

Gloria Estefan, right, performs at the Tony Awards in June with Ana Villafuete, who portrays Estefan in the Broadway musical *ON YOUR FEET!* (L) JEFFREY M. HARRIS



GLORIA ESTEFAN WANTS YOU 'ON YOUR FEET!'

Janette Mascarella | Special for USA TODAY

You know her name, you know her music but you might not know that Gloria Estefan's chart-topping songs and life story play out eight times a week on the Broadway stage. And the rhythm is definitely going to get you. Estefan and her husband and producer Emilio Estefan have transported Cuban flair and inspiration to *ON YOUR FEET! The Musical*. The true tale about heart, heritage and two people who believed in their talent — and each other — has become an international sensation. The hit Broadway show is, in Gloria Estefan's words, "a love story to this country, our love story, a love story to music."

YOU GO
Gloria Estefan, soprano, and Emilio Estefan, pianist. www.onyourfeet.com



Gloria Estefan performs a number from *ON YOUR FEET!* at the Tony Awards in June. (R) PHOTOFEST/GETTY IMAGES; (L) PAT AMUNDSON/REUTERS

With seven Grammy Awards and over 100 million albums sold worldwide, Gloria Estefan is the most successful Latin crossover performer in pop music history. In addition to 24 No. 1 hits on various charts, her accolades are numerous. She has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, for example, and has been inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame. Her journey in Broadway began, really, when she was involved in a horrific accident at the height of her career in March 1992. She suffered a broken back when her tour bus was hit by a truck on a snowy Pennsylvania highway. The musical tells of her triumph over that tragedy, along with the myriad challenges she faced to reach such heights in the music industry. Opening night in Chicago was very emotional, Estefan told USA TODAY, recalling the first time she was in the audience and what she saw on stage. "I was sitting there holding my sister's hand... My heart was pounding, my whole family was around me and the emotion of the moment was really overwhelming." Ana Villafuete, who plays Gloria in the show, made her Broadway debut after originating the role at Chicago's Oriental Theatre. Estefan says she was "in awe" of her. **► STORY CONTINUES ON 36**

'A chance to inspire'

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fan says they looked at about 3,000 actresses during casting, and she knew immediately that Villafaña was the one. "From the moment she sang," Estefan says. "She didn't particularly sound vocally yet like me then, but now she's really incredible. On the acting side she was phenomenal."

Estefan wrote a note that opening night to Villafaña to try to prepare her for the amount of work eight shows a week would be, while giving her a glimpse of the many rewards. "It said, 'I want you to remember this note on the days you start questioning why you ever decided to do this.' ...

"I told her our motivation is really to inspire people in the theater every night. ... If anyone has given up on the dream, ... if they have challenges in their lives that they need to overcome, I told her she has an incredible chance to inspire."

Estefan, now 59, says she is honored to share the story of her life and the chance she has to inspire a new generation. "People leave the show every night, they're entertained, they feel good and maybe they have some ideas I never thought about before," she says. "That's the blessing that we've had with the success of the show."

MEET ANA VILAFÑA

ON YOUR FEET! is all about the American Dream, and Ana Villafaña is living it. We caught up with the breakout Broadway star, who opened up about her inspirational role and how she got it.

Q What was the audition and casting process like, and the first time you met Gloria Estefan?

A My audition process was pretty unorthodox because I was living in Los Angeles. The moment I heard about *ON YOUR FEET!* I knew I wanted the chance. My team had a video of me singing covers of *Titanium* by Sia and *Piel Morena* by Thalía



ON YOUR FEET! includes many of Gloria Estefan's biggest hits. PHOTOS BY MATTHEW MURPHY

they sent to the casting director.

I grew up dreaming about being on Broadway — and never could have imagined I'd make my debut playing Gloria Estefan. Her music was always a part of my life. ... I'd seen her at events, so as a "fan" there was always a connection. We officially met at my final callback. It was my first Broadway audition, and this living icon was sitting in the room as I sang her songs and interpreted scenes from her life...

I felt a crazy confidence to show her that I knew specific moves she makes. But I was actually terrified. Now we are very close. It's an honor to have her in

my life as a muse, mentor and *ON YOUR FEET!* friend.

Q It's a fun jukebox musical where people sing and dance, but there is also a strong takeaway. Tell us about the inspirational message of the show, and how you connected with it.

A This show has serious heart, and that is what I love most about it. I can feel the audience being a little bit shocked because they get to learn so much about this incredible woman and her determination. People come into the theater expecting only one dimension — the dancing, the songs,

the fun — but they get so much more. It is a very human story about facing any obstacle life throws your way, while remaining true to yourself. I think anyone can relate to that idea. The fact that it's a true story makes it that much more inspiring. It gives you the strength of spirit to say, "I can do that too!"

It is difficult to summarize how rewarding this has all been, almost impossible to put into words. Above all, being trusted and chosen by Gloria herself to interpret her life has taught me to believe in myself at the highest level imaginable. She has empowered me as an individual, and together with our cast, we are living out her legacy. She represents an entire culture. I take that very seriously. ... This story is the American dream, which is so much bigger than me."

ABOUT THE SHOW

Directed by two-time Tony Award winner Jerry Mitchell (*Kinky Boots*), with choreography by Sergio Turjillo (*Jersey Boys*) and book by Academy Award winner Alexander Dinelaris (*Birdman*), *ON YOUR FEET!* features iconic Estefan songs of the past 25 years, including *Rhythm Is Gonna Get You*, *Conga*, *Get On Your Feet*, *Don't Want To Lose You Now*, *1-2-3* and *Coming Out of the Dark*.

Ektor Rivera as Emilio Estefan and Ana Villafaña as Gloria Estefan in ON YOUR FEET! The Estefans rose to fame with Miami Sound Machine in the 1970s and '80s before she launched a solo career and he became a star producer.