

TROPICAL LIFE

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H1



A MUSICAL JOURNEY HOME

BY DAMASO REYES
Special to The Miami Herald

HAVANA — Arturo O'Farrill stared from the Chinese-made tour bus, watching the Cuban countryside roll by through tinted windows. The sky had been leaden all day, making the tropical air seem barely warmer than the New York he had left 10 hours before. This trip was the Grammy-winning jazz pianist's fifth back to the land that had given birth to his father and the music that was his passion.

But this time something was different. This time O'Farrill was returning with the orchestra to which his father had devoted the last years of his life and to close the circle that had been broken after the 1959 revolution.

For the past eight years O'Farrill, 50, has been

ARTURO
O'FARRILL
RETURNS TO
CUBA WITH
HIS FATHER'S
ORCHESTRA
TO FULFILL
A DREAM.

• TURN TO O'FARRILL, 4M

A NEW GENERATION: Adam O'Farrill plays trumpet while his father Arturo plays piano during a performance at the U.S. Interests Section in Havana.

MIAMI BEACH GAY PRIDE

Andy Cohen:
Changing gay TV
I program at a timeBY STEVE ROTHBAUS
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Andy Cohen, the queer eye behind *Real Housewives*, *Project Runway*, *Shear Genius* and *Kathy Griffin: My Life on the D-List*, loves a gay parade.

"What's not fun about a gay-pride parade," says the highly visible host of *Watch What Happens: Live*. "I got my waving down."

Cohen's wrists will get a workout Saturday when he serves as grand marshal of the third annual Miami Beach Gay Pride parade on Ocean Drive.

"Just being who you are goes a long way," Cohen says. "We're still in a society where every person who comes out counts. You saw the impact Ricky Martin had. The more people are out and clear about who they are and open about what they are, that just helps. There becomes a greater community of people who are out."

Cohen recalls being a "deeply closeted" kid in 1970s St. Louis and view-

• TURN TO ANDY COHEN, 2M

DIANE BONDAREFF/AP



THEATER

Weaving a tapestry of dreams

BY SERENA DAI
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Two years ago, Stephanie Ansin was lying on a couch sleepily listening to her artistic collaborator Fernando Calzadilla read a Chinese folk tale when fantastical visions of fairies in a pink cave and flying stone horses jolted her awake.

Ansin, founder and artistic director of The PlayGround Theatre in Miami Shores, had been looking for ideas to embellish into a new production. Inspired by her dreamland vision, she decided to bring it to the stage.

"I found these images rich," Ansin

says. "And I'm in awe and joy [of the Chinese culture]."

Working with Calzadilla, The PlayGround's resident artist, Ansin developed a script and designed a set for *The Red Thread*, a play based on an ancient Chinese folk tale. It opens in previews on Wednesday.

The production, which won a \$100,000 matching grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and involves a cast and crew of 20, doesn't make many sacrifices in its quest to

• TURN TO 'RED THREAD', 4M



PETER ANDREW BOSCH/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

FAMILY TROUBLE: Jesus Quintero is the weaver at odds with his eldest daughter (Kate Shine) over an exquisite tapestry he saw in a dream.



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MUSIC

O'Farrill returns to Cuba with his father's orchestra

• O'FARRILL, FROM 1M

on a mission to perform in Cuba with his father's band, the Chico O'Farrill Afro-Cuban Jazz Orchestra. Chico O'Farrill's name might not be universally well known, but his influence on jazz was large. When he wasn't writing for Benny Goodman, Charlie Parker or Dizzy Gillespie, he was composing now-classic pieces, such as *The Afro-Cuban Jazz Suite* and the *Manteca Suite*.

But O'Farrill, who died in 2001 at 79, was never fully recognized in the United States for his contributions. In Cuba, which he left in 1948, his legacy was even more obscure. By bringing the 18-member orchestra to perform during the Havana Jazz Festival in December, O'Farrill hoped to reintroduce Chico to Cuba and fulfill his dad's dream of one day playing in the land of his birth.

"When you play music it's a physical reality. You put vibrations into the air," said O'Farrill, who performs April 30 as part of New York's three-month iSiCuba! Festival. "It interacts with the environment. The way Chico was raised impacted everything that he wrote."

For Arturo, the physical and emotional connection to his father's music and to the island drove him to return, to play.

"Hearing it performed in Cuba was magical for me," he said. "It just felt right. It was like hearing it for the first time."

He was not the only one moved. Many Cubans who attended the tour's four concerts had never had a chance to hear Chico's music. Jim Seeley, the orchestra's lead trumpet player, has been performing it for 20 years, "but to play it here is just a really deep experience," he said.

Many people in the United States assume that the roots of jazz lie in New Orleans. The reality is far more complex. Cuba and other Caribbean countries played an enormous role in influencing the development of the genre in the early 20th



DAMASO REYES

A CLASS ACT: Arturo O'Farrill, right, encourages a group of young music students to improvise during a master class at the Amadeo Roldan Conservatory in Havana.

century. Musical greats from Charlie Parker to John Coltrane played in Havana's clubs and hotels before the U.S. embargo. Cuban musicians played and composed for U.S. audiences as well.

Even as he was bringing his father's music back, O'Farrill, who plays piano, felt himself connecting with the island. "This feels like home," he said. "Why? I didn't grow up here, but it feels like I've been here my whole life."

Along with the band, O'Farrill brought his wife Alison; teenage sons Zack, a drummer, and Adam, a trumpet player, and his Mexican-born mother, Lupe. Adam and Zack performed

with the orchestra in a piece that O'Farrill composed for the occasion called *Fathers and Sons: From Havana to New York and Back*.

The highlight of the trip may have been the band's first performance in Havana at the National Theater. As the musicians took the stage, and the concert began, a wave of calm seemed to wash over O'Farrill as the opening chords of his father's *Afro-Cuban Suite* filled the hall.

Afterwards, O'Farrill embraced his mother as she wept.

Despite a full schedule, O'Farrill and the orchestra spent two afternoons teaching master classes at the

Amadeo Roldan Conservatory in the heart of Havana. The teenage students face a rigorous classical training program, and few had studied jazz formally. The final night saw, at Lupe's insistence, Chico O'Farrill's name in lights on the marquee of the famous, 1,500-seat Mella Theater in Havana for the first time. The place was sold out. The program included the premiere of *Fathers and Sons*. Chucho Valdes, perhaps Cuba's most famous jazz composer and pianist, had agreed to play the piece along with O'Farrill's sons and several young Cuban musicians. O'Farrill sat, rapt, as Valdes and the others

played.

The Afro Latin Jazz Alliance, which O'Farrill founded and serves as artistic director, is planning a new venture: an ongoing educational exchange between U.S. and Cuban musicians and students to begin with a week-long series of master classes next December in Havana.

"We want to give these students and these musicians an opportunity to ... share their experiences and learn about each other's culture," Eric Oberstein, the alliance's executive director, said. "We are committed to cultivating the next generation."

For O'Farrill, the educa-

tional exchange is the true fulfillment of his father's legacy.

"We have so much to learn from these young musicians," he said, "and we have so much to offer them, too."

Playing in New York

The iSiCuba! Festival runs through June at various venues in New York. For more on the festival, go to <http://sicuba.org/en>.

THEATER

PlayGround Theatre weaves a tapestry of dreams



PHOTOS BY PETER ANDREW BOSCH/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

DADDY'S GIRL: Jesus Quintero with Christina Jun as the youngest daughter who supports her father's art and seeks to retrieve the tapestry.

• 'RED THREAD', FROM 1M

breathe life into Ansin's dream.

The Chinese-influenced music is original, composed by Luciano Stazzone. The dusty blue garments featured in most of the play are hand dyed. Long silk wedding costumes, custom-made to mimic ancient Chinese robes, feature a dozen gold-and-red patterns and are trimmed in beads. And the ceiling-to-floor wooden blinds that represent a tapestry, the driving object of the story line? Unable to find a domestic manufacturer, the production crew had them made in Spain.

In *The Red Thread*, Guairén, a weaver played by PlayGround regular Jesus Quintero, becomes obsessed with duplicating an exquisite tapestry that he has seen in a dream. But this consuming project forces his family into poverty. His eldest daughter, played by PlayGround newcomer Kate Shine, sick of being poor, convinces the middle daughter (Melissa Almaguer) to help her steal the tapestry just before it's finished. The youngest sister (Christina Jun) supports her father's art and seeks to retrieve the tapestry. Her journey across China — filled with love, life lessons and a flying stone horse — constitutes the play's overarching plot.

"The tapestry becomes a metaphor for community," Ansin says. "This one tapestry ends up magically reuniting [the characters] with their homeland."



DREAM JOB: Stephanie Ansin is founder and artistic director of The PlayGround Theatre.

Some of the magic may have blessed the play's production. Since the company started work, serendipity popped up here and there. On a trip to California — as far west as she could go, Ansin jokes — her hotel room was decorated with Chinese paintings and statues. Then, before Ansin headed to New York to find actors, a cousin called her: "Stephy! I had a dream that you were pregnant with twins!" And then Ansin, unknowingly, hired two actors with the same birth date.

"The mystical red thread connects two soul mates who are destined to meet," she says. "[It] will stretch or tangle, but it will never break. Well, isn't that what was happening already? The actors were destined to come here."

The nonprofit PlayGround has produced 10 plays since its 2005 opening, including another original production, *Inanna and the Huluppu Tree*, and adaptations of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *A Very*

Old Man with Enormous Wings. Ansin, 39, plans to take the company on a three-city national tour within five years and hopes that some day a New York theater will produce one of its plays.

Though PlayGround's primary aim has been to expose Miami-Dade schoolchildren to live performances through weekday matinees, Saturday performances of *The Red Thread* will be at night, a tactic aimed at helping the well-regarded "family" theater attract more adult audiences.

"What is a family?" Ansin asks. "Where does family end? You could come with your siblings or your parents or your aunt or uncle or whoever. Or you could come with a date. Family isn't just 3-year-olds."

If you go

What: "The Red Thread" by Stephanie Ansin and Fernando Calzadilla

Where: The PlayGround Theatre, 9806 NE Second Ave., Miami Shores, through May 27

When: Previews 10 a.m. Wednesday-Friday, opens 7 p.m. Saturday; weekend shows 8 p.m. Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday (no show April 24); weekday shows 10 a.m. Tuesday-Friday (some shows begin 10:30 a.m.)

Cost: \$20
Info: 305-751-9550, www.theplaygroundtheatre.com