

Hamilton Dramaturgy's TheatreNow! Interview with Murielle Borst Tarrant

Anne Hamilton
Hamilton Dramaturgy's TheatreNow!
A Production of [Hamilton Dramaturgy](#)
<http://hamiltondramaturgystheatrenow.com>
hamiltondramaturgystheatrenow@gmail.com

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Hamilton Dramaturgy's TheatreNow!
Interview with Murielle Borst Tarrant
Playwright, Director and Producer
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Anne Hamilton: Welcome to Hamilton Dramaturgy's TheatreNow! This is a podcast series featuring some of the most exciting female artists working in the theatre today. I'm your host, Anne Hamilton. Today our guest is Murielle Borst Tarrant.

Murielle is a member of the Kuna and Rappahannock Nations. She is an author, playwright, director, producer, cultural artist, educator, and human rights activist. She comes from a long line of cultural activism with her family's theater company, the world famous Spiderwoman Theater, located in New York City. For four years she served as the Special Assistant and liaison to Tonya Gonnella Frichner, the North American Regional representative to the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. Finally, she is the director of "Safe Harbors" Indigenous Arts/Theatre Collective at La Mama ETC. Welcome Murielle.

Murielle Borst Tarrant: Thank you for having me today.

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AH: I'm interested in this term you use to describe yourself, which is an urban Indian. Can you explain to us what that means?

MBT: Well, let me just explain the two tribes that I come from. I'm Rappahannock, which is from the State of Virginia and I'm a Kuna, who's off the Coast of Panama, from the Sovereign Nation of Kuna Yala. I describe an urban Indian because I grew up primarily in New York City, even though I briefly lived on the Reservation for four years. But my family came and relocated here in the metropolitan area, primarily in Manhattan and Brooklyn. I'm part of the urban community here, which means that we sustain our cultural heritage and our cultural identity through the arts and singing and dancing, storytelling and political awareness, on different levels. Because we live in the urban area, we have to be aware of each other's different cultural identities and tribal or nation identities. So, we spent a lot of time sharing and different songs and dances. And that is part of one of the things that have kept our community so alive in the urban area.

The urban area I come from is 8,000 and in the five boroughs, and that's not counting the tri-state area of Connecticut and New Jersey. [Editor's Note: Murielle later corrected the figure to 112,000.] My family migrated from Virginia around the 1800s. That is the urban experience, which is not an immigrant experience, but some of it was our relocated experience because, [there are] those of us who could no longer live on our traditional homelands, or we wanted to get work off of our traditional homelands, or we were removed from our traditional homelands. And a lot of us came here to New York City to find work. That's what makes this particular community so unique. And, you know, it's not in only New York City, there's Toronto, and there's Chicago, and California, they all have urban experiences. But our particular urban experience is unique to us because we also have the New York City urban experience.

AH: Tell us about the Spiderwoman Theater.

MBT: Spiderwoman Theater is one of the oldest Native American theatre companies in the United States. They're also an international theater company. Spiderwoman was first formed as a feminist theater company. Originally, [it] was my mother and my two aunts, Lisa Mayo and Gloria Miguel. They had other original players to the ensemble cast and really they were talking about feminist issues. Later on, they expanded to making Native theater and talking about their experiences in Native theater, particularly my mother and two aunts, talking about their experience facing racism, alcoholism, cultural identity in Brooklyn, New York, and making their own take on that experience - talking about it, and using and developing the methodology of story-weaving.

AH: What is your methodology?

MBT: The methodology of story-weaving is explained to me in different ways, and this is how I primarily work. I was told that theater is storytelling on epic scale. And it is a traditional teaching and it's this organic process. And it's taking the storytelling method, which is a traditional method, and then expanding on it to get one's story to make the

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development of theater. So, it's also making the *process*, and this particular methodology is working to make an ensemble cast.

I just like to say, you know, this process isn't for everybody. You know, a lot of people don't expect to speak so intimately when we started the story-weaving process. But there are those who really want to work like this. How do we work out of our experiences? How do we tell our story from our voice?

When I was first told why this was developed, my mother explained it to me because she was working as a feminist and the point of view as a woman. And it was her story versus history. Everything [at the time was from] the point of view of the man. So, how did they get to the point of view of the women? That's why they started telling stories, to talk about this point of view and then getting on their feet.

What I do is the point of view through the native lens. That's how I work. Through the native or indigenous lens, so to speak. How do we think about racism? Because that's primarily what I work under. But also, I have taken the methodology and then I add western techniques. I've studied. I studied at HB Studios with Uta Hagen. So, I combined certain techniques and methodologies to work for me. I also lecture on this particular subject. So, you know, [the question is] how do we get there? How do we talk through the native lens?

AH: What are some of the famous productions that Spiderwoman Theater has put on?

MBT: Well, what they're working on now, is *WOMEN IN VIOLENCE*. In the beginning, it was a revival, but it's being redeveloped. I just came back from a session with that, which really was more like master classes that my mother was teaching when we went to Canada. And, all of us are trying to re-oil what we've learned on this methodology. I'm talking about violence against women on the whole. And realizing, how is violence against women any different than it was in 1970 than it is now? And then, talking, you know, really getting in depth. So *WOMEN IN VIOLENCE* is probably their most well-known piece because it was the first one to go to Europe, when they were a feminist troupe. And from different people, different companies came out then. There was *Split Britches*, this was Lois Weaver, Peggy Shaw. They do this process, but they talk about their own issues. Then, of course, there is *SUN, MOON, AND FEATHER*, which is the most known piece from Spiderwoman Theater. And that's loosely based on the *Three Sisters*.

AH: If I were to go to one of your shows, what would I see?

MBT: *SUN, MOON, AND FEATHER* is basically about the urban experience. And it's about the urban experience told through the native lens. And told through that experience, not how our family, you know, dealt with genocide, but how we deal with everyday life. And that's why it was so parallel to Chekhov's *THREE SISTERS*. How do you leave Brooklyn? Brooklyn's a far-away place from Manhattan.

AH: Is it true that your mother made a, made a show called *RED WOMAN*, that you directed?

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MBT: RED MOTHER. Yes. RED MOTHER was developed and written by my mother, Muriel Miguel, and I was asked to be the director on that. And it's still a running show. It was at [La MaMa](#). We did a run there and, we toured it in Canada. RED MOTHER is loosely based on MOTHER COURAGE. I also dramaturged it.

There was wonderful writing in it. And I decided to take that wonderful writing [and stage it]. Some things were poetic. But how do you do poetry on stage? How do you do that in action? And so, what I did was I really started talking about the look of it and how we were going to proceed. One of the things that really came into my mind were ghost stories and demon stories. First, in the Japanese legends, right? And there was a book called, "Ghosts and Demons", which I was very interested in, with Japanese mythology. What I did was I started looking at that look and then I went to Kurosawa's THRONES OF BLOOD. And then I started going deeper into the storytelling in my own tribe, which was the Kunas. They have clear stories about demons. And not demons on a Christian level.

So I started looking at that and then talking about craven women. Women who aren't so heroic. Women who will do anything to survive. The native woman who puts her kids up for adoption, who is the crack addict, who is the alcoholic. I am a firm believer the more stoic you make us as a people, the more you marginalize us and you dehumanize us. We're human beings, we feel, we cry, we kill. I mean, and to say that we don't do these things and we're these spiritual perfect people, that really means that we're not human. So, this piece was really about those women that we don't want to talk about, those women who aren't so great. But why did they get there? And then adding another layer of a ghost story, that maybe this is a deity who feeds off a war and just lands, and lands, and lands until it's your time to go home. And the question at the end of it: "Is she allowed to go home with all of the things that she did?" And then, is she dead or alive? So, that's what RED MOTHER basically was about on my point of view as a director.

AH: That's fascinating. [Chuckle]

MBT: And you can get it on, you can get more information about RED MOTHER on the [Spiderwoman website](#).

AH: And what's the name of the website?

MBT: Well, just look up [Spiderwoman Theater](http://www.spiderwomantheater.org) [<http://www.spiderwomantheater.org>]. They're on Facebook, and it will take you directly to their website.

AH: Can you tell us about your new piece that you're workshopping at La MaMa?

MBT: DANTE'S INFERNO. [Chuckle] It's called the "JOURNEY TO HELL, A LIFE IN INDIAN SHOW BUSINESS", and that's a working title. [Chuckle] [Editor's Note: The show's current name is DON'T FEED THE INDIANS (A DIVINE COMEDY PAGEANT)] Ah, well, let me just give you a little background. One of my one-woman shows that I'm well-known for is MORE THAN FEATHERS AND BEADS, and that took an international tour, and it went to the Sydney Opera House. Part of that [concerns] what was talking, again,

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from a point of view of an indigenous lens, of how we see things in the modern era, and how someone like me who grew up in the '80s got all of our influence from the '70s. Back then, I wanted to have the trickster to be a stand-up comedian. I went into other things since then, and, what I wanted to do with this piece was for it to be an active piece about our point of view in a native lens on racism and racism in the media, and how we see it constantly as native peoples - how we always see it, and we feel kind of helpless. You know, you'll be enjoying a movie and the Indian joke comes. Or you'll be enjoying a cartoon and the Indian joke comes. And when's enough? Enough is enough, and how do we do that? How do we talk about it other than protesting, other than standing naked in front of The Gap, for our generation to hear us? How do we do that without being arrested?

I was just speaking to someone about anger and how angry someone could be and [asking], "How can anger become positive?" And that's a hard thing for people to understand. We wouldn't be having an Occupy Movement if anger didn't turn into [something] positive. [Editor's Note: Murielle later corrected her reference. It is the [Idle No More](#) Movement.] So, am I angry? Yes, I'm extremely angry that I as a native actress and as native artists, we are told such racist things. And a lot of the times my thing, our things - not only me, but a lot of our things - aren't funded or produced because we are not being looked at as humans. I mean, basically that's it, we're not thought of as humans, we're thought of these ideal characters. Or we go the other end and we're so horrifying you can't believe it. Or [we're] the butt of the joke. So, I'm taking that anger - because it's something that's in me - and making a piece about it.

I first realized how angry I was that my work wasn't done in theater is when I had seen a Broadway show, and I really don't want to mention the Broadway show because I don't want to put any energy towards it. But that was a show, that was a musical, and that was a musical comedy. And it was basically about someone in our history, Andrew Jackson, who was ethnic cleansing, really, native peoples, and that was made into a musical.

And that would have been fine, and I was trying to understand it, but it was the Indian jokes that I couldn't understand. It was [about] how we were the butt of the joke again, how we were being made fun of. And there was something really scary about that at one point when I started really looking at it. And I kept on saying to myself, "This is what it must have felt like to be in Nazi Germany, to desensitize a nation". So the world would say it was okay, you know: "So what? You took their land. They are funny characters". And everyone will say, "Oh, it's satire". Yeah, okay, it would have been satire if we were asked to be part of the joke. We were part of the joke. We were being laughed at, not laughed with. So, I made a piece, a protest piece with Nina Mankin who is a dramaturg and writer. And with that, we took different parts of the play, and the songs, and we talked about how it made us feel. And then we compared it to Nazi Germany, we made a cabaret of genocide, we did a Wild West show, you know, we really started telling the story as a protest piece.

But I no longer wanted to just talk about that particular play, I wanted to talk about us in showbiz in a whole, and one of the things is that we needed to survive. All of us who were actors, or who were dancers, and who were singers, you know, we had to do something to survive. And a lot of us come from the background of BUFFALO BILL'S WILD WEST

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shows. During the time there was Vaudeville, with all these different circuits that were going around, and we had the Wild West shows where we were able to perform. That's a painful moment in our history that not all of us talk about. But that is where I come from. I come from four generations of performance people, including my husband. We grew up on stage. No matter how it is, we grew up in show business and Indian show business, and you have to swallow a lot of stuff.

And the biggest joke that I always remember is that someone was playing Crazy Horse. There was an uncle, and Crazy Horse got beat up, got beat up every night. He got scalped every night, so someone asked him, "Well, why do you do this every night? Why do you do this every night?" And the uncle turned around and said, "What? [Stop?] And give up show business?" So, you know, [Chuckle] it's an old joke but it's true, you know.

And so, now I feel I want to do a journey called DANTE'S INFERNO, And talk about the absurdity, going into the absurdity of what's it like, including the pain of the absurdity and also trying to figure out how you make that into musical comedy. And right now I workshopped it at La MaMa and they've been a great support for me. They understand where I'm coming from, especially on an indigenous level, especially Mia Yoo. So, right now we are looking for different funding projects, [asking], "How do we get further with this?" This is a very big project. The idea is it for it to go on, for there to be sideshows, and then it's a Wild West show, so you wind up seeing so many iconic native images you can't take it anymore. And that is where I'm at right now with this. This time we based it on musicals. Now how do we go further with it?

AH: Why do you think more people in this country haven't seen pieces by Native American artists?

MBT: In the whole?

AH: In the whole.

MBT: In the whole. I think that what happens is, that we stay a lot of time with our communities. There's not only me. There's tons of native artists. A matter of fact, Lisa Lane just did an article about life on the reservation on Pine Ridge. And that's not where I come from, but it was one of the best television shows about how creative native peoples are. Because really, you know it's either you laugh or you cry, but you have to survive. And creativity is the best way to survive. And native peoples are extraordinary people - how creative they are! I'm not the only one speaking this way, you know. You know, if we get too political, you know a lot of people don't want to hear that. I mean you have to understand, it's not so long ago that native peoples could not practice their religion, could not practice their songs and dances - that it was outlawed in this country.

And that is very fresh in a lot of our minds. And that is what we're talking about. It's a dark period of this country when we talk about native peoples and what we went through, but how we're still surviving. And one of the biggest things that we have to remember is that I stand here. My daughter, who walks in New York City and goes to school, is there because of

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prayers. Because we had great-grandparents who did not think we were going to survive and prayed for us to keep on going. So when we're talking like that, you know, a lot of the mainstream doesn't know really how to take that. I come from a theater family and I'm lucky. And so, I take it to the Absurd or the Avant-Garde. And that's where it's kind of staying, because right now we're in the aesthetics of Native Theater.

AH: I'm so impressed by the fact that you're completely conversant in, the history of Western American theater and your own, and you're taking your own forms, your own impulses and your own messages and seamlessly creating brand of completely up-to-date now theater, and a new form and a new movement. [Murielle chuckles] I think it's magnificent.

MBT: Oh, thank you, thank you. We try. [Laughter] I mean, one of the things that you have to remember is that there's no one way, and if we all thought just one way, the greatest artists wouldn't get someplace. Whether it's Western art, whether it's Native Theater, you know - art in a whole. The rules should be there are no rules, to tell your story the way you need to tell it. So, I was supported with that, within my family. And I do thank my family, because they gave me this huge foundation. My mother would be very clear to me. I had a single mom. So she was like, "Go do the cattle calls. Do that. Do what you have to do. You'll find out," and you do. You really do. And I say this all the time.

We are probably the only peoples that, when you go to a casting call, they will say to you that you don't look Indian enough. And, "Can you look more ignorant when you read something?" I mean, it's amazing what happens. And if you call them racist they would say, "Oh, this is the biz. You have no business saying that to us."

But, meanwhile, they would never say it to any other ethnic culture, because they would be so afraid of someone coming down on them. And what also happens is that a lot of people believe that there's no Indians. So, you know, it's okay.

And, another thing that I figured out, too. Native peoples are very much a part of the Americana. I mean, not so long ago, you would ask somebody what they wanted to be in life and they'd say a police officer, a fireman or an Indian chief. I mean, we all have heard that. So, we have become part of that Americana. And so, when we are fighting to reclaim it, a lot of times people fight for the image back. Or, really, you turn around and point it out to them and they say, "I didn't know this. I really never was taught this."

AH: I love that you're putting your own stories on stage, and providing new images, new lenses, and new ways of thinking. And I believe that the more it's done, the more that will take place - that it will have an effect on changing peoples' opinions.

AH: I really want people to be able to take in as much artistic and theatrical output by Native Americans as possible, so could you just give us a list of anyone you could think of who is doing great work, that we can follow?

MBT: [Spiderwoman Theater](#), and then there is a website from [Amerinda](#). There is also my website. It's www.murielleborsttarrant.com, and I have a [list](#) there. Terry Gomez, who is my

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editor. I have a list of all those people directly linked with me.

I have a novel that is. The first novel is coming out in September. And on my website, I have all of that information. It's seven books, as we talked about before.

AH: Wow! What's the name of it?

MBT: "[The Star Medicine](#)" and that is based on my Rappahannock tribe, and it's a fantasy series.

AH: What made you go from writing and producing theater to writing the novel?

MBT: It was actually a very easy transition for me, don't ask me why. It was an easy transition for me because - what I learned about writing as a novelist, I learned from being an actress. You know what I mean. I was an actress, and all of that background that you do for [writing] a character, you do the same type of background for a character when you're acting. So, it was a very easy flip and I didn't want to do a historical novel. I wanted something, again, that had no rules. So, what I did was I took storytelling to a different level as I went into communities and talked about beings, and creation stories, and [asked], "What does that mean?" If I went to a community, how could I tell the story? Sometimes they said yes, sometimes they said no.

My book is not about vampires, but I was talking about vampires, that there are vampire stories all over the place. And I said, wow, you know, these vampires just come here and they just take over and are Indian vampires really upset, you know? [Laughter]

How do I research that? So I went into communities and I asked [about] stories, and really, there were no vampire stories. Anything that was similar, native communities didn't talk about. And then I had to be very careful. I came the closest in Alaska and I asked [about] the story, and they said, "Well, you can only tell the story during wintertime." And so I said, "So in other words, that means I can't tell the stories."

So, I decided to just lift off and go somewhere else. That's one of my responsibilities - to tell a story [respecting] what you can tell, what you can't tell, [regarding] their sacred songs, their sacred dancers, and their sacred stories. So, [by] going into fantasy, I was able to lift off and just make other realms and base it, loosely base it on the stories that brought me up, and having a battle and all of that.

AH: Can you tell us what kind of artistic activities you took part in when you were a child?

MBT: Well, I was a child actor and so I was on "Sesame Street" and I did "Vegetable Soup". And also, I was on stage as a dancer very, very young. My family, we all performed, so I started working like around four or five, including, you know, including my husband's family. I was a trained dancer and, I started acting very young. I started dancing very young, as a traditional native dancer, and I was on stage very young. I started actually around five and then I continued and then I went to school. I went to school for theater.

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AH: What is your artistic process when you're approaching work, for instance, your new show?

MBT: I really do use the Spiderwoman methodology. That is what I use. Sometimes a lot of this stuff is very personal when people start telling stories, especially racism stories. You get five actors in a room and you're talking. The first session is really about talking. It could be extremely emotional and so you have to figure out on your feet different ways to bring them out of it. When I teach with the actors, young native actors who aren't [trained], and things come up, you have to figure out different ways for them to come to lift this off their body and so that's really what I do. And then I combine it with a western process. You know? Well actually, it's not really a western process, the organic process that I learned, that I was taught when I studied you know, outside - outside of Spiderwoman.

AH: Well Murielle, I think we've covered just about everything I wanted to cover. Do you have anything else that you would like to say that you want people to know?

MBT: Well, that I refused to be invisible and for them to really look at my work, to come to my website. I have a list of native artists there. My influences will always be Spiderwoman, but also I have outside influences and mostly it was in films. So, it doesn't matter where you get those influences. And to keep on fighting and to keep on working because you have to keep on working to survive if you're an artist. That's the only thing you can do to have your voice heard. Just because someone says that you don't exist and you know you exist, keep on working, and understand your self-determination in the arts.

AH: It's been wonderful to have you and I thank you so much.

MBT: Okay thank you. Thank you for having me. I really enjoyed it.

AH: You have been listening to Hamilton Dramaturgy's TheatreNow. We have been speaking today with Murielle Borst Tarrant. You may read more about her at murielleborsttarrant.com. You may read a transcript of this interview and download this podcast on our website which is <http://hamiltondramaturgystheatrenow.com>. The series is also available on Soundcloud. Our theme was composed by Nancy Ford. Otto Bost is the sound designer. Cate Cammarata and Walter Byongsok Chon are the US Program Assistants. Natalie Pandya is the UK Program Assistant. Helaine Gawlica is our Digital Archivist. I am Anne Hamilton, your Producer and Host. Thank you for listening.

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(Episode 3) Margo Jefferson, Theatre and Cultural Critic

(Episode 4) Maria Alexandria Beech, Playwright, Bookwriter and Lyricist

(Episode 5) Murielle Borst Tarrant, Playwright, Director and Producer

(Episode 6) Judith Malina, Co-Founder, The Living Theatre

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Anne Hamilton, Producer Hamilton Dramaturgy P.O. Box 906. Quakertown, PA 18951 USA