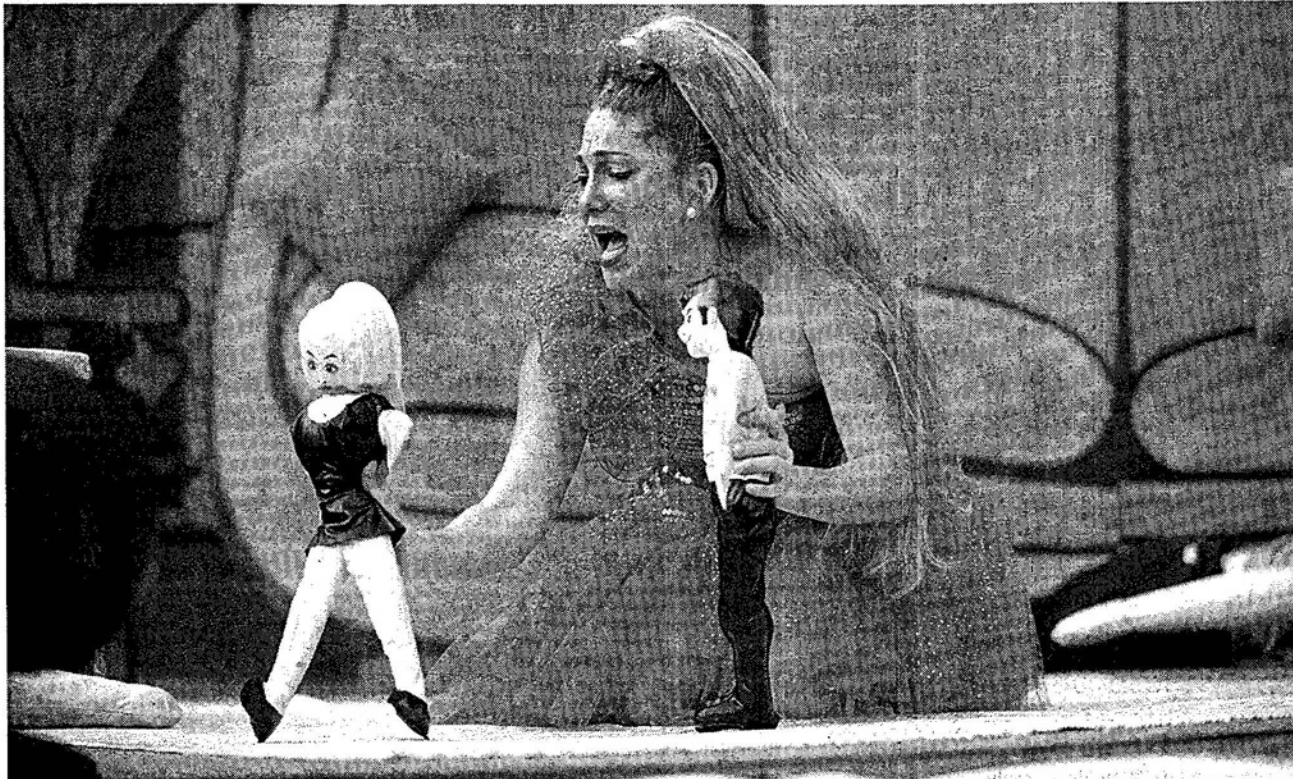




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Richard Termine for The New York Times

Satirical comedian with a tale of facials, diets and survival: Wanda Arriaga, star and author of "How Happy Barbies Are!" ("Qué Felices Son las Barbies!"), a presentation of the Puerto Rican Traveling Theater and the Teatro Círculo.

HOW HAPPY BARBIES ARE!

Written in Spanish ("Qué Felices Son las Barbies!") by and starring Wanda Arriaga; directed by José Cheo Oliveras; produced by Miriam Colón Valle. Sets by Jason Sturm; costumes by Harry Nadal; sound by Frank Rodríguez; makeup design by Barbara Kent; stage manager, Adrian Gallard; prop maker, María Guzmán. Presented by the Puerto Rican Traveling Theater, in collaboration with Teatro Círculo. Performances outdoors in the five boroughs, Newark and Jersey City. Information: (212) 354-1293.

THEATER REVIEW

Cancel All Appointments, Barbie, You're Not Going Anywhere

By D. J. R. BRUCKNER

The Puerto Rican Traveling Theater sets off in a new direction with this year's summer tour, free productions in parks and on streets throughout New York City and in Jersey City and Newark through Aug. 26. In the past it has usually chosen familiar Latin American plays or mimes with music and has given them a kind of vaudeville treatment.

This year it presents "How Happy Barbies Are!" ("Qué Felices Son las Barbies!"), a satirical comedy with a dark message, written and acted by Wanda Arriaga. It is produced with Teatro Círculo, which first staged it last year. Ms. Arriaga is a dramatic presence who can fill any space she chooses to. But in the open-

ing moments of this play her character, Bárbara Pérez, tells her Barbie doll, "I have an idea." It is a suggestion that Barbie pull the wool over the eyes of her boyfriend, Ken, and set up a hot date with G.I. Joe. After a while Bárbara frowns and says, "You're not getting this, are you?"

That is a warning to the audience. Whatever is said or sung for the next exhaustingly energetic hour has many meanings, some of which can snap back and slap you in the face a few lines after you hear them. Expecting audiences to follow these sometimes demanding mental gymnastics could be too optimistic.

For more than a decade feminists and many cultural critics have used the ever-popular Barbie doll as a symbol for a vast range of social ills. Ms. Arriaga creates a character whose values have all been taken from what the doll represents but

Unhinged by an ideal that's all too perfect.

who still loses her husband to a woman who embodies the Barbie ideal — the impossible physique with perfect bones and skin — better than she.

She has been unhinged by her experience, but her fury is magnificent. As she lashes out against a dozen men, her catalog of face-lifts, implants, liposuctions, skin grafts and diets gives her a dozen brief stories that are horrifying and irrepressibly funny at the same time. A cuisine tour with this woman is a trip through a devilish fun house.

What is happening to her makes her hate men, but the more she despises them the more she needs them. They are unnecessary and to be used like Kleenex, she says. One of them can claim to be Flash Gordon or Superman when in fact he is "gordito, bajito y feeeeo" ("short, fat and uuugly"). Yet the one who is getting away from her plunges her into hell-fire, and she chants a sarcastic litany, praying for each abuser she has ever known, from mere liars to those who use women as punching bags.

In the end she knows who the real enemy is of course and decides to murder Barbie on the Malibu beach where she and her doll live. The closing lines can make one shudder. The manipulative power of the popular commercial culture is summoned up with something like a repulsive reverence. That part, at least, of the American spirit belongs to the

sharks.

"How Happy Barbies Are!" is a tough, exciting experience. Unlike some previous summer tour offerings of this company, this one will mostly elude anyone without Spanish; much of its power comes from wordplay. And much of its emotional drive comes from music. Ms. Arriaga's voice can arouse memories of several Latin American singers with telling wit.

But perhaps her most revealing use of song comes in the one English number. Bárbara acts out the words as Gloria Gaynor's voice belts out the 70's anthem of disco "I Will Survive," and sadness falls over the listener amid all the laughter this performance calls up, for it is clear right then that the only way Bárbara can survive is by shedding the personality she has worked all her life to acquire: she has to bury Barbie.

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