



Playwriting Profile: Monet Hurst-Mendoza

by Connor Spaulding

Recently, I got the opportunity to sit down with one of the playwrights Monet Hurst-Mendoza who is developing her play *breathe•tulum* with us as part of In Process. Monet is a Marymount Alum from the Writing for the Stage Concentration and later worked in the Emerging Writers Group at The Public Theater, the WP Theater Playwrights Lab, and the Van Lier Fellowship at New Dramatists. Currently, she's a full-time staff writer on *Law and Order: SVU*. Talking to her was genuinely one of the highlights of my week and her enthusiasm for theatre and this project was contagious to say the least.

Where do you start when you're writing a play? What's your inspiration?

It depends on a few things. Usually, it'll be sparked by an image, or maybe even a piece of literature, art, or something I've read about in a newspaper. For me, what makes something a play is I can't stop thinking about it and there's no other medium with which to tell the story. It can't be something that inspires me to write an essay, or an episode of television, or a screenplay. It's specifically for the theatre. There's a certain dramatic tone. I can also usually visualize the story on stage. I'll often have a starting or final image of the play, and then I have to fill in everything in the middle. The characters will also start talking to me. It sounds a little witchy-woo-woo, but they're like, "Hey, write my story down." That's generally where I start, but the important thing is the impetus to make it a play.

What would your goal be when you're writing a new play?

Get the story out of me. I'm just the vessel, you know what I mean? That's why I say "the voices" talk to me. It sounds weird, but there's a character that's in my head that has a story they want to tell, and I'm the receiving vessel through which they can tell that story. The goal is just bringing those voices out.

What is your greatest inspiration as a writer?

I tend to write about marginalized communities — people who are underserved or undervalued by the general population, whether it be because of their race, their gender, their sexual orientation, or otherwise. They feel othered in some way. I love to give voice to those people and give them a platform to speak on. They are my greatest inspiration.

As far as literary inspirations, I'm deeply inspired by strong women writers like María Irene Fornés, Migdalia Cruz, and Naomi Iizuka. In college, I was also really into Chuck Mee, Anne Bogart, and SIT Company. I just love people who break with tradition, who really mess with the form of what we think "theatre" is.

Would you say breaking form is important for you in your work?

Ironically, no. I write in Final Draft and everything looks structurally formulaic, so I appreciate the playwrights whose words are literally expressive on the page. Aleshea Harris, Phillip Howze, and Alexis Scheer are examples of playwrights who break the mold in that way. Even though my work looks "traditional" on the page, I think how I'm telling the story or what the story is about is not. For instance, my play, *Torera*, is about a female bullfighter and the entire play is a comment on gender in the bullfighting world. The main character breaks the mold by just being a woman, existing in that world, and having a passion for that sport. And then, I'd say that the way I write is very collaborative, so that also breaks the traditional convention of how one might think a play is made. Writing alone is just one piece of the puzzle — when I get with the director and the actors, they inform a lot of my writing and much of what we discover in the rehearsal process will often end up on the page.

What drew you to writing about Tulum?

I'm working on a play cycle over the course of my life about different parts of Yucatán, a state in Mexico where my family is from. I want to show stories of working-class women in different towns and each story will be a different focus based on the locale. Even though I was born and raised in the United States, my grandparents took me to Yucatán frequently. All of the memories I have that are rooted in my culture are there. When I started writing plays, I noticed that many of them were set in the Yucatán, and then I was like, "Well, why do I feel such a strong pull to that?" I think playwriting is a way I can keep my ancestral blood and connection to that land, even though I'm an American.

I had been wanting to write a play about Tulum and the ecological effect that tourism is having on that specific part of the world for a while. I remember visiting a few times when I was younger and there was not much there other than the ruins and a sleepy beach town that you drove through. In the last ten years, there's been a tourism boom that has really put Tulum on the map. No one used to know where it was, and now it's a hot spot destination. Sort of the way I'd say Cancun was twenty years ago. There are luxury hotels everywhere in Tulum — I just went there in December as part of the research for this script, and it was kind of insane. I feel like if I had gone in my 20's, maybe it would have been like a fun place to party, but in my mid 30's, I was like, "This is too loud." Also, it's COVID-times and people were too close together, no one was wearing masks. And most of the people that are down there are tourists, which also kind of angered me because we're in the middle of a global pandemic and the people who are being irresponsible are the people who are not from that country. They're just visiting.

I think my recent experience there really shifted what this piece currently is. Because of the influx of people, there's more trash, the beaches are dirtier. There's an explosion of seaweed on the shoreline that has to be cleaned every morning by the private hotels that own the beachfront property; it doesn't just naturally look beautiful anymore. So, I began thinking about what Tulum was like when I was there when I was younger and remembering how magical it was, and now it just feels overpopulated. Who does that help? I don't want to speak for the people that are Tulum natives and live there, but it did make me wonder who is responsible for making Tulum what it is now. Developers and hoteliers? Or the original caretakers of the land? How much of the profits do they reap from tourism? I was interested in and excited by all of these questions.

***breathe•tulum* will be presented at New York Live Arts on March 31st, and April 1st and 2nd.**

Stay tuned for information about tickets. If you're interested in learning more about Tulum and the issues

Monet is talking about this VICE video is very informative: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PNFCGZ1fUo4>