

Patricia Ariza

Ten Broken Mirrors

After many failed attempts I decided on the mirror. How do I see myself in other women? Who are they? Why do they inhabit me so obsessively? What moves me to talk about them in the language of images?

When I was asked to write an article for *The Open Page* everything seemed easy - I had the time, the themes, the desire, everything ... Theatre, Women and Lives. Everything was there like a stone ready to sculpt. However, sitting down to write it became a difficult and fascinating puzzle. What would the essence of the article be? What would be its tense? And the theme? What do I want to talk about after having been in theatre for thirty years?

After many failed attempts I decided on the mirror. How do I see myself in other women? Who are they? Why do they inhabit me so obsessively? What moves me to talk about them in the language of images?

The mirrors in which I am reflected at the moment are Emily Dickinson, my Aunt Elvira, Frida Khalo, the character of *The Great Complaint* and the widows of Urabá.

EMILY DICKINSON

Who is Emily? I am about to open a play where she was invoked and she arrived in a broken, fragmented fashion.

There are two actresses, two Emilys, a train track in front, a house behind and a black veil stretched across the proscenium, along the line of torment that leaves the actresses unable to enter or exit. Everything is there, behind the transparency, in a kind of nowhere ...

Emily's drama, her internal exile, is a kind of strong creative force that grows and puts her under pressure not to leave the space; to remain inside and protect herself against the dangers of the world. Emily Dickinson decided that it should be that way. Little by little she began closing the exits, shutting the windows, dressing herself in white and opening the spaces of her internal world. From there, she wrote letters to a world which never answered. She only published nine poems in her life, corrected by her editors and teachers. Now, her poems are taught in kindergartens in the United States and nobody who calls themselves an editor or a teacher fails to recognise the importance of her work.

When we submerged ourselves in her world we discovered two Emilys. One who needed to stay there in the second floor room, safe from being shunned, and the other who wanted to fly, converse one to one with God, the stars and the bees. So we decided to create a play with

these two Emilys in conflict in front of an old railway line, surrounded by the audience and the house.

In this mirror I see a faint image of myself. She is a kind of reflection in cut glass - a bevelled half moon tells me about the outside where everything has been done and that within the house everything waits to be discovered: the universe itself.

Emily must have written, in one of her habitual seclusions, after putting on her starched white dress and sending a basket of fruit to the children next door:

*Crumbling is not an instant's act
A fundamental pause
Dilapidation's processes
Are organised decays*

*'Tis first a cobweb on the soul
A cuticle of Dust
A borer in the axis*

*An elemental rust
Ruin is formal -
Devil's work
Consecutive and slow
Fail in an instant, no man did
Slipping - is crash's law.*

One day in 1995, on a European tour and in front of a giant ice breaker I saw a red-headed girl who reminded me of Emily and I wrote her this poem:

Emily,
You never came to Helsinki
Or saw the giant ice breakers
If you do
Bring a white shawl
It's cold
 Your friend
 The Spider

Today, in rehearsal I perceived that one of the Emilys became trapped in the mirror and that this image should be restored very soon.

MY GREAT AUNT ELVIRA

When I think of the blackness of Elvira's eyes pressed against the train window, I have the sensation of losing myself with her in dementia. I learned of her story in fragments, and, a few years ago with some family members, I reconstructed it to put it in a broken mirror and put this mirror in my family tree, full of absences and unknowns.

Elvira was an orphan with five sisters whose godfather adopted her to "educate and protect her". As part of his protection he became the owner of her inherited lands ... It was 1930 in a small town in the interior of the country and a railway was being built. Elvira was seventeen years old and was mysteriously beautiful. Her church outings were a great event. Everyone stared at her. When she was fifteen years old, after being raped by her godfather she showed signs of irreparable disturbance. She would take off her clothes - they say - and howl like a wild animal on heat on the roof of the house.

Somebody had said that they could cure crazy people in Bogotá "if they arrived there alone". So her adoptive father, with the help of his family, the Mayor and the entire town, dressed the young seventeen year old who caused them such consternation. They packed a change of clothes in a bag, said goodbye, with music of course, and they put her onto the recently inaugurated train headed for Bogotá. The town, guilty of such a terrible banishment, had to make a myth out of her in order to keep on living: Aunt Elvira, said some, had become a millionaire after marrying a prestigious doctor. Others swore that they had seen her dressed as a beggar, a prostitute and so on.

Elvira, the minute girl with unbelievably brilliant black eyes, is the character in a script for a movie that I have been working on for years. At the end of the film she presses her face against the window of the last carriage, watching the town that sees her off with a fanfare. "Where is she?", I ask myself. She lives, amongst many other places, within me. She is within the tree, in

a broken mirror between reason and judgement. There she is, this woman that inhabits me along with the desperate desire to howl naked from a roof top. The reflection of the mirror on the roof awaits.

WOMEN AND THE NIGHT

Three actresses arrived at my house one night wanting to create a play. I'm always open to these types of projects - necessary and experimental. I believe that one is like a medium; a kind of public delegate that captures what it is that people don't know, but want to hear, and this is filtered through one's body and mind to be converted into an image.

The three actresses belong to Narcotics Anonymous. They went there to look for help because they were consuming "excessive amounts of drugs". We began to gather stories, texts, poems and later they began to improvise on stage. First, the three improvised together, and later, individually. The themes were: the night, paranoia, drugs, compulsion. Long silent sequences, music - jazz and salsa, atmospheres as dense as Bogotá by night with solitary women looking for spirited substances to calm their anxiety.

The improvisations were life experiences. Later I wrote some texts, amongst others:

I knock at the door and you're not there
I scatter dust in my partitions
So that the wind invades my heart
Father, where the hell are you?
At the moment there is only smoke and dust
Tale dust
Snow dust
Ground crystals
Where are you God?
Are you dust too?

It was difficult beginning with them; however, slowly, a play is appearing. At the moment it is called: *The City, Women and the Night*. We are travelling slowly; getting to know this city and its nowheres, looking

for possible spaces where - without hurrying, without anxiety - three little dusty mirrors might exist.

FRIDA KAHLO

When I think about this woman a celebration of colour invades me. She is Mexico but she is also pain-made-painting. Every feeling within her body and her soul she transformed into atmospheres. I have read about her, seen various plays and was in her house in Coyoacán. I saw Leduc's movie. I feel that something remains to be said. As a result, I decided upon video as a medium to explore Frida's dreams. That will be the name of this project.

In these dreamed-again-dreams I have seen Frida on the streets of Bogotá, in her very Mexican style dress, with a basket of tomatoes, and behind Diego runs to catch up with her. Later an accident, a bus and tomatoes on the ground.

Another dream is Frida dressing herself. Over her nakedness the harness grips her bones, over that, the shirt, and over that, the shawl and the plaits. This occurs while she walks in the middle of a big room where ten projectors reflect her paintings on the walls which, at the same time, reflect upon her body and her shirt. She walks out, unhurt, upon a balcony where she sees Frida as a young girl, running in a field, daintily playing hopscotch. She and the girl converse. Only music can be heard - I wouldn't want to know what they talk about.

Another dream (the final one amongst others which I haven't included in this description): a car honks its horn, Frida draws near and sees Diego inside. She pulls herself up upon crutches. She is very pale and her hair is loose. A strange woman dressed in black helps her descend the staircase. Frida walks down the stairs with difficulty, looking back now and again as if she had forgotten something. She steps inside the car. The camera shoots the car from above. It is a hearse. The woman in black waves goodbye. Frida arrives at a big

garden full of lilies. She takes off her coat and lies down amongst the white flowers. Wind and music as Mexican as she was.

THE GREAT COMPLAINT

In my suburb a sculptor is exhibiting life-size fibreglass figures modelled from men, street people and employees. These masculine images are everywhere, inclement silhouettes on roofs, in windows, on the top of high walls, etc.

I have taken on the task of following in the footsteps of a woman - who represents others - while she complains to these silent men, conversing with them and making demands ... Sometimes she is an old woman, other times a young girl - it is a barrage of constant complaint. Sometimes it is inspired by pain, other times by celebration, sadness, or silence and its music. There they are, immobile, submerged in the fibreglass that stops them from going out dancing, answering her or kissing her. It is a video and the actress is called Brumi.

We are in the process of writing the texts. At the end she is a recycler of rubbish who carries the men off in a heavy wheeled cart. She takes them through the streets until she arrives at a desert. Then she disappears into the horizon.

THE CHILDREN OF URABÁ

Urabá is perhaps the most violent region in the world. At the same time it is one of the most complex areas of Colombia. Diverse cultures and ethnic groups along with all their dramas co-exist in this settling place of Afro-Colombian and indigenous villages. Thirty years ago the United Fruit Company sowed enormous banana plantations there and produced a great migration of white and mixed race people who came from the interior of the country looking for riches. Urabá exports forty-five million boxes of bananas to Europe and the United States each year.

It has now become a strategic zone because the construction of an inter-oceanic

channel is planned. A very powerful part of the guerrilla, drug trafficking organisations and paramilitary groups occupy the zone. Recently it was declared a trouble spot by the government and, as if it wasn't enough already, the military were ordered in. Many of the worst massacres and assassinations have occurred in this region. More than six thousand people die each year, the majority being young civilian men, workers, banana union members and small land owners who sympathise with one or other sector in the conflict. Paradoxically, only the minority die in armed conflicts.

Due to its nature as a cross-road, Urabá has converted into a kind of crucible where distinct national and Caribbean cultures mix and melt together. Tourism hardly exists in Urabá. The people that arrive are government delegates, non-government organisations that work for human rights or for peace and adventurous merchants that arrive to do business. There is coast all around and this makes it a perfect zone for smuggling.

Two years ago, Carlos Satizábal - a musician and theatre practitioner - and I began working on this project. In December 1995 we arrived to give a theatre workshop. The artists of the region were happy. In general, few cultural projects come to Urabá. The first thing we found was a group of children who shined shoes and sang Rap in the streets. We were surpassed by the richness of the music and the words of the songs. All are about war. Later we invited the children and the adults to attend the theatre workshops. We were there one month and we managed to form the children into a group. They called themselves *Los Chicos de Urabá* (The Kids from Urabá).

Something very surprising happened. In the improvisations, in order to find a theme for a theatre exercise, the children talked and sang only of war. The adults, instead, insistently explored the diverse cultures and esoteric beliefs of the zone. In the children's exercise, all the characters -

including the President - ended up dead. The adult's exercise finished with their characters celebrating at a big party. When the characters that the children represented all fell down upon the floor, little by little they gathered themselves up singing:

*I didn't want to die
I didn't want to kill
The only thing I wanted
Was to go to work*

Since then we have continued to work in Urabá. The children have come to Bogotá on various occasions to present their Rap, accompanied by excellent popular musicians. Now they are known in their town, and in their suburb.

They live in *Las Tablitas*, a place stolen from the sea, built over putrid water where wooden houses stand connected to one another by flimsy planks and bridges over which one must cross! It is an African village full of grace and music in the midst of misery. They say that it's not easy to enter. However, for us, it is not only easy but wonderful. The parents of the children respect us very much because now their children don't want to go to war when they become adults. Now they want to become rappers. All the time they are composing and improvising:

*Cut Throat
I was walking around the town
When I felt footsteps
That filled me with fear
It was the Cut Throat
Who wanted to cut my throat
And the kids from Urabá arrived
And were able to save me
They took him to jail
Singing Rap to him
It was the only thing that could finish him
Cut Throat
They're going to kill you
Cut Throat
In the zone of Urabá*

*You Can't Trust Anyone in Urabá
You can't trust anyone in Urabá
Because the violence
Is going to finish us off
If you go to a farm
They'll kill you there
Children don't think about studying
The only thing they think about is stealing
And they'll be killed in the future
Because in Urabá they don't know what
forgiveness is.*

*Chorus: Violence!
That's what exists in Urabá*

We are connected with Urabá and Turbo in such a way that we are sure that in the future the region will be the fruit of the country. These children are the roots of the tree, the same earth from which one has to nourish oneself in order to keep flying like in the month of Antheus.

Translated from Spanish by Gabriela Queen

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