

**Ep: 7 – Karen Rodriguez: “Bruja Status”**

**Date: 8/18/20**

**Featuring:** Caroline Neff and Karen Rodriguez, with Cliff Chamberlain, Audrey Francis and Mary Hungerford.

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**Karen Rodriguez:**

Like, so much of the reason that I’ve even gotten into the rooms that I’ve been able to, has been my intuition—has been my instinct.

**Audrey Francis:**

From Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago, Illinois—

**Karen Rodriguez:**

And I’ve always been very imaginative. It’s like, I could read a play and be like “I know what this person’s life was.”

**Audrey Francis:**

This is *Half Hour*. Cliff, Caroline: we're back with a very special guest this week Karen Rodriguez. Let me just say I loved listening to this conversation because I felt like I was back in the dressing room of *Dance Nation*, which if you don't know or if you didn't see (and Cliff would you were lucky enough to not be a part of) Caroline, Karen and I all we're forced into a very small dressing room together.

**Caroline Neff:**

I love that you say forced. I mean, we did insist. [Laughter] On the first day of rehearsal, we went to our stage manager like “We have to be in a dressing room together.”

**Audrey Francis:**

The three of us. Like do not separate us.

**Caroline Neff:**

No, no.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Oh, it can really make or break an entire experience your dressing room situation. I mean, I've had plays that were made so monumentally better by getting a chance to hang out for a half hour with someone amazing.

**Audrey Francis:**

And I will say, I think, when I got to share a dressing room with Karen for *Doppelgänger*, people were not impressed with our warm up which was basically rapping Cardi B's “Bodak Yellow” at the time at the top of our lungs.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

And that went over poorly?

**Audrey Francis:**

You know, I think people liked it for the first eight shows—

**Caroline Neff:**

Until they realized there were children in the play.

**Audrey Francis:**

There were children in the play. I think it eventually grew tiresome. [Laughter] Karen and I just got better and better every show.

**Caroline Neff:**

Practice makes perfect.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

I can definitely attest to how good *Doppelgänger* was and how good Karen was. It's like—that show was a big Steppenwolf show, full of ensemble members, a TV star (Rainn Wilson) was in it, and yet I walked away going “Who, who was that actress?” She's so funny and just completely stole the show for me. I mean, I just remember being completely amazed at how confident and funny and, just, good she was.

**Audrey Francis:**

So to see Karen's work in *Doppelgänger* and then to see her do something completely different in *La Ruta*—which was a show that she did with Isaac Gómez, her longtime friend and collaborator, about the tragic story of the Lost Women of Juarez and the violence that happens in that community—to watch an actor be able to inhabit such powerful and completely different roles is a really inspiring thing to see for me as an actor.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

And even in this conversation, like, the more you get to know her the more impressive she is. Because in that, in *La Ruta*, she was so heartbreaking, and her mime work was incredible.

**Audrey Francis:**

Right?

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

I love some good mime work. I seriously love some good mime work. And whatever she was doing was so specific and real, it was fucking amazing. And I don't mind I don't mind admitting to the world that I love some good mime work. And she was aces.

**Caroline Neff:**

I got to meet Karen, like, I think her first year in Chicago. I was doing a reading at Victory Gardens and Isaac was the Director of New Play Development there. And he brought Karen in to simply read the stage directions. And Karen reading the stage directions for this play, I was like “Who is this?” And like I literally went up on the lines that I was reading—from a page—because Karen was so captivating just like, “And then she opened the door.” I'm like, “Who is this person?!”

**Audrey Francis:**

I think for the listeners to know: Karen mimed this entire conversation. [Laughter] Alright let's listen to it.

**Stage Manager:**

Company, this is your half hour call. This is half hour til top of the show. Half hour. If you have not signed in, please do so at this time. Half hour. Half hour.

**Caroline Neff:**

So, Karen, I just want to start a little bit by talking about where you grew up and what your pathway to Chicago was.

**Karen Rodriguez:**

Um, so I grew up in Matamoros, Tamaulipas, Mexico. It's a little town in on the border by Brownsville, Texas. And I moved to the US around when I was 11. But I moved to—I moved to Kokomo, Indiana, like I didn't go across the border. It was like I moved to Kokomo, Indiana because of my dad's job. And so, I literally got plugged into the school system without knowing any English. Like I literally would sit there—yes, dude—I would sit there and not understand. It was like, what is it like the Peanuts teacher? “Wah-wah-wah.” Like that, it was like that. Well, the kids—there was like, no, like Latin x people in that little town. And so, the kids would actually pinch my skin. Yeah, yeah, it was like so it was a really bizarre experience, especially because I couldn't communicate, but I would have like, um, I would have tutoring sessions afterwards. And so anyway, I watched a lot of *I Love Lucy* and a lot of *Frasier*. The tutor was like, “You should let her watch TV because it'll—like, she'll pick it up.” And so those were the American shows that I loved. *[Laughter]* And then we moved back to Matamoros, but my parents were like, “You know what? You learned English in like a year and a half. And this is gonna be good for you in the future.” Which was like a very, like, ominous and abstract thing to say to a 13-year-old, now. And so, they sent me over to a private school in Brownsville. And around 15—I got very like, “I'm gonna master this language,” because I think it was kind of traumatic to not be able to communicate in a classroom. And I was like, “I'm going to master this.” And I signed up for my drama club. Also, because my teacher was like, “You're so hyperactive, and you won't shut up during class, do you want to come audition?” I'm not kidding. I mean, that's such a cliché story. But that's really what she said to me. And then from then on, it was always in my life.

**Caroline Neff:**

What was it like going to, like, not only sort of leaving your family and going to a private school, but then going to a private school in a different country? I mean, was it any more or less of a culture shock than—

**Karen Rodriguez:**

And that's such a good question, because it totally was. Because in Kokomo I was like, super othered. I mean, like—it was—I, like it's horrible when I think about it now, but it was also—they just had never seen anyone like me, you know? And—but when I came back to Brownsville, I was still othered because I had such—I had very sharp English like mid-Western English. And, like 90% of the kids in the private school in Brownsville were from Matamoros. They were Mexican. And so, they had a very like— they had a bilingual accent. They had a thick accent and so I was sort of like, “Oh, this is like the gringa now.” Even though I was—*[Laughter]* It was such a bizarre, like, I'm laughing because it was just so—what a weird time. So, just sort of like, it was like I didn't belong. So, a lot of those years I longed to just go back to what was my normality what was my—but that wasn't the case. And honestly though, like, if it hadn't been for that, as much as it was difficult and certainly shaped me and shaped my worldview intensely, I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for that move. I would, I would be in Mexico. I would have gone to like, *El Tec de Monterrey* and probably been like some kind of lawyer businessperson, really.

**Caroline Neff:**

So how did you end up in Chicago of all places, not New York, not LA not—?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

So, I went to UT Austin, and a lot of the grad students there were from Chicago. We had Will Davis Halena Kays, Kenneth Carpenter, Steve Wilson—there were there were a good amount of Chicagoans. And what was really cool about that program was that it has an amazing playwright MFA program. And so, I did a lot of new play development with them and worked very closely with the directors and the playwrights. And when it came time to—like, I was starting to get close to graduation—they were like, “Hey, I know you're doing the business thing. I know, you want to go to law school, or get your MBA, but if you really want to do this, which you should, you should move to Chicago, you'd blow up there.” And that was like things that people said to me separately, like in almost the exact same words. And I do believe in like the universe speaking to you, especially when it's like repeated language. And so, I went to school with Isaac Gómez who is a freakin collaborator of mine and my best friend and he wanted to go to New York. And I said to him, “I think I'm gonna go to Chicago.” But I like knew nothing about it. I— it was just literally I can't—it was a gut thing and I probably wouldn't have done it if it wasn't for the fact that he came to me like two weeks later and was like, “You know what, I think I want to go to Chicago too.” And he did it and then he was like, “Are you coming or what? Am I looking for a Craigslist roommate, or am I looking for a two-bedroom for us?” And I said, “Fuck it, I'm going I guess.” But it was really like—now I think about it—it's like, such a like, early 20s like dumb thing to do. You know? Like, I didn't think about it. I just was like, “Fuck it. I'm doing it, I guess.”

**Caroline Neff:**

And how did you find yourself at Steppenwolf? Was *Doppelgänger* the first play that you did?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

No, I did *The Rembrandt* first.

**Caroline Neff:**

Oh, that's right. I'm sorry. *The Rembrandt*. Yeah.

**Karen Rodriguez:**

Yeah. So, uh, I had done a general and that was kind of it. That was kind of it with my journey at Steppenwolf. And *The Rembrandt* came along I had not been called in for it. And I got a call that day— speaking of like repeated language and repeated, like, motifs—I got a call that day, in the morning I was having brunch with a friend. And this random person like, like we're acquaintances, but it's not somebody that calls me all the time. She had called me and she goes, “Oh my gosh, how was your audition mine went terrible.” And I said, “Audition for what?” And she goes, “For *The Rembrandt*. They're calling all the Latinas in for *The Rembrandt*.” And I was like, I—awkward, I think. So, I'm like sitting there like with my toast. I was like, “I didn't get called.” She goes, “Oh, that's weird. You'd be so right for it. Anyway, let me tell you” and then so then she told me and I hung up and I was kind of bummed out, but I thought, “Well, I mean, I trust my agent I trust—I trust people to, like, know, what's up for me,” right? Like I didn't. I wasn't thinking like, “Let me take this into my own hands.” I just was like, I trust. And then I was actually doing a show at your other resident company, Steep. I was doing *Hookman* at the time. We were having rehearsals. And I was on my way to rehearsal, and I get another call. And it's literally the same conversation, but this one from a very close friend of mine. And this time, she said, “Karen I am not hanging up the phone until you email your agent and you say you need to get seen for this because you're so right for it. I'm sending you the script right now.” And so, I did, and they

got me an audition the next morning. And I went in, and I was—I hadn't prepped very much because I got it so late. And I was really nervous. And I thought, "I'll just—I'm just gonna hold the script and do the acting and that's kind of it." And then I got a call back and I had a week and a half to prepare this time. And I don't want to be like super dramatic, but it ended up being that the agent who's no longer at my agency, the agent who handled that, said to me that a casting needed another push for me. So, I went into that audition thinking that Steppenwolf didn't want to see me. Which was not true. Which was not true. And it liberated me in a way because I was like, "You know what, I'm just gonna lay it down. And, and be proud of what I put out there because these people didn't want to see me." And I think about that story a lot because that show—that booking—led to me auditioning for *Doppelgänger*, led to a bunch of other things, and led to an ensemble membership at Steppenwolf. And I think about how easily I could have not sent that email, or easily could have allowed a semi-lie to deter me from feeling confident in that room. And I just think about that a lot like. And how easily I was allowing other people to take control of my career, and of my—of what was meant for me. And it's like "no." And so I think about that a lot. Now when I get nervous or I get scared to speak out, it's like, "No, just take it. Who cares? What's the worst thing that can happen? They tell you no?" And they didn't. [Laughter]

**Caroline Neff:**

Do you think that you've always had that kind of ferocious mindset of like, "I'm going to be courageous and ask for a thing that I think I'm right for"? Or was that a relatively new experience for you?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

Absolutely. No, no, I think. I always like the definition of bravery is like—or courage—as, it's doing something courageous with the fear. It's not being without fear. So, it's not fearlessness. It's bravery, it's courageous despite of. And I had to get teeth a little bit with the way that the works. Because I don't operate in that way. I really operate—I always been like this, and it's so annoying because it's just not the way the world works—but I tend to put other people before me. And it's so sad because it's not a bad quality. I wish everybody walked through the world like that. But sometimes the world does teach you, like, you still got to look out for number one, because you are your—you are your best advocate. Only you know what you actually want. But it's scary. So, I have to continuously remind myself. And I have to say, I don't know why, because my life keeps showing me that when I do, it gets rewarded in some sort of fashion. But I still don't learn the lesson. I still have to, like, practice it.

**Stage Manager:**

Company, this is your fifteen-minute call. Fifteen minutes to the top of the show. Fifteen, fifteen.

**Caroline Neff:**

So, I think of three things when I think about you, Karen. [Laughter] First of all, I just think that you're like one of the smartest and most intuitive people that I've ever met. And I'm always, always surprised—not surprised—I'm amazed by so many of my conversations with you because they take twists and turns that I was never ever anticipating. And they make my brain think in a different way. Now the other thing that I think about you is new play development. And so, the third thing that I think that I really associate with you on top of those two other things is your constant and longtime collaboration with Isaac. And one of the things that I love, especially about theater, is that you can have these lifetime collaborations. And I'm just wondering, what is it like for you having somebody that knows you so well and somebody who is such a brilliant writer, and is able to, I think really capture something about you, Karen, that you bring onstage in a way that feels effortless, it doesn't feel put on it doesn't. How has it evolved?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

I mean, I think the way it's evolved is that it's become more shorthand. Like we really can read each other's minds at this point. Like, he'll be like, "Oh, cause I was thinking of—" "Oh, yeah, yeah, no, I totally I got you." And then it's like, and then we do it. And it's really fun that way. And we kind of dazzle each other. Like we laugh a lot—it's a very joyous collaboration. I think when we started at UT, it was more—it was more about a shared interest of what mattered to us in storytelling, and that is still true to today. But like our mission statement as far as like, furthering Latinx voices—particularly Mexican culture, Mexican voices—and then, of course, like understanding that women at least in my view, weren't being written with everything that they are. Like, you get to play a facet. And Isaac was writing the whole shebang, the whole meal. And if you see our trajectory, I mean, he writes characters for everybody, but—I'll speak for myself—for me that that are, like, funny and charming and lovely and grotesque and like, and mean and ugly, and everything in between and in one person because that's who I am. I mean, it's the greatest gift to have someone really understand you and reflect you and vice versa. Because it's not just one sided. It's about him too, like, he always tells a story. He's like, "You're coming with me bitch no matter what, because you were the one that read my plays at 1am in the morning in our, like, dingy ass first Chicago apartment." And it was a lot of figuring it out. And we kind of had—we cut our teeth on each other. It's, yeah, I'm like, forever. There are like no words. There's no words. I haven't experienced anything close to that. So, I know it's very special. And I try to honor it and protect it as much as I can.

**Caroline Neff:**

So you're speaking of like a psychic connection with Isaac and I know that you're a person that believes very, very strongly in the energy of the universe and like the energy—and energy that is around us, and that's like energy that's shared between other people and energy that just kind of follows us around. Is that something that—is that something that you think about when you're in process? Are you thinking about the energy that's surrounding you? Are you sort of like letting that energy inform you without asking questions? Or is it not something that you think about at all? Is it something that you just sort of allow it to just happen?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

I think when I was younger, I didn't think about it. Because I do think I think as you get older, like the world kind of fogs you a little bit. Like your intuition and your—you just get, you know, you live and you get more baggage. And I do think that that kind of can cloud you. So, as you grow into an older adult, I do think your job is to try to clear yourself of that fog. So, I think when I was younger, I didn't have to try at it at all. I really—like so much of the reason that I've even gotten to the rooms that I've been able to has been my intuition. Has been my instinct. And I've always been very imaginative. Like I—it's like I could read a play and be like, "I know what this person's life was." There was a time in my early 20s, where I started to get very depressed. And I almost thought it was like manic or something. But it was actually—I realized that I was an actual empath. And so, what was going on was like I was absorbing. And it's—and I think it sort of happened because I started to be more surrounded by artists who we do—I do think that we are special in that we're always having to confront ourselves. And so it just makes us like a lot more open than, like, mere muggles. You know what I mean? And so, it was starting to affect me. And then someone told me, "I think you're just an empath." And once I had that understanding—it has opened up like—now I'm much more purposeful about it and allow—it's sometimes not like the best. Like I remember when I did *La Ruta*. I really opened myself up to those women and it did—it kind of did a number on me. But yeah, I—it's like I'm giving witchy vibes here. But I mean, it's a real thing. It's happening to me. So, I know it's for real. And I see it with other people. They just have, it's like, everybody has it to a certain extent, you just have to kind of be, like, open to it.

**Caroline Neff:**

We got to share a dressing room with Audrey during *Dance Nation* [Laughter] and I just, I'm—between the two of you, I just, I'm not sure that I've ever walked into a room and been like, “Oh, they know exactly what's going on with me today.” And I think that's super rare. Because, you know, you and Isaac have known each other for a really long time but you Audrey and me have not, actually. We don't we don't have that super long history. But it was is like walking into an incredibly safe and—as you said—intuitive room. I mean, I think there were a handful of times where you're like “What's wrong” and it's like, “Bah! How did you know?”

**Karen Rodriguez:**

[Laughter] But I thought that was true of all of us. I mean, like, and—I told you this—like we all, for the listeners out there, we all did induct ourselves into like *bruja* status over here. Like I remember that day I was like Caroline, you're a *bruja* too, you know? [Laughter].

**Caroline Neff:**

Can you, just in case anybody doesn't know, can you just explain the term *bruja*?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

Oh yeah. So *bruja* just means like—it literally means like a witch. But it's—the reason I say it in Spanish is because it's like a deeper thing. It's about like being spiritually connected. It's about being an open vessel. Which, again, can like, you know, it's not always a good thing. Because, like, it's not just the good things that come in or that you perceive. But I do think that—I mean, this kind of art. If you have something like that, it inevitably requires you to tap into it. And it also, I mean, it's what happens with ensemble. Like, it's sort of like really having to see the person. I mean, that's what happened—because it wasn't just on stage. It's like, we're in the dressing room and I cannot help but like, receive you when you come into the room. And especially like thinking about like, “This is for life, like, you're stuck with me, I'm stuck with you” and it's beautiful, you know, and we're at the start of it.

**Caroline Neff:**

And I love—I just, I do—I genuinely love the idea that we get to make art together for the rest of our lives. You know?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

For the rest of our lives. It's, like, incredible. It's incredible. We'll be—one day we'll be, like, the older ensemble members and be like, “Do you remember back in the day?” Because we're still like—that's the thing. That's the thing about this whole like—you're literally like in an ensemble with like, incredibly well-established well-known actors (yourself included). But like, I have to say that like, in harnessing that and really like, interrogating that I'm like, “You know what?” It's taught me to understand and appreciate—like, I will never get this moment back. I am the youngest I'll ever be and the oldest I've ever been. And one day I'm going to, like, reminisce about this time when I was like, hitting the pavement and cutting my teeth and like, hungry for it. And I already want to skip those steps and be like, established and like, talk about like the good old days. I'm living the good old days! You know what I mean? Like with you, with Audrey. And so that's sort of where I'm living now.

**Caroline Neff:**

Do you consider yourself a role model?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

Oh, God, um. You know, I think my like, detrimental self would say no, but I have to say, Steppenwolf has given me a lot of gifts. And one of them is like, stepping into understanding that I may not feel like that (and I certainly don't necessarily want the responsibility of that all the time). Even though my existence in the theater is radical in and of itself. Like, that's just the truth of it. And I think that was enough for me for a while, because that's a very horrible way to like, I don't know, it's just—to always kind of be a trailblazer, like, inevitably is like—it can be very exhausting. So, I didn't—no. So that that was a big “no” for me for a long time. But then, in my trajectory at Steppenwolf, and in particular, when I did *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, which was the last show that I got to do at Steppenwolf. Seeing all those little girls that were actually fifteen and look like Julia—look like that lead character. Here, I'll tell you a story. So, we did a mentorship program, together, you and me, Caroline, last summer, called the 88-Seat Project. And my mentee, it was the first theatrical thing she had ever done. Like, it was the first play that she had seen. When we went to go see *True West*. It was the first, like, public acting she had done. She wasn't sure if it was for her. And we kept in contact and then she came to see *Mexican Daughter*, and she wrote me a letter where she said—because we had a lot of conversations, cause she's Mexican, too, and she said, “I don't know if my parents... I don't know how they're gonna feel about it.” And I said, “Well, you know what, like, if you want to do it, you should do it. If it's because of fear, then you should do it.” Like, I was like, “You're so young you're not even eighteen” But you know, I mean I can tell her all I want and you know, “Don't do it for me. Don't do it for anybody. Do it for you. Like, try to think of, like, outside of expectations and just like what do you want to do?” So anyway, so like six- or seven-months pass, and she came to see *Mexican Daughter*. And she wrote me a letter. And in the letter she wrote, like, she had applied to Columbia, she got in and she's going to study theater. Yeah, bitch. Yeah, bitch. So, cue like fucking tears for me, right? And I'm not like—the thing is that's, like, not of me or from me or anything. But it was the first inkling of like, I mean, the first direct understanding that my presence alone can do something.

**Stage Manager:**

Company: this is your five-minute call. Five minutes til the top of the show. Five minutes til the top of the show. This is five.

**Caroline Neff:**

So the reason why we call this podcast *Half Hour* is because as you, perhaps more than anyone else I have ever worked with, you know how special the time before we go on stage is. [Laughter] And what I will call half hour, I will call Karen's three hours. [Laughter] What is your—

**Karen Rodriguez:**

[Laughter] She's not lying folks. She's not lying.

**Caroline Neff:**

[Laughter] What is your, what is your process?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

So, she's right, I get there—well, I get there like two hours before, Caroline, okay? But I get there two hours before. She's like, “That's a lot Karen.” Okay. I get there two hours before. Sometimes a little more—it depends—sometimes a little less. *Pero*, if I get there two hours before half hour, that means I'm getting there before stage management. Which is the way I like it. [Laughter] So I go to the set before they come in. And I just walk the space. I think like, the bigger rooms that I've gotten in, the more I can get very nervous. And it's my way of like—it's almost like I'm peeing on the set. I'm not actually peeing. But you know what I mean. It's like I'm owning the set. It's like, I'm putting my scent on the set

so that it's mine and not yours. Like, you are new to the space and I am not. And I imagine the people in the seats. And sometimes I'll say a little lines, sometimes, but most of the time it's just quiet. I'll sit in the chair, if there's a chair or couch or whatever. And then I come out, I take off the mask. I'm doing this all with a mask, so you know, just for visuals here and then [Laughter]—

**Caroline Neff:**

Not like a *commedia dell'arte*—

**Karen Rodriguez:**

[Laughter] Sorry! Yeah, like a skincare face mask.

**Caroline Neff:**

That is a delightful visual for me though.

**Karen Rodriguez:**

No, it's like a Halloween mask that I get—no, no *este* [Laughter] Both are great.

**Caroline Neff:**

Put on your Jason mask, then go out there and pee on the set.

**Karen Rodriguez:**

Yeah, exactly. And just be like I'm intimidating the set, “You are mine.” No, *este*—and then people start to roll by. And then this is where—this is why I get there early because I do my focusing before. Because then I like to fuck around as you know, with everybody there. And then I like to watch myself a lot in the mirror once I start to put on my makeup. Because it's like my—it's like everybody has—I love to get ready. And I think anybody no matter your degree of like “how you like to get ready or not,” everybody has their own way that they get ready. And in half hour, once half hour gets in there, that's when I start putting on my makeup and doing my hair. And I'm really watching the character. How she would do, whatever. Because certain characters take a long-time others are like “In five minutes I'm done.” And so, I like watching that transformation. And then I sometimes pray and then we get—we do the thing.

**Caroline Neff:**

So, we always like to end—have you listened to *Half Hour* before Karen? Not to put you on the spot.

**Karen Rodriguez:**

I have, actually. I'm a big fan. So, I'm very geeked out.

**Caroline Neff:**

So, you know what's coming next?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

A little bit, yeah. A little scared, *pero*, because I'm not good at like “lightning round.”

**Caroline Neff:**

These are our lightning round questions. Okay, are you ready?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

Yes, I guess. [Laughter]

**Caroline Neff:**

They are softballs Karen, softballs.

**Karen Rodriguez:**

Okay. Okay. *Aqui vamos, aqui vamos.*

**Caroline Neff:**

What is the cosine of—I'm just kidding. That was a trig joke.

**Karen Rodriguez:**

*Ay callate, estupidas.* [Laughter] Yeah, I was like, "What the fuck?" Oh, my gosh, that freaked me out!

**Caroline Neff:**

Okay, what is your favorite Steppenwolf production that you've ever seen?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

*Guards at the Taj.*

**Caroline Neff:**

What was your toughest experience at Steppenwolf?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

*Doppelgänger. Doppelgänger.* That farce, that character. But it was also like, one of my greatest joys like, performing it was so amazing. It was awesome.

**Caroline Neff:**

What is your most prized piece of play memorabilia?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

I have, literally since I was 15 years old (which is when I started to do acting), I have a big Hello Kitty box (because I used to be into Hello Kitty in a hardcore way) I have all of my opening and closing night cards from everybody. And sometimes when I kind of get sad or lose my way or I'm like cleaning up my apartment, I find it again. I'll read it and it's amazing. Like, all the lives that the theater has allowed me to like be in, and touch. And you'll see the trajectory of my journey. And then I remember people. Or people that are still in my life because of the theater. It's pretty—that's—those are very special to me.

**Caroline Neff:**

What is your favorite moment of any live theatrical experience whether you were performing in it or not?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

This one's hard because I feel like I have that for every show that I've been in, no lie. I'll say the one that I hold like a lot of pride in. So, during *Doppelgänger*, Rainn Wilson was notorious. He loved—like if he even saw a tremble in your lip that you wanted to laugh, he was going to go—he was like shark to blood dude, he was going to go for it. So, the whole run he was just really trying to get us to break, which made it super fun but also like, it was like nerve wracking. And then like, maybe like the last week of shows guess we finally got him? I made Rainn Wilson break and I was like freaking cast MVP. I mean this

before I was an ensemble member, so it was just like all the ensemble members saying, “Yes! You got him!”

**Caroline Neff:**

What job didn't you get that broke your heart?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

Um. Last year. I got to go in for a pilot where I was going to get to play the wife—okay, Caroline, get ready—the wife of Gael García Bernal. I literally—I know dude! I know. And like dude, like I grew up watching him! Like I was like, *Amores Perros*, *Y tu mamá también*, *The Science of Sleep*. I mean, like I literally as a child, into adolescence, into young adulthood: I was so obsessed with him. And I knew that I was gonna fuck it up. I just knew. Because I'm looking at the reader just like erasing his face and putting Gael's face on it. And those scenes were very like *coqueta*, they were very flirty. It was like “Put that cigarette out sir” like “You're not supposed to like—” I don't know and I just couldn't! [*Laughter*]

**Caroline Neff:**

What was the last song you listened to?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

Bomba Estéreo, “Duele.”

**Caroline Neff:**

Who is your favorite writer?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

I mean, I have to say Isaac Gómez. I have to, because everything that he writes, I'm like, “Where do I sign?” Um. Pablo Neruda. Anaïs Nin.

**Caroline Neff:**

Where's your favorite place to unwind in Chicago?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

Pick Me Up Café, in a booth for like four hours looking at a script and getting a cake. Getting a slice of cake. [*Laughter*]

**Caroline Neff:**

What animal do you most identify with?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

A mongoose.

**Caroline Neff:**

Yes!

**Karen Rodriguez:**

Okay. Can I just do like—okay, *porque*, this is why. Because they're cute and sweet and—but also kind of grotesque. And then, they eat snakes! And they're impervious to snakes! And then like have little fangs

and that's how I walk the world. I'm like, "I try to be nice and kind, *y todo*, but if you reveal yourself to be a snake, girl, I'm gonna eat you." [Laughter]

**Caroline Neff:**

If you've got poison in your fangs.

**Karen Rodriguez:**

[Laughter] And I'm impervious to you. So that's all I'm gonna say. Yeah, a mongoose.

**Caroline Neff:**

Okay, final question.

**Karen Rodriguez:**

Okay, I'm ready.

**Caroline Neff:**

If you were a character in a play, what would your character's description be?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

Um. A talker, clearly. A potty mouth. Mercurial. Earth sign. And funny! And thinks that leopard print is a neutral, which it is. [Laughter] It is! It is a neutral.

**Stage Manager:**

Company: this is your places call. Places, please, for the top of the show. Places, please, for the top of the show. Have a good one. Everyone places please, places.

**Caroline Neff:**

And that's it for this episode of *Half Hour* brought to you by Steppenwolf Theatre Company.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Thanks for listening.

**Audrey Francis:**

And thanks again to our guests this week Karen Rodriguez.

**Caroline Neff:**

*Half Hour* is produced by Patrick Zakem, mixed and edited by Matthew Chapman.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

The theme music for *Half Hour* is by Rob Milburn and Michael Bodeen.

**Audrey Francis:**

Today's stage manager was Mary Hungerford.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Special thanks to Erin Cook, Joel Moorman, Kara Henry, Gin To—

**Caroline Neff:**

And all the folks at Steppenwolf.

**Audrey Francis:**

Follow us on Twitter @Steppenwolfthtr or on Facebook and Instagram.

**Caroline Neff:**

And you can always get in touch by emailing [halfhour@steppenwolf.org](mailto:halfhour@steppenwolf.org).

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Till next time, this is Cliff Chamberlain—

**Audrey Francis:**

Audrey Francis—

**Caroline Neff:**

And Caroline Neff. A lifetime to engage; half hour, to places

**Audrey Francis:**

You heard it here folks. Karen Rodriguez: actress, extraordinary human, phenomenal mime.