

## **Dorothy Friedman August**

### **The Nuyorican with a Big Heart: Remembering Miguel Algarín**



I remember Miguel Algarín for his talent as a poet and person. I was impressed by his demeanor and generous spirit from the first time I met him in the 70's at Maurice Kenny's apartment on Clark Street in Brooklyn Heights. It was where Kenny entertained poet friends, many published in his magazine, CONTACT II. There was Josh Goschiak, CONTACT II co-editor Diane Burns who sometimes lived at TRIBES Gallery, Pedro Pietri, Carol Polcovar THE HELEN REVIEW co-editor along with myself and others. At this first meeting I was immediately struck by Miguel's polite and congenial demeanor. I saw him on and off over the years, often at The Nuyorican Poets Café. Sometimes on the streets nearby. He was always genial. I remember his smile when we ran into each other outside the HOWL Festival at Tompkins Square Park, in front of ART AROUND THE PARK, where artists painted on

canvases before dazzled passersby. It was a fitting place to meet Miguel, egalitarian like he was, as he smiled as Gary Azon took a photo of both of us.

A few years earlier I'd asked Miguel to judge DOWNTOWN's "Year Of The Poet" contest, along with Susan Sherman and Wanda Phipps. He kindly contributed his vote. It was the year Sapphire won 1st Prize.

It's difficult to talk about Miguel without talking about his contributions to the cultural life of the Lower East Side, perhaps The Nuyorican Poets Cafe his greatest.

The Cafe, a performance space, is a site of Puerto Rican culture and activism and known for its tolerance and inclusiveness, its poetry slams that Bob Holman curated in the 80's and 90's, it's terrific theater, poetry, jazz and performance. I remember hanging out with Miguel at his office on the 2nd floor and seeing plays there by Steve Cannon, Ishmael Reed and Amiri Baraka, who also read and performed there, along with Pedro Pietri and many others. It's one of the few arts venues that hasn't succumbed to gentrification and is still going strong after almost five decades.

Miguel was born September 11, 1941. Sixty years later the World Trade Center was attacked by terrorists who crashed their planes into its towering buildings that were a symbol of America's power. It was where corporations were housed, in the two buildings that jutted out into the sky.

Miguel, on the other hand, was far from a corporate type. He was one of our counterculture heroes, a leader in the Puerto Rican and Lower East Side community, along with Miguel Piñero and Pedro Pietri. Pioneer, poet, person, Miguel was exemplary, as generous and courteous as he was talented.

Miguel Algarín won National Book Awards in Poetry. He unites the best elements of poetry in his writing, craft and content, with his insights into the politics of living in NYC and America,

the hardships of urban life, and other struggles against poverty and racism that so many face living in a city divided between poor and wealthy. Along with many of us, he's watched as gentrification has slowly and insidiously devoured the city, the Lower East Side in particular, forcing people to either leave or live in the streets. Homelessness is still on the rise, as more hi-rises and banks dominate the neighborhood's landscape and more stores forced to close are replaced by banks.

Miguel Algarín had a keen eye for detail in his poetry and a superb way of capturing the nuances of our culture and city, the times we were living through its obstacles, and inequities and inability to provide The American Dream to all its citizens, not just the white and wealthy. Personal, universal and profound, his strong clear voice resounds through his poems, as well his fine craft and rhythms. Controlled and elegant, yet earthy and accessible, he unites the elements that make for good poetry and makes good poetry better.

**The following are excerpts from three of Miguel Algarín's poems:**

"NEW YEAR'S EVE, DECEMBER 31, 1975"

no symbol of/but the very thing itself/the knife in the belly/and the blues singing/soft shoes of pain as my gut/kicks my nerves insisting/on its pain vomiting more pain/about gifts that on a Christmas/day reach a dead child too late to be played with/but it wasn't the delivered fact/it was his psyche who kept forgetting that Christmas falls with love/not on a calendar but on the tender/feelings where the self of all others wants/love and sharp edges that airock the intrepid mind into a self-created speech. . ./and I got me one more minute of talk/and I got one more accurate talk /before 1976 finds me shooting up and down behind the Nuyoric

Poets Cafe bar/ trying to decode a nuclear voice with its ravings/ short circuits that block the world from coming together

"ELECTION...and second part (1985)"

there aren't any guarantees/ for the public to take hold of/ although some go out and vote/ pretending /that the machinery isn't/ fraudulent/ that Duende doesn't

repress/ not understand that it's written in every man's bible/ that in El Salvador christ has not yet/ freed his folk

"NOT TONIGHT BUT TOMORROW"

Not tonight but tomorrow/ when my body will have shed its fear of turning old and soft/ Not tonight but tomorrow/ when the universe moves on beyond the field of action/ that is the Earth to me and you/ will I discover the interplanetary clues/ that signal the roots of my moment to you/ Not tonight but tomorrow/ will I throw my feelings into New York streets/ to stew in the violence and despair of our planet/ Not tonight but tomorrow will the Earth turn green.

These powerful and poignant poems evoke Miguel Algarín's spirit, taking us on a journey through his physical and psychic world. This is how I will always remember him in the world of poetry and humans-as the Nuyorican with a big heart.

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**Dorothy Friedman** August is a widely published award-winning poet. She's won two New York Foundation of the Arts fellowships and published three books of poetry, including FAMILY ALBUM and THE LIBERTY YEARS, fourth book, THE L SHAPED ROOM, will be published by Poets Wear Prada this fall. She currently edits WHITE RABBIT, a zine, has directed poetry programs for The Living Theater, and is working on a memoir about the lower east side.