



**alt.** theatre  
cultural diversity and the stage

Vol. 8 No.4 JUNE 2011

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*alt.theatre: cultural diversity and the stage*  
is published quarterly by



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ATELIER 6 / DFI GRAPHIK.CA

COVER PHOTO

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Robyn Bull, Luke Foster, Nora Hickey (Yellow Cake Gals) in 4th Line Theatre's production of Charles Hayter's *Eldorado Town—The Port Hope Play*. Directed by Robert Winslow, Summer 2010.

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*alt.theatre: cultural diversity and the stage* is Canada's only professional journal examining intersections between politics, cultural plurality, social activism, and the stage.

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Founded in 1998, *alt.theatre* is published quarterly by Teesri Duniya Theatre—an intercultural theatre company with a mandate to produce socially engaged theatre that reflects Canada's social and cultural diversity. *alt.theatre* is indexed in the MLA International Bibliography.

Bibliothèque et Archives Nationales Du Québec/Library and Archives Canada ISSN 1481-0506

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DE MONTRÉAL



We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts which last year invested \$20.1 million in writing and publishing throughout Canada.



Canada Council  
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts  
du Canada

We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Periodical Fund (CPF) of the Department of Canadian Heritage towards our project costs.



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# PERFORMING COMMUNITIES: LATINO THEATRE IN TORONTO

BY JEANNINE M. PITAS



The stage is dark except for a large, illuminated screen covered with a strange pattern of drawn squares. Even from my seat at the front of the theatre, it is difficult to tell what the drawing is supposed to represent. Are the squares supposed to be houses? For a moment, they look more like graves. In the background we hear traditional Colombian *cumbia* music, and then, suddenly, the shadows of two women appear behind the screen, each clasping the edge of her long, flowing skirt with one hand, bearing a flickering candle in the other. Dancing delicately, with smiles on their faces, the women emerge from behind the screen and place the candles on the floor alongside two others that are already there. After snuffing three of the four candles out with a bowl, they turn around and disappear behind the curtain.

Suddenly, the music changes, becoming sinister. A map of Colombia appears projected on the screen, and we see the shadow of a hand tracing a curved vertical line through its centre—the Magdalena River. Then the map is flipped on its side, and behind the screen we see the shadow of someone rowing down the drawn river, only to be halted suddenly by an ominous discovery: a boot. The music intensifies as the shadowy figure collapses into the river, unable to stand up again.

Thus begins Toronto-based Aluna Theatre's *Nohayquiensepa* (*No One Knows*), a multidisciplinary theatrical performance that is as beautiful as it is horrifying. Combining the media of dance, music, dialogue, shadow play, video, and live drawing projected onto a screen, this production seeks to unsettle its viewers, ripping us out of our habitual ways of thinking and confronting us with a harsh reality that we would perhaps rather ignore: the human rights abuses committed by American, Canadian, and British mining companies against innocent people in Latin America, particularly those living along Colombia's Magdalena River.

"Our goal is not to make the audience feel guilty, as guilt is nothing but an empty emotion," states Colombian-born actor Beatriz Pizano, who founded the nonprofit professional Aluna Theatre company in Toronto in 2001. "Our objective is to raise awareness and inspire members of the audience to take action."<sup>1</sup>

Pizano, a professional actor, dancer, and Torontonian, came to Canada thirty years ago. While her early work did not seek to address social issues, a 1998 visit to her home country changed her life completely. Travelling through Colombia peace brigades, Pizano met people who were protecting human rights activists. "I began writing plays about social issues—the experience of female human rights issues, the problems of memory during and after war. I wanted other people to come to know reality in the way that I had. It became an obsession for me."

This desire culminated in the production of *Nohayquiensepa*, which came into being when Aluna members became aware of human rights abuses along the Magdalena River perpetrated by mining companies who hire armed groups to forcibly remove local residents from their homes. According to the show's director, Trevor Schwellnus, the starting point was Puerto Berrio, a town in a "hot zone" of Colombia's armed conflict:

We found a report that read like a tale out of a Gabriel García Márquez novel: along the banks of the Magdalena river scavengers often discover mutilated body parts that have floated down from some point further south. Effectively, the river is an enormous mass grave. When a body part is found and cannot be identified it is interred at a mausoleum dedicated to these N.N.'s (No Names), where it is adopted by a local resident who will pray for the lost soul.

Instead of writing a script, Schwellnus and the Aluna actors adopted a method called "Collective Creation," which they had learned about while travelling in Colombia and collaborating with various Bogotá theatre groups, including the Teatro de la Candelaria and the Corporación Colombiana de Teatro. According to Schwellnus,

Theatre makers like Santiago Garcia, Patricia Ariza, and Carlos Satizabal (among many others) have worked over the past forty years to build an indigenous theatre where none had previously existed. By digging into the concerns they share (consciously and unconsciously) as artists and human beings, they develop work that speaks deeply to their community in a way that larger media outlets do not. They then follow these initial discoveries with substantial research, further improvisation, and rehearsal, to produce work of superior quality with a very committed group of performers. Our work plan is based upon this kind of improvisations, analysis and further improvisations.

The ultimate result is a performance in which the actors, artists, and lighting designers manage to evoke—rather than to describe—the fear with which residents of the Magdalena must contend on a daily basis. However, the issue is made more complex through Aluna's inclusion of the Western perspective. One of the most powerful scenes occurs when an actor playing a Western journalist seeks to ask some questions of area women, who are seen writing on the floor in anguish. The journalist is forcefully accosted by a female dancer who drags him to the ground with the others, thereby denying him his outsider status and drawing him into these women's reality.

Other overwhelming moments occur at various points—for example, when the actors line up in a straight row, as if to confront the audience, and in

frustrated tones begin to tell their stories at once. Their jumbled voices shout over each other, stifling any actual communication, suggesting that the experience of their daily lives is not communicable. The climax occurs when, projected on the screen, we see a letter to the Canadian government by a Colombian struggling to raise awareness of the issue. The letter arrives at its destination torn, and at the end of play the letter writer's name is added to a list of the dead.

Aluna's production of *Nohayquiensepa*, which ran for three weeks in Toronto in March 2011 and had previously been performed in Colombia, is only one among many examples of socially conscious alternative theatre to emerge from Toronto's rapidly growing Hispanic community. Another high profile group, Teatro Crisálida, is a community-based theatre that seeks to reach out to Toronto's Hispanic community and create opportunities for people of all walks of life to engage in the arts. "It isn't easy to get Latin American people involved in theatre," explains Crisálida director Ivan Lemus. "In many Canadian Hispanic cultures, theatre is not a priority; people are more concerned with getting by on a day-to-day basis. But, we are trying to improve this reality, to build new communities through the arts."

"When I first came to Canada I found the theatre scene very competitive. I managed to get involved with some companies, but I really wanted to work in Spanish. When the opportunities aren't there, you need to create them," explains Salvadoran-born Lemus. In 2006, he began organizing open theatre workshops for the Hispanic community at Casa Maíz, a community centre which serves to facilitate various projects initiated by Hispanic organizations. These workshops soon grew into the company that he would name Crisálida—the Spanish word for chrysalis. "Since we started, over 250 people have participated in these workshops. Many of them don't want to be actors, but to improve their lives. A show comes to an end, but the workshop makes a lasting impact. This isn't just a theatre company, but a project in individual and social development through the medium of art," Lemus explains.

Soon, Lemus got together with a core group of actors from the workshop and began to produce plays. Highlights included Federico García Lorca's *La Casa de Bernarda Alba* in 2008, *Bodas de Sangre* in 2009, and several "Noches de Teatro," or variety shows, that allow various performers to show off their talents. However, the culmination of Crisálida's efforts occurred in April 2011 with a four-week theatre festival in honour of Hispanic Heritage Month, featuring Dario Fo's *Aquí no paga nadie* (*We won't pay*), Lorca's *Yerma*, and Alvaro Menendez Leal's *Luz Negra* (*Black Light*).

Crisálida's production of Federico Garcia Lorca's classic tragedy *Yerma*, which ran from 8-10 April 2011 opens with a lively flamenco dance performance by María-Margarita Rigó accompanied by live flamenco

singing. This passionate dance provides a sharp juxtaposition to the image we see when the curtain rises: the childless Yerma, played by Spanish actress Susan Sanz, sits in a chair, gazing anxiously into space. Her white dress is reminiscent of her still recent wedding, and a clamor of voices begins to deride her for her childlessness. The scene quickly cuts to Yerma going through her daily routine as the lonely, frustrated housewife of the shepherd Juan, whom we soon learn she has married out of familial obligation rather than love. Throughout the ensuing scenes, as Yerma converses with neighbours and ultimately visits the local witch for help, we see her increased anxiety which ultimately leads to tragedy.

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The main strength of Crisálida's rendition was its vivid portrayal of Yerma's internal mental state through various external media (such as the recordings of voices representing Yerma's shame and fear of gossip) and the use of dance throughout the play. At the end of the first act, Yerma's humiliation and erotic repression are represented by a frenzied modern dance performed by three women against a backdrop of red light. And again toward the end of the second act, as Yerma kneels in prayer at the *ermita* (a religious site to which she and other women go to pray for fertility), María-Margarita Rigó reappears, this time wearing a colourful mask. She performs a feverish flamenco dance in which she seizes Yerma by the head and spins her around wildly, thus revealing her madness. These elements combine to give the play a decidedly contemporary feeling, forcing us to contemplate such salient issues as mental illness, domestic violence, and societal oppression.

Another fascinating component of the festival was Salvadoran playwright Alvaro Menéndez Leal's surrealist play, *Luz Negra (Black Light)*, which ran from April 15 to 17. It featured Luis Rojas and Ivan Lemus as Goter and Moter—two recently executed convicts who seek to communicate with people in the living world in order to determine whether or not they are actually dead. Reminiscent of Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit*, this play managed to be comic and tragic simultaneously. The easygoing cynicism of Moter—who describes himself as a lifelong professional swindler—is juxtaposed to the admirable but somewhat feeble idealism of Goter, a failed revolutionary. “A thief and an idealist deserve the same punishment,” Moter affirms, causing Goter to wince in disgust. “All who see the black light are cursed. It happens in all parts of the world,” he says, suggesting that all attempts at idealism are ultimately futile.<sup>2</sup>

The salient feature of Crisálida's rendition of this play—which is a standard text read by schoolchildren in El Salvador—is not its philosophical musings as much as its comic but poignant depiction of an unlikely friendship, suggesting that in extreme circumstances even the most unlikely of companions can find common ground. By revealing the absurdity and brutality of the death suffered by “those who see the black light,” the





MY MAIN IMPETUS IS TO  
ESTABLISH A DIALOGUE  
BETWEEN NORTH AND  
SOUTH



play lends them dignity and reveals the importance of their struggle.

Following the success of this year's inaugural festival, Crisálida will soon begin another round of workshops and preparations for next year. However, this diverse company has also given birth to several other groups, many of which performed in November 2010 in Casa Maíz's first annual cultural festival, "Art for Peace in Our America." One of these is Grupo Teatro Libre (Free Theatre Group), which was started by Crisálida members who wanted to engage in theatre that was more overtly socially conscious.

"One of the challenges we must face is that of putting forward works that people don't necessarily want to see—works by writers like the Uruguayan Mario Benedetti and others who have resisted political oppression," explains Teatro Libre general manager, Enrique Castro. "But we are determined to continue sharing this message, this social obligation."

Another group formed by Crisálida members is Teatro Double Double, comprising eighteen members, mostly from Mexico. Under the directorship of Oscar Ortiz, this group has prepared a hilarious piece called *Calaveras de Posadas*, a comic interpretation of an ancient Mexican custom: the annual Day of the Dead tradition. Featuring a series of dead characters who come out of their graves to dance and exchange insults on All Hallows night, this piece was performed during the 2010 Casa Maíz festival as well as the International Theatre Festival in Valleyfield, Quebec, in April 2011.

Edgar Díaz, an arts management student who is involved with the project, views *Calaveras* as a chance to raise public awareness of Mexican culture:

The widespread image of Mexico portrayed by the media is not an accurate representation of reality. Also, Canadians have an overly generalized idea of the Mexican cult of the dead. One of the ambiguities which we hoped

to show was the humorous aspect of the attitude toward death in Mexico, our tendency to laugh at ourselves, to make calaveras—humorous verses—about death, to show the comic aspect of the custom. ... After losing someone, after the years have passed, we don't forget our loved ones, but instead try to remember the happy, pleasant aspects of the person. I think it's useful for Canadians to take this idea seriously.

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Another member of Double Double, dancer and psychologist Lucy Ibarra, wanted to try her hand at directing. With a small group of friends, she wrote, directed, and starred in an adaptation of popular Brazilian author Paulo Coehlo's *Veronika Decides to Die*. In her

version, the clinically depressed Veronika is shoved from home to work each day by dancing demons, which ultimately make her life unmanageable. "I related to the book because the main character is my age, and as a psychologist I wanted to raise people's awareness of this issue," Ibarra explains. She performed the show at one of Crisálida's "Theatre Nights" and at the 2010 Casa Maíz Festival.

The life of a theatre artist is not easy, and this is especially true for a new immigrant struggling to adapt to a new culture. However, Toronto's Hispanic artists constantly reveal their resourcefulness and determination in creating opportunities from scratch. In the words of Mayahuel Tecozautla, a Mexican Canadian professional dancer and member of Aluna Theatre, "I feel that I can contribute something unique to the Canadian arts scene in terms of my approach to creative work. I have found the mainstream theatre scene here to be quite competitive, but I prefer to work as part of a team," she says. "As an immigrant I know various methods and can bring different forms to my work; my culture is very rich in its tradition. My main impetus is to establish a dialogue between North and South, between cultures, and to enrich our diverse communities."

## BIO

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## NOTES

- 1 All quotations are from personal interviews with the author.
- 2 Qtd. from Teatro Crisálida's production of Alvaro Menéndez Leal's *Luz Negra*, 17 April 2011.