

Performers to take audience into harsh lives of 'Anna in the Tropics' characters

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“Anna in the Tropics” by Nilo Cruz, the second theater production in Alfred University’s (AU) Division of Performing Arts 2014-15 season, opens in the C.D. Smith III Theatre Wednesday, Nov. 12 and will be performed nightly at 8 through Saturday, Nov. 15.

The play “poignantly and poetically” illustrates the yearning for meaningful lives of Cuban Americans working in a Central Florida cigar factory in the late 1920s. By blending plot and themes of the Russian novel “Anna Karenina” with the lives of these workers, Cruz transports his audiences with the beauty and power of his language.

Reservations are required and may be made by emailing performs@alfred.edu or by calling the box office at 607.871.2828. Tickets are \$10 general admission, \$5 for non-AU students and senior citizens, and \$2 for AU students.

“Anna in the Tropics” is directed by Stephen Crosby, professor of theater; stage design is by Tatyana Wilds, visiting assistant professor of performance and design.

The mind-numbing work of Santiago Alcaraz’s cigar factory is difficult. Making matters worse are the scorching Florida sun and stifling conditions. Santiago is succumbing to a gambling addiction and slowly losing his factory to his ambitious half-brother, Cheché. Cheché, anxious to speed production, pressures Santiago to replace the antiquated yet traditional hand-rolling system with modern equipment, threatening the workers’ jobs.

Ofelia, Santiago’s wife, wishes to stick with the tradition of hand-crafted cigars. For her, the workers are family. To alleviate the oppressive working conditions, she wants to maintain the long-standing Cuban tradition of using a “lector,” who reads aloud from newspapers and novels to the workers. Lectors, who held exalted positions in these factories, educated and entertained their listeners with news, commentary, and classic literature, helping them through their oppressive workday.

Ofelia sends for Juan Julian, a young lector from Cuba. Juan, elegant and charming, chooses to read Tolstoy’s novel, “Anna Karenina.” Unwittingly, he becomes a catalyst in the lives of his listeners for whom Tolstoy, the tropics, and the American dream prove a volatile combination. Cruz uses “Anna Karenina” to mirror life and art in this hot and steamy setting where passions thrive.

The cast for AU’s production includes: Andrew Hazer, a junior from Brooklyn portraying Santiago; Nazim Kourgli, a freshman from Alfred as Cheché; Chloe Theodosiou, a sophomore from Mahopac playing Ofelia; Rachel Romack, a senior from Candor performing as Conchita; Ms. Sam Faller, a freshman from York, PA as Marela; Danny Gray, a senior from Madison, WI performing as Juan Jillian; Jamal Welcome, a senior from Brooklyn playing Palomo; Lucas Rougeux, a sophomore from Niagara Falls portraying Eliades; Nathaniel Yard, a senior from Quakertown, PA playing Carlo; Vanessa Englerth, a sophomore from Rochester performing as Manola; Brian O’Connor, a sophomore from Chittenango as Peppino; and Julie Yendall, a sophomore from Tonawanda playing Pasquala.

Wilds designed “Anna in the Tropics” costumes, sets, lights, and projections. Art student Jason Dearing, a junior from Whitehall, PA, designed props. Performing Arts Division staff members Zach Hamm and Debra MacCrea are technical director and costume coordinator for the production, respectively. Co-stage managers are Samantha Piper, a senior

from Bath, and Niki Kimball, a sophomore from Farmington. Assistant stage manager is Abby Hurley, a sophomore from Barrington, RI, and salsa dance instructor is Daniel Gonzales, a senior from Scarsdale.

Crosby, actor, director, and writer, has worked professionally in New York, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, and in regional theater. He has appeared in film and on PBS television. Additionally, Crosby's stage credits include playing Oedipus in "Oedipus," Harpagon in "The Miser," Banquo in "Macbeth," Bottom in "A Midsummer Night's Dream," and Scrooge in "A Christmas Carol." He has performed and toured Alaska with the Fairbanks Shakespeare Festival.

Hamm has worked on dozens of productions along the East Coast, particularly in New York, North Carolina, and Virginia. He earned a bachelor of arts degree in architectural studies in art from Connecticut College-New London and a master of fine arts degree in technical theater production from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.

McCrea, costume shop manager, has over 30 years of experience as a spinner, weaver, and dyer. She has also worked professionally as a seamstress and costumer. She has taught natural-dyeing workshops for the Mid-Atlantic Fiber Association, Finger Lakes Fiber Arts Festival, NYS Sheep and Wool Festival, and the Pacific Conservatory of the Performing Arts.

Wilds, a theater designer and multimedia artist, earned bachelor of arts and master of arts degrees in art education from Kuban State University, Russia, a bachelor of fine arts degree in digital arts from Washburn University, Topeka, KS, and a master of fine arts degree in theater design from the University of Kansas. While attending school, Wilds was nominated for the 2012 U.S. Institute for Theater Technology Inc. Award for Young Designers and Technicians and won the Achievement in Costume Design Award from the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival Region V in 2012.

Playwright Cruz was born in Cuba in 1960 and immigrated with this family to the United States at age 9. He showed an interest in theater early on while attending Miami Dade Community College and eventually earned a master of fine arts degree at Brown University. His lyrical writing style mixed with his unique stage settings led to him winning two NEA/TCG National Theatre Residency grants, a Rockefeller Foundation grant, and a Kennedy Center Fund for New American Plays Award.

"Anna in the Tropics," 2003 winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, was widely regarded as a "long shot" for winning the award because it had not been seen in New York. However, according to Dominic Papatola, the chief drama critic of the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* and a Pulitzer drama juror, the strengths of Cruz's quietly absorbing play stood out even on the printed page.

"With Nilo's work, you can see it, taste it, smell it. It's all there." Cruz, responding to receipt of the award, commented: "By honoring my play 'Anna in the Tropics,' the first Latino play to earn the Pulitzer Prize in Drama, the Pulitzer Prize Board is not only embracing my work as an artist, but is actually acknowledging and securing a place for Latino plays in the North American theater."