

Tato Laviera bio

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Tato Laviera

Jesús Abraham Laviera Sánchez, better known as Tato Laviera, was born September 5, 1950 in Santurce, Puerto Rico. He was nine years old in 1960 when his family moved to New York City and Young Tato, knowing no English, waded into the totally new environment of the Lower East Side. He learned so successfully to move within two cultures and two languages that he became an iconic Nuyorican, and the best-selling Hispanic poet in the United States.

Laviera graduated from high school with honors in 1968 and began his college education at Cornell University. After three weeks, the poet decided to return to City University of New York's Brooklyn College. He never completed his undergraduate studies and decided to put his efforts into his community. Among his early projects was directing the University of the Streets, an educational project that helped adults obtain a high school diploma and attend college. Also, he was an administrator at the Association of Community Services, directed the Hispanic Drama Workshop and joined the boards of various social agencies.

His life was a beautiful amalgamation of his creativity and his commitment to his people. *La Carreta Made a U-Turn*, his first poetry book, published in 1979 by Arte Público Press, received much praise. It also served as witness to his aim to breach the gap between the poet and the people. As Francisco Cabanillas has pointed out, Laviera exchanged the “I” for an “i” and humbly described himself as a mere chronicler of the world around him. *La Carreta Made a U-Turn* is Laviera's take on René Marqués' canonical work *La carreta*, in which Laviera suggests that New York City can be an alternative domicile for Puerto Ricans

Laviera's papers, including an extensive collection of unpublished materials, are held by the Archives of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College. The highlights of the collection include photos, many of his plays, varied poems and personal treasures such as letters from his students

The success of *La Carreta Made a U-Turn* became evident when President Jimmy Carter received

Laviera at the White House Gathering of American Poets in 1980. His second book *Enclave* (1981) made him the first Hispanic author to win the American Book Award of the Before Columbus Foundation, and poems from his third publication, *AmeRícan* (1986), have been included in more than thirty anthologies. *Mainstream Ethics* (1988) denounces marginalization and demands social equality, while *Mixturao and Other Poems* (2008) celebrate the multicultural aspects of American life and populations. Laviera had been working on a poetry book entitled *Continental* and on two novels, *Mayanito* and *El Barrio: Spanish Harlem*, when he became ill.

His oeuvre revolves around the development of an identity that is inclusive of bilingualism and biculturalism and contributes to the establishment of Afro-Caribbean traditions that imbue poetry with orality and musicality. In contrast to other Nuyorican poets who emphasize the negative aspects of the Puerto Rican experience, Laviera's poetry is of an optimistic bent. Carmen Dolores Hernández remarks that although "his poetry is a documentation of injustices, of painful dualities, of uncertainties; it is also testimony of the strength of the Puerto Ricans in New York who have defended their distinctness."

The poet taught at Livingston College (Rutgers University) during the 1970s and more recently held his Cosecha Voices writing workshops at the University of Texas – Pan American. Laviera was also a prolific playwright. His *Olú Clemente* (1978), based on the life of Puerto Rican baseball legend Roberto Clemente, and published in *Nuevos Pasos: Chicano and Puerto Rican Drama* by Arte Público Press, was one of his most successful plays, with around forty performances in New York City. *Piñones* (1979), *AmeRícan* (1986), *Can Pickers* (1995) and his *Mixturao Review* (2004) are among his best known plays. *The Spark* (2006) and *77 P.R. Chicago Riot* (2007) appeared in *The Afro-Hispanic Review*.

In 2004, Laviera became legally blind as a result of a diabetic condition, which encouraged him to work with the American Association for Diabetes. He became the spokesperson for Latinos suffering from the illness and aided in promoting awareness of the disease. He also developed the Jesús A. Laviera One-Day with Diabetes Project, which promoted Sugar Slams, events in which poets talked about the devastating effects of diabetes in the Hispanic community.

In recent years, Laviera received much professional recognition, including the Long Island State University Lifetime Achievement Award and the Pedro Pietri Hand Award in 2009, among other honors. New York University also held a tribute for the poet in 2010.

After falling into a diabetic coma in late January, Laviera passed away on November 1, 2013 in Mount Sinai Hospital in Manhattan. Besides his sister, he is survived by his daughter, Ella Laviera; two grandchildren, Kayden and Skye; niece Noelia Quiñones and her son, Simeon; niece Cynthia Mercado and her children, Melissa and Ralphie; nephew, David Sánchez and his son, Graysen; and nephew Alexi Quiñones. Laviera had a son named Che Malik who passed away in 2005.

Three Poems by Tato Laviera in *The New York Times*

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/13/nyregion/13poemweb.html> [2]

A Video of Tato Laviera Reading His Poetry, on Centro TV

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=goyibmrp03w> [3]

An Interview with Laviera in *Latino Rebels* <http://www.latinorebels.com/2012/07/11/an-interview-with-tato-laviera-the-king-of-nuyorican-poetical-migrations/> [4]

The Media Remembers the Poet. *The New York*

Times <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/06/arts/tato-laviera-nuyorican-poet-dies-...> [5] "

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[6] http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/06/arts/tato-laviera-nuyorican-poet-dies-at-63.html?_r=0