

Compassion & Community

A Profile of Luis J. Rodriguez

By Jeff Biggers

Luis J. Rodriguez is a singular act in contemporary American literature. Poet, publisher, essayist, fiction and film writer, music producer, children's author and youth advocate, and founder of performing arts centers in Chicago and Los Angeles, he is also one of the busiest in the business; in 2002 alone, Rodriguez made scores of public performances, published a collection of short stories and a nonfiction chronicle on his longtime work with youth, released a CD of spoken-word poetry, received writing fellowships from the California Arts Council and the Sundance Institute, and launched Tia Chucha's Café Cultural in his new home base in the northeast San Fernando Valley.

The return with his family to the West Coast in 2000, after a 15-year sojourn in Chicago, was providential: Within months of Rodriguez' homecoming to the smoldering Los Angeles neighborhoods that provided the geography, suffering, honesty, and moral urgency in his writing, he was selected by the Dalai Lama as one of 50 "Unsung Heroes of Compassion" in the world.

The "puzzling" city of Los Angeles (wonderfully termed by one of Rodriguez' characters in his collection of stories, *The Republic of East L.A.*), balkanized into "republics," polarized by disparity, discordant pieces of its existence paradoxically united in a common yearning by immigrants for the California dream, has been Rodriguez' most fertile landscape. On a par with Nelson Algren's searing portraits of "the other" Chicago and Hubert Selby's unblinking vision of Brooklyn, Rodriguez' collected pieces of Los Angeles are raw, fierce, relentless, and measured in step with the clashing rhythms of backstreet hopes and front-page tragedies. His work is rooted among the fraying margins of the underclass and dispossessed, with a backdrop of prayerful immigrant parents and their American children's bewildering attempts to straddle the contrary roads of opportunity and denial, despair and success, and affliction and joy. Unlike Selby and many other urban chroniclers, however, Rodriguez' underlying themes are girded by hope, renewal, and a biting sense of humor. In one of his new short stories, "Sometimes You Dance With a Watermelon," a Mexican immigrant grandmother overcome by the oppressive heat of domestic life literally dandles a watermelon on top of her head in a final act of jubilant defiance:

Rosalba had not looked that happy in a long time as she danced along the bustling streets of the central city in her loose-fitting skirt and sandals. She danced in the shadow of a multistoried Victorian—dancing for one contemptuous husband and for another who was dead. She danced for a daughter who didn't

love herself enough to truly have the love of another man. She danced for Pete, a butcher of beasts and gentle companion. She danced for her grandchildren, especially that fireball Chila. She danced for her people, wherever they were scattered, and for this country she would never quite comprehend. She danced, her hair matted with sweat, while remembering a simpler life on an even simpler rancho in Nayarit.

Rodriguez has never really known a simpler life. Carted across the "Bridge of Americas" at El Paso, Texas, in 1954, he spent his first two years in Ciudad Juarez, until his ostracized school-teaching father and beleaguered mother left Mexico for a new life in Los Angeles, settling first in South Central L.A. and then in the San Gabriel Valley. By the time he reached his teens, Rodriguez had joined a gang embroiled in the barrio wars, picked up a drug habit, and been arrested for numerous

offenses, including attempted murder; he spent a brief period on the streets as a homeless youth. Despite returning to school and getting involved as a student leader in the antiwar and Chicano movements of the 1960s and early 1970s, Rodriguez found himself in a web of crime and punishment, and at the age of 18 he faced a possible six-year prison sentence. Thanks to the good graces of community members, who spoke on his behalf, Rodriguez served a lesser sentence in the county jail and eventually kicked

his drug habit. It was during this period that he had a "calling," as noted in one of his early poems, to become a writer:

*The calling came to me while I languished
in my room, while I whittled away my youth
in jail cells and damp barrio fields.
It brought me to life, out of captivity,
in a street-scarred and tattooed place
I called body.*

"The Calling"

From then on, Rodriguez never looked back, working four years in Maywood, and doing off-hour jobs as a truck driver, carpenter, janitor, and bus driver while pursuing his writing and social activism. After attending night school, he served as a journalist for a series of weekly newspapers and radio stations in California, and headed up the L.A. Latino Writers Association, until he relocated to Chicago in 1985. Plunging into the Chicago literary scene (birthplace of the "poetry slam"), Rodriguez eventually launched his own publishing house, Tia Chucha, and cofounded the Guild Complex performing arts center, when he became frustrated by the lack of publishing prospects for avant-garde writers with an ear to the streets. After he released a first collection of poetry on his own, Rodriguez' second collection, *The Concrete River*, was published by Curbstone Press in 1991, and received the PEN Josephine Miles Award, among other honors. Again rejected by mainstream publishing houses, his Curbstone-published landmark memoir, *Always Running: La Vida Loca, Gang Days in L.A.*,

Books by Luis J. Rodriguez
Always Running: La Vida Loca, Gang Days in L.A.
(Curbstone, 1993)
The Concrete River (Curbstone, 1991)
Hearts and Hands: Creating Community in Violent Times (Seven Stories Press, 2001)
It Doesn't Have to Be This Way: A Barrio Story
(Children's Book Press, 1999)
Poems Across the Pavement (Tia Chucha Press, 1989)
The Republic of East L.A.: Stories
(Rayo/HarperCollins, 2002)
Trochemoche: New Poems (Curbstone, 1998)

thrust Rodriguez onto the national scene in 1993 and eventually became an international best-selling paperback for a Simon & Schuster imprint.

Always Running is required reading in untold numbers of schools, and appears on other reading lists for its rare and unerring account of gang life and Rodriguez' journey of rebirth and liberation. The memoir has also generated its own share of controversy; like Algren's *Never Come Morning*, *Always Running* has been banned—in suburban Chicago schools and around the country.

Since the mid-1990s, Rodriguez has been one of the most sought-after speakers and writing-workshop leaders at schools, universities, and cultural centers. Deeply committed to youth in trouble, Rodriguez dedicates a great part of his time to programs at juvenile detention centers, prisons, migrant camps, and homeless shelters. He has also been an active participant in Michael Meade's Mosaic Multicultural Foundation programs. In recent years, Rodriguez has increasingly embraced his family's indigenous Mexican traditions, traveling back across the border to participate in Mexika/Tolteka and Tarahumara/Raramuri rituals. Along the way, he has published another collection of poetry and children's books; written numerous essays and stories; and won awards from the Lannan Foundation, the Lila Wallace-Readers' Digest Fund, and numerous art councils.

A daunting ability to balance the writer's life of "solitaire et solidaire," as Albert Camus declared in his landmark essay, "*Sous le signe de la liberté*," makes Luis J. Rodriguez' work as vital today as ever. *The Bloomsbury Review* caught up with Rodriguez in fall 2002, during a break on his book tour. ■

INTERVIEWER: **Jeff Biggers** is a writer who lives in Illinois and Italy.

My writing is meant
to be a beacon of hope,
insight,
challenge, and vision
—from the prism of one
man's life and dreams to
the life of our world and
its dreams.