

# Carmelita Tropicana: Your Kunst is Your Waffen (1994) By Ela Troyano



Annie lobst, Livia Daza Paris, Sophia Ramos and Carmelita Tropicana (Alina Troyano) in *Carmelita Tropicana: Your Kunst is Your Waffen*

*Carmelita Tropicana: Your Kunst is Your Waffen* (1994) By Ela Troyano originally aired as part of a one-hour program featuring cutting edge performance art and spanglish rap for public television's Independent Television Service (ITVS). A collaboration between sisters Ela and Alina Troyano, the film mixes Carmelita Tropicana's monologues and drag performance, the women's prison film genre and American musicals, and wreaks havoc with cultural stereotypes. 28:00

Featuring Carmelita Tropicana, Sophia Ramos, Anne lobst and Livia Daza Paris  
Production Design and Costumes by Uzi Parnes  
Edited By Freddy Rodriguez  
Music by Fernando Rivas  
Director of Photography: Sarah Cawley  
Line Producer: Alfredo Bejar  
Screenplay: Carmelita Tropicana and Ela Troyano  
Produced and Directed by Ela Troyano  
Funded by The Independent Television Service and the New York State Council on the Arts

- Winner, Best Short, Berlin Film Festival

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ELA TROYANO is a New York-based, Cuban-born filmmaker. She was selected to attend the first Latino Screenwriter's Workshop at the Sundance Institute with Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Currently she is working on a documentary, *La Lupe*, a feature-length film based on the work of the internationally renowned pop singer La Lupe, the black, Cuban-born stage diva who rose to fame with the onset of the Cuban revolution in 1960.  
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CARMELITA TROPICANA (a/k/a Alina Troyano) is a comic persona who emerged into downtown New York underground queer and women's theater from the '80s East Village club scene. A self-described Latin bombshell of great self-possession, she revels in her accent, her heels and boas, her cross-cultural metaphors and sly sexual innuendo. In the 1980s she was often accused of promoting negative Latin stereotypes. To that she sarcastically responded, "A Latin lesbian talking about performance art; yes, very stereotypical."

Scripts for Carmelita's performances as well as other writings are collected in: Troyano, Alina with Ela Troyano and Uzi Parnes. *I, Carmelita Tropicana: Performing Between Cultures*, edited by Chon A. Noriega. Boston: Beacon Press, 2000.

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"Comedy is Your Weapon: Performance Artist Carmelita Tropicana's Oppositional Strategies" by Melanie Dorson. <http://sitemaker.umich.edu/intersections.cultural.studies/mdorson/multilingual> accessed 28 Nov 2005

A key way in which Carmelita inserts new possibilities into the social script is by constantly juxtaposing multiple selves, multiple cultures and multiple languages; her self-professed survival strategy "when two or more cultural systems come into contact (and when don't they?)..." consists of finding the "multi" that holds them together in communication. (A. Troyano, ix) One technique she employs is multilingualism. Throughout *Your Kunst is Your Waffens*—the very title of which uses the German words for art and weapon—characters slip in and out of English, Spanish, Yiddish and German. Moreover, the film includes two scenes that underline assumptions within Latino culture about who has access to the Spanish language. Early on in the film Carmelita's sister, Sophia (played by Sophia Ramos), has a hostile encounter with a deli attendant. After Sophia suggests that the produce is overpriced, the attendant mutters in Spanish that Sophia is a cheapskate, and is shocked when Sophia replies in Spanish. Sophia responds "You thought I was black . . . Open your eyes because Latinas come in all colors" (E. Troyano 1994). Later in the film, when Carmelita, Carmelita's girlfriend Orchidia (played by Annie Iobst), and Sophia have been arrested for participating in a protest, their cell-mate, a white homeless woman named Dee (played by Livia Daza Paris) surprises all three with her knowledge of Spanish. Dee has to explain how she joined a Puerto Rican prison gang during the course of multiple incarcerations and was eventually "adopted" by a Puerto Rican family (E. Troyano 1994). Such scenes are "worldmaking" in that they propose an alternative to mainstream understandings of identity that are "unable to account . . . [for the] collision of two or more minority designations" (Muñoz, 166). Moreover, Carmelita's decision to focus on performance art, rather than more traditional stand-up comedy, grew out of her recognition that she wanted to perform multi-lingually to communicate about the intersections of race, culture, gender and sexuality, as she discusses in this description of her initial training with a female comic:

'I started doing comedy, but this woman was very much a stand-up comedian and knew everything having to do with stand-up comedy, and she was very great but, where she wanted to go was not where I was interested in going because I was told that you couldn't use a lot of foreign words because mainstream America would not know these words. You couldn't use Spanish words because they would not know them; hence that was out. And you couldn't use Jewish words like "chutzpah" because they would never know what it was. So, the message was to stay away from that, to stay away from any linguistic...problems, and words like "Adonis." She said to me "I don't know what that is, most...Americans are not going to know what that is. Don't put that into your

comedy." So clearly we were talking a different language and what I was interested in, maybe was not what she was interested in. So I thought well,...maybe what I do is not really comedy. Maybe it's something else. So I stuck with the things that I really wanted to talk about a little bit more. (A. Troyano, 1994 interview).'

*Tropicana sidesteps easy us/them, straight/queer identity paradigms. She mixes Latino "ranchera" musical scores – a genre traditionally associated with heterosexual couplings – with lesbian activist protest imagery and drag cabaret performances to express a culturally hybrid queer identity that both participates in and stands outside the mainstream.*

**Works Cited:**

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London, New York: Routledge, 1994.

Muñoz, Jose Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

Troyano, Alina with Ela Troyano and Uzi Parnes. I, Carmelita Tropicana: *Performing Between Cultures*, edited by Chon A. Noriega. Boston: Beacon Press, 2000.