

FROM *Ser: L.A. vs. B.A.*

Karen Anzoategui

Ser: L.A. vs. B.A. grew out of a piece first conceived at an immigration reform protest/manifestation on HR4437 in Los Angeles on March 25, 2006—the largest protest in Los Angeles history. I experienced a solidarity among the protesters that catapulted me into writing, but it was not until 2008, when I joined the LA Writers Center with the collaboration of dramaturg/director Che’Rae Adams, that I started to expand the story to a full-length solo play that has gone on to be staged nationally. *Ser* was produced at the REDCAT as part of the Studio series for new work and went on to have workshops at Company of Angels in 2010 and then presented as an excerpt at L.A.C.E. Later that year, a workshop of *Ser: L.A. vs. B.A.* was presented by Teada Productions. The full-length version went on for further workshop at the Hollywood Fringe Festival. In 2011, a shorter version was presented at Highways for the 4X4: New Latino Works Festival that I produced along with Marcos Najera and Leo Garcia. *Ser: L.A. vs. B.A.* then played in the heart of West Hollywood at the Macha Theatre in November, 2011. I have performed it at various cultural and university settings in California and Arizona.

Now in its eighth year of its solo show life span/trajectory, *Ser: L.A. vs. B.A.* is taking a new turn with direction by Marcos Najera: The piece now includes a live band that tells the story through music and interchangeable purpose in the structure of the solo piece.

The band creates the tango-playing hot steamy streets of Buenos Aires and then back in Boyle Heights, the mariachis and then it turns into a funky

James Brown band. The four-piece band accompanies the solo performer on stage as the lead character Karen balances the soccer ball with numerous tricks while reclaiming the turbulent game of futbol, turning it into a communal game for love, community and social justice. *Ser!* received its World Premiere at The Los Angeles Theatre Center, featuring live music by Cava and in collaboration with Louie Perez of Los Lobos; produced by Latino Theatre Company for the Fall season, opening November 15, 2013.

This excerpt begins just after Karen has immigrated with her mother and brothers to Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1986 after escaping her father's abuse and abandonment.

SCENE 1

LIGHTS up.

KAREN: Tia Sylvia picks us up from the airport.

TIA: ¡Hola Karen!

KAREN: Tia drinks and drives—drinks mate, a tea we drink. It gets you high but it's not weed. Even though it's green and it looks like weed and the gourd makes it look like a water pipe. Drove on a freeway with so many walls along the way covered in graffiti. Spray paint never looked so boring. It just says stuff like, "Yankees Hijos de Puta??" Didn't think they like baseball here!

TIA: Los Yankees son Americanos.

KAREN: Ouch.

TIA: Somos American, too—South American.

KAREN (*reading*): “Thieves! Asesinos!” Words strike. They mean a lot but it’s ugly. In L.A., the graffiti on the walls is art, cool. Buenos Aires graffiti is straight up in your face and up your ass. Just the words. Not a pretty picture. The need to get “Yankees hijos de puta” on that freeway wall was unveiled in the penmanship of that spray. Letters come from a frustrated grip. A mark placed for all drivers going to and from the airport to read and digest. Why? (*Pause.*) Tia, have you seen Diego play?

TIA: ¡Diego! ¡Ese es un pelotudo!

ANNOUNCER VO: Foul for Tia!

KAREN (*gasps*): If anything is a shock to me, it is that there are Argentines that do not like Diego Maradona. That is crazy.

SOUND of school bell ringing.

ANNOUNCER VO: Welcome back to the game of a new school year. It is one breezy, beautiful day at the Caballito grade school. Now for the national anthem.

SOUND of Argentine national anthem.

KAREN: What are you doin’? I don’t know how to sing it! I was placed in fourth grade when I am supposed to be in third.

SCHOOL DEAN: Technically she should be in fourth grade. Blah, blah, blah.

KAREN: Fourth grade? What the hell?

MOM: Karen, watch your language!

TONY: Just think of it like you skipped a grade, like you're actually smart.

KAREN: Always wanted to be one of those kids. Then I saw her...Paula....

PAULA: Karen...¿como se vive en los Estados Unidos? (*Giggles.*)

KAREN: She made me feel famous.

SOUND of school bell ringing.

MAESTRA: Bueno clase, today we are going to learn about verbs.

KAREN: English class?! Taught by an Argentine to me, the girl from the U.S.A.? Are you kidding?

MAESTRA: The cat is in the window. Repeat

KAREN: The cat is in the window?

MAESTRA: I went fishing at the sea

KAREN (*mocking*): I went fishing at the sea.

TEACHER: Karen! Would you like to share? Give us an example of a verb sentence.

KAREN walks to the front of the classroom.

KAREN (*rapping*): I said a. . .hip hop, the hippie, the hippie to the hip hip

hop, and you don't stop rockin', to the bang bang boogie, say up jumped the boogie, to the rhythm of the boogity beat—(*Her ear is getting pulled.*) Ouch! Ouch! Ouch! I'm failing English! These kids were too smart for me. It was like *The Twilight Zone* when it was time for math and geography. I come from the States. We don't do geography!

MOM: Karen, ponete las pilas or you won't see one soccer game, ever!

KAREN: Mom almost chopped my butt off!

SOUND of a whip.

SCENE 2

Same time period, different day.

KAREN: Mom when can I go to a game?

MOM: I have a better idea, something that a girl your age would love. Let's go shopping!

SOUND of whistle blowing.

ANNOUNCER VO: Free kick for Mom!

KAREN: What about me?

ANNOUNCER VO: You have to score first.

KAREN: I'm never going to make it to see any game! Mom, why are you

wearing those sunglasses and that scarf on your head?

MOM: In case your dad tries to find us. Dale. ¡Vamos!

SOUNDS of a large crowd protesting on the street.

WOMEN: ¡Justicia!

KAREN: Mom! What's going on?

MOM: Forgot about the protest.

KAREN: What's a protest? (*KAREN reads a sign from afar.*) Distribution of wealth?

MOM: The mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. They are protesting for their children who were killed. Let's go this way.

KAREN: In this plaza, there are tons of women, all wearing sunglasses and scarves on their heads. They are holding banners and beating on pots and chanting. Talking to bikers, men who are holding their signs. They get louder and louder. Dang, these women are powerful!

SOUND of whistle blowing.

MOM (*as if she is strategizing a play*): Karen! We'll have to avoid them and not go through the middle and work the sides.

KAREN: Not to go through the middle of them all?? That's gonna be hard. They are the pit bulls of the plaza. You can't get around them.

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A MADRE: ¡Queremos Justicia! Justice for all the mothers and grandmothers of the disappeared! Just show your faces. We demand to know who tortured our children. Show your faces, you cowards!!

KAREN: What happened to their children?

MOM: We have to get out of here!

KAREN: Why?!

MOM: Karen, protests are dangerous!

KAREN: Everything is dangerous!

A MADRE gets close to KAREN.

A MADRE: My daughter was kidnapped by the Argentine military government in 1980. She was tortured, raped, and had a baby that was taken away—

MOM: Señora! My daughter is a child!

A MADRE: So was mine! She needs to know the truth!

KAREN: Mom! Is that why we came to the United States?

MOM: No....Oh look! A leather store.... *(Grabs KAREN by the hand to get her out of the protest.)*

LIGHTS FADE OUT.

SOUNDS of the crowd fill the theatre and FADE OUT as we transition into a LIVING ROOM.

KAREN: Tia, why are those women marching in the street today?

TIA (*holding and sipping her mate*): A las madres de la plaza de mayo...bueno, si las cagaron.

TIA sips from the mate very passionately.

KAREN: Love Aunt Sylvia. Knew she'd be able to tell me the truth about those women. Why doesn't Mom tell me the truth?

TIA (*sipping mate*): Such a long story, or history. Those women are old but they had little children like you and one day they all disappeared. About 30,000 people disappeared. The government had a dictatorship and anyone who spoke up—gone. Professors, students—don't you want to watch the game? This is very important one. We need to beat the English!

KAREN: Yes!

TIA: Let's go. It will start without us.

KAREN: Don't know why I wanted to know so much about the women. It hurt my heart to hear their kids were gone. That would never happen in America!

TIA (*sips*): This is a historic event. Let's go to the Plaza de Mayo! If we win the game, we will be in the best place to celebrate. If not, we'll have the best shoulders to cry on.

SOUNDS of a subway. TIA and KAREN enter.

ANNOUNCER VO: Bienvenidos a la Copa Mundial. Mexico vs. England, Argentina's biggest rival. The rivalry is intense, especially because of Argentina and England's not-so long-ago political war.

KAREN: Tia told me there was a war with England over the Falkland Islands right before I was born. And we lost.

Subway reaches stop. KAREN gets out of the subway and steps into the streets.

KAREN: All of Buenos Aires is on fire with flags! And we are right in the huge plaza where we saw those women protesting. Those aren't protest signs, those are mothers and daughters and son and fathers and dogs and cats wearing Argentina colors. Wearing their flags in their hearts and on their sleeves. There's a bunch of people gathered around a TV set watching the game. (*KAREN gets permission to go see the TV*). And there he is, our team's secret weapon, singing the national anthem. Not so much a secret when they have five defenders on one tiny magical speck of a man. Diego Maradona is magic. Abracadabra, goal! A five-foot-four magician that does things to the ball that only men and women who have 150 year-old-feet can do. Spins like ancient wheels that last so long, all generations could see. Dazzles and disappears in between five men trying to tackle him like a futbol. The referee turns his head. He goes down. But he gets right up, undefeated by their trickery. Now it's time for you to go down, England!

SCENE 3

KAREN arrives in Argentina 15 years later in 2001.

KAREN gets out of the taxi and it screeches away.

KAREN: Stupid taxi! I should have guessed they'd rip you off! And that was all the cash I had! *(Pause.)* It's all meant to be. I have one last chance to see Diego!

A WOMAN approaches.

WOMAN: ¿Hola, cómo estás? ¿Podes compartir algo hermana? Please, any change will do. I'm starving!

KAREN: Hola. Don't have anything, gave last of my change to the taxi who ripped me off.

WOMAN: Si tenes mucho pero no te das cuenta. ¿De donde sos? Oh wait, let me guess. You are a Yankee? ¿O, por qué no me di cuenta?

WOMAN takes out a knife and threatens KAREN.

WOMAN: You North Americans don't know shit about what's going on.

KAREN: ¡Soy Argentina!

WOMAN *(laughing)*: What do you know about being Argentine? If you really want to experience being Argentine, you must have heartache, and have the government fucking you all the time. Your heart must be buried and you

must be reborn. Have nothing. Be stripped, fucked...you understand that Yankee, fucked?!

KAREN: Want to cut me? Cut me. I don't have any money.

WOMAN (*laughing*): Give me your shoes, your rings, your necklace. Money isn't always green, but you are. Welcome to Buenos Aires, querida.

WOMAN struts away with her new belongings.

KAREN: This fucking blows! I don't have any money for a cab. I have no phone. Fuck! Where am I?

ANNOUNCER VO: Attention! Offsides! Red card! Red flag! Argentina has gone into economic collapse. Economic collapse.

KAREN: Economic collapse? It's December 20th, 2001. Four days before Christmas, the banks shut down. No more money. All of Argentina is in pain, in anger, and in total confusion, wanting answers to why they can't have any of their hard-earned money. Mom, Tia, Tony! Tom! How can this be? What do I do? Where the hell does this place me? Hey, I'm American!

PROTESTORS (VO): "Kick them out! Kick them all out!" "¡La gente unida, jamás sera vencida!" "¡Argentina! ¡Argentina!"

KAREN: Family. People in the city out on the streets like mad. Raving soccer fans taking to the Plaza de Mayo—not happy. I meet this man.

YOUNG MAN: Been out of work for two months. Worked every day of my life, and I don't get benefits!

KAREN: Another man stops me like he needs to tell me his deepest secret.

OLDER MAN: ¡Corruptos hijos de puta! The banks took our money to feed themselves! ¡Putos Multinationals!

KAREN: Police are on horseback with clubs and guns ready to shoot.

YOUNG WOMAN: THIEVES!

KAREN: People sing along the sidewalk and streets they know so well, running straight into the guns of the policemen!

PEOPLE (VO) (*chanting*): ¡Ladrones! ¡Ladrones! ¡Ladrones!

OLD WOMAN BEATING ON PAN (*to the police and the mass of people*):
¡Yo no me muevo hasta que me paguen lo que me deben! I'm going to keep beating on the pots and pans so that they can hear the emptiness. Hollow stomachs: the less there is, the more sound we make! They are starving us and our children!

YOUNG WOMAN (*to the police*): ¡Animales! Going to show the government how to run this country! Why did we privatize?!

KAREN: There are women standing on trashcans. Burning trashcans. Mounds of people. Moving cars and knocking 'em over, lighting 'em on fire....

SOUNDS of a helicopter.

KAREN: And the president just took off. Buenos Aires is on fire; this time it's burning to the ground. I can't believe this could happen! No moves. Game over. Stuck. I can't be an ignorant Yankee. Must sit on concrete couches. Be

there for my family. Starve with them. Suffer with them, just like with our team who don't pass the second round. We suffer together as a nation, as a family. For twenty-four days, I starved with my people... ¡Estoy harta! I can't do this anymore!

MOM: Karen, don't think, it burns too much of your energy....

TIA: Chicos, tomen mate que es lo unico que nos queda.... Take the mate....

KAREN drinks mate like it's her only source of food. DIEGO, a soccer ball rolls onto stage.

DIEGO: Pssst!

KAREN: Diego!!! I couldn't see your last game!

DIEGO VO: Be happy you are alive.

KAREN: Don't have the courage to tell my family that L.A. is my home. A home that won't collapse before my eyes, and where the banks won't steal your money.

DIEGO VO: Mira, te entiendo. I don't want to be Argentine anymore, but there are times of need when people that you don't even know will help you like family, like Cuba will do for me. Fidel Castro is a good man.

KAREN: What happened to you, Diego?

DIEGO VO: I need to take care of myself far, far away from all the futbol fields of the world. My brain is...is...dead.... If you don't see me play, let me live in your memory.

SOUNDS of tango music. KAREN tangos with DIEGO.

DIEGO VO: Mi amor....

KAREN: Ciao mi amor. Te veo en mis sueños. See you in my dreams.

SOUNDS that suggest danger as images from the 9-11 attack on the Twin Towers in New York and images from the Iraq war are projected. Soundscape FADES into sounds of helicopters.

ANNOUNCER VO: Welcome—

KAREN (*interrupting*): Got this, I'm on my own now. I don't need you! Where were we? Oh—Boyle Heights: where bullets fly over cholo poet heads. Where silence of family tenderness on Breed Street is shattered by a teenage shooting. Proving manhood and taking off with your homies, jumping over yellow-taped streets. Life went on without any soccer. Since I couldn't see Diego Maradona play anymore, my life was over. Gotta do something with my life.

KAREN takes out a piece of Astroturf. Clown music plays.

KAREN: Hey, hey! Buy a piece of land! You know you want it! This beautiful piece of grass is on sale. Take a good look, its very durable. (*Pause as KAREN waits for a response from any buyers but there are none.*) They say the money is in real estate, but until I get my house on the beach, all I could afford was Boyle Heights. Peep through the windows hoping I can survive this place. (*Gun shot sounds.*) It has character. It can be like one of those off-the-beaten-path kind of urban neighborhoods, just like Buenos Aires's smoky alleys.... Mom and the rest stayed in B.A. The communication between us grew as wide as a continent. Third-world communication. To get the best calling card you have to travel to the barrio.

SOUNDS of norteña music playing.

KAREN: Through the telephone wires that hang low from the weight of sneakers, hanging on lines in the sky, pointing every direction. You have to cross the street from the bail bonds place, pass Al and Bea's and walk towards the mariachis, pass the five bakeries and the taco truck with the best ceviche, pass the Virgin mural on the corner, and then you will find the liquor store with 300 calling cards. (*Enters liquor store.*) Of course when I point to the card with the Argentine flag on it, the hombre's surprised.

MAN: ARGENTINA?? You have a good soccer team—Messi—but I go for Brasil!

KAREN: Forget it. Olvidate. Brazil are the golden boys to anyone that doesn't like Argentines. They love Brazil and cheer the win, and then rub it in our faces. Just like when the Salvadorans hate Mexicans and are Argentina's number one fans. So when Argentina beats Mexico, they triumph and rub it in their faces.

RADIO VO: Rumbo al mundial, World Cup South Africa 2010! In the most recent news, Diego Maradona, head coach of the Argentine squad gets ready for the first match of the World Cup.

KAREN: Diego?! Why didn't he tell me?! He didn't come back!

MAN: He won't come back. Los Argentinos will never win, Messi can't score in Argentina. ¡Jaja! ¡Va ganar Brasil!

KAREN: Give me my calling card! Having Diego as a coach, wow.... The man finally hands me my trophy, the calling card with the best cellular minutes.

SOUNDS of phone ringing.

MOM: ¡Hola Karen! Hola. ¿Cómo te va? How is the real estate? Oh my god, I'll die of a heat stroke! It was 105 degrees today; I'm swelled up like a balloon. Karen—Se te—las—tios—mierda!!

KAREN: Mom...can't hear you you're—I'm broke. Depressed...can't stand living here...suck at real estate...suck at dreaming. Can't understand why... how you did it by yourself? Can barely take care of me while you took care of three....

MOM: Loved you all that's how....

KAREN: Ma, you were so brave. I can only wish I could be as brave as you and all the Madres I met, but I've been so mad at you. Why did you stay? Why aren't you back? I need you....

MOM: This isn't easy for me. When I was there I was working and working so hard I was bones, pueros huesos. I need to be home. I'm happy here. I'm retired. I can see my brothers. I can breathe.

KAREN: Why would you want to stay there?! It's a mess! Maybe I made a mistake....

MOM: No, you didn't. I made a mistake! The economy is more stable there. There's not one day that goes by where I don't feel regret.... Things in Argentina are getting better, very slowly, one step at a time. O sí, be careful when you watch the World Cup. Don't go outside, los mejicanos se ponen bravos. Ok. Un beso que te quiero.... Any boyfriends yet?

KAREN: So I finally told her...

MOM: ¡Ay no! ¡¿Por qué?!

SOUNDS of trumpets wailing.

KAREN: She drowned in tears. "It's just a phase!" My brothers resuscitated her by taking her to eat pasta. She felt better. Mom, I have to be myself.

KAREN takes her mate and sits down on the sidewalk.

RADIO VO: Vamos por el clásico para Los Angeles. ¡Argentina-Mexico! Argentina wins but we still do not witness a single goal from Argentina's soccer star, the next Maradona, Lionel Messi.

SOUNDS of kids playing soccer on the street.

KAREN: Diego?

CHICANA: Who are you talking to? Ay mira, oh shit! Where did you come from? Are you Salvi or what?

KAREN: No, I'm Argentine. Gonna watch the game. Want to join?

CHICANA (*laughs*): You guys are so gonna lose! You guys are cheaters and Mexico was so close to beating your ass!

KAREN: ¡¿Vos viste el mismo partido?!

CHICANA: Ok, can you just speak right?

KAREN: What's speaking right anyways? Want to take my life, go, fly above, beyond. Let's go. Above words and past sentiments: Let's go to where our ancestors found happiness. We can get there, too. Choose to be when you close your eyes and fall into dreams, anything can happen. Might not know who wins the game but I'm willing to jump in headfirst because that's how I was born. Ain't no other way unless I want to wind up an ass. Been there one too many times. I need to dive into all the depths and tectonic plates that exist in our cores. Walk like I got an emergency kit in my trunk. I got this. So, yes let's go. Let's play in our sunset, in our street. Sweep you into me no matter how many worlds apart we are. Take you by the hand, like taking my destiny and saying: This is who I am. I'm queer, y que? We create our truth and maybe it's with you....

CHICANA: No one's ever told me anything like that before. *(Pause.)* But you guys think you're European and think you're all that. What do you know 'bout life?

KAREN: ¡JAJA! I have a story for you—over some mate! It's not so bad when you put azucar encima.

CHICANA: Your accent's not so bad. *(Takes a sip of the mate and smiles, concealing her disgust.)* Orale.

CHICANA extends her hand to KAREN who accepts. They exit together, leaving the ball behind. KAREN looks back at the ball and winks. LIGHTS FADE OUT on the soccer ball.

END OF EXCERPT