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FEEL THE BEAT

CAST AS THE LEGENDARY GLORIA ESTEFAN IN THE HIT MUSICAL *ON YOUR FEET!*, NEWCOMER ANA VILLAFañE ELECTRIFIES BROADWAY.

BY AMANDA CARGILL

■ **GOOD NEWS, GLORIA ESTEFAN FANS: THE CUBAN SUPERSTAR IS BACK**, belting out her chart-topping singles and rocking her iconic black chaps nightly in New York City. At least, that's what you would think if you saw *On Your Feet!*, the hit Broadway musical starring Ana Villafañe. Eight times a week, the blossoming Latina sensation channels Estefan in a performance so uncanny—she wears four different wigs to evoke the singer's signature curls—one could be forgiven for thinking it was 1986. If the rhythm didn't get you then, Villafañe's perfect portrayal of Estefan will now.

"I feel a responsibility to carry out Gloria and Emilio's legacy, and to continue celebrating everything they've accomplished," says Villafañe, 26. "I also feel pride that this particular story is being told in such an iconic American art form."

Born to a Cuban mother and a Salvadoran father, Villafañe considers her depiction of Latinas carefully. Lupe Ontiveros, the late actress best known for portraying Yolanda Saldívar in *Selena*, once told her, "I played a maid 50 times so that you'll never have to." Those words resonated with Villafañe, who actively pursues edgy and authentic roles that represent the full spectrum of the Latina experience.

That commitment is on full display in *On Your Feet!*, which showcases Villafañe's powerful talents in knockout vocal and dance numbers. One of the musical's most dramatic lines is delivered by Villafañe's costar, Josh Segarra (Emilio Estefan). Told by a radio DJ that Miami Sound Machine's music is not sufficiently American, Segarra shoots back: "This is what an American looks like!" For Villafañe, it's the moment wherein Gloria sees Emilio not just as a businessman and creative collaborator but also as a partner in love and life.

"I look at my family, my friends, and my cast," Villafañe says, "and it's full of Latinos who are proud, accomplished, vibrant and, above all else, who have the freedom to be the best versions of themselves. I think that's exactly what Americans look like."



PHOTOGRAPH: MATTHEW MURPHY