

The New York Times

THURSDAY, MARCH 7, 1996

Theater in Review

A Bit of the Ridiculous In a Search for Her Roots

'La Gringa'
Repertorio Español

All the characters in Carmen Rivera's play "La Gringa" have a strong streak of the ridiculous in

them, and it is precisely that quality that makes them familiar and lovable. Successfully translating that insight about people into delightful theatrical confrontations is a notable achievement for this novice playwright, one of two whose work is being introduced into the regular repertory of Repertorio Español (138 East 27th Street) as part of its "New Voices" program.

"La Gringa" is the story of a young woman from New York who goes to Puerto Rico in search of her extended family. When she finds them, the complicated misperceptions that develop on all sides unfold in comic dialogue that arouses constant shouts of laughter and bursts of applause from the audience.

People with no Spanish who might wonder whether the robust response will prevent their hearing the simultaneous translation have nothing to worry about; the situations are transparent and the body language of a fine ensemble cast tells you most of what is being said. The play was a crosscultural experience for Ms. Rivera as well; she wrote it in English and it was translated for this performance.

In either language, she has captured the spirit of the Puerto Rican experience. There is a tradition of approaching serious ideas through vigorous self-mocking comedy in Puerto Rican theater, and "La Gringa" fits into it very well.

The plot tatters and the story gets emotionally confused in the last 10 minutes as Ms. Rivera tries to bring peace and reconciliation to all. But that is after 90 minutes of laughter, and a delight ratio of 9 to 1 would be a very high score for any theatrical veteran.

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