

STAGE REVIEW

# Fact, fiction, and forging an identity in ArtsEmerson's 'The Real James Bond . . . Was Dominican'

By **Don Aucoin** Globe Staff, Updated November 9, 2023, 20 minutes ago



Christopher Rivas in "The Real James Bond . . . was Dominican." LAURA BUSTILLOS JAQUEZ

James Bond, a.k.a. Agent 007, lives in the public imagination as the quintessential Englishman, albeit one capable of considerably more derring-do than your average Brit.

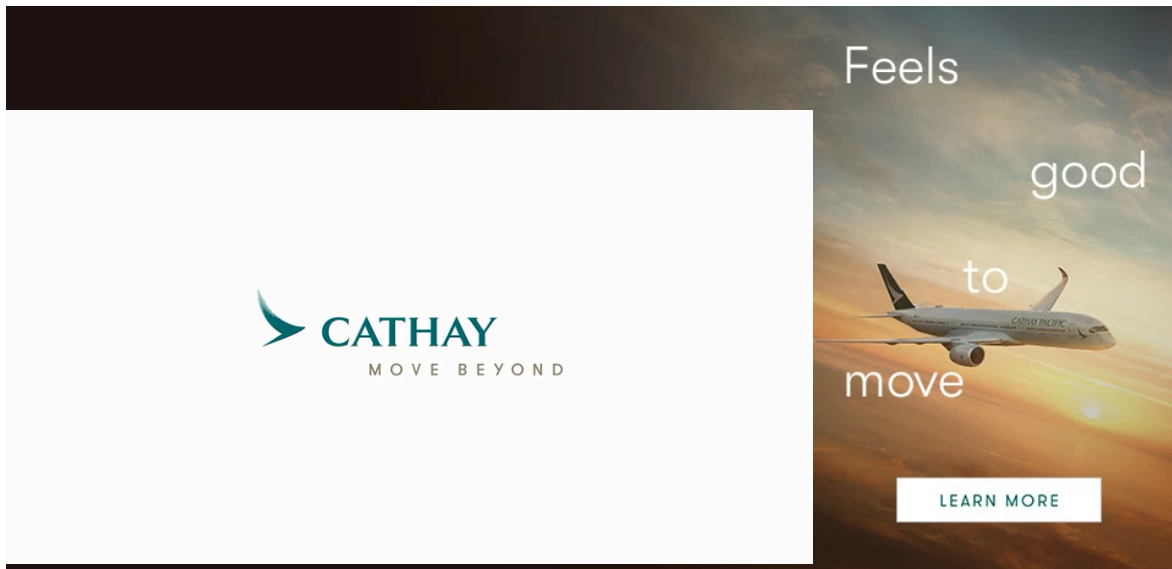
But what fired the imagination of Christopher Rivas when he was growing up in Queens was the discovery that novelist Ian Fleming was believed to have modeled Bond on the persona and exploits of Porfirio Rubirosa, a dashing diplomat, polo champion, race car driver, airplane pilot, and playboy from the Dominican Republic.

For Rivas, a young Dominican-American entranced by Bond and trying to figure out his place in the world and how he should carry himself, Rubirosa was an inspiring figure. In "The Real James Bond . . . Was Dominican," Rivas traces the way Rubirosa's life and career began to also register as a cautionary tale as he dug deeper into his idol's story.

An engaging and expressive narrator and performer with a high-energy presence, Rivas is alone onstage except for percussionist Jonathan Gomez for "The Real James Bond . . .," which opened Wednesday night at the Emerson Paramount Center and runs only through Sunday.

Rivas begins the show attired in underwear and a singlet, but by the end of the performance he has transitioned into Bond-style evening wear. Sometimes, he addresses a photo of Rubirosa propped up onstage. Rivas notes that when Fleming introduced the character of James Bond in the novel "Casino Royale" in 1953, "You couldn't have a franchise built on a man of color."

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Rubirosa was a supporter of Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo, and the first of his five wives was Trujillo's daughter, Flor de Oro. Others included Doris Duke and Barbara Hutton, and he had innumerable affairs. Rivas notes that Rubirosa was abusive to some of the women in his life. He died in a car crash in 1965 in Paris at age 56.

Rivas seems intent on making "The Real James Bond . . ." an interactive show. Perhaps too intent. He calls on individual audience members to read Rubirosa's words aloud, an approach that disrupts the production's flow and diminishes its dramatic impact a bit, especially in a show that runs only 70 minutes.

At the end, I actually found myself wishing it were longer — a rare feeling as we near the end of a year in Boston-area theater that has included marathon productions of "Angels in America" and "The Lehman Trilogy."

In his youth, Rivas says, he was riddled by fear and uncertainty. "I wanted to be anything but me," he says, describing the way he was "composing myself out of the pieces of everybody else," and trying to be "worthy enough of being seen," noting that it's possible to be "so desperate to be seen that you destroy yourself."

But “The Real James Bond . . .,” which is directed by Daniel Banks, ranges beyond autobiography and an examination of Rubirosa’s impact on Rivas to encompass broader issues of colorism, code-switching (he mimics the formal tone of voice his father employs when addressing white people), and the still-lagging representation of nonwhite performers in Hollywood.

In one of the production’s most trenchant moments, the faces of white actors who have played Latino characters — such as Al Pacino as Cuban drug lord Tony Montana in “Scarface” — are shown on an upstage screen. (The projection design is by Alexandra Kelly Colburn and Kate Freer.) Let’s just say it is a very lengthy parade of performers.

Though he lived a freewheeling life, Rubirosa was not immune to the social pressures of the time. According to Rivas, Rubirosa lightened his skin and had a nose job. You sense that Rivas came to see the glamorous Rubirosa as an illustration of the price you pay when you submerge your ethnic identity in order to gain entrée into political and social circles controlled by whites.

## **THE REAL JAMES BOND ... WAS DOMINICAN**

Written by Christopher Rivas. Developed with Daniel Banks. Directed by Banks. Presented by ArtsEmerson. At Robert J. Orchard Stage, Emerson Paramount Center. Through Nov. 12. Tickets start at \$25. 617-824-8400, [www.ArtsEmerson.org](http://www.ArtsEmerson.org)

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Don Aucoin can be reached at [donald.aucoin@globe.com](mailto:donald.aucoin@globe.com). Follow him [@GlobeAucoin](https://twitter.com/GlobeAucoin).

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