

Stagey Lady

Reviews and previews beyond the West End

The glamour of a variety artist?

Copla the Musical, Tristan Bates Theatre

La Gitana has the world at her feet. Standing tall in her bright red heels she marks the stage under the steady glow of limelight. Night after night the crowds of New York shriek and cheer in applause.

She's living the dream with her American lover in the cultural capital of showbusiness, but she's sad and forlorn. Memories of the Spanish Civil War seep into her performances, her unrepentant Republican spirit competing with the might of Franco as he dominates the world stage on the other side of the Atlantic. The full glamour of a variety artist is put on display before the sobriety of after party reflections and commiserations that reveal themselves with each layer of make-up removed.



Produced by an Anglo-Spanish company, HisPanic Breakdown, *Copla, The Musical* is a one-man show written and performed by Alejandro Postigo. His dual-roles are split between a drag artist longing to leave her life of political exile to return to the life she escaped from, and a modern-day Spanish researcher living in England. He shares with her the conflicting cultural and sexual identities.

They're demanding parts to play for one actor, and between the two, La Gitana shines so bright that the modern counter character is reduced to a shadow figure that struggles to ripen to its full potential. The emotions that La Gitana surges through the audience with all her unearthed angst pales in comparison to the inner turmoil of a European migrant who's torn between the love for his culture and the freedom to love who he does.

It's certain that the star of the show is the Copla music itself with live piano and violin accompanying feet-tapping melodies belted out in Spanish and translated into English. A type of folk music that belonged to the people of Spain, it changed course when the Franco regime repressed it into a form palatable to their political ideals.

Traditionally it was a protest song used by women to channel the struggles and realities of their lives and naturally became adopted by trans artists to express encrypted subversive material. The musical is a reminder of the power of music to give voice to protests rising above the enforced silence of censorship.

The enduring appeal of the songs mirrors the healing power harnessed from resurrecting forgotten voices. Humour interchanges with grief as often as La Gitana's costume changes from red velvet gowns to being stripped naked on a prison floor. The musical is unapologetic in bringing together history and politics under the guise of popular entertainment with just the right balance of frivolity and reality.

I was heartened to see that the play was included in a European film festival and not the current *Queer Season*, blurring the edges between the voice of minority struggles and the attention of mainstream audiences. As part of the festival, *A Piece of the Continent*, the central aim was to reignite cultural links weighed down by despondency and disillusionment following the passing of Article 50 and the ensuing *Brexodus*.

Just as La Gitana was a pioneer of her time, the play could be used as a stepping stone to pave the way for diverse LGBT voices and minorities in political exile in our current times, landing on the shores of Europe for an uncertain future.

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