

Staging the Magdalena Pacífica Theater Festival:
A Culturally-Specific Take on Feminisms' Tasks and Strategies

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*“Colombia condenses
all Western dramas.”
—Patricia Ariza*

From the glossy surface of my Magdalena Pacífica Festival program, a set of black eyes stare out at me; they belong to a young woman dressed like Frida Kahlo: wide eyebrows, a solemn gaze, and flowers in her hair. She stares at me now just like she stared at me from every poster, schedule, button and T-shirt in Cali, Colombia, for a week and a half in September 2002. She was everywhere: taped to store windows, on the corners of theaters, on the lampposts in the streets, on the glass doors of the museum... Under the photograph, a name: Melisa Contento. I remember the moment when, standing in front of one of the largest banners of the festival, someone looked at her photograph and told us that Melisa Contento was a rap artist from Bogotá, and that she had recently died in a car accident. Looking at her now, having again returned from Colombia with a feeling of urgency around the violence the country is suffering, I see how—in a single click of the camera—this photograph captures two things simultaneously: women's artistic expression and death.

The awareness of those two elements was ever-present in the Magdalena Pacífica Theater Festival I attended in Cali. The women of Teatro La Máscara (the organizers of the festival), decided to frame the event as a collective reflection about the rampant violence in Colombia, through the voices and bodies of women. Colombia has endured over fifty years of armed conflict. Paramilitary squads, guerrilla forces, drug traffickers

and the army kill whomever they consider to be their enemy. Entire towns are destroyed. Car bombs go off on the streets. Kidnappings abound. Increasingly afraid, many city dwellers no longer travel by land to other parts of the country, and so, the country gets smaller and smaller for its inhabitants, confined to one city and (perhaps) to the airplane that once in a while takes them to other cities, which are just as confined. Violence, and the daily threat of violence, has become a part of people's "normal" lives—and the media showers them with it. Between the latest soccer scores and the close-ups of models in bikinis, news broadcasts often show ultra-explicit scenes of bodies gunned down and covered in blood. That is why the women of Teatro La Máscara declare that, for them, "it is essential to express our concern about the situation of violence that has intensified after the breakdown of the peace process and the resurgence of combat mentality. We know full well the risks we live under" (La Máscara, press release, August 2002).

As I have detailed elsewhere (Ramirez-Cancio 2003), the women of La Máscara have even more personal reasons to know these risks "full well". They still remember the late 1980's, when they had to leave the country due to repeated death threats received at their theater and their homes. Lucy Bolaños, the director of the group, says they began getting anonymous phone calls from men who said: "We're going to kill you, out you rats, leave the country, you anti-Colombian bitches, *Black Flag* with you all!" A close associate of theirs, writer and director Patricia Ariza, was also the victim of threats during this period. As the story goes, she would walk around wearing a bulletproof vest she had decorated with embroidery and sequins—a gesture which called attention to the alarming degree of normalization that violence had reached.

Besides the danger of this very real, physical death, La Máscara is also haunted by the constant threat of another kind of death: artistic invisibility. Despite having just celebrated their 30th anniversary, the work of Teatro La Máscara —the oldest and one of the only all-women, feminist theater groups in Colombia and Latin America— has been constantly ignored, excluded from local festivals, denied funding, “invisibilized” time and again. First of all, La Máscara’s is working in an atmosphere where *machismo* is insidious, one in which “feminism is a curse word,” if not entirely dismissed. To quote Pilar Restrepo, founding member of the ensemble: “Feminists are always accused of being radicals, of hating men, of wanting to take away their power, of not believing in the family and moral values. The term ‘feminism’, far from revolutionizing, has become a false pamphlet” (personal interview, 1998).

Furthering their invisibilization is the fact that they are a political theater dealing with themes of violence in a country bombarded by the media with images and news of that violence —unlike people in other countries who might turn on their television to watch *other people’s* horrors (over there, far away) and suffer *compassion* fatigue, people in Colombia suffer from what I call *crisis fatigue*: they’re exhausted of their own crisis, so when they go to the theater, the last thing audiences want to see onstage is their crisis one more time. According to Pilar Restrepo, audiences are resistant to La Máscara’s “sad plays”, such as *Los Perfiles de la Espera* (The Profiles of Waiting), which is a movement-based piece about the countless Colombian women who wait for their disappeared family members. Performed mostly without language, we see the scars of violence, death, and terror that inevitably puncture these women’s every gesture and every physical task. Fear is lodged in their bodies. As the program for the play declares,

“This is a theatrical act made against persecution, torture, desperation, and fear. [...] The words and movements of the characters subvert silence, making us witnesses to a world encircled by fear” (La Máscara). The strength of this piece, for me, lies beyond making audiences witnesses to the world and the fear of these specific women. The piece targets the denial that results from crisis fatigue, the self-blinding which, unlike what Diana Taylor calls “percepticide,” is not rooted in the fear of being *caught* looking (by outside forces), but rather, in the fear of *catching oneself feeling one’s own fear*. What *Perfiles* suggests is the following: even if you haven’t been *directly* hit by violence, even if you haven’t had a family member killed, or had to wear a bulletproof vest, or been forced to flee the country, you’re not exempt from the reality of violence. *Living with constant fear is being a victim of violence*.

When I interviewed her in 1998, Lucy Bolaños shared one of her biggest preoccupations with me: “The truth is we are fenced in by fear,” she said. “We are in a triple crossfire: the guerrilla forces, the paramilitary, and the military, but also so many other ‘dark forces.’ ...I want to talk about all this, even if everyone is seeing it in the newspapers.” At that time, she responded to her desire to “talk about all this” by staging *Los Perfiles de la Espera*. In 2002, she responded by staging the Magdalena Pacífica Festival.

Santiago García, director of Bogotá’s renowned Teatro La Candelaria, once wrote that “A theater movement or scenic arts tendency that doesn’t develop its own dramaturgy is destined, if not to *perish* completely, then at least to fade away and barely leave its mark on the culture in which it is located” (García, 7, my emphasis). But is “dramaturgy” the only way to “leave your mark” in culture, the only way not to perish?

Besides the work that remains in the Archive, there are other ways to transmit knowledge, namely through embodied practice, or what Taylor calls “the Repertoire” (Taylor 2003). La Máscara’s focus is not on *writing dramatic texts* (when they do create “original” work, they grab material from different authors —oftentimes non-dramatic texts such as poetry and torture testimonials— and make something new through collective creation). But I consider their work on stage as just a *slice* of their performance work, which extends to offering workshops to marginalized communities, creating and maintaining ties between women in different sectors, and actively participating in political demonstrations both locally in Cali and nationally in Colombia. And I don’t think that kind of work “perishes” or “disappears”, as is usually said of live (or non-documented) performance. I see the staging of the Magdalena Pacífica Festival *as* one of La Máscara’s performances, as an intervention into the social memory of their city.

Their struggle for survival, their desire to “leave their mark”, and their wish to have their city engage in multilayered dialogues about violence, women, and peace propelled the festival and determined the festival’s goals. Since 1994, La Máscara has presented its work in the international theater festivals of the Magdalena Project (an International Network of Women in Contemporary Theatre, based in Wales) which has fed their commitment to women’s theater and strengthened their links beyond national borders. When the Magdalena Project lost its funding, the organization of the festivals had to begin rotating between participating groups. Last year, Teatro La Máscara took on organization and hosting of the festival. This provided them the opportunity to explore what for them is an urgent concern: rethinking the role of women in the construction of peace in Colombia. They named the event “Magdalena Pacífica” not only because it was

a festival from the *Magdalena* Project taking place in the *Pacific* coast of Colombia, but also (in a beautiful coincidence of words) to express their wish that the land of the *Magdalena* (the “mother river” of Colombia) may someday exist in a *pacific* (*peaceful*) situation, free from war and violence.

Through the national and international participation of women artists in the *Magdalena Pacífica*, therefore, they wanted to unite the city of Cali in a common celebration, to (quote) “propose other ways of putting an end to the attitudes of war makers, [...] not by means of military confrontation, but by means of cultural reflection” (La Máscara, press release, August 2002).

This goal of “cultural reflection” on a large scale was their first priority, and it manifested itself in multiple facets of the festival. Its reach was so wide as La Máscara’s desire for communication, and grew tentacles—so to speak—to extend to cultural areas beyond the theatre. In just ten days, there were over seventy events in different parts of Cali, which included 70 shows by 40 theater groups; there were poetry readings by women, workshops in theater, singing and dance; video projections; painting and photography exhibits in the Museum of Modern Art; and special events called “Voices of the Women of the World for a Peaceful [Pacific] Colombia”, which were discussion forums that brought together women from many walks of life. We heard not only from feminists and theater directors, but also journalists, economists, philosophers, indigenous leaders, politicians, and activists who insisted that “we cannot achieve peace with a logic of war”. Women like Vera Grabe was there: for 16 years she was a guerrilla fighter in the M19, and she was one of the key figures in the negotiations that led that group to disarm.

She recently ran as a Vice President under presidential candidate Lucho Garzón. In her talk she said “We who waged war know very well the value of peace.”

Another goal was that the festival generated the largest possible number of spectators among the different communities of Cali, and that they had access to the festival events. For instance, they provided transportation and cheap tickets to groups of young mothers and invited high schools and colleges to take their students to the Special Events during the day. The general public of Cali was also taken into account when creating the programming: although a few plays were performed during the afternoon, all the rest were scheduled for 7:30 pm, because, as Pilar told me “that's the time when people usually go to the theater”. Finally, the opening and closing events were big celebrations that consisted of music shows that were free and open to the entire city. This festival was made *for* Cali and its citizens, to create audiences, to generate discussion. Such a wide selection was ideal for audiences, but having to choose *one* of the ten shows that were going on every night, all at the same time, was not easy...

Both Lucy and Pilar received extremely critical comments from several participants, veterans of the Magdalena Project, who thought La Máscara's version of the Magdalena had failed because its main focus wasn't the participants' sharing their work with each other. In previous years, the festivals had been smaller; the Magdalena AoteaRoa in New Zealand, for example, ended with the participants staying together in an island for three days. The Magdalena *Pacífica*, according to some colleagues from the Magdalena Project, had been too ambitious and spread out, “not feminist enough”, and some said that the forums and other special events had “nothing to do” with the spirit of the Magdalena Project.

But, in a society saturated with war like Colombia's, I am convinced that, on the contrary, all of the festival's events had everything to do with that spirit. The performance project of the women of La Máscara is inextricably linked to the social and political context of Colombia: violence is an *urgent* issue, *it's the here and now*, one that these women, yearning for change, don't want to --and cannot-- put aside. If the new government has created "networks of civil informants" to rat each other out, why not create networks of differential consciousness through events like this one? The goal of this festival was not to bring women to an enclosed, intimate environment, but rather to open them up to the entire city, to create spaces of reflection about violence, to reach the diverse communities of Cali, to rethink the role of women in the country's transformation, to imagine alternatives *different* from what the mass media and its blood-filled images broadcast every day. The Magdalena Pacífica was a strategy to *act* (in and out of the theaters) towards peace, through the art, thoughts and presence of women. I think it is fundamental to understand that the world of "women" is not homogeneous, that the priorities and goals of the women in one country won't be the same to the women in another— and that *if their goals differ, then their strategies will also differ*. We have to adapt to local objectives and strategies, be flexible when we negotiate, on a transcultural level, the "shoulds" or the "duties" of feminisms (plural). I submit that the Magdalena Pacífica, far from being a "deviation" from the Magdalena Project, was an extension, an expansion and a positive re-signification of it, in a particular context.

The closing event in the outdoor theater was full of people. You could see the silhouettes of the people filling the place up to the highest seats. I remember Lucy's face as she looked at the people in the crowd, dancing and clapping to the music that marked

the end of the celebration. I was glad to see her smile and absorb the magnitude of her accomplishment. Seeing Lucy watching the audience that last evening, I could feel the mark that she was leaving on her city's social memory. As Vera Grabe had said, "Peace is a way of seeing the world; we have to change the culture of violence in this country, and that's something we all have to do together". I also imagined the mark that all those women and men in the audience were leaving on La Máscara, driving them to continue their theater work on gender from the terrain of *their own feminism*.

And, through this all, of course, the huge image of Melisa Contento in the background, also watching in silence, with her impassive eyes, from the white posters of the festival. If from her portrait we could have heard her singer's voice, in what words and in what rhythm would she have described what she was seeing?

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