

STAGE WEEK

'Cuba': Drugs and Father-Son Connection

By JANICE ARKATOV

It's not easy getting a serious answer from Reinaldo Povod. "Everything is a diversion," said the New York-based playwright, whose acclaimed "Cuba and His Teddy Bear" opens Friday at the Calboard Theatre in West Hollywood. "I didn't ask to be here. I don't give a damn about anybody, I'm just gonna do my time and check out."

The distinctive patter continues. On Eugene O'Neill: "Five hours of doom and gloom. But it's like castor oil, it's supposed to be good for you." On mentor Miguel Piñero: "I wanted to become him. So I became addicted to drugs when I was 19—till I was 22."

His seven-character "Cuba"

(pronounced coo-ba) premiered at Joseph Papp's Public Theatre in 1986 and later went on to Broadway, with Robert De Niro and Ralph Macchio in the leading roles.

Povod, 28, is quick to admit that the play, which focuses on a drug dealer and his teen-age son, mirrors the playwright's relationship with his Cuban-born father. "I was born and raised on 13th Street on [New York's] Lower East Side. This was a story I'd been working on since I was 22, when I was 25, it clicked."

His literary influences? "William Burroughs. Anais Nin. I read a lot of plays too, and they bummed me out—because the color of the talent was white. That was their world, not mine. But I have the right to resurrect my past, the same as Sam Shepard and Tina Howe."

Povod doesn't feel reined in by Latino culture. His third play, "Evil Begets Evil," is set on the eve of IRA protester Bobby Sands' death in 1981 and takes place in an Irish bar. Explains Povod, "No minority has the monopoly on injustice."

And he is working on the screenplay of black writer Charles Gordon's "No Place to Be Somebody" for Warner Brothers and producer Quincy Jones.

But "Cuba" is personal: "I'm the kid, Teddy—when I was young I was chubby, like a teddy bear—and my father was Cuba, a street-fighting man. It's ironic that the fruits of Cuba's labor, his drugs, become Teddy's fruit. But it's really a play about father and son. Drugs are the vehicle to bring them together."

"Comedy of Errors" is the vehicle for Shakespeare Festival/LA's third season, which begins afternoon performances Saturday at Citicorp Plaza downtown. (An additional weekend will be sponsored at the John Anson Ford Theatre on Sept. 10-11.) Parking is free, as are tickets, in lieu of admission charge, audience members are once again asked to donate canned goods or

clothing for the city's needy.

"Since the last festival, I've taken a year off from producing theater and committed myself to the development end of it," said artistic director Ben Donenberg. That meant creating a board of directors, attaining major funding (principal contributors are Arco, Citicorp and Bank of America) and establishing a permanent home at Citicorp Plaza.

For "Comedy," he imported director Kevin Kelly from Juilliard and set the piece in 1928 New Orleans at Mardi Gras—meaning heavy on the masks, bright costumes and Dixieland music. "It works perfectly," Donenberg said. "It turns out that Southern dialect is much closer to Elizabethan English than [the contemporary] British accent."

CRITICAL CROSS FIRE: "Bittersuite: Songs of Experience," a five-person revue by Elliot Weiss and Michael Champagne, opened in June at the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys.

Said Don Shirley in The Times: "Most of the 26 songs in 'Bittersuite' are about aging and adjustment, disillusionment and discovery. But they're not all wistful and goopy. In between the sighs, this is one of the funniest shows in town. It's also one of the most polished."

From Tom Jacobs in the Daily News: "The theme of hope giving way to reality gives the show a Sondheim sort of feel—especially with lines like 'My life is really Reader's Digest, condensed and bland.' Indeed, as with Sondheim, one must listen carefully to the lyrics, there's a lot going on."

In Drama-Logue, Lee Melville: "This 'Bittersuite' (not to be confused with the Noel Coward musical 'Bitter Sweet') leaves one with a pungent aftertaste that will return to haunt the reveries of the soul. Weiss and Champagne provide more than mindless diversion with their thoughtful inspections of people's dreams and memories."

Steve Hendrickson of the Antelope Valley Press was less impressed: "The revue often sounds like a series of bumper-sticker slogans put to song. There are moments, to be sure, that rise above the stale similes, but the material says little that is particularly witty or profound."

Kathleen O'Steen of Daily Variety disagreed: "Director Rick Roemer has added a good amount of physical comedy and bite to make the audience appreciate just what's going on. Luckily he has a witty and able cast who not only offer strong singing ability, but also are adroit with the grand gestures needed."

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 (By James L. Taylor)

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