

**Bina Sharif**

## **Laughter Is the Key Which Opens a Box of Memories**



Miguel Algarín was the founder of the great Nuyorican Poets Cafe. A wonderful poet himself, a professor, a genius blessed with an amazingly lively and crackling laughter. When I started to go to Nuyorican Poets Cafe after moving to the East Village I felt as if I was in an atmosphere in which I was breathing poems, smelling poems, performing poems and just loving every minute of it. Miguel wasn't at the Cafe much and I didn't even know who he was. I soon became part of the poetry slams and one evening I saw a gentleman sitting at the bar, having a drink and laughing heartily. I am always enticed by a nice, loud laugh and no one had a laugh like Miguel.

I said hello, and he said, "And who are you?"

And I said, "I am a poet."

"So, you are?" He said with a sarcastic wit.

And I said, "Who are you?"

"You are in my cafe girl." He said and laughed even louder.

And I realized that I am in the presence of a great man with a personality so huge and a wit so sharp which was quite powerful and intimidating. I just knew it was Miguel because I had already heard about his mesmerizing personality.

"So nice to meet you." I, said

"Where do you come from?" He, said

"From far away." I, said

"How far? From East 4<sup>th</sup> Street?" Another laugh...

"From far, far away," I, said

"And you came straight to my Cafe."

"Yes, sir." I, said

"Your laughter brought me here." I wanted to say, but I didn't. I was in awe of him.

That was the moment of respect and admiration for him which lasted a long time. And then I started to laugh myself. His laughter was vibrant and full of joy. It always rejuvenated me. After that whenever I saw him in the Cafe or in the street or at another theater winning awards, the

sweet joy of his laughter entered my soul... And that's how I remember Miguel.

It's not that we had a deep friendship, or that we went to parties and dinners together. It was a relationship of joy and happiness. When he got to know more about my work, he used to say, "There's no stopping this girl." And then he would have a giant laugh and I would laugh with him. I think I have a good laugh myself but no way near Miguel's. Many times, I ran into him at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Ave and 6<sup>th</sup> Street corner bar, and we would stand outside on the steps and chat about poetry, theater, and the way of the world, and then he would go into the bar and I would go on my way but with much more giddiness. He made me feel alive.

Another time, I was invited to a radio recording at the Cafe, I think it was WBAI. My name was not on the list and the person guarding the door wouldn't let me in after a while, he became convinced somehow and let me in and when I told Miguel about the incident, he just laughed and said, "You should have told him what I always say about you, "There is no stopping this girl, she came from far away."

My regret is that I didn't develop a deep friendship with him. I think I was a bit shy and intimidated and never wanted to impose myself. But I respected him a great deal and will never forget his heartfelt and wonderful laughter so full of life.

Miguel Algarín's laughter is in my memory, and it will remain there forever along with his poetry, his humanity, his giant personality, and his incredibly sharp wit.

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**Bina Sharif** is an award-winning playwright/actress/director/poet/performance artist and a visual artist. She has performed poetry at Nuyorican Poets Cafe, at Bowery Poetry Club, Steve Cannon's Gathering of Tribes, and St Mark's Poetry Project. She has had 33 plays produced in NYC and in theater festivals abroad. Her play, *My Ancestor's House*, is published in *Women of Color American Playwrights* by Rutledge Press and is being taught in several universities. Her one-woman play, *Afghan Woman*, a response to Sept 11 and the Afghan war was produced by Theater for The New City (TNC) and toured at least 20 university drama departments with Bina Sharif as the performer. The play has been translated into Arabic and was performed off and on for 8 years in Toronto, Pakistan, Hawaii, England, and Belgium. She was nominated for the Joseph Jefferson Award for best-supporting actress at Goodman Theater in Chicago. Her new play, *Life Is A One-Act Play*, will open at TNC this September 2021. She has worked with great talents such as Maria Irene Fornes, Fernando Arrabal, Vanessa Redgrave, Sarah Schulman, Kevin Mitchell Martin, and Brian F O'Byrne and has conducted many film and theater interviews for Cover Arts. She has an MD from Pakistan and a Master's degree from John Hopkins.