

# ICWA LETTERS

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THE AMERICAS**

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

## Topsy-Turvy Cuba

By Paige Evans

*[Transcript of a speech delivered at the Members and Trustees meeting of the Institute of Current World Affairs, Monmouth, NJ, June 15, 2000]*

I want to talk to you today about my experience in Cuba. Some of what I'm going to say I haven't been able to tell you until today. Cuba is a marvelous but deeply troubled country. It is a land of ironies. I thought I knew something about Cuba before I went because I'd read a lot about it. But once I'd spent time there I realized that reading could never have prepared me for what I learned. Cuba, of course, is more than cigars, rum, baseball, Desi Arnaz and 1950s cruises.

Because of my background in theater, I thought it would be interesting to look at Cuba through its performing arts. And, while I learned a great deal about Cuban music, theater and dance, much of which will inform my future life as a writer and producer, I mostly want to talk today about what it meant to be an American woman in a Communist, neighboring, enemy nation.

As an ICWA Fellow, I studied conga and bongo drumming; went to music, theater, ballet and modern dance performances and festivals; interviewed performing artists; and read books and publications on Cuban music, theater and dance.

Cuba's performing arts are rich, dynamic and, often — but not always — exceptionally good, particularly for a country of Cuba's size and limited resources. The revolutionary government has cultivated high-quality arts education, available without charge to anyone with talent. It has also stoked Cubans' national pride in their performing arts and artists. Performances of everything from opera to ballet to popular music cost Cubans only a few pesos, so audiences for Cuba's performing arts are more diverse than any I've seen elsewhere in the world. Imagine an audience at Carnegie Hall with faces of all colors, from great grandmothers to toddlers, dressed in anything from lycra to long gowns. It's an American not-for-profit theater's dream.

Music is everywhere in Cuba. It spills out of homes onto the street, it's practiced in courtyards, it's performed in city squares. Roughly one in ten Cubans plays music, and, though they may be playing on drums with metal heads because leather is too hard to get, their strong technical skills mean the music they play is often good.

Cuban music is rhythmic, rousing and sexy. Cubans love making music,



*The author and her son, Tyler*

they love listening to it and they especially love dancing to it. Even young children can pick up a drum or a pair of *claves* and tap out difficult, sophisticated rhythms; and it seems like they're born suggestively swiveling their hips.

Cubans also love to party. A few instruments or a boom box, a bottle of rum and an alleyway can make for a good time any day or night. This air of festivity and fun, together with Cubans' readiness to view most situations with humor, helps to balance the frustrations of everyday life. And those frustrations are many.

I'd never visited a Communist country before going to Cuba, but I'd heard and read reports of the drab, grey life under other Communist regimes. Not Cuba. Cuba is Latin and tropical and infused with heat; it's a vibrant, colorful place. I didn't just look at Cuba through its performing arts, of course. I also looked at it through the lens of my own cultural and individual identity. I looked at it from the perspective of a born-and-bred U.S. citizen, a woman from the superpower enemy just 90 miles and worlds away.

It took me two days to get from Miami to Cuba. I flew via Nassau. Before relations between Cuba and the U.S. disintegrated in the early '60s, direct flights between Miami and Havana regularly shuttled privileged Cubans, U.S. businessmen, honeymooners, gamblers and others seeking what Graham Greene described as Havana's "louche atmosphere." Cargo planes and freighters carried U.S. goods to Cuba and sugar, oil, rum, cigars, minerals and fruit from the considerable U.S. holdings in Cuba to markets in the States. Cruise ships, too, brought Americans to Cuba for a taste of exotic romance. Direct flights still exist between Miami and Havana, but today they're special charters, open to a limited few.

Because of America's economic embargo, I had to apply for a Department of Treasury Permit to go to Cuba legally. The government bureaucracy was so sluggish that I left without it. I hadn't yet been granted a Cuban residential visa by the time I left, either. Foreigners wanting to spend long stays in Cuba must find a Cuban "*organismo*," or organization, to sponsor their residential visas. That way, if a foreigner engages in activities deemed "Counter-Revolutionary" while in Cuba, the organization sponsoring him or her is held responsible.

Because of the economic embargo, U.S. credit cards and travelers' checks can't be used in Cuba, and U.S. banks can't transfer money there. So I arrived at Havana's Jose Marti International Airport with a thick wad of dollars in my money belt. The fact that U.S. dollars are now an official and coveted currency in Cuba is but one of the many ironies underscoring everyday life there. Until 1993, owning even a single dollar bill was a crime punishable with imprisonment in Cuba. But during what Castro called the "special-period" austerity program that followed the withdrawal of Soviet subsidies,

the Cuban government was forced to legalize dollar holdings. Today, Cuba's dollar-based economy, which is essentially capitalist, runs parallel to its Communist peso economy and is much stronger. Everything relating to tourism is charged in dollars; even Cubans earning meager peso salaries are forced to shop in costly dollar supermarkets. Another irony. While their monthly rations once provided adequate food, clothing and other household necessities, Cubans now receive scant supplies with their ration booklets.

Some of the most common complaints Cubans voice about the situation there today stem from what they call "tourism apartheid." Systematic segregation prohibits even Cubans with dollars to spend on renting cars, patronizing tourist hotels and nightclubs and using medical facilities and other services designated for foreigners. More irony.

The dollar economy has also widened the class gap among Cubans. For the first three decades after Cuba became Communist, government higher-ups had more power and privileges than other Cubans, but the food rationing system and artificially low prices made Cuban society relatively egalitarian, with dramatically less of a socio-economic gap than other Latin American countries. Now, Cubans with access to dollars — those with family in the States or who work in tourism and earn dollar tips, hustlers and prostitutes, musicians and artists who travel abroad and sell their work at internationally competitive prices — belong to a privileged class. And ordinary Cubans who have loyally supported the Revolution have been impoverished. Ironies on top of ironies on top of ironies.

To dissuade professionals like doctors from leaving their jobs to become cab drivers and chamber maids in the desperate pursuit of dollars, the Cuban government prohibits people who work in tourism from having college degrees. So young Cubans, who for decades had widely pursued higher education since it was both good and free, now often see little point in becoming professionals. Why should they go through years of medical school if they'll end up earning the equivalent of \$18 a month, and a single bottle of cooking oil costs \$3?

This kind of financial disincentive, and to my eye the topsy-turvy logic behind it, was for me one of the most interesting and the most confounding things about Cuba. So many parts of its system work in the opposite way from Capitalism. The more money a Cuban puts in a personal bank account, for example, the less interest he earns. The idea is to keep money in circulation and discourage personal accumulation of wealth. It runs counter to the most basic tenets of Capitalism.

For more than 30 years, as part of its nationalist creed, Cuba's Revolutionary government shunned foreign investment. But since the fall of the Soviet bloc, it's been

forced to court foreign investors — first in tourism, and then in other areas. Now, foreigners can even own Cuban real estate, thus obliterating one of its Revolution's principal tenets: that only Cubans would own Cuban land.

Investors from around the world have been rushing to get involved in Cuba. Only the United States, with an economic embargo prohibiting its citizens and companies from spending dollars in Cuba, is missing out. Or is it? When I went to the women's room at the airport, I was surprised to see that the toilet bore the revered name of Crane. Brand new Crane toilets — American toilets made by the same company that funded my Fellowship — in Cuba? I soon discovered that a broad array of American products, from Nike sneakers to Marlboro cigarettes to Coca-Cola, make their way to Cuba despite the embargo, via third countries like Canada and Mexico.

Practically every Cuban I met, whatever his political ideology, condemned the crippling U.S. embargo. And with good reason. For almost 40 years, the U.S. embargo has hurt the Cuban people and helped the Revolutionary regime it's intended to destroy. It has served Castro amazingly well, offering him an ideal scapegoat and rendering him a martyr and the U.S. a bully in the eyes of the rest of the world. The 1996 Helms-Burton Bill, which made the embargo even more drastic, rekindled Cubans' nationalistic sentiments and rallied support behind Castro at a time when his popularity had plummeted.

Before I went to Cuba, I imagined one good thing about the embargo might be that it had helped isolate Cuba from American popular culture and so keep its arts purer and more distinct. But no. Grade-B Hollywood movies are shown on Cuban TV three times a week, and it seems like everybody watches them. And young Cubans know more about the latest American pop music than I do.

Back to the airport. When I got to Customs, an officer in military fatigues combed through my bags. She was most interested in a satchel stuffed with mail, English-language books and publications, most of which I was bringing for friends of friends. The mail system between the U.S. and Cuba is unreliable at best, so people usually send things with a traveler instead. The Cuban Customs Official confiscated my bag and told me I could pick it up the next day. I worried that the authorities might take the letters or object to one of my books. When I returned to pick up my bag the following day, though, only one thing was missing: a special issue of *Martha Stewart "Living."*

After my encounter with the Customs Officer, I had little contact with the Cuban authorities. But one Sunday afternoon about midway through my stay, an Immigration official came into my apartment and demanded to see my passport and Cuban identification

card. He told me to report to my local Immigration office the next morning.

I was scared. This was during a particularly repressive period, when the government was cracking down on prostitutes, purse snatchers, self-employed Cubans and Cubans who spent time with foreigners. Fortunately for me, I didn't fall into any of these categories.

To enforce the new laws, Castro augmented his Revolutionary Police Force, doubled their salaries and bought a fleet of new police cars. In Havana's central neighborhoods, at least two police were posted on every corner; frequently stopping Cubans and sometimes arresting them without explanation. The government was also cracking down on foreign journalists: anyone thought to be critical of the regime risked expulsion. My close friend Laetitia, who'd just written a cover story on Cuban music and the Revolution for a prominent French music magazine, was kicked out of the country on a day's notice. I was definitely nervous.

By the time I arrived at Immigration Monday morning, there was a swarm of people outside. Immigration had done a sweep of Havana's touristed neighborhoods and called in all foreigners staying in private homes and their Cuban landlords.

The Cuban government legalized self-employment in 1993. Cubans can now engage in private enterprises like renting out rooms and running small restaurants out of their homes. They aren't allowed to use intermediaries or non-familial employees, though. Together with high income taxes and a lack of access to credit, these restrictions work to keep profits low and ensure that self-employed Cubans don't compete too strongly with state-owned enterprises. While small Cuban entrepreneurs are struggling for economic survival, foreign investors are given the red-carpet treatment. Yet another irony.

But most self-employed Cubans know how to circumvent these legal restrictions. For instance, my landlady, Delia, reported that she was renting out only two rooms instead of the entire upstairs apartment. This way, she paid \$250 in monthly taxes rather than the \$500 Cuban law would have required for all four rooms.

Lying had its negatives, of course. Delia, who was extremely nervous anyway, was terrified that the Housing Inspector would someday appear unannounced, discover her ruse and fine her. Fines for renting illegally or using one's car as a taxi without a permit usually run about \$1,000 — no small sum, especially for a Cuban. So, when Immigration asked to see her that same Monday morning, Delia feared the worst. So did I.

As it turned out, the Immigration officials asked me just two questions: whom I worked for and where I lived. They already knew the answers, of course, as well as a

good deal more about me. After all, my phone line, installed by the state-run phone company, was bugged. I knew this because both my phone calls and emails were cut short anytime I criticized Cuba's government. Imagine having your phone line go dead, all of a sudden, when you spoke badly of a politician.

When I got home from Immigration, Delia was trembling with anxiety. "They asked me everything about you!" she exclaimed. "Who your boyfriend is, what you write about, where you go every day! They asked me to register the names and addresses of any Cubans who spend time in your home."

From the start, Delia had worried about having an American as a tenant. Like many Cubans, she has family in the States: her only son lives in Miami. During the 1994 *balseo* crisis, her son, his wife and their daughter spent nine months at the U.S. naval base on Cuba's Guantanamo Bay awaiting clearance to migrate to the States. Delia's son doesn't intend to return to Cuba, and the U.S. government might not allow Delia to visit him in the States. So, though she talks about him constantly and dreams of going to America, Delia may never see her beloved son again. This tragedy of severed families is all too common in contemporary Cuba, as we've recently seen with Elian Gonzalez.

Despite her close ties to America, Delia was convinced that, as an American living in Cuba, I must be a spy. She didn't want me to install an international phone line for fear I'd use it for Counter-Revolutionary activities; and she regularly asked Ariel, my then-boyfriend, what I was writing about. Ariel was used to fielding such questions: nearly every Cuban I knew had asked him if I was a spy.

Delia said Immigration already knew the details of my comings and goings. Someone had been watching me. Most blocks in Havana have at least one *cibaton*, or "big goat" — a good citizen who spies on his or her neighbors and reports the findings to the local Committee for the Defense of the Revolution. This system of having friends and neighbors report on each other for the good of the Revolution, together with the fact that almost everyone has to lie and steal in order to get by, has bred a strong underlying mistrust amongst Cubans.

When I first got to Cuba, nearly every Cuban I met warned me not to trust anyone. I'm a native New Yorker, so I'm no pushover. But this widespread lack of trust was one of the hardest things for me to adjust to in Cuba. It works to the totalitarian regime's advantage, of course. If Cubans trust neither friend nor neighbor, it's less likely they'll band together and rebel. Castro is an incredibly shrewd politician.

Toward the end of my stay in Cuba, I spent a good deal of time at Havana's U.S. Interests Section, a tall, heavily-guarded glass building that's the equivalent of

an embassy in a country where the U.S. doesn't have formal diplomatic relations. I went there to help Ariel, whom I'd recently married, apply for a U.S. visa so he could come to the States for our son's birth. We originally applied for a temporary visa, which would have allowed him to come to the States for a period of up to three months. At that point, we planned to return to Cuba after Tyler's birth so I could finish my Fellowship.

We arrived before dawn. There was already a long line of Cubans waiting outside, across from a huge billboard where a cartoon face of Uncle Sam shouted defiantly: "Imperialists, we have no fear of you!" An elderly woman standing in front of Ariel was applying for a temporary visa for the fourth time. The first time, she'd applied because her son, who lived just across the Straits of Florida, had fallen ill. The second time, she applied because his condition had worsened. Each time, her application was rejected. Now, she was applying because her son had died, and she was hoping to go to the United States to pick up his remains and bring them back to Cuba.

Ariel's interview, conducted through a thick pane of bulletproof glass on the outside of the building, lasted less than 30 seconds. Most of them did. And, like Ariel, most applicants for temporary visas — more than 90 percent of them — are turned down. Under the Cuban Adjustment Act, any Cuban who reaches the shores of the United States is eligible for a U.S. residency. (Elian Gonzalez didn't reach land.) So the U.S. government strictly limits the number of Cubans who might enter the States "temporarily" and then stay.

The day after he was turned down for a temporary visa, Ariel and I began the complicated application process for his U.S. residential visa. Strangely, the INS has an office in Havana; and as a U.S. citizen with a Cuban residential visa, I was able to submit the application there. It was processed within a single day, circumventing the usual six-to-12-month waiting period at INS offices in the States.

We then filed copious documents with both American and Cuban authorities at breakneck speed, and Ariel was called in to the U.S. Interests Section for a second interview within two weeks. I joined him, because Cubans with an American citizen generally receive much better treatment than those without.

When we entered the building, we passed through two security points, under two different cameras. One camera was so that the burly U.S. Marine posted inside the door could see who wanted to enter. The other was for the Cuban Ministry of the Interior officers posted behind closed curtains in an apartment across the street. They, too, were curious about who entered.

Inside, Ariel and I sat in a large waiting room filled with Cubans. At the front of the room, a videotape of TV Marti spouted statistics about the large number of cars

owned in Cuba before the Revolution. TV Marti is produced by Cuban exiles in Miami and beamed exclusively to Cuba — where it is blocked by Cuban technology. The only place in the world it's shown is Havana's U.S. Interests Section. Like Cuba's two state-owned television stations, TV Marti is a font of propaganda. It simply uses different statistics.

Nobody in the waiting room seemed to be watching the television, anyway. They were too involved in their own dramas. Most of them had won the *bombo*, a lottery that grants 20,000 Cubans U.S. residential visas each year. As they received their visa packets, often two or three years after winning the lottery, their faces were both exultant and sad: they were about to join the million and a half Cubans living in the Land of Opportunity, distanced from their homeland and their families by the diplomatic divide between the two nations.

Cubans love their country fiercely — and deservedly so: it's a verdant, steamy, beautiful land with a rich national character. In part, this accounts for why America's Cuban exile community — who still consider themselves "exiles" even after they've lived in the States for four decades — fantasize about going back and reclaiming their country. In all likelihood, this won't happen. But as both the Cubans who came to America after the Revolution and the Revolutionary regime they fled grow old and die off, what's essentially been a Civil War between them may, finally, come to an end.

When the Pope visited Cuba in 1998, he said: "Cuba

must open to the world, and the world must open to Cuba." The fact that the Pope was even in Cuba shows that it is, indeed, undergoing the opening process he advocated. If the Cuban government continues this opening process, allowing Cubans to enjoy greater profits from their own efforts as well as access to the Information Age; Cubans' high literacy and innovative natures, together with Cuba's natural resources, prime location and appealing climate could offer the country a promising future.

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Some final words. When I was interviewed for my ICWA Fellowship, a few Trustees had reservations about me, because I was older and more experienced than most candidates. I'd already traveled a great deal and had something of a career, and they questioned whether an ICWA Fellowship could profoundly affect my life.

Now — as my Cuban-American son, Tyler Diaz, and my Cuban husband, Ariel Diaz, attest — I think it's safe to say I got closer to another culture than I'd ever been before. Tyler's Cubanismo will be as much a part of him as his blue eyes. I've taken the country with me and will have it with me for every day of my life.

Both personally and professionally, it's been a transforming experience, filled with growth and learning. My profoundest thanks to Peter Martin, the Trustees, my wonderful avuncles and all that is ICWA for allowing me to travel down these rich and revealing roads.