

# Big Voices, Bigger Hearts: Joe Ortiz’s ‘Escaping Queens’ Returns with Music, Memories and Plenty of Soul



*Adam Saucedo stars as Herman, the gambling addicted father in the musical “Escaping Queens” playing at the Actors’ Theatre in Santa Cruz. Credit: Jana Marcus*

by [Jana Marcus](#) July 7, 2026

## **Quick Take:**

Joe Ortiz transforms the chaos of his 1950s childhood into an exuberant musical memoir filled with unforgettable songs, powerhouse performances from Lori Rivera and Adam Saucedo, and enough heart to earn a sold-out opening-night audience's standing ovation.

“Shut up and eat!”

It’s less a suggestion than a way of life inside Joe Ortiz’s childhood home.

Dinner is loud. Everyone talks at once. Arguments erupt without warning. Someone is singing while someone else is threatening to leave. Through it all, Mama keeps another plate of food coming as though feeding the family might somehow hold the whole circus together.

Welcome to “Escaping Queens: Over the Roof.”

Judging by Friday night’s sold-out opening at Actors’ Theatre, audiences were more than happy to pull up a chair. They cheered after nearly every musical number, and by the final scene, they rose together for a standing ovation that felt genuinely earned.

The remarkable thing about “Escaping Queens” isn’t its volume. It’s that the chaos never feels manufactured. Ortiz isn’t writing jokes about growing up in an Italian and Puerto Rican family in 1950s Queens, New York; he’s opening the front door and inviting us inside.

Over the past 15 years, Ortiz has continued revising this deeply personal memoir, searching for the best way to tell the story of the family that shaped him and the wounds they carried. With a book by Ortiz and Greg Fritsch, music and lyrics by Ortiz, and co-direction by Fritsch and Cathy D. Warner, the result feels less like a conventional book musical than a family scrapbook brought vividly to life through song.



*Lori Rivera as Mama brings down the house in her final song, “Anthem.” Credit: Jana Marcus*

If “Escaping Queens” has a heartbeat, it’s Lori Rivera as Mama.

Although young Joey’s memories guide the evening, the production ultimately belongs to his mother. Mama isn’t simply the emotional center of the show. She’s the reason Joey survives.

She quietly absorbs the fallout from her drinking and gambling husband, Herman. She protects the children, feeds everyone, and holds together a home that seems forever on the edge of coming apart. Rivera never plays her as a martyr. She plays her as the steady force that keeps love alive when everything else threatens to unravel.

This is Rivera's show, and she owns the stage, moving seamlessly between broad comedy and genuine heartbreak. Her rich, smoky voice wraps itself around Ortiz's melodies with remarkable ease, making every number feel like an emotional necessity rather than simply another song in the score.

The show's biggest audience pleasers are Rivera and Adam Saucedo, as Herman. Their playful duet, "She Feeds Me Macaroni," begins with flirtation before exploding into a marital argument that perfectly captures the show's mix of comedy and conflict.

Rivera also delivers gorgeous interpretations of "High Flyin' Life" and "A Few Moments of Magic," songs whose melodies linger long after they're over.

Adam Saucedo is equally outstanding as the gambling and chronically unfaithful father. Local audiences who admired Saucedo's star performance in last summer's "Sweeney Todd" at Cabrillo Stage will find another actor completely at home in his role.



*Adam Saucedo as Herman, Kasandra Maita as Laura, Lori Rivera as Mama, and Ryan Stallings as Joey in the musical "Escaping Queens." Credit: Jana Marcus*



*Adam Saucedo as Herman and Lori Rivera as Mama, have a complicated relationship in the musical “Escaping Queens.” Credit: Jana Marcus*

Herman could easily become a cartoon or an outright villain. Saucedo wisely chooses neither. Instead, he creates a man whose charm is inseparable from his flaws. He’s funny, impulsive, frustrating, and occasionally infuriating, yet Saucedo never lets us lose sight of the humanity beneath it all.

Even as Herman makes one terrible decision after another, we understand why this family continues to love him. It’s a nuanced performance that never asks us to excuse Herman’s behavior, only to understand the complicated man behind it.

Saucedo’s comic instincts are impeccable. “Rent Party Tango,” performed with nothing more than a mop as his dance partner, nearly brings down the house. Yet it’s the quieter moments that reveal the depth of Saucedo’s performance, allowing glimpses of regret and vulnerability to peek through Herman’s swagger. Every time he steps onstage, the production seems to gain another burst of energy.

Joyce Michaelson brings warmth, humor and genuine tenderness as Mama’s sister Rose, creating some of the evening’s most touching duets with Mama, including “With or Without A Man.”

Miguel Reyna has obvious fun as neighborhood bookie Freddie. The Doo Wop trio, featuring Ian Grant, William Calden, and Ryan Stallings, beautifully captures the sound of 1950s street-corner harmony, helping establish both the musical style and the period atmosphere.

Seated behind the piano, offstage, music director Max Bennett-Parker quietly becomes the production's secret weapon. As the family argues, laughs, and occasionally implodes, his expressive playing provides the emotional glue, carrying us gracefully from one memory to the next. His musical direction keeps Ortiz's ambitious 27-song score flowing with confidence while creating some of the evening's loveliest transitions.

If there's one area where "Escaping Queens" could still be stronger, it's pacing. Twenty-seven songs and a long parade of family episodes revisit emotional territory that has already been explored.

Fortunately, Ortiz writes memorable melodies, so you'll keep hearing them, and humming them the next day. A little trimming would only sharpen the story's emotional impact.

The production's other challenge lies with its youngest performers. Ryan Stallings, as young Joey, Kasandra Maita, as his sister Laura, and even Jennifer Galvin, as Estelle, have the difficult task of anchoring the emotional core of the story, opposite veterans like Rivera and Saucedo. Stallings, Maita and Galvin show promise but are still discovering how to fully inhabit each moment. It's a difficult assignment, and one that experience will almost certainly deepen.

Then comes "Anthem."

Everything that has come before suddenly falls into place.

For two and a half hours, we've watched Mama sacrifice, forgive, endure, and keep moving forward.



*Adam Saucedo as Herman, filled with dread at his current gambling loss. Lori Rivera as Mama and Ryan Stallings as Joey in the background. Credit: Jana Marcus*

In “Anthem,” years of exhaustion, disappointment, and buried dreams finally rise to the surface. The moment recalls Mama Rose’s climactic transformation in “Gypsy,” not because the women are alike, but because both finally stop living entirely for everyone else.

Rivera delivers the number with extraordinary emotional honesty, allowing it to grow from quiet heartbreak into hard-won liberation. By the time she finishes, the audience is applauding a woman who has finally reclaimed her own life. It’s a thrilling finale, and one of those rare moments when a musical stops entertaining and starts saying something larger about survival, forgiveness, and finally choosing yourself.

That’s ultimately why “Escaping Queens” works.

The show isn’t polished and doesn’t try to be. It’s a love letter to a family that argued loudly, laughed often, survived more than its share of heartache, and somehow always found its way back to the dinner table.

Beneath all that family chaos is something surprisingly universal: Every family carries its own stories, its own heartbreaks, and its own impossible people. Somehow, they also shape who we become.

By the end, one thing becomes clear: in the Ortiz household, food was never just food. It was forgiveness, comfort, survival – and love.

And if Joe Ortiz has his way, you’ll leave hearing one voice echoing long after the applause fades:

“Shut up and eat.”

**Reviewer’s note:** *This review reflects the opening-night cast. Lori Rivera performs the role of Mama on most dates. Brissa Ibarra will perform the role on July 18, 19, and July 23 through 26.*

### **If you go**

**Who:** Santa Cruz County Actors’ Theatre

**What:** Joe Ortiz’s “Escaping Queens: Over The Roof”

**When:** Through August 2

**Where:** 1001 Center Street, Santa Cruz, CA

**Tickets:** [www.santacruzactorstheatre.org/tickets](http://www.santacruzactorstheatre.org/tickets)