

Get Unlimited Access To Local News \$9.99 Per Month

Subscribe
(http://offers.news-press.com/specialoffer?gps-source=BENBsep&utm_medium=exchange&utm_campaign=

Review: Lab Theater's 'Anna in the Tropics,' set in Ybor cigar factory, features all-Latino cast

Charles Runnells, Fort Myers News-Press Published 1:16 p.m. ET Sept. 18, 2018 | Updated 1:34 p.m. ET Sept. 18, 2018



(Photo: Paula Sisk)

Halfway through Lab Theater's "Anna in the Tropics," I was hooked. I hung on every word, completely entranced by this intoxicating story of love, lust and dreams in a 1920s cigar factory.

You could feel Nilo Cruz's Pulitzer Prize-winning drama barreling toward its unavoidable, shattering climax. "This is going to be sooo good," I thought.

And then, *poof*: It all evaporated like a cloud of cigar smoke.



David Pimentel and Carmen Rivera in a scene from Lab Theater's "Anna in the Tropics" (Photo: Paula Sisk)

That powerful climax never quite happened, thanks to a major prop failure that blunted the play's emotional impact at the worst possible moment. Instead of weeping silently in my seat, as anticipated, I just sat there bewildered and thinking: "Huh?" And I left Lab Theater feeling deeply unsatisfied.

These things happen, of course: It's live theater. But it's a shame.

Because despite that major issue, "Anna in The Tropics" is a potent and groundbreaking opener for Lab's 10th season: The semi-professional theater's first bilingual play runs during National Hispanic Heritage Month and is told in both English and Spanish with an all-Latino cast.

ADVERTISEMENT

Lab Theater assures me the prop issue has been resolved (I don't want to specify which prop, since that would be a huge spoiler). And if it's truly been fixed, that's great news for theater lovers in Southwest Florida.

Your guide to the SWFL theater season:[Here are all the plays and musicals happening in 2018-19, from Florida Rep to Barbara B. Mann Performing Arts Hall \(/story/entertainment/2018/08/15/theater-season-swfl-your-guide-all-2018-19-plays-and-musicals/956823002/\)](#)

More: [Fort Myers theater delayed. New Phoenix is now expected to open in January. \(/story/entertainment/2018/07/27/fort-myers-theater-new-phoenix-delayed-set-open-january/837636002/\)](#)

Without that issue, "Anna in the Tropics" is a memorable drama full of poetry and deep emotion. And it's also a fascinating dive into the world of old-school cigar factories in Ybor City, where Cuban factory owners hired lectors to read newspapers and novels to entertain workers while they hand-rolled cigars. No wonder it won the 2003 Pulitzer.

True, there are other issues in Lab Theater's production. The acting can be hit or miss, with some actors being much better than others. And another crucial problem: The show's difficult-to-use subtitles translating both the English and Spanish dialogue.

If you speak English, you're probably OK. Most of the play is spoken in that language, with only a few sections in Spanish. But if your primary language is Spanish, you're forced to make a choice: You can either read the subtitles, projected high above the stage to the far left; or you can watch the performances below. You really can't do both (not easily, anyway). The subtitles would have worked much better if they'd been lower and closer to the center of the stage, where the audience's eyes could easily flit back and forth between words and actors.



Lab Theater's "Anna in the Tropics" (Photo: Paula Sisk)

Even so, director Annette Trossbach and her cast manage to overcome most of those shortcomings and deliver a beautiful story about a cigar factory and its new lector, whose reading of the Russian novel "Anna Karenina" awakens hopes and dreams and major life changes in the employees.

The Cuban-American playwright's words are rich and flavorful like a fine Montecristo cigar. And despite some actors' limitations, the performances are mostly good enough to let Cruz's wonderful story and language shine through.

Take, for example, these words from lector Juan Julian (a suitably gentle and worldly David Pimentel), who's speaking about life in the city: "As my father used to say, living in the city is like living inside the mouth of a crocodile, buildings all around you like teeth."

Or this line about how "Anna Karenina" could save a bitter man whose wife ran off with the previous lector: "He needs to listen to another love story and let the words make nests in his hair, so he can find another woman."

Really, that's what "Anna in the Tropics" is all about: The power of art to inspire people and change lives, for both good and bad.

More: [Sanibel's Strauss Theater stops theater program while BIG ARTS leaders plot its future \(/story/news/2018/07/05/sanibels-strauss-theater-stops-theater-program-while-leaders-plot-future/759514002/\)](#)

More: [Gulf Coast Symphony's 2018-19 season: Midtown Men, 'Barber of Seville,' Star Wars and more \(/story/entertainment/2018/08/22/gulf-coast-symphonys-2018-2019-season-midtown-men-star-wars-and-more/1041619002/\)](#)

The story starts when new lector Juan Julian arrives in Tampa Bay's Ybor City neighborhood and causes all the women to swoon, including young dreamer Marela (a luminescent Chloe Tsai) and her sister Conchita (a subtle-but-effective Carmen Rivera), who's suffering through a loveless, mismatched marriage to Palomo (comedic actor Miguel Cintron in a rare dramatic role, performing here with complexity and deep layers of emotion). The women love Juan Julian for the beautiful words he reads and how those words make them feel, taking them away from the tedium of cigar-rolling and firing up their imaginations.

"I let myself be taken," Marela says in a nice bit of innuendo. "When Juan Julian starts reading, the story enters my body and I become the second skin of the characters."

Eventually, real life starts mirroring the famous story of "Anna Karenina," especially in the case of Conchita, who begins a love affair with Juan Julian. The two actors have simmering chemistry together, and it's hard to forget their steamy scene reading the novel, alone in the factory, while Juan Julian gently caresses and kisses Conchita from behind.

It's not literature. It's foreplay.

That scene is made even more powerful by the presence of Palomo, lurking on the platform above, seething as he watches what's happening below (despite having already admitted to his wife that he has lover, himself).

Meanwhile, the young Conchita daydreams of another life in Russia while factory owner Eliades' brother (Ronaldo Chico Guido) harbors a hidden lust for her. And Eliades (Ernesto Lasso de la Vega) gambles away his money and struggles with a midlife crisis as his wife Ofelia (Grace Delvalle-Hernandez) does the real work of running the factory.

I should also mention Michael Eyth's rough-hewn factory set: Raw-wood cigar-rolling tables and stairs; tobacco leaves drying on lines suspended against a brick facade; and a pair of tall factory windows overlooking the outside world. I just wish we could have seen the actual cigar-rolling process. It would have added even more realism to the story, but the audience's view is blocked by a lip on the tables.

In the end, there's a lot to love about "Anna in the Tropics," which makes its Southwest Florida premiere with this production. The play is packed with emotion and beauty and filled to the brim with love and lust, hope and despair, anger and sadness.

Despite its problems, this is probably one you don't want to miss. Especially if that pesky prop starts working.

Connect with this reporter: Charles Runnells (Facebook), @charlesrunnells (Twitter), @crunnells1 (Instagram)

If you go

What: "Anna in the Tropics"

When: Now through Sept. 30

Where: The Laboratory Theater of Florida, 1634 Woodford Ave., downtown Fort Myers

Tickets: \$28

Info: 218-0481 or [laboratorytheaterflorida.com](http://www.laboratorytheaterflorida.com) (<http://www.laboratorytheaterflorida.com/>)

Read or Share this story: <https://newspr.es/2DavuAj>