

Nara Mansur

Without Generation?

We used the techniques of the Theatre of the Oppressed to express our criticisms and proposals.

We were animated by a vocation which was not only theatrical and belonging to exhibitionist rebels, but rather an attempt to produce change through what we had learned and to create a different kind of opening with our propositions to improve conditions of study.

I do not feel that I am part of a generation. I feel that I belong to a sensibility made up of many people. Some of these people I have known, others are wonderfully unknown, yet others are dead. They are men, women, people I only perceive from a distance, people of different ages and of different political, religious and sexual persuasions.

When I read that for José Lezama Lima (a Cuban poet and founder of the group *Orígenes*) the University of La Havana in the '30s was the place and the environment that taught him an ethic, I feel enthusiastic and astonished. He meant ethic most of all in the sense of a revolution of the soul, and an engagement with and for our country, where he recognised the need to transform the non-culture of the people into *poiesis*. I feel something similar in my own humble experience. Here, I feel that two lines cross; two lines that are basic for me in the professional apprenticeship, in any relationship of teaching/learning. Here, I feel what goes beyond the profession and does not limit it, converting the professional vocation into something deeper and more ethical.

I was part of a group of militants belonging to the Union of Young Communists. We used the techniques of the Theatre of the Oppressed to express our criticisms and proposals. We were animated by a vocation which was not only theatrical and belonging to exhibitionist rebels, but rather an attempt to produce change through what we had learned and to create a different kind of opening with our propositions to improve conditions of study. In the same way I can say that, during the process of studying my speciality, theatre studies, the acting classes and the active groups to which I belonged were the most interesting for me. Groups were made up of painters, musicians and theatre practitioners and together we would take "art" to the mountains of Eastern Cuba, to places where often there was no electricity, where normally "signs of culture" did not arrive.

Lezama Lima gives an impressive description of the

student demonstrations and how they meant much more to him than the lectures and master-classes of a decaying system of university education.

When I graduated from the Instituto Superior de Arte, I experienced a terrible fear. For what was I prepared? For what was I suited? What kind of work could I carry out in an efficient and honourable way? Who needed me?

Years before many recent graduates from I.S.A. had gone to obscure places, such as the one I described in the Eastern mountains, but that time had passed. Today it hurts me to see young, and not so young, people who only see life in a *curriculum* format. Their attitude is that the path of learning is built on masters degrees, diplomas, doctorates and credits (a word belonging to the world of economy and finance), in a sausage string typical of the eternal student. It would be stupid of me to deny that we are all eternal students, that to acquire knowledge every day is necessary for self-growth, but how best is this to be done?

The egoism that lies beneath each individual's professional or personal "small-life" takes the place of the desire to do things for oneself and for others at the same time. Beyond the deceptions brought about by a broken vocation and lack of generosity, I seem to be particularly silly as I discover that I do not function efficiently in our competitive and unloving times.

I feel dependent on the little I have achieved.

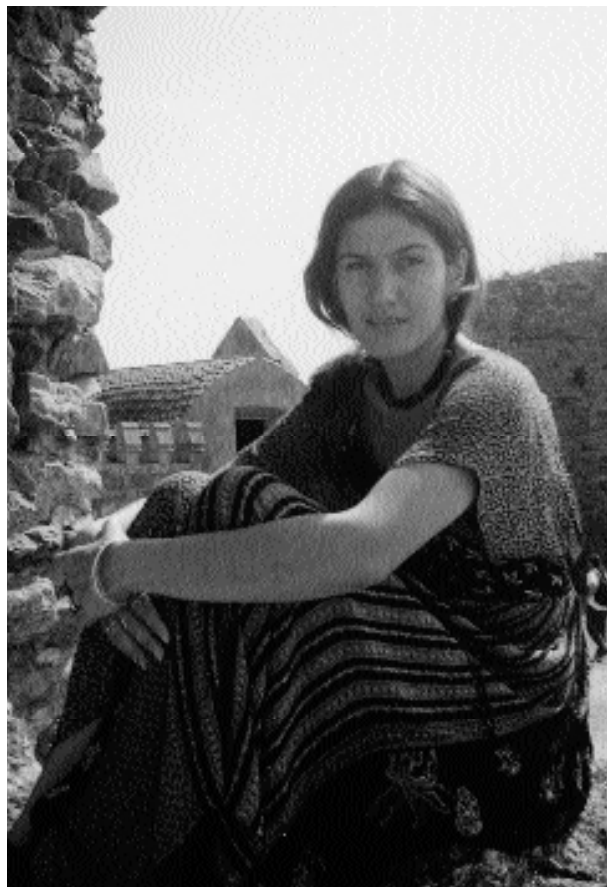
The willingness to learn infects many of my apparently ordinary conversations and my participation in the editorial team of the *Conjunto* journal of La Casa de las Américas. The opportunity to bring ideas to a common project has been marvellous, but, in addition, to stand-in as a secretary, as public relations or cultural promoter, all these roles have enriched me in a very

obvious way. I have benefited also from working with producers, technicians and stage directors who "disintellectualise" theatre, who see the audience in a more pragmatic way and often prefer television series.

Where does learning start and end? In which masters do I recognise a tradition to which I can belong? The acquisition of knowledge, going to classes, starting a university career and working become linked with routine, with a very severe economic crisis, with competition and the return to many of the values that were apparently overcome by forty years of Revolution. What ethical and spiritual elements survive this experience?

The theatre environment is very, very frail.

Nara Mansur, 1998



I have experienced theatre life with a group of students like myself, and some others who had already graduated. I kept a diary as a record of the process. I sewed, I did the make-up and for almost two years I always arrived home at dawn and La Havana seemed to me to be the best place in the world. All this is part of my background, even if the critics did not believe in the merits of our performances. The fact that people could abandon such a group project brought me brutally face to face with the world. We, who had been confident, who had been friends; we, who felt absolutely committed to an idea and to a common dream, who together with the taste of tea at night had rejected a conventional life to take refuge in a self created ghetto... suddenly, we had separated. It happened in the same way as in my small country, where people want to substitute their collective dream for an individual, more concrete and achievable dream, because the vision that incorporates a big group of people seems to be impossible.

There is another part of me that is involved with poetry, or more accurately, the writing of poems. In this territory I see everything more clearly. To write puts me in a

more comfortable position, that of being a "literary woman". I move about and organise everything in an environment in which I feel totally free. Frequently theatre symbolism appears in my verses - the product of a theatre vocation, where to live in theatre or in poetry is the same thing.

Translated from Spanish by Maria Ficara

NARA MANSUR (Cuba) was born in La Havana in 1969. She graduated from the Instituto Superior de Arte in 1993 with a specialisation in Theatre Studies. Her book *Mañana es cuando estoy despierta* was published in February 2000. She now works in the Theatre Department of the Casa de las Américas and edits the theatre journal *Conjunto*.