

¿y tu abuela, dónde está? Demythologizing the American Identity through Pregones/Puerto Rican Traveling Theater and Roadside Theater Co-production of BETSY! (2015)

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In the popular PBS show *Finding Your Roots*, host Henry Louis Gates exposed the secrets of celebrities' ancestors. However, as Ben Affleck found out when he discovered a slave-owning relative, not everybody's ancestors were heroes. The cover-up of the truth of Affleck's slave-owning relative raises some interesting questions: What happens when our roots betray our cultural status and identity? Could we benefit from confronting our 200-year-old ancestor's depravity and acknowledging our past? The dramatic musical *BETSY! (2015)* meets these questions head on.¹ As a collaboration between the Bronx-based Pregones Theater and the Appalachia-based Roadside Theater, *BETSY!* brings two diverse ensembles together to stage a compelling drama about six generations of women named Betsy.

The play's minimal set is the empty stage in a Latin jazz club in the Bronx. As the lights come up, the headliner, Miss Betsy García (played by Caridad De La Cruz) sashays confidently onstage to an upbeat Cuban *guaracha* played by a live quartet. Betsy starts serenading us in Spanish, but a jarring announcement interrupts the music: Betsy's father, Pedro García, has just died. This event sends Betsy on a journey into a past that she never knew she had. A two-century journey unfolds in which a female Spirit (played by Elise Santoro) and her male counterpart (played by Pat D. Robinson) shift in and out of the shapes of Betsy's matrilineal Scots-Irish ancestors and tell their tales through songs rooted in the indigenous folk traditions of Irish, Bluegrass, and Latin Jazz. At first, Betsy makes fun of her ancestors' accents and colloquialisms and tells the Spirits, "You are definitely not my people!" Like many of us, this modern-day protagonist believes that her racial and cultural identity is secure and unmistakable: "I am a García! The daughter



Caridad De La Cruz performs in the jazz club at the center of *BETSY!*

Photo: Marisol Díaz for Pregones/PRTT



Pat D. Robinson in *BETSY!* Photo: Marisol Díaz for Pregones/PRTT

of Pedro García!” Yet as the spirits of her ancestors reveal the truth that has been hidden from her, Betsy, once certain about her status as a pure Latina, has to reconcile the flawed, white, marginalized, and racist people in her familial past. By the time the play ends, it is Miss Betsy García *Swindel* who takes the spotlight in the jazz club, having added her mother’s maiden name. In a hallmark of Pregones/Roadside productions, the actors engage with the audience. The production ends with the actors repeatedly asking the audience a musical question, “¿y tu abuela, dónde está?”²

BETSY! challenges common notions of identity by showing us how tangled and disruptive our roots may actually be. Ben Affleck’s fear of tarnishing his image led him to pressure *Finding Your Roots* host Dr. Gates to conceal information about his slave-owning ancestor. By contrast, these two ensembles have created a drama that unearths the inglorious past for the purpose of healing the present. *BETSY!* is one person’s history that transects many people’s stories. *BETSY!* encourages characters and audiences alike to face the challenge of accepting “family” in all its racial and cultural complexities.

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Notes

¹ *BETSY!* Book by Dudley Cocke and Ron Short with Rosalba Rolón and Beegie Adair. Music by Ron Short, Beegie Adair, and Desmar Guevara. Lyrics by Ron Short and Beegie Adair. Co-directed by Dudley Cocke and Rosalba Rolón. Puerto Rican Traveling Theater, New York City. 9 - 26 April 2015.

² This last refrain is from a poem by the Puerto Rican poet Fortunato Vizcarrondo. The poem examines the culturally accepted practice of identifying as white and denying any African or Taino heritage, which was popular in Puerto Rico at the time (1940s). Vizcarrondo’s words translate to, “You display yourself as white. And your Grandma, where is she?” Pesante, Leslie. 2012. “Out of Context or Just Invisible? The Afro-Latino Debate in Puerto Rico,” *Being Latino Online Magazine*. <http://www.beinglatino.us>. 13 August.