

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Lorca Peress: Growing the Theatre's Family

Jaz Dorsey · Wednesday, June 27th, 2012

*Lorca Peress goes on the short list of people who have blessed my life and career. Lorca was in both the 1997 and 1999 Equity Showcases of a musical called NELLIE, for which I wrote the score. It was on that adventure that I learned that Lorca is an artist and colleague who always gives 150%. Today, Lorca is, among other things, co-president of The League of Professional Theatre Women. I asked her to tell us about her life and her work.*

### **What role did theater and the arts play in your childhood and upbringing?**

I grew up in a multicultural family of professional artists. My father, Maurice Peress, is a music conductor of Polish and Iraqi Jewish parents; my mother, Gloria Vando, is an award-winning Nuyorican poet; her parents Erasmo Vando and Anita Velez-Mitchell were and are recognized writers and performers; my siblings are Paul Peress (drummer/composer) and Anika Paris (singer songwriter/composer), and my aunt is Jane Velez-Mitchell (CNN and HLN anchor and journalist). As many go into “the family business,” I too followed suit.

As a child, I performed in operas and operettas that my father conducted, including Britten’s *Noah’s Fluude*, *The Little Chimney Sweep*, and I sang the shepherd solo in *Tosca*. I studied piano, painting and sculpture, and dance. My family traveled because of my father’s career, but I considered NYC home. We moved to Texas where my father was music director of two orchestras. The political, social, and religious issues I experienced were life-changing and I became politically active and bilingual.

In Texas, I got involved in the school board anti-busing issues, and in NYC while attending Friends Seminary, I boycotted grapes to honor Cesar Chavez and read the names of dead Vietnam War soldiers at the NY Public Library. I studied at the Lee Strasberg Young Actors Program, and appeared in a dance/drama production with Rudy Perez at Barnard College. We lived in Europe for several summers where my father was working, and at 14, I took a fabulous acting class in Austria with Bettina Jonic Calder who was teaching Peter Brooke technique to opera singers, and I made the decision to be an actor. My father expected me to be a classical pianist (I studied hours a day), but I convinced him that I had a different field in mind.

I went to Bennington College and embraced modern dance, writing, abstract painting, opera studies, and drama. My aesthetics blossomed and transformed to embrace the non-traditional. I studied poli-sci and continued being an activist for human rights (feminist, gay, civil). I spent summer and winter seasons at various regional theatres as an Equity Candidate Member and attended National Theatre Institute at the O’Neill Theatre Center in spring of my junior year. After Bennington, I moved back to NYC to pursue my acting career. My parents gave me a thousand dollars, a big hug, and said “good luck.”

### **Tell us about your own evolution as an artist. What obstacles did you face, if any?**

First I had to stay alive. I did what every young actor does, looked for a way to make fast cash and avoid a full-time job. The dog walking thing wasn't for me, so I worked as a waitress, a Fine Arts manager's assistant, painted make-up on mannequin heads at a factory in Brooklyn, proofread at a publishing house, sang at the Playboy Empire Club (I wrote about this in my one-woman show, and took the job because they hired Bunnies and male Rabbits who also wore ridiculous costumes). I modeled, temped for some crazy attorneys, and got mobbed passing out free cigarettes in the Diamond District in an evening gown and had to escape up Sixth Avenue. I survived many years of Toy Fair, trade shows, live and video industrials, and acted and sang in as many theatre productions and operas in NYC and across the country as possible.

One of my greatest obstacles was that I didn't look like everyone else. I was told I was "too ethnic" for television. I was blonde, but my eyes kind of went up and I had thick dark eyebrows which wasn't the look in the 1980s. I didn't "pass." If you didn't resemble Cybil Shepard or have a strictly Anglo-Saxon appearance, you didn't work in television where the money was. Yes, there were African-Americans on TV, but they played maids, janitors, cops and teachers; the few Asian-American actors who had careers played doctors, nurses or lab techs; the Italian actors were (and still) played bad guys; and the Latinos were blue collar, gang members, or suffered the same stigma as the African-American actors without accents. I had three call-backs for a reputable regional theatre for *Meg in Crimes of the Heart* and after the third audition I received a letter telling me that even though they loved me, I didn't fit with their "family" vision. It wasn't that I was "too ethnic" but not ethnic enough.



There were very few cross-cultural faces around and the term multicultural didn't exist. I did get cast in many productions, but it was a constant struggle. A lot has changed since then, and thankfully the faces on television are much more interesting and less stereotypical. Hats off to the Non-Traditional Casting implemented by the Unions. Labels are getting less common, but it's still a struggle across the country, especially for women.

After surviving for many years, I wrote *Women Under Glass*, a one-woman show which won an Inky Award from La MaMa; and I toured the show in festivals. Many of my survival experiences were woven into the show. While writing and work-shopping the show with legendary director Gene Frankel, he thought I would be a good director and encouraged me.

I began directing which I hadn't done since college, and in 1997, I launched [MultiStages](#), a multicultural and multidisciplinary theatre company that was an answer to the obstacles and stereotypes I fought. I wanted to present new work that celebrated the faces and stories of the America I ride with on the subway. These are my peers, and I am happy to say we are having a successful run. We look forward to the rest of the country taking this ride with all of us who challenge traditional theatre.

### **What are you doing now?**

I wear many hats: Artistic Director of MultiStages, Co-President of the [League of Professional Theatre Women](#), teacher at the Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute, NYU Tisch Strasberg Studio, and I freelance direct theatre, opera and musicals. I just completed directing two fabulous new one-act operas by Bruce Saylor, conducted by my father (a first for us as director/music director): *The Image Maker*, libretto by James Merrill about a Cuban Santero and we incorporated Afro-Cuban dance and projections; and *My Kinsman, Major Molineux*, based on a Nathaniel Hawthorne political coming of age of America tale, both dissonant atonal modern works.



My next project is a one-woman show, *Black Girl, You've Been Gentrified* written and performed by Nichole Thompson-Adams at Joe's Pub at the Public Theatre on July 27, 2012. And for MultiStages, our current New Works Contest winner, *The Island of No Tomorrows*, will receive its world premiere in November which I will direct. This new work written by award-winning playwright Fengar Gael is a seriocomic musical allegory on political oppression, sexual subjugation, and the challenges of parenting in the electronic age. We are partnering with the League of Professional Theatre Women's "30 Plays Celebrate 30 Years" series honoring the League's anniversary. We are also starting our sixth MultiStages New Works Contest, Guidelines [here](#).

We have several pieces in the MultiStages Script Development Series, and are currently raising funds for the second production of *Temple of the Souls*, which premiered Off-Off Broadway in December 2011. This Puerto Rican/Taíno musical drama was written by my 96 year-old grandmother Anita Velez-Mitchell and composed by my sister Anika Paris and co-composer Dean Landon. It was very well received, and we feel it has "legs." The work is political, educational, and includes native dance, original music, large scale puppetry, (we will add projections in the next production), and tells the tragic love story of a young Taíno man and a Conquistador's daughter (a Romeo and Juliet tale) in 16th Century Puerto Rico. Kacike chiefs and Members of the Taíno tribe support the production, and several spoke about their traditions to the audience. I am very proud of what we've accomplished thus far with MultiStages and new works in development, and look forward to many more collaborations and creative expressions to come. We're also working with Arden Kass on a new play, *Appetite*, that received a reading in 2011 with Tovah Feldshuh in the lead role.

MultiStages' mission is to encourage collaborations between playwrights and artists to develop multicultural and multidisciplinary new works that celebrate a fusion of art forms that enrich, explore, and reinvent today's theatre. Our New Works Contests, Script Development Series, readings and productions provide platforms for artists to collaborate in an experimental and supportive environment. MultiStages has developed over 30 new works with poets, filmmakers, choreographers, composers, musicians, visual and theatre artists who represent an imaginative and cultural perspective. We have received many awards, including two Manhattan Community Arts Fund Awards (LMCC and the DOCA) and a Dramatists Guild Fund grant. Our writers, designers, talent, and staffing are as diverse as our audiences. Fortunately, the fusion of arts in theatre is not as novel as when we began in 1997, but we believe it is the truest collaborative art form and applaud all who are breaking new ground and shaking up the landscape.



My other full time commitment is being the Co-President of the League of Professional Theatre Women (with Co-President Kristin Marting, Artistic Director of HERE). We head up a unique organization of nearly 500 women. The League's mission is to increase the visibility of and promote opportunities for women in all aspects of professional theatre.

Our members are national and international. In 1980, despite the fact that women were instrumental in establishing the regional theatre movement, there were few women artistic directors at major regional theatres, and few in non-performing artistic capacities in the Broadway theatre. No woman director had ever won a Tony. The idea for the League was hatched in 1981 at an American Theatre Association conference by a group of women concerned particularly with the dearth of women playwrights and directors in the for-profit and not-for-profit sectors. Julia Miles

was the Associate Director of the American Place Theatre in NYC and became the League's founding member and first chair; she later founded The Women's Project. League members are actors, administrators, agents, casting directors, choreographers, company managers, composers, critics, designers, directors, dramaturgs, educators, general managers, historians, journalists, librettists, lyricists, press agents, producers, stage managers, and theatre technicians.

And finally, I teach at the Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute and for the NYU Tisch Strasberg Studio. I was the Strasberg curator for NYU hotINK Festivals for nine years and curated plays from Iran, Libya, Spain, the Caribbean, Canada, Europe, and the US. Working with artists from all over the world is inspiring, and we share a common bond and universal love for the art.

*Images (top to bottom): Lorca Peress, Director, watching a rehearsal of "The Image Maker" opera; "Day of Reckoning" by Melody Cooper, directed by Lorca Peress, featured Cast (l-r): Freedom Bradley, Melody Cooper (AUDELCO Award Nominee), Parris Nicole Cisco, Photo Credit: Nick Andrews; "Temple of the Souls" by Anita Velez-Mitchell, music by Anika Paris and Dean Landon, directed by Lorca Peress, Featured Cast: Jen Anaya, Theresa Burns, Victor Cervantes, Raquel Faria, Bradley D. Gale, Giselle Gastell, Randall Marquez, Kenneth Kyle Martinez, Robmariel Olea, Ricardo Puente, Laura Riveros, Laura Lebron-Rojas, Alexis Sweeney, Joshua Torrez, Patrick Valley, Photo Credit: Luis Carle; "The Image Maker" opera by Bruce Saylor, libretto by James Merrill, directed by Lorca Peress, choreographer Caroline Webb, projection design Jan Hartley, lighting/set design Harry Feiner, Queens College Goldstein Theatre, Featured Dancers (l-r): Madelin Geraldino, Jude Evans, Hideki Takahashi.*

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