

May 18 5 min read

De Inga y Mandinga: Diasporas in Conversation on stage

Updated: May 19

By Vida Behar

De Inga y Mandinga: A tale from Latin America is a multidisciplinary and cross-cultural performance that commands the emotional investment of its audience. Staged at the historic Langston Hughes Performing Arts Institute and presented by LANGSTON in collaboration with Early Music Seattle, the live shows took place May 5-6 to nearly sold-out crowds. A recorded performance is available for viewing online beginning May 20.



The title of the piece is an abbreviation of the common saying, “el que no tiene inga, tiene de mandinga,” which approximately translates to “those who do not have Indigenous blood, have African blood.” The enduring popularity of this phrase reflects the fact that most Latin Americans have mixed ancestry and cultural heritage. Weaving together the cultural output of the Afro-Latinx and Sephardic diasporas, the production features folk music and poetry in Ladino, Hebrew, and Spanish.

Creator and artistic director Monica Rojas-Stewart describes the production as a way to tell the history of colonialism through art from the perspective of African descendants. As an artist she aims to foster a sense of community through the production by bringing together fragmented worlds. At its core, *De Inga y Mandinga* is about diasporas in conversation.

I asked Rojas-Stewart about how she decided to bring Sephardic traditions into this year’s performance. The idea, she said, was sparked by the fact that Taryn Webber, one of the members of her band DE CAJÓN Project, is Jewish. Rojas-Stewart is Assistant Director of the African Studies and Latin American and Caribbean Studies Programs at the University of Washington Jackson School of International Studies and Webber is a former student from 2002. They have been playing music together practically ever since. “She is an amazing musician and has been playing Afro-Peruvian music for many years. At this gathering for my birthday with the band during that summer of 2019 we discussed bringing *De Inga y Mandinga* back to the theater, given the offer from Early Music Seattle to support this project. I said to her ‘what about your music? There is a lot of Jewish influence in Latin America,’ and that is when our exploration began.” Rojas-Stewart then reached out to Devin Naar, Professor of Sephardic Studies at UW, for more ideas and in the process came to realize that she had encountered Sephardic music and culture many times. When she was about 19 years old, Rojas-Stewart attended a concert in Lima, Peru,

by her friends José and Olga Barcenas, who sang a full set of Sephardic music. "I thought it was [some] of the most beautiful music I had ever heard. But I left it there and never explored it again until now," she said.

Lian Caspi, lead performer and vocalist in this iteration of *De Inga y Mandinga*, proposed some Sephardic folk songs to mix in with the Afro-Latinx numbers that Rojas-Stewart's band had already been playing. As the creative process unfolded, the show became a telling of the parallel narratives of the two women, Caspi and the other lead performer, Milvia Pacheco.

Rojas-Stewart and her creative team are excited about the possibility of future performances of *De Inga y Mandinga*, slated for next year or maybe even earlier depending on resources. They had performed the show previously in 2012, 2013, and 2014. Rojas-Stewart explains that the 2014 performance was more diverse in terms of regional music and more focused on the Afro-Latinx diaspora. By comparison, the most recent iteration makes connections with Sephardia and womanhood, with songs about finding ways to survive in spite of circumstance. She sees this performance as "a window to more possibilities," possibilities that depend on future participants and the perspectives that they will bring to the table.

The performance opened with the two lead performers folding brightly colored clothing and carrying boxes of food around the stage, transporting us to a small Mediterranean or Latin American marketplace that felt worlds away from the typical urban Seattleite experience. The strong connection between performers and audience was palpable from the moment when, during the first number, "Los guisadas de berenjena," Caspi beamed while handing out eggplants (berenjena) to the front row. The audience's involvement in the piece further blossomed on the two occasions when the entire crowd stood up and clapped in time with the pattering African rhythms of the music, not to mention that there were also multiple standing ovations.

Temporality was a major theme of the show, reigniting artistic practices of the past while acting out a future of intercultural understanding and solidarity. Early Seattle Music's Gus Denhard played percussion on a Quijada, a traditional Latin American instrument of a donkey's jawbone that creates a buzzing sound when struck as the teeth rattle against the bone. I couldn't help but marvel at how a piece of a dead being was being brought back into the world of the living through the power of music.

At one point, Pacheco recited her poem, "Que de dónde vengo?" while Caspi's lilting voice sang a hauntingly beautiful song about the black fish who will swallow her up to save her from love. At the musical climax, the performers face each other as they don flowing crimson skirts and slowly, deliberately, wrap scarlet scarves around their hair. Looking into each other's eyes, it is immediately obvious that the bond between these two women is as real as the ground they stand on, a connection that transcends the act of performance. In fact, the entire performance was a testament to how art married with activism *does* exist and has consequences in the real world. As the song ends, they stand back-to-back, basking in the glow of the moment in the show that Rojas-Stewart describes as "time-travel," when our ancestors are summoned into the present moment and vice versa.

Womanhood is central to *De Inga y Mandinga*—the show calls on the tradition of women as holders and transmitters of cultural knowledge in the intimate mother/child relationship. This is particularly relevant in times when the dominant culture is at odds with diasporic communities or when this knowledge is simply not part of

mainstream society. The performance is directed by a woman who centers female performers and feminine power. Milvia Pacheco (lead performer, choreographer, and poet) gave an outstanding performance, her movements at once unrestrained and perfectly poised. Her voice resonated so powerfully that it filled the auditorium, even sans mic. The bond between the two lead performers, Lian Caspi and Milvia Pacheco, was palpable in the chemistry they had on stage. This bond across cultures reminds us to embrace the ways in which we are connected as humans, as women and as children of diasporas.

[Vida Behar is a Seattle-based writer and artist.]

Top photo features performers Lian Caspi and Milvia Pacheco. Bottom photo is Monica Rojas-Stewart. Photos courtesy of De Inga y Mandinga.

