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A CurtainUp Review
La Lupe: My Life, My Destiny

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by [David Lipfert](#)

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In the opening scene of Carmen Rivera's new play, Guadalupe Victoria Yoli (better known as La Lupe) argues with her creative writing teacher at Lehman College that her paper is all true. That was her life.

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La Lupe gives it her usual all, but he still doesn't believe, even after an evening of chronological flashbacks. No one should blame him, because it would seem truly impossible that this diminutive woman, mature but not aged, could have played at Carnegie Hall. No one ever accused her of being retiring, though, and by the end it appears she will get the grade she wants.

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Rivera said that she made sure all the facts in the play were corroborated. She had better, because there is a small but dedicated group of La Lupe fanatics out there. There are even personal ads in the *Village Voice* that mention her.

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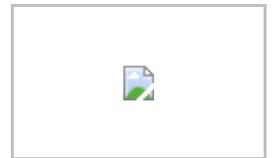
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La Lupe was the best at creating legends around her. A friend of mine recalls seeing her on the Upper West Side in the years before she hit fame. Disheveled and with a wild look in her eye, she must have been among the most driven and crazed people that came to New York in search of destiny.

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Here are the facts. Born into a poor family in



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rural Cuba, she became a sensation first in Havana and later in New York. Fame and wealth came almost without asking. In the 1960s and 70s she was the toast of Latin music at the most prestigious clubs and in the recording studios. Her unique voice and extravagant performing style garnered thousands of fans and attracted attention outside Hispanic circles (now called "crossover"). Then luck turned. Tito Puente and other former collaborators began to use Iris Chacono instead of La Lupe. Her husband fell ill and died; a disastrous fall left her momentarily confined to a wheelchair. She bottomed after fire destroyed all her possessions. A dramatic change of course allowed her to channel her intensity as a Pentecostal preacher.

The professor is right, it can't possibly be true. Yet that was La Lupe. She never gave up the struggle: there she was trying to restart her life yet again with a college education.

This is not Rivera's first portrayal of a once-famous, now-neglected female Hispanic figure. Her *Julia de Burgos, Child of the Water*, produced at Puerto Rican Traveling Theater two years ago, successfully revealed the Puerto Rican poet's interior life. In *La Lupe* Rivera combines biographical detail with glimpses at the singer's performing personality. This play with onstage salsa band to accompany over a dozen songs can even seem like a musical.

Fortunately Rivera largely avoids the clichéd narrative style in favor of dramatizing key moments in her subject's life. Invented dialogue is top rate and eminently believable, particularly with Sully Diaz's exceptional identification with her character. Diaz's superb acting and singing should dispel the controversy in some quarters over her not possessing a Black physiognomy as Lupe La Negrta had.

Applause breaks out during and after each number, but especially for favorites like "Que

te pedi" and "La Tirana". Director Luis Caballero, who saw La Lupe perform in Puerto Rico, has incorporated into this show the singer's later mania for casting off shoes and jewelry at the most intense moments. I don't know whether the audience at the English-version premiere would have let pass so easily seeing La Lupe bang her head violently against the wall, as she was wont to do.

Supporting actors are excellent, and Rivera graces each with multiple roles. Gilberto Arribas shines as Dick Cavett for the famous TV interview with La Lupe; as an incredulous Professor he provokes his once-famous student into recounting her life story. Tito Puente comes alive in Eddie Marrero's nice then nasty portrayal. Marrero is also La Lupe's sympathetic husband Willie. As La Lupe's Santeria godmother, Monica Perez-Brandes in white reappears at intervals to repeat her fateful prediction of fame then humiliation. Finally Marly Rivera does a great take on TV hostess Mirta Silva.

Maria Cristina Fusté's lighting design neatly specifies each of the many scenes. Salvatore Tagliarino's set is understandably minimal, but at least it doesn't get in the way of the action. Costumes are clearly a budget effort, but Christina Giannini assisted by Natasha Guruleva effectively recreates La Lupe's image in every stage of her life with lightning quick changes. Four on-stage musicians under William Rodriguez provide superb backup for Diaz, who is onstage for nearly the entire show.

While Rivera was remarkably non-judgmental in setting out La Lupe's colorful life, I wish she had offered her own insights to explain the singer's psychology. Were her temper tantrums (Diaz does these up fine) a childish way to assert control in a pre-feminist era or did these indicate serious character flaws? How did her Pentecostal involvement relate to her previous life? Rivera glosses over this final chapter as if embarrassed by it. The maternal feelings La Lupe expresses toward her two children at the end of the show come

a bit out of the blue. Deepening these aspects would make this highly entertaining character even more involving.

Although the play is scheduled to close on August 11th, there is the possibility of a run in another theater in the fall.

La Lupe: My Life, My Destiny
by Carmen Rivera
Directed by Luis Caballero

with Sully Diaz, Gilberto Arribas, Eddie Marrero,
Monica Pérez-Brandes, Marly Rivera, William
Rodríguez, Jimmy Delgado, Hector Máximo Rodríguez
and Johnny Rivero

Set designer: Salvatore Tagliarino

Lighting designer: Maria Cristina Fusté

Costume designer: A. Christina Giannini, Natasha
Guruleva;

Sound designer: Frank Rodriguez

Music arrangements: Oscar Hernández

Spanish translation: Raul Davila

Running Time: 2 hours, 15 minutes with one
intermission

Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre, 304 W 47th Street
(8/9 Aves.)

Telephone (212) 239-6200

Performances began June 27, 2001

Wed, Th @ 8 in English, Fri - Sat @ 8, Sat @ 3 and
Sun @ 2 and 6:30 in Spanish; \$25

Reviewed by David Lipfert based on English version
opening night 7/12/01 performance

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