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## A play on words, emotions and music

### 'Ultima Partida' by Monica Lopez-Gonzalez to be performed in Spanish at Theatre Project

By [Tim Smith](#), The Baltimore Sun

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Even in a group of overachievers, Monica Lopez-Gonzalez would likely stand out. advertisement

The 30-year-old native Baltimorean has two bachelor's degrees — in French and psychology — and an M.A. and Ph.D. in cognitive science, all from the Johns Hopkins University, where she recently did a stint as a postdoctoral fellow researching "the cognitive neuroscience of artistic creativity."

"The joke among my friends is that I'm such a nerd that I will get another Ph.D. so I can put 'Ph.D.?' after my name," said Lopez-Gonzalez, who currently does consulting work in the field of data visualization.

She has served as a visiting professor at Hopkins and the Peabody Institute (one of her courses examined surrealism), as well as the [Maryland Institute College of Art](#), where she earned a certificate in photography.

In her spare time, she studied piano at Peabody, made documentary films — "The camera is my instrument," Lopez-Gonzalez said — and last year, organized the Contemporary Latin American Film Festival at Hopkins. Oh, yes, she wrote a play, too.

"Ultima Partida" ("The Final Draw") premieres this week at Baltimore [Theatre Project](#).

The staging will be directed by Lopez-Gonzalez and presented by an organization she co-founded and serves as artistic director, La Petite Noiseuse Productions (the French in the company name translates as "little troublemaker").

Featuring seasoned Madrid-born actors Luz Nicolas and Ignacio Garcia-Bustelo, "Ultima Partida" is set in a cabaret, where a man and a woman are engaged in a deep dialogue. It will be performed in Spanish with English surtitles. There will be live, improvised piano accompaniment.

A Spanish language play is a rarity, possibly a first, for Baltimore.

"This show is a great fit for us," said Chris Pfingsten, producing director of the [Theatre Project](#).

"Baltimore has a very fast-growing Hispanic community, and we're looking forward to expanding our

reach to them. The other great thing is that this is a local show. We didn't have to look any further than our own backyard."

After the [Theatre Project](#) premiere, the play is scheduled for the cabaret series at Germano's Piattini.

Lopez-Gonzalez described her script as "very poetic, written in beautiful Spanish with a carefully crafted play on words."

"The English translation is conceptual and loses the musicality," she said, "but I've made sure it's very poetic, too." (She will be in the booth running the surtitles during performances.)

The playwright gives the two characters plenty of loaded topics to address and explore, among them solitude, desire, love and death.

"I take the audience and dump them straight into the issues this couple faces — what has happened, is happening and will happen to them," Lopez-Gonzalez said.

"Ultima Partida" was inspired, in part, by the playwright's longtime interest in film.

"I think of all those movies, especially in the '50s, where the dialogue was so intense, where you get all this emotionality," Lopez-Gonzalez said. "My play is a conversation in the sense of [the 1981 film] 'My Dinner with Andre,' but more emotional."

Intensity of expression is something she finds lacking currently on the screen and the stage.

"I hate to say it, but you don't get that emotionality in today's cinema," Lopez-Gonzalez said. "I don't know what happened. It's the same with contemporary theater, too. There is not anything like 'Cat on a Hot Tin Roof,' with that emotionality and character development from beginning to end that seeps right in."

When Lopez-Gonzalez, who has made several short films, got the idea for "Ultima Partida," she initially saw it in cinematic terms.

"Then I thought, 'No, I'm going to put this on the stage,' " she said. "But in rehearsals, I tell actors, 'Oh, I know what I would do if I had a camera. Here, I would zoom in.' But I can't. I'm learning how to reorient myself. And I'm learning how important lighting is, and also music."

The musical component of "Ultima Partida" is particularly novel. The characters will not be the only ones expressing themselves.

"I wanted to see how emotions can be translated into music," Lopez-Gonzalez said, "so there will be live, improvised jazz on the piano played by Cesar Orozco. He and I are on the same wavelength. We're both interested in transforming — translating — emotion through music."

The Cuban-born Orozco, who just received a graduate performance degree at Peabody, will be following cues provided in the play's script, weaving his improvisations through each performance.

"He will be reacting to the actors' dialogue and body language," Lopez-Gonzalez said. "But he will be

expressing his own feelings, too. He's part of the story. I want to see what happens, since it will be different every time."

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### **If you go**

"Ultima Partida" will be performed at 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday and 3 p.m. June 22 at [Theatre Project](#), 45 W. Preston St. Tickets are \$15 to \$30. Call 410-967-2861 or 410-428-4551, or go to [theatreproject.org](http://theatreproject.org). It will also be performed at 7:30 p.m. June 26 at Germano's Piattini Cabaret, 300 S. High St. \$20. Call 410-752-4515, or go to [germanospiattini.com](http://germanospiattini.com).

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