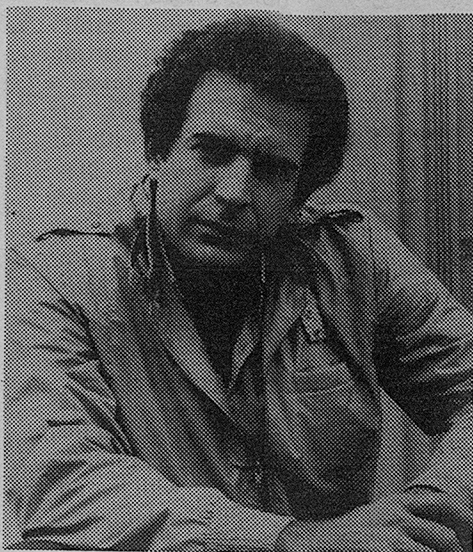


Popular Panamanian Artist/Actor Takes Up Residence in Miami



Roger Pretto
by Ana Rosas

Roger Pretto, Panama's most popular artist/actor, has moved to the Miami area hoping to make his bid for a share of the American dream.

The artist is known here for having enchanted local art enthusiasts and collectors in 1980 with his exhibition of miniatures. Since then, he's had two more local shows which have equally delighted art lovers and critics. According to *The Herald's* Helen Kohen, Pretto is a "...master miniaturist...whose work is seductive, exquisite...and perfectly made."

Pretto's reknown in his native Panama is more significant, however. Among his country's masters, he ranks as its most popular and controversial. He has a polemical reputation tracing back to his beginning exhibits in 1976 where heated controversy about the contents and merits of his work was voiced loudly through the media. Since then, discord has been involuntarily the rule throughout his career. Pretto's troubles stem from being staunchly principled and frank in a society where hypocrisy rules supreme. Opinions on diverse national matters, both in and out of his works, have made his ascension to his success an up-creek effort sans paddle.

His current prominence came in February, 1984, when Pretto exhibited in Panama's prestigious Museum of Contemporary Art. Not only a virtual sellout, the show drew national acclaim. It was not lacking controversy, however. Quite the contrary. The show stirred political heat at the highest government levels.

In an enlightening and prophetic (the show predicted a critical political event which none saw coming) collection of 42 perfectly executed temperas titled **NATIONAL PEACE: A Pictorial Essay**, Pretto probed his country's nationalistic conscience with surgically-razed intellect. Both intellectuals and the general public loved it and filed into the museum's halls in record-breaking numbers. The press's overwhelming attention helped turn it into the country's most publicly discussed art exhibition and Pretto into one of its most respected artists.

Pretto is also one of his country's most admired actors. Descending from a family of nationally acclaimed singers, actresses and painters, he has played lead roles to Panamanian audiences who have been nothing short of fascinated by his histrionic talents. He's walked away with quite a number of best actor awards in his country.

Spiced by his manly and imposing good looks, controversy has been a staple additive in his theatrical prominence, too. Established producers boycotted him from major commercial productions for a number of years because, so it seems, Pretto refused "important" parts that he considered "artistically trivial". "I was

either unmoved emotionally by what I read in the script or saw nothing socially redeeming in it. The grave situations in our [Latin American] countries demand that social concerns be addressed in the artist's work. Its different here where so much social justice already works," was how Pretto voiced his stand. He was kept from the commercial stage for a couple of years.

In 1983, a new production company, planning to produce the Spanish play *Trial For A Scoundrel*, turned to Pretto with an offer for the lead. They felt only he could play its harsh histrionic demands. In many ways, Pretto's own life paralleled *Juan Esquin's* moral predicament in the play, and the producers knew it. They also knew Pretto could draw the crowds nightly. The widely publicized controversies as both actor and painter had helped him become considerably popular. As it turned out, his magnificent portrayal of the betrayed and vengeful *Juan* solidified the actor as a highly skilled and bankable stage star. Other roles followed and his new power as a professional had to be reckoned with.

Pushing against the grain is not a source of discouragement for Pretto. He was tempered in the art of resisting odds by the example of his invalid father, a victim of a hunting accident when the artist was a year and a half. "I never saw him walk, but in his wheelchair, I saw a person who took on overwhelming odds and pushed on in spite of them." Teary-eyed, he adds, "His right side was paralyzed and he had no money. Yet, he eventually ran a business and (smiling) enjoyed the company of women. How's that for a role model?"

An effective character actor (flawlessly bilingual), he's tackled diametrically different roles with convincing physical transformations, grounding his multifaceted skills in the dramatic craft. In Spanish or English, he's played personalities ranging from the tenderly rebellious priest in *Cambio de Guardia (Mass Appeal)* to the coarse, Bronx-Puerto Rican *GOD* in the original version of *STEAMBATH*. He has also acted in Miami playing a Cuban anti-Castro freedom fighter destined for the Bay of Pigs in *RUNNING SCARED*, a Hollywood film shot here in 1979.

Pretto, who confesses to being very shy "...even at 40, can you believe it!", moves into Miami wanting to busy his artistic talents. He's looking to join a theatrical company "...serious in its determination to present meaningful theatre." Pretto's contacted local talent agents and has already auditioned for the award-winning *Miami Vice*. "I didn't get the part. They got someone from New York, I was told," he says, smiling. "I don't impress much in auditions. My acting gets sharp once I get my teeth into the part. In a way, I wasn't too disappointed. I don't think my image was right, and, besides, I got shot at the beginning of the episode. What a way to start my career in the States, huh? But, golly, I need work... I have to act or I'll go crazy."

Painting is no problem, though. He's been exhibiting internationally since 1980.

He wants to play a part in the construct of the cultural understanding that is ever more necessary between the U.S. and Latin America. "Events in Latin America are affecting Americans one way or the other, whether they like it or not. We're neighbors, for cryin' out loud. We have to develop mutual understanding. I came here with personal hopes of expanding my artistic horizons, but in the process, however, I hope to also broaden those of our cultures by helping to bridge some of the gaps that exist between our shores of America. Only as one are we able to save Spaceship Earth!" Hear, Hear!

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