

## Una Navidad Muy *Especial* at LATC

by DIANA YANEZ

“Let’s put on ‘un show!’”

Yes, you read correctly. I said “un,” as in “a” show, but in Miami-speak. That about sums up my childhood as a first generation American living in one of the most Cuban neighborhoods in Miami, *La Souwesera*. Oh, I’m sorry. That’s also in the indigenous language I grew up with. I mean, “The Southwest Area.”



Diana Yanez in "The Latina Christmas Special." Photo by Xavi Moreno.

Hola, my name is Diana Yanez and I am the creator of the *Latina Christmas Special*. The “special” in the title is an homage to all those TV shows we watched growing up — all those “Christmas Specials” that we so closely identified with the holidays but had no Latinos in them (or maybe just Jose Feliciano).

My cast members and I have backgrounds in stand-up comedy, so we’re used to eliciting laughter from audiences. But what happens when we have an opportunity to tell the whole story, including the moral of it all? Well, that’s the “special” part of it for me. Our Latino stories are often left untold in commercial holiday entertainment, and we aim to change that. This is a play about the experiences of those of us who have grown up in America, beautifully living in between the culture of our parents and the culture of our country.

The *Latina Christmas Special* is made up of three original mini one-woman shows. Three great friends of different Hispanic-American origins have a get-together during the holiday season where the conversation naturally turns to childhood holiday dramas. The great stories of Christmases past bubble up, and so does the fun and magic of a new holiday tradition.

This show began in 2013 in a little space on theater row in Hollywood. We dealt with leaks, (one day we came in and the audience section was an island surrounded by a moat of dingy water), suspected rat incursions and a light system that was unreliable. We did everything ourselves. We mopped the floors. We brought things from home to decorate the set (I lost all of my wine glasses that first year!), and I’ll never forget my co-star and friend, Sandra Valls, struggling to screw an armrest back onto one of the audience seats before a show. We had help from friends who took tickets and ran the concessions, and our co-producer (Matthew Quinn) didn’t charge us rent. But guess what? It was fun! And it was wildly successful! We had to try it again in 2014. We added more shows. We added a couple great guest stars, and it happened again! Sold out. Standing room only.

Yet, there we were, still doing everything ourselves, including directing — which was undeniably the collaboration of Sandra Valls, Maria Russell and myself, trying to figure out how best to perform our little gem. The monologues were strong but loosely held together by transitions we didn’t have time to fix in between selling tickets and raising funds to cover basic needs. We needed help if we wanted the play to evolve, and Santa must’ve been listening. That Christmas we got the best present yet. “He” came to the show one evening in 2014: director Geoffrey Rivas of the Latino Theater Company.

Honestly, the word was out. Our “little show that could” was starting to get offers, but no one came close to the passion and genuine interest Geoff shared with us that night after seeing the show a second time in the same week. I can’t quote him exactly, but it was something along the lines of, “Who do I talk to!? I want this show at the LATC!”

The journey to the prestigious Los Angeles Theatre Center downtown and having actual producers (The Latino Theater Company) and a budget began in the new year and here we are. Countless hours spent revamping, producing, rewriting, laughing, crying, negotiating, listening, feeling, and deepening this new version, which we are calling “Moms, Cucarachas, and Farrah Fawcett,” was truly something to experience.

I’m going to tell you why I do what I do. I’m an actor, but I’m also a writer, a performer, an artist and — without a doubt — my passion is STORY. When I was a little girl, a bad dream or the mysterious sounds of the night would scare me, and I would run to my parents’ bedroom and jump in their bed. To help me feel less afraid, no matter how tired they were, they told me wonderful personal stories — great stories, because they were unguarded and open and true.

I hope that beyond leaving entertained from the *Latina Christmas Special*, you are also encouraged to be less afraid. Listen to our stories and then tell your own.



Maria Russell, Diana Yanez and Sandra Valls  
Photo by Xavi Moreno