MPR News | Minnesota Now Minnesota Now - In new musical, St. Cloud playwright explores identity through complicated figure in Paraguayan history 01M355HYE49P98SF1061ZAZ9VV

NINA MOINI: This weekend, actors in ST Cloud will take the stage to sing out scenes from a fascinating life. Eliza Lynch was an Irish woman who moved to Paris in the 1850s. There, she met Francisco Solano Lopez, the future authoritarian president of Paraguay. They returned to the South American country together. And while they never married, Lynch was by Lopez's side as he led Paraguay into a catastrophic moment-- a war that's estimated to have killed 2/3 of Paraguay's population.

Eliza Lynch is the subject of *Reina,* a new musical by my next guest, Jorge Delgado. Welcome to the program, Jorge.

JORGE DELGADO: Hi. Thank you so much for having me.

NINA MOINI: What a fascinating human being. Just so many fascinating stories to dig into with these historical figures all over the world. But what drew you personally to this story, to Eliza Lynch's story?

JORGE DELGADO: Well, the fascination drew primarily from first discovering the War of the Triple Alliance, that story. When I was around 11 years old, I was adopted from Paraguay and grew up in West Central Wisconsin. And I discovered this story after trying to look into my heritage. And the little characters that were in it were Francisco Solano Lopez and Eliza Lynch.

Her story, about being a person from somewhere else, trying to find a sense of home, really connected with my own story. So when it came to, how do we tell this story, it was merely just us being like, just tell your story through Eliza's lens, because it parallels so well with each other. And that's where we took it.

NINA MOINI: I wonder about the Triple Alliance War. You were learning about this. Can you talk a little bit about what happened in that conflict? I mentioned in the introduction a little bit of context around it, but could you tell us a little bit more about how Eliza Lynch, specifically, was around that or involved in that?

JORGE DELGADO: Yeah. So it's very much debated on how much involvement that she had with the war because she was an outsider. She was a courtesan from Paris. And a lot of the Paraguayan elites, a lot of the Brazilians, Argentinians, and the Uruguayans, tried to basically have this smear campaign against her character of being this Lady Macbeth type player in the whole thing. But it really, really only came down to one thing, which was Francisco Solano Lopez wanting to prove that Paraguay was this independent nation that was basically on the rise.

And it was on the rise until they took this, basically, almost a misunderstanding of a ship that was on their waterways, crossing a boundary, as they so say-- the disputed boundaries between Paraguay, and Brazil, and all these other places-- and there's a lot of internal politics to it when it came to who was supporting who and how that got in the way. But eventually, it all just boiled down to this one event where Francisco said, yeah, look at this boat that's on our waterways.

It is clearly somebody trying to attack us and try to figure us out. And we're going to go immediately to war with Brazil to prove that we're stronger. And it didn't really work out in his favor.

NINA MOINI: Right. And it's interesting to think about these historical figures now as really complicated human beings and what were their personalities like-- what were their hearts like? What types of people were because they made such an impact, to your point, on all the rest of the people around them and all the rest of us. How do you feel about these two figures after creating this sort of representation of Eliza Lynch's life? How do you feel about her? How do you feel about Francisco Solano Lopez?

JORGE DELGADO: Francisco is a pretty easy one to figure out, because he was the same kind of person through his entire life. He grew up as an army brat, practically, was ushered into the presidency, and was kind of a bit of a bully. And he was, yeah, like you said, an authoritarian figure. He really did have a passion for his country. But his mindset of the country versus myself, there wasn't a difference between them.

NINA MOINI: Right.

JORGE DELGADO: And Eliza was kind of just, in our version, probably history's more accurate version, is that she was kind of on the side. She was pregnant throughout this engagement, this war. And so she didn't really have time to be at the side of the president and whispering in his ear of who to attack next or whatnot.

It's just historians were like, that's kind of not plausible. And we're just like, yeah, yeah. But there were many other interesting things that were going on. And to see, from her perspective, of this huge thing that's playing out in front of her and having almost no say in it, and this home that's being destroyed around her. It's tragic and sympathetic. Yeah.

NINA MOINI: So much having to adapt and so much challenge on different levels of her life. I know you worked with Katie Horner, who wrote the music and lyrics. Walk me through a little bit of how that process was and how that kind of fits into this weekend's event, which is a workshop, right, not a full performance. Tell us about just the musical process and the workshop this weekend.

JORGE DELGADO: Yeah. So the musical process was that I first took a stab at trying to write the songs and realizing that I might have been a little bit underqualified. We set out to look for somebody that was vastly more qualified. And then Katie actually showed up within this search.

She reached out to us after we threw out the net and was hoping to find somebody. She came to us and was just fascinated, also, with the story, and with Eliza's perspective in it all, and really understood the musical language that we wanted to have in the show, which was to have representation of Paraguayan culture, Eliza's Irish heritage, as well as the Paris culture, which are the three main themes that we have throughout the entire show is all these connections to who Eliza is and her home.

And that plays into this weekend, as we have a couple of the songs that are ready and able. And one is just incredibly super catchy-- just one that we soon figured out is you really can't walk away from this one song called [SPANISH WORD] which is a very uplifting, kind of communal number that we have. And she just understood that.

When I said, "I want this to be catchy," and she just immediately delivered. And, yeah, I'm very excited for this weekend.

NINA MOINI: And for folks to check that out. Yeah, and I understand that tickets are free, but registration is required. We only have about 30 seconds left, but are there still spots available? And then when does the musical open for good?

JORGE DELGADO: Yeah. There are still slots available. And we're looking at possibly doing the same thing next year with a little bit of a bigger production-- maybe more costumes, more sets, and everything around the same time. So, yeah, hopefully this can be an ongoing thing where you can see the progress of the show take place.

NINA MOINI: Wonderful. Jorge, congratulations. Have a wonderful time with everybody.

JORGE DELGADO: Yeah. Thank you. And, yeah, everybody, please come out.

NINA MOINI: Take care. Jorge Delgado is co-writer of *Reina,* a new musical that's being workshopped this Saturday afternoon at St. Cloud's Paramount Center for the Arts.