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Theatre Lab's "Ich Bin Ein Berliner" A Profound Work of Hybrid Art



By [John Thomason](#) April 16, 2021



What is Vanessa Garcia's "Ich Bin Ein Berliner," now streaming from Boca Raton's Theatre Lab? Is it a play? A podcast? A work of video art?

The short answer is yes. Of South Florida's various pandemic-era experiments in bringing live theatre into people's homes, Garcia's audio play is arguably the most hybrid example of necessity as the mother of invention.

For three performances earlier this month, it was an in-person, outdoor play reading. Since then, it has been available as both an audio play, in which listeners bring the work into their ears and let the mind paint its own pictures, and with a "visual companion." In this option, which I chose, we don't see the actors reading the play; rather, their voices and sound effects from the audio version lay atop illustrations, animated graphics, and archival photographs and TV clips.

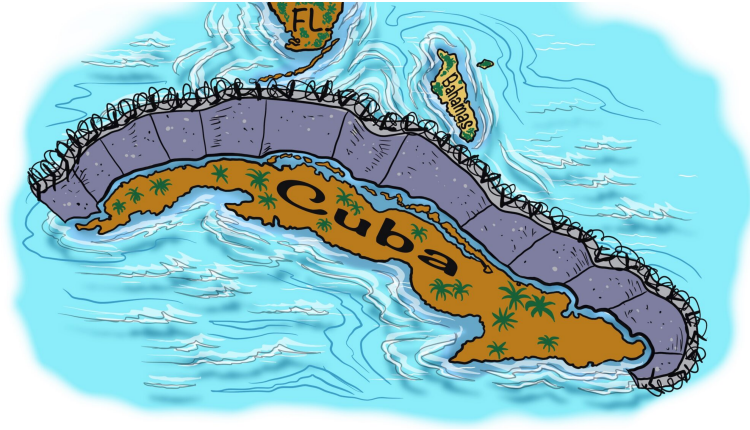
Thus, in terms of format, this work is a veritable choose-your-own-adventure novel, and content-wise, it's equally slippery: "Ich Bin Ein Berliner" hopscoches between memoir, essay and dramatic re-enactments. Marrying personal history with reportorial detachment, Garcia achieves, in just an hour's time, a catharsis of self-exploration. Its universal emotions and analyses are likely to hit home with anyone who has endured the divisions of walls, either physical or ephemeral.

It begins in a classroom in 1989, the night the Berlin Wall crumbles, and instructors everywhere interrupt their curricula to turn on the news. Most of her peers don't comprehend the significance, but Garcia, to her own surprise, cannot contain the tears that only her teacher shares. The rest of "Ich Bin Ein Berliner" is essentially an attempt to comprehend, decades later, those unexpected emotions.



Garcia takes her listeners and viewers down a curated rabbit hole of geopolitics, pop-culture and memories of her youth, weaving in blue jeans, Bruce Springsteen, clandestine meetings in laundry rooms, and revelatory pool parties. It's all interesting, though for the first half-hour of "Ich Bin Ein Berliner," we are essentially waiting for the other shoe to drop; we're with it, without exactly knowing where it's going.

Eventually, the playwright, who is Cuban-American, wends her way toward a pivotal connection, relating East Berliners' prohibition from the freedoms of the West to her disconnection from her ancestral homeland, one riven with similarly anti-democratic policies. The iconic clips of JFK and Ronald Reagan from earlier in the play give way to new interviews with Garcia's mother, whose embargo of her native country prevented Garcia from visiting until she was well into adulthood. You can still hear the pain in Garcia's narration, as well as the empathy for her mother's hardline position. The political becomes the personal.



If you choose the video supplement, you'll see still photos of the playwright, her mom and her grandfather. You'll see what Cuba looks like today, and what Berlin looks like today; in one image, capitalism's most visible logo, the golden arches of McDonald's, appears outside Checkpoint Charlie, a detail that won't be missed on anyone.

But with all respect to John Shamburger's endearing black-and-white illustrations, I almost wish I'd chosen the audio version. It would feel more like a vital episode of "This American Life." Indeed, "Ich Bin Ein Berliner" is uniquely tailored for these times. It wouldn't work as a traditional play. I've been vocally anti- "virtual entertainment" since the pandemic started, but I'm finally humbled: Here is a profound work of creativity that perfectly meets the moment.

Audio tickets for "Ich Bin Ein Berliner" cost \$5; audio-video tickets cost \$15. Order them [here](#).

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