

"I Am A Hyphenated American": Interview With Dolores Prida

Wilma Feliciano

Cuban-American playwright Dolores Prida explores the conflicts and ambiguities of living in two worlds simultaneously. As her Latina characters struggle to define their identity, Prida dramatizes how language, gender and ethnicity provide the means for personal and cultural introspection. Her plays affirm the quest for self-definition by asserting the strength derived by individuals from their culture. In April 1993, I mailed Prida a draft of my article, "Language and Identity in Three Plays by Dolores Prida" (*Latin American Theatre Review* (28/1, Fall 1994), and requested an interview. We spoke at her home in New York City's *el Barrio* on May 27, 1993.

Your preparation in theatre seems to be experiential. Do you also have an academic background?

No. I took drama courses at Hunter College, but they analyze the story and the human element, not the craft of theatre. Craft is organization. I'm an observer and I like to comment on social issues. I need to put myself in the story, and I like political theatre that is funny. My plays aren't just the stories of people and families; there's a message, something larger.

Do you feel theatre has the potential for social change?

Yes, except that theatre is not a mass entertainment like television. That's why I take it seriously; TV has an impact.

Mainly, your characters are strong women. Do you find it easier to write feminine discourse than male, or are they the same?

Rubén in *Bótanica* is a strong male character, but I have no problems writing for the male or female voice.¹ Drama is about people, so the characters must grow into credible human beings. As they develop, dialogue springs from them naturally. At times, the dialogue takes on a life of its own, so I change the architecture to accommodate it. Often another character takes over the center, but I don't fight it. I like to allow for this serendipity. My goal is total balance, perfection in craftsmanship between the character, his words and actions.

Have you ever had a character become independent? Initially you envision him one way, but the character takes a different turn?

Yes, it happens most of the time. I didn't mean for *Botánica* to be Geno's play; I started out to make it Millie's play. But Doña Geno took over, and I let her.

Your last two plays are in Spanish, which runs counter to the trend for most Latino writers. Does this imply that you want to promote the maintenance of Spanish in the United States?

That's an interesting observation. My transition toward Spanish is significant in practical ways. I get better reviews for my plays in Spanish, even from English speaking critics. The critic who reviewed *Coser y cantar* didn't speak Spanish, but she said ELLA had better lines than SHE because ELLA got more laughs. For me it's interesting to read the literary criticism about my plays. As the creator, I'm not aware of the layers and interpretations that critics give my work. And yes, I want to promote Spanish, but in even stronger terms, the need to master English.

Do you have a language preference?

No, I do what feels right depending on the characters. In the beginning, I wrote in English. *Pero cuando empecé a escribir plays en español encontré más respuesta en las audiencias latinas.* More recognition. I wrote *Botánica* in Spanish because Repertorio Español gave me the commission. I used Puerto Rican Spanish and the Puerto Rican audiences get every word, every allusion. For example, the audience laughs at Millie's suggestion that Doña Geno retire to Guayama because they know its reputation as *el pueblo de los brujos*. They're engaged in the subtle nuances of the language.

Your assertion that Coser "must NEVER be performed in just one language" suggests that it is an intensely personal play, intended strictly for bilingual audiences. Was that your intention?

No, not at all. Language is the third character. If you do this play only in one language, it doesn't work.

How would you describe that third character?

If you notice when ELLA speaks in English and SHE in Spanish, they really become one person. Language ceases to be a barrier. The switch marks a change in their relationship, a tender moment. Instead of fighting, they're sharing, remembering, regretting. The dynamic that each one speaks a different language adds another character.

Latinos have another way of looking at the world, and *Coser* explores those differences. We will always remain outside of both Spanish and English monolingual cultures, never fully understood by either one. I am a hyphenated American, a bilingual person who lives by dualities. Monolingual people who see *Coser* may get only half the story, but they'll get an inkling of the other half. Or else they just don't get it. *Coser* was not well received by the reviewers in San Juan, Puerto Rico. They didn't want to deal with the issue of bilingualism. I don't write Latin American theatre, I write American theatre.

Where do you get your ideas from?

From my own experience, mainly. Doña Geno's recordkeeping comes from my father. He threw everything into paper bags: records, receipts, even money. Just like Millie, I bought him files and a cabinet which he never used. Her anecdotes about pork being poison and about *pasteles* at the beach were stories related by friends. *Coser* is loaded with personal stuff: the description of *la pecera*, singing along Olga Guillot, the monologue about dreams: wanting to swim with the sharks and walk in the sunshine. *En mi pueblo las mujeres se cubrían del sol porque se decía que la piel blanca era más bonita. También me molestaba tener que esperar tres horas después de comer para entrar al agua.* I rebelled against all that.

What about the denouement? ELLA/SHE share a certain nostalgia and fear of the outside world. But they're still bickering. They aren't reconciled.

No, they're not. They're looking for the map. The search defines the play. Once they find the map, SHE/ELLA will know where to go, but simply finding it would be a sit-com solution. *Coser* is about the process of searching, being, living; not about easy solutions. SHE/ELLA must find common ground inside before they can venture outside. The struggle isn't to obliterate the other, but for *supremaclia*.

The struggle for self-definition involves process: who wins, which culture will rule the body. Both cultures win and neither one wins; that's the point. *Coser* dramatizes the convulsions of rejection and reconciliation. *Ese tira y jala* keeps them alive. Sure, it's painful but it's not negative. Once SHE/ELLA accept the other, the Woman becomes a different person.

Is that what you mean by the third character?

Yes. These convulsions create a new person, a composite that accepts and reconciles dualities. This combination is not the result of acculturation, which implies the melting pot concept. Latinos walk a tightrope; we have to balance polarities to prevent falling to one side or the other. That balance differs with each individual. Biculturalism is a positive energy. What's negative is self-estrangement, the refusal to participate in American life. Some Latinos view themselves as "non-melted" people with split or incompatible personalities. Also, divisive issues like bilingual education and the English-only movement create the impression that Latinos want to remain separate, to retain Spanish as our principal language. In fact, we are the truest Americans because we combine the two Americas.

You said your childhood was mainly outdoors, but your plays take place indoors. In Pantalas and Coser the outside world appears hostile.

That's the New York experience. Inside is a familiar, protected space; the danger is out there. It happens in *Botánica*, too. You have to get your *caca* together inside so you can work at a bank or deal with the outside world. Also, I began my career with small theatres. Plays with big sets and lots of characters cost too much to produce.

Mainly, though, I want to represent internal struggles. The tension between ELLA and SHE, *lo que pasa en la botánica*, the experiences of Latinos in New York are different. *Somos un pequeño mundo dentro del mundo más grande*. Also, the dynamics of people are more concentrated in small spaces than

outdoors, like when characters deal with nature. Besides, that's not the world I live in. My reality is inside.

Did you grow up in a religious home? Was santería part of your early experiences?

No. Not at all. My family didn't practice *santería* even though it's part of the traditions of Caribbean people. I researched the topic and found a booklet with *recetas espirituales* in a *botánica*. They're true prescriptions, not inventions of my imagination.

Where did you get the idea to combine santería with computer technology?

From Joseph Campbell. I was impressed by his comment that computers have little angels inside; they're the magical modern treasury of collective memory that never dies. Doña Geno believes the ceiba tree is sacred because the values and secrets of the race are buried at its roots. Computers are the modern equivalent of the ceiba: the place to bury *los secretos espirituales* for future generations. Latinos must hook into the tools of tomorrow in order to create and to participate in 20th century life while still preserving our traditions. I love the symbolism of the computer.

The theme of the buffalo also came from Campbell's book. When white men killed the buffalo, they cut the roots of Indian culture. Millie suffers a similar loss. She goes through convulsions in college when she tries to reject her past. Later she must find the balance between the bank and *la botánica*. While I was writing, some of my friends suggested that Millie reject the bank and stay to manage the shop. Nah. That would have been unrealistic and sentimental.

Which play do you consider your greatest achievement in a personal, not economic sense?

I feel closest to *Coser y cantar*. It recreates my own personal struggle to adapt. It's an original play, solid. It works well with audiences because it has comedy and depth, yet it has an abstract quality. *Botánica* is more realistic, but it's lighter.

I read a short play called Garbush recently; it was hilarious. What else are you working on now?

That's part of a trilogy called *The Sidewalks of New York*. I really like the subtitle of *Garbush*, "My Brother's Sweeper." That's me. As a homeowner, I'm required by law to sweep my sidewalk plus 18" of curb. So I'm responsible for other people's garbage. I find a lot of symbolism in that. The second piece will be about ATMs (Automatic Teller Machines) as shelters for homeless people. I haven't worked out the third play yet.

What makes a play or a writer "Hispanic"? Is it the theme, characters, use of Spanglish, or merely a Spanish surname?

An Hispanic playwright writes American plays about other Americans who are also Hispanic. The language is not important. Cultural issues have more resonance because they're current: identity, how much to adapt to be successful, what to leave behind, changing relationships, living in this society. The overarching themes are identity, nostalgia, class and generational issues. Unfortunately, some theatres expect Hispanic plays like *Short Eyes* and *Cuba and His Teddy Bear*. All Latinos are not injecting drugs, or selling them, or collecting welfare checks. Latino families struggle with common human problems, like everybody else. Once a woman said my play, *no recuerdo cuál era*, was *agit-prop* because it was political. *Aquí ponen un play de la tortura en Argentina o de South Africa y todo el mundo va*. But write about oppression in the South Bronx and people don't want to hear about it. They don't want to know about the problems around the corner.

What future do you foresee for Latino theatre and literature?

Right now publishers want Latino stories for children, but theatre is contracting. It's very expensive and the funding agencies have made deep cuts. Video is booming, and with 500 channels on television, there may be more opportunities for Latino plays. Also, theatre companies like Repertorio are looking for new plays in Spanish. Latinos are here to stay.

SUNY College at New Paltz

Notes

1. The plays discussed are included in *Beautiful Señoritas and Other Plays*, Houston: Arte Público Press, 1991.