

A Hunger for Stories

An Interview with Quiara Alegría Hudes

CARLA CHING

*Quiara Alegría Hudes is an award-winning author of plays, musicals, screenplays, and other literary works; in her work she combines an intellectual curiosity with a humanistic vision to tell new American stories. She won the Tony Award for Best Musical for her play *In the Heights*, which also received the Lucille Lortel Award, the Outer Critics Circle Award, and was a Pulitzer Prize finalist. Her other work for the theater includes the children's piece *Barrio Grrrl!*, *Elliot*, *A Soldier's Fugue* (Pulitzer Prize finalist), *26 Miles*, and *Yemaya's Belly*. Hudes was born and raised in Philadelphia. Her first play was produced in the tenth grade by Philadelphia Young Playwrights, where she now serves as a board member and mentor to other young writers. She received a BA in music composition from Yale and an MFA in playwriting from Brown. She is a resident writer at New Dramatists, and the Joyce Fellow at the Goodman Theatre.*

Carla Ching: *How did you write your first play?*



Photo of Quiara Alegría Hudes by Josh Lehrer.

Quiara Alegría Hudes: I have always been an eavesdropper. I listen for stories, for language. I grew up in West Philly, in a twin Victorian. Across the alleyway from my bedroom window was a similar bedroom window. It was a rental apartment and new people always came through. Some were quiet. Sadly, one was an abusive couple. I always day-dreamed that a girl my age would move in next door and her bedroom window would be across from mine and we'd become best friends and get to

glimpse each other's worlds—for better and for worse. So I wrote my first play with that premise. I imagined two windows, separated by an alley, and two girls from very different walks of life, who spy on each other, judge each other, confide in each other, and ultimately, fall in love.

CC: *What are the challenges of taking a play from the page to the stage? Can you describe the process of getting your first play produced at Philadelphia Young Playwrights when you were a sophomore in high*

school? Is there anything that you took with you from that experience into the rest of your writing life?

QH: There was one lesson that stood true then as it does now—writing is a personal obsession and a hauntingly difficult craft. Back then I had no idea about rewrites—I had a dramaturge asking me questions and offering advice, but I had no idea how to implement it or change my play for the better. Now I probably am slightly better at that. But it’s a struggle.

CC: *Can you describe the role you play now on the Board and as a mentor at Philadelphia Young Playwrights?*

QH: My favorite aspect is interfacing with the students. Each summer I’ve participated in a summer intensive with a group of young playwrights from all over the city. Getting to tell them about my own writing process and lead them through it over the course of a couple days is thrilling. The creativity with which they attack the writing is incredible. It’s raw writing, it’s adventurous writing. Of course, you can’t teach someone how to write a play. You can put a few tools in their hands, and then it’s up to the students to use those tools and refine and spend the time to become a good writer. So I spend the two days looking at as many tools as possible with them, and we have a blast, and at the end, they have a ten-minute play.

CC: *You were composing music for a while before coming back to writing. What brought you back?*

QH: Story. I have a hunger, an elemental fascination with and belief in story. In my own family, as my grandmother passed away—taking with her many stories of a different life and time in her native Puerto Rico—I had a sense of loss. How many stories had she never told me? How many stories went into the ground with her? I decided to spend my life writing, testifying, to let no stories die.

CC: *Do you enjoy collaboration?*

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QH: Yes. I love the dialogue and the interplay of ideas. The thrill of the back and forth, of two people finding an idea, refining the idea, articulating the idea. But it can be a crutch. The most terrifying thing is to write a play, in isolation, alone, with no one else to bolster you. You are solely answerable to the material.

CC: *Has your writing changed over the years?*

QH: How can it not? I change. Life changes. A story, by virtue of writing it down, is changed. I was very interested in “magic realism” earlier on—at least it was labeled that, though I strongly dislike the label. I’d say that my earlier plays have a much more obvious spirituality and heightened theatricality. I’m much more subtle about it now—I interfuse stark realism with heightened theatricality, and I disguise the spirituality much, much more. I found that American audiences are very uncomfortable with spiritual themes—especially ones not from the mainstream point of view.

CC: *Can you describe any writing exercises you’ve done over the years that really shook loose some interesting work?*

QH: Paula Vogel’s bake-off. Write a full-length play in forty-eight hours. It forces you to connect with the subconscious. What comes out is a complete mess. It’s also the closest I come to a raw spirituality and an unhinged vision. I’ll spend the next year editing and refining a bake-off play because the writing is so raw. And yet there’s something so real about that rawness.

CC: *Do you have any writing rituals or advice that you would like to share with young writers? Was there anything that a teacher or mentor ever told you that has served you well in your writing life?*

QH: Keep going. I’ve had two master teachers in my life, and that was what they told me. Keep going. And find the dissonance. ☺