

ISLAS' intention with this section, "Profiles," is to introduce our readers to the life, work, ideas, and perspectives regarding Cuba today, and to the future of outstanding African descendants on the island. These black men and women are involved in politics, culture, civic activism, and religion.

Yoslainy Pérez Derrick

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One is left with a special impression after meeting Yoslainy Pérez Derrick. Behind that youthful appearance, whose beauty, sensitivity and tenderness are beyond just pleasant, there is a full-fledged artist, a woman of undeniable character and principles. This causes immediate admiration and solidarity among her interlocutors.

Yoslainy is a soprano who at nearly forty, and after a career of more than twenty years, has had numerous academic experiences. These have given her broad and solid training, which together with her talent, and her daily devotion to consistently and responsibly studying her craft, have led her to continue perfecting her gift even five years after graduating in voice from the Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA).

The devotion to studying and perfecting her craft that characterize Yoslainy has given her a solid background in artistic directing and producing, as well as in English and German. As a member of the Coro del Teatro Lírico since 1996, she has been involved in various successful productions and numerous performances independent of the company. For this she has garnered notable praise from both her

public and critics. This charismatic soprano earned second place in the lyric voice category and first place for the best opera singer at the 2009 Mariana de Gonich voice contest.

Despite her demonstrated and recognized talent, Yoslainy has not been fairly judged in her own company, thus adding her name to the list of black Cuban classical singers who have fallen victim to racist exclusion and disdain on the part of the authorities that control the fate of this lyric art in Cuba. In spite of having spent more than ten years unsuccessfully demanding the place she deserves, Yoslainy has not abandoned her daily effort to improve her artistic mastery, and professional and cultural training, steps that have caused her to return to university studies, this time for a law degree.

This artist's strength and conviction in confronting injustice and indolence in her search for her own rights and rightful place can only inspire admiration and hope in people sensitive to the trauma and needs of our complex coexistence. Beautiful, talented, devoted, indefatigable fighter Yoslainy Pérez Derrick is the very best and most moving example of what we African descendants have



Yoslainy Pérez Derrick

been throughout our history. She embodies the undeniable expression of black Cubans being protagonists and not just traditional victims of our history, and builders of our own destiny. Yoslainy Pérez Derrick has agreed to share with *ISLAS*'s readers her experiences and opinions.

Leonardo Calvo Cárdenas: What influenced your love of and devotion from an every early age to an art that causes us to admire you so much?

Yoslainy Pérez Derrick: Great, representative figures in the Nueva Trova, Pablo Milanés and Silvio Rodríguez, inspired me and inclined me towards this art, although I also loved and still love to go to the ballet, see plays, visit art galleries, etc. My work at the Teatro Lírico is a combination of all these things, even if singing is the greater priority.

LCC: What has inspired you to keep up that love of and devotion to an art to which

you have devoted your life, despite the neglect and injustice you have endured throughout your career?

YPD: Life is full of obstacles that, in some way, help you remain firm in your principles and ideals, or cause you to lose your way. Yet, in my life, every time an obstacle gets in my way, the hand of God is there to help me via the least expected person. I cannot forget all those professors, when I was a student, who selflessly gave and continue giving me their support. There are many whose full names I don't recall, and others, more recent ones, who have marked my professional life, and to whom I always dedicate each performance, each presentation, whether it be in concerts or on stage.

I am very grateful for the opportunity I have had to know the person who directed the Coro de la Ópera de Cuba, Maestro Ricardo Linares Fleites, who I met personally through Lidia Rosa, another singer from that institution who at the time, when I was not yet sure what I wanted to do, or how I wanted to use my musical knowledge and desire to combine all the arts I enjoyed and in which I wanted to be involved. While he is no longer with us, among the many others who love him, Linares Fleites, above all, is still the one who inspires and energizes my career. He always said that one must be prepared because opportunities arise when least expected, and it was better to than ready to start getting ready as soon as the knock on the door comes; one always had to give one's best, if one really loved what one was doing; our public receives us with the same amount of passion we invest in our art.

He would say that for art to be believable, we had to feel it and then express that feeling. He would also say that the voice, as an organ, would atrophy if it were not used, that vocal chords were muscles that needed daily exercise

to be strong and resistant, despite the many setbacks—unforeseen, intentional or commonly familiar—we suffer when we are preparing for a presentation. Despite their constant presence, they can affect us at the most crucial moments of our career.

I am also grateful to many professors and students who supported me when I was a student at the ISA, especially at my most crucial moment, when I graduated. In particular, I want to mention my Harmony professor, advisor and friend, Martha Padrón, and my piano accompanist, Maestro Rafael Díaz Carter, for many years Director of the National Concert Band, who was also an infinitely patient, dedicated and loving voice teacher and advisor who gave me back my voice, and the good sense to pursue this career I so love.

I also know that everything I have accomplished thus far is thanks to the support of others who I have not named. Their giving and devotion to me has served as an example to keep me going; it is important to acknowledge that no one has been able to subject or derail me from my artistic goals, nor will anyone be able to prevent me from achieving my goals, despite the many trappings. I defend my principles and try to stay away from current trends like bribery or adulation, because there is nothing better than to enjoy a triumph achieved cleanly and without tricks, as a reward for my effort, devotion and dedication to my profession.

LCC: What do you think about the omission or distortion of the image and legacy of black Cubans in our country's cultural sphere, particularly in the scenic arts (theatre, dance, television, film)?

YPD: In the first place, there is the persistence of that retrograde school of thought that believes we have no intelligence or talent for the arts or anything else, which has cost so

many tears, but has had to be acknowledged. Through the years, life has shown that African descendants are strong of character and constitution, but not so savage so as not to be able to understand the impact of our actions. We are not animals or objects to be manipulated according to the convenience of others, without our opinion mattering, no matter where, but rather humans who feel, love, and want success, to learn and, above all, work to be able to meet our needs by dint of our own sacrifices.

It is sad but true that we are pigeonholed or cornered by those who justify their actions using the broadly accepted but false criterion that the leading role must be played by a white person, or that we are dealing with a racial topic whose dramaturgy we cannot change. These are among the many idiotic notions that abound in the minds of many. This leads people to believe that we are strict regarding complying with the work's composer, whichever it is, but not conventional regarding race. Thus, what kind of a society are we that needs to go into so many discriminatory details after so many years of "Revolution"? Have we truly revolutionized things, or are we just extending the colonial or neocolonial era? Are racism and discrimination done with, or not? The questions are many but the answers few or worthless, and far from representing what is proclaimed constitutionally about the equality of rights and responsibilities of all citizens without regard for race, sex, religion, etc.

If everything has a limit, even human life, then it's time for those attitudes to also come to an end, because in reality, our society no longer contains whites or blacks. We are the product of a process of miscegenation that went on for years, under Spanish colonialism, when it brought African slaves to this island.

Despite the popular saying “quien no tiene de congo tiene de carabali” (which means that everyone in Cuba has African descendants), which holds quite true, there will always be people who do not acknowledge their African heritage because they have more refined features and lighter skin than others.

LCC: What steps should be taken by our society and institutions to concede to black Cuban artists and creators the spaces and opportunities they deserve?

YPD: If what is at stake here is art, and the art is well done, no matter who creates it, be it a black Cuban or not, then acknowledging the artistic talent of any human being is not just a compliment, it is only fair. The most important thing is not who offers it but how it is offered. If what is offered has quality and professionalism, it is always welcomed and appreciated, and the person who receives it leaves satisfied and wanting to come back.

It is time to destroy these old paradigms. They only serve to harm those of us who are excluded from their profession by exclusionary supremacists who want only to impede in the development and image of art itself. In the end, it is the public that has the final word, even if its words do not appear in the press and are not revealed on television.

LCC: What needs to happen regarding the reality of the racial problem in Cuba?

YPD: The convenient and conscience veil of ignorance of many who direct artistic and non-artistic institutions must be lifted. These are people who still defend the notion that blacks do not have the opportunity or skill to practice our profession. We must finally arrive at the conclusion that the most important thing in all this is the work we do, not the color of our skin. We are maintaining attitudes that do not exist and are not even mentioned in other countries.

LCC: What steps should be taken to efficiently confront the issue of racism in Cuba in a manner that could be successful?

YPD: The steps should be that same that supposedly inspired the attack on the Moncada barracks, in 1953. We must reevaluate whether or not the objectives for which so much blood was spilled, and so many lost their lives, while fighting for this nation’s independence and liberation, were fully achieved or not. If not, then what socialism and what equality of rights for all citizens are we talking about? If we have proved that we are capable of representing our nation, and of becoming Olympic champions, earning prestigious prizes like the Principe de Asturias award, of people like renowned athlete Javier Sotomayor, then might we not be capable of success in other areas, when the promised and unfulfilled justice and equality for which we have dreamt, prevails?