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# BWW Review: Keeping Up Appearances in 1950s Cuba: CONTIGO PAN Y CEBOLLA at Milagro Theatre

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Covering up the dinner table to hide the modest meal, talking about buying a piano, insisting that her son goes to art school -- these are just a few of the things Lala does to hide her family's dire financial straits in award-winning Cuban playwright Héctor Quintero's 1962 comedy CONTIGO PAN Y CEBOLLA, now playing at Milagro Theatre. Presented in Spanish with English supertitles, CONTIGO PAN Y CEBOLLA is the only foreign-language play on the Portland theatre schedule this season.

As a non-Spanish speaker and someone with an embarrassingly slim knowledge of Cuba, I admit I was unsure of how well I would relate to this play. But the job of great

theatre is to take you somewhere new, and the play's themes are universal -- we've all wanted what we don't have, schemed to make our lives appear better than they are (ahem, Facebook), and been in situations where not getting what we wanted was actually the best thing for us.

CONTIGO PAN Y CEBOLLA takes place in late 1950s Havana, as Fulgencio Batista struggles to retain power in the face of Fidel Castro's revolutionary forces. During this time, Havana was something of a playground for the rich and famous. But not everyone was rich and famous, and many Cubans were struggling. This isn't a political play, but the social context is important for understanding Lala's choices. (If your Cuban history is as lacking as mine, don't worry. Milagro graciously put together a study guide for the play, which you can find [here](#).)

The play centers on the Prieto family: Lala and her husband, Anselmo; their teenage children, Anselmito and Lalita; and Aunt Fefa. Anselmo, who works in a fabric store, provides the family's sole income, while the children attend school. Highly conscious of the family's perceived social standing, Lala's demands continuously put more and more pressure on Anselmo's meager income. The main conflict is Lala's decision to purchase a refrigerator.

CONTIGO PAN Y CEBOLLA is about the importance of appearances and about finding a balance between the various wants and needs of a family and the individuals who make it up. Lala wants a refrigerator, mostly so her friends and neighbors will know she can afford one. Anselmo wants to be able to pay the bills without giving up his cigarettes. Lalita isn't particularly interested in her expensive English and piano lessons -- she wants to get married and have children. Anselmito is a bit of a daydreamer -- he loves his painting classes, but would like to work to help support the family. Fefa just wants to listen to her radio programs. The introduction of a refrigerator into their lives brings relief in some ways (ice water on a hot day), but difficulties in others (bill collectors at the door). The play is funny, particularly Lala's constant schemes to cover up her family's true condition (a bit in the vein of *I Love Lucy*).

I enjoyed Milagro's production start to finish, starting with the excellent design. The moment you walk into the theatre, you are transported to a 1950s Cuban living room, complete with walls full of portraits, period furniture, and music coming out of an old-fashioned radio. The set, the costumes, the lighting -- everything works together perfectly to create a beautiful snapshot of time and place.

Director **Nelda Reyes** has assembled a diverse and accomplished cast, with actors originally from countries across Latin America, including Cuba. I'm not even going to try to pick favorites. (Okay, maybe one -- I loved Amalia Alarcón Morris as the ever-hard done by, radio-loving Fefa.)

Overall, I really enjoyed CONTIGO PAN Y CEBOLLA, and I recommend it very highly.

CONTIGO PAN Y CEBOLLA runs through March 5. Get tickets at [www.milagro.org](http://www.milagro.org).

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