

The Balm of Connection

After Quiara Alegría Hudes' North Philly family told her their war stories, a great American trilogy of pain and hope was born.

By Rob Weinert-Kendt

Inspiration can come less like a lightning bolt than a lightning bug—a tiny, quicksilver flash that you'd miss if you blinked. That was certainly the case with Quiara Alegría Hudes, who spun a trilogy of acclaimed plays out of “a feeling that was so fleeting” that she noted during a brief visit with a beloved cousin.

In the spring of 2004, she took a break from a playwriting festival at South Coast Repertory in Southern California to visit Elliot Ruiz, her 18-year-old cousin from her hometown of Philadelphia. Ruiz had just returned to Camp Pendleton after six months as a Marine in Iraq, where a severe leg injury sidelined him and initially had doctors warning he'd never walk again.

“I just saw something slightly changed in his eyes,” Hudes recalls from her home in Washington Heights, the New York neighborhood made famous by the Broadway musical *In the Heights*, for which she supplied the book. “Elliot was my happy-go-lucky, kind of crazy cousin, and he was still a kid, still very boyish, still kind of a goofball. But there was just that little changed thing in his eyes which I knew I would never understand.”

On the plane ride home, she realized she'd have to write about that troubling moment. She started drafting a scene in which Elliot's mother, Ginny, nurses his injured leg in her lush garden in North Philly. Though that Pietà-like image would never end up being staged, it would become the ur-text of three plays about Elliot and his family's intergenerational struggles to name and repair their own damage: *Elliot, a Soldier's Fugue*, which debuted at a small theatre in New York in 2006 and was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize for Drama; *Water by the Spoonful*, which premiered at Hartford Stage in 2011 and startled the theatre world when it took the 2012 Pulitzer; and *The Happiest Song Plays Last*, which bowed at Chicago's Goodman Theatre in 2013.

The trilogy was largely conceived and born in the gap between Hudes' two children: Cecilia is 7, and Julian is a little over a year old. Now 36, Hudes—hyper-articulate, circumspect, but never less than forthcoming about her work—shares a spacious co-op apartment with her kids and her husband, Ray Beauchamp, a public defender she's dated since she was 17. Her eighth-floor view of the Hudson



Quiara Alegría Hudes

River from the bedroom where she does most of her writing is almost distractingly gorgeous, and it's not such a leap to assume it's the source of the water imagery that recurs in all three plays.

Mining family history

The water began, in fact, with that verdant scene in Ginny's garden. Says Hudes, “The female characters in these plays are facing this question about healing themselves and others, and water is a really important part of that: How do you heal yourself, how do you heal others, how do you instigate growth?”

At first, though, after writing that garden scene, Hudes immediately got stuck. “I was like: What am I going to write about war? Why am I doing this?” One more thing spurred her curiosity: Elliot's father, her uncle, served in Vietnam. “Why did Elliot enlist?” she says she wondered. “His father had had a rough time in Vietnam, I assumed.”

She'd never heard her uncle speak about his service there, so she sat down for an interview with him, in the first of a flurry of such talks with family members that would inspire much of the plays' material. If her uncle's silence about Vietnam had made her assume he was suppressing horrific memories, she found that once she got him to open up about it, there was a “lot of pain there,” indeed, but so much more besides.

“Just giving him the context in which to talk about it, all of a sudden he was like Motormouth Mabel; he would not stop talking,” Hudes recalls. “There were so many stories, and they were rich—they were fully alive in him.” Knowing he’d never spoken to Elliot in the same way helped her put together one part of the puzzle. “I realized why his son might have walked in the same footsteps and not learned the lessons, or had to learn them on his own, because he just hadn’t heard the stories. It’s like every generation has to burn their hand on the stove.”

More interviews with veterans, including Elliot, broadened her canvas to consider an underlying theme: “What happens when there’s something major in our personal lives, our family lives, our society that we’re not allowed to talk about, or where there’s not a normal way to discuss it?” She began to write monologues from these interviews, in which veterans simply recreated their experiences in training, in barracks, in combat. Then another flash of inspiration struck. “I imagined them doing it all at once, and then that looked like a fugue to me visually, like notes on a staff. I was like, ‘Oh. Maybe they’ll listen to some Bach.’”

Structure shaped by music

Hudes, who has a bachelor’s degree in music from Yale but put that aside to get her master’s in playwriting from Brown University, feels she’s still doing music, “just in my writing.” If Bach’s preludes and fugues provided a template for the first Elliot play, the muse of *Water by the Spoonful* was the dissonant jazz of John Coltrane, in particular his oceanic jazz suite “A Love Supreme.” It seems an appropriately rangy backdrop for a play that adds new voices and expands the story beyond Elliot, at home in Philly and still struggling with his war injury, to encompass some of his family’s untreated wounds. The play’s fulcrum is Odessa, Elliot’s estranged birth mother, who has overcome a crippling crack addiction and now moderates an online forum of fellow recovering addicts. With aliases like Orangentan, Chutes&Ladders, and Fountainhead—Odessa’s handle is “Haikumom”—this motley peanut gallery supplies a buzzing counterpoint, and eventually rewarding subplots of its own, to Elliot’s difficult family drama.

As with the veterans’ monologues in *Elliot*, the Internet chatter of *Water by the Spoonful* provides another venue for Hudes to explore a “rich, emotional, vivid part of people’s lives that doesn’t have a place in daily conversational life. It’s about the things we can’t talk about, but here is a medium that is essentially interested in talking.”

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—Quiara Alegria Hudes



A Ghost (Barzin Akhavan) makes his presence known to Elliot Ortiz (Daniel José Molina) in *Water by the Spoonful*.

As freeing as such a format may be, it’s not as if Hudes has surveyed any of her characters from an Olympian remove; she, too, shared some of their discomfort in addressing awful subjects, and looked for ways to work through that in her writing.

“I always knew I would be compelled to write about addiction,” she said, given her family’s experiences. “But as with war, I was like: Why am I choosing such a dark theme? It’s miserable. Why do I want to make an audience miserable?”

The key was finding something hopeful as an “organizing principle,” she says. *Elliot* builds to a reverie in which the injured soldier recalls his favorite memory. In *Water by the Spoonful*, scenes of connection and comity jostle with bitter confrontations, but Hudes says she was only able to go there because she knows that the cousins on which she’d based Odessa had found “some level of healing.”

“The ones who are really successful at staying clean, it essentially is their full-time job,” Hudes says. “And there is something about that that I feel is deeply American.” She compares their struggle to that of *Death of a Salesman*’s Willy Loman. “He’s a guy who wants to be better, and that becomes like a disease in his life. It ends up being toxic for him. I don’t think it’s toxic for my characters, I think it’s redemptive for them. But it’s not easy; it’s work. Every character in *Water by the Spoonful* is at a different point in that work; they’ve made a choice that they’re gonna try to be better.”

If she started out thinking she would never understand that changed look in her cousin’s eyes, a decade and three plays later, she feels closer to the truth.

“The instinct to write a play in the first place is to get in someone’s mind and heart and understand what they feel like,” says Hudes. “I was there for a little while. And I think I understand a little bit more.”

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