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Gelber Explains 'Cuban Thing,' His Play on Castro

By LEWIS FUNKE

Almost a decade after Jack Gelber, an ex-mimeograph operator at the United Nations (night shift) achieved wide acclaim with "The Connection," produced off Broadway, he's finally making it uptown. "The Cuban Thing," a play by him about the Castro revolution, opens the Broadway season Tuesday at Henry Miller's Theater.

Mr. Gelber, who at 36 gives the impression of knowing his own mind as well as his relationship to the world around, is neither neurotic about his tardy arrival (he was sidetracked "dealing with Hollywood"), nor awed by his impending debut.

"I showed the first draft to David Balding, the producer," Mr. Gelber explained the other afternoon during a rehearsal break, "and he said, 'The play's about a middle-class family and the middle class supports the theater in this country, in New York. It could have wide appeal. Why not Broadway?' So I said, 'Why not Broadway?'"

Scars of Revolution

The validity of the judgment remains to be tested. Set in Havana, the play covers the period from the time Fidel Castro was waging his guerrilla campaign in 1958 until 1964, after the revolution had been consolidated and the members of the family had made their adjustments. "They've realized," Mr. Gelber said "that there can be no upheaval without scars."

Wearing a black turtle-neck shirt, tight khaki chinos and what looked like desert boots, Mr. Gelber, having just finished directing some scenes from his play, settled deep into a couch in one of the Henry Miller dressing rooms. He extended his legs across a chair and continued:

"No, I'm not a Marxist in the accepted sense that that is ordinarily thought of. Certainly not in the social reformer's sense, not in the sense that I'm active in any kind of insurgent group. But I think this Cuban revolution was necessary and I think that as an event it was grossly mishandled here, misjudged and misrepresented."

Mr. Gelber is a short, near match-thin man who at times speaks with a scholar's cool at others with an actor's flair for evoking the connotation of words. He said he became interested in Cuba on a visit there as a tourist in 1957. President Fulgencio Batista still was trying to maintain his dictatorial grip while Castro was stirring up things in Oriente Province.

"I traveled all over the island. Outside of Havana it was like a police state," Mr. Gelber said. He went again in 1964 to attend a theater conference and

"found a sort of kibbutz fervor."

"They were changing everything—man's relationship to man, education, housing—and I came back wanting to write this play about how and why it was."

For several years, the playwright recalled, he tried to write the play on a large canvas, politically motivated as he was, with historical figures included. But it kept coming out as a kind of pageant with "some agit-prop Brechtian stuff thrown in. I'm not good at this sort of thing and I gave up."

The play, currently giving

preview performances developed in 1967 after a third visit to the island. Mr. Gelber had been working in Hollywood, growing increasingly resentful that nothing he had done was being produced. He had gone there in 1965, after the failure of his third play, "Square in the Eye" ("The Apple" was his second).

"I think I must have written four or five scripts, maybe more, in the three years that followed, most of them originals, most of them on interesting subjects for people I respected and, I might add, I got paid a lot of money. Yet, no

matter how much they were liked, how much I was encouraged, they didn't get done."

Describing the genesis of "The Cuban Thing," he said: "I had known after the first try that the play that I wanted to do would have to come from the inside, out of character, be part of the whole human scene, not from my superimposed feelings."

"And even if I had to say things that were harsh about the revolution, which is very difficult for me to do, believing what I believe, I'd have to do it. As a playwright I realized this was necessary, be-

cause you can't knock down a straw man."

A deep sigh led Mr. Gelber to confess that he was tired. He hadn't had a day off since April 25 when he had gone to London to stage Arthur Kopit's "Indians" for the Royal Shakespeare Company's West End season. (His only previous experience as a director had been on Arnold Wesker's "The Kitchen" two years ago off Broadway.) After "Indians," he returned to plunge into preparing and directing "The Cuban Thing," for its pre-Broadway exposure during the Berkshire Theater Festival at Stockbridge, Mass.