

Sidedoor Season 6 Ep. 14 The Goddess of Broadway Final Transcription

Lizzie Peabody: This is Side Door, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: It's New York City, the early 1940s and famous gangster Bugsy Siegel walks into a smoke-filled nightclub in Midtown Manhattan, fake Palm trees lined the walls. White linen on the tables. A band plays on stage.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Bugsy's girlfriend, Virginia Hill rests a well-manicured hand on his arm. She's wearing a stunning gown, full length, white beaded shimmering in the dim light. They make the rounds of the club. And of course, everyone knows who they are when they peek into one of the dressing rooms, a performer says...

Maria Foley: Oh my God, Virginia. I love that outfit.

Lizzie Peabody: That performer was Diosa Castello. And this is her great niece, Maria Foley.

Maria Foley: And Virginia dropped it right there in the dressing room, gave it to her and sat naked in her fur coat to watch Titi Diosa's performance.

Lizzie Peabody: Now I've complimented many people's clothes in my life, but I have never had someone strip in front of me and hand me the clothes off their back. Let alone the glamorous girlfriend of one of the best-known gangsters in New York. But Diosa Costello was a big deal.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Diosa Costello was a force to be reckoned with. A star of the New York clubs, she recorded albums, films had run-ins with gangsters and became the first Puerto Rican to perform on Broadway when she appeared in the 1939 production, Too Many Girls.

Maria Foley: She was just being the strong, fearless, extraordinarily talented woman that she was. And in turn it opened doors for her people.

Emily Key: Lin-Manuel Miranda on Broadway doesn't exist unless there is Diosa Costello in the 1920s and 1930s.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Emily Key, Director of Education at the Smithsonian Latino Center. She says many Americans today may not recognize the name Diosa Castello.

Emily Key: But they do know Lin-Manuel Miranda. And they do know Hamilton, but before you get to Hamilton, before you get to Lin-Manuel Miranda, you have Too Many Girls in 1939. So, I think it's important to know our history in order to know where we're going.

Lizzie Peabody: So, this time on Sidedoor, we bring you the story of the fearless, the funny, the one, the only Diosa Costello, the Puerto Rican pioneer of Broadway.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Guayama, Puerto Rico, 1920. Four-year-old Diosa Costello's father is deathly ill. She's probably too young to understand what's happening, but she does know one thing. When she dances, he smiles.

Maria Foley: And she saw what that did for him as he was dying.

Lizzie Peabody: Diosa's father died just before her fifth birthday. This is her niece, Gudelia Navarro.

Gudelia Navarro: After my grandfather died, Diosa's mother was left with five children and pregnant.

Lizzie Peabody: So, the family moved from rural Puerto Rico to the capital city, San Juan, to be close to family. This is where Diosa realized she could make money dancing. She'd perform on the street, passing her hat to collect pennies, but her mother did not approve.

Gudelia Navarro: You know in those days, show business was not what it is today. It was not an honorable profession. And she didn't think that it was lady like for her daughter to be singing and dancing in the street and people giving her money.

Lizzie Peabody: Diosa's mother would do everything she could to discourage her daughter from dancing. Lock her in a room, take the money she'd earned. None of it worked. Diosa especially loved dancing at the docks for people getting on and off the ships in San Juan Harbor.

Diosa Costello: And I used to say, where are those boats going?

Lizzie Peabody: This is Diosa Costello in an oral history she recorded for the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History in 2006.

Diosa Costello: And somebody said, he's going to America, those boats. And I said what's America? I didn't even know. What's America? Well, America... And then they explained to me and I said, well, someday I'm going to be on one of those boats. And I'm going to go to America.

Lizzie Peabody: In the late 1920s, Diosa got her wish when her family boarded one of those boats to mainland America, more specifically New York City, where they had relatives. Instead of going to school, Diosa worked at a chocolate factory, even though she was only 11 years old. When she could, she'd sneak away from her mother to audition at nearby theaters.

Diosa Costello: And I always had a big mouth, big, loud. I've always been loud. I can't help it. I am loud. And whenever everybody singing, my voice was over so you could hear my voice on top of everybody.

Lizzie Peabody: Diosa also realized her voice gave her an advantage. So, in 1931, she entered a contest to sing on an album with Pedro Flores, the biggest Puerto Rican composer at the time.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: It was a long shot, but she was determined.

Maria Foley: She was very concerned about her reputation as far as her home land went. And she took it very seriously because she grew up with all that shame that everybody said she was a bad girl in Puerto Rico being a singer and a dancer. So, when she won that contest, it meant a lot to her.

Lizzie Peabody: She won. Diosa also was 13 years old when she recorded the song you're hearing, "Siboney."

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: While Diosa's career was taking off, something else was happening. Cuban dances, like the Rumba and the Mambo were becoming the latest craze in New York city.

Emily Key: Part of it has to do with immigration of Cubans into the New York City area.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Smithsonian Latino Centers, Emily Key again.

Emily Key: We obviously think of Cubans and Cuban Americans and we think of Miami, but actually there was a great wave of immigrants moving to New York and New Jersey looking for work. And at the same time, you have the creation of a new sound coming out of the mixing of communities in New York.

Lizzie Peabody: As a teenager, Diosa also began performing in Cuban nightclubs all over New York City. She was making a name for herself. So, she took it one step further and literally made a name for herself.

Ashley Mayor: She was actually born Juana de Dios Castrello.

Lizzie Peabody: This is assistant curator. Ashley Mayor with the Smithsonian's National Museum of American history. She says Diosa was born Juana.

Ashley Mayor: And then she changes her name and she kind of adopts stage name Diosa. Goddess. Labiosa I feel like that's such a bold statement. And she was a very bold person, so I can totally envision her just deciding for herself. Oh, I'm going to become the goddess. Diosa.

Lizzie Peabody: Now it's around this time that, let's call it an opportunity, smacks her right on... You know, I'm going to let Diosa explain this one.

Diosa Costello: And I was doing my dance and I always used to feature...

Lizzie Peabody: She's pointing to her rear end.

Diosa Costello: Not J-Lo. Me. This is the original one. And here I went to the stable and I was doing like this and I went like that and this man went like that and slapped me in my behind. Man, I got so mad I went bow I gave it right back to him.

Maria Foley: So, then the manager of the joint came running out saying, oh my God, you have no idea who you just slapped. And she's like, I don't care. Who did I just slap? The man slapped my ass. Who did I just slap? That's Pretty Boy Floyd. He's like one of the biggest gangsters in New York. Are you... I can't believe. And she goes, I don't care.

Lizzie Peabody: Diosa slapped notorious bank robber, Pretty Boy Floyd, the FBI's public enemy number one at the time. A man known for gunning down cops and burning mortgage documents during the great depression. And Diosa refused to leave or apologize. So, the manager fired her.

Maria Foley: But word got out that this young, fiery, gorgeous Latina, young lady, she couldn't have been more than maybe 15, something like that, when she slapped him and you created quite a reputation.

Lizzie Peabody: Diosa took her new reputation to one of the hottest Cuban nightclubs in New York City, La Conga. That is where she met this guy. No, not Cuban Pete. The man singing, famous Cuban musician and actor Desi Arnaz. You might know him better as his character, Ricky Ricardo on I Love Lucy. Desi was still unknown in the 1930s, but he used to come by La Conga club with his guitar looking for work.

Maria Foley: In those days, when they were sending people over from Cuba that were interested in the entertainment field, Desi Arnaz was told to ask for my [inaudible 00:11:46] Diosa. So, he went to La Conga to meet her. And she at the time had signed a four week contract at Martha Ray's 500 club in Miami that she had to honor.

Lizzie Peabody: So, Diosa took Desi to Miami with her, but the owner of the club, Martha Ray, didn't want to hire him.

Diosa Costello: So, Martha says, well, what does he do? And I said, well, he played the guitar very bad. He doesn't sing so good. He doesn't play the conga so good either, but look at him, he's gorgeous.

Lizzie Peabody: So, Diosa got Desi a job. Her star was rising and she wanted to use whatever power she had to open doors for fellow Latino performers. And soon enough, a big door opened for Diosa. She was back in New York, dancing at La Conga club when she met Broadway's biggest producer at the time George Abbott and he loved to dance Roomba.

Maria Foley: And George Abbott would come into La Conga just to dance with her.

Lizzie Peabody: Diosa also begin giving Abbott private dance lessons. And then he made her an offer. How would she like to be in his newest Broadway show, Too Many Girls. This was a big deal and Diosa jumped at the opportunity, but she had one demand.

Maria Foley: To Diosa, said to George Abbott, I want Desi Arnaz in this production.

Lizzie Peabody: But Abbott said no.

Maria Foley: And she said, well, if you don't put Desi in, then that is the end of our private dance lessons. So, if it wasn't for that, Desi would not have been put in Too Many Girls.

Lizzie Peabody: So, in the fall of 1939, the names Diosa and Desi lit up the Broadway marquee of Too Many Girls. Having shattered this glass ceiling, Diosa reached a new level of professional success, but her personal life, that was a different story. Diosa and Desi had become sweethearts both in life and onstage in Too Many Girls, but when it was announced that a film version of Too Many Girls would begin

shooting in California a year later, Diosa said, no, thanks. She liked the spontaneity of the stage and she really hated to travel. But Desi, he went to Hollywood and well he met someone else. No, not Sally Sweet. Lucille Ball. She was also in the film Too Many Girls. And that's where Desi realized I love Lucy.

Fred Glietch: There's a hilarious story in the Police Gazette at that time, which was the tabloid of the period with Diosa on the cover, where the story is about how she's so angry that Desi went out to Hollywood and met this red head woman.

Lizzie Peabody: Is Fred Gleach. He's an anthropologist at Cornell University who spent the past two decades documenting Diosa's life.

Fred Glietch: That's the way it was spun in the tabloids of the time.

Lizzie Peabody: But Maria says Diosa was never really mad at Lucy. It was just one of those complicated situations.

Maria Foley: They became friends towards the end, but she was kind of always the other woman.

Lizzie Peabody: Desi always had a place in his heart for Diosa. Maria says decades later, when Desi was dying, Diosa came to say her final goodbye

Maria Foley: On his death bed, he said to her, "Is there a chance for us yet, Diosa?"

Lizzie Peabody: Still to come, Diosa finally does go to Hollywood. That's after the break.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: It's Spring of 1941. As World War II rages in Europe, American audiences get their first glimpse of Diosa Castello on the big screen, the film, "They Met In Argentina." Diosa's wearing a long floral dress, a neckerchief, a bow in her hair. She approaches a dapper American oil man. He's sitting solemnly in a town square as people around him dance joyfully. Diosa tugs his arm. A reluctant young Buddy Epsom joins Diosa. He towers over her as she teaches him to dance. Fred Gleach has seen this film countless times.

Fred Glietch: In that film she plays I think of it as the sort of comedic secondary romance couple. Diosa was very small and Buddy Epsom was very tall. So, part of the comedy comes from their pairing.

Lizzie Peabody: How did she feel about playing an Argentinian?

Fred Glietch: I don't think she had any problem with that. It was just what needed to be done. Latin performers, especially in that period, were used to being billed in any number of ways that didn't necessarily have anything to do with who they actually were. Exotic female I think was really the dominant role category at that period. In fact, Diosa was very seldom billed as Puerto Rican.

Lizzie Peabody: In 1945, Diosa played a Mexican performer named Conchita in the Laurel and Hardy comedy, The Bullfighters. Was that Diosa's real accent in the film?

Fred Glietch: They wouldn't let her do her real accent. They wanted something even bigger and broader for the film.

Lizzie Peabody: Was that normal at the time to ask that kind of thing?

Fred Glietch: Yes. And I think it's normal still. Certainly, I've seen commentary from Latin performers and from African-American performers in both stage work and especially film and television work who are encouraged to build things even bigger, even more so in order to fulfill the expectations of the directors and producers.

Lizzie Peabody: Diosa played Mexican, Argentinian, and Cuban characters, but she's probably best known for playing the Vietnamese character, Bloody Mary in the 1950 Broadway show South Pacific by Rogers and Hammerstein. South Pacific was like the Hamilton of the day. It was a box office smash and it even won a Pulitzer prize for drama.

Ashley Mayor: One of the interesting things about her performance as that character that I think a lot of people don't know is that she appeared in the touring productions of South Pacific. And those touring productions were actually hugely controversial.

Lizzie Peabody: That's because a major theme in the musical was an interracial marriage, something that was still illegal in many states at the time.

Ashley Mayor: There are several states that actually tried to ban the production from touring and being performed because they felt that it was un-American.

Lizzie Peabody: And Ashley points out there's a contradiction here, Rogers and Hammerstein are challenging Americans to confront their own racism. Meanwhile, they're asking a Puerto Rican actress to put on fake eyebrows and yellow face makeup to play an Asian character.

Ashley Mayor: And so, I think it's always interesting that she played kind of this figure in the touring production. And I think that that's an interesting part about her story.

Lizzie Peabody: Diosa had reached the height of success for a Latina performer at the time. There weren't any leading roles for an aging quote, unquote Latin bombshell as she was often billed. She was relegated to playing the exotic female or stereotypical Latina.

Ashley Mayor: You definitely see that becoming more of an obstacle because she doesn't necessarily get to play more complex roles. She kind of gets pigeonholed into that same stereotype and isn't able to break free and kind of become a more humanistic complex actress.

Lizzie Peabody: By the time Diosa was in her fifties, she reached a crossroads. Her second marriage ended in divorce. She was worn out and she decided she was done with acting.

Gudelia Navarro: She was never around for holidays, birthdays, because she was always working. And after the divorce from her husband, she felt she wanted a new start, something different, not what she had been doing, which really took a toll on her life.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: So, where does a performer go who wants to step out of the spotlight, but not too far out of the spotlight? Sin City, baby. Diosa became a blackjack dealer, a pit boss, and then a casino executive at Caesar's palace in Las Vegas. And she did it all under a new name, Dee Casino.

Gudelia Navarro: She didn't want people to really know who she was, even though they knew who she was the minute they sat down at the table.

Maria Foley: I remember the one night that Sammy Davis sat down at her table and looked up and said, Diosa is that you? I'm Dee Casino here. I'm not Diosa here.

Lizzie Peabody: Diosa knew better than most that you get your 15 minutes in the spotlight and then your time is up. A fresh face, walks in and you walk out. Gudelia and Maria say she knew the deal. And she was happy living her final days out of the public eye. But is she near the end of her life? Friends and family urge her to share her story with future generations. Maria says she represents something much larger than a single person.

Maria Foley: It's one for our side. We have a queen that went from the Hills of Puerto Rico, gathering coal at five years old for her family to bring it back so that they could make breakfast. And she made something of herself.

Lizzie Peabody: And in 2011, at the age of 94, Diosa donated an assortment of gowns and her Bloody Mary costume to the Smithsonian. Gudelia says Diosa never considered herself a trailblazer. But that changed when she arrived at the museum for a ceremony in her honor.

Gudelia Navarro: She was saying, this is a place where they have all those treasures. Presidents, kings, diamonds. She felt very honored to have her beautiful downs on display. She wanted children everywhere to have the hope that they could achieve greatness through hard work. After all, she had done it.

Maria Foley: And what the Smithsonian did for her, what she shared with me is that look, I'll never be forgotten. And that meant a lot to her because in saying that it wasn't, I'll never be forgotten to the world. I'll never be forgotten to my people in Puerto Rico.

Lizzie Peabody: She died two years after that ceremony at the Smithsonian, but not before changing her name back to Diosa. She re-embraced the title she gave herself a lifetime ago. The goddess had returned for one final curtain call.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

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Lizzie Peabody: To hear stories about other historical figures like Diosa Costello, check out our Latinas Talk Latinas series online at americanhistory.si.edu. And to see a picture of Diosa in that dress that Virginia Hill gave her off her back, check out our newsletter. You can subscribe at si.edu/sidedoor.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Special thanks this episode to Ranald Woodaman at the Smithsonian Latino Center. Thanks also to Gudelia Navarro, Maria Foley, Ashley Mayor, Emily Key, and Fred Gleach. Shout out to our team at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History: Valeska Hilbig and Laura Duff.

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Lizzie Peabody: Our podcast team is James Morrison, Stephanie DeLeon Tzic, Ann Conanan, Caitlin Shaffer, Tami O'Neill, Jess Sadeq, Lara Koch, and Sharon Bryant. Episode artwork is by Dave Leonard. Extra support comes from Jason and Genevieve at PRX. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder. If you want to sponsor our show, please email sponsorship@prx.org. I'm your host Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.

Maria Foley: And she always told me, and it might sound kind of crude, but she said Maria, to make it in show business, you only need to remember one thing. And here I am, thinking, oh this is going to be so profound. She said, remember that everybody wipes their ass. And I said, wow. Okay. And she said, yeah, it'll keep your feet on the ground.