

Luisa Calcumil

Woman, Mapuche, Artist

Interview by Isabel Martin

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Luisa Calcumil is a Mapuche artist. The Mapuche are one of the ethnic people that inhabited Argentine Patagonia before the Conquista, which is to say before the beginning of the spoliation that started with the land, continued with the culture and persists to the present day with the attitude of a country that denies recognition of mestisaje (cross-blood). Luisa does not deny her origins, the dark colour of her skin. She puts questions to her elders, she recovers the indigenous language, history, philosophy and passes this knowledge on from village to village by means of theatre and song. In her fifties, this woman, who follows her path teaching her public to say "love, earth, dream, work" in the Mapuche language, came to Paris. In this interview she tells us about this and her many other stories.

In your presentation you explain that you were born in the province of Río Negro. Are the Mapuche people concentrated in that area nowadays?

No, we also live in Neuquén, Chubut, La Pampa and Santa Cruz.

Are these rural villages?

Not totally; there are communities formed by families living with great distances between them. They raise some sheep and goats, but because of the absence of support and development for farming, in many cases only children and old people live there; the men and women move to the cities in search of work. This is why many like myself are born in the poor neighbourhoods of big cities.

When did this desire to know and defend your origins arise in you?

I was brought up in a humble home, in a small house that we made by tramping the mud with our feet to make *adobe*¹. There

1. Clay construction material, sometimes used to make non-cooked bricks.

I lived with my mother, father, brothers and grandparents. I grew up with respect for shared work, until the day when I went to the school where all children go, thinking everyone is equal. It was at that point that we came in contact with abuse, devaluation, humiliation and shame, because everything that belongs to us is seen generally as bad: the colour of our skin, our hair, names, customs, the bread we bring from home... Our parents send us to school so that we can be like the others, have the same prospects, and we go there with an enthusiasm we have inherited in a move towards knowledge. But everything appears quite difficult and incomprehensible to us.

The study of history for example, I can imagine...

Among other things, because this kind of education does not contemplate our values, our ancestors are never mentioned to us. We study history that worships the *Campaña del desierto*², in which the *malones*³ are not referred to, so it is a matter of luck if we meet with our own past. It is as if they brainwash us and we are not aware of it. In the prologue of *Fei c'mei aihuiñ tuhun* (It Is Good to Look at One's Own Shadow), the first theatre piece I created, I say: "I have a good mother, I have a good father, I have good grand-parents, and because of this our God looks at me with favour. I am not a white woman, I am a Mapuche woman, daughter of Calcumil, Luisa is my name. A woman who makes her way by telling stories, my people named me. Born in the Argentine Patagonia, in the land of the south, in the place that the beloved ancestors called Pantano Frío, that after the arrival of the

white people was given the name of General Roca, the general who carried out the extermination and submission of our beloved ancestors."

Why theatre?

At twenty-four, for reasons I hardly remember, I took part in a theatre workshop, and I got acquainted with this marvellous possibility for expression. Ever since then, I have never stopped studying and working in theatre. I don't know if I can say that my apprenticeship was eclectic, but it has different sources, and I do not feel that they have colonised me, rather amplified my expressive perspective. In the first years I was always cast as a maid or servant in the national classical theatre. And when European plays were put on, I would end up amongst the technical staff... But I never left theatre activity. I have worked with stage design, lighting, costumes, sound. I have started independent theatre groups, opened theatre spaces with other colleagues, always with great enthusiasm.

How did you start in film?

When I began to study theatre, I dreamt one night that three unknown people came to look for me to make a film. I told my companions about this dream, thinking that - as we Mapuche do - we would speak about the dream and work on it. But this did not happen. Perhaps they took it as the pretension of a small star with film fantasies. Six years later, these same companions attended the opening of the first of the five films I have made. Exactly as I had dreamt, three people I did not know (Jorge Pellegrini, the author of the book, Raúl Rosso and Carlos Paola, respectively director and story-board writer) invited me to make *Gerónima*, a film based on the life of a Mapuche woman and

2. Military expedition of the 19th century against the indigenous territories.

3. Indigenous rebellions.

her children. Gerónima died of sadness due to the lack of understanding from the ruling culture.

What you say about dreams is interesting...

It is one of the principles of the Mapuche culture that is essentially based on respect for nature, family, work and dreams. When I speak of dreams, I don't refer to imagination or aspirations, I speak about the dreams we have when we sleep. Our culture is based on extraordinary and oneiric experiences. Through dreams we receive signs, messages and knowledge.

There are people who feel fascinated by this mystical aspect of the Mapuche culture.

Yes, but unfortunately few of them manage to understand the true meaning of this ancestral wisdom because they approach it with a secular attitude. When someone now and then asks me about the "circle question" and speaks of "energy" as something exotic, I do not tell them about the circle dance in our rituals. I tell them about the tramping of mud to make the *adobe* I mentioned before,

while we walk in a circle laughing, working hard with our feet; heeding our grandfather's advice in order to get good results, listening to how my father would tease my mother or to the jealous comments and complaints... I tell them about my grandfather's pride in teaching us to work and to honour our work, praising the achievement of a child. My grandfather, a shearer, knowledgeable in all aspects of farming, taught me to enjoy and take pleasure in my work.

Did the main role of Gerónima, a raw naturalistic film, open many doors for you?

Even if I owe the fame of my work to this film, the most important thing for me was that while researching the character and her story, I got to know about our real history and understand the reason for so much concealment, pain, discrimination and repression. It was a very hard and cruel time for me. I questioned everything and I questioned myself ferociously. Being the protagonist of this story, located me within my identity quite painfully, it made me look again at the importance of being indigenous now-



Luisa Calcumil in *Es bueno mirarse en la propia sombra*

days and of having adopted such a noble and demanding activity as the art of acting.

The film also affected your own plays: you wrote songs speaking about the situation of indigenous women...

It was everyday life that showed me this discrimination! Therefore I always say that it has been my predicament to be a protagonist and defend myself from the triple adversity that being *woman, indigenous* and *artist* means. When I speak of defence, I refer to the reality of discrimination. When I applied for work, it was required that I should have an "appealing presence". What does it mean to be appealing even today in Argentina? To have blond hair, blue eyes and white skin? Despite everything I managed to work and study, but I feel that we belong to a society very full of prejudices, not only towards the racial issues. There exists a fear of everything that is different. We suffer this terribly in all sectors, since discrimination is practised both in the city and in the country, a discrimination we share with others as well.

What place does the Mapuche culture give to women?

It is said of our culture that it was matriarchal in ancient times. Mapuche women are charged with passing on values. It is an oral culture. And, even if the influence of Western culture has coloured the relationships a lot, the Mapuche man reveres women's capacity and knowledge. In my case, I enjoy this privilege enormously as the peasant men treat me with gentleness and respect, not because I am a renowned artist, but because I am a peasant myself, and because of my efforts to retrieve, value and spread our culture, firstly amongst those who were born with this heritage, and then amongst all those who want to get to know

and respect our culture.

What kind of reception do you receive amongst women?

Oh, I could tell you hundreds of anecdotes of moving moments that I experienced thanks to theatre! Once, a very old Mapuche woman saw me performing *It Is Good to Look at Our Own Shadow* in a peasant community and at the end she told me: "Little sister, I have a big courtyard at home, why don't you come to present your work there?" That day I was proudly promoted to being Courtyard Artist. The old woman was called Lorenza Railaf (which means Flower on the Lake) and for her I wrote the calling-song *Maneremia* (My Way). Her invitation also inspired the title of the play I wrote years later: *Artistas de patio* (Courtyard Artists).

You directed this play.

Yes, but let's start from the beginning. Whenever I can, I work in a group and in 1996/97 I wrote this piece that came out of the training and improvisations done with a group founded with the actors Gabriela Otagalli, Mariela Serra, Lilian Mendizábal, Sergio Quintian and Pablo Scatone. The group was called La Cuadrilla, to imitate and pay tribute to how migrating workers organise themselves to make the harvests in different parts of our country. We created the performance over two years with great effort and urgency. I worked as an actress and I directed. We had a very nice way of summoning people to the performance: we arrived at the villages with our play and sung serenades as in the old days.

The play speaks about the situation of a man who dreams of becoming a circus artist. He learns juggling and other virtuoso tricks, but before achieving his dream, the circus disbands. Doña Eleuteria Tropan, a lone

servant Mapuche woman takes in this young man who has no work or home. Later a humble woman from Córdoba, who sells herbal remedies, joins the household and later still Don Zoilo, an old man who also has no refuge. Starting from there the characters mix in a story of love, ambition and jealousy enveloped in magic peasant realism. But the show did not go well for us. We thought I could act and direct, but it was not possible. Remembering this production today, I am still moved by the commitment my colleagues put into the work. These young actors deserved to be successful, but the truth is that I could not achieve a good result by being the co-ordinator, which is what I did instead of directing - and a performance needs to be directed.

Along what other paths did theatre take you?

Essentially it has taken me round many villages of the interior, but also to many cities. On one occasion, when I went to work in a big city, my performance was organised by a political association of women. After the performance, a woman of humble aspect came up to me to say hallo with a bag in her hand. She said she was moved by the play. I thanked her for coming. As I saw her with a bag, I asked if she was going away on a trip. She told me that she was not, but that she went around with the bag in search of a job as a maid, as that same day she had stopped working because the lady of the house where she worked had not given her permission to go to the theatre performance. All week she had asked her mistress to be allowed to go but she would pretend to be busy. She took advantage of an interview I did on television and called the lady. She said: "Look! There is the artist I want to go and see tonight!" The lady made the following comment: "You are going to see this Indian? What kind of artist can she be?" The woman did not answer, but

when it was time to go to the theatre, she took her things, asked to be paid and left.

Do you travel regularly?

At least once or twice a month; I go on short tours because I am not a traveller, I miss my home. I travel by bus, by plane and other times by van. An assistant always accompanies me. During all these years I have always had a young man or woman with me, beautiful *duendes* who look after me and look after my work. I owe them a lot. During the early years I travelled with my family; my husband assisted with the technical aspects. Later I worked with Pablo Millán, who left his administrative work and studies and followed me for four or five years, after having accompanied me on a tour around the Tobas communities of North Argentina. Later still I was assisted by Sergio Quintian, another incredible human being, and by a visual artist and generous and talented university lecturer, LÍlian Mendizabal. Now a beautiful and intelligent twenty-year-old girl, my niece, Gloria Calcumil, accompanies me.

You travel by van because a good part of your work is in rural areas.

I work a lot in community centres, in country schools, around farms, in indigenous communities. Of course I also work in theatres, cultural centres, normal auditoria. But I have a special relationship with the people from rural areas. I cannot let them down. When I arrive in the Mapuche communities with my theatre, the old women receive me with their most noble songs and prayers. They, who never go to theatre buildings, pray for the work to go well and that good weather should be with us. They speak of "work" while at times, in the big cities, those who call me are taken

aback if they have to pay me. They say "Ah! She takes money...!!!"

Travelling one learns...

Each journey is a lesson, a marvellous experience. Today people speak about the little interest there is in art and theatre, but when I arrive at the performance place in the country there are always many horses, cars, vans, lorries, in which the most humble people have travelled to be present at what I do. When I return home I need a lot of silence, in order not to lose all that has been experienced, so as not to bastardise it and so that I can keep it in the best place in my heart and mind.

With my oldest van, I often broke down on the road, but it always happened after having worked, and nothing very serious ever happened to me. How can we not be grateful for life! Not long ago I was working in a completely mountainous region, in Junin de los Andes, five hundred kilometres away from home. The villagers made a cultural event and invited me for the third time with *La Tropilla de Ruperto*. I have taken other performances, but they never tire of seeing *Ruperto*...

You also wrote this performance.

Yes. In reality, it is a compilation of popular humour. I have tried to rescue our people's way of thinking as translated into popular sayings. I did it from a humorous and comic perspective. Anyone can identify with this reflection. Perhaps this is the reason why it is so popular, apart from the music and dance that I always use.

... and the presentation of Mapuche instruments and clothes. Your conception of theatre is particular.

I try to share the beautiful things that I have inherited from our ancestors. How couldn't I show the woven blankets, the endless hours of work; the particularity of the sound of each instrument and the occasion on which it should be played? But I also think that the actor should run risks, create new situations, and be able to put stories on stage with a great economy of means, in whatever space one finds, be it conventional or alternative. The most important challenge is to present various characters in the same play.

Do you follow any kind of actors' training?

The right to go on stage is achieved by study, daily work, rigour and awareness. Each day, after a personal assessment that allows me to see whether my instrument is getting out of tune, burned, blocked and without resonance, I work with the eyes, space, ways of walking (we walk so much these days), voice, balance, action, objects, poetry, mirror reflections, memory. Those male and female masters, points of reference who are sometimes far away, but who belong to my identity, appear in my work space. In this space my tears - the product of ignorance and isolation - have mixed with sweat many times! But I keep at it, in order to find a way through that will allow me to give life or to enrich a character.

The social militant is also to be found in this coming and going of the artist.

There is still a lot to do to change the injustice and expropriation that our people suffered and keep on suffering. In the public Argentine schools, one still says that we "existed" in the past tense, and this is terrible. We have to give new values to the American continent's culture to register our awareness and testify to our presence. Starting here, we also have to reclaim our

land by right of having occupied it for centuries, and in some cases millennia. Not so long ago I went on tour to Mendoza, where we managed to convince the local government to approve the law about land expropriation in order to give it back to us.

This city has received your theatre very well.

I can tell you an anecdote about my work in taking theatre to the furthest places where people invite me. In Mendoza, a wild animal warden who knows my work, visited a peasant's hut and saw that the man had a photograph of me stuck on the wall with an article that was published in the magazine *Viva* (part of the newspaper *El Clarín*) a couple of years ago. The warden chatted with the peasant, about the weather and other things, and at a certain point, without telling him that he knew me, he asked about the woman in the photo. The man said it was an indigenous artist who took her art to faraway places. This gave the warden the courage to ask why the photo was on the wall. "Do you know her?" The peasant answered: "No, but one day she will come, she will come here." The warden left without saying that he knew me, and when he met me in Mendoza he told me this anecdote. Thankful for his discretion, for not having disturbed the illusion that this man has in the solitude of the rural area, I asked him to take me to that place to give the man a performance. The place is called Lonco Vaca and I really wish to get there.

What does your family think of your work?

My husband and my children have moulded my transit through art, and every second of absence, which surely they have engraved in their souls, I have tried to transform into beauty, into a profound message, so as not to have to ask forgiveness for my passion for my



work. I got married at twenty-two to Omar, son of peasant *criollos* (cross-blood between Spanish and indigenous populations), who left farming for the same reason as my people. They moved to the province of Chubut where we met. He is a carpenter, a working man with a great sense of solidarity. We have two children: Cecilia, twenty-six, and Matías, twenty. We still don't have grandchildren.

Art brought you to Paris, at the invitation of the Suradas Festival, for a showing of Gerónima. You also went on stage, what did you feel performing for a French audience?

That paradoxically language is not a problem in the moment of communicating the commitment, the struggle, but also the music and happiness...

Always a committed theatre.

I am a worker; of course I am Mapuche, but also a theatre worker, a woman. I don't feel "representative of". I am grateful to life for

the possibility that it has given me to express that which is mine and to learn from so many people. If there is anything that I thank my parents for, and especially my grandfather Calcumil, it is having taught me to enjoy work and fight exploitation. Nevertheless my work does not belong to the idea of division between the indigenous people and white people. I think we should educate and work for a society where people can live together in cultural diversity, solidarity and understanding. This is why my work is closely connected to education, health, rural areas and human rights. My work speaks of this reality, of the indigenous reality. People invite me to share my artistic expression and I can say without exaggeration that I am full of gratitude, but I am not dependent.

Translated from Spanish by Julia Varley

LUISA CALCUMIL (Argentina) is a Mapuche Indian who since 1975 has worked as actor, singer and director in theatre and film, receiving international recognition. Luisa now writes her own plays and is touring the following shows: *Testimonios* (Testimonies), *Aukiñ* (Echoes), *La tropilla del Ruperto* (a compilation of popular humour), *Es bueno mirarse en la propia sombra* (It Is Good to Look at Oneself in One's Own Shadow) and *Folil* (Root).

ISABEL MARTIN (Argentina/France) has a degree in Social Communication from the National University of Cuyo, in Argentina, and a Master's in Latin-American Arts. She has worked as a journalist in different media and is now specialising in theatre arts. She is currently working towards a PhD in Theatre Studies at the University of Paris X, in France.