

David Baida: Dancing on a cruiseship and landing “On Your Feet” on Broadway!

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“When you can successfully play diverse characters it is very fulfilling.”
~David Baida, Actor

by **Bessy Reyna** - CtLatinoNews.com

I have been interviewing Latino actors for many years, however, I confess I never knew one who worked as an entertainer on cruise ships, or went from assisting in a law firm to starring on Broadway. There are so many interesting elements to David Baida's story, I'm sure I could double the amount of questions and still have many more I would like to ask. Among the things that impressed me the most was how supportive his parents were about his interest in the arts. I wonder how many boys were taken by their father to a Diana Ross concert to celebrate their 15th birthday.



The play “*My Name is Ben*” based on a true story and opening at the Terris Theater in Chester, CT. The story was inspired by information in the obituary of Bernhardt Wichmann III, who lived in New York City, and was mute. A fixture in his neighborhood, Ben could not speak and carried a notepad and pen to communicate. The play was developed by conducting interviews with people who knew Ben, and became his friends. Written by Scott

Gilmour and Claire McKenzie, with music by McKenzie and lyrics by Gilmour. David Baida plays the role of Jorge, one of the doormen who became friends and supporters of Ben.

In Conversation with David Baida:

BR: Where are your parents from? Did they speak Spanish at home?

DB: My mother is from Honduras and my father is from Ecuador. Yes they spoke Spanish and English at home.

BR: What was dinner at your family like?

DB: We ate together at the dinner table regularly and my mom's cuisine varied from her native Honduran recipes, (like her classic *sopita de olla* or her delicious *nacatamales*) to Ecuadorian dishes taught to her by my grandma Rosa (beet and carrot salad, for example) to more American dishes like my momma's incredible spaghetti or pork shops. The Baidas love to laugh and they love their pets. I grew up with Silky Terriers so Tootsie or Ginger were always around, getting fed under the table from our scraps. We couldn't resist their begging.

BR: What was your childhood like?

DB: I grew up in the 70's and early 80's in Southern California in a diverse neighborhood. Music was a huge part of my existence from an early age. I had a **Donna Summer** poster on my wall when I was 7! My sister Maritza and I loved the Disco era but our house was filled with all kinds of music. My dad loved **Bach** and my mom loved old *Boleros* and **Jose Luis Rodriguez'** music. My mom's favorite movie was the TV production of **Rogers & Hammerstein's Cinderella** with **Leslie Ann Warren**. My dad had seen **Barbra Streisand** on Broadway in *Funny Girl* so we had that movie soundtrack too. So Broadway was a part of our lives too. My dad was big on taking us to the library. He exposed us to classic Hollywood films. He would borrow the reel to reel movies of **Laurel & Hardy** from the library, set up his screen in our living room and invite all the kids in the neighborhood to watch with us. It was awesome. It's no wonder I am obsessed with old Hollywood actors and films to this day. On my 17th birthday, my dad took me all over Hollywood to see all the sights and movie star homes and then we even successfully sneaked into the old MGM lot! I have the best parents in the world.

David Baida, MAC Awards, NYC, 2018



BR: When did you become interested in acting/singing/dancing?

DB: I was always imitating Disney movie characters and the voices on commercials. My sister and I were big on taping ourselves doing silly characters and made-up commercials. Both me and my sister were put into dance class because my mother was brought to the US as a nanny to a California couple who

ran many dance studios across the Southwest. They trained many of the dancers on the *Lawrence Welk Show*. So I was taking tap dance classes when I was young. Singing was something I just always did for the fun of it and because I loved pop music. In Junior High, a friend suggested I take a Drama class and I never had so much fun in my life. But when I was 15 I saw the film "*East of Eden*", starring **James Dean**. I had never been so moved by an actor's performance until that film. And I immediately felt that THAT was what I wanted to do, to move people with my performance, make them laugh and make them cry. And around that time, my high school drama teacher forced me to start taking singing lessons, saying I had a good voice. The rest is history!

BR: Your first play or concert? Memories about it?

DB: My father took me on my 15th birthday, to see **Diana Ross'** concert at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas in 1985. I was a HUGE fan of hers and it was magical. No one can hold an audience in the palm of her hand like she can. Phenomenal performer!

BR: You talk about the movie "Fame" inspiring you, what caused that emotional/reaction for you?

DB: First of all I had an emotional connection to the music from that film. Songs like "*Fame*" and "*Out Here On My Own*" were just incredible emotional songs. And **Irene Cara's** voice just astounded me. Such passion in her singing! And then when I saw the film, I was swept away by the gritty yet exciting glimpses of New York City! As a kid who took tap dancing classes, who was always singing his heart out in his bedroom and always imitating commercial voiceovers and Disney movie characters, I felt an instant kinship with these diverse, young and talented actors, singers,

musicians and dancers. They were trying to make a career out of their talents and I didn't know you **could** have a career doing that! And then there was the performance of Irene Cara. She was Latina and she could act, sing and dance with the **best** of them! As a young Latino hopeful performer, one of the reasons I didn't know that I could make a career out of performing, was because I never saw anyone who looked like me doing it. There were **so** few role models in this field that you could identify with and look up to. For me there was **Angel Florez** on the 1970's Mickey Mouse Club and there was Irene Cara.

Old Man, "On Your Feet" on Broadway, photo courtesy: DavidBaida.com



BR: 46 St in New York is important to you....

DB: For a few reasons. In the spring of 2015, I was working full time assisting an attorney at the Practicing Law Institute on 46th Street and 6th Avenue. And by September of that year, I was working one block west on 46th and Broadway at the Marquis Theatre, performing on Broadway in *On Your Feet*, the **Gloria Estefan** musical. On top of that, the most iconic scene from the 1980 film, "*Fame*", the scene where all the students are dancing on top of the cars in the middle of the street to the song "*Fame*", was filmed on 46th Street, between 6th and 7th Avenue! And that film, starring my favorite triple-threat Puerto

Rican/Afro-Cuban singer/actress, **Irene Cara**, was one of my biggest inspirations to become a performer when I was 10. And today, if you stand in the place on 46th where they were dancing and look west up a half block, you can see the marquee of the Marquis Theatre.

BR: It took you years to finally succeed as a professional actor, what sustained you all those years and kept you from giving up?

DB: Well, I worked sporadically when I was younger but it's true I didn't achieve my dream of performing on Broadway until I was 45. The truth was I did give up...a few times in fact. I left show business completely and worked full time assisting attorneys at a Park Avenue law firm and at the Practicing Law Institute. But somehow, through fate and through the insistence and encouragement of good friends, show business kept coming back into my life. And for the last 5 years, I have been lucky enough to be working in my chosen field. It's a blessing I appreciate, believe me. So the answer to your question is that close friends, who believed in me more than I even did...THEY sustained me.

BR: Favorite composer, music?

DB: In musical theatre, **Stephen Sondheim** is my favorite composer. I adore his scores for "*Passion*" and "*A Little Night Music*." As far as pop music, I could write a book about the many diverse artists I love. But some of my greatest loves in popular music are **Donna Summer**, **Culture Club**, **Eurythmics** and **Mariah Carey**.

BR: If you have participated on different stages, do you have a favorite one? Karaoke and Comedy?

DB: I've never tried stand-up comedy but anyone who knows me knows I've sang on just about every karaoke stage there is! I live for karaoke because I'm such a fan of popular music. I have my own professional karaoke system and library at home in my bedroom! I sing at home by myself all the time. I'm always working on new songs at any given time. Karaoke is one of my greatest joys.

BR: I have never interviewed an actor who performed in a cruise ship, tell us about that experience.

DB: I was the high tenor in a 4 man *acapella* group and those 4 years were amazing in that they afforded me the opportunity to sail all over the world, see many amazing places and meet fascinating people from all over the world. It was also a gift to be able to give my family Mediterranean, Alaskan and Mexican Riviera cruises. But it's not healthy to live in that fantasy world too long. I got carried away with the partying lifestyle and when I came back to reality in New York it was quite a rude adjustment.

BR: In an interview, you mentioned how the audition for the cruise ship was a nightmare..why?

DB: LOL. That was many, many years ago, and it was a nightmare because I had to dance a ballet routine (this was when I was MUCH thinner) and as I was turning across the floor with a bunch of male dancers, my glasses flew off my head and almost flew out an open window! I stopped turning in horror and all the dancers bumped into me, ruining everyone's audition. And of course they were video-taping this, so someone has had a big laugh watching that footage. That's why it was a nightmare.

BR: Aside from theatrical productions or concerts have you also worked on movies and TV?

DB: I just got my SAG/AFTRA card recently after being cast as a dancer who gets impaled by a stop sign in an episode of Comedy Central's Latin-flavored sketch show, "*Alternatino*", starring **Arturo Castro** of *Broad City* and *Narcos* fame. It was a lot of fun and now that I have my card, I hope I'll get more opportunities to work more in TV and film.

BR: Do you have a preference as to the type of work you do?

DB: I've always wanted to work in musical theatre above all else, especially new works like *Hi, My Name Is Ben*. It's always an honor to be the first to originate a role. But recently I've ventured into the New York cabaret world. I created my debut solo cabaret show at the Metropolitan Room in 2017, called *Unexpected Surprise* and I was honored to win the 2018 MAC Award for New York Male Debut. I truly love this unique artform that is a totally different skill than musical theatre. It's so personal and creating it was a labor of love.

BR: The role of Jorge, the doorman in the play "Hi, My Name Is Ben" is very different from the role of Piragua Guy, which you had in "In the Heights". I'm always curious how actors can switch so seemingly easily from such diverse roles. How do you accomplish this?

DB: When you can successfully play diverse characters it is very fulfilling. "*On Your Feet*" was great practice for this. I was honored when our illustrious director **Jerry Mitchell** kept giving me more characters to play in that show, both comedic and dramatic.

BR: How do you find the essence which allows you to portray these characters?

DB: With Jorge, I took a chance and walked into the Mayfair building where he still works today and got to meet him and spend 2 hours with him! He was tickled pink that I was playing him and could not have been more gracious or forthcoming, telling me all about his life and his wonderful friendship with **Ben Wichmann**. I also met his good friend Juan, also a doorman there, and asked

him what Jorge was like. Talking to them helped me tremendously with the history and background of Jorge's character in the show. I didn't have to use my imagination as much to determine what his motivations were or to create a background history for his character. I used the information I received from them and from observing him. I hope I'm able to create a 3-dimensional character in Jorge in the short amount of time we have. He won't be a direct impersonation of him but I hope to capture the essence of this wonderful and kind person.

Piragua Guy, "In The Heights", photo courtesy: DavidBaida.com



BR: Your next project:

DB: I will be playing Piragua Guy again in "*In the Heights*" in August at Sacramentos Broadway at Music Circus. I've always wanted to work there and I'm excited to work with **Dennis Castellano**, the music director there who was my college professor

many years ago and also music directed me in *Pirates of Penzance* when I was 18!

BR: What do you do for fun? Me and my partner Ben are big *Rupaul's Drag Race* fans. We watch every episode and even went to the drag convention, DragCon to meet all the drag queen stars! I also love true crime documentaries, audiobooks, especially biographies, autobiographies. I'm reading Sally Field's autobiography right now.

BR: Gracias David for taking the time to answer my questions in the middle of your hectic rehearsal schedule. And thanks **Elisa Hale**, Public Relations Manager for facilitating this interview.

Bessy Reyna, David Baida



The Terris Theatre, 33 N. Main St., Chester. Friday, May 17 – June 9. Wednesday 2 and 7:30 p.m., Thursday 7:30 p.m., Friday 8 p.m., Saturday 3 and 8 p.m., Sunday 2 and 6:30 p.m. \$49 and up. 860-873-8668 (www.goodspeed.org)
Bessy Reyna is a member of the CT Critics' Circle.