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Grand Pré fireworks company on deck for 500th anniversary of Cuban city

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Havana, the capital city of Cuba, plans to celebrate its 500th anniversary this coming November with a bang.

And they've called upon none other than Nova Scotia's own Fireworks FX to make it happen.

"It's 100 per cent an honour," said designer George Wade, describing how it feels to be helping Havana celebrate a milestone five centuries in the making.

"Speaking relatively, in worldwide terms, we're certainly a small company, but we're honoured to have gained such confidence in countries like Cuba," Wade said.

This coming show will be the biggest, most prestigious show the Grand-Pré company has ever put on in Cuba – but it won't be the first.

"We've had the honour of doing several shows in Cuba; three in Santiago de Cuba for the 500th anniversary of that city, one in 2018 for the 60th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution and one for the 200th anniversary of the City of Cienfuegos," Wade said. "We have never performed in Havana yet, so we're looking forward to it."

Fireworks FX will be performing two shows in Havana – one on Nov. 15 at the fortress of El Morro at the mouth of the harbour, and a pyrotechnic show on Nov. 16 in front of El Capitolio (the National Capital Building).

"There'll be a lot of different things going on with this one," Wade said.

With 164 modules and more than 2,400 cues – which can be set up to activate multiple devices at a time, all in the span of four minutes – the El Capitolio show will be the most complicated pyrotechnic show the company has ever arranged.

In the case of one particular cue, it will be attached to several thousand devices.

"When I say devices, we're not going to use fireworks for the El Capitolio show," Wade said. "That show will be done with 100 per cent pyrotechnics – like the kind of stuff used on stage when a band is performing.

"We don't want to damage the building we're firing off, since it's such an important historic part of Havana."

The pyrotechnics will be set to the rhythm and melody of a piece renowned Cuban composer Frank Fernandez prepared specifically for the occasion.

"Combine that with the fact that it's going on in a foreign country, and with that Cuban heat, it'll be a challenge," Wade said. "But it's something we're all really looking forward to."

Wade said the shipping container holding the enormous payload of fireworks and custom-made pyrotechnic devices was sailed out to Cuba about two weeks ago. Once that arrives, he and nine other specialists will travel to Cuba to arrange everything in order.

Preparation for the event has been ongoing for months. As designer, Wade will be going to Cuba himself to propose a plan to the president of Cuba, Miguel Diaz-Canel. Diaz-Canel has already seen a virtual simulation of the plan,

Although the fireworks and pyrotechnic displays are wild spectacles, they require precise planning on the ground.

Wade and several other specialists with Fireworks FX will travel to Cuba to make sure every single cue and module is in place.

"We need to know what order and position all the cues are in, so the computer can fire it at the correct moment in the song," Wade said.

Fireworks FX developed a new process in preparation for the 500th Anniversary of Havana.

"It's the largest show we've done with this system. We essentially have to use two corresponding systems and link them with a time code."

When asked if the process of trying something new on such a large scale was exciting, Wade interjected with a correction, saying, "Terrifying? Yes."

The fireworks at El Morro and the pyrotechnics at El Capitolio have to be set up simultaneously by two crews since there is such a short amount of time between them.

"Once you hit the fire button, there's nothing that can be changed then," Wade said.