

# Bye UA, Hola Havana

The cast of 'Alcestis Ascending' performed in New York City and Cuba this summer.

by David Bolus  
Community contributor

"A heart is a marvellous thing, Alcestis."

Hades cajoles a reluctant Queen Alcestis, recently passed over. She covers her chest, guarding herself against his thieving fingers. As she defies him, the god summons from the depths of his dominion a weaker soul — whose heart he plucks, bears forth, and crushes to dust in a cold fist.

"The spiritual heart," he explains, "digs further and further into the deepest regions of your soul until there is nothing left of you but a distant, plaintive howl."

The soul, whirling and contorting in metaphysical asphyxiation, finally crumbles to the black boards, where it is drawn wailing back to the stygian depths.

With his patience wearing thin, Hades, sharp-dressed deity, offers politely one last time: "It is as it must be...Let go."

As Alcestis's brave grip slips against the god's entreaties, a clear voice calls out. "HOLD!"

A man steps out toward the lord of the underworld.

"Not bad, Sam," he tells the nodding god. "Give her heart a stronger gesture: like this —"

He throws his arm up in a strong line. Hades tries again.

"Great. Claudia?"

The soul reappears, quicker than at Hades's command.

"I loved what you did with your leg. But can you give it a little 'throb' when Hades says..."

She is getting about half of this.

"WILLIAM!"

Quick as a bolt of lightning, there is another man beside him.

"I loved what you did with your leg."

"Le gusta mucho el movimiento de tu pierna."

"Can you make it 'throb' when Hades says?"

"Cuando Hades dice—"

"Throb."

"— 'throb,' puedes agitarla un poco?"

The soul gives it a try.

"Perfect! Let's take it from 'marvellous thing'; Ali, you're doing great."

This man who positions gods and conjures dancing spirits is Seth Panitch,

director of MFA and undergraduate acting programs at the University of Alabama — and, this summer, writer and director of "Alcestis Ascending," a bilingual collaboration between UA and the Consejo Nacional de Artes Escénicas of Havana. If he seems familiar with his American and Cuban cast, it is because he is: "Alcestis" marks Panitch's fourth project with Company Habanabama, a project begun under the aegis of UA's Cuba Initiative and with the blessing of the Cuban arts ministry.

If his direction seems particularly urgent, it is because it must be — on a tight rehearsal schedule, his cast would first perform preview shows in Tuscaloosa before becoming the first official Cuban/American theatrical collaboration to appear before New York audiences since the embargo.

The plot is a simple one, and old. Like the myth and the Euripides play, Panitch's "Alcestis" begins with the news that

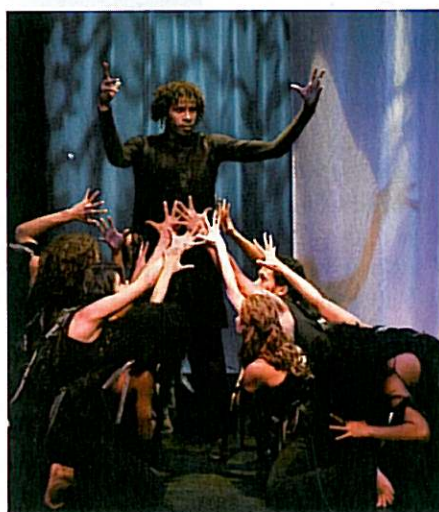
the thread of King Admetus's life is about to be cut — until Apollo intervenes. The Fates offer a trade: If Admetus can find another to sacrifice their life for his in 24 hours, he may be spared. As one might imagine, this is easier said than done.

Admetus goes to his subjects, his friends and his parents — all of whom turn him down. It is not until Admetus is at his most despondent that he thinks to turn to his wife, the stalwart Alcestis, who has been waiting patiently for his request. She dies for him gladly...but it is only when she's gone that Admetus realizes how empty his life must be without her. With the fortuitous assistance of Hercules, Admetus penetrates the dark realm of the dead and rescues his wife, heart and all.

Because of its bicultural cast, the show is half in Spanish and half in English. Don't speak Spanish? Most of the American audience did not — and yet, the story on stage was as clear as if it came with subtitles. It speaks to Seth Panitch's writing and staging, of course, but also to the enormous physicality with which the actors from Havana attack their lines.

The cast performed for two weeks at the Harold Clurman Theater in New York City, before voyaging to Cuba, Americans and all, for a 2-week run in Havana.

The education received during the project was not purely artistic; Alcestis taught that we are not borders and political feuds, we are not our leaders; there is no embargo of the soul.—David Bolus served as company liaison for "Alcestis Ascending."



Actors perform scenes from "Alcestis Ascending," written and directed by the University of Alabama's Seth Panitch.

Photos courtesy of Corey Rives Visual Art