‘Anna in the Tropics’ play to debut Wednesday

By Bonnie Berger
Reporter
Passion, history and culture combine for an exciting production of Anna in the Tropics, opening at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday in Jones Theatre.

Set in Florida during the later 1920s, employees in a Cuban cigar factory are exposed to the everyday relevance of literature. In order to pass the long hours spent rolling cigars, a dashing young lector enters the factory to read to the workers, introducing them to ‘Anna Karenina’ by Leo Tolstoy.

“This is the end of an era as we’re seeing this lector … read Tolstoy to these factory workers,” said director Dr. Stan Denman, Baylor Theatre directing chair. “[The workers] are finding parallels in their own lives. The passion, the need for love and lust all comes to an explosive conclusion with the characters in the play.”

Written by Nilo Cruz, the play is set at the turn of the century when radio successfully enters the market. Cuban influences permeate the production, drawing the audience into a flavorful era of American history.

“This is a fantastic opportunity to expose Baylor campus to Hispanic American literature that we have not been able to in the past,” Denman said.

A surge in the theater department’s ethnic composition allows the production to ooz with authenticity, as native Spanish speakers tap into the strong Cuban influences.

“Expect to be wooed, to be touched, to feel happy and laugh a lot at certain parts.”

Chris Ramirez | Cast member

“It’s the first time Baylor’s really done that,” said McAllen senior Andrew Saenz, who plays the lector Juan Julian. “We [the cast] already know a lot of the culture since it’s part of our lives.”

Cruz originally wrote a merged English and Spanish script. The cast took utilizes this to add a flavorful twist.

“In order to make our production unique, we combine both scripts at time,” Denman said. “Even if you don’t speak Spanish, you can really understand what’s being said.”

Cast members expect the script’s unique duality to appeal to the greater Waco community. In conjunction with marketing endeavors for the production, Irving sophomore Chris Ramirez posted fliers in Mexican restaurants around town. Posters have been printed in both English and Spanish.

“It’s the perfect show to reach Hispanic audiences,” said Ramirez, who plays Santiago. “We’re hoping to bring in a new audience to Baylor Theatre.”

In addition to locally marketing the performance, students wholeheartedly embraced their roles.

“I really feel like with so many of these actors, it’s some of the best, most detailed work they’ve done,” Denman said. “It’s rewarding, not only as a director but as a professor at an educational institution, to see them grow like this, to have them start the rehearsal process at one place and have them surprise themselves by the end of rehearsal.”

Denman offered constructive advice to actors, yet cast members put personal twists on their characters.

“I play Santiago, a man in his 50s who owns the factory,” said Ramirez. “He has a lot of what the show represents: passion, pride and hard work.”

Getting into character was natural for Ramirez, who drew character inspiration from his family life.

“It’s my goal for the audience to see their fathers and grandfathers in Santiago,” he said. “I have fallen in love with this character … He’s such a lovable person. It’s a bizarre yet beautiful experience to play my dad on stage.”

Delving into characters also took time, exploration of external resources and coaching from Denman.

“I felt at the surface level my character was simple to play,” Saenz said. “[Denman] helped me find my depth. It’s so rewarding to build a character from scratch.”

Although the play contains entertaining and deep characters, adult themes appear which warrants a disclaimer. This is not a show for young children, Denman said.

“The reason we have that disclaimer is not because [the play] is incompatible with Baylor’s mission, but because a husband is having an extramarital affair and the wife, because she is neglected, her eye begins to wander, too,” Denman said.

“One of the main plots is how this novel [Anna Karenina] ignites the passion for both of them, passion initially outside the marriage and then ultimately within the marriage.”

Patrons can anticipate passion, drama and sprinklings of laughter from this upcoming performance.

“Expect to be wooed, to be touched, to feel happy and laugh a lot at certain parts,” Ramirez said.

The production also stirs up thought-provoking themes that may inspire personal reflection after the show.

“It’s got a little bit of every thing,” Denman said. “Hopefully it will make you think deeply and feel deeply as well.”

Anna in the Tropics runs Tuesday and Thursday and March 16-19 at 7:30 p.m. in the Jones Theatre, with a matinee at 2 p.m. on March 19.

Tickets may be purchased from the Baylor Theatre Box Office at 254-710-1865 or online at www.baylor.edu/theatre.

McAllen senior Andrew Saenz and Houston freshman Alexis German perform as Juan Julian and Conchita in Baylor’s upcoming production, Anna in the Tropics, Monday, in Jones Theatre.