



THEATER INTERVIEW: VANESSA GARCIA ON 'ICH BIN EIN BERLINER' AT THE FAU THEATRE LAB

Pat Cuadros April 14, 2021 Comments Off 345 Views

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This year marks the premiere of an audio play called *Ich Bin Ein Berliner*. The title caught my eye because I immediately thought of JFK's famous 1963 "Ich Bin Ein Berliner" speech by the Berlin Wall. In the audio play, playwright Vanessa Garcia ties her experience of watching the Berlin Wall fall on television to her own experience as a Cuban American. The show is directed by Matt Stabile, with illustrations by John Shamburger. It's streaming now through May 23 with [Theatre Lab at Florida Atlantic University \(FAU\)](#). Tickets are \$5 for "audio only" or \$15 for "audio with visual companion."

I caught up with Vanessa Garcia recently to learn more about how this audio play came together.

I watched the play, and I really enjoyed it! It sounds like you were writing this story all of your life. How did you know this was the time to make the play and release it?

I always say that I realize things in my life by writing through it. This is one of those stories that I've always been trying to figure out. I've had little bits and pieces of it. There was a moment about a year and a half ago that I reached out to FAU Theatre Lab. Matt Stabile was the one who commissioned this piece. I told him that I wanted something that immersed the audience in the story. I envisioned a fifth grade classroom where the audience was in it and that's where it started.

I want to say he was amazing because a lot of the times, these conversations go nowhere. He was really interested in the piece. Twenty-twenty came around and he called me. He said, "We want to commission a few audio plays. We want to commission you."

What ended up happening was that I realized April will be the first time a **Castro** may not be at the helm of Cuba after 62 years. Nothing may happen and everything may stay the same, but there's also this window of potential opportunity. There have been a number of people in Cuba protesting through hunger strikes and that have been standing in front of the Ministry of Culture. [They] have been asking for freedom of speech. This has been happening inside the island. The fact that it's so of the present for me in terms of timing is really important.

You just said writing is a process for how you work things out. Is it harder to do things based on real life and fit that into the span of a one hour program?

I actually like the constriction of the time. Otherwise, you just ramble and say 17,000 branches of the tree that is you. [laughs] The fact that I had this medium, which narrows down how to tell the story, allowed me to tell it in a very specific way. Also, [it] made me say what are really the connective points, the scenes, and the moments that are important to get to the core of this particular story?

My piece uses creative non-fiction. I'm always careful to say when things are fiction or non-fiction. This is based on a true story. Most of the things in here are true. Some of the characters are composites, like kids in the classroom are bits and pieces of my classmates. In that sense, I fictionalize a little bit in order to fit in all those elements. It's also what makes it not a thousand percent non-fiction.

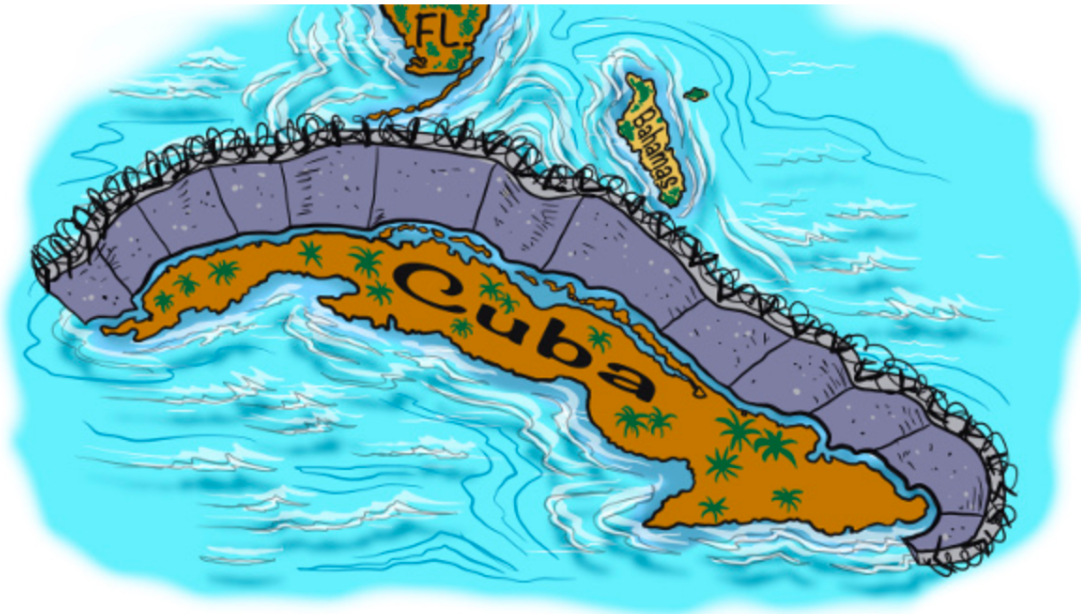
Why are you offering two different formats: one with visuals and one without?

One is that it's definitely an audio experience at first. It was Matt's idea to do a visual companion for two reasons. Sometimes there are visual people that want to actually see photos and who these people are. He didn't want to make it a scrapbook photo album. He wanted it to be a companion in the sense that it's not an illustration. You're not watching TV. You're having a visual companion to the audio piece. That's why the animation was a little slower so that you could listen and it could reveal a little more. You can feel a closer connection to the people.

The play is available virtually, but I understand you held an outdoor in-person event. How did that go?

It was the first in-person event that FAU had in over a year. It was incredibly moving to have people in the audience spread apart outside, almost in picnic style, experiencing this thing. You could see that when my mom comes in, people were moved by those moments where you could connect to the actual person. It was Matt's intention, and it was nice to see that it worked out.

We're building towards a world where maybe this is also a graphic novel. We already know it will be an actual play, a production. The audio and the visual companion are meant so that it can cross borders. It's the core of the story to cross borders. It's not just for Miami or South Florida. Anyone in the world can listen to it and watch the companion.



Courtesy of The Tropical Agency

Take us through the process of getting the illustrations done for the visual companion.

The person who drew it is an illustrator named John Shamburger. First, the idea started with Matt and he hired John. I thought that was amazing because I come from a visual arts background. I sent Matt a bunch of different photographs, putting them in different files like: me and my mom in Cuba, general pictures of me as a kid, people in my class, me and my sister. Working off of those, John made these really beautiful images. I remember early in the process that for one of those, he sketched an old photo of my grandfather that appears in the piece. He sent it to me and I was moved by it.

Because life is the way it is, in the middle of this process, my grandfather entered hospice. My mom texted me at the premiere that he had just passed. The show is dedicated to him. It was also my birthday. Some people don't believe in these things, but there was this moment where the minute he came on the screen and we had this trickle of rain. Trickle, trickle. It was literally a sprinkle and then stopped, but I completely felt him there.

I come from a mixed race background, half Ecuadorian and half Filipino. With the idea of homeland and freedom, especially when these governments are restrictive, I feel like this would resonate with lots of others whose families hail from other countries. Is that the vibe you've gotten from people sending you feedback?

It's very interesting that the people who see it and hear it. Yes, you feel it immediately. When I talk specifically about these subjects and how they relate to what you're saying, a very mixed experience – it's an experience that's as much deeply American as it is Cuban for me. That could be for other people, what it means to be a Vietnamese American, a Filipino American, or a Filipino Ecuadorian American. There was an Armenian person in the audience, for example. She was very moved. [When] she came up to me, she said, "I know this story."

It's moving because you see people talking to each other and saying this is their experience. I'm having a lot of thoughts about what it means to be specific and universal. There's the cliché that the universal is in the specific. That is true, but do we have to be universal all the time? No, in the sense that by telling a story very specifically and being connected to those characters, all of us have the potential to connect to them. We as people have different prisms that we filter it through. It depends who you are and where you're standing. I'm really grateful that there are people with mixed experiences that now can more and more feel this is like their story and they can tell their own story. For a huge amount of my career in writing, people literally told me, "Nobody cares about Cuba." And that's not true. People do care.

ABOUT PAT CUADROS



Pat Cuadros frequently covers theater and television for Blogcritics Magazine. Every quarter, she enjoys putting the spotlight on new voices and emerging talent. Her portfolio includes interviews with Juliette Binoche, Daniel Davis, Fran Drescher, Derek Jacobi, and Ndaba Mandela.

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