

María Cánepa

A Voice for the Voiceless

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BEFORE THE DICTATORSHIP

I began to work in theatre as an amateur, in church, in the community and at school. When I was at university I saw a performance by a company which called itself “experimental”, directed by a true genius of theatre, Pedro de la Barra. In spite of all that I had seen before, this performance had such an impact on me that I said to myself: “This is the theatre I want to do and which I am going to join”. I went to the place where they were working, I asked to speak to the director, Pedro de la Barra, and I told him: “I want to work here”. “Is that so? Are you sure you love theatre above everything else?” he asked. I answered: “Yes, I am sure.”

And so I started working in a theatre group of about twenty people. It was extraordinary: we met after work, on Saturdays and Sundays, and we presented small productions that were almost always taken from classical Spanish plays. There was no hurry, no concern about money or anything else, because we borrowed everything and kept busy going from one place to the other. It was a marvellous experience. In 1954 the group turned professional under the aegis of the University of Chile. We were paid a salary, so we had to resign from our respective jobs as teachers, social workers and so on, to dedicate ourselves full-time to theatre. They gave us a theatre, the Teatro Antonio Barra, and there we would present three plays a year: a classic, a modern play from the universal repertoire and a Chilean play.

This theatre movement continued for about twenty years. I believe what we did was a kind of naturalistic theatre, which we did rigorously under the guidance of demanding directors who had grown within this movement, like Pedro Orthus, my husband, and Augustin Sirrey, a sensitive actor as well as a good director, who also started our theatre school. Among the things I remember, besides the joy of doing this work, was the passion we put into the work, the discipline that we demanded of ourselves and



María Cánepa in *Fuenteovejuna*, 1952.

was demanded of us. People who saw us remember us even today, which happily means we remain alive in their subconscious.

From 1968, the year of social and other kind of reforms that arrived in Chile from Europe, a politicised action began in relation to theatre, requiring significant plays that reflected the distress of the working class to be presented. We all had many dreams with the arrival of Allende, and great was the frustration when we had to face the military coup. After the military coup and President Allende's death, it was like permanently walking arm in arm with death. I lost my husband, a very sensitive man who became seriously ill. The loss of Pablo Neruda was also very painful.

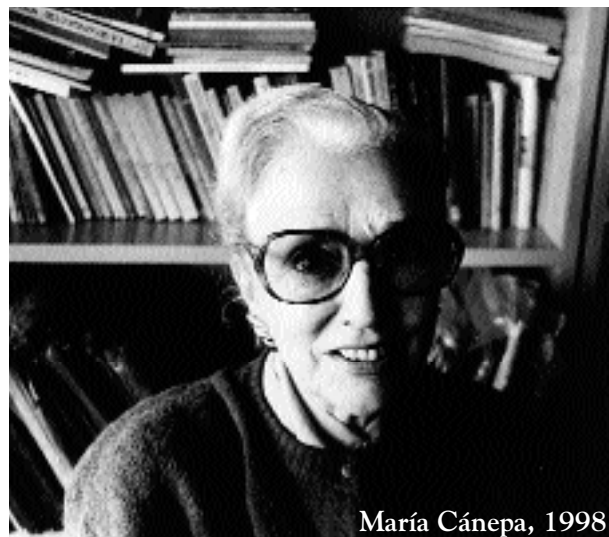
DURING THE DICTATORSHIP

Allende was buried in Valparaíso, and they only allowed his wife, and a military escort to accompany his funeral. They did it secretly at dawn to avoid any kind of demonstration, any kind of tribute that the people would like to make to the person who had meant so much to their country. At this time Pablo Neruda lay ill in a Santiago clinic. When the military coup happened on the 11th of September 1973, Neruda managed to listen to Allende's last message and, despite his serious illness, he was aware of all that was happening. His desolation as a man who loved Chile and its people was so great that he quickly deteriorated. The night of the 23rd of September 1973, his heart stopped and he passed away. That evening, that very same evening, a few moments earlier, while his wife Matilde remained at his side, a military dispatch arrived at his house and pulled it apart. They destroyed the house on the

side of San Cristóbal's hill. They opened up a channel to flood the building, they broke down doors, windows, they destroyed all they could, and burnt books and objects. It was a rainy and cold day. Neruda's wife Matilde ordered that the funeral wake should be held in this house, so that people who came to bid farewell would see the horrors committed by dictatorship. Everyone got to know. The young people in his party made a picket to guard the urn. My husband, who was already ill, went to pay his regards and say good-bye to the poet. He came home shaken and anguished by all he saw.

After a response given by friends, intellectuals, politicians and also by priests - amongst them Mariano Puga - the procession left surrounded by diplomats, humble people, students. Everyone was silent and experiencing great anguish. I had always thought that the day Neruda passed away we would sing *When the poet died* for him. All the people of Chile were crying. He was buried in a borrowed tomb. Later Matilde moved him to a humble niche so she could lie beside him when she died.

What happened was horrific. There was no respect for significant personalities and what they stood for, just as there was no respect for anyone during that period. But theatre continued to be the voice of those who could not speak, theatre continued to work in the poor neighbourhoods. We suffered during the dictatorship, because theatre has always been a threat to the authorities and even more so for a military regime. A tent built by some colleagues was burnt. Theatre was silenced at first, but then it became the voice of those with no voice.



María Cánepa, 1998

LEARNING TO SPEAK UP

On the demand of a group of women who wanted to read well and to be able to express themselves, I started to go twice a week with Juan Cuevas to the marginalised and poor neighbourhood of Santiago where they lived. We led the women, showing them how to relax, how to breathe, teaching them how to read with confidence and composure, asking them to talk about what they had understood from the paragraph they had just finished reading, giving suggestions as to how they might modulate a sentence. What was important was to read out loud slowly and in an assured way. Some of them managed later to read the gospel on Sundays and speak up at meetings. We taught them to speak about their life experiences and dreams. It was a pleasure to hear them express themselves in public, overcoming their fear to tell their stories.

The women spoke about pain. A mother told of her disabled son and of how she realised that her fears were groundless when she saw him run during a marathon race for disabled children. There were winners and losers. She saw her son running and how the other children cheered him and all this gave her confidence. She got rid of the fear and shame of having a son like him. She

expressed all of this in her own words. It was very moving to listen to her - as it was hearing all the women speak of their lives.

Another notable story was one of the women's dreams. She lived beside a football field, where the players who came to play undressed practically in front of her house. She was a mother of two girls and she did not think it respectable and nice to have to witness this kind of exhibition. So she designed a football pavilion with changing rooms and showers for the players. With her own means, she made a real plan, like an architect's drawing. Around the pavilion she placed trees to give shade. She was actually thinking of her daughters not having to see men undress while using foul language. But on the other hand she felt that her ideal, her dream would contribute to the awareness of the need to have a good football field with benches for the spectators instead of the dusty bare ground. In time her dream came true. Now the football field has the best facilities, with places for the men to change and for people to sit in the shade. For these women it was wonderful to know that what one of them had dreamed had really happened, as if having spoken out loud at a meeting had made their thoughts become concrete.

TEATRO Q

In 1982, when our heads had started to lift a little after the strong impact of losing democracy in our country, I had no work and so I decided to try and do something with Juan Cuevas. We decided to do a kind of Gospel according to Saint Matthew as a monologue that I would interpret and we called it *Un mensaje para todos los tiempos* (A Message for all Times). We presented this monologue in poor communities, for youth associations and in schools. In return for my performance certain groups of young people presented their work to us and so I discov-

ered a great amount of new talent.

Together with Hector Noguera and other colleagues we decided to gather those who wanted to learn to act, for free. It was enough that a journalist friend wrote in *El Mercurio* "María Cánepa and Hector Noguera teach theatre for free" for more than two hundred to sign up. We obtained an old barn in the outskirts of the city and there we taught acting, movement and voice to about thirty young people. There was always surveillance and at times they questioned those who came. We had to be careful so that they did not take away some of the youngsters who were evidently politically to the left. But, apart from some small skirmishes and some young people being held by the police, we did not have major problems. I think this is because we only reached out to a small circle.

The group was called "Q", referring to the gospel's name for a source that assembles and recomposes the lost parts of the gospels, which means that "Q" should be a source of wisdom. The theatre, in the same way as ICTUS and other groups, worked by preference with plays collectively created. One of the last things that this young people's theatre "Q" did was an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, talking to people about questions of justice. The rehearsals and the performances were done outside on Friday and Saturday evenings and gathered many spectators. Most of the young people in the group had never read a play before, but they became curious. It was very satisfying to awaken their interest in the art of theatre and their desire to educate themselves.

THE CHURCH

We received help from Carolina Meyer, a missionary who arrived in Chile twenty years ago and decided to live among the poor in the same way as Father Mariano Puga, a

priest in jeans, with whom we still collaborate today.

I had taken the Gospel monologue to Mariano's church and so got to know the place where he lived. During the hardest period of the military dictatorship, the church organised a demonstration once a year that was disbanded at times, which only had one prayer: that the dictatorship nightmare would end once and for all. I joined Mariano and other priests who struggled to defend the people, to protect the widows of the disappeared or of those who had been killed. During a certain period of the dictatorship the church was an example also thanks to the bishop we had at that time. Today, Mariano lives and works in the neighbourhood of La Legua, also called *Cartel*, because drugs are distributed to the whole of Santiago from there. The drug dealers are like a small independent republic and they represent a great temptation for the young, especially because of the high level of unemployment.

AFTER THE DICTATORSHIP

I am now working with Juan Cuevas and a group of young people who have finished their courses at different theatre schools. In Santiago there are about thirty theatre academies, created by those who cannot find jobs in theatre. The city of Santiago does not have sufficient capacity to absorb the more than two hundred young people who, after two or three years of study, every year receive their diploma. Many of them remain depressed on the sidelines. We selected a group of fourteen youngsters and we convinced a Chilean author, Alejandro Sibekin, to write a piece about the reality of the commercial roads that run through Santiago, *El Rey de los Pasajes* (The King of

Crossroads). We hope the performance will be successful so the youngsters can earn their own living.

Theatre continues struggling and fighting so that the dark days we have experienced do not return. Young directors have chosen new aesthetic references, and often I do not grasp the contents they wish to express. Young people leave the theatre saying they did not understand, but they liked the performance a lot. This is very strange for my generation, because I learned to understand art as something you must comprehend and feel. Around me I see a great scepticism towards politics and an emptiness which seeks technological advance, and better material and economic conditions, but even so theatre continues to be for me the place which enriches life, the spiritual life.

Translated from Spanish by Julia Varley

MARIA CANEPA (Chile) worked with the Teatro Experimental de la Universidad de Chile for twenty-five years, interpreting about sixty different roles. She founded various theatre companies including Teatro del Nuevo Extremo, Teatro del Callejón, Teatro Q and Taller 666. She also works for television and film. She has received various honours amongst which are *Caupolicán* and the *Laurel de Oro*. In 1998 she received a medal as Woman of the Year of the City of Santiago.