

The Latina Christmas Special

theatermania.com/los-angeles-theater/reviews/the-latina-christmas-special-latc_83383.html

REVIEWS

In its third incarnation, Los Angeles Theatre Center makes this holiday comedy a tradition.

Jonas Schwartz • Los Angeles • Dec 5, 2017



Sandra Valls, Maria Russell, and Diana Yanez in *The Latina Christmas Special*, directed by Geoffrey Rivas, at the Los Angeles Theatre Center.

(© Xavi Moreno)

Both a gentle parody of the celebrity Christmas specials that ran on network television in the '60s and '70s, and a poignant memory play, *The Latina Christmas Special* is a goofy, spirited, lark running at the Los Angeles Theatre Center. Never limiting their audience to one community, the three writer-actors Maria Russell, Sandra Valls, and Diana Yanez reveal life tragedies and farces that have universal appeal.

Three close friends share childhood photos, reminisce about the holidays, and settle past traumas, whether bullying, homophobia, or suffocating familial bonds. The women joke about their backgrounds but with a sense of nostalgia.

Created by Yanez but written by all three actors, the stories feel authentically autobiographical. Though exaggerating for comic effect or theatrical structure, Russell, Valls, and Yanez reveal plenty about themselves, utilizing their own photographs and home videos, which further allows the audience to connect with them and their joyous and bittersweet tales.

BUY TICKETS

Russell, who was raised by an affable Lithuanian father and a dominant Latina mother, learned about bullying first-hand from the mean girls at her school. Yanez, whose family escaped from Cuba, grew up poor but loved. Christmas became a time of sharing as opposed to breaking the bank with expensive gifts. Valls, who grew up a tomboy before coming out, found gift-getting a draining experience, since her parents refused to respect her love for more gender-neutral presents. Her story ends with sadness and reconciliation. All three are naturals. Quirky, with wonderful chemistry, they are delightful to watch. Valls exposes a solid singing voice with heartfelt resonance.

If you have seen kitschy holiday show parodies such as *The Paul Lynde Halloween Special* (with Betty White and Kiss) and *Captain & Tennille: The Christmas Show* (with musical interludes, schmaltz sentiment and endless eye-roll worthy jokes), *The Latina Christmas Special's* style will make perfect sense. The actors overemote and appear to be performing, which all fits the milieu. When the veil slips and they divulge painful realities, the play becomes a mirror to the audience's own family dynamics. For the monolingual, there are sentences that can be easily deciphered, but too much is exclusionary for those who want to comprehend the women's jokes. The play also runs a bit long for a one-act, clocking in at around two hours.

Director Geoffrey Rivas gives the actors space to infuse the stage with authenticity while also tailoring them for the TV holiday special motif that they adored when they were growing up. Michael Navarro's set looks as if the audience has walked into their living room. Ivan Robles's sound design amplifies Valls's singing voice, creating the illusion that she has been miked for a rock concert.

A gateway to the holidays, *The Latina Christmas Special* is a warm chocolate cookie and milk with just enough tears to offset the sweetness.