

Under the Radar 2019: Flaco Navaja Sings Through His Life in Evolution of a Sonero

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For those unfamiliar with the word *sonero*, New York-born Puerto Rican Flaco Navaja offers some instruction. There are salsa singers and then there are *soneros*, those quintessential performers of salsa who combine a distinctive voice, a commanding stage presence, and a soulful ability to improvise with any melody: Think Rubén Blades, Héctor Lavoe, Ismael Rivera, and Celia Cruz. Navaja is, self-admittedly, still striving for that empyrean realm of the salsa gods. But the story of his journey, told in his music-filled, often hilarious *Evolution of a Sonero*, now running as part of the Public Theater's Under the Radar Festival, proves that his goal is within reach.

Navaja says his life is like "an epic salsa song," so it makes sense that he breaks down this show into the sections of one: an intro, two verses, a bridge, and a "mambo" (Lucrecia Briceño's subtle lighting helps mark the transitions). Navaja takes a whimsical approach to it all, guiding us winkingly through memorable events of his early years in the Bronx — performing a Menudo song in the third grade and loving the applause, being arrested for smoking weed at school, listening to his uncle Maxi's socialist rants. Things take a dark turn when he gets hooked on drugs, but his love of music pulls him into the light. Interspersed throughout is Navaja's energizing *mélange* of salsa, hip-hop, and spoken-word poetry (in English and Spanish) backed up by his suave five-member band, the Razor Blades, who keep the salsa beats sharp.

Despite some continuity gaps in his 80-minute show, Navaja dominates the stage with his beautiful voice, irresistible smile, and dynamic talent for impersonating the people from his life with loving humor. Anyone with ties to the Puerto Rican community will recognize Uncle Maxi and his effusive mannerisms, as well as the old woman who looks out on the street from her apartment window and gets into everyone's business. Along with his knack for comedy, there's an endearing humility to Navaja's admission that he is still growing into his role as a *sonero*, a title that few salsa artists ever attain. With a promising show like this, though, you'll want to catch him now before his evolution is complete.