

## So Many Possibilities before you Crack the Egg: A Conversation with Laurie Carlos

E. Angelica Whitmal

Laurie Carlos (b. 1949) has been one of the American theatre's most provocative and distinguished writers, actresses, directors, and choreographers since the 1970s. Carlos came from an artistic family; her mother, Milagros Smith Randall, was a dancer; her father, Walter P. Smith, a drummer. This artistic and musical background was the foundation for her collaborative and improvisational solo artistic expressions. Her works include *Vanquished by Voodoo*, *White Chocolate for My Father*, *The Cooking Show*, *Organdy Falsetto*, *Kicked the Boot*, *Raise the Dust and Fly*, and *Family Portraits*. These works reveal Carlos' biting examinations on social, gender, and race-related issues. Moreover, they also illustrate her ruminations of what it means to be an African American woman. Carlos started acting when she was fourteen and was mentored by actor Harry Belafonte. Carlos' performance as The Lady in Blue in Ntozake Shange's critically acclaimed choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* mesmerized audiences. Carlos' art has left an indelible mark on the performance art scene and critics noticed by awarding her an Obie (*for colored girls*) and Bessie (*Heat*). Augmenting and extending her work as a pioneer in performance art, Carlos maintains an exhausting schedule of teaching workshops in the academy, giving lectures, working as a fellow, and writing a performance novel in St. Paul Minnesota. Carlos remains committed to using art to reexamine what it means to be an African American woman in America.



Whitmal: When and where were you born?

Carlos: (Loud laughter) Born? I was born Jan 25, 1949. I was born in New York.

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Whitmal: A New Yorker.

Carlos: Yeah, a real one!

Whitmal: Let's talk about your family.

Carlos: My mother was a dancer and my father was a musician and grew up on the Lower East Side. My two sisters, then my three sisters, then...I'm at the end of the whole long story. I'm the first of eleven children.

Whitmal: I'm one of eleven.

Carlos: Where are you in that number?

Whitmal: I am the ninth child.

Carlos: Oh

Whitmal: Yeah, it is a big family. Huge. You know what that's like. They don't make big families like that anymore.

Carlos: No one can afford to.

Whitmal: I think for some folks, back then, religion, needing help to work the farm or land was key to having larger families. For my parents it was loneliness. My parents were both only children—they were lonely as children and both wanted a big family. I can't even imagine doing that today.

Carlos: Oh my goodness. Well, I only have one child. And, probably the reason I only have one is because I was the first of eleven.

Whitmal: Sure, you probably worked like a second mother to your siblings.

Carlos: Yeah, I did.

Whitmal: Let's get back to your parents. Your father's name...

Carlos: My father's name was Walter P. Smith. My mother's name...I call two people my mother. My mother is Milagros Randall and my stepmother is Lillian Louise Smith.

Whitmal: Milagros. That sounds like a Spanish surname.

Carlos: Her father was Spanish.

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Whitmal: Ok.

Carlos: And, it doesn't help (laughter).

Whitmal: So, your parents were performers?

Carlos: Yeah, my parents were both performers. But, neither one of them...ah, they both worked. They worked a lot. Neither one of them was trying for a major, major career thing.

Whitmal: Yes

Carlos: Ah, and my father was also a chef. And, my mother did all kinds of work. All kinds of work.

Whitmal: Randall or Louise Smith?

Carlos: Randall. Though, she was also Smith. She and my father divorced. They didn't divorce until I was fourteen, but hey hadn't been together for a long time. And, my stepmother was a nurse. But she passed away two years ago.

Whitmal: I'm sorry.

Carlos: That was a hard one too because she died of cancer.

Whitmal: I am very sorry.

Carlos: It was hard. So hard.

Whitmal: So, there were eleven children, father was a chef, mother did a variety of jobs, and stepmother was a nurse. So were there many performances, impromptu performances in your home? Music?

Carlos: Yes, we had music. We had a piano. My grandmother played. There was also a piano teacher on my mother's side. But she also cleaned houses. Then she moved from Tennessee and they moved to Brooklyn. They...they were ...there was like these ...lots of these girls groups...my birth mother used to dance in between the Rock n Roll shows. When, right before the movie went on, they'd perform. And, right before the other performers came on she'd be part of that chorus. So, we spent a lot of time backstage in these places, me and my sister. And then uh she also worked as a waitress. And, my father did a lot of work as a drummer. So...he played a lot clubs around New York, Long Island, and Brooklyn.

Whitmal: Let's talk about your education. Where did you go to elementary school?

Carlos: I went to P.S. 188. Right on Houston Street. Do you know the lower east side?

Whitmal: No, I don't. Where'd you go to high school?

Carlos: I went to the high school of performing arts.

Whitmal: The FAME school?

Carlos: Yeah, the fame school. (Laughter) That's not why I went there.

Whitmal: (Laughter) Ok. And, college. Did you go to college?

Carlos: I worked. I was doing work...ah, theatre work. Working with Mobilization for Youth, which was run by Woody King, the whole theatre, uh, component. And, ah, Olive Wong. And so, I was doing plays on the street and in school. Making films and all kinds of stuff like that. So, when I left, when, um, it was time for me to graduate from school, high school, umm, I didn't have a lot of family support. So I didn't get to go the graduation or to prom night, or any of those things. So, I just wasn't being supported by my family. And, ah, I was working. I'd hold one two jobs down at a time. Yeah, so no I didn't go to college. That's the answer for college. I didn't go to college because I was working.

Whitmal: Ok. That's fine. I saw that you were a belly dancer, lots of dancing, sold shoes...Is that accurate.

Carlos: I've done a lot of things. Yeah.

Whitmal: Ok, you know you see things on the Internet and you just don't know what is true. I tend to be a little suspicious of some things on the Internet. There is so much that is incorrect. I think folks should be a little dubious of that as a source.

Carlos: Yeah. I've...I've also been a Go-Go dancer too. And, then I sold clothes, shoes, answered telephones, and waited tables and a lot of things.

Whitmal: Cool. My understanding is that your first huge breakout performance was in *Shange's for colored girls*. Is that right?

Carlos: That was...that was...no.... because we were all doing similar work. I would say that my first real important work was done when I was eighteen or nineteen years old. I worked at Belafonte Enterprises.

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Whitmal: Belafonte. Harry Belafonte?

Carlos: Ummmm. And, I believe I got that gig because I'd gotten some...there were some awards done, gotten because of some film work that we were all doing for Mobilization for Youth and so a lot of people were interested in the group of people that were working there and I was doing all kinds of experimental work at that time. And, I was also working at Le Grand Hotel, which was a clothing and shoe store. I think I was eighteen years old. Ah, and living on St. Mark's Place. And, so, I went to work for Belafonte Enterprises as a... worked there and studied casting. And, then and worked for Vic Ramos. So, I ended up casting the first...ah...Black films that were done in New York: *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, *The Landlord*, something called *Angel Levine*, all kinds of stuff like that. And I worked at the Negro Ensemble Company in the evening as a, oh God, as a, I almost said waitress, but that's not what I was doing. As an usher. As an usher in the theater.

Whitmal: Ok. And this is when you're still eighteen?

Carlos: Yes.

Whitmal: You were busy. Really working hard. Very busy.

Carlos: Yeah, eighteen, nineteen, twenty. But that's what people did in those days. You know kids that got to go to college...that was a whole another...most people didn't get to go to college.

Whitmal: Sure.

Carlos: I didn't have a lot of support in my family for me to do that.

Whitmal: Yep. Lots of families are like that.

Carlos: Yeah.

Whitmal: Well, after working in casting, what lead you to *Colored Girls*? Can we talk about that? What lead you to that piece of work?

Carlos: Actually, we were all doing ten thousand things. I was working at Roger Thurman's Heritage Theater. I was working at the Public Theater. Edgar White, doing Edgar White plays and working with Jamie Sanchez and working at place called Rigbea Studio and doing a lot of stuff.

Whitmal: Yes.

Carlos: It was all very experimental at that time and because so many, so many, because so many Africans, Black, Negro plays only had women in them that were whores and mummies, and there wasn't a lot of work of substance for us to do. So we each kept making stuff up.

Whitmal: So you created your own space and work.

Carlos: Absolutely. No, well, yeah. That's what we did. So, I was working at the Public Theater and the stage manager and I then met Ifa.

Whitmal: Ifa Bayeza?

Carlos: Yes, Ifa. Ifa was Ntozake's sister. Ntozake came into town at some point. Gylan Kain of the Last Poet was arrested for murder. Yes, murder. But, of course he never did a murder. But he was arrested for murder and we started to do for colored girls to raise some money for his...ah...his I don't remember if it was for his bail or for trial.

Whitmal: For bail, trial, or legal fees?

Carlos: Yeah, all that kind of stuff. I met Ntozake. I didn't meet Ntozake actually until two days before we did some work at DeMonte bar. Ntozake would give me pieces of poems. And that's how we...that's how I started knowing who she was. And she was working, she was working, um, with Dianne McIntyre over at Sounds and Motion down on 125th as a dancer, I think. We all started coming together to do this work so that we could raise money for Gylan.

Whitmal: And, during those performances were you the woman in blue?

Carlos: Ah, well that...see that woman in blue stuff didn't exist.

Whitmal: Oh.

Carlos: No, that didn't exist. There was none of that. We came together in DeMonte bar, we performed there, we performed at universities. You know get on the bus or van and go and work in these universities. All us working together for a big chunk of time, so we had live playing. We'd work out movements through this language, worked on, ah, worked on a lot of breath work because of the influence of Dianne McIntyre. Yeah, through Jazz, through movement, through theater movement on the stage and we were really in a state of, oh my God, a state of deep radical controversy and studying renegadeism.

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Whitmal: Renegadeism.

Carlos: Oh yeah. Well, we were not trying to repeat what had occurred previously. And, so we were at a particular place of, ah, making our own language. At that particular moment, the language that was at hand was Ntozake's language. Aku Kadogo. Oh goodness, names, names Aku Kadogo, Paula Moss, who has another name completely now. Um, oh...and I'll remember her name in just a minute. ...Thea Martinez.

Whitmal: Ok.

Carlos: Thea Martinez was a dancer I'd known since the second grade. Ah, she was also working with us, Trazana Beverley, who I met at the Negro ensemble Company when I was 17 or 18. Let me see who else. Oh, Judy Dearing, who at the time was one of the, in my own opinion was one of the most brilliant dancers ever. Yeah, she married John Dearing. Is Dearing's John's name? Really good. I don't remember. It was a group of people or vein of women, or vein of people, Thulani Davis, all of us was trying to make some kind of language, sonically, and physically. It was so much we didn't know about what our own journey was. We were not, none of us were really willing to participate in a theatrical vernacular in the way that had been, ah, in any way that had been...that we knew previously.

Whitmal: So very avant-garde, right?

Carlos: Yeah. And, we were...well, Ntozake didn't have no hair and neither did I. I had cut off all my hair. I cut it bald. She'd cut her hair off and we wore scarfs and lots of bracelets, and long skirts and people just didn't...they called us weird. Weird colored people. (laughter)We didn't think we were weird. Cause we knew better.

Whitmal: Absolutely. But weird, really?

Carlos: Yeah, we got that a lot. That was bizarre.

Whitmal: Ok, so you mentioned a concept earlier that I'd like to get back to. You mentioned Thought music. Let's talk more about Thought Music.

Carlos: Thought music, um, thought music didn't actually come into play until ah... the 80s. Yeah, Me and Jessica Hagedorn, Robbie McCauley. Well, after for colored girls and *Spell #7* people wanted to pigeonhole what we were suppose to be. How you were suppose to speak? Now, mind you, I had been, I had been an actor since I was 15 years old. A quote unquote legal actor since I was 15. So, here I was, here I was in my...and my baby, my daughter Amber was about 12, maybe 13, no 12 yeah 13, and people were still then, were then trying to make me, pigeonhole me, and pigeonhole us into a genre, that was already imagined in *for colored girls* and so that had already happen. Um,

so we wanted to do a lot of different kinds of things. We wanted to keep exploring different kinds of work. So, we became Thought Music. So, we could pull these collaborations together and do whatever the hell we wanted to do.

Whitmal: I know that's right.

Carlos: (Laughter) Ummm...and so we became performance artists. It meant we didn't have to construct, um, what everyone called the play form. It meant we didn't have to, um, rely on certain kinds of stories to tell our stories and it also meant that we could then be continue to make this investigation of movement to text and text to movement. And that is how Thought Music got made.

Whitmal: Ok, so what did you do for funding? I mean, you decide, understandably so, that you don't want to be pigeonhole and you decided to do this experimental performance art, so how do you fund your projects? Are you self funded? Do you receive grants? How are you doing this?

Carlos: Some, at this point, I'm doing so grants.

Whitmal: Some grants.

Carlos: Yeah, one thing I was not doin at this point was working in "legitimate theater." *For colored girls* and the making of those Black films I was part of that, when we started, when that work started in the late 60s there were hordes of Black actors that had no SAG cards. So, there wasn't much work for Black actors. And, so you get at some point in time a lot of people became SAG and they you know they'd come on the set to be extras. Who then they'd get a waiver for their SAG card. And, so between 60, 68-75 a lot of people became SAG actors. So, and at that same time, a lot of people became, um Equity...Black Equity actors.

The problem for me was, at the point that *for colored girls* went to the Public Theater, equity walked in. We'd gotten all these rave reviews and Henry Street Settlement and the moment we opened up and the reviews came out, and folks start to come see it, Equity walked in and you had to become a member of Equity. The problem with Equity was that you could not work in certain places, you could not work, um, under certain circumstances, so at the same time you entered Equity you also were, um, locking down, in terms of what your vision for what your work was. So, I worked most of the time outside the Equity, um, mandates. Um, whenever I had to pay my dues I do. When I do legitimate work in legitimate theater I do. So, um, so, making work became problematic, in terms where you could make it. Getting the money to do it, kinda became problematic, but because I also was used to doing five things at once and I worked. I would work at night, like from 11:00 until 4:00 or 5:00 in the morning doing something else. Have to start rehearsal at like 11:00 in the morning, one in the afternoon, doing my work, or set up some kind of time so that I would



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always feeding back into my work through some other work. I did that for a long time. Or, it really was a matter of just simply finding all kinds of ways to get it done. It meant that the child that I had, my baby, ah, my baby ended up living in Queens with my father and my stepmother. For big, long periods of time. But, mainly because I could not feed her and she'd come stay with me for a long time whenever I had, whenever I was set up enough to do that. And that became problematic.

Whitmal: Motherhood, the hardest job in the world.<sup>1</sup>

Whitmal: You mentioned how your father and stepmother helped you take care of your daughter. I know that you wrote a performance piece about him. Let's talk about *White Chocolate for My Father*.

Carlos: *White Chocolate for My Father* was written because my father was not around. He was just not there. If you know my father's life....if you know anything about my father and mother's life, you can't put blame anywhere. What I wanted to do...I was molested when I was eleven.

Whitmal: Oh, I'm so sorry

Carlos: I couldn't tell my father because I didn't think he'd um...he would hear me, uh, we lived, um, separate lives, and I was, I was s angry with him. I was so angry with him since I was like eight years old and then this shit happens. And, my mother didn't throw this man out and my father, I believe had a lot of regret, a lot of regret in his life, concerning us, his children, and didn't understand why his and my mother's marriage didn't work. And, I wanted to say something about how we lived when he wasn't there, ah, I wanted to, I wanted to say something to him about it and so I started working on *White Chocolate for My Father*, Of course, I didn't realize it was for my father until five years after I wrote the piece. That's what it was for...just basically it was something that was for him since he wasn't there.

Whitmal: Why the title, *White Chocolate for My Father*? What is the significance? Why the food metaphors?

Carlos: Well, I use a lot of food metaphors...

Whitmal: Yes.

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<sup>1</sup> Here the interview turned to a more candid conversation about motherhood, regret, and men. Out of respect for Ms. Carlos' privacy, I've omitted that part of our interview.

Carlos: I use white chocolate....well when you're holding it you don't know what it is unless you actually know what it is. So, probably part of the influence for me was, there was something about who we, who we are as Black people in American, we know who we are, but we don't know who were in the room with, because we don't recognize ourselves. So, that's the white chocolate. (laughter)And, my father loved chocolate. Yeah, yeah.

Whitmal: Ok. So, let's talk more about the food metaphors. Certainly in that instance I understand how you use it, but in other pieces, you make use of food. For instance, in the "Cooking Show," "Organdy Falsetto," can we talk more about those food metaphors?

Carlos: Well, my father is a chef. My daughter Amber is a chef as well as an artist. My grandmother on my mother's side was a chef. My father's grandmother was a chef.

Whitmal: Ok, I see.

Carlos: We ate...all this stuff. We lived with multiple palettes. We had all kinds of food. We ate Puerto Rican food, we ate Chinese food, we ate Kosher food, we ate Polish food and my great grandmother, my father's grandmother was one of the best Kosher cooks in New York state. Yeah, so she worked for a lot of politicians and she um she and my other grandmother on my mother's side made, they made extraordinarily elaborate cakes and extraordinary simple dishes. I, they made black eye peas and hoecakes. My grandmother on my mother's side would make these incredible tureens and these triple-decker, triple-decker um blueberry pies, and these incredible cakes, and she wore these extraordinary hats. She save up, washing white people's floors, save the money and buy these extraordinary hats and clothes. They'd be dressed to the nines. Then you could come in and have a cup of black-eyed peas and some rice. Or, you could walk in and have, ah, these roast, or my father would make Chinese lo mien and they'd be in the same room. I learned a lot about being Black in America — we had to speak all of those languages. So, I'm also a brilliant cook.

Whitmal: Well, go head then.

Carlos: (Laughter) I am. I am a brilliant cook. I can cook anything, from any country, anywhere, and all I have to do is smell it.

Whitmal: Oh, wow. I'm not there yet. I still need a recipe.

Carlos: No, I don't need anything of those things. My mother and grandmothers cooking taught me how to smell, any kind of food we made it. Food becomes a way of identifying who you are and where you are in the world. So, I use a lot of food metaphors.

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Whitmal: Ok, so let's talk about the pork chop wars, since we're still talking about food.

Carlos: Yes. Um, *Pork Chop Wars* is a performance novel. About ten years ago, I started talking, I work a lot in Austin Texas. I started talking there about doing something to push the theater forward—the playwright form—to move it, to destroy it. To examine and discuss the nature of our lives beyond a, could you put quote around this

Whitmal: Yes

Carlos: “White voice” to tell our stories. How do we tell our stories without, without having to limit where we are on the stage or what mediums are we going to use to tell these stories? Beyond this, basically we have a very long string attached to it. So, when I tell you about all the work that has been done over the past 35 almost 40-45 years, then you realize that this conversation has been going on a long time. The idea that creating a novel, there are certain things that happen in your mind when I say the word novel, and I want you to think of the performance novel in terms of bigger and deeper. I'll put it that way. Now, how do you perform it bigger and deeper in terms of telling the American story? Ah, so the performance novel became the frame for it. So, what the hell is a performance novel? That is the question. Sharon Bridgforth is a brilliant writer, I started working on *Pork Chops Wars* and had to stop because my stepmother was sick and I had to put it down. She has one called: *Love Conjure Blues*, so she has a lot of people are putting other ideas on the plate to create excavating and investigation for the performance novel. So, she, it was my idea, but she has now written it. She has written the first one and I'm working on the second one.

Whitmal: Ok.

Carlos: I did hear that someone else is working on a performance novel. What I know at this point—the idea of it—becoming a, people are beginning to work on the idea of it.

Whitmal: Can we discuss the specifics of your new performance novel? Are you comfortable discussing that part?

Carlos: Oh, yeah. In *White Chocolate for My Father*, I only spoke about certain aspects of the matriarchy in my family and I decided to work on the matriarchy on both my father and my mother's side. So, it's a big story. A big story. A deep story. So, what in the hell is a performance novel? It is very abstract a lot of....holding the story together on the page using, ah, using gesture movement on the page. That's been the challenge. So, um, I've had small readings of some versions of it, um, so, um, I'm back at working on it again. I threw the original one in the garbage and I've started again. Yeah.

Whitmal: I understand that ritual is important to you. So, let's talk about the importance of ritual in performance.

Carlos: Ah, I think almost every single, every single thing you see in the theater, every thing from music, what you do through your daily travels, the way you think is all about ritual. Setting up, setting these points you can recognize, you have with other, connecting it with other points that you have learned, come to understand on your journey. When I'm working with rituals I always bring something original based on what's in the text. Period. You won't always work from the same space. The language always dictates what the ritual is and what is going to develop. So when the director says step to the left, come down stage, turn this way, turn around, walk up stage that is ritual. And, since I'm into gesture and movement that is obviously abstract in terms of the language and done in a jazz aesthetic and sometimes people will say Laurie you're choreographing the work, or, I did think I was making ritual. I do a lot of that kind of language and when people have tried to understand it in academia, they want you to nail in some kind of idiom that they can understand. They're trying to figure out some kinda fucking idiom (laughter).

Whitmal: (Laughter) I...I...trust me. I understand. It can be very taxing.

Carlos: The other thing they try and say to you is: Ah, Ms. Carlos you can't do this...I wanna say shut the fuck up...(Laughter) I can do it. I did. I've done it many times. Get the fuck outta my face.

Whitmal: (Laughter) I don't believe you.

Carlos: The institution tries to, the institutions just kills the artistic. Art is not like that! In the institution, they want you to give them the five steps of how it happened. I just came out of a Cal Arts fest, this past winter.

Whitmal: Were you teaching there?

Carlos: It was a residency thing. Carl Hancock Rux is running the performance studies there. And, it's great because I don't have to explain everything. It really is great because you don't have to explain a goddamn thing to Rux.

Whitmal: How long were you there?

Carlos: Probably for like two and half, two months. Working with a new writer from Uganda. Her name is Deborah Asiimwe. I'm going to go back up this winter and work with her. It's great to work with people that you don't have to have all these

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explanations. Or, go through trying to prove to somebody that what you're talking about is actual.

Whitmal: Now, this was 2008?

Carlos: Yes.

Whitmal: Great. Sounds exciting.

Carlos: Yeah, now Suzi Lori Parks was running that literature theater thing up there and that was really good, because she set it up, that everybody could breathe and continue to make progressive and avante-garde work.

Whitmal: There are a few more things I'd like to talk about before I let you go. I know you've worked with Professor Joni Jones in Austin, right?

Carlos: Yeah, with Omi!

Whitmal: Have you worked with other universities?

Carlos: Yes, I've worked...I'm doing a project with UIC Champaign Urbana with Cynthia Oliver. And, I've worked at the University of Iowa, Amherst, I've worked University of Texas, Arizona State (Herberger Theater Center).

Whitmal: Let's talk about the importance of feminism or womanism in your work.

Carlos: Well, it's all I have. I don't even know how to not be (laughter)...You know, part of this—you said you're 41?

Whitmal: Yes.

Carlos: You have no idea how restricted, confined, just down women were at the time I was born and yet I was born freer than my mother and my grandmother, my great-grandmother. At the age that I am I get up every morning as a free Black woman. I been a free Black woman since forever. I don't have to pick cotton, get no water, suck no dicks, no nothing I don't want to. I do what I want to do. I don't have to do shit. So you know when I'm bored, when I'm upset, or aggravated that's on me. You know. Nobody tells me what to do.

Whitmal: That's healthy. A blessing even.

Carlos: But...but that cost me a lot in a lot of ways. It had to be done. I just heard this song on the radio the other day (singing)

*I will always be your slave  
Til the I'm buried in my grave  
Oh, bringing it to me  
Bring your sweet love on home to me  
Oh, bringing to me  
Bring it on home*

My daughter ain't never heard no shit like that. Because I don't like shit like that. In my house? You know, but this what, what, but this was the nature, the life of, as a woman everywhere. Ah, so there's really nothing else we could have done. In *For Colored Girls* the drugs, the cocaine, this, the that, and all of that crap. That work had been started by Odetta, and by Cicely Tyson, there were women who, you know, Esther Rolle, ah, Roxie Roker, these were women. I mean they gave up so much to do the life. So, ah, by the time I got born there was really nothing but be a feminist...all I had was a feminine...feminist vocabulary. After being on stage without a bra on, really, that was a revolutionary act and I heard it from every single male person that was a producer, director. Well, you know in those days I was considered ugly—just really ugly. Ah, because here I was doing things that were done and the things women had to do, ah just survive. It was just...it was the only voice I could speak with. There were so many women, doing so many I didn't believe in that disenfranchise ways of seeing the world. I mean, I couldn't because my reality, I mean, I remember that people would say that Asian women were so demure and so, um, I never met a demure Asian woman before. Never.

Whitmal: Neither have I.

Carlos: Never.

Whitmal: Really, where did that stereotype start?

Carlos: White men wanted that to be the norm. So, this hypersexual Black female. Goodness. I don't know what people are talking about!

Whitmal: Right.

Carlos: So, I couldn't play the game. That was part of it. My feminine voice was very strong from the time I was five years old. So, I couldn't play the game. I looked great in high heels, but I couldn't play the game.

Whitmal: Too restrictive?

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Carlos: It was. Um, unreal. I told you that I did all kinds of dancing things. One of things that happens when you are working topless in a bar, you learn the numbers. My sister taught me the numbers. Ah, along the bar and certain men want certain things. You know from a kind of position in the body what--what they want. And, you make a decision on whether you want to do that or not. Yeah. You have to learn how to read that body language, like you do a map, yeah. So, there's something. My mother was a dancer. But, she was also an exotic dancer, so I also had, um, some real clues as to what that looked like in that environment. Once you learn to read that map, you then have to agree or not agree to continue on with this language, yeah. And, I decided that I could not give in to that language.

Whitmal: I think there is a documentary out about exotic fan dancer, *Pretty Things* and about the politics of dance and what goes on in that culture. Though, I think that film is about white women.

Carlos: Doesn't matter. Woman is woman. You know you could go to a club and you could figure out and I'd figure it out easily. These things-- I'm not going to do--never could--never would. There was always, at least, one other girl in the club that was gonna do it. You could always figure that out. (Pause) When you watch cross-dressers...you know men?

Whitmal: Yes.

Carlos: I learned a lot of stuff from them too. They know. They know exactly what they are performing to and for. So, they know what is expected. Every woman knows this, but as an actor, I always thought of it in terms of character. This character. And, how do you act. So, that maybe part of the reason I understand, that this was how I always had to work. I-could-not-play-the-game. But, I had to speak from my most feminine place.

Whitmal: Let's talk more about the backlash of speaking.

Carlos: Oh yeah. There was a lot of backlash. I mean, I was, I was one of the best actors I know. I didn't get a lot of work. Still, haven't. Because I couldn't play the game. It hurt and then on another level it didn't hurt. It left me completely open to what I really wanted to do and I know that there is a place all through American theater arts, film arts, and the work that the worked that I've done has been influenced by.

Whitmal: Absolutely.

Carlos: And, that couldn't happened if I had played the game. Yeah.

Whitmal: Can't be a pioneer if you're a follower.

Carlos: But, I wasn't trying to be a pioneer.

Whitmal: What I mean, is that is the end result, even if you weren't trying. So, I think you were though...

Carlos: Yeah, because I couldn't play the game. I couldn't.

Whitmal: Did the backlash come just from men? How did women respond?

Carlos: Oooh, lots of women really—were--there are some that get pissed off. Part of it is they are pissed that I'm not playing the game. So, how did you get from here to there not playing the game? And, then they want to talk about your sexuality. People don't know what the hell they're talking about most of the time (Long pause).

Whitmal: Ok, wrapping up here. Could you talk about how *The Cooking Show* got started?

Carlos: PS 122 and Dance Theater Workshop wanted me to do something. Oh God was that the 80s or the 90s I don't remember now. They wanted me to do something there and I had worked up there as a director for Niky Paraiso and something else with Dan Froot, but I don't remember and so I went back up there to do the cooking show because her stuff took place in a living room and a kitchen. So, I figured I could use and try out some materials that I was working on and that I could take some other things that I wanted to work on and solo and make a salad. And that is how that started. And there was a moment there when people didn't have enough money to bring your whole troupe. I was working with a group of actors, so I would go on these solo adventures and call them *The Cooking Show*.

Whitmal: What specifically did you do during those show adventures?

Carlos: I'd make a big three bean salad. Talk about the origins of the ingredients inside of the salad. Or, it could have been anything that I wanted to make that didn't need to be cooked on the stove. And, then I'd give, I would do something that had to do with what was going on in the news, internationally, American politics, and how I was feeling. And, some gossip, always some gossip. Ah, some songs, keep making the salad and talking. So, *The Cooking Show* was never the same. You know, it always had an improvisational part to it.

Whitmal: And, the *Organdy Falsetto*?

Carlos: I was writing *Organdy Falsetto* and I wanted to say something about the artifice of femininity. And, relationship. So, that's how that happened. It was suppose to be me



*E. Angelica Whitmal*

and Robbie McCauley and then Robbie didn't do it. LaTanya Richardson, Taria Joseph did, me, Ruben Santiago Hudson and yeah, and then Sam Jackson. Sam ate chicken, drank beer, and watched television (Laughter). Cause I had to have a silent man. And, in order to have Robbie in the piece, I got an old photograph of her and had it blown up to 8 feet by 4 feet. And, just hung it on the stage and lit it.

Whitmal: You're an interesting director. That is an interesting way to keep her in the work.

Carlos: That's right. Because I'm gonna get what I want.

Whitmal: Ok. So, Sam Jackson is the silent character?

Carlos: Yeah. He was the silent character. LaTanya Richardson did, she played, I don't remember. And, we did it downtown.

Whitmal: Do you remember when that was?

Carlos: I'm gonna say 1987.

Whitmal: What would you like your legacy to be? In the world of Black female performance artist. Not that you're going anywhere, but what...

Carlos: I'm really not. (Laughter) I'm about to get into so much trouble in the next six months. Um, I don't...I just...this had been my own little secret nut, forever. I want to tell the American story from the kitchens where I learned it. Because they were so many hips, recipes, multiplicity of language, ah, and soaps, rustlings of crinolines, and crepes, so many possibilities before you cracked the egg. And, black coffee boiled. I wanna tell that.



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