

LA GRINGA

by Carmen Rivera



STUDY GUIDE



REPERTORIO
español

LA GRINGA BY CARMEN RIVERA SYNOPSIS

Setting: a house in the rural mountains of Puerto Rico

ACT I

The *gringa* is María, a second-generation Nuyorican fresh out of college with a degree in Business and Puerto Rican Studies. She has foregone a trip to Europe in favor of spending her Christmas vacation in Puerto Rico. At last she will meet her mother's family and find her roots.

María bursts into the family house (built with money her mother has sent), extolling the island's beauties in broken Spanish, aiming her tourist camera at everyone, thrilled by the music of the *coquí*s (tiny frogs). She has come home! "*Una sinfonía de sapos no es música,*" remarks Cousin Iris, who is already tired of María's naive enthusiasm. Although Uncle Victor welcomes María warmly, her Aunt Norma greets her with a thinly veiled and unexplained hostility, leaving her gift from María's mother untouched. In the morning, Norma launches into full-scale criticism of her niece's music (too loud), shower (too long), and helpfulness (she hates sharing her kitchen).

Fortunately, María forms an immediate bond with her Uncle Manolo. The old man has long been confined to a wheel chair, but María breathes new life into him with her interest in theatre and music and Puerto Rican culture. He remembers acting, coaxing rhythms from his *güiro*, and the magical island of his youth.

María wants to see San Juan. Iris finally has a job interview there (unemployment on the island is dauntingly high and she grudgingly agrees to take María along, but only if she will discard her jacket with the Puerto Rican flag on the back.

Before they can leave, Iris's friend Monchi arrives. Iris calls him a "high class *jibaro*" (a sort of Puerto Rican hillbilly) because Monchi gave up his engineering scholarship to study agriculture and work the land. Impressed with the nobility of this calling, María promises to be at his farm at dawn to help out.

Farm labor is hard work! After an exhausting day, María is determined to stay in Puerto Rico. She is more in love with the island than ever and perhaps a little sweet on Monchi, too, although she is not ready yet to admit it. Manolo begins to play Cupid and for the first time in years, he gets out of his wheel chair.

Now María is the one with a job interview in San Juan. Against Norma's wishes, Manolo goes along.



Carissa Jocétt Toro and Frank Robles. Photo by Michael Palma.



Gredivel Vásquez, Frank Robles, Ricardo Hinoa, Rosie Berrido, Mario Mattei, and Carissa Jocétt Toro. Photo by Michael Palma

ACT II

Norma and Iris wait to see if María lands the position. Iris dreams of going to New York where work is plentiful, but Norma is adamant: her daughter will not abandon the family the way María's mother did. Iris can do nothing to allay her mother's resentment and paranoia.

María enters in tears. They have denied her the job because she's not Puerto Rican. She is outraged. "But you're American," Iris says. María's newfound identity crumbles, and she throws her Puerto Rican flag jacket on the floor. Manolo understands, but both Iris and Norma argue against María's right to claim her *boricua* (Puerto Rican) identity or her place in their family.

Later that night, Victor and Manolo share a bottle of *maví* and reminisce about the days when they were all happy and Norma would sing instead of complain. María joins them to say good-bye. She has already bought her ticket and will fly back to New York the following evening.

Victor and Manolo encourage María to take heart. "*Cuando los niños nacen, hay que darles una palmada. Tú naciste hoy,*" insists Manolo. The two men recount the family struggles and give María some of the *maví*.

SI UNA GATA PARE DENTRO DE UN HORNO, LO QUE NACE, ¿QUÉ ES? ¿GATOS O PAN? —Manolo

An impromptu, slightly tipsy conspiracy develops. In the morning Manolo will take María to visit *abuela's* grave. They will sneak out with Monchi before Norma is awake. After their trip to the cemetery, María's initiation into the soul of Puerto Rico begins. Manolo leads them to *el Yunque*, the rain forest where the unseen goddess Atabey bathes María in a magical rain. Monchi and Manolo tell her that Atabey has accepted her.

They return home too late for María's flight, but who cares! Although Manolo insists the experience at *El Yunque* was his gift to María, Norma berates the girl for jeopardizing Manolo's health and quarrels with everybody until Victor finally breaks through her hostility. "*Tienes amor, Norma, cariño: Y si tú no lo aceptas, la gente se va a cansar.*"

At last the house is calm. María tells Tío Manolo that her one unfulfilled wish is to see a *parranda*, a real Puerto Rican party. Manolo remembers the old-time parrandas when he played the *gidro* while Norma sang *bombas*. Manolo and María start singing *bombas*, and soon Iris joins in, then Monchi, and at last Tía Norma. Outside, even Victor's truck engine rumbles to life again. Everyone's hostility has melted away.

But where is Manolo? In the midst of the fun, he has slipped out. María goes to look for him and finds him dead. Alone, she feels her uncle's presence. In the empty box she has left out for the wise men to fill, Manolo has placed his final gift to her—the *güiro*. María is *boricua* after all.



Ricardo Hinoa, Gredivel Vásquez, Rosie Berrido, and Carissa Jocétt Toro
Photo by Michael Palma

CARMEN RIVERA

THE HEART OF CULTURE

LA GRINGA premiered at Repertorio Español on February 28, 1996. It was the second in Repertorio Español's "Voces Nuevas!" series of new Latino plays.

Carmen Rivera is a Nuyorican born and bred. "My experience with Spanish was very painful because we just didn't speak it, although I remember my grandmother singing *bombas* to me when I was little. She was actually a *bomba* singer in Puerto Rico. She nearly signed a professional contract but her mother wouldn't let her go—I used that in **LA GRINGA**. My parents came here as children, so they grew up American and they wanted us to be American, too. My father was raised in Hell's Kitchen where there were a lot of Italian and Irish gangs and he fought. He didn't want us to have that problem.

"Even though I studied Spanish in high school, when I went to Puerto Rico—I've been there quite a bit—I never understood the language. Then in college I was a double major in Economics and Spanish. Because of that, the whole culture opened up to me. Now people speak to me in Spanish—my father, everybody."

LIFE BECOMES ART

Rivera's serious approach to her heritage belies her gift for comic dialogue and in-your-face irony. She is earnest in her quest for understanding what make people tick as cultural beings. "A lot of what happens in **LA GRINGA** is true. One summer I went to Puerto Rico and the whole idea of wanting to live there, to be Puerto Rican, just exploded inside me. Like María, I even started looking for work there and had a job interview where they said that even though I was qualified, they wouldn't hire me because I was American. I went right back to New York, crying."

Carmen found herself working for a big insurance company, miserable because she wanted to be a writer. Her uncle Manuel, like Manolo in the play, had been an actor in Puerto Rico but gave it up to go to New York. He told Carmen, "If you want to write, you have to do it now." She did.

LA GRINGA began as a one-act scene between a niece and her uncle. Rivera didn't find a way to expand it until her uncle died, when she came to terms with his death and her Puerto Rican heritage through writing.

"As the play was developing, I decided to make it more than just my life. I wanted to talk about anthropology and religion and the *coquí*s and the Taino people's culture." During her visit to the island and in subsequent reading, Rivera had found that Taino spiritual life "wasn't religion like we have it in Western culture, separate. It was a way of being."

So in **LA GRINGA** María undergoes a magical baptism at El Yunque, an intensified version of Carmen's similar experience in the same place. "*El Yunque* is a rain forest, a power vortex," Rivera explains. "A Taino woman was the cacique for El Yunque. Imagine—a woman in charge of the most powerful point on the island, its spiritual mecca." The woman inspired Rivera to celebrate Atabey, the Taino goddess of fertility, water and earth, in her play.

rites of passage

Rivera was fascinated with the real life rituals which mold us culturally. She asked herself, "What are the steps through which one develops and passes into the culture?" then put María through that process. "First is the release of ego—it happens when María feels like she's nobody and throws the Puerto Rican flag on the floor. Then libation, when they drink *maví* in preparation for their journey, and the worship of ancestors at the cemetery. There is baptism, then celebration at the *parranda*, when they sing *bombas*. Near the end there is death and rebirth; and, finally, passing on the culture—to María with the *güiro*. All in the context of Puerto Rican life." For Rivera, as for audiences of **LA GRINGA**, the process of acculturation is painful, funny, and moving.

DIVISION AND HEALING

Some characters in **LA GRINGA** struggle against the cultural ties that connect them. "We are very divided as a people," Rivera says. "I live in an Italian neighborhood where fourth and fifth generation children who barely speak Italian are still part of the traditional family, but my Puerto Rican cousins call me gringa. My accent doesn't help." When an actress from Puerto Rico—"an educated, progressive woman in the arts, a nationalist"—saw the play in New York, "you could see it in her eyes; she just could not conceive of the fact that I am part of her culture." The play strives to heal the division.

Rivera has dedicated more than **LA GRINGA** to binding the wounds we inflict on each other. At the Lower East Side's Henry Street Settlement, she shows teenagers how to use drama as a tool for conflict resolution, letting them choose any issue they feel is important. Through drama they learn a new kind of self-expression and better interpersonal skills. Rivera also teaches playwriting to high school students in the New York Public Schools.

When she and her husband, Cándido Tirado, co founded a theatre company, they named it the Shaman Repertory Theatre “to symbolize healing in the community,” Rivera said. “The problem was all the people from the Village came expecting dream catchers.” Re-dubbed the Latino Experimental Fantastic Theatre, or LEFT (“which pretty much describes what we do”), the organization’s purpose remains intact. A piece she wrote for LEFT, *Plastic Flowers*, is the source of Monchi’s scheme in **LA GRINGA** to buy back Puerto Rico for the people, acre by acre. With LEFT, Carmen and Cándido have initiated another act of healing, a series of plays about Latinas living with AIDS.

Carmen Rivera holds an MA in playwriting and Latin American theatre from New York University. Her plays have been produced at a number of theatres, including SoHo Rep, La Mama E.T.C., Theatre for a New City, INTAR, and the Nuyorican Poet’s Cafe. The Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre Co produced her *To Catch the Lightning* in 1997. Her play *Plastic Flowers* has been performed in theatre festivals in Russia and Chile, while *ameRican* was adapted as a short film and won Best Screenplay in a local film festival. *Julia*, which toured New York high schools, has been anthologized in a Penguin USA collection of Puerto Rican Theatre. She has been an O’Neill Playwrights Conference finalist, won a fellowship from New Dramatists, and earned a playwriting residency at New York Theatre Workshop, home of *Rent*. Ms. Rivera is co-founder of E.P.P. (Educational Play Productions), along with Cándido Tirado, which brings plays that deal with social issues, into the public schools.



Carmen Rivera

STUDY QUESTIONS

- 1 Playwright Carmen Rivera based her play on earth metaphors, such as sowing seed and the fertility of the soul. Discuss the places in the play where she explores these metaphors.
- 2 Discuss the importance to the plot of *maví*, *coquí*, *parranda*, *bombas*, *jíbaro*, and *El Yunque*.
- 3 “I’m a *gringa*” says Lidia Ramirez, an actress who plays María. “I do go back to the Dominican Republic and I do have problems speaking Spanish and relating to my family members and they have problems relating to me. I think the play is very universal. It hits anybody who is brought up here and tries to go back to their roots.” Compare her remarks and the play’s events with stories you know from Latino communities in the US. What relationships do you see between language and culture?
- 4 Explore the following, from actress Marilyn Seri: “*Me intrigo con Iris porque soy puramente puertorriqueña y allá no tenemos prejuicios. Lo único que sí, cuando viene alguien de afuera, como lo decimos allá—aunque sean puertorriqueños de Nueva York, son considerados americanos gringos.*” Do you find Seri’s statement consistent or not? Why? How might someone argue the opposite point of view?
- 5 “*Yo he conocido personas con este tipo de amargura y resentimientos absolutamente absurdos,*” says actress Ana Margarita Martínez-Casado. “*Norma es una combinación de los personajes de la abuela de Carmen Rivera, que era que cantaba, y una tía que estuvo muy enferma y de carácter poco amable que jamás recapacitó ni la quiso nunca.*” How did Norma’s anger affect her life? How have grudges and resentments affected the lives of people you know?



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