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Rosie Herrera confronts a tough past in 'Cookie's Kid'



Dancer Rosie Herrera, rehearsing her solo piece 'Cookie's Kid' at the Miami Light Project in Wynwood, remembers, 'In our house, being tough was more important than happiness.' **CHARLES TRAINOR JR MIAMI HERALD STAFF**

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Maria Luisa del Pino survived growing up poor in the South Bronx by being the toughest girl in the neighborhood, the proverbial tough cookie.

Raising her own family in Hialeah, Pino instilled the same brutal skills in her youngest daughter, Rosie Herrera, and her other two daughters by the time they were in preschool. How to whip around, grab a potential attacker behind you, and slam his head into your knee. To never back down in a fight.

"My mom taught me to fight when I was a little kid," says Herrera, 31. "She would say, 'If you go to school and somebody kicks your ass, I'm going to kick *your* ass. If your sister goes to school and someone kicks her ass, I'm going to kick her ass *and* I'm going to kick your ass.' We knew if we got into a fight, we had to fight until the death, until someone pulled us off. Because we had Cookie to deal with.

"In our house being tough was more important than happiness, more important than success, more important than anything."

Herrera confronts the consequences of being taught that life was a battle in *Cookie's Kid*, which runs Thursday to Saturday at the Miami Light Project's space in Wynwood. This is the first solo piece for Herrera, who since 2009 has been creating vivid, surreal dance theater works for her [company](#), works that have been staged by the Adrienne Arsht Center, the [American Dance Festival](#) and the [Baryshnikov Arts Center](#) in New York.

On one level, Herrera is using *Cookie's Kid* to confront the harshness in her childhood, "the emotional oppression of toughness, and how toughness can be disabling."

But more recently, Herrera has also come to see the piece as being about how she transformed the brutal qualities her mother taught her.

"My mom had to become Cookie, she had to become this bad ass, fighting, nobody-messes-with-me woman," Herrera says. "What did I become to survive? I also had to find a way to escape. And part of that for me was developing this really elaborate imaginary world. That's how I became an artist."

Herrera's mother grew up as one of 12 children in a poor family in the South Bronx, as the area was sliding into violent urban decay. That she was blond, blue-eyed and beautiful made her a particular target, Herrera says.

"She had a really hard life in every way, every bad thing that can happen to a kid," Herrera says. "There was a lot of abuse and neglect. By the time she was 12 she was so sick of being abused that she became Cookie, she became a bad ass. Nobody would mess with her, and nobody would mess with her siblings, either."

Pino hung on to those survival mechanisms as an adult, even though her own family lived in a benign neighborhood in Hialeah next door to her girls' paternal grandmother on a block filled with aunts and uncles and cousins. She once sent Herrera, then in second grade, to her Catholic school wearing a bandanna that said "100% Puerto Rican B--ch." She hustled guys out of money by arm-wrestling them in bars.

That her youngest daughter was a cheerful, unconventional kid with a petite doll-like physique and a high-pitched, girlish voice — *and* that she wanted to be a dancer — was a bewildering disappointment to Pino. By high school, Herrera was dancing in hip-hop crews, voguing in clubs with drag queens and working as a showgirl in a Little Havana cabaret.

"To say she has a hard time understanding my life choices is an understatement," Herrera says. "Last year for Mother's Day she wanted to go to a shooting range. And I made a picnic and said OK, even though I cry because guns scare me. Whereas she has four on her nightstand."

For Herrera, digging into her past made the already daunting process of creating a solo piece still more intimidating. When Miami Light Project's artistic and executive director Beth Boone first proposed doing a solo almost two years ago, as Boone was planning the group's 25th anniversary season, Herrera enthusiastically said yes.

"Then she said, 'But we want you to be the soloist,'" Herrera says. "And I was like, 'Wait, let me call you back.'"

Still, she quickly decided that it was a challenge she could not turn down, a chance to grow as an artist and a person.

"It was so scary... I thought obviously that's the direction I have to go in," Herrera says.

A self-described control freak as a director, Herrera avoids performing in her own work. Her last project, a piece called *Show.Girl.* for New York's [Ballet Hispanico](#), was her first commission for a

major company. With *Cookie's Kid*, she has gone back to her roots as a dancer, even as she explores new creative and personal territory.

"I've had the good fortune to have a lot of great support and commissions," Herrera says. "But I really want to be the type of artist who seeks projects for growth and because it speaks to my heart, vs. trying to survive financially.... Every project that I get, one more amazing than the other, it's 30 pounds more pressure on your shoulders and even more doubt. It's important to remind yourself that the reason you're doing this is to make beautiful things and make people think and stir up the status quo."

Boone hopes the commission, as with others Miami Light has given to Miami artists such as [Teo Castellanos](#) and [Rudi Goblen](#), will help Herrera grow.

"Her profile has risen around the country with these wildly imaginative spectacles," Boone says. "What's interesting about this piece is it's much more soulful and introspective. You can see glimpses of that in [other Herrera works]. I think that's what makes her work compelling. As outrageous as it might become, it works because of the underpinning of pain and pathos."

In *Cookie's Kid*, Herrera dances, speaks, vocalizes and sings (she is also a classically trained vocalist). An emotional moment comes in a short film by Adam Reign, a longtime collaborator. It recreates the times when Herrera's father, who divorced his wife when their girls were very young, would come home late from his job as a chef and carry his sleeping daughter to her grandmother's house.

"Sometimes I would wake up in the middle of the journey, and I would just see the floor and my foot would be dangling and my dad would be holding me, and there would be a blanket around me," Herrera says. "That sensation of being really safe is just the warmest and most precious thought."

Another sentimental element came when her maternal aunt surprised her by sending her 30 cassette tapes of poems and songs composed and recorded by Herrera's grandfather. Herrera never met him but had always heard he was abusive and alcoholic.

"They're romantic, sad. He was quite the phenomenal composer," she says. "I'm still unpacking these things."

In a way, *Cookie's Kid* seems to have become as much about forgiveness as blame.

"My mom had a really tough life, and she dealt with it as best she could," Herrera says. "She tried to prepare me to be as ready to take on the challenges of the world.

"You're shaped by these things. But it's important to recognize how you've been shaped."

For all her introspective artistry and soft-spoken demeanor, Herrera retains some of her mother's toughness. A couple years ago a solo road trip brought her to a drag bar in South Carolina, where five teenagers were mocking the singer whose performance Herrera was enjoying.

"I asked them in the nicest way possible to leave her alone," she says, "and they jumped me."

A security guard had to drag her away from the fracas.

"I did *not* lose that fight," says Herrera. "I will avoid conflict under any circumstances. It does *not* mean I am to be [messed] with. I'm still Cookie's kid."