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New musical lets Celia Cruz brighten stage again

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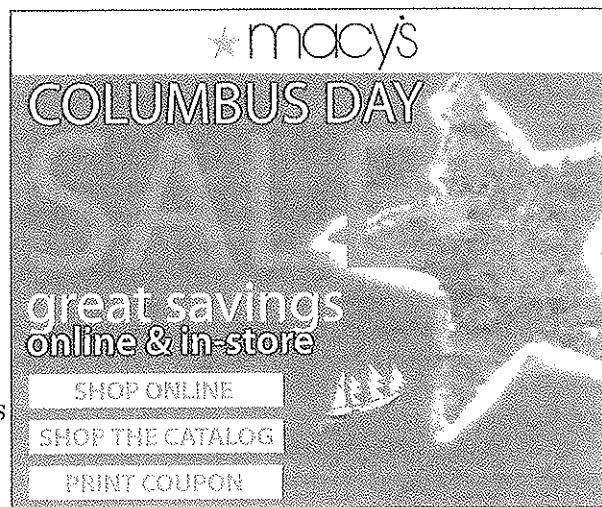
With the golden age of Latin music receding further into the past, eager audiences are searching for ways to recapture moments that deeply affected their lives. This summer, "El Cantante," a biopic about singer Héctor Lavoe's life, riveted a generation of salsa fans despite mixed reviews. Now it's Celia Cruz's turn to be immortalized, this time in an Off-Broadway production now playing at New World Stages Theater (212-239-6200).

"Celia: The Life and Music of Celia Cruz" is in many ways more satisfying than "El Cantante." It helped that Cruz's story was presented as live musical theater. Former Yerba Buena singer Xiomara Laugart took advantage of her starring role with stunningly accurate performances of Cruz standards like "Cumbanchero" and "Quimbara." Even longtime collaborator Johnny Pacheco, who was in the audience, was visibly moved when Laugart closed the first act with her rendition of "Bemba Colorá."

The play is narrated by Cruz's husband Pedro Knight (played thoughtfully by Puerto Rican actor Modesto Lacén) through flashbacks during his last weeks of life. Knight recalls how the couple met in Cuba while he was a trumpeter for the legendary Sonora Matancera, tells anecdotes about how their friendship grew into romance, and explains how their disaffection with the Castro revolution forced them to go into exile. The playwrights Cándido Tirado and Carmen Rivera portray Knight as his public image suggested - gentle, devoted, and good-natured about his second-fiddle role as "Mr. Cruz."

To offset Laugart's heavy workload as a singer juggling staggering costume changes, local actor Selenis Leyva played most of the scenes as Cruz opposite Lacén. The two effectively conveyed aspects of Cruz's life that ranged from the political to the emotional. Cruz faced skepticism that an Afro-Cuban should be the lead singer of the country's best orchestra, and showed a strong defiance against Fidel Castro. One of the play's most poignant scenes comes when Cruz and Knight travel to Guantánamo and can only see their native land through the fence surrounding the military base. When they are almost simultaneously diagnosed with cancer, they realize the only sense of Cuba they have left is in each other.

While the politics of the play can evoke strong feelings, it is not overdone, and the humanity of Cruz and Knight come through with tasteful sentimentality. One of the play's unexpected lessons is that the creation and nurturing of Afro-Cuban and salsa music was done through a collaboration of different Latino nationalities in New York. Cruz's main collaborators were Tito Puente, a New York-born Puerto Rican,



and Johnny Pacheco, who was born in the Dominican Republic. And in a surprising feat, the play is almost stolen by Pedro Capó, who plays the orderly who cares for Knight during his last days.

Capó, who is the grandson of legendary Puerto Rican singer Bobby Capó, delivers the line that can bring Latinos together around the question of Cuba. When considering Knight's lonely exile, he murmurs in dismay, "I would die if I couldn't go back to Puerto Rico at least once a year."

"Celia: The Life and Music of Celia Cruz" is performed five times a week in Spanish, and twice in English.

CRUCIAL SONIDOS. Marc Anthony and Jennifer Lopez play Madison Square Garden (212-307-7171) Sunday ... Yerba Buena and Orishas play the Nokia Theater (212-930-1950) Monday.

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