

A Cuban Odyssey: Dramaturgy as Collective, Intercultural Learning

By Joan Robbins



Figure 1: Havana, Cuba

Michael Chemers wrote that “There is no theatrical production without dramaturgy. None. . . . The question is merely how it gets done, and by whom.”¹ Chemers sagely locates dramaturgy at the core of the theatrical process, as central to what we do as performing the roles, or staging the action, or designing the environment of a play. The implication—which Chemers expands on at the start of *Ghost Light, An Introductory Handbook for Dramaturgy*—

¹ Michael Mark Chemers, *Ghost Light: An Introductory Handbook for Dramaturgy* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010), 4.

that the whole company of a theatrical production must of necessity undertake acts of dramaturgy, is central to the story I want to tell.

I am the co-founder and production dramaturg for Ohio Northern University's International Play Festival, a platform for new work from around the world that offers our students, faculty, and community an intercultural theatrical experience. Begun in 2003 and having recently completed its thirteenth season, this festival has been host to world premieres of plays from around the globe; international theatre artists have come to Ohio and joined with our faculty and with undergraduate theatre students to produce theatre from no less than sixteen countries, translated from eight languages. The design of each festival is unique, its structure and production parameters created afresh to serve the needs of that particular year's cultural and artistic objectives. Productions have ranged from staged readings to fully designed performances.

I want to focus here on our 2015 festival, for which we developed the first English translation of *Nevada* by Cuban playwright, Abel González Melo, translated by Yael Prizant. This particular festival offers a useful template for a kind of collective American dramaturgy of foreign plays. As dramaturg, I curated the project and orchestrated a research trip to Havana for the production team, which in turn informed crucial aspects of the design and rehearsal process. The whole experience represented an immersive approach to international education and to the dramaturgical process. Experiential research, accomplished collaboratively, became not only a journey of cultural enrichment and understanding for the whole company, but really defined all aspects of the production going forward. I would like to propose that aspects of this

experience point to dramaturgy's capacity to engage and unify a company in the shared act of cultural research.

Setting the Stage: Dramaturgical Curation

Dramaturgy requires a multilayered process by which, like the peeling of Peer Gynt's onion, the dramaturg and company work to unveil a play's myriad meanings. The first stage or outermost layer of that process is often the curation of a project, the initial design of its parameters and artistic goals.² As curator and production dramaturg, I have discovered that my early decisions about content, structure, and personnel can entirely shape the experience for all involved. For the 2015 festival, my production staff and I selected Cuba as a cultural focus. We had commissioned a one-act play by Cuban playwright Abel González Melo in 2004; it was performed at ONU that same year and directed by Mexican director, Otto Minera. In 2004, both Cuban and American governments conspired against our attempts to bring the Cuban playwright to the U.S. for the production. We wanted to work with González Melo again, and I hoped to do better this time. We engaged theatrical translator Yael Prizant, who had translated a number of González Melo's plays and had recently published a book on Cuban Theatre.³ In consultation with the playwright, Yael and I soon settled on *Nevada* as a choice of play, one of a trilogy entitled *Winterscapes*, and the only play of the three not yet translated into English. Minera would once again direct; not only was he a Spanish speaker with an expertise in Cuban

² Michael Bigelow Dixon discusses the important but under-examined nature of the dramaturg's leadership of project development in an interview with Lynn Thomson. *Between the Lines*, Eds. Judith Rudakoff, Lynn M. Thomson (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2002), 177.

³ Yael Prizant, *Cuba Inside Out: Revolution and Contemporary Theatre* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2014).

theatre, he had an established rapport with our festival staff, and with the playwright. With director, translator, and playwright on board, our collaboration commenced.

The dramaturg's job of bringing the world of a play to life in a culturally authentic way can be especially challenging when working on a foreign play; in this case, at the outset of the project I possessed only a basic knowledge of the cultural background of Cuba, and my students knew almost nothing. And yet in some ways, the dramaturgical process lends itself quite seamlessly to the objectives of international education, as Robin Quick notes: "The dramaturg's questioning spirit, applied to the world of a play from a country other than one's own, can serve as a point of departure for a meaningful engagement with that culture."⁴ (p. 158) The ideal way to encourage such meaningful engagement with another country and culture is some form of immersion, a position held by institutions such as my own, who increasingly promote study abroad experiences for students. If I could orchestrate a brief trip to Havana for members of our faculty and student production team to meet the playwright in his own cultural context, I could engage in a kind of experiential dramaturgy that accomplished these cultural objectives.

I investigated various sources of funding for the trip, eventually securing monies from a combination of University sources, and a Cultural Exchange grant from APAP (Association of Performing Arts Professionals). We requested and were granted official permission to travel to Cuba, still off limits to United States citizens without a specialized license. The next layer of the onion was ready to be peeled.

⁴ Robyn Quick, "The Dramaturgical Process and Global Understanding," *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy* (NY: Routledge, 2016), 158.

Nevada

A brief description of González Melo's play will provide some helpful context for the research we undertook in Havana. The plot centers on the improbable but familiar scheme of escape from Cuba to the U.S. by raft, a plan undertaken by Lucia (age seventeen), and Rosnay, the man she loves. Rosnay is a hustler who grew up on the street and who operates in the shadowy world of petty crime and prostitution. Other characters include Lucia's younger brother and her mother: a woman of fifty, alone, desperate for love and to keep her family intact in dire economic circumstances. Much of the action occurs in the street in front of the Payret Cinema, a dingy establishment with "grimy walls and tall crystal doors,"⁵ a place of private, illicit transactions, and an ironic symbol of the lofty, cinematic scope of these characters' dreams. An elderly, semi-homeless man, Higinio, sits out front, a canny observer of much of what transpires in his view. Wrapped in a tattered bedspread, he talks of a paltry income he receives from the state for watching over the cinema at night. González Melo's writing is stylistically layered: he combines elements of naturalism with a poetic theatre of images; stage directions are often abstract, or call for surreal moments such as snowfall, and scene titles conjure the emotional life of the play on a "thermal scale." *Nevada* is also a conventionally plotted melodrama with a tragic end, with plot strands that overlap at cross-purposes. Mother and daughter—unbeknownst to each other—both love the same man, and a double death by gunshot concludes the action.

⁵ Abel González Melo, *Nevada*, trans. Yael Prizant (unpublished rehearsal draft), January 22, 2015, Ohio Northern University, 5.

Like the other two plays in the *Winterscapes* trilogy, *Nevada* offers a window into the marginalized segment of Cuban society; the action has a gritty, film noir quality, and an atmosphere of longing, of desperation pervades the storytelling. González Melo juxtaposes a poetic landscape of desire with profoundly diminished emotional and economic realities. Sex in the world of the play becomes a commodity and an escape, and familial bonds are distorted as a result of economic exigencies. Translator Yael Prizant aptly describes the play's economic landscape: "The relentless reality of Havana since the 1990s, in which resources are scarce, is echoed in every exchange in the piece. . . . Necessity transforms sexuality and secrecy into central instruments of power and security in the play."⁶ One means of escape is to undertake the precarious journey to the United States. González Melo wrote that "Nevada is the Utopia." The play's title reflects Rosnay and Lucia's dreamt of destination—Las Vegas, Nevada—but it is also the word in Spanish for snowfall, an impossibility in the tropics, and for the characters in the play, a desire "for snow that never comes."⁷ Lucia imagines that it must snow in Nevada, that "if it's called Nevada it can't be as hot as here."⁸ Ironically wrong assumptions like this one occur throughout the play, underscoring the Utopian, unobtainable nature of the characters' dreams.

⁶ Yael Prizant, program note, *Nevada* by Abel González Melo, trans. Yael Prizant, dir. Otto Minera, Ohio Northern University, February 19-22, 2015.

⁷ Abel González Melo, program note, *Nevada*, ONU.

⁸ Melo, *Nevada*, 32.

Research in Havana

Nevada so thoroughly embraced the fabric of contemporary Havana and its multiplicity of Cuban realities, that being able to experience the location of the play firsthand felt particularly necessary. In early January of 2015, just prior to the start of rehearsals, three members of the Theatre Arts faculty (myself, our scenic and lighting designers), and three theatre students (our stage manager, costume designer and props mistress), spent four days in Havana. For the three students, this was a unique experience that incorporated a powerful form of active learning and the chance to serve as co-researchers with their faculty. Abel was our constant guide, introducing us to the people and places of his beloved Havana. He designed a meticulous itinerary, focusing on specific locations where the action of *Nevada* is set, with additional places and experiences that helped us to get a feel for the larger cultural context. We were all excited by the intercultural ramifications of our undertaking: as Americans in Havana we recognized our status as outsiders, but we were also fellow theatre artists undertaking a cooperative cultural endeavor that could lead to greater understanding for all involved.



Figure 2: Old Havana

Educating ourselves about Cuba needed to begin with an awareness of our cultural and political identity as U.S. citizens, and of our own government’s complicity in the suffering of the Cuban people, and in its complex history. We were producing a play filled with Cuban perceptions of the United States, and so part of our research involved gaining a better understanding of those various attitudes and their origins. Many of our conversations with Cubans in Havana explored this rich territory. Our personal Cuban odyssey coincided with the launching of a new political chapter in relations between the U.S. and Cuba: on the eve of our journey, Raul Castro and Barack Obama surprised the world with a historic phone conversation—the first between leaders of the two countries in five decades—that advanced the opening of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the U.S. Many Cubans we spoke with were eager to discuss this historic moment, excited to offer their own, various predictions as to what would befall this crucial political relationship.⁹



Figure 3: The Payret Cinema (Photo: Kathe DeVault)

⁹ Since that historic moment, much has clearly changed to influence relations between the two countries, including: the death of Fidel Castro (2016) the retirement of his brother Raul Castro (2018), and the restoration of certain travel restrictions by the Trump administration.

Havana is a tropical city where life is lived in the streets. In a talk he gave at Ohio Northern, González Melo spoke of his inspiration for *Nevada*: as a young writer, walking through central Havana, he wondered about all the Cubans living their lives in the streets, waiting, watching. What were their stories, how did they live?¹⁰ A crucial part of our itinerary involved walking these streets with Abel, experiencing first hand all of the play's locations, scattered throughout the part of the city known as Old Havana. (Fig. #2) Imagine a vibrant, colorful place of crumbling colonial architecture, reclaimed and restored in some places, and in others, people have resourcefully created residences or businesses out of the ruin of a formerly glorious building. (Fig. #4) From the inner courtyards of such buildings, we noted the ingenious way in which Cubans had re-purposed space in order to live. We particularly focused on locations in *Nevada*: around the Capitolio, or Capitol building, outside the dilapidated Payret Cinema, and in and around the Parque Central or Central Park, where the lives of the marginalized intersected with tourists, street vendors, and ordinary Cubans. (Fig.#3) These were busy places, full of people: some walking, some hanging out, others waiting.¹¹ Our lighting and scenic designers took copious photos and video, capturing the light, the sounds, the feel of the places. The experience represented a kind of immersive cultural dramaturgy of extraordinary sensory power.

¹⁰ Abel González Melo, "Theatre in Cuba," (symposium talk, Ohio Northern University, Ada, OH, February 17, 2015).

¹¹ For an excellent introduction to Havana and the Cuban economic and social realities, see: Ben Corbett, *This is Cuba, An Outlaw Culture Survives* (Cambridge: Westview Press, 2004).



Figure 4: Old Havana (Photo: Kathe DeVault)

Freelance journalist Ben Corbett writes eloquently about the subtleties of the Cuban reality that can only be appreciated if one is there, and open to really looking for them:

You can inhale the entire picture and get an instinctual *feel* or impression of what's going on, but there's always so much more. Small things. Important details. I learned during my trips to the island over the years that there's a real pulse to the fragments, and the key to Cuba is in finding this rhythm no matter how fleeting or chaotic it seems, and then operating in the beat.¹²

We also visited the coastal area and beachfront from where thousands of Cubans have escaped the island both legally and illegally on rafts, and from where the characters in *Nevada* hope to make their clandestine departure. We traversed the sand dunes and the groves of trees used to conceal the rafts, getting a sense of how the escapes would be physically orchestrated, and we looked for the police who regularly patrol the beaches in order to prevent such escapes. Again, our team took copious photographs and video. (Fig. #5)

¹² Corbett, *This is Cuba*, 3.



Figure 5: The coast near Havana

We supplemented our detailed locational research with rich cultural, and historical experiences. We walked much of Central and Old Havana, accompanied by Abel and his long-time collaborator, director Carlos Celdrán, and lighting designer, Manolo Garriga (both of Argos Teatro). Together, the three Cuban theatre artists provided us with a personal introduction to the cultural and political history of this place. We visited Argos Teatro, founded in 1996 by Celdrán as a permanent laboratory for actors. Argos Teatro is among the best of Havana's smaller, experimental theatres, known for new work and for productions of classics that likely possess political criticism, veiled in metaphor and layers of meaning to avoid censorship.

The Cuban government censors all public speech, artistic or otherwise. As Carlos and Manolo described productions of plays such as *An Enemy of the People*, *Uncle Vanya*, or *Endgame*, all directed to contain implicit critiques of the Cuban economic and political systems,

I wondered how these productions had been allowed. And how had this theatre been permitted to produce Abel's plays, which clearly paint contemporary Cuban society in a critical light? Carlos's answer to my question about censorship was revealing: "I know what I can do and what I can't do," he said, "I know my boundaries."¹³ He spoke carefully but also quite freely, and without resentment. The Cuban political context was something Carlos had learned to work within, and by which he did not feel his art was constricted. In part, the messages of his political theatre were sufficiently coded.¹⁴ The lessons here for our team were layered and numerous; we were getting a feel for the Cuban reality, one story at a time.

The economic realities that Argos Teatro contends with, however, *are* constricting. Carlos and Manolo described substantial obstacles they had to overcome to produce theatre in Havana. They own very little in the way of equipment; the theatre community participates in a system of borrowing and trading to get what it needs, even the most basic lighting instruments. Such material austerity was part of the complex economic background to *Nevada* so crucial for our team to understand. Like the political context, Cuba's economic picture is layered and complex: it includes two currencies, one in dollars and the other in Cuban pesos, serving essentially two economies—one for Cubans and one for foreign visitors. In Cuba, state-sanctioned salaries are readily available to all, but pay very little (perhaps \$20 per month), supplemented by ration cards, free education and healthcare, and reduced housing and utility costs. But many Cubans add to that income with other employment so as to make ends meet. We were struck by a lack of access to basic goods, particularly in Central and Old Havana. Even

¹³ Carlos Celdrán (conversation with the production team from ONU, Havana, January 5, 2015).

¹⁴ For a discussion of censorship in the Cuban theatre, and theatre makers' ability to "endure within the structure of authority," see Yael Prizant, 24.

in tourist areas there were virtually no shops that carried basic food stuffs, drinks, or even water. This scarcity pervades the action of *Nevada*, as translator Yael Prizant has noted, and is a function of every exchange. We spent a lot of time in conversation with Cubans, unpacking the details of an elaborate economic situation so vastly different from our own American experience of material excess.

The trip was filled out with other immensely valuable cultural encounters too numerous to describe here in detail: they included a visit to the Instituto Superior de Arte or ISA, Cuba's prestigious university for the arts, where we gained insights into arts training and funding; a performance at La Tropicana, Havana's famed cabaret; and on our final night, a special one-woman performance arranged by Abel for our group, featuring Cuban actress Gisselle Sobrino, who played Lucia in the Cuban premiere of *Nevada*.¹⁵

Collective Dramaturgy

Our immersive dramaturgy accomplished in Havana would profoundly influence the production of *Nevada*, including: the actors' cultural understanding, development of the translation, all aspects of design, and direction. Upon our return home to Ohio and with the start of rehearsals, the next phase of this intercultural journey ensued: the sharing of materials and impressions from Havana. It was important to me that the model of collaborative dramaturgy that had characterized our trip should continue with the company. Admittedly, we had only begun to understand the Cuban reality, but were enthused to share the various ways

¹⁵ Sobrino performed *Kassandra* by Sergio Blanco, directed by Abel González Melo, for a small invited audience on January 6, 2015, in the basement bar of the Bertolt Brecht Theatre, Havana.

in which the play, our map for production, had come into more clear focus. The term “cultural liaison” might best suit the dramaturg’s role in this situation, a kind of intermediary between cultures, and one who encourages cultural engagement rather than serving as a cultural authority.¹⁶ We devoted much of the first week of rehearsal to dramaturgical exploration including detailed discussions about discoveries made on the trip, and about the world of Abel’s play. The fact that only three members of the student company had been in Havana was a limitation; however, those three assumed a quite wonderful sense of leadership as cultural liaisons in this early phase of the rehearsals, and inspired in their peers a greater level of commitment to the process of cultural learning.

This was an extremely rich period of the process, during which we shared video, photographs, stories, and impressions of our time in Havana. With the text of *Nevada* as a guide, together we explored the cultural, political, economic context we had discovered first hand in Cuba, reinforced by the act of re-telling and reflecting. We examined the inner city housing situation relevant to the characters in the play, discussing photographs from the trip that helped to illustrate the specific physical austerities with which most Cubans contend. (Fig. #4) We explored in detail the photographs of all the places where the scenes in Nevada occur, substantiating the truth of Abel’s fiction with visual research. Moreover, we shared our impressions of atmosphere, and of cultural nuance. And we discussed all that we had learned firsthand about producing theatre in Havana, a city of sophisticated arts and culture but without access to production materials that we in the U.S. usually take for granted.

¹⁶ Walter Byongsok Chon, “Intercultural Dramaturgy—Dramaturg as cultural liaison,” *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy* (NY: Routledge, 2016), 136-140.

We were generating what Mark Bigelow Dixon has described as a necessary “shared framework of understanding,” a way of finding “commonality or shared ground between theatre artists” while working on a new play,¹⁷ or in this case on a play with an unfamiliar cultural landscape. This was a kind of collective dramaturgy that went far beyond the traditional idea of dramaturgical research in the rehearsal room, the collaborative nature of which set a tone for the rest of the production. In writing about her teaching of collaboration as part of a graduate course in dramaturgy, Lynn Thompson criticizes the overly vague use of the term and offers a definition:

True collaboration is a verb, not a noun, a process of engagement, a map more than a destination. The process fosters a community of makers, who engender a shared vision, which in turn fuels individual creation.¹⁸

In our case, the feeling of collaborative engagement established at the outset did indeed encourage individual creativity by the whole company: actors, director, designers and technicians alike. It also established process and cultural understanding as priorities over product, an attitude that has been a hallmark of our international play festival.

To supplement the sharing of research from Havana, I employed two films in the early rehearsals as an additional way into the world of the play. We watched *Balseros*, the 1994 documentary that follows the fate of seven Cubans who attempt the harrowing journey to the U.S. by raft. The fact that some of our company had just come from walking the coastline where this dramatic human drama unfolded made the material more immediate. And we watched the film version of Abel’s play, *Chamaco*, another in his trilogy and beautifully acted by

¹⁷ Dixon, *Between the Lines*, 172.

¹⁸ Lynn M. Thompson, “Teaching and Rehearsing Collaboration,” *Theatre Topics* 13.1(2003), 118.

a Cuban cast. The similarities in style, subject matter, and cultural milieu between *Chamaco* and *Nevada* provided the company with an excellent opportunity to enlarge their understanding of Abel's writing, and fruitful discussion about both films occurred.

Cultural understanding was further expanded in the process of developing the translation with Yael Prizant. Included in Ohio Northern's commission of this new translation was a week-long residency for the translator; she attended rehearsals, revised the translation and served as a resource about Cuba and Abel's work. Yael was of vital assistance to me from the start of the project, advising on elements of our journey to Havana and on dramaturgical resources. The process of interrogating the details of the translation was itself a cultural education: linguistic nuances and phrasing choices were examined and discussed with the actors, considering ways in which those choices colored character or revealed cultural context. This is a vital stage in the development of theatrical translation, during which the translator must allow the hearing of the text to influence her/his work. Furthermore, this is the stage at which translation and dramaturgical processes overlap, to mutual benefit. Prizant's explanations about specific word choices, cultural idioms, and slang, also contained insights into character, plot, and cultural context. This phase of the process for us continued to be very collaborative, with everyone in the room having a voice. The collective spirit of exploration that had previously been established now encouraged the actors' attentiveness to the needs of the translation, and to utilizing Yael's expertise.



Figure 6: Production photo of *Nevada* with Jeremy Martinez as Rosnay and Jordan Loyd as Higinio (Photo: Kathe DeVault)

The design elements of our production of *Nevada* flowed directly from our research trip, as did much of Otto Minera’s inspired direction. Minera wanted to embrace the melodramatic components of *Nevada* conceptually, as a sign that the characters lived in their dreams in order to escape the hopelessness of their daily reality. He was interested in depicting the cinematic scope with which the characters interpret their existence in the design. Scenic designer, Brian Phillips, used the Payret Cinema as inspiration for the basic scenic element (Fig.# 6): he designed two large projection screens on either end of the playing space in our studio theatre, with runway style seating along the two longer and opposite sides. From the start of our design conferences, the plan was to incorporate images collected on the trip. The production included brief excerpts of both American and Latin American films projected onto the screens, as well as the look, feel, and light of Havana captured in our photographic research—its crumbling elegance, its crowded avenues, shots of the sea, as well as of the specific locations of the play’s

action. The audience entered the space to the sound and sight of the sea, an important symbol in the play of both the possibility and the danger of escape. This pre-show effect was created from video our team shot on the coastline of Havana. An array of images were continually conjured on the large screens, intimate to both the actors and audience, thrusting us into the sights and sounds of Havana and its environs. The costumes were also highly influenced by the trip; student costume designer, Kayla Duling, transferred her firsthand experience of the street life of Havana into the worn but colorful look of the clothing. (Fig.#7)



Figure 7: Production photo of *Nevada* with Alecia Pagnotta, Kathryn Watson, Lexie Kilgore, Alie Becker, Annie Liskow (Photo: Kathe DeVault)

The week of performances represented not only the final stage of the production, but also the final phase of influence of our collective dramaturgy. Abel came to Ohio and participated in a week of outreach opportunities with our students, the campus, and our audiences, which is standard practice for the playwrights in ONU's International Play Festival. However, this year was different. Abel's visit to us was preceded by the time he had spent with our production team in Havana, guiding our experiences in the city through the lens of his play,

and participating in our dramaturgical process. This set the scene in both practical and symbolic ways for a relationship of mutual respect and understanding: Abel got to know us as guests in his country, understood our desire to fulfill the cultural truths and the vision of his play, and had the chance to contribute to a production of his play in an American university context. I think that the intercultural aspects of the experience for all involved were reinforced by the collaboration being launched in this way in Cuba. We recognized that this would be an American production of a Cuban play, and therefore not entirely “Cuban,” but by having the playwright be integral to the creative process from the start, the work had proceeded with a crucial form of cultural respect.

As with any production, I look back in retrospect to determine what could have been improved. Did we effectively balance the goals of cultural education with the exigencies of production? This is an ongoing challenge for us. In some ways, Minera’s exquisitely beautiful, stylized staging added more than the play needed, or that we had time to edit to perfection. But overall, it was an enormously rewarding experience, particularly in terms of the intercultural learning that was achieved. I hope that this example of the curation, research, and rehearsal process for *Nevada* can be of use to other undergraduate theatre programs. While an international research trip may not be within reach for all—the stars had to align for us to accomplish this rare opportunity—a collective approach to dramaturgy has many and varied applications. International theatre continues to be under-represented on both our professional and university stages. ONU’s festival is a small step toward correcting that, and toward encouraging a spirit of openness about cultures other than one’s own.

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