

Tolstoy y amor: 'Anna in the Tropics' sizzles at Lab Theater

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By Florida Weekly Staff | on September 19, 2018

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David Pimental plays Juan Julian and Carmen Rivera plays Conchita in "Anna in the Tropics."

Books are wonderfully dangerous things.

Reading one can have the effect of a Molotov cocktail thrown into the middle of your life or heart.

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Books can change your mind, the way you think about something.

They can change your life.

Which is why dictators are so pro-censorship; they don't want you to see anything except the way they present it.

Books can make people ask questions.

In "Anna in the Tropics," a small group of Cuban-Americans find themselves changed by the words of Tolstoy's "Anna Karenina."

Though the classic novel is set in 19th century snow-covered Russia, its universal themes of love, jealousy and longing speak to the hearts of these Latinos living in 1929 in the sub-tropics of Ybor City in Tampa.

Playwright Nilo Cruz knits the two together in this Pulitzer Prize-winning play, which the Lab Theater is presenting bilingually. A screen above the stage translates all English to Spanish and vice versa. (A tip: If you're not bilingual enough to ignore the screen, don't sit in the front rows; otherwise, you'll have to crane your neck to see the words.)

"Anna in the Tropics" is the first play of the Lab's 10th season. (It's also the first production with new seating, on risers, in the space.

The play opens with two scenarios: a group of loud, boisterous men betting on cock fights, with the owner of a cigar factory on a losing streak, and a trio of women —a mother and her daughters — at the docks, awaiting the arrival of the new lector, the man who will read to the cigar rollers as they toil in the factory.



When Juan Julian (David Pimentel) shows up as the lector, the women are flustered. With his impeccable grooming and manners, Mr. Pimentel's Juan Julian strikes a romantic figure. He's charming without being smarmy. Both sisters immediately fall in love with him. His very presence at the factory disturbs some of the men, especially Cheche (Ronaldo Chico Guido) and Palomo (Miguel Cintron), both of whom already have their share of women problems.

Mr. Cintron's hapless Palomo is having an affair. His marriage to Conchita (Carmen Rivera), elder daughter of the factory owners, is falling apart, but he feels impotent to fix it. The actor's portrayal is a nuanced one, and he skillfully makes us feel empathy for his character.

Mr. Guido's Cheche is a half-brother to the factory owner patriarch but, like anyone with just a little bit of power or authority, he over-reaches his role and struts around as if he owns the place. He is against having a lector in the factory, though the workers like it as it helps pass the time while they do their repetitive work of hand-rolling cigars.

Cheche is a hothead, but Mr. Guido plays him at full-blast throughout the play. I wish director Annette Trossbach had pulled him back a little. The later scenes would have been more powerful if we'd seen Cheche simmering and building to a boil, rather than full-volume angry all the time.

His character and, to a smaller extent, Mr. Cintron's, show the sad results of men destroying what they don't understand and can't control.

"Anna in the Tropics" not only deals with affairs of the heart but with change in general: the old ways vs. the new ways, handmade versus machine-made.

Mr. Pimentel caused the audience to laugh with his horror at the flatness of Florida. He also has some interesting comments about city life. He definitely believes in the old ways.

Santiago (Isaac Osin), the patriarch, is a comic figure, especially when he's nursing a hangover, but it's his wife, Ofelia (Grace Delvalle-Hernandez), who almost steals the show. Girlish and giddy, with a sparkle in her eyes, Ofelia provides much comic relief, especially when she gets a little tipsy. She lights up the stage every time she steps onto it, and I'd love to see her in more shows.

Their daughters are Conchita (Ms. Rivera), who's married to Palomo, and Marela (Chloe Tsai), a romantic teenager who's very taken with the stories she hears. Both characters have a crush on the new lector; both actors are very strong in their roles. They're trapped by their circumstances, but it's Conchita who has the strength to try to break out of them. Ms. Rivera presents us with a complex woman whose life and marriage has become mundane and boring.

Ms. Tsai's character falls in love with "Anna Karenina," who harbors the romantic fantasies of a young girl who has been shielded from the world.

These two are believable as sisters.

Abe Hernandez, Dan Hernandez and Dr. Ernesto Lasso de la Vega are also part of this cast.

The set — a brick-walled factory with oversized opaque windows and rows of tobacco leaves hanging from the back wall — is one of the Lab Theater's more adventurous ones. In a nice touch, the space becomes festive and colorful when paper lanterns are hung for a party.

The men wear Guayabera shirts, and the women wear floral patterned 1920s dresses. One woman even considers bobbing her hair, a very bold move.

Ms. Trossbach assembled a bilingual cast for this play and in doing so has also introduced us to some actors we haven't previously seen on the Lab stage. She's chosen well, and with producing "Anna" has raised the bar for the types of plays her theater presents.

Sometimes the staging seems a little formal, with actors stepping forward and saying their lines to the audience, rather than to each other. I think some scenes would feel more natural if the actors would ignore the audience and interact among themselves, rather than stepping out of the action as if giving a speech.

Mr. Cruz's lyrical dialogue is like musical waves of words that wash over us. He cleverly weaves together Tolstoy with early 20th century Cuban-American culture and entwines them both with the secret longings of our own hearts. †

"Anna in the Tropics"

>> When: through Sept. 30

>> Where: Laboratory Theater of Florida, 1634 Woodford Ave., Fort Myers

>> Cost: \$28, \$25 for military and those 65 and older, \$10 for students

>> Info: 218-0481 or www.laboratorytheaterflorida.com

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