

**Book Review:**  
***Anna in the Tropics***

**Nilo Cruz**

by

Henry Pérez

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*Anna in the Tropics*, the latest play by the Cuban-American author Nilo Cruz, is the recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. The action of this two-act play occurs in (Ybor City) Tampa, Florida, the home of several Cuban cigar factories in the United States during the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. The action of *Anna in the Tropics* takes place in 1929, a time of economic upheaval due to the market crash. Among the themes of the play are: tradition vs. change; male perspective vs. female perspective; nature; literature; acting; and, of course, love. The title of the play alludes to its tragic outcome: the Anna of the title refers to Leo Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina* where the romantic triangle of the classic Russian novel and the tragic ending of the adulterous affair reappear in *Anna in the Tropics*.

In act one, the lone agent of change is Chester (Cheché), the half-brother of the cigar factory owner, who wants to do away with the position of lector (reader) in the factory and introduce machinery into the hand-rolled cigar industry. The rest of the characters want to keep the traditional lector, who reads aloud novels and newspapers while the cigars workers labor. Tradition, momentarily wins, due to the fact that the lector is paid by the workers and not the owner. Nilo Cruz, in an introductory note to his play explains: "After 1931, the lectors were removed from the factories, and what remained of the cigar rollers consisted of low-paid American workers who operated machines. The end of a tradition." Cheché, personally, resents lectors, because his American wife ran away with the previous lector in the cigar factory.

Act two shows the magic power of great literature since all the characters grow after listening to the lector read *Anna Karenina* and by discussing the meaning of the book according

to each other's point of view. The cigar factory owner and his wife have become closer than ever and their younger daughter, whose humorous reactions were child-like in the first act, now behaves like an adult. Their oldest daughter and her husband have also changed; their troubled marriage reflects the plot of the Russian masterpiece. In the first act, the problem with the oldest daughter's marriage is that the husband is having an affair. In the second act, it is the wife who has an affair with the new lector. Curiously, the lector's role becomes that of a sex surrogate who actually brings the married couple together again. Momentarily, the tragic ending seems altered; however, tragedy lurks in the mind of the only character who has not changed—Cheché. It is ironic that the agent of change in the cigar industry has not grown like the rest of the characters in the play; perhaps the author is differentiating between real personal growth and overblown advances in technology. Cheché takes revenge on the lector, possibly to make up for his lack of action when the previous lector ran away with his wife.

In *Anna in the Tropics*, Nilo Cruz has recreated a previous historical boom of Cuban workers and entrepreneurs in the United States and has done so in a poetic style that is delightful to read or listen to on the stage. The philosophical and psychological insights gained by the actors of the play can be equally instructive for the reader or spectator. And if this is not enough, reader and spectator of *Anna in the Tropics* look forward to dusting off their copy of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* from their bookshelf.

**Book Review:**  
***ReMembering Cuba: Legacy of a Diaspora***  
**Andrea O'Reilly Herrera, Editor**

by  
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If you are part of the Cuban exodus, like me, this heartfelt book can be very painful to read. It reminds you of what you went through in order to flee Castro's Cuba and the difficulties of starting a new life away from your home country, away from your own language and culture. However, as the saying goes "no pain, no gain." Professor O'Reilly Herrera must be congratulated for compiling the testimonies found in this text. *ReMembering Cuba* consists of testimonials from Cuban exiles who left their country at different times during the last forty-five years, people from different generations, and from different social and economic backgrounds. It also includes literary and artistic samples from several writers, painters, and photographers.

Professor O'Reilly Herrera dedicates this book to Heberto Padilla, the recently deceased Cuban poet and "all of those who have died, in exile, with the unfulfilled hope of returning to a free Cuba. In the "Preface," she explains how this project really started when she was approximately seven years old when she would beg her older Cuban relatives to tell their stories about leaving Cuba. Her quote from Edward Said describes the painful experience of exile perfectly: "For exile is fundamentally a discontinuous state of being. Exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past." In the "Introduction," O'Reilly Herrera discusses the differences and similarities between exiles who left Cuba as children and those who left as adults. Cuban writers Ricardo Pau-Llosa and Reinaldo Arenas explain the suffering that accompany abandoning one's country—thus maintaining the sorrowful tone of the book: "The exile knows his place, and that place is the imagination...." And "The exile is a person who, having lost a loved one, keeps searching for the face he loves in every new face and, forever deceiving himself, thinks he has

found it.”

Section I, “The Interior Exile,” includes several testimonials that emphasize the fact that many, who are still in Cuba, are already in exile within the island since they oppose the revolution and are treated as outsiders. This part of the book deals with the recollection of life in Cuba before escaping.

Section II, “Merely a Player,” narrates the experience of several people who left Cuba as children, several of whom were members of Operation Peter Pan (14,000 unescorted children left Cuba during the 1960’s with the help of the United States government and the Catholic Church. Once in the United States these children were placed with relatives, foster parents, or in orphanages.) Memories from this group are not only about Cuba, but also about the United States. Comparisons and contrasts between both nations abound in this section as these young exiles try to understand their double identity as Cuban-Americans.

Section III, “Crossing the Generational Divide,” exile is seen from the perspective of members of the same family, but from different ages. The struggle of the adults to find gainful employment is explored along with the equally difficult attempt of their children as they try to fit in school. Both generations struggle to succeed in the new culture without abandoning the ways of the country to which they hoped to return some day.

Section IV, “Snapshots,” the common thread in this part of the book is the family connections. The majority of the recollections pertain to the relationship between the older generation of Cubans who arrived in the United States as adults and their children who have been raised in the United States. Similarities and differences proliferate between these two groups; however, the tie that binds them is one of love.

Section V, “The Culture Wars,” emphasizes the linguistic war inside each of the bilingual

and bicultural Cuban-American writers and professors gathered in this part of the book. The “wars” being described, whether linguistically or culturally, are in constant state of flux, no winners or losers here, just a continuous struggle with two realities equally true and meaningful that produce a third reality, no longer just Cuban or just American, but instead a Cuban-American reality.

“The bite of Exile,” as the title implies, in section VI, deals with the pain involved with leaving one’s country, The pain is not only physical—it is also psychological. Scars have replaced the bleeding wounds, but the pain still lingers. Perhaps the pain is no longer physical, but it still hurts. This part of the book contains several recollections from the perspective of people at the end of their lives where the emphasis is on the loss caused by exile. A few, however, are younger and only in midlife; nevertheless, their memories are dark and brooding.

Section VII of *Remembering Cuba* is “Grace under Pressure” and it brings relief from the foreboding tone of the previous chapter. Several artists, musicians, and intellectuals explain how exile has given them a fertile subject to work on. The suffering of leaving Cuba and starting life from scratch has been positive in the sense of it being a never ending theme for their art.

The ending chapter of this tome “Inheriting Exile” summarizes the feelings of a new generation of Cuban-Americans. Most of them were born outside of Cuba, of Cuban parents; however through family recollection of the island, they are still connected to Cuba. This last section makes it clear that the book has not come to an end, that in the future, a second volume will be needed to deal with what will happen next, what will happen to Cubans in the United States after Castro.

This excellent book by Professor O’Reilly Herrera lends itself to be read and reread in order to understand the Cuban Diaspora and how many preconceived ideas about Cubans in the

United States are just plain stereotypes. There is no one story, there are as many stories as there are Cuban exiles in this country.

**Biography**

Henry Pérez, a native of Cuba, graduated from the University of Massachusetts at Boston with a double major in English and Spanish. He received his doctorate in Spanish and Latin American Literature from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Dr. Pérez is the former chair of the Department of Modern Languages at Manchester College in Indiana. He has taught at Henderson since 1991.