

Street Smarts Round Out An Ivy-League Education

By D.J.R. BRUCKNER

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Reviews/Theater

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Book learning doesn't stand a chance against worldly wisdom in Dolores Prida's new play, "Botánica," which, under the direction of Manuel Martín Jr., has been added to the current roster of works being presented by Repertorio Español at the Gramercy Arts Theater. But Ms. Prida seems to have a bottomless fund of humor that keeps the contest alive even when the outcome is clear.

Ms. Prida, who has written about a dozen works in the last 15 years, most of them musicals, knows no fear of familiar plots and theatrical tricks. Like many old Hollywood comic writers, she uses them deliberately and counts on her verbal facility to get a laugh out of every line. Given her success, who will fault her for that?

"Botánica" explores cultural conflicts in East Harlem among an old Puerto Rican woman, her daughter and her granddaughter, who has just graduated from an Ivy League university.

The old woman, Doña Geno, runs a

business dealing in herbs, spells and spiritual powers. She and her daughter, Anamú, expect Anamú's daughter, Milagros Castillo, to take over the shop, La Ceiba. (It's the round tree seen everywhere in the Caribbean, with seed pods harvested for kapok; here it may help to know that many people in the tropics hint at certain powers it has when they call it the God tree).

Obviously, Milagros — who began calling herself Millie at college, since, as she says, Miracles Castle isn't a great name in English — plans to take up a career in a big bank downtown and forget about the barrio. But she has things to learn that the Ivy League doesn't teach, and Doña Geno is just the professor she needs. The old woman, who knows nothing of computers and banks, and who may not even know much about herbs and what Millie calls spiritual mumbo jumbo, is astute about life in the way only a great survivor can be. Besides, she has the help of a couple of popular flashy saints whose crafty connivances would astonish theologians.

All of the action is predictable. Indeed, a few of the characters seem to be thrown in only to be the butt of jokes. And some of the incidents are merely distracting, including one emotionally powerful moment between Millie and her grandmother. Dramatic logic is not Ms. Prida's strength.

The language of laughter, and of the streets, is, and she makes the most of it. After more than 20 seasons of increasingly impressive performance, the Repertorio Español has installed an infrared simultaneous translation system to reach a wider audience. But "Botánica" is not one of this year's works for which translation is provided. Maybe it would be impossible, or of limited use. Even an audience of people who speak Spanish

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Gerry Goodstein/"Botánica"

Ana Margarita Martínez-Casado, left, Ofelia González and Iliana Guibert, right, in a scene from Dolores Prida's new play, "Botánica."

tends to break into time-lag outbursts as it catches late the meaning of some of Ms. Prida's dialogue. The language is Spanish, with some English phrases mixed in, but the idiom is New York barrio, and a lot of that can be lost in translation.

As one has come to expect of this company, the ensemble performance

is admirable. But the play provides especially fine comic opportunities for Ofelia González as Doña Geno and Iliana Guibert as Milagros. Ms. González is a gifted veteran of the troupe and a formidable presence, but Ms. Guibert, a relative newcomer, has an assurance and a feel for comedy that make the contest between the two spirited, and great fun.

Botánica

By Dolores Prida; directed by Manuel Martín Jr.; assistant to the director, Beatriz Córdoba; sets and costumes by Randy Barceló; lighting by Robert Weber Federico; technical director, Rigoberto Obando; production assistant, Manuel Herrera. Presented by Repertorio Español, Gilberto Zaldívar, producer; René Buch, artistic director. At the Gramercy Arts Theater, 138 East 27th Street.

Doña Geno.....Ofelia González
Anamú..... Ana Margarita Martínez-Casado
Milagros Castillo.....Iliana Guibert
Rubén..... Rolando Gómez
Pepe El Indio..... Juan Villarreal
Luisa..... Irma Bello
Carmen..... Marielva Sieg