

SPIDERWOMAN THEATER AND THE TAPESTRY OF STORY

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Abstract/ Résumé

Spiderwoman Theater was founded 20 years ago by three sisters of Kuna and Rappahannock ancestry. It is the oldest continually-running women's theatre company in North America. These versatile performers have acted together and separately around the world, from China to Panama. They are actors, singers, writers and teachers, providing much inspiration for young Aboriginal artists.

Spiderwoman Theater fut fondé il y a 20 ans par trois soeurs de l'ascendance Kuna et Rappahannock. C'est le plus ancien théâtre dirigé sans interruption par des femmes en Amérique du Nord. Ces artistes aux multiples facettes ont joué ensemble et séparément dans le monde entier, de Chine à Panama. Ils sont acteurs, chanteurs, écrivains et enseignants, et représentent une bonne source d'inspiration pour les jeunes artistes autochtones.

1996 marks the 20th anniversary of Spiderwoman's first production, *Women in Violence*. Founded in 1976 by sisters Lisa Mayo, Gloria Miguel and Muriel Miguel, Spiderwoman Theater is the oldest continually-running women's theater company in North America. The company has been a training ground for Native actresses, notably Murielle Borst and the Colorado sisters, Hortensia and Elvira, who have gone on to develop their own careers. Since its inception Spiderwoman has offered performers a space to explore and examine their own issues and ideas, in their various transformations, the company has included actresses of European and African-American heritage, but what has remained constant is their technique of storyweaving. Inspired by the Hopi goddess Spiderwoman, who taught the People to weave, Lisa, Gloria, and Muriel create theatrical weavings through interconnecting designs of language and movement, blending fantasy and reality, humor and seriousness.

Lisa was also a founding member of the Off The Beaten Path theater group. She studied at the New York School of Music and is a classically-trained mezzo-soprano, and has studied with Uta Hagen, Robert Lewis, Walt Witcover, and Charles Nelson Riley. Gloria studied drama at Oberlin College and has performed throughout the United States in Spiderwoman and in such works as *Grandma*, a one-woman play by Hanay Geigogamah, and in Canadian productions of *Son of Ayash* and *Jessica*, for which she received a nomination for the Sterling Award for outstanding supporting actress. Muriel was a dancer and choreographer with the Thunderbird American Indian Dancers and worked with Joseph Chaikin in The Open Theater. In February and March of 1996 she developed a new piece entitled *Trail of the Otter* at the Banff Arts Center in Alberta.

Their productions have included *Sun, Moon and Feather* (which was adapted as a 16 mm. film by Jane Zipp and Bob Rosen), *Winnetou's Snake Oil Show from Wig-Warn City*, *Rever-Ber-Berations*, and *Power Pipes*. They also appear in film and television, as well as together in the work of others, such as Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters*. In September, 1995 Lisa and Gloria performed excerpts from Spiderwoman productions in China at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women.

A new production featuring Lisa and Gloria, *Daughters from the Stars: Nis Bundor*, premiered in November, 1995 at the Dance Theater Workshop in New York. This work, their twenty-first original piece, is an exploration of past, present and personal identity, and about the retracing of steps. It began as an outgrowth of Lisa and Gloria's journey in February, 1994 to Panama and Kuna Yala on the San Bias Islands, which is located in the Caribbean between Colombia and Panama. (The sisters' heritage on their father's side is Kuna; on their mother's side they are Rappahannock).

While the sisters were in Panama and the San Bias Islands they began the research which forms the dramatic center of the production. They learned Kuna stories, listened to oral history, and heard of the many Kuna ceremonies. Only three of the islands in the San Bias chain permit visitors, but Lisa and Gloria were invited by their father's relatives to visit Naragana, his native island. They also attended the traditional Kuna Congress and a commemoration of the 1925 Kuna uprising against the Panamanian army.

As the project began to take shape, Lisa and Gloria wrote the song lyrics for the play, selected a director, Renee Philippi, the first non-Native director of their work, and collaborated with other theater artists to develop the musical score, lighting, costumes, and illusions. Northern Arapaho painter and sculptor Ernie Whiteman designed some masks, the set, and the large painting used as a backdrop.

Spiderwoman has endured because their work emerges from the cultural foundations of their heritage. Certainly, the subjects they explore are not unique to Native communities: domestic abuse, violence toward women, cultural assimilation and loss. But their plays integrate elements of Native myth and the oral tradition--a storytelling tradition--with the realities of contemporary life to examine these issues.

Using these life experiences as the foundation of their stories and the technique of storyweaving to bring those stories to life, *Spiderwoman Theater* reflects the tapestry of humanity and weaves a web of connections among people. And like the Hopi goddess, *Spiderwoman* is ever-present, ready to offer counsel and guidance through their work.

I spoke with Lisa, Gloria and Muriel one afternoon in New York City in October of 1995.

How did you start out in theater?

LM I began as a child performer, working with my mother and father and Gloria and then later Muriel in snake oil shows. My father would do shows all over New York with other Native men and sometimes he got a job in a carnival or something like that and the whole family would come along. That was my first experience with performing. When I was ten years old I decided to leave that; I wouldn't go anymore with my family. Later I became a classical singer and studied opera and languages. I studied privately and at the New York School of Music. During that time I decided to take acting classes too because I thought it would help me as a singer and in the interpretation of songs, especially the German. So I went to a school in Greenwich

Village called the HB Studio and there I had to audition for Uta Hagen for acting and technique and for Charles Nelson Riley. I studied with those two for quite some time. From there, I began to audition and perform and I became a member of the actors' union. Then in 1976 my sister Muriel asked me to join her for a piece that she was working on. That became Spiderwoman Theater and I've been very involved and working with Spiderwoman since 1976.

- GM I started as a little child working with my father in show business. My father sang and danced and many times we went on shows with him, and so we were involved with small skits. When I was thirteen I discovered that I could sing and began taking voice lessons, and sang all the way through high school, but after high school I became very discouraged and didn't have the money to continue with voice lessons, so I put it aside for awhile. I worked with children, went to Brooklyn College and studied early education and did various jobs, including artists' model and director of a preschool when I lived in Ohio. I went to Oberlin as a faculty wife and studied drama for three and a half years, and also studied with Bill Irwin there. I got divorced in 1976, which coincided with the first rehearsals of Spiderwoman. I returned to New York City and began rehearsals for our first piece *Women in Violence*. We had a great time putting it together. Luis Valdez of Teatro Campesino saw us at an international theater festival in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1976, and there we met people from all over the world. We were invited to Nancy, France for the World Theater Festival. We performed throughout Europe, and people liked us because we were women and Native and were doing a new type of theater. *Women in Violence* was written by the whole group, us and three non-Native women. That was the first company of Spiderwoman. We all put together the show.
- MM I started as a dancer and I started pretty young. I was interested in dance because around the age of nine I started to Indian dance. Out of the group of people that I danced with came the Thunderbird American Indian Dancers, which is almost thirty years old now. We started when we were nine, ten, eleven years old in the greater New York area, which means that we worked with Native people at a very early age. There were two directors at that time. I was one of them, and Louis Mofsie was the other. A dance teacher of mine asked me if I was interested in working with actors and that's when I met Joe Chaikin and joined The Open Theater. Joe was interested in working with dancers and making his actors move, but it felt to me like I went the other way. I was a dancer who wanted to work on exercises using

words, voice and drama. A lot of the choreography I was doing at the time was heading in that direction. So it was a small jump to start working that way. Oh, I was in all the initial famous pieces! I was in Pavanne, which was the groundwork for Jean-Claude Van Italie's *America Hurrah*. I was in *The Serpent*, *Viet Rock*, *Terminal* and *Ubu Roi*. We worked with stories in Open Theater, and I understood stories. They were doing storytelling and it was like they just discovered something that, from my point of view, my family always did, so I understood storytelling, you know, from my toenails up. When I left Open Theater I wanted to explore further the idea of storytelling and what the possibilities of storytelling are, how there are so many stories out there. That's what we did; we used stories to make different stories.

Could you talk about the early years of Spiderwoman and that first play?

LM It wasn't my way of working, although I admired what they did very much. My sister Muriel had been at the Open Theater in New York City and she had a certain way of working without a script, they wrote their own scripts, and I thought it was wonderful work, but I didn't think it was for me because I had never worked that way before. I wasn't very receptive of it to begin with. But after a week or so I saw the possibilities. I adjusted and became quite good at it, as a matter of fact. It wasn't that different from the way I worked. It was a different approach but it was getting to the truth, which is what acting is about: getting to the truth of the character and what is real. It wasn't anything put on or forced or phoney. That was the beginning of Spiderwoman. *Women in Violence* was about violence in women's lives, in their home or in a marriage, as children, in the workplace, anywhere. That was the first piece and we did it by finding our clown. We became clowns, so it was a slapstick kind of piece, but we addressed subjects that were, for the time, not discussed. We were talking about incest and child molestation and abortion and that kind of thing. We were working with subjects that were not very palatable to people. People sometimes didn't want to hear that but we continued. I think our saving grace was that we were comediennes. We were very funny and so even though our main message was a heavy one, we were funny and very entertaining. When we went to Europe with that first piece we were very successful. We were supposed to stay for three weeks, but so many people came that we stayed for seven months. When we

came back home, we realized that we were going to continue to work and we've been working ever since.

GM For that first work we researched the violence in our lives, as far back as we could remember, violence with siblings, parents, abuse from men, other experiences. We all thought way back. How did we come out of it? What we developed was the story of ourselves. Putting the story on paper, visualizing the story, was a healing process. We used the clown as another persona. Each one of us made up her own down, and my clown was someone who didn't know who she was, she was always looking for herself. The costume had mirrors on it, so I could always reflect. I carried a flashlight and a hard hat to protect myself and to hide behind. I went around looking for myself. We recounted stories of the violence in our lives, told dirty jokes, and sang pop songs.

MM I worked with large women's groups at that time and eventually I worked with two other women and we started a theater group called Woman's Space. It was based on stories and the differences among three women, one woman was like an ex-Weather [Underground] woman, one woman was coming out as a lesbian, and me, the Indian mother and actress, and our misconceptions of each other and what that meant. It was one of the first feminist pieces. I wanted to have a woman's group, and I wanted to work with my sisters, but that was a little hard. One sister was in Ohio, the other sister seemed like she didn't want to work with me. Finally out of Woman's Space I received a grant and collected some women that I wanted to work with and we started on a piece, *Women in Violence*.

And it was about violence. We talked a lot about violence and what violence meant. I could feel the violence around me and I could feel the violence in me and the anger I had and so when I approached other women, you know, a lot of this anger was coming out. We talked about things like dirty jokes being sexist jokes and the feelings on the street, and so what we did was combine stories. We decided we wanted personas and developed clowns, real clowns. I didn't realize at the time that mine was a trickster, a coyote trickster with a tail and whiskers and crazy-like blonde hair. It's interesting because that trickster followed me all along, I'm doing trickster stories, coyote stories, now. Even this new one-woman piece has a trickster. So it's interesting how you develop something and it follows you. It may be different but it follows you all the way through your career if that's the way you're working.

You've all worked with other actresses in the evolution of Spiderwoman.

MM Right. It was my idea to get together and do *Off the Beaten Path*, which used Native men as well as Native women. I should say that Spiderwoman began with non-Native women for a while, and then there were just the three of us, and then we invited African-American women to work with us, and we traveled all over the world with that company, too, in a piece called *The Lysistrata Numbah*. Eventually, the community really wanted us to be involved in teaching and doing our thing, and so it seemed right that we be an all-Native group. We did *Sun, Moon and Feather*, which was a kind of a life story of the three of us, and the way it was received in the community made us realize that this was the correct way to go. Later we invited Elvira and Hortensia Colorado to join us. and they worked with us for a while. Hortensia did one or two with us, and then we were all in *PowerPipes*, which was a Spiderwoman show, and also Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters*. My daughter Murielle Borst was in both of those, too. So a lot of Native women have worked with us. I think I directed two pieces for the Colorados. The last one was *Blood Speaks*, which was done for the Columbus Quincentenary.

Muriel, how did you get into directing?

MM Again, it's because I started to direct at a very early age. I was one of the directors of the dance company when I was seventeen or eighteen, and I started to do my own choreography. I had a group of people and would direct them and choreograph pieces. I never even thought of it as a director. It's simply what I like to do and what I did. I have an idea and I take it and put it on people and I go with it. People thought I had to have a title of some kind and so they called me a director, but it was very interesting because I didn't know how seriously people took being a quote unquote "director." When we went to Europe the first time it was a big deal that I was a director of this feminist group. We were the first feminist group to go to Nancy, France to the One World Theater Festival.

What process do you use for writing your plays?

MM Some of us work on our feet, which means that we have an idea and a sense of where the words are going and a concept of what the whole thing is. You might have an idea for a story, or you might have a story,



Spiderwoman Theater Company. From top: Lisa Mayo, Gloria Miguel, Muriel Miguel. Photograph from Martha Swope Associates/William Gibson.

so you tell the story. We try to repeat it back to you. Meanwhile, someone's writing it down. Later on, we got wise and used tape recorders. But at the beginning we wrote like mad...very fast! And then the story was finalized, so little by little you'd get a script. The first show didn't have a script, we had bits of paper and later on, when I tried to recreate it I had to gather all these bits of paper from all over. It was pretty amazing. Some of us went home and would write, some of us did it on our feet. Some of it was suggested and some was improvisation and writing. I usually end up being the dramaturge. Sometimes I fought like mad to get things either stretched or reduced. But that's another thing.

It seems like elements in one work are developed in later works.

LM Our work does seem to go in a progression. We did *Winnetou's Snake Oil Show from Wigwam City*, a satire about people selling our spirituality. During the process we found that there were many real things that we wouldn't put in *Winnetou* because that's a show where much of what we do is fake. It's satire. We do a Wild West show and then we do a Plastic Pow Wow Workshop, where in a weekend and for \$1,500.00 you can become a shaman. Stuff like that. So we decided that the next piece would be about real things, so we called that *Rever-Ber-Berations*.

Power Pipes is also a play where we deal with our real spirituality. There were three other people besides us in *Power Pipes* [Elvira Colorado, Hortensia Colorado, and Murielle Borst]. There were some funny things in it but it was mostly serious. You have to remember that we have a drum in this piece and that isn't funny. And the pipes are not funny. The pipes are the life's breath and the drum is the heartbeat. We are women and it's not traditional for women to play or use the drum in some Native groups. So we were taking chances because we were women at the drum, and the women who were of child-bearing age did not touch the drum, only the women who were mature were at the drum. The drum and the flute, naturally, are not slapstick, they just couldn't be.

GM We look for issues that bother us and that have to be dealt with, and in *Winnetou* it was the plastic shaman, people selling guidance and spirituality. These are people who learn from workshops and then charge money. It is against the Elders' teachings to profit from spirituality. You can't buy Indianness.

People were upset with us, and we got a lot of hate mail. One non-Indian woman said to us that we were stingy and selfish and didn't want to share with her, so we put this in our show and used it, to show that this is wrong and against the Elders to sell spirituality. It made us feel bad when they told us that they knew more about Native culture and spirituality than we did. Some people went out of their way to tell us that, to correct us, to flaunt what they took from us, like beadwork. They feel that Natives are losing their culture and that White people are going to come and save it. One woman actually told me, "You are my history. You are my culture." But we're not dying out. To be told that is hurtful. If you want a religion, go back to your own religion, find out where it comes from, get your own spirituality. That's what I wrote in *Winnetou*.

Much of your work has a humorous dimension which goes hand-in-hand with a serious intent.

MM That's very important to me. I hate it when the message gets didactic. I would go to see a lot of the feminist plays of the time, this was years ago, and I was saying, "Oh, God, isn't it a relief when they stop hitting you over the head." I also felt that I could never be in a piece when we all held hands and walked off into the sunset; that's not realistic to me either. I tried to develop other ways of seeing things, taking the absurd and going so far into it that you almost puff it inside out and you come up with something else. I guess that's the way my mind runs. I'm interested in finding the bottom line, the universal fine, and the kernel of the story. Another way is to transform and sometimes take a story over the edge into the absurdity of what something is, or follow how your mind rambles into something. But I also try to find solutions and ways of doing things where you see all the mechanics of the story happen.

LM We are comedienne, and that's something we didn't work hard for. It's with us, with me, that's our way. It just makes me laugh because I remember when I was in acting school, I was given a scene from one of the Chekhov plays. It wasn't a funny scene but people were laughing and I realized that the choices that I made were very natural choices but they were not right for that particular scene. The teacher, Uta Hagen, laughed. She said, "I wish I could get laughs like that. You are a natural comedienne, but you have to learn to make other choices." It was just a natural thing. Both of my sisters are like that

too. The issues that we decide upon are generally what you would call political, things that are happening with Native people in this country, and as they are viewed in Europe they are very political issues. It's a heavy subject: annihilation and survival. We are not supposed to be alive now if the people who came here had their way. So you just think about that and you see how it is political.

I think we picked up our timing from our family. My mother was like this too. Another thing is the fact that humor is a way of survival. We were brought up in Brooklyn in an Italian neighborhood. We were the only Native American children there and I was the only one in my class all through grade school. We were different, other kids made fun of us. I had long braids and I'd get my braids pulled. When we walked down the street, people would "Woo-woo-woo" us and call us Injun Joe and all kinds of stuff. So finding the funny part of that is a way of survival. I believe that I have that and my sisters have that sense of humor because it was a survival mechanism, to get along where we were.

Could you talk about Sun, Moon and Feather?

LM That play came from *The Three Sisters* by Chekhov. We found a way that we could do it by making all the males big, life-size puppets. We had to do a lot of research into Chekhov. It was a challenge. During our research we discovered that we had a lot of personal information and that we could create another show, our show. The next year, after we did *The Three Sisters*, we decided to embark upon *Sun, Moon and Feather*. In *Sun, Moon and Feather*, parts of our Rappahannock names, we found our own "three sisters." We were three sisters, Indian sisters, living in Brooklyn trying to get to Greenwich Village. That was the play, and then a film maker came to see the play and asked us if we would like to do a film of it. He wrote a film script. It's not a video of our play; it's a film script made for 16 mm. We made a video copy of the film.

Do you feel that you're known as a Native acting company?.

LM We've traveled all over and wherever we go, we're not only invited by Natives, Native people come and want us to come to their communities. They invite us to different organizations. We're invited to pow-wows, to schools for storytelling. That's the kind of audiences we

have. So we have many kinds of audiences. In New York City we have an audience of theater people who have watched us grow, and we're in residence at the American Indian Community House and very, very involved with the Native community. We're part of it and have been part of it all our lives. I'm also on the Board of Directors at the Community House.

GM All the material I use is from my Native background, even though I was trained in both classical and experimental theater, as well as in clowning. I've always used, and can never get away from, my heritage, and I always felt Indian. Every step of the way I use my Indianness in my work. But we have the skills and techniques to tackle other subjects.

Muriel, you've done a one-woman, Hot and Soft. What is that about?

I have two one-woman shows right now and the third one that I have a residency for in Banff. Hot and Soft let's see. It came about because I was reading and seeing a lot of erotica and I thought, "Oh, skanky, oh, yuk. This is lousy stuff." When people talk about pornography they aren't really talking about the erotic. After reading a lot of the trickster stories I realized that they were all male, but it couldn't possibly be that way in reality. When you think about it, the anthropologists that wrote these were male and so we ended up with male tricksters. One of the things that's wonderful about tricksters is that they do change gender but female tricksters are rarely mentioned. So I decided to take that as my premise, that the trickster is a female, and I also decided to make the premise that coyote is a lesbian. On top of that I added all this erotica, but erotica like the taboos that we, as lesbians, don't talk about, like hair, or two-timing, or being uncomfortable, or getting older. That's what my one-woman shows are about. They're funny and they're silly and at the same time somewhere in there is the bottom line where people see themselves.

How did the newest show, Daughters From the Stars: Nis Bundor, come about?

GM Originally I had a one-woman show called *One Voice*. I was interested in the theme of taking my voice, because I travel so much. I've travelled to Central America, throughout America, way up into Canada, and many times I would mention that I was Kuna and the Cree

in Canada, for example, had never heard of the Kuna. And I would go to Central America and talk to the Kuna and they never heard of the Rappahannock. Some nations don't know about each other, believe it or not in this day and age. I think if we are going to survive as Indian people we have to know more about each other and accept each other. Well, I had a dream and this dream told me that I should throw my voice out, my one voice, and travel with my body and get people together. I started to sing "Una Voce Poco Fa" by Mozart, and my voice travelled very strongly across the rivers and mountains and over the deserts. What was my voice saying? My voice was reaching out from where I am to all my people, and saying, "Yes, we are different, but we are the same." We have to recognize this and create mere action in terms of this. So I started to write on that. I developed a character called Flies Far Jumping Woman. She comes from the mountains of Central America and travels all over. She jumps and tickles and kisses and wiggles her way into people's thoughts and minds and talks about herself, and wants to know about other people. This character I put together with a character called Suriabad from Kuna Yala. Every night in the San Bias Islands they have what they call a congress, and there's a man with a big stick who keeps people awake and he yells out, "Wake up, wake up," you know, listen to what's going on. So I put those two characters together to finally create Flies Far Jumping Woman. She's a mythical, spiritual character.

So I did the one-woman show. Then we always wanted to go down to Central America, to Kuna Yala and the San Bias Islands, to our people. I had been down there before for six weeks in 1971, and we wanted to get newer information and make another show, using *One Voice*, and put it together with the voice of the people from Kuna Yala, because people don't know much about their music or anything like that. We wanted to put that all together with some myths, stories and words from there. At first we called it *The Kuna Project*. Then we learned of a Kuna myth called "Nis Bundor, Daughters From the Stars," and that's where we got the name, *Daughters From the Stars*.

LM This is a two-person show, two people with a cast of hundreds. I had a piece that I was calling *Voices from the Criss-Cross Bridge*. To me it's a healing piece; the whole thing is a healing piece. I'm from two different nations, I live in New York City, I've been a Christian, I've been a Jew, and it's about making myself and my family and other Indians and urban Indians whole. And then as I look at it, it's not only Indian, it's not only Indigenous Americans, it's other Indigenous

people from other places, so one step led to another. I first did *Voices From the Criss-Cross Bridge* at the New York Theater Workshop as a one-person show. Then I did it at the American Indian Community House as a one-person, and then Gloria and I did our pieces at The Public Theater, separately but on the same stage on the same evening, so it was getting closer together.

GM I am very interested in connecting, connecting, connecting. I put down all my thoughts and write from a storyteller's point of view. Spider-woman Theater, we're actresses and storytellers, and then we weave our stories together. We visualize them and they become a whole piece. I put together stories dealing with connecting people.

LM *Daughters From the Stars* concerns two different groups, the Kuna and the Rappahannock. We're bringing the information from the Kuna to North America and from North American tribes down there. That's part of it. The other part is, well, it's to make yourself whole. We're thinking we're Kuna, we're Rappahannock, and we're brought up in New York City, we're actors in New York City, and we travel all over the world. This tends to do something to one's psyche, so this is a healing piece, I'm using all kinds of things, like magic and illusion, and I'm also learning different European stories because that's part of the healing. I meet many, many non-Indians who are interested in Native people because they, the non-Indians, feel that they don't have anything, and that we have a way of helping ourselves through our religions and the ways we worship. They're not happy with who they are. I want to let them know that they have a lot, so I went to some of the old stories that I've heard and that have been told to me by non-Indians, European people, and I use some of those in this new piece.

GM We have some stories that we think would be fun if there were a bit of magic to them. Since we have, let's say, at least thirty people in our circle we want to make an illusion that there are thirty people on stage. I have people around me but I'm all alone. I want to make the illusion of all these people, old people, young people, human beings, spirits. Some are coming from the stars, and we want to make the illusion that we're all here together in the circle.

LM The piece is about medicine of all kinds. When I say medicine, it's the way we talk about medicine people, people who are spiritual helpers. The play is feeling better about being brought up as an Indigenous person in New York, in Brooklyn, in Red Hook to be specific, in a very inhospitable environment. That takes its toll in some way, and each

one of us had a different way of handling it. I tried not to be an Indian for awhile, for quite a few years, and it didn't work. But I didn't know that then. It was, you know, live and learn. So it's about that, and still to this day, every day of my life I am confronted with who I am. The way I look, my persona, people always ask me, "who are you? what are you?" Some days I can handle it better than others. Some days I say I'm a human being. But people always say, "May I ask you a personal question? What are you?" So it's that. When that happens to you it does take a toll. I am more than one nation, I never lived on a Reserve, I am a complete urban person. That also takes its toll when you go to Native people who are different. Sometimes you're rejected. So it has to do with a lot of that.

GM As a storyteller, as an actor, when you're on stage and you're acting out your feelings, your stories, people will respond. There's always a time when someone will come up and say to me, "This is also my story, and when I saw you and how you dealt with that, it helped me." We're not medicine women. We never hope to be, never claim to be, but our plays are about what we went through, our experiences, and sharing that experience can be a form of medicine to some people. Just the retelling of that experience and how we dealt with it, or how we didn't deal with it, can help people.

Is there one thing that characterizes what Spiderwoman is all about?.

LM I think healing is the main thrust of what we do. Not healing like a spiritual people who are trained and who inherited that, no, but we have a feeling for what makes us feel bad about ourselves, I mean, all of us Native people. Why don't we feel part of what is going on around us? If we do go into the mainstream society, how do we feel about that? Do we feel as though we're "sell-outs" and so on? I think that the main thrust is to make ourselves feel good, to realize that we are wonderful, wonderful people. Our ancestors gave this all to us and that's what we do.

In almost all our work, there is a theme of survival. That layer is there. It's not only survival for us but also for the future. We're concerned for future generations and as we get older now we're passing on our information to younger Native people and young people in our own families who have decided to enter theater as a profession. So we're passing it on. That's part of survival, too.

What do you see as the future of Spiderwoman Theater?

- GM As we get older we realize that there has to be someone to take our place. I have a daughter and my sister has a daughter who are actresses. It would be nice to have our children take over. I've thought that if we got lots of money we'd open a small school for Native people. I can see myself acting on the stage until eighty years old, at least.
- MM My feeling is that there is going to be an expansion of doing different things, I'm interested in working with lots of other people, different people, and I'm also interested in doing one-woman shows. I'd like to start a Native theater space some place. We have the American Indian Community House, but it's not a theater as such. There are at least five Native theater groups in New York City. I'm interested in having the control ourselves of what we do and how we do it. I don't see why we can't have a Native theater in New York City. I think each of us has been through New York theater and has been very disappointed. I mean, when we go outside of our groups we've been very disappointed in how we're perceived, the type of racism that we forget about, and that we don't have the control. The other thing I'm interested in is the idea of working with young Native people, young Native actors, and thinking and talking about theater in terms of how it comes from the Native center, and then trying to combine European training with Native culture, using different things, how one grass dances and how one shawl dances, how you sit at a drum, all these different things that make us knowledgeable as a people. I'd like to make that combination so we get an Indigenous theater and can talk about it in terms of Indigenous theater training.
- LM I see myself and my sisters as acting mentors for Native people. My teacher Uta Hagen is 76, and she strove for the best, for the highest goals, and what I do I learned from her. I think of her every day of my life. She's part of my life, that woman is. Her ideals are so high, I want to keep that within myself, so I can work with the young Native people of this country and the Indigenous people of Central and South America and Mexico who want to study and do their own theater. You can do this when you're old. But I'm still going to act, I'm still going to sing, as long as I can carry a tune. I've only been working for the last forty years. What can you learn in forty years?