



Cárdenas, Nancy (1934-1994)

by Tina Gianoulis

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Poet, journalist, playwright, director, and activist, Nancy Cárdenas was perhaps the first out lesbian public figure in Mexico and a pioneer in the Mexican gay movement. From small-town roots, she traveled extensively to study theater and writing, finally returning to Mexico to become a motivating force in Mexican gay politics and culture.

Cárdenas was born on May 29, 1934 in the town of Parras, Coahuila in the far north of Mexico. She described her hometown wryly as "a 400 year old small town with a million trees, 20 thousand people and only one access road."

She received her primary and secondary education there, but went on to earn a university degree and a Ph. D. in dramatic arts in Mexico City at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. In 1960-1961, she studied film and theater at Yale University in the United States, and in 1961 she continued her education in Lodz, Poland, studying Polish language and literature.

After her European travels, Cárdenas returned to Mexico City, where she worked in radio, first in production, then as an actress. She also worked as a journalist and translator. During this time, she was also active politically and was arrested while participating in 1968 student protests against police violence.

Always, Cárdenas's first love was the theater. In 1960, she wrote *El cantaro seco*, or *The Empty Pitcher*, which was produced at the Universidad Nacional. Subsequently, she continued to write plays, but in 1970 she also began to direct and produce, often adapting the plays she produced. Her first effort, *El efecto de los rayos gamma sobre las caléndulas* (a translation of Paul Vindel's *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds*), won first prize from the Asociación de Críticos de Teatro.

In the early 1970s, Cárdenas became aware of gay liberation movements in Europe and the United States. She began to seek out ways to improve the condition of lesbians and gay men in her own country. She opened her home to gatherings of gay and lesbian writers who began the process of expressing a positive gay Mexican identity.

In 1973, Cárdenas took the courageous and irrevocable step of joining a discussion of homosexuality on a national television program. Her appearance on Jacobo Zabludovsky's *24 Horas* placed Cárdenas squarely in the public eye as a lesbian.

She made the most of that position. In 1974, she founded el Frente de Liberación Homosexual (FLH).

As one of very few out women in Mexico, Cárdenas felt it was her role to increase the visibility of Latina lesbians. She attended lesbian conferences in Latin America and the Caribbean, and she began to write and produce more overtly lesbian plays, including *El día que pisamos la luna* or *The Day We Walked on the Moon* (1981) and *Sexualidades* (1993).

She also translated and adapted many lesbian works for Mexican audiences, including *El pozo de la soledad* (1985)--Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*. She was able to make use of her distinguished position within Mexico's theatrical community to gain the sponsorship of many celebrities for Ser Humana, an organization for adults and children with AIDS, which she founded in 1992.

Cárdenas died in Mexico City of breast cancer on March 23, 1994. She remained an activist and an important figure in Mexican theater and literature until the end of her life.

Although her works have not yet received the mainstream attention or translation they might have achieved had she not been such an outspoken lesbian, she has been given a fitting honor by Mexican lesbians. In 1995, a lesbian history archive was created and given the name "Centro de Documentación y Archivo Histórico Lésbico de México, América Latina y el Caribe Nancy Cárdenas."

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About the Author

Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.