

Nine to Watch, Onstage and Off

Marga Gomez

Actress

SAN FRANCISCO

"I hope she does not flop with this one," the Cuban entertainer Willy Chevalier says about his daughter Marga Gomez's latest performance piece. "That's all she needs. My daughter has a hard life, ladies and gentlemen. Everyday, persecution for loving women — and still she's alone."

Appearing in a posthumous comeback,

Chevalier is played by Ms. Gomez in her one-woman show "Los Big Names." Given her relationship with her larger-than-life parents, it's only fitting that she relegates herself to being the butt of their jokes.

"You see the show and you understand everything," Ms. Gomez said. In it, she talks about growing up onstage, backstage and upstaged by Latino celebrities who happen to be parents. "Los Big Names" connects the dots between her thrilling, if neglected, childhood and her adult efforts to eke out a morsel of Latina tokenism in

Hollywood.

At the moment, Ms. Gomez and her longtime director, David Schweizer, are tweaking the show at the Marsh, a hole-in-the-wall theater in the Mission District here, before its April 9 opening at the 47th Street Theater in Manhattan.

It is being staged in New York by the Puerto Rican Traveling Theater, whose founder, Miriam Colón, 70, says she remembers Ms. Gomez's parents well.

"It's really about what happens when show people come home," said Ms. Gomez, who plays her parents with a residue of girlish awe in the presence of fabulousness. Willy and his wife, Margarita, a Puerto Rican dancer, starred with performers like Celia Cruz and Tito Puente in lavish Latin variety shows in the 1950's and 60's. The couple embraced their eccentric, extravagant lifestyle as headliners — and as actors in the histrionic telenovela that was their home life.

That home, on West 169th Street in Washington Heights in Manhattan, witnessed soap-opera theatrics like giddy application of stage blood, and spousal sparring with leopard-skin handbags and hot coffee. In one episode, Ms. Gomez's parents sat her down and made her choose which one she loved more ("I choose you, Mom; sorry, Dad"). Still, Ms. Gomez's send-up is a loving tribute by the couple's biggest fan.

In the play, she celebrates rather than slams her parents' idiosyncrasies. "I've actually learned more from having them inhabit my body," she said. "It's a little freaky but I've been playing my parents for so long that they're sort of lodged in there."

In 1979, Ms. Gomez fled to San Francisco to avoid, she said, getting yelled at by her mom for being gay. After stints with the Latino theater group Culture Clash and the San Francisco Mime Troupe, she began performing solo in 1985. Residuals from a minor role in "Batman Forever" and a ludicrous bit part in the movie "Sphere" help pay for an apartment (with no bed) in the Mission and another (with a bed) in Brooklyn.

Solo shows like "Jaywalker" (about striving for stardom in Hollywood) and "Intimate Details" (about striving for sex in New Jersey) revealed Ms. Gomez's unmitigated neediness — but without her back story. It was "Memory Tricks" in 1991, about her mother's Alzheimer's, and "A Line Around the Block" in 1995, about her father, that filled in the blanks and lifted her comedy above everyday stand-up. When asked by the producer Jonathan Reinis to mount a back-to-back evening of her parent plays, Ms. Gomez instead decided to fuse the two.

Pondering what older Latinos might think of the lesbian naughty bits, she says, "I'm hoping that I won't give any of these old-timers a heart attack."

What would her parents think if they could watch the show? "I think over all, they would be very happy," Ms. Gomez said. "Well, I hope. I always think, Gosh, if they're not, and there's an afterlife, I'm just going to be grounded for eternity."

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