

Alvin Eng

Firsts That Last: Remembering Miguel



It was an enormous affirmation for Miguel Algarín, Rome Neal, and Bob Holman to welcome me and many of my fellow Asian American spoken word, theatre, and music artists to the magical community that is The Nuyorican Poets Cafe. Miguel was the first artist-activist-visionary to acknowledge my work in a substantial way. That acknowledgment was giving one of my plays a full production – a first beyond one-to-three-night stands. As far as I know, my “punk-rap” musical, *The Gong Hay Kid*, was also the first full-length Asian American dramatic work to be performed on and around the Cafe’s magical stage in 1994.

Miguel and Rome nurtured the play with tough love and tender affirmation. In dramaturgical discussions, Miguel’s words were powerful and memorable. As powerful as hearing him begin an epic street poem with, “I’d rather pay for my sex than live with it...” As memorable as him exhorting a loud, exasperated “puh-leeze” at a midtown Off-Broadway play after a well-intentioned but ultimately forced and hollow soliloquy for early ‘90s multicultural unity. Before each performance, Rome led spiritual circles of chanting “I just want to celebrate” in rooms above in the Cafe that lifted the cast, crew, and band to higher ground before we would descend the stairs to enter the main area and stage. I was also the guitarist in the “pit band.”

Several years later, Miguel and Lois Griffith included *The Goong Hay Kid*, in their amazing anthology, *Action*. This play publication was another first.

I first entered the Cafe a few years earlier when Bob Holman led the entire company of the Poets Theatre at La MaMa over there after our final performance in Spring, 1990. Immediately, you could feel the power and energy of that special space. I found myself in the center of a community of artistry with a singular level of primal talent and diversity that I have not experienced before or since. The Cafe felt like the heart and soul of NYC’s early 90s “Gorgeous Mosaic” as our late Mayor Dinkins christened that era. In subsequent years, I went on to be one of Bob’s substitute hosts for the Friday Open Slam, as well as the host of Wednesday night Slam Open. More firsts. But with these high-flying moments also came timeless revelations.

The Cafe was where my late mother saw my work for the first time. She was born of peasant farmer ancestry in the village of Taishan in the Southern China province of Guangdong and had never learned fluent English. After Miguel and Rome gave her a most respectful introduction from the stage, my mother stood up and took a bow for the ages. It really surprised me as I watched her from the band pit. As the play progressed, I could feel the close spiritual bond in the happiness on her face, but I also felt the puzzlement of missing many linguistic riffs – my stock

in craft – that the rest of the audience acknowledged. While the Cafe helped us feel and elevate everything that was in and around us, it also made us realize what was missing and, thus, crystalized the work needed to be done to continue to grow as people, as artists, as a city, as a world.

The last time I saw Miguel was in 2019 when I recited a poem for him in the hospital. I read “Twas the Night Before Chinese New Year” – a poem that Miguel and Bob included in their seminal anthology, *Aloud*. This publication was another first.

All of these firsts with Miguel and the Nuyorican Poets Cafe will last with me forever.

Thank you for lifting me and countless others, Miguel. Rest in power.

Alvin Eng is a native NYC playwright, performer, and educator. His plays and performances have been seen Off-Broadway, as well as in Paris, Hong Kong, and Guangzhou, China. Current/Recent Projects: HISTORY, NOT NOSTALGIA: CROSSROADS 2021, for JAMES BALDWIN—essay, spoken word video and Baldwin-inspired playlist for National Sawdust’s “ideas” website page; Dixon Place 2020 Workshop Residency to develop a solo “acoustic punk raconteur” work, HERE COMES JOHNNY YEN AGAIN (or How I Kicked Punk); 2020 NYSCA/NYFA Fellowship in Nonfiction Literature for his memoir, OUR LAUNDRY, OUR TOWN: Memoir Portraits of an NYC Chinese American Life-In-Progress. www.alvineng.com