

Reviews

Yearning for Freedom in “Ich Bin Ein Berliner”

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What, exactly, makes a thing theatre? That straightforward question has turned on its head by the COVID-19 pandemic, which made the conventional theatrical experience all but impossible.

Though one could make a strong argument for *Ich Bin Ein Berliner*, the entirely produced audio play now available for streaming through Theatre Lab, not being theatre at all. I did feel something of that old in-the-audience high when I attended the “play”’s live launch event this past weekend. No live *actors* were present, but the appropriately masked and distanced guests did get to enjoy an atmospheric war-torn “set” and some pre and post-show live music from talented local band Hola Hi.

There was a palpable sense of enthusiasm among the crowd for what was likely one of the first few in-person theatre events that any of us had attended in months. The first day of summer energy, or maybe closer to a just-out-of-prison-energy, but perhaps it’s in poor taste to be joking about prison when far graver infringements on freedom than those we endured during our quarantine are *Ich Bin Ein Berliner*’s primary subject.

That would be those imposed by two communist regimes, the comparison between which forms *Ich Bin Ein Berliner*’s core: the one that ended in the Berlin Wall’s cathartic crumbling, and the Cuban Castro regime is still in power today. It’s an intensely personal affinity to playwright Vanessa Garcia, whose family was one of many that fled Cuba’s atrocities to search for peace on

Miami's more accessible shores. Garcia, playing herself, goes on to tell us the story of her reckoning with that affinity and her Cuban heritage. And though the play's intensely personal nature gives it much of its power, its entrenchment in the person may also be its primary flaw.

This is not my first time tangling with an audio play. Still, *Ich Bin Ein Berliner* was explicitly crafted for the medium and presented with a video accompaniment made it a far different experience than listening to a more conventional theatre piece merely adapted to the audio form. The photographs and animated sequences certainly added more texture to the story than could be achieved with audio alone; in one poignant moment, Garcia's recounting of her father's death from a heart attack is movingly coupled with a visual of a disappearing heart. And when Garcia tells us about Chris Gueffroy, the last man shot before the Berlin Wall came down, we are stricken by a photograph of his haunting human face.

These animations are sometimes used for comedic effect, particularly in clever classroom scenes that also serve to provide background knowledge about the Berlin Wall's construction events for audience members who aren't in the know. But these expository sequences also added to my sense that *Ich Bin Ein Berliner* hasn't entirely made it over the border that separates a work intended to convey a message. However beautifully and entertainingly, to one that tells a cohesive and satisfying story.

I certainly don't want to downplay the importance of or at all disagree with *Ich Bin Ein Berliner*'s urgent political purpose. Still, the fact that Garcia's "arc" was mainly intellectual discovery and reflection seemed to rob the story of any real tension. Her desire to understand her intense reaction to the fall of the Berlin wall eventually transforms into a desire to travel to Cuba, which ignites some familial tensions physically. Still, the trip she ultimately takes is one that even she describes as a "false entry" given that the country itself is still not free. We don't grasp the stakes that that specific event has for Garcia's understanding of her roots or herself as a character.

Though *Ich Bin Ein Berliner* made passing reference to the Holocaust, it also didn't quite connect its two historical subjects to a broader theme of combatting injustice and finding solidarity with fellow victims of oppression, which might have made for an even more powerful message. Garcia's journey still moved me, but I do thus see how someone without a connection to the subject matter might fail to connect to the story as a whole.

But *Ich Bin Ein Berliner* is still definitely worth a look, especially since you don't even have to leave your couch to check it out! Rich, witty dialogue, a vibrant emotional core, and excellent performances by a predominantly Latinx cast of talented South Florida actors give this play a hell of a lot more heart than anything you might queue up on Netflix. However, I'm also still hesitant to call it a "play."

Are audio recordings and projected visuals things that can be used in the service of a theatre piece? Sure, and once the pandemic is over, I'd love to see how creatively theatre artists are apt to put them to work! But do those things constitute theatre in and of themselves? For fear of disrespecting the element of live performance that makes our art form so visceral and enervating, I'd have to say, no, not exactly.

But these days, such compromises are about the best we can do. The mere fact of having gathered to take in a story with other human beings gave the premiere an air of occasion and emotional weight that could never be replicated if I had just watched it alone in front of a computer screen. I also would have lost out on a chance to catch one of the first public performances of a new song by Hola Hi, directly inspired by the play that preceded it.

This song was one of the most moving parts of the evening—and to see how artists can inspire each other and inspire empathy despite everything the pandemic's thrown at us is certainly nothing to take for granted these days. I hope that kind of collaborative spirit is still alive and well when it is again safe to gather more freely once COVID finally starts to loosen its deadly grasp. And let's not forget those whose confinement is not so temporary—those still trapped against their will in countries that deny them their autonomy—even then.

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Ilana Jael

Ilana Jael earned her MFA in Creative Nonfiction from Sarah Lawrence College and a BA in Writing and Psychology from Florida Atlantic University's Wilkes Honors College. She also served as co-founder of the student theatre troupe "Theatre in the Raw." She has been dabbling in both playwriting and acting since high school. A few favorite roles include Rebel in Columbinus (Bob Carter's Actor's Rep), The Fearful One in The Cave (G-Star School of The Arts), and Amanda in The Glass Menagerie (Theatre In The Raw). Her one-act plays Goodbye, Karma's A Bitch, Certainly Not About Him, and Open Heart have also been previously performed at Actor's Rep and/or at Florida Atlantic University. More recently, Ilana appeared in and created the original musical ZeeZou's Stardust Extravaganza with Area Stage's Miami Queer Theatre Collective. Her short plays have been produced virtually by New City Players, Theatre Lab, and Femuscripts. She is also a current company member of New City Players, and you can check out her theatre blog at ilanaintheatreland.com!

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