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## movies and TV



Benjamin Bratt in Miramax's *Piñero* (Miramax Films)

### Poetry from La Isla — A Second Look at Piñero

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As Miguel Piñero, the Puerto Rican-born writer who became the bard of the Lower East Side and the godfather of spoken word poetry, Benjamin Bratt is perpetually unkempt, bleary-eyed and bearded. Sporting a Che Guevara beret, the half-Peruvian, half-German Bratt (formerly detective Reynaldo Curtis on television's *Law & Order*, and until recently Julia Roberts' steady date), glides and staggers through the streets of Lower Manhattan like a patron saint of artistic martyrdom.

*Piñero*, released late last year but largely ignored in the rush of holiday blockbusters, depicts its hero battling poverty, discrimination and drug addiction and producing searing and ruthlessly unsentimental poetry that gave early voice to the plight of New York's Puerto Ricans, helping to lay the foundation for the art forms now known as rap and spoken word poetry. The product of Cuban-born director Leon Ichaso, the film — still showing at some smaller venues and soon to be available on video — deserves a second look. It tells a fragmented story in prismatic fashion, succeeding beautifully in conveying Piñero's disjointed identity and tormented life.

The narrative looks at Piñero's life from his days in Sing Sing, where he began writing in a prison workshop, to his death in 1988 at the age of 41. It's punctuated by black-and-white flashbacks to "Mikey"'s traumatic childhood in the Bronx and snippets of a particularly candid interview the poet gave a journalist after his play *Short Eyes* was nominated for a Tony — in six categories — and won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award in 1974. ("You cleaned the Tonies?" asks the journalist. "Actually, we as Puerto Ricans have been cleaning for a long time — your houses, your offices," retorts Piñero.)

As he tells another interviewer, Piñero is not a member of the Pablo Neruda and Gabriel Garcia Marquez school of "magical realism" — but he believes in "street realism, Lower Manhattan realism." Piñero mined his life and that

of his friends, fellow artists and junkies, writing about drug addiction, prison life and Puerto Rican-ness: one delightful scene shows Piñero reciting verses by an imagined Puerto Rican Shakespeare to his close friend and fellow writer, Miguel Algarin, played cunningly by Giancarlo Esposito (*Do The Right Thing, Ali*). The film's most powerful scenes, though, are masterful shots of Piñero on high-rise rooftops in the Bronx and downtown, fiercely reciting his verses to an accompaniment of conga drums and piercing trumpets. The film's utterly dope soundtrack jumps with Latin jazz, R&B and 70s salsa hits from political salseros Willie Colon and Hector Lavoe (Lavoe, another Nuyorican cultural icon, had a tragic life that mirrors Piñero's, dying of AIDS shortly after the poet died of cirrhosis of the liver).

Though the film traces the archetypal trajectory of a gifted, self-destructive, tragically flawed artist – "I have to keep doing bad to keep the writing good," Piñero says, and "Writing is half-inspiration, half-inhalation" – it also tells a larger story of Puerto Ricans in New York. This, of course, was one of Piñero's subjects as well: aside from structural problems of poverty, racism, crime and drugs, the poet probed more elusive issues such as loss of identity, invisibility, and second-class citizenship. Piñero's mother (played by Puerto Rican star Rita Moreno) continuously reminds him of their glorious heritage, telling him that Puerto Ricans are not just "doormen and chauffeurs." Piñero's passionate rooftop recitals are an attempt to rise above his fate, to transcend the poverty, sexual abuse and addiction that marred his life.

But for the poet the real Puerto Rico (as opposed to the New York one) proves disappointing. The movie shows Piñero revisiting la Isla del Encanto (the Island of Enchantment) for the first time since leaving at the age of seven, lovingly hugging palm trees and splashing in the Caribbean waters with some "Diasporican" friends – but his homecoming culminates in a scene of poignant sadness as the poet recites gritty, unfiltered verses to an audience of Puerto Rican academics unimpressed by his Spanglish, defying him to show that Puerto Rico is more than "rum, music and dominos on the street."

The Puerto Rican experience Piñero wrote about is still very relevant. When Puerto Ricans first began pouring into New York in the 1940s and early 1950s, hoping to find opportunities in the city's postwar labor market, most experts were optimistic that these "newcomers" to New York would be swiftly integrated into the society. Yet, as a recent New York Times article stated, "Although there has been no shortage of success stories...there is much about the fate of Puerto Ricans that remains puzzling. Why, for instance, are so many among the poorest of the city's poor?"

According to recent data, about 40 percent of New York's Puerto Ricans qualified as poor, a percentage much higher than that of African Americans and worse than the average rate for all Hispanics. In the 1990s, despite a strong local economy, the percentage of Puerto Rican households in the city living at or below the poverty line increased to a rate higher than that of any group. In 2000, fewer than 10 percent of Puerto Rican New Yorkers over 25 had a college degree.

Different explanations have been advanced to explain the persistence of poverty among Puerto Ricans. Some scholars have argued that American citizenship has made it easier for the island's poorest citizens to emigrate north, and once here collect welfare benefits rather than take menial, low-paying jobs with no benefits. But most Puerto Rican immigrants arrived on the mainland to work in the low-wage manufacturing jobs of the post-war economy; as manufacturing began to decline in the 1950s, '60s and 70s

they were among the hardest hit.

Whatever the causes, Puerto Ricans are widely seen as an exception to the upwardly mobile trend of other immigrant groups, including other Hispanic groups – a fact of which Puerto Ricans are keenly aware. As one Puerto Rican scholar observes, "After fifty years of massive presence in New York and other parts of the United States, Puerto Ricans have gone from being left out of the sauce to being left out of the salsa."

It's not surprising, then, that Puerto Ricans and African Americans often feel a deep connection. Both groups have been brutalized by America and then abandoned, left for dead and blamed for their social ills. Many of the problems afflicting the Puerto Rican community are similar to those plaguing African Americans – dilapidated public schools, segregated housing and discrimination. "Throughout their century-long sojourn in the Big Apple, and especially since the late 1940s, New York Puerto Ricans have been at close living and working quarters with blacks, perhaps closer than any other national group in the history of this country," writes Puerto Rican cultural critic Juan Flores in his critically acclaimed book *From Bomba to Hip-Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Identity*.

Piñero was the product of this cultural symbiosis, and his poetry powerfully articulated both communities' predicaments. Deeply influenced by Black Nationalist poets such as Amiri Baraka, Piñero expressed views and sentiments that resonated with African Americans and Latinos, and would help lay the groundwork for the art form of rap and the later rap-poetry movement. The film limns Piñero's friendship with Edgar (a black poet played by Michael Wright of *Sugarhill*), encouraging the latter to convey his "niggerness" in his poetry and their work at a theater workshop in Sing Sing, which ultimately produced *Short Eyes*.

In the last poem Piñero wrote before his death, he expressed the desire to have his ashes scattered on the Lower East Side. The final scene of the film shows different poets – including Amiri Baraka (played by Baraka himself) – performing at an outdoor stage in homage and tossing Piñero's ashes from an urn into the air of lower Manhattan.

The Nuyorican Poets Cafe, which Piñero co-founded with Algarin, remains a popular spot for poets and spoken word artists of all races. "Nuyorican is the Yankee Stadium of poetry venues. What better place to rock your poetry than here?" asks Gabriel Portuondo, a Dominican-American poet and actor. "Spoken word offers a voice to speak independently, on my own terms, of releasing my feelings in a structured, communicative way people can feel. I'm a hip hop head and a trained thespian – my spoken word is a blend between Shakespeare, prose and hip hop vibes."

On a recent Friday evening at Nuyorican, Portuondo "The Taino Prince" performed a poem, "Aluta," (from the Mozambican independence motto, "A Luta Continua," or "the struggle continues" in Portuguese) about Afro-Latino identity and history:

"For my ancestors were chiefs and kings  
 Reyes y Caciques  
 They ruled the Caribbean  
 For nearly 1000 years before Columbus  
 The Tainos endured disease, extinction  
 And alongside the Africans with their blood mixed  
 They endured slavery  
 Cutting sugarcane by hand in 95 degree heat and humidity

From dawn till dusk

And then blue collar Latino immigration...  
Aluta the struggle continues  
But so does our triumph  
Our Glory  
Our Victory  
Nuestra Gloria  
Nuestra Victoria  
Aluta!"

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