

MARCUS SANTOS

Oscar-nominated screenwriter/playwright José Rivera's play "The Hours Are Feminine," set in Ronkonkoma, is being produced on Long Island by EastLine Theatre.

BY BARBARA SCHULER  
Special to Newsday

**A**fter ravaging several Caribbean islands and parts of Florida, Hurricane Donna hit Long Island on Sept. 12, 1960, causing widespread power outages and nearly \$2 million in damages.

Playwright José Rivera was only 5 at the time, having just moved the year before with his family from Puerto Rico to Ronkonkoma. He doesn't remember a lot about the storm, but it clearly made an impression. The hurricane is the

# CULTURES CLASH

The kindness and cruelty that newcomers can find are center stage in a play by José Rivera

epicenter of his play "The Hours Are Feminine," which EastLine Theatre will produce Sept. 20-Oct. 5 at the BACCA Arts Center in Lindenhurst to mark Hispanic Heritage Month, which began on Mon-

day and ends Oct. 15.

The raging storm comes near the end of the play, and "it destroys everything," Rivera said in a recent phone interview. The play, set in Ronkonkoma, centers on two

families living side by side — one recently arrived on Long Island from Puerto Rico, one more established, from Italy. "The essential relationships are between the women in the families," said Rivera, 70, stress-

ing that this is very much an autobiographical work. "It's really about the first year of my parents' life in the United States."

His family rented a small cottage from an Italian family, and the cultures clashed, said Rivera, a prolific playwright and screenwriter, perhaps best known for "The Motorcycle Diaries," a 2004 movie based on the memoir of Cuban revolutionary Che Guevara. The work earned him an Oscar nomination for best adapted screenplay, making him the first screenwriter of Puerto Rican heritage to be nominated for an Academy Award.

In "The Hours Are Feminine," two women, one from

See RIVERA on E22



Rehearsing for the EastLine production are, from left, Carl DiModugno, of Ronkonkoma, Christina Thompson, of North Babylon, and James Brautigam, of Williston Park.

ELIZABETH SAGARIN

# A friendship across cultures

RIVERA from E21

each family, develop a friendship “across language and cultural barriers,” Rivera said. “That friendship is really the motivator of the play.” The production is a “beautiful tale of the kindness and cruelty newcomers can find in the United States,” said a review posted by the website Theater Mania when the play premiered last year at INTAR, a New York City company devoted to developing the work of Latine artists.

INTAR artistic director Nidia Medina was excited to produce one of Rivera’s works. “You cannot speak about groundbreaking contemporary theater without mentioning the work of José Rivera,” she wrote in an email. Calling him “a master of language and a



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— EastLine artistic director Nicole Savin

builder of poetic worlds,” she said his work challenges future generations to think outside the box. “There isn’t a play of his that you couldn’t just pick up and produce right now that wouldn’t still be as vital as it was when it was first written,” Medina said.

It’s the perfect moment for the play, said Megan Laguna, who is directing the EastLine production. “It’s so important because of our political climate,” said Laguna, 31, of Lindenhurst. It’s the right time to discuss “why immigrant families come here and the strug-

gles they face, whether it’s racism or just simply trying to get stable work,” said Laguna, whose own family came from Puerto Rico in the 1960s. “This play really dives into the fact that they just want to be here, they want to work, they want to take care of their children . . . to live an ordinary life.”

## HISPANIC HERITAGE PROGRAMMING

The play really fits “what we’re looking for with our Hispanic Heritage programming,” said Larry Meneses, chairman of the theater’s

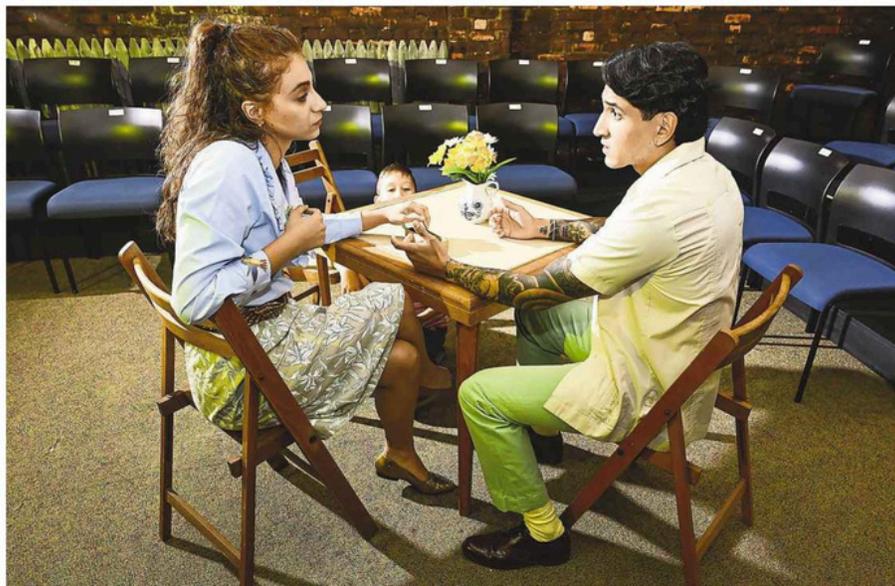
board. He said it’s been his mission to promote works that celebrate Hispanic artists since joining the organization in 2020. The Hauppauge resident, 72, remembers Hurricane Donna. “There was flooding all over,” recalled Meneses, who was 7 at the time. “The schools were closed . . . It was just one of those big events you remember from childhood.” In the play, he said, the storm and its tragic aftermath “is a convention to help create a dramatic impact.”

Others feel the story is also relatable.

“A lot of Long Islanders will find this is their story,” said Nicole Savin, 34, of Lindenhurst, EastLine’s artistic director. Even though many people are a generation or two removed from immigration, she said, “we really thought it would connect.” The group did another Rivera play, “Salvador Dalí Makes Me Hot,” two years ago during Hispanic Heritage Month, and Savin said the playwright has continued to be on EastLine’s radar. “He’s probably one of the most well-known Hispanic playwrights in America,” she said.

## MOVIE PROJECTS

He’s completed writing on a remake of the 1987 film “La Bamba,” about the life of teen idol Ritchie Valens, who died in a 1959 plane crash that also killed musicians Buddy Holly



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Abril Lopez Ruiz, left, Hector Rivera and, behind the table, Aiden Falco, 8, rehearse the José Rivera play.

and *The Big Bopper*. And a project with Lin-Manuel Miranda is in the works, a movie about the Molina family baseball dynasty. It's the story of three brothers from Puerto Rico who all played catcher on different Major League Baseball teams — and each won a World Series at some point in their career.

Rivera said he knew Miranda casually, and after discussing the book in cinematic terms with Miranda and his father, Luis, who is co-producer, he was hired to adapt it to the screen. "I come from a big family of brothers [he has five], so I know that dynamic really well," he said. "It's been a good experience," Rivera added, noting that he's already finished the first draft, though he has no idea when the movie will come out. "The movie business," he said, "grinds slowly."

Rivera got the "Motorcycle Diaries" gig on what he describes as a blind date. He said he heard the film was in the works and a writer was being sought. After a lunch with director Walter Salles, he said he was offered the job. "I didn't have to pitch anything," Rivera said. "He'd read samples of my writing . . . it was probably the easiest job I ever got." The movie did well, nominated for best foreign film at the Golden Globes, along with winning an Oscar for best original song (Jorge Drexler's "Al Otro Lado del Río") and Rivera's nod for best adapted screenplay.

**OSCAR NOMINATION**

"My life turned upside down," said Rivera, thinking about the nomination, but he didn't let it go to his head. Losing to "Sideways," he said, was fine. "I was kind of glad when it was over," he said. "You become possessed by this thing, there's all this hype and expectation. It's all anyone wants to talk about."

"All I wanted to do was write," said Rivera, so from his perspective, the Oscar nomination didn't mean much beyond "maybe getting another job." He's written more than 30 plays, reaching across all genres from extreme realism to comedies to explorations of mysticism. One of his best-known plays, "Marisol," has elements of sci-fi and horror (the moon has disappeared for nine months).

**PROPS TO LI TEACHERS**

Rivera got the basics, he said, from a great education on Long Island. "I was lucky," he said, noting that his family came here when a lot of people were moving East. "There was a huge tax base," Rivera said, "so there was money to spend

**Artistic director Nicole Savin, left, and director Megan Laguna at BACCA Arts Center in Lindenhurst.**

on schools." The family moved to Holbrook at some point, and he graduated from Sachem High School in 1973, where he was active in the theater department and "had some really good English teachers who recognized I had some ability and encouraged me to write."

**FULBRIGHT FELLOW**

Rivera graduated from Denison University in Granville, Ohio, in 1977 with a degree in theater. He lived in London briefly, thanks to a Fulbright

Fellowship, then gave Los Angeles a try when he started gravitating to movies, though he's been back in New York City since 2010.

He wrote the Netflix series "100 Years of Solitude" from his Manhattan apartment in spite of misgivings. Rivera said he'd heard from friends that the producers were looking for a writer, "but I thought it was going to be terrible." Still, he said, "I knew the book in and out," having studied with Nobel-winning author Gabriel García Márquez at a writing workshop with the Sundance Institute in 1989. "I felt comfortable with the material," he said and decided to give it a shot. The book is a complicated multigenerational saga about a fictional town where being alone and a plaguelike malady are heavy plot points.

Rivera wrote the pilot, which was well-received, and was hired to do a second episode. Then COVID-19 hit. "Good timing," he said. "There wasn't much else to do but write." Rivera finished the rest of the series. The first eight-episode season was released last November, the second is being filmed now.

"It was pretty ironic," he said of writing this story while being alone in his apartment, with his partner and two children out of the city. "I'm in solitude, writing about solitude, in a plague, writing about a plague," Rivera reminisced. "It was crazy."



ELIZABETH SAGARIN

**EASTLINE'S MISSION**

**F**or four years, EastLine Theatre has devoted one of its fall slots to a play honoring Hispanic Heritage Month. Board chairman Larry Meneses said he is especially proud of that commitment, which he'd insisted on when he joined the board.

"I totally embody the immigrant story," he said, explaining that his parents came from Colombia in the 1950s. Growing up on Long Island, he learned about playwrights like Tennessee Williams and Samuel Beckett. "But there was very little about Hispanic writers," he said. "That's the purpose of this project."

EastLine is taking something of a risk this year, moving "The Hours Are Feminine" to a larger venue where it can seat about 20 more people per performance. The company is offering free tickets to a select group of students from Suffolk County Community College and a youth enrichment program to help spread the message, said Nicole Savin, the theater's artistic director.

"We're very aware that Rivera is from Long Island," said Meneses, and the play is set in a Ronkonkoma backyard. "I hope this will make people think," he said, noting that the story of migration is universal and is especially timely. "It gives the sense," Meneses said, "of an immigrant trying to assimilate into a country that may not be as friendly as we'd like to believe."

**WHAT:** "The Hours Are Feminine"  
**WHEN:** Fridays, Sept. 26, Oct. 3, and Saturdays, Sept. 27, Oct. 4, 7:30 p.m.; Sundays, Sept. 21, Sept. 28, Oct. 5, 3 p.m.  
**WHERE:** BACCA Arts Center, 149 N. Wellwood Ave., Lindenhurst  
**TICKETS:** \$25; 516-749-5047, eastlinetheatre.org