

# A Return to Cuba, A Search for Himself

By MIREYA NAVARRO

ON Oct. 30, 1961, at the age of 8, Eduardo Machado left Cuba with his younger brother in the exodus known as Operation Pedro Pan, an airlift that brought to the United States some 14,000 unaccompanied Cuban children whose parents feared Communist indoctrination, or worse, under the new revolutionary government of Fidel Castro.

It was a decision that Mr. Machado, the head of the graduate playwriting program at Columbia University's School of the Arts, has questioned and resented all his life. "They were teaching us Marxism in school," he said. "But my parents treated it like they were gassing us."

Mr. Machado did not return to Cuba until 38 years later, in December 1999, and while he still cannot understand his parents, he said, he came back to the United States with a better understanding of himself. Now 48, he remembers growing up pained by a sense of loss, of not belonging, but his visit accomplished what years of therapy never did.

"I felt sometimes at home and sometimes a total alien," he said of his time in Cuba. "I realized I was really American and I couldn't survive there."

Many exiles have journeyed back to Cuba as the American economic embargo of the island softened enough in the 1990's to allow such travel, but in the case of Mr. Machado, the experience led to a semi-autobiographical play, "Havana Is Waiting," which opens on Wednesday at the Cherry Lane Theater. Performed at the Actors Theater of Louisville last April during the Humana Festival of New American Plays (with the title "When the Sea Drowns in Sand"), the work delves into the playwright's exploration of identity and his anger at the cold war politics that shaped his life.

Over coffee at the Cherry Lane on a recent morning before rehearsals, Mr. Machado said he thought the United States sponsored the Cuban children's flights in the early 1960's "to make things chaotic in Cuba" and that Mr. Castro allowed them because "he thought he'd have real panic if he didn't do it."

"I wish you would have fought to get me back," the play's main character, Federico, says as he encounters a rally for the return of Elián González, the Cuban boy who



prompted a custody dispute between the two countries last year.

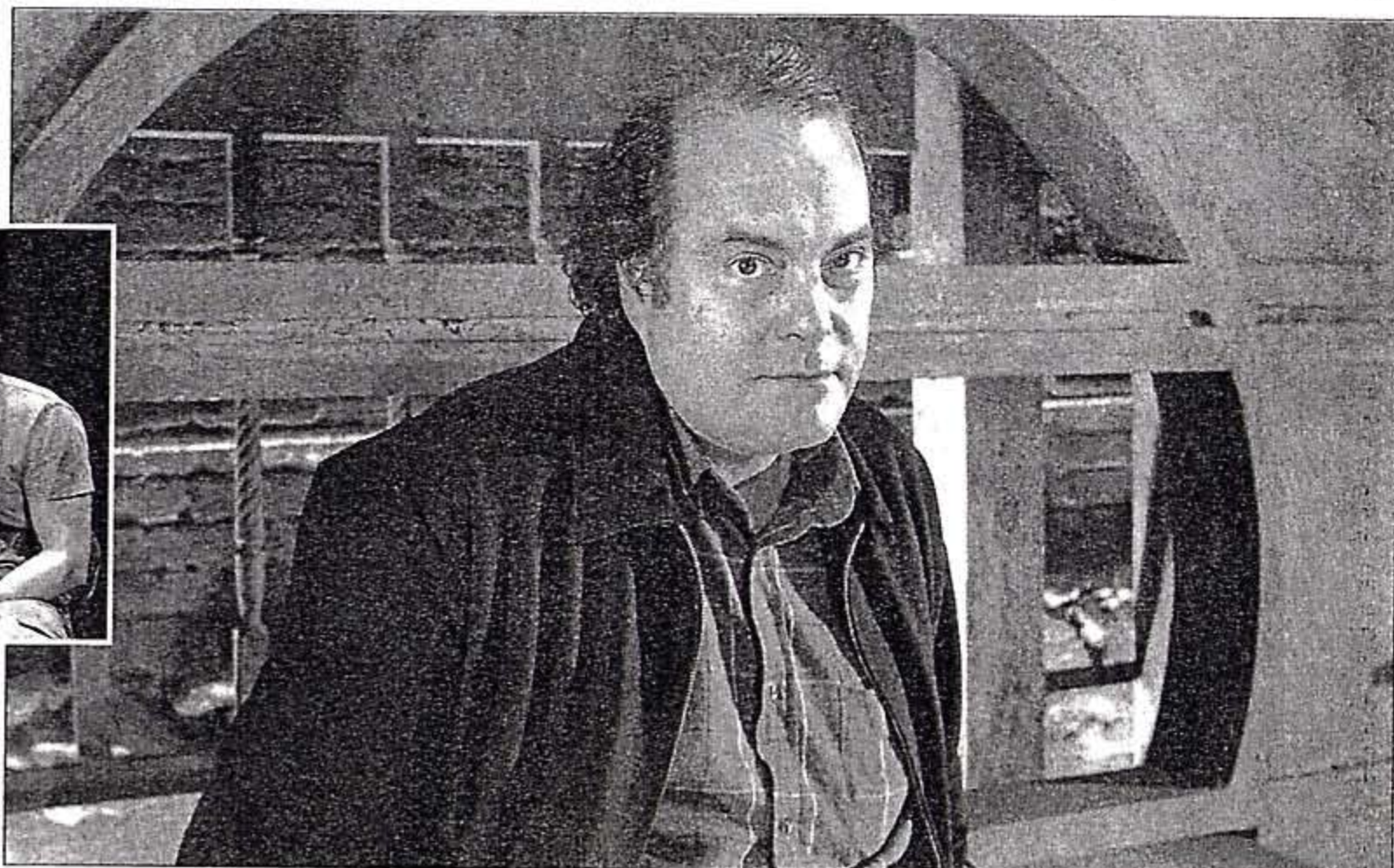
"Havana Is Waiting" is Mr. Machado's most political work, and he said he finds it ironic that it is opening against the backdrop of the United States' new offensive after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The play makes a plea for getting past the thirst for revenge, of transcending politics, and its themes now have a special resonance.

"I've been at the mercy of politics my entire life," Mr. Machado said, "and there has to be a way to step beyond it, to have human interaction."

In his review of the Louisville production in The New York Times, Bruce Weber wrote that the play's three characters "embody a variety of conflicts that Mr. Machado perceives as parallel and potentially self-dividing: between capitalism and Communism, between hetero- and homosexuality; between the Cuban and Cuban-American character."

Set in New York and Havana, the play, directed by Michael John Garcés, depicts an anxious Federico (portrayed by Bruce MacVittie), who travels to Cuba with his best friend, Fred (Ed Vassallo), where they hire a taxi driver (Felix Solis) to take them to Federico's childhood home. A fourth performer, Richard Marquez, provides percussion. Federico, like Mr. Machado, is gay, and the play grapples with questions of sexual identity and self-understanding.

Although Mr. Machado and his brother, Jesus, now 43, were eventually reunited with their parents, their culture shock in the United States included becoming instantly poor after an upper-middle-class existence in Cuba. They initially went to live with an uncle and aunt in Hialeah, Fla., who had two



Photographs by Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Eduardo Machado, above, on the set of his play "Havana Is Waiting," with Bruce MacVittie, inset left, and Ed Vassallo.

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children of their own and who had taken in two other relatives.

The day after they arrived, Mr. Machado still vividly remembers, his uncle gave them costumes and sent them out into the neighborhood to ask for candy. It was Halloween, and the boys were clueless.

"I thought we had become beggars," Mr. Machado said. "I hated that holiday ever since."

The next year, the family was reunited and ultimately moved to California, where his father worked as an accountant. By the time Mr. Machado was 16, the family had succeeded economically (although his parents later divorced), but the initial poverty, uprooting, language barrier and fear of abandonment carved lasting scars.

Had he been given the choice, Mr. Machado said, he would not have boarded that plane in 1961. "I think giving up your culture is a big deal," he said. "The alienation we

experienced when we got here was so extreme and colored so much of the rest of my life. Caribbean people are Caribbean people, and it's a whole other way of life. You have to become someone else to navigate life here. It's a big price one pays."

Yet, Mr. Machado's self-acknowledged "obsession" with Cuba has ruled his body of work: of 27 plays, all but 7 deal with his family or Cuba in some way. They include the four-play cycle "Floating Islands," which follows four generations of a Cuban family from the 1920's to their exile in California.

Mr. Machado thought he had exhausted the subject, he said, but his three visits to Cuba (he has been back twice since the 1999 trip) have opened up a whole new artistic phase. In addition to "Havana Is Waiting," he just finished writing "The Cook," about a cook who has maintained a Havana mansion intact for its owners in exile. The play was inspired by a woman who runs a paladar, as Cuba's private home restaurants are known.

Mr. Machado, who all these years was never emotionally ready to become a United States citizen, said he is ready now. But his ideal world is a binational one — he would like to be able to live part of the year in Cuba and part in New York. He has no relatives left in Cuba, but he noted that some of the

friends he has made on his trips "were the first people to e-mail me when the towers went down."

"I want to have a dialogue with them," he said. "Everybody gets to go home but Cubans."

The day the World Trade Center collapsed had been scheduled as the first day of rehearsals for "Havana Is Waiting." Mr. Machado refused to cancel the rehearsal, moving it instead to an apartment after no one could get below 14th Street to the Cherry Lane.

"I said, 'You must go on, it can't stop you,'" he recalled, reminded of the Cuba he knew as a boy when bombs were going off in Havana and people were scared of being killed as the revolution was about to topple the government.

When someone asked him whether he would alter his play to remove any material that could be deemed unpatriotic, like his anti-embargo stance, he also said no.

"The United States has been an imperialist power and I have the right to say that," he said. "We can't, at this point, make ourselves victims and blind ourselves. It's important to see how other people feel about you and try to understand why they feel that way about you."

Risky words these days, but spoken like a true American. □