

Arts and Humanities

People and Community



From tragedy to triumph

"The Amparo Experience" is an immersive play that explains the moving history of the founders of Havana Club rum.

By Amanda M. Perez

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University of Miami alumna Vanessa Garcia recounts her personal journey writing for the highly acclaimed play, the "Amparo Experience."

It's a time warp that takes you back to Cuba in the 1950s. The moment a person walks into "The Amparo Experience" they are immediately immersed in the story that follows the moving history of the founders of Havana Club rum.

"The piece of theater is unlike any other. It tells the story of how the Arechabala family was ripped apart during Fidel Castro's Cuban Revolution," said Vanessa Garcia, writer of "The Amparo Experience."

Garcia, who is a University of Miami alumna, had the unique opportunity of bringing the interactive production to life.

"The minute I got involved I knew this was something special. I feel like this project is so much bigger than I am," she said.

"Amparo" is an experiential theatrical journey in downtown Miami that takes you by the hand straight into the heart of one family's fight for love, country, legacy, and the truth behind the real Havana Club rum. For 90 minutes the audience travels with the cast, which features 23 actors, four musicians, and two dancers. Throughout the play the audience learns more about how the Arechabala family lost the rights to produce the rum in 1959 when the Castro regime confiscated the company. In 1995 the Bacardi family bought the rights to the recipe from the family in an effort to help continue the family legacy. Garcia wrote the show in a way that allows guests to experience this story in various ways by following different characters.



Alumna Vanessa Garcia, left, with director Vanessa Collado.

"I think the way we have chosen to tell the story makes it so unique. You have to go through your emotions. You're not just sitting down and watching, you're part of the play," Garcia said.

Garcia, who is Cuban-American, was immediately drawn to making sure the Arechabala story was not only told to the Cuban community, but to others from different backgrounds as well. Garcia said it is incredibly moving to see how the play has reached people from all over the world.

"I once spoke to a Vietnamese couple who came to watch the show and they mentioned how they were able to relate to the story. This is the story of Vietnam. It's about refugees around the world trying to find refuge," she said. "It's a story that Venezuelans, Nicaraguans, and Panamanian people can relate to as well."

The idea of catharsis plays out very poignantly throughout the play. Garcia said what moves her the most is seeing audience reaction.

"I was moved to tears one day watching so many people crying and trying to control their emotions. I could feel them reliving their past and trying to understand what their parents went through. It was a storm of emotion," Garcia said.

She is proud to say that her voice as a playwright has been found through this play.

"I feel like there was a moment when I found my voice years ago when I made the decision to center my stories around Cuba," she said. "There is also a moment when it goes out into the world, and that's happening right now, and it's wild."

Garcia, who received her Master in Fine Arts in creative writing in 2009, has some words of wisdom to aspiring artists at UM for their future careers.

"Every artist has some kind of drive and focus. Whatever that thing that is driving you to do something is, there for a reason, and you might not know what it is until you find your voice. When you do it's really a beautiful thing."

Due to overwhelming success, "The Amparo Experience," which was first scheduled for a limited two-month run, has been extended until September 29. Garcia is forever grateful to be part of this artistic phenomenon.

"I say thank you every day for this show. I am filled with gratitude to have been called to tell this story. I feel extremely mission driven," she said.

For more information on how to buy tickets visit www.theamparoexperience.com (<http://www.theamparoexperience.com/>).

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