

Miami Herald, The (FL)

January 22, 2007

A writer's life: Cuban exile author draws from painful experience

Author: ANA VECIANA-SUAREZ aveciana@MiamiHerald.com

Edition: Final
Section: Tropical Life
Page: 6E

Estimated printed pages: 4

Article Text:

The event and the emotions that came with it -- fear, humiliation, shock, despair -- have been seared into Carmen Duarte's mind.

She is 18, a college student and an aspiring playwright at the University of Havana. Another student, in the acting track, accuses her of a "crime" that threatens not only her nascent career but her entire future. The young man claims he caught her kissing another woman in a college classroom, an act of homosexuality that means, at the very least, expulsion.

"Until then, I had not realized how homosexuals were marginalized," Duarte recalls now, in the relative safety of exile in Miami. "That was a point when things changed. Classmates were afraid to talk to me. Professors wouldn't recognize me in class. There was a great aggressiveness all around me. It was as if I were an assassin."

Though the accusation was eventually dropped, Duarte never forgot the danger lurking for those who expressed a sexual orientation that did not conform with "The New Man" the Cuban Revolution was trying to create. Nor did she ever recover a good relationship with her psychiatrist father and homemaker mother.

"There was much disgust in the family even though they were publicly supportive of me," she says. "The relationship with my father was never the same, and my mother, who is still alive, deals with it by not talking about my sexuality."

Three decades later, Duarte uses the memory of that pain to infuse her second novel, *La danza de los abanicos* (The dance of the fans) with a surreal poignancy that is likely to touch even those who have never suffered the vicissitudes of communist oppression or anti-gay bias.

La danza, published in Spanish by Editorial Egales and available on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com), is the story of four women who want to live with their sexuality and their feelings without restrictions. They dream of escape and eventually make their way north, to Miami, where the narrative continues.

Though there are yet no plans to translate it into English, Duarte hopes word of mouth will promote enough sales of the book to garner attention from a U.S. publisher. After all, she says, the story of Cuban and Cuban-American lesbians is not one that has been told at any length. Homosexuality -- whether in Cuba or across the Florida Straits -- tends to be a taboo subject for many Hispanic families.

"I don't know what the reaction will be here," she says. "It can be ignored, criticized or accepted. Either way, it's a story that had to be told."

Cuban art critic Alejandro Rios agrees. Rios, who arrived here from the island in 1992, recalls Duarte as a promising young playwright whose career was made doubly difficult because of her sexual orientation. He hopes that this novel will break some barriers.

"It's a door that opens and by which others may follow," he says.

While he concedes that Hispanic Miami may be reluctant to accept homosexuality in literature, "if we want to be a truly open and diverse society, we have to make way for this," he says. "I think the public is there."

Yet, Duarte, now 47, says she doesn't want the novel to become a treatise on the state of Cuban-American lesbians. That was not her intention. "I wrote it for me, out of a personal necessity and not so much to tell people this is how it is for us," she says. "It was like a relief to write this."

Without an agent to shop the book around, it took her four years of rejections to get it published. Early last year, a publisher in Spain, one that she had submitted the manuscript to previously, surprised her with an acceptance letter. The book was launched in September in Mexico and Spain.

Reaction? "What I hear from readers is that they find it to be an interesting world, something they didn't know about," Duarte says. There have been very few reviews, however. A very short one, published in *Berkana*, a magazine from Spain, calls it "magical." Her first book, a historical novel *Hasta la vuelta*, published by Editorial Plaza Mayor in Puerto Rico in 2001, got few reviews, too, but good ones, including one from award-winning Cuban-writer Mireya Robles, now working at a university in South Africa:

"Carmen Duarte tells us that return is inevitable, be it to our city, to our island, to our past that we have left behind but that in some form doesn't disappear, only surges once again in the people we are today."

Novel writing is only the latest incarnation of Duarte as a writer. Today she makes a living as a producer for the Telemundo news show *Al Rojo Vivo* (Red Hot) but, before this, she

had already begun to make a name for herself in the world of local Cuban drama and Spanish-language media. She is perhaps best known locally as one of the voices on the radio show *Transición*, where she interviewed several important Cubans and Cuban Americans, including high-ranking communist officials Ricardo Alarcon and Abel Prieto. Sponsored by The Cuban Committee for Democracy, the show was one of the few alternative voices to the more traditional hard-line views found on Spanish-language airwaves. (She left, after seven years, because she had not been paid for several months, she said.)

Before radio, she had already decided to abandon drama in Miami, though she had, somewhat successfully, staged her best-known play at Miami-Dade College, *Que me das marinero?* (What will you give me, sailor?)

"There are different barriers here," she explains. "There's an economic wall. (In Cuba), there was the wall of censorship."

Not that she would ever give up writing. Her earliest memories -- from as soon as she could form her letters -- are of writing stories in her house in the Santo Suarez neighborhood of Havana. At 10, she was reading *Crime and Punishment*.

Ultimately it was her writing talent that gave her freedom. At an international drama conference in Frankfurt, Germany, she met up with a cousin from Miami. He accompanied her to the U.S. Consulate, where she received entry papers into the United States and in December of 1993, at the age of 34, she asked for political asylum as soon as she landed at Miami International Airport. By then, her reputation as a critic of the Castro regime was hurting her career.

"I couldn't handle it anymore," she told *El Nuevo Herald's* Armando Correa, who covered her arrival here. "I had decided not to return."

She doesn't regret her decision, though it was not easy at the beginning.

"It wasn't missing Cuba so much as being disoriented, not knowing what path to follow and how to make a living," she says. "But I feel good now. I miss my mother and my sister, but Cuba as it was, no. I'm used to things here."

She has visited her family several times, but Miami "is the place I miss when I travel." She is now at work on a third book, a historical novel about a Cuban poet who dies in Key West. "Writing books for me has become a form of escape," she says. "It's therapy."

Caption:

PHOTOS BY AL DIAZ/MIAMI HERALD STAFF UNTOLD STORIES: Carmen Duarte, at left with partner Jody Schenk,, says homosexuality tends to be a taboo subject for many Hispanic families. ~~