

# The Gardens of Anuncia

**Michael John LaChiusa** music, lyrics, book

**Mitzi E Newhouse Theater, Lincoln Center, New York** 19 October – 31 December 2023

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Eden Espinosa, Kalyn West (Anuncia), Mary Testa and Andréa Burns; Tally Sessions's Deer and Priscilla Lopez's older Anuncia; grandpapa Enrique Acevedo with West

It's the season for new musicals based on the girlhoods of real-life entertainers reared by single moms. On the heels of Alicia Keys's Broadway-bound *Hell's Kitchen*, which uses the pop star's song catalogue to chronicle her teen years in midtown Manhattan, Lincoln Center Theater debuts a new musical from Michael John LaChiusa about the upbringing of the 84-year-old dance legend Graciela Daniele. A student of Merce Cunningham and Martha Graham, Daniele performed in the original Broadway productions of *Follies* and *Chicago* – and then went on to choreograph such 1990s classics as *Once on This Island* and *Ragtime*.

*The Gardens of Anuncia*, which Daniele directs and co-choreographs, follows her childhood in 1940s Argentina during the rise of the Perón regime and charts how the adults in her life shaped her trajectory as artist and human being. The lessons come primarily from the three women in her life: her mother (played by Eden Espinosa, flashing a grounded maturity), a single mom and amateur tango dancer who worked as a secretary for the local governor and introduced her daughter to ballet, initially as a means of fixing her flat feet; her mother's sister (Andréa Burns, elegantly soulful), who helped develop her niece's passion for music and storytelling; and her grandmama (delightfully brassy Mary Testa), 'agreeably separated' from her merchant-marine husband, who nurtured her granddaughter's 'flair for the dramatic'. And while her father is mostly MIA, grandpapa makes an occasional appearance (played by Enrique Acevedo, who also takes on multiple other male roles), to gift her with a sense of wanderlust that will take her far from Argentina: first to Europe and then to a long and successful career in New York City.

Priscilla Lopez, herself a Broadway legend since playing the original Diana Morales in *A Chorus Line*, gracefully narrates the story as the older version of Daniele. Here named Anuncia, she recounts her life in her garden as she reluctantly prepares to accept a lifetime achievement award. Kalyn West, lithe and lovely and looking like the young Natalie Wood in *West Side Story*, shadows Lopez as a wide-eyed younger version of Anuncia.

“This show openly embraces magic realism, featuring not one but two singing deer”

Composer Michael John LaChiusa, a longtime Daniele collaborator, has written a delightful and richly melodic score which initially leans heavily on solos as the matriarchs in Anuncia's life dispense their pearls of wisdom in song. The simplicity of the score deepens in the group numbers,

including a charming opening song about 'Mama, Grandmama, Tia and me' and a later quartet in which Anuncia and her three matriarchal influences create a goosebump-worthy four-part harmony that makes you long for it to go on forever. The cast sounds sensational, backed by a 10-person orchestra including an accordion-like bandoneon to lend additional Argentine flavour. Indeed, there is so much texture and sophistication

to the music that you don't miss a bigger chorus.

*The Gardens of Anuncia* is a captivating chamber musical that straddles the line between modesty and maximalism, stubbornly defying both categorisation and commercial impulses. After all, this is a show that openly embraces magic realism, featuring not one but two singing deer complete with antlers (both played by Tally Sessions), who encourage Anuncia to 'dance while you can'.

And there's a stripped-down quality to the production, reflected in Mark Wendland's simple stylised set (suggesting a series of beaded curtains); Jules Fisher and Peggy Eisenhauer's colourful lighting; and Toni-Leslie James's deceptively simple costumes. Surprisingly, Daniele is even parsimonious in her use of dance (conceived with co-choreographer Alex Sanchez). She deploys just enough to capture her portrait of the artist as a young hooper without losing sight of the overall arc of the memory-play of a story. There's a restraint here – a measured deployment of music, motion and narrative – that reflects a team of artists in full, mature command of their creative gifts.

Thom Geier

## Production credits

**Cast** Priscilla Lopez, Kalyn West, Mary Testa, Eden Espinosa, Andréa Burns, Enrique Acevedo, Tally Sessions

**Direction** Graciela Daniele

**Choreography** Graciela Daniele, Alex Sanchez

**Orchestrations** Michael Starobin

**Music direction** Deborah Abramson

**Set** Mark Wendland

**Costumes** Toni-Leslie James

**Lighting** Jules Fisher, Peggy Eisenhauer

**Sound** Drew Levy

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Musicals Feb/Mar 2024 **M** 63