

ICWA LETTERS

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THE AMERICAS**

Paige Evans is an Institute Fellow looking at Cuba through the lens of its performing arts.

Remediano Remedies

HAVANA, Cuba

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By Paige Evans

Late the night of October 28th, my aggressively anxious landlady, Teresa, beckons me and Ariel downstairs for a little chat. Rather than talking directly with us (which, blaming frayed nerves, she hasn't done for months), she has invited a giant, meaty man to speak to us in her stead.

The moment Ariel and I have alighted on Teresa's dog-hairy couch, the giant man informs us: "Teresa's nerves are extremely delicate. Her health is in grave danger." Teresa, who is built like an ox and will likely outlive us all, nods in solemn assent. "Renting out the apartment upstairs puts too much pressure on her nerves. You two will have to leave by the end of the month."

Rents to foreigners have gone up in Havana since I first negotiated with Teresa 14 months ago. I know she'll continue renting, for more money, after we're gone. Though Teresa always assured me she'd give me a month's warning if she ever wanted me to leave, I have no lease (legitimate rental leases don't exist in Cuba) and no recourse.

After packing, securing a truck and moving our things to a friend's house, we head east to Remedios to see how preparations for the *parrandas* — the town's annual Christmastime festival — have progressed over the past two and a half months. We arrive late at night, famished, and go straight to the state-owned Rumbos snack bar that's housed in Cuba's oldest cafe. The town mute, whom we've encountered on each trip to Remedios, scrambles to scrub down our already clean rental car in hopes of a dollar tip.

As we inhale cheese sandwiches, a little girl hovers nearby. We smile at her, and she smiles timidly back, inches closer and begins to speak with us. Her name is Juanita; she is four years old; she just bought five loose cigarettes for her mother. While telling us all this, Juanita stares, transfixed, at a pile of chocolates on our table. Ariel offers her one. She takes it, flashes a dimpled grin and disappears.

Moments later, a woman in hot pants and a worn Mickey Mouse t-shirt approaches our table, clutching a lit cigarette in one hand and Juanita with the other. She drops Juanita's arm and extends her open palm towards me. "I am Maria Gonzalez, Juanita's mother. Did she ask you for that chocolate?" Ariel assures her he offered the candy, and Maria explains that, as tourism burgeons, Remediano parents and schools are trying to teach their kids not to solicit things from visitors.

Cuba was the Caribbean's leading tourist destination before its Revolution in 1959. But Cuban tourism virtually stopped in 1961 and only resumed in full force after the withdrawal of Soviet subsidies in 1990. It has since become the country's top industry, supplanting sugar exports as Cuba's pri-

mary source of foreign currency. The flat, fertile farmland of Villa Clara Province, where Remedios is located, yields about one tenth of the nation's sugar cane crop. But the region — like most other parts of the island — is now being developed for more lucrative tourism. The Cuban government owns (or co-owns with foreign investors) all hotels, travel agencies, dollar stores, sizable eateries, rental car agencies and gas stations; so it, primarily, benefits from the growth of tourism. But many individual Cubans also struggle to gain much-needed dollars from foreigners.

Perky and alert, Maria pulls up a chair and starts recounting her personal history. Within seconds, we learn about Juanita's two-timing father; Maria's ovarian problems and subsequent inability to deliver more children; her hard-drinking second husband; and the honest man she now lives with but refuses to marry. Coming from the more reserved (or repressed) U.S. WASP culture, I'm sometimes surprised by the intimate details Cubans tend to confess on first meeting. I'm also grimy and exhausted and can only think about a shower and sleep. Though I try to cut the conversation short, it lasts for what seems like hours.

Bleary-eyed, Ariel and I check into Remedios' newly-renovated Hotel Mascote. The pock-marked, leggy lad at the front desk asks us for our passports, and on seeing Ariel's *carne de identidad* (the official identification card Cubans are required to carry with them at all times), he sheepishly asks to see our marriage certificate. This is standard procedure, as ordinary Cubans are allowed

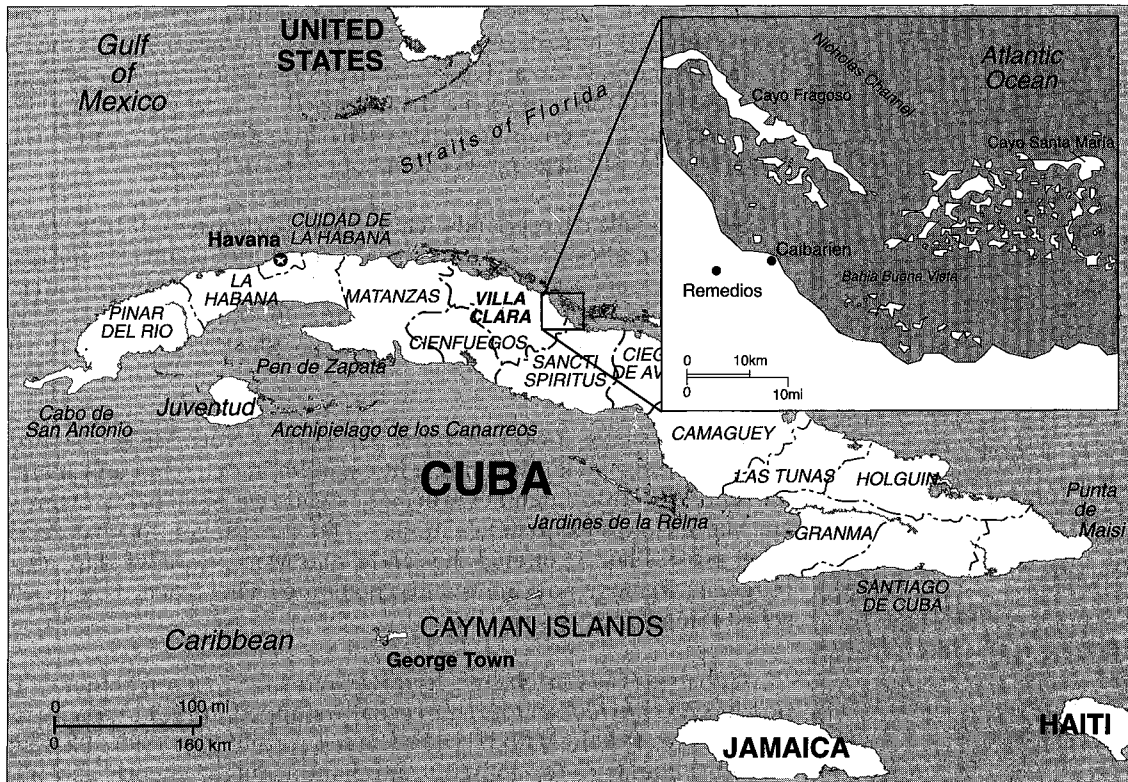
to stay in Cuban dollar hotels only when legally married to a foreigner.

Our room has fantastically high, beamed ceilings and is decorated in a spare, charmless style. The television has cable, with shows like CNN and MTV. These fascinate Ariel, who has never seen them before and is accustomed instead to the two state-run stations available to Cubans — one of which almost inevitably features either Castro speaking or a retrospective glorifying the "Triumph of the Revolution." Our small balcony overlooks Remedios' Parque Marti, and we drift off to sleep to the sound of homemade fireworks exploding in the historic square, set off by local youths as precursors to the *parrandas* (Christmas celebrations).

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The next morning, Ariel and I stop in on Celia, Director of Remedios' *Parrandas* Museum. As we sit beside the Soviet-made motorcycle with sidecar parked in her gloomy living room so no one will strip it of parts, Celia's frail, ailing mother perches on the edge of a fractured chair. She reports that she stood on line three hours this morning for their daily ration of bread, but it did not arrive. "We have a growing boy in this house!" Her frail forefinger pokes at the air. "He needs to eat!" She will stand on line again tomorrow, in hopes of receiving their household's allotment of rolls.

On the way to its *parrandas* warehouse, Celia gleefully informs us that El Carmen — her neighborhood —



is further along in its preparations for the festival than its rival, San Salvador. We've already heard this from several other Remedianos. Though preparations are carried out in secret, Remedios is a small town with big eyes and ears; and rumors about the opposing neighborhoods run rampant. Celia's features clench. "Last year, both our *carozza* and *trabajo de plaza* lost." There is no official judge for the festival, but popular opinion clearly dictates which floats win or lose. "This year, El Carmen is working especially hard. We are determined to win."

Segments from this year's *trabajo de plaza* cover most of the warehouse floor. Wide strips of wood have been curved and cut with a makeshift electric saw, then nailed together into geometric, jigsaw-like pieces. After all the segments are built, they will be painted and wired for electricity. About 10 days before the *parrandas*, assembly of the towering structure will begin in the town's main square.

Celia introduces us to the *trabajo de plaza*'s designer, Ignacio Rojas, aka "Titi." Titi, a professional fumigator in his early 40s, shows us his drawing of the project and proudly proclaims: "This *trabajo de plaza* will be over ninety feet tall! It will use more than thirty thousand light bulbs!" In a country where both wood and light bulbs are notoriously scarce and costly, the project's sheer magnitude is remarkable. (Light bulbs generally cost about a dollar each, and many Cubans, especially those living outside Havana, cannot even find or afford a single light bulb for their homes.)

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San Salvador's dilapidated wooden warehouse was originally built as a private bakery in the 1930s, then fell into disuse after the Revolution. In the 1980s, when Remedios' rival neighborhoods decided to designate warehouses for working on *parrandas* projects (rather than using whatever spacious homes or buildings they could find), the Cuban government donated the former bakery to San Salvador and an open plot of land to El Carmen.

Fewer people are working here than at El Carmen's warehouse, and, as predicted, they're less far along in their preparations. Beside a hand-written poster warning "62 DAYS TO GO," Pipio and his team of four assistants are working on models for the neighborhood's *carozza*.

Wary of our revealing neighborhood secrets, Pipio initially refuses to show us the *carozza*'s design. But Ariel convinces him to let us see the top-secret drawing. In bold colors and intricate detail, the project's designer — a 25-year-old, award-winning student at the *Instituto Superior de Arte*, Cuba's foremost university-level art school — has painted a stunning montage from Puccini's

Chinese opera "Turandot." When I ask Pipio how many lightbulbs the *carozza* will use, he responds with a blank stare. He obviously cannot care less.

As he describes his lengthy, labor-intensive model-making process, Pipio's chestnut eyes and sinewy body ignite with enthusiasm. "I am a lucky man! I love my work. I do not know what I would have done for work without the *parrandas*. I could have restored old houses, maybe. But in restoration, the state ignores details to save money and time. For the *parrandas*, I can spend as much time as I need to get something just right."

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Next, Celia suggests we visit El Carmen's costumer, Eduardo Roca. Leaning close to us, she confides: "I should probably tell you about Eduardo's problem. He is a *pajaro*." Literally "bird," this is how many Cubans refer to gay men. Lowering her voice even further, Celia murmurs: "I have nothing against them, myself. They can do what they want... in private... As long as they do not do anything to my son or my husband."

I've noticed more overtly gay men in Remedios than any other place on the island outside Havana. Though the Castro government no longer sequesters gays in labor camps for "rehabilitation" as it did in the 1960s, homosexuality remains closeted and homophobia prevails throughout most of the country.

Celia leads us to a colonial house painted bright turquoise on the Carmen side of town. A slim-hipped, pitch-skinned woman in a neon pink body suit answers the door. "Eduardo is in Buena Vista, making costumes for its *parrandas*," she explains in a bass voice that sounds like she's got a mouthful of marbles. When Celia mentions my interest in the *parrandas*, the slim-hipped woman invites us into the foyer. Its bare brick walls are hung with big, gaudy headdresses for El Carmen's *carozza*, made from gold, red and navy-blue plasticized paper. "The rest of the costumes for El Carmen are inside, in boxes. Eduardo worked very hard on them, day and night. He finished earlier than expected."

As we walk away from his house, Celia laments: "Eduardo is not a great artist. He makes things very fast, without the care or detail that San Salvador's costumer, Juan Carlos, invests in his work. But Eduardo has worked for El Carmen for many years, since he was a little boy. We cannot fire him. When he was ill one year, we hired another costumer who did much better work. But the next year, Eduardo was back. He has been with us ever since."

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Under a glaring sun, we cross cobblestone streets to a house on the San Salvador side of town, where the

Beatles' "Abbey Road" drifts out onto the street through open windows. When they first gained international success in the 1960s, the Beatles were unofficially banned in Cuba because they sang in English, then a taboo language. But today they're resoundingly popular.

A shirtless, baby-faced man in stylishly tattered cut-offs, with a shaven chest and thick silver hoops in both ears ushers us inside and informs us that Juan Carlos is in the provincial capital of Santa Clara, shopping for material for *carozza* costumes.

The house has stripped brick walls and few furnishings. Of the three front rooms, one contains only a boom box; another, two large wooden racks for hanging costumes; the third, just a table, where a young woman sits silently wrapping tulle around donut-shaped pieces of cardboard to make pompoms. The baby-faced man, whose name is Amaory, tells us San Salvador's costumers rent the house as a workspace in the months leading up to the *parrandas*.

"I usually spend the night on a mattress in the bedroom here. I work twenty hour days and do not have time to travel back and forth between here and my house." For the other eight months of the year, Amaory makes baseball caps in his home and sells them for dollars on the black market. "I do not like doing clandestine work. It is frightening. But it is the only way I can make dollars. And, like all Cubans, I need dollars."

Amaory shows us the costume designs for this year's *carozza*: three enlarged figures from the "Turandot" montage, painted by the same award-winning young artist. "We try to stay as faithful as possible to the original design, but of course we must make compromises. Ideally, this year's costumes should be silk. But silk is too expensive. So we looked for a fabric with its same shine, a similar texture. We were hoping for satin, but we could not get satin, either. We are using lycra. The Directive has only been able to get one third of the lycra we need,

so Juan Carlos is trying to get more today.

"We must also compromise on colors." Producing a hard-covered tome, he turns to a photograph of an actor in stylized Chinese make-up with a rod of red and gold pompoms springing from his silk cap. "We saw in this book that the Chinese use pompoms in their costumes. We are making our pompoms out of pink and white tulle. The colors are wrong, but it is what we could find." I ask how they learned about Chinese costumes, and Amaory holds up the tome. "There was nothing in the libraries," Amaory explains. "We got this book from the friend of a friend in Caibarien.

"We just began work Friday. This was later than expected, because our Directive could not find material for the costumes." He nods toward three large wire structures hanging against the walls of an adjoining room. "Those are frames for the *carozza's* three principal costumes. I was up all last night, working on them." Leading us into the room, he steps around a swath of brown paper stretched across the floor, where he has penciled a pattern and hammered nails into it. "I heat up wire, then bend it around the nails with pincers to make the frames. We make everything for the *parrandas* in a very primitive way." He gives an affable shrug. "It is the only option we have."

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As Ariel and I drive home to Havana, I think about the many things to be done before I leave shortly for the United States to give birth to our son: the myriad documents needed to get Ariel's U.S. and Cuban visas, the subsequent interviews, the search for a new apartment. I begin to feel overwhelmed by the prospect, then remind myself of the Remedianos' resourcefulness. The thought of their ingenuity in the face of severe shortages and economic hardship bolsters me; if they can find 30,000 lightbulbs in a country where acquiring a single lightbulb can prove an accomplishment, I should certainly be able to find a new apartment. □