

## Diego Romay

CEO of Teatro Nuevo Alcalá

Alejandro Romay, the renowned Argentinian businessman with investments in media outlets as well as theater venues in Argentina, is also credited with the reopening of the Alcalá Theater last January, after fourteen years of darkness. His son Diego, a producer and playwright, links the stakes in recovering the Old Alcalá to some magical circumstances which play on his father's memory longing for the theaters he once owned and which were destroyed one day by an intolerant mob in Argentina.

**P** What kind of business opportunity did the Romay family see when they acquired the Alcalá to remodel the building and restore its stage in 2000?

**R** I know this will sound as a contradiction, but for theater lovers as we are, it is hard to talk about it as a business because it is hard to think of it as business. To begin with, I believe we can say it is related to a whim of emotions and love towards the arts, towards the theater. Later on, it might become a business. Of course in the United States, they talk about show business. They just say there is no show if there is no business involved. But then, this becomes the question about which came first: the chicken or the egg. Finally, I believe this was a big dream for my father and a personal need to reclaim a deep pain lodged in a corner of his body since those hard times of repression in Argentina when his theater was burnt down. Then one day, as he was walking around here, he stumbled upon a theater which was falling apart, and that image must have appealed to his memory, to his emotions. I understand that in a way, it felt like revenge; a call to begin again. We are always starting a new path. Our goal is to produce great musical shows, great theatrical plays. Our theaters both in Argentina and in Spain compose an integral business structure because, in a way, when we open big musical comedies over there and have the possibility of presenting them in another venue, they become more profitable. You are able to amortize costs in a smarter way, thus getting a more profitable business. That's why it is necessary, and in this particular case it becomes interesting, to have the possibility of developing an integrated business operation in Argentina and in Spain.

**P** The Nuevo Alcalá starts its activities when the specific weight of cultural industries in our country are declining, as it was also the case in other markets, also in Argentina...

**R** Over there for us, it was really a paradox because there was a very peculiar phenomenon related to *Tanguera*. We opened *Tanguera* in January 2002, and in December 2001, just a month before the opening, Argentina suffered one of the most difficult socio-economic crisis in its history. We went through the fall of a Minister of Economy, the fall of a president, devaluation... the absolute cataclysm of a country, the destruction of companies, the lack of credit, people's money locked up in banks... a disaster. This was the situation for all of us Argentinians in the last quarter of the year 2001. At that point, we were about two or three months away of opening *Tanguera*, and the whole thing looked like pure madness. Stores were being burnt down in Buenos Aires, there were street protests with people clamoring for their money almost daily, paradoxically at that time *Tanguera* becomes a hit. This fact reminds me of some historical phenomena which occurred during World War II, in moments of the worst crises, people feel the need to find refuge in places where art may rejoice their hearts, dignify them in a certain way, help them make some sense out of the political, social and economic madness they are going through. Similarly, *Tanguera* was the answer to that. *Tanguera*, as other shows which opened at that time filled up the venues, sort of a recognition to all of us producers who

ventured to open new shows in spite of all the hardships. We as businessmen wondered how people could afford the tickets because their money was frozen in closed banks... Whatever little money they had, they spent on tickets to go to the theater because the theater undoubtedly conveys a message, a communication and helps people make sense of life. Therefore, you encounter an exceptional and wonderful phenomenon. I do believe that the harder the times, the stronger the theater's appeal.

## **WE OPENED TANGUERA IN BUENOS AIRES JUST WHEN ARGENTINA SUFFERED ONE OF THE MOST DIFFICULT SOCIO-ECONOMIC CRISIS IN ITS HISTORY**

**P** In Buenos Aires, you are the owners of the Broadway and El Nacional theaters which have resumed their activities about the same time as the Alcalá. What are the differences you notice in the theatrical activity between the two countries?

**R** There is not much difference. Argentina has a huge cultural history. I'd say that any differences are related to the marketplace. I mean, basically, the consumer's ability. It is obvious that in Europe, in this particular case in Madrid, stability or a moderate economic stability, though there is some type of crisis and recession which may happen periodically, people are consumers; people go out and pay for leisure activities, they buy entertainment. Spain is a country I didn't know much about, and as an Argentinian, I am amazed to go out in Madrid and see crowded cafés and restaurants where you need to have prior reservations in order to get a table. This does not happen in my country. Here people go out for lunch, go out for dinner, and go out for breakfast. They seldom eat at home... That is a surprise and it is related to the fact of a deep need of a market of affluent consumers, a market which attracts a huge amount of tourism. Unfortunately, Argentina does not have those economic characteristics. Argentina is a country which has suffered many blows, which has been destroyed by the politicians in power at any given time. As a result, the possibilities are limited to the internal market, to the people of a certain economic position who have access to purchase tickets for a movie, for a play, who can have dinner at a restaurant. But this is a very particular segment, a minority really.

**P** The Nuevo Alcalá opened its doors with *Tanguera*, a musical which has been a hit for eleven months in Argentina. Do you perceive any differences in the audience's reception in each one of the countries?

**R** Yes, the audience here is a bit colder than Latin American audiences for the most part. I'm not talking about the Argentinian audience, but rather Latin American ones –the Chilean audience, the Argentinian audience, and the Venezuelan audience– which have very distinctive traits. Here audiences are a bit colder, but it is still an interesting audience from the perspective of their sensibility towards the artistic project. I mean, when there is a product which touches their sensibility, they keep it, they absorb it and they love it forever. And they promote it, they understand it, they recommend it and this is really a vital lifeline for the theater. It's what we, theatrical producers, call the priceless "word of mouth." Spanish audiences love to recommend, they love to talk about what they like, what they love, what they want to see, and they will defend their choices. And that dynamics is quite interesting.

**P** You are the co-author and producer of the montage, which is the contribution of this musical to the genre?

**R** It's a great production. *Tanguera* is not your typical tango production. It was a big challenge, an important move by a creative group who dared do something totally different within the genre. Typically, the tango spectacles are shows with their own orchestra, five or six conventional, traditional couples. In *Tanguera* what makes this presentation unique and different is the fact that there is a story that gives meaning to the dance. The dance matters, the dance narrates a story through the performers' wonderful body language. That's the point, the dance narrates a story. And there lies its big difference. There is a conflict. The Greek of yore were the creators of that phenomenon that we now call theater. They are the ones who created tragedy. In *Tanguera* there is a conflict to narrate, there is a story that touches people's hearts. Besides, the production involves a huge display with period costumes, lots of people on stage -over thirty artists-, music specially created and conceived for the show, a unique lighting arrangement. This is a show that has a very poetic, very sensual, very attractive lighting which makes the story beautiful. And of course, impressive choreographies by Mora Godoy who is a very talented Argentinian tango choreographer. Therefore, this is a proposal which breaks away from the traditional model. A proposal which, in a certain way, infringes the traditional paradigm of tango.

**P** Which elements make it possible for *Tanguera* to touch people's sensibility on both sides of the Atlantic?

**R** The show has universal characteristics. Particularly, and I'm talking about Spain, tango shares a common root with Spanish history. It is clear that Argentina is a nation born out of the wonderful mix of immigrants from different nationalities, mostly Spanish people. The genesis of tango is born from the contribution provided by a lesser musical genre from Madrid: the *zarzuela*. It also benefitted from contributions of the *habanera*, the sentimental and sluggish music brought in by the sailors who sailed the commercial routes between La Habana and Argentina, and of course the influence of *candombe* brought in by the Black people who arrived in Río de la Plata as slaves. In brief, there is a mixture of rhythms that blend together and originate the tango, and in that sense, Spain is a fundamental piece in that development, in that transformative process which gives birth to tango. In this case, there is a very particular attraction between tango and the Spaniards because we are talking of a common history and this is a story which deals with immigrants.

## **WE DEAL WITH OUR THEATERS IN ARGENTINA AND IN SPAIN AS AN INTEGRATED BUSINESS STRUCTURE**

**P** Is Spain a good hub to export theatrical productions?

**R** Yes, of course, we are working on that angle, we are in business conversations with an important agency which will be representing the company in the United States in order to export our shows. To begin with, we have a lot of opportunities because Spain for me, in a sense, is a great shop window. We are in Europe, and this means an opportunity for many Spanish producers and businesspeople to get closer to us, stirred by this phenomenon and to get to know right here, in Madrid, a first-class show, and therefore be willing to develop business deals with us. We have already programmed a tour with *Tanguera*. We'll be going to Germany, to the Staatsoper Unter den Linden, which is a very prestigious opera theater, and the conductor there is a renowned musician very admired in Spain, maestro Barenboim who happens to be a fellow countryman. The tour is also planned for Asia in November, China, and Hong Kong... a number of other cities. And next year, we'll be visiting many cities in Europe and in the United States. In fact, we are planning to develop two simultaneous companies: one for the needs of the

European markets and the other, for the American markets. This show has tremendous possibilities. We are very happy and very grateful to the Spanish audiences.

**P** What do you think is the reason for this avalanche of musical shows on Spanish stages?

**R** It is something new in Spain and I believe it is just the novelty of it. This is a genre which had not had a real opportunity here... Well, it did have at some point, it is historical. I know there were musicals years ago, as the marvelous case of *Man of La Mancha*, and of course a hit presented on this very theater Alcalá, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, under the musical direction of José Antonio Carrión, and the participation of Teddy Bautista, president of the SGAE (Spanish Society of Authors and Publishers), in one of the main roles... Yes, there is a history, there is a tradition. This country has welcomed some musicals and many interesting things have been developed. But after many years of absence of this genre, this is sort of a new phenomenon which returns supported by theater producers and powerful companies ready to invest a lot in order to have musicals with the same type of montage of those products presented in the United States or in London. And this is a surprise, to be able to see high-quality products with wonderful montages and displays. Of course this is unique, but we must be very careful at the same time. I think that both Argentina and Spain are countries which defend fiercely their language, countries with a very particular idiosyncrasy; therefore, it is necessary to develop products tailored to their identity and their needs. That's why, and pardon me for this harsh statement, you cannot buy a product by McDonald's. I don't think that going to the theater in Spain can be compared to that. I do believe that if producers are smart enough to develop castings and adaptations closer to the Spaniards' heart, the proposal may be very interesting.

### **THE AUDIENCE HERE IS COLDER THAN LATIN AMERICAN AUDIENCES, BUT IT IS VERY SENSITIVE TO THE ARTISTIC ANGLE**

**P** Your company has an important competitor here: the Corporación Interamericana de Entretenimiento (Inter-American Entertainment Corporation) which successfully presents one musical after the other on Spanish stages...

**R** Well, we don't really consider CIE as a competitor. We come from the entertainment world of television. My father was a TV and radio mogul. Therefore I can tell you there is an important gap between what is considered competition in theater and in television. In television, competition is cruel, it is really hard. And those of us who are knowledgeable in the world of theater, we say that there is no competition in theater because there is always room, there is always the possibility to present and to see new plays or revivals. In fact, I believe the more offer there is, the better it is for the audiences, and the more projects producers dare to develop, the better it is for the theatrical market. Today, you can see *Tanguera*, and tomorrow I recommend you go see *Phantom of the Opera*. In fact, I'm going tomorrow. I also recommend you *My Fair Lady*, as well as *Cinco mujeres punto com*... In my opinion that is the essence of theater: to create a market, an atmosphere, a habit, a context.

**P** What musical productions endorse a trajectory initiated by the Romay family in the 1960's?

**R** Definitely, ours is a long trajectory, we've practically been involved in everything in Argentina from the very beginning... I'll just talk about the last period because in the first theatrical period which started in the 60's, the titles we produced are too many to enumerate, to name just a few: *Chicago*, *A Chorus Line*, *Cabaret*, and *Fiddler on the Roof*... We've produced about everything

related to musical comedy. Since we returned –after the sale of Canal 9–, as my father likes to put it, to our first love which is the theater, we opened *My Fair Lady* that became a hit, *Saturday Night Fever*, *Little Shop of Horrors*, all of them important musicals which have been big hits in Argentina. As a matter of fact, the revival of *Fiddler on the Roof* is among the titles we want to produce again. There are many titles, many of those are theatrical plays, not just musicals.

**P** You announced your desire to turn Madrid into Europe's Broadway. Do you still think this is a realistic possibility?

**R** I do believe in Europe's Broadway. At this time, there are other interesting markets in Europe for musical comedy which are being exploited successfully. Spain is not unique in this aspect. Both the United States and London are open now to sell the essence of their musical comedies or their theatrical plays. This is something which would have never happened ten years ago. So it's time to consider why it is that plays are coming to Spain, musicals as *Phantom of the Opera*, or even wonder why they are showing *My Fair Lady* in Spain. They come to Spain because without any doubt the United States and London are going through a particular time of crisis. Those two are very strong theatrical markets which have held great products and didn't feel the need to go into other markets to make money. Their venues were very profitable, they were strong and interesting tourist markets. Nevertheless nowadays, as part of a smart change of strategy, they begin to sell because they are going through difficult times as well. My personal opinion is that the theater in the United States and in London lacks creativity nowadays. The fact is that all the great shows produced lately, such as *The Lion King*, are based on successful movie products. Before there was a whole generation like Cameron Mackintosh's, which gave us *Phantom of the Opera*, *Cats*... but the situation has become difficult nowadays.

**P** The Romay family theaters suffered two bomb attacks in the 70's and 80's. One of the theaters was about to open *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and the other was about to present a satire about dictatorship. What does a stage representation contribute to the conquest of freedoms?

**R** Everything, absolutely everything. I believe theater is an expression of absolute freedom. The problem is mankind, human beings, the ones making theater, not theater as an independent and separate phenomenon from people. I believe human beings have the choice to be free at any given time and it is a choice they can make in any sphere of their lives. Theater is an expression, a way of talking, a way of narrating our troubles, our hardships, and a way to review our human conflicts. In that sense, I think it is the great opportunity for human beings to find an exit and of course, they can benefit from it or they can throw it away as so many other things, but it is a great deliverance. I believe it is a great opportunity which of course depends upon what human beings choose to do with their lives because we can just fall into saying whatever, and that's okay too, or we can profit from the theater as a way to reflect on things, to ask questions, to generate doubts, to talk about life's ambiguities, about black and white, about right and wrong, about justice and injustice. They are all themes which are permanently within reach and which have the possibility to be constantly reviewed, so in that sense I think the theater, as a massive form of art, has a fundamentally critical role.

**P** Do you believe it is mandatory to produce theatrical plays with a critical weight?

**R** I'm not saying the theater needs to do social criticism, what I'm saying is that in any cultural act, we get the basic problems of human beings, and it can be dealt with in the entertainment business as well. Otherwise, you could think "Okay, the discourse is cultural," and that's not the point. In my opinion, culture is a great conversation where anything can be discussed, anything

might be culture. That's why I say that it doesn't deal with social criticism only. The point is that social criticism also appears in entertainment, in leisure, as well as in other type of expressions.

## **BOTH THE UNITED STATES AND LONDON ARE NOW OPEN TO SELL THE ESSENCE OF THEIR MUSICAL COMEDIES BECAUSE THEIR MARKETS ARE ALSO GOING THROUGH A TIME OF CRISIS**

**P** The Nuevo Alcalá has two venues, one for the staging of musicals, and the other for theatrical plays. Is there an opening day for the María Guerrero venue?

**R** It will be ready by the beginning of the season, in September. The space is almost finished. In the María Guerrero space, we'll open *Closed* as the first play, but right now we have five important titles in the works. We've chosen this play to start because it is the one that is mostly done in form and design. At the moment, we are working on the final steps of its casting. The goal of this venue is to produce important theatrical plays, great interesting dramatic plays, though comedy could have a space there as well. It is a very particular venue ideal to develop pieces with three or four characters. There are 300 seats, so obviously we are limited in physical space, nonetheless we'll present important things responding to the stakes and the montage. It will allow us to develop wonderful, interesting plays which have been awarded prizes worldwide. The playwrights are eager and hopeful of finding their place here in Spain, in Madrid.

**P** From your experience as a producer and a playwright, how would you rate the current creative moment in our country?

**R** I'll be very humble about the answer to your question. I feel very young in this market and I'm getting to know it by observing it very attentively. I'm researching, I'm learning, so I cannot really answer your question. What I can say is that I am witnessing the existence of a cinematographic phenomenon in spite of the fact that the industry is quite hurt and it is going through a hard time in which there are no financial credits and there are difficulties to shoot. But there are great creative teams in Spain and we'd like to take advantage of the opportunity to have Spain develop products which may be attractive to other markets.

**P** The Nuevo Alcalá is also home to the Manuel de Falla Conservatory. Is there much to do in relation to the development of the future protagonists of musical comedies in Spain?

**R** Yes, but the risks taken by these companies in favor of musical comedies have opened a hopeful market for many young people who know how to sing, others who know how to dance, and still others who deeply love the theater as a way of living. I believe musical comedies open to all of them a special market to integrate these disciplines which are merged in musicals: singing, dancing and performing. Therefore, I believe there is big market eager to learn and which is favorably disposed to develop all of this, and that makes me very happy because it gives us the possibility of shaping new people, new generations. We are now in the stage of planning the operation of our conservatory, we are deciding on study programs and their design and curricula. At the moment, thanks to the success of *Tanguera*, we have opened a tango academy which is... well, right now it is a passion. I don't know if this is a direct result of the musical, but people are so enthusiastic that they register for classes. The truth is that we can hardly handle all the requests.

## **SOCIAL CRITICISM ALSO APPEARS IN ENTERTAINMENT, IN LEISURE, AS WELL AS IN OTHER TYPE OF EXPRESSIONS**

**P** Will it be possible for your father Alejandro Romay to uphold here the title of "Tsar" which he accomplished after 50 years of work in media, culture and entertainment in Argentina?

**R** He was called the Tsar of Media, I don't know if that title was given to him by journalists. I didn't assign it to him, but beyond that title, my father is a great creator; his creative skills are innate. He is a great producer, I am not just talking about the man who produces theater or television, but I rather mean a way of living. He is a man who produces artistic events, events related to social life and to ways of communication with other human groups. In that sense, I think that is exactly what we'll be doing here, we'll transmit that emotion to the Spanish audiences with products which hopefully will be well liked here and will be attractive to the audiences

**P** Are you considering any possibility of diversification of your business in Spain?

**R** I don't think so, at the moment we are not considering getting into other fields. But, well... who knows. I cannot anticipate anything. Today we are here in the theater and we are very committed to it. There is quite a lot of work to do.