We know how he works, and

'A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM'/'UN SEUNO DE UNA NOCHE DE VERANO'

- **What:** Spanish-language Shakespeare production, performed by a cast of Cuban and American actors
- **When:** 7:30 p.m. Aug. 6-8
- **Where:** Allen Bales Theatre, Rowand-Johnson Hall on the UA campus
- **Admission:** \$5
- **More:** Make reservations by calling 205-348-3845 or by e-mailing spanitch@ua.edu.



Director Seth Panitch, left, blocks a scene with actors Linette

ACTORS

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he knows how we work," said Rayssel Cruz, who is playing Lysander, one of the young lovers. "It's easy to establish connections, and the language barrier is just thrown out."

Playing Lysander's love interest Hermia, Alianne Portuondo said that although Panitch doesn't speak fluent Spanish, he manages to communicate his intentions, with the help of the Cubans who speak some English.

"Because we were working with him in this last play, he established this physical language," she said. "We understand each other all the time."

Panitch favors having his actors all on campus with him.

"It's going much better because it's a controlled environment," he said. "Havana is very wild, and they have very difficult lives, so sometimes it's very difficult for them to make rehearsals all the time. Here, because they're so close to us, it feels as if it's all about the project."

Another advantage in the Tuscaloosa setting is that he can use more American actors, for a longer period.

"Down in Havana, I could only take five students," he said. "Up here I've got a slew of them, and because of that ... it's more like a company and less two groups of people working on a show.

The director's yelling at everybody, so they're all in the same boat."

Friendships sprang up almost immediately, along with a sense of actor-ly camaraderie.

"Everybody's going bell-to-bell here, so there's a nice relationship developing between each side, just talking about theater and acting, interacting as actors, and finding out what's similar about the two cultures of theater, as opposed to what's different, which is kind of what we established last year," Panitch said.

It's the Cubans' first visit to the United States. But Portuondo said UA's older, traditional architecture makes her feel like she's in a European town.

"I feel very comfortable in this theater," she said, referring to the Allen Bales Theater, where the cast and crew were blocking the play last week.

"There are not great differences," Cruz said. "When Seth came to Cuba, we worked the same, the same time schedule ... in the work, there isn't a great difference."

Many of their expectations of America were based on movies, he said.

"In Cuba, American culture has a great influence and great impact," Cruz said. "There are a lot of things in United States that are like the movies. Like the parties."

"And the crazy people," Portuondo said, laughing.

One hope Panitch and the cast have for this performance is to let average Americans see and meet real Cubans, perhaps to dispel images they might have from movies.

"There's a lot of stereotypes about what Cuba is and what Cubans are," Cruz said. "The thing is to tell that person that's maybe got that paranoia the way that we are."

"We only hope that we can get an open dialogue, and that this dialogue will continue," Portuondo said.

Speaking of dialogue, the Cubans are working closely with the Americans to help them pronounce their Cuban-dialect Spanish.

"It is very funny," Portuondo said, laughing. "But the American students try very hard to speak Spanish."

Panitch feels he's getting a little better at broaching the language barrier.

"I can hear it when they ask me questions; I just can't respond," he said. "They're understanding my jokes a little better, but not enough to make me feel good."

Overall, he said, the show is coming together quickly — performances here will be Aug. 6-8 before the show moves to Havana — but the mixed cast is blending swiftly as well.

"I don't believe barriers exist, I believe we create them," he said. "And this group isn't letting that happen."

