

DOLORES PRIDA



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A PROFILE OF DOLORES PRIDA

" I don't need to be 'discovered.' I've never been lost."
-Dolores Prida

From Caibarién to the Big Apple

Dolores Prida was born the oldest of three children in Caibarién, on the northern coast of Cuba. "My mother, who is now dead, was the typical Latina mother, the martyr type, and my father, who is a very handsome man, was the Don Juan of the small town. And my mother knew, so there was a soap opera every other night. I always said, "I'm not going to be like my mother" because I saw her suffering, being a victim. I would have kicked my father out. Sometimes you gain strength from weakness."

Soon after the 1959 revolution her father fled to the US in a boat, and two years later the family followed. Dolores recalls arriving as a teenager "with nothing. The first thing I did when I came to Miami was to borrow a dime to call my uncle for \$50 to come to New York." She started working in a bakery, up to her elbows in dough, but six months later she had been promoted to its office, and by the time she left the bakery six years later, she was editing the employee newsletter. She had found her destiny.

The Young Author

"The need to say who I am and where I come from and what makes me tick has been there all along," says Prida, who has produced poems, stories, and journalism since childhood. "I love learning and I'm an avid reader," she says, "but for writing, you don't need a diploma-it's not like being a dentist." Prida never earned a university degree. Instead she took literature courses at Hunter College night school for years and went on to a successful career in journalism, writing and editing for New York's Spanish-language daily, *El tiempo*, as well as *Visión*, *Nuestro*, and *AHA!*, the monthly newsletter of the Association of Hispanic Arts. She also published poetry.

Her acquaintance with theatre began in the mid-1970s. "I never went to the theatre in Cuba, because I'm from a small town," Prida recalls. "There was no such thing. We only had two movie houses." She saw her first live play in Manhattan. The first musical she experienced-most of her later plays would involve music-was the film of *West Side Story*, which she found "so weird-people just start singing out of nowhere."

Her theatrical work began in 1976 with a collective group, *Teatro Popular*, on the Lower East Side. She is proud of the practical training she gained there. "I didn't write a play until I had been involved with other things: doing the props, doing the lights out of tomato cans, running the music cues." Perhaps most important, she found with *Teatro Popular* the kind of theatre she loved. "In most of Latin America," she says, "theatre is a class thing-theatre for the rich people who want to wear their best clothes and their pearls-or

an intellectual thing-modern and avant-garde groups. And on Latino TV, all you get is soap operas made in Mexico where everybody's blonde and middle- and upper-class. There's really very little of everyday life, everyday people." At Teatro Popular, she found her kind of theatre, "a popular theatre, theatre for people to identify with."

Professional Playwright

In the next decade, Prida wrote nine plays. Some were one acts. Many were musicals. Her special home was at Duo, an experimental theatre on East 4th Street which she describes as "my kitchen, where I experiment." But she has also worked at INTAR and the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre. She mixes her languages, writing bilingual, English and Spanish scripts. She frequently takes up political topics: feminine stereotypes in *Las beautiful señoritas* (1977), the endless begging of community organizations through grant applications in *The Beggars Soap Opera* (1979), or the end of the world as a setting for soap opera in *Pantallas* (1986). But she normally treats these topics in a light and thought-provoking way, with music, farce, and satire.

Prida's two great issues, being a woman and being bicultural, run through her plays from *Las beautiful señoritas* to *Casa propia*. "My intention as a writer is to explore, in many different ways, our being here," she says. "Being from a different culture. Trying to fit in or not fit in. How other people see us, how we see ourselves." In *Coser y cantar* (1981), she dramatized the two-sidedness of women and Latin-Americans by showing two characters named She and Ella-two selves in the same woman-in a New York apartment.

These issues also underlie her nondramatic work as a Senior Editor at *Latina Magazine*. "I enjoy working there with young Latinas," she says. "Younger Latinas today are more self-assured. They have opportunities we didn't have thirty years ago. With the boom of Latino popular culture we're experiencing, they feel it's 'cool' to be a Latina-and they rejoice in it. As an older Latina it makes me proud that in my lifetime I can see a magazine of such quality for and by Latinas."

Much of Prida's theatre "works on different levels." On the outside, she says, "the play is very funny-laugh, laugh, laugh," but underneath lie serious issues. *Botánica* (1991), her first production at Repertorio Español, echoed the trauma confronting "many young Puerto Rican women today who go off to study at a university out of New York. Some of them can make it, but some of them win scholarships and then they give up. They're like fish out of water." She describes *Casa propia*, which opened at Repertorio Español in January, 1999, as "a comedy/drama about a group of women in search of a space of their own."

Career Information

Dolores Prida has written for Spanish-language television and film, including sitcoms, series pilots, educational films, and documentaries. She has received playwriting fellowships and residencies, conducted workshops at colleges, spoken at conference panels, and served as a contest judge or literary adviser at major theatres on both coasts. At the end of the 1980s, she received an honorary degree from Mt. Holyoke College. During the run of *Botánica*, she was working as a freelance editorial writer and a city commissioner's speech writer. By the time *Casa propia* opened, she was writing for *Latina* magazine, and *Allentales* (1994, with the Allentown Pregones Project) and her musical *Hola Ola!* (1996, Tribeca Performing Arts Center) had been produced. Today Dolores Prida says, "I always tend to introduce myself as a playwright. Theater is what I do best-and easiest."

The end of the millennium found two more projects nearing completion. *L.I.P.S.* (*Latinas in Power...Sort Of*) is about a group of twenty-something Latina professionals, "that new generation with education, consumer power, and jobs to match," and Prida thinks it has potential as her first real "crossover" play. *Four Guys Named José* and *Una Mujer Named María* is a musical review built around the best known Latino songs of the 40s and 50s-"a commercial enterprise," in Prida's words.

Other projects in various stages of development, some for most of a decade, include a piece about a middle-class Cuban family whose son is dying of AIDS (*Patos*); a full-length musical developed at INTAR under the direction of María Irene Fornés (*The Saxophone Man*); one set in "a Cuban restaurant with pretensions of being a nightclub" whose owner dreams of being the Cuban Howard Johnson (*The Electric Maraca*); and a pet idea for a piece about teen pregnancy that could travel to high schools. Says Prida, "All those projects are still on the back burner. I'll get to them some day. The issues they address are still dear to me. My theater always has reflected our Latino reality-I don't think that'll ever change."

PRIDA SPEAKS

About Casa Propia

"About 9 years ago I bought an old house in East Harlem. The adventures and misadventures of being a home owner in a Manhattan barrio were my inspiration. Then the Fannie Mae Foundation and Repertorio Español announced a contest about Latino home ownership-and that fit like a glove.

"The play is about realizing that 'American dream' of owning a home-but it goes beyond that. It's a sort of 'A Room of Your Own' infused with *Lysistrata*. It ends up being a play about a community of women who, ultimately, cannot be dispossessed because they have a house of their own-in which men can come and go, but they remain. It also deals with domestic violence of various kinds. And despite all of that-it's a lot of fun!

"I call it an opera without music because I tried something different for me. Characters step out of the immediate reality of the scene and 'sing' an aria. Each character has a monologue about themselves, an episode in their lives, their dreams or sorrows, that only the audience hears. It's only at the end-the coda, as it were-that they tell their stories to each other, repeating short pieces of the original monologue.

"The play is in Spanish reflecting the different inflections and vocabulary of Cubans, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans-and it includes an Italian old lady who speaks both bad English and bad Italian! Of course, there are phrases in English here and there.

"Is it a feminist play? I don't know what that means any more. It's a woman's play. The Manolo of the piece is somewhat based on my father, who actually was a traveling lamp salesman in Cuba. The character Manolo is a nice guy, but he can't help being a womanizer, and what he calls being a "free spirit" is actually immaturity. Mario is that elusive man younger women are always after. There you see him, there you don't. He's of no consequence. Junior is a lesbian comfortable with herself. Her lesbianism is a fact, something she doesn't need to advertise or flaunt."

Audience Reaction to Casa Propia.

"People love Casa propia. What they enjoy the most, of course, is the humor. Second, the familiarity of the characters. They know people like that. They are like that. The women in particular enjoy seeing the female characters realize their situation and empower themselves.

"When Repertorio has shows during the day for high school students, there's always a discussion afterwards. Kids are always asked if, at the end of the play, Olga should have let Manolo into the house after she changes the door lock. They all scream, 'No!' I love them.

"Men always enjoy Manolo the most-of course. They identify with him . . . until Olga locks him out. They also enjoy the sexiness of Yarisá-but when she comes out with a black eye and delivers her monologue about trying to learn to say 'enough' to her husband's violence, they keep very quiet and fidget in their seats. The women always applaud that monologue."

Prida's Views on Latino Theatre

"The things that get rave reviews are the things that Americans think that we should be writing about, things that portray Latinos as they think we are. Any time there's a play about drug dealers, disintegrated families-that's what they think we are, that's all we are. What bothers me is that other things aren't accepted."

"When you become a stereotype, you lose your humanity. Young people don't know how to deal with it. It's internalized-the cramped space, the limited horizons. Our young people have such needs-identity, possible images for themselves, seeing their stories being relevant-there's such a need and thirst for that. The majority of Latinos don't live off welfare anyway, don't have a drug problem. They have other problems, every day. Ninety-nine per cent of the people I know work hard to get ahead."

"When you sit down to write, you don't write for any audience in particular, ideally. I think that I have an audience and that audience is mostly the Latino community. I'm very close to the Puerto Rican community and I know it very well. I am not very well liked by Cubans because of my 'politics.' I've been threatened with death. I've had a play canceled in Miami because I had been to Cuba and written about it. It became a national First Amendment issue."

"What else could I write about? I couldn't write about a place where I'm not. I really can't see people writing plays about Cuba who haven't been there in thirty years. I prefer to write about immediate things and immediate people."

"Theatre plays so many different roles in our community. It's not just show business, entertainment, literature, whatever. It's educational. It's sociology, it's an opportunity to see out in the open things that you've felt or have heard from your family and friends, things that are not perceived out there. Theatre brings out things we need to say and need to see.

"Hispanic American theatre is beginning to have an impact and is going to be the theatre of the future. I still think that we will continue to be very much bilingual. It's not going to disappear like Yiddish theatre, and the American theatre will be richer because of our Hispanic theatre, because it's part of the whole mosaic of what this country is."

CASA POPIA SYNOPSIS

Dolores Prida calls Casa Propia "an opera without music in an act and a half." Its central characters are a Cuban family and their neighbors, people who typify much of Latino life in New York City.

Act One opens on a sidewalk outside three old brownstones in a formerly Italian neighborhood. It is garbage collection day. The elderly Fanny sweeps her "garbash" over to the sidewalk of the vacant house next door, and the neighborhood handyman-actually a young woman called Junior-makes her daily joking offer to buy Fanny's place.

Olga, a hula-hoop maker and prospective buyer, believes the vacant house has great potential for their family, but her husband Manolo sees only trash and trouble. The couple's grown daughter, Marilis, arrives with her grandmother and the wrong key from the realtor. It seems Olga's family will never see the inside of this house, let alone its merits.

But Yarisá, the sexy neighbor from the bodega, gets help from Junior, who has worked on the house and lets them in with her key. Yarisá and Manolo flirt.

The second scene takes place in the trash-strewn yard outside the vacant house. Marilis believes homeownership is beyond her parents' means. Besides, she wants to have a big, expensive wedding in Puerto Rico and settle there with her boyfriend Mario's well-connected political family. As Olga reminds her, Mario has not even proposed yet! But Marilis is undaunted-she will escape the poverty and drudgery that plague her parents.

Manolo emerges, critical of the shoddy neighborhood, the trash-strewn property, and old Fanny next door, who mistakes them for Puerto Ricans. Better they should wait and buy a house in Cuba. But Olga knows that will never happen, and she has enough saved to make this down payment right now. Olga has always yearned for a secure nest. Manolo, however, sees himself as "an eagle-a hunter with restless wings," a bit of a Don Juan with little patience for stability.

Manolo wheezes that all the dirt here gives him an asthma attack (as did his wedding and impending fatherhood). He goes off for a coffee from the bodega next door. He will bring one for Fefa.

Olga's first supporter is Manolo's mother, Fefa. When Fefa realizes she can have a room of her own-on the ground floor, too!-she speaks out for the first time.

The youngsters return, Mario cautioning prudence; old houses can develop costly problems. Olga takes them down to inspect the boiler, leaving Fefa and Fanny to make faces at each other over the fence.

In a scene at the bodega, where Manolo buys a Lotto ticket, he and Yarisá discuss their amorous frustrations. Yarisá keeps falling for the wrong man, and Manolo keeps trying to escape from Olga but always returns "when my last pair of of underwear gets dirty." Back in the yard of the house, Fefa softens toward Fanny when she hears Junior offer to help the old woman to sweep the sidewalk. Junior says, "Fanny, may I. . .?" and Fefa hears "FannieMae." Fanny must be the loan lady! She goes into the bodega to see what's happened to the coffee Manolo promised.

Act Two takes place on the same littered sidewalk one year later. Fanny still sweeps her garbage onto Olga's sidewalk, and Fefa sweeps it over to Yarisá's, who sweeps it back to Fanny's, who returns it to Olga's.

Junior still wants to buy Fanny's house. She knocks at Olga's door. When she and Olga come out, we learn the boiler is broken. Manolo, coming home, finds this suspicious. Something is always breaking down in the old house. When Olga confesses that the boiler needs to be replaced, Manolo goes out "to buy cigarettes."

Marilis tells Jr. that Mario has won a fellowship to the University of Michigan and will also teach math.

Manolo meets Yarisá outside the bodega, and they embrace.

Olga, in tears, complains that every time Manolo goes out for cigarettes, he stays out. She thinks he is leaving her for Yarisá, this time for good. Fefa worries that Olga will lose the house unless Fanny will accept lower payments. No, Olga explains, the money came from FannieMae the Federal loan program, not from their neighbor. Fefa has been nice to Fanny for no reason!

A few days later, on Halloween, Fanny and Fefa spar with their brooms, and Olga confronts Yarisá, demanding to know Manolo's whereabouts. Manolo has won \$40,000 in the lottery and left them both. He offered Marilis a ticket to go to Mario in Michigan, but Marilis refused. Olga has brought hula hoops home from the factory for Halloween treats. Fefa and Fanny start dancing with the hoops-Fefa was a hula hoop champion back in Cuba-then Junior, Marilis and Yarisá join in. All the women look around at the "convent" their little neighborhood has become. They remember their old longings, accept the dreams that have failed, and embrace their reality.

CASA PROPIA STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Above the list of Dramatis Personae, Prida inserts this quote: "A veces hay que abandonar un sueño para alcanzar otro." What dreams do the characters in her play give up, and in exchange for what new dreams? Which of these dream tradeoffs do you feel is most important to the play? Explain.
2. Does a man need a woman? Does a woman need a man? Choose two characters from Casa propia and discuss what their answers would be and why.
3. What do you think about Marilis's decision to stay in New York rather than follow Mario to Michigan?
4. What happens to the family when Manolo wins the lottery? What does the play have to say about the importance of money in our lives?
5. Do you believe that the playwright is condemning men like Manolo in this play? Why or why not? Imagine that Manolo is a close friend. What would you say in his defense?
6. Is Prida critical of individual characters in Casa propia? Which ones? And why?
7. Analyze Casa propia in relation to the great theme of all immigrant literature: new country vs. old.
8. Why do you think the author called this "an opera without music"? What is "operatic" about Casa propia?

WOMEN IN HISPANIC AMERICAN THEATRE

Today in the theatres of Hispanic America, women play all the roles: dramatist, actress, director, designer, and producer. But what is the history of women in the dramatic arts of this hemisphere?

The most highly regarded playwright of Spain's colonial period was a woman-Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648-95). Known as "the Tenth Muse" by her contemporaries because of her poetry, she was also a playwright who wrote her first drama at the age of eight. At fifteen, having joined a convent, she collaborated with her confessor on a comedy of intrigue influenced by Lope de Vega. Her best solo-written play is *The Obligations of a House* (*Los empeños de una casa*) which takes its title from Calderón and some plot from Lope but its spirit from Sor Juana herself. Unfortunately for us, her own obligations in the convent house and the insistence of her religious superiors led her to quit writing drama.

As secular and professional theatre developed in the Americas during the 18th century, women played no significant role as artists. They were not allowed to act on Latin American stages until the end of the century. Colombian dramatist Lorenzo María Lleras encouraged women to act in private performances at his home, but when the same plays appeared at the public theatres, female parts were taken by boys, as in Shakespeare's theatre. When women did finally appear publicly as actresses, they were frequently foreigners or ladies acting under assumed names. As late as 1806, when an Argentine playwright wanted to show a woman wearing a man's uniform, the censor objected to an actress in pants.

During the nineteenth century, the drama of the Americas matured, and a few women playwrights were among its brighter talents. Isabel Angel Prieto (1833-76) moved from Spain to Guadalajara, where she wrote comedies that were funnier and more successful than those of contemporary Mexican men. Her 1862 piece, *Los dos son peores* (*The Two Are Worse*), takes a humorous look at social customs as the finicky Pepa is wooed by the foppish Don Lendoro and the bookworm Samuel. Matilde Cuyás (1859-1900) wrote a play that was famous in the Argentina of 1877, *Contra soberbia, humildad* (*Against Haughtiness, Humility*) - the title could be the generic title for most comedies.

In the twentieth century, women playwrights have moved from notable to commonplace. Consider Mexico, where Luisa Josefina Hernández (1928-) is eminent among the senior generation of playwright-mentors like Emilio Carballido and Vicente Leñero. Her contemporary, Elena Garro (1920-98), achieved notoriety for a poetic etching of domestic discord, *A Solid Home* (*Un hogar sólido*, 1956), set in a family crypt where different generations recount their petty and ironic memories and emotions. Younger Mexican women are even more visible as dramatists. Maruxa Vilalta (1932-), who won attention with many short plays, such as *The Story of 'Him'* (*Historia de 'El,'* 1964), won prizes for *Esta noche juntos, amándonos tanto* (*Tonight Together, Loving Each Other So Much*), a bleak urban vision of life behind locked doors and blacked-out windows while neighbors die in the hall. Other major Mexican playwrights include Sabina

Berman, a dramatist-critic-teacher, and the multi-talented Rosario Castellanos, whose eterno femenino been performed at Repertorio Español.

In contemporary Argentina, one of the clearest dramatic voices belongs to Griselda Gambaro (1928-). Gambaro writes powerful plays about dignity and freedom under siege by social or political pressures. *El Campo* (1967) is the most famous of her plays in the US. Its title refers to an ambiguous place-military camp and/or countryside and/or concentration camp-where the characters, who seem at first to be on vacation, find themselves treated brutally but lovingly. Gambaro was forced into a three-year European exile when Argentina's President, Rafael Videla, banned her novel *Ganarse la muerte* (To Earn One's Death) in 1977. But since returning with *Decir sí* (1981), she has written prolifically. "All of our theatre is more or less political," says Gambaro of today's Argentina. "There is always implicit or explicit political content in our work, though it is not always a goal."

Hispanic American women are visible all over the North American landscape, especially as actresses, theatre producers, and playwrights. A leading example is María Irene Fornes, who moved from Havana to New York in 1945 to become a painter. Her early plays, such as *Tango Palace* (1959-1963) and *The Successful Life of 3* (1965), were key examples of the experimental off-off-Broadway movement. One of the most important plays of the feminist 1970s was her *Fefu and Her Friends* (1977), and later plays have pursued strong human and social situations. As important as Fornes's plays has been her teaching, the workshops she has given at INTAR in New York and at the Padua Hills Playwrights' Workshop in California. Students like David Henry Hwang, Milcha Sanchez-Scott, and Eduardo Machado testify to how she liberates writers. Fornes teaches as she writes-that art is not "role models" and automatic happy endings, and that artists, like the characters they create, must "find your vitality and move on."

The future of Hispanic American theatre? It is impossible to imagine without a host of major women artists. Instead of ranking and describing today's best female writers, let us just list them: Milcha Sanchez-Scott, Lynne Alvarez, Denise Chávez, Lillian Garrett-Groag, Estela Portillo Tremblay, Ana Maria Simo, Migdalia Cruz, and a dozen more. Whether Puertorriqueña, Cubana, Chicana, whether native born or emigrée, these women are the talents of tomorrow in Hispanic theatre. Watch for their work.

QUOTATIONS FROM LATINA PLAYWRIGHTS

As a Hispanic kid growing up in New York, theatre was alien to me. It just wasn't part of your normal scene. I didn't really go to the theatre to see live performance until I was probably twenty and I saw my first play. The whole thing made such an impression on me. Outside of seeing school plays, I had never seen professional actors on a stage, and when I did it just blew my mind. And I said, "Hmm, that would be fun to do."

-Gloria González

The freedom of creativity is a myth. It is the expertise, knowledge of a given craft, that is free. All creative flow must be caught, carved, and curbed to be true to what is honest about life and people. When I started writing drama I believed that the universal theme was the main concern. From there I could build an edifice. I was wrong. Honesty is the underlying structure that never fails. . . . The universal themes are then pleasant discoveries once the play is already written.

-Estela Portillo Trembley

There have always been isolated movements, sporadic periods of women writing, but they were never organic. Women in Argentina gained the vote many years ago, and they made certain gains, but a feminist movement did not previously exist. Now, with the new democratic government which took office in December 1982, our feminist movement has gained strength. We are hearing women's voices, and we have benefited.

-Griselda Gambaro

I'd never tried to write. I was just collecting stories. For instance, a woman told me her child had died two years previously and that at the mortuary she had lifted her child and put it across her face to give it a last goodbye. For two years she said the whole side of her face and her lips were cold. I was just writing things down.

-Milcha Sánchez-Scott

FURTHER READING ON NEW YORK LATINOS

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