

Book Review:
Anna in the Tropics

Nilo Cruz

by

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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.