

The New York Times

ON THE WEB

David Gonzalez: Orpheus as a Charmer With a Sax

By RALPH BLUMENTHAL

NEW YORK -- David Gonzalez tells tales out of school. He tells them in school, too, and on radio and in museums and theaters and arts centers and anywhere else he can find a stage and young audience for his one-man musical storytelling epics.

But "storyteller" is surely too static a description for the hyperkinetic Gonzalez, whose new show, "Mytholojazz," featuring a be-bop and modern jazz interpretation of the Orpheus myth, opens Friday night for 11 public performances at the New Victory Theater here.

Lanky at 6 foot 1, lithe and rubber-faced, the 42-year-old part Cuban and Puerto Rican professional music therapist and guitarist dances, orates and scat-sings, falling silent only at rare intervals and by great force of will. "I'm working on moments of stillness," he said in a series of fast-moving live and phone interviews briefly interrupted by the loss of his cellular phone somewhere in his cluttered car.

So what is he? "I call myself different things," he said. "Solo theater artist. Performance artist. Family-oriented performance artist. There's no good word really."

In a culture where entertainment is often either unsuitable for little eyes and ears or numbingly boring to adults, Gonzalez is out to engage a broad audience. "My mission is to be a vehicle for the transmission of these stories so they come to life in the imagination of the audience," he said. "It only works if there is a deep rapport between us. So I'll do whatever it takes."

His first hit, "Sofrito!," a spicy stew of folk tales set to jazz, salsa and mambo rhythms by Larry Harlow and the Latin Legends Band, including the redoubtable Yomo Toro and Adalberto Santiago, filled the New Victory two seasons ago and went on to play Central Park, the New Jersey Performing Arts Center and other venues. (Lawrence Van Gelder of The New York Times called the show "rousing" and praised Gonzalez's "supple voice and command of gestures.")

Since 1992, he also has been on the radio on Sunday nights at 6 on WNYC-AM (820) with "New York Kids," a two-hour show of call-ins, quizzes, music, book talk and occasional storytelling by Gonzalez, who shares the microphones with a buoyant, sisterly and silken-voiced partner, Florence Barrau, and rotating pairs of grade school hosts from a different school each week.

He has performed for schoolteachers at the Lincoln Center Institute and devised arts programs for them and their classes. He is also an accomplished poet who has given readings at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe on East Third Street in the East Village, and is an adjunct professor at the New York University School of Education, from which he holds a doctorate in music therapy.

In May, in a big departure, Gonzalez is to be performing an original multimedia piece at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. Geared particularly to teen-agers and young adults, the one-man show, "Double Crossed: The Saga of the St. Louis," commemorates the 60th anniversary of the voyage of the ship that sailed from Germany in 1939 filled with 937 refugees from Nazism and was turned away from port after port -- including Havana, near Gonzalez's childhood home -- and finally returned to Europe on the eve of World War II. Nearly half of the passengers perished. Gonzalez plays all 13 characters, including the captain of the ship, several passengers, Goebbels and President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Aside from "Double Crossed," Gonzalez's "Mytholojazz" is his most ambitious creation. As Orpheus, he plays an imaginary saxophone to captivate the underworld prince, Hades (whom he also portrays, along with the hapless Eurydice). He rescues his beloved from death but then loses her, as he must, for failing to follow instructions. "Mytholojazz" includes a Chilean fairy tale, "Delgadina," adapted from a story told by Laura Simms about a girl who gets the Midas touch from a magical red snake. Gonzalez's wife, Lisa Sokolov, sings Eurydice's lament and Delgadina's song to her mother. Both pieces are performed to an original jazz score by D.D. Jackson and performed by his D.D. Jackson Trio.

"David's like really raw talent," said Lenard Petit, a friend and director of the Michael Chekhov Actors Studio, whom Gonzalez brought in to direct "Mytholojazz." "He needs someone like me to give him some shape."

The diversity of his projects has been particularly gratifying for someone

sensitive about being typed, in Gonzalez's words, as "El Storyteller," someone expected, as he said, to "fill every school district's requirement for multiculturalism."

Not that he isn't proud of his Cuban roots and his mother's Puerto Rican heritage, he said. On the contrary. "I'm a Latino storyteller," he said. "But I'm not just a Latino storyteller."

He was born in the Bronx and taken to Cuba as an infant. Several years later, Fidel Castro's takeover sent the well-to-do Gonzalez family fleeing. (His father ended up working for the Central Intelligence Agency and was posted offshore in the failed Bay of Pigs attack, Gonzalez said.) The family returned to the Bronx, where his parents divorced and his mother supported David and his elder brother with secretarial jobs.

He began telling stories when he was 7, he said, when his Uncle Jose made him a puppet theater and his mother hung a pair of red velvet curtains on it.

He attended James Monroe High School, where, he said, "I was held at knifepoint about 10 times and started hanging out with some bad kids." He got into some trouble himself, he said: "Petty thievery, some minor drug problems."

Then a teacher, Tom Porton, introduced him to drama, music and ballet. "My whole world burst open," Gonzalez said. "I started taking classes in folk guitar, blues, jazz. I fell in love with sound. It saved me. I could have gone an entire other way."

He studied guitar in Spain and went on to New York University, where he pursued graduate and post-graduate degrees in music therapy as a way of connecting with handicapped children. It was there that he met his wife-to-be, Ms. Sokolov, a singer, who was also studying music therapy. They live in Rockland County with their two children, Jake, 8, and Raina, 5.

Gonzalez, who also spent five years studying dance with Abdullah Djoniba Mouflet at the Djoniba Dance and Drum Center, broke into storytelling with a program of Aesop's fables that he called "Animals, Animals, Animals," soon followed by shows of folk tales he entitled "Up in Smoke," "Totally Awesome," "Cuentos: Tales From the Latino World" and "The Handless Maiden," among others.

He has performed these and other shows before some 1,500 audiences at

the Royal National Theater in London, Lincoln Center, the Brooklyn Academy of Music, the Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center, the Kravis Center for the Performing Arts in West Palm Beach, the Smithsonian Institution, the St. Louis Art Museum, the Detroit Center for the Arts, the Philadelphia Art Museum and the International Festival of Art and Ideas in New Haven.

Finding the Shows

"Mytholojazz," featuring David Gonzalez, will run through Feb. 21 at the New Victory Theater, 209 West 42d Street, Manhattan. Performances are tonight and Feb. 18 to 19 at 7 P.M.; tomorrow and Feb. 20 at 2 and 7 P.M., and Sunday and Feb. 21 at 1 and 6 P.M. Tickets, \$10, \$20 and \$25.

Information: (212) 239-6200.

Mr. Gonzalez can also be heard most Sunday nights from 6 to 8 on the live radio show "New York Kids" on WNYC-AM (820); like its young listeners, the show is on vacation during the summer.

From May 4 to 6, Mr. Gonzalez will appear in a one-man show, "Double Crossed: The Saga of the St. Louis," based on the ill-fated voyage of refugees from the Nazis who were denied asylum at numerous ports and ultimately sent home, many to their deaths. Performances are at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 100 Raoul Wallenberg Place, S.W., in Washington. Admission is free to the museum and performances, but reservations are required and there is a \$1.75 service charge per ticket. Reservations: ProTix, (800) 400-9373.

Friday, February 12, 1999
Copyright 1999 The New York Times



[Back to the r.m.a.-l Press Archive](#)



[Picadillo Home Page](#)