



GENDER

IAN SKLARSKY

THE BRIDGE INITIATIVE: *Women In Arizona Theatre*

By |aye Fortune

A HISTORICAL MARVEL occurred at the Tony Awards this year. Three women won in categories previously dominated by men. Albeit a brilliant moment, it did not extinguish gender disparity in the theatre world.

Arizona's largest theatres, Arizona Theatre Company and Phoenix Theatre, will not produce female playwrights this 2015-2016 season.

Proactive women have and are forming theatre groups. The Bridge Initiative: Women in Arizona Theatre is one such group.

January 2015, co-founders, Tracy Liz Miller and Brenda Jean Foley received an Art Tank grant. According to Tracy Liz, the grant strengthened their respect within the theatre community. Both have impressive theatre credentials from New York, too many to list here. Tracy Liz teaches Acting and

Cinema at Chandler-Gilbert Community College. Brenda Jean is on the board of Mesa Encore Theatre.

"The Bridge Initiative is an Arizona nonprofit working to identify and empower female artists in the Southwest region, with the aim of gender parity across all theatrical disciplines. The mission also includes bridging the gap between academia and the professional world, encouraging students to envision a clearer path to becoming lifelong artists."

Grant in hand—website established—a call went out nationwide to female/trans* playwrights and directors. Over 100 scripts were submitted. Guild member Kat Ramsburg was chosen Playwright of the Year for *Anatomy of a Hug*. *Anatomy* received a production in June. Director of the Year, Amanda Noel Trombley (Arizona native), directed.

Mesa Encore Theatre is the fiscal sponsor for The Bridge Initiative. Located at 318 E. Brown Rd., Mesa, AZ, MET has been in the Valley for over 75 years and

PARITY

its Black Box is where The Bridge Initiative's June Symposium was held. The symposium included reading excerpts from top plays submitted, workshops led by NYC-based director Stefanie Sertich, discussions with local artists, and a developmental play reading of *Dairyland* by Heidi Armbruster.

Anatomy's set included a multitude of TV screens flashing iconic shows from the past, media designer, Daniel Fine's creation. He shared his technical genius with three female interns. One example of how The Bridge Initiative will provide practical experience in cross-disciplines for women in AZ.

The Kilroys' (playwrights/producers) "The List" is "The vetted collection of industry-recommended works" by female/trans* playwrights. "The List" is a resource for producers and theatres.



Kat Ramsburg

Zakiyyah Alexander of The Kilroys says, "Since the year that The List has been in existence, we have seen more theaters promoting their 'all female season.'"

Tracy Liz Miller and Brenda Jean Foley are also establishing a list; a theatrical database of


SCOTT HYDER



Tracy Liz Miller, Lizz Reeves Fidler, and Brenda Jean Foley

women in cross-disciplines, thereby informing those in the industry of capable female/trans* residing in Arizona.

Professor Bonnie Eckard of Arizona State University School of Film, Dance and Theatre also supports The Bridge Initiative. Prof. Eckard read many of the plays submitted. Asked if her students were cognizant of gender disparity in theatre. "Some of my female (and male) students are acutely aware...The reality of gender disparity becomes more immediate once students leave academia."

Tracy Liz Miller and Brenda Jean Foley demonstrate their commitment to gender parity by establishing The Bridge Initiative: Women in Arizona Theatre. Website: <http://bridgeinit.weebly.com>. Email: bridgeinit@gmail.com. 

Lisa Loomer

Quiara Alegría Hudes



by Francesca Piantadosi

IAN SKLARSKY

While at the Dramatists Guild Conference, I heard many remarkable women speak: Lisa Kron, Linda Bloodworth-Thomason, Marsha Norman, Kristen Anderson-

Lopez, Julia Jordan...to name a few. Now I'd like to thank artistic director Bill Rauch of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival for including Lynn Nottage, Quiara Alegría Hudes and Lisa Loomer in his season so the reign of remarkable women can continue.

[The following is an excerpt from Francesca's conversation with Quiara and Lisa in Ashland, OR this summer.]

FRANCESCA PIANTADOSI: How do you feel about what you're called? How do you want to be identified or *not* identified as a writer?

QUIARA ALEGRÍA HUDES: It really depends on my mood and context, to be honest. There's something about me—maybe because I'm bi-cultural—I always resist categorization. There are times and circumstances where I'm aware of being a female playwright, a Latino playwright and then there are times when I feel like it can get me pretty mad. If we're

discussing issues of culture or issues of identity, then bring it. If we're getting together to talk about the content of my play, it starts to feel like a way to spin one's wheels for longer than necessary. And a way to punch the conversation one way.

LISA LOOMER: I agree. It depends, sometimes, on the agenda of the person who's asking me. Or what I would be furthering by answering in a certain way. I may feel it's like a prism, or a box, that someone wants to see me in terms of. And I think, "If you really want to know my box, man, it's going to take hours." It's going to take a long, long time for me to tell you all those things that describe my identity. I wish they would just say "writer" because it's a roomier box.

QUIARA ALEGRÍA HUDES: It's very true for me. At the beginning of an interview if they say the "Half Jewish/half Puerto Rican..." There is a way of telling the story in which those facts are correct. But they are misrepresentative in other ways. I've written a lot of plays about North Philadelphia so I'm described as being from there even though I was raised in West Philadelphia. People just want a quick way of saying



PHOTO: JENNY GRAHAM

Lynn Nottage, Lisa Loomer, and Quiara Alegría Hudes whose work was seen at Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland, OR this summer.

it but there's no quick way of saying it. It can especially feel wrong when I'm not entitled to a neutral identity. I have this neutral title called playwright. And there's a specific play that we're discussing so let's get to that.

LISA LOOMER: Or this whole idea of "you write what you know." How would anyone know how I know what I know? How do I even know what I know? It's not geographical. It's way more complex.

QUIARA ALEGRÍA HUDES: I know with some of the ensemble plays I've written especially, every one of those characters is me for various reasons. Some-

times for not that interesting of reasons. But they all come from deep within. But clearly they're aligned with me.

LISA LOOMER: It's always funny when someone says to me, "You must be so and so in that play of yours." No. Probably I'm a bit of everyone. But the one I really identify with would probably surprise you. I think people are more protective, and rightly so, of their ethnic identification at this point in history.

QUIARA ALEGRÍA HUDES: Even in a world in which gender identity is becoming more fluid, more familiar, the basic paradigmatic talk is still a binary male

or female. Right? Whereas I do think ethnicity, just for sheer numbers and history, there is coming a sea of rage that we have to pay for. The question “What are you?” is more and more common because people don’t know. So I think the easy binaries that we’ve come to rely on, become a lot harder especially when something like with the Latino population growing so much which in and of itself is on the radius of so many ethnicities.

FRANCESCA PIANTADOSI: I was at a play of Lisa’s (*Living Out*) many years ago at Seattle Rep. When the talkback started the very first question was “Is the playwright Latina?”

LISA LOOMER: How wonderful that she didn’t know. But somehow, she was disturbed by that. She didn’t know where to come down. In other words, she didn’t know what prism to put the play in.

In the end of *Living Out* there’s a scene between the Latina nanny and the Anglo Mom and the Latina nanny makes a choice about whether or not to say something to her employer. To make a long story short, the Latino audiences saw her choice one way and the Anglos saw the choice as meaning something completely different. This came out in almost all of our after-play discussions. The Anglos saw the nanny as being considerate of the employer. The Latinos saw her choice as a need to draw a line, to protect her own...dignity. It was fascinating.

FRANCESCA PIANTADOSI: Have you experienced any of that, Quiara?

QUIARA ALEGRÍA HUDES: I feel that my writing reflects my own multi-cultural sensibilities and is that totally mainstream yet? I don’t know. But I think it puts people at ease, because it lands somewhere in between. In fact as I’ve been dealing with some characters that are bi-racial, mixed ethnicity, and it really strikes a chord with a lot of people with a mixed cultural background and I think it reverberates to a larger philosophical question. Which is... “Where do I belong?” “Where do I fit in?” It’s fascinating how I found that to strike a chord. I think it’s something of a new frontier. But it asks an age-old question.

LISA LOOMER: A deeper question that goes even

beyond ethnicity.

QUIARA ALEGRÍA HUDES: And I think also if we’re speaking of drama, the classic dramatic coming of age question of “Who do I choose to be?” Or who is society choosing me to be? Actually it’s something akin to *Death of a Salesman* to me. “But I work this way. I’m this way but the world has moved on and I’m still this way. How do I be the normal person that I perceive myself to be... in a world that doesn’t perceive me to be that way?”

FRANCESCA PIANTADOSI: Now do you feel that way, Lisa?

LISA LOOMER: In two plays, I wrote someone who was of two cultures and that was her dilemma. It was probably twenty years ago. I don’t think it was something people resonated with as much they do now.

QUIARA ALEGRÍA HUDES: Multi-ethnic discussions in theatre are much more common these days. I was at a workshop last week for a musical and one of the lead characters is multi-ethnic and one of my actors, actually two of my actors were talking about that. It became an email chain of “Have you read this essay on the topic or this essay on the topic.” There was a merging of scholarship.

FRANCESCA PIANTADOSI: Let’s talk about commissions for a moment. If I run a theatre and I’m commissioning you to write a play, let’s say I’d like you to write a play about the cable cars of San Francisco...

LISA LOOMER: Chances are I would have to find...the question evoked by those cars! With [my play] *Roe v Wade*, Bill Rauch asked me if I might be interested in the subject. But I had to find my way in. I was not interested in the case per se. What interested me was the ongoing divide between liberals and the Christian right. Why can’t we talk to each other? Luckily the story itself, which I won’t give away, gave me that divide. So sometimes a commission may look one way...but, of course, you’ll find your own entry point.

FRANCESCA PIANTADOSI: What about you, Quiara? If I commissioned you to write a play about polar bears would you be able to find your way into that?

QUIARA ALEGRÍA HUDES: Not polar bears. But if you ask me to write a play in which polar bears were performing...that I could probably do. I might just take you up on that.

FRANCESCA PIANTADOSI: What do you feel about writers block or whatever term you give it. Do you believe in it?

LISA LOOMER: I don't have writers block but I do waste time. I usually say I'm doing research. But it's all part of the mysterious process. While I'm avoiding I'm probably percolating.

FRANCESCA PIANTADOSI: What about you Quiara? Do you ever get stuck?

QUIARA ALEGRÍA HUDES: I've stopped writing a play before because I read it and it struck me a little bit like a lie. So I stopped writing it. I might pick back up sometime.

Knowing how my plays have been developed, sometimes I just let it be for a month. I don't know the answer now. I find taking walks to be really healthy. The activity helps. Even meditating helps. I don't formally meditate. But sometimes just being is pretty productive and the positive thing to do. It's writing but not exactly pen in hand.

I have a play going to the Signature next year. It's a five-scene play and I thought scenes one through three always felt right and scenes four and five felt okay. And I put it away and let it be. Then I had a reading of it and I finally figured out scenes four and five. I don't think about it as writer's block.

FRANCESCA PIANTADOSI: I'm a little bit curious as to what you meant by it felt like a lie.

QUIARA ALEGRÍA HUDES: Like I was deciding every character. My relationship with each character was not purposeful. I also thought stylistically, that it looked like a stranger had written it. Often times that does happen.

LISA LOOMER: And that could be good.

QUIARA ALEGRÍA HUDES: But this felt like I was playing dress-up a little bit.

FRANCESCA PIANTADOSI: Has that ever happened to

you, Lisa?

LISA LOOMER: I'm having the experience right now with a play where people say, "Boy, that doesn't sound like you at all." It's about homeless teens... so it's their voice. And it may be something people don't expect from me.

FRANCESCA PIANTADOSI: I feel we've come full circle. We started by talking about identity and how sometimes we don't mind identifying as something and other times we bristle. It sounds like what you just mentioned has to do with identity because they're saying "This doesn't sound like you." I bristled on behalf of you and thought, "What does that mean?"

LISA LOOMER: I do want the freedom to not sound like what people might expect.

FRANCESCA PIANTADOSI: Do you feel the same way, Quiara? For example, maybe you've written about Philadelphia so much that people expect or want that from you?

QUIARA ALEGRÍA HUDES: I have written about Philadelphia, so I've written myself into a box there. I have no problem with any conversation that comes out of the actual material. It's very gratifying to me.

FRANCESCA PIANTADOSI: I was just curious. Because you were very clear, that you were not the girl to write my fictitious polar bear play.

QUIARA ALEGRÍA HUDES: I've become better and better about identifying what's going to make me feel trapped for months on end. And what's going to make me feel terrified and fulfilled. And I think I've become better at answering that question early on. And not make people go crazy.

LISA LOOMER: I think that should be part of our job description to "feel terrified and fulfilled."

QUIARA ALEGRÍA HUDES: In the best circumstances if I'm writing a play and I think something really good is happening writing wise, it's still so hard and brutal and manic and it's probably somewhat strange and upsetting to the people around me. If it's a bad circumstance it's even worse. I like being a writer with

children because I can only do that so much and then I have to turn it off or I'd just be like that 24 hours a day.

LISA LOOMER: Yes! I have to remember, those people in the play are NOT real. And that child is very real.

FRANCESCA PIANTADOSI: Let's talk for a moment about teaching. Quiara, I know you teach.

QUIARA ALEGRÍA HUDES: Wesleyan. Yes. I teach playwriting one day a week. It's a wonderful job. The students are interesting, very creative. They definitely keep me on my toes.

LISA LOOMER: What made you want to teach?

QUIARA ALEGRÍA HUDES: I reached a crossroads. Thank God I had some choices. I thought rather than taking a writing job that would pay handsomely, I'd rather keep my relationship with playwriting personal. I had a chance to do TV jobs but I walked this fortunate path to get to where I am where at many junctures I had extraordinary teachers. At some point I knew there will be a reckoning with all this. I have to pass it on.

LISA LOOMER: I'm curious. You actually determined at a certain point that "TV and film is not for me?"

QUIARA ALEGRÍA HUDES: I did.

LISA LOOMER: You're lucky to be clear. It's such a waste of time to not be clear.

QUIARA ALEGRÍA HUDES: It is awful to not be clear. But it took a lot of years of grabbing my hair and crying. I talked to Bridget Carpenter. I spoke to Sarah Ruhl and said "I don't know what to do and I'm in crisis." And it was a big question for years especially when I had my second child. There were some real financial considerations brought to us that we had not been planning for. And even then being faced with the kind of writing job that I only could have imagine dreaming of ten years ago, part of me was saying, "Don't do it. Don't do it. Don't do it."

LISA LOOMER: You mean TV?

QUIARA ALEGRÍA HUDES: Yeah. A good job. So I was feeling very irresponsible saying no. And if I'm saying

no I have to earn that no somehow. Then I took the teaching job and it's not a decision I regret. Writing is extraordinarily challenging for me. It's hard. I'm slow. I get very aggravated if it's not perfect, which as we know is never. So I just thought what's going to come of me as a playwright if I'm giving five days a week for eight months straight to other writing. It just seemed like utter obliteration. It wouldn't work.

FRANCESCA PIANTADOSI: Were you happy with what you wrote?

QUIARA ALEGRÍA HUDES: Yeah. I found it easier to be honest. But ease had nothing to do with it.

Actually when push comes to shove there are a hundred reasons we become playwrights. But some of those for me, were seeing my mother perform her religious rituals as a child. It was seeing a relative in the circus. It had to do with what happens when people are in a room and shit's going on. And that doesn't even make sense for TV. So for me it's easier because I don't even seek that relationship with TV.

LISA LOOMER: Some people were raised on TV and love TV.

QUIARA ALEGRÍA HUDES: To be honest, I was raised on TV and watch it religiously. I remember watching MTV when it first started. I remember all the iconic things of that generation. But that's entertainment for me. I'm not a participant. I've never felt like a consumer of theatre. I don't consume theatre. I dive head first into the event.

LISA LOOMER: I agree. Where do I go when everything is falling apart? To the theatre. And I feel... well, at least I feel alive. Connected again.

QUIARA ALEGRÍA HUDES: I guess there's a lot of questioning about the future of theatre. Is it obsolete? I get the feeling we've crossed into the digital realms so much that theatre has more of an arc to it. It speaks for itself now. The problem is the area of critical mass. Technology is so much a part of our every day life that theatre is special again.

FRANCESCA PIANTADOSI: (*Laughing*) So we've decided theatre is relevant. I'm so glad. 🎭