



Carlos Prieto, Mexican-born and MIT-educated, is one of the most respected cellists in the world.

ARTES AMÉRICAS

CROSSING BORDERS WITH ART

WHEN PEBBLES WADSWORTH RECALLS a recent performance by cellist Carlos Prieto, there's fire in her eyes. Her excitement is about Prieto, his cello, and the geography that both the artist and the instrument have spanned. *(Continued on next page)*

“For 45 minutes he talked about his cello. He has a Stradivarius, and it was commissioned by a Mexican. I’ll bet nobody in the audience knew that. His cello went over to the Old World and lived with the Spanish royalty, and it played one of the first Haydn concertos. Eventually it came back to Mexico where Mr. Prieto has it today,” Wadsworth says.

entries went out, and a field of artists including Latin Americans and U.S. Latinos submitted proposals. A selection panel made up of artists, presenters, and agents from across the Americas had the difficult job of choosing the performers. Of the 10 people on the panel, only one slot was allocated to the University of Texas. The initial season included a variety of artists from a range of countries and disciplines,



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Wadsworth has a keen sense of such cultural and geographic contradictions. As Director of the Performing Arts Center (PAC) at the University of Texas at Austin, Wadsworth is devoted to bridging those contradictions, especially when it comes to Latin American culture and artists. When University of Texas President Larry Faulkner’s 1998 Strategic Plan called on the university to play a role in strengthening the relationship between the United States and Latin America, Wadsworth immediately recognized the important role that the arts could play in achieving his goal. A vision for ArtesAméricas was born: a program to break down cultural barriers and to foster understanding through the support and exchange of artists throughout the Americas.

Wadsworth noticed that because many talented Latin American artists were unknown in the U.S., they were given opportunities only in festivals based on their nationalities, thus lowering patrons’ expectations of their work. Wadsworth imagined a program that would integrate the work of Mexican and Latin American artists into the PAC’s regular season. Then Wadsworth’s vision grew. Why limit this experience to the University of Texas? Why not invite institutions around the United States and Latin America to participate as well?

“The arts cross every barrier”

Wadsworth enlisted the help of LLILAS to create a program with three components: 1) the presentation of Latin American and U.S. Latino artists at the PAC and throughout the Americas, 2) the creation and distribution of educational materials supporting these artists, and 3) the facilitation of educational and professional exchanges.

“Nick [Shumway, LLILAS Director] got it right away—the arts cross every barrier,” Wadsworth says. “We use the arts as a conduit and a catalyst to open dialogue.”

President Faulkner gave the program an immediate blessing. The result of this vision was ArtesAméricas: one part performance, one part resource center, and one part exchange program.

The First Season

Developing the first season took almost two years. First, a call for

including Ballet Folklórico de México, Amalia Hernández, and Tania Libertad—artists celebrated throughout Latin America but virtually unknown in the United States.

A vital component of ArtesAméricas is the development of comprehensive materials to supplement, contextualize, and extend the audience’s experience of the art forms presented and the culture from which they were derived. The materials are designed to serve as a resource tool for designing arts education, outreach, and cultural participation events surrounding performances. It seemed like a natural fit to harness the resources of the university: its libraries, LLILAS, and a vast knowledge base. Graduate student writers working with LLILAS Outreach Coordinator Natalie Arsenault and PAC Assistant Director Judith Rhedin produced introductory guides to countries and cultures of Latin America for the general community as well as teacher and student resource materials in accordance with national teaching standards. Latin Americanist faculty and students at UT were engaged to serve as reviewers.

“Educate, enlighten, entertain: this is the core of the PAC’s mission and at the heart of the partnership between LLILAS and the PAC,” says Arsenault. “ArtesAméricas provides LLILAS with a great opportunity to link its educational outreach to the performing arts ... What better way to stimulate interest in a culture than through music and dance? LLILAS provides the regional expertise, the PAC provides the artistic knowledge, and the audience comes away with an appreciation not only of the artistic quality of Latin American performances, but of the geographic, historic, economic, political, and social circumstances that produced them.”

According to Shumway, the program’s depth and breadth make it unique. “From the beginning, it was conceived as a Latin American program, including many different aspects of Latin America, and not simply an exchange program for artists or a program for bringing Latin American artists to the university.”

ArtesAméricas invited 52 institutions around the country, with venues both large and small, to be Presenting Partners. Founding partners like the Kennedy Center in New York and UCLA in Los Angeles quickly signed up, citing the opportunity to bring the artists to their communities and the quality and detail of the supporting materials.

Professional Collaboration

As part of the exchange program, ArtesAméricas has traveled to Mexico, Costa Rica, Argentina, and Brazil to hold seminars on arts management. The program also has traveled to Mexico and Latin America to assist theaters with other aspects of production such as lighting and sound.

For three years, ArtesAméricas has traveled to Mexico City for *Intercambio Experto* (Expert Exchange), a three-week lighting seminar held at the Palace of Fine Arts. With approximately 100 attendees each summer, the seminars allow arts professionals of all nationalities to share knowledge and collaborate through their craft and its tools. At a dinner at the end of the first trip, Wadsworth asked a group of participants from several countries what they thought had been the most important part of the program. “All of them said that it broke down preconceived barriers. These tech guys are tough guys, and now they’re all bonded.”

Bringing the Arts to the Community

Last year, ArtesAméricas and the Peruvian Cultural Association brought the 28-person dance company *Perú Negro* to inaugurate the new theatre at the Carver Center, an African American community center in East Austin.

The next day, *Perú Negro* did a youth performance on the UT campus for students in Austin and the surrounding areas. “We went out to a number of schools beforehand and did in-class workshops with teachers and students,” said Rhedin, “so it’s not just about coming to the arts and seeing a show—you have to learn something from it.” Christi Cuellar, ArtesAméricas Manager, puts it simply, “a performance isn’t really ArtesAméricas unless it has a community relations aspect.”

Artes in the Future

In 2006, ArtesAméricas is well established and in its third year of performances. It has earned sizable credibility with artists, patrons,

and Presenting Partners. Now, the program’s directors are using their experience and connections to develop the resources of ArtesAméricas. The program is facing big changes: rather than spend time and resources to help artists tour, ArtesAméricas is now refocusing on fewer, larger projects that can have a bigger impact in the communities.

Instead of relying on a selection committee to choose performers, ArtesAméricas is now working directly with the Presenting Partners to learn what genres, themes, and styles generate the most interest with their audiences. “Rather than push artists out there, we’re going to use our contacts with the Presenting Partners and with Latino artists to make the best fits,” Cuellar says.

Arsenault states, “LLLAS remains committed to educational outreach as part of ArtesAméricas. In summer 2006, we took 15 K–12 educators to Mexico for a seminar on the performing arts, and we want to expand that project into other teacher training programs—we want to take that experience to inspire other teachers to bring the arts, and ArtesAméricas artists and countries in particular, into more courses across the curriculum.”

The program also is supporting projects with residency opportunities or that encourage the creation of new work. Most recently, ArtesAméricas received a \$20,000 grant from the Texas Commission on the Arts to take the play *By the Hand of the Father*, written by Alejandro Escovedo, to UT Brownsville. Best described as a spoken-word performance set to live music, the show portrays five immigrant fathers raising their families on the border. The day before the show, actors held a dedicated workshop at an area high school, and students then attended the matinee performance. “It was amazing to see high school juniors and seniors sit still for 90 minutes,” Cuellar said. “They were maybe even more receptive than the audience that saw the evening performance.”

And relating is what ArtesAméricas is really all about. “If you understand each other’s culture, you’ll respect each other,” Wadsworth says. “That’s a very simple concept, but I believe in it one hundred percent.” ☀

Pebbles Wadsworth, above left, is Director of the Performing Arts Center at the University of Texas.

Some of the performers with ArtesAméricas have included Los Cenzontles, left, and Tania Pérez-Salas Compañía de Danza, right.

