

“SOFRITO!”

Press Kit

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A spicy blend of music, stories

By Daniel Chang

With all the hype surrounding Latin music today, it's refreshing to see an act that takes risks, stretches a little and tries to accomplish something new and relevant in a rapidly growing field of imitators. The difference could come by way of new instrumentation, stylistic fusion or linguistic experimentation. One act in particular piques my curiosity because it blends music, theater and storytelling to entertain and educate audiences.

Nuyorican (that's a Puerto Rican New Yorker) entertainer **David Gonzalez and the Latin Legends Band** flex this trio of talents into a show named for a typical Hispanic seasoning, "Sofrito," that looks and sounds as good as this culinary concoction tastes.

"Sofrito," which has toured nationally and plays at the Irvine Barclay Theater on March 3, offers a unique insight into a Hispanic culture uncommon to California - that of Caribbean Hispanics (Cuban, Dominican and Puerto Rican) in New York - using folkloric tales, original stories and salsa music. Gonzalez and the Latin Legends recently performed 30 minutes of their 90-minute program as part of Showcase 2000 at the Orange County Performing Arts Center and the audience reaction was enthusiastic.

Gonzalez is a talented storyteller, inflecting emotion and depth through tone of voice, facial expression and physical comedy. When backed by the Latin Legends Band, Gonzalez's stories take on a new dimension. Aside from providing the obvious drum roll to cue a punch line or lending a synthesized sound effect to punctuate the moment, the Latin Legends create atmosphere using a recipe of funk and rhythm that is, at times, reminiscent of Booker T and the MGs. Repeating a hokey-pokey-like instruction to "roll it up, stir it up, spice it up and shake it all around," Gonzalez had the audience of about 100 on its feet and following his simple steps to salsa dancing by the end of the show.

Beyond the contagious fun that "Sofrito" obviously provides, there is something more profound in this serving of entertainment. That is the subject of ethnic identity.

"I don't consider myself an anthropologist," said Gonzalez whose youthful face and demeanor belie his 43 years of age. "There's a wide range of culture in my own life. My father is Cuban and my mother is Puerto Rican. I don't pretend that this (show) is in any way representative of Latino culture. It's representative of Caribbean Latino culture and the diaspora to New York."

RESISTING HIS ROOTS

Before creating "Sofrito" with Latin Legends keyboardist Larry Harlow in 1997, Gonzalez performed solo theater and storytelling wherever he could, including colleges and prisons. He still hosts a popular interactive radio program for children on New York public radio. Yet throughout a roughly 20-year career, Gonzalez resisted expressing his ethnic roots. "I had avoided for many years doing a show of

Latino stories because I didn't want to be pigeonholed as a Latino storyteller, a cultural storyteller," he said. "I didn't want to fulfill somebody else's cultural requirement. Bit by bit, though, Gonzalez incorporated his background into his acts. He developed a subsegment of his one-man shows in the mid-90s and titled it "Cuentos ... Tales From the Latino, World." "My creative muse is very wide. It's mostly rooted in my experience, of the natural world, in my experience of contemporary art, my experience of depth of psychology and also my experience as a Latino, but not only that," Gonzalez said. "So I wanted my career, my reputation to reflect all of that," he added. "It's a much harder thing to do once you establish yourself as kind of folkloric or ethnic storyteller or artist to then introduce these other aspects. I wanted to establish myself as a really broad artist without being squished into, 'Oh, he's the Latin guy.' It's not all of who I am. It's part of who I am." Still, "Sofrito" relies heavily on ethnic identity, with Gonzalez telling tales in Spanish (the band translates for him), English and some combination of the two. The music is decidedly Afro-Caribbean Latin but the tales carry universal themes. There's the tale of Chango, an Orisha or messenger of God in Afro-Cuban religion, who trades his powers of prophecy for the ability to play the drums. There's a mythical tale about how the palm tree came to exist in Puerto Rico. And there's a personal story about Gonzalez's uncle, who could make a tree sing.

Honestly, whether you're Hispanic or not, these stories are easy to relate to or understand. Just like you don't have to be Greek or Roman to appreciate classical mythology, you don't have to be Hispanic to enjoy "Sofrito." In fact, the only barrier to this family-oriented show may be a generation gap, of sorts. "The funny thing is," said Harlow, whose legend stems from playing with the Fania All-Stars band that fueled the 1970s New York salsa craze, "the kids want more stories and the adults want more music."

EXCELSIOR DEL CONANDO DE ORANGE, Semana del 3 al 9 de Marzo de 2000

SOFRITO celebra la cultura latina hoy en Irvine

Por Miguel Suárez Orozco

Sofrito, un grupo que celebra la cultura latina en alegre fusión de música y relatos, presentará hoy su contagioso espectáculo a las 7:30p.m., en el Irvine Barclay Theatre de Irvine. Mambo, salsa, guaracha y otros ritmos, interpretados por The Latin Legends Band, dan marco a cuentos leyendas mediante los cuales el relator, David González, muestra variados aspectos de la cultura latina. Los relatos exploran tradiciones, costumbres, magia y mitos de las poblaciones precolombinas, reflejando la grandeza de las culturas que distinguen a cada pueblo del Continente Americano. Sofrito es fruto de la creatividad e iniciativa de González, quien durante varios años llevó sus relatos a muchas escuelas del país y anhelaba acompañarse con un conjunto musical de primera.

A mediados de 1996, mientras actuaba en Broadway, Gonzalez conoció a Larry Harlow y sus músicos, y al hablar de sobre su proyecto coincidieron en ideas y, después de prepararse durante seis meses, debutaron en marzo siguiente en la urbe neoyorquina.

Desde entonces, dijo David, recorren el país acumulando éxitos en los más importantes escenarios, donde Sofrito divierte al público y motiva su reflexión. The Latin Legends Band suma el talento de Harlow, Yomo Toro (maestro del 4 y del 3 cubano y de la guitarra flamenca), Adalberto Santiago y otros extraordinarios músicos. David

tiene un doctorado en musicoterapia y escribe también música. "Me interesa mostrar la grandeza de nuestra cultura", expresó David, "activando la imaginación, en estos tiempos tan penetrada por la TV y los juegos de video. Cuando los muchachos no activan la imaginación se pierden, no pueden crear algo nuevo para ellos ni para sus comunidades".

El espectáculo de esta tarde incluye cuatro cuentos: dos africanos, un tahino de Milomaki y el otro de Latinoamérica, sobre el árbol que hace cantar. Otra meta próxima de Sofrito es grabar su primer álbum, concluyó González.

WHAT PRESENTERS ARE SAYING

“Imaginative, moving and beautifully performed ... an enactment of artmaking!”

- *The Lincoln Center Institute*

“David’s pure and joyful brand of family theater was a hit of our festival ... we’re having him back next season for a longer run.”

- *The New Victory Theater*

“[David] is an artist of rare talent and warmth whose unique style of solo theater held our sell-out audiences spellbound. We are already planning a return engagement.”

- *London’s Royal National Theater*

“From sell-out crowds at our main stage to outreach with our migrant community David was a shining star of humor and inspiration.”

- *The Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center*

“Top-notch, charismatic and just marvelous ... I would recommend David Gonzalez to *any group, any time*, without reservation.”

- *The St. Louis Art Museum*

Los Angeles Times

ARTS, ENTERTAINMENT, LEISURE

MONDAY, MARCH 6, 2000

Actor-Dancer Brings Ethnic Tales to Life

David Gonzalez and the band of keyboardist Larry Harlow perform Caribbean fables that enrapture children and adults at Irvine Barclay.

Jazz Review

By BILL KOHLHAASE
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Ask any first-grader: Nothing enlivens a story like music. "Sofrito!," the New York-based, kid-friendly program of music and story, made the most of that connection Friday at the Irvine Barclay Theatre with its lively mix of tales and tunes from actor-dancer David Gonzalez and the six-piece Latin Legends Band of keyboardist Larry Harlow.

But "Sofrito!," like music and storytelling at large, is not just for tykes. Gonzalez spun yarns that reflected his Caribbean heritage-Afro-Cuban creation myths, a Puerto Rican tale about the magic of the royal palms and a ditty from his formative years in the Bronx in which a tree is made to sing--that captivated adult imaginations as well as kids'.

And the same devices that can make children's stories so much fun--repeated lines, descriptive movement and audience involvement--helped adults get in on the fun.

Gonzalez is an animated storyteller who paces the stage and makes use of a full-range of physical expressions to keep attention high. Dramatic pauses saw him freeze like a statue. His face alternately expressed joy, puzzlement or wonder. When he sang about the program's namesake, the Caribbean mother sauce of peppers, onions, tomatoes and spices, he had everyone in the crowd on his feet singing, "Stir it up! Mix it up! Spice it up!" along with him. Adding to the magic was an array of audible effects from Harlow, percussionist Wilson "Chembo" Corniel and drummer Bobby Sanabria. Funniest of these occurred in one story in which characters slept, and the entire band contributed snores, mumbles and peeps. Often, certain musical phrases became touchstones, bringing continuity and the kind of predictability that, as anyone who reads to children knows, makes these kinds of stories so much fun. The musical selections served as interludes between the tales, linking them with rhythm and sound. Not all of it was Latin in origin. Harlow and company frequently employed the hip-hop beats of the day as tools of involvement, getting the audience to clap along with the backbeats as they emphasized various aspects of the narrative. The highlight of the musical presentation was the play of guitarist Yomo Toro, whose excursions on the Puerto Rican cuatro--a stubby, guitar with a harmonized tone similar to a 12-string guitar--rang with authority. Toro constructed a solo medley of tunes ranging from "The Mexican Hat Dance" to "In the Mood" that had children and adults giggling with recognition. Much of the presentation was bilingual, with Spanish phrases followed in rapid-fire succession by English translations. Still, Gonzalez was so expressive, verbally and physically, that even the most "linguistically challenged" members of the audience (as Gonzalez put it) could find meaning even before the English was spoken.

Island Fairy Tales With Spicy Rhythms

'Sofrito'

Old-fashioned storytelling and hot Latino music are blended to pleasant, often rousing effect in "Sofrito." Playing through Sunday at the jewel box that is the New Victory Theater in Times Square, this 90-minute intermissionless show spotlights the gifts of David Gonzalez, a storyteller who sings and dances, as well as the spicy music of the Latin Legends Band, whose stars include the keyboard artist Larry Harlow, the lively singer Adalberto Santiago and Yomo Toro, a virtuoso of the guitarlike cuatro.

Although the New Victory was founded as a children's theater, "Sofrito" offers plenty of fun for adults. While Mr. Gonzalez's stories, derived from Caribbean culture and myth or from his childhood experiences in the Bronx, are clearly intended for youngsters, the music of the Latin Legends—salsa, mambo, jazz, flamenco and more—is calculated to bring audience members of all ages to their feet, clapping rhythmically and singing along.

Mr. Gonzalez, lean and lithe, with a supple voice and a command of gestures that illuminate his stories, is an engaging performer. Suspense and surprise may not dominate his simple tales, which often stretch across musical interludes. But they are the stuff of childhood listening: a Yoruba tale of the Creation; the story of the Creator's messenger who traded the power to see the future for the power to make music; the Puerto Rican fairy tale of the healer Milomaki and how the island got its royal palm trees; the account of the uncle who taught Mr. Gonzalez that trees could sing by making him a guitar, and "El Rey del Agua," about a little girl and an enchanted goldfish. "Sofrito" makes for easy listening.

LAWRENCE VAN GELDER

The New York Times, March 26, 1997