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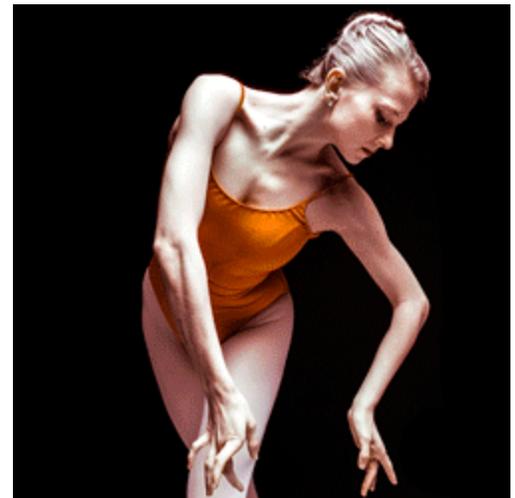


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Review: Latinidades: A Festival of Solo Shows | Cara Mia Theatre Company | Latino Cultural Center

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Rumba Like No One is Watching

Cara Mía Theatre Company's *Latinidades* solo festival began with the fantastic *Evolution of a Sonero*.

by [Teresa Marrero](#)
published Wednesday, August 21, 2019



Dallas — *Evolution of a Sonero* brilliantly kicks off **Cara Mia Theatre Company's** cycle of solo performances called **Latinidades** a



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Photo: Pregones/PRTT
Flaco Navaja
in *Evolution of a
Sonero*

Latinidades is the plural of Latin, which alludes to the plethora of Hispanic cultural traditions. In the case of their first show, *Evolution of a Sonero* delves into the rich musical and cultural richness of Puerto Ricans in this country, particularly in the Bronx.

The word *sonero* is a singer of the *son*, a musical form derived from the *clave*, a syncopated rhythm in 2/3 or 3/2 time. It is the

backbone of the traditional Afro-Caribbean music and dances collectively known as the *rumba* (different from the American and international ballroom dances known as the rumba). Salsa can be thought of as the granddaughter of the son and the rumba.

The rumba was born in the streets and ports of Havana during the early 20th century by the various African diasporic communities. It quickly spread to other islands and has accompanied the Puerto Rican and Cuban communities both in the respective islands and into the various diasporic destinations of its people. A rumba is also another way of saying a party, a get together based on this contagious percussive rhythm. More on the rumba that preceded Saturday's performance in a bit, in spite of the fact that I saw the show on Friday.

El Flaco Navaja ("flaco" is a masculine nickname given to a skinny guy), a multi-talented storyteller, singer, actor and activist, delivered a streamlined, rich and nuanced performance. According to Jorge B. Merced, the director of the piece, the entire 80-minute performance was written by Navaja, narrating key moments of his own life, as well as the life

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Under ordinary circumstances one might say that the performance was backed by a five-piece band, the Razor Blades, but in this case it is more appropriate to say that the band and Navaja were in perfect communion throughout. It felt more like a conversation than a lead singer with a back-up band. The Razor Blades musicians are: Carlos Cuevas on piano, Waldo Chávez on bass, Gabo Lugo on percussion, Victor Pablo on percussion, and Hommy Ramos on trombone. Together they wove not only a personal story, but the history of Latin music. And Navaja's voice range brilliantly accommodated salsa classics such as those sung by legendary Hector Lavoe and Menudo, to the balladeer Ismael Rivera, and paying homage to rock as well as the classic crooner music that is the *bolero*.

This complex performance tells the story of a neighborhood and its people. It is formatted as the various musical parts of the rumba, right down to ending with a coda. It tells the personal story of the narrator and storyteller, and importantly it tells the story of a people through their intimate connection to their music.

Evolution of a Sonero is a Latin music lover's dream, as it weaves all-time favorites into the story with ease and a talent as big as the heart that beats within the man singing it and the musicians playing it.

Both director Merced and Navaja are [Pregones/Puerto Rican Traveling Theater](#) company members, Merced a seasoned and talented actor in his own right. I first saw Merced perform in the late 1980s when I was a graduate student. He impressed me as an actor then, and his talent as a director now is equal to the complex task of this piece, shying away from excess to allow the brilliance and talent of the actor-poet-singer to shine without adornments. Just refined talent.

They are part of one of the oldest Latino theater companies continuously working in the United States. The Puerto Rican Traveling



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Theater, founded and directed by Rosalba Rolón, and the Puerto Rican Traveling Theater Company, announced plans to merge. Two names that stand out as Latinx theater pioneers, Miriam Colón and María Irene Fornés, one Puerto Rican and the other Cuban, both lived and worked in New York City, and are both pillars of Latinx theater communities today.

Getting back to the performance on Friday night, I was captivated by Navaja's agility to morph into at least eight characters (give or take, I really did not keep track) with a minimal amount of both movements and props. Actually, there were no props. Dressed in a serious suit and jacket that included a vest and long-sleeved shirt, Navaja only took off his jacket once, to bare his arms alluding to the story of Jimmy, a junk-addicted yet deeply human character. Another exhilarating moment came with the early birth of his second baby daughter on March 1, a *leitmotif* that empathized the urgency of nearly giving birth in a taxi, during a New York City traffic jam...on March 1!

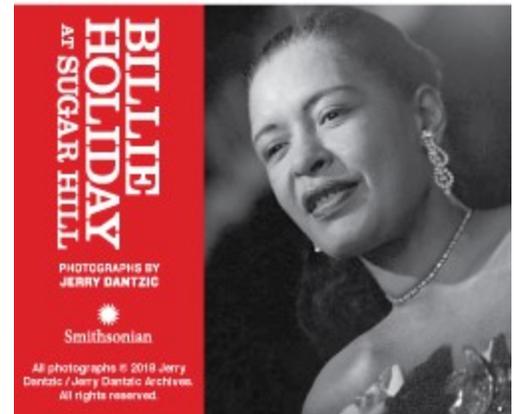
Navaja's facial expressions did the heavy lifting, rendering every character: His dad; his mom; his best friend with whom he got busted for smoking pot on school grounds on his mother's birthday and ended up in jail; his Vietnam-vet uncle; the various singers whose music he loves; and lastly, himself. Vulnerable without being frivolous, Navaja set himself as a multi-faceted performer able to command a solo performance with a unique kind of rapport with his audience.

Not to sound sappy, but one could feel the love that he has for his culture and his community.

With regards to community, on Saturday there was a related treat, and I went back for more. From 5 to 7:30 p.m. the foyer of the Latino Cultural Center turned into a huge rumba — both a community party and the music. Will Richey from Journeyman Ink and a spectrum of

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"What is culture?," asked dancer Gibson, whose commanding presence got the audience not only thinking but feeling the music. She moved the audience onto our feet to move with the beat, the drums that connect us to the ground, to our hearts. Bare-headed and dressed in a simple long white skirt and t-shirt, she had the moves of a traditional Afro-Cuban dancer. Her presence coalesced the once-passive audience into a community experience whereby the racial tensions so prevalent today disappeared.

I asked Gibson if she preferred to be identified as black or African-American, and she said "neither." With a deep sense of her own origins she calls herself New Orleanian. Keep an eye out for the forthcoming master class residency and subsequent performance of Afro-Cuban dancer and ethnographer Danys "La Mora" Pérez and composer, percussionist, educator Francisco Mora Catlett, co-founders of Oyu Oro, a New York-based Afro Cuban Dance Company. Choreographic work will be performed with live percussion for the BTWHSPVA November Dance Concert.

» Teresa Marrero is professor of Latin American and Latinx Theater in the Spanish Department at the University of North Texas. She is a member of the American Theater Critics Association and is on the Advisory board of the Latinx Theater Commons. She is co-editor with Chantal Rodriguez (Yale) and Trevor Boffone (U of Houston) of the anthology *ENCUENTRO: Latinx Performance for the New American Theater* (2019, Northwestern University Press). She is often seen dancing tango.

Aug. 22-25

Your Healing is Killing Me

Written by Virginia Grise

				
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When the US health system meets a Queer, Chicana body, its full limitations come into sharp focus. The result is a manifesto full of clarity into the revolution that must come in order for our society to truly care for its most vulnerable.

Your Healing is Killing Me is a collaborative touring production in development.

Please note: *Recommended for ages 18 and up*. Performance is in English.

Aug. 29-Sept. 8

Ursula

Written and Performed by Frida Espinosa-Müller

Composed and Performed by Armando Monsivais

Ursula tells the journey of Nadia, a 7 year-old, separated from her mother after seeking asylum at the US-Mexico border. As Nadia waits for her asylum to be processed, she reflects on the difficulties she is *leaving* behind in Honduras and the new reality she is facing. Live, original music from will take audiences into Nadia's mind as she tries to make sense of all that is happening around her.

Ursula is a Cara Mía Theatre touring production in development.

Please note: *Recommended for ages 10 and up*. Performed primarily in Spanish with English supertitles. **TJ**



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