

Meet Cuba's top detective writer, incognito at home

Detective fiction fans and literature buffs worldwide love Leonardo Padura; some watch his sleuth Mario Conde on Netflix. But back home in Communist Cuba, the author is virtually unknown. "I am semi-visible," the grey-haired writer, 61, tells AFP with a smile. He has spent the morning smoking and drinking coffee while working on the latest Conde novel in the Havana house where he continues to live and work. "I very rarely appear on television in Cuba. I rarely appear in the media. But I have lots of readers."

Cuban 'Tolstoy'

Padura won international acclaim for his 2009 book "The Man Who Loved Dogs," a historical thriller about the agent who assassinated Soviet exile Leon Trotsky. A politically loaded tale for an author living in Communist Cuba, The New York Times likened it to the work of the Russian greats Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky.

But Padura is perhaps best known for

the series of novels starring his hard-drinking, heavy-smoking Havana detective. Lieutenant Conde was immortalized last year in a Netflix original mini-series. But with little internet access on the island, few Cubans are likely to see it.

With thousands of books sold and prizes under his belt, Padura could live comfortably abroad if he wanted to. His novels have been translated into 20 languages. He spends four months a year abroad for publishing commitments. But Padura says there is only one place where he can write: his home neighborhood of Mantilla. Dressed in shorts and sandals, he tends the banana and lemon trees in the grounds of the house, Villa Alicia, that he shares with his wife Lucia. He even repairs the brickwork, with the help of a builder friend.

'Ideological problems'

Cuba's regime repressed writers and intellectuals in the 1970s for criticizing the Communist revolution. "They were silenced

and sidelined," Padura says. He was not writing during that period. Like many Cubans-including revolutionary leader Fidel Castro himself-he had dreamed of becoming a baseball player.

He worked for the Communist state media in the 1980s and 1990s. But later he became what he calls one of the government's "usual suspects." Officials once judged from his work in a culture magazine that he had "ideological problems," and sent him to be "re-educated" at another publication. Even there he defied pressure and carried on "writing what I wanted," he says.

Searching for answers

Artistic life became freer in the 1990s, even as the economy plunged, after the fall of Cuba's Communist protector, the Soviet Union. Now Cuba is gradually opening up its economy and foreign relations.

But uncertainty hangs over its warming ties with the United States under President

Donald Trump. With one eye on history, Padura notes that sales of George Orwell's dystopian allegory "1984" reportedly rose in the United States after Trump took office. "People are not finding answers in politics," Padura says.

"Some people go to church to pray and find answers there. Others read and find answers in literature." With his reflections on nationalism and totalitarianism and his allegorical echoes of Soviet themes, Orwell in his time touched on some of the same subjects that Padura is covering.

A small, devoted local readership snapped up Padura's books at the recent Havana Literary Festival. But another planned event-the presentation of a new edition of "The Man Who Loved Dogs"-was canceled by authorities without explanation. Padura is used to being largely overlooked by the country's media. But he insists that he will not leave his country. "Without Cuba, Leonardo Padura the writer would not exist," he said. — AFP



This file photo taken on March 18, 1997, shows a man displaying a T-shirt tribute to rapper Biggie Smalls aka The Notorious B.I.G., as friends and fans lined the funeral procession route through his old neighborhood in Brooklyn. — AFP

Tributes 20 years after death of The Notorious B.I.G.

The rap world paid tribute Thursday to one of its defining figures, The Notorious B.I.G., 20 years after he died in a still murky shooting. Diddy, a fellow New York rapper who was one of the slain rapper's proteges, marked the anniversary with an Instagram call for fans to recite their favorite Notorious B.I.G. verses and post the cover versions online.

Diddy wrote that the artist-also known as Biggie Smalls or, after the title of one of his songs, Big Poppa-was "the greatest rapper of all time." He described his first meeting with Biggie at a soul food restaurant in Harlem, saying, "The first thing I remember was how big and black he was," in contrast to many of the rappers who had gone mainstream by the 1990s.

Among the artists who posted tributes was the rising Canadian rapper Belly who gave his rendition of the opening verses of Biggie's "It Was All a Dream." Biggie, whose real name was Christopher Wallace, was shot in an SUV as he visited Los Angeles on March 9, 1997, with his murder remaining officially unsolved. Speculation immediately rose that his death was linked to a feud between East Coast and West Coast rappers that had been simmering for years, although some music historians say the coastal rift was exaggerated for commercial reasons. His death came less than a year after Tupac Shakur, the legendary rapper from the Los Angeles scene, was himself gunned down in Las Vegas.

In a grim anniversary tie-in, a memorabilia dealer has put on sale the cars in which Tupac and Biggie were shot. In a sign that they rival each other even in death, each car is for sale for the same price — \$1.5 million. The dealer, Moments in Time, said that a family had bought the SUV in which Biggie was killed and did not know of its history until a detective informed them in 2005 that it may be needed for the investigation. — AFP

Broadway musical celebrates unsung Canadian 9/11 heroes

On September 11, 2001 they quietly provided refuge to nearly 7,000 anguished airline passengers. Nearly 16 years later, ordinary Canadians from Newfoundland are the heroes of a musical making its Broadway debut. On that terrible day, 38 jets landed at Gander airport just minutes apart when US airspace closed after the Al-Qaeda plane strikes on New York, Washington and Pennsylvania, which killed nearly 3,000 people.

Gander may once have been a busy refueling base for trans-Atlantic flights, but those years were long gone by and the airport had never known such a frenzied pace of arrivals. Thousands of residents mobilized to help the trapped passengers, some forced to spend more than 20 hours on planes before being allowed to disembark. The ensuing days of cohabitation left an indelible impression on everyone.

"The first day, these 7,000 people that landed were strangers. And after five days, it was like 7,000 people added to your family," recalls Gander mayor Claude Elliott, who is stepping down this fall after 21 years in the job. But if it might be easy to imagine such fraught days being turned into a book, a film or even a play, a musical was less easy to imagine.

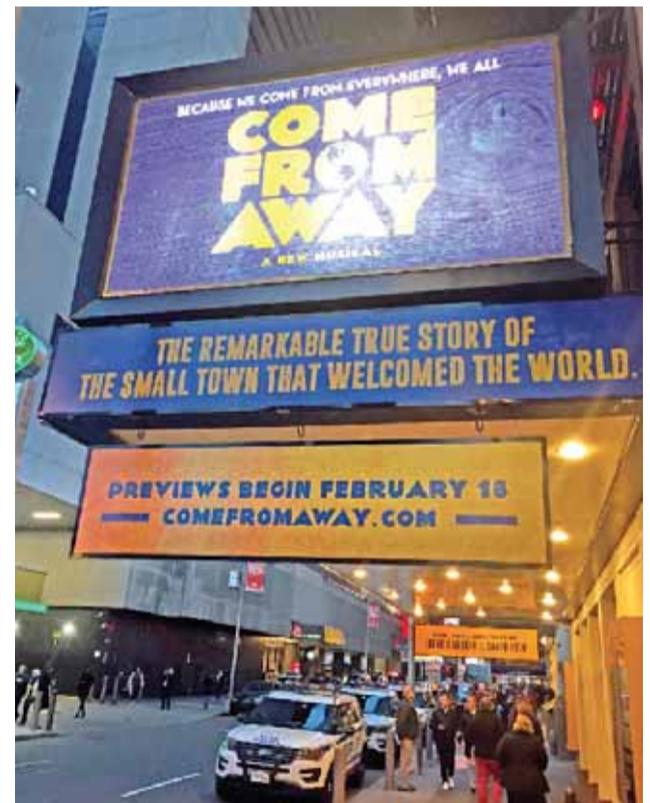
When Elliott first heard that two Canadian writers were working to turn those frantic days into the plot of a musical, he had his doubts. "It was a little bit scary at first," he admits, not least because the mayor's character is so central to the cast. But writers Irene Sankoff and David Hein have turned dozens of interviews into "Come From Away," a work faithful to the atmosphere of those five extraordinary days. Each actor plays at least two roles, often that of a Gander resident and an airline passenger.

'Something nice'

The musical, which makes its official Broadway debut Sunday-after successful trial runs in San Diego, Seattle, Toronto and Washington-has deftly avoided pathos and is peppered with a light comedic touch. The songs are less flamboyant than some of Broadway's big hitters, the music is subdued, the orchestra sits on stage rather than in the pit, and there is a Celtic influence and a disheveled tone that do much to capture the mood. Elliott says he loves the end result.

"It's first class," he says. "It's certainly telling the story that happened in Gander. It's right on." He saw it three times in Canada, and is planning to attend the show twice in New York, where Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is also to take in a performance on March 15. The underlying message of kinship between citizens from all over the world is a prescient theme in the context of the global refugee crisis and Donald Trump's protectionist anti-migration policies.

The passengers, especially Americans returning from overseas,



The Musical "Come from Aways" plays at the Gerald Schoenfeld Theatre on March 9, 2017, in New York. — AFP

"needed a lot of help, food, clothing, but most important, they needed love and compassion," recalls Elliott. "A lot of American passengers were wondering what kind of country they were going back to. We gave them that reassurance that goodness and kindness will prevail every time over hatred," he tells AFP.

The writers avoid the trap of cliches by showcasing the tensions, frustrations and impatience, but also prejudice with a Muslim passenger who arouses suspicion. They also include the story of one of the airline pilots, Beverley Bass, who tells the audience about being a woman in a man's world and the pitfalls she needs to navigate to become their equal. "A lot of people learned a lot of things about life," remembers Natasha Gagarin, 41, a distant cousin of the Soviet astronaut and who was a United stewardess on one of the last planes to land on Gander that day. "It was a horrible day, but something nice came out of it," she says. — AFP