

Humble native Jorge Maldonado is enjoying success Off-Broadway

By: David Dow Bentley III, The People's Critic
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I always enjoy reviewing shows here in The Big Apple, but it is even more fun when there is a Texas connection, as in my recent review of Houston's Tommy Tune in "White Tie & Tails." Now I have had the pleasure of enjoying the success and talent of Humble, Texas native, Jorge Maldonado in the new Off-Broadway musical, "Latin Heat."

Maldonado is a graduate of the University of Miami's School of Music, and is known to Houston area residents for his appearances in such shows as the TUTS production of "Evita." Previous New York appearances have included his roles in "4 Guys Named José," and "Grease." Now he has a featured role in this latest New York offering from Amas Musical Theatre, renowned for showcasing the finest in Latino talents. Noted producer, David Coffman, director, Ovi Vargas, musical arranger, Oscar Hernandez and the production's brilliant choreographer, Maria Torres, combined efforts in conceiving "Latin Heat."

At curtain time, four exotic silk banners and a conga drum dress the stage. (Set designers Leonel Valle & Jeffrey Newburger with Lionfish Design). The rich, powerful voice of Will Perez guides us through an explosive "Bugaloo Medley," as the full company bursts onto the stage in a rhythmic splendor reminiscent of "West Side Story." They follow with an electrifying rendition of "I Like It Like That," **that featured the dazzling lighting designs of Herrick Goldman, which repeatedly set the show on fire in numbers like "Bang Bang."** Sensational vocalist, Janet Dacal, leads the cast in an exciting "I Wanna Have Fun," that could only have been improved if the superb onstage orchestra (Musical Director, Benny Harrison) had softened, just a bit, to highlight her elegant voice. As they fill the stage with the seemingly endless creativity of Torres' exquisite choreography, the attractive cast of 12 (six men and six women) have the kind of youthful energy I remember from Broadway's "Grease." And these ladies could challenge Britney Spears in a tight jeans beauty contest! But who's looking?

Perez joins Elisio Roman, Gabriel Croom, and our own Maldonado in a haunting quartet of "Beautiful Maria of My Soul," that features rich harmonies and seductive vocals.

While the orchestra serves up an exotic "Caravan," Verónica Vásquez, Michelle Marmolejo, Nadezhda Hernandez and Dacal provide joyful dance in silhouette and shadow. Maldonado, Croom, Kirk Torigoe and talented Jhesus (yes that's the spelling) Aponte then court the sensuous Vásquez passionately to the strains of Marc Anthony's "I Need to Know." The hot-orange costume designs of Miguel Angel Huidor add to the fire. I found myself thinking this stage full of talent was a great relief from the contemporary drivel of "American Idol" wannabes.

With the intensity and power of an ancient ritual, "Quimbara /Magdalena Mi Amor" had savage passion from the captivating Margo Reymundo, while the talented cast **surrounded her with elegant choreography bathed in sunshine lighting.** The handsome Maldonado is in fine voice for "Senõrita," and the company provides a wedding background that continues the swirl of magical music and dance. **With the dancers in lush lavender spotlights, Roman's sweet "When Nobody Sees Me," though a bit over-long, reminds one of the Mr. Cellophane number in "Chicago."** **Dancing circles of light complement the orchestra's fabulous tribute to Tito Puente**

during "Oy Como Va." The well-done challenge dances of "Havana After Dark" conclude the first act with a kind of dance/drama that needed sharper focus. **Under smoky, feathered lighting, Act II's "Chan Chan" sported some of the show's surprisingly appealing "rap" lyrics of Marisa Vural.** Dacal brings her divine voice to "Rhythm Divine," and even if we can't hear her every word clearly, it doesn't matter with the chorus behind her as solid as any on Broadway. The salsa flavors of "Here Comes the Band" give way to a sultry Margo, in a glittering scarlet and black dress that shows her figure to great advantage while she delivers a richly passionate "What I Asked You." Janet, Jorge & Company bring us in for a landing with a very hip "Urban Hip Hop Ballet," as our hometown boy sings a vibrant and funky "Maria, Maria," that would make fans back home in Texas proud. In the "Me Gusta" finale, Veronica and the energized and youthful cast were so sensational that even this old timer was rappin' to himself as he left the theater -- "Me Gusta! Me Gusta!"

Bentley's columns, featured in newspapers from the East Coast to the Gulf Coast, may be viewed at www.ThePeoplesCritic.com and e-mail comments may be directed to ThePeoplesCritic@earthlink.net

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