

FROM "LA ESPERANZA" TO "LA REALIDAD." THEATRE IN THE BORDERLANDS

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a dramatic metaphor of the creative journey I went through when I left my native country, Mexico, to enroll in a graduate program at UBC in the Department of Theatre, Film and Creative Writing. Since I am a theatre practitioner, and not a critic or an academic, "*From 'La Esperanza' to 'La Realidad'*" is not an academic dissertation, but a personal reflection on how reality has informed my theatre practice and has changed my perception of my social responsibility as an artist.

The thesis' hypothesis is that there are no clear boundaries between the personal, the political and the artistic: these are three different aspects of our lives as social beings and as such our theatre practice is informed by them, whether we are conscious of it or not.

This work is a product of my own practice as stage director and it is written in a personal style that combines poetry, a theatre piece and fragments from my director's journal with the intention to depict the complexity of the theatre-making process.

The thesis consists of three parts. The first part is the script of *La Maestra (The Teacher)*, a play that I directed during my first year as a graduate student. The second part of the thesis is a direct consequence of the staging of *La Maestra*; in it I reflect on the relation between reality and fiction juxtaposing the plot of *La Maestra* with the most recent events in Chiapas, México. The third part is built on the question "What kind of theatre should I do?"; in it I analyse how popular theatre can be used as part of the process of cultural and political struggle led by the indigenous peoples of México.

These three parts are combined with a self explanatory theatre piece written by me and called "The Traveler". This piece is divided into six movements and its only character, The Traveler, is myself.

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To Enrique, *por el futuro*.

To the indigenous peoples of Chiapas, in solidarity.

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INTRODUCTION

You will open this thesis to the first page. Your eyes will make a familiar movement, looking for the first line: written in black ink on the page you will read “introduction”.

I open my notebook. I stare at the blank page, delighted by its emptiness. In the silence of my room I look for the words to share my thoughts with you, the invisible reader.

You and I will meet here, in this place—in the gap between the page and my thoughts, between the words and your eyes. But, who am I and who are you? A simple explanation would say that I am the one who is writing and you are the one who is reading. And yet, I cannot avoid wondering how much you will write into this text as you read it, and how much I am reading into it as I write it.

Writing is like walking a labyrinth—a particular labyrinth of one’s own, where there are no pre-established signs, only the path one is creating as one walks. If seen from above, a labyrinth has a clear pattern and a discernable design. If seen from within, a labyrinth is a confusing place and neither the path nor the exits are clear. One does not write *about* something one already knows; writing is in itself a process and one learns as one writes. We create the labyrinth by walking it or, as my friend Warren says: we create the trail by writing it.

But you and I are not walking the labyrinth at the same time, nor are we walking it from the same starting point. I wonder sometimes if I am really writing for you, and I realize that most of the time I have been writing, in the first place, for myself; in fact, I am *writing myself* as I write.

Somehow I have abandoned the safe place usually inhabited by the director—the one who watches—and I have become a character in my own story.

I am not a detached observer, but a passionate participant in this story. Basically, it is a story about myself: the traveler who left home looking for the idealized image of *the other*, only to discover that it was herself that she had been looking for. *The other*, then, became unimportant; only a point of reference for her own search, the one against whom she could perform, not to become like him, but to grow in the opposite direction, emphasizing and accentuating the differences between them.

It is ironic that I travelled so far away from home to face the realities of my own country. Is there any other way for a colonized subject to decolonize herself?

Since this is an introduction, let me introduce myself:

I was born in Mexico City in 1971. I began doing theatre at the age of eleven. Since then, the stage has been for me the place where I can have all the creative freedom I need—all the intellectual freedom I want. In 1989 I entered the National School of Theatre in México City, where I had my professional acting training. During the third year at the School I felt limited as an actor. I felt at that time that, as an actor, there were always important parts of me—of what I thought, of what I felt—that were compromised in order to communicate the vision of the director. And I did not like it. So, following an inner impulse, I decided to become a director.

The first thing I ever staged was a performance on October 2nd of 1992. It was about the 1968 massacre in México City. My co-director and I criticized the repressive role of the armed forces that killed hundreds of students in Tlatelolco.

Then, in May of 1994, I staged a version of *Hamlet*. In March 23 of this same year, Luis Donaldo Colosio, the ruler party's candidate to occupy the Presidency of the country, was shot in the

head while attending a public political meeting. Despite the official interest in making the people believe that the crime was the action of a solitary assassin, the general opinion was very different; for many of us, it is obvious that this was a political crime organized by the same party to which he belonged. In our play, Hamlet appeared above the heads of the spectators and decided, with one foot on the air, *to be*: he decided to stop being silent, he decided to talk. When he descended, he signalled for the players to appear: three mimes and two musicians. The mimes acted out the story: a man killed his brother with the intention to have his throne and his wife. Someone in the court began to be uncomfortable. He was, of course, the King; this particular King was wearing a tuxedo and his chest was crossed by the tri-coloured band traditionally worn by Mexican presidents. He stopped the scene, shouted, and ran out through the audience. The lights were turned on. The actors, out of role, talked about their personal opinions of living in Mexico in this violent age. *Hamlet* is a political play and we were using it to talk about our own political problems.

I continued directing the same group of actors in several productions until I came to the University of British Columbia with the intention to study for a Master of Fine Arts degree in Directing.

In my country there are no Masters programs in theatre, and studying abroad seemed to me the only way to acquire professional training as a director. The only thought in my mind at that time was that I should come to a first-world country to learn what theatre is all about; in a first world country—I told myself—I will learn what I need to become a solid director. This proved to be a myth, a product of my own colonized imagination and my prejudices against my own national culture; but at that time I did not know it. So, I left my home and came to the Theatre Department at UBC, but I soon realized that it was not an environment conducive to my artistic development.

One of the most shocking moments occurred when someone tried to convince me that theatre, in order to maintain its quality as “good art”, should be apolitical.

In México it is common for us theatre practitioners to conceptualize our practice within a broader context in which the discussion of political issues is not only important, but necessary in order to survive. Theatre and politics for me are inseparable. Any artistic manifestation expresses the vision of the world of its creators. This vision, although it could be considered *only* a personal statement about the world, is in fact informed by the broader social and political context in which the artist is immersed. This is not to say that every piece of theatre has a political content, but if we look beyond what seems to be “only personal” and if we analyse the way theatre is produced, we will discover that every single piece is expressing political statements about the world we live in—be they statements to reinforce the status quo of a group of people, or statements to question this same status quo and validate different world views. Besides this, every theatre production reproduces, among the theatre company at first, and among the audience later, a set of relations of power that are in themselves, political if we take the word in its broader sense.

To emphatically assert that theatre, to maintain its status as art should be apolitical seems to me, at best, a naive comment. At worst, it is a reactionary assertion from someone who believes that his is the only possible world. He would not recognize that “his world” is built upon unequal relations of power between the “first” and “third” worlds, between the colonizers and the colonized, between white and black and indigenous peoples, between men and women.

I am sure you are wondering by now what this has to do with my thesis. Due to this comment, made by a teacher in class, I seriously questioned my decision to study in the graduate program of the Department of Theatre. I thought “well, if this is what they want to teach me, I can perfectly live

without these lessons." Of course, this professor is not the official representative of the Theatre Department's position and fortunately there are people who have very different opinions. However, his assertion was confirmed by the daily practices and productions of the department.

This, together with the department's preference for a conservative repertoire, a traditional acting training and a commercial producing system, made me decide to quit the Directing program. A suicidal idea for someone who is preparing herself to be a director? Maybe. But maybe directing has more to do with life than with institutional programs.

Despite this, I did not quit the university; returning to my country without a degree made no sense to me. I had this opportunity to study, and I wanted to take advantage of it. Therefore, I proceeded to transfer to the Master of Arts in Theatre, a program that allowed me the freedom of thought that I was looking for and enough room to pursue my artistic process in my own direction.

This explains why, although the MA is an academic program, my thesis is something between an academic paper, a director's script and a reflective journal. This thesis is, in fact, an exploration of how the personal and the political inform each other. My hypothesis is that there are no clear boundaries between the personal, the political and the artistic. These are three different aspects of our lives as social beings, and as such our theatre practice is informed by them, whether we are conscious of them or not.

Since I am a theatre practitioner, and not a critic or an academic, I chose to write this thesis as a dramatic metaphor of my own journey. "From 'La Esperanza' to 'La Realidad'" is not an academic dissertation, but a personal reflection of how reality has informed my theatre practice. In a way it is my artistic manifesto and a guideline for my future practice. In this sense, these years at the university have been very productive.

The thesis is an accurate summary of some of the things I have learned while in Vancouver. Surprisingly, this work has been done within the margins of the Theatre Department; but, with the exception of a course on Popular Theatre and a directing project, it has been a very individual inquiry.

The thesis consists of three parts. The first part is the script of *La Maestra (The Teacher)*, a play that I directed during my first year as a graduate student. Although the dramatic text was already written, the actors and I staged the play collectively and altered the script in some ways.

The second part of the thesis is a direct consequence of the staging of *La Maestra*. In it, I reflect on the relation between reality and fiction. This part was originally written to be performed at a conference and, instead of changing the text, I have preferred to leave it in its original format because it clarifies the dramatic structure of the piece. That is why the roles assigned to the other actors-participants are indicated.

The third part of the thesis is built on the question "What kind of theatre should I do?" More than a closure to the journey that began when I left my country, it is the beginning of another journey, one that will take a very different direction.

These three parts are combined with a self explanatory theatre piece written by me and called "The Traveler". This piece is divided into six movements and its only character, The Traveler, is myself.

What you are about to read are the traces of a journey--a very personal one--that has changed my perception of my social responsibility as an artist. I invite you to join me in this journey and to explore with me the fragile boundaries that exist between the personal and the social, the academic and the artistic, theatre and reality, our story and our history, our voice and the voices of others.

Hopefully, now that my intentions are written down and publicly exposed, I will not be able to hide myself behind the comfort of an established theatre. Hopefully, I will not be able to remain silent and to turn my back on the indigenous peoples of my country who are defying with dignity the culture of death imposed on them by centuries of colonization.

I am alone. In silence. I trust my feelings, my touch, my skin more than my words. Distrustful of the act of writing, I keep my eyes on my own shadow, wondering if it is my mind the one who finds the words or if it is my hand the one who guides my mind.

I am alone. I change as I walk. I close my eyes and play with my own image in this chamber of mirrors where there is always another possible self--*myself*--emerging from the walls . . .

PART I
GOING COMING BACK
TO
AMERICA AMÉRICA

THE TRAVELER

FIRST MOVEMENT

AN EMPTY STAGE. ABSOLUTE SILENCE FOR SOME SECONDS, UNTIL A LIGHT GRADUALLY ILLUMINATES THE STAGE. THE TRAVELER IS SITTING ON A CHAIR. SHE IS STILL AND HAS AN OPEN SUITCASE ON HER LAP AND AN AIR PLANE TICKET IN ONE OF HER HANDS. A MAP OF LATIN AMERICA IS CUT IN PIECES AND SPREAD ALL OVER THE PLACE, ON THE FLOOR.

THE TRAVELER LOOKS AROUND, THEN SHE LOOKS AT THE AIR PLANE TICKET IN HER HAND. SHE SIGHS AND MAKING AN EVIDENT EFFORT TO OVERCOME HER FEAR, DECIDES TO CLOSE HER SUITCASE. AS SOON AS SHE CLOSES HER SUITCASE WE HEAR THE NOISE OF A PLANE TAKING OFF. SHE HOLDS ONTO THE CHAIR. HER BODY IS TENSE. HER EYES ARE CLOSED.

FROM A SET OF SPEAKERS A VOICE BEGINS TO TALK. AT THE BEGINNING IT IS SIMILAR TO THE VOICE OF AN AIRLINE ATTENDANT HEARD WHEN A PLANE TAKES OFF; BUT SUDDENLY THIS IMPERSONAL AND NEUTRAL VOICE GIVING DIRECTIONS CHANGES AND BECOMES THE VOICE OF THE TRAVELER, PRE-RECORDED. THIS IS THE VOICE

THAT WILL BE HEARD THROUGHOUT THIS PIECE, EXCEPT WHEN ANOTHER IS INDICATED. ALTHOUGH IT IS ALWAYS THE TRAVELER'S VOICE, IT SHOULD NOT SOUND LIKE A SINGLE VOICE. IN FACT WHAT THE AUDIENCE SHOULD HEAR IS A MULTIPLICATION OF THE TRAVELER'S VOICE THAT SOUNDS SOMETIMES LIKE A CHORUS, SOMETIMES LIKE DIALOGUE, SOMETIMES LIKE A CHAOS OF DIFFERENT VOICES ARGUING.

It is dangerous
to make a suitcase
and take a plane
You never know
which faces of yourself
you have not seen before
you are going to find
You never know...

IN THIS MOMENT, A SCREEN IS TURNED ON BEHIND THE TRAVELER. AT THE BEGINNING IT DOES NOT PRESENT ANY IMAGE, EXCEPT HORIZONTAL LINES THAT APPEAR WHEN ONE TURNS ON AN OLD TV. AS SOON AS THE TRAVELER OPENS HER EYES A WORD IS PROJECTED ON THE SCREEN, IN BIG, BOLD LETTERS:

C A N A D A

THE TRAVELER OPENS HER EYES, LOOKS AROUND INTIMIDATED AND FINALLY STANDS UP. SHE BEGINS MIMING THE ACT OF WALKING.

CHAPTER 1

A-M-E-(')-R-I-C-A

I had made a suitcase and taken a plane. Finally, I was *here*, enrolled in a theatre graduate program. América was behind me. A-m-e-(')-r-i-c-a: Within the parenthesis lay, in suspense, an accent--a different history, a different reality. After crossing the border I had arrived, finally, to America.

Here, the landscape has an unusual beauty. *Here*, the faces and the voices have a serenity I had not expected. But *here*, when I walk through the city I feel so lonely; very often I discover myself missing the antiquity of my own city. *Here*, the sound of my feet on the ground has no echoes; *there*, each stone still speaks of the City in the Lake of the Moon: México-Tenochtitlan. *There*, each step was accompanied by a crowd of phantoms and memories; *here*, not even a shadow walks with me through these streets. *There*, I could never have imagined that my actions were isolated from the remote past and from the future; *here*, I feel the loneliness of a person estranged from history. *Here*, my steps are silent. *Here*, my language is lost... as lost are my tongue, my compass, my identity.

The Theatre Department was not, as I had expected, an artistic home for me. I felt awkward since the beginning. The main reason for this awkwardness was a gap between my theatre interests and what the department could offer. Pragmatism is necessary in any profession; but too much pragmatism can kill anyone's dearest dreams. After some weeks in the program it was obvious for me that I was in the wrong place. At that time, I wrote in my director's journal

To be or not to be/come a director. No, this is not the question. This question has been already answered. The real question is: to become a director in this mainstream oriented context; in this theatre machine that produces show after show without ever making a halt to question its old-fashioned aesthetics; in this place where there is no room for experimentation and where alternative kinds of theatre are disregarded as if they did not exist?

Of course, this is a democracy and everybody is free to make her own decisions--choosing between show A and show B, between this and that other play is not a big deal--but it is as far as decision making goes: nobody here questions the system. It seems that everybody believes that the form of production that begins with auditions and ends with flowers and claps is the only existing form. It seems that they believe that this conventional theatre is the only possible theatre. It seems that they think that theatre cannot be more than entertainment. A superficial practice, theatre here is a shell, an empty skin that tries to hide with its lack of seriousness an inexistent soul.

I stop and look at myself in the mirror: Do I believe that the technical tools of the profession can be learnt if they are alienated from content? Am I able to learn a technique with which I disagree because of the vision of the world it reflects and perpetuates? Do I think that theatre is apolitical?

No, I do not and I cannot fool myself pretending I do.

Do I want to have a teacher who insists in "banking" me with what he knows without acknowledging that which is important for me? Who decides what I am supposed to learn? Who validates one model of theatre over the others? What is the room left for the individual to control her own learning process? Am I going to compromise my personal vision to become this kind of director prepared by the institution to reproduce a model of theatre that is authoritarian and, in this sense, oppressive?

My answer to all these questions is a categorical no. I will not become this kind of director. Nevertheless, the "show" must go on . . . (Note from my director's journal. February 1997.)

What was the option? To run away, to return as if I had been unable to confront a different reality?

To argue, to write letters of complaint, to try to change the program? For me, these were not realistic options. I soon realized that only by producing it I could remain faithful to the theatre I believe in.

THE TRAVELER

SECOND MOVEMENT

THE TRAVELER IS STILL WALKING WITH HER SUITCASE IN HER HAND. IT SHOULD BE EVIDENT THAT SHE HAS BEEN WALKING A LOT, SHE IS TIRED AND CONFUSED. ONCE THE FOLLOWING LINES BEGIN, SHE OPENS HER SUITCASE WITHOUT INTERRUPTING HER WALKING. SHE TAKES OUT FROM THE SUITCASE NEWSPAPERS THAT SHE THROWS ON THE FLOOR WITH VERY SLOW MOVEMENTS AS SHE WALKS. AS THE VOICE INCREASES ITS RHYTHM SHE BEGINS TEARING WITH FRANTIC MOVEMENTS THE NEWSPAPERS SHE IS TAKING OUT BUT HER WALKING MAINTAINS THE SLOW RHYTHM ALL THE TIME, CREATING A COUNTERPOINT WITH THE VOICE.

América. America
I wonder why an accent makes such a big difference

An accent:
a wall a fence a cop
A language
A different universe

The difference hurts
The difference
has changed my vision
of my land my future my history my life
My land is not even a country
it is a mobile space
My landscape,
that of the
displaced
the marginal
the outsider

Despoiled
of my own continent
each time someone says "North America"
to refer to the United States and Canada
Displaced
from my own centre
when I hear the words
"Third World Countries"
Marginalized
by this cult to the order
the clean the hygiene the organic

I
wonder

what is the place for my country
in this self contained universe?
What to do with the violence,
the injustice,
the war?
How to explain that I do not know
what to do with the blood that runs through the streets?
How to live to respond to that call
that claims a hand a mouth a witness?
How to assume the responsibility
for the world I have inherited?

THE TRAVELER STOPS IN A SUDDEN WAY AFTER THIS LINE.

NEWSPAPERS ARE SPREAD ALL OVER THE PLACE. LIGHTS OFF.

CHAPTER 2

I WAS BORN *THERE*, IN *THAT TOWN*

I staged *La Maestra (The Teacher)* as part of my course work during my first year as a graduate student. Why did I choose it?

La Maestra was written by Enrique Buenaventura,
born in 1925 in Colombia.

I had arrived some months before from México City, the place where I was born and where I had lived all my life.

"I was born *there*, in *that town*." (Buenaventura 1974)

I was looking for answers. The differences between *my* Latin American *reality* and *this* foreign *reality*, as well as the differences between my artistic expectations and what I actually found, made me experience, in a vivid way, how much a given socio-political context influences our perception of the world.

The staging of *La Maestra* was not an exercise of nostalgia. Certainly I was homesick, and directing a play originally written in my own language--Spanish--was familiar for me. But more important than that, my staging of this play was motivated by a question of identity: Who am I? This,

apparently personal "I", was in fact the place where my artistic, social and political concerns converged. The question "who am I?" could not be separated from the questions: where did I come from, what is my relation to this context, what are my reasons for doing theatre?

The Teacher, a young woman,
is seated alone on an empty stage.
Her first lines are:
"Estoy muerta. Nací aquí, en este pueblo."

The Teacher is talking from the cemetery,

"I am dead. I was born here, in this town. In the little house made of red clay, with a straw roof. By the road, across from the school. The road is a slow-moving river of red clay in winter, and a whirlwind of red dust in the summer ..." (Buenaventura 1974)

My decision to stage *La Maestra* was, for me, a public pronouncement. It spoke of my decision to conceive my theatre practice as political and to swim, as Eugenio Barba says, against the current, publicly disengaging myself from the mainstream practices of the Department.

I wanted to emphatically assert that, for us we were not born *here*, but *there*, in *those* towns, political theatre is not a fashion but a necessity.

Although I was not born in Colombia, my voice,
as *La Maestra's* voice, is also coming from the cemetery.
In a way, I was also born *there* in *that* town.

THE TRAVELER
THIRD MOVEMENT

...behold, I touch a wound:
it is my memory.
It hurts, therefore it is true.
It bleeds real blood.
And yet, if I call it mine,
I betray everyone else.
I remember, we all remember.
Rosario Castellanos, 1968

THE TRAVELER IS STILL. SHE IS HOLDING HER SUITCASE,
EMBRACING IT AGAINST HER LAP. SHE LOOKS AROUND. SHE TRIES TO
MOVE FORWARD BUT SHE IS EXHAUSTED. SLOWLY SHE SITS DOWN
ON THE FLOOR. SHE OPENS HER SUITCASE AGAIN, TAKES OUT A
NOTEBOOK AND A PEN AND WRITES (THE AUDIENCE HEARS HER
RECORDED VOICE AS SHE WRITES):

I was born in the vortex of an apocalyptic city...

AS SOON AS THESE LINES ARE DELIVERED, SOMETHING
APPEARS ON THE SCREEN. IT IS NOT AN IMAGE, JUST THE COLOUR

RED. IT IS NOT A FIXED COLOUR; IT IS MOVING AS IF IT WERE WATER RUNNING OR A CLOTH MOVED BY THE AIR.

A CHAOS OF SOUNDS BEGINS: SIRENS OF AMBULANCES, PEOPLE SHOUTING, GUN SHOTS ... IT SHOULD SOUND AS SOMETHING HAPPENING VERY FAR AWAY, BUT NEVERTHELESS PRESENT ALL THE TIME.

THE TRAVELER STANDS UP, FRIGHTENED. SHE RUNS FROM ONE PART OF THE STAGE TO THE OTHER, TRYING TO ESCAPE, BUT SHE IS TRAPPED. WHEN SHE REALIZES SHE CANNOT ESCAPE SHE TRIES TO GO BACK TO WHERE SHE LEFT HER SUITCASE, BUT AS SHE IS WALKING SHE BEGINS TO STUMBLE INTO IMAGINARY CORPSES. SHE TRIES TO SURROUND THEM BUT ONCE AND AGAIN SHE FALLS DOWN. WHEN SHE RECOVERS FROM ONE OF THESE FALLS, SHE ACCIDENTALLY LOOKS AT HER HANDS ... SHE REACTS AS IF THEY WERE COVERED WITH BLOOD. AFRAID, AND UNABLE TO ESCAPE, SHE COVERS HER HEAD WITH HER HANDS AND BENDS HER BODY. THE IMAGE SHOULD BE THAT OF A FETUS; ALTHOUGH SHE IS NOT LYING ON THE FLOOR BUT STANDING.

THE TRAVELER WILL REACT WITH HER BODY TO WHAT SHE LISTENS AS IF SHE WERE STRUGGLING WITH INNER IMAGES AND FEARS.

WITH THE NOISE OF SHOUTS, AMBULANCES AND GUNS SHOTS, ANOTHER SOUND BEGINS IN THE FOREGROUND. IT IS A CONSTANT

SOUND ... A DRUM, A CLOCK, A HEART BEATING?

THE RECORDED VOICES OF THE TRAVELER CONTINUE:

I was born in the vortex of an apocalyptic city
built, stone over stone, with the blood of its
inhabitants...

(FROM HERE ON, THE WORDS THAT APPEAR ON THE SCREEN ARE
INDICATED IN A BOX.)

**México,
D.F.**

1 9 6 8

THE FOLLOWING TEXT SHOULD BE DELIVERED AS A CHORUS IN
CRESCENDO. DURING THIS TEXT THE TRAVELER WILL ACT AS IF SHE
WERE TRAPPED WITHIN A VERY SMALL SPACE AND WAS TRYING TO GET
OUT. HER MOVEMENTS SHOULD INCREASE IN RHYTHM AND
INTENSITY IN ORDER TO ARRIVE AT A CLIMAX WITH THE LAST LINE
OF THE TEXT. THE METAPHOR FOR THIS IMAGE IS THAT OF SOMEONE
BEING BORN.

1968.

Thousands of students and workers walked through the city, challenging the
government. Their demands? Democracy, freedom for the political
prisoners, stop to the repression.

**Democracy.
Freedom.
Stop to
the repression.**

On October 2 the government answered:

In Tlatelolco the Mexican soldiers shot their machine guns against their own people. The students ran from one place to another, trying to escape, but they were trapped ... By the end of the evening there were hundreds of unidentified bodies filling the morgues of the city.

**Unidentified bodies
Unidentified bodies
Unidentified bodies**

Most of the citizens did not know what was happening. They were watching TV, attentive to the Olympic Games, which would begin in the city a week later. In the same city: bullets of lead for the students, golden medals for the athletes. In the same city: murder, non sense, stupidity.

When I was born the city had been suppressed and silenced.

Suppressed and silenced

The leaders of the movement who were still alive and free decided to hide themselves in the province, in the mountains. The people did not talk about the killing of 1968. The people tried to act as if nothing had happened, but everything had changed.

I inherited a gagged city

Since October 2 of 1968 all of us were born with the fear engulfing our bodies and the skepticism encrusted in our souls.

THE SCREEN GOES BACK TO RED. THE RED IS SLOWLY TRANSFORMED INTO THE IMAGE OF A HEART BEATING. THE SOUND OF THE SHOUTS AND AMBULANCES DISAPPEARS. THE SOUND OF THE

HEART BEAT INCREASES ITS RHYTHM AS THE FOLLOWING LINES ARE REPEATED. THE TRAVELER STRUGGLES WITHIN HER IMAGINARY SPACE UNTIL, BY THE END OF THESE LINES, SHE IS ABLE TO FREE HERSELF AND EXTENDS HER BODY AT THE SAME TIME SHE SHOUTS AT THE TOP OF HER VOICE.

Since October 2 of 1968 all of us were born with the fear engulfing our bodies and the skepticism encrusted in our souls. Since October 2 of 1968 all of us were born with the fear engulfing our bodies and the skepticism encrusted in our souls ... the fear engulfing our bodies and the skepticism encrusted in our souls ... fear engulfing bodies ... skepticism encrusted in souls ... fear engulfing ... skepticism ... bodies ... fear ... souls ... skepticism ... souls ...

THE LINES ARE INTERRUPTED WHEN THE TRAVELER SHOUTS. THE SCREEN GOES BACK TO WHITE. EVERYTHING IS SILENT. THE TRAVELER LOOKS AROUND AS IF COMING FROM A NIGHTMARE. SHE BREATHES DEEPLY, TRYING TO RECOVER HERSELF. STILL AFFECTED, AND ALMOST FALLING DOWN WITH EACH STEP, SHE TAKES HER SUITCASE AGAIN. AND CONTINUES WALKING. IN CONTRAST TO HER WALK IN THE FIRST SCENE, THIS SHOULD BE A DISJOINTED, CRIPPLED WALK. LIGHT SLOWLY FADES.

CHAPTER 3

LA MAESTRA

The text

La Maestra was written by Enrique Buenaventura in 1968. It belongs to a collection of short plays grouped under the title *Los Papeles del Infierno (Documents from Hell)*, described by Buenaventura as “several episodes about the violence.” (Buenaventura 1970, 155). These plays document the period of the Colombian civil war, also known as *La Violencia*, that left more than 300,000 dead between the years 1948 and 1965. (Taylor 1990, 91)

La Maestra begins with a young woman seated on an empty stage. She informs the audience that she is dead and she adds that she was born in that town. After describing her native home, she narrates how the military entered the town, how they killed her father accusing him of being a political leader, and how they raped her. After being raped, she, the schoolteacher of the town, refused to eat and drink, letting herself die.

While the Teacher narrates her story, the other characters of the play--the Teacher's father, Peregrino Pasambú, the Sergeant and some people from the town--appear but have no direct interaction with her.

The play ends as it began, with the Teacher sitting on a bench, describing how the town's road will be transformed again into a “slow moving river of red mud...” (Buenaventura 1974)

What is most striking about this short play is the fact that it comprises, within two pages and 10 to 15 minutes of performance time, a profound analysis of the political structure that has enabled the ruling classes of many Latin American countries to maintain their power even against the interests of the majority. Although *La Maestra* was written in Colombia, the town where she was born is never specified. The only thing we know about this town is its name: La Esperanza (Hope). In La Esperanza, the community leaders are killed because of the need of a centralized government to "set up the elections." In La Esperanza a Sergeant with no name shoots Peregrino Pasambú; then, this Sergeant and a group of anonymous soldiers rape a schoolteacher. In La Esperanza, a schoolteacher from a rural area lets herself die after being raped. In La Esperanza, the relatives and friends of the victims are afraid because "some time ago fear came to this town and hung suspended over it like a great storm cloud."(Buenaventura 1974) In La Esperanza, the victims die little by little and the criminals go unpunished. In La Esperanza, the military is sent to intimidate and kill the same people they should be defending. In La Esperanza, there is no justice, no peace and no hope, only a river of red mud that never ends. La Esperanza could be Colombia, Perú, Nicaragua. Peregrino Pasambú could be any other man, the Teacher could be any other woman. As Judith Weiss states,

In a majority of the plays that treat the various periods of Latin American history, the protagonists very often transcend their well established position of victims ... more significantly they figure as witnesses and as agents of the historical circumstance and the future of their community. In the absence of a collective protagonist (an uncommon device because of its difficulty of representation), individual subjects will frequently typify the collectivity ... (Weiss 93, 165)

Teatro Experimental de Cali

La Maestra, although written in its final form by Enrique Buenaventura, was the result of the collective work of the Teatro Experimental de Cali (the Experimental Theatre of Cali) also known as TEC.

TEC was founded in 1955 by Enrique Buenaventura. By the mid-sixties the group had begun to develop a method of collective creation that has greatly influenced contemporary Latin American theatre.

From a simple perspective a method is a way to do something. But in reference to theatre, a method implies hundreds of choices that implicitly or explicitly define the artist's position in the world. When we do theatre, with or without a socio-political consciousness, we are either reinforcing or opposing a system of artistic, social and political values.

From this point of view, TEC's practice is political not only because of its content--which very often openly addresses political issues--but also because it deconstructs the alienated system of traditional relationships within the theatre. Instead of reproducing foreign plays, it has created its own repertoire based on the particular life conditions of the people in Colombia; instead of courting traditional elitism, it has looked for a popular audience; instead of assuming individual authorship of a play--usually endorsed by the playwright or the director--it has developed a method that gives the actors the right to express their own concerns.

In TEC's proposal, the actor is not a tool to reproduce the words of the playwright or to express the vision of the director, but a person who thinks by herself, a person who makes choices, has responsibilities and runs her own risks.

Collective creation is nothing new; it has been at the roots of theatre since its beginning. The relevance of TEC's practice lies in the fact that, in the context of colonization and imperialism in which the Latin American theatre has been developed, the collective creation has been effective in creating original works, while vindicating the Latin American right to have a theatre of its own. On the other hand, developed under a repressive regime--during the government of Rojas Pinillas, in which any

attempt to defy the structure of power was violently repressed, collective creation was certainly revolutionary. Buenaventura states,

We [TEC] have been an official theatre, pampered by the government and the press, invited to the Theatre of Nations. We have sold the cultural product like more or less honest merchants. Yet, without really knowing how, without anyone suggesting it to us, the need to develop our own work with our own raw materials and to show it here led us to confront the system structurally. (Buenaventura 1970, 153)

This confrontation with the system was not an isolated experience. Although TEC was an independent group with its own interests and procedures, its practice was part of a wider Latin American movement. Called "the New Theatre", sometimes also regarded as "the New Popular Theatre", this movement was "...in opposition to commercialism, anti-popular elements, and hierarchical structures" and was characterized by a search "for alternatives to the canon of Western theatre." (Weiss 93, 153-154)

According to Marina Pianca, during the end of the sixties and the beginning of the seventies Latin American theatre practitioners redefined the theatrical paradigm by questioning the ways in which theatre was produced and distributed. During the sixties, collective creation became an important tool in the struggle for the creation of a different theatre culture. Theatre practitioners were looking for different ways to reach popular audiences—usually marginalised from the mainstream theatre—and they conceived their practice within a broader struggle for the decolonization of Latin American culture.

In her analysis of the contributions of collective creation to the Latin American theatre, Judith Weiss affirms that

The main contribution of collective creation does not lie only in the creation of a new text or even a new production, but rather in the complex process itself, which (1) serves as an educational experience for the group members, in relation both to a historical or social question and to their relationship with the community or audience; (2) builds links with research institutions or scholars, on the one hand, and

community organizations, on the other; (3) equalizes task sharing within the organization and empowers all members with critical skills; and (4) contributes to the development of repertoire and styles of production and performance that contribute to the cultural strength of a specific sector of its society and to the development of a national theatre. (Weiss 93, 169)

TEC's method of collective creation

The collective creation proposed by TEC does not always imply the collective writing of the dramatic text. More often than not, TEC works with texts previously written, but the actors collectively create the staging of the text, what Buenaventura calls "the discourse of montage."

Because of the collective process that carries a production from research to 'post mortem,' individual authorship is often the equivalent of editing or writing down drafts and the final text based on group input. And in the case of preexisting authored scripts, the director's hand and the group's decisions will influence the shape of the production. (Weiss 93, 167)

TEC's point of departure for collective creation is the collective analysis of the play to be staged. The objective of this analysis is to identify the central conflict of the play, dividing it into sequences, situations and actions, and establishing not only the individual identity of the character--for example, the Teacher and the Sergeant--but also the social group they represent-- in this case, a marginalised peasant community is represented by the Teacher, and the Government is represented by the Sergeant.

The purpose of this collective analysis is not only to understand the text in its dramatic, social and political complexity, but also to allow the actors to incorporate their point of view about the conflict represented in the text.

After the analysis of the text, the group creates the discourse of montage through improvisations proposed by the actors. These improvisations do not have the intention to illustrate the conflict as presented in the text, but to explore the contradictions within it in order to avoid

simplistic or unilateral interpretations. Through the improvisations, the characters and staging solutions--scenery, blocking, use of props, use of sounds and music--are created.

Within collective creation, the director is not the intermediary between the text and the actors, and the one who owns "the" interpretation of the written text. The text-actor relation is transformed, allowing the actors a more direct participation in the creation of meaning. According to Buenaventura,

Only a process of production that organizes the creative participation of the actors in all the phases and levels of the discourse of montage can be the origin of texts that are not mere imitations or adaptations of the tradition or the avant-garde of the occidental theatre. (Buenaventura 1970, 153)

This kind of theatre also requires specific dynamics and forms of organization. As Judith Weiss explains,

As social organizations, Nuevo Teatro Popular groups have tended to conform to a nonhierarchical internal structure. ... all these groups have succeeded in developing a successful internal process and sharing of responsibilities, which would indicate that the director's role must also be that of a skilful coordinator and facilitator. (Weiss 93, 155-156)

Our staging of La Maestra

In October of 1996, I decided to stage *La Maestra*. The objectives for this project were:

- i) To do documentary research into Enrique Buenaventura and his importance to Latin American theatre, putting particular emphasis on the method of collective creation developed by him and the members of TEC.
- ii) To analyse *La Maestra* in relation to the context in which it was created, incorporating information about Colombia and other Latin American countries.
- iii) To coordinate a workshop with the aim to make a collective staging of *La Maestra*. Instead of choosing the cast in advance, the play was going to be cast through the process.

iv) To encourage a cultural dialogue between the director and the group of actors, as well as between them and the audience.

I posted signs in the UBC Theatre Department, inviting actors, designers and musicians to participate in the staging of *La Maestra*, a project characterized by a collaborative process and the introduction of collective creation techniques. As was specified in this posting, no auditions were required. I was not looking for a group of "talented actors"--whatever that means--to cast for the play, but for a group of people interested in a collective project. Eleven people showed up; two of them dropped out after the second rehearsal, but the remainder were part of the project until the end. All the participants were students; some were actors, some had previous acting experience, one had never acted before. Their theatre experience ranged from participation in highschool productions to professional performance in institutional theatres or popular theatre groups.

The participants of this project were: Rita Amisano, B.A., 1st year; Kesten Broughton, B.Sc. in Mathematics, 4th year; Pryde Foltz, B.A. in Theatre, 3rd year; Luisa Jovic, B.A., 1st year; Warren Linds, Ph.D. in Education; Steve Noble, M.A. in Education; Kadi Purru, Ph.D. in Comparative Literature; Charles Sammut, M.A. in Theatre; Marnie Watson, B.A. in Theatre, 4th year.

From December 19 to 21 our workshop provided the basic material for the collective creation. Between January 2 and 11, we analysed the context of the text and at the same time we continued our collective work toward the staging of the play. Between January 18 and February 13 we cast and staged it.

A detailed description of our staging process is impossible within the scope of this thesis, but there are some important characteristics that I would like to mention.

- We spent our time working collectively in the analysis of the play and developing improvisations from where the staging proposals were taken. In these improvisations the actors shifted roles continually, contributing in this way to the collective creation of the characters.

- as part of our daily work we read, discussed and analysed numerous articles about the socio-political reality of Colombia in particular, and Latin America in general. Most of the staging proposals emerged from these readings. None of the actors were born in Latin America and for many the content of the play, which deals with political repression and torture, was completely new.

- the traditional working method in which the actors read and analyse the play sitting around a table before beginning the staging process was substituted by a process of analysis "on our feet." We were shifting all the time from periods of intense verbal group discussion, to physical exercises and improvisations, and vice versa. No rigid boundaries were created between theory and practice and between real testimonies and fictitious characters.

Each one of the performances--on February 14 and 15 at the Big Blue Room in the Hut and on April 9 at the Dorothy Somerset Studio--were followed by a forum in which the members of the audience were invited to discuss the issues presented by the play. In these forums the members of the audience expressed their concerns about the content of the play and had the opportunity to talk with the actors about the creative process. It was interesting for me to realize that the discussions were focussed on the content of the play; the performances were regarded not only as theatrical events but as social events with a meaningful content.

*When I decided to stage *La Maestra* I did not know that this experience would be so significant for me. I did not know that the Teacher's voice was going to make me cross another border, this time in the opposite direction: when I left México I thought that my*

journey was going to take me from the South to the mythical North, the "developed" part of the world. But I did not know that borders are tricky places. Following the Teacher's voice the process reversed itself and I ended up on *another side* of the border; not even the place where I came from, but somewhere else...

THE TRAVELER

FOURTH MOVEMENT

THE STAGE IS SUDDENLY LIT, REVEALING AN OLD MAN SITTING ON A CHAIR. HE IS TALKING TO HIMSELF, AS IF HE WERE THINKING ALOUD. NEVERTHELESS, HE IS CONSCIOUS OF AN IMAGINARY AUDIENCE, LISTENING TO HIM SOMEWHERE IN THE FUTURE, IN A DIFFERENT SPACE AND TIME, NOT NECESSARILY IN A DIFFERENT GEOGRAPHY.

THE OLD MAN, ALSO KNOWN AS "BUENAVENTURA"--WHICH MEANS "GOOD FORTUNE"--SPEAKS:¹

At a 1967 symposium in Montreal, I, along with other colleagues, had to answer the question: 'What kind of theatre should we do?'. Throughout my entire professional life, I have been asked that same question and with each new stage of my life I responded differently. But when I heard it in that foreign country, where the only thing familiar to us Latin Americans were the Indian reservations, I suddenly felt I was on another planet, stunned I don't remember what I answered. (Buenaventura 1970, 151)

A SPOT IS LIT ON THE OPPOSITE SIDE OF THE STAGE. THE TRAVELLER IS STILL WALKING. SHE DOES NOT LOOK WELL; SHE IS PALE, TIRED, HER EYES LOST IN THE SPACE. SHE HOLDS ON TO HER

¹ All the words attributed in this scene to Buenaventura were taken from Buenaventura's "Theatre and Culture," 1970.

SUITCASE, THE ONLY FAMILIAR THING TO HER. SHE WALKS WITHOUT
ANY PRECISE DIRECTION. HER PRE-RECORDED VOICE IS HEARD.

América. America
I wonder
why an accent
makes such a big difference
América

THE OLD MAN DOES NOT NOTICE HER, AND HE CONTINUES.

TALKING:

A director-actor-playwright, a 'comedian' as one says too aptly in Spanish, does his [sic] job with his whole organism, and transmits experience through a form that is direct, alive- and ephemeral. He [sic] cannot pack up his way of life and memories and go off to set them down in a tranquil place without soldiers, without guerrillas, without starving proletarian masses, without students. I confess that I regret very much that I am unable to escape, that every day I have to make an almost mystical effort not to run away. My commitment, fortunately, is not just a personal attitude nor has it been an individual decision. It encompasses the story of TEC. (ibid., 153)

IMAGES OF MEXICO CITY ARE PROJECTED ON THE SCREEN. THE
TRAVELER DOES NOT LOOK AT THEM, BUT SHE REACTS AS IF SHE WERE
SURROUNDED BY THESE IMAGES. AS SHE WALKS, STRUGGLING AS SHE
WERE CAUGHT IN A SPIDER WEB, HER VOICE IS HEARD THROUGH THE
SPEAKERS:

... to escape
I just wanted to escape
from the chaos
from the economic crisis
from the corrupted government
... to escape

Not to see again their silhouettes
not to see them again

... they, walking bared-feet through the streets,
carrying their poverty
their children
their lack of opportunities with them

... to hide myself from them
... to hide myself....

... to forget
... to forget their faces
their hunger
their resignation
their hopelessness

THE TRAVELLER CONTINUES HER ACTIONS, WITHOUT
NOTICING THE OLD MAN WHO SPEAKS AGAIN:

Many Latin Americans who belong to the international republic of arts and letters resolve this contradiction by making a radical separation between art and politics. As artists, their fundamental concern is art: their only objective is good art. As men [sic] they are politicians and commit themselves to all kinds of declarations. The best way to do this is to live in Europe and support Cuba. (ibid., 152)

THE TRAVELER: ... to escape, to escape, to escape
...their faces
You won't forget their faces
To hide myself
... they walk at your side
they follow you
they look at you in the mirror
they are inside
they look at you
inside
they are inside your eyes

THE TRAVELER THROWS HER SUITCASE IN AN INTENT TO MAKE
THE VOICES SHUT UP. ON CONTACT WITH THE FLOOR THE SUITCASE
ACCIDENTALLY OPENS AND WE HEAR THE NOISE OF CRYSTAL

BREAKING. THE IMAGES ON THE SCREEN VANISH. THE TRAVELER ACTS AS IF SHE WERE WAKING FROM A BAD DREAM. FOR THE FIRST TIME SHE SPEAKS WITH HER OWN LIVE VOICE:

... chaos, poverty, desperation. They are not outside; they are inside me. I cannot escape. This big town full of spirits, crisis and the hope of a better future, this country, belongs to me. It is all that I have. I cannot run away from it as I cannot run away from myself.

SHE IS NOW FACING NOT ONLY THE SCREEN, BUT THE CHAIR WHERE THE OLD MAN IS SITTING. SHE LOOKS AT HIM FOR THE FIRST TIME AND SHE LISTENS ATTENTIVELY TO WHAT HE SAYS.

... without knowing how, without anyone suggesting it to us, the need to develop our own work with our own raw materials and to show it there led us to confront the system structurally. ... TEC is being thrown out of the system. What we are trying to learn is where we are landing and what we can do there. Can we continue doing theatre?

And so I have returned to the question that was asked me in Montreal. There are other groups--the Living Theatre and the Bread & Puppet Theatre among them--who share our situation. What differentiates us from them is the society in which we work, the audiences to whom we direct ourselves. (ibid., 153)

FOR THE FIRST TIME THE TRAVELER DISCOVERS THAT THERE IS A MAP ON THE FLOOR. SHE WATCHES IT AND THEN BEGINS WALKING INSIDE ITS DISJOINTED PIECES, NOT DARING TO TOUCH THEM ALTHOUGH SHE NOTICES THAT THEY ARE IN DISORDER ... A BROKEN CONTINENT, A CHAOS. WHILE SHE DOES THIS, THE OLD MAN CONTINUES:

Our people in Colombia ... are apathetic because immediate and primary needs do not give them rest; they barely have time for anything else. Besides, they are on the margins of society. They are used by the system, but the system keeps them separated. They are a 'reserve army'; they are the only ones who

need to destroy the system to survive. ... The language of these outcasts needs deciphering, and we must learn it in order to establish communication. ... We direct ourselves to the men and women whom exploitation wants to reduce to an amorphous mass ... (ibid., 154)

THE TRAVELER FINALLY DECIDES TO TAKE A PIECE FROM THE MAP. IT IS THE PIECE OF COLOMBIA. SHE IS WONDERING HOW TO MAKE IT FIT WITHIN THE MAP BUT SHE STOPS WHEN SHE LISTENS TO THE FOLLOWING LINES:

But we need to go still further. The colonized man [sic] must be divided within himself, to show him how, at the level of habit, conditioning, morality, he continues to carry within him the exploiter against whom he is fighting. And the exploiter must be shown that all charitable ways of soothing his conscience or of calming the wrath of the exploited will not last long, because they are resting on a radically false foundation. (ibid., 155)

THE TRAVELER, STUNNED BY THESE LAST LINES, BEGINS WALKING TOWARDS THE OLD MAN, WITH THE PIECE OF THE MAP IN HER HAND. SHE IS GOING TO ASK HIM SOMETHING WHEN HE VANISHES IN THE AIR. WE STILL LISTEN TO HIS LAST WORDS, FLOATING AS AN ECHO:

We and the audience are re-creating a model reality, and only through that reality, in active proof of it, are we revealing ourselves to ourselves and to the public, just as we reveal the public to ourselves and itself. (ibid., 156)

WHERE THE OLD MAN WAS THERE IS ONLY A BOOK. CAUTIOUSLY, THE TRAVELER APPROACHES THE CHAIR AND TAKES THE BOOK. SHE SITS DOWN ON THE CHAIR WHERE THE OLD MAN WAS SITTING. SHE OPENS THE BOOK AT RANDOM. SHE READS ALOUD

"DOCUMENTS FROM HELL:
THE TEACHER"
BY ENRIQUE BUENAVENTURA

CHAPTER 4
OUR SCRIPT OF
“DOCUMENTS FROM HELL: THE TEACHER”

By Enrique Buenaventura

Translation by Gerardo Luzuriaga

Scenic version by
Rita Amisano, Kesten Broughton, Pryde Foltz, Luisa Jojic, Warren Linds,
Alejandra Medellín, Steve Noble, Kadi Purru, Charles Sammut and Marnie Watson²

PRE-SCENE

A DOOR IS OPENED. THE AUDIENCE ENTERS THE ROOM. WHILE THEY WALK TO THEIR SEATS. **[MUSIC 1 “TE ESTOY BUSCANDO AMÉRICA” (I’M LOOKING FOR YOU, AMERICA) BY RUBÉN BLADES BEGINS. IT IS SUNG IN SPANISH BUT THE AUDIENCE RECEIVES A PIECE OF PAPER WITH THE LYRICS IN ENGLISH]**

² This scenic version is the product of the collaborative work of the actors and the director. The main differences between this version and Buenaventura’s original text are: the addition of a chorus, the insertion of the director of the play as a visible character, and the insertion of testimonies. V. Buenaventura 1974, trans. Gerardo Luzuriaga.

TE ESTOY BUSCANDO AMÉRICA

I'm looking for you América
afraid of not being able to find you,
your footprints are lost
in this darkness.

I'm calling you América
but you don't answer me,
you have been disappeared
by those who are afraid of the truth.

Surrounded by shadows
we deny what is true:
if there is no justice
we will never have peace.
Living through dictatorships
I try and cannot find you,
your tortured body
doesn't know where it is.
(My translation)

[MUSIC 1 SLOWLY FADES] THE GENERAL LIGHTS FADE OUT. WHEN THE STAGE LIGHTS FADE IN, THE DIRECTOR—Alejandra—IS SITTING ON A CHAIR (CENTRE STAGE) READING FROM BUENAVENTURA'S BOOK.

ALEJANDRA: Estoy muerta. Nací aquí, en este pueblo.

WARREN WALKS TOWARD ALEJANDRA'S CHAIR. HE TRANSLATES ALEJANDRA'S LINE: I am dead. I was born here, in this town.

ALEJANDRA WATCHES WARREN AS HE TAKES THE PIECE WHICH REPRESENTS MÉXICO FROM THE BROKEN MAP IN THE FLOOR, SHOWS IT TO THE AUDIENCE AND

POSTS IT ON THE WALL. THEN WARREN GOES TO A CORNER OF THE STAGE.

ALEJANDRA CONTINUES READING,

ALEJANDRA: En la casita de barro rojo con techo de paja que está al borde del camino, frente a la escuela.

LUISA WALKS TOWARD ALEJANDRA'S CHAIR, AND TRANSLATES: In the little house made of red clay, with a straw roof.

RITA ADDS: By the road across from the school.

ALEJANDRA: El camino es un río lento de barro rojo en el invierno y un remolino de polvo rojo en el verano.

WARREN, LUISA AND RITA GO TO WHERE THE TRAVELER'S SUITCASE WAS LEFT. IT IS ALREADY OPENED AND THEY TAKE FROM IT TWO LONG PIECES OF RED FABRIC THAT THEY EXTEND ON THE FLOOR WHILE THEY SAY IN A CHORUS: The road is a slow moving river of red clay in winter, and a whirlwind of red dust in summer.

ALEJANDRA: Cuando llegan los meses de sol, el polvo rojo cubre todo el pueblo.

FROM THIS MOMENT, THE ACTORS, WHILE SAYING THEIR TEXT, BEGIN TAKING, ONE BY ONE, THE PIECES OF THE BROKEN MAP AND POST THEM ON THE WALL, AS IF COMPLETING A PUZZLE OF LATIN AMERICA.

STEVE: In the months when the sun hangs high and long in the sky, the entire town is covered with red dirt.

ALEJANDRA: Las alpargatas suben llenas de polvo rojo, y los pies y las piernas y las patas de los caballos y las crines y los sombreros, todo se impregna de polvo rojo.

PRYDE: The sandals go up the road, filled with red dirt and the hooves and legs of the horses, and the snorting nostrils of the mules and horses, and the manes, and saddles, and the sweaty faces, and hats, all become filled with red dirt.

ALEJANDRA: Nací de ese barro y de ese polvo rojo, y ahora he vuelto a ellos.

ALL THE ACTORS FORMING A CHORUS: I was born from that mud, and from that red dirt, and now I have returned to it.

ALEJANDRA READS FROM ANOTHER PAGE: Personajes.

CHORUS: Characters.

WITH THE FOLLOWING LINES, THE ACTORS TAKE THEIR COSTUMES FROM THE TRAVELER'S SUITCASE, SAY THEIR CHARACTER'S NAMES, PUT ON THEIR COSTUMES AND TAKE THEIR PLACES.

ALEJANDRA: La Maestra.

PRYDE: The Teacher.

ALEJANDRA: Juana Pasambú.

RITA: Juana Pasambú.

ALEJANDRA: Pedro Pasambú.

KESTEN: Pedro Pasambú.

ALEJANDRA: Tobías el Tuerto.

WARREN: One-eyed Tobías.

ALEJANDRA: La Vieja Asunción.

LUISA: Old Asunción.

ALEJANDRA: El Sargento.

STEVE: The Sergeant. HE MOVES TO CENTRE STAGE AND FREEZES. HE HOLDS THE TEACHER'S SCARF IN HIS HANDS.

ALEJANDRA: El Viejo. SILENCE. NO ONE MOVES. El viejo? SILENCE. The old man? SHE LOOKS AROUND BUT HE IS NOT THERE. BLADES' SONG BEGINS AGAIN, INTERRUPTING HER THOUGHTS AND, DESPITE THE FACT THAT THE OLD MAN IS NOT THERE, SHE IS COMPELLED TO CONTINUE.

[**MUSIC 2 BEGINS.** IT IS THE CONTINUATION OF "TE ESTOY BUSCANDO AMÉRICA" (I'M LOOKING FOR YOU AMÉRICA)]

ALEJANDRA STANDS UP AND OBSERVES THE CHARACTERS TO MAKE SURE THAT EVERYTHING IS IN ITS PLACE, READY FOR THE BEGINNING OF THE SHOW. SHE NOTICES THAT THE SERGEANT IS STANDING AT CENTRE STAGE AND THAT HE HAS THE TEACHER'S SCARF IN HIS HANDS. SHE TAKES THE SCARF FROM HIM AND PUTS IT IN THE TEACHER'S NECK. SHE WATCHES THE SERGEANT AGAIN AND GENTLY PUSHES HIM OFFSTAGE. HE LEAVES THE ROOM.

ALEJANDRA LOOKS AT THE MAP ON THE WALL. SHE REALIZES IT IS MISSING SOMETHING: THE PIECE WHICH REPRESENTS COLOMBIA IS NOT THERE. SHE LOOKS FOR IT AND FINALLY FINDS IT INSIDE THE PAGES OF BUENAVENTURA'S BOOK. SHE POSTS IT ON THE WALL THUS COMPLETING THE PUZZLE. SHE MAKES A SIGNAL TO LOWER THE MUSIC [**MUSIC 2 ENDS**] AND TO TURN OFF THE GENERAL LIGHT. SHE SITS DOWN IN A CHAIR NEAR THE AUDIENCE AND WATCHES IN SILENCE WHAT UNFOLDS IN FRONT OF HER EYES.

**SCENE I
THE RIVER**

DURING THIS MONOLOGUE THE CHORUS PLAY WITH THE ROAD THEY HAVE MADE OUT OF THE TWO PIECES OF RED FABRIC. THEY PLAY WITH IT AS A SLOW MOVING RIVER, AS A WHIRLWIND, AS THE RAIN... THE TEACHER IS SITTING ON A SET OF STAIRS. SHE TALKS DIRECTLY TO THE AUDIENCE. THE OTHER ACTORS ARE KNEELING DOWN, EACH ONE IN ONE EXTREME OF THE ROAD.

THE TEACHER: I am dead. I was born here, in this town. In the little house made of red clay, with a straw roof. By the road, across from the school. The road is a slow moving river of red clay in winter...

CHORUS: a slow moving river

THE TEACHER: and a whirlwind of red dust in summer.

CHORUS: a whirlwind of red dust

THE TEACHER: When the rains come you lose your sandals in the mud

CHORUS: you lose your sandals in the mud

THE TEACHER: the mules and horses get their bellies smeared with mud,

CHORUS: smeared with mud

THE TEACHER: the saddles and even the faces of the horsemen are spattered with mud.

CHORUS: spattered, spattered with mud.

THE TEACHER: In the months when the sun hangs high and long in the sky, the entire town is covered with red dirt. The sandals go up the road, filled with red dirt and the hooves and legs of the horses, and the snorting nostrils of the mules and horses, and the manes, and saddles, and the sweaty faces, and hats, all become filled with red dirt.

CHORUS: all become filled with red dirt.

THE TEACHER: WITH THIS TEXT SHE DESCENDS FROM THE STAIRS AND BEGINS TO PLAY "IN" THE ROAD. I was born from that mud, and from that red dirt, and now I have returned to it. Here, in the small cemetery that watches over the town below, surrounded by daisies, geraniums, lilies, and thick grass. The acrid smell of red mud mingles with the sweet odor of yaragua grass, and in the afternoon even the smell of the woods drifts overhead, and rushes down upon the town. **[MUSIC 3 BEGINS "PAJARITO VERDE" (LITTLE GREEN BIRD) BY SOLEDAD BRAVO.]** THE TEACHER PLAYS WITH THE ROAD. IT IS A JOYFUL, SENSUAL, LIVELY GAME. ABRUPTLY, SHE GETS TRAPPED IN THE ROAD'S FABRIC. **[MUSIC 3 STOPS ABRUPTLY]**

SCENE II
THE FUNERAL PROCESSION

THE TEACHER IS TRAPPED IN THE FABRIC AS IF IT WERE A SHROUD. THE OTHER CHARACTERS REACT TO IT WITH FEAR. AFTER A MOMENT OF SILENCE, THE TEACHER GOES BACK TO SIT AT THE TOP OF THE SET OF STAIRS WHERE SHE WAS AT THE BEGINNING.

THE TEACHER: They brought me here in the evening.

[MUSIC 4 BEGINS. IT IS A FRAGMENT FROM "SANTA MARÍA DE IQUIQUE", BY CONJUNTO QUILAPAYÚN.] THE CHARACTERS SLOWLY EXTEND THE ROAD AGAIN ON THE FLOOR, FORMING AN "X" WITH IT. THEN THE CHARACTERS BEGIN A PROCESSION: ONE BY ONE, THEY MIMIC THE OFFERING OF "FOOD" TO THE TEACHER. THIS FOOD IS REPRESENTED BY WHITE KERCHIEFS THAT THEY PUT ON THE TOMB (THE STAIRS WHERE THE TEACHER IS SITTING). ON ONE HAND, THIS IS A MOURNING PROCESSION. BUT AT THE SAME TIME IT IS AN ACT OF DEFIANCE TO THE AUTHORITY WHO PROVOKED THE TEACHER'S DEATH.

THE TEACHER: Juana Pasambú, my aunt, came.

JUANA PASAMBÚ WALKS TOWARDS THE TOMB. ONCE SHE IS THERE, SHE PUTS A WHITE

KERCHIEF ON THE TOMB AS AN OFFERING. SHE STANDS NEXT TO THE TOMB, AS IF SHE WERE PRAYING (THE OTHER ACTORS WILL REPEAT THIS SEQUENCE OF ACTIONS WITH THEIR LINES).

JUANA PASAMBÚ: Why didn't you eat?

THE TEACHER: I wouldn't eat. Why eat? Food had no meaning anymore. You eat to live, and I didn't want to live. Life no longer had meaning. Pedro Pasambú, my uncle, came.

PEDRO PASAMBÚ: You liked bananas and corn on the cob with salt and butter.

THE TEACHER: I liked bananas and corn on the cob, but I wouldn't eat them. I kept my mouth tightly closed. (A pause) Squint-eyed Tobias was here: he was the mayor years ago.

SQUINT-EYED TOBIÁS: I brought you water from the spring where you drank when you were a little girl; I brought it in a cup made of leaves, and you wouldn't drink it.

THE TEACHER: I didn't want to drink. I kept my lips pressed together. God forgive me, I began to wish the spring would dry up. Why did water continue to gush out of the spring?, I wondered. For what reason? (A pause) Old Asunción was here. The midwife who brought me into the world.

OLD ASUNCIÓN: Oh, woman! Oh, my child! I brought you into this world. Oh, my baby! Why wouldn't you take anything from my hands? Why did you spit out the soup I gave you? My hands that have healed so many, why couldn't they heal your torn flesh? SHE AND THE TEACHER TRY TO REACH EACH OTHER HANDS. WHILE DOING THIS, THE TEACHER'S SCARF FALLS ON THE FLOOR. ASUNCIÓN AND THE OTHER CHARACTERS REACT TO THE FALLING OF THE SCARF (THE SCARF SYMBOLIZES THE TEACHER'S RAPE, AND ALTHOUGH THE AUDIENCE DOES NOT KNOW THIS YET, THE CHARACTERS DO). And while the murderers were here...

[MUSIC 4 STOPS] THE CHARACTERS MOVE IN SLOW MOTION, UNTIL THEY ARE IN THE CENTRE OF THE CROSSROADS, CREATING AN IMAGE OF FEAR.

THE TEACHER: They are afraid. Some time ago fear came to this town and hung suspended over it like a great storm cloud. The air reeks of fear, voices dissolve in the bitter spittle of fear, and the people swallow it. One day the cloud ripped open, and the thunderbolt fell upon us.

SCENE III

INTERROGATION AND TORTURE

THE SERGEANT ENTERS THE STAGE. HE THREATENS THE AUDIENCE AND THE CHARACTERS WITH HIS ATTITUDE. HE SPITS ON THE CHARACTERS, TAKES THE TEACHER'S SCARF FROM THE FLOOR AND GOES TO HIS CHAIR. HE SITS DOWN IN FRONT OF THE MAP OF LATIN AMERICA WITH HIS BACK TO THE AUDIENCE. HE WILL MAINTAIN THIS POSITION THROUGHOUT THE PLAY. THE CHARACTERS RUN AWAY FROM HIM, THEY GO TO DIFFERENT CORNERS OF THE STAGE WHERE THEY STAND TO WATCH WHAT IS HAPPENING. THE SERGEANT CALLS THE SOLDIER. THE SOLDIER (KESTEN, WHO HAS CHANGED HIS CLOTHES INTO MILITARY ATTIRE) APPEARS. HE APPROACHES THE SERGEANT WHILE MARCHING IN A MILITARY WAY. THE SERGEANT GIVES HIM A LONG PIECE OF PAPER WITH NAMES WRITTEN ON IT. THE CHORUS BEGINS MARCHING IN ITS PLACE. AS THE SOLDIER CALLS OUT EACH NAME, THE CHORUS SAYS "DESAPARECIDO."

(THE FOLLOWING ARE REAL NAMES OF COLOMBIAN PEOPLE, DISAPPEARED BECAUSE OF POLITICAL REASONS BY MILITARY AND PARAMILITARY SQUADS).

SOLDIER: Pedro Luis Valencia

CHORUS: Desaparecido

SOLDIER: Luz Estella Vargas

CHORUS: Desaparecida

SOLDIER: Jaime Pardo Leal

CHORUS: Desaparecido

SOLDIER: Juan Gabriel Cuadros

CHORUS: Desaparecido

SOLDIER: Pedro Hernández

CHORUS: Desaparecido

SOLDIER: Peregrino Pasambú

THE MARCHING ENDS AND THERE IS ABSOLUTE SILENCE.

SOLDIER: Peregrino Pasambú.

SILENCE.

THE SOLDIER WALKS TOWARD THE AUDIENCE AND BEGINS LOOKING FOR PEREGRINO WITHIN THE AUDIENCE. FINALLY HE DISCOVERS PEREGRINO SITTING THERE, IN THE

AUDIENCE'S AREA. HE GRABS HIM AND THROWS HIM IN THE CENTRE OF THE STAGE.

SOLDIER: Peregrino Pasambú.

CHORUS: Disappeared.

SOLDIER: HE TIES PEREGRINO'S HANDS AND THREATENS HIM. Your name's Peregrino Pasambú, right? **THE OLD MAN NODS.** Then you're the big leader here. **THE OLD MAN DENIES IT WITH A MOVEMENT OF HIS HEAD.**

SERGEANT: GIVES THE SOLDIER A VISUAL ORDER TO SHUT UP. Your name's Peregrino Pasambú, right? Then you're the big leader here.

TEACHER: Father had been named mayor twice. But he understood so little about politics that he didn't realize the government had changed.

SERGEANT: You got this land because of politics, isn't that right?

TEACHER: That wasn't true. My father was one of the founders of the town. And because he was one of the founders he had this house next to the road, with some land. He gave the town its name. He called it "Hope".

SERGEANT: Aren't you going to talk? **THE SOLDIER BEATS PEREGRINO.** Aren't you going to say anything?

TEACHER: My father didn't talk much.

SERGEANT: POINTING AT THE MAP OF LATIN AMERICA. This land isn't divided right. We're gonna divide it all over again. It's gonna have real owners with deeds and everything.

TEACHER: When my father came here, it was all a jungle.

SERGEANT: Aren't you gonna talk? **PAUSE.** **THE SERGEANT LAUGHS, HE TAKES THE**

TEACHER'S SCARF. CARESSES IT. The jobs haven't been given out too well, neither. Your daughter's the schoolteacher, isn't she?

THE TEACHER: It wasn't really a job. They seldom paid me my salary. But I liked to be the schoolteacher. My mother was the first teacher the school ever had. She taught me, and when she died I became the teacher.

SERGEANT: Who knows what that bitch teaches. THE SERGEANT AND THE SOLDIER LAUGH. THE SERGEANT GIVES THE SCARF TO THE SOLDIER, WHO BEGINS TO PLAY WITH IT WITH AN EVIDENT SEXUAL INTENTION DURING THE FOLLOWING LINES.

(IMPORTANT: THIS IS THE MOMENT OF THE RAPE. ALTHOUGH THE ACTIONS OF THE SOLDIER PRETEND TO BE DIRECTED TO PEREGRINO, THEY ARE IN FACT DIRECTED TO THE TEACHER).

THE TEACHER: REACTING TO THE SOLDIER'S ACTION—TO HIS CARESSING THE SCARF IN AN OBSCENE WAY. I taught reading and writing, and I taught catechism and love for our country and our flag. When I refused to eat and drink, I thought about the children. It was true that there weren't very many of them, but who was going to teach them? And then I thought, why should they learn the catechism? Why should they learn to love their country and their flag? Country and flag don't mean anything anymore. Maybe it wasn't right, but that's what I thought.

THE SOLDIER: SHOWING TO PEREGRINO THE TEACHER'S SCARF. I'm not to blame. I'm just following orders. THE SERGEANT, PEREGRINO, THE SOLDIER AND THE TEACHER FREEZE IN THE RAPE IMAGE AND REMAIN IN THEIR POSITIONS DURING THE FOLLOWING SCENE.

INTERMISSION

THE GENERAL LIGHT IS TURNED ON AND THE FOLLOWING TESTIMONIES ARE READ IN NEUTRAL, INFORMATIVE VOICES.

ALEJANDRA STANDING UP FROM THE CHAIR FROM WHERE SHE HAS BEEN WATCHING:

"The bodies of those seized by armed men and forced into cars are usually found later dumped beside the road. Many are tortured first--their bodies mutilated, dismembered and burned with acid or fire. Torturing the victims and mutilating their corpses not only obscures their identities and cause of death. It is also intended to create a climate of fear." *American Watches Report on Colombia, 1986.*

WARREN: "Every day I receive a list of assassinations, threats, attacks and 'disappearances'... I ask myself: What is this? This isn't a democracy, this isn't a country. This is the law of the jungle." Carlos Mauro Hoyos Jiménez, Colombian Procurator General, in a statement to the press on November 25, 1987. Two months later he was abducted and murdered.

LUISA: "In August 1987 four peasant leaders who had been involved in a strike were killed. All four had been named on a death list of 76 peasant and civic leaders in Convención, North Santander department, Colombia. The list was reportedly found in the possession of a police officer and handed over to the Procurator General. The names of the four were at the top of the list, which was handwritten, and beside their names, in different handwriting, was the word 'cumplido' (carried out)." *Amnesty International Briefing, 1987.*

RITA: "The Zenú Indian community of San Andrés de Sotavento in the department of Córdoba has a long-standing dispute with a local landowner. The Zenús claim that the land in dispute is a

resguardo, or reservation, and therefore cannot be sold or transferred outside the Indian communities. Eleven members of this indigenous community were detained on October 30, 1986, in a police operation. The following day, four police officers went back to the Zenú community. They arrested Pedro Hernández, an elected leader of the community. His detention was then denied. Three days later his body was found nearby. He appeared to have been tortured and there were bullet wounds in his head. As far as Amnesty International knows, no one has been brought to trial for the killing of Pedro Hernández." *Amnesty International Briefing, 1987.*

ALEJANDRA: "Amnesty International knows of no case where members of the security forces--police of military--implicated in political killings in Latin America have faced criminal prosecution and been convicted. Intimidation has been identified as a major problem. Witnesses, lawyers and even judges have frequently withdrawn from cases after receiving threats. Some have been seized, 'disappeared' or killed after ignoring threats." *Amnesty International Briefing, 1987.*

WARREN: "At least 250 known modern-day war criminals, torturers and former senior officials of murderous government regimes are free in Canada. The list ranges from former death squad members from Latin American countries to senior officials from Bosnian, Somali, Iraqi and Afghan regimes and the former Duvalier government of Haiti." *The Toronto Sun, Sunday, February 9, 1997.*

LUISA: "She fled here, looking for sanctuary from the pain and torture of her native Ethiopia. From those who had detained her in prison, had beaten her, scarring her for life. She believed herself safe here. Tried to bury her memories, allowed herself to breathe the air of the free. And then she saw her torturer in the subway. Stared into the dark eyes which had tormented her, haunted her. Her heaven was his as well. We had opened our gates to the man who had locked her in his." *The Toronto Sun, Sunday, February 9, 1997.*

RITA: "Hussein Sheik Abdirahman, a top official in the Somali government of deposed dictator Mohamed Siad Barre, failed to disclose his past when he came to Canada in 1993. After a CTV report revealed that he was minister of defence when government troops allegedly shot 400 protesters in 1989, the Liberals vowed to deport him. That was three years ago. He still lives in Ottawa." *The Toronto Sun, Sunday, February 9, 1997.*

ALEJANDRA: 400 dollars are being spent to renovate the UBC Residence House to host the leaders of Asia and Pacific countries in the fall of 1997 as part of their meeting to discuss trade. UBC President, David Strangway, has invited these leaders to UBC. This gathering will include men responsible for massive human rights violations, such as Indonesia's President Suharto and Chinese President Jiang Zemin.

WARREN: "For the Ethiopian woman who saw her torturer in a Metro subway, that injustice turned her heaven into a tarnished hell. How could she live in a country that would welcome her nightmare as easily as it had welcomed her? *The Toronto Sun, Sunday, February 9, 1997.*

SCENE IV TORTURE AND DEATH

GENERAL LIGHT IS TURNED OFF. THE INTERROGATION CONTINUES. IT IS EVIDENT NOW THAT THEY HAVE BEEN TORTURING PEREGRINO FOR HOURS, AND BOTH TORTURERS AND TORTURED ARE EXHAUSTED.

SERGEANT: So you're the big leader here. SILENCE. You got this land because of politics, isn't that right? THE SERGEANT HITS THE FLOOR WITH A BELT. Aren't you gonna talk? Aren't you gonna say anything? THE SERGEANT HITS THE FLOOR 5 OR 6 TIMES WITH THE BELT WHILE THE SOLDIER MIMICS HITTING PEREGRINO.

SERGEANT: Why don't you talk? This isn't my doing. I'm not to blame, I'm just following orders.

CHORUS IN A WHISPER WHICH SHOULD SOUND AS A LITANY. I'm not to blame I'm just following orders. I'm not to blame I'm just following orders

SERGEANT: HE IS CALM NOW, A MAN WHO IS CONVINCED OF THE IMPORTANCE OF HIS DUTY. You see this list? HE SHOWS A LIST, AN EXTREMELY LONG LIST. All the big shots and fat cats of the last government are on it. We got orders to get rid of them all so we can set up the elections.

CHORUS: WHILE THE SOLDIER BLINDS PEREGRINO WITH THE TEACHER'S SCARF AND TAKES OUT HIS GUN. I'm not to blame I'm just following orders. I'm not to blame I'm just following orders, ... THEY REPEAT THE LINE UNTIL THE SOLDIER SHOOTS. WHEN THE SOLDIER MIMICS THE ACT OF SHOOTING, THE CHORUS CLAP AND STAMP THEIR FEET ON THE FLOOR TO INDICATE THE GUN SHOT.

PEREGRINO FALLS DOWN IN THE MIDDLE OF THE CROSSROADS...THE FABRIC IS NOW HIS BLOOD, RUNNING THROUGH THE TOWN, THROUGH THE COUNTRY, THROUGH THE CONTINENT ... HIS BLOOD, FRAMING OUR HISTORY, FRAMING MY STORY.

SCENE V
SUBVERTING THE SILENCE

THE TEACHER: So that's the way it was. They put him against the mud wall behind the house. The sergeant gave the order, and the soldiers shot.

THE SERGEANT: I'm not to blame. I'm just following orders.

THE TEACHER: The sergeant gave the order and the soldiers shot.

THE SERGEANT TURNING HIS FACE FOR THE FIRST TIME TO THE AUDIENCE IN AN INTENT TO DEFEND HIMSELF FROM THE TEACHER'S ACCUSATION: I'm not to blame, I'm just following orders.

THE TEACHER IN FIERCE DEFENCE OF HER ARGUMENT: The sergeant gave the order. Then the sergeant and the soldiers came into my room and, one after the other, they raped me. **THE SERGEANT IS READY TO REPLY BUT... HE HAS NO ARGUMENT. HE LETS THE LIST FALL FROM HIS HAND.**

THE WOMEN IN THE CHORUS REPEAT, ONE BY ONE, LOOKING DIRECTLY TO THE SERGEANT:

RITA: One after the other, they raped me.

LUISA: One after the other, they raped me.

THE TEACHER: They raped me. (PAUSE) Then I wouldn't eat or drink again, and so I died, little by little. Little by little.

THE ACTORS TAKE OUT THEIR CHARACTER'S COSTUMES--EXCEPT FOR PEREGRINO,
THE SERGEANT, AND THE TEACHER, WHO REMAIN IN CHARACTER WHERE THEY ARE. THEY

GO TO THE TOMB TO TAKE A KERCHIEF.

KESTEN SHOWING THE KERCHIEF WITH THE NAME OF A DISAPPEARED PERSON WRITTEN ON IT: They put him against the mud wall behind the house. The sergeant gave the order, and the soldiers shot. HE PUTS THE KERCHIEF ON HIS BODY (AROUND THE NECK OR AN ARM) AND HE REPEATS THE TEXT WHILE WALKING AROUND THE STAGE IN CIRCLES, VERY SLOWLY. ONE BY ONE **RITA, LUISA AND WARREN** REPEAT THE SAME TEXT AND ACTION, AND THEY JOIN THE MARCHING AROUND THE STAGE.

THE TEACHER WHILE SLOWLY STANDING UP: It will rain soon, and the red dirt will turn to mud. The road will be a slow moving river of red mud, and the sandals will come up the road again, and the mud covered feet, and the horses and mules with their bellies full of mud, and even the faces and the hats will go up the road, splattered with mud.

SHE WALKS TOWARDS PEREGRINO'S BODY. THE PROCESSION OF KERCHIEFS STOPS. ONCE SHE IS NEAR PEREGRINO, SHE KNEELS DOWN BESIDES HIM, CARESSES HIS HEAD, TAKES THE WHITE SCARF FROM PEREGRINO'S EYES AND PUTS IT ON HER HEAD. AS SOON AS SHE TAKES THE SCARF [**MUSIC 5 BEGINS** "HAY UNA MUJER DESAPARECIDA" ("THERE'S A DISAPPEARED WOMAN") BY HOLLY NEAR AND RONNIE GILBERT.] THE ACTORS CONTINUE WALKING AROUND THE STAGE. THE TEACHER WALKS WITH THEM.

HAY UNA MUJER DESAPARECIDA

Hay una mujer desaparecida
(there's a disappeared woman)
hay una mujer desaparecida
en Chile, en Chile, en Chile.

And the Junta knows,
and the Junta knows
and the Junta knows where she is
and the Junta knows where they are.

Hay una mujer desaparecida...
hay un hombre, hay un niño
(There's a disappeared woman,
there's a man, there's a child)

Hay una mujer desaparecida
en Chile, en Uruguay,
El Salvador, Argentina...

And the Junta knows,
and the Junta knows
and the Junta knows
where she is,
and the Junta knows
where they are.

LIGHTS OFF FOR A MOMENT TO ALLOW PEREGRINO AND THE SERGEANT TO EXIT THE STAGE. AS THE LIGHTS FADE IN VERY SLOWLY, ALL THE ACTORS ARE SEEN AROUND THE EMPTY SPACE LEFT BY THE BODY IN THE CROSSROADS. ONE BY ONE THEY TAKE OFF THEIR KERCHIEFS AND PLACE THEM AT THE CENTRE, WHERE THE BODY WAS. THEY RETURN TO THEIR PLACES.

THE END

PART II
ON THE EDGE OF THE STAGE

CHAPTER 5

FROM "LA ESPERANZA" TO "LA REALIDAD"³

LAURIE: *La Maestra/The Teacher* was written by Enrique Buenaventura in Colombia in 1968 and it belongs to a collection of plays grouped under the title "Documents from Hell". *La Maestra*, a young woman, is seated alone on an empty stage.

KADI CROSSES THE STAGE AND SITS DOWN IN THE TEACHER'S PLACE.

LAURIE: Her first lines are,

KADI: "I am dead. I was born here, in this town".

LAURIE: From the cemetery she tells her story. This story, which is about her persecution and death by the military, is the story of the victimization of the peasants in Colombia. *La Maestra* tells us that she was born in the town,

KADI: "...in the little house made of red clay, with a straw roof. By the road, across from the school. The road is a slow moving river of red clay in winter, and a whirlwind of red dust in the summer. When the rains come you lose your sandals in the mud, the mules and horses get their bellies smeared with

³This chapter was part of the panel "Desbordando afiliaciones: 500 years of solitude in Nepantla," presented at the Canadian Association for Latin American and Caribbean Studies Congress (March 20, 1998). Laurie Aikman was the moderator, and Kadi Purru, a participant in the panel, performed the Teacher's text.

mud, the saddles and even the faces of the horsemen are spattered with mud. ...I was born from that mud, and now I have returned to it."

LAURIE GOES TO SIT IN HER PLACE. ALEJANDRA ENTERS "THE STAGE".

ALEJANDRA: I staged *La Maestra* last year and now I know that ours was not a chance meeting.

KADI: "Estoy muerta."

ALEJANDRA: I am dead.

KADI: "Nací aquí, en este pueblo."

ALEJANDRA: I was born here, in this town.

KADI: "En la casita de barro rojo con techo de paja que está al borde del camino, frente a la escuela."

ALEJANDRA: In the little house made of red clay, with a straw roof. By the road, across from the school.

KADI: "El camino es un río lento de barro rojo..."

ALEJANDRA EXTENDS 'THE ROAD' (A RED FABRIC) ON THE FLOOR.

ALEJANDRA: The road is a slow moving river of red clay... As I followed *la Maestra* through this road, through this slow moving river of red clay, I learned that theatre is more than producing plays, more than the interpretation of a written text, more than images and words, more than props and rehearsals, more than fictitious characters...

Theatre, I learned, is not an innocent act.

The slow moving river of red clay is taking me to where I did not ask to go... As I walk, I realize that this journey has a precise itinerary: it goes from la Maestra's native town, "La Esperanza", to "La Realidad"⁴, one of the towns founded by the Zapatista Army for the National Liberation (EZLN)* in the state of Chiapas* in January of 1994. You can come with me, if you do not mind losing your shoes in the mud and running the risk of ending up with your feet, your hands and your face all spattered with mud.

ALEJANDRA SITS DOWN AND READS THE FOLLOWING LINES AS IF SHE WERE WRITING THEM.

Darkness increases outside the windows. Inside, I watch in silence. What unfolds in front of my eyes is in no way predictable but, at the same time, is an experience already framed by many hours of analysis and rehearsals. I am sitting on the edge of the stage, exactly on the line which divides reality from fiction.

The actors, once they get ready, perform Buenaventura's *La Maestra*. Kesten, Warren, Luisa and Rita play the chorus in this scene. They are on stage, trying to master the movement of two long pieces of red fabric that we are using to indicate the road ... Steve, dressed as the Sergeant, is standing offstage as he waits for his cue (Why are Sergeants always standing offstage, waiting for their cues? -I wonder). Pryde, who plays the Teacher, is sitting on top of a set of stairs, which represents the cemetery from where the Teacher watches over the town below. She is delivering her lines to an imaginary audience. I am listening to her, wondering how to give to these lines the force of a real, concrete action of resistance and rebellion...

⁴ For an explanation of the terms followed by an asterisk (*) v. Glossary.

KADI: "They are afraid. Some time ago fear came to this town and hung suspended over it like a great storm cloud. The air reeks of fear, voices dissolve in the bitter spittle of fear, and the people swallow it. One day the cloud ripped open, and the thunderbolt fell upon us."

I distract myself from the scene while writing a note regarding the movement of the chorus. Suddenly, before turning my face again towards the stage, I hear an unexpected voice:

LAURIE (offstage): Estoy muerta. Nací aquí, en este pueblo.

A second voice adds itself to the crying...

LAURIE (offstage): I am dead. I was born here, in this town.

A third voice is joining in...

Wait a minute--I am ready to exclaim--that is not the line you are supposed to say, we were at... But I stop, silenced by what I am seeing. I am paralysed as I watch these women standing up from the floor, while repeating:

KADI, LAURIE: Estoy muerta. Nací aquí, en este pueblo.

... as they increase in number I wonder where are they coming from. Terrified, I realize that I am not in the rehearsal room anymore. I am somewhere else ... I cannot move. I am a silent spectator. More than forty people are walking around... women, children, men. And the line goes on, as a litany, but also as an accusation.

KADI, LAURIE: Estoy muerto. Nací aquí, en este pueblo.

Here--I repeat to myself--in this town. Which town...? I was doing theatre and then... Oh, my God! My feet, my hands, my face are all spattered with ... No, it is not mud. What is happening? Why is all this blood running around as... as if these were real people, as if this were not fiction, as ... I can hear their voices ... dead ... born here ... in this town. Their voices ... What is ...?

ALEJANDRA'S LINE IS INTERRUPTED BY LAURIE. [GENERAL LIGHTS ON]

LAURIE: La Jornada. México, D.F. 24 de Diciembre de 1997. Hermann Bellinghausen, enviado. (For an English translation of these testimonies, v. Appendix, page 114.)

"Los hoy muertos y heridos se encontraban aquí, a orillas de Acteal, rezando. Estaban *rezando*. Así, de rodillas, los cogieron por la espalda desde los cerros circundantes los disparos de armas de alto poder. Y así se fueron muriendo hasta sumar 45.

Según los sobrevivientes, la balacera comenzó a las 10:30 de la mañana de ayer. 'Y no teníamos ni con qué defendernos,' se lamenta con rabia Juan.

Rosa Gómez estaba embarazada cuando cayó moribunda en la explanada del campamento. Sus asesinos llegaron hasta ella para rematarla. Y uno de ellos, 'con un cuchillo--relata un testigo y hace un ademán de puñalada que inmediatamente reprime con un temblor--le sacó su niño y lo tiró allí nomás.'

A Juana Vázquez, 'primero la mataron y luego la robaron.'

María, pequeña madre, lleva su bebé a la espalda. Se aproxima y apoya su cabeza en mi pecho. Se estremece. Su hermana, Elena, habla. Traduce un miembro del concejo municipal: 'Esta familia, murió su padre, su hermano, su cuñado.' El niño de María, envuelto en el rebozo, llora ya cansado de llorar.

Nos presentan a una hermosa niña de no más de 12 años. Guadalupe Vázquez Luna y su hermanito son los únicos sobrevivientes de otra familia. Su padre, Álvaro Vázquez Gómez, era jefe de zona de los catequistas. Guadalupe lo vio morir, y a su mamá, a su tío Victorio, que era promotor de salud, y a su hermanito.

... una mujer aprieta entre las dos manos el blanco rebozo ensangrentado de su hija Susana, muerta. Un hombre relata, sollozante. 'Se murieron en la balacera todos sus hijos, y con su nieto, seis de familia perdió,' dice el traductor, y el hombre agrega algo más en su lengua. 'Aparte dice que se murió su nuera.'

Debió ser una de las Rosalía, Zenaida, Manuela, Regina, Marcela, Verónica, Guadalupe, María, Martha, de la innegable lista.”

ALEJANDRA: I can hear her voice.

KADI: Estoy muerta. Nací aquí, en este pueblo.

ALEJANDRA: I hear her voice constantly.

KADI: I am dead. I was born here, in this town.

... muerta ... aquí, en este pueblo.

ALEJANDRA: I hear her voice,
slipping through the labyrinth of my ears,
...her voice, slipping through the labyrinth of my fears.

Who is *she*, you will wonder. This question does not have a simple answer. *She* is not only she, but someone else. *She* is someone I cannot name, yet she does have names. *She* is talking from nowhere, but this does not mean that I cannot show you on the map the place where her voice comes from. *She* is dead, but nevertheless *she* is speaking.

She is the twenty one women killed in December 22 of 1997 in the community of Acteal, Chenalhó*, Chiapas by a paramilitary group, armed and protected by the Government of the state. *She* is also the fifteen children killed that day. *She* is the nine men assassinated in the massacre.

I hear her voice again.

LAURIE: Estoy muerta. Nací aquí, en este pueblo.

This time *she* is Guadalupe Méndez López, killed in Ocosingo*, Chiapas in January 12 of 1998 during a peaceful demonstration. The same day, thousands were marching not only in Ocosingo, but in each state of México and also in several cities around the world. The aim of the demonstrations was to pressure the Mexican Government to recognize the San Andrés Larráinzar agreements and to protest against the military repression in Chiapas. At the same time these people were asking for peace, Guadalupe, an indigenous woman, was killed by policemen who fired on Ocosingo's demonstrators.

And *she* was born *there*, in *that* town.

I, Alejandra, was also born *there*, in *that* town. But *she* is dead, and I am alive.

Do not think that my life and her death are due to a stroke of luck. Do not assume these things happen by chance. Somehow there is a logic and if you watch us carefully, you will find out. Her face is a constant image in my mind, through her face I find out why she is dead and I am alive: because I am white and *she* is not.

She are dead.

But I am alive and I was also born *there* in *that* town.

[MUSIC 2 "Soy Zapatista del Estado de Morelos" (I'm Zapatista from the State of Morelos)]

ALEJANDRA: I wonder: What is the meaning of doing theatre at this time, to whom to talk, about what, with what purpose? What should be the role of theatre in a country--*my* country--where the most basic human rights are not respected? Should theatre practitioners remain silent while the guns and machetes of paramilitary groups are killing indigenous people? Should I remain silent? Can I wash my hands naively thinking that their death is not my responsibility? Should theatre remain, politely, in its institutionalized space, or should it go outside and take the streets, the plazas, the public space? Is theatre able to change reality or at least to challenge our perception of it?

I do not have a clear answer for these questions. What I know is that I do not want to become silent again; I do not want to become peaceful; I do not want to pretend that it does not matter.

You are dead and I am alive.
I did nothing to avoid your death.
I cannot promise that you will not die again the same death,
but I can promise you that I will not live again the same life.

Darkness increases outside the windows.

Inside, *we* watch in silence...



The military entered La Realidad for the first time since 1995.

The women, small as they are, with only their arms and hands as weapons, detained them in Xóyep.

Photo: Pedro Valtierra.

La Jornada, January 4 1998.

What unfolds

in front of our eyes

is in no way predictable...



The indigenous people of Patria Nueva, municipality of Ocosingo, formed a fence to impede the military from entering their communities.

Photo: José Carlos González.

La Jornada, January 9 1998.

We
are still *here*,
on the edge of the stage...

But everything has changed.



The military guard the surroundings of La Realidad, Chiapas.

Photo: Pedro Valtierra.

La Jornada, February 22 1998.

The dividing line
between theatre and reality
is not anymore the safe place

I

had imagined.

“¿Hasta cuándo?”

Esta es la pregunta que dibujó la sangre en Acteal.

Esta es la pregunta que nos hacemos frente a la tumba de Guadalupe.

Esta es la pregunta para ustedes, para ellos, para todos.”

“Until when?”

This is the question drawn by the blood in Acteal.

This is the question which we ask in front of the tomb of Guadalupe.

This is the question for all of you, for all them, for everyone.”

Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos. (La Jornada, January 14 1998. My translation.)

Until when?

When will *we* stop being passive spectators?

When

will *we* cross

the

boundary?

THE TRAVELER

FIFTH MOVEMENT

THE TRAVELER IS STARING AT TWO LONG RED FABRICS THAT INTERSECT THE FLOOR, CREATING A CROSSROADS. SHE HAS HER SUITCASE WITH HER. SHE LOOKS AROUND, A GESTURE OF HOPELESSNESS IN THE EMPTY SPACE. AS SOON AS HER PRE-RECORDED VOICE BEGINS DELIVERING THE FOLLOWING TEXT, SHE BEGINS WALKING IN SLOW MOTION--WITH DELIBERATE, EXTENDED, STYLIZED MOVEMENTS--TOWARD THE CENTRE OF THE CROSSROADS. HERS IS A SOFT VOICE, ALMOST A WHISPER.

I look I think I remember...

Encountering my past
in each one of the faces of my future

Walking in circles

Circles
around the same spot
the same centre
the same dead body bleeding in the
centre

of the square

I wonder: which square?

And it is here where the traditional geography
is not useful anymore

A square *is* a square

call it

Tlatelolco,

Ocosingo

or

Acteal

Names/dates

don't matter

the

s i l e n c e

that follows the gun shot
is the same

BY THE TIME WHEN THE LAST LINE IS DELIVERED, SHE IS EXACTLY IN
THE CENTRE OF THE CROSSROADS. SHE STOPS HER MOVEMENT WHEN
THE VOICE STOPS. THE LIGHTING MAKES AN ABRUPT CHANGE AND
ILLUMINATES THE AUDIENCE. THE TRAVELER LOOKS AT THEM,
STARING AT EACH PERSON'S EYES CAREFULLY. WITH BITTER ANGER,
DIRECTED TO HERSELF AS WELL AS TO THE AUDIENCE, SHE SAYS:

Until when?

When will we cross the boundary?

SUDDENLY SHE BEGINS COLLECTING THE PIECES OF THE LATIN

AMERICAN MAP THAT ARE ON THE FLOOR AND PUTS THEM IN HER SUITCASE. THEN SHE COLLECTS THE TWO PIECES OF RED FABRIC. QUICKLY, AS IF SHE WERE GOING TO MISS A VERY IMPORTANT APPOINTMENT, SHE WALKS UP THE AISLE THROUGH THE HOUSE TOWARD THE THEATRE DOOR. THERE, SHE LOOKS AT THE AUDIENCE FOR THE LAST TIME, OPENS THE DOOR AND GOES OUT.

PART III

HOMECOMING

or reflections from the other side of the mirror

CHAPTER 6

(HI)STOR(Y)IES

The questions

On January 7 of 1998, the scientist Arnaldo Krauze (physician) and the artist Gabriel Macotela (painter) published in the Mexican newspaper La Jornada, an article inviting the scientific and artistic communities of México to break the silence with a calling for peace in Chiapas. More than two thousand scientists and artists signed a letter addressed to president Ernesto Zedillo expressing their condemnation of the massacre of Acteal and asking him to urge the military to go back to their barracks. There has not been a governmental response to this request as there has not been a response to the many requests received both from inside and outside the country.

Krauze and Macotela also invited the scientists and artists of México to donate 10% of their monthly salaries to Chiapas.

Can I wash my hands
naively thinking that their death
is not my responsibility?

Krauze explained that the purpose of the call was to try to coordinate different efforts and to overcome what he called “the existent divorce between the professional activities of scientists, artists and researchers, who back up with their silence what is happening in Chiapas.” (La Jornada, January 18, 1998. My translation)

Should theatre practitioners remain silent while the guns and machetes
of paramilitary groups are killing indigenous people?
Should I remain silent?

He asked himself what is the value "of knowing the structure of the molecule or of making a sculpture
if there are still people dying of hunger or being shot." (ibid.)

What is the meaning of doing theatre at this time,
to whom to talk,
about what,
with what purpose?

On January 21, Krauze and Macotela published another article in which they stated,

Maybe the most important lesson we had can be summarised in the verb to do. To do something. To do
whatever is required, to do whatever one can. To do as a duty, to do in order to heal the pain. The feeling
of impotence after Acteal unified consciences and hopes, hurt by the tremendous need to express oneself
against the horror.

The answer, now, is to do: today, Chiapas is, for many, closer to the heart than the chisel to the stone or
the eyes to the microscope. (La Jornada, January 21, 1998. My translation)

Gabriel Macotela and Arnaldo Krauze expressed the thoughts and feelings of many. This is the
current challenge to the Mexican intellectuals and artists.

What to do with the violence,
the injustice,
the war?

Since Acteal's massacre I have asked myself the same questions: is there any way to
bring our chisels and our microscopes, not only our hearts, closer to Chiapas? Is there any way to
bring our theatre closer to Chiapas?

There are no simple answers to these questions. They have been asked many times, in different countries and epochs, and very different answers have been already improvised, rehearsed, staged. In the case of Latin America, our particular socio-political conditions have put us on the edge many times; similar questions have been posed as a response to massacres, military repression, imprisonment and disappearances.

... in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Chile, Ecuador,
El Salvador, Guatemala, Haití, Honduras, México, Nicaragua,
Puerto Rico, Paraguay, Perú, Uruguay...

History

Aware of the fact that the present does not exist in a vacuum I need to make some room for a bit of Latin American theatre history, with the understanding that a detailed analysis of this topic is beyond the scope of this thesis and that my intention is simply to situate myself within a process which began many years before I was born but which has influenced my own attitudes and responses towards my theatrical practice.

In the last year and a half--the time I have been a graduate student--an artistic conflict which had manifested itself before became more acute. The conflict can be summarised in the following dilemma: either to continue directing experimental theatre focused on a highly artificial and sophisticated aesthetic form, or to face the fact that, no matter what relevance my own theatrical practice could have for me, it will not be linked to the intense socio-political process in my country.

I should clarify that these two options do not necessarily exclude each other. Theatre is an art

and it will always require a level of expertise and craft no matter how politicised its intentions. Moreover, the aesthetic forms it takes are not only the vehicle for communication, but also a certain way of communication in themselves, a carrier of political and social values. The opposition between “pure art” and “politics” is an artificial one. Nevertheless, the differentiation between politically committed theatre and theatre for the sake of art, is an important one: it is vital to understand the dynamics of specific forms of theatre in relation to their particular contexts. With the term “politically committed theatre” I do not necessarily mean theatre aligned to a particular political party, but theatre that is concerned about political and social issues.

Since last year I have felt torn apart between two needs: on the one hand, the need to develop my professional craft as a stage director, and, on the other hand, the need to clarify my own political position in a moment in which México is going through a huge structural crisis. After 70 years of the so called soft-dictatorship of the ruler party, PRI--disguised in the form of apparent, but never true democracy--things are falling apart. The level of corruption within our institutions is unbearable, the economic situation could not be worse, repression due to political dissidence occurs every day. As if these were not enough, there are two indigenous guerrilla movements--one in Chiapas and the other one in Guerrero--struggling to have their needs and purposes heard, and our future seems, if not black, at least shadowy.

This, of course, is part of a larger, global crisis, but at the same time it is a very localised national crisis which requires specific answers; there is a sense of urgency. It is in this context that my dilemma appeared clearly in front of my eyes, helped by the fact that I was not living in México; the distance not only gave me a point of reference--the “other”--but also obliged me to look at myself in the mirror with sharper eyes.

I realized that when one comes from a colonized country, the dilemma between "political" or "artistic" theatre is necessarily linked to the question of "universal" versus "national" culture. Although I do not have the intention to oversimplify a complex reality with an artificial dichotomization of it--being fully aware of the fact that Mexican culture is not only both European and American, but also both North American and Latin American--I consider this issue to be of great importance for a theatre practitioner working in a Third World country.

With these dilemmas in mind, I began to study the development of the Latin American theatre only to discover that what I thought were my personal questions, had been at the centre of Latin American theatre development.

Since the independence of Latin America from Spain and Portugal, the new nations have oscillated between a culture whose identity is an image mirroring the European culture, and the need to create an authentic Latin American culture, responsive to the specific conditions, languages and popular traditions of our countries. The result has been, of course, a *mestizaje*, a mixed culture which carries in it both heritages and which cannot claim to be the product of just one of these.

Nevertheless, as the relation of the native culture to the once foreign, colonizer culture has been one of dominated-dominator and has been characterized by overt social injustice, the acceptance of the *mestizaje* is in no way a peaceful resolution but the field of complex inquiries, conflicts and dynamic relations with ourselves and with the others.

In her analysis of the evolution of the Latin American theatre from 1959 to 1980, Marina Pianca states that after the independence wars of the Latin American countries, the new nations faced the task to create the future. This future,

... had a bifurcation in the minds of its creators and two different and contradictory visions for the realization of a Latin American destiny were born; these visions have signalled the evolution of the continent and have been integrated in the collective imaginary. We are referring to the set of ideas present in the projects of the Argentine Faustino Sarmiento and of the Cuban Jose Martí. The first one wanted to foment 'the progress' implementing European and US models; the other, suspicious of every colonialism, was dedicated to the task of creating a free and integrated América that he called Our América. The Latin American theatre... has not been alien to the tensions of this bipolar and antagonistic prospective. (Pianca 1990, 15. All the translations from Pianca's text are mine.)

With this in mind, Marina Pianca analyses the history of the Latin American theatre of the second half of this century, dividing it into three different periods: the first period, which ranges approximately from 1959 to 1968, began with the Cuban revolution, and its main characteristic is the dichotomy between an elitist theatre, dominated by European plays and the conception of theatre as high culture for the educated classes, and the social project in which the urgency to build "Our América", independent and revolutionary, was the main objective. "The national dramaturgy"--Pianca states--"is still postponed, favouring the production of the canonical 'universal' plays." (Pianca 1990, 16)

The second period ranges from 1968 to 1974, and

... is marked by a conscious redefinition of the theatrical paradigm and the questioning of the production and distribution of theatre. During this period appears the collective creation, the search for a popular audience beyond the doors of the consecrated cultural buildings and the formulation of a Latin American theatre committed to the historical becoming of the continent. (Pianca 1990, 17)

1968 is, of course, a key year to understand the strength, idealism and commitment of this period. Theatre practitioners dedicated themselves with passion to the creation of a new culture and what they thought was a mortal wound to the establishment. Theatre went to the streets, the factories, the slums, in an intent to reach a marginalised audience which, due to its life conditions, had been left out from the previous "national" projects. Theatre practitioners began to call themselves cultural workers instead of artists. According to Pianca, four of the main characteristics of this period were

1) The fight against naturalism; 2) the approach to popular forms as *commedia dell'arte*, circus, *carpas*, medieval theatre, together with popular literature, dances, songs and music; 3) the 'nationalization of the classics' and its application to the unmasking of problems of actuality; and 4) the nationalization and assimilation of Brecht as a bridge towards the development of forms of their own within production systems and collective organizations that followed revolutionary commands. (Pianca 1990, 77)

Those were the days when socialism was still a dream and when the Cuban revolution was regarded by many as an example.

...the name of *Che Guevara*
circulated from mouth to mouth,
hand to hand,
heart to heart.
But dreams,
it seems,
can be turned into nightmares.

According to Pianca, the third period began during the Second Festival of Caracas, in 1974, and lasted until the eighties. It was during this festival that theatre practitioners and critics began to talk of the crisis of the Latin American theatre, a discourse still in vogue in 1989, when I entered the National School of Theatre, in México. This "discourse of the crisis" was a reaction to what was considered a failure. In Caracas, the oscillation between a "universal" and a Latin American culture moved towards Europe and, with this and coming festivals, a European avant-garde fashion gradually replaced the search for an authentic Latin American theatre that had characterized the previous period. In the words of Adam Versényi,

The 1960s and 1970s also saw the proliferation of theatre festivals throughout the region and abroad. ... These venues provided a space for interchange of ideas and techniques as well as a stage for the presentation of theatre created upon an aesthetic foundation directly linked to specific communities and reflecting those communities' problems, preoccupations, and means of expression. By the 1980s, however,

many of these festivals began to take on a different character, with work created specifically for the festivals. Often displaying spectacular technical ability, these pieces were rootless and soulless, speaking only to those momentarily gathered together for the festival itself and responding to the needs of no community. (Versényi 1993, 193)

José Monleón, having participated in the Latin American theatre festivals since 1971, wrote in the Spanish magazine, Primer Acto, that,

Many statements that in the Manizales Festival of 71 seemed unquestionable today seem as naive idealism. Many hours of debates and dozens of theatre presentations have left a balance, an account of work and an account of impotence, with which it will be necessary to live: (...) Five years have shown many things. Political formulations, statements which seemed clear, to which many people gave even their lives, have not been translated into real changes. Hence the crisis, the need to stop smoking the 'opium of optimism,' and to face reality, departing from new conclusions. (Monleón 1978, 235. My translation)

This "account of impotence" was not restricted to the stage; it was a generalized answer to a series of events that were the end of many hopes. In 1973 Bordaberry abolished the parliament and began a dictatorship in Uruguay. In the same year, Salvador Allende was killed and Pinochet took power in Chile. In 1974 Juan Domingo Perón died in Argentina and the Junta took over, leading the country to a state of terror and leaving behind 30,000 "disappeared".

Theatre was not the only loser of this period.

... the answers given by this theatre have proved to be illusory, gratifying, and more attentive to the 'conservation of the fighting morale' than to the development of real alternatives. And who would dare to say that this has been a mistake of the 'men [sic] of theatre'? The mistake was originated from above [theatre practitioners], in the interpretation of the ideologists and the leaders of many parties, in the illusory demagoguery so many times squandered. (Monleón 1978, 236. My translation)

Many theatre artists were persecuted, imprisoned, disappeared, exiled. Despite the fact that some of them remained faithful to their causes and that there are still groups doing political theatre, "as the 1980s continued, strictly politically oriented theatre in Latin America waned as a force." (Versényi

1993, 195). A sense of impotence took over a theatre practice, which, in many cases, still regards the committed theatre of the 70s as a failure. This historical period has been marginalised and almost untouched by the younger generations who, afraid of "making the same mistake," have preferred to look at it from the distance, as if it were the skeleton of a now extinct mythical animal.

My Story

It is September of 1989. This is my first day at the National School of Theatre. I am sitting in a big wooden floor classroom surrounded by huge windows. Outside it is getting dark. Inside, 40 students are looking at each other, nervously; inside, 40 students are waiting in expectation.

Guided by a teacher we introduce ourselves. After the introduction, we are asked to take a sheet of paper and to draw on it something we think would represent who we are. Then, we are asked to post this drawing to our body and to walk around the classroom, looking at each others' drawings. We are told not to speak. As we walk in silence, we look at each others' faces for the first time. We smile to each other, we carefully study our drawings.

The teacher then proposes to begin making groups in a random way, getting together with the people whose drawings have something in common with ours. In these small groups we talk about our drawings and about ourselves. After this introductory activity, we break up our small groups to form a big circle in which all of us are included. There, I hear the question for the first time in my life: "in your opinion, what is the social function of theatre?" It is Gabriel Fragoso, Academic Secretary of the School, who is asking this. (I learned that Gabriel had worked many years with Cleta, a theatre company which began doing political theatre during the 70s and whose plays were regarded at the time I entered the School as no more than leftist, old fashioned pamphlets.)

I cannot remember the answers we gave to this question. I do remember, though, that I was surprised. Social function of theatre? The discussion took at least two hours, and then the question was addressed again and again during the three weeks that our introductory course lasted. Now I realize that during this course, although we did some acting exercises, we spent most of our long evenings--sessions started at 4 and finished at 10, day after day--talking about the role that actors have in society, about what was expected from an actor student in terms of social practice, and about the reasons for having chosen theatre as a profession. Acting, during these first weeks, was never regarded merely as a craft, but thought of in a wider context in which it was seen as a socially committed activity.

We spent some of our time analysing the program of the School, which emphasized the role of the actor as a professional with a responsibility towards society and proposed that acting students, as part of their academic activities, should do some social service which would allow them to develop bonds with their communities.

At that time, we were still not sure about how this was connected to our only interest: to be on stage, to rehearse a play, to become actors.

In the summer of 1990, as part of our first year acting class, we staged a play written by the Mexican playwright Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda. *Los Motivos de Luz (Luz's Reasons)* was based on the real case of a poor woman who lived in the slums of the city and was accused of having killed her four children. As part of our research for the staging of this play, our teacher, Alberto Velázquez, encouraged us to visit the neighbourhood where she used to live. One Sunday morning we went to this slum. We had the intention to obtain some information about the woman--who was being prosecuted at the time--and to get to know the environment in which she lived. To our surprise, we

not only talked to her neighbours but we also bumped into her mother-in-law. The mother-in-law was a character in the play we were rehearsing, in which she was presented as a very insensitive, cold-hearted woman. We did not tell this woman that we were doing a play in which she, or more accurately, a representation of herself, appeared. We did tell her that we were theatre students. I can still remember that we were very impressed by this encounter and that we looked at her with morbid eyes. "Is she the witch the play depicts?" we were asking each other while we talked to her. Afterwards we discussed this encounter, trying to find in her words and attitudes something to confirm our previous opinion of her; we kept on saying: "She was not very nice. Did you notice the way in which she looked at us? And how did she talk to her granddaughter?", and we went on and on, judging this woman who had agreed to talk to us and let us enter the garden of her house although she did not know anything about us. In our staging of the play she was in fact depicted as the bad heartless woman that the playwright had proposed.

Of course the experience enriched us... but did it enrich the people we were talking about, that very real people about whom the play was? The answer, of course, is no, it did not. The staging was a success at the School; we got an extended run of it--something unusual for a first year production--and, as far as I know, this play had a very meaningful place in our actoral training. But I still remember Luz's house: a one room hut built with stones. The street where it was, was not paved. The only floor this house had was the dirt. In it there were a very old mattress, some plates and children's clothes scattered all over the place... No kitchen, no drainage, no electricity. No protection against the cold, the wind, the rain. We staged the play, yes. We did it with passion, we believed in what we were doing. I think it was good students' theatre... After it ended we left the theatre, took our belongings and continued our training, but Luz's house is still there, still abandoned, still cold and wet.

At the same time we were staging *Los Motivos de Luz*, we were reading Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* within our Text Analysis class. Our teacher, Leticia García, was convinced that we should learn to analyse the not always evident political and philosophical statements that underlie each one of the texts we were studying. She taught us to be critical towards our own practice. Some of us were fascinated by what she said. I remember perfectly well how one of my best friends of those days, Israel Martínez, and I, would go on and on discussing Leticia's concepts and trying to incorporate them to our actoral training. I do not think we succeeded; at least while we were at School there always seemed to be a gap between theory and practice, between concepts and very real artistic limitations, and our own work was always marked by these contradictions. But this class certainly influenced the way we look at our own practice and the directions we have taken in our theatrical lives.

During our third year of school we had a whole semester dedicated to the study of Bertolt Brecht in theory and practice--with the staging of a play intended in Brechtian style. And here again my most strong memories about it are marked by a gap, by the feeling and the thought that what we discussed in theory classes never succeeded in being integrated into our theatrical practice.

That same year, we staged Ghelderode's *Christopher Columbus* directed by Mercedes de la Cruz. It was 1992, and the "discovery of America" was being celebrated by some groups and regretted by others. In this context, Ghelderode's text was very pertinent. The staging was divided into three acts, and in the transitions between one act and the other the actors addressed the audience in an informative style with opinions by different contemporary intellectuals about the "encounter of two worlds", testimonies of the savage annihilation of the precolumbian cultures, and our own thoughts about this commemoration. I specially loved the part when Montezuma greeted

Columbus and told him "We were expecting you." Then he asked Columbus for wine--he knew there was some in the ship--and, in bitter words, proposed a toast to the death of the indigenous world.

We performed this play at the School, and then, within a cultural program of social assistance, we performed it for three weeks in the different prisons of the city. We, along with Mercedes, met at the School's doors and from there we took the official bus that drove us to a different prison each day. There, we would go through the guard's scrutiny of ourselves and our costumes and props before being allowed to enter. We were always accompanied by guards, under strong police surveillance. In most of the prisons they have auditoriums that are used for different activities. There we would perform our play. But I could never overcome a sense of embarrassment. Yes, we were entertaining the prisoners, but I was wondering all the time if that was enough. Besides that, although the play was always well attended, and it was sometimes well received, I very often had the impression of expressing something very far away from the interests and the world of this particular audience. In some prisons we had the chance to chat with some of the prisoners who were always very friendly to us and spontaneously would tell us their stories. Very often they talked about the unfair legal system that only protected the people who had the money to pay for it. They talked about the extended corruption and extortion within the prisons. Most of them said they were imprisoned for no reason. When we finished our tour, we took our belongings and moved on. But I still remember the faces of the people we met. Often I wonder if they are still in prison.

At our last year at school, after three years of courses on "universal" theatre history we had a three month course on Mexican theatre. We never reached the theatre of the 60s and 70s. It surprises me now to think that we never had a single class on Latin American theatre.

Despite all the meaningful experiences I went through while I was at school, I find myself over and over again wondering why I associate these years with an overwhelming sense of powerlessness. Now, I realize that a story was trying to be delivered to us--the students--at the same time that it was being erased by the attitudes of defeat and disenchantment that accompanied it. Maybe I am being partial and this should be taken only as my very personal opinion, but for me all these socially committed intents were signalled by contradictory voices that made the message ambiguous. These voices would say: "yes, theatre with social concerns is valuable," but at the same time they would add: "... try, but you will not succeed. We have tried already and we have proved that it is impossible. All we can do now is to try to maintain our political positions, but without going too far. Without challenging the institutional framework, without challenging the distance between middle class artists and popular spectators, without being very definitive in our assertions." These lessons were always accompanied by a sense of resignation and tiredness, never by a sense of strength or resistance, as if reality had already proven that theatre could be no more than light entertainment or, at its best, socially committed entertainment.

Since 1968
all of us were born
with skepticism encrusted in our
bodies
and fear engulfing our
souls.

None of these attitudes were overtly expressed or discussed, but they were an undeniable part of the atmosphere in which I began my professional theatrical training and, as such, an undeniable part of my learning and the learning of a whole generation. Sometimes I had the impression that several of my teachers were like priests preaching something they thought was important but in which they were

unable--against their own desire--to believe anymore. And I say anymore because of course they once believed what they were saying, they had tried, they had made their own, very valuable struggle. But theatre, dreams and hopes were temporarily defeated by repression, torture, disappearances, assassinations.

I was born in 1971.
I belong, someone would say, to the generation X:
no hope, no political affiliations,
rebellion without revolution
would be my characteristics.

I look at my empty hands, and I realize that I can only afford no hope. I look around me and I see the remnants of what used to be the ideals of a generation, now reduced to ashes. I look at my back, only to find the silhouette of my own shadow. And nevertheless I feel a burning; I feel it in the fingertips of my hands, in the space between my lungs, I feel it with each breath. The burning has a cutting edge; it speaks of hope turned into despair, of labyrinths made out of fear and resignation, it speaks both of the faith and the skepticism that signal each one of my acts. It speaks of cynicism. Nevertheless, it also speaks, in a subtle, almost imperceptible voice, of resistance. It speaks of that message that my teachers tried to pass over to my generation...

A dismembered message that I could only begin to decode when I realized that it is made of the silenced voices, of the clandestine writings, of the broken images of a generation who endured the political repression of the 60s and 70s, and survived. This is a message that urges us to claim our own place in history. Its voices are coming, as in Buenaventura's *The Teacher*, from the cemetery and despite the years, despite the pain and the loss, they are still speaking to us:

I taught reading and writing, and I taught catechism, and love for our country and our flag... And then I thought: why should they learn the catechism? Why should they learn to love their country and their flag? Country and flag don't mean anything anymore. Maybe it wasn't right, but that's what I thought.
(Buenaventura 1974)

Maybe it was not right but that is what we learned. But it is not too late to recover the strength these voices once had, to learn from their stories, to claim our own heritage... to learn: in the present, from the past, for the future.

CHAPTER 7

ON POPULAR THEATRE

The first day of the long life ahead of it

Chiapas, January 1, 1994. A group of indigenous people, the Zapatista Army for the National Liberation (EZLN)* made public its rebellion against the federal government. After their guns spoke, we observed a minute of silence and listened...

*Many of us were listening to them for the first time.
Many of us are still listening...*

Chiapas is the southern state of México and the poorest in the country, despite the fact that it produces oil, coffee and corn both for the rest of the country and for exportation.

One million indigenous people live in these lands and share with *mestizos** and *ladinos** a troubling nightmare: five hundred years after the 'meeting of two worlds,' indigenous people have the option to die of misery or repression. (Shadows of Tender Fury 1994, 36)

According to Arij Ouweneel,

Of the State's three million people, in 1992, two-thirds were registered as without education; eighty percent earned way below the official minimum salary. Half of the population lived in houses with mud floors and no drainage, toilets or water. About thirty percent of the people younger than fifteen years could not read and write. (Ouweneel 1993, 93)

As if this was not enough, fifty-four percent of the Chiapan population is malnourished and 14,500 people die each year of curable diseases. (Shadows of Tender Fury 1994, 36)

This is Chiapas. There, the Zapatistas speak. They demand the right to own the land--land that had belonged to them for centuries--to maintain their languages, traditions and social forms of organization, to have hospitals and education. They demand a place in the country. They demand respect. They demand the right to be listened to.

The Mexican government has been trying for four years to minimize their demands. It signed with the Zapatistas the agreements of San Andrés*, but instead of fulfilling them it proposed an unilateral modification of some of the agreements already negotiated. The Zapatista Army rejected these modifications and for two years there has been no advancement in the negotiations. Meanwhile, the army has occupied the state in what has been considered a counter-insurgency war. The government has not adhered to the word given to the Zapatistas and has shown its intolerance and lack of principles many times.

But a country is not only its government. A country is made of people and many people, from different states, from the city, from other countries, have expressed their support of the indigenous movement. As Luis González Souza wrote in La Jornada,

[We have] the hope to build a true nation with our native people taking the lead. If our current governors want to rectify and join us, they are welcome. If not, they should not be in the way of the mobilization of society. (La Jornada, January 11, 1998. My translation)

"The mobilization of society" González Souza is talking about is not an abstract concept, but a reality. He is referring to the thousands of persons working in Chiapas to alleviate the situation: to the civilians living in the peace camps to support the indigenous peoples' resistance; to the NGOs working in the area; to the teachers, intellectuals, artists and students who have been collaborating with the indigenous peoples in different projects. I ask myself: does theatre have a role to play too? Does theatre have something to offer? Does theatre have something to learn?

As I see it, theatre does have a role and it should not remain isolated and estranged from the political and social struggles of the country. Of course, theatre practitioners always have the choice to continue working in the name of their own, strictly theatrical interests, watching from the distance what is happening outside the theatre and mirroring with their work the reality to which they remain spectators. But theatre practitioners can also choose to play an active role, to accept the risk of being challenged by reality, to do instead of to watch, to cross the boundaries imposed by the mirror, to get involved, to conceive their practices within a broader context in which culture is something that changes, that is transformed by reality in as much as it transforms reality: culture as an active subject for change.

The role theatre could play in this particular moment has nothing to do with messianism, with ready-made messages or with the aim to "politicize" the masses. These are fears that always arise when one mentions the term "political theatre". But, despite the bad reputation of these terms in some sectors of the artistic and academic community, in a Third World, colonized country like México, if theatre wants to assume a socially responsible role, it has to be political. This does not mean that theatre should be reduced to a propagandistic activity, it means that it needs to be engaged in the struggle for the creation of an egalitarian society.

And this should be done despite the skepticism of many who pretend that political art is not needed anymore. Some weeks ago, talking with a university professor from the "other" generation --someone above 40 years old--I had a real surprise with her answer to my comment regarding my need to link my theatre with the indigenous struggle in Chiapas. She said: "Well, what you are saying sounds like the discourse of the 60s," and she added something implying that this past had already been overcome. She treated me as if I were naive and ignorant, as if I had not realized that "things

had changed". And I wonder: what are these academics expecting from my generation? Do they want us to believe that their answers to the dilemmas between art and politics, academia and reality, academic work and social action, are the ultimate solution, or, in this case, the ultimate failure? To these people I answer: of course many things have changed, but not everything has changed. Academic fashions come and go, but reality is still there, and reality, for many people, has not changed that much. If it seems that we are repeating something that they have already said, if it seems that we are doing something that was already done, it is not because we are ignorant, it is because we need to continue struggling with that which the previous generations left unsolved. As Tomás Borge said after the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, "everything is still to be done." (quoted by Galeano 1986, 74)

The committed art of the 60s and 70s was responding to questions posed by war, by poverty, by ecological destruction. The committed art of the next millennium, despite the fall of the Berlin Wall, the dissolution of communism in East Europe, the post-modern, post-feminist and post-colonial discourses, will need to address the same questions: war, poverty, ecological destruction, injustice, endangered species, endangered cultures, endangered human beings.

Eduardo Galeano asserts,

In a few months we have witnessed the clamorous shipwreck of a system that usurped socialism, that treated people like children who never grew up, dragging them by the ear. ... In our time, the bureaucrats have stigmatized hope and besmirched the most beautiful of human adventures; but I [also] believe that socialism is not Stalinism.

Now, we must begin all over again. Step by step, with no shields but those borne by our bodies. It is necessary to discover, to create, and to imagine. ...

This is my testimony. The confession of a dinosaur? Perhaps. In any case, it is the affirmation of one who believes that the human condition is not doomed to selfishness and the obscene pursuit of money, and that socialism did not die because it had not yet been. Today is the first day of the long life ahead of it. (Galeano 1992, 279)

Theatre: For whom, by whom, with what purpose?

We see that being only good and polite changes nothing. We see that we must take up arms. All this we see, and so we have done. But we also see that it is not only the mouth of a gun that will achieve liberty. We see that many other mouths must open and shout so that the powerful tremble. We see that the struggles are many, and those who walk in struggle are of many colours and use many tongues. And we see that we are not alone. And we see that we do not die alone.

Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee-EZLN

Is there a role for us, middle class theatre practitioners, to play within this context? Can theatre be of use in the struggle against racial discrimination, military repression and lack of democracy?

In a magazine about Asian people's theatre Tsuno Kaitaro wrote,

The people's right to live does not mean the right to live like animals. It is a question of culture, that is, a question of what people find joyful in life. And the people who will win in the end are the people who can create a culture rooted in their village life; people who can create their own pleasure—not have to buy it. (Kaitaro 1979, 8)

Yes, it is a question of culture. The indigenous peoples in Chiapas are not only asking for food, land or jobs. They want to speak their own languages*, they want their social-organizational forms to be respected, they want to be part of the national culture without losing their own cultural identity. Interestingly enough, since 1994 they made clear in words and actions that theirs is not a separatist ethnic movement, but an inclusive struggle for the development of a nation in which different peoples could live together, sharing common goals but recognizing each other's difference. This characteristic of the Zapatista movement has been an open invitation and a challenge for intellectuals, activists, artists, teachers, NGOs, students, politicians. A very intense dialogue has already begun. But a dialogue needs the participation of at least two parties. The Zapatista's demands could become a

reality only if we--white, middle class people--reposition ourselves. We need to question what and how we have learned; we need to be conscious of the fact that we have had a position of power, reinforced generation after generation; we have to unlearn many things and to learn different ways to relate to each other with the aim to create a different culture. Eduardo Galeano states,

The struggle against structures hostile to democracy, structures of impotence, requires the development of a liberating national culture, capable of unleashing people's creative energy and capable of washing the cobwebs from their eyes so that they might see themselves and the world. (Galeano 1992, 213)

Which kind of theatre would be able to collaborate in the development of a liberating national culture?

The following are examples from which some clues to answer this question can be elicited. Galeano wrote this anecdote about the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua:

In their languages, the indigenous peoples debate their problems. When they cannot explain a situation, they act it out. Some improvised actors show a boat crossing the river--in this way they inform us that they need a motor boat because by balsa or canoe it takes ten days to bring the bananas from some of their villages; an efficient mime let us know that many have spent in alcohol the money that should had been used for the sowing of beans; a young woman explains how the indian women who emigrate to the lower part of the river become prostitutes.

Ernesto Cardenal speaks: 'We are discovering our identity, this identity is made out of diverse cultures, including your culture. We are learning.' He explains that the literacy teachers will collect myths, legends, traditions and testimonies from the recent history, dances and songs.

Unanimously, the assembly decides to ask him for a guitar. (Galeano 1986, 78. My translation)

Eugène van Erven describes the work of the Philippines Educational Theater Association (PETA) in the following way:

... the essential task of the Filipino Theatre of Liberation is not so much to encourage the oppressed by performing *for* them as to help them perform their own stories *by* themselves. Joy Barrios, one of the driving forces behind Peryante, told me how in December 1985 her group went to work for two weeks with the striking workers of the Artex rubber factory just outside Manila. Everyday, after classes, the actors travelled to the plant by jeepney to conduct theatre workshops with the workers on the picket line. Together, they created a play in which the police killing of a striking worker was reenacted. Thus, the theatre activities served a multiple purpose: it helped the workers occupy their free time on the picket line in a meaningful way; it channelled the anger and grief over the comrade's death into positive action; the play

was performed for friends and relatives and around town, thereby disseminating the facts about the strike and inviting contributions for the strikers' relief fund. (van Erven 1989, 50)

The Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, writing about his experience at the Kamĩĩthũ Community Education and Cultural Centre, explains,

The Kamĩĩthũ practice was part of education as a process of demystifying knowledge and hence reality. People could see how the actors evolved from the time they could hardly move their legs or say their lines to a time when they could talk and move about the stage as if they were born talking those lines or moving on that stage. Some people in fact were recruited into the acting team after they had intervened to show how such and such a character should be portrayed. The audience applauded them into continuing doing the part. Perfection was thus shown to be a process, a historical social process, but it was admired no less. On the contrary they identified with that perfection even more because it was a product of themselves and their collective contribution. It was a heightening of themselves as a community. ...

The results of all this effort to evolve an authentic language of African theatre were obvious when the play opened to a paying audience on 2 October 1977... *Ngaahika Ndeenda*, was an immediate success with people coming from far, even in hired buses and taxis, to see the show. Theatre became what it had always been: part of a collective festival. ...

On 16 November 1977 the Kenya government banned any further public performances of *Ngaahika Ndeenda* by the simple act of withdrawing the license for any public 'gathering' at the centre. I myself was arrested on 31 December 1977 and spent the whole of 1978 in a maximum security prison, detained without even the doubtful benefit of a trial. They were attempting to stop the emergence of an authentic language of Kenyan theatre.

But that was not the end of Kamĩĩthũ's search for an authentic language of African theatre in form and content. ...
(Wa Thiong'o 1986, 57-58)

After describing how the community regrouped for the production of *Maitũ Njugĩra* (*Mother sing for me*) in 1981, he made the following reflection:

A collective theatre, or what Boal has called a 'theatre of the oppressed', was produced by a range of factors: a content with which people could identify carried in a form which they could recognise and identify; their participation in its evolution through the research stages, that is by the collection of raw material like details of work conditions in farms and firms; the collection of old songs and dances like *Mũthĩgũ*, *Mũcũng'wa*, and *Mwomboko*, and opera forms like *Gĩĩro* etc; their participation, through discussion on the scripts and therefore on the content and form; through the public auditions and rehearsals; and of course through the performances. The real language of African theatre is to be found in the struggles of the oppressed, for it is out of those struggles that a new Africa is being born. (Wa Thiong'o 1986, 59-60)

Adam Versényi in his history of the Latin American theatre asserts,

Perhaps the most radical example of Latin American liberation theatre is the work of Alan Bolt, and his group Nixtayolero (Nahuatl for 'new dawn'), in the Nicaraguan Communitarian Theater Movement. Bolt's work in Nicaragua arises directly out of recent Nicaraguan history. As a Sandinista militant in the 1970s Bolt attempted to use theatre to spur social change. He and his theatre group at the time went and lived with the poorest of the poor, sharing their lifestyle and analyzing the reasons for their oppression. ... Bolt and his associates 'began to realize that for theatre to make a social change, theatre had to change.' ...

Bolt's method, and the method employed by other collectives within the Communitarian Theater Movement, is derived from his pre-revolution experiences. His group will go out into a given community, live there, and research the community's problems in order to create theatrical pieces which directly address the community's needs. In addition to such investigation is added the component of rescuing the indigenous artistic forms from the perception of inferiority created by hundreds of years of colonial rule. Whether such indigenous art is in the shape of dance, music, or ritualistic story-telling, its use and pride in its continued existence after so many years of oppression, is encouraged. (Versényi 1993, 165-166)

Alan Bolt himself has said,

We are not trying to train actors. We are trying to develop theatre workers. For me the theatre worker is a human being who works with other human beings to change reality and to create a better society'. (Rojas Godoy 1991, 196. My translation)

As seen from these examples, there is a tradition of people's theatre that has been informed by the needs of different communities working in particular contexts under specific socio-political conditions. This tradition has been marginalised and does not form part of the curriculum in most professional theatre schools. Although it has been regarded as unimportant by mainstream theatre practitioners, it has existed for many years in different parts of the world. This is theatre done with, by and for the people. It has the objective to effect change in the lives of peoples marginalised from society for ethnic, social, economic or political reasons.

This kind of theatre has been defined as "popular theatre", "theatre for development", "theatre for liberation" or "community-based theatre." An analysis of these terms and their implications is beyond the scope of this thesis, but it is important to notice that all these terms refer us to a kind of

theatre that plays an important role in the lives of the communities in which it is developed and that challenges pre-established ideas and boundaries—be they the idea that art should be apolitical, or that there should be a strong division between actors and spectators, experts and amateurs, art and activism, theatre and social movements, etc.

With the aim to give a clearer idea of this theatre I would like to summarize some of its characteristics. In words of its own practitioners this is a kind of theatre that,

- starts from a community need, the theatre being a response to the need for change. (Selman 1987, 53)
- has the aim to serve in the liberation struggles of oppressed women and men. (Burgess 1991, 39)
- has the aim to increase the power of the oppressed in relation to dominant classes by increasing their participation in the assertion of control over their lives. (Kidd 1980, 20)
- stimulates discussions and a critical understanding of problems, contradictions and structures underlying everyday reality. (Ndumbe Eyoh 1984, n.p.)
- creates contexts for collective creation and action. (Ndumbe Eyoh 1984, n.p.)
- emphasizes art as 'production', opposed to traditional notions of 'creativity', 'expression', or 'reflection'. (Kidd "Popular Theatre and Political Action in Canada", n.d., n.p.)
- must challenge people to look critically at their situation. (Kidd, *ibid.*)
- changes theatre from a monologue fostering passivity to a dialogue in which the audience actively engages in the production of meaning. (Kidd, *ibid.*)
- is a process where individuals within a community use theatre to identify and analyse issues and problems of concern to them, perform a play to raise these issues with a wider community, and as a

result of these processes, take action to change the conditions which created the problems. (Selman 1998, 2)

- enables the audience to speak *for* itself through theatrical forms rather than using theatre as a means of speaking *to* the people in the audience in a patronizing way that mirrors centuries of colonial oppression. (Versényi 1993, 159)

This theatre is, at least in Africa and Latin America, "as old as indigenous practices are on the one hand, and as old as colonialism on the other" (Kamlongera 1982, 207). Nevertheless, its contemporary methodology and practice are impossible to be understood without the reference to Paulo Freire's liberation pedagogy, which has had a great influence all over the world. In the words of Adam Versényi, in Latin America,

Numerous theatre practitioners have looked to Freire for a means by which they can form a way of doing theatre that communicates with the Latin American audience... The theatre should become another force for liberation from certain inherited structures, whether societal, political, or aesthetic, that have been externally imposed. Perhaps the best known of these new Latin American approaches is that developed by the Brazilian Augusto Boal in Peru in the early 1970s. ...

Freire and Brecht have been the two pillars upon which the work of other Latin American theatre practitioners such as the Colombian Enrique Buenaventura and the Nicaraguan Alan Bolt have rested as well. While each man has worked within his own country, both Buenaventura and Bolt share with Boal (and many others who go unmentioned here), a central perception that the Latin American theatre is historically an art form that solely reflects the concerns of the region's colonial and neo-colonial oppressors. Each man approaches the task of liberating the theatre from those inherited structures in a different way, but the wishes for result is the same: to put the means of producing theatre into the hands of the Latin American people themselves. (Versényi 1993, 159,163)

If we put side to side the theatre of Enrique Buenaventura and that of Alan Bolt, we will discover that although they have similarities they also have fundamental differences. As Mario Rojas (1991) has identified, both of them have the objective to reach popular audiences, both of them create collective plays and modify them according to the input and comments of the audiences for whom they perform and both of them incorporate elements of popular culture. Nevertheless, they have two

fundamental differences: in Buenaventura's theatre the actors are professionals who perform for a popular audience to which they do not belong, whereas in Bolt's community theatre the actors are members of the same community that constitutes the audience. The other fundamental difference lies in the fact that Bolt's theatre not only communicates a political message—as Buenaventura's theatre does—but, going beyond the artistic expression of a problem, it aims to contribute to its solution in a direct way, collaborating with a given community in the search of strategies for action.

I do not have the intention to say that Bolt's theatre is more relevant than Buenaventura's, or vice versa. What is important for me is to recognize in their practices the tradition from which my own practice could nurture and grow.

Taking as a point of reference Buenaventura's and Bolt's theatre, as well as other popular theatre experiences in developing countries, I have the intention to create a project to be developed in México. This project would be conceived as:

- a space for dialogue across difference,
- a means for cultural decolonization, and
- a way to strengthen endangered cultures.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's practice, and his concerns about Kenyan culture in particular and African culture in general, could be easily applied to Latin America. In his book *Decolonizing the Mind*, he wrote,

The aim, in short, should be to orientate us towards placing Kenya, East Africa and then Africa in the centre. All other things are to be considered in their relevance to our situation and their contribution towards understanding ourselves... This, we have argued, is justifiable on various grounds, the most important one being that education is a means of knowledge about ourselves. Therefore, after we have examined ourselves, we radiate outwards and discover peoples and worlds around us. With Africa at the centre of things, not existing as an appendix or a satellite of other countries and literatures, things must be seen from the African perspective. (Wa Thiong'o 1986, 94)

If we take Thiongo's words and substitute "Mexico" for "Kenya", and "Latin America" for "Africa", we have an excellent proposal to radically challenge and change our ideas about culture. In México this process should pass through a revalorisation of the indigenous cultures and the 56 indigenous languages still spoken in the country, as well as through a revalorisation of ourselves in relation to the rest of the world, specifically a reconsideration of our cultural dependency on Europe and the US.

In theatrical terms this will imply small but assertive steps towards a kind of theatre that would acknowledge in a concrete, practical way the existence of the indigenous cultures. One way to do this will be to call into question what we have always taken for granted when doing theatre: the language of the colonizer. This does not mean that we should ban the Spanish language from our stages; for many millions of Mexicans, myself included, Spanish is our native tongue. But we have always assumed that it is the obligation of the indigenous peoples to learn *our* language, and we have never thought about learning theirs. Although some intellectuals and artists have been struggling for years to obtain for the indigenous languages the recognition they deserve, and although there are indigenous writers publishing in their own languages, these are rare cases that should be encouraged. This is a very appropriate moment in México to look for opportunities to create collaborative projects between the indigenous and the non-indigenous population. Theatre practitioners could begin working together in the creation of theatre in indigenous languages and Spanish; this would acknowledge the fact that México is a multilingual society. For the indigenous actors and audiences, this would be a means to reaffirm their collective identity; for the Spanish speaking actors and audiences it would be an opportunity to question the position of power we occupy in society. This would be more effective if theatre in indigenous languages is performed not only in the indigenous people's villages, but also in the cities in public places where the use of indigenous languages is not common .

It is important to mention that in México there has been indigenous theatre in which the indigenous people speak both their own language and Spanish, but, as far as I know, there has been no case in which Spanish speaking actors have learnt an indigenous language to do bilingual theatre.

Although language plays a central role in any process of decolonization, it is not the only component of a people's culture. In Nicaragua and Kenya, theatre has been effectively used to collect and enact myths, legends, traditions, testimonies, dances and songs which are part of the collective identity of a people. A similar process can be implemented in México, thus aiding in the struggle to strengthen endangered cultures and responding to the claim of the Mexican anthropologist Miguel León-Portilla, who asserts,

Historians and anthropologists, who study their own and other's universe of culture, must perceive the increasingly urgent need of endangered societies to deepen from within the knowledge of themselves. They might even be able to enrich their awareness of their own identity, opposing it to images that others have forged. ...

The discovery of the ways by which a cultural identity can be strengthened is vital in order to face dangers and make room for changes and interactions that truly benefit one's own being. The salvaging of values, symbols, and meanings, with an awareness of cultural self-determination will, in turn, permit participation and collaboration within broader contexts, not in a forced manner, but rather through the pursuit of common goals.

It is the responsibility of those whose profession is to study culture, including cultural dangers and perspectives, to seek new responses. (León-Portilla 1990, 21)

I am not proposing that white, university educated actors should go to the indigenous communities, learn from them their songs, language and dances, and then incorporate them in their own, middle class oriented theatre. What I think is that a creative dialogue should begin between the professional actor's training and expertise in certain techniques, and the indigenous knowledge and traditions. Of course, the indigenous peoples themselves should be the ones to decide whether or not they want to share their traditions and which is the best context to do it.

In order to do this, we need to begin an egalitarian and open relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples. It is obvious that this relation cannot be imposed on the indigenous peoples and that it should emerge from an invitation from the communities.

Gary H. Gossen, in his article "Who is the Comandante of Subcomandante Marcos*", states that,

... the composition of EZLN, although generally Maya, is actually fairly diverse in terms of ethnic, linguistic, and religious backgrounds that are represented. Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Zoque, Chol, and Tojolabal speakers, as well as Mexican mestizos and ethnically 'white' Mexicans, are all united in pursuit of common political and social goals. ... While the immediate goals of the Maya Zapatistas appear to be primarily of an economic and political nature to outside observers, I believe that the pan-Maya nature of this enterprise has a powerful component of post-colonial ethnic affirmation that goes well beyond political action. ... The Zapatista Movement is part of this pattern of increasingly honest dialogue between mestizo and Indian sectors of these nations [México and Guatemala]. (Gossen 1996, 119)

The importance of this dialogue that has already begun both in the internal organization of the EZLN and in the links it is creating with other groups and individuals, cannot be overemphasized. It is a fundamental step towards the recognition of the indigenous peoples' rights but also a step towards the creation of a different culture. This new culture is being characterized by the need to build alliances. The Chicano feminist Gloria Anzaldúa describes alliance work as

the attempt to shift positions, change positions, reposition ourselves regarding our individual and collective identities. In alliance we are confronted with the problem of how we share or don't share space, how we can position ourselves with individuals or groups who are different. (...) Alliances are made between persons whose vague unconscious angers, hopes, guilt, and fears grow out of direct experiences of being either perpetrators or victims of racism and sexism. (Anzaldúa 1990, 219-220)

Alliances can also be understood as the

... knowledge of, respect for, and commitment between persons who are in essential ways different but whose interests are in essential ways akin. For dominant groups, alliance is a process of sharing power and resources with others in society in order to create structures equally responsive to the needs and interests of all people. This process requires giving up one's drive to superiority, giving up one's prejudices against others, and embracing a more flexible relation to oneself, to others, and to society as a whole. For oppressed groups, alliance is a readiness to struggle with dominant groups for one's right to an equal share of power and resources. (Gail 1990, 36)

These three characteristics—theatre as a space for dialogue across difference, as a way to strengthen endangered cultures and as a means of decolonization—will be the objectives for a project that will involve two different activities: theatre done in México City to raise awareness and solidarity with the peoples in Chiapas—theatre directed to a middle class, urban audience—and theatre done in rural areas of Chiapas to collaborate in community-based projects. Both activities will use popular theatre processes and techniques and will be done in coordination with other groups such as NGOs, human rights organizations, etc.

Some notes towards a project in Chiapas

For the last months I have been thinking about the most appropriate way to begin this project. Each time I try, I end with a strong feeling of frustration due to the fact that I am unable to define specific actions—strategies, methods, exercises. Aware of the fact that a community-based project should emerge from the community involved, I have consciously avoided designing a specific project that would run the risk of being an imposition on any given community. This project, if it happens, will occur after beginning a dialogue with the indigenous communities. What I know is that there are several indigenous communities in Chiapas that are already working with different NGOs in educational and cultural projects, and they have expressed their interests in continuing this collaboration between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples. The NGOs working in the area, have elaborated their projects after consultations with the communities, and they have made clear that they are promoting the projects that the indigenous communities consider important. In this way, the NGOs act as promoters of the indigenous peoples' interests and create links between them and other groups and organizations.

It is obvious for me that the first step for a theatre project in Chiapas will be to go there and to know the people; their interests, their needs, their expectations. There is no place for romantic idealizations: there is a war in Chiapas, and the situation worsens every day. There are about 15,000 internal refugees, more than 70,000 soldiers, at least 7 paramilitary groups, and constant aggressions against national and international activists and human rights observers. Nevertheless, there is still some hope.

Two weeks ago a colleague who is studying in France sent me an article—published in the French newspaper Liberation—about FOMMA, a group of indigenous women who are doing theatre in Chiapas.

FOMMA (La Fortaleza de la Mujer Maya or Strength of the Mayan Woman) is a cooperative of Mayan women and children in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, México. The country's first Indian women playwrights founded the group in 1993 to offer creative and educational workshops to women who have fled to the city from their Indian villages in an effort to escape political, religious and economic duress during these troubled times. (Laughlin, "The empowerment...", n.d., 1)

FOMMA was founded by Isabel Juárez Espinosa and Petrona de la Cruz Cruz. Both of them write, direct and perform their own plays together with a group of women and children.

FOMMA also offers bi-lingual literacy classes for women and children in two Mayan languages, Tzotzil and Tzeltal, as well as in Spanish.

They have toured in Indian communities and they have also performed at Barnard College, in New York, in New England and in Vermont, and they are currently writing a play about what happened in Acteal, Chenalhó.

Once I had learnt about this group, I realized that the first thing to do if I am interested in doing theatre in Chiapas, is to investigate who are the people already doing theatre there and contact them to find whether they see any possibility of collaboration between my theatre group—based in México

City—and theirs.

The goals and procedures for this collaboration cannot be defined in advance because they would emerge from the needs and interests of both groups. For me, the mere possibility of indigenous and non-indigenous peoples working together in a creative process and crossing the boundaries between ethnic groups in a visible way through public performance, would be a goal in itself. Of course, if the conditions are appropriate, this could be the beginning of an ongoing collaboration that would gradually involve a wider community.

The first contact being established, my proposal would be to go with my theatre group to San Cristóbal de las Casas for a period ranging from 4 to 6 weeks. During these weeks, both groups would work together to:

- i) identify common interests and define themes or situations to be explored together
- ii) share theatre tools and techniques (improvisation, physical training, mask making, clown, pantomime, etc. and indigenous forms as music, storytelling, dances, ...)
- iii) create a collective play to be performed both in Chiapas and in México City.

Of course the base for this would be an egalitarian relationship in which both groups would learn from each other, instead of one being the “expert” and the other the pupil.

These activities would have the following objectives:

- i) to get to know each other.
- ii) to cross racial and class boundaries with the aim to achieve a common goal.
- iii) to begin a collaborative process that could be extended to other groups and/or communities.

These are no more than tentative steps towards the creation of a long term project that needs further practical and theoretical exploration. I am convinced of the fact that by struggling against the imposition of rigid boundaries, we will gain for ourselves the flexibility required to redefine our theatre practice according to the needs of our particular communities. This is not to say that artists should deny their personal freedom in order to follow the dictates of an abstract collectivity; but that they can articulate their practice in such a way that their art could be conceived as a space for social exchange and community transformation.

I cannot remain a mute spectator to this reality--to the Reality--.
Is it subverting the silence that theatre can become a form of resistance?

By subverting whose silence? My silence? Their silence?

Who is the one who speaks,

in the name of whom,

to whom,

with what purpose?

Who is the one who is dying?

Who is the one who is carrying the weapon?

Who am I? Who are you?

What is the relation between us?

Is an encounter between you and I possible?

You are not only "you"; I am not only "I".

Ours, if it happens, will be more than a personal encounter.

We have a complex relation that began centuries

before you and I were born.

Between you and I, is the silence, open like a wound.

Between you and I, is the nation, open like a wound.

Between you and I,

some people are dying,

some people are living, loving, dreaming...

THE TRAVELER

EPILOGUE

AN OPEN SPACE. THE TRAVELER IS WALKING. A BACKPACK, A JACKET, A PAIR OF HIKING BOOTS ARE HER BELONGINGS. SHE WHISTLES A LIGHT MELODY AS SHE WALKS. SHE ARRIVES AT A SQUARE. WITH A PIECE OF CHALK SHE DRAWS A CIRCLE ON THE GROUND. FROM HER BACKPACK SHE TAKES A DRUM AND BEGINS PLAYING IT, CHANTING POPULAR SONGS TO ATTRACT THE ATTENTION OF THE PASSERBY. WHEN SHE HAS AN AUDIENCE, SHE BEGINS PLAYING A MARTIAL TUNE. THEN, SHE GOES TO THE CENTRE OF THE CIRCLE, OPENS HER BACKPACK AND TAKES OUT A PAIR OF MILITARY BOOTS. WHILE HOLDING THEM UP, SHOWING THEM TO THE PEOPLE, SHE SAYS:

Some time ago fear came to this town

and hung suspended over it

like a great storm cloud...

APPENDIX

English Translation of the Testimonies Presented in Chapter 5

"Those today dead or injured were here, at the edge of Acteal (Chenalhó, Chiapas), praying. They were *praying*. There, while kneeling down, they were taken by surprise by the gun shots coming from the surrounding hills. They died, one by one, until they totalled 45.

According to the survivors, the shooting began at 10:30 yesterday morning. 'And we did not have anything to defend us,' Juan laments in anger.

Rosa Gómez was pregnant when she fell down on the terrace of the camp. Her assassins went to where she lay to finish their killing. And one of them, 'with a knife—relates a witness making a gesture to indicate the stab, a gesture that he immediately suppresses with a trembling—removed her child from her and threw him to the ground.'

Juana Vázquez 'was first killed and then robbed.'

María, little mother, carries her baby at her back. She approaches me and rests her head on my chest. She is shuddering. Her sister, Elena, speaks while a member of the municipal council translates: 'This family: their father was killed, their brother, their brother in law.' María's child, wrapped in the rebozo [shawl] cries.

We are introduced to a beautiful girl, Guadalupe Vázquez Luna. She is 12 years old. She and her little brother are the only survivors of another family. Their father, Álvaro Vázquez Gómez, was the chief of the catechists in this zone. Guadalupe witnessed his death as well as the death of her mother, of her uncle Victorio—who was the health promoter—and of her little brother.

... a woman clutches in her hands the bloody white rebozo that belonged to her daughter, Susana. A man relates, sobbing: 'All her children were killed in the shooting and, including her grandson, she lost 6 relatives.' The man says something else in his own language and the translator adds: 'she says that also her daughter in law was killed.' She was one of Rosalía, Zenaida, Manuela, Regina, Marcela, Verónica, Guadalupe, María, Martha of the terrible list."

Herman Bellinghausen, La Jornada, December 24 1997. My translation.

GLOSSARY

Acteal Village in the region of San Pedro de Chenalhó, Chiapas; site of the massacre of December 22, 1997.

Chiapas State in South East México, bordering Guatemala.

EZLN Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, Zapatista National Liberation Army. On January 1, 1994 the EZLN revolted in the state of Chiapas in response to the lack of both adequate living conditions and the lack of adequate representation in the government. They called for effective democracy, for the recognition of the indigenous people's rights, and for the resignation of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari.

For two decades, these Indians have been demanding change in an era of famine, debt crisis, austerity, soaring unemployment, and epidemic disease. Instead the government has allowed and condoned the pillaging of Chiapas by large corporations.

The EZLN's spokesman, Subcomandante *Marcos*, stated the EZLN's ideology in the four "Declarations from the Lacandon Jungle." (V. EZLN. Documentos y Comunicados and Shadows of Tender Fury for an English translation).

La Realidad Village founded by the EZLN.

ladino In Chiapas and other regions of Mesoamerica with large indigenous populations, a non-Indian or Spanish-speaking person of European or mestizo (see below) extraction. In Chiapas, ladino is the word for mestizo.

mestizo. Person of mixed indigenous and European racial and cultural heritage. Applies to the overwhelming majority of México's people.

San Andrés Agreements Agreements signed by the EZLN and the Mexican Government in 1995 after negotiations. The government has refused to abide by the accords.

Subcomandante Insurgente Insurgent Subcomander.

Subcomadante Marcos Spokesman of the EZLN.

Tlatelolco Square in México City where hundreds of protesting students were killed by the Mexican Federal Army in October the 2nd of 1968, just prior to the opening of the Olympics.

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