

Language as a Cure: An Interview with Milcha Sanchez-Scott

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Milcha Sanchez-Scott's first play, *Latina*, premiered in Los Angeles in 1980. Since then, her characters in their simple clothes have appeared often, healing with poetry when their world offered no remedies. In 1984, INTAR produced *Dog Lady* and *The Cuban Swimmer*; *Dog Lady* was later published in *Best Short Plays of 1986*. INTAR, in 1987, produced *Roosters*, which was published that same year in *On New Ground*, an anthology of contemporary Hispanic-American plays. The following year *Stone Wedding* premiered in Los Angeles and *Evening Star* appeared at the Cubículo in New York. *Evening Star* prompted a reviewer to write, "Ms. Sanchez-Scott has a theatrical flair and a lyrical command of language, both of which will be assets as she continues to explore her potential as a playwright." Her dramatic work has also earned many awards: seven Drama-Logue awards, the Vesta Award, the Le Compte de Noüy Foundation Award and a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. Currently, she is at work on a full-length play tentatively entitled *The Architect Piece*. She hopes to finish it for the South Coast Repertory Theatre this spring.

When I first met Milcha Sanchez-Scott at the New Mexico Repertory Theatre in Santa Fe, the whole house, not just the set, was under construction. Plaster dust floated through the August light; a hammer pounded a nearby wall, and the playwright seemed completely comfortable in the unsettled theatre where her play *Roosters* would be produced for the 1988/89 season. Scarcely a year since its debut in New York City, *Roosters*, a story of farm workers and aspiring gamecock trainers, was being seen as far away as San Francisco and London. To me, however, the play's New Mexico premiere was the more important occasion, so I spoke with the playwright about herself and her art.

Throughout that conversation and a later conversation by phone in December of 1989 (from which the following interview is a conflation) she peppered her comments with her humor and, when we had run out of tape and time, she asked, "Now can we talk about important stuff--like lipstick?"

Tell me about your background. You have a famously checkered past.

Yes, overall, particularly from country to country. My father was in Indonesia and he was a botanist--more like an agronomist, working on how to improve crops. He was interested in Third World countries, so he was in Indonesia when he met my mother, who was Indonesian and Chinese. He was Colombian and Mexican.

We spent a lot of time in Mexico. You know, the Mexican culture is so strongly different from all the rest of South America.

Is that because it's so close to the United States?

I don't think so. I think--this is just my theory, okay?--that it's really the most successful blend of Mexican and Spanish, the true Mestizo Culture. There's so much Aztec in the Chicano culture that you feel in California and even here in New Mexico. But the rest of South America has so many European blends. Europe is really the old continent and corrupt. I think that that's what makes Mexico so much more interesting.

In an earlier interview, you said that you feel part of you is Chicana but a larger part is not.

My parents came to California to settle, and the Chicano culture there was so different to me--very, very different from Mexico or where I came from [in Colombia]. Yet there were similarities: we spoke the same language; we had the same skin color; we had the same interaction with culture.

But New Mexico reminds me more of South America and Mexico. There's a tremendous difference from California. For instance, at the auditions in Albuquerque, the actors who came to read were all from New Mexico and used little phrases of Spanish. I heard them talking to each other in a very clear Spanish, really beautiful Spanish. When I hear Spanish in California, it's not like here.

The setting of Roosters is supposedly "The Southwest," but it feels like it is set in New Mexico.

You want to make something that speaks generally of an area, but in my head, all my plays are set in New Mexico, even *Dog Lady*--that's New Mexico. I was really upset in one production when they had a barrel cactus, and I thought, "No, no, this is Arizona, not New Mexico."

It's because there's such an element of magical realism here. Literature seems to have come to this state from South America. When it comes to California, it becomes something else; it's not that it's bad or good. Even when I saw these New Mexican actors, the way they worked brought that to

my mind. There's something magical, something like, "We're going to pretend," as opposed to California actors who always say, "Let's be real."

I feel that somehow my home is here. I don't know what it is, but I do think I will be moving to New Mexico sometime during my life. Soon, I know. It's a great place to write. It's very peaceful, and the place gives a grounded feeling.

You often get asked the question, "Are you a Chicana playwright?" Do these labels get in your way?

I've just come back from what they call "The Hispanic Playwright's Conference" at South Coast Repertory in Orange County, right outside of Los Angeles. Playwrights, dramaturgs, and producers come from all over to meet, to share their thoughts, to read new plays, and to take a look at these plays and wonder if they can do something with them in their theatres. So it becomes part market and part meeting.

This year a lot of the playwrights were Hispanic in name only. Some of the plays were very wonderful and very beautifully crafted--and the level of craft has certainly gone up--but anybody could have written these plays. In one play, the only thing "Hispanic" was that the mother's name was "Carmen."

Some of the playwrights don't speak Spanish. They've assimilated so much! I thought to myself, "Well, that's one of the wonderful things about America, and it's also one of the bad things about America as a melting pot." That's what we're supposed to do--we're supposed to assimilate. Yet one feels like we've lost a lot of rich ground. Particularly in the Southwest because it's worked into the natural history. So the theatre people from the Southwest were up in arms. They said, "Why are you calling this a Hispanic festival? This isn't about our culture or our people. This is mainstream!"

The term "Hispanic," to me, encompasses everybody that has a history, a background with the Spanish Language. The problem with the label is that "Hispanic" is going to be stretched and stretched to cover a whole range of things--Chicanos in the Southwest, Puerto Ricans in New York, Cubans in Miami--until I don't know what good the label is. I suppose it's very good when you're trying to sell tickets.

As for what I feel, I feel I'm an American writer who has been influenced by the places I've lived or where my parents were born.

So although it might be easier to get grant money for an "Hispanic play," it becomes limiting?

I'll tell you what is so limiting by telling you what's so wonderful about doing *Roosters* at the New Mexico Repertory. In every Hispanic theatre, I have felt that sometimes the Hispanic actor that was available at that time was not the actor I needed and we could not go outside the community to get that actor.

Maybe a Hispanic actor who was perfect for Gallo was working on a film, but this other Hispanic actor was available. He didn't fit the part really, but he was Hispanic, so I was forced to use him as opposed to an Anglo actor who is a Gallo. So I get punished sometimes as a playwright.

When I came here, people said to me, "we are just going to get the best actors we can." So the dream which Roxanne [director Roxanne Rogers] and I have for this particular *Roosters* has a very good chance of coming to fruition.

This isn't the play's first production.

It's been in New York, in San Francisco, in Texas, where it was translated partly into Spanish, and currently in London.

I understand that PBS is planning a production.

Yes, for *American Playhouse*. I'm in the midst of writing that. It's a bit frightening because it's totally different. In a sense it's wonderful and fun because I get to go under the porch with Angela and see what her area, her play space looks like. It takes me to those nooks and crannies. It's going to be done basically as a play on a sound stage, but we will have a little more freedom, a little more movement.

How has Irene Fornes' writing workshop at INTAR affected your work?

She is an extraordinary woman, an extraordinary teacher and, I feel, an extraordinary writer. What she actually did for me was put me in touch with my subconscious at the time I wanted to get in touch with it. Before, I used to lay around my house, wait around to be "moved" to write in that way. And I did wait. I'd be waiting for Mr. Muse to come: "I'm here now, any time!"

There are two kinds of writing: the cerebral, the kind where you make it in your head, like editing; and the kind that comes from your gut. You let hours and hours go by and you don't know where it came from. Slowly you see where it came from, but it's some surprise to you.

That's the kind of writing that we're talking about. She taught me to bring it out at any moment. Choose any time of day and I could write in that way.

Irene Fornes has these wonderful writing tricks that get you out of any stuck situation. We exercise before we write. We stretch and we actually get in a very relaxed state so that writing becomes, all of a sudden, meditation, instead of trying to push it out of you and trying to impose your will.

Immediately after you get into that stage of relaxation, think of a situation before you were ten years old. Let's just say there's somebody sick in your house, and you go into your memory to see what happened. When I do that, I remember the kind of shoes I was wearing. You remember your favorite

shirt, your favorite dresses and things that you wore and how it felt. That someone was sick in your house absolutely connects you to whatever relationships you had. You don't really "think" about it. In this way, what comes out is really true.

And you have called Roosters a "tearing-away-from home play."

I think we all have that relationship with our parents. With parents, there's a new interest in what their offspring is doing, since they're an extension of themselves. It's usually a series of blows when you start, very suddenly, pushing away from them--pushing away, pushing away, pushing away. Some parents can't bear it, to see you go that far away. They feel like they're losing you. And then how are they going to connect? What bridge are they going to have? Then there's all that "No, you're going out. You're not as good as me. You're not an adult." How are you going to break this? And especially with fathers, "Are you going to be smart? Are you going to be smarter?" Until suddenly there's this turn, and they're proud of you.

What has happened between you and your parents?

I think my parents always thought of the theatre and writing as fantasy. It doesn't really bring in the big bucks for a while--if ever! They were concerned if I was choosing an impractical sort of life. Young adults at that point say "Like it or not, this is how I choose to live." When you stand up for what you want to do, you engender a new respect.

Has it helped that your work in the theatre has been so successful?

Yes, it's helped.

What books or authors influenced your development as a writer?

Colette was always one. I never read anyone who can bring a sense of memory back stronger. I remember reading all the Colette books in the summer when I was very young. Also the early English novelists--they were who I read the first time I developed a brain. The Brontë sisters. Then the South American writers--Márquez and Borges and many others. The influence there is the whole range of feeling.

We in North America read Márquez' books, see this mixture of fantasy and realism, and think, "What's the author doing?" But he apparently says South America is magical.

It is. And it pulls very strongly on you because the Andes are so spiritual. I mean people there--whether or not they see the things they see or not--they all believe they see them and believe people who say such things. In my grandmother's house, my cousins and aunts would come to the breakfast table and ask, "Did you hear it?" "Yes, I heard it." There's a story about somebody who rides through the house, looking for the bride he lost there. I think it comes from the history of the house that a young bride died in that house, and so they hear it and see it. And I see them see it with a passion. And my father said I used to see it until I went away and became Anglicized.

You lost your innocence?

He says I lost my innocence. I know that people do see things, and I also know that strange things happen and miracles seem possible. They do in New Mexico, in that wonderful church in Chimayo.

[*Santuario de Chimayo*, in Chimayo, New Mexico, is an adobe church with a dirt floor where a repository of healing sand awaits those who pass through the ambulatory. The level of the sand, it is said, has never waned though pilgrims have carried it off in handfuls, particularly during the Easter pilgrimage, since the church was built centuries ago. Lining the walls of the Sanctuary are crutches left behind by those who have walked away healed.]

I'll be interested to see how New Mexico audiences take that element of Roosters.

I think they'll be pretty divided. But I hope so, because it's a history that's here for New Mexico, the magical realism.

Roosters also has a great deal of humor. Is it a respite or relief? Is it a defense? Is it, as Luis Valdez says, "a weapon" (Huerta, 398)? The play is quite serious, but you have people laughing in the middle.

But that's life, isn't it? It really is. I mean you're going through whatever you're going through, and you get feelings that are horrific. But then there's somebody in the room, and you make some crack about it.

At funerals people remember these feelings. I knew someone whose grandfather died, and we all passed this market on the way to the cemetery and suddenly somebody in the car, one of the brothers of the grandfather, started laughing and then the other brother looked. They realized that at this corner grandfather had had this "scene" with the butcher. He had said to the butcher, "You're robbing all the people here." He was so funny that day. In the saddest situation, humor is there.

A lot of my early work was working with comedians and writing jokes. How I started writing by writing jokes. Humor's always made life better. It's

also a real connection with people. It's also absurd. Life is absurd--you have to have a sense of humor.

Could you describe this early comedy work?

That's really part of how I started writing. I happened to be in the situation where I had two comedians around me and I seemed to be on rhythm with them; that is really a lot of humor--the rhythm. When my friends started doing comedy professionally and they started getting famous, then I started doing it for shows and coming in and punching-up things. I began thinking, "Well, this is no way to go though life. It doesn't seem serious enough. It doesn't have substance."

You also use dance in Roosters.

The dances are pretty dark. There is something that happens to our souls in dark moments which resembles a kind of dance, but there's not a light mood. It's really emotions taking you. You're not bounded.

Many of your characters seem interested in having secrets. Where do you see the power in secrets?

A sense of yourself. A sense of taking your own council, having your own little worlds inside of yourself that are yours. Every human being should have his own secrets. Maybe it has to do with the secret music you hear. It has to do with creativity and the creative part everybody has in that secret world.

I think too often when men and women fall in love they lose that. Their ground somehow merges, and somebody forgets or isn't hanging onto their secrets.

Has that happened to you?

I don't know if it's quite happened to me, but there's always a reluctance. I guess it's a matter of trust. It's wonderful to trust somebody. When I said secrets, I meant a sort of spiritual secret in who you are. Giving that away makes for a binding that is too close; instead of two individuals, there's one individual over all with all this potential of warfare.

Are you saying it's trust in the sense that you don't have to know what your lover's secrets are?

Exactly. There's a generosity about allowing a person to be who they are, to have their own world.

That's part of the tension between Gallo and Juana in Roosters.

Yes. The secrets that Juana has given away, the self that she has given away --she lives her life, primarily, for him--is part of the strength she's thrown away, out of their marriage. If she'd been a person to stand up a little bit for him, to guide him, to help him more in that sense, it would be an adult relationship as opposed to a relationship where one is submissive and the other is *a dictator!*

Respect has to be maintained. In a situation where somebody is totally submissive all the time, there's no respect there because there is no person there.

Let's talk about cockfighting. The first act of Roosters ends with Hector's memory of his first cockfight, and you have written elsewhere about seeing one when you were a young child.

I wasn't even a year old. I think it's very funny, very spooky how that relates, because [while beginning work on the play] I didn't know I had gone to one. They're religious in Indonesia, and my father just wanted to see. I think he just carried me along. They're not scary. It is a religious ceremony, and it is the soul and the good and bad forces in us the fight. It's like a bullfight in the sense of meeting death, confronting it.

We've had roosters since the Peloponnesian Wars when the general had these wonderful cocks he brought before his troops. He plunked them down and said, "Look at the way they fight. We can only fight with that kind of nobility and spirit." It's been in almost every culture. In England, at the Eaton School, that was one of the courses those boys took. And Henry the Eighth was supposed to be a big lover of cocks.

The cock has always been a symbol of virility and warlikeness and machismo. I wanted to see that from a lot of different angles; I wanted us in the end to be able to transcend it, to go beyond war. Because in the end, it's Hector who can easily kill his father and has been provoked, almost, to kill his father. He realizes we aren't animals and throws the knife down. And that's when Angela, wanting to find his spirit, goes up.

Why is Angela the character you single out?

She vocalizes a spiritual transcendence--when I say spiritual, I mean it in a lot of ways--of reaching out to another level of life, of better quality. All through the play she's been seeking that, she's been seeking to be lifted, to break through her small prison, to have things made possible. When her brother throws down his arms, his knife, and refuses to kill his father--or controls his urge, his anger--it opens up for her a whole different world of possibilities for her generation, maybe her generation of men.

You mean, in general, that the generations can improve?

We have to! We're facing such strange dilemmas in environmental issues; we've all been witness to incredible acts of terror; I'm sure our parents have too. I think these lessons have got to serve their purpose. We have to change; we have to become greater, or as great as we can be. This could be the most wonderful world when we get it, but we have to reach.

Though it's a very slow process, I really feel that it's speeding up a bit now. We have all of these people choosing a form of government that is universally held as being democratic. Everybody is breaking the chains to be in that form of government. That helps a great deal in facing our problems, which I see now as global problems as opposed to just national problems. If we're more united, they would become easier to solve. We still have environmental and health issues, you name it, we have all the issues here. *The Architect Piece*--I wanted to stress the environmental more--deals with the rain forest in Brazil.

I predict a pretty big debate on the issue of machismo, because Roosters doesn't seem to give it a favorable verdict.

But in another sense Chata has a lot of machismo--she's what they call a "macha." And I think of it as a spirit of life. We have a war spirit. I think all human beings do. It's there to give us energy. I think all of our emotions are very useful, and I just think that we need to channel it as opposed to bombing people and working on more nuclear weapons.

It depends a lot on the production, whether you admire the machismo or not. One character says, "We're independent." We all have to hope for that, for being independent.

So it's no simple theme, like "we must override the machismo."

You can't be simple about anything in life. Everything's really complicated and yet simple. Like the double helix, the DNA molecule, and how they found out about it--how complicated and how simple and elegant it is at the same time.

Finally, I'd like to ask you about language. Are you doing anything in particular with the code-switching [between Spanish and English] in Roosters or are you just trying to mirror a world that you know?

No. When I talk to people who speak Spanish in this country, for instance busboys, they--even from the introduction--give their names and say, "*A sus ordenes.*" It's a very typical Spanish introduction--"Awaiting your orders"--which I think is so beautiful. The Spanish they use is so beautiful, so

rich, and so high falutin'! Yet at the same time when they speak in English, they sometimes sound very common. How is it that a person who can think in this language that is so beautiful in its structure, will speak English and choose the most common words? I don't know why that is, but the [Spanish] language is taught that way--they use powerful words. I want Chicanos to think they should speak English in the same way they choose to speak Spanish.

I've had people get upset, saying "This isn't realistic, I've never heard a Chicano talk like this," and that sort of thing. Well, no, I never heard a shepherd sound like Shakespeare's either. So if he can do it, why can't we?

What should the role of theatre--your theatre in particular--be in education?

I don't see theatre as an entertainment form as much as I see it as a ritualistic form. We can learn by stories and rituals. They move people! I think the theatre should impassion people. Film is so common and can tell a realistic story so much better these days, that theatre has to become something else. And theatre's strength really is that it's personal: people are there, people are alive on stage. With those kinds of strengths it, hopefully, will impassion and empower people.

What changes do you see happening to theatre that might emphasize the ritual more?

Well, I don't want to negate entertainment. I think by ritual, we're entertaining. I would have to come up with why people performed rituals: to make themselves feel better, to cast out the darkness. I think there's something very primitive in us that needs ritual. To mark different times, to mark the seasons even, and to teach.

As theatre people, we have to gather, and see where our strengths are. Live theatre becomes very special. If your generation has been raised on film and television--as I have--going to the theatre becomes a participation in community, and that's where its strength is, in that community.

Does the writing itself have a ritualistic dimension?

Only habitually. One has one's rituals with writing: paper and pen, you know.

For me, it becomes about language and poetry. Some shamans in Oaxaca believe in the language--what comes from our mouths, the words we choose from our brains--as almost a cure. In that form, writing is a ritual. It lets you uncover problems, lets you heal problems.

Language is a cure then, certainly for the writer. Is it also a cure for the audience, even the illiterate?

There are countless people who haven't had the benefits of education. Who plod along and work very, very hard for a living. But I haven't seen a *coarseness* of soul--Do you know what I mean? I mean that their souls, their hearts, their spirits are still incredibly sensitive, as sensitive as somebody who's, say, been reared with a lot of literature. They may not understand, but they feel. They come--open heart and open mind--to the theatre and realize that they're part of this body, they're participating.

A friend of mine who's at The Public [The Public Theatre in New York City] said that she met Mother Teresa when she was in New York and had been so inspired by this woman, that she wanted to follow Mother Teresa to India to help the poor. Mother Teresa said, "well, we may be poor in the material sense, but this country is very hungry in the spiritual sense." She said that my friend's work in literature was the best that she could do for this country.

I feel that that is our job as playwrights, to nurture people.

How about the opposite? Would you say that there is a greater tendency for the well-off to have a coarse soul?

Take our society, one has to work so hard, and there's a toughness, a facade that we come to believe in. I don't know Mr. Trump, but he becomes a hero to so many. In some of our television shows, the more ruthless the person, the colder, the meaner, the more he is admired. The tough is what we admire. Like the short guy on *Taxi*--the audience loves him! It's that kind of strange stuff that keeps popping up in our culture. We're always having to be so tough with each other and always fearing that we're going to be victims and taken advantage of. I think, if you aspire to something, sometimes you have to put on this facade to make your way to push through obstacles. In a way, the rich become, sometimes, too tough and too forward. The successful become too toughened.

Has that been true with your success?

I don't think this applies to writers.

How about your theatre--have you made it available to people who might be more disadvantaged? Would you like to work in that direction?

We have to, we really have to. Theatre has to go into the community. We're thinking of doing *Dog Lady*, which takes place in a *barrio* in Los Angeles, and just doing it there--right in that *barrio* in front of a house that looks like the *Dog Lady's* house. Everything takes place on the porch outside. We could do both that play and *Evening Star* because they take place right there. We would not have to rent a theatre.

For some of the larger theatres, it's possible that this could be their "reach-out program." I also think it's important that children get to the theatre, *very important* that they get to the theatre.

I found myself exuberantly agreeing with this last statement. In January of 1989, I had taken my sons to see *Roosters* at the KiMo Theatre in Albuquerque. Jordan, who had just turned six, had a very short attention span, and I doubted that he would follow the entire production. I was wrong. Throughout the matinee, he sat wondrously still, eyes fixed on stage. Since that afternoon he has seen other plays and wanted to see more. A year later, he still asks me about *Roosters* and especially Angela.

"Who kept putting the dots on those tombstones and kept calling Hector 'Horrible Hector?'"

"Angela."

"I like Angela."

Santa Fe, New Mexico

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