

Interview with Dolores Prida

Luz María Umpierre

Dolores Prida was born in Caibarién, Cuba. She came to the United States after the Revolution of 1959 and attended Hunter College. Since then, as a playwright and as a director, she has been an important force within the Hispanic theatrical community in New York City. With the help of fellowships from CAPS, CINTAS and INTAR, she wrote, edited and translated Spanish narrations for the documentary films *La operación* and *El Salvador: Another Vietnam*.

I interviewed Dolores Prida at my home in New Jersey on October 7, 1985 as part of a larger project on Hispanic Women writers in the United States. The purpose of this project is to expose these writers to a larger audience, given that they are making major contributions to literature and theatre in the U.S. During these interviews, I allow the writers themselves to summarize and characterize their most important works, to place themselves as part of a generation, to explain what they are involved in at this time and where they see their work headed. What follows is a capsulized version of the interview.

Do you consider yourself part of a generation of writers or a group of writers in particular?

In general terms, yes, and that is the Hispanic playwrights living in New York, writing about the experiences of being a Hispanic in New York.

Who are part of that group?

Tato Laviera, Eduardo Machado, Manuel Martín . . . because you have people like María Irene Fornés who is perhaps the best known His-

panic playwright in the United States, but she has not written about the Hispanic community. She is an avant-garde writer.

In what and where are you working at this time?

Right now I work for the Association of Hispanic Arts. I'm the editor of a monthly newsletter (*AHA!*) which covers all the Hispanic arts; at the same time I am a playwright. I work with several theatrical groups, particularly with the Duo Theater, a small company, which has always been my kitchen, where I experiment. This was the group that first gave me the chance to put on a play. Not many people know it because their presence is not there like other groups; but it is a pioneer in many things, doing the first Hispanic musicals, doing contemporary plays. It has always been the motor, not doing plays by anybody who is dead, but by people who are writing here in New York. Duo was one of the first groups to do plays from Cuba by Cubans here. They put on *La noche de los asesinos* and other plays around 1969. My first play was a musical; *Duo* had confidence in me.

Your first play was a musical?

Yes, *Las beautiful señoritas*, (1977) which is like a spoof. It's a feminist play, very early feminist play. It dealt with stereotypes about Latin women. What I do is I use all these characters, the Carmen Miranda types with bananas on the head, the Latin bombshell, *la madre sufrida*, and all of them go through a process where they take away all this superficiality and dig inside themselves, to find who they are. It's a *búsqueda*, a search.

So outside of that search work could you give us a list of other plays that you have written?

Two years later, in 1979 I did "The Beggar's Soap Opera," which is a free adaptation of *The Three Penny Opera*, and it was brand new music, a lot of latin music; a Cuban composer did that. What I did is I placed these characters in the Bronx, in the Hispanic community in the Bronx. That was very successful, we had lots of coverage and full houses. Then in 1980 I did "La era latina," with Victor Fragoso, a dear wonderful friend of mine, a poet who died in 1982. In it we were making fun of Hispanic theater; of so many plays about Hispanics that were always the same, "the kitchen sink dramas." People dealing with drugs and welfare. We had this character who was a writer and four other characters that were in his head, it was kind of a Pirandello type of thing. In 1981, Duo did *Cocer y cantar*, which is a

bilingual play. It's about two women who are really the same woman, the Latin woman and her alter ego, the American part of her. The idea is to be bilingual and bicultural. The play is very funny too. That play has been produced many times, I think every year since 1981 it's been presented in festivals; throughout New York we have done a couple of tours through campuses in the North East; it was in the Festival Calderón in San Antonio, Texas. The radio version was done for National Public Radio in Puerto Rico. In 1981 I did another adaptation I said that was the last one: a play which is a version of *Los intereses creados* of Jacinto Benavente's *commedia dell'arte*. It was a little crazy. That came out really well. Also in 1981 I did *Juan Bobo*, which is a bilingual play with music for children based on the Puerto Rican character of Juan Bobo. It went very well in schools. We had a lot of programs with the Department of Education, with a lot of Bilingual Schools. It's done in a way that everybody understands without the characters having to repeat word by word what they are saying. *Savings* was just done a few months ago (1985) and it's a play about gentrification, a neighborhood in transition and people being displaced from their homes. It is about a racially mixed neighborhood and it was my first play in which not all the characters are Hispanics. I felt great about being able to develop special characters, like a Jewish lady. In the spring (1986), for the first time a non-Hispanic theatrical group is going to do a play of mine and this play is called *Temporary Fantasy Island*. It's a little bit of a take off from the T.V. show *Fantasy Island* being Manhattan Island for all the immigrants. It's a different play in the sense that there is not a plot, but a series of testimonies. In January (1986) I had my first play all in Spanish, and that's *Pantallas*. *Pantallas* is a three character play; a black humor comedy. It's about three soap opera actors, who have done millions of *telenovelas* and they are stuck in this house by the beach, and there has been a terrible disaster outside, and that's a nuclear attack. And what they do as *salvavidas* is that they do the acts of some scenes of the soap operas they have done in the past. The play has many levels, sometimes it's a play within a play within a play, because sometimes they are acting as soap opera actors, sometimes they are interrelating like friends, they love each other. Besides being very funny it leaves you breathless at the end just thinking that it could be true.

Would you say that you have any theatrical models that you follow?

Brecht is one. And the American Musical is another.

When you are writing these things are you thinking of an ideal audience?

I think I used to. I think that my early plays had some things that only Hispanics could know what they were. I had to strive for more universal characters. We should present problems that people are able to identify with. In a way now, however, I don't write thinking of an audience any more. What I think of now is: "Is this character true?" Lately my theater has gone more and more towards that. Sometimes the directors and the actors help with that because they tell me what the audience will respond to and understand.

Have you had problems being a Hispanic woman playwright and trying to make it in New York?

I've been lucky that I met people from Hispanic theater groups. It's important to make it among one's own people. If I had not found people like Teatro Rodante Puertorriqueño and INTAR it would have been difficult. Now I have The Invisible Performers Workshop interested in doing my work. The problem comes when I'm writing in English and I get critics from the *New York Times* or *The Village Voice* commenting on them negatively. The discrimination is there. They fail to put the plays in the context of the experience of the Hispanic community. I think they have a pre-conceived notion of what a Hispanic is. If they see a woman with a *peineta* the American critics will say "This is real Hispanic."

Do you have much contact with other Latina playwrights?

Not here, first of all because there are no mechanisms to have the right contacts. I have thought of having a Hispanic playwrights organization. *AHA* has had a series of *encuentros*. I know Cherrie Moraga and Ana María Simó. I would like an organization where playwrights can exchange ideas with the producers.

Where do you see your work heading and where do you see the Hispanic theater in New York heading?

I see my work heading into many different directions. I've been in the theater for ten years now, I've done some of the things I wanted to do. I want to go a little deeper in a way. I can see myself writing something more serious, the satirical kind of thing. I want to write a novel, I'm also interested in films. I think the theater in New York has grown, that it has advanced. I still feel there has to be more communication between producers, writers and actors. The theater that we are doing is beginning to have an impact and is going to be the theater of the future. I still think that we will continue to

be very much bilingual. It's not going to disappear like Yiddish theater, and the American theater will be richer because of our Hispanic theater, because it's part of the whole mosaic of what this country is.

Rutgers University

Elenco Experimental

After a successful seven years at the University of Texas at El Paso, the Elenco Experimental has relocated at Texas A & M University. As in the past, the company will continue to perform a season of multi-cultural, bilingual plays written by Latin American, European and Hispanic American playwrights.

An exciting component of the program will be the addition of the Elenco Experimental Research and Performance Center with an emphasis in the study of contemporary national and international bilingual drama and theatre.

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