

'Tell our family's story': Her mom's request drives prize-winning writer Quiara Alegría Hudes

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If Quiara Alegría Hudes is not a household name yet, maybe she should be. The incredibly accomplished playwright is a leader in the theater world and a winner of its most prestigious honors.

She earned a Tony Award in 2008 for the book of *In the Heights* — a collaboration with Lin-Manuel Miranda — and a 2012 Pulitzer Prize for *Water by the Spoonful*.

Her new musical, *Miss You Like Hell*, opens off-Broadway at the Public Theater in New York in March. But she took time to answer questions by email about *Elliot, a Soldier's Fugue*. That play, a 2007 Pulitzer finalist, tells the story of three generations of veterans in a Puerto Rican family. It will be presented by WaterTower Theatre in Addison through Feb. 18.

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Christopher Llewn Ramirez performs in *Elliot, A Soldier's Fugue*, presented by WaterTower Theatre in Addison.

(Evan Michael Woods)

What inspired *Elliot, A Soldier's Fugue*?

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Quiara Alegría Hudes, whose play *Elliot, A Soldier's Fugue* will be presented by WaterTower Theatre in Addison.

(Emma Pratte)

My cousin served as a Marine in Iraq at the very beginning of the war. My uncle (his dad) served as a Marine in Vietnam. My great-uncle had been a Borincaneer in Korea — they were the first Puerto Rican troops to serve in the U.S. military, in segregated regiments. So this is a family story.

I actually wrote two follow-up plays to track the lead character's path through re-entry. I call it *The Elliot Trilogy* — all three are being done in L.A. right now. [Center Theatre Group's production of Pulitzer finalist *Elliot, A Soldier's Fugue* will be at the Kirk Douglas Theatre Jan. 27-Feb. 25; *Water by the Spoonful* at the Mark Taper Forum Jan. 31-March 11; and *The Happiest Song Plays Last*, presented by Latino Theater Company at Los Angeles Theatre Center Feb. 17-March 19.]

To what extent does your heritage and/or being a woman inspire or inform your work?

I was taught about the indigenous arts of natural healing growing up, which is a theme in this play. The mother tries to heal the son's physical and spiritual wounds in her backyard garden using aloe, earth and water.

How do you feel about *Elliot, a Soldier's Fugue* being done at WaterTower Theatre? Have you ever been to the Dallas-Fort Worth area?

My plays are more well-traveled than my person. My work has been to Japan, Armenia, many places! I've never been to Dallas-Fort Worth, but now my words have!

The year 2007 must have kicked off an incredible time in your life. That year, the off-Broadway production of *In the Heights* opened and *Elliot, a Soldier's Fugue* was named a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. The following year, in 2008, *In the Heights* won the Tony Award for Best Musical and in 2009 it was a finalist for the 2009 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. How did all that recognition change your life from the inside and the outside?

The recognition helped me get a foot in the door when I was a young unknown playwright creating Latino plays. It also helped ease all the insecurities, traumas and deep fears of writing personal work and sending it out into the public. But recognition can't sustain you in the long term — your centeredness, purpose and an undying love of the daily craft is the real source of my joy.

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Lin-Manuel Miranda (center) as Uanavi in the musical *In the Heights* at the Richard Rodgers Theater in Manhattan, Feb. 13, 2008.

(File Photo/The New York Times)

What was it like collaborating with Lin-Manuel Miranda on *In the Heights*? How did you meet? Are you still friends?

He is a dynamic, playful collaborator, and so our creative work sessions were ebullient and fun. We traded material dynamically — for instance "Sunrise" started as a scene, as did "Finale." He'd use my stuff and I'd use his. Many of the Rosario family conflicts started as songs, but ultimately I turned them into scenes.

Did you in any way anticipate the *Hamilton* phenomenon?

I went to an early reading of *Hamilton* and came home and told my husband: "Musical theater is about to change forever." And yes, we are pretty good buddies still.

['Hamilton' has a date for Dallas — and here's how to get tickets](#)

You wrote the script for the upcoming animated movie *Vivo*, about a music-loving monkey, with songs by Miranda, for Sony Pictures Animation. Can you tell us about that project? How does that fit in or depart from the type of work you like to do?

Animation is wonderful! By contrast, the stage is limited to three ingredients: what's physically possible in a material world, words spoken by actors and the audience's imagination. I love the limitations of the stage because they're profoundly human, but I've enjoyed the sky-is-the-limit freedom of animation.

What was it like to learn that you won the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 2012 for *Water by the Spoonful*?

The day itself was quite exciting and surprising. With reflection, though, I see it as the world telling me: "Game on." It called me to a higher level of responsibility to my community, because it gave me a more "legit" platform than I'd ever had. So now I try to comport myself as a leader in addition to being a reclusive writer.

I used to like the reclusivity, but now I see that as a luxury. For instance, I try to advocate more actively for women and people of color, for a theater landscape that reflects reality and is not stilted toward wealth, whiteness or maleness. I also run a restorative arts program addressing mass incarceration. I have less fear and hesitation about actively contributing, and being a squeaky wheel when necessary.

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Armando Riesco and Zabryna Guevara in the Pulitzer Prize-winning play by Quiara Alegria Hudes, *Water by the Spoonful*, at the Second Stage Theatre in New York in 2012.

(File Photo/
The New York Times

Did you always know what you wanted to do in your career or did it come as a surprise? Was there a turning point for you when you figured out what you wanted to do and, if so, can you tell us about it? What does your family think about your career?

I learned to write young and have been doing it every day since then, but it was play, not work. In my early 20s, my mom looked me in the eye and made a request: "Tell our family's story. The written word has tremendous power in this country." I said, "OK."

You studied music composition at Yale University. What role does music play in your writing? What is the significance of the word "fugue" in the title of *Elliot, a Soldier's Fugue*?

The play has the answer! Grandpop talks about how a Bach fugue has themes that overlap and intertwine. "It's about untying the knot," he says. It's a perfect metaphor for how families work, to me!

What inspired your new musical, *Miss You Like Hell*, that you wrote with singer/songwriter Erin McKeown?

I wanted to write a meaty, complicated mother-daughter story. In this case the daughter is 16 and a citizen, and her mother is undocumented. So they have many issues to resolve and chop up before the mother's final immigration hearing. We are involving immigrant and migrant youth from all over the country — NYC and Washington state. I would like to engage the immigration community as part of the conversation.

What are your hopes for yourself as an artist going ahead and for theater in America going ahead?

Every writing day I can get. So many more stories to tell!

Plan your life

Previews Jan. 26-28, opening night Jan. 29, continues through Feb. 18. WaterTower Theatre at Addison Conference and Theatre Centre, 15650 Addison Road, Addison. \$25-\$42, pay what you can on Jan. 28. watertowertheatre.org.