

Frank Perez

Burning Down the Nuyorican Poets Café



I had always heard of Miguel Algarín as a poet, but had never met him until I went to the Nuyorican Poets Cafe to try and put on a show there. It was the early 90's and the Lower East Side was still hot, drugs, arson and all kinds of things going on good and bad. My friend and I wanted to put up a show Rican-Struction: Estorias del Barrio at the Nuyorican and figured the best way was to just go there and ask. It was mid afternoon when we arrived. At this point in time I had just finished directing *El Cano* by Louie

Delgado for Repertorio Español. It ran for 2 years and received great reviews, along with *La Gringa* the productions received an Obie award. So I was very full of myself and thought getting into the Nuyorican shouldn't be a problem. As we walked in we saw him eating lunch onstage, he had an almost regal look, sitting in a chair as if it were a throne. Are you Miguel Algarín? I asked. Who are you? He bellowed back. Right away the "street" came out in me and I said "well are you him?" He looked at me inquisitively and I just introduced myself knowing it was him. I rambled a bit about how I have this great show of one acts by talented writers and performers who are Nuyorican and should be here. After my pitch, he told me he hadn't seen my work or heard of me. I guaranteed him I could sell out the Cafe, he was regally unmoved. I understood his position but instead of being disappointed, I was angry because I knew this show was good and belonged at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe. But my partner and I understood and we turned dejectedly to walk out. As we were walking out I don't know why I said this but out of anger and frustration I turned to my partner and said in a loud voice so Miguel could hear "I wonder how many cans of gas it would take to light this place up" my partner without skipping a beat said "two." All of a sudden I heard this loud belly laugh that I would come to hear at the Cafe a lot, "come back here" he commanded. First of all I would've never burned down the Cafe, but I think he got a kick out of the "ballsy-ness" of this veiled threat. We negotiated a two-week run which turned into a month. He loved the show, never missed a performance and we sold out each show. After that opportunity the Nuyorican became my second home, I met all the characters of the Cafe and became part of the Cafe lore by having our theater company's picture in the first floor bathroom for years! A true honor, thank you Miguel for taking a chance and believing in a dream.

Frank Perez is a published author, playwright and poet, he is an Obie award winning theater director and a media producer. Born in East Harlem, where he currently resides, he has

performed in many spoken word venues, universities and literary institutions/events across the country. As a social justice activist he has marched, demonstrated and performed everywhere there is injustice including Vieques, Puerto Rico, Washington DC and the University of Puerto Rico. Currently he is producing an award winning cable TV teen talk show dealing with the East Harlem community, from a teen point of view. His latest published poetry can be found in the anthology, *Me No Habla Con Accento* available at The Gift Shop in El Museo del Barrio, in East Harlem.