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THE THESPIANS

Miami's theater scene may still be under-the-radar, but there are some visionary key players and organizations looking to change that.

BY DANNY BRODY



Given the hipness of Wynwood's visual arts enclave and the high-profile, international spectacle of Art Basel/Miami Beach, it may seem that theater and the performing arts have taken a back seat in Miami. However, there are several determined thespians here who want to change that and help position a strong performance scene that is both rooted in tradition and prone to experimentation.

A highly charismatic, ambitious and multitalented figure in the scene, Natasha Tsakos – who created the existentialist and gloriously playful "Up Wake" – feels that Miami has a chance to become a serious live theater town. Her piece was supported by the Carnival Center, Miami's embattled shrine to the performing arts, where it took place. "Miami has been very nurturing, especially the Carnival Center," she says, her enormous eyes and spider-like limbs seemingly tailored for the big stage. In "Up Wake", developed over five years, Tsakos plays a character named Zero, surrounded by 3D animated images that dance and move in intricate and precise harmony with her live-action performance. She points out that her "mission is to stay away from bullshit…the bickering and backstabbing."

NATASHA TSAKOS, DIANA LOZANO AND OCTAVIO CAMPOS. PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN KAZAR ASARE

"There are people here who are so open and willing to help," Tsakos adds, naming Ray Sullivan of the Miami Contemporary Dance Company, and especially Octavio Campos, whose "Bugchasers" was a recent controversial hit at the Carnival Center as well. "Octavio is always open to collaborating and offering artistic guidance."

Another big influence on both Tsakos and the performing arts scene as a whole is Diana Lozano, founder of Circ X, who, along with Campos, now teaches at Miami's New World School of the Arts. A protean traveling performance troupe, Circ X has also been commissioned by the Miami Light Project (another key organization within the performance realm in Miami) and the Carnival Center to create a fresh piece that will be performed next year at "Here and Now: 2008", a showcase of original works by South Florida visual and performing artists.

"Circ X combines the visceral edge of a nightclub performance with the sophistication and technique of trained actors and dancers," Lozano explains. Founded in 2002, Lozano sees a bright future for Miami and Circ X, which manages to pay the bills through many corporate events. "There was a time when I wanted to leave," she adds, "but after traveling so much with Circ X, I am excited about what is happening right here. Miami has some of the best raw talent – groundbreaking artists as amazing as anything you'll find in New York or Chicago."

But while some local artists and performers have had works commissioned or produced by the Carnival Center, the performing arts complex has also become the $400 million gorilla in the room. There is only so much money to go around, and everyone wants their share. Could this have an effect on the smaller venues, with little hope of major corporate gigs or sponsorships?

One such small but popular troupe is the Mad Cat Theatre Company, whose founder and artistic director, Paul Tei, sees a growing struggle for the few dollars that will remain for arts funding after this year's tax cuts in Miami and Miami-Dade County. "People here are willing to support art if the arts support themselves," he says, somewhat mystically. "Though when the Carnival Center cries poor, their support comes from the same organizations that fund Mad Cat and other smaller arts organizations. It's the same pot." Tei molded Mad Cat after John Rodaz's Area Stage on Lincoln Road, where he and Mad Cat actors Scott Genn and Erik Fabregat started their careers. Plays such as "Animals and Plants", "Everything Will Be Different", and the extraordinary "Mr. Marmalade" draw an audience that is "pretty hip and pretty young, even if they're in their 50s or 60s," Tei mentions. "Cool people you'd want to have a drink with after the show."

Of course, Area Stage closed eight years ago, displaced by Victoria's Secret, and in order to maintain a healthy performing arts scene, as the great Russian actor/director Constantin Stanislavski once observed, "First of all, one has to create a company." So, while Tei created Mad Cat (which hosts its plays at Miami Light Project's Light Box Studio) out of the ashes of those before him and admires the new troupes that have sprung up (such as Ground Up & Rising), he knows that there is only one way for the scene to continue to grow and thrive.

"In the early '70s, in Chicago, some artists stopped going to New York for work, and you had the birth of the greatest homegrown theater scene in the U.S., maybe the world. Now, while there still needs to be more of an awareness in the Miami area, there are more artists who are actually staying here," he observes, pointing to people like local playwright Marco Ramirez, whose "Mister Beast" premiered at Mad Cat in November. The 24-year-old won the Heideman Award for best short play, and, while he may have gotten his BFA at NYU, he is a graduate of Coral Reef High and is based in Miami. Adds Tei, with a glimmer of hope, "What happened in Chicago, I hope we can see that in Miami in our lifetimes."