

SPOTLIGHT

on Charo

by Clint Hamblin

Born Maria Rosario Pilar Martinez Molina Baeza in Murcia, Spain, this actress, singer, comedienne and bombshell is best known in the United States as the “Cuchi-Cuchi” girl for her trademark hip-shaking movements, but if you take a closer look, you’ll find that behind the big hair, the thick accent and her skintight pink satin pants, there is so much more to Charo.

At three years old, Charo had a dog named Cuchillo who liked to wag his tail when he was happy. Charo would imitate the dog shaking her bum saying “como Cuchi, como Cuchi” which later became “Cuchi-Cuchi,” a phrase with which she would forever be identified.

At 10 years old, Charo began studying the classical guitar and was very fortunate to have as one of her teachers the world-famous master guitarist Andrés Segovia. In her nightclub and concert performances, after the comedy, self-deprecating jokes and malapropisms, Charo retreats to her tall stool, embraces her guitar and mesmerizes audiences with the sensual sounds of flamenco. Her virtuosity instantly transforms

the “Cuchi-Cuchi” girl into a legitimate artist of the highest caliber, frequently coaxing tears from the eyes of those lucky enough to hear her play.

Charo’s journey really began after recording several albums as a teenager and appearing on a Spanish television show similar to Sesame Street. Bandleader Xavier Cugat saw this talented young lady on TV and immediately hired her to be in his orchestra. In 1966, they were married, followed by a divorce in 1978.

Faced with tremendous success very early in her career, Charo’s first U.S. album, “Cuchi-Cuchi,” went platinum when she was 19 years old. Her exposure exploded on American television in the 1970s when she was featured on more episodes of “The Love Boat” than any other guest star. Films, game shows, talk shows, situational comedies, concerts and nightclub performances made Charo instantly recognizable throughout the world.

Her credits are astonishing and include hundreds of appearances on “The Carol Burnett Show,” “The Dean Martin Show,” “Sonny and Cher” and numerous Bob Hope and Sammy Davis, Jr.

specials. Johnny Carson loved Charo and often featured her on “The Tonight Show.” She was a regular guest on “The Merv Griffin Show” and “The Late Show with David Letterman.” Charo was everywhere.

Charo went to Hawaii on her honeymoon with husband, Kjell Rasten, a Swedish-born businessman. They built a house on the island of Kauai and opened a restaurant called Charo’s. In 1987, they relocated from Beverly Hills to Hawaii after her son turned six years old.

“I wanted our son to grow up in a healthy and beautiful environment. I just closed my eyes to some good offers in show business. I love show business, but my family is my priority,” Charo said.

When asked how she has

maintained her great looks, Charo proudly responded, “I have good nutrition and no plastic surgery. You can buy \$100,000 in plastic surgery like Joan Rivers, but what about energy? Your face may look 18, but when you walk into a room, people can tell that you were born with Christopher Columbus.”

“I also have good DNA, good living, but I am much younger than people think I am. I was working with Sammy Davis at the El San Juan Hotel in Puerto Rico when people started asking me about my age. Women look at me and I know they are angry because I look soooo good,” proclaimed Charo. “Cuchi-Cuchi!”

On the topic of the record business, Charo boiled. “Tower Records went bankrupt. Do you know what this means? Big record companies are disappearing and it’s up to the artist. If you believe in your product, you must promote yourself.” With the introduction of the internet and downloadable music, the record industry has forced recording artists into publicizing and distributing their products. Charo continued, “If I don’t sell my music, what will I do, teach English?”

The unmistakable signature accent has not dimin-

ished. As a matter of fact, it seems to have gotten thicker over the years, and Charo’s audiences love to hear her mangle the English language.

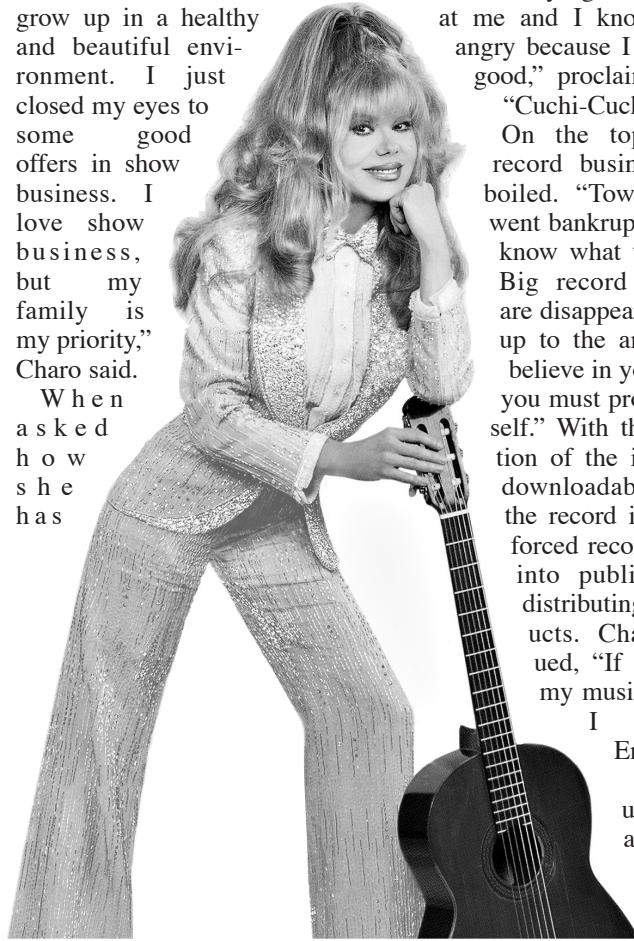
When asked about her recent Geico insurance commercial, she quietly responded, “I had a friend who was in an accident and was covered by Geico insurance. She was taken care of very well, so I decided to do the commercial.”

“I thought I was going to sing a duet with that cute little gecko lizard,” she said. “I was very disappointed with the script, but I was very polite and suggested we change the format to what is now being used around the country.” Charo interprets the insured person’s English to Spanish along with a few healthy doses of her signature “Cuchi-Cuchi” moves. It’s hysterical.

On tour, Charo is enjoying sold-out performances. “I am working with Mr. Andy Williams – you know, Moon River, Moon River.” On Friday, May 18 and Saturday, May 19, she will appear at Scullers Jazz Club at the Doubletree Guest Suites Hotel.

Her new CD, “Charo and Guitar,” demonstrates her mastery of classical guitar in a combination of original music and famous classical masterpieces. “I love what I do,” she said. “I can never turn down a beautiful audience.”

She looks amazing and she will make you laugh until you cry. When she picks up her guitar and begins to play, you’ll understand and appreciate the enormous talent that is Charo.



Theater Review

The Wild Party

by Jules Becker

Think of Queenie and Burrs as the Frankie and Johnny of the Roaring Twenties.

Joseph Moncure March probably did when he wrote the 1928 full-length verse narrative *The Wild Party*. Pumping his verse with the insistence of jazz and the envelope-pushing sexuality of the decade, the New York poet-journalist offended tender sensibilities and angered censors but nevertheless caught the unfettered spirit of his age in this sometimes frenetic, sometimes bluesy and very dark tale of a femme fatale and her abusive and cuckolded man who were doing each other wrong. All of the fire of this singular poem blazes through in the torrid New Repertory Theatre staging of Andrew Lipka’s Off-Broadway musical version of the same name.

Against the fittingly unsentimental brick backdrop of Janie E. Howland’s stunning set, sexually adventurous Vaudeville entertainer Queenie (whose legs “were built to drive men wild”) and scary clown Burrs (“mean and rough”) play out an ultimately lethal game of competing agendas and inner drives. Promising “no limits, no compromises,” Queenie throws a party not only intended to be the wildest New York City has ever seen, but also meant to test her volatile relationship with Burrs. Living up to its hype all too well, the title bash both slithers and dances its way to a night of booze and bawdiness ending in violence.

Lipka captures the rhyme and the raunchiness of the tantalizingly evocative Joseph Moncure March poem. His book captures the rich diversity of the guests and their individual odysseys at the party, while his score ranges smartly from jazz, blues and Latin stylings to music hall and circus themes. A catchy dance entitled “The Juggernaut,” crisply choreographed by Kelli Edwards, calls to mind the vibrant orchestrations of *West Side Story*, while a rousing gospel-like ensemble “Let Me Drown” recalls a similar number in *Guys and Dolls*. Other songs may favorably suggest Kurt Weill and Jule Styne as influences, but Lipka’s score has a vitality and a tunefulness all its own.

Is Lipka’s version closer to the March poem than John La Chiusa’s Broadway treatment of the same name? Without hedging, this critic enjoyed the latter as well, both in New York and locally at SpeakEasy Stage, with what appeared to be a greater emphasis on the Paglacci-like qualities of Burr. Still, Lipka’s edition has

The Wild Party. New Repertory Theatre, Arsenal Center for the Arts, Watertown. Through Sunday, May 20. 923-8487.

Confessions of a Mormon Boy. Boston Theatre Works, Boston Center for the Arts. Through Saturday, May 19. 933-8600.



a sensuality and a film noir ambiance that seem even closer to the original work. In fact, New Rep artistic director Rick Lombardo has nailed both of those elements in a staging too adult for the squeamish (complete with tub and toilet in the vulgar scheme of things) but admirably true to its source. As the party sizzles, characters recombine repeatedly in a sexual spectrum that Kinsey would endorse. The stylized orgy itself, with Queenie and her new interest Black center stage in bed and surrounded by other couples (all stripped down to underwear and lingerie), catches both the steamy exploration of the 20s and the pathos of lost souls.

As with such earlier musical triumphs as *The Threepenny Opera* and *Sweeney Todd* and the recent *Ragtime*, New Rep’s ensemble strengths continue to shine. Todd Alan Johnson has all of Burr’s menace and melancholy, by turns leering and lonely.

Amy Doherty, standing in for Marla Mindelle, finds all of Queenie’s emotional insecurity, especially in a kind of signature song called “Out of the Blue,” though she could do with more abrasiveness as the tenacious hostess.

Sarah Corey delivers instigator Kate’s cynicism and alienation, especially as she pairs up with Burrs. Maurice E. Parent brings a sensitivity to Black, arguably the only really sympathetic character in the lead quartet, in keeping with his insightful advice to Queenie and his low-key nature. Standouts in support include Leigh Barrett’s mischievous lesbian Madeleine True and Jeremy Amasa Towle’s vulnerable bisexual Jackie. Towle, a member of the talented Snappy Dance Company, brings poetry and heartbreaking pathos to “Jackie’s Last Dance.”

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