

Puma Perl Remembering Miguel Algarín

Photo, Nancy Mercado, Loisaida Festival, 2017



As an elementary school student, I recall being given the assignment to write about “the most unforgettable character I’d ever met.” I believe the idea came from a series in *The Reader’s Digest*. I couldn’t think of anyone, so I wrote about a great-grandmother whom I’d only met once, unforgettable because she was 101 years old. I would wager a safe bet that nobody who passed through the Cafe, whether or not they interacted with him, ever forgot Miguel Algarín.

It astounds me that he must have been only in his early thirties the first time I saw him, at the original Nuyorican Poets Cafe located on East 6th Street. I look at pictures from that era and,

although I see a slim, dark-haired, handsome young man, the Miguel I picture is always an elder, the person who made poetry and performance accessible, who inspired confidence and hope, especially in those of us who had little belief in ourselves. In my case, it took a few years of getting drunk, acting out, and being a general pain in Miguel’s ass before I finally realized I could utilize the creative force within, more productively and that it would save my life. Since that time, I’ve written and published five solo collections and each has been inscribed to Miguel the same way – “There’s no me without you.” The remembrance I’ve chosen to share has to do with his personal resilience and his strength.

Twenty years ago, I attended the premiere of the film *Piñero*. Miguel Algarín’s character was played by Giancarlo Esposito. There was uncertainty about whether he could attend because he was very ill at the time, suffering from pancreatitis and other opportunistic infections related to his many years of living with HIV and AIDS. But he was there, in a wheelchair, being cared for by a friend. His mind seemed very unclear, whether from illness, medications, or an onset of dementia I could not tell. I had the sinking feeling that it might be the last time I’d see him. About a year later, I was walking up Avenue B, when Miguel came bounding towards me, gave me a big hug, told me he’d just gotten off a plane from Dallas, Texas, where he’d given a reading and was now off to a favorite watering hole before another scheduled performance. The best words to describe him that day are “hale” and “robust.” And that’s how I like to remember Miguel Algarín – doing what he loved with a few hugs and a couple of drinks with friends in between.

Puma Perl is a poet, writer, and performer with five solo collections in print. The most recent is *Birthdays Before and After* (Beyond Baroque Books, 2019.) She is the producer/creator of

Puma's Pandemonium, which brings spoken word together with rock and roll, and she performs regularly with her band Puma Perl and Friends. She's received three New York Press Association Awards in recognition of her journalism, and is the recipient of the 2016 Acker Award in the category of writing. She was a HOWL Happening! artist in residence, May, 2021.