

NYC's Latino theaters back in full swing

BY MURI ASSUNÇÃO
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

"iAmericano!" – based on the true story of an undocumented Mexican teen rejected by the U.S. Marines after he tries to enlist in the days after 9/11 – continues through June 19 at New World Stages (340 W. 50th St.).

The musical centers on Tony Valdovinos, who arrived in the U.S. from Mexico when he was 2 and learns the truth about his immigration status when he was turned down at a Phoenix, Ariz., recruitment office.

Valdovinos turned his disappointment about his immigration status into a career in local politics and enrolling in Deferred Action for Childhood

Arrivals, the program initiated by former President Barack Obama in 2012 that allows immigrants brought to the U.S. as children to work, and protects them from deportation.

His story caught the attention of theater producers in Phoenix, where "iAmericano!" opened in 2019 for a critically acclaimed run before it's current Off-Broadway production featuring a nearly all-Latin cast headlined by Colombian actor Sean Ewing ("West Side Story" and "Amazing Grace" on Broadway) as Valdovinos. new-worldstages.com

TORCHED! LIGHTS UP THE BRONX

Pregones/Puerto Rican Traveling Theater's original musical production "TORCHED" runs May 19 through June 12 and features a mix of salsa, funk-disco, and hip-hop to tell the tale of the Bronx in the bad old days of the 1970s to present-day personal accounts of those who lived through the borough's fires amid the arson-for-profit business. Directed by Rosalba Rolón, musical direction by Desmar Guevara. At Pregones Theater, 575 Walton Ave. near 149th St. pregonesprtt.org

'EVA LUNA' OPENS AT REPERTORIO ESPAÑOL

Isabel Allende's novel "Eva Luna," adapted for the stage by Caridad Svich and directed by Estefanía Fadul, is a coming-of-age story about a woman born into poverty who becomes a storyteller and a reflector of history. Performed in Spanish with English subtitles. Preview begin May 28 at Repertorio Español, 138 E. 27th St. repertorio.nyc

With Viva Staff

JOYS OF SUMMER



Luis Caballero's new play uses Disco Queen's songs to empower domestic abuse victims

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Heaven knows, Donna Summer was a fighter.

The five-time Grammy Award winner who sold over 100 million records worldwide, dominated dance floors across the globe, and went from being a gay icon to having to defend herself from alleged homophobia – during the height of the AIDS crisis – will forever be remembered as the ultimate Disco Queen.

Summer, who died in 2012 at the age of 63, was also open about her struggles with depression and even a suicide attempt in 1976. Now, a new play inspired by her music hopes to empower victims of domestic violence by mixing fantasy, reality, and disco classics.

The inspiration for "Love to Love You: La Historia de Dolores Verano (The Dolores Summer Story)," written and directed by Luis Caballero, began in a New York City yellow cab about four years ago.

Actress Lorraine Vélez, known for "Rent" and "Dreamgirls" on Broadway, took her friend Caballero to see "Summer: The Donna Summer Musical," a Broadway show about the "Heaven Knows" singer.

Caballero had directed Vélez a



decade ago in the Off-Broadway musical "DC7: The Life of Roberto Clemente," and as the two friends headed home, they talked about how Vélez would have been great in the Donna Summer show – though they both felt that as a Latina, she would have never been cast as the African-American hitmaker.

That's when Caballero came up with an idea for a play. "What if [the character] is a lady who's got issues, and her name is Dolores, and then we change Summer to Verano?" Caballero recalls telling Vélez.

"If you want to sing Donna Summer songs, you don't have to necessarily be Donna Summer,"

he remembers telling her. "So I started developing this story about a beautician who works in a beauty parlor in the Bronx. She's autistic, and her idol – her God – is Donna Summer," Caballero told Viva.

The beautician, named Dolores, is a victim of domestic violence and abuse who uses Summer's music as a tool to help her survive and overcome the psychological trauma she's had to endure.

With the show, Caballero wanted to shine some light on the ongoing crisis of violence against women in Puerto Rico – a situation so extreme that it led Gov. Pedro Pierluisi to declare a state

of emergency over the increase in cases of gender violence on the island shortly after taking office in January 2021.

Much of the play, which is performed in Spanish with English subtitles and runs through May 29 at Teatro Circulo (64 E. 4th St.), is inspired by Caballero's personal life. Before moving to New York City, the 57-year-old actor, director, writer and college professor grew up in the small town of Barceloneta, about 40 miles west of San Juan. The youngest of four kids, Caballero witnessed violence in his own home when his father would often get violent with his mother – until she fought back.

"I saw my mama liberating herself, saying to him, 'This is the last time.' [Then] she got a hammer, and she hit his head," he recalled. "She never hit him again."

That's when, as a young boy, Caballero saw "the liberation of a woman who was haunted by domestic violence." And that's the message he wants to share with "Love to Love You."

"These killings of women – because somebody wants to control them – they have to stop. For me, art is a weapon. If you go to the theater and you are not transformed, you didn't achieve your goal."

COURTESY OF iAMERICANO!



MICHAEL PALMA/COURTESY: TEATRO CIRCULO