



REBEL YELL Ortiz, left, talks politics with Velasquez.

Guerilla theater

José Rivera envisions the final days of Che Guevara in *School of the Americas*.

By Kerri Allen

Che Guevara, the ultimate socialist poster boy, may have been executed without trial by the Bolivian Army in 1967, but his image and legend have never been more ubiquitous. Red Che T-shirts are an old cliché on the street; early next year, Steven Soderbergh will unveil his latest feature film, *Guerrilla*, starring Benicio Del Toro as a late-career Guevara; and, of course, Gael García Bernal opened eyes in '04 as a young Che in *The Motorcycle Diaries*. That film had a Tony-nominated screenplay by playwright José Rivera, and now the dramatist is having a second go at the subject: His *School of the Americas* opens July 6 at the Public Theater and centers on the last two days in the life of the Argentine revolutionary (portrayed by Nuyorican actor John Ortiz).

"Growing up, I had a typical second-generation Latino love of Che," Rivera, 51, recalls. "But I didn't have the depth of information or knowledge." Then he came across the 1994 documentary *Ernesto Che Guevara: The Bolivian*

Diary, which shed light on Guevara's final days. "None of it figured into the film, but I thought it would make an amazing play."

School of the Americas is a tense 90-minute drama based on the true story of teacher Julia Cortés (Patricia Velasquez) and the wounded warrior in her schoolhouse (which Guevara's captors used as a makeshift prison). Curious and impetuous, the young woman talks a guard into letting her converse with the famous prisoner. The story is rooted in fact, but the dialogue is pure poetic license. Rivera has created equally complex characters for the unknown Cortés and the iconic Guevara. "It's based largely on my imagination of what may have happened," Rivera admits. "This is a kind of 'what if' exercise."

The script was workshopped two years ago by the LAByrinth Theater Company, of which Rivera is a resident playwright. He had Ortiz in mind from the start: "There is no other actor working in theater that I could imagine playing Che." Initially, however, Ortiz did not share Rivera's faith. "I've had one or two illuminating moments so far and it's kind of encouraging," the actor says. "Still, for the most part, I've got a huge mountain to climb. At the end of the

run, I'll probably say, 'Oh shit, I think I got it!'"

Guevara's ubiquitous pop-culture image inspires some and enrages others, but it intimidates Ortiz. "When I see someone wearing that T-shirt, my first thought is, Oh my God, I'm going to be playing that guy onstage!" Daunting though the task may be, Ortiz, 36, is no slouch. When not shooting films with Antonio Banderas (*Take the Lead*) or Jennifer Lopez (*El*

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Cantante), the acclaimed actor serves as LAByrinth's co-artistic director with Philip Seymour Hoffman. He knew little about Guevara before delving into research, but now he waxes passionate about his character: "[Guevara] felt that his message and his movement were bigger than his life, and as long as that remained true, he didn't worry about dying."

Raised in Bed-Stuy, Ortiz had a humble childhood focused on survival, not the arts. "It was

definitely an inner-city upbringing; it was all about getting by," he says.

"The schools that I went to were not as well-equipped as they should have been." Still, he was better off than Julia Cortés's students, whose schoolroom figures large in the script: "The room is so impoverished it seems more suited to farm animals than to children," reads Rivera's stage direction.

In spite of sovereignty issues surrounding Guantánamo Bay and ever-worsening tensions between the U.S. and a certain Latin American leftist (see Chavez, Hugo), Rivera did not write *School of the Americas* with a specific political agenda. "I'm interested in the portrait of a relationship," he asserts. "The play is as much about her as it is about him. I want the audience to experience the very unlikely but intense relationship that grew." For his part, Ortiz sees a timeliness in the work. "A huge part of [Guevara's] life was about confronting superpowers, particularly the U.S. I have a little bit of the politics in my head, but when I'm doing it, I try to let go of all that stuff. I'm just trying to find the man."

School of the Americas is playing at the Public Theater. See Off Broadway.