

Broadway

Posted: Thurs., Oct. 13, 2005, 8:01pm PT

Latinologues

(Helen Hayes Theater; 597 seats; \$60 top)

A Tate Entertainment Group presentation, in association with Juan Carlos Zapata, Rick Najera, AEG Live, Rene Lavan, Icon Entertainment, Tati, Richard Martini Entertainment and Alan Spivak, of a revue in one act by Rick Najera. Directed by Cheech Marin.

With: Eugenio Derbez, Rick Najera, Rene Lavan, Shirley A. Rumierk.

By [MARILYN STASIO](#)

San Diego, San Antonio, Los Angeles, Houston, Miami ... Is there a port city, border town or other immigrant Mecca that this brash Latino revue (shrewdly cast and improbably directed by legendary stoner Cheech Marin) has not played over the past eight years? Oh, right -- New York. Well, "Latinologues" finally came to town, and if word of mouth gets out to the boroughs that the cast is hot, the humor is spicy and the Latino sensibility is authentic, it should have a healthy run. (Limited engagement is skedded to end Dec. 4.)

What we've got here is a modest (Did I say "cheap?" I did not actually say "cheap") production performed on a bare stage with canned music, cheesy graphics, retina-damaging lighting and spotty sound effects. None of that seems to matter, though, once this high-energy show launches its first monologue -- a nose-thumbing view of illegal immigration from the perspective of a Mexican border-skipper named Erazmo, currently employed as a dishwasher at a Gotham restaurant.

Having found an ingenious way of getting a free vacation to Puerto Vallarta, Erazmo is on his way back to New York when he stops to explain to the audience the "natural migration pattern" of illegal workers. Eugenio Derbez, a comedian with timing you could set the sun to, keeps the savvy [aud](#) in stitches, even as he squeezes every drop of irony from Erazmo's performance in the "Third World Olympics" of border jumping.

"Erazmo trains by working 80 hours a week with no overtime, picking tomatoes, picking peaches, picking lettuce," Derbez tells us, putting a sharp edge on his comic delivery. "He's running and crossing 5,000 miles just to pass out flyers for strip joints in Times Square."

The rest of the monologues in the show are constructed in the same vein, with layers of pain, anger and bitterness cushioned by comedy.

With directorial assists from Marin, scribe Rick Najera engineers a bit of interactive byplay for these janitors, busboys, dishwashers, drug dealers, indulgent mothers, pregnant teenagers and veteran sex workers. But even when that loose (very loose) narrative thread breaks -- as it does, for instance, for a hilarious Cuban visit with Elian Gonzales and his father, or the rebellious last hurrah of the Miss Puerto Rican Day Parade -- the energy keeps flowing from scene to scene.

With only four thespians in the cast, that energy is the premium fuel that keeps the show pumped up. Although the comedy sketches are nominally performed in English ("because we don't want the Anglos confused --

they paid full price"), the Latin rhythms, Spanish curses and breakneck speed of delivery give the monologues the hard-to-catch quality of street-corner outbursts.

There's enough good material to go around so that this sturdy cast of pros can play to their distinctive comedic strengths.

Shirley A. Rumierk takes on distaff roles that, in Najera's table-turning writing style, present themselves as stereotypes but go on to reveal surprising depth of character. Thesp clicks on the clueless rap of a visibly pregnant teenager ("I'm a virgin, and don't you fucking doubt me"), and puts terrific comic snap into a hard-bitten hooker trying to peddle her hard-luck story on the streets of Havana ("Oh, my God, you're unmoved -- you must be an American"). All the while, however, she's setting us up for the pathos she finds in their lives.

The versatile Derbez plays the diva roles, delivering his tour de farce as a Latina mother, the driving force of the Daughters of the Inquisition and a real ball-buster, who is volubly grateful because her son is a vampire - - not gay. (Although almost buried by such flashy roles, his cool and creepy turn as the bodyguard to a drug lord is a special treat.)

Rene Lavan has the satirical hook on Latin loverboys like Alejandro, who racks up extra macho points by bedding blondes. But after holding this Colombian busboy up for ridicule, thesp takes him down gently when his ego is bruised.

"Hey, don't feel sorry for me," says Alejandro, who, like all the resilient characters in Najera's gallery, has more self-knowledge than most people give him credit for. "I'm a macho, and as long as I'm a macho, I'll never be just a busboy."

Najera is himself a hoot in multiple roles -- from a chubby, bratty Elian Gonzalez ("I want to go back to Miami, Cuba sucks") to Felix "Veterano" Nogalez, a powerful drug lord aghast at the inefficiency of professional hitmen who can't shoot straight. "They kill the old woman, the baby, the guy with the full scholarship to Princeton," he says in disgust.

In the best application of his performance chops (picked up in regional theater, TV and films like "National Lampoon's Pledge This"), the switch-hitting scribe scores big as Buford Gomez, a Tex-Mex officer with the U.S. Border Patrol who makes the generous gesture of educating the audience about border jumpers. Having established that "not every single Latino is Mexican," he goes on to define the ethnic differences in pointed barbs aimed at every Latin American cultural group (presumably) sitting in the audience.

"Puerto Ricans are legal Mexicans. ... Cubans are Mexicans with rafts. ... Dominicans are Mexicans who play baseball really well. ... Venezuelans are Mexicans with oil." Although Buford chickens out on Colombians ("Colombians are real nice"), he even has a cutting word for any Argentineans in the house: "Argentineans, you are not European. I repeat, you are not European."

This is funny stuff, and no, you don't have to be Mexican to get the jokes -- or the message.

Costumes, Santiago; lighting, Kevin Adams; sound, T. Richard Fitzgerald; video, Dennis Diamond; production stage manager, Arabella Powell. Opened Oct. 13, 2005. Reviewed Oct. 11. Running time: 1 HOUR, 30 MIN.

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