

Miriam Colón: Puerto Rican Icon and Theatrical Traveler

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Miriam Colón, Puerto Rico's greatest theatrical export, was born on August 20, 1936, in Ponce, Puerto Rico. Her international career spanned more than fifty years and her appearances on the stage were balanced with a productive television and film career. She served as a representative of Hollywood's Golden Age studio system of the 1950s, performing with the likes of Marlon Brando and Karl Malden, as well as mentoring thousands of actors inspired by her legacy as the founder of the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre. In short, Miriam Colón was a living legend and a Latina icon responsible for the careers of countless performers, playwrights, and practitioners who followed in her footsteps. Miriam Colón shuffled off her mortal coil on March 3, 2017, in her beloved, adopted New York City.

While a child, Miriam experienced a profound feeling of separation when her mother and father divorced and she moved to San Juan's public housing project, *La residencia de las casas*. As a child she was unaware of theatre, chiefly because of the structured decision-making of her mother. As Miriam recounts, "My mother was the most wonderful woman and mother in the world but things like the theatre and plays, even storytelling, were not a part of my upbringing. For her, it didn't matter what field I went into because she would be supportive regardless. She is my single greatest inspiration." This meant for the young Miriam a life where determination, and the strong role of a single woman, influenced the decisions she would make as an actress, businesswoman, and producer.

During her early teens at the Ramon Baldoriatry de Castro School she met Marcos Colón, a University of Puerto Rico drama student, who was assigned to direct a production by the head of the Theatre Department, Leopoldo Santiago Lavandero. Though Miriam had no experience with plays, she looked forward to socializing with her friends in a non-academic setting and volunteered to

audition. Soon, Miriam was cast in her first play and thus began her love for the theatrical arts. The teenage Miriam became obsessed with the process of creation and extremely depressed when the play was over, misunderstanding the fact that Marcos Colón would move on to direct plays at other schools. Upon her insistence, he instructed her to send a letter to the head of the department at UPR. Luckily, Lavandero had seen Miriam in the play and allowed her, as a junior high school student, to attend classes at the university, with the directive to observe only. Soon, Miriam was performing in university productions alongside such talented practitioners as director Victoria Espinosa.

During a June 2009 interview in her beautiful 94th Street brownstone, Miriam informed me it was her initial work with UPR's touring company that sparked the idea for the creation of the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre: "My desire to perform came from a necessity to bring theatre to the people, to the community. When the University of Puerto Rico's Touring Company would go into the small towns in Puerto Rico, I would see their faces light up. It was like the circus for them. We were creating the strongest community bond...through theatre." After finally matriculating at the University of Puerto Rico and studying with many of the professors she had worked with as a high school student, the university created a scholarship to send Miriam to study at the Dramatic Workshop and Technical Institute with the iconic Erwin Piscator. This scholarship guaranteed that Miriam would perform in New York City.

While studying at the Institute, Miriam began making the "rounds" to agents and casting directors as well as befriending some of the most popular working actors in New York. Eventually a colleague asked if she would be interested in becoming his partner for an audition at the famed Actor's Studio. Miriam, unaware of the stature of the institution, agreed and following her audition asked to speak with Lee Strasberg. Miriam, as feisty as ever, entered his office with an album of pictures and Spanish language reviews, believing Strasberg was "a casting director or agent." As chance would have it, Strasberg invited her into the Studio, prompting Miriam to experience its breadth of talent and, subsequently, become the first Latina/o member of the Studio's prestigious Board of Directors.

Miriam's move to New York City eventually led to her participation in the premiere of René Marqués's *La Carreta*. After being sought by producer Roberto Rodríguez Suárez, she signed on as an original company member of the production, first performed in a small church in Manhattan and eventually, at the Hunts Point Palace in the Bronx. Miriam found herself performing



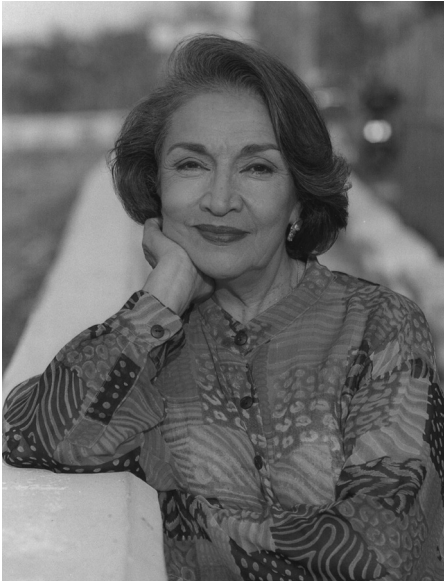
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for the Nuyorican community that, for the first time, saw itself represented on the commercial stage. *La Carreta* would become the first theatrical happening detailing the Puerto Rican emigrant audience and allowed Miriam to construct a vision for herself as a producer. Her dedication to Marqués's play made it possible for Miriam to work with legendary director Lloyd Richards, fellow Puerto Rican actress Lucy Boscana, and then-unknown actor Raúl Julia.

Simultaneously, Miriam's budding Hollywood career prompted her casting in many Western serials, including *Gunsmoke*, *Have Gun Will Travel*, and *Bonanza* and an eventual pairing with lifelong friend and Studio alum Marlon Brando in the film *One Eyed Jacks*. How ironic it is that this accomplished, classically

trained actress, would eventually become best known for her depiction of fellow Studio alum Al Pacino's patient, but hardened, mother in the Brian DePalma epic *Scarface* (1981). Though a Hollywood career seemed a wise economic choice, Miriam realized that New York City was where her heart was, and she returned to the Broadway stage on three separate occasions during her life, as well as starring in dozens of Spanish-language plays ranging from the Golden Age to Lorca.

It was, however, Miriam's dedication to the Latina/o community that shaped her theatrical destiny, as she railed against the limited opportunities for Latinos to experience professional productions in New York. In 1965, Miriam and her husband, George Edgar, a Wall Street entrepreneur and theatrical producer, formed a 501© organization that toured during the hot New York summers and focused on impoverished neighborhoods that were deemed too "dangerous to visit." This venture, which included dozens of Latina/o actors, designers, and community activists came to be known as the Puerto



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Rican Traveling Theatre (PRTT), which in 1967 was given a formal home by then Mayor John Lindsay: a red firehouse on West 47th Street and 8th Avenue, nestled in the heart of the Broadway theatre district. The Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre has nurtured the growth of theatrical artists and audiences who, like myself, saw their first positive Latino representations on Miriam's stage. Miriam Colón's vision provided an opportunity for Latinos to participate in the communal experience of what she called "the transformative magic of the theatre."

In July 2007 I was blessed to sit on a panel with Nuyorican theatre expert Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez during the International Hispanic

Theatre Festival of Miami's (IHTF) Lifetime Achievement Award to Miriam Colón. As academics, our focus was U.S. Latina/o Dramaturgy; the audience's focus was Miriam Colón. Two years later, Miriam allowed me to interview her for an introductory essay celebrating IHTF's 25th anniversary. Miriam's home was cluttered with paperwork from the upcoming PRTT summer tour of *Cinderella* while at the center of the room was a beautiful bouquet from actress Marga Gómez, filled with a unique combination of lilies of various hues. "They are all so unique and beautiful. They must be seen to be described," Miriam exclaimed, holding my arm.

I too, felt the same way, but about Miriam. The difficulties of funding the cultural arts brought the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre to a dangerous cliff by the end of the last decade. While the theatre teetered just slightly over the precipice, it was, once again, rescued by its community. In a consolidation with Pregones Theatre of the Bronx, Miriam was able to retire a few years before her death, leaving the company she founded safe for the immediate future.

In her final year on Earth, President Barack Obama awarded Miriam the prestigious National Medal of Arts. Following the reception, Miriam noted, "This is like a never-ending endeavor. This is what we do every day. We want

to continue doing theatre, bilingual theatre, in the city. I think we have a moral obligation to reflect what is happening and what is upsetting us. And what is making us cry and also what is making us laugh.” The rest is prologue. Rest in peace, glorious *maestra*.

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