

Rosa Luisa Márquez

The Play Is the Thing ... The Thing Is to Play

To act, to play, to turn actions into games, to make believe, to pretend, has always interested me. I was a member of the volleyball team at the University of Puerto Rico and at Michigan State University. I enjoyed the thrill of sports, the intensity of my involvement; being present in the act of doing; the energy released by the audience. I guess a combination of both sports and performance made me interested, and perhaps obsessed, with the play element in a play, with the connections between games and theatre.

During the years of the Vietnam conflict, I was studying theatre at the university. Puerto Rico, as a colony of the U.S. since 1898, had to pay its blood tribute to the war. Many of my classmates were recruited into the army, went to the battle front and either never came back or returned addicted to substances which made their memories of war more bearable at home. Others avoided the draft, got married, had children, went into teaching. As students of theatre, we left the closed and protected atmosphere of the classrooms and the theatre to perform on the streets, in the hallways, at strikes, wherever and whenever we were needed to make a statement against that war. Paris had lived its "Summer of 68", we were reproducing its contagious spirit. A year later, in New York, classes were cancelled by student protests and we took to the streets to perform theatre for peace. New skills were developed, pieces were short, vital, urgent, site specific. Precise rhythm was not an aesthetic choice, it was a necessity.

Around that time I came across Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Reading it determined many of my future choices. Boal had effectively translated Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* into theatrical terms. Its basic premise was that the illiterate and the literate, the student and the teacher, the actor and the audience share fundamental experiences that through a healthy exchange process could produce knowledge and change. He had developed many of his techniques while collaborating in a literacy campaign in Peru during the early 1970s.

Theatre forms such as Image Theatre, Invisible Theatre

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and Forum Theatre emerged as logical responses to oppression and class struggle in Latin America. Games and exercises were the basic components of training for an interactive theatre for literacy and social transformation. Boal's practical research questioned the authoritarian relationship of the conventional theatrical event in which the audience sits passively in darkness, while the actors play for them in the light.

Boal developed a system in which the audience, once it saw the first performance of the play, was invited to replace the main character and take her role on stage to find options in order to solve her particular predicament. For the audience to achieve this with ease, it participated in a series of theatre games which loosened inhibitions and served as warm-ups for dramatic intervention on stage. The audience's role became that of actor and scriptwriter, inventing new strategies for change and therefore altering the development of the plot every time one of its members went on stage to propose an alternative to the original conflict. I followed Boal to Paris and Rio de Janeiro to learn his techniques.

After twenty years of adapting his work in Puerto Rico, recurring results strike me as interesting. Most of the pieces created by and for a coherent community have the same basic plot which is left for the audience to resolve. The plot is something like this: a nuclear family, the father abuses the children and the mother, and something must be done to alter this pattern. Women from the audience come on stage to take the role of **T h e M o t h e r** in order to combat, convince or challenge The Father. The energy generated by the members of the audience while they participate in the theatre games and warm up sessions and their interventions on stage, resemble the response of spectators during volleyball when a point is scored or during

baseball when a player hits a home run: it is contagious, strong and exciting. During one of our performances in Cuba, many audience members stood on their seats to cheer one of their own as she went on stage to challenge the domineering father. I guess that was the live audience Brecht wanted for his plays: alert and active, concerned and willing to respond.

Another experience that was all important in my decision to research and practice theatre games took place in 1973, while studying for a doctorate in theatre and drama. I was invited to participate in a children's creative drama pilot project for Michigan State University's Acting Company. For three years, we scripted original pieces to be performed in gyms for hundreds of elementary school children. Then we would visit each classroom again. The children, now in smaller groups, were to dramatise the very same stories we had performed for them. In order to achieve that objective with ease, theatre games were played that allowed for an atmosphere conducive to creative collaboration. We worked with techniques developed by Viola Spolin and Brian Way and our own variations, widening our vocabulary of theatre games.

When I returned to Puerto Rico I was allowed to put these techniques into practice with fourth grade school children. We enacted the wishes of many children: "the day the school disappeared ..." and they were so happy dreaming about that possibility that they developed a very pertinent piece in which the memory of a real community soon to be dispersed by urban planning was preserved through their research and performance. The very denial of the School through fiction secured its existence. Games were the basis for establishing trust, stimulating ideas and creating a joyful environment conducive to perfor-

mance.

Both the Boal and the creative drama experiences made me think of new ways to use theatre games as an educational instrument, as a resource for the training of future teachers, nurses, rehabilitation counsellors, recreation specialists, sociologists, psychologists and artists; to share them as tools for the liberation of creative potential, for the discovery of theory and practice through theatrical language.

In 1978, after six years studying in the United States, I returned to the University of Puerto Rico and started teaching at its Theatre Department. The following year a course called Dramatic Activities, and labelled by the students “brincos y saltos” (leaps and bounds), became my laboratory for the development of skills and techniques that would approach theatrical concerns. Skills such as: how to allow for non-competitive and artistic group work; how to ease inhibitions; how to achieve deeper concentration; how to work with others in a creative and trusting environment, taking into account both time and space constraints. We explored ways of discovering how to foster and channel the particular skills of each individual, how to find a comfortable transition between the language of the body and the spoken word, and between a private collective game and performing for an audience and how to articulate all the creative energies of a specific group into the fullest aesthetic experience and the richest performance proposal. We tried to integrate recognisable traditions of Puerto Rican culture and experience like sports, children’s games and salsa dancing into a vibrant performance vocabulary. One question was how could we perform all this material for the widest audience possible and in the most open and accessible performance spaces.

During the last twenty years, we have

been trying to answer these questions and many more and gradually, the same questions and the search for answers that came out of the process have been applied to rehearsal and performance. For each play, new questions have to be answered collectively. How do people wait in line? How can we translate our images of a poem into collective sculptures? How do we organise the many collective sculptures into a moving sequence? These theatrical answers are presented in groups instead of individually and they take into account composition, relationships, rhythms and transitions. The material that emerges from these sessions is rich, interchangeable, dynamic and offers a vast vocabulary from which to select our final dramatic scripting. Actors as a group have effectively collaborated with the *mise en scène* and not only with their individual rendering of character. Team work is crucial to achieve these goals.

Games are also an integral part of our performance. In most of our plays we insert the element of chance to keep actors alert and ready. Actual games such as “the twister”, “rope jump”, “dice” and “bouncing balls”, have been introduced as dramaturgical elements which make each performance totally unique because of the unpredictable results of chance. The actors play for real on stage.

In 1994 and again in 1996 these academic and performative experiences were collected in a book called *Brincos y saltos: el juego como disciplina teatral* (Leaps and Bounds: Games as Theatrical Discipline). Ten sessions establish different approaches and themes with suggested games as stimuli: Trust and Concentration, The Senses, Mime and Mutations, Body Letters and Words, Image Theatre, The Role of Paper, Music, Storytelling, Any Text as Pre-text, and Forum Theatre. The book also records the specific anecdotes and reflections by



students from the course while teaching theatre games within the public school system or while creating theatre pieces with special communities of addicts in rehab, senior citizens, orphanages, psychiatric wards and special education.

Yet, an account of my experience with theatre games and creative drama is not complete without the description of a very playful artistic relationship I've had during the last fifteen years with Puerto Rico's foremost graphic artist, Antonio Martorell. Since 1984 we have been engaged in the creation of more than fifty "graphic-theatrical" events that range from a parade through the streets of San Juan to protest at the possible intervention of the U.S. in Nicaragua (in which 120 volunteers participated and created huge puppets out of recyclable materials), to opening performances for Martorell's numerous exhibits and installations, to set designs for plays such as *Waiting for Godot*, *The Lion and the*

Jewel and *The Conference of the Birds*, to the transformation of empty spaces into installations. A performance is then created based on specific circumstances: space, time, the talents and skills of the participants, the materials we have available to work with, the issues we want to discuss and the audience to whom each performance is directed.

Each experience is unique and provides us with the challenge of creating an artificial community of artists (and non-artists), who share the intensity of a few days of collaboration in order to transform reality and express themselves. In a basement at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology we worked with the theme of "food as shelter" creating houses out of tortillas, multiplying bread through Xerox copies, making a spaghetti rain shower and a house of winter coats for shelter. In a small forest in Oaxaca, Mexico, we developed a tribute to Mexican film and music with elements made out of traditional tissue paper cutting

techniques with sixty theatre students and professionals for the International School of Theatre for Latin America and the Caribbean. In a community in Machurrucutu, Cuba, the town's history was re-enacted and the residents followed the performance from their own balconies and streets into the hotel that housed yet another session of the International School of Theatre for Latin America and the Caribbean; there they were showered with confetti falling to the tune of *Let it rain coffee in the fields*. At a studio theatre in Albany, New York, we dramatised the effects of spending cuts in education and the arts through a chess game played by live actors. In the lobby of a bank in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, we staged an exhibit of "tableaux vivants" of the typical Puerto Rican family richly dressed up in newsprint costumes that were totally destroyed during performance. The entire mural painting of a cultural centre in Managua became the backdrop for fifteen *Cantastorias* (Story-tellers) ...

Each new project offers a new set of challenges that makes each experience fortuitous. Our work is therefore intense, pleasurable, enjoyable, playful and unpredictable. Every time we meet new friends we create a team to play theatre. During that time we are blessed by a harmoniously creative society. Then we all leave and make believe that play is what it is all about ...

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