



## **FAQ : FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

### **What childhood or young adult experiences, memories, characteristics shape you and your writing?**

I came to U.S. when I was five years old and my life would never be the same after that because for the most part my life became about finding an identity and trying to figure out who I was Mexican or American? Also, my father had an affair, one of several, that I found out about when I was 12 and I got to see just how unjust things were for women especially Mexican women. It broke my heart and I hated my father for many years because although my father was psychologically abusive towards my mother, she would not allow me to be angry at him so I buried my hatred for him and was only able to express it through my writing. Writing has been my form of therapy. Thanks to my writing I've forgiven my father and made peace with him, I've forgiven myself and have done a lot of spiritual healing.

Another thing that happened that affected me was when "A.K.A. Pablo" a sit-com created by Norman Lear for Paul Rodriguez was aired and after only 6 episodes it was cancelled. I was so excited that at last I was going to see a Mexican family on TV and then when it was cancelled I was so depressed. I yearned to see myself represented. Since I was undocumented for 13 years I felt invisible and I yearned to be human. As a little girl I felt like an "alien" and wanted to see myself on TV because I thought whatever was on TV was the truth...up until I started seeing negative representations of Latinos and then I realized that TV perpetuated lies. I set out to write to tell the truth about Latinos and women.

### **Did anyone inspire you to become a writer?**

My mother was my muse and my first writing teacher because she had a talent for oral literature. Her storytelling ability showed me how to view the world in an interesting way. However, it was Luis Valdez who was my first inspiration. I loved his actos and decided I wanted to be a playwright after I saw his acto *La Carpa De Los Rasquachi*.

### **Have you been mentored by any playwrights?**

I was very lucky that I started writing plays at 16 and had access to several playwrights through my connections with LATC, the Los Angeles Theatre Centre. I attended the Young Playwrights Lab led by Playwright Mariana Meyer who became a mentor for a few years after. I was also mentored by the director Bob Harders and Irene Fornes while taking her six month workshop at INTAR in New York City.

### **How did you face, encounter, and/or overcome any obstacles to getting your plays produced?**

I was very lucky that I got my first play *Simply Maria* or *the American Dream* produced when I was 18 and my first full length play *Real Women Have Curves* when I was 21. So I didn't have too much trouble getting produced. I have had several productions of my play, but I used to get so many rejections at first. However, I just kept submitting my play and usually after a production of *Real Women...* the word would get out and other theatres would be interested.

### **What do you believe your characters reflect or reveal?**

My characters all reveal an inner strength, which allows them to go beyond their comfort zones to discover they are more powerful and beautiful than what they think they are.

### **What would you say would be the themes of your work?**

Anger is power. Being real and authentic and vulnerable is powerful. Make people's assumptions about you work toward your advantage. Life without passion is not worth living. Live in the present and you can live forever.

### **What inspires you and or your writing today?**

Anger is what inspires me to write the most. A lot of things piss me off so much I have to say something, speak up. It really makes me angry the way women, especially actresses, are treated and expected to starve themselves to have a career whereas men could be fat and unattractive and mediocre and get ahead. So many things around me that are so unfair and obviously ridiculous but we don't change them as a society.

### **Why have you chosen theatre as the medium for your storytelling?**

I think theatre is a spiritual experience. There is an exchange of light and energy between an audience and the actors. It can be life altering.

### **What makes a good story/play/script?**

A good story is one that challenges that which we hold sacred or can't bare to look at. Like - my parents are sexual beings, like - we all die... I also think using humour in a story that otherwise could easily be a drama or a tragedy. It gives the characters a certain degree of dignity and it makes the audience bare or at least be entertained enough to listen to new truths that are sometimes too painful to accept.

### **Do you have a list of the plays produced since 1995?**

No, I don't. In April of 1995 I signed a contract with Dramatic Publishing so they could handle the licensing for all my plays so I stopped keeping track. You can go to [dramaticpublishing.com](http://dramaticpublishing.com) to get the list.

### **Do you mentor aspiring playwrights?**

Yes, I teach writing at CASA0101 and work with a few aspiring playwrights whose work we plan to produce.

### **What is your connection to your community?**

I love Boyle Heights. It's another one of my muses. I want to give back to my community as much as I can. I wrote a play titled Boyle Heights, which is an homage to my community.

### **What are you working on right now?**

I am presently workshopping the musical version of *Real Women Have Curves* at CASA 0101, finishing my first novel *Hungry Woman in Paris* and starting her second one *A Girl and A Ball*, writing *Trio Los Machos*, a play about three bachelor men in their seventies who play in a guitar trio who met while participating in the Bracero Program, for Brava Theater in San Francisco. I am also currently writing a quinceanera movie based on *Once Upon A Quinceanera* for Sony/Lifetime, and I'm writing a gorilla low-budget feature I hope to direct myself.

**In researching your biographical information, I came across this quote and was very moved by it: ""Unless you have lived through your childhood knowing that, in the eyes of your adopted country, you have no right to exist," she says, "there is no way to explain the terror and anger I felt back then." Can you tell me a little more about this, about how it felt growing up undocumented in the US, etc. How did this play a role in your individual development, in your perception of the US, in your overall psyche?**

The journalist reworded my quotes, but the essence of it is there. I truly felt like I was an alien from another planet and was not a human being. I felt invisible. Being undocumented affected me so much; my self esteem. I started writing to affirm my humanity.

**Further along those lines, I also read that in high school you were told by a professor that you needed to lose weight to have a chance as an actress.**

Yes, this is true. She was my favorite theatre teacher and she told me this coming from good intentions. She had personal life experiences to prove what she was saying. I thank her dearly for being so authentic with me and opening my eyes so that I could do something about it. I truly could choose my future knowing the realities of the business.

**Do you feel this ideal of being thin, US-born, etc. is still as predominant in our society as it was 10 years ago?**

Yes, it's just as bad if not worse. Hollywood makes movies for profit, tits and ass make profit, therefore objectifying women on film and TV is so profitable the industry will not change.

**If so, what message does it send to young girls about themselves?**

The message is that you are only as valuable as your body or your face. So when you get older you lose your value/currency. It also says what you think is not as important as how you look. You have to be beautiful so you can be loved and be valued. It makes young women have to choose between being beautiful or intelligent.

**How did it make you feel as a young woman?**

It made me feel that being "brilliant " was a waste if I was not beautiful. I felt I had to get fat so boys/men would stop looking at me as a sexual object and listen to me and my thoughts. I was taken seriously when I was fat, but when I would get thin I was physically grabbed in public or had men tell me dirty things. It was frightening to be beautiful and get so much attention. I felt so vulnerable being beautiful because men felt entitled to comment on my looks and my worth. I also hated seeing men treat me better than other women because I was sexy/beautiful. I hated seeing this superficial side of men.

**How do you feel Real Women Have Curves makes an impact against societal prejudices and subsequent self-image perceptions?**

It makes women feel good about themselves so Madison Avenue has failed and therefore it makes an economic impact... I really don't know... I just know it's a big " fuck you " to all the advertising campaigns to degrade women's sense of self worth.

**Who, or what, specifically inspired you to write Real Women Have Curves and why?**

I was inspired to write Real Women Have Curves shortly after I got my temporary residence card in 1987. I had been working in my sisters sewing factory just a few weeks before I got it. It was definitely the women and the way they did their work with such dignity that inspired me to write my story. I really enjoyed working there and listening to the gossip of the women. I wanted to celebrate becoming " legal " by writing my play about my experience working in the sewing factory. I wanted to celebrate the camaraderie between women

**Can you talk to me a little about what you feel the status/roles of Latinos in today's US-society are?**

Since I am not an anthropologist or sociologist I don't know that I can accurately answer that. I am excited by the fact that the recent census statistics show that Latinos are the " largest minority " - I know it's an oxymoron. This is a huge question because the debate still persists about who is a Latino and the status varies with each group. Unfortunately, our real status doesn't matter as much as the perception people have of us. For instance, in Beverly Hills is that of servant, therefore for most of the Hollywood executives their relationship to Latinos is very limited and their perception of us is of being the " help " so that's often what we see in films and TV and sadly it makes that the reality in people's minds.

**What do you think is the best approach for Latino-empowerment? Is it solely education - or is there a bigger picture beyond it?**

Yes, it definitely starts with education and of course getting fair representation. Now that we have a Latino mayor we will see what kind of empowerment comes with that.

**I read an article in which you spoke about the importance of minorities finding their own voices, the importance of oral traditions (even within your own family). Can you talk to me a little about this please?**

Oral tradition is very important. I learned to become a writer by listening to my mother's stories and gossip and my grandfather's ghost stories. I think there are so many Latino authors out there who don't know they are writers because they are working in beauty shops telling their stories to other women. If these women simply wrote down their stories and edited them and put them in the acceptable mainstream formats then they could be considered authors instead of "chismosas ".

**What are your goals as an individual?**

My overall goal is to contribute to humanity with my writing and my artistic expression.

**What are your goals with Casa 0101? What do you hope for its' future?**

I am no longer artistic director of CASA 0101, but my hopes were to bring the arts to my community. I hope the new artistic director continues carrying the torch and is able to inspire more artists like I hope I did.

**...your own future?**

In the near future I hope to be a good mother, a successful novelist, and a maverick film director.

**What inspires you now? Is it any different than what inspired you when your artistic career began?**

When my career began my concern was the accurate and fair representation of Latinos on TV and film as well as women's rights. What inspires me now is global understanding and the love and care of our planet. I'm becoming a citizen of the world. I still however see how important the sacred feminine is to the survival of the planet and humanity.

**Who is/are your hero/heroes and why?**

Hero? Hmm... I would say that the little girl inside of me thinks I'm here hero...probably Michael Moore.

A few biographical questions...

**a) How many brothers/sisters do you have?**

I have 7 siblings, four sisters and three brothers.

**b) Is your family still primarily L.A.-based?**

No, my parents and my older brother and his family live in Mexico. My third oldest sister and her family live in Utah, I live in LA with my family along with the rest of my brothers and sisters and their families.

**c) When where you born?**

I was born March 19, 1969

**What do you hope for your daughter's future? How will you encourage her, particularly as she passes through the trying preteen and teenage years, to view her self-image positively, etc? What advice do you give other young people (or their parents) regarding body-image, cultural identity, personal image.**

I have a 2 and half year old son and another son on the way due this June. I always wanted a daughter, but I promised myself I would stop at two regardless. So I guess I will never know what it is to have a daughter... However, I did think about what I would say to her for a long time.

The first thing I wanted her to get clear was that sex and love are not the same thing and it's okay to have sex without being in love. I think that is the biggest misconception that really messes with a girl's heads... Okay, now to body image. I don't think it's as important what you say to a girl about her body as much as how you are her best model of self-worth. In raising a young girl you would have to be the kind of woman that she would want to model herself after. Most of the time young girls resist becoming their mothers because mothers had to pass down a lot of bad advice that continued oppressing women - of course given with the best of intentions. So I would have to love my body, cherish myself, pamper myself and value myself so that naturally my daughter would know what self-esteem and confidence looks like. I would remind my daughter that ads with unrealistically perfect looking women are sad imitations of real women. I would encourage my daughter to celebrate her femininity, but not at the price of her whole self which also includes her masculine side which is the assertive, leader, active self. I would show my daughter what it is to be a whole person first before being just a " girl. "

**What are your Hispanic roots? How have these roots impacted your career?**

I am Mexican-American and seeing the misrepresentation of Latino pissed me off so much I decided to do something about it. It gave me a career. It impacts my career in that most of my stories have something to do with being Latino. They're not necessarily about identity, but about capturing the wide range of Latino experiences.

**Do you still have connections to your homeland?**

Yes, my parents retired and went back to our hometown to live 'til the end of their days. I visit them at least every other year. I want to try to live in Mexico sometime so I can improve my Spanish and buy a summer home in San Miguel De Allende.

**Whom or what has had the most influence on you in becoming a writer?**

My mother was my muse and my writing teacher. She told the best gossip and stories. My mother had only a few years of formal education, but she showed me intelligence is different than wisdom and not as important as having a sense of humor.

**As a Hispanic woman, what barriers have you encountered? Based on these experiences, what recommendations do you have for Hispanic women of the future?**

I have had soooo many barriers that there have been times I just cried and stayed in bed. The biggest one is the assumption that is made about me being inferior for having breasts and having Lopez as a last name... I can't begin to tell you just how much resistance I've gotten, from my parents, my siblings, people around me, men... Yeah, I'm stubborn and was pissed off enough to prove people wrong and get some things done. My recommendation is that Latinas realize that self-confidence is not about anything external, it's about saying "I matter because I say so." When we stop believing that the right look, degree, clothes, etc. will make us worthy or happy, then that's when we will discover the true power of our mind to make anything happen.

**How has your writing style developed into what it is today?**

That's a hard question to answer, because I don't know what my style is. I would have to leave that to a critic or a PhD student to analyze. I simply write what I feel, it is often funny and now that I have done it more, it comes out easier.

**How much you have been involved in the writing of Real Women?**

I wrote the first and second draft and then when my father decided to boycott my wedding because I had written several plays about him in which he was the antagonist I fell into a depression and I didn't want to continue writing the script. I did a few more revisions, but after wards I didn't want to continue working on it. George continued to work on it and made the rest of the changes. Before I started writing George and I discussed the obstacles in adapting it and the changes that needed to be made. The screenplay that got produced was my third attempt at writing the screenplay. The previous two were so close to the play and were very insular, staying a lot in the factory, but no one would do it that way and I was advised to open it up.

So the first decision we had to make was who will be the protagonist? In the play Estela is the protagonist. In the movie we chose Ana because she had the most to learn and was the better character to take us into the world of the sewing factory.

The main plot in the play was the whole immigration paranoia, which would not work in the movie because we would have to go out of the factory and as soon as we would do that we would realize it was not the immigration but the DEA.

The play was an ensemble and the movie had to be about one person and her arch, so that's why Ana was the better protagonist.

Also, the mother in the play is funny and annoying, but she is not the antagonist. In the movie we needed a better antagonist since we were losing the whole immigration antagonist forcing things to happen. So the mother became the antagonist and the symbol of tradition and culture. She was made even meaner than I wrote her because George and the director felt they had to. The director's mother, according to her, was evil and mean like the character in the movie. So that's how that happened.

This subject is also connected to the presence of men in the movie (they are absent from the play) and the role they play: in the movie they are shown as very positive characters, supporting even Ana, but that is not the case at all in the play. What has motivated these changes? What is your opinion about their result?

Since we had to open up the story and take the women out of the factory we had to add men. I loved the play for not having them, but we had to add them. George and I felt it was important not to make them the center of attention, because it wasn't about them, so we made them supportive. I liked that because my father was tired of being the antagonist. I also liked that it was a step forward for Latino men and their representation. Lastly, the greatest tragedy is that machismo is passed down by mothers and we wanted to show that. Overall, I am very happy with the movie. The movie is really a mixture of my fist play Simply Maria or the American Dream and Real Women...

## **Was the play adapted to be shown in movie theatres or on TV?**

The play was adapted to be a movie for the screen, but George, who was also the producer couldn't get a film company interested in it as a feature so HBO was interested in it for it's cable channel. Luckily because of the success at Sundance and all the interest in it, HBO decided to distribute it theatrically.

The play is a comedy and on stage you can get away with more things that make it easier to bring out the humor in the unfortunate circumstances the women are stuck in. The movie is a "dramedy", because what works on stage doesn't always work on film. Yes, people who have seen the play and then saw the movie were disappointed by it because it wasn't as funny or tension filled. My own father-in-law was very disappointed.

Yes, I've become more interested in film because it can reach more people and I am also a visual writer. I was teaching for a while and I loved it, but right now I'm actually trying to adapt three of my screenplays into novellas because I have several screenplays, but haven't had any luck getting them made. So I am going to see if I can give them a life on the page before they make it to the screen.

I also have three treatments for three screenplays already written which I hope to expand into screenplays. Most importantly I am working on a low - low budget screenplay which I plan to produce and direct in the next two years.

## **SURVEY QUESTIONS - CASA 0101**

### **Where did your theatre originate? (Figuratively & literally)**

I produced Real Women in 1998 for a weekend fundraiser and it was so successful I decided to produce it professionally for 13 weeks. I became very good friend with the stage manager and one of the actresses and the set designer became my husband. So I decided to start a comedic all female trio called PMS and we started doing shows at different locations. We were very successful and I yearned for my own space where we could perform our shows without having to rush in and out or put up with a particular theatre owner's passive aggressive behaviour. So with my student loans from UCLA I leased a small space on First Street that was formerly a bridal boutique in April of 2000.

I called it CASA because I always felt artistically homeless and at last I had found a home. I called it 0101 because of the digital revolution that had just started a few years earlier that was going to create more opportunity for guerrilla artists.

### **Who was the original Artistic Director? Why and where did they move on?**

I became the Artistic Director when I signed the lease. I have moved on because I wanted to take time off to be with my son before my next child is born. I also want to write a novel and focus on my writing and becoming a film director. I love being an activist, but I need to continue growing as an artist and I need to make time for my family and personal life.

### **When did you begin working as the AD? How did this come about?**

I didn't start calling myself Artistic Director until March 2002 when we produced a very successful run of Real Women Have Curves and afterwards we had shows running throughout the year.

### **What is the purpose or goal of your organization?**

My goal is to inspire and nurture young writers and be a catalyst in the Boyle Heights Renaissance.

### **How does this relate to your mission statement?**

It relates because nurturing writers and authors is my priority.

### **What is your mission and how did you come about it?**

Our mission is to bring digital filmmaking, theatre, art and dance so as to nurture the future storytellers of Los Angeles who will someday transform the world. I came up with it because I felt there was a lack of accessibility to the arts in Boyle Heights. Since I grew up in Boyle Heights I felt I did not get enough exposure to the arts.

### **What are you doing now to achieve/meet your mission?**

My ex husband, who was the executive director, and I selected another Artistic Director to take charge of Casa 0101 who we trust will continue our mission.

### **What steps to you take towards achieving this goal? Have they been successful? Why or why not?**

We were successful in bringing the arts to Boyle Heights. However, we felt we needed to do more community outreach to get the immigrant and Spanish speaking community to come see theatre at our space. We felt we failed in that sense. That was one of our biggest concerns when we selected the new artistic director.

### **What was the biggest challenge in your first three years as a theatre (or as AD)? And what challenges are you still facing? (I.E. financial, artistic, & community)**

The biggest challenge is marketing, advertising and outreach, because if you don't have a budget for a publicist then it's time you have to devote to get the word out. Outreach to the Spanish speaking community was the biggest challenge. We produced Real Women Have Curves in Spanish but it was tough getting an audience even for a successful show like that.

### **What has been the greatest accomplishment of your theatre?**

There were many, but getting a great review from the L.A. Times for a show I wrote, produced, and directed which sold out. That show was Confessions of Women from Boyle Heights and it coincided with a photography installation titled "48 Hours in Boyle Heights."

### **Do you have any community outreach programs? Education? Etc. Have they been successful? How/Why?**

We had writing classes that were educational and involved the younger community. They were very successful.

### **Who is on your artistic staff? What are their job titles & descriptions? Do you find that these titles are clearly defined or does everyone tend to do everything?**

My husband was the executive director and he handled the administration of the non-profit that was in charge of CASA 0101, and then there was Selene who also did administrative work, secretarial, costumes, but yes, we all pretty much did everything that needed to be done.

**Do you have Prop, Set, Costume, Storage? Scene & Costume shop? How and where do you build your sets, props, costumes?**

Yes, we had a storage space upstairs in an apartment which was also used as our greenroom for the actors. Our sets were minimal so the theatre was the only place where we could build anything. We were lucky we had a guy named Tony who was very talented and could build just about anything. I also did interior design and costumes and props and just about anything that needed to be done.

**Do you have a company of actors you generally work with? How important do you feel that is?**

Yes, we had a company of actors. It was not a formal company, it was more like a pool of actor we loved working with because they were talented, hard-working, and easy to work with. It was important to build a family because it made it easier to put shows together because we knew we could count on certain people.

**How do you choose your season? Do you have a given set of criteria? Who has the final say in play selection?**

We made it up as we went along. I mostly decided and also my husband. My husband and I are both directors so we tried to do shows that would challenge us. I also wanted to get my plays produced because I wanted to publicize my work, but also because we would have bigger student audiences when my work was produced.

**When you work as a director, what is your process? Are you collaborative?**

I try to create a family with my actors, but I'm in charge. The collaboration is minimal, there is a lot of freedom I give actors, but ultimately it's a dictatorship so that the play comes together organically and on time.

**How do you attempt to create meaning on stage? Is it important that the audience leaves understanding that meaning or the significance of your staging?**

I create meaning every possible way: the writing, design, staging, everything. Yes, I want the audience to get the meaning without hitting them over the head.

**What does theatre mean to you? What is its purpose in a modern context? What is its relationship to community? How does your theatre foster that relationship?**

Theater is very much a spiritual experience for me since I don't believe in organized religion. Its purpose is to make people examine their lives and consider other possibilities. Theatre builds community in the moment. Total strangers come together in a dark room and share their spirit and unite in spirit and breath for a little while. It builds community on a spiritual level.

**Do you wish to create theatre where everyone feels the same or feels entirely different? How do you attempt to create that?**

I'd like to create theatre in which people may intellectually disagree, but spiritually and emotionally they are united. I try to shock people with humor so that people are divested immediately of the societal mask and quickly we get authentic about our true selves and watch theatre from the point of view of our true selves.

**How do you attempt to capture and compel your audiences?**

I try to shock them, make them laugh and cry at the same time, and then show the ridiculousness of our societal mask.

**What vehicles of communication are most important when connecting to the audience? Words, music, images, etc?**

I think images are more powerful than words because they connect with our primal self and our archetypal nature. That's why dreams are so powerful, they speak truths in pictures.

**Do you think an audience is more interested in being educated or being entertained? How do you balance the two?**

I think they are more interested in being entertained because the arts are an escape into our primal authentic self. The way to balance things is through humor, you give the audience a sugar coated pill and they get the spiritual and intellectual nourishment they need without knowing it.

**How important is it to have a permanent space? How important is the structure of the stage?**

I loved having a permanent space because no one could kick us out and we could try whatever we wanted. I was more willing to try new things because I knew we could repaint the walls whatever color we wanted. Our stage was small and had several limitations which forced me to be more creative.

**How important is spectacle?**

Hmm... I've never consciously sought out to create spectacle, I just know how to make one.

**What are you looking for when casting a play? What is the goal? Are there given criteria?**

You cast the best actors even if they are not perfect. The best actor could simply be the person with the best attitude, not necessarily the most talented. The goal of casting should be finding the best people who will make your job easier.

**How would you describe your subscriber base? How did you generate & sustain that base?**

We don't have a subscriber base, we have our regulars, but we never got to the stage where we had subscribers.

**How would you describe your general audience?**

Our general audience was university students who probably considered themselves Chicanos.

**Are you reaching out/drawing in the type of audience you'd like?**

Yes, we were able to get people from the west side to cross the border/bridge and come to the east side. It was a pleasant surprise to see non-Latinos from the west side make the trip to the east side.

**What type of marketing does your theatre do?**

Because we had a minimal budget, we mostly did post cards and e-mail lists and listing in all the Latino websites we could post our info on.

**Where do you get your funding?**

We got two grants for \$10,000 each, but everything else my husband and I dug in our pockets and paid for it ourselves. We basically looked at it as though we were paying for a Master's Degree in Directing/Producing/Theatre Administration and justified the cost that way.