

# ¿Qué Pasa, USA?

Thirty years ago this series showed American television how to create bilingual programming for a diverse audience.

By Humberto Delgado & Lorna Veraldi

**A**worried mother, Juana Peña, sits on the orange velvet couch in her modestly furnished living room in Miami's Little Havana. Her dilemma? She wants her teenage daughter, Carmen, to have a traditional *quinceañera*, an extravagant celebration of a girl's 15th birthday traditional in Juana's native Cuba. But daughter Carmen was born in America, and Juana's teenage son, Joe, while born in Cuba, has grown up in America. Juana knows that like many of his generation, Joe would scorn such a throwback to the old ways, and perhaps Carmen would, too. Grandparents Antonio and Adela, who also inhabit the house as part of this extended family, will no doubt approve of an impressive party. But Pepe, Juana's husband, is likely to balk at the price of a fancy catered event, its lavish choreography, limo, dresses and tuxedos—all of which can add up to a budgetary disaster.

So began "Fiesta de Quince," the pilot of bilingual comedy series *¿Qué Pasa, USA?* Originally produced for public television in the mid-1970s, the series was intended to be—and remains—an "educational" experience—coaxing viewers over the boundaries of language, culture, gender and generation with broad humor, appealing characters

and universal themes. It was created in an era in which most of the television industry and the rest of America thought of Spanish-language programming as a transitional phenomenon, a way to help ease the passage of recent Cuban immigrants to the English-speaking American mainstream. It was aimed at the wave of exiles who had come to Miami beginning in the early 1960s seeking what they thought would be a temporary refuge from Castro's Cuba.

Today, the Cuban community has become a dominant force in Miami business, cultural and political life. Hispanics have become the largest and fastest-growing minority group in the United States, and Spanish-language television an established and growing part of the television industry. And through all the changes, *¿Qué Pasa, USA?* has endured to become an evergreen classic still aired on both non-commercial and commercial stations around the world. In 2005, author Bert Delgado interviewed many of those who helped create this ground-breaking series. Here, in their own words—thirty years later—is the story of the making of *¿Qué Pasa, USA?*

## Origins

Luis Santeiro, who was Head Writer of *Qué Pasa*, says the proposal for a sitcom



**Qué Pasa family portrait: the grandparents (standing), Luis Oquendo & Velia Martinez, the parents (sitting), Ana Martinez Casado & Manolo Villaverde and the children (on the floor) Rocky Echevarria & Ana Margarita Menendez**

aimed at “teenagers in the acculturation process” originated with two professors at Miami-Dade Community College in response to an announcement by the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) that grants were available for the creation of television programs by and for minority groups. However, Santeiro continues, “Anyone can have an idea. The problem comes in its execution.”

It was not until the series was in pre-production in 1975 that Santeiro became involved. “They had already hired a head writer but they were not happy with the scripts. I had already written for PBS and wrote a ‘spec’ episode for this series, which they liked so much that it was used as the

pilot program.” Once the pilot was produced, studies of the target audience were conducted, and results of the studies were submitted to the Project Officer in Washington. Jose “Pepe” Bahamonde, who served as Executive Producer for the series, recalls, “Once we got the green light, ‘Fiesta de Quince’ was stored until shows 2-9 were completed so we could air the whole block.”

HEW required the series to be bilingual. When the show was first conceived strictly for a South Florida audience, the ratio was weighted toward more Spanish. “For South Florida, 60:40 favoring Spanish was comfortable for the audience(s),” says Bahamonde. When it looked as if the series would

be broadcast nationally, the balance was changed to favor English. “It had to have 60 percent English and 40 percent Spanish,” says Santeiro. “Sometimes they had to even count words.”

But what exactly was “bilingual” supposed to be? Bahamonde remembers that finding the right formula was difficult: “The Request for Proposal specified monies available for ‘bilingual, educational TV programs,’ and the proposal writers simply picked a 60-40 balance...They didn’t have the foggiest idea how this was to be accomplished.” A bilingual children’s program then being produced in Texas “depended mostly on back-to-back repetition.” But Bahamonde wanted to avoid such

“excessive repetition”:

“Thanks to my background in comparative linguistics, I came up with a color-coding scheme right on the script” he says,” to ascertain that the balance was observed, as it was now a contractual term—and worked closely with Luis Santeiro, my Writer/Story Editor, to make sure we presented the plot points in both languages without getting into excessive repetition. Sometimes Spanish monolinguals would miss out on a joke, and at other times English monolinguals would miss out, but everybody knew where the storyline was headed all the time. A little Latin ‘broadness’ in the acting helped keep everybody on track. Yes, that was intentional.”

## **The grant writers forgot budget lines for support areas. Half of the set was propped and dressed with the executive producer’s personal items.**

### **Challenges in Producing the Program**

In 1975, when preparations for the series began, the average half-hour sitcom produced in Los Angeles cost \$300,000 to \$400,000 an episode. Executive Producer Bahamonde still finds it hard to believe that “we [were] so daring as to try to do the same thing for less than \$25,000 an episode!” A grant of \$250,000 from HEW’s Office of Education was supposed to cover the *entire* first season (10 episodes), provided they thought the pilot “proved we could produce a bilingual sitcom with audience appeal and at the same time convey educational content.”

The grant writers had never produced a television series on the scale of the Norman Lear “live audience sitcoms” like *All in the Family* that inspired *Qué*

*Pasa*. “They forgot budget lines” for support areas, including props. “Half the *Qué Pasa* household (set) was propped/dressed with my personal home accessories,” Bahamonde recalls. “And there were many wardrobe items that the cast brought from home, or I bought at Goodwill or the Richard’s bargain basement with my personal money.”

“Imagine. I went to LA to see how Norman Lear was producing live audience sitcoms,” he says, “and came home to wear 10 hats because I had to get involved (assist hands-on) in every production aspect, except maybe the most technical ...like boom operation or camera op. I even did the audience warm-ups, and casting on a weekly basis, plus supervised

all the editing and audio sweetening, here and in LA where we postproduced, at places such as

MetroMedia and CFI.”

Bahamonde emphasizes that *Qué Pasa* was intended to target a *local* Miami audience, and so was provided only a *local* budget. “There were other ESSA grants for regional and national productions.” George Dooley, now retired, was an executive at Miami public television station WPBT when the program was produced there: “[W]e did not have any idea of its possible success...I never thought it would play in North Dakota. In Miami, yes; but it has played in every state in the union.”

Writer Luis Santeiro adds that *not* only was the federal grant not intended to fund a national series, but in fact those in charge of the grant had no national ambitions or long-term contingency plans. HEW, in Santeiro’s view, specifically

targeted minority populations in specific locales with the grant money that made the series possible:

“[T]he money was allocated to South Florida,” he says. “HEW had money for minority groups...HEW was trying to develop biculturalism, or perhaps was trying to pacify minority groups. Nobody ever thought that these programs were going to be successful, nor were [the people] at HEW ready to deal with success. When *Qué Pasa* became successful, they did not lend us a hand, no help whatsoever. They gave us the grant for five years. At the end of the five years, and regardless of the success of *Qué Pasa*, [HEW] did not renew the grant.”

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Executive Producer Bahamonde confirms that the program was not cancelled for poor ratings or the typical factors that affect a decision not to continue a commercial series (lack of success, disputes over stars’ salaries, artistic differences, or content). This was public television, funded by a government grant. “Only my HEW Project Director could have ‘cancelled’ *QP* on the grounds of ineffectiveness in reaching its target audience, as measured by our annual market studies (obligatory under the grant process). But our assessment/audience surveys always returned with the highest of ratings.” At the “cessation or natural expiration of grant funds,” WPBT decided not to reapply for continuation funds.

*Qué Pasa* has enjoyed lasting popularity beyond anyone’s expectations. Santeiro is happy that the project has

achieved such success, but admits to frustration that those who made the series have not reaped financial rewards. Because this was a government project, everyone signed contracts waiving their rights in perpetuity. On his first job as head writer, Santeiro recalls, he was happy to waive residuals for what was a unique opportunity. “It was not for CBS or ABC, so it was not so absurd not to ask for residuals.” But it is frustrating to Santeiro that in the years since “nobody has made a penny” except the commercial networks that continue to air the series to this day.

So how did a nationally televised series survive on a shoestring? Fortunately, recalls Bahamonde, talented friends were “totally supportive.” They pitched in to do make-up (Carlos

Gomery), hair (Iris Perdomo de Castro), and wardrobe (Antonio Gonzalez). Bahamonde believes his personal connections to other local artists were critical to the success of the series: “[A]ll my friends from theater and my dancer days worked for peanuts because they knew me. In a way, they came to my rescue, and by extension, to the show’s.”

The series’ unexpected success launched more than one emerging Miami actor to national prominence. Rocky Echevarria, who played teenage son Joe, went on to make a name for himself in Hollywood as Steve Bauer. And perhaps the biggest success story to emerge from *Qué Pasa* was that of the Cuban-American actor/director Andy Garcia, who was “discovered” playing Carmen’s boyfriend in an episode of *Qué Pasa*. Ironically, Bahamonde’s inventiveness in trying to do more with less eventually

cost him career opportunities: “*Después de QP*,” he recalls, “everybody wanted to pick my brain, but nobody would offer me a job because they thought they couldn’t offer me ‘the big bucks I was making while doing *QP*.’ Ha! ha! ha!” Eventually, Bahamonde learned to begin negotiations by “making sure I sounded affordable.” He told potential clients that “*QP fue . . . trabajar por amor al arte!*” (“*Qué Pasa* was . . . to work for ‘the love of art!’”)

Some would say that the lasting appeal of *Qué Pasa* stems largely from its nostalgic look back at a time that is no more. Head writer Luis Santeiro, who now resides in New York City, views *Qué Pasa* as a tale of times gone by:

“You can watch *Qué Pasa* from a historic point of view,” he says. “It was an era of the Cuban immigration when the ‘melting’ was at its maximum. Today it is different. *Qué Pasa* represents a period of the Cuban immigration when the large bulk of Cubans was landing in the melting pot. *Qué Pasa* is like a graphic testimony of the period. We have changed from then. We are at a different level. At the time of *Qué Pasa*, we were still naïve. I believe people watch it today as a remembrance of an era . . . there is comedy, but the series is also nostalgic . . . what we had . . . it is like a record of that time.”

But *Qué Pasa* is more than a time capsule. While it successfully portrayed the reality of the era and continues to evoke memories special to those who grew up in the Cuban community as it existed in 1970s Miami, the series transcends its era. The generational differences and conflicts it portrays, the longing for old ways and places, is the continuing American story of displacement and adaptation. In that sense, the series also rings true for other Americans with immigrant roots. Rick Loconto was in charge of audio at WPBT

during the taping of *Qué Pasa*, and when interviewed in 2005 still worked as senior audio engineer at the same Miami public television station. He spoke about his personal response to the program as the son of Italian immigrants: “I could easily relate to the program, because in my household there was a lot of Italian spoken . . . I think everybody can relate to it, because everybody has a background and is not native from this country.” While *Qué Pasa* may deal with themes that appeal to Hispanic or Latino households, it has a universal appeal as well. The themes of *Qué Pasa*—tensions between cultures, generations and genders, family struggles, and a search to become an American on one’s own terms—exist not just in Hispanic households, but are universal issues underlying the American experience.

Moreover, despite a limited production budget, broad acting and the absence of “adult” language or graphic sex and violence, *Qué Pasa* rang true to viewers. Ana Margo, who portrayed daughter Carmen, says the series mirrored her life as a teenager in Miami:

“I was raised with two groups of friends, Americans and Cubans,” she says. “We all shared together, but I personally was living in high school the very same situations I was portraying in *¿Qué Pasa, USA?* Exactly the same: the chaperone, the American friends. I left home to go to the studio to record; to me it looked exactly the very same. Real life and the studio were the very same situations and topics.”

As Margo sees it, *Qué Pasa*’s honest portrayal of diverse cultures is a key to its lasting appeal.

“My Cuban and Latin friends felt honored by the way we portrayed them on the screen,” she says. “Never did the

series humiliate Latins, or insult our race. I believe that is why *Qué Pasa* has been so successful. We laughed at ourselves in a way that no one felt insulted or misrepresented. We were doing real life, as it was at the time in Miami. We respected our culture even though we poked fun at it.”

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*Qué Pasa* succeeds at being truly bicultural because it is truly bilingual. Both English and Spanish monolinguals can enjoy their fair share of the jokes. But those who make an effort to understand both languages are rewarded with a richer experience. Spanish is not merely sprinkled occasionally into the story to flavor it, nor is any viewer treated as an outsider by being asked to read subtitles. Spanish and English (and Spanglish) share the spotlight.

The series encourages monolingual viewers, English-speaking and Spanish-speaking, to stretch beyond their comfort zones. Actress Barbara Martin played Sharon, Carmen’s blonde, wide-eyed, Anglo classmate. Asked what her American friends in 1970s Miami said

about the series, Martin replied, “Some told me that they did not understand it...Some said they understood only

half. Yeah, I said, that IS the point.”

Martin, a native English speaker, continued a television acting career after *Qué Pasa*. She surprised herself by winning Best

Actress in a Hispanic Sitcom for her appearance in a Spanish-language sitcom for Univision. Martin modestly suggests the award came in part because people still remembered and loved *Qué Pasa*. “I thought it was a sentimental vote.”

Thirty years ago, ¿*Qué Pasa, USA?* showed American television how to create bilingual programming for a diverse audience. Not every viewer may understand every word. However, *Qué Pasa* delivers humor on a level playing field. Both sides struggle to understand and to be understood. Neither “Anglo” nor “Cuban” culture or language is mainstream or marginalized. The result? A series that is still young at 30—providing a whole new generation laughter and insight about what it means to be part of “the new USA.”

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Humberto Delgado and Lorna Veraldi are on the faculty of the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Florida International University, the public university in Miami, where they teach in the television program.