

Pilar Restrepo

Poetry on Stage

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The future of feminism perhaps depends on those women who, little by little, have taken a distance from it: the creators, the artists. A new world cannot be inaugurated without new words, without new forms.

Françoise Collen

Let me remember briefly how the theatre company La Máscara began, in order to bear witness to the way in which a group of women has created the dramatic texts (scripts and librettos) of the company's plays, using poetic, narrative, epistolary, mythical and even journalistic texts as a starting point, with the intention of dealing with their own and other subject material on stage. The ultimate purpose is to present to the audience, through the art of their own theatre creations, other imagery, alternative points of view, different thoughts concerning reality, in order to alter people's sensitivity and to instil the need to transform the social relationships and behaviour that diminish our existence on the planet.

The group was started in 1972, as part of the movement known as Nuevo Teatro Colombiano (New Colombian Theatre), and inspired by the reinvigorated national dramaturgy of the pioneering groups (Teatro Experimental de Cali, La Candelaria, Teatro Popular de Bogotá, La Mama, etc.). It was a propitious moment for the formation of many other independent collectives, some of which have continued to produce dramaturgical work in the theatre spaces built over the years.

A developing national theatre, as a manifestation of a live culture with a language of its own, investigates and deals politically and poetically in its own plays with the alternative history and true events that have happened to us collectively here in the South American continent, in a third world country. The characters and protagonists in these dramas are the anti-heroes facing all the ignominy of a society that is organised in this way.

Masterly plays such as *Soldados*, *A la Diestra de Dios*

Padre, Guadalupe años Cincuenta, I Took Panama, gave us back our lost identity as a colonised people. A particular aesthetic is strengthened defending popular culture with a collective method that assimilates, selects, re-creates, invents and makes a proposal to the world's culture, in which it affirms and recognises its own values and pain. At the same time as this dramaturgy offers a beam of light and possibility for others, it influences and strengthens the desires of those people who work in an utopian way to change the human hierarchies of power and domination in order to find a more harmonious and democratic way of building reality.

The process of collective creation grows and develops through the necessary and vital collaboration of actors, director and playwright in the invention of the scenic language of the plays to be staged, without anyone having to abandon her particular artistic role.

La Máscara is part of the Corporación Colombiana de Teatro, an association made up of the country's theatre groups, which stimulates and popularises the national theatre, by reaching as many people as possible through the organisation of regional exhibitions and theatre festivals. The movement is characterised by workshops, seminars, meetings and talks that promote confrontation with the artistic process and give validation and quality to the theatre work and to the aesthetic position of the collectives. It also influences the awakening of Latin American theatre.

At the beginning, La Máscara was a mixed group, staging plays from the universal repertory, with directors and actors from the Teatro Experimental de Cali (T.E.C.), directed by Enrique Buenaventura; plays like Herzec's *La Mina*, Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Machiavelli's *The Mandrake* and others that supported the learning and appropriation of the tools of the trade for collective creation,

improvisation and knowledge of the theatre process. Lucy Bolaños - present director of the group - uses and develops this knowledge in order to maintain her artistic commitment to a theatre collective of women, experimenting with other productions as well as with the professionalism of this school of work.

The perception that we had of ourselves, of our own bodies, had begun to change. We were becoming aware of our own intolerable situation in being discriminated against as women. The need to show on stage not only the relationships of power, but also of gender, became a vital motivation. What had begun as a political duty, staging sketches for feminist activities, became the object of aesthetic research in order to explore how we are allowed to be as women, ideologically and naturally, in this white, capitalistic and patriarchal society.

The male order to which we belong from when we are little girls teaches us above all "how" to be women. From our first childhood games we are trained to imitate and to reproduce an all-consuming family model, to yearn for courtly love and the rich Prince Charming who will come and awaken us, the man we have to conquer with our virginal passivity in order to be able to realise our destiny as female beings. Sadly marriage continues to be the institution that gives us value and makes sense of our lives as women. Whoever He is, it is not necessary for Him to legitimise Himself. We are blessed amongst women, since He loves us, accepts us, approves of us and judges us when He thinks that we are not behaving in the socially authorised way.

The words of the public and political spheres, of science and art are essentially in the men's domain. So, how can we speak of domestic and private matters? What equally political vision can we give of them? We are always enclosed in an unequal way and we

have no proper choice about whether to take part, because our bodies, and even more our voices, do not belong completely to us.

Feminist philosophy, with its almost archaeological research within men's sciences, draws attention to the mistakes of phallo-centric thought and reclaims not only the rights of women, but also those of their ancestral culture (the neglected victim of persecution, exploitation and punishment throughout the whole of history). It gives us the necessary strength of those truths and their proposals for change in the relationships between men and women. These truths name us before the eyes of the world; they give us the confidence to use the words which are buried in our bellies; they suggest a necessary and intimate way of thinking about ourselves as females, in order to express and communicate what remains inside us as ballast, that has to be got rid of if we are to be able to fly unburdened.

How can we speak of women's daily life, of situations that appear as necessary and normal evils - prostitution, abortion, infanticide, physical and psychological abuse - without mentioning the institutions and their imprisoning apparatus: the law, religion, the school, the family and work? How can we discuss this capitalistic and patriarchal organisation that, moreover, is devastating and warlike? How can we act out our own dramas if not with poetry? To make theatre as women is a real challenge. Only through the poetical images proposed by theatre are we able to intervene in this system of thought that seems unique and universal.

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We already knew what subjects we were

interested in dealing with through theatre. Another question followed: how to deal with dramaturgy, the plays, spoken language? As we were not writers we chose to work using literature as a starting point. We found existing poetical and narrative texts a very rich source of theatre inspiration and experimentation. Themes, images, characters, were put on stage as an adventure, turning into dramaturgy in a vital and organic way; not only to solve the question of spoken language in the theatre, but in the sense of getting in touch with its literal quality, of exploring its signs, beginning with a coded language and working towards decoding the unknown poetic language, in order to make the plays we needed.

And it was exactly with the poetry of a theatre man, Bertolt Brecht, that we began this work of women's dramaturgy. Three of his poems, *Of the Infanticide Maria Farrar*, *Song of Nana*, *The Widows of Osseg*, when dramatised, became the performance *Histories of Women*, directed by Enrique Buenaventura.

Abortion and infanticide, prostitution, the situation of the widows of mineworkers, constituted the theme of this piece that had a wide circulation in Colombia, Mexico and Central America. The texts are not adapted for presentation. They keep their verbal and poetic autonomy, but the emphasis is put on the fictional narrator characters who are entrusted with speaking the verses of the poems in different ways and in precise situations.

In the book of *New Portuguese Letters from the Three Marias* (by Portuguese women writers arrested during Salazar's dictatorship because their words attacked the morality of that society), we found the precise words of a language that discovers and names us from another point of view, giving us the possibility of looking back at ourselves, in order to see the occult, the unknown, the

neglected and to compare that with contemporary reality.

This marvellous text, in its exploration of women's letters, poetry, stories, thoughts and experiences, draws us into its strong and strange influence, an influence that develops and intrigues us in the engaging process of revealing it on stage.

With Jaqueline Vidal as director, we staged two texts from the book, *María M* and *María Delia*, under the title *Noticias de María*. The first text combines the letters and the story. We kept the text as language, but the dramaturgy consists of the ways in which the director and the actors translated

that text for the stage, putting the conflict into scenes, inventing a space, creating the characters, all the improvised elements that together make the performance.

The piece offers the audience an extremely dramatic and theatrical situation: María leaves the arms of her husband and flees. It is a parody that demonstrates the manifest arguments of a paternalistic order that is perverse in its ingenuity. The second text stages with humour and irony the teaching and learning of little girls in a religious school.

In this way we can consider the particular and different experience of inventing texts for each of La Máscara's performances:



Lucy Bolaños and Claudia Morales of La Máscara in *Mujeres en trance de viaje* Photo: Pedro Rey

Mujeres en trance de viaje, a collective creation about the political persecution of women, directed by Patricia Ariza; *Emocionales*, adapted from the play *For Coloured Girls Who Have Considered Suicide when the Rainbow Is Enuf* by the North American author Ntozaque Shange, directed by Ruben D'Pietro; *Bocas de Bolero*, with texts from the Bolero song, directed by Wilson Pico; *Luna menguante*, a play written and directed by Patricia Ariza; *A flor de piel*, a collective creation directed by Elena Armengod; and the most recent *Los perfiles de la espera*, a collective creation directed by Wilson Pico, about the women who wait for the missing people in their families, with text by various Latin American poets.

The creation of texts starting from an aesthetic with a woman's way of thinking allows us to move from the point where we are blocked as a society by giving an impulse towards change and movement; teaching a new language; offering reasons for supporting women; raising awareness in other women; and showing other ways of experiencing ourselves. It allows us to find our own voice as women, revealing and identifying us in our singularity as feeling/ thinking/being women on earth.

So we look at the representations of reality that emerge from the belly and heart, but also come from the bedrooms, kitchens, factories to reach outside to the streets, markets, squares and theatres, to show themselves publicly. The ancestral Silence permits us to stutter, it gives importance to the gargling of words and to the intention to

remove the muzzles that make us mute in the interval between the elaboration of an idea and the need to express it, with the certainty of having to assert ourselves and present our most urgent and heart felt concerns.

Translated from Spanish by Maria Ficara

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