REVOLUTIONARY
in RESIDENCE

TWO REVOLUTIONS

Curiosity uncovers a personal thread between America's quest for independence and Cuba's 20th-century revolt

BY CHAZ MENA

PORTRAIT BY DARNELL VENNIE

Like "Joseph K" in Kafka's *The Trial*, my father hadn't a clue when or how he'd veered from the good graces of the authorities. He had no inkling why his classes had been suspended. But surely, he thought, the Cuban Revolution would uphold freedom of expression and inquiry, as it promised.

Then came the dinnertime phone call:

-Yes?

-You've said some things in class. They're taking you east to a re-education camp tomorrow morning.

-Who is this?
-A friend.
-Why have you called me?
-I'm a friend.
-What is your name?

The caller hung up. It was 6:30 in the evening.

Mom, Dad and my older sister, then just 7 months old, waited until dark, then got into their tiny Ford Anglia. They left the lights on in the house. Left the radio playing, the television screen on to stave off suspicion from the neighbors who were, by then, officially designated vanguards of the revolution — neighbors were telling on each other by 1962 in Cuba.

This would be an all-night drive from Camagüey Province to the capital city of Havana. There, they'd get a tourist visa to the United States, promising to return in a fortnight. "This'll all blow over by then," my father thought. The authorities would realize they'd made a mistake. He'd make a call, straighten it out, continue teaching and earn his doctorate in economics.

Dad was forever grateful to the country that opened its arms to a family forced to disappear into the night, leaving everything behind in their Ford's dusty wake. Within two years, my family members were naturalized U.S. citizens. They instilled in me a wonder about America's durability: America is always in a state of flux and development yet always returning to its Bill of Rights even as it reforms. For people like my parents, the United States of America was a shining city on a hill.

But they also had great pride in Cuba, its historic yearning for freedom and its hardworking people. They wanted me to understand Cuba's past.

My parents told me how in 1781 Havana merchants loaned monies and that the city's women even donated their jewelry to the French army and navy sent to bottle up British forces in Virginia.

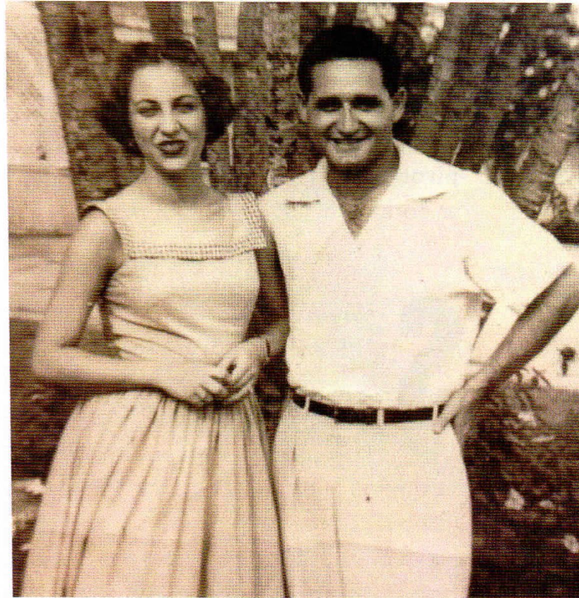

PHOTO COURTESY OF CHAZ MENA

Chaz Mena's parents, Carmen and Carlos Mena, wanted to be sure their American-born son understood Cuba's past and its contributions to America's beginnings.

A French fleet, battered after fighting the Battles of Fort Royal (off Martinique) and Chesapeake, needed refitting and without Havana's loans, it couldn't have sailed in time to check British Lt. Gen. Charles Cornwallis at Yorktown.

That was enough to pique a 12-year-old's imagination as he listened to his parents on a Miami porch. Had people like my parents participated in the birth of America? With a master's degree in fine arts from Carnegie Mellon, I decided to brave the New York acting market and soon became busy. But I never lost interest in 18th-century American history and the early republic.

Then a board member from the Florida Humanities Council approached me about writing one-person plays that would introduce historical Floridians to community centers, schools and universities. This would culminate in playing the likes of José Martí, a Cuban poet and patriot; the Osceola, the brave Seminole; and Pedro Menéndez, unsung founder of St. Augustine, the oldest continuously occupied city in the Nation. My research work was later recognized with a John C. Pace Visiting Scholar Award from ›

the University of West Florida to study with UWF historians and archaeologists. My goal was to research Bernardo de Gálvez and his siege of Pensacola, a pivotal battle that led up to the surrender at Yorktown.

Soon after the Spanish occupied French Louisiana, the first successful rebellion in what would become the United States occurred — not at Concord and Lexington but at New Orleans. French Creoles resisted their new Spanish masters, who had acquired the province in 1763 from France after the end of the Seven Years' War.

The dissent came to a head late on Oct. 28, 1768, when Spanish Gov. Antonio de Ullóa and his pregnant wife were forced to leave on a fast schooner to Havana, as angry French Creoles, from whom he never won loyalty, rioted in New Orleans. They appealed to Louis XV of France to take back the territory, but that request was ignored. Instead, the Spanish returned with more soldiers and a harsher military governor, cracking down on further rebellion.

After a brief period of military rule and a transitional government, a young battle-tested colonel named Bernardo de Gálvez became governor in 1777. The 30-year-old son of a Spanish general and viceroy was a friend to the French Creoles upon arrival. Almost immediately, Gálvez began strengthening Louisiana's military force and taking action against British smuggling and blocking their access to ports.

Gálvez was soon corresponding with the likes of Patrick Henry, John Jay and other members of the Continental Congress. He secretly allowed American ships to fly the Spanish ensign flag, shielding them at times from British attack. The small vessels of a soon-to-be new Nation found safe harbor in New Orleans. From there, supplies were sent up the Mississippi River to the Continental Army at American-held Vincennes. At the same time, clandestine supplies of gunpowder, small arms and uniforms would begin at the Spanish port city of La Coruna, then move on to Havana, across the Gulf of Mexico to New Orleans and head up the Mississippi into the Ohio Valley.

When Spain declared war on Great Britain on June 21, 1779, Gálvez was ordered to prepare to defend New Orleans from British attacks. Instead, he began a brilliant offensive against British forts to the north at Manchac, Baton Rouge and Natchez, linking the lower Mississippi with the Ohio Valley where American Gen. George Rogers Clark was well ensconced. Within weeks of declaring war, Spain had wrested a huge swath of land in North America from the British. By 1781, the only British presence in the Gulf was at Pensacola.

The Spanish, with help from the French, sought to unseat the British in the Gulf of Mexico and transform it into an Allied lake that would inevitably tilt sea power in favor of the Americans.

One of the most complex battles of the Revolutionary War began on March 9, 1781. After weeks of bitter skirmishes, British defenders from atop the heights of Pensacola saw trenches being dug as the Spanish inched their way forward. On May 8, a Spanish grenade landed in the fort's powder house and British Commander John Campbell saw the Queen's Redoubt, the first of three lines of defense, go up in a devastating blast. When Spanish troops scrambled up to the ruined fort bringing their heavy cannon with them, Campbell realized his position was untenable and he raised the white flag. On May 10, 1,100 British prisoners crowded onto ships bound for Havana,

to be exchanged or repatriated. The Battle of Pensacola allowed for the final strategy of the war to be put into motion. The British had to be blocked by sea while hemmed in by land.

The siege at Pensacola saw combined branches of French and Spanish services, integrated with foot soldiers — known as regulars — of many nationalities and ethnicities. The bulk of the invaders were peninsular: Spanish regulars from Iberia in white muslin uniforms best suited for fighting in the Tropics. They were joined by the Hibernian Regiment of Irish volunteers, a battle-hardened elite corps of the Spanish Army. A Catalan regiment of volunteers fought, as well as a regiment of regulars from Flanders. Native Americans fought on both sides. French Creoles, white and black, by then stolid veterans who worshipped Gálvez, stood with their governor at Pensacola.

Months later, Washington's Continental Army with a smaller French force under Comte de Rochambeau would execute the most magnificent march of the war. The Continental Army had transformed itself into an effective, well-oiled machine. Six years earlier, these men had been farmers and yeomen, fishers and mechanics, whalers and printers, shopkeepers and students. Now, those who had marched more than 600 miles in the campaign would defeat Cornwallis, effectively ending the war.

The siege of Yorktown is well celebrated; the siege at Pensacola is not. The Battle of Pensacola was the culmination of a western campaign initiated by Gálvez. Early, small victories made by Spaniards and French Creoles — white and black — preceded a Franco-Spanish strategy that bottled up the British on the coast using a very large, combined naval fleet made up of French, Spanish and Continental navies. Without the Pensacola victory, the combined Spanish and French warship fleet — upward of 20 Capital ships — couldn't have freely sailed up and down the littoral United States as French Admiral François Joseph Paul de Grasse did to block the British at Yorktown.

So that 12-year-old on his porch in Miami all those years ago finally found his answer: Men like my father and women like my mother dared to put to sea and march for miles to birth this new country. A nation made up of many nations — a place where a child might one day tell stories, like that of a Spanish governor who loved the American idea so much that he spilled blood for it.

In *Yo Solo, Bernardo de Gálvez*, Mena portrays an 18th-century Spanish colonel who loved the American idea and joined the fight.

DARNELL VENNIE

Chaz Mena, a scholar, performer and producer, was a Colonial Williamsburg Revolutionary in Residence in April 2017. Bernardo de Gálvez, the victor of Pensacola and fast ally to America, began to reveal himself in Mena's work at the University of West Florida. He wrote a one-man stage play, Yo Solo, Bernardo de Gálvez on the Stage of the American Revolution, *which he performed at the Kimball Theatre on April 28. The Revolutionaries in Residence program is generously funded by the Grainger Foundation of Lake Forest, Ill.*

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