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Cruz's dreamy `Hortensia and the Museum of Dreams' needs time to gel

November 17, 2005 | By Chris Jones, Tribune arts critic.



Nilo Cruz, the only Pulitzer Prize-winning Cuban-born playwright, is part of the cultural fabric of South Florida. But he has generally avoided taking a stand on Fidel Castro, embargoes, government-sanctioned artists and other political matters important to many Cuban emigres.

Cruz is a lyricist rather than a politician. And as he once told me in person, he stays away from issues he sees as divisive among Cuban-Americans.

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Cuba -- and a palpable love of things and people Cuban -- suffuses all of Cruz's work. But Cruz tends to see his beloved little island through a variety of softening gauzes -- the past, the tricks of memory, the sensual potency of the regressive dream.

As the title none too subtly telegraphs, "Hortensia and the Museum of Dreams" is very much of that magic-realism mode. Set during Pope John Paul II's visit to Cuba in 1998, it's about the return of two estranged Cuban-American siblings, both in Cuba for the first time since their mother put them on one of the so-called Peter Pan flights in 1961.

When it comes to that particular experience, Cruz knows whereof he speaks. He was flown out of Cuba for good at the age of 9.

But in this play (first seen in Coral Gables, Fla., in 2001 and finally getting a Midwest premiere at the Victory Gardens Theater), Cruz isn't so much concerned with charting political contrasts as chronicling a kind of troubled, spiritual return. His emigres wander into a variety of Cuban

possibilities -- torrid affairs, domineering authorities, power cuts and the titular museum, run by a woman determined to retain a spiritual essence despite the communist regime. It's a work laden with evocative images that doesn't fully hang together if you try to perceive it through any kind of realistic prism. Check that tendency in the lobby.

Even if you do, this piece is not in the same league as "Anna in the Tropics," a justly lauded play that comes both with Cruz's signature sense of mood and soul, and a compelling narrative. Such is the price of winning a Pulitzer. Post-facto expectations rise.

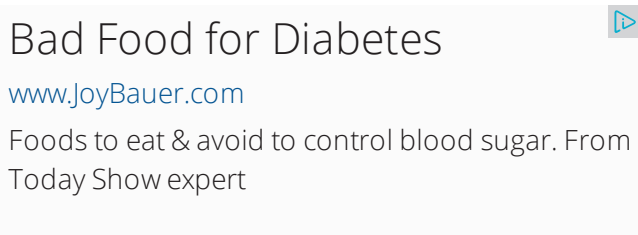
"Hortensia" feels like a minor, somewhat schematic work today. But it's not without provocation or a capacity for sensual arrest. And on a cold November night, the Los Angeles-based director Diane Rodriguez offers a warm, human and provocative production that doesn't reach into every Cuban corner, but still effects a welcome transport.


Cheryl Lynn Bruce's Hortensia grounds the piece in earthy authenticity. **And as a Cuban man intrigued by a beautiful visitor from the U.S., Christopher De Paola positively smolders with possibility.**

In the two lead roles of Luciana and Luca, Alex Meneses and Ivan Vega (respectively) make for a highly attractive, evocative presence. They're terrific when reacting to the Cuban characters but they're also not especially at ease with each other.

And because Cruz has injected a forbidden sensuality into their relationship, that's intermittently appropriate and also a serious production weakness. In short, this pair catches our interest, but their mutual dilemma needs to be more compelling.

This is a show, I suspect, that needs time to gel.



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Actors have to feel their way into Cruz's plays. In this case, it feels like folks flew in not so long ago, and need more time for a slow dream or two.

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"Hortensia and the Museum of Dreams"

When: Through Dec. 18

Where: Victory Gardens Theater, 2257 N. Lincoln Ave.

Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes

Tickets: \$25-\$40 at 773-871-3000