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When Life's a Crazy Mess, Try Going Onstage

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Sonya Kelly and Paul Curley in Ms. Kelly's play "How to Keep an Alien," at the Irish Arts Center. Credit Ger Holland

Last year, the actor and writer Brian Quijada proposed to his girlfriend. Diamond ring. Bended knee. White sand beach. The whole Instagram-worthy shebang.

Then he began to worry. His fiancée is half Austrian and half Swiss; he is the son of undocumented immigrants from El Salvador. First he wondered how the wedding D.J. might remix polka and reggaeton. Later, more substantively, he

questioned how to describe this varied inheritance to future offspring. “I’m not entirely sure how I fit into this crazy world, let alone ever figuring out how to explain it to my child,” Mr. Quijada said.

Some people might go to insight-oriented therapy for help. Others might consult a spiritual adviser. Others might let those unborn children sort it out for themselves and go back to their calligraphy pens and place cards.

Mr. Quijada instead elected to write and perform a solo hip-hop show, the engaging and obliging [“Where Did We Sit on the Bus?”](#), directed by Chay Yew at the Ensemble Studio Theater. Another autobiographical monologue opening this week, Sonya Kelly’s droll [“How to Keep an Alien,”](#) directed by Gina Moxley at the [Irish Arts Center](#), is also a tale of immigration. More pointedly, both pieces detail the performers’ attempts to wedge months and years of disorderly lived experience into more or less tidy narratives, to create life stories that they could live with.

The question that lends Mr. Quijada’s show its title is one that he poses to his third-grade teacher as she concludes a lesson on Rosa Parks and the [Montgomery bus boycott](#). Where did Latinos sit? he asks. His Midwestern teacher, flustered, replies: “Oh. They weren’t around.”

In his efforts to discover who he is and where he comes from, Mr. Quijada rushes in where even confessional artists might fear to tread, acting out the coitus that led to his conception and continuing from there. (Hey, it might not be too late to see that therapist.) As he describes his Illinois upbringing, he breathes and pops into the microphone, occasionally strumming a ukulele, then looping the sounds into a backing track for his rhymes, somewhat in the style of [Reggie Watts](#).



Brian Quijada in his show “Where Did We Sit on the Bus?” CreditGerry Goodstein

Though the show begins as an exploration of his place as a kid of “brown persuasion/a product of U.S.-bound migration,” it morphs into Mr. Quijada’s efforts to sell his folks on a career in the arts. His parents, who endured hardship to arrive and thrive in America, aren’t buying it.

Ms. Kelly, as she tells it, set out to persuade an equally skeptical audience, the [Garda National Immigration Bureau](#) in Dublin. Ms. Kelly fell in love with Kate, the Australian stage manager who was in Ireland on a temporary work visa. United by a doomed Gogol adaptation, they first made eyes at each other while miming suicides. “She puts her finger in a plug socket and pretends to fry her brains and I fall out a window: Flirting, Irish style,” says Ms. Kelly.

Ms. Kelly’s earlier solo piece, [“I Can See Clearly Now \(The Wheelchair on My Face\).”](#) detailed her severe myopia. Here, she’s trying to get the government to see straight (and gay), rallying friends and family to help her fashion a story of the relationship that will persuade the bureau to let them cohabitate. “Falling in love requires paperwork,” she moans.

Ms. Kelly enhances her tale with the help of a spirited stage manager, Paul Curley, and a limitless supply of one-liners, many of them delicious. Of an unhappy parting she remarks: “Life is not a movie. It is an underestimated gas bill.”

Both performers draw on abundant personal charm. Mr. Quijada seems half desperate to please his audience. His face, an appealing mix of handsome and goofy, is always ready to split into a smile, and his feet are quick to dance. (He does a killer, crowd-delighting moonwalk.)

Ms. Kelly, a more seasoned performer, sometimes brings to mind a bespectacled [Holly Hughes](#) or [Deb Margolin](#). Her comic style varies nicely from straight-faced to vivacious, from deadpan to a pan that is very much alive, especially her irresistible, maniacal grin.

Ultimately, neither show offers much drama or conflict. Were Mr. Quijada and Ms. Kelly older, the obstacles they faced might have been greater, their outcomes less predictably happy. Ms. Kelly’s greatest trial is a camping trip with her girlfriend’s family. Pretty much the worst thing that happens to Mr. Quijada is that a kid calls him Brian Quesadilla. “Quesadillas are delicious!” he responds.