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## GALA's 'Lara' Offers Musical, if Not Dramatic, Delights

By Celia Wren

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As is sometimes the case with bio-musicals, "Agustín Lara: Boleros & Blues" feels rather like a concert, with dramatized scenes tossed in to justify the theatrical venue. That said, this offering from GALA Hispanic Theatre is certainly an exceptionally classy example of the concert-with-acting genre.



Dayan Aldana and Hugo Medrano in the GALA Hispanic Theatre production of "Agustín Lara: Boleros & Blues." (By Daniel Troconis -- Gala Hispanic Theatre)

Directed by Abel López with a book by Argentinean playwright Gabriel García, this world premiere serves up the music of the famed Mexican composer with the refinement and adoring reverence that a four-star chef might lavish on a creme brulee.

Lara (1897-1970) penned more than 600 popular songs, including numbers recorded by Frank Sinatra, Nat King Cole and Bing Crosby. An international celebrity nicknamed "El Flaco de Oro" ("Golden Skinny Man"), he had many an amorous liaison, including a brief marriage to Mexican film star María Félix -- a union that evidently was the Brangelina phenomenon of their era.

In the narrative sections of the GALA show, the prolific tunesmith is portrayed by Hugo Medrano, but the composer's presence is primarily felt in lush renditions of his romantic songs, including such well-loved classics as "Granada" and "Solamente una vez" ("You Belong to My Heart").

Interpreting these crowd-pleasers are several talented singers, most notably Nelson Pino, a Uruguayan performer who, according to GALA's program notes, is the go-to vocalist in Montevideo's tango circles. Outfitted in tuxedos by costume designer Marcela Villanueva, the dashing Pino looks as if he could inherit the James Bond mantle from Daniel Craig, and his velvety, operatic voice is smashing. His interpretive prowess in songs such as "Impossible" and "María bonita" is fully matched by the show's four-piece onstage band, headed by musical director and pianist Mari Paz. (Orlando Cotto is the invaluable percussionist.)

The band sits to the left of Mariana Fernández's elegant Old World set, with a white stucco facade with a black ironwork promenade jutting toward the audience. Downstage, hanging lamps resembling lanterns and incense burners complete the mood of retro gentility.

This setup provides ample room for the short theatrical scenes: Lara's early lessons with an innovation-shy music teacher (an engaging Monalisa Arias, in a pillbox hat); his companionable carousing with a buddy named Renato Leduc (Carlos Castillo); a dream-sequence mutual-admiration session


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with Spanish poet Federico García Lorca (Castillo); and so on.

As Lara, GALA Producing Artistic Director Medrano is dapper and understated (lighting designer Ayun Fedorcha carefully keeps him in shadows when he's playing the young composer). Swanning around in a white fur-trimmed satin robe and wielding a long cigarette holder, Dayan Aldana -- one of the production's key singers -- brings apt sultriness to the role of Félix. But it's Castillo, a GALA regular, who furnishes the show's ziestiest acting: He's delightfully unctuous as a swaggering radio host, and he turns the minor character of Leduc into a hyper-animated bon vivant -- a happy-go-lucky fellow who, upon learning that his girlfriend has run off with Lara, shrugs and cheerfully chugs champagne from the bottle.

That champagne-swigging gesture could be an emblem for the entire production, with its sampling of Lara's heady oeuvre. Those unfamiliar with the composer's work will find the proceedings educational and tuneful, if not exactly dramatically gripping. For Lara fans, of course, the show is a must-see -- or, more accurately, a must-hear.

*Agustín Lara: Boleros & Blues*, book by Gabriel García; music, Agustín Lara. Directed by Abel López; sound design, Brendon Vierra; projections, Jeff Will; properties, Sofia Gawer-Fische. With Anamer Castrello. In Spanish with English surtitles. About two hours. Through June 29 at GALA Theatre at Tivoli Square, 3333 14th St. NW. Call 800-494-8497 or 202-234-7174 or visit <http://www.galatheatre.org>

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