

Marga Gomez's final solo show is touching and hilarious in Berkeley

- Sam Hurwitt, Correspondent
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Marga Gomez performs her show "Latin Standards" at The Marsh Berkeley through Nov. 17.

Twenty-seven years after she premiered her very first solo show, "Memory Tricks," at the Marsh, San Francisco comedian and theater artist Marga Gomez is back at that solo theater hub (or at least its Berkeley branch) to say goodbye with an evening of "Latin Standards."

OK, several evenings — her show runs there for about a month — but Gomez has proclaimed that "Latin Standards," her twelfth solo show, will be her last.

That's not to say that it hasn't been a long goodbye. After premiering at New York's Public Theatre in early 2017, "Latin Standards" played twice at San Francisco's Brava Theater Center and once at San Jose's MACLA (Movimiento de Arte y Cultura Latino Americana) earlier this year.

Also, it's not really a goodbye at all. Even if she's decided 12 solo shows is enough, Gomez is branching out to other things. She recently starred as a thinly veiled Fidel Castro in Central Works' "King of Cuba" at Berkeley City Club.

There's a nice parallel, too, in that fact that her first solo show, "Memory Tricks," was about her mother, while "Latin Standards" is in part about her relationship with her father, Cuban immigrant comedian, songwriter and impresario Willy Chevalier. She previously explored her father's story in 1994's "A Line Around the Block" and both her parents in 2005's "Los Big Names."

Still, this latest and last show is by no means a repeat of old material. In "Latin Standards," she draws a parallel between her father hustling for gigs — always while projecting the image of a big shot with more work than he can handle — with her own experience trying to produce a series of comedy nights at the late Latino drag club Esta Noche in the Mission.

Directed by longtime collaborator David Schweizer, she frames the evening as a farewell concert. Wearing an almost blindingly glittery blazer, she talks about the songs her father wrote — some of them Latin Billboard hits, recorded by other artists — and their mix of cheery music and bitter, done-me-wrong lyrics about her mother. Instead of launching into the songs themselves, these intros lead thematically into back-and-forth stories between her childhood with her father and her mishaps at Esta Noche and with her then-girlfriend.

A lot of the funniest bits are in the persona of her charismatic showman father, especially in his ludicrously elaborate pitches for coffee commercials. The coffee itself is a strong running gag throughout the show — almost as strong as the coffee would be itself (she describes the Cuban coffee her father made as “stronger than crack”). The voice and bearing alone are hilarious as she embodies Willie with smooth-as-silk suavity, as if he’s always performing even when he’s just chatting with his little girl.

That too is paralleled in Gomez’s comically rakish patter in the winking conceit of the concert without singing (although in fact there is a little singing involved). What really ties the show together, though, and makes the juxtaposition of elements feel like more than just a clever if transparent device is the heartwarming tenderness of an conclusion that ties it all together beautifully. If this is really some kind of farewell to Gomez’s decades as a solo artist, it ends on an awfully lovely note.

Contact Sam Hurwitt at shurwitt@gmail.com, and follow him at [Twitter.com/shurwitt](https://twitter.com/shurwitt).

‘LATIN STANDARDS’

By Marga Gomez, presented by The Marsh

Through: Nov. 17

Where: The Marsh Berkeley, 2120 Allston Way, Berkeley

Running time: 90 minutes, no intermission

Tickets: \$25-\$100; 415-282-3055, www.themarsh.org

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