

Kat Avila

An Introduction and an On-line INTERVIEW with Silvia Gonzalez S.

Kat Avila entrevista a Silvia González S., a la que admira desde hace varios años, pero que no conoce personalmente. Esta entrevista fue llevada a cabo a través del Internet. La introducción explora la obra de la dramaturga chicana y deja al descubierto su talento teatral y, por su lado, la entrevista nos presenta su posición frente al teatro y otros fenómenos. González es autora de aproximadamente treinta obras, muchas de las cuales o han sido montadas o han tenido lecturas dramáticas. La mayoría de las obras se encuentran en el sitio Web de González en <http://playsontape.com/gonzalez.html>

I have been wanting to write about Chicana playwright Silvia Gonzalez S. for some time now, despite my not having ever met her in person or seen any of her estimated thirty plays, many of which have received at least a staged reading. This puts me at a great disadvantage when reviewing her work, since a play reaches its fullest potential when it is produced. This is the goal of every playwright. The final judgment of Gonzalez's plays must be situated in their staging.

Plays remaining on paper are only half-realized. A playscript is akin to a computer file of HTML coding. As a webmaster, I know no matter how wonderful my HTML markup looks in its complexity, the real test of its soundness is the unfoldment of the file on the Internet. In a similar fashion, a play may read well but may not work on stage, thereby failing the test it has set up for itself. However, the small number of

institutions dedicated to producing Chicano work, and their tremendous geographic distance from each other, limits accessibility to productions.

Mainstream theater institutions have been helpful to minority playwrights, but up to a point. In a 9 December 1992 letter, Gonzalez responded to a write-up I did of Cornell University's invitation-only "Grassroots Theater in Historical and Contemporary Perspectives" conference held October 9-11, 1992. "I enjoyed your editor's notes," she wrote. "It's all very interesting. One particular situation jumped out at me. That is, how mainstream institutions get funds for minority play development, then do nothing for you when clearly your resume was in the application. Looking back, I think my resume has been used for grants at other institutions or simply to show arts commissions that are breathing down a theatre's neck of minority participation."



Photo courtesy of Elena Gannabov A.

Most of Gonzalez's playscripts can be downloaded from her web page at <http://playsontape.com/gonzalez.html>. The web page includes play synopses and related photographs. Three plays are available in a 5" x 7-1/4" softcover book format. They can be ordered through Dramatic Publishing at <http://www.dramaticpublishing.com/>. Those plays are: *The Migrant Farmworker's Son*, *La Llorona Llorona (The Wailing Woman Cries)*, and *Alicia in Wonder Tierra, or I Can't Eat Goat Head*. *The Migrant Farmworker's Son* has also been reproduced in Perfection Learning's *Drama for Reading And Performance* alongside work by such notables as Neil Simon, David Mamet, and August Wilson. Gonzalez has observed that her work is probably published more often than produced, but the benefit of publication is her work being utilized by high school teachers in their classrooms and graduate students in their thesis projects.

I like what I have read of Gonzalez's work, and through queries, I am aware as is the playwright, that not everyone shares my interest. My enjoyment of a play is a subjective experience, as it is for most people, including mainstream theater critics who are slow to acknowledge the influence of their Western European-dominated upbringing and education on what they see, how they interpret and experience, and how they judge American theater infused with dissimilar cultural influences. That many theater critics are male further removes their interest from a Chicana's work.

Gonzalez writes on a variety of subjects. She does not allow her gender or ethnicity to restrict her voice or manner

of expression. One of Gonzalez's latest plays in production in Chicago is *Don't Promise*, a play about Mormon women in the mid-1800's. Yet, her best known plays, such as *Boxcar*, *The Migrant Farmworker's Son*, and *Alicia in Wonder Tierra, or I Can't Eat Goat Head* address aspects of the spirit of the Mexican/Chicano experience. By spirit, I mean the essence of in-group knowledge and experience of Mexican nationals immigrating to this country and/or the sometimes conflict-filled upbringing of their American children. The strength of *Boxcar* and *The Migrant Farmworker's Son* is in character-driven drama, interspersed with encounters with the mystical, supported by the audience's recognition of the cultural context and the audience's intuitive abilities to supply the subtext. This style of drama stands in provocative contrast to the overtly didactical, vaudevillesque male-written theater pieces Chicano theater has come to be strongly associated with through the popular work of Luis Valdez, Carlos Morton, and Culture Clash.

An adequate biography and review of Gonzalez's plays can be found in *Women Playwrights of Diversity*, edited by Jane T. Peterson and Suzanne Bennett (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997). A second-generation Mexican-American, Gonzalez was born on 23 March 1958 in Southern California (in a remarkable coincidence she is one day older than me). She grew up blue-collar. The traumatizing interpersonal dynamics of her family lead her to write the play *The Narcissistic Personality Disorder Radio Show*, which for awhile was posted as recommended reading on a web site dedicated to the

disorder. She earned a bachelor's degree in Education at Loyola University of Chicago, after having completed coursework at other Loyola centers of education in Los Angeles and Italy. A twenty-acre ranch in Oregon is where Gonzalez presently resides with her husband Tom Scherer and their dogs and cats.

Besides playwriting, Gonzalez has written poetry for small press publications. She has also performed her poetry. As she explained in an unpublished 8 July 2000 letter, "The best part was the audience's reaction in open-mike bars, especially after I read 'Monster in My Chest.' The images in this poem are of horrible fang-like arms bursting out of a woman's chest and trying to choke her to death. I appear very cheerful when I go up to the mike, then Poe-like poetry or urban prose material spills out of my mouth and maybe worries the audience or scares them."

Boxcar, also known under an earlier title as *The Empty Boxcar*, was written in 1987 and was the first play Gonzalez ever wrote. It evolved from a CNN news story about a group of immigrant workers who suffocated in a locked railroad boxcar in Laredo, Texas. In the play, six adult Mexicans and an El Salvadoran teenager gradually realize they are trapped in a boxcar in the desert and there will be no coyote to free them. Roberto and Bill, who both work for la migra (the I.N.S.), find everyone dead in the end, except for one person. Troubled by nightmares over the nature of his work and haunted by an Aztec skull dancer, Roberto has been lead to find the immigrants by his Mexican grandmother's spirit in a hard lesson about the risks people will continue to

take for a better life. In the boxcar, while the immigrants are swapping stories, one character remarks, "If we bring our children here, they turn into Chicanos. *Hijo*, they are worse than gringos." He could easily have been talking about Roberto.

A fifteen-minute version of *Boxcar* was seen in 1988 at a theater conference and play festival in Phoenix sponsored by the Arizona Commission on the Arts. At Seattle Group Theatre's Multicultural Playwrights Festival in 1989, *Boxcar* received a staged reading. In May 1991, the world premiere of *Boxcar* was made possible by a joint venture between Theater Works in Glendale, Arizona, and *Teatro del Valle* in Phoenix, Arizona.

The reading of *Boxcar* in Seattle led to an invitation two months later by internationally known playwright Maria Irene Fornes to join Fornes's writing workshop at International Arts Relations (INTAR) Hispanic American Arts Center in New York. She wrote *Rivals* while at INTAR. Gonzalez recalls her four-month residency with Fornes in *Conducting A Life: Reflections On The Theatre Of Maria Irene Fornes*, edited by Maria M. Delgado and Caridad Svich (Lyme, N.H.: Smith & Kraus, 1999).

In *The Migrant Farmworker's Son*, high school student and rapper wannabe Henry struggles to understand an angry father who stubbornly clings to the old ways of the mother country Mexico and expects his assimilating wife and his American-born son to do the same. Henry is comforted and given advice by a sage farmworker named Oliverio whom he has characterized aloud as "an old man that stares at stars." In due time,

Henry learns the identity of a young girl in braids who unbeknown to everyone but Oliverio and the father continually makes appearances throughout the play. Finding her photograph in the house, Henry confronts his father. It is a picture of Henry's older sister. She drowned in a canal trying to wash a dress her father punished her for dirtying. Henry's father has been carrying around the guilt for fifteen years. After the father's confession, the family is put on a path toward a complete healing. The play has had several staged readings and received a workshop production at the Chicago Dramatists Workshop in 1992.

Another play that has attracted much public attention is specially tailored for young audiences. The play is *Alicia in Wonder Tierra, or I Can't Eat Goat Head*. A screenplay is currently in the works. A teenaged Alicia while visiting a Mexican curio shop with her mother falls down and hits her head. Her accident becomes her ticket to a fantastical journey through a borderland populated with denizens like a talking Day of the Dead sugar skull, an armadillo with a Texas accent, a gang of heavy-on-the-mascara Elvira lookalikes, and a tree of talking heads strangely resembling those of figures from Latino culture and history. In the Distorted Memory Forest, Alicia carries on a conversation with an oven-cooked goat head as it loses one of its eyes to her hungry father. A trumpet-playing puppet named Ramón serves as her guide. She comes away from this crash course with a new appreciation for her Mexican heritage.

Alicia in Wonder Tierra has had staged readings at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., South Coast Rep-

ertory in Costa Mesa, California, and the Bilingual Foundation of the Arts in Los Angeles. There was a 1995 production at The Coterie Theatre in Kansas City, Missouri. Another production is expected in Phoenix, Arizona.

ON-LINE INTERVIEW

K: How long does it take for you to complete a play?

S: I have written an entire draft in a week, with all the components. But tweaking it can take more than a week. Generally, it depends on my attitude toward the work: Is it something I want to finish real fast? Is it something I want to take my time at? Is it a work that needs lots of research and I have to do it when I'm in a huge library? Works that are appalling (even to me) are hard to finish. I will hide the work for years, then go back to it. Also, there are works so intense and emotional I have to finish them right away. Additionally, I see theater as a collaborative art. I usually insist on having a play read with actors in order to hear it. Sometimes I can get actors right away, other times I have to wait a year for a theater to offer this.

K: When you write, where do you look for inspiration?

S: Anywhere. Each play is different. For example, *Boxcar* started from watching CNN news. *Waiting Women* walking into the Yuma Territorial Prison museum; *Los Matadores* subconscious, free association; *The Migrant Farmworker's Son* driving past all the farmworkers every day on the way to work; *Alicia in Wonder Tierra* a psychotic episode; *Squeezed Avocados* my friend got engaged to a girl who was a jinx, and he got in an accident as a result; *The Shrinking Wife* my experience with a

strange neighbor and how he treated his wife; *Don't Promise* a letter from 1864.

K: Is there a difference in the way Euro-American women and Latina playwrights express themselves?

S: I think the difference is in presentation. However, playwrights have to experiment with presentation or theatre dies.

K: Is there a difference in the way women and men tell stories?

S: I believe a writer is a writer. A true writer has no gender.

K: What have your plays done for you?

S: One play in particular, *The Narcissistic Personality Disorder Radio Show*, changed me as a person. It explained all the holes in my life and the "lostness" I felt. Writing that play made me whole. It was the play I subconsciously had to write in order to be whole.

K: If we were to place labels on cer-

tain periods of your creative development, what would those labels say?

S: 1) Who Am I?, 2) Who Are They?, 3) Why the Abuse?, 4) A Woman's Desire To Be Independent, 5) Historical Time Periods, 6) History.

K: What types of audiences do your plays draw?

S: I don't know for sure. My plays are so varied and attract different sets of people. However, the theatre would be in sad shape if audience members saw only one type of play.

END OF INTERVIEW

Silvia Gonzalez S. has proven herself to be a passionate and prolific playwright through the great number of plays she has generated to date. Future goals for Gonzalez include producing her own film and video projects, which would provide another way for audiences to see her work. ☺

Kat Avila graduated from the University of California, San Diego, with an M.A. in Communication. Being of Japanese and Mexican ethnicity, she has taken advantage of her up bringing in the Pacific rim—California, Hawaii, Japan—to write on both American subcultures. Avila is the listed compiler of her father's book Mexican Ghost Tales of the Southwest (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1994). She maintains a web site on Chicano theater and U.S. Latino theater at <http://www/geocities.com/buscandocalifornia/>. Buscando California Now Includes California Tempura: Asian-American theater pages.