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Meet Melinda Lopez: Playwright, Equity Actor, and Mom

An Interview with Melinda

Conducted by **Bobbie Steinbach**

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Melinda Lopez
Photo by: Ken McGagh

Melinda Lopez, a playwright and actress, and a graduate of Dartmouth College and Boston University who teaches theatre and performance at Wellesley College, is one of Boston's true theatre gems. I first knew Ms. Lopez as an actress of great warmth, intelligence and charisma. She has appeared at the Huntington Theatre (ROSE TATTOO, A MONTH IN THE COUNTRY), Portland Stage (ROMEO AND JULIET, A CHRISTMAS CAROL), the Guthrie Theatre (MANY COLORS MAKE THE THUNDER KING), Shakespeare & Co. (TWELFTH NIGHT, THE TAMING OF THE SHREW), SpeakEasy Stage Company (ANNA IN THE TROPICS, THE DYING GAUL), and Boston Playwrights Theatre, (A GIRL'S WAR.) Melinda is also featured in the movie FEVER PITCH.

Her extraordinary talent as a playwright emerged in the late 90's, when she starred in her solo piece, GOD SMELLS LIKE A ROAST PIG, for which she won her first Eliot Norton Award (the Boston equivalent of a Tony) for her performance. Once again calling on her Cuban heritage, she wrote SONIA FLEW, which won the Elliot Norton Award for "Best New Play", and the IRNE (Independent Reviewers of New England) for "Best Play" and "Best Production". It has been produced at the Huntington Theatre, Coconut Grove Playhouse, the Contemporary American Theatre Festival, and the Summer Playwrights Festival, NY. It will be broadcast on NPR's "The Play's The Thing!" next spring and run at Steppenwolf Theatre, Chicago this winter.

Her other award winning plays include MIDNIGHT SANDWICH/ MEDIANOCHE, (Coconut Grove Playhouse), THE ORDER OF THINGS (CenterStage, Kennedy Center Fund for New Plays) HOW DO YOU SPELL HOPE? (Underground Railway Theatre,) and SCENES FROM A BORDELLO, (Boston Playwrights Theatre).

Ms Lopez was the first recipient of the Charlotte Woodard Award, given by the Kennedy Center to a "promising new voice in American Theatre".

Ms. Lopez has great heart, unique style and genuine gifts as a playwright and performer. We Bostonians are delighted to share her with the rest of the world, but hope that she always comes 'home'.

Bobbie: You act, you write plays, you teach and you have a family. How do you juggle all this?

Melinda: Mostly one at a time. I don't write when I'm performing. It's not a conscious decision; it just seems that I don't have enough imagination to do both at the same time. All my creative juice can only go into one project, so if I'm performing I don't write. Whatever I'm doing, my family does it with me, but it's much harder to be performing and

have a family than it is to be writing and have a family obviously because you can write at home, you can write at 3 in the morning, you can write when you're making dinner-in your head. But when you have to be in the theatre, you either bring them along, or they miss you.

Bobbie: You teach too.

Melinda: I teach two Dramatic Literature seminars (at Wellesley College) where we read plays and talk about them. I'll be teaching playwriting this year and I also teach an oratory class.

Bobbie: It's great that you can talk about the plays you read in your Dramatic Lit class from both the perspective of a playwright and an actor.

Melinda: I actually also find so much of my material comes from seeing interesting productions.

Bobbie: Talk about a production that really affected you.

Melinda: The Fiona Shaw's "Medea" was one of the most electrifying theatre experiences I've ever had. I was literally blown backwards, hyperventilating through three quarters of the play. She was so funny. Who knew Medea was funny? And she had this wonderful self-deprecating ability to be really ordinary. The production was very simple, very streamlined-they were in jeans and button down shirts, and ordinary dress and she came striding in with these dead children, carrying them like they were animals slung on her back. She just bridged the classical role and our world in a way that I've rarely ever seen. She was incredible.

Bobbie: What inspires you? Is it a performance more than anything and does that impact not only how you experience it, but also how you then might look at yourself in the part?

Melinda: I love actors and for me the experience of going to the theatre is 98% about the actors and what they do to me as an audience member, and what they're doing to each other. That's how I approach my writing. I'm always thinking about what would be fun for someone to do. Lately I've been putting songs in, or secrets, or psychological games. An actor can do so much with just one word. I never want my actors to be bored. I like the challenge to either give them great words or great language or like in "Sonia Flew" to have these transformations happen during intermission so that in the second act they're completely different characters. So what seems like an ordinary modern dad is suddenly this strange spy with secrets. The transitions that actors go through endlessly fascinate me. I'm very inspired by actors.

Bobbie: How would you describe a perfect day in the life of Melinda Lopez?

Melinda: My daughter climbs into bed with me-she gets up very early-then we cuddle together for a while. Then she gets her breakfast and goes to school. Then I will not empty the dishwasher and not clean, although I usually have to make the bed before I can write. Then I'll write for 3 or 4 hours. When I'm on a writing jag I will have accumulated materials from the last time I wrote, so there'll be lines in my head or I'll suddenly know what happens in the next moment. If I'm lucky I can go right to it and write, write, write, write, write and be very focused.

I get more ideas either running or driving in the car. This is a good normal day. After that my daughter comes home from school, my husband comes home from work and I'm with my family. That's really the best time of the day. I have a glass of wine. I feel so much better when I've written something. On a bad day when I can't write, or have no ideas, or don't get to write, or what I write is awful, I'm very crabby.

Bobbie: When you're acting and not writing do you get crabby that you're not writing.

Melinda: Don't we all always feel like we should be doing more?

Bobbie: Indeed.

Melinda: I've managed to compartmentalize and I can go back to things that I've worked on three months ago and with a little greasing of the wheels get back into it. But sometimes I put something away because it wasn't working and I look at it again and it still isn't working.

Bobbie: Do you have more than one writing project going at once?

Melinda: Yes, frequently I'll have two or three things that I'm working on. When things are good, like right now, I'm just finishing something which I've been working on pretty intensely for the last month. I've gotten to the point where I've actually written the last page, but I don't think it's right. So I'm not calling it a first draft yet...But just to have gotten through, start something, get through the middle of it, solve some questions and to the point where I'm just about to write, "Big kiss." The End-that feels great.

Bobbie: Is this project a secret?

Melinda: This is actually a movie script. I was approached by a producer that had seen a play I had written and he said, "I have an idea for a movie", and I really liked the idea. It's a romantic comedy about politics. It's fun.

Bobbie: Do you have serendipitous inspiration when you write?

Melinda: Yeah, I do a lot of tearing articles out of magazines-I have a New Yorker file. For example I read this great Susan Orleans piece-I'm probably giving away too much-on pigeons, people who keep pigeons. I thought it was really interesting and I have a homing pigeon in my screenplay now. It just sort of sits in the back of your mind and finds its way-I think a lot of the way I write is like a Rubik's cube-I have all these pieces and I keep rearranging them and seeing how they might be fun together. Or weaving something, or cooking, and you throw in another thing and another thing and somehow it arranges itself into a form.

There's a long period of time where a lot of ingredients are going into the writing file in my head. At some point this person pops out, or this thing that makes me laugh, or something that someone says, an idea that I steal from someone moves to the front. I've learned that if I have an idea, I really seize on it because I don't get them very often. So if I have an idea I sit down and try to write something right away, or at least follow it until I don't know what happens any more, and sometimes that's the end. The late great August Wilson who was a huge inspiration for me, had come to speak to my playwriting class and he said that when you're in that writing mode, everything becomes fuel. You see a black cat and you think -there's a black cat in my play. Or you see a store front with a word on it and that word goes into your play. It's a very organic process.

Bobbie: So August Wilson is one of your great inspirations.

Melinda: He wrote such great people. I think my writing is more spare. I try to write less, because I'm always thinking that the actor can do more.

Bobbie: Anyone else?

Melinda: I was always was inspired by John Kuntz. (another talented Boston actor/playwright) and other solo performers like John Leguizamo, Claudia Shear. My first work God Smells Like a Roast Pig was a solo performance. People who could take their first person experience and turn it into more than 'let's talk about me'. They could turn it into story that everyone could participate in.

Bobbie: Do you think every actor has a story they could tell?

Melinda: Yes I do. **Bobbie:** What is it that allows you to take your own story, and make it into something bigger than yourself?

Melinda: You have two things happening at the same time. It's sort of like fooling one hand so that it doesn't really know what the other hand is doing. You have to have a dual awareness. The first thing you have to do is write. Everyone has a show that they want to do, but most people don't write. My students at Wellesley taught me the expression 'Done is better than good', which I swear by. So the first thing is to write, and whatever you write is right. At first you can start writing dreck and you need to get it out of the way so that your real unconscious will come to the surface. When I started writing, I didn't know what I was writing about. I just sat down and said I don't have any stories to tell, so I'm going to tell someone else's story. I started writing stories that my parents had told me. Lo and behold, everything I was writing about was Cuba and I realized that's where I live, that's where my unconscious goes. So write. Then when you have twenty pages or twenty monologues or that file in your computer that keeps getting bigger and bigger you can start looking at it and ask yourself, "Okay, what's the story? What is this about?" And the "about" is bigger. The "about" is "unloved girl finds success." Or the "about" is "me and racism." Or the "about" is "God." There is going to be something bigger than you in your

words. No one is that self-involved. Or if you are, that's what it is and it's a comedy about an actor who's so self-involved that they can't see...I think it's dangerous to do the second step first because then you get pompous and say, "I'm writing about world peace...". And then it's dictatorial. Whereas I think writing from personal experience and writing what's true even if it seems trite (is important). You have to keep those two parts separate for awhile. It also really helps to have a good friend to read it. Someone you trust.

Bobbie: You did the playwriting course at Boston University?

Melinda: Yes, I did. I actually started writing in Minneapolis. I moved there and I didn't know anyone. I had done all these staged readings at the Playwrights' Center and they taught a playwriting class. I went to the class because there I was. That's how I started. Then I wrote a bunch. I moved back to Boston and did the BU Playwriting program so then it was sort of official. Also it means designating the time. It means you're sitting down for six months-giving yourself the permission to do it.

Bobbie: What do you own that says "this is Melinda"?

Melinda: I have a great green leather bag that I think is very Melinda. I have about three turquoise rings, big, big turquoise rings that are me.

Bobbie: Do you have a 5 year plan?

Melinda: Oh god! Now I'm worried about it. Now, you know, I'm thinking of all the phone calls I haven't returned. I don't (have a 5 year plan), and I never have. Shouldn't you? I guess my 5 year plan is that I put money away for college (for my daughter.) I think if I look back 5 years ago I feel like I'm moving forward whatever that means. I feel like life is richer. When I think of how my life might be richer than it is now in 5 years, I have a sense of that, but I don't have a plan.

Bobbie: How did you get your Equity Card?

Melinda: I got my Equity Card playing Olivia in Twelfth Night for Shakespeare & Company back in 1990 or 1991. I did my training with them, and they were all idols in my eyes - I spent a really buggy wet summer after college carrying a spear (really!) for Antony and Cleopatra. Four years later when I got the call from my teacher Cecil McKinnon (who was directing Twelfth Night) that she wanted to use me, I thought she meant for set dressing. I'll always be grateful that she took this really green, but pretty passionate, kid - out of all those gloriously talented regulars - and gave me "my big break."

Melinda: I always go back to the classics. I'm too old now, but I've always wanted to play Hamlet. My secret is that I love to sing. I should maybe someday take it seriously and try to sing in a play-as opposed to doing a musical. That's my secret shame (hearty laugh).

Bobbie: I'm thinking about you doing something for yourself where you could put together something for you, Melinda, where you could 'play' Hamlet.

Melinda: One of the plays that I've put aside is among other things, is the story about two actors who are doing a musical production of Macbeth, called MAC! In the play they have to rehearse what I imagine are these terrible musical numbers, which I think is hilarious. It's misery for them and they know it's bad. So maybe in a way I am finding material and getting Shakespeare into my world.

Bobbie: How do you relax?

Melinda: In the grand scheme of things, sitting on some great expanse of red rock in the Utah desert, with the sun baking me-very hot and dusty.

Bobbie: What's always in your fridge?

Melinda: (laughs heartily) I have this bottle of tomato juice that I bought when I thought I was going on the Zone Diet, that I never went on, and it's been there for about nine years.

Bobbie: What's on your night table at the moment?

Melinda: I have an eye mask so that I can sleep in. I'm reading John Updike's Terrorist, and usually whatever book I'm reading to (my daughter) Maddie is there. Right now it's one of the Jewel Princess books. Oh, and my Sudoku. I pick it up and seven hours later I'm still doing it.

Bobbie: What did you want to be when you grew up?

Melinda: An actor. And an eye doctor.

Bobbie Steinbach is a Boston member of Actors' Equity

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